

Chapter One

As Nick “Wolf” Garrick exited his Aston Martin DB11, he narrowly resisted the urge to slam the door.

A valet raced over. “Evening, sir. I’ll take good care of her.”

Nick just grunted and handed over the keys. He glared at the entrance to the Plaza Hotel. He wasn’t in the mood—to be polite, to attend this shindig, or to socialize.

Scratch that. He was never in the mood to socialize.

Anger churned inside him, and he straightened his tuxedo jacket and headed for the red-carpeted stairs into the building.

He had a job to do, and he’d do it. He and the Sentinel Security team had gotten word, last-minute, that the target of one of their ongoing investigations was going to be at this charity dinner tonight.

A bunch of New York’s wealthiest would be in attendance including Michael Denning. On the outside, Denning was a wealthy businessman...who also happened to be doing lucrative arms deals on the side with several rebel groups in South America.

Nick and two others from Sentinel Security were in charge of planting a near-microscopic bug on the man.

“God, I love a hot guy in a suit,” a female voice said in his earpiece. “The beard is an added bonus.”

He flicked a glance up at the security camera above the hotel doors. He snorted.

“You’re hot, Wolf, especially when you’re grumpy,” Jet “Hex” Adler said.

The tech whiz was running comms from the Sentinel Security office in Chelsea. Knowing her, she’d hacked into the hotel security feeds in under a minute and had full control of the hotel’s computer system. The woman could hack anything.

He didn’t deny he was feeling pissed off. He’d flown in from San Francisco today after a successful job to help his boss’ sister. While Nick had been away, he’d gotten a panicked call from his little sister, Nola. Technically, half-sister, but he didn’t bother with the half. From the day she’d been born, Magnolia had been his family in every sense of the word.

She’d called, worried because her best friend was getting death threats.

He strode into the Plaza’s lobby. It was all cream marble and gold accents, a giant chandelier hanging overhead. Once, he’d felt uncomfortable in places like this. Like a bull in a china shop. But his work had taught him how to blend into all kinds of different settings and situations. Fancy hotel or arid, desert battlefield—he could do either.

His thoughts didn’t linger on the grandiose decor as he made his way to the Grand Ballroom. Instead, they turned to threats of death to one Elaine Madden.

They were pretty fucking ugly threats. Nola and Lainie had been best friends since middle school, joined at the hip since they were twelve. Being six years older, he hadn’t paid too much attention to his sister’s slightly awkward, geeky friend. He’d been too busy counting down the days to getting out of the house and away from his overbearing, asshole stepfather. The day Nick had graduated, he’d joined the Navy, and was gone. He’d been obliged to go home when he could, to see Nola, but that was it.

The less time Nick and Charles Newhouse spent in the same room, the better.

Then on one vacation, he’d discovered his sister’s sweet friend had morphed into a beauty. A smiling, smart, gorgeous young woman.

His hand flexed.

Then he'd fucked up and kissed an eighteen-year-old Lainie Madden by the pool.

It had been wrong. She was too young for him. He was the son of an ex-con, something his stepfather never let him forget. At the time, he'd also been a SEAL, doing some pretty tough, shitty missions.

And Lainie was Nola's best and closest friend.

That was something he could never let himself forget.

He'd spent the years since keeping a lock on the highly inappropriate attraction he felt for Lainie. Mostly by not spending too much time with her.

After his stint as a Navy SEAL, followed by several years in SAC—the CIA special activities center, he hadn't seen much of her. Lainie had gone on to become the successful CEO of a billion-dollar online graphic design company, Pintura.

He'd seen her beautiful face and velvet-brown eyes on the covers of a bunch of business magazines. He'd even kept a couple.

Lainie was off-limits. He'd never, ever do anything to hurt his little sister. Nola was the only person who'd always loved him unconditionally. Hell, he didn't want to hurt Lainie, either, and Nick knew he wasn't built for relationships. Lainie had candlelit dinners and white-picket fences written all over her.

Still, he sure as fuck would keep her safe.

He gritted his teeth and stepped into the Grand Ballroom.

The charity event was in full swing. The ballroom had an ornate, curved ceiling, and was flanked by fancy columns. It all looked overblown to him. There were circular tables set up at one end, overflowing with flowers, and a dance floor at the other end. People, in their glittering best, mingled and laughed politely.

After Nola had called him, panicked about Lainie's death threats, he'd raced back from San Francisco, only to be unable to get a hold of Lainie all day. She hadn't answered her

phone. Hadn't returned his messages. She wasn't at her fancy apartment in Tribeca. Or at the Pintura office.

Her assistant had assured him that she was in meetings, but Nick didn't think Lainie was taking these threats seriously.

Now Killian, Nick's boss, had pulled him in for tonight's job.

Nick blew out a breath. His first priority for tomorrow would be to track Lainie down.

He nabbed a drink that he would pretend to sip and studied the crowd. He spotted the mayor of New York, a famous actor, and several billionaires.

He also saw Denning.

The older man laughed heartily, his second wife—a much younger, glamorous blonde—stood beside him, decked out in a clinging, designer gown. From the intense investigation Sentinel Security had completed, Nick knew the man also funded a twenty-two-year-old bikini-designer mistress in Miami and a twenty-eight-year-old opera singer in London.

Not to mention the lucrative, illegal arms deals. Denning kept himself very busy. No, looking at the wide, congenial smile, no one in this crowd would guess what Michael Denning did in his free time.

A new couple swept into the room. A few people turned to look and whispered.

They made a striking pair. The man was tall, well-built, with a hawkish face and dark hair. He looked like he'd been born wearing the tailored tuxedo.

But Nick was well aware Killian "Steel" Hawke, the owner of Sentinel Security, looked just as comfortable in mud-splattered fatigues, cradling an M-4. Nick knew because they'd fought side-by-side too many times to count.

And it didn't take more than one look into Killian's black eyes to know he was dangerous.

Nick let his gaze skate over Killian, like they were strangers. All part of the plan.

The woman on Killian's arm was elegant. Her brown hair was streaked with strands of

blonde, and upswept, accenting her stunning face. Her black dress encased her curved, feminine form. She had a faint smile on her face, her blue eyes taking in the crowd. She looked like a beautiful society woman.

In truth, she was Hadley “Striker” Lockwood. Hadley was former British Intelligence—MI6. The elegant façade hid a sharp mind and a strategic genius. She was an impressive sniper, and an expert in close-quarter combat.

She also had a sexy, British accent, and fought dirty.

He watched her take a glass of champagne, smiling sweetly at the waiter.

Nick circled the room, away from Killian and Hadley. A woman in a formfitting, red dress spun, bumping into him.

“Oh, sorry.” Her gaze latched onto his face and her smile turned sultry. “Hi, there.”

Nick lifted his chin and sidestepped her. He didn’t have time for any fluttering eyelashes. He needed to get this job done, then get back to his apartment and do some more research on Lainie’s death threats.

Some had arrived in the mail—printed on generic, untraceable paper—and a slew had come electronically, via fake email accounts. The ones Nick had seen so far were vile and sickening in their sadistic detail.

He’d seen some of the worst of what humanity could do to other people, and the thought of anything like that happening to Lainie...

Anger burned. He knew her success made her a target. He was just angry that she hadn’t returned his calls.

And pissed she hadn’t come to him sooner.

Shit. Get your head in the game, Garrick.

He was here to ensure they planted this damn bug on Denning. Nick knew better than anyone, that if you got distracted on a mission, people died. His gut curled into knots.

Focus. On. The. Job.

He moved through the crowd, and spotted Killian and Hadley moving in on the target.

A bright, beautiful smile broke out on Hadley's face. If anyone could charm the dirty businessman and get the tiny tracker on the man's skin, it was Striker.

Nick pretended to sip his drink, alert in case the plan went FUBAR. If Hadley didn't succeed, she'd hand off the tracker to Nick and he'd accidentally stumble into Denning.

He had no doubt Killian and Hadley would get the job done, but Killian didn't just plan a backup plan B. He planned C through Z, as well.

The music from the band swelled, and he let his gaze skim over the dance floor.

A flash of green caught his eye, but it was the wickedly feminine curves inside the green dress that kept his gaze riveted. The dress made him think of Greek goddesses. It skimmed over a mouthwatering body, and he tried not to stare at the amazing cleavage like a pervert.

Then he took in the loose fall of deep-brown hair and the pretty face as she smiled at her dance partner.

Nick's gut clenched.

Lainie.

Okay, so this party wasn't so bad.

As her handsome dance partner spun her, then pulled her close and dipped her, Lainie Madden laughed.

She'd always been a hopeless dancer. She'd been a geek at school, and took coding classes, not dance lessons.

But Brandon—or was it Brent?—was making her feel downright graceful. He was handsome. Sure, it was in that bland, boring, Ken-doll kind of way that had never done much for her, but still, he was prettier to look at than her keyboard and computer screen. Definitely

a nice change from her overflowing email inbox.

Lainie kept her smile in place, enjoying the dance and the pleasant buzz from the glass of champagne she'd had. She didn't drink much and was a total lightweight.

Because you're always working.

Ah, there was her annoying, inner voice. Always trying to put a damper on things.

Busy CEOs of successful companies have a lot of work to do, she told herself.

She narrowly avoided stepping on Brandon/Brent's foot.

And I'm here tonight, not working, so quit nagging.

You didn't want to come, her inner voice countered. *You're here because it's for charity.*

And I know you're planning to do more work later. You have no personal life and you never let anyone get too close.

Lainie resisted the urge to wrinkle her nose. *Shut up, inner voice.*

Her inner voice sniffed. *Well, at least you aren't worrying about the death threats.*

Annd Lainie's good mood instantly plummeted.

No. No way. She absolutely was *not* thinking of those horrible messages and the increasing bombardment of cyber attacks on the Pintura website. She'd hired more security staff to help her overworked team.

She had no proof, but she was sure they were related. Whoever was fantasizing about killing her was also trying to hack her company's computer system.

She missed a step and bumped into her dance partner.

"Steady, there." He shot her a handsome smile.

"Sorry. I warned you that I wasn't great on the dance floor."

His hand curved around her hip. "You're doing fine."

She waited to feel some sparks or heat. Her best friend Nola was always nagging her about her nonexistent love life.

Lainie had sworn off love, and sex, and men.

She felt her inner voice stir and stomped on it. *Don't you start.*

She was too busy anyway. Pintura was her life and it left little time for anything else. And the sad reality was that she stunk at choosing men. Her college boyfriend had cheated on her, and her most recent boyfriend had cheated on her with a plump-lipped influencer. *Ugh.* She'd wised up and dumped Keenan six months ago.

Thankfully, she hadn't loved him. He'd been gorgeous, a model, and a few years younger than her, and...gorgeous. She was a little embarrassed to admit she'd only been with him for his looks. They'd had zilch in common, and she'd gotten pretty tired of posing for pretty social media photos every time they went out.

The sex had been okay. She'd been hoping for fireworks and got more of a gentle fizzle. It always felt like Keenan was performing when his clothes came off, more worried about looking and sounding good than ensuring she enjoyed herself.

So, no men. She didn't need any more self-absorbed cheaters.

The song ended. She stepped back, smiling. "Thank—"

"I'm cutting in," a deep voice said.

Brandon/Brent frowned, and Lainie's head shot up.

Her gaze met a deep blue one.

Nick Garrick.

Her body froze, then it came to spectacular life.

This was what sparks felt like.

Nick was about the same height as her dance partner, but that was where the similarities ended.

Lainie's heart pounded. Nick was broader and had more bulk. His tuxedo didn't hide any of it, as it was all muscle. His chestnut-brown hair needed a cut, and his beard suited him. He

looked a little rough and a lot tough. He made Brent—she was sure it was Brent—look like he was twelve.

Brent straightened. “Sorry, we were just—”

Nick shouldered past the man and swept Lainie into his arms.

He moved across the dance floor astonishingly well. She was shocked that a big, bad former Navy SEAL could dance.

Her body brushed against his hard one, and tingles erupted everywhere. He’d always made her breath catch. She’d thought her major crush on her best friend’s brother had dimmed over the years, but boy was she wrong. When she’d first met her new friend Nola’s older brother, she’d been a gangly, awkward twelve-year-old, and he’d been a gorgeous, athletic, eighteen-year-old with a bad-boy edge. And throughout the years, when she’d caught glimpses of him, he’d matured into a handsome man, still with an edge.

But this Nick—this hard-eyed man—was nothing like that long-ago teenage boy.

“You get my messages?” His voice held a touch of gravel.

Lainie swallowed. “I’ve been busy—”

“Someone is trying to kill you, and that doesn’t take precedence?”

That bossy, take-charge tone made her hackles rise. “Nola shouldn’t have called you. I’m handling it.”

“She’s worried. She showed me photos of some of the messages. You should be worried, too.”

Lainie dragged her gaze off his rugged face and looked over his wide shoulder. Really wide. Nick was big and powerful, and under her hand she could feel the flex of his muscles.

“I’m taking precautions, Nick. I have a security team at work—”

“Corporate security. You have a small, inexperienced team.”

Her gaze flew straight back to him. His eyes were the color of cobalt. Such a deep,

mysterious blue. “You looked into my company?”

“Yes. You’re in danger. Nola’s worried. I’m worried. You’re...like a sister to me.”

Ugh. She hated hearing that. Hated that the man who often starred in her most secret fantasies saw her as a sister. She hated even more that he’d always treated her like that. Nola’s little friend.

Except for one time.

She’d been eighteen. Nick had been home from the Navy on R&R. He’d filled out, had been fit and strong. It was the first time she’d seen him with the sexy beard.

He’d had a huge fight with his stepdad. Lainie had very little time for Nola’s stern, snobby father. Mr. Newhouse always took every chance to rub Nick’s face in the fact that his father had been a criminal. Like a child had anything to do with that.

She’d heard them fight, seen Nick sitting by the pool on a lounge, shoulders hunched.

She’d ended up sitting with him. They’d talked, and she’d even managed to make him laugh.

Then, he’d kissed her.

Sadly, for Lainie, it was still the hottest, sexiest kiss she’d ever had.

Unfortunately, Nick had pulled back like he’d been burned, and taken off like she was toxic. She hadn’t seen him much since then. Glimpses of him at Nola’s parties, the odd dinner with Nola and their group of friends. He was always scrupulously polite.

That decade had hardened him.

Nola said he’d been part of the CIA. Whatever he’d done, it clearly hadn’t been easy.

Lainie lifted her chin. She wasn’t eighteen anymore, and she wasn’t stupid. She was a smart, successful businesswoman. She was a CEO, and she was used to giving orders, not taking them.

“I’m not your sister,” she said.

Something flickered in his eyes, and he leaned closer. “No, you’re not.”

Dammit. Butterflies were dancing in her belly. His hand clenched on her hip, and she felt the press of those strong fingers burning through her dress. Her gaze dropped to his lips.

“You’re coming with me,” he announced.

What? “Nick, I’ll call you tomorrow. I need—”

“No.” He pulled them to a stop in the center of the dance floor.

“What do you mean no?” She’d been running her own company for several years and didn’t hear no very often. “I agreed to attend this event tonight. I’ll—”

“I said no. It’s too dangerous. Whoever is after you could be here.”

Lainie felt a cold shiver skitter down her spine. Her gaze ran over the laughing crowd. “No one’s going to do anything in the middle of a crowd.”

“It’s the perfect place to do something.” He wrapped a hand around her bicep. The impact of his fingers on her bare skin made her gasp.

Don’t get distracted, Lainie.

“I’m not leaving.” She put a hand on her hip.

“You are,” he growled.

“God, you’re annoyingly bossy. It’s not an attractive trait, Nick.”

“I don’t give a fuck. I care about you being safe.”

Her heart did a weird flip-flop. She ignored it. “What are you going to do, carry me out of here?”

His blue eyes narrowed. “If I have to.”

She gasped, her mouth dropping open.

Now his gaze dropped to her lips.

“You can’t,” she said. “People will stop you, or—”

“I’ll make it look credible. I guarantee, no one will get in my way.”

Lainie made a scoffing noise. "I'm adding arrogant and overconfident to bossy."

"Thank you."

She rolled her eyes. "They weren't compliments, Nick."

"Enough arguing."

She waved a hand. "All right then, let's see your grand plan. I won't be bailing you out with hotel security."

He yanked her close and kissed her.

Lainie's brain short-circuited.

Her lips parted, then Nick's tongue was in her mouth.

Oh. *God*. The man tasted so good, like the best chocolate—rich, dark, delicious.

He made a low sound that vibrated through her. She kissed him back. She met him stroke for stroke, plastering herself against him.

In that moment, she wasn't Lainie Madden. She wasn't a workaholic CEO with a bad track record in men. She wasn't at a mostly boring charity party.

She wasn't receiving nasty death threats.

She was pure feeling.

And Nick Garrett was holding her and kissing her.

Then he lifted his head and muttered a curse.

Lainie blinked, dazed. She licked her lips.

He cursed again.

Then he grabbed her arm and dragged her across the dance floor, through the crowd, and out of the ballroom.

And dammit, he was right, no one stopped him.