

Prologue: Jack
10 Years Ago

“Wake up, Jack. We’re moving out. Your assignment is done.” My commanding officer barks his orders, jolting me awake. Opening my eyes, I sit up fast and blink as the dawn barely lights the cold room around me. On any other day, I would jump up and gather my things, but today is different.

“What do you mean, *done*? Last night we were waiting on the search warrants. We had the whole family. It was going down—” Glancing at the little light from my wristwatch to confirm the early time, I continue, “—today.” Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, my feet touch the frigid floor as dread sets in at the realization I am not still dreaming.

The events of the last few days replay in my head and his words don’t make sense. I’ve been on the ground with my unit for months working special ops undercover with local law enforcement on a federal level. Our orders were simple, collect whatever evidence we could find and round up witnesses willing to come forward against one of the largest crime organizations on the West Coast. Okay, maybe it wasn’t that easy.

Matteo Sparr and his organization have been hard to pin down. To innocent eyes, Mr. Sparr and his family are upstanding citizens; hosting charity events for the community and financially investing in local business. Only those unlucky enough to cross him ever get the chance to see what is under his mask and once you catch a glimpse, it’s already too late for you.

His criminal reach probably spreads further than what we already know. We have a weak case against him for drug trafficking. Then there’s the prostitution and some other minor offenses which is where our current operation came in. Word on the street is that these charges are only the tip of their illegal iceberg and it goes deeper into weapons dealings and more, but after a certain point, everything is locked down. There are no snitches higher up the ladder willing to talk about what they are really up to so all we have to go on are the minor misdemeanors. No one has ever been able to nail him on the charges that matter; the ones that carry serious jail time, or worse.

We were called in to work along with a group of government agencies. Just say the alphabet, they’re all in there somewhere.

With Port Thomas being a smaller city near the coast in Oregon, law enforcement is always underfunded so they were thankful for the additional manpower, as long as we didn’t step on too many toes. The red tape has been ridiculous. First the sheriff phoned in a request for help, but trusting anyone else on the ground was a nightmare. Determining who was and wasn’t in the Sparr pocket was the toughest task.

Things changed when an officer was found shot, execution style, in a ditch just outside of town. Everyone on the force knew who was behind it. It was an unnecessary hit only meant to send a message and keep everyone else on the force in line, but it backfired. The officer was one of the good guys, just out doing his job. He was highly respected among his peers and only a year away from retirement, leaving a wife and son behind.

No one said a thing, publicly. The conversations being held behind closed doors was an entirely different beast. One by one, officers filed into the sheriff’s office with what they knew,

what they heard and what they saw. It was only a lucky break the sheriff wasn't in Matteo's pocket.

Once we knew the situation better, working our way into the key players became much easier.

Then, everything finally began to snowball together three days ago.

First, one key witness who works at Sparr Industries got nervous and came forward with allegations of money laundering; then a second with another piece of the puzzle; then a third came in with solid proof, including files and damning video they managed to scrape together without getting caught.

It turns out the decision not to bring the mayor or his office in on the operation was the right choice. The mayor was in deep with the Sparr family, so a meticulously coordinated and highly secret request for all arrest and seizure warrants were processed through different channels.

We had our mission in place for today. Our ducks were in their pretty little rows but this wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"It blew up. Shit went down a few hours ago. Apparently, they knew we were coming. They had someone on the inside after all. The Sparr family is gone. All of the evidence against them is now speculative. Four witnesses are dead. Another two are in the wind." Then, as he opens his mouth, I see the hesitation in his eyes as his body physically braces for a fight.

"Jack." My commander starts then stops, carefully considering his words with a frustrating pause. "It's Jessa. Both her and her brother's bodies are missing."

"What do you mean, *missing*?" Then the weight of his words hit me. "Wait. What do you mean, *bodies*?" Bolting out of bed onto shaky legs, my head spins as my world begins to crumble piece by piece.

He chose his words carefully.

She isn't missing.

Her body is missing.

"Her family was in a car accident just outside of town at the bridge late last night. It looks like they went over the steep drop into the ravine. Her parents' bodies were recovered from the water downstream along with the car. We can't confirm yet that it's related, but three other people from the company are dead as well. It was a quick job." He glances around my area as I feel panic begin to flow through my veins.

"Maybe Jessa and Travis weren't in the car. Did you check their house?" I counter in a desperate attempt to think of something they haven't yet but I already know I'm behind.

Memories flash before my eyes. I saw Jessa and Travis yesterday. We were talking about how fast our high school grad is coming up in a few months. For siblings, they are almost inseparable. Twins who look nothing alike but finish each other's sentences at every turn.

When I started this undercover op, six months ago, I never expected to meet someone like Jessa. I was just a kid myself at 23 and I was five years older than her and her brother. But I fit into their senior year in high school.

No one knew my secret.

I was sent in to get close to Maxwell, Matteo's son. Because of his family's connections, Maxwell was one of the most popular kids in their high school. He learned how to keep up appearances from his father but word had it, he had become just as deep into all of the family's illegal activities.

The one thing we had in common was Jessa. Watching Maxwell, I noticed he always changed when she was around. He put on a good show for everyone else, but I could tell by the way he stared at her when she wasn't looking that she could probably write her ticket for life with him if she wanted to.

Everyone around her noticed it, except her. She always spoke kindly with him as she did with everyone, but that was where it ended for her. She only wanted to be his friend.

She was too good for him anyway. She was too good for the both of us.

I first met Jessa when I was paired with her on a science project. Her laugh was infectious and I lost myself in her smile. I understood Maxwell's attraction to her instantly. Both her and her brother were the most well-rounded kids in that school. They stayed away from the more dramatic groups and kept even further away from the most undesirable ones. They both had only a couple of friends in their core groups but they never excluded anyone who wanted to hang out.

Everything about Jessa just fit for me.

And now they are both missing.

"We've been to the house and the hospital. We retrieved the car an hour ago. Preliminary reports say the back passenger window was broken from the inside out. We found her school bag in the back seat. And before you ask, we already have over half the team in on the search. We've been working with the local guys and they have all of their information. We're checking the river banks as well as the water. Anyone making it out will be found, unless..." His voice trails off as his face drops in realization he said too much, but I pick up where he left off.

"Unless they got pulled under and sucked down the rapids." I feel my empty stomach clench tight.

His eyes stay locked on me as I pause to gather my thoughts then, without pretense, my body involuntarily spins to get dressed and go after Jessa and that's when I notice them.

Two men are standing still behind my commanding officer; I can't make out their faces. I'm sure they've been given orders to stand down unless necessary and the four walls in my room suddenly feel as though they are closing in.

"Look, Jack. We know you and Jessa became close but you need to let the team handle it. Finding her and Travis is our priority while we're here. Our mission still stands and your orders are to pack up and let them do their job. You'll head out to Fort Stevens in an hour." His attempt at pacifying me is beginning to speak to a part of me I don't want to show. The way he trivializes my feelings for Jessa ignites my fight or flight reflexes.

We didn't become close.

She was it.

She became everything.

Days working side by side at school and nights of time spent talking and growing closer. Everything she said about her past and her future spoke to me. Then the one special night we spent together shifted our relationship and everything changed.

I know I was out of line. I know I had a job to do here, but I wasn't about to let her go when everything was done.

She was mine and after the arrests were made, I was coming for her. I was going to come clean about everything. I was going to tell her I was undercover and five years older than she thought I was. I was going to ask her to forgive my secrets and I was going to tell her I loved her and start earning every beautiful piece of her back.

Now she's gone.

She's out there somewhere scared and cold.

Or she's... The thought hits me like a freight train and, without warning to myself or the guys in front of me, my body lunges toward the door, pushing and forcing my way through, but I don't make it.

Anticipating the move even I didn't know I would make, one of the men standing behind my commander steps into my path and takes me down without effort. In my haze, all my thoughts are of Jessa. Not combat. Not tactical maneuvers. And he takes advantage.

In the next breath, I'm on the floor with both of the new guys on top of me, pinning me in place, and my body finally kicks into fight, but I've already been immobilized.

His tactical experience level is evident by the way I hit the ground fast without feeling much pain. Or I could now be numb from the emotions building inside of me.

"Jack." I hear the sorrow in my leader's voice. It isn't his sadness he's projecting. He's reflecting my own misery and my face is suddenly wet as I look down at the floor to see the growing pool of tears gathering underneath me and I feel my chances of finding Jessa disappear. "We need to get you out of here. You're being sent back to base for eval. You can get up on your own, or you can wake up there." He lets his threat linger in the room as the guys begin to shift to take full control of my person. "And Jack. I am sorry."

I know he isn't talking about his regret at needing to restrain me. He's talking about Jessa and I realize at least a couple of hours have passed since the car went over the edge. The late spring weather has been uncharacteristically cold and it's made the water deathly frigid. She either made it out by breaking the window and swimming to shore—but no, she would have been found, cold and close to hypothermia—or she made it out and got pulled under.

Those are the only two scenarios in my head and, as I review them, my commander's voice echoes into my thoughts.

Her backpack was in the car and the window was broken from the inside. Their bodies are missing.

There's my line. I'm not going to be walking out of here today.

My body shakes and I can't control it. As much as I try to stop the pain from manifesting, I can't. It's too powerful. Releasing a guttural cry, I feel a surge of anxious energy flood through my arms. I need to release this pressure, it's too much to take.

As I struggle to suck in the air I just cried out, I hear one of the guys order the other to hold me still, then I feel it. A pinch in my arm and my will to fight dulls. My body finally relaxes then numbs as my world goes black.

