

## Chapter One

She leaned against the bar and sipped her drink.

It was sparkling water in a cocktail glass. While she wouldn't have minded a real cocktail, she was working.

Siv Pedersen sipped again and glanced at her watch, then made an annoyed face.

“Nice expression,” an amused male voice in her earpiece said. “It says ‘that damn, good-for-nothing boyfriend of mine is late again.’”

She snorted. There was no boyfriend, she was just playing the part of an abandoned woman in a bar in order to keep an eye on her target. The guy was currently eating a filet steak medium rare at a table by the windows of the fancy steakhouse.

“He isn't worth it, Siv,” the voice in her ear said. “A man should never stand up a gorgeous woman like you.”

She hid her smile from the restaurant.

“Quit flirting with our newest recruit, Oliveira,” came the darkly lethal tone of their boss, Vander Norcross.

“I'm a one-woman man these days,” Ace Oliveira said. “I'm just making the rookie feel welcome.”

Ace was also about to become a dad. He and his fiancée, Maggie, had a baby due very soon. The tech guru of Norcross Security couldn't stop sharing snaps of Maggie's very large belly.

Siv did feel welcome. She'd needed a change, and moving from Norway to San Francisco to work in private security for Norcross was proving a good decision.

Her hand tightened on her glass and she crossed her legs. After she'd left the Norwegian military, life hadn't felt right. She'd loved the Army, but she'd known it was time for a change, but civilian life had initially proved harder than she'd guessed. She hadn't found a job she enjoyed. And then once her ex, a man who professed to love her, had dumped her to marry a pretty socialite with connections, Siv had decided it was time for a change.

"Siv, target is finishing his meal." Ace's voice was all business now.

She swiveled a little and scanned the target. Mastro's Steakhouse was pretty quiet this evening, but nearby, she saw a server carrying a huge seafood platter to a table. Her gaze shifted to the man just beyond.

Anthony Patterson Robson the Third. Tony to his friends.

It was a pretentious name for a mediocre man. He was an analyst at a San Francisco tech firm, and he'd decided that making a decent paycheck for hard work was beneath him. Instead, he'd decided to try his hand at corporate espionage.

Unfortunately for Tony, Norcross provided security for his employer, Nova Tech.

"He's on the move," Ace murmured.

"Siv, are you ready?" Vander asked.

"I'm on it." She fluffed her hair. It was brown, but shot through with gold streaks. She was wearing more makeup than normal, highlighting her blue eyes.

Tony headed her way. He was good-looking enough, but boring, with a weak jaw. He reminded her a little of her ex. As Tony drew near, Siv put her plan into action.

"Damn the man." She slammed her phone onto the bar and lifted her drink. She let a few tears fill her eyes. She also let more American leak into her accent. It was easy enough. While her father was Norwegian, her mom was a California girl, through and through. Living in

Norway had never softened Christie Pedersen's accent.

"Excuse me? Are you okay?"

Despite being about to meet his contact outside to hand over a flash card full of data, Tony stopped in front of her.

The man's other weakness was leggy blondes.

She shifted her legs, and watched his gaze drop. She wore a short, silver-gray skirt and a silky shirt in deep emerald green. Her hair was loose, and she tossed it back.

"I am now." She shot him a smile. "My boyfriend, make that *ex*-boyfriend, has stood me up for the last time."

Tony smiled, and flicked another glance at her legs. "I find it hard to believe that any man would stand you up."

She laughed. "I'm Eve." It made a good cover name since her real name sounded similar, just with an *S*.

"Eve. Look, I need to step outside and meet a business contact, but would you like to go somewhere, and have a drink?"

She pretended to consider. "You know what? Why the hell not?" She leaped off the stool and grabbed her handbag.

"Um, great." Tony's smile turned a little strained. "So I just need to hand over some files to my colleague and I'll be done."

*I bet you do.* She knew the man couldn't risk sharing the files on the internet, hence why he'd copied them to a flash card. She fluffed her hair again. "Sure thing. I'll touch up my makeup while you do your work thing."

Tony's smile brightened. "Great." He waved a hand toward the front of the restaurant.

She walked ahead of him and put a little extra sway into her hips. She could practically feel his gaze glued to her.

*Men.* So predictable.

Her ex, Johan, had been. Not at first. No, at first, he'd loved her strength. Said he was proud of her military career. Was falling in love with her.

Until he hadn't been.

She knew when it had started. A night out in Oslo with some friends. A drunk had been shouting abuse and grabbed the arm of their friend Espen's date. The woman had been scared and shaken. Siv had taken the man down in about three seconds and then passed him off to the bouncers at the nightclub.

She'd thought Johan would've been pleased. Instead, he'd been quietly furious. When they got back to his place, he'd ranted that she'd embarrassed him. He was the man, not her. He was the one who should've protected them.

Siv opened the door of Mastro's and rolled her eyes. She could open her own doors, drive her own car, lift her own bags, and defend herself. Protection wasn't what she'd wanted from Johan.

They'd broken up three weeks later, and a month after that, he'd been engaged to an elegant, well-dressed, twenty-something, whose father owned a shipping company. Siv had discovered he'd been screwing his new fiancée while he was still seeing Siv.

Siv's pride had been hurt, and she'd been mad that she hadn't realized he'd been cheating on her. It was then that she'd also, thankfully, realized that she hadn't been in love with Johan.

She'd wanted to be in love with a man who adored and respected her. But she was coming to realize that love was a stupid fairytale that the movies used to sell shit.

Total fiction.

Her parents' disastrous marriage should have already taught her that. And her father's subsequent parade of women.

Siv didn't need love. A hot night here or there would do the trick. She only needed herself—not someone who tried to erode her sense of self, her confidence, and her pride.

"I'll just be a second, gorgeous," Tony said.

"Sure thing." She pulled out her lipstick and compact from her handbag.

"Saxon is parked in a vehicle out front," Ace said. "And the contact is incoming."

She angled the compact mirror and saw a man striding up the street. Despite the warmish evening, he had a windbreaker on. The man was walking fast, like he had somewhere important to be. Some corporate espionage to conduct.

Tony straightened, looking nervous. Siv swiped some lipstick over her lips.

"Are you Mr. Black?" Tony asked the man.

"No names. You have the item?"

Tony nodded.

"Who's the woman?" the man asked.

"My plans for the next few hours."

*Oh, don't you sound smug and overconfident.* Siv rolled her eyes again.

For a second, another smug, overconfident male came to mind. And his outrageously handsome face and sexy smile.

*No.* Siv shut that down. She was not spending any time thinking about the medic who helped out Norcross Security. She wasn't spending time thinking about *any* man.

She turned and saw Tony holding out the data card.

"Actually," she said. "I'm here to take the information you stole, Tony, and stop this cozy bit of corporate espionage."

Tony frowned, looking confused.

Mr. Black was quicker on the uptake. He started to spin away, but Siv burst into action.

Her kick caught him in the gut.

The man made a pained sound and doubled over. Ooh, yes, that high heel had to have hurt.

She spun, snatched the flash card, then grabbed a still-stunned Tony's arm and yanked.

She bent her legs and he sailed over her head, and fell flat on his back on the concrete.

Siv stuck the flash card in her bra. Saxon Buchanan, a blond god of a man in tailored Armani, stalked up to her.

He eyed the men. "You don't mess around."

"No," she replied.

"Nice work." He hauled Tony up. "I think we'll have a little chat with these two, then—"

Saxon's eyes widened. "Siv, look out!"

There was a sudden, burning sting on the side of her rib cage. She swiveled, and saw Mr. Black, pocketknife in hand.

She kicked him, ducked another slash of the knife, then blocked his next swing.

Saxon charged into them and tackled Mr. Black to the ground, pinning the man's arms to the concrete. Siv dropped to her knees on Mr. Black's legs. The man jerked beneath them.

"*Fuck.*" Saxon lifted one hand. It was bleeding from a cut on his palm.

"He caught you?"

"Yeah." Saxon's gaze dropped and his brow creased. "But not as bad as you."

Siv looked down.

*Oh, hell.* Her shirt was soaked with blood.

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"There we go, Bish, all good now." Ryder Morgan pressed a bandage to the now-cleaned cut on the older man's swollen foot. "You need to take your meds and keep off your feet for a while."

The homeless man nodded. His hair was tangled, and his beard was an unruly mess. He smiled, showing some missing teeth.

“Thanks, Ryder. You’re the best, man.”

Ryder smiled and pulled his gloves off. “Still got those shoes I gave you?”

“Uh-huh.” Bish nodded, collecting his trash bags filled with his things from the corner of the clinic room.

Frustration hit Ryder’s chest. He knew he couldn’t save everyone who came through the doors of the Anderson Free Clinic in the Tenderloin.

The Tenderloin was fifty square blocks, wedged in between some of the wealthiest areas of San Francisco. But here, the streets were suffused with poverty. There were cheap apartment buildings and hotels, there was drug dealing out in the open, and these streets were home to more than half of the entire city’s homeless.

Bish always hit Ryder hard. The man was a veteran, and had fought as a teenager in Vietnam. He’d come home, but hadn’t made it through to the good life. PTSD and other mental health problems had ended with Bish living on the street.

He’d be back at the clinic in a few weeks, his feet cut up again, all exacerbated by his poorly treated diabetes, and the assholes who stole his shoes.

Bish hunted around in a bag and pulled out a pair of Ryder’s old running shoes. “Here they are.” He shoved them back in the bag. “Catch ya later, Ryder.”

Ryder fought back a sigh. “Yeah, man. Hey, have you seen Robbie lately?”

Bish frowned and shook his head. “Nah. Haven’t seen him for a while.”

Ryder hadn’t either. Robbie was another vet Ryder kept tabs on. Robbie was younger than Bish, but older than Ryder. Like Ryder, Robbie had also been a combat medic and had served in the Gulf War.

When he could, Ryder bought Robbie a meal, and they traded war stories.

Unlike Bish, Robbie had a family who cared for him, and tried desperately to help him. But Robbie always ended up back on the dirty streets of the Tenderloin. Especially when the

demons got too loud, and the lure of the drugs got too shiny.

Ryder sank back against the wall and closed his eyes. Yeah, he couldn't save them all, but it still fucking sucked.

Outside the treatment room, he heard the insistent wail of a crying baby, the hubbub of conversation, and someone weeping.

The clinic was always busy, and offered free medical to the disadvantaged and vulnerable of San Francisco. The Tenderloin could be tough and harsh, and Ryder did his bit to offer a little light in the darkness.

The rest of the time, he worked as a paramedic, attached to Fire Station No. 2 in Chinatown. Anyway, for tonight, his shift was almost over.

He was ready to head home, shower, jerk off, and have a glass of wine. He liked to drink a good bourbon with his brothers and friends, but Ryder's weakness was a full-bodied Napa Syrah.

One of the nurses passed by the doorway.

"Iris, I'm clocking off," he called out.

The middle-aged woman eyed him. She had a well-groomed afro, high cheekbones, and wore pink scrubs that looked good with her dark skin. "You'd better get out of here before some emergency comes through the door."

An emergency usually constituted a gunshot wound, stabbing, or an overdose.

He lifted his chin. "See you in three days."

"I will miss that fine, white ass of yours while you're gone."

He flashed her a smile. "Iris, no sexual harassment in the workplace."

She waggled her eyebrows. "You haven't seen anything yet."

He waved her off, and saw her face turn serious as she headed to intercept some parents clutching a lethargic toddler.



They all joked around. It was a way to cope with the grim reality they saw in the clinic each day.

Ryder made his way to the tiny locker room in the back beside the even tinier break room. He grabbed his backpack from his locker and decided to just wear his blue scrubs home. They weren't covered in anything hazardous today.

His cell phone rang.

Probably one of his brothers—Hunt or Camden.

He was putting his money on Cam. The youngest Morgan brother had just gotten out of the military a few months back, and was still acclimatizing to civilian life. But he seemed to be adjusting well to life in private security, and enjoyed working at Norcross Security.

Hunt was a cop, and he'd recently fallen in love with a sexy, blonde artist. He wasn't available for beers and burgers with his brothers quite as much now. Not because Savannah wouldn't let him, but mostly because he couldn't drag himself away from her.

Ryder pulled out the phone. Vander Norcross' name was on the screen.

*Shit.* Vander was a friend, but when he called, it usually meant someone was hurt. Ryder's third sideline job was patching up the Norcross Security guys.

"Vander."

"Hi, Ryder. I'm almost at the clinic. We need your help."

"Everyone okay?" Ryder strode through the clinic with a wave to his colleagues.

A dark-eyed girl, maybe three years old, popped up on a waiting chair and saw him. She was in cute little pink pajamas covered in polka dots, and her parents were nearby, rocking a crying baby. Ryder winked at her, and pulled a lollipop out of his pocket. He caught the father's eye. The tired man saw the candy, nodded, and gave Ryder a faint smile.

Ryder handed the lollipop to the little girl and ruffled her dark hair. She smiled at him.

"Nothing life-threatening," Vander said. "But there's a lot of blood."

Vander sounded pissed. “Cam?”

“Not Cam. He has a night off. Saxon’s got a cut on his hand, but Siv copped the worst of it.”

At the thought of tall, sexy Siv being hurt, Ryder’s gut tightened. “How bad is she?”

“Well, she’s cursing a lot in Norwegian.”

Ryder hit the sidewalk out front. The night had turned a little sticky, but his thoughts all turned to Siv Pedersen.

He’d first met her at Savannah’s art showing a few weeks ago. Siv was one hot, tough badass in a beautiful body. He had no problem conjuring up an image of her. Tall, toned, her military training obvious in the way she held herself.

She had a tawny mass of blonde-brown hair and blue eyes like a cloudless sky.

And a killer scowl and a smart mouth.

They’d danced, he’d tried to charm her, then she’d decked him. She’d laid him out on the dance floor with one smooth move.

Ryder wanted her. *Badly.*

He turned down a few offers of company over the last few weeks because the only woman he seemed to want was a tough, former Norwegian special forces brunette.

He’d seen her a couple times at the Norcross office, but she’d made a point to avoid him.

Ryder smirked. Well, she couldn’t avoid him tonight, although he wasn’t thrilled she was hurt.

A black BMW X6 pulled to a throaty halt in front of him. Ryder opened the passenger door of the SUV and saw Vander behind the wheel.

“Hey.” Ryder slid in. “What happened?”

Vander pulled out onto the street. “It was a fucking simple corporate espionage job. We didn’t expect the guy to pull a knife.”

Vander took care of his own. He was never happy when one of his people was in danger or hurt. Most people in San Francisco went out of their way to avoid pissing off Vander Norcross.

To Ryder's intense amusement, a few months back, he'd gotten to watch Vander and Ryder's cousin Brynn do a short, intense circle around each other. It seemed that even major badasses fell in love.

Most people thought that since Vander had fallen for Brynn, it had softened him a bit. In Ryder's opinion, it made Vander more dangerous. He was intensely protective of the woman who held his heart.

Ryder hadn't ever felt the need to find "the one." Sharing his time with a variety of lovely ladies worked for him, but watching Vander's brothers, Vander, and now Hunt take the fall... Well, he was starting to wonder if they were onto something.

Then he'd taken one look at Siv Pedersen, and he needed to know how she tasted.

Well, for the moment, he was going to worry about making sure she didn't bleed to death.