

Blood, Ash, and Bone

Chapter One

“Do it again,” he said.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, my legs shaking. “You’re kidding.”

“No. One more time.”

“I need to catch my breath first.”

He moved behind me and ran his hands down my ribcage to the small of my back, palms flat. He toed my feet two inches further apart and tucked my hips under. “One more time. Shoulders down and back. Keep your feet in neutral.”

“Can’t we move to side kicks?”

“Round kicks.”

“Trey—”

“One more set.” He stood in front of me again and picked up the kick pad. “Keep it sequential.”

I gave up arguing and straightened my stance. We were alone in the workout room at the gym, his students long gone. No way to avoid his laser-lock attention. I took a deep breath and kicked one more time, channeling my annoyance into the kinetic chain of hip-thigh-ankle. To my astonishment, I landed it solid, all of my mass and energy converging in a blow so powerful it knocked Trey back a step.

I bounced on the balls of my feet. “I nailed that!”

He didn't smile, but I did detect satisfaction. He always looked so boyish with a light sheen of sweat on his forehead, his black hair mussed.

"Good," he said. "Stop bouncing and finish the set."

I squared my stance as he put the kick pad up again, then launched into the rest of the set, seven more kicks in rapid succession. I felt like a ninja, a starburst, a firework.

I put my hands up in a fighting stance. "Come on, let's do some sparring."

"Not today."

"You always say that."

He lowered the kick pad and started untying his handwraps, eyes down. I put my hands on my hips.

"Trey. We have talked about this."

He shook his head, not looking at me. "Nonetheless."

I exhaled in frustration. Three months previously, in the heat of a bitter argument, I'd grabbed his elbow. He'd popped my hand away in a Krav block, a move as precise and sudden as a lightning strike. It hadn't hurt, but it had certainly shocked me. Trey too. He'd stared at his hands like they were alien things, then babbled an apology. And we hadn't sparred since.

"You still spar with your other students. Why not with me?"

He didn't deny the charge. His attention remained on the neat unwrapping of his hands.

I spread my arms. "Look at me. Shin pads, combat vest, gloves. I've even got the damn helmet on. You're wearing a tee-shirt and shorts, barefoot. I'm a

virtual tank, and you're one layer from naked."

He folded his arms. I recognized the gesture — full defensive lockdown — which meant I wasn't breaching his perimeter with a direct assault.

I took two steps closer, and he narrowed his eyes, wary. Up close, he smelled like sweat and bleached cotton. I imagined how he would taste, the salt sting of bare skin against my tongue. I ran one hand up his arm, from wrist to elbow. He didn't visibly react, but I knew he craved the flare and ignition as much as I did, even if he was better at tamping it down.

I smiled at him. "We'll take it slow and easy. No sudden moves, no surprises."

He didn't budge. I ran one finger down his breastbone, feeling the contraction of each muscle group — first the pecs, then the diaphragm, then the abs. He could make a fortress of his body. He was doing it right in front of me.

He cocked his head. "Tai? What are you doing?"

"Sparring."

"This isn't sparring."

"You sure?"

And then I yanked my knee up within a millimeter of his groin. He froze, and his eyes went ice-blue. And he got calm. Real calm.

I looked him in the eye. "So drop the over-protective routine, Mr. Seaver. I may not be the Krav Maga god that you are, but I can take care of myself."

He hadn't moved an inch. "A point."

I smiled bigger. "In my favor, I do believe."

And then it happened. Suddenly the world somersaulted — wheel and whirl and reel and tumble — and the back of my skull slammed against the cushioned mat with a thud. I blinked into the overhead fluorescents, flat on my back.

Trey stood at my feet, hands on hips, not even breathing hard. He hadn't broken eye contact, had simply grabbed my arm and flipped me, one deft move. Close the space, vault and release.

I squinted up at him. "Omigod, you have to teach me that."

"What?"

"Seriously. That was awesome." I held a hand in his direction and wiggled my fingers. "Help me up."

His natural courtesy almost undid him, and he reached out to take my hand. Fortunately for him, his training kicked in a millisecond later, and he snatched his hand back before I could grab it.

I grinned. "You almost fell for that."

He glared at me, then headed for the door.

I rolled to my stomach. "And where do you think you're going, you sneaky son of a bitch?"

He bent over his gym bag and pulled out his gloves. "To get my sparring gear."

He drove me back to Kessesaw the back route, avoiding the interstate, keeping the Ferrari right at the speed limit. I watched Atlanta roll by — steel

buildings, gray asphalt, tree branches going bare against a gunmetal November sky. My thighs ached from the last thirty minutes on the mat. He'd been relentless. I hadn't been able to get in a single punch, much less block anything he'd sent my way, and he'd sent the whirlwind.

"That still wasn't sparring," I complained. "That was you teaching me a lesson. You dominated the entire time."

He turned onto my street, a narrow lane lined with small mom-and-pop stores, of which my gun shop was one. It was fully dark now, the streetlights blooming in the night like nocturnal flowers.

"Of course I dominated. I'm better than you are."

"That doesn't mean you need to go full bad ass on me! What happened to the zone of proximal learning, keeping students at the edge of their comfort zone?"

He didn't reply.

"You used to give me a fighting chance. But tonight, all you did was knock me down over and over. I didn't learn a damn thing."

He glanced my way. "Nothing at all?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

I frowned. "Is this you being cryptic? Because I'm not used to that."

He considered his words. "Every offensive move exposes a defensive vulnerability. The same move that put you close enough to attack also put you too close to defend."

“I couldn’t have defended against a front takedown, you haven’t taught me how!”

“I keep explaining this, and you keep ignoring me — don’t move outside your training. Stick with what you can execute cleanly and effectively.”

“Or get knocked on your ass, I get it.”

“I’m serious.”

“I am too.”

“I’m more serious.”

I laughed at that. “Don’t worry, coach, the next time I seduce you, it will be for real. And then you’ll be in big trouble.”

His mouth quirked in an almost-smile, and I felt a current of relief. Usually I spent post-workout nights at his place in Buckhead, but since I had an appointment with my friendly neighborhood ATF agent in the morning — plus a ton of packing for the upcoming Civil War Expo — we were headed to Kennesaw instead, to drop me off at my apartment above Dexter’s Guns and More.

“Seduction is not the point,” he said.

“What is the point?”

“That one move won’t save you, not in a real fight. Not with a trained fighter.”

“If you’d been a real bad guy, I would have shot you.”

“If I’d been a real bad guy, you wouldn’t have gotten that chance.”

Another valid point. But I wasn’t interested in the finer instruction of hand to hand combat. At least not the combat part.

I leaned over and nuzzled behind his ear. "Come up with me. The place is chaos, but no more pizza on the floor, I promise."

He raised one dubious eyebrow.

"Come on, I told you I'd replace the shoes."

"You can't afford Prada."

"I was thinking Hushpuppies."

But he wasn't listening anymore. His eyes were focused instead on the front door of my shop. "Tai? Who is that?"

I squinted through the windshield and saw the figure waiting next to the motorcycle, his features shadowed in the amber haze of the streetlight, blurred by cigarette smoke. My stomach clenched.

"Aw hell, not tonight."

Trey pulled the Ferrari into the space next to the door, the tires crunching gravel. His shoulders dropped, and his expression went cool and questioning. His ex-cop face.

The man beside the bike was tall and husky, with broad shoulders under a road-fatigued leather jacket, his Levis and black leather boots dusty from the road. His salt-and-pepper beard was neatly trimmed, but the hair was a shoulder-length tangle of curls. He'd been riding without a helmet again, which meant he'd come through some state besides Georgia on his way into town. I couldn't see his eyes, but I knew they were blue. Not blue like Trey's, which were a crystalline sapphire blue. Blue like the edge of a thunderhead, a tumbling gray-blue.

I exhaled. "That would be John, my ex. So you should probably stay in the

car—”

Trey got out of the car. “Is he the one who left you for your roommate?”

“Yes, Trey, thank you for that succinct reminder.” I snatched my workout bag from behind the seat. “Which is why I’d like to handle this myself, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t think—”

“He’s harmless. Gritty on the surface, marshmallow underneath.”

Trey ran his eyes down my face and across my mouth. I didn’t complain; I was used to having my veracity verified on a regular basis. It wasn’t even insulting anymore, just another quirk in a Smithsonian-worthy collection of quirks. But I was telling the truth, so I let Trey see it.

“You’re doing it again,” I said. “That over-protective thing.”

“But—”

“Go home. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He eyed my visitor, then nodded reluctantly. I kissed him goodbye, with perhaps a little more display than necessary.

Afterward, he put his mouth to my ear. “Tonight. Call me tonight.”

“I will. Now go.”

He climbed back into the Ferrari, eyes still on the guy standing at my door. He revved the engine and pulled a tight arc in the parking lot, kicking up gravel.

I went up to my visitor. I could hear the tick-tick-tick of the Harley engine cooling. So he hadn’t been there long.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. “John Wilde.”

“Tai Randolph.” He smiled, his eyes sparkling. “That’s the kind of guy you’re seeing now? Some uptown yuppie?”

I looked over my shoulder to see the taillights rip around the corner, the F430 coupe taking the turn at an almost ninety degree angle.

“Uptown, yes. Yuppie, no. Trust me on that one.”

John laughed. He had a really good laugh, and it came from deep in his chest. His voice was still pure Alabama, slow and rich, like a deep river.

“A Ferrari.” He shook his head. “Your taste in men certainly has changed.”

“Not as much as you might think.” I unlocked the door and bumped it open with my hip. “Come on in. Then you can explain why out of all the gun shops in the greater metro area, you ended up at mine.”