

Chapter One

Trouble was coming.

Hadley Lockwood sipped her champagne and scanned the swanky party. It was being held in a restaurant in the Shard. She had to admit that she loved the modern skyscraper, and the way it contrasted with the old, historic charm of London. And the view of the Thames and city from here was first class. She eyed Tower Bridge for a second, before she looked back at the guests.

She spotted several members of Parliament, some high-ranking government officials, and the chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, known to most as MI6.

Her old boss.

Yes, trouble here would be bad. Most of these people were in their off mode, and not expecting problems.

Hadley sighed. She'd just wanted a simple evening—attend the party, go home for a cup of tea, and read a book. But no, some bad guy had to ruin it.

She sipped again. There was no point in wasting good champagne. She really liked Dom Pérignon.

Unfortunately, she couldn't truly enjoy the champers the way she'd like to with her finely tuned radar for trouble pinging. Loudly. Her years at MI6 had developed it, honed it. She looked around again at so many of London's VIPs, but couldn't tell who was setting it off.

She spotted her current boss talking with some officials from MI6. He stood out, and was

very easy to look at.

Killian “Steel” Hawke’s sharp, handsome face was impassive, but after working for him for over a year, she could read him quite well. He wasn’t loving the hobnobbing, but he knew it was a necessary evil when you worked in private security. They’d flown in that morning on the company jet—one perk of working for Sentinel Security was all the toys. Killian kept his security team well-stocked, and well-compensated.

Another perk was living in New York. Hadley loved the vibrant city, and didn’t miss gray, old London much.

Killian met her gaze across the crowd. He didn’t react, but she knew he’d come her way soon. She did a little loop of the room—smiling at people she knew, and air kissing a few old acquaintances.

“Ravishing as always, Hadley,” an old contact from MI6 said.

“You too, darling,” Hadley replied.

“Hadley, you get more beautiful every time I see you,” an old friend of her father’s rasped.

She laughed. “You’re such a charmer, Sir James.”

She finally found a quiet spot by the floor-to-ceiling windows. All the small talk and compliments left her cold. Finally, the reflection in the glass showed her that Killian was heading her way.

Gosh, he was a handsome devil. It was a shame he was both her boss, and a friend. And there was none of that kind of chemistry between them.

She liked and respected Killian. A lot. He’d offered her a job that she loved, and given her a found family that had filled a tired, jaded hole inside of her she hadn’t known she’d had.

They’d bumped into each other a few times when she’d been at MI6, and he’d been with the CIA. Steel was a bit of a legend.

But she also knew he was a man who often pushed himself too hard, especially when it

came to protecting his people.

“You look gorgeous as always.” Killian stopped beside her. “Blue is your color.”

She swished the skirt of her royal-blue dress. She wore a long skirt in deference to London’s cool weather, but the neckline plunged deep in front. She had no qualms about utilizing all her assets.

“I spoke with the Minister for Energy and Climate earlier. He talked to my cleavage.”

Killian’s teeth flashed. “The poor guy’s about a hundred and four. You probably made his night.”

She turned to face him. “Killian, something’s wrong. I can feel it.”

Now, her boss turned to look at her, his face settling into serious lines. “Security for this party is tight.”

“We both know that’s not always enough. There are some high-powered people here.”

“The trouble can’t be for us,” he said. “I made sure our names were not on the guest list.”

Hadley shrugged. “There are lots of juicy targets.” Including some of her family. She turned and caught sight of her parents.

Lord Charles Lockwood, Baron Astley, and Lady Caroline Lockwood. They looked as they always did—posh, rich, and aloof. She’d already said hello to them, and kept it mercilessly short.

She didn’t always like them, but they were her parents, and she cared about them. If something went down tonight, she didn’t want to see them hurt.

Killian gave a sharp nod. “I’ll look around.”

Her shoulders relaxed a little. “Thanks, Kill.”

He squeezed her arm. “Ready for the meeting tomorrow?”

She nodded. It was the reason they were here, instead of back in the huge warehouse in New York that Killian had converted into the Sentinel Security headquarters. They had a

meeting with MI6 about a classified project. Killian hadn't told her anything.

"I'm always ready," she said.

"So you are. Keep an eye out." He stalked off, cutting through the party crowd like a knife. Several women looked at him, then cast Hadley envious looks.

"There you are," a cultured voice said. "*Please* tell me you're shagging him and it's amazing."

Hadley's older sister Annabelle sidled up to her, wearing a classy Stella McCartney dress.

"He's my boss," Hadley said.

"So? He is *fine*," Annabelle smiled. "How are you, darling? Still off saving the world?"

"My little corner of it."

Annabelle rolled her eyes. She had their father's brown eyes, while Hadley had their mother's light-blue shade.

"It sounds so tedious," Annabelle said. "You should come home, enjoy the good life."

Annabelle's idea of the good life was attending parties like this, shopping, ensuring the kids were with the nanny, and the odd ski trip to France. She'd married a wealthy London businessman, and had a very cool, British marriage. They both cheated, but did it discreetly, and neither of them cared.

All so icily civilized.

Hadley knew that was life. Real love was a crapshoot. Oh, it happened, of course. Two of her fellow Sentinel Security friends, Nick and Matteo—men she cared for deeply—had recently fallen in love with two wonderful women. Hell, they'd charged into it.

Thankfully, Hadley loved Lainie and Gabbi. They were both so good for the men.

But those couples were the exception that proved the rule.

Real love required trust, and Hadley had a short supply of that. Her family had been the first to give her lessons in not trusting. She loved them, but she wouldn't trust them as far as

she could throw them. They were all selfish to the bone.

Then, at MI6, she'd learned the rest of her lessons. She'd seen many accomplished liars and expert betrayers.

And as a young, idealistic agent, she'd let one idiot fool her. She'd thought she'd been in love, and she'd learned a very hard, almost deadly, lesson.

She sipped her champagne again. Trusting someone was a risk usually not worth taking.

She trusted her fellow Sentinel Security team members, but that was it.

"Come home and stop working so hard," her sister continued.

"Annabelle, have you seen the weather here?" As if to help make Hadley's point, fat raindrops hit the glass. "I'll take New York weather and shopping any day."

Her sister nodded. "Fair point." Then she lowered her voice. "Not to mention some strapping American men to sample."

Hadley hid her eye roll. "How are the kids?"

Annabelle waved a hand. "Oh, you know, noisy."

God, her sister. "Tell them Auntie Hadley says hi. I'll stop by to visit when I can."

"Mummy and Daddy want you to come over for dinner one night."

Hadley groaned, and Annabelle grinned.

That meant a stuffy dinner at their parents' home, along with whatever stuffy single man they tried to foist off on her.

"I'm not sure I'll have the time."

Annabelle snorted. "You know that won't stop them. Bring someone. Maybe your hot boss."

"No. I'm not subjecting Killian to that."

"Someone else, then."

"No." A tingle started at the back of her neck.

It got stronger. She idly hoped it was wrong, for once, but it was never wrong. Trouble was close.

Suddenly, a strong, muscular arm wrapped around her waist in an exceptionally possessive way.

She looked up and her body went stiff. She looked into extraordinary hazel eyes, filled with gold flecks. Eyes she'd never, ever admit that she sometimes dreamed about.

"I'm sorry," the newcomer drawled. "Can I steal her away?"

Annabelle blinked, then grinned. "Sure. Go ahead."

Then, British billionaire Bennett Knightley, whisked Hadley away and onto the dance floor, and she found herself pressed up against a hard, suit-clad body.

There was nothing quite as attractive as a beautiful woman shooting you an annoyed glare.

Bennett Knightley slid an arm around Hadley's waist. "Ms. Lockwood."

"Mr. Knightley," she clipped.

Oh, there was something else as attractive as the glare—it was the cool, sharp tone as she said his name. She had the rare ability to be polite and tell him he was a dickhead at the same time.

His cock tightened.

Down, boy, or she'll cut you off.

They moved across the dance floor, and of course, she danced as easily as she breathed. He could only dance because his mum had forced all her kids into lessons. Bennett and his two brothers had suffered through theirs, while their sister had laughed at them gleefully.

But he wasn't surprised that Hadley "Striker" Lockwood danced well. As far as he could tell, she did everything well. Hadley was frighteningly competent at everything.

He pulled her closer to avoid bumping into the tipsy, millionaire owner of a high-end

department store, and an equally tipsy blonde who looked vaguely familiar. Bennett thought she might host a television morning show.

But as he got more of a feel of Hadley, his thoughts scattered. She was built for temptation. Tall, with curves in all the right places. But as a former special forces soldier, he wasn't fooled. Despite the creamy hint of breasts her dress displayed, and the thick, light-brown hair that was captured in a sleek, elegant style, her body toned. Hadley could use everything at her disposal as a weapon, if required.

It was what had made her a very good MI6 agent.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I was invited. Unfortunately, I get lots of invites to parties like these." Most of which were tedious, filled with people who were mostly interested in talking about themselves.

"The tough life of a multimillionaire," she said.

He smiled at her. "Billionaire."

She rolled her beautiful blue eyes—they were pale, like Arctic ice. "Sorry, *billionaire*. How is business?"

His gut tightened. "Secura is ticking along fine."

"There's always a market for weapons of war."

His brows drew together. "I don't sell weapons. We sell gear. Body armor, uniforms, bedding, meals. Everything else soldiers need in the field. The stuff that often gets neglected or is of poor, cheap quality. It isn't just bullets that takes lives."

He heard the edge to his voice. He knew firsthand that good people got injured or killed because of the damn clothes they wore in the field, or because the gear and food they had was sub-standard.

Hadley cocked her head, studying his face. "You lost someone."

Bennett fought the urge to move his shoulders. Damn her for being too perceptive. The

Special Air Service had trained him to stay still when required, and show nothing. He cleared his throat. "I lost lots of people. Many of them for no good reason."

But for a second, he saw the face of Hamed. A good man who used his language skills to help. Bennett had worked and fought alongside him, and he'd saved Bennett's arse too many times to count. Hamed Rahmani had been a man who'd made do with what he had to help his country.

A man who'd died, splattered in blood, on the desert sand of a rundown village.

Not long after Hamed had died, Bennett had left the military. He'd come home, determined to make a difference in other ways.

Secura had been born. His company specialized in high-tech fabrics; lightweight, but durable, gear soldiers needed. Better, more nutritious meals. Hell, he spent a fuck-load on his team of scientists for research and development. And Secura had become more successful than he'd ever dreamed.

As he and Hadley whirled around the dance floor, he spotted Killian Hawke. The man raised his drink, and Bennett nodded.

Now, there was a man not to underestimate, and not turn your back on. Bennett was damn glad they were on the same side.

"So, you have a meeting at MI6 tomorrow," Bennett said.

Blue eyes flashed. "None of your business."

"Didn't Killian tell you that I'm your backup, if you need help while you're here?"

She shot him a smile. "I don't need help."

"But you don't know what the job is yet."

"It's classified."

"Mmm. It's okay to ask for help, Hadley."

"Not if I don't need it."

Yes, he'd noted her fierce independence before. He'd seen her smile, seen her with her Sentinel Security friends, but under it, he sensed how self-contained she was. Could feel the walls that he suspected could sustain an attack or a stealth invasion.

What had forced her to build them? And what would it take for her to let someone in?

You think you deserve to be that someone? The sly voice in his head made his gut clench.

His gaze moved over her face. "Christ, you're beautiful."

She blinked. Her gaze dropped to his mouth.

"Ah, I finally said something that's made you speechless."

"Hardly." Her gaze flicked back up to his. "It takes more than some clumsy compliment from you, Knightley."

"It's the truth. I love your perfume too." It was a blend of citrus and floral that teased the senses. He shifted his hand a little and touched her wrist, stroked her pulse point.

He felt it beating hard. She wasn't as immune to him as she liked to make out.

But she didn't snap at him, instead, a serious look slipped over her face, and she scanned the crowd.

Bennett's arms tightened. "What's wrong?"

"I've just got a feeling."

He followed her gaze. Nothing looked amiss. "You're sure?"

"Yes. I've been feeling it for a while. Something's off."

"Okay." He studied the partygoers closer.

Her gaze met his. "That's it? You believe me?"

"Hadley, you were scary good in your previous line of work, and I got a firsthand look at how good you are in your current job in Italy."

"Where you butted into a sensitive operation."

"Where I *helped* you get your job done."

She huffed out a breath, but her attention was on the guests. “Can you see anyone who doesn’t belong?”

Bennett took a good look around. All the partygoers seemed relaxed, and were enjoying themselves, chatting and laughing. Some looked like they’d had a little too much to drink.

“No.” He took a closer look at the servers, and the suited guards standing discreetly by the walls. “There’s a lot of security here tonight.”

She huffed out another breath, not once missing a step. “Maybe I’m just tired.”

“Jet lag is a killer.”

“Oh, I don’t suffer jet lag. I don’t believe in it.” Her nose wrinkled. “And I’ve had plenty of practice in avoiding it.” Just then, he felt her stiffen. “Knightley—”

Her tone of voice made him turn his head.

A young man in a rumpled suit staggered onto the dance floor. He was sweating, nervous, his face unnaturally pale, even for the end of winter in London.

Fuck.

“N-nobody move!” The man opened his jacket to show the bomb vest strapped to his chest.

Screams cut across the party. Bennett heard Hadley curse under her breath.

Then he saw her reach into the slit in her dress and pull out a small, black tactical knife.

She opened it with a well-practiced flick, the diamonds at her wrist glinting, then she quickly concealed the knife in the folds of her skirt.

Annnd he was hard again.

Fuck. Get your head in the game, Knightley. Lust after the hot woman after the dangerous situation is contained.

Her blue eyes met his—calm, composed, and calculating.

Bennett gave her a small nod and forced his muscles to stay relaxed. Ready to attack the

target.

She edged toward the bomber. “Oh, please don’t hurt us.”

Damn, even he believed that terrified tone.

“Stay back,” the young man yelped. “Just listen.” He swiped a shaking arm across his forehead, while his other hand clutched a small detonator attached to a cord. “I have to read something.” He fumbled in his pocket.

“*Please.*” Hadley did a stellar impression of pure terror. “I don’t want to die.”

She moved closer, and Bennett moved in behind her.

The bomber looked up and met Bennett’s gaze. He blanched. “M-Mr. Knightley, you aren’t supposed to be here.”

No, it had been a last-minute decision to attend, when he’d heard Killian and Hadley would be here. Bennett realized two concerning things. One, the bomber was wearing a Secura tactical vest. And two, Bennett recognized the young man.

“Archie, put the detonator down,” Bennett said calmly. “Let’s talk—”

“I can’t. They’ll hurt her.” He let out a sob. “I can’t. It’s too late.”

Bennett studied the detonator. Thankfully, it didn’t have a dead man switch.

Hadley moved closer, without looking like she meant to. He needed to keep Archie’s attention off her.

“It’s going to be fine.” Bennett held up a placating hand. “Now, just let me—”

Hadley struck.

She threw the knife, which slammed into the joint between Archie’s shoulder and neck.

The young man cried out, dropping the detonator, leaving it swinging by the cord attached to the vest.

Whirling around, Hadley kicked him in the head. Then, Bennett dove, tackling Archie to the floor.

He kept the man pinned as Hadley opened his jacket.

“It’s a fake.” She shook her head, and met Bennett’s gaze, relief in her eyes. “It’s not real.”

“Security!” Bennett bellowed. “It’s a fake, but let’s not take any chances. Clear the party out.”

Everyone seemed frozen.

“Everyone out, now!” he shouted.

There was a flurry of activity.

Killian appeared beside them, looking unperturbed. “Have you got this under control?”

Hadley nodded.

“I’ll deal with security, and call the police.”

Bennett lifted his head. His and Hadley’s faces were only inches apart.

“You sure know how to liven up the party, Ms. Lockwood,” he said. “Nice takedown.”

“Thanks. You weren’t too bad yourself.” She arched a brow at him. “You know this guy?”

Archie was sobbing hard, incoherent.

Bennett blew out a breath. “Yes, unfortunately, I do. He works for Secura.”