Sweet Child o’ Mine

A Masters and Mercenaries Extra
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Dedication

To you. Yes, I’m talking to you, dear reader. This one is all for you with my great thanks for all the support and love. Thank you for sharing this journey with me and I look forward to many more adventures.
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Chapter One

Ian Taggart frowned as he looked at his childhood friend. Sullivan Roarke had grown up with Ian, Alex, and Sean. He’d worked the same shitty jobs Ian and Alex had worked for the same shitty pay. He’d given Ian some of that pay when Ian had a hard time keeping a roof over his and Sean’s head. Sully had never asked for payback.

Until today.

“So what you’re telling me is this douchebag lets you film his life and people watch it? Like actual living people who breathe and shit.”

Alex, who was sitting beside Sully, groaned. “Ian hasn’t developed tact in the decade or so since you last saw him.”

Sully sat back with a wry smile on his face. “I wouldn’t expect him to. And we don’t call Hoover the douchebag. We like to call him the talent.”

“Which only proves you have no understanding of the word.” Tact was useless in Ian’s mind.

“Perhaps, but I’ve made a lot of money off Kendalmire’s Way. The network recently reupped us for three years. Do you have any idea how unusual that is? I’ve been in this business for a while now and this show is my goldmine. If I can get six or seven years out of this show, I’ll be set for life and I won’t have to do reality shows anymore. I’ll be able to move into scripted TV, which is where I want to be.”

Thank god. He’d worried that Sully had lost his damn mind. “So you don’t particularly want to film douchebag rich kids who think they’re DJs and their blonde model girlfriends, who shop and prove the American education system has completely failed?”

Sully chuckled. “Not particularly, but then I suspect you’ve taken on some jobs that weren’t agreeable for the sake of money.”

Oh, he’d saved a few people who he would rather have strangled. “True.”

“So from what I understand you have to run this by the rest of the team before you take a case?” Sully asked. “I didn’t know that or I wouldn’t have brought Hoover in today.”

Normally, he would present the case to the team and they would decide to take or reject the assignment and who was the best operative to work the case, if they agreed to it. “You didn’t just bring Lord Douche. You brought all his douche minions, too.”

“The good news is apparently none of them eat because Charlotte offered them cookies and they looked at her like she was crazy,” Alex offered. “That’s in your favor, Sully. If any one of them had touched Ian’s cookies, he would have thrown them down an elevator shaft.”

They were his freaking cookies. Sean had recently brought in an assistant pastry chef at his restaurant, Top. Ian was a principle investor so he tended to treat Macon Miles like his own personal bakery. Adam’s baby bro didn’t seem to mind. He’d kept Ian supplied with sweets. Ian was caught in a never-ending cycle of pain. He got nervous about Charlie giving birth and he ate. He got worried that he was going to end up as big as Charlie and with no actual babies coming
out of him, so he worked out. He then worried he was working out too much and neglecting Charlie and he reached for the cookies again.

He was going to be so freaking happy when the demons were all born and life could get back to...

Yeah, he wasn’t sure what normal was anymore.

He really wanted one of those cookies followed by a couple of rounds of punching the shit out of someone in the ring he’d set up at the new Sanctum facility. Or he could punch Hoover KendalMire. That would be fun, too.

“We’re taking the case, Sully,” Alex assured him.

They were. Because he owed Sully for all those precious ten dollar bills he would slip to Sean for school lunches and for showing up with pizza right about the time Ian’s paycheck would run out. “How many times has he been assaulted?”

“Yesterday makes three. It was a really close call. Someone took a shot at him. We have it on camera.” Sully explained.

Ian had already looked over the footage. Hoover and his model girlfriend Brie had been filming their very high-end picnic when someone had taken a shot at Hoover with a high-powered rifle. Unfortunately, they’d only managed to hit the bottle of Cristal that had then splattered all over Brie’s overpriced shirt and she’d thrown a fit. She hadn’t been pissed someone had nearly taken off her boyfriend’s head, but damn she wanted to hurt whoever had ruined her designer wear.

Ian wished whoever had tried to kill the fucker had been better at their job. He sighed and leaned forward. “Why don’t you go and join your crazies in the conference room. Alex and I will be right out. I want to take one more look at that footage before we talk to…god, I hate even saying his name…Hoover.”

Sully stood. “Yeah, his parents had more money than sense. I often think they named him after the vacuum cleaner, which is oddly appropriate since he sucks the intelligence out of any room he enters. But damn that kid’s got a million-watt smile. And if you can solve this case without Hoover dying, I can use all of this as a storyline for next season. If the kid dies, so does the show. But you aren’t going to let that happen. I know you, Ian. You’re going to solve this in no time.”

Sully was smiling as he left the office. At least someone was happy.

“I say we set Si and Jesse up on this case,” Alex said. “Phoebe and Chelsea won’t mind a couple of months in LA. I’ll estimate the project at roughly six to eight weeks. We’ll need to interview everyone involved and get a feel for what the victim’s life is like. I’ve already been on the phone with LAPD. Derek has a friend in the Threat Management Unit. They’re overtasked and apparently Brie and Hoover are difficult to deal with. What a surprise.”

Ian flipped a button on his computer and looked over the footage again. The shooter had been roughly five hundred feet away, in a cluster of trees. The shot would have taken off Hoover’s head if he hadn’t caught sight of his reflection in the bottle of champagne. The dumbass actually picked up the bottle and started to admire himself. His narcissism saved his life.

The cops had found the spot where the shooter had likely stood, but they couldn’t determine much. The spot was a hiker paradise. There had been too many footprints to make any kind of guess.

“I’ll talk to them. Maybe we should send one of the new guys, too.” He’d recently set up a close-cover bodyguard unit within McKay-Taggart. His operatives were almost all family men,
and that didn’t seem to go well with twenty-four seven close cover. So he’d talked to a friend of Sean’s and allowed him to run his business as a subsidiary of McKay-Taggart. “Do you find any of Fisher’s men annoying? Because I want to set someone annoying on this guy. Jesse and Si will be too nice. Hey, maybe Chelsea can do some of that rat bastard stuff she used to do to me.”

Like putting him on a no-fly list and subjecting him to body cavity searches for months when he flew. It had been a complete dick move and one he respected. He didn’t fuck with his sister-in-law much anymore. She was mean and he could understand that.

Charlie could be mean, too, but when she was he would spank her sweet ass and show her who was boss. Well, she was boss and he damn well knew it, but in the bedroom there was no question who topped who.

God, he wanted to top her. Lately, he was too worried to. He looked at that big belly of hers and worried things were going to change again.

“Stop.”

Ian looked up. “What?”

“You’ve got your ‘worried dad’ face on.”

“I do not have one of those.”

“You do. It’s a little like your ‘I’m going to murder someone’ face but slightly less happy. You’re going to be fine, Ian.”

He hated this. Hated all this touchy-feely shit. Still… Alex was kind of his go-to guy. If he couldn’t talk to Alex, he couldn’t talk to anyone. “I have no idea how to raise girls. Why couldn’t they have had penises? I know what to do with a boy. Shove ’em out in the backyard and let them free range for a few years. They’ll build their own cabins and become self-sufficient. I don’t think I can do that with girls. Speaking of complaints. Why two? One I could maybe handle, but now it’s a freaking girl gang at my house. Do you think they’re pulling a fast one on dear old dad? Maybe they’re hiding their penises and laughing their asses off in utero.”

Alex laughed, the sound lightening the mood. “This has been a fun nine months for me, brother. I can’t wait for the rest because there are no penises and that gang of girls is going to be so much fun for me to watch when they get to be teens.”

Ian shuddered. He didn’t want to think about teens.

Alex leaned forward, that sensitive I’m-about-to-give-you-words-of-wisdom-because-I-watched-a-lot-of-Oprah-in-my-time look on his face. “You’re going to be fine, Ian. I know you think because your dad walked out that you won’t know what to do, but Sean would disagree. Sean would tell you you’ve already been a great dad. There’s only one rule.”

“Don’t kill the children. Charlie already made me promise.” He didn’t like the fact that Alex was right. Or that the idea of Sean thinking he was going to be good at the father thing made him a little soft on the inside.

Alex rolled his eyes. “God, you’re a pain in the ass.”

“What?” He wanted to know. “What’s the one rule?”

“Be there. And let me tell you, Ian Taggart’s got that one down. So relax. You’re going to be a pro at this in no time. And I think you’re going to look good in the pink sling Eve bought you.”

“Oh, that was so not Eve, asshole.” The baby shower had been a revelation. So much fucking pink.

Alex gave him a shit-eating grin. “I laughed the whole time I was buying it. I tried to find a place that would bedazzle the fucker, but Eve wouldn’t let me.”
Ian stood. “You know what, I’m going to make that shit manly. You think I won’t wear a pink sling? I will rock that motherfucker.”

“If anyone can, it’s you,” Alex conceded. He grabbed his laptop. Alex would deal with setting up the project files and all the administrative stuff that came with a new case. He’d backed off of active duty since he and Eve had adopted a baby boy named Cooper. Who would one day likely turn that innocent gaze of his on Ian’s daughters.

“You tell your boy to keep his hands to himself.”

“Oh god. I hadn’t even thought about that. You’re going to be that dad. You know the one who thinks his girls are perfect angels and all the boys around them are the devil? Can we wait until they’re born before you accuse Coop of trying something with them?”

Ian kind of thought Cooper eyed Charlie’s baby bump as though he knew something good was going to come out of there. “You’re wrong. I know my girls won’t be angels, and that’s why I intend to keep an eye on them at all times. And they’re going to look like Charlie so they’ll be gorgeous. No doubt about it. Those girls are going to be trouble.”

He followed Alex out into the hallway. It was so weird to walk this hallway now. At one point the floor had been damn near empty. They’d really only needed reception, the main conference room, and seven offices, though when they’d first begun, Ian had claimed they only really needed six because Adam was so far up Jake’s butt they should share one.

He still loved giving Adam shit. It was one of the constants in his life.

Back in the beginning they’d closed off half the floor and now he was thinking about buying the floor below him if he could convince those damn lawyers to move out. The back conference room had been turned into a daycare center. Charlie now occupied a corner office where she helped Alex with the administrative stuff and was the chief liaison with clients and the outside world. They’d lost Sean to the culinary arts and the world was a better place for it, but somewhere along the way they’d picked up Simon, Jesse, Phoebe, Erin, and now even damn Tennessee Smith had an office, though he’d put Ten in the back next to the babies so he didn’t think this was a forever thing.

He was a little scared he was going to end up with all of Ten’s former team on the payroll. Since Ten had been disavowed by the CIA for getting too close to a dirty politician, his old team was slowly working their way out and they all ended up at Ian’s office with their hands out. He would send the fuckers away but Charlie kept putting them on the payroll.

“Boss, you can’t be serious.” One of the newbies was marching down the hall, her red hair flying behind her and a look of righteous fury on her face. Yeah, Erin had obviously gotten her new assignment.

“I’m never serious,” he replied. God, he loved parts of his job, and fucking with his employees was one of them.

Especially when he fucked with them for their own damn good.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank god. I was hoping it was a joke.”

Alex never fucked with anyone. He was practically Captain America. “It’s not a joke, Erin. You can pick up your tickets with Grace. You and Theo are set to fly out early Thursday. You have a meeting with the security head of the hospital on Monday, so rest up. It’s a long flight and you’ve got a half a day’s layover in Frankfurt. Grace gave you a nice long layover so you don’t miss that flight to Monrovia. Also, since your cover is that you’re an ex-military, down-on-her-luck girl looking for work, we put you in coach. I’m really sorry.”
Ian snorted. Damn, maybe Alex did fuck with the employees. That flight to Liberia was a killer. “But we made sure Theo’s got the seat right beside you. After all, a Master always looks after his precious submissive.”

Erin’s face went a bright red that could have been anger, but unfortunately her T-shirt was thin and that showed the truth. Poor girl’s nipples had gone rock hard and it wasn’t cold in the building.

Really, he should get extra for playing cupid to the clueless.

“Send someone else with me,” she said, her shoulders straight and her feet planted like she was standing at attention. You could take the girl out of the Army, but Erin hadn’t yet figured out how to get the Army out of the girl. “Send me in with Chase or Hutch or Michael Malone. I understand that I’m the only female operative who can handle this mission. Hell, I believe in this mission. I want to take out Senator McDonald as much as anyone, but I don’t think Theo is ready.”

Was that how she was going? “In what way? Is his SEAL training not sufficient? Was his time as a CIA operative too short for your liking? Or is there something else you would like to tell me? Has he harassed you?”

He hadn’t considered that. Theo had been attracted to Erin from the moment he met her. There was sexual chemistry between them, but also his half-brother seemed genuinely fond of her. He tried his damnedest to take care of Erin, though it was obvious she was scared of Theo. But if Theo had been doing something he shouldn’t, Tag would shut that shit down, brother or no.

Erin’s eyes slid away. “No, Sir. You know he’s actually very kind. I don’t know how to handle it. I would be more comfortable with Hutch.”

Because Hutch treated her like one of the guys. “Hutch is incapable of looking like he’s in love with you and he has zero training in D/s. Faith McDonald has been in the lifestyle for longer than you have.”

“Longer than Theo, too.” It was obvious Erin wasn’t giving up.

“But Theo has been training day and night.” Theo seemed to have figured out what Erin needed, and he was trying hard to be able to give it to her. He’d been working with Ten under Tag and Alex’s tutelage, and he’d come a long way. His brother was more than ready for this assignment. He was the best man for the job. Tag liked to fuck with his employees, but he took his business seriously. “Theo is perfectly prepared for this mission and you’re the right operative to get close to Faith McDonald. You’ll be her personal bodyguard and you can bond over giggling and tea and whatever girls bond over.”

Erin flipped him off. It was a good sign. He suspected she had some serious shit in her background having to do with authority figures. Flipping the boss the bird meant she was comfortable he wasn’t going to hurt her. Now she simply had to figure out Theo wouldn’t either. “I’ll take care of Faith. I actually kind of admire her. She’s smart and seems to be trying to do good in the world.”

Unfortunately, her father was an evil fuck who sold out servicemen for a buck and made his fortune off keeping the wars going. Faith McDonald could be Mother Teresa and he would still use her to take down her father. “Don’t go into this expecting a lifetime friendship. She’s the target. Talk to her. Convince her to come to Dallas with you so she can meet a new Master. She’s single right now, but the word is she always indulges during her off time. Get her back here with you and Ten will handle the rest.”

“And Theo?”
Did he have to figure out everything? “Don’t sleep with him. It’s just your cover. Sometimes operatives don’t use their covers to get a little something something.” Ian scratched his head, trying to think of an example. It was hard. His operatives were the worst when it came to sleeping with their partners—Simon and Chelsea, Jesse and Phoebe, Alex and Eve—or being stupid fucks and falling in love with their targets—Sean and Grace, Li and Avery. Hell, Jake and Adam had married their freaking client. It could be their new slogan. McKay-Taggart: We Don’t Keep It In Our Pants. Oh, well, there was one he could think of. “Alex and I went undercover once and we did not sleep together.”

Alex shrugged. “He tried but I wanted someone a little more tender. Li used to go undercover with Karina and he’s never once slept with her. Then there was that first mission we sent Jesse on at the strip club.”

Ian cleared his throat. He was pretty sure Jesse had slept with about ten of those strippers, but that had all been before Phoebe.

Alex shook his head. “JoJo, Eboni, and Misty Rose weren’t his partners. Simon was. Si swears up and down they’ve never cuddled. Not once. So you’re safe, Erin.”

“You’re all jackholes, you know that, right? And Liberia? Really? I left the damn Army so I didn’t have to spend all my time in the world’s shitholes.” Erin was shaking her head as she walked away. “Simon gets to go to Venice. Li’s biggest op was in London. I get fucking West Africa.”

“Don’t forget the Ebola,” Tag called out. “You’re welcome.” He shook his head as she disappeared around the corner. “They’re totally going to do it in Africa.”

“Oh, they will so do it, but then that’s your plan.” Alex started toward the conference room again. “You know she’ll probably end up being your sister-in-law. Your girls will call her Auntie Erin and she’ll teach them how to make homemade grenades or something.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t seem to get rid of anyone anyway, so I might as well minimize the damage. God only knows who Theo would drag home if he wasn’t all moony over Erin. I’m pretty sure Case is going to show up with some chick he scrapes off the floor of a bar. That boy can drink.” He had to smile because the light of his fucking life stepped out of the break room.

Charlie Taggart. The sight of his gorgeous wife made his heart speed up. He knew she was due to deliver their babies in five weeks, but damn he wanted to fuck her long and hard. She was stunning, a freaking super-hot fertility goddess who made his dick stand up and cheer every time he thought about her. She had a grin on her face as she caught sight of him. “Hey, those people from LA are completely insane. They asked for spring water but nothing filtered by modern hands or from any country with a dictator or not approved by Angelina Jolie. They also asked for water without carbs. Seriously. They think water has carbs. We could make so much money off these people.”

It would be a miracle if he survived the afternoon. “How does Chelsea feel about heading to LA for a couple of weeks?”

“Months,” Alex said. “This could take months and Sully has promised to pay top dollar.”

Charlie frowned. “I don’t know that I want to be so far away from my sister after the babies are born. I kind of hate that idea.”

“I’ll figure it out.” If Charlie wanted Chelsea, who was the single least maternal woman he’d ever met, around their babies, then Chelsea would be there. “Maybe this once, Jesse can work with Michael.”

She went on her toes and kissed him. “Thanks, babe. And have you come up with a name yet?”
“Rocky.” It was a joke between them now. “Or Rambo. Hey, maybe you’ll name yours Rambo. I think they’re perfect names for twins.”

She made a vomiting sound and slipped her hand in his as they walked down the hall. “Over my dead body.”

“Is he still doing this? What was it last week?” Alex asked.

Ian saw the conference room up ahead. It was full of Sully’s “cast.” Apparently, it wasn’t Kendalmire’s way to travel with less than an entourage. “Chuck. Girls can be named Chuck.”

“Not if they want to have any kind of a social life. Ian, they’ll be here soon. Mine is Kenzie. Her sister needs a name that wasn’t plucked from an action movie.” Charlie gave him her death stare but it was really softened by the hand on her belly. She smoothed it over as though soothing the babies inside. “We can talk about it after the meeting.”

He stepped inside, and Sully was talking to his people.

“This is all going to be over soon and it won’t disrupt your schedule.” Sully spoke in silky tones, like he was calming down an unruly child. “Trust Mr. Taggart. He’s got a sixth sense about this kind of thing. We’ll have you safe in no time, Hoover.”

An emaciated blonde flipped her hair back. Ah, the girl who modeled. According to her press kit, Brie Westerhaven was the daughter of a minor rock star from the eighties and a groupie who didn’t know how to use birth control. The show chronicled her attempts to make it big on fashion runways while her dunce boy attempted to take on the music business in absolutely the most superficial of ways. They were surrounded by hangers on. Hoover’s two brothers, his producer, who looked heavily invested in dental gold if that grill he was wearing was real, two personal assistants, who looked like they really wished they’d finished college and gotten real jobs, and the chick with the crazy eyes.

Ian looked over at Alex, who shook his head.

“You can’t know that,” Alex muttered under his breath. “Don’t, Ian. We should follow procedure.”

“Do you see those eyes?” It was all so clear to him and he’d spent two seconds with these people. Alex’s mouth firmed stubbornly. “It could mean nothing. Let Jesse handle it. He’ll follow procedure and we’ll actually make money off this.”

Brie shook her head as she paced. “God, I hope we get back to Cali soon. This is so boring. I thought Texas was one of those not real places. You know what I mean.”

She glanced over at a woman who stood by her side, staring up at the model as if she was the second coming of the Virgin Mary. “I do. You’re so smart, Brie. I didn’t think Texas was real either. I mean who would? Sully, we should tape this scene. Brie is so funny.”

“Dude, anyone who’s seen Dallas knows it’s real, hello.” Hoover waved a hand through the air as though it was all too much for him. “Don’t you watch TV and shit? Where do you think J.R. came from? It’s a brilliantly ironic television show about global warming.”

The pixiesque woman by Brie shot the DJ a look Ian had seen before.
Damn, Sully had really lost his touch. He used to be good at understanding the people around him. Alex wasn’t going to like it, but Ian really couldn’t stand the thought of even having these people as an open case halfway across the country. It was time to shut this shit down.

He pointed at the girl because despite the fact that Sully was willing to pay by the hour, if these people didn’t get out of his office he was going to launch a grenade at them. “It’s Crazy Eyes. She’s a closeted lesbian in love with Dimwitted Blonde, and she tried to kill Douchebag.”

Damn, didn’t they know it was always the bitch with the crazy eyes?

His wife turned, about to yell at him—yeah, he knew that look—but Crazy Eyes saved him from the inevitable lecture about giving peace a chance and shit by pulling a forty-five out of her outrageously large handbag.

“You don’t deserve her!” Crazy Eyes shouted as she pointed the gun at Hoover.

All hell broke loose, but then it wasn’t really a day at the office without a little chaos.
Chapter Two

“Crazy Eyes, I swear to god if you fire that fucking gun in my conference room, I will kill you myself, and you won’t like how I do it,” Ian swore. His heart was going to beat out of his fucking chest. Charlie was in here. If the bullets started flying, she could get hit. The babies could get hit. Damn it, they were supposed to be safe here.

Brie had a hand over her chest as though protecting herself. “Marcy, what are you doing?”

Sully put out his hands and eased toward Crazy Eyed Marcy with the calm movements of a lion tamer. “Marcy, honey, there’s no need for this. Hoover wasn’t trying to be mean. You know how he is. Let’s calm down and talk about this.”

Hoover had ducked behind the dude with the grill and was currently peeing his pants, if the smell was any indication.

Yeah. Sully was going to pay for that.

“Charlie, get out of here.” He didn’t like how shaky Marcy was. And she’d already proven herself entirely incapable of hitting her target.

“It’s fine, Ian.” She didn’t move, merely watched as the chick with the gun pointed it her way.

“Don’t move,” Marcy said, her voice thin and reedy.

“God, Marcy, you’re such a drama queen.” Brie huffed and sat down in one of the chairs and started to look at her nails as though the rest of the action bored her.

“Marcy, honey, why don’t you give me the gun?” Sully asked.

“Wait, it was Marcy?” One of Hoover’s brothers scratched his head and seemed to be trying to figure the situation out.

“Dude, I thought you slept with her,” the other brother whispered in a too loud voice.

Marcy pointed the gun toward Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumb. “I only love Brie. I would never sleep with any of you.”

Alex leaned toward him. “You get Charlie and I’ll take down the girl.”

Ian nodded. He had to be careful. Normally he would simply hit Charlie with the force of a steamroller, forcing his body over hers so if a bullet came their way it would take him out instead of her. But her body wasn’t her own. Her body held their babies. His girls. All three of his girls were in danger. His heart pounded in his chest, adrenaline coursing through his bloodstream. Normally he went ice cold in these situations. Charlie was deadly all on her own. His wife could take care of herself, though he preferred to handle the dangerous stuff. She was competent, but she was almost nine months pregnant. God, if anything happened to his girls…

Charlie had died once. Oh, it had all been a ploy in a spy game they’d been playing, but he’d spent five years in hell mourning her. He couldn’t do it again. He couldn’t lose her again and god, he couldn’t lose their daughters. He had a sudden vision of burying all three of them, and it stopped him in his tracks.

“Ian, are you all right?” Alex whispered.
And that was the moment Charlie chose to make her play. Marcy had backed up, moving away from Sully, who seemed to be putting himself between the gun and his star. Unfortunately, it moved Marcy’s back close to Charlie, who had her in a choke hold before Ian could scream. The gun fell out of Marcy’s hand, clattering to the floor.

“Oh, my god. Something’s kicking me!” Marcy said before her eyes closed and she went limp.

Charlie let her drop to the floor and Alex was kicking the gun away before Ian could move. She grinned his way, her hand on her belly. “Ian, the babies just went crazy. I swear to god they could tell we were taking someone down. They’re already helping Mommy take out the bad guys.” She frowned. “Babe, are you all right? You are really pale.”

Ian sat, staring ahead as he tried to get himself under control.

“I think you broke him,” Eve whispered to Charlie two hours later.
“I can still hear, you know.” He hadn’t moved in hours. He was replaying the situation over and over in his brain. The sight of Charlie creeping up on a woman with a gun while she was super pregnant wasn’t one that would go away easily.

The Dallas Police had shown up and hauled Crazy Eyes off to prison. She was about to find out just how damn real Texas was, complete with a prison system where she could totally find a new girlfriend since Brie wasn’t interested. She hadn’t been all that interested in Hoover, who had required a change of pants, either. She had been interested when the press had shown up downstairs.

Derek was going to keep McKay-Taggart’s name out of it so they didn’t become the go-to security firm for douchebag reality stars. Lieutenant Brighton had tried to question Ian, but all he’d managed to say was something about asking Charlie since she was freaking Superwoman and his babies in utero could kick ass.

Jesus. He couldn’t breathe.

“Babe, do you want something to eat? I can have Sean bring something over.” Charlie was using a deeply soothing tone on him as she rubbed his shoulders.

“Not hungry.” He might never eat again.

“How about some Scotch?” Charlie offered.

“I know Alex has some eighteen-year-old,” Eve offered. “Or we could go back to my office and sit and talk. You’ve been through something traumatic. You need a safe place to discuss your feelings.”

That got him moving. He wasn’t going to have a flipping session. “I’m fine.”

He stood up and started down the hall but not before he noticed Eve taking a twenty-dollar bill from Charlie, who was shaking her head.

“Told you it would work,” Eve said under her breath. “Now you need to go and fix him. That man is in serious denial.”

He wasn’t in denial. He knew damn well there was absolutely nothing he could do. He strode down the hallway. It was utterly out of his control. He hated this. He wasn’t in control of fucking anything anymore.

Adam started to walk out of his office and shrank right back in when he saw the look on Ian’s face. At least one person was still afraid of him.
He needed more fear from his employees. He should begin routine beatings. Yes, that would make him feel better. He could randomly beat the shit out of people, and then he would have the illusion of control.

Because it was all an illusion.
He’d just sat down in his chair when she came through the door, closed it quietly, and locked it behind her.

What was that about?
“Ian, I know you’re mad.”
“I’m not mad.” He couldn’t be mad. She was ridiculously pregnant and that meant he couldn’t get mad. He couldn’t take charge. He couldn’t do fucking anything. He was supposed to be “supportive” and calm, even when she did stupid things like take down a killer with a choke hold.

“Yes, you are furious and I don’t really understand how you aren’t yelling at me. Come on, babe. It would make you feel so much better. Do you want me to get the paddle out? It’s been a while since you gave me a good long spanking. We could both use it.”

Yes, he could so use a nice session where he took out all of his frustrations on her gorgeous backside. But again, she was pregnant. “I think you’re right. I’ll have some Scotch and chill out here. It’s not a problem, though I’m sure Alex is pissed I didn’t draw this out.”

She reached out a hand, and when he thought she would lower herself into his lap, her knees found the carpet and she knelt down beside him. “You always have had an instinct for finding crazy eyes.”

“Baby, that can’t be comfortable. Let me help you up.”
“No, I want to be here. I’m fine. You have got to stop treating me like I’m made of glass. I’m fine. You’re the one who’s fragile right now.”

“I am not fragile, Charlie.”
A little glint hit her eyes. “Prove it.”

Frustration raced through him like a freight train. When she got that light in her eyes, he was usually in for a hell of a time. His Charlie could take as much as he could give. Their kinks matched beautifully. He topped and she loved to be topped.

If he was honest, he would say his kinks changed for her. He’d been hardcore, dominating women for both discipline and sex. His D/s style had been rigid. Now he was a lovingly indulgent top who spanked his wife more because she liked it than for any real disciplinary reasons.

Though today, he’d definitely wanted to smack her ass for pulling that stunt. She could have been killed. She could have lost the babies. Anything could have happened.

“I’m not going to talk you into punishing me, am I?” Charlie asked, her eyes wide and innocent.

He wanted to, but he didn’t dare. She was so close to delivery. She might think she was superwoman, but she was pregnant with twins and he would be damned if he caused her a single moment’s discomfort until she was fully recovered.

Then all bets were off and her ass was his.

And he would still have to deal with the fact that he wasn’t in control. Two small girls would prove that to him once and for all. He couldn’t control those girls. Kenzie and…

One of his babies didn’t have a name yet and he couldn’t come up with one. He’d been joking about Rambo, but he couldn’t for the life of him come up with a name. The one thing Charlie had asked him to do.
“Ian, you’re going to be good at this. Everything is going to be fine. I know you’re scared, and I didn’t make that any better by taking down crazy pants by myself. I think you need to relax. You’ve spent the last several months catering to my every whim and I really need to pay you back for that.” Her hands were close to the fly of his slacks. She was on her knees, that gorgeous mouth of hers trembling. “I need you to top me. I need to know that you still want me. For weeks you’ve been so sweet and so distant. I know I’m big, but I still need you. I need to be more than the mother of your children. I need to be your wife. God, I miss being your submissive.”

And he longed to be her Master. What could it really hurt? If he was gentle, he wouldn’t hurt her.

He twisted a hand in her hair, pulling lightly. He wouldn’t be too gentle. Charlie wouldn’t like that. He pulled just enough to watch her eyes go soft as she began to submit. “You want to play, brat? You want to play after that stunt you pulled? I need you to understand a few things, Charlie Taggart. Your ass is mine as soon as those two girls who are renting move out.”

She bit her bottom lip before running her tongue over it. “What are you going to do to it, Master?”

Fuck. He was going to come before she touched him. He took a tight reign on that unruly and desperate cock of his. She was right. They both needed this. He needed a few moments where he could pretend everything was the same. “I’m going to slap that sweet ass silly. Have you seen some of the new toys I’ve bought for you, my love? Unzip my slacks and take my cock out. You’re going to see to me while I explain how bad it’s going to get for you in a few weeks.”

He let go of her hair and she eagerly moved forward, her hands on the fly of his pants in an instant.

It was one of the things he adored about his wife. She didn’t hold back or prevaricate. She loved playing with him and she didn’t hold back her affection. It was Charlie’s honest need for him that had first broken through his defenses and allowed him to love her openly and with a free heart. God, he fucking loved her.

He was also going to torture her.

His cock popped out as she drew back the band of his boxers. He was already hard as a rock and wanting, but he was going to enjoy this and that meant not shooting off the minute she touched him no matter how much the bastard wanted to. “Lick me. I want you to suck my cock until I tell you to stop, but I swear to god, Charlie, if you’re in pain because of the position, you better tell me.”

Charlie groaned and her only real reply to him was a long lick of her tongue over his dick. Her hand disappeared and he groaned as he felt that soft palm cup his balls. She rolled them lightly as she swiped at his cockhead, licking up the cream he was already producing. His dick was always ready to go where she was concerned.

So fucking good. His wife knew exactly how he liked it. She leaned over, her strawberry blonde hair flowing all around, and she sucked at the head of his cock. He shifted his hips, trying to make it easier on her. She settled in and started to suck his cock in long passes. Pure pleasure swamped him, but he hadn’t forgotten what he promised her.

He settled back and watched his cock disappear between her plump lips. “Once you’re recovered, I’m going to take you to Sanctum. It’ll take a few months, but it’s going to be perfect. I’ve stocked it with everything I need to torture you. You won’t believe the things I’ve bought. New plugs to open up your asshole with. Pretty clamps for your nipples.”
Her head came up. “It might take a while to get to those, Ian. I plan to breastfeed. You know how sensitive they are now.”

They were crazy sensitive now. He could lick one and practically make her come. Her whole body had been sensitive lately. After the initial vomiting period, Charlie had been all about getting a little something something, until the final month when she’d been somewhat miserable because she had two extra humans in her body.

Why did his sperm have to be overachieving? Two babies? Three girls. He was going to be so overwhelmed.

He growled and pushed her back to his cock. “I do not need to talk about lactation right now.” Although her breasts were larger. Plump and round. Sexy. He knew the reasons for the change, but he couldn’t see her as anything but stunning. And his.

“I built a privacy room that’s just for us, baby.” He wouldn’t have to share it with anyone because there were plenty. He’d built them a suite complete with a massive bathroom. The shower and soaking tub were built for the two of them. The tile was heated because her feet were always cold and the towel racks warmed the big fluffy bath sheets he’d ordered for her. The bed was huge and there would be an armoire stocked with everything he would need to torture his pretty submissive. In that room they wouldn’t be husband and wife. They wouldn’t be partners. They wouldn’t be parents. In that room, they would be lovers, Master and sub. Ian and Charlie.

“I can’t wait to see it.” She sucked the head of his cock, sending pleasure coursing through his system. Her tongue bathed his dick. Over and over, she loved him with affection.

He was a possessive asshole, but he wasn’t going to change. She belonged to him. She’d belonged to him since that moment he’d looked across the dungeon floor in Paris and saw her. Back then she’d had dark hair, but that mischievous grin had been the same.

That very night he’d approached her and negotiated a scene. He’d spanked her and they’d been in this very position about two hours after meeting. She’d been on her knees, sucking his cock like she would die without it.

Suddenly, he needed more. As she sucked him, he could see it—their life together playing out in sharp scenes in his head. Those first days when he realized what it meant to go crazy over a woman. He’d never wanted anyone the way he had Charlie. It had been refreshing and terrifying all at one. That first time he’d slid into her body, forcing his way in as she clung to him. *Sweet Child o’ Mine* had played throughout the club and they’d taken way longer in the privacy room than he’d signed them up for. He saw her standing there in London as he’d made her his wife and no matter what he did, he would always see her dead. It was always on the edge of his consciousness. He knew what it felt like to lose Charlie.

And to get her back. He could feel himself opening the door the night Alex and Eve had remarried. One moment changed everything. One turn of a doorknob had shifted him into another world—one where Charlie was alive again.

He’d fought her. He’d fought so hard and now he couldn’t think of a single reason why. He should have gotten on his knees and thanked the fucking universe for the second chance he’d been given.

There was no one—no other woman in the world—who moved him, who challenged him, who completed him.

He tugged her off his dick. If she went much longer, he would come in her mouth, and that wasn’t what he needed. He needed communion. His love for her was sacred and he needed to pray. “No, Charlie. I want to get inside you. I need to be inside you.”
He stood, not giving a damn that his slacks slid off. He reached down to draw her up. She was heavier, but that was only because she was carrying their babies. The truth was, she was beautiful always to him. She could gain or lose weight, grow older, change her hair. It wouldn’t matter. He would see her one way. He was surprised to find out the Charlie of his dreams wasn’t the woman he’d first met. She’d been amazing. She’d haunted his dreams for years, but when he closed his eyes, the Charlie he saw was the one he’d opened the door to. The one who had been smart enough and brave enough to find her way home. The one with strawberry blonde hair. She’d gotten on her knees for him that night, too.

“Charlie Taggart,” he said in an authoritative voice as his hands found her hips. Despite the fact that she was tall for a woman, she had to look up at him. “Yes, Ian?”
He stared at her as though he could imprint his will on her. “Did I ever say thank you?”
Her lips curled up slightly. “You rarely do, but you don’t need words to say how you feel. I know.”
But she deserved the words. “Thank you for coming back for me.”
Her face softened and reached up to touch his, her fingertips sliding along his jaw. “Babe, there was never a question of that. I will always find my way back to you.”
“I love you and you should know that if you die on me again, I’ll find you. I won’t let us be apart again.”
“Never again,” she promised. “Ian, I’m going to be okay.”
She always saw through him. He lowered his mouth to hers. “You better be or there will be hell to pay. I love you.”
“Back at you, Taggart.”
Her arms went around his neck and he stopped thinking about anything but getting inside her. His tongue plunged deep and met with hers, sliding together. He caressed those sensitive breasts and felt her shudder in his arms. She was right. He’d spent the last few weeks treating her like she was fragile, but his Charlie was strong enough to handle almost anything. He drew her close and circled one of her nipples with his thumb. Even under the cotton shirt and bra she was wearing, he could feel the nipple go rigid, begging for his tongue and mouth. He unbuttoned her blouse and drew the strap of her bra down so he could release one plump breast.
“Please, Ian,” she murmured as his hand cupped her. “Please touch me everywhere. I miss this so much.”
He kissed his way down her neck, her skin so familiar and yet always so exciting to him. This was his true home. This woman. They could be anywhere in the world and as long as he was with her, he was home.
He leaned over and gently captured that pert nipple between his lips. He was careful with her, licking around the areola before sucking it into his mouth. Charlie shook in his arms, her hands finding his hair and fingernails scratching along his scalp. He fucking loved that. He pulled on her clothes until she was bare from the waist up and he got those breasts in his hands. He dropped to his knees and began to drag the voluminous cotton skirt she wore over her big belly.
“You’re sure it’s not horrible?” She stared down at him.
She might still get a spanking. He dragged on the skirt until it hit the floor and then ran his hands over the outrageous curve of her stomach, smiling when something kicked back at him. His girls. They weren’t calm or patient. They wriggled around as though anxious to get this life going. He kissed her belly. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world, and just for that I’m putting you on the human hamster wheel. No talking shit about my property.”
She was his and no one talked shit about his queen. Not even his queen.
He gently eased her back on his desk, his hand running down between her legs. He could already smell her arousal. Sweetest damn smell in the world. His fingers found her, parting her and playing through her labia. So hot. She was already wet for him.
Charlie spread her legs for him. She was supported by his desk, her palms flat behind her so she leaned back to where she could get comfy. Yeah, he could work with this position. He circled her clit.
“Hamster wheel?” Her voice came out in a breathy pant. “You can’t be serious.”
Oh, he was serious. “Top of the line. And after you’re through breast feeding, I’ll trade out the little water bottle for vodka.”
She threw her head back and laughed, the sound sweet to his ears. Like everything his wife did, she laughed with great enthusiasm. She moaned as she tilted her pelvis up. “That feels so good. And you’re insane if you think I’m running on a hamster wheel. Hey, maybe we should get one for the girls. If they’re anything like their cousin, they’ll be rambunctious. Carys is a little ball of energy. We can let them run on the hamster wheel for a couple of hours a day and then they’ll sleep.”
And she matched him for deviousness. “Done, baby. I knew Sean was too easy on that kid. He lets her play with Aidan and Tristan. He’s asking for her to get involved in some weird ménage thing.”
“Yes, right there. Oh, right there.” Her head dropped back. “And you have to go easy on the boys. They’re infants. They’re not trying anything.”
He wasn’t so sure, but he would keep his own counsel on that one. And he was definitely watching the boys in his daughters’ playgroup. He might even have a little man to baby talk with all of them so those boys knew the lay of the land. Charlie had liberal ideas about how girls should be raised. He was thinking about going old school and locking them in a very nice cloister for the first forty years or so.
She was close, but Ian liked to tease. He withdrew his hand.
His wife’s head came up, those gorgeous eyes flaring. “Ian!”
He was ahead of her. He lined his cock up and started to work his way in. He spread her wide but kept the penetration shallow. In another two months or so he would take her hard and plunge deep, but he was careful now. “I’ll give you what you need, baby.”
He found her clit again and pressed down as he thrust inside her.
Something kicked him hard, a sure sign that those girls were going to make his sex life very difficult. Luckily, he didn’t let anything get to him when he was fucking. They could kick all they liked. This was his time.
Charlie tightened around him, but he was ready. She responded so easily to him, as though she was always primed to take pleasure from him. He set a steady rhythm and watched as her breasts bounced as she moved against him, trying to force him in deeper. It wouldn’t work. He controlled this, but he liked to watch her fight for her orgasm. He pressed hard again, the pad of his thumb tight to her clit, and she flushed. Charlie’s body tightened and her eyes went soft. She called out his name and squeezed him tight.
This was what he’d needed. Connection. When he was inside her, everything was right with the world. The rest of it—the worry and fear—it fell away until there was only her and pleasure.
He felt his balls draw up and thrust faster, getting just a bit deeper. It wasn’t all he wanted. He wanted to be balls deep, but he would take her any way he could get her. He was addicted to this woman. He craved her.
He let go and his orgasm flooded his system with pure joy. The world seemed softer than before, his troubles further away. He pumped into her, giving her everything he had.

He sighed and reached for her, pulling her close. Her belly was between them and the girls seemed more active. He chuckled as he kissed her nose. He even loved her damn nose with its light dusting of freckles. “That didn’t make them happy.”

Charlie laid her head on his shoulder. “It made me happy.” She draped herself around him. “I swear they’re fighting for dominance in there.”

He ran a hand over her flesh. “They’re Taggarts. What else would they be doing?” He suddenly wanted to stay this way, alone with her, naked with her. “Baby, why don’t you get dressed and I’ll take you home. We’ll take the rest of the week off. Hell, let’s take vacation and we’ll wait for the babies.”

She turned her head up, a little frown on her face. “I really am fine, Ian.”

She wasn’t because she obviously didn’t understand him. “I wasn’t concerned about your health.” Though he really always was. “I want to be alone with you. In a few days, there won’t be much alone time. I want some peace before the demons show up.”

She laughed and lightly slapped him across the chest. “Stop calling our daughters demons, Ian Taggart. They are going to be sweet little ladies.”

“So you cheated on me with the UPS guy?” Because his daughters likely wouldn’t be very ladylike. Not if they took after their dad.

She hugged him again and then pushed away, getting to her feet. He kept his hands on her, making sure she didn’t fall. She looked him up and down. “You are the only man in the world who can have his junk hanging out like that and I still find attractive. Naked is so much hotter.” She proved it by turning around and walking toward the bathroom conveniently located a few feet away.

“You didn’t let me get undressed, baby. You were too hot for that.” He bent over and dragged his slacks up, tucking his shirt back in. His body was humming and the sight of his gorgeous wife walking across the room made him wonder if they shouldn’t take a nice long shower before they went home.

She disappeared behind the door.

Why not take the next few weeks off? Alex could handle the administrative crap and Simon could deal with clients and operative questions. They didn’t have too much on the docket. Sully had written him a hefty check despite the fact that it hadn’t taken him more than a few moments to solve the case.

He could easily spend a few weeks nesting with his wife, and he could start by washing that lovely body of hers off in the shower he’d had installed a few years back. Back then that bathroom had been all about function. He often slept at the office in the early days. Now it was definitely helpful for those times when he and the missus decided to get their freak on.

And he suspected Sean had hauled Grace in here just for kicks. It would serve him right since he’d screwed Charlie on Sean’s desk at Top a couple of months before.

The heart wanted what the heart wanted…and his dick definitely wanted her.

He was almost to the door when it opened and Charlie stood there, her eyes wide.

“Ian,” she said in a breathless voice.

His heart nearly seized. “What?”

“My water broke.”

How the hell did water break…shit.

Normal was over.
“Do you think they can tell?” Charlie asked when the doctor left.

“Yes,” Ian replied. “They can tell you’re pregnant, baby. They are really good doctors and they know a pregnant lady when they see one.”

She’d lost her damn mind, but he was going to be supportive.

Her eyes rolled and she shook her head as she maneuvered her way to sitting on the hospital bed. “No. I’m talking about sex. Do you think they can tell that we had sex?”

He gave her belly a pointed stare. “Yeah.”

She sighed. “I meant recently, Ian. I meant like two hours ago. That kid was all down there looking at my lady bits and I was wondering if he could tell you’d been up in that today.”

“No at all.” Probably, but he wasn’t about to tell her that. “All they can see is the centimeter thing.”

Charlie’s whole body stiffened and she reached for him. He moved as quickly as he could, giving her a hand to hold on to as the pain took her. It seemed to last forever, but he knew it wasn’t more than a few seconds. His wife was in pain and he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Well, he could.

“Take the epidural.”

“I will if it gets to be too much,” she agreed. “But right now it would only slow down the labor.”

He needed everything to slow down. He needed it to stop. From the moment she’d told him the babies were coming to now seemed like both forever and the blink of an eye.

The door opened and Chelsea strode in. “Hey, sis. Looks like my nieces are eager to get here.”

Ian took that as a sign that he could step out for a moment. He kissed his wife and left her with her sister for the moment. Dr. Bates couldn’t have gotten too far. He had a few questions he didn’t want to ask around his wife.

He walked out the door and jogged to catch the OB who was standing at the nurses’ station. Melinda Bates was a lifestyle friendly doctor. There was a small network of them. Dr. Bates had grown up with a mom and dad who were full-on 24/7, and she understood. It made Ian infinitely more comfortable to have her watching out for Charlie. She wouldn’t look at them sideways if Charlie forgot and called out for her Master.

“Doc,” Ian began.

“Yes, Mr. Taggart? Is Charlotte all right?” Dr. Bates asked.

“For now. Shouldn’t we be doing a C-section? And isn’t it early? The babies are going to be premature. Shouldn’t we have things set up to take care of them?” They would be small. So fucking small. They would be fragile, and if anything happened to them it would be Ian’s fault. This was his family. His girls.
“Ian, it’s going to be fine.” She put a hand on his shoulder, obviously tossing aside formality. “If she hadn’t gone into labor this week, I likely would have pushed to induce her soon. The babies are at a good weight, and from what I can tell they’re already obedient little girls. They’re both in a heads down position and ready to be born. Charlotte’s placenta isn’t obstructing her cervix. This is a textbook case for delivering twins vaginally. Everything is going perfectly.”

“And if something goes wrong?” He didn’t even want to think about it. He would almost rather just get it all over with.

“Then we do an emergency C and she’s still fine. Look, nothing I say is going to make you feel better. You’re out of control and I can’t give it back to you. This is woman’s work and it always will be. There isn’t a man in the world who’s watched his beloved labor to bring their child into the world and not felt helpless,” Dr. Bates said with a sympathetic smile. “But Charlotte is strong and your daughters are strong. Let them do their work. For now, all you can do is let them know much you love them.”

He nodded, but her words didn’t really help. All he could see was Charlie looking pale in that hospital gown she’d had to change into.

So many things could go wrong. He could lose them all.

“Ian?”

He turned and Sean stood there. He was still in his chef whites, as though he’d walked out in the middle of prep for tonight’s dinner. Which given the time was the most likely scenario. “You didn’t have to come up here. It’s probably going to be hours.”

Sean simply walked up to him. “I wouldn’t be anywhere else. My sous-chef can handle Top for the night. I’m staying here with you. Grace and Li stayed behind to close up McKay-Taggart, but they should be here very soon if not already. I think you’ll find everyone else is here. They’ve kind of taken over the waiting room. We are going to be hell on the volunteers.”

God, he hadn’t expected that. “Tell them to go home, Sean. Like I said, it’s going to be hours.”

Sean put a hand on his shoulder. “Walk with me. Chelsea’s got Charlotte covered for the moment. I want to talk to you.”

He stepped back, wary. “I don’t need touchy-feely shit.”

“Sometimes I wonder why we put up with you,” Sean said under his breath. “Fine. I’ll go to plan B. Ian, I’ve got lemon cookies Macon made in the waiting room.”

“Oh, I will take those.” As long as he wasn’t about to get some lecture about the step he was about to take. He didn’t want to hear about that. He kind of didn’t want to think about that. Sometimes it was best to simply let things happen.

He started to follow Sean down the hall.

“Do you remember the moment you decided you wanted kids?” Sean asked.

Touchy-feely territory. Yep. His brother was trying to get him there, but Ian was good at avoiding the land mines. Usually he would simply walk away, but he wanted those cookies so a little deflection was necessary. “Nah. Charlie really wanted kids. You’ve seen her with Carys. Besides, Carys deserves family. After you and Grace made the decision to keep her a single, it kind of fell to me and Charlie to give her cousins.”
"You make it sound like we did it to spite you," Sean groused. "The doctors told Grace another pregnancy could be very difficult. She wanted to try. I said no. Carys needs her mother more than she does more siblings."

This was the way it was with him and his brother. They worked out their issues through sarcasm. They didn’t need the therapy crap other people did. "Well, I think she needs cousins. I will say if I’d known about Case and Theo at the time, I totally would have shoved this duty off on them."

"Don’t even say that," Case said, walking up to them.

Theo was at his side with a big grin on his face. "I’m up to the challenge, big brother. Well, maybe not the actual babymaking challenge, but I’m willing to practice."

Case rolled his familiar blue eyes. "He thinks he’s getting some in Africa. He’s absolutely certain Erin is going to fall into his bed while they’re fighting Ebola and stuff."

Theo didn’t back down. "I’m optimistic. I’m getting her alone and I’m pleading my case."

"Yeah, she’s going to respond by shoving her foot up your ass, little brother," Case explained.

Ian kind of figured that Erin would try to shove her boot up Theo’s ass, but he also thought she might not fight him too hard. "Any way I can convince you to go to Africa and just get the job done?"

He’d often found that the people around him did exactly the opposite of what he asked them to, so he employed reverse psychology to get his way. In this case, it wasn’t exactly his way. It was Theo’s way, but Theo was going to waste a ton of time if he didn’t go after that girl and take her down. She wouldn’t respond to roses. She responded to a man strong enough to take her shit and protect her from whatever the hell she was afraid of.

Theo frowned. "I’ll try, but I gotta be honest. I’m probably not going to try very hard. Something about that woman does it for me. I can’t help it."

Case groaned. "I swear I’m going to beat him to death if he bursts into song."

Ian sympathized. "It’s disgusting, isn’t it? I had to put up with Sean singing about Grace for weeks."

"I did not sing, asshole," Sean shot back.

They continued down the hall. "I distinctly remember you singing and weeping and playing really bad guitar."

"I did none of that," Sean clarified.

"I’m pretty sure Theo’s been writing poetry."

Theo shook his head. "Never once in my life have I written poetry."

Sean and Theo walked alongside but there was zero way to miss the similarities. Case and Theo might be twins separated by mere minutes, but they were he and Sean all over again. Before they got to the lobby, Case put out a hand and held Ian back. Shit. Was Case about to ask him not to send Theo to Africa? Case could be super protective of his younger brother. Another thing they had in common.

"What?"

Case frowned. "I just wanted to say something. I know I was kind of an asshole when we first met."

"You can’t help it. It’s your personality." He knew what Case was talking about. Case had always resisted acknowledging their connection as anything past a coincidental biological link. He was wrong, of course, but Ian didn’t bother to point it out.
Charlie, on the other hand, had been pretty specific with his brothers. They were family and therefore her responsibility, and she didn’t care if Case agreed. A while back, Case had broken his leg, and without bothering to ask the boy what he thought, she’d simply moved Case into the spare bedroom and taken care of him while Theo was off in Dubai.

“Yeah, well, it’s yours, too,” Case shot back. “Look, this is hard for me. Could you please shut the fuck up and listen? I’m sorry I was an asshole. I worried you would come in and Theo would look up to you.”

Ian felt for the kid. He remembered what it felt like to only have his brother. “I was never going to take Theo away from you.”

“I know, but I think you should also know that I wish it had been different.”

Ian could only imagine. “I’ll get Charlie to back off. It was never my intention to run roughshod over you, Case. I just wanted to get to know you.”

“That wasn’t what I meant. I didn’t mean I wish we hadn’t met. I mean I wish you’d been my big brother, too. All those years…I wish it had been you and Sean and me and Theo.”

The Taggart brothers. “You understand I’m going to beat the shit out of you.”

“Jesus, man. Is that a tear?” Case looked properly horrified.

“It’s manly hug time.” He caught his brother and gave him a good pounding on his back.

“And now we’re done.”

Case’s mouth turned up. “Thank god because Theo would have drawn that shit out.”

Sean popped back out of the waiting room. “What’s going on?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Ian lied because Sean would drag that shit out, too, and the last thing he needed was a bunch of crying dudes hanging on him.

“Not a thing, brother.” Case gave him a nod and joined the rest.

Sean stared at him suspiciously. “Yeah, I believe that.” He sighed. “You know you’re going to be good at this, right?”

“I’m good at everything.” But not this. Maybe he would be awful. He was sarcastic and didn’t particularly believe in showing his emotions to anyone but Charlie. He worried that he was going to resent the kids for taking time away from her, and didn’t that make him a complete asshole?

“Joke all you like, but in this I’m the leader, brother. I know what this feels like. I know how awful it feels to watch your wife do something you can’t help her with. You can’t take this burden from her.”

Ian shrugged. “Charlie’s tough.”

“And I also know what it feels like to worry that your whole world is about to change,” Sean said, ignoring him completely. “And guess what—it is. Nothing you’ve gone through prepares you. A lot of people will tell you you’ve already been a parent to me, and in some ways you were. You took care of me. I know what you sacrificed, but Ian, I wasn’t your kid. You have no idea how you’re going to feel when they put that first baby girl in your hands, and nothing I say will prepare you for it. But I am going to say this.”

“Do you have to? You know I really think those dudes back in the sixties had it right. We should go and sit in a bar somewhere and a nurse will call us and tell us the baby’s here.”

Sean put a hand on his shoulder. “Wasn’t that the life? Sorry. Come in here and you’re going to figure something out. I know you say you’re not afraid, but I’m going to do this anyway.”

He led Ian through the doors of the waiting room, and Ian was shocked at how they’d taken up all the space.
Li and Avery sat with Jake and Adam and Serena. They’d set up a small playpen and the boys were sitting in it while Carys held court between them. Grace was talking to Eve while Alex was pacing the floor and talking on his cell phone.

“Yes, Damon. I’ll be sure to call when they’re born,” Alex was saying. “Yeah, I know. Two girls. They’re going to drive him absolutely insane. Say hello to Penny for us.”

Simon was sitting with Jesse and Phoebe, and at least half of the members of Sanctum were here, too.

“I know one thing in this world and that’s the fact that Ian Taggart knows how to create a family. None of us would be here without you, you sarcastic asshole brother of mine. So go and help your wife make our family a little bigger.”

Ian did just that because the last thing he wanted any of them to see was the way his eyes had watered.

They’d come together because they’d all been defeated one way or another. They’d all been broken—by death or loss or failure. Ian hadn’t wanted to lose them. He hadn’t wanted to lose himself, so he’d started McKay-Taggart in order to give them all something to do.

How had they become more than friends? More than colleagues? Those people had become his family.

And his family was about to welcome another two of their own.

He slipped into Charlie’s room, ready to face the future.

Ten hours later, he was fairly certain his hand was going to break.

“One more big push and the first one will be out, Charlotte,” Dr. Bates said. “You’re doing great. I wish all my twin deliveries went like this.”

Charlie grunted and squeezed his hand and seemed to put all her willpower into her task. Then again, she was trying to push two whole human beings out of her vagina. She glanced up at him. “You could say something helpful.”

“Nope.” He really couldn’t. He’d spent hours watching her in pain and not being able to do or say anything that could make it better. He hated this. He hated every part of it. They were never doing this again. These two girls better like each other because they weren’t getting siblings. No way. No how. For the first time he actually thought about getting snipped so she would never have to deal with this kind of pain again.

“Wimp.” Somehow Charlie managed a smile right before she screamed again. And then with a long sigh, she laid back.

“Oh, hello pretty girl,” Dr. Bates said. “Ian, do you want to cut the cord?”

He wasn’t getting anywhere near that. He didn’t even like the symbolism. “I’ll pass.”

He needed to stay with Charlie. He needed to make sure she was all right.

“You are lucky, Charlotte,” the nurse said. “Any longer and you would have been giving birth to two toddlers. The first twin is five and a half pounds. She’s perfect.”

“Go and see her,” Charlie said.

“I’m fine. I can wait until the other one is out.”

“That could take a while,” the nurse said. She was holding a tiny bundle in her arms that looked absolutely nothing like a toddler. Toddlers were resilient, if Carys was any indication. The kid could bump all day and not really come to any harm. But whatever was in that little pink blanket, that was a fragile thing.

He was far more used to killing than nurturing.
“Show her to your wife,” the nurse urged.
Ian shook his head. “Charlie should hold her.”

Dr. Bates looked up from between his wife’s splayed legs. Yeah, it was that kind of a day.
“No. I think this one is close. Charlotte needs to push again.”

Charlie nodded. “I can feel it. This one isn’t going to wait. Let me see her, Ian.”

Deep breath. He could do this. It was just one tiny baby that had recently been expelled from
his wife’s body. He could handle one small female. Hell, he was the Dom of Doms. He was the
ultimate authority figure.

The nurse placed the little bundle in his arms and Ian looked down.
The baby looked up. Not the baby. His baby. His daughter. She had Charlie’s eyes and the
sweetest little cap of strawberry blonde hair. There wasn’t much of it, but it was there. She had a
little bow mouth and a tiny little nose. And a totally misshapen head.

“She looks like an alien.” An alien version of a baby Charlie. A gorgeous baby girl with a
cone for a head.

“If you don’t show me that baby right now, Ian Taggart, I am going to pull your balls off,”
Charlie growled.

He knew when to obey. Even the baby’s eyes had popped open, as though she knew the
sound of her mother in a killing rage. “I think this is the one who tried to take out crazy eyes. I’m
naming this one.”

He lowered his daughter down and watched in wonder as Charlie’s eyes softened and she
reached to touch her daughter for the first time.

And then her body seemed to seize. “Oh, here comes your sister.”

He cradled baby number one in his right arm and held Charlie’s hand with his left. He kept
switching his gaze between his girls. The baby in his arms was yawning as though the whole
event had really been tiring but no big deal.

Her sister was born three minutes later, and ten minutes after that he found himself
following his daughters down to the nursery. He stood outside, watching through the glass as the
pediatrician began checking the babies over. Baby number one was wrapped in her pink blanket
and number two was in yellow. It was a good thing because he couldn’t tell them apart by
looking at them. He wouldn’t let them out of his sight and explained in no uncertain terms that
his daughters wouldn’t be left there overnight. Charlie had been very specific about it. She was
keeping them in the room with her unless they needed to be checked out, and then Ian would be
watching. At the time, he’d thought she was being unreasonable. She was surely going to need
sleep. He’d been planning on quietly letting the girls go to the nursery.

Never. Not even once was he letting those babies out of his sight. They were his.

This was what Sean had meant. When they’d put baby number two in his arms and he
lowered them both down to Charlie, he’d finally understood. He’d protected Sean, but Sean
hadn’t been his.

These two small things were his and Charlie’s. They were proof beyond all doubt that they
loved each other. Those girls were immortality, a way for his love for his wife to always live on.
In that one moment, he understood what it meant. His love for his wife could be selfish. He

He wanted nothing from these girls except the right to love them, the right to protect and
teach them.

Loving Charlie had made him a man, but these girls made him a father, and that was so
much more.
“Look at that,” Sean said, coming to stand beside him. The rest had gone with promises to come by in the morning, but his brothers had stayed. Oh, Case and Theo had both fallen asleep in the waiting room, but they were here.

Ian and Sean watched the babies through the glass as the pediatrician checked them out. Kenzie, daughter number two, was lying peacefully while his firstborn had already kicked out of her swaddling and was currently giving the doctor hell. Baby girl didn’t like the eyedrops. She didn’t like the shot. She didn’t like being poked and prodded, and now the whole hospital knew it.

“That one’s going to kick a little ass, Sean.” He smiled as his daughter screamed her head off. He could already tell that scream wasn’t about pain. She was pissed.

And then her sister tuned up with her, as though crying in sympathy. Damn but they could make a racket.

“Any idea of what you’re going to name her?” Sean asked.

“Yeah. I think I got that all figured out,” he said with a smile.
Epilogue

“Kala? Isn’t that like the goddess of chaos in Hindu mythology?” Adam stared at Ian like he knew something was going on. Adam followed him out on the porch, away from the rest of the team who were now getting ready to sit down to Charlie’s welcome back dinner.

She’d only been in the hospital for two days, but Ian had made them wait two weeks before getting together in a big group. Charlie needed peace and quiet, but now she was ready to show the babies off to their family.

Naturally, Kenzie had gone to sleep right after her feeding and Kala had fussèd, so Daddy was holding her close, cuddling her so she could rest. His Kenzie and his Kala.

Adam was always far too perceptive. It was precisely why Ian loved to give him shit. “I think you’ve watched too much Indiana Jones. And no. That’s Kali. Kala is a perfect little name for a precious baby girl. In Sanskrit it means virtue.”

Adam’s eyes narrowed. “You looked it up?”

Maybe he shouldn’t have mentioned that part. At the time it seemed like a really good way to throw people off the scent. Charlie had accepted his explanation of Kala without blinking an eye. She’d told him she loved it and that it was perfect.

If only she knew how perfect it was…

“I can look things up, Adam. It’s my daughter’s name. It’s important.”

Adam took a drink off the coffee he was holding. This little dinner party was booze free since Charlie was breastfeeding. Sean and his sous-chef had made a grand Italian dinner for the group. The smell made Ian’s stomach rumble. “I don’t believe you. You’re the man who wanted to name them Bruce and Arnold.”

Ian shrugged, patting his daughter’s back. She seemed to like to sleep on his shoulder for some reason. Kenzie preferred being cradled, but Kala always wanted to be up high. “I have a deep affection for 80’s cinema. What can I say?”

Adam frowned. “I’ll figure it out in the end. Hey, Charlotte. Did the other little princess wake up?”

His wife stepped out onto the back porch with Kenzie in her arms. “She never sleeps for long if Kala isn’t close. We tried to force them to sleep in separate beds, but they cried until we put them together.”

He loved to watch them sleep. Honestly, he kind of loved to watch them do everything. He’d never understood until he looked down at a baby that was equal parts him and the woman he loved more than life. He would sit there like an idiot and watch those babies sleep, cuddling together like they had in the womb.

“I’ll go see if I can help with the prep work, but I meant what I said, Tag. I’ll figure it out and I’ll find some way to use it.” Adam grinned as he walked back in the house.

It would likely be fitting if Adam was the one who took him down. He gave Adam more crap than all the others, but he was fairly sure his friend wouldn’t figure it out.
God, he hoped Charlie never figured out he’d named their daughter an anagram for Kick A Little Ass.

“What was he talking about?” Charlie said, suspicion in her voice.

Ian gave her his most innocent look. “No idea, baby. You know how he likes to torment me.”

Charlie laughed and sank into one of the two rockers on the back porch. “Yeah, Adam torments you. That’s one world view. Sit down for a minute. Sean will come and get us when dinner’s ready.”

He sank down beside her. “Too many people? I can throw them all out.”

She shook her head. “Don’t you dare. That’s our family in there, but I wanted a couple of minutes where it’s just us.”

Us had been him and Charlie, and now that one word meant something more. Us meant two sweet girls who would likely drive their father utterly mad.

He reached for her with his free hand. He always wanted the connection with her. “Think you’ll ever want more?”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “Eventually, yes. I thought I would have to fight you on it.”

He shook his head. “No. I get it. I think I thought if we had kids, I would have to share you and I do, but I also thought somewhere in the back of my head that I wouldn’t be me anymore. I’m just a different me. I like this me, Charlie. Best thing I ever did was to open that door and welcome you home.”

Her jaw dropped. “You are such a liar, Ian Taggart. You gave me hell.”

Sometimes it was good to be him. “Not how I remember it.” He was good with his revisionist history. When she started to argue with him, he hushed her. “You’ll wake the babies.”

The gorgeous gleam in her eyes promised retribution. And he would take it. He would take everything he could get from her and give her back all of himself.

He held her hand and rocked while inside his family waited.

A man couldn’t ask for anything more.