

Reath

I was ready for this damn day to be over.

A headache throbbed in one temple, and I made a mental note to grab some aspirin. Leaning over the keyboard, I tapped a few times and scanned the CCTV footage on the screen.

Nothing.

I growled under my breath. Some fucker had broken into my client's warehouse in Mid-City and stolen some industrial equipment worth a lot of money.

I *would* find them.

I always did. It was what made Phoenix Security Services the best in New Orleans.

A whistle sounded at the door to my office. "Hey, boss, you're looking slick."

I lifted my head and saw one of my men, Lincoln, standing there with his tanned skin and shaggy, blond hair. He looked like he should have a surfboard tucked under one arm, ready to hit the waves. But despite the smile and easygoing demeanor, he was also a former Navy SEAL, an expert in Muay Thai fighting, and skillful with tech and computers.

I tugged on the sleeve of my tuxedo jacket. A fucking white tuxedo.

My brother Dante was holding a party at his upscale restaurant, Wildfire. It was *Great Gatsby* themed, and his woman, Mila, had delivered the suit to PSS with a demand that I wear it.

She was an event planner, and she could be strict.

“I have a charity thing. Dante and Mila are holding it at Wildfire.”

Linc grinned. “Those two are always raising money for something.”

It was true. My brothers and I all liked to give back as much as we could.

We’d come from nothing. Five boys who’d been discarded, abandoned. We’d all ended up in foster care, and we knew what it was like to have nothing but the clothes on your back. I’d been abandoned as a newborn and never known my parents. The foster system had been hit-or-miss for me. Some of my foster homes had been okay, but then, sometimes out of the blue, I’d be whisked away to a new placement.

Not all of them had been good. My jaw tightened. Some had been downright bad. Old memories lashed at me—shouts, blows, blood.

I locked the memories down. The past was the past. It couldn’t touch me anymore.

I’d found my brothers in our last foster home. They’d saved me—in more ways than one.

Now, we’d made successful lives for ourselves. We’d made New Orleans our home.

Dante owned the hottest club in the city, Ember, and several bars and restaurants. Colt was a successful bounty hunter. Kavner had always vowed to one day be rich and had built a billion-dollar business empire. Beauden ran Hard Burn, a gym with a long wait list to join.

I’d taken the skills I’d learned in the military—and some gained during a stint with The Agency—and used them to start Phoenix Security Services.

We were our own men, protecting what was ours, and living life our own way.

Except when I had to put on a 1920s-inspired suit, and schmooze.

Still, the money was going to help foster kids, so it was worth it.

I straightened. “I’d better go. Can you tell Noah there was nothing helpful on the CCTV for

the Hixson case? Tell him to keep looking.”

“Will do. Have fun.” Linc waggled his eyebrows. “Maybe try and meet a woman.”

I shot him a look and headed out of my office.

After passing through the darkened computer room and through a secure doorway, I strode out into the hall. The interior of the PSS offices consisted of polished-concrete floors, wood, and glass with some industrial touches. I walked past the glass-walled conference room.

A sense of pride washed through me. This place was *mine*. I’d built it, hired every person, worked hard to make it a success.

For a long time, I’d had nothing that was just mine. Nothing that hadn’t been worn or used by someone before.

I straightened my long black tie as I walked down the stairs. Again, that was in the past. I nodded at my man sitting at the reception desk, then stepped outside.

Night had fallen. Around me were the familiar streets of the Warehouse District. My brothers and I owned the entire block. We had several warehouses, most of them renovated to become our homes, offices, and places of business. Kavner lived in a penthouse in Ignis Tower, which rose above me on the corner.

I strode down the street and turned the corner. Ahead, the gold sign for Ember glowed in the dim evening light. Beside it sat Smokehouse, Dante’s bar.

But tonight, the crowd gathered outside Wildfire. There was a long line of people dressed in their 1920s finest, waiting to get in through the sleek, gray concrete entrance. Spotlights strobed and jazz music echoed from inside.

I glanced at my cellphone. Still no message from Jack’s sister.

A spear of frustration hit me, which made my headache throb. I’d texted and called my best

friend's sister numerous times. I'd had no response. Zero. She hadn't bothered to answer the phone once.

Jack was my best friend. We'd been in the Army together, and now Jack worked for a private military contractor.

I frowned. Lately, Jack had been taking riskier and riskier jobs. I didn't like it. I'd offered him a job at PSS, but the man wouldn't sit still, wouldn't put down roots.

One day, he was going to get himself hurt. Or worse.

He'd called me a few weeks back, from who knew where, to ask me to keep an eye on his sister. She was moving to New Orleans to study at Tulane University.

Francesca Parker. I'd only met her once years ago, not long after Jack and I first joined the military. She and Jack's mom had flown in from Seattle to meet him off the plane.

I had a vague recollection of a gangly teenage girl with braces and dark hair. I knew she had to be in her mid-twenties now. She was doing some sort of postgraduate studies.

I really didn't have time to babysit some college girl. Especially one who didn't return phone calls.

I strode toward the door of Wildfire.

"Hey." A blonde in a tiny flapper dress standing in the line grabbed my arm. "*Please* take me in with you."

"Sorry."

"But this line is so long." She fluttered her eyelashes.

She was beautiful, but I didn't even feel a blip of reaction. I never found it hard to find company of the female variety, but it had been a while.

Lately, I just hadn't been interested.

I shook my head and tried to soften it with a smile. The bouncer saw me and waved me in.

“Sorry. Have a good night.” I turned and stepped inside.

The large space had a high ceiling and moody, gray walls. There was a tree in the center of the restaurant. The branches rose up, spreading outward, covering the ceiling. Glowing blossoms on the branches twinkled gold.

There was a good crowd, so I figured Mila would be happy. As if I’d conjured her, I spotted her in the crowd. She was talking to some of the staff, and was dressed in a black-and-gold flapper dress. Her brown hair was done in a mass of gentle waves.

And not far behind her was my older brother, Dante.

Dante was tall, dark, and masculine. He gave off the vibe of a man who liked being in charge. He was wearing all black, with a gold scarf.

As I watched, he reached out and touched Mila’s ear. She looked up and shot him a brilliant smile.

I felt a strange pull in my chest. It was good to see Dante happy. I just hoped it stayed that way.

Love wasn’t something I trusted.

I loved my brothers—a bond forged in blood and hardship. It was one I knew would never be broken.

But romantic love... That seemed like a much more fragile thing. Something that flared bright, then winked out fast. Something that was more hassle than it was worth.

I headed toward the couple. Mila saw me first and smiled.

“I *knew* you’d look fabulous in that suit, Reath.”

I lowered my head and kissed her cheek. Then I nodded at Dante. “The place looks great,

Mila.”

She beamed. “Thank you.”

“That’s because she’s a genius,” a female voice said.

I glanced up and saw Macy. The bubbly blonde was dressed in a champagne-gold dress with fringe along the bottom. Colt was at her side. My bounty hunter brother looked about as thrilled as me to be dressed up.

“I *love* this dress.” Macy swished the fringe skirt. “Daisy demanded one of her own.”

Daisy was Colt’s daughter—technically his niece, whom he’d adopted. And I wasn’t at all surprised Daisy wanted a matching dress. That girl liked anything pretty and sparkly.

Beau appeared out of the crowd. You could take the fighter out of the ring, but Beau still looked like the boxer he was. He had the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up, showing off the tattoos on his arms. He was also wearing a dark-green vest.

“Beau, where is your jacket?” Mila protested.

Beau lifted a whiskey glass and sipped his drink. “This is all you’re getting.”

The brunette huffed out a breath.

There were murmurs in the crowd, and I turned.

Our final brother had arrived.

“The man has to make an entrance,” Colt murmured.

“But look at them,” Macy whispered. “So glamorous.”

Kavner and his woman, London, entered Wildfire.

Kavner was tall, dark, and handsome. Not to mention a billionaire. He attracted attention wherever he went. Tonight, he wore a black tuxedo and had his hair slicked back. A silver handkerchief winked from the top pocket of his jacket. Beside him, London looked tall and

svelte, wearing a long, silver drape of a dress. The neckline was cut impossibly low, showing off gleaming dark skin, and long, white gloves completed the outfit.

People pushed toward the couple. Everyone always wanted to talk to Kavner.

London—a former Treasury agent—was quite protective of him. She shot several people sharp looks.

The couple reached us.

“Evening,” Kavner drawled, his arm tight around London’s waist.

“You two look gorgeous,” Macy said.

“You, too.” London smiled. “I love that color on you, Macy.” She swiveled. “Mila, this place looks incredible.”

“She’s right,” Kav agreed. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

Mila looked around, pleased. “Thanks.”

“Now,” London continued, “you promised me a special cocktail.”

Mila nodded. “I have some exceptional ones planned for tonight. I’ll make you a Daisy Buchanan. Vodka, champagne, elderflower, and a lemon twist.”

The women fell into conversation. Dante turned to Kavner. “I see those stocks you made me invest in are up.”

“Of course they are.” Kavner took a glass of wine from one of the servers.

I turned my head and scanned the crowd.

A glimmer of red caught my eye.

As I watched, a woman emerged from the throng. She paused and looked around.

I went still.

She wasn’t tall, maybe five foot five. She had some curves that filled out her red and black

flapper dress to perfection. Her black hair didn't quite reach her shoulders, and was done in a 1920s wavy style, with a headband topped with a red feather.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. Suddenly, my headache didn't feel so bad.

I let my gaze drift down her body. When I looked back at her face, our gazes locked.

She wasn't quite beautiful, but she was definitely attractive. She had wide eyes, but she was too far away for me to tell the color. She also had a wide mouth, and her lush lips were painted red to match her dress.

This time, I felt a tug. A big one.

The crowd shifted, blocking my view of her.

I set my drink down. "I'll be right back."

Frankie

Wow.

I looked around the party. *Amazing.* New Orleans sure knew how to throw a shindig.

I mean, there was a freaking tree in the center of the room, with flower-laden branches spreading across the ceiling. They glowed prettily.

I'd only been in the city two weeks, and I liked it already. To be fair, I'd spent most of my time setting up my new laboratory. Even the cute little house I was renting was still filled with boxes.

Tulane was helping to fund my new project...with help from the government. It was my dream come true. I was a microbiologist earning my PhD and helping my country at the same time.

But tonight, I just wanted to have some fun.

Tonight, I wanted to let my hair down a little.

I ran a hand down my dress. I *loved* the red flapper dress. It was a nice change from my lab coat, and who didn't like the chance to dress up? I was also wearing a long strand of pearls, and had a cute red-feather headband.

My other goal tonight was to see the Fury brothers.

I'd heard so much about New Orleans' favorite sons already. Well, okay, I really wanted to see Reath Fury—my brother Jack's best friend.

My brother idolized the man.

My nose wrinkled. Jack was closer to Reath than he was to me. They were like brothers. I felt a pang. I loved Jack, but he was always away from home. Always off looking for the next adventure.

Mom and I hadn't been enough for him. I'd learned that as a little girl desperate for her popular brother's attention.

My mom had always warned me that some men were always looking for the next exciting thing. Something new and shiny. A pulse-pounding adventure.

My dad had been. Not that he'd traveled the world or was unfaithful. No, he'd poured all his passion into his job as a cop.

Until it had killed him.

I shook off the melancholy. This was a party, and New Orleans was a fresh new start. I took a drink off a tray and smiled at the server. I took a sip of the champagne, and the sweetness fizzed on my tongue.

I didn't really remember Reath. I had a vague recollection of a man in uniform—like all the other soldiers milling around when Jack had come home. All I'd seen was my brother. I'd missed him so much.

"Oh my God, there's Dante Fury," a woman nearby whispered furiously. "His girlfriend is the *luckiest* woman in New Orleans."

I glanced at the trio of gossiping women, then turned.

Oh, yes. It seemed Dante Fury was a hot, dark-haired man, with a muscular body, and a strong jaw covered in a dark beard. The kind of man men wanted to be, and women just wanted. The brunette beside him in the killer black-and-gold dress was laughing, and of course, stunningly attractive.

I craned my neck to look at the others. There was a tall, grumpy-looking man with a beard, and small, blonde woman in front of him, patting his chest.

“I’ll take Colton,” another woman drawled. “All that bounty hunter badassness.” The woman mock shivered.

At that moment, the crowd shifted, and I couldn’t see the other brothers. *Darn it.*

Sipping my drink, I made my way closer, but I still couldn’t see a thing. I hated that everyone in the world was taller than me.

My best friend Lindsay back in Seattle would tell me to quit complaining. She was five foot nothing, and complained bitterly about being short.

Suddenly, the crowd parted, and a man in a white suit made me forget all about the Fury brothers.

Oh, boy. He was gorgeous. The white was perfect against his dark-bronze skin. He clearly had some African-American heritage. His face was almost beautiful, but his strong jaw saved him from being too pretty. His black hair was short, and the way he held himself said that he was a man who knew how to move, who knew how to deal with whatever life threw at him.

I saw him scan the room, watchful and alert. I’d seen that look in my brother.

Someone passed between us, and my chest tightened. *Wait.* Was he looking at me?

Then his head lifted, and his gaze collided with mine.

Oh. My heart did a hard rap against my ribs.

I couldn't look away. We stared at each other for a beat.

The crowd moved again, blocking my view. I quickly drained my drink and resisted the urge to fan myself.

I started moving through the guests toward the bar. There were some people out on the dance floor, doing some 1920s-style dancing to the jazz music.

Glancing back, I looked for my mystery man. I really didn't need a hot guy messing up my plans. I was Frankie Parker, career girl. My PhD was my main priority. Dr. F. Parker had a wonderful ring to it.

I had no room for men, love, and entanglements. My project was too important.

My work would change things—first for the military, but later for so many sick people.

I thought of my mom. My father had been killed in the line of duty when I'd been seven and Jack was on the cusp of becoming a teenager. He'd been devastated. As had mom. Dorrie Parker worked hard to keep the perfect home, had come to soccer games and cheerleading practice. But after dad had died, it was like a light had gone off inside her. She'd pined for her husband and had never remarried.

I had no plans to let a man do that to me.

I pushed through a small crowd of people and ran straight into a hard body.

"Oh, sorry." I pressed my hands to the man's snowy-white jacket. I felt hard muscle and warmth.

Then I looked up into a familiar, handsome face. I blinked. He had dark-brown eyes that I couldn't look away from.

"Hello," my mystery man drawled.

My brain sort of stopped for a second. "Hi." God, my voice was breathy. I sounded like a bad

Marilyn Monroe impersonator.

“It looks like you need a drink.” His voice was deep and rich. “Allow me.” He held out an arm to me.

I didn’t even think. I just slipped my arm through his.

Mr. Mystery had even more impact up close. As my body brushed his, my belly clenched. He smelled like limes and spice, and exuded a quiet strength.

He led me to the bar, and people seemed to move out of his way. He lifted a hand, and the stunning black bartender brought a fancy cocktail glass over, along with a short tumbler filled with amber liquid.

“For you.” He handed me the cocktail glass.

“Thank you.” I closed my hands around the glass, thankful to have something other to do than stare.

“Are you enjoying the party?”

“Well, it’s fancy.” I took a sip of the drink, and flavors exploded on my tongue. “Mmm, this drink is good.” I leaned in closer and caught a whiff of his crisp cologne again. “Honestly, I’m not much of a party person.”

“I’m not, either,” he said. “Although I get dragged to more of these parties than I’d like.” He tugged the lapel of his jacket. “And I’m always forced to dress up.”

“I don’t mind the dress-up part.” And really, this man should dress up more often.

His gaze lowered, and he took his time as he studied my dress. Heat ignited in my belly.

That brown gaze came back to mine. “Actually, I don’t mind you dressing up, either.”

My throat tightened, and I felt tingles everywhere.

“So, why don’t you do many parties?” he asked.

“Work. I’m a bit of a workaholic.”

His lips quirked. “Me, too.”

“I love what I do, so it doesn’t bother me to work late.”

He nodded, and I could see he understood.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

I shook a finger at him. “No, don’t ruin it. I’m enjoying the air of fun and mystery.”

He paused. “Okay, Ms. Mystery.”

I smiled. “Don’t try saying that three times fast.”

He laughed.

God. It was a good laugh. Desire shot straight between my legs. I didn’t know what was going on. No man had ever affected me like this before. I could see he felt it, too, reflected in the intense way he watched me.

I took a big gulp of cocktail. “So, you work too much?”

He nodded. “Like you, I enjoy my work. I have my own business.”

“For me, it’s knowing my work will help people. It gives me purpose.”

“Mine too. Too many people look or walk away when they could help.”

He was a double whammy. A good guy *and* a feast for the eyes. I shifted, and my glittery black handbag slid off my shoulder and hit the floor.

“Dammit.” I crouched, gripping the hem of my dress so I didn’t flash anyone.

Mr. Mystery crouched too, and our faces were close.

Both our hands closed on the strap of my bag.

Looking at each other, we slowly rose. His fingers, bigger and darker, tangled with mine. His brown gaze stayed locked on my face.

“I noticed your mouth first,” he murmured.

I blinked. “Oh? It’s big. My brother used to tease me about it when we were kids.”

My companion reached out and stroked a thumb across my bottom lip. “I think it’s perfect.”

My heart raced, flutters going crazy in my belly. His touch felt electric, and I wanted him to touch me in other places. Anywhere.

I swallowed and licked my lips. It touched his thumb. There was a dangerous flash in his eyes.

“Shit,” he muttered as he stepped closer. He took my glass and set it with his on one of the tall tables that dotted the venue. Then that intense gaze came straight back to me. “I want to kiss you.”

My heart was beating so fast. “If that’s a question, even though this is crazy and I don’t kiss strange men that I’ve just met, it’s a yes.”

“Good.” He lowered his head.

I could barely breathe.

His mouth touched mine. A tantalizing brush of lips. The crowd disappeared and my lips parted. His tongue stroked inside my mouth, and I moaned. He deepened the kiss, his hand cupping the back of my head.

The room whirled. Like the Earth shifted on its axis. I pressed my hands to his hard chest to hold myself up.

I lost myself in the taste of him as he kissed me. It was a sexy exploration of teasing, tasting, and learning. He made a low humming sound.

His mouth lifted. Our lips still touched, both of us breathing heavily.

I pulled in air. “I need—”

Shouts broke out. I heard glass smash.

His head whipped up, and his eyes sharpened as he turned. A fight had started nearby. Two men in suits were shoving at each other.

I recognized the look in his eye. My father and Jack had both possessed it. The knowledge that there was trouble nearby, and they needed to wade in.

“I need to help,” he said.

I nodded, feeling dazed. “Go.”

He charged in, shouldering past several people. I watched him pull the fighting men apart. One was clearly drunk.

A second later, I saw Dante and Colton Fury appear. A big, tattooed man and an elegant man in a suit joined them. They all dove in, herding people back and calming down the chaos.

My guy waved at the security guards, who were closing in.

“Deal with them,” Dante ordered, his tone cold.

Then he turned and slapped my mystery man on the back. “Quick reflexes as always, Reath.”

Reath.

My world tipped again, and my stomach tightened.

Oh, no. No. No. No.

I’d just kissed Reath Fury.

I’d just kissed my brother’s best friend.

I pressed my palms to my burning cheeks. Panicked, I wheeled around and hurried through the crowd.

Jack would kill me.

God. This was why I never went out.

I made a beeline for the front door.