

Chapter One

When **Ian** Walser got off the plane in his hometown of Spokane, Washington, all he'd really wanted was a cold beer and twelve hours of undisturbed sleep.

His family and friends had other plans.

He took a long pull from his beer and sighed. At least he'd gotten one of those things. All around him, people milled in the semidarkness of the club. **Elle** and her new boyfriend sat at the other end of the long table, and he thanked his lucky stars they were more interested in each other than him. To be fair, he'd shut his sister down every time she came over and tried to talk to him. He just wanted to be alone.

It wasn't in the cards for him tonight, though. Along with his baby sister, the crowd was filled with old high school friends he hadn't bothered to keep up with, aside from the occasional phone call or e-mail. It wasn't that he'd wanted to cut all ties with this place when he'd shipped out overseas—he'd just never been good at long-distance communication. Hell, outside of his family, the only person he talked to regularly these days was Nathan, and his best friend hadn't been able to make it tonight.

Ian's mother perched on the chair next to him, effectively blocking any chance of escape. Even knowing he was safe here, the familiar tightness started in his chest. He wanted to ask his mom to move, to let him have the end seat at the table, but then he'd have to explain himself, and he hadn't seen fit to share all the gory details of his most recent tour of Afghanistan. As bad as it had been the first time around—even with Nathan by his side—it had been a thousand times worse the second time through. Just thinking about it had the pressure building in his chest.

He made a conscious effort to breathe—in through his nose, hold for three seconds, out

through his mouth.

It didn't help.

Neither did his mother.

“Your sister went through all the effort to plan this party and you've spent the entire time sitting in the corner, glaring at anyone who tries to talk to you. You're being rude.”

As much as he loved his mother, dealing with her was the last thing he needed right now.

“No one asked me if I wanted this.”

If he *had* been asked, he would have found a way out of it. But there'd been no time to escape once Elle picked him up from the airport and hustled him here, barely giving him enough time to shower at her place on the way.

Here, with the country music twanging, balloons attached to every available surface, and the clash of too many people in too small a space, his nerves were shot, and he had a nasty headache starting. A trio of laughing women bumped into the table, one of them falling against the balloons on the farthest corner. One of the balloons popped, startling him half out of his skin despite the fact that he knew it was coming. He dug his fingers into the table, fighting for control, but there was too much noise, too much movement, too much everything.

“Ian Christopher Walser—”

Elle chose that moment to jump to her feet, looking like a virgin sacrifice in a den of iniquity wearing a white dress with her hair pulled up. “Mom! I just had the best idea about the wedding.”

Their mom zeroed in on her like a shark scenting blood. “I hardly think—”

“Come on.” Elle hustled around the table, grabbed their mother's hand, and practically dragged her out of her seat. She paused long enough to peek around the closest cluster of red,

white, and blue balloons to wink at Ian, and then they were gone, disappearing through the mass of people.

That had been a close one. He rubbed his hands over his face and then down his sternum, where the pressure hadn't decreased. If anything, it was a thousand times worse, like there was an invisible gargoyle on his chest, slowly smothering him.

Christ, he had to get out of here before he lost it. He was already having a hard time holding still. He kept reaching for where his gun should be holstered—*had* been holstered. Not anymore, though. Ian wouldn't survive a third tour. Or rather, his body would probably survive, but he wasn't sure his sanity would. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had more than four hours of nightmare-free sleep.

He finished his... Honestly, he wasn't sure how many beers he'd had. Not enough to dull the irrational shit flickering through his head. It didn't help that the owner of the club he was currently sitting in belonged to his baby sister's thug of a fiancé.

That, at least, gave him something to focus on besides his own misery. Gabe Schultz was a scary motherfucker, tall and packed with enough muscle to make most guys think twice before messing with him. His best friend—Gabe's little brother, Nathan—had the same build, but at least Nathan had a reason for it when he was in the service. His baby sister's new guy, on the other hand, looked like trouble. Just like the asshole she'd dated before Ian had stepped in and put an end to that.

Maybe focusing on Elle and Gabe wasn't the best idea he'd had either because the room suddenly felt even hotter. Hoping moving around would calm him down, he slipped out of his seat. The crowd of people seemed to press in on him, smothering him as he made his way to the bar. It was a trick of the mind—no one was actually touching him—but Ian's mind was more

than adept at this kind of thing now.

Air. He needed air.

Giving up on the bar, he headed for the elevator like there was a goddamn monster breathing down his neck. A man stepped into his path, his height instantly making him a threat. No, that wasn't right. There were no threats here, and this guy was grinning like they were the best of friends. Ian blinked, belatedly recognizing the face of his old quarterback. Despite playing beside the guy for four years in high school, his name slipped through Ian's fingers like sand.

The guy clapped his shoulder. "Hey, man. Long time, no see."

He couldn't do this now. Even that small touch had him clenching his jaw and scrambling for control. If he didn't get out of here soon, he was going to lose his shit completely. "Yeah." When the guy only grinned wider and looked like he was settling down for a good, long talk, Ian slid around him. "Be right back."

If he had anything to say about it, he'd never set foot in this hellhole again. Elle's fiancé be damned.

Ian stopped trying to hold himself in check and more or less jogged the last few steps past the elevator to the stairwell. As soon as the door closed behind him and he hit the stairs running, the music dimmed to a dull throbbing sound. Helpful, but not near enough. He caught a glimpse of the bouncer's raised eyebrows as he shoved through the door on the ground floor and made for the exit.

It distracted him enough that he didn't see the woman until he ran her over.

"Oomph."

Ian had the presence of mind to control their fall so she landed on his lap instead of

scraping her face all to hell on the concrete outside the door to the club, but he took the full force of the impact. He blinked at the sky for a second while he relearned how to breathe, but his instincts, born of too many combat situations, wouldn't let him lie there for long. Might as well paint a target on his forehead. He rolled to the side and immediately got an eyeful of beautiful brunette.

She frowned down at him, the expression doing nothing to take away from her old-school movie star looks. Why the hell was he noticing her *looks* right now? No doubt she was about to rip him a new one. He braced himself—he deserved it after knocking her down like this—but she just frowned harder and gave his shoulder a push. When he realized he still had his arms around her, Ian climbed to his feet and pulled her up with him. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry.”

She leaned around him and eyed the door he’d just blown through. “Where’s the fire?”

At the reminder of the scene he’d just left, his chest tightened all over again. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She opened her mouth—probably to deliver the scathing comment she’d held back initially—but stopped and really *looked* at him. Under those green eyes, he felt stripped bare, as if she could see every single thing he tried to hide from the rest of the world.

He hated it.

Before he could escape her scrutiny, she smiled. The change took her from gorgeous straight into breathtaking.

“So, you kind of fail at the whole Prince Charming gig,” she said, “but think you can help me find something to take care of this?”

She motioned, drawing his attention down her body. Ian temporarily got caught up on the brilliant pink skirt that hugged every curve before he landed on her legs. Though he’d taken the

brunt of the fall, she'd skinned up the side of her right leg. It wasn't a serious injury—he'd seen more than a few of those in his time—but there was already a thin line of blood welling along her skin.

“Shit. I am so sorry.” He looked around for the bouncer. The man still stood by the door, his arms crossed over his massive chest. “Hey! You got a medic on staff?”

Her eyes went wide. “No, seriously. That's really okay. I was just thinking maybe we could find a first-aid kit.” When he moved closer, she held up a hand. “Don't you dare think of carrying me anywhere. It's just a scratch—not like I lost a leg or something.”

Blood, he could handle, but loss of limb? The flashback hit so hard that it almost took him to his knees. How one second Jones was there, the next he was laid out, both of his legs gone. The man had made it, but **Ian** still had nightmares about those first few seconds after the mine exploded, how the pale sand had been coated with red and darker things.

“Hey.” The woman snapped her fingers in front of his face, startling him back to the present. She was frowning again. “Are you okay?”

The fact that she had the balls to ask that when *she* was the one bleeding made him fist his hands. “I'm fine.”

“Oh, I seriously doubt that, physical perfection aside.”

He was still trying to process her response when the woman touched his shoulder, the press of her fingers opening up something in his chest. Something...freeing. **Ian** closed his eyes for a moment, taking his first full breath since he entered the club hours ago.

She kept right on talking, oblivious to the change her touch brought about in him. “Are you really okay? Because most people don't flee a club like there's a scary man with an ax chasing them for no reason.”

The choice lay before him—Ian could make up an excuse and leave like a pansy, or he could attempt to carry on a conversation with this woman without looking like he was coming unhinged. He could tell from the look on her face that she wouldn't let this go, so he took another deep breath and went for a half-truth. "I hate clubs. The music is too loud, and the crowds are too thick."

"I can understand that." She took a step closer and slid her hand lower, to his forearm. Her perfume, something light and airy, wrapped around him, holding him in place more firmly than if she'd fastened an anchor to his ankle. Between that and her fingers playing against his skin, the pressure in his chest decreased a bit more. "The top floor has no crowds, and they only play the most tasteful of classical music. It's a pretty chill atmosphere. And quite frankly, you look like you could use some chill right now. What do you say? Want to go in and help me find a first-aid kit?"

Ian didn't want to go back into that club, but he couldn't make himself let go of her hand. A nasty panic attack waited on the edges of this awareness, eating away at his control. But damn it, he needed to make sure she got patched up. He tried to smile. "I should probably buy you a drink, too. Seeing as how I knocked you down and all."

"Darling, you just said the magic words." She grinned again and gave his arm a squeeze that made the five steps toward the door feel manageable. "I'm a sucker for a man who wines and dines me. And if you're lucky, I'll even let you play doctor."

