

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark olive green military-style shirt with buttons and pockets, is shown from the chest up. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark with ornate, light-colored floral patterns in the corners.

*She's cloaked in mystery, but he's
determined to uncover all her secrets*

FIND ME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**STACEY
KENNEDY**

A PHOENIX NOVEL

FIND ME

A PHOENIX NOVEL

STACEY KENNEDY

*For everyone who came on the Phoenix journey with me.
Thank you!*

CONTENTS

[Content Warning](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Mailing List](#)

[Don't miss Stacey Kennedy's new sexy series, The Sensual Equation:](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Want more sexy reads from Stacey Kennedy? Check out the first book in the Three Chicks Brewery series:](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

CONTENT WARNING

References to emotional trauma, abandonment by a parent, and organized crime.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Stacey Kennedy. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute or transmit in any form or by any means. For information regarding subsidiary rights, please contact Stacey Kennedy.

Stacey Kennedy

www.staceykennedy.com

Edited by Lexi Smail

Copy Edited by Terrance Grundy

Cover Design by Regina Wamba

Manufactured in Canada

Hawke Foster strode through the maze of underground tunnels in midtown Manhattan, a place once used for illegal activities during prohibition. As he made his way down the stone-lined hallways toward Phoenix, an exclusive sex club that catered to voyeurism, he couldn't help but feel the weight of its secrets hidden behind the thick walls. When he approached a large metal door on his left and saw the security guard sitting at her desk, he smiled. Only members had access to this door, which opened into the basement of the Phoenix and was one of four entrances scattered around the city.

Phoenix had strict security measures in place, including ID checks and surveillance cameras at all tunnel entrances. A team of watchful security guards made sure that only the wealthy and elite who met the expensive membership requirements could enter. The end of the tunnels led to a security system that rivaled Hawke's experiences with the Navy SEALs, which was not surprising given that the security detail consisted of retired military personnel.

"Good evening, Hawke," said Rosalyn, a brunette who wore a new color of eyeshadow every day. She'd worked the Phoenix's West tunnel for as long as he'd been working there, which was going on nearly a year now.

"Hey," Hawke replied. "How's it looking tonight?"

"Everything's in order," Rosalyn said.

"Excellent," Hawke replied. That's the way he liked it.

After he exchanged some brief pleasantries, he entered the club and walked down the silent hallway, hearing communication between the security team through his earpiece tucked in his ear. As he passed by the women's changing area, he heard muffled voices coming from inside, indicating that the performers for tonight's show had arrived and were preparing. The voices grew fainter as he entered the next room on his left.

The room was a showcase of advanced technology, filled with rows of monitors and surveillance equipment. The soft light from the screens illuminated the faces of the four people positioned at their control stations, their unwavering attention fixed on their tasks.

Hawke's gaze flicked to the man at the end of table. Archer Westbrook, head of security, stood with an air of casual authority. His broad shoulders and powerful frame exuded confidence while his piercing blue eyes held an almost predatory glint. Archer was the epitome of a retired United States Army Special Forces.

"Evening, Hawke," Archer called, nodding in his direction. "All good?"

Archer was owner Rhys Harrington's secondhand man, and Hawke was Archer's, working under him as a security team lead. "Quiet so far," Hawke replied. "I've done a sweep of all four tunnels and checked in with the team. No issues to report."

"Good to hear," Archer said with a firm nod. "We've done another sweep of the club and haven't found any bugs."

The last one they found three days ago had sent shock waves through the security team. How anyone got a bug in past security was still an unknown, as was who put it there.

Hawke nodded, aware the club's security was at risk. Phoenix was an invite-only secret club with strict membership requirements, and it was this very sense of mystery and allure that drew people to its doors. Every member wore a mask, but not everyone managed to conceal their true identities. Last

week, Hawke recognized an A-list celebrity and a billionaire CEO.

But that security was at risk because a few sophisticated bugs had been hidden in the sex-show room and the change room. No one on the security team took that lightly.

Hawke took pride in his role at Phoenix after he was forced to retire from the Navy SEALs when an explosive took his right leg. Now he sported a prosthetic leg, and he was determined to maintain the standard of excellence that had earned him the respect and trust of his fellow SEALs.

Failure did not sit right.

“Speaking of which,” Archer continued, lowering his voice, “Are you with Penny for the rest of the night?”

That would be Penny, the hacker that Rhys had hired to look into the breach in their security and to hunt down the mole. “If I’m dismissed to do so.”

“You are,” Archer said, simply. “Let’s get this resolved.”

“Copy, boss,” Hawke replied.

Archer tipped his head to the corner of the room, and once Hawke followed, Archer said, “Keep this between us, but while you’re working with Penny, look into her. Find out exactly who she is.”

Hawke lifted his brows. “You want me to look into your wife’s good friend?”

Archer’s lips thinned. He crossed his arms and frowned. “Elise trusts her. My gut tells me to trust her. But we also know nothing about her. Elise is very tight lipped where it comes to Penny.”

As a hacker, Penny had made it that way. From what Archer told him, the woman didn’t leave a digital fingerprint. She was like a ghost with no past. “I’ll get close to her.”

Archer scoffed. “That might not be as easy as you think.”

Hawke grinned in challenge. “Probably not.” But that’s what he liked about Penny. He had initially met her through

Elise, who was her best friend. It wasn't until they discovered the bugs, that he found out she was a skilled hacker who collaborated with Elise at her investigative firm.

“Excellent” Archer said. “Keep me updated.”

After a final nod, Hawke watched as Archer left. His gaze swept across the room, looking over the members of his team. “Everyone good here?” he asked the team.

He received nods and agreement from those present, so he exited the room and made his way to the main area, a routine he followed every time he worked to set the guests at ease. He was aware that his presence added to the sense of security, along with his all-black uniform. This allowed the members to fully let go of their worries without fear of judgment or exposure.

As he entered the bar, Hawke took a moment to absorb the unique atmosphere that filled the depths of Phoenix. The club's air of exclusivity drew in high-profile guests and hushed whispers from those desperate to watch forbidden delights. Because the club only had one rule: *look, don't touch*. It took more than just deep pockets to gain access; one also had to be vetted to the extreme. Even then, there were no guarantees of admittance.

Hawke strolled past the bustling bar staff, exchanging nods and quick chats with each one. “How's it going?” he quipped to Marco, one of the bartenders.

Marco winked and gave him a thumbs-up. “Smooth sailing so far.”

“Good. Enjoy your night,” Hawke replied, as he continued his patrol.

As Hawke made his way through the main sex-show circular room, shadows danced on the stone walls from the sconces, while luxurious fabrics in shades of scarlet and gold cascaded from above, adding to the overall feeling of indulgence. The air was filled with a heady mix of sandalwood and amber scents, creating a sensual atmosphere that was hard to resist.

He stepped back into the hallway, his boots making a soft *thud* as he crossed the threshold into Rhys's office. His pulse quickened with anticipation, and his gaze landed on the person behind the desk—Penny Larson.

Her reputation preceded her: a formidable hacker with unmatched tenacity and intellect. But it wasn't just her professional skills that captured his attention. It was also her fiery red hair, which seemed to embody her spirit, and her piercing green eyes that held endless secrets within them. He couldn't help but feel drawn to her, despite knowing the dangers of getting too close to someone who was essentially invisible to the world.

But the image of her stirred something within him, awakening buried desire of something other than lust—something *deeper*. His past was full of lovers and detachment, as being a SEAL made a relationship near impossible.

As his gaze landed on her sitting behind the large cherrywood desk, he felt a tightness in his chest. There she was, completely focused and determined as she pored over data. Hawke had known from the day he'd met her that his fascination with her went beyond mere physical attraction; there was something about her unwavering dedication and resilience that spoke to the very core of who he was.

He had never believed in love at first sight until he'd met her.

Focus, Foster, he chastised himself internally, his jaw clenching as he fought against the pull of desire that threatened to consume him. He had a job to do, and he couldn't afford to let anything get in the way—not even the captivating allure she presented.

She looked up, startled by his sudden presence. Her eyes met his, and for a moment, Hawke felt like he was drowning in the depths of that emerald gaze. Though he couldn't fight his smile at her T-shirt that read: THAT'S A HORRIBLE IDEA. WHAT TIME? "Any luck?" he finally asked.

"Maybe," she replied. "I think I've found something... or I should say, someone."

“Show me.” As he moved in beside her, their arms brushed against each other, sending shock waves through his body. Hawke clenched his jaw again, struggling to maintain his composure.

“Who is this?” she asked, pointing out a tall brunette in lingerie, leaving the changing room.

“Julia Castillo,” Hawke murmured.

“Member?” Penny asked.

“Participant,” he replied. “She’s been doing shows for about six months now.”

Penny’s eyebrow raised. “Was she vetted?”

“No one comes through these walls without being vetted.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you,” Penny said, pointing at the screen. “But your vetting sucks, because *that* is the person who planted the bug.”

Hawke had no reason to doubt Penny, but asked anyway, “You saw her do it?”

Penny shook her head. “No, but I’m certain it’s her behind it.”

He sighed and regarded Penny, who held his stare, her bright eyes sparkling. “Come on, we need to tell Rhys.”

She blinked in surprise at him. “That’s it? No questions? No digging to see if I’m on the right track?”

He watched her closely again and then shrugged. “I figure you’d appreciate not having to repeat whatever you have to say.” For as long as he could remember, he was calculated in his choices. The military taught him that. But he followed his gut this time, lifting a brow at her. “Do you want me to question you or trust you, Red?”

She narrowed her eyes at his nickname for her like she always did. He was convinced that fire in her could be his undoing.

A beat passed. She held his gaze, just like he expected. Focused. Intent. “Those can’t be my only choices. And my

name is Penny.”

He lifted his brow higher. “What’s another choice then, Red?”

She rose and snorted, shaking her head at him. “You can follow.”

He grinned, following her with his gaze as she headed toward the door. This smart-as-hell, firecracker of a woman had him by the balls, and he was certain, he’d follow her anywhere.

PENNY WANTED ONLY two things in life. One, excel at her job. Two, prioritize her independence. The gorgeous, magnetic man at her back, burning his gaze into her, was getting in the middle of both those things. He was getting in her head. And *that* was really starting to piss her off.

The scent of rich tobacco and leather enveloped her as she stepped into the dimly lit cigar lounge that was located above the Phoenix club.

Hawke led the way as she caught sight of Rhys, sitting at a booth with Kieran and Hazel, who were married, and Elise, who was Archer’s wife and Penny’s closest friend.

Penny couldn’t relate to all that loved-up stuff. She had boyfriends in the past, some serious, some not, but she couldn’t imagine committing to someone forever. It wasn’t that she had trauma in her past or commitment problems. It was her job that got in the way. As a hacker, she saw into people’s lives with a microscope. People were terrible and were rarely who they portrayed. She didn’t want the headache that came with a relationship. She didn’t need sex that bad.

Elise’s light blue eyes locked on Penny’s approach, and she jumped up, her long, dark brown hair swinging off her shoulder as she threw her arms around Penny. “Hey, girlie!”

“Hey,” Penny said, returning the warm embrace.

Elise was the reason Penny was involved with this group of friends. They met on a job—Elise was a private investigator—and the friendship stuck. Plus, Penny worked for Elise’s private investigation firm ever since, keeping her on the legit side of hacking these days. Elise was the only person whom Penny knew was authentic, and the only person she trusted, other than her grandmother.

When Penny broke away from Elise, Kieran gave her a nod, his green eyes as strong as ever. “Penny.”

“Hi.” She smiled at him, then exchanged greetings with Hazel, but she made it brief. The only one at this table she knew well was Elise, and she was getting to know her husband, Archer, more now that he and Elise were married. But all these people were members of a voyeuristic sex club, and she was not interested in gaining membership to the club. What could she possibly have in common with any of them?

Only her vibrator got her off. Most men needed an instruction manual to her clit.

Elise asked, “How’s things going?” She meant, *Have you found the person who planted the bugs?*

“It’s slow going.” Penny smiled in response.

“Damn,” Elise grumbled. Penny didn’t doubt that Archer’s mood had been rocky, since the bugs were planted under his watch.

“I take it you have something for me,” Rhys interjected to Hawke, his sculpted face and squared jaw framed by jet-black hair that contrasted strikingly with his gray eyes. The man reeked of power.

Hawke crossed his muscular arms over his chest. His cropped dark hair and chiseled features amplified the sense of danger that clung to him like a second skin. “The report is yours,” he told her.

Penny really did hate the way her heart rate spiked whenever he set those icy blue eyes on her. “I do have something for you,” she told Rhys.

Not that she didn't *want* Hawke, she did, but he made heart beat a little faster. She'd seen her mother give everything to a husband who treated her like a doormat. When Penny tried to talk her mother into leaving her stepfather, her husband cut off their communication, and her mother let him. Penny would never become that obsessed with anyone. The way Hawke observed her and interacted with her, even giving her a nickname for crying out loud, didn't just speak of desire. It conveyed something else entirely, something that made her feel the urge to run and hide.

"Please excuse me a moment," Rhys said to his friends, and Elise waved at Penny as she followed him toward a table in the corner, away from listening ears.

Rhys pulled his cell from his pocket and sent a text, waiting for Penny to sit first, before he joined her around the table. Hawke took the seat across from her.

Rhys laced his fingers together on top of the table. "What have you found?"

"I have concerns about one of your participants, Julia Castillo," Penny explained. "I've been reviewing the surveillance footage, and something about her rubs me wrong."

"Go on," Rhys said, leaning forward with interest.

"She seems to be aware of the surveillance cameras, and her mannerisms scream nervousness. It's as if she knows she's being watched and doesn't like it." Penny paused, searching their faces for any sign of surprise.

Hawke's disciplined expression remained unchanged, but she could see the gears turning behind his eyes. Rhys, however, raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued.

"Why do you think she might be aware of the cameras?" Rhys pressed.

"She is the only member, participant, employee that looks at the cameras, and she does it every time," Penny replied.

"I see," Rhys said, his gaze thoughtful. "I trust your instincts, Penny. If you believe there is cause for concern, dig

deeper.”

Penny glanced at Hawke, who nodded in agreement. The silent strength he exuded offered a sense of comfort she wasn't used to—and that's what was unsettling. Her reaction to him was unnerving, and something she needed to fix. Pronto.

Rhys sighed, drawing her attention back to him. “That said, do you have any idea what Julia might be after?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she replied, meeting his gaze evenly. “But I'll find out.”

Rhys leaned back in his chair, his expression contemplative. “What's your next move?”

Penny took a deep breath to consider. “I think the best way to confirm my suspicions is to get closer to her. I need to put her under surveillance with full access to the club.”

Rhys looked to Hawke.

He nodded in agreement. “I think it's our best bet. We need to know for certain if she's the one behind planting the bugs.”

“What did I miss?” a deep voice interrupted their conversation. Archer sidled up to the table with an air of authority that demanded respect.

“Archer,” Rhys acknowledged with a nod, indicating for him to join them. “Penny has some concerns about Julia Castillo. She thinks she may be our mole.”

“How certain are you?” Archer asked without missing a beat, taking a seat next to Rhys.

She couldn't stop the slight curve of her mouth. Not too long ago, Archer wouldn't have trusted her word. Because she was the hacker that didn't follow the law and had once hacked into their security system. “I can't say I'm absolutely certain until I confirm my findings,” she replied. “But I'd put my money on it.”

Archer turned toward Hawke, his gaze unwavering. “Stay close to Penny when you're out in the field. Elise would never

forgive me for bringing her in on this if anything happened to her.”

Penny’s lips parted but Hawke interjected, his jaw clenching. “Understood. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

Archer nodded in approval.

Penny was instantly annoyed by the idea that they thought she needed protection, but she also felt a shiver run down her spine as her gaze locked with Hawke’s, the intensity of his promise igniting a flame within her that threatened to consume her.

A dangerous thing that was...

The atmosphere in the room crackled with tension as Rhys leaned against the table. His eyes surveyed Penny, Hawke, and Archer. A cloud of cigar smoke hung heavily in the air, its heady scent mingling with the lingering traces of cologne and leather.

“All right,” Rhys began, his voice low. “We need to put Julia under surveillance—discreetly, of course. We can’t risk alerting her to our suspicions.” He looked pointedly at Penny, who nodded in agreement. “And as much as I dislike it since you are not a member or participant, you can have full access to the club.”

“Good,” said Penny. “I’ll start by digging deeper into her.”

Hawke rose, his muscular frame tensed like a coiled spring. “I’ll stay close to Penny,” he said, his deep voice resonating with conviction. “Keep an eye on her while she works.”

Penny felt her pulse quicken at the thought of having Hawke so near, but she pushed her attraction aside, focusing instead on the task at hand. “I appreciate that, but I don’t need a babysitter.”

All three men ignored her like she hadn’t spoken.

Rhys gave a curt nod. “Then it’s settled. Keep me updated on your progress and remember—discretion is key.”

As the group dispersed, Penny scoffed. “Did no one hear me? I don’t want a babysitter?”

Hawke’s gaze snapped to hers. He closed the distance in two powerful steps, leaving no room between them. Penny’s heart raced, her breath catching in her throat as she drank in the sight of him—the chiseled lines of his face, the raw strength evident in his every movement. Heat tightened her stomach.

“Call me your babysitter again, Red,” he said, eyes flaring. “And I’ll show you how I handle you.”

She wisely kept her mouth shut.

Forty-five minutes later, Hawke followed Penny into an old, red-bricked warehouse covered in graffiti in the Bay Ridge area, the door creaking softly as it closed behind them.

Despite the chaos outside, this space was a peaceful refuge. In the center of the room was a large desk, adorned with cutting-edge hacker equipment that hummed and whirred in a symphony of technological mastery. He was captivated by her setup, a true testament to her skill and determination.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Penny said with a sly grin, the corners of her eyes crinkling in amusement at his reaction. “Not what you expected?”

“Definitely not,” Hawke admitted, scanning the room. “This is... impressive.”

“Thanks.” Penny’s cheeks flushed a faint pink. “It’s been a long time in the making.”

She slid into the chair at the desk, her fingers dancing gracefully over the keyboard as she brought up files and images. Her piercing eyes sparkled with intelligence and purpose, drawing Hawke in like a moth to a flame.

Christ, she was fucking beautiful, and clever. From the moment he met her, he could tell Penny was unique in a way he had never encountered before. He made it clear that he was interested in finding out. However, his blatant attempts at flirting, only had her keeping him at a safe distance. But he caught her lingering heated looks. He didn’t like that Phoenix

had been compromised, but he couldn't deny his happiness to dig a little into her and see if there was a chance for something more between them.

“Can you make us some coffee?” she suddenly asked, breaking into his thoughts. “The machine is on the counter.”

“Sure.” He moved toward the galley kitchen in the corner of the warehouse, but not before watching Penny twirl up her hair into a bun on the top of her head. He smiled to himself. Every soldier had a routine before going on a hunt. Apparently, that was hers.

He got to work fixing the coffee as he listened to her fingers rapidly racing across the keyboard. As the coffee brewed, Hawke's gaze wandered around Penny's high-tech lair, taking in the sleek, sterile surfaces that seemed to mirror her personality. He spotted a bed in one corner with a nightstand and light, and a bathroom in the other corner. He noted the absence of framed photos, artwork, or any semblance of a personal touch—a stark contrast to the warmth and familiarity he sought in his own living spaces. “Do you meet with clients here?” he asked.

“No, never,” she replied.

Good. He should have known that she would keep her workspace and living space separate. She was probably more knowledgeable about security measures than he was.

As he studied her space, his interest in Penny grew stronger, fueled by an insatiable curiosity to uncover the secrets buried beneath her guarded exterior. She lived like she planned to leave at any second. A sudden urge to break through the barrier that separated them washed over him like a tidal wave, leaving him with a hunger to look into this woman's mind.

“Mugs are in the cabinet next to the sink,” she told him.

Pulling himself from his thoughts, he grabbed two from the cabinet, unsurprised to see the mugs had taglines on them just as her T-shirts did. The mug he picked for her read, **SOME DAYS I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH COFFEE OR MIDDLE FINGERS.**

He chuckled, added a little sugar and milk in the way he'd seen her make her coffee before and then poured himself a black coffee.

“Do you always live so minimalistic?” he asked cautiously, not wanting to push too hard too fast.

Penny paused, considering his question before responding with a shrug. “I don't get attached to stuff.”

Hawke understood the sentiment all too well. It was a coping mechanism he'd employed during his time as a Navy SEAL. Don't get attached to anything but the important stuff, but he thought it a shame she didn't include her home in things not to get attached to. A home should feel safe and comfortable.

When he returned to Penny's side, handing her the steaming mug of coffee, their fingers brushed briefly as she took the cup from him. A jolt of electricity coursed through his veins. He wondered if she felt it too, but her expression remained unreadable.

Not surprising. She had two modes. One, eye-fucking him. Or two, avoiding his gaze at all costs.

He preferred the former.

“Thanks,” she said, taking a tentative sip. The warmth of the coffee seemed to thaw her ever so slightly, her shoulders relaxing as she settled back into her chair. “Julia's digital footprint is minimal, but I managed to find some useful information.”

“Great,” Hawke said after a sip from his mug. “Show me.”

Penny's fingers flew across the keyboard as she pulled up document after document, detailing Julia's past. She uncovered her resume of previous jobs, from a receptionist at a law firm to a waitress at a high-end restaurant. They delved into her relationships, finding photos with a string of former lovers, yet none of them seemed to stick around for long.

“Looks like she's had quite a colorful past,” Penny observed, scanning the information on the screen. “She was

arrested once for being involved with an underground gambling ring, but the charges were dropped.”

“Interesting,” Hawke said, his focus on a document she printed. “What’s this?”

Penny glanced his way. “She has used multiple aliases and moved frequently. But Julia Castillo is her birth name.”

“So here in New York City, she’s not hiding,” Hawke offered.

“Seems like it.” Which was why nothing came up in vetting her. “Damn it,” she muttered under her breath as she began typing again, the corners of her mouth curving downward in a frustrated frown. “Looks like I need to bypass another security protocol.”

“Can I do anything to help?” Hawke asked.

“Thanks, but I’ve got it,” she replied, her focus never wavering.

He could feel the heat radiating from her body as he stood just a few steps away, her determination palpable in the air. It was getting harder for him to resist the urge to reach out and touch her—to trace the delicate curve of her jaw or tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. The way she furrowed her brow when faced with a challenge tightened his groin in ways foreign to him.

“Got it,” Penny announced triumphantly. “I’m in.”

“Nice work,” Hawke praised, forcing himself to focus. “What did you find?”

“Julia definitely spends a lot of time at this bar downtown. At least, according to these photos,” she said, scrolling through the data on her screen. “She’s there nearly every night.” She tapped the enter button and small squares popped up on her screen showing time stamps over the last month. “Nine o’clock, which is about a half an hour from now.”

“Where did you get these stills?” he asked.

“Used face recognition on the cameras situated around the city.”

“Damn, Red, you’re good.” Hawke leaned in, their shoulders touching, caught in the magnetic pull to her.

“You’re right, I am,” Penny said with a laugh.

“ALL RIGHT,” Hawke said, after they gathered all the intel they could on the bar. “We should set up surveillance equipment in Julia’s apartment and grab something from her place so we can see if her fingerprints are on the bugs.”

Penny nodded. “It’s a good way to confirm she’s the one behind this. I know a place where we can get everything we need—hidden cameras, audio devices, you name it.” She glanced at him sidelong, a smile tugging at her lips. “You sure you’re ready for this, Foster?” She regretted throwing the playfulness out there the moment the words left her lips.

“Always ready, Larson,” he replied with a wink, and she felt a familiar warmth flood through her at the sight of his grin.

She moved to her bookshelf, and behind one of the books was a fingerprint scanner. The moment it read her print the wall whisked open and a small room was revealed, full of surveillance equipment.

“Let’s see...” Penny mused, her fingertips tracing over the shelves lined with an array of discreet gadgets. “We’ll need a couple of these,” she said, plucking two small, black cameras from the display. “These are perfect for hiding in plain sight, and the image quality is top-notch. And for audio”—she grabbed a handful of tiny listening devices—“we can put these in various spots around her apartment.”

As she handed him the equipment, she noticed the marvel in Hawke’s expression. Their hands brushed against one another, and she couldn’t help the way her senses narrowed on the feel of him.

Whatever spell he was conjuring was working, but too bad for him, logic reminded her that feelings this intense made women weak.

She refused to go down that road. She'd made peace with staying single and focusing on her business.

"Good choices," he said, doing a piss-poor job of controlling the huskiness of his voice. "We'll need to be in and out quickly, without leaving a trace."

"There is no *we*," Penny said with a laugh. She turned, and his eyes locked on hers with a fierce intensity that made her stomach clench. "You're the retired SEAL. I'm the hacker. I don't do dangerous things."

At that, he lifted an eyebrow. "You don't do dangerous things?"

"Nope," she said, fighting against the blush creeping along her cheeks that told her he wondered if she considered him *a dangerous thing*.

Damn. He was hot and dangerous, and everything that made her hot as hell.

"Penny," he said, breaking the silence.

She met his gaze again. *Be cool*. "Yeah?" she asked, glancing his way again.

He took a step closer before he stopped himself. "If you don't put the surveillance equipment in yourself, who does?"

"I outsource."

His jaw muscle twitched. Once. Twice. "To who?"

"Someone I trust." Which was Elise, but no way in hell would Penny rat out Elise to Archer's friend. Archer was protective and she doubted he'd approve.

He watched her closely, his expression revealing nothing. "Do you have a lot of people you trust?"

"No," she said simply, breaking the eye contact. "We need to catch her at her house before she leaves to make sure it's safe to go in."

He waved her out of the room. "Agreed. After you."

With equipment in hand, they left the warehouse and headed for his truck. While they got in and hit the road, she couldn't help but feel comfortable with Hawke. He had an aura about him that made her feel safe. Likely the Navy SEAL in him.

The city seemed to pulse with life, the streets busy as people left their workweek behind for a fun night out.

When they made it into the Lower East Side, Hawke parked at the curb, far enough from Julia's townhouse, but close enough to watch her leave, then he cut the ignition.

The silence became thick, and without even thinking about it, she suddenly blurted out, "Tell me something about you. Something from before all this."

"Before what?" Hawke asked, his dark eyes flicking toward her.

"Before Phoenix. Before Navy SEALs. Before... all of it," she clarified, her gaze holding his.

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. "All right," he conceded, his voice low and gentle. "I used to be quite the football player in high school."

"Really?"

"Really," Hawke confirmed. "But then I joined the Navy SEALs and everything just... changed."

"Changed how?" Penny prompted.

Hawke exhaled slowly, his gaze drifting back toward the house. "The challenges I faced were unlike anything I'd ever experienced," he began, his voice laced with both pride and pain. "We trained relentlessly, both physically and mentally. And the missions we carried out... it stays with you. After I lost my leg—"

The only reason she knew was because she had seen him wearing shorts. Elise had mentioned that he had undergone intensive physical therapy, which didn't surprise Penny at all. He seemed like someone who was always focused on hard work and pushing himself.

“I thought I’d be miserable, but honestly, I realized I wanted something more, something beyond the constant adrenaline and danger. A sense of normalcy, I suppose.”

“Can’t blame you for not missing the danger in the field,” she said, understanding all too well the longing for stability in a world of chaos.

“Took some time to get used to the quiet,” Hawke conceded, his smile returning as he glanced back at her. “What about you? Tell me something about how you grew up.”

“I grew up with an absentee father and a terrible mother who eventually disowned me when I was eleven,” she said, hearing the coldness in her voice. “My grandmother raised me after that.”

Awareness suddenly hit in his gaze. “You don’t see your mom anymore?”

“No,” she said with a firm shake of her head. “It’s better that way.”

Anger twinged his voice. “Did she hurt you?”

“No, she never hurt me,” she said. Then paused and reconsidered. “Not physically anyway.”

She leaned back in her seat, a brief silence enveloping them as Hawke studied her with quiet curiosity. “But all that time in my room and the computer I bought for myself led to hacking, so I can only thank her; it could have been a lot worse.”

Hawke frowned. “You shouldn’t thank someone for giving the bare minimum.”

She winced at the pity in his gaze, and quickly changed the subject. “Being a hacker isn’t all glamour and excitement. People assume it’s like something out of a movie—chasing down criminals and living life on the edge.”

“Isn’t it?” Hawke asked, the tension still heavy in his features.

“Sometimes, of course,” she admitted, looking away to the house for a moment, seeing all the main floor lights were on.

“But more often than not, it’s hours spent poring over documents, waiting for something—anything—to reveal itself.”

“Sounds like you’ve got some stories to tell,” Hawke prompted, shifting in his seat to face her more fully.

“More than a few,” Penny conceded. “People can be horrible to each other.”

A beat. Then, “People can also be good.”

“I only know two good people,” she said. “Being a hacker forced me to confront the worst parts of human nature—betrayal, greed, violence.”

“One is Elise, right?” At Penny’s nod, he asked, “Who’s the other?”

“My grandmother. She’s good stuff,” she admitted. “Everyone else is something else. Trust becomes a rare commodity in this line of work.”

Hawke nodded slowly, regarding her deeply.

“What?” she asked with a laugh.

“I just learned something about you, that’s all.”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “What exactly did you learn?”

“That our lives have been defined by an unyielding pursuit of justice, but that pursuit has come at a cost—one that we both bear silently, like invisible scars etched upon our souls.”

Penny couldn’t look away from the softness in Hawke’s eyes. He touched on something that made her armor fall, revealing a heart yearning for connection and healing. And she hated him for that. How easy it was for him to slide past all her defences.

“There she is,” Hawke said, breaking the silence.

Penny jerked her gaze toward the building as she watched Julia leave and lock the door behind her, her long dark curls cascading down her back. Penny snapped back to reality. “Go. Go now!”

He was out the door a second later.

Penny watched Hawke as he strode away from the truck, his muscular build and chiseled features a testament to his years of training. She couldn't help but admire the quiet intensity with which he moved, every step purposeful and efficient. The streetlights lit up his cropped dark hair, until he faded into the darkness around the block.

Within minutes, Hawke was calmly walking back to the truck like he was going to get groceries, his expertise and resourcefulness evident in the seamless execution. Penny felt a surge of admiration mixed with surprise; she had expected the task to take much longer.

Hell, he was good.

As Hawke made his way back to the truck, Penny couldn't suppress a shiver that ran down her spine. It wasn't fear. She knew they were doing what needed to be done. But rather a thrill at knowing a man like Hawke was, by all accounts, actively pursuing her.

Dammit. She was in so much trouble.

"Done," Hawke announced, sliding back into the driver's seat. He held up a plastic bag. "I grabbed a knife and fork from the dishwasher for the prints." His dark eyes met hers, and for a brief second, Penny allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to cross the unspoken boundary between them. But she couldn't go there... she *wouldn't* go there.

"Nice job," she said in approval. "Let's get to work." Her fingers danced over her laptop, tracking the data as it streamed across the screen. The bugs Hawke had planted were working perfectly, as was the audio. "Everything looks good," she said. "We're connected."

"Great," Hawke replied. "We need to make a stop at my place so I can change for tonight."

"Okay, let's go."

He started the truck and took off, his dark eyes never leaving the road as he navigated through the city streets.

Penny really did hate the thoughts that swirled through her mind—the main one being that she wouldn't mind seeing his bedroom... and more importantly, his bed.

The thought hadn't escaped her even an hour later, after she stepped out of her bathroom at the warehouse, the steam from her hot shower still clinging to her skin.

The mix of anticipation and nervousness danced in her veins, making her heart race. She never went out in the field. Elise did that as a private investigator, never her. But she was up for the challenge. She dressed in a tight black dress with sexy heels to match, before quickly doing her hair and makeup. Then she found Hawke waiting for her in the living room.

He stood before her, an image of raw power and masculinity. His muscular build was evident even through the sleek black dress shirt and slacks he'd grabbed from his condo. His chiseled features were accentuated by the sharp angle of his jaw, contrasting against the soft glow of the evening light filtering through the curtains. The man was a force to be reckoned with, and Penny's pulse quickened at the sight of him.

Her breath hitched as Hawke's gaze lowered, taking in every inch of her body with a deliberate, almost predatory intensity. The way his eyes roamed over her body made her skin prickle with a heat that seemed to radiate from her very core.

"Wow," he murmured, his voice low and husky as his gaze lifted to her face. "That dress is out of this world, Red."

"Thanks. You look great too." Her cheeks flushed at his words, and she felt a tightening sensation in the pit of her stomach. She became acutely aware of herself, of the way the short black minidress clung to her hips and thighs, revealing just enough to stoke the flames of desire but leaving plenty to the imagination.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" he asked, moving closer.

Damn. He thought she was hesitating for all the wrong reasons. “Of course,” she replied firmly. But beneath the surface, she nearly ripped her dress off to see that heat burn deeper in his eyes.

She shook her head firmly. What was going on with her?

“All right then, let’s go,” he said, breaking out of her reverie and heading for the door.

It took twenty minutes by cab to get to the bar. None of the heat had died. If anything, it seemed to grow as they sat closely in the back seat.

They asked the cabbie to drop them off a block from the bar, and as they walked, her mind raced with thoughts of the operation ahead, yet her focus couldn’t help but drift back to the man beside her. The way his muscles tensed beneath his suit, the crisp scent of his cologne, the heat radiating from his body—it all overwhelmed her senses, urging her to acknowledge the burning desire that simmered just below the surface.

Yup, she was in big fucking trouble.

Hawke pushed open the heavy wooden doors, and the atmosphere of the bar enveloped her like a sultry embrace. The dim lighting cast flickering shadows across the exposed brick walls, and the scent of aged whiskey and spiced perfume hung heavy in the air. A slow, seductive melody played by a live jazz band beckoned patrons to sway and dance, their bodies pressed close together, lost in the rhythm.

Penny scanned the room, taking note of the assortment of people present. There were couples entwined at the bar, sipping on rich amber liquid from cut crystal glasses, while groups of friends laughed and conversed animatedly in the plush booths.

She followed Hawke to a corner table, where they wouldn’t draw attention. As they settled into their seats, a waiter appeared, offering them a menu filled with beers and cocktails. Penny ordered an espresso martini and Hawke ordered a beer. As the waiter left to fetch their drinks, she took

the opportunity to sneak glances at Hawke. His jaw clenched as he surveyed the room, his eyes sharp and focused.

When her drink was set before her, she took a sip, allowing the liquid courage to calm her nerves. She knew they had a job to do, but with Hawke so close, his presence all-consuming, she couldn't help but feel the passion all but sizzling around them.

The truth was glaringly clear. She wouldn't mind going a round or two with Hawke, but she could see it written all over his face since she'd first met him. He wanted *more*. He wanted a girlfriend. And all this was a little too lovey-dovey for her.

Pushing all those thoughts away, her gaze flicked over to Julia, who was laughing with a group of friends at the far end of the bar. "She looks cozy."

"She does," Hawke said, his eyes locked on their target.

A plan formed in Penny's mind. "Let's pretend we're taking selfies so I can look into her friends."

"Good idea," he agreed, pulling out his phone. He angled it so that Julia would be visible in the background.

"Smile," Penny whispered, leaning in close to Hawke as they struck a casual pose for the camera. Her heart raced, acutely aware of the heat radiating from his body. She fought to keep her wits about her as she focused on the task at hand, observing Julia.

They continued their ruse, snapping pictures and occasionally sharing a laugh to maintain their cover. As they drew closer together, their fingers brushed, sending sparks of desire racing through Penny's veins. She knew she should move away, but the magnetic pull between them was overwhelming, and she found herself inching even closer to him.

"Something's happening," Hawke said suddenly, his tone serious.

It took Penny a moment to realize he didn't mean that explosive heat building hotter as each second passed.

She finally followed his gaze to see Julia slipping away from her friends, making her way to the back of the bar.

“Let’s follow,” Hawke said, rising from his chair.

“This better not come back to bite me,” Penny muttered, striding after him.

As they moved through the crowded bar, staying just far enough behind Julia to avoid detection, Penny tried to focus on the task at hand. But with every step, the memory of Hawke’s body pressed against hers lingered, leaving her breathless and longing for more.

Get. It. Together. Girl!

“Holy shit,” Penny snapped at the unfolding scene.

A handsome dark-haired man confidently approached Julia, his commanding presence parting the throng of people like the sea before him. Julia, momentarily forgotten by her friends, moved to meet him halfway, her dark curls bouncing with each determined step.

Hawke frowned. “Is that—”

“Victor Romano,” Penny breathed.

He was no stranger. He had a reputation as one of New York City’s most notorious criminals, and Julia walked straight into his open arms.

The warehouse was silent except for the rhythmic tapping of fingers on a keyboard. Seated in the chair next to Penny at her desk, Hawke read through the police report that she'd obtained. He finally sighed, rubbing his face. "Victor is neck-deep in some truly dangerous activities."

Penny glanced his way and nodded. "Drugs, money laundering... and extortion, too, by the looks of it."

"Fuck," he grumbled, slowly shaking his head. "We need to find a way to connect these dots." He ran his hand over his face. The hour was growing late, and fatigue was beginning to set in, but they had to keep going.

As the minutes passed since they returned to the warehouse from the bar, Hawke stayed quiet, while Penny delved deeper into the murky world of Victor Romano, each new revelation fueling Hawke's need to put this matter to bed and quickly. He worried for Phoenix and Rhys, as well as his friends within its walls, if Romano had any ties to those bugs.

Penny's fingers flew over the keyboard, her piercing eyes darting back and forth between the computer screen and the stack of documents.

But the deeper she went, the more worry sank deep into Hawke's gut. Until he couldn't take it anymore. He cursed and rose from the desk. "This is dangerous. Too dangerous," he told her.

She spun in her chair, watched him closely. "You don't need to worry about me. I can handle myself."

“None of us can handle ourselves against Romano,” he told her firmly.

She didn’t even flinch. “Let’s just focus on gathering evidence of Victor and Julia’s relationship. We still have no idea if he has a hand in this. It could all be a coincidence.”

“We know that they somehow know each other,” Hawke said, reaching into his pocket. “But we need to know *who* Victor really is.” He fired off a text to Hunt, one of Rhys’s closest friends and participant at Phoenix.

“Who are you texting?” she asked.

“Hunt,” he said, and then caught Penny’s deep frown.

“Isn’t it a bit late for a meetup?” she asked.

“No,” he muttered. “Not when Romano is involved.”

As expected, Hunt’s immediate reply was, I’LL BE THERE IN 20.

And Hunt was right on time, as Hawke arrived at the Italian restaurant. Heavy curtains framed the arched windows, casting a muted glow on the walls adorned with dark paintings of sultry women in the restaurant. Hawke noticed Penny’s slight hesitation the moment she set eyes on Hunt.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her.

“I probably should have mentioned that Hunt hates me,” she said softly.

Hawke frowned. “Why?”

She pointed to herself. “Hacker.” She gestured to Hunt. “Cop. Those two things normally don’t go together.”

He realized he should have considered that, but figured since Penny was very good friends with Elise, she would have met Hunt many times. He never realized the conflict they’d share.

Wanting to show Hunt he was on her side, Hawke took her hand and led her forward. He felt the jolt spark between them, as much as she did, if her quiet gasp and firm hold told him anything.

Seated at a booth, Hunt ran a hand through his messy golden-brown hair, watching them closely as they approached, his light brown eyes holding a slightly harder edge than usual. He looked every bit the seasoned NYPD detective he was: tall, muscular, and uncompromising. His stare focused on their held hands before he lifted a questioning brow at Hawke.

“You know Penny,” Hawke said, waiting for Penny to slide into the booth before he joined her, finally letting go of her hand.

“I do,” Hunt said, tightly. He looked to Hawke and sighed. Then said to Penny, “Hello, Penny.”

“Hi.” She smiled rigidly.

Hawke restrained his laughter. At least they were being cordial.

Hunt’s gaze finally swung back to Hawke. “What do you need?”

With Hunt being in Rhys’s inner circle of friends, he was in the know for all the inner workings of Phoenix and its troubles. “We’ve got an update on the bugs,” Hawke said, before turning to Penny. “It’s your update.”

She drew in a big deep breath and then relayed all the information they knew so far.

When Penny finished catching Hunt up, he folded his hands on the table. “Romano is not someone to be trifled with. He’s a powerful figure in the criminal underworld. The organized crime unit has tried to pin something on him for years, and even the FBI is working the case, but he’s slippery, always managing to stay one step ahead of them.”

“Tell me everything you know about him,” Penny said.

“Romano is cunning and ruthless,” Hunt continued. “He’s fiercely protective of his territory, and he commands respect and loyalty from his subordinates. His criminal empire spans across several illegal activities, such as arms trafficking, drug trade, and money laundering.”

Hawke processed that and asked, “Could you think of anything that would tie him directly to Julia?”

Hunt hesitated for a moment before answering. “Besides what you have learned that she has a personal relationship with him, no. Julia most certainly wasn’t connected to Romano when she joined Phoenix, or Archer would have known when he vetted her.”

Hawke made a mental note of that, taking her being Romano’s old friend off the table.

Penny’s gaze lingered on Hawke as she obviously thought over what she’d heard, making it difficult to concentrate. He got lost in those eyes.

“Listen, both of you,” Hunt said, drawing Hawke’s focus. “Romano is not someone to underestimate. He has eyes and ears everywhere, and he’ll do whatever it takes to protect his interests. You need to be cautious and plan every move carefully.”

“Understood,” Penny replied, her eyes flashing with determination. “And right now we don’t even know if he’s involved here or if it’s just a coincidence that Julia knows him.”

Hunt studied her for a moment, nodding slowly. “Let’s hope for Phoenix and Rhys that Romano has no hand in bugging the club.”

“No shit,” Hawke muttered, and silence settled over them like a heavy fog.

Until Penny broke it. “Julia’s our best lead,” she said. “We need to continue to keep an eye on her—find out what she knows about Victor and why he’s interested in her.”

Hawke nodded and told Hunt, “We’ve bugged her place. Let’s hope something comes of that.” He pulled the plastic bag from Penny’s purse. “Can you run the prints on this and compare them to the ones on the bugs?”

“Can do,” Hunt said with a firm nod, taking the bag and tucking it into the pocket of his jacket. “Be careful out there,” he warned, his voice deep with concern. “Remember, this is

Victor Romano you're dealing with. Don't underestimate him."

"We won't," Hawke assured him.

Hunt leaned back in his seat, his gaze connecting with Penny. "I have no doubt he's connected digitally as well. Watch where you go into."

Hawke fought his smile. He knew Hunt was treading lightly with his words.

Penny grinned. "I'm in and out before anyone knows I was ever there."

Hawke outright grinned at that. She was fucking incredible. He understood Hunt's qualms about Penny's profession, but Penny worked on the good side as far as Hawke had seen. But Hunt lived in the black and white as a law enforcement officer. Hawke, a Navy SEAL, understood that sometimes breaking laws for the greater good saved lives.

Hunt cursed softly, shaking his head, rising from his seat. "Keep me in the loop."

"We will," Hawke said, rising too.

Once they settled their bills and left the restaurant, Hunt walked in the opposite direction. The air was thick with the tension, heavy with the looming unknowns.

Hawke knew better than to go home now. They needed a plan to quiet their heads for the night. "Up for some grub, Red?"

Penny nodded. "Yeah. Food needs to happen before we talk next steps."

Twenty minutes later, Hawke's stomach agreed as he held open the door for Penny. They stepped into the diner, immediately enveloped by the cozy atmosphere within. A warm, golden light bathed the room, casting a gentle glow on the well-worn leather booths and gleaming countertops. The hum of conversation and laughter filled the air, along with the clinking of silverware against plates and the sweet aroma of coffee and freshly baked pies.

“Ah, Hawke!” A voice rang out in a thick southern drawl as an older waitress approached them, her face lighting up with delight at the sight of him. Her once raven hair had faded to a silvery gray, but her eyes sparkled with the same warmth and kindness they always had. “Haven’t seen ya ’round here in a while.”

“Hey, Mabel,” Hawke greeted her with a genuine smile, wrapping her in a brief hug. “It’s good to see you too. This is my friend Penny.”

Mabel turned her attention to Penny, giving her a once-over before nodding approvingly. “Well, ain’t you just a pretty thing?” she said, beaming at Penny. “Come on now, I’ll get y’all settled.”

As they followed Mabel through the bustling diner, Hawke couldn’t help but take in the familiar sights and sounds that surrounded them. The red-and-white checkered floor tiles, the vintage jukebox tucked away in the corner, the hiss of the griddle as the cook flipped burgers and tossed hash browns. This place held a special meaning for him. It brought back memories of his childhood, when his parents would take him for breakfast at a similar diner in San Diego. They still lived there, and he cherished their visits. His father was an engineer, and his mother was a physical therapist.

“Here y’all go,” Mabel said, gesturing to a booth beside the window. “Take a seat, and I’ll be right back with some menus.”

As they slid into the booth, Hawke replied, “Thanks, Mabel.”

In no time, they had placed their orders, and Mabel returned not long after with their food. Penny’s grilled cheese sandwich boasted thick slices of buttery, golden-brown bread hugging layers of gooey, melted cheddar and mozzarella, while Hawke’s cheeseburger was a symphony of savory flavors—juicy beef patty, crisp lettuce, and ripe tomato all nestled beneath a fluffy, sesame-seed bun.

“How did I not know about this place?” Penny said, her eyes widening in appreciation as she took in the generous

portions.

“It’s the best restaurant in the city as far as I’m concerned,” Hawke encouraged with a warm smile, watching as she lifted the sandwich to her lips and took a bite. The crunch of the toasted bread combined with the rich creaminess of the cheese elicited a soft sound of pleasure from her, and Hawke couldn’t help but feel a thrill of satisfaction at the sight of her enjoying the meal. He’d like for her to enjoy him as much as that.

He lifted his own burger to his lips, the soft, warm bun yielding beneath his fingers as he bit down. The explosion of flavors assaulted his taste buds in the most exquisite way, the tender beef seasoned to perfection and cooked just right. He couldn’t suppress a low moan of appreciation, earning a knowing smile from Penny.

“Good, isn’t it?” she asked, her voice husky with shared pleasure.

“Better than I remembered,” he admitted. “And it’s not just the food.” His eyes locked on to hers, the unspoken words hanging in the air between them like sparks waiting to ignite a flame.

Penny’s eyes met his with a sparkle that heated him up. “You come here often, I take it,” she said, swiftly switching the subject.

He chuckled, wondering why she did that. She appeared interested... and then not. Hot and cold was her thing. “A few times a week usually, but I’ve been busy lately,” he replied. “It’s quiet, and Mabel’s sweet.”

“She is,” Penny agreed.

He finished his bite, and then asked, “You mentioned being close to your grandmother. Do you see her often?”

“She’s in a retirement community in Rhode Island,” Penny replied, dabbing her lips with a napkin. “I go as often as I can.”

Hawke watched her intently for a moment, before he asked, “Was she reason you got into hacking in the first

place?”

“Why do you think that?” she breathed out.

He shrugged. “You don’t seem the type to do something for no reason.”

“What type do I seem?” she urged.

His gaze met hers and held. “Like the type that would do anything to protect someone they loved.”

She visibly swallowed and then put her sandwich down. “When I was sixteen, someone broke in my Gran’s house and robbed her. One of the assholes knocked her down. When the cops couldn’t find the guy, I did.”

He took his time chewing before responding with a slow shake of his head. “That’s impressive, but not at all surprising that you caught the perpetrator.”

She smiled and asked, “Did you grow up here in the city?”

“No,” he replied. “I grew up in San Diego with my happily married parents. I’m the only child, so it was a bit of a hit for them when I didn’t stay at home after the military, but the job offer at Phoenix was too hard to pass up.”

She snorted. “I bet. Working at a sex club would entice a lot of people.”

He watched the judgment in her eyes, but got it. The concept was out of the norm. “It was less about the sex club, and more about the money and being a part of a team again. The pay was three times what I would make elsewhere.”

“I guess that makes sense,” she said, taking a nibble of her sandwich. “What led you to join the military?”

He snorted. “Ego had me enlisting in the military. I was young and wanted to prove myself at the highest level.”

“You did that,” she pointed out.

He simply nodded in response.

She took another bite, and after swallowing, she questioned, “Do you feel like the military changed you?”

“Changed me?” he paused, clearly mulling it over. “Yes,” he finally answered. “It made me more aware of my mortality, of the fragility of life. But it also instilled in me a need to protect, to serve.”

“Do you miss the action?” she probed gently.

He shook his head. “I can’t think that way. After losing my leg, I had to adjust to a new way of living. I can’t let myself dwell on what could have been.”

“That makes sense,” she asked, before taking another bite of her sandwich.

With his curiosity growing about her life, he asked, “Is Elise your closest friend?”

“My *only* friend,” she said with a laugh. “Like I said, in my line of work, it’s hard to trust people. But with Elise... it was an instant connection. She’s been a very good friend to me ever since. She’s as solid as they come.”

Hawke agreed with nod. “The entire group of friends are like that.”

“I don’t really know the others,” Penny admitted with a slight shrug. “I’m only starting to get to know Archer a little bit more.”

“You’ll find every one of Elise’s friends are good people,” he told her. “It’s why joining the Phoenix team was so easy for me. I’d trust any of them as much as I’d trust my SEAL team, so that’s saying a lot.”

She grinned. “Although I wonder if your SEAL team is a bunch of voyeurs?”

At that, he lifted a brow. “You’ve never seen a show?”

“Nope, and don’t plan to,” she said adamant.

“Yeah, I’ve been there too,” he said, “but you never know what you’ll do in that situation; being surrounded by that kind of sensual energy changes you.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” she said flatly, and then promptly changed the subject “All right. We should probably

talk about our next move.”

His gaze fixated on the lingering traces of ketchup on the corner of her mouth. The urge to wipe it away with his thumb was nearly overwhelming, but he managed to restrain himself. “Right,” he agreed, forcing his focus back to the matter at hand. “What are you thinking?”

“Maybe I should try to befriend Julia,” she suggested. “Get to know her outside the club, understand her a bit better. It might just give us the leverage we need.”

“That’s risky,” Hawke said, raising an eyebrow at the implication.

“Not if I do it through Phoenix,” Penny clarified quickly, her cheeks pinking. “Maybe if I meet Julia casually, she’ll open up. People tend to let their guard down during girl talk.”

Hawke lifted his brow higher. “You do girl talk?”

She laughed. “Not really, but in this instance, I could pull it off.”

Hawke considered. Even if he knew better, part of him liked the idea of seeing Penny in Phoenix. Especially if her cheeks pinkened at whatever thoughts were swirling in her incredible mind.

He pulled out his phone from his pocket and fired off a text. “I’ll send Rhys a message about arranging a show with Julia tomorrow night,” he told her.

“Can he arrange a show that fast?” Penny asked.

“For the right amount of money, yes,” Hawke replied. Every participant that took part in the shows were gifted money for the show. “He’ll do whatever it takes to keep Phoenix safe.” When Rhys’s reply came in the next second, he grinned at her. “We’re on for tomorrow.”

“Good.” She pushed away her empty plate, barely meeting his gaze.

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he wondered just how she’d handle being in the club tomorrow. “All right,

then. Let's get you back to the warehouse. Tomorrow is going to be a long night."

They settled up the bill, and as they headed for the door, Mabel called, her southern accent wrapping around the words like a warm embrace. "Y'all take care now."

With a light touch on Penny's lower back, Hawke guided her toward the door of the diner, and swore he felt her shiver.

Christ, he couldn't wait for tomorrow.

“Is this dress appropriate for Phoenix?” Penny inquired the next evening after Hawke arrived at her house.

His eyes scanned over her tight, black, crew-neckline dress with cutouts around her waist and sheer fitted sleeves. His gaze lingered on her cleavage before he cleared his throat. “More than acceptable.” He arched an eyebrow at her. “You sure you’ve never gone to Phoenix before?”

“Never,” she said with a laugh, glad that she got the attire right.

His gaze roamed over her again. “You’ll fit right in, don’t worry.”

She swallowed against the heat flaring in his eyes. She began to wonder if maybe she would indulge in that heat when this was all over. When the case no longer was the most important thing on the table.

She shook her head. *Stay focused.*

He took a seat on her couch. “Just give me a moment.” He rolled up his pant leg, revealing his prosthetic limb, and began making adjustments.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

He shook his head. “At first, there was a lot of muscle soreness as my body adjusted to walking with the prosthetic. But now, it’s just a bit itchy.” He scratched at it briefly, relief evident on his face, before repositioning the leg and standing up once again.

“Do you ever get angry about losing your leg?” she asked.

“No, never.” He stood up and looked at her closely. “Does that surprise you?”

She shrugged. “I suppose, a little.”

“Who should I be angry at?” he countered.

“The government for sending you into that fight or the person who caused the explosion?”

He held her gaze, and she saw a softer look in his eyes that she hadn't noticed before. “I don't know who set the explosion, and I would go back there in a heartbeat without hesitation.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I lost my leg because I went back to save a little boy. I didn't regret it then. I don't regret it now.”

Emotions welled up, seeming to collect in her throat, making it hard to speak. “Did you manage to save him?”

“I did.”

“But at the cost of your leg... and your career?”

He closed the distance between them, and she saw a side of Hawke that she had never seen before. “But the boy survived.” He walked toward the door and then turned back to her. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, let me just grab my purse.” She picked up her clutch from her table and followed him out the door, seeing him through new eyes.

In most cases, when she saw someone through a lens, she saw the bad. But not Hawke. As the layers of him unraveled, she began to see a man worth trusting.

She wasn't exactly sure what to do with that.

When they reached Hawke's truck, he turned back to her. “If at any moment you're not comfortable tonight, tell me, and we'll go.”

She smiled. “Thanks. I'll be fine.” *I hope.*

An hour later, the nervousness was still tightening her throat as she stepped through the heavy doors into Phoenix. A heady mix of nerves and excitement coursed through her veins like a drug as they entered the employee sitting room, intoxicating and empowering her all at once.

“Ah, Penny, there you are,” Rhys called, striding toward them from the bar. “Are you ready for your introduction?”

“Of course,” Penny replied, masking her nerves.

“Excellent.” Rhys said.

Just as she went away, Hawke reached for her arm, holding tight. “Don’t forget what I said. If you want to go, we can.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, letting go of any nerves and sliding into her role tonight to befriend Julia.

As she stepped into stride with Rhys, her senses were assaulted by the sights, sounds, and scents of Phoenix. He ordered her a glass of wine and handed it to her once the bartender delivered it.

“Julia is just over here,” Rhys said, leading her toward a secluded corner where Julia sat alone, drinking a glass of wine.

“Julia, may I introduce Penny?” Rhys asked as they reached the table. “She’s new to Phoenix and could use some guidance to feel comfortable.”

Julia’s eyes flicked toward Penny, a hint of curiosity and guardedness in her gaze. “Of course, Rhys,” she replied, her voice soft and inviting. “I’d be happy to help.”

“Fantastic.” Rhys flashed a smile before stepping back, leaving the two women alone.

As Penny took a seat beside Julia, she couldn’t help but marvel at how effortlessly beautiful Julia was. The woman had an air of vulnerability about her that tugged at Penny’s heartstrings, urging her to protect her even as she sought to use her for information. Deep down, Penny knew that beneath the facade of pleasure and decadence, there were secrets hidden within these walls—secrets that could potentially shatter lives

and bring down the club. But first, she needed to break through Julia's defenses and gain her trust.

"Thank you for agreeing to help me," Penny began, offering a warm, genuine smile. "I won't lie. I'm a bit nervous, but I need the money from the show."

"No need to thank me," Julia replied, her eyes searching Penny's face for something—perhaps reassurance, or maybe a hint of her true intentions. "I once needed the money too." But she didn't now. Penny made a mental note of that, as Julia continued, "Let's just take it slow, and remember: Phoenix is a place for healing and discovery. Embrace it, and you might just find what you're looking for."

The sultry scent of jasmine wafted in the air, mingling with the low hum of whispered conversations among Phoenix's employees. Penny glanced around the dimly lit room, noting the flickering candles casting shadows on the sconces that adorned the walls. She felt the softness of the plush seating beneath her, and it was clear that every detail had been carefully curated to create an atmosphere of seduction and mystery.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," Penny began, leaning closer, "but how did you first get involved with Phoenix? I got in here all by luck. Knew the right people, that kind of thing."

Julia hesitated for a moment, her fingers absently tracing the rim of the crystal glass cradled in her hands. "I suppose you could say I stumbled upon it by chance," she admitted. "At the time, my life felt stagnant, and I yearned for something more—a world where I could break free from my inhibitions and explore my desires." She paused, her eyes meeting Penny's once more. "And I found that here."

Penny nodded thoughtfully, considering Julia's words. "It sounds like Phoenix changed your life. I'm hoping for that too," she said, before adding with a playful smile, "and maybe even find some excitement along the way."

"Excitement is certainly never in short supply here," Julia agreed with a soft laugh. Her expression grew more serious as she studied Penny for a moment. "But remember, it's not just

about seeking pleasure; it's also about forming connections with others who share your desires.”

“Speaking of connections,” Penny ventured, her heart racing as she broached the topic. “Do you have a boyfriend or anyone special in your life right now? I guess I’m wondering how they feel about you being a participant here. I just... I guess I’m looking at this long-term and wondering if it’ll affect me down the road.”

A shadow seemed to pass over Julia’s warm brown eyes, and she hesitated before responding. “Nothing serious at the moment,” she said quietly, her gaze fixated on the swirling crimson liquid in her glass. “I’ve had my share of relationships, but none have lasted. It’s difficult to find someone who truly understands me and accepts the complexities of my needs.”

Penny reached out, placing a reassuring hand on Julia’s arm. “I understand how you feel,” she said. “It’s hard to let people in when you’re afraid they might judge you or try to change you.”

“Exactly,” Julia agreed, her gaze meeting Penny’s once more. “But I hold on to the hope that one day, I’ll find someone who sees me for who I am—and loves me because of it, not in spite of it.”

“Isn’t that the dream?” Penny agreed, lying breezily. She swirled the wine in her glass as she considered where to take this conversation next. “You know, I’ve always been drawn to bad boys, the ones who look like trouble waiting to happen.”

“Really?” Julia’s eyes danced with curiosity, and she leaned in closer, eager for more.

“Absolutely,” Penny replied, keeping her voice light. “There’s something so alluring about the danger they carry with them, don’t you think? It’s like dancing on the edge of a cliff—thrilling and terrifying all at once.”

Julia laughed, the sound warm and genuine. “I can see the appeal, but it doesn’t always end well, does it?”

Penny shook her head. “No, it doesn’t. But that’s part of the risk, isn’t it? I’m single right now but I keep finding myself attracted to the same type of man, hoping that this time will be different.”

“Maybe you just haven’t met the right one yet,” Julia suggested.

Penny grinned. “Know of anyone that would fit the bill?”

“Yeah, I might.” Julia laughed. “Let me think on it.”

“Thanks,” Penny said.

A soft bell chimed in the room. Julia drained her drink and then gave a sultry smile. “That’s my call. Hope you enjoy the show.”

“I’m sure I will,” Penny replied, as she watched Julia leave the room.

The bell chimed again, and Hawke approached.

“Ready for this?” he asked, his smooth voice brushing over her.

Not even sure what to think in this moment, she nodded.

Hawke chuckled and gestured out the hallway. “I left you something to wear in Rhys’s office. To go any further, you’ll need to change.”

She glanced down at her dress. “I thought you said this was suitable attire?”

“It is, for the bar,” he explained. “Not for the show.” He hesitated, cocking his head. “It’s up to you. Stay or go. But if you want to see more of Julia, I suggest you get changed.”

Penny shoved away her thoughts. I mean, how hard could it be to watch the show? And she did want to see how Julia interacted with the people there.

“Okay, I’ll get changed,” she told him.

Without putting more thought into it, she left Hawke in the bar area and headed for Rhys’s office. When she shut the door,

she turned to find high heels, a black metal mask and a black lace something resting on the chair.

In quick work, she shed her dress and panties, and slid into the lingerie and heels. She stared down at herself, realizing Hawke had picked the best option. The sheer tulle teddy was sexy with its plunging halter neckline and satin-tie ribbon around her waist, showing ample cleavage, but with the cheeky bottom, she felt covered, less exposed.

Before she lost her confidence, and once she tied on the mask, she headed back out of Rhys's office and then stopped dead.

Hawke leaned a shoulder against the wall, waiting for her, one hand in his pocket. He wore black slacks and nothing else, and his body was not a body, it was a damn piece of art. He was built to perfection. He wasn't too big to be showy, but his muscles were toned and defined. Every line of his body spoke of his training, his dedication to his job, and his work ethic.

Fucking hell.

But then she wasn't looking at his body, she was looking at his face covered in a dark gray mask, and as he pushed off the wall, his jaw muscles flexed. Once. Then again.

He closed the distance and offered his hand. When she stared at it, he smiled, "Let's make sure everyone knows you're not an option for tonight."

She knew she liked the sound of that too much, but the warning alarm that she should not get closer to him began to quiet.

He chuckled at how quickly she grasped his hand, then lead her back into the bar and then through the double doors at the end of the room, revealing a circular room, which was now filled with people. All of the women wore lingerie and a mask, and men were wearing the same attire as Hawke, no shirt, dress slacks and a mask.

At the far end of the slightly raised stage, a muscular man stood against the stone wall, naked, wearing a silver mask. His

head was tipped back, his lips parted, and he was stroking his cock.

The dimly lit room pulsed with the rhythm of the sensual music, each beat echoing through Penny's heated veins as her gaze remained fixed on the erotic display. She could feel Hawke's eyes on her, searing into her like a brand, their unspoken desires entwining in the charged air between them.

"Jesus," she breathed, her voice barely audible over the sounds of pleasure filling the space.

"Finally, a break in that ironclad resolve," Hawke murmured, his voice husky and low, betraying his own arousal. He leaned closer to her, his breath warm against her ear, sending shivers down her spine. "I was beginning to think it was impenetrable."

Penny tore her eyes away from the scene, meeting Hawke's intense gaze. The desire that smoldered within them threatened to ignite her very soul, and yet she fought against it, struggling to maintain her professionalism in the face of such raw temptation.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she replied, her voice wavering slightly as she tried to regain her composure. "We're here to gather information, that's all." Her eyes flicked back to the stage.

Hawke's hand brushed against hers, a seemingly accidental touch that sent an electric jolt through her body. His fingers lingered, grazing her knuckles as their eyes locked once more.

"We can leave if you want," he said quietly. "Or do you want to stay?"

She could feel the heat of his body, the magnetic pull drawing her closer to him.

Penny swallowed hard, as she attempted to tear her thoughts away from the overwhelming desire that threatened to consume her. Her mind raced with conflicting thoughts. The stolen glances and subtle touches between her and Hawke only served to stoke the fire burning within her, and she couldn't

help but wonder what it would be like to feel his strong arms wrapped around her.

But no—she couldn't afford to let her guard down, not when she had a job to do, and not when Hawke wanted more than a wild night. But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy the moment. "I'll stay."

HAWKE SLID his hands into his pockets, in order to not touch Penny next to him. He scanned the shadowed faces around him, each one obscured by a mask that allowed them to indulge in watching their desires without revealing their true selves. The scent of musk and expensive perfume hung heavy, clinging to the sensual lingerie on every feminine body there.

He glanced back at Penny. Her warm eyes were shining with a wild intensity, even in the low light. He swallowed deeply, controlling the need coursing through him. Little did he know how much more challenging it would be seeing Penny in this atmosphere.

Lust oozed from her, and he stepped closer, inhaling it.

The spotlight shifted, casting a golden glow on the stage as Julia emerged from the darkness. Her long, curly brown hair cascaded down her back, framing her voluptuous form in a way that captivated everyone's attention. She was a vision of sensuality and confidence as she moved with fluid grace, her hips swaying to the rhythm of the music. The seductive gaze in her eyes held the audience captive, whispering promises of pleasures beyond their wildest dreams.

Sheathed in a silk robe that draped over her curves, Julia looked every inch the alluring siren she portrayed for tonight's show. As she reached the center of the stage, her movements became more deliberate and provocative, drawing gasps and murmurs from the crowd. Each step seemed calculated to incite desire, her body undulating with an unspoken invitation that no one could ignore.

Hawke watched as Penny's breath caught in her throat as she watched Julia, torn between keeping his distance and wanting to take her in his arms. He knew that beneath her sultry exterior lay a woman still grappling with the wounds of her troubled past—a woman who had learned to adapt and survive in a world that constantly sought to break her. And yet, she stood next to him, unapologetically embracing her sexuality and power.

“Penny...” he whispered under his breath, his voice barely audible above the music. Her name tasted like fire on his lips, igniting an unfamiliar hunger within him.

She didn't look his way, entranced with the scene.

The hushed whispers of the audience swirled around Hawke like tendrils of smoke, their anticipation palpable as they awaited the culmination of Julia's seductive dance. Her eyes met those of the man leaning against the wall, stroking himself faster now. Harder. The hungry gaze they exchanged spoke of a chemistry that could not be denied, a magnetic pull that drew them together.

“You want me?” Julia asked, her voice sultry and inviting as she held the man's intense stare. “Don't you?”

“Always,” he replied, his voice deep and rich with desire.

With the grace of a predator stalking its prey, Julia approached the man, her hips swaying hypnotically as she closed the distance between them. She disrobed and reached up to stroke his chest. The air around them seemed to thicken with desire, heightening the tension in the room as every eye remained fixated on the pair.

As Julia pressed her body against the man's, their lips met in an impassioned kiss that left no doubt as to the intensity of their connection. Their hands roamed over one another's bodies, exploring every curve and contour with a fervor that spoke of unbridled passion. Each touch, each caress, seemed to ignite a fire that burned brighter and hotter, threatening to consume them both.

Hawke's chest tightened as he watched the explicit display, his mind warring with itself as conflicting emotions surged through him. He knew he should focus on the investigation, on uncovering Julia's secrets. But as the heat between Julia and the man intensified, so too did his growing desire for Penny, who had become an undeniable temptation.

He glanced at her, her eyes wide and filled with heat, and he hardened so fast he bit back a groan. He could see the flush that had crept across her cheeks under her mask, her breath coming in shallow pants as she took in the scene.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly, trying to tamp down his arousal.

"Y-yes," Penny stammered, her voice betraying her own arousal. "I didn't expect it to be so... intense."

I didn't expect you, Hawke thought to himself.

Penny leaned forward, captivated by the erotic display on stage.

"Have you ever seen anything like this before?" Hawke asked, whispering in her ear.

Penny exhaled shakily, breaking her gaze from the performance for a moment. "No," she admitted, her voice husky with desire. "But I..."

Like it, he wanted to finish her unspoken thought. Instead, he put his focus back on the show.

As they continued to watch, Julia and the man moved together in a seductive dance of passion, their bodies slick with sweat as the man held Julia in his arms and rocked himself up into her. The moans and gasps escaping their lips filled the room, creating an atmosphere charged with raw intensity.

Hawke couldn't help but notice the way Penny's chest heaved with each breath.

"Do you like it?" he inquired cautiously, his eyes never leaving her face.

Penny hesitated before nodding, her cheeks flushed a deep shade of crimson. “Yes,” she confessed, locking eyes with him briefly before returning her focus to the stage. “But I shouldn’t.”

“Sure you should,” Hawke murmured softly in her ear, his voice barely audible over the cries of pleasure echoing through the room. “Listen to how fucking hot that is.”

Penny turned to look at him once more, her eyes searching his for unknown answers. And in that instant, as their gazes locked and held, he was teetering on the edge of control, the precipice of desire threatening to consume him whole.

But then he noticed Penny trembling, and he frowned. “You okay, Red?” he asked.

Penny’s gaze fell to his mouth, and she licked her lips. “Just fine,” she clearly lied, her eyes flicking back to the stage for a brief moment before returning to Hawke’s intense gaze.

Hunger radiated out of her.

Hawke didn’t need another invitation.

“Let’s get out of here.” He took her hand. The electric touch sent shivers down his spine, and he knew that he couldn’t deny this wild intensity burning between them.

As he made his way through the crowded room, the energy between them crackled like a live wire, each step bringing him closer to the inevitable moment of surrender.

Until he got her out in the hallway.

Turning back to her, he clasped her hand tight. For a moment, time seemed to stand still as they stood there, her gaze holding his, the world around him fading away until there was nothing left but the raw desire that pulsed between them like a living, breathing entity.

And then, without warning, Penny’s lips crashed against his, capturing his mouth in a fiery and intense kiss that left them both breathless. He caught up in an instant and pressed his body against hers, her back hitting the wall. He cupped her face, deepening the kiss, fueled by a passion that had been

building for far too long, and in that instant, he knew that there was no turning back.

“Wait,” Penny rasped, suddenly pulling back from the kiss. Her chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath, her eyes clouded with confusion. “We can’t do this, not now. We’re in the middle of an investigation.”

Hawke’s heart clenched with disappointment, but he knew she was right. As much as he wanted to continue down this path, they had responsibilities to fulfill, and giving in to their desires could cloud their judgment. If he got his hands on her, he wouldn’t think of anything else but that, until sleep stole him away.

They needed to stay focused on Julia. But he couldn’t ignore that he got the feeling that the *job* wasn’t the only thing holding her back.

“Of course,” he said reluctantly. He slid his hand to the back of her head, tangling his fingers into her hair. “When we solve this, we’ll revisit *this*. Yes?”

She nibbled her bottom lip. “I’m not saying no.”

“I’ll take it,” he said, taking a step back, putting distance between them he did not want and leading her back into the room to catch Julia’s shuddering orgasm.

A week later, Penny sat behind her desk in the warehouse, as frustrated as ever. Hunt had verified a couple days ago that Julia's prints matched the ones found on the bugs, confirming they were on the right path. Surrounded by state-of-the-art surveillance equipment and computer screens flickering with data, she should have had Julia all figured out by now, but she was getting nowhere.

She scanned document after document for any information that could help her uncover the secrets hidden within Julia's past. She'd met her a few more times at Phoenix and Julia seemed to trust her a little more, but she never gave up any further information.

"Come on," Penny muttered under her breath, impatiently tapping her foot on the cold hardwood floor. "There has to be something I'm missing."

The thought of Hawke briefly flitted through her mind, the memory of his lips on hers igniting an ember of longing deep within her, as it had every minute of every day since their mind-blowing kiss. But she quickly pushed it aside—she couldn't forget she was on a job. No distractions. Especially gorgeous Navy SEAL ones.

He would arrive in an hour after a meeting with Archer, and she needed to stay focused. Her fingers fluttered over the keyboard, each keystroke bringing her closer to uncovering the truth about Julia. An alarm sounded, indicating someone arriving at her front door. Penny clicked a few buttons until the surveillance camera appeared on her screen, revealing Elise.

“Come in,” Penny said through the intercom and then buzzed her in.

As Elise headed into the warehouse a minute later, her presence was a welcome distraction from the weight of Penny’s investigation. She approached Penny at her desk with two to-go cups, her smile warm and genuine.

“Thought you could use a coffee,” Elise said, offering one of the cups to Penny. “The dark stuff that will keep you awake for days.”

“Thanks, I do,” Penny replied, gratefully accepting the coffee. She took off the lid and blew on it gently, allowing the steam to dissipate before taking a cautious sip. The rich, dark brew invigorated her senses, giving her a much-needed jolt. “What do you have for me?”

Most of Penny’s income came from working for Elise and her clients through her private investigator agency, even though Elise respected Penny’s need for secrecy.

“I have a client whose husband has been receiving some suspicious emails lately. I was wondering if you could help me look into the sender’s background, maybe find out what their intentions are.”

Penny’s curiosity sparked to life. At least she could feel useful, instead of the sitting at a dead end with Julia. “Of course, I’ll help. What’s the client’s name?”

“It’s Rosemary Clark,” Elise replied, a sigh of relief escaping her lips.

Penny quickly accessed Elise’s system and pulled up the client’s case file, her eyes scanning the screen for any critical details. Elise leaned against the edge of Penny’s desk, sipping her coffee while watching intently.

“Rosemary believes her husband may be cheating on her,” Elise began, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “She’s found some suspicious messages and unexplained charges on their credit card statements.”

Penny nodded, her eyes narrowing as she absorbed the information. She could sense the pain and betrayal that must

be tearing at Elise's client, and it only reminded her how flaky people were.

Only a few minutes later, she said, "I have an address." Another few seconds passed before she added, "And a name. Scarlett Morrison."

Elise cursed. "Well, Rosemary's suspicions might just be right. Scarlett is her husband's co-worker."

"Ouch," Penny said, focusing back on her computer. She finished pulling all the evidence she could to prove to Rosemary her husband's betrayal, which included deleted text messages the two lovers shared. "There. It's all in Rosemary's file."

"Thanks, babe," Elise said. "You're the best."

"Don't you know it." Penny grinned, before taking another sip. "What are you up to tonight?" Penny could use a night out to clear away the failure on Julia's case.

"Oh, I'm going to Phoenix," Elise said. "Hawke's doing a show tonight."

Penny blinked. Once. Twice. "What was that?"

"Hawke," Elise said, slowly this time. "He's doing a show at the club. Of course, as you know, going to Phoenix really isn't my thing, but I hear the gang is going, so I thought, why not, I'll go too."

Penny knew that Archer had given up attending the club for Elise. Respected him for it too. Not that they didn't still partake in kinky pleasure, but they attended private and smaller intimate parties.

In Penny's silence, Elise pointed at Penny's face and grinned brightly. "Oh my God, you've fallen hard, girl."

"What are you talking about?" Penny said, turning away, putting her focus back on her monitor.

"I just totally made all that up to see how you'd react," Elise said.

Penny jerked her gaze to Elise's beaming face. "That was rude."

Elise laughed and shrugged. "Not rude, efficient."

Penny snorted.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on between you two?" Elise asked.

"There's a little something going on," Penny admitted to her closest friend. "Right now, I'm focused on Julia." She paused, but then realized she needed to get this off her chest. "Besides, it's a complication I don't want in my life."

Elise regarded Penny. She finally took a deep breath before speaking, her words measured. "I remember feeling the same way when Archer and I started getting closer. It just seemed impossible that it could work out. Mostly because I wanted to kill him." She laughed softly.

As Elise spoke, Penny felt a faint flicker of hope ignite within her chest. So far what she'd seen of Hawke had been nothing but a solid man. But to go into a relationship—a real one—meant facing pain in her past she wasn't sure she wanted to face.

"Love is never without risks," Elise continued, her gaze steady and reassuring. "But sometimes, those risks are worth taking. When I look back on my life with Archer, I know I made the right choice, despite all the challenges we've faced."

Penny chewed on her bottom lip, her mind racing with possibilities—the thrill of Hawke's touch, the warmth of his embrace, the safety found within his strong arms. But alongside these images, another thought persisted: the potential for pain, for betrayal, for loss.

The awareness that love changed people.

"Regardless," Penny said, shaking her head, "it's not something I can think of now. Not with Phoenix still in jeopardy."

Elise nodded in understanding. "Just don't let fear hold you back from something that could bring happiness and

fulfillment into your life. You deserve to be loved like crazy, Penny.”

Penny’s breath caught in her throat at the very thought. No, she didn’t want to face anything. She liked her safe, quiet life and she wasn’t ready to change that anytime soon. She faked a smile. “I’ll think about everything you’ve said. Thank you.”

Elise returned her smile, her eyes sparkling with warmth and understanding. “That’s the spirit,” she encouraged. “And remember, you don’t have to face it alone. Hawke’s a good guy. Just talk to him. Or me. We’re all here for you.”

The simple truth of Elise’s statement seemed to reverberate through the warehouse, wrapping around Penny like a comforting embrace. She felt her chest swell with gratitude for her friend, who had stood by her side through thick and thin, never failing to offer support when needed. But she, for the first time in a while, felt unnerved, like everything was changing.

And she couldn’t let it—*wouldn’t* let it.

“Thank you, Elise,” Penny said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Probably make terrible decisions,” Elise teased gently, lightening the mood. “But that’s what friends are for—to keep each other grounded and remind us that we’re not in this crazy world alone.”

A soft chuckle escaped Penny’s lips, and she nodded her head in agreement. “You’re absolutely right,” she admitted.

“All right,” Elise announced, her voice slicing through the stillness. “You’ve come to my rescue again. I’ll get out of your way, so you catch the asshole stirring shit up.”

The heaviness on Elise’s face was indication enough that Archer was stressed. “Tell Archer to relax. I’ll put this to bed soon enough.” She hoped.

“I told him,” Elise said. “But he’s like you, he’s doing what he’s doing best, working to catch this prick.” She pushed off the desk.

“So, what are you going to do?” Penny called, as Elise heading for the door.

When she reached it, she glanced over her shoulder. “Do what I do best: distract him and put his mind on something else much more important.”

Penny lifted her brows. “Which is?”

Elise grinned. “Me.”

Penny laughed.

Elise took a step toward the door, but then turned back with an exclamation. “Oh, I almost forgot! We’re having a games night tonight at eight,” she said eagerly, wiggling her eyebrows. “Hawke will be there.”

“Oh, my God, Elise, stop,” Penny said, rolling her eyes. “But okay, I’ll be there.” She smiled.

That smile kept popping up all day as she thought about the fun night ahead. But when she got there, she realized it wasn’t just Elise, Archer, and Hawke, but the entire group of friends in the Phoenix circle, and that smile promptly fell.

She stood awkwardly in Elise’s kitchen, finishing off her glass of wine in one big sip. The laughter in the kitchen was a warm blanket, wrapping around Penny as the group beckoned her closer, their smiles genuine and inviting. But that was even more uncomfortable. She felt out of place.

“Try the merlot next; it’s divine,” Nessa suggested from across the marbled island, flicking her honey-blonde hair over her shoulder.

“Yes,” Zoey, Rhys’s wife said. Her light hazel eyes dancing. “It’s literally to die for.”

“Want some?” Lottie offered, moving toward Penny with the bottle of merlot. Lottie, Hunt’s wife and club participant, had the prettiest eyes Penny had ever seen, being an amethyst color.

“Thanks,” Penny replied, handing over her glass, studying the ladies around her. *They seem so... normal.* She couldn’t

wrap her head around that. How did all these people participate in sex shows?

“So,” Hazel said, fluttering her long eye lashes, as Lottie poured the wine. “What’s going on with you and Hawke?”

“Nothing,” Penny answered, too fast considering the smiles around her. “We’re working together, that’s all.”

“That’s not what I heard.” Lottie gave a sheepish grin. “I heard from a reputable source that he was holding your hand.” She winked.

Penny felt the heat climbing up her neck. She slid into the chair at the island, her fingers lightly brushing against the cool marble. “It’s not like that,” she countered. “He was trying to show a solid front is all.”

“Is that right?” Lottie teased, pushing a strand of brown hair behind her ear. “Because from what I see he can’t take his eyes off you.”

“Or his hands apparently,” Zoey added slyly, her lips curving into a smile.

“Stop teasing her,” Elise quipped. Penny could have kissed her for interjecting. Until she added, “We’ve all been there. She’s a goner, and so is he, they just haven’t come to terms with that yet.”

Penny sighed, taking another long sip from her glass.

Laughter rippled through the group. Yet Penny couldn’t help but steal a glance at Hawke in the living room, who was engaged in animated conversation with Ronan, a fellow Navy SEAL, as Archer, Hunt, Kieran, and Rhys stood nearby, his broad shoulders relaxed as he nodded along to some shared joke.

“Nothing going on, huh?” Lottie chimed in, nudging Penny’s shoulder with hers. “Whatever is going on, it’s good. Hawke seems happy.”

“Like I said, things are purely professional,” Penny stated, though her heart beat a contradictory rhythm.

She observed Hawke again, how his laughter seemed to resonate with a genuine joy. There was an ease to him, a sense of contentment that drew her in, a magnetic pull she found increasingly difficult to resist.

She wanted to taste a little bit of that happiness.

“He seems like a good man, that one,” Hazel commented from beside Penny. “Which are always hard to come by, right?”

Penny allowed herself a small nod, feeling the truth in Hazel’s words. Hawke was a good man—there was no doubting that.

“All right,” Rhys said, entering the kitchen, with the others following behind. Zoey nestled under his arm, her expression one of pure bliss—a stark contrast to the fierce independence Penny had always championed. “Here’s to kid-free nights.”

“Cheers,” the group echoed, raising their glasses, Penny included, before taking another sip.

Hunt called out, “Now who’s ready to lose miserably to me in Settlers of Catan?”

Groans and laughter filled the air, and Penny watched as couples began sitting together around the rectangular table in the dining room, their competitive edges glinting like unsheathed swords. She felt a gentle tug on her consciousness, the realization that beneath the surface of flirtation and fun, lay a deep reservoir of mutual respect and affection.

She suddenly realized she didn’t know this in her life. She had Elise, but this felt like... *family*. And... maybe she was missing something...

“Looks like you’re sitting with me, Red,” came Hawke’s voice, a touch deeper than the rest.

“Guess I am,” Penny replied, unable to suppress the flutter in her stomach as she met his gaze.

As the game began, and once they explained the rules to Penny, the warmth of friendship wrapped around her tight. There were no pretenses here, no performances; just a

gathering of very close friends. They teased, they strategized, they lived in the moment, enjoying each other, and Penny found herself marveling at how ordinary it all felt.

“Rhys, you blocked my road!” Nessa exclaimed, throwing her hands up in exasperation while the rest of the group dissolved into chuckles.

“I can’t help that I am better with resource management than you,” Rhys quipped back, his eyes twinkling with mischief, as he stole the longest road card from her.

Penny found herself smiling.

“Your turn, Penny. You’ve got this,” Kieran encouraged, nudging dice toward her.

Taking a deep breath, she rolled, her fingers releasing the cube. It tumbled across the board, coming to rest on a number that drew a collective gasp from the group.

“Seven! Dammit,” Hazel exclaimed.

Penny laughed as Hazel, Archer, and Hawke had to return half of their cards to the bank.

Hawke’s thigh brushed against Penny, and heat spiraled through her. He looked her way and winked. “Next time, help me, not Rhys.” It did look like he was going to win.

“I still don’t know what I’m even doing,” she said with a smile.

His low chuckles drifted over her sensually.

Just then, her phone buzzed in her back pocket, and she knew exactly why. She swiftly retrieved it, and her heart jumped when she saw the alert.

“Is everything all right?” Hawke asked, his expression filled with concern.

“We need to leave,” she told him, her mind already shifting gears.

“Of course,” Hawke replied, standing up from his seat without hesitation.

“Is there a problem?” Rhys inquired.

Penny looked at each of their faces, uncertain if she should reveal the truth. “It’s about my case.”

“I have full trust in everyone here,” Rhys declared firmly. “What’s going on?”

“I just received a notification from the bugs we planted in Julia’s house,” Penny said, glancing at Hawke. “It picked up Victor Romano’s voice.”

“We need to go now,” Hawke said urgently.

Penny almost took a step forward but stopped herself, looking around the table. Her heart raced and she felt like it was lodged in her throat. “Thank—” She cleared her throat. “Thank you for tonight. I had a great time.”

Elise’s wide smile radiated love. “We still have our game to finish, so you better come back to the next game night and play with us.”

Penny smiled in return, filled up with so much warmth she could burst. She followed Hawke, realizing that the person she was when she entered the house was not the same person leaving.

As Hawke drove through the dark streets toward the warehouse, the city lights blurred into streaks of color.

Throughout the night, Hawke resisted the urge to grab Penny and kiss her again, reliving their passionate moment from last week. But as the days passed, his desire only grew stronger. He resorted to jerking off daily, but even that did nothing to lessen his longing for her touch. He recalled the way her body had felt pressed against his, the delicate curve of her waist fitting perfectly into the palm of his hand, and the taste of her kiss.

Christ, she nearly brought him to his knees.

“Focus, idiot,” he scolded himself, trying to push away the overwhelming passion threatening to consume him. He knew that whatever Penny had found was important, but he couldn’t help but crave the adrenaline rush that came with being near her.

The warehouse loomed ahead, its shadowy outline barely visible against the night sky. As he pulled up to the entrance, the growl of the engine cut through the silence. Penny hopped out of the truck, hurrying to her front door, after being on her phone the entire drive.

In four long strides, he made it to the front door, and Penny had it open, the heavy metal door creaking, its sound echoing through the vast emptiness of the warehouse. The dim light cast eerie shadows across the floor as Hawke stepped inside.

“Come on, let’s see what we have.” Penny’s voice echoed softly, a mixture of urgency and vulnerability that raised the hair on his neck. He followed her and watched her as she sat behind her desk.

“I’ve got it,” she said, her eyes locked on his, conveying the gravity of the situation without a single word. “I’ve confirmed his voice through voice software.”

“Let me hear it,” he asked, his eyes never leaving Penny’s.

“All right.” She pulled up the audio file with practiced precision. “Here you go.”

As the recording began to play, Hawke steeled himself for what was to come.

“Julia,” Victor’s cold voice reverberated through the speakers, “I need you to plant a bug in Rhys’s office. We need to keep tabs on him and Phoenix. They disabled the ones you planted. We need you to plant more, especially in his office.”

“I’m not sure I can get into his office,” Julia’s hesitant reply rang in Hawke’s ears, her trepidation palpable despite the recording’s static undertones. “He’s usually in there.”

“You can do this. I *need* you to do this. I need to capture every single face in that club to use as I see fit. We can’t afford any more mistakes.” Victor’s final command sent a shiver down Hawke’s spine as the reality of the situation bore its full weight upon him.

The tension in the air was nearly suffocating. Penny’s eyes locked on to his, their verdant depths reflecting the gravity of what they had just heard.

“Victor’s making his move,” Penny said, quietly. “He wants to blackmail and extort the members, maybe Rhys, too, and he’s using Julia to do it.”

“Son of a bitch,” Hawke snarled, anger boiling inside him. “It’s all about power,” he commented, more to himself than to Penny. “Getting everything his dirty fucking hands want.”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Penny’s face, and she hesitated, her fingers drumming rapidly against her thigh. “We

need to stop him. We've got one shot at this, and if we miss —”

“We won't miss,” Hawke cut her off firmly. “We can't let Romano win. We can't let him hurt Rhys or anyone else at Phoenix.”

“I know that,” she whispered. “But how can we stop him if even the Feds can't?”

“Because this is personal to us,” Hawke said. “Before we make any moves, we need to gather more intel. This recording is a start, but we'll need solid proof to bring Romano down for good.”

Penny nodded, her eyes narrowing in thought as she absentmindedly twirled a strand of her hair around her finger. “Right. Our best bet is to keep Julia at the club and watch her closely for when she plants another bug and remove it. We don't want to let Victor know we're on to him, or he could just plant someone else. We need concrete evidence that not only exposes Julia's betrayal but also links Victor directly to all the illegal activities he's been orchestrating. We need to take him down without revealing there was ever a security issue at the club, or else Phoenix's reputation will be ruined.”

“Damn it,” Hawke muttered under his breath, unable to shake the sense of unease that had settled in his chest. He rubbed at his jaw with one hand.

Silence fell between them for a moment as the weight of the situation pressed down on them like a heavy fog.

Until an idea came to him. “I might have an idea,” he said, the words punctuating the silence that had settled over the warehouse.

“Go on,” Penny urged, curiosity sparking in her eyes.

“Hunt mentioned that the FBI are already investigating Romano for other crimes,” Hawke began. “What if we hack into their investigation? We could gather evidence against Romano, and at the same time, ensure the safety of Rhys and the club.”

Penny considered his proposal, her fingers drumming on the table as she weighed the risks. “It’s risky, but it could work.” She paused, her gaze locked with Hawke’s. “But why do you think we can solve the case when the FBI can’t?”

His voice was low and steady as he replied, “Because they don’t have you on staff.”

Her breath hitched, eyes widening a little. Until she fell back into that neutral expression she owned so well. “And your expertise won’t hurt either,” she added.

“True,” Hawke conceded, a grin touching his lips. “But we need to remember the danger here. The consequences of failure could be catastrophic for Rhys and the club, as well as us.”

“Agreed,” Penny replied with a nod. “This will take me a while,” Penny said, her eyes focused on her screen, the light casting a glow on her face. “I need to bypass the FBI’s security measures without raising any red flags.”

“Is that difficult?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It’ll take me all night, but it’s a start.”

“Right beside you,” Hawke murmured. Like he wanted to stay. He leaned in closer, catching Penny’s floral aroma and inhaling it in as deep as he could.

She visibly shivered at his nearness.

“Stay focused, Red,” Hawke said with a grin. “We’ve got a job to do.”

She drew in a deep breath, all traces of the heat gone from her expression, and she grinned in return. “Let’s burn this fucker’s world down.”

The following night, Penny was running on four cups of coffee and pure frustration after an entire day of investigating. Even though she got the FBI's file on Victor, she hadn't even found a tiny thread that could get him put away. While Hawke had updated Rhys and Archer on the new development, he was deep in the FBI files looking for *anything*.

But Penny had her mind focused on Julia as she followed her into a high-end lingerie store on Fifth Avenue, after receiving Julia's text inviting her for a shopping trip. Her plan to get close to Julia was working, and Penny sighed a breath of relief. "Doesn't Phoenix provide outfits for the shows?" she asked Julia.

"They do, but pretty, lacy things make me happy," Julia said, a smile in her voice.

The air was thick with the scent of perfume, and soft music played in the background. The lights were dimmed, casting a warm glow over the array of lacy garments hanging from the walls and mannequins seductively posed throughout the shop.

Penny browsed the teddies, her fingers tracing the silk and delicate lace before settling on a set that caught her eye. She noticed how Julia would often pause, seemingly lost in thought, a faraway look in her eyes that spoke volumes about whatever secret she was hiding. As they made their way toward the dressing room, Penny couldn't help but wonder how deeply entangled Julia was with Victor.

They stopped at a counter laden with lacy bras and panties, the salesperson smiling widely at them both. “Can I help you ladies find anything?”

“Just browsing,” Penny said, glancing over at Julia who seemed lost in thought.

The *click-clack* of high heels on the tile floor echoed through the store as the saleslady walked away toward another customer.

“Are you okay?” she asked Julia.

Julia glanced her way. She watched Penny closely then shook her head, smiling. “Oh, yes, sorry, I’m good. Just got a man on my mind.”

Penny’s heart nearly jumped out of her chest. “That sounds interesting.”

Julia shrugged casually. “It’s not, believe me.” She watched as Julia’s eyes darted around the room, taking in every shadow and every sound, her body tense. “I think I’m in trouble.”

Penny hesitated at the faraway look in Julia’s eyes. This was not a woman out to burn Rhys. Penny offered a comforting hand on her arm. “You can’t be in any trouble that Rhys and Archer can’t help you out of anything.” And she meant that. “I haven’t even known them that long,” she said, playing the part of a new participant. “And I know that.”

A smile ghosted across Julia’s lips, and she reached out to take the bra from Penny’s fingers. “You don’t know this man like I do. He can be very persuasive.”

“I understand,” Penny said, her stomach churning at the thought that maybe Julia wasn’t a willing participant but another one of Victor’s victims. “Still, you have people around you that could help you.”

Julia looked at her then, taking a deep breath before letting it out slowly. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“One step at a time,” Penny replied, squeezing Julia’s arm gently. “Tell me more about him. About why you’re afraid.”

Julia bit her bottom lip, eyes still fixed on her reflection in the mirror. “He’s powerful,” she whispered softly. “Very powerful.”

Penny pulled a matching thong from the rack to keep her hands busy. “And you trusted him?”

A small laugh escaped Julia’s lips as she took the garment from Penny. “I didn’t really.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I thought... I thought he could help me.”

“Help you how?” Penny prompted, her mind racing with possibilities.

“He... he promised me security. A way out.” Julia’s voice was hollow, her gaze still not meeting Penny’s in the mirror. “I didn’t realize how much I’d given up until it was too late.”

“It’s not too late,” Penny assured her. “I can help you.”

Julia put the underwear back, looking at Penny with a hardened gaze full of terror and said firmly, “No, Penny, you can’t.”

The sheer fright in Julia’s eyes had stayed with Penny for the rest of the shopping trip, even though Julia had expertly steered the conversation into lighter territory. The trip ended with Penny spending too much on lingerie that she wondered what Hawke would think about... even how he would react if he saw her wearing it.

A thought she found she didn’t want to shut down anymore.

When she returned to the warehouse, Hawke was sitting on her couch, reading a file.

He glanced at the bag in her hand and grinned, full of heat. “Want to show me what you bought?”

She hated the heat that rose to her cheeks. “In your dreams.”

“You’re not wrong there, Red,” he muttered, before he added, “How did it go?”

“I actually got somewhere with her,” Penny said, setting the bag down on the table and then taking a seat next to him. “She told me about Victor, without mentioning his name. To be honest, I got the feeling that she’s not part of this but got roped in. She’s scared.”

“You don’t think she’s a part of Victor’s plan?” Hawke asked.

She shook her head. “I actually don’t. That terror I saw in her face can’t be faked.”

Hawke sighed, running a hand over the back of his neck. “All right, that changes things. Let me talk to Rhys and see how he wants to proceed—”

A beeping alarm had Penny lurching off the couch and running to her desk.

“What is it?” Hawke asked, closing in on her.

“I don’t—” A few clicks of her keyboard later, a sudden *bang* shot through the warehouse. The security camera footage popped up, revealing three men slamming a battering ram against the back door. “Are those cops?”

Hawke narrowed his eyes on the monitor. “No. Grab your laptop.”

Penny’s heart raced as she stared at Hawke, who quickly sprang into action. He headed for his duffel bag by the couch and grabbed a gun, putting all the files and her laptop in his bag.

“You are not going to shoot them,” she snapped. “I don’t want blood on my hands.”

“I won’t kill them,” Hawke said, firmly, grabbing her by the elbow. “I’ll slow them down.” He took her by the elbow, tugging her toward the door that led to the empty space in the warehouse. “We need to move,” he ordered, his voice firm.

They hurried through the warehouse, their footsteps echoing on the concrete floor. “Stay close,” Hawke warned over his shoulder.

The back door burst open, revealing three burly men in black suits. Their eyes widened at the sight of Hawke, his weapon pointed at them.

“Drop it,” one of them growled.

Hawke didn’t flinch, his grip tight on his gun. “I don’t think so.”

They charged at him, and Penny gasped as Hawke expertly shot. Once. Twice. Three times—until the men were wounded, but still on the move.

He grabbed the first man by the collar, slamming him into the wall and disarming him before punching him unconscious. The second tried to tackle Hawke from behind, but he spun around, blocking the move with ease and sending him flying with a vicious kick, until he was on the ground moaning. The third man drew his own weapon, but Hawke was ready, disarming him and pinning him against the wall.

He turned to Penny, his eyes scanning the room. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, breathing hard. “We need to get out of here,” she said, her voice shaking.

Hawke hit the man on the head with his weapon, sending him slinking to the ground.

Together they ran toward the back exit. She cursed under her breath when she saw another group of men entering through the front.

The men rushed forward, guns drawn. Penny held her breath, but Hawke aimed his weapon just in time. *Boom. Boom.* Two shots fired, and the men grunted and groaned, hitting the ground.

“Move,” he said, his voice rough. “That will only slow them.”

She charged forward, and once out in the parking lot, Hawke opened the driver’s door. “In,” he roared.

Suddenly, a shot rang out and Penny screamed, diving into the truck, with Hawke following behind, throwing the bag at

her. He had the truck turned on, and the tires screeching out of there before she took her next breath.

“Are you okay?” he demanded.

“I think so.” Penny nodded, her body trembling with relief and adrenaline.

He pulled her next to him, their chests heaving together. “We need to get to safety,” he said. “Hang on.”

She barely registered the next few minutes as he drove like a madman until he finally slowed when they reached the entrance to Owl’s Head Park. He pulled into a parking space on Sixty-Seventh Street, then threw the truck in park.

Hawke glanced her way, his face etched with concern. “Are you okay?” he asked again.

“Yes,” she lied, unable to look at him. “Just shaken.”

He pulled her into his embrace, and she didn’t even fight it, melting against his strong chest, finding relief in the safety of his arms. His familiar scent of musk and aftershave filled her nostrils as she buried her face in his chest. His heartbeat echoed in her ears, and she felt the rapid thud under her cheek. Hawke held her tightly, his arms like steel bands around her.

“You’re trembling,” he whispered, tracing circles on her back.

She nodded against him, unable to speak.

He lifted her chin, eyes boring into hers. “Penny, look at me.”

She met his gaze, seeing the worry there, and reality slowly started piecing itself back together again. And pain shot through her. “Actually, scratch that,” she grumbled, “I’m not okay. I got hit.”

“Where?” he asked, urgently.

“The back of my left shoulder.”

His touch was gentle, despite his rough exterior as she leaned forward. “Fuck.” He lifted her shirt and then exhaled

deeply. “The bullet grazed you. It’ll hurt like a bitch, but you’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” she said, glancing at her shaking hands.

He followed her gaze. “It’s the adrenaline letdown.” He took her hand and squeezed tight. “We’re fine.”

She got the feeling that, as he drove away, she wasn’t the only one he was telling that to.

Penny followed Hawke through the underground garage of his building in the West Village. They passed the doorman at the front door, before they headed up the elevator to the fourteenth floor, and when he unlocked his front door, she found a sleek, contemporary, earthy colored condo. When they stopped a few weeks ago, she hadn't gone inside. Now she could clearly see him reflected in the space. The furniture within the space was modern and minimalistic, with sharp edges and a mix of textures. Large windows showed views of the Hudson Bay and the park, giving it an airy and open feel.

"Come on," Hawke said, shutting the door behind her and locking the deadbolt. "Let's see about that wound."

She followed him as he led her down the hallway, grabbing a chair from the table as he went.

Stepping into the bathroom after him, she was greeted by sleek marble floors, a sparkling chandelier dangling from the lofty ceiling, and a spacious glass shower.

He set the chair next to the bathtub. "Straddle this and take off your shirt."

Instant heat flared through her at the demand, but the looming pain ahead of her stole the glaring need as Hawke returned with a first aid kit.

He opened it on the sink, grabbing gauze, wipes, and ointments before sliding his hands into gloves. He stepped in behind her, and said, "Sorry, this is going to hurt."

She squeezed her eyes shut tight and breathed past the pain as he gently cleaned the wound. “How bad is it?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“Not bad,” he said, tossing the bloody wipes. “It just grazed your skin. Take a look.”

She rose, moving closer to the mirror, and saw he was right. The wound was small and looked insignificant. “Why is that so painful?”

“Because you had a red-hot bullet glide over your skin,” he said flatly. “It’s going to feel like a burn and your shoulder muscle will likely be sore.”

“That sounds fun,” she muttered.

He snorted, adding ointment to the wound before placing a square bandage over it. Then he stepped in closer, placing both his hands against the sink, leaving no room between them.

“I’m sorry that happened,” he said intently.

She frowned. “Why are you apologizing?”

“Because a bullet hit you,” he said. “That’s on me.”

“No, that’s on Victor’s assholes,” she said. She turned, brushing up against him as she did. Staring up into his guarded eyes in the mirror, she added, “You got me out of there. Had you not been there, I’d be dead.”

His eyes flared. “If that wound was deeper, Romano would be dead,” he said, firmly.

She believed him.

“Obviously something I hit on alerted him that I was looking into him,” she said.

Hawke nodded, but asked, “How would he know that?”

“My guess is his hacker would place in safety measures that would get tripped if anyone was looking. His hacker must have been monitoring Julia’s records to cover his ass.” She paused. “I know that because that’s what I would do.”

Hawke frowned. “Is there anything else in your warehouse they could find?”

“Maybe,” she said, “but it’ll be blank. Like I said, I have safety measures too. I wiped my servers when they broke down the door. Everything I have is on my laptop in your bag.”

“Fuck, you’re smart.”

Again, that spark lit up in her chest at his approval. Oh, how dangerous that was, but she was beginning to forget the danger and revel in the feeling of it.

She held his stare, and for a moment, time seemed to slow. The air between them was charged, electric, like a storm waiting to break.

And somehow she couldn’t find the strength to deny whatever this was.

“We almost died tonight,” she said.

A nod. “We did.”

The awareness of that suddenly crashed through her, breaking down all her barriers full of her fears. She erased the rest of the distance, sliding her hand against the scruff on his cheek. “Kiss me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he murmured, sliding his mouth across hers in a wicked kiss that she felt right down in her very core.

When they eventually broke away, they were both breathing heavily, as she grabbed his shirt and began lifting it. He helped her, pulling it over his head and tossing it aside. Penny marveled at the hard planes of muscle beneath Hawke’s skin, honed from years of disciplined training. She wanted to learn every inch of him, every scar, and she traced her fingers over a few old burn scars and healed bullet wounds, and secrets hidden beneath his stoic exterior.

She met his heated gaze, and he asked, voice strained, “Are you sure about this, Red?”

“More than anything,” Penny replied. Her emotions felt overwhelming and she craved... *him*. “Please, I need you,

Hawke.”

He groaned, reaching out to take her hand, his strong fingers intertwining with hers, and the sensation sent shivers down her spine. It was as if every nerve ending in her body had suddenly come alive.

Slowly, he led her through the condo, their footsteps muffled by the plush carpet underfoot. As they approached the bedroom door, Penny’s pulse quickened, her anticipation mounting with each step.

With deliberate care, Hawke tugged her toward his bed and pulled Penny into his arms, pressing his lips against hers with an urgency that left them both breathless. Their mouths explored one another’s, tongues dancing in passion. His hands roamed her body, tracing the contours of her curves, igniting a fire within that threatened to consume her.

“God, Hawke,” Penny gasped, as his lips trailed a path down her neck, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Her fingers tangled in his dark hair, urging him closer, unable to get enough of him.

“Tell me what you want,” Hawke murmured against her skin, his voice rough and hungry.

“You,” she breathed, burning with desire.

His lips met hers again in a kiss that grew hotter with every swipe of his tongue. Soon her bra was gone and in a heap on the floor, and her jeans and panties followed.

He broke away to scan over her. When his heated gaze met hers again, warmth and wetness spread between her thighs. “Ah, now I have all of you, every single fucking gorgeous inch to enjoy.”

“Then touch me,” she rasped, her breath hitching.

The side of his mouth curved sensually as he slid a hand over her breast to pinch her nipple before he dragged his fingers between her thighs. She arched into his touch, craving more of this sweet torture.

“Is this what you want?” he breathed into her ear, his voice low and husky.

“Y-yes,” she stammered, struggling to form coherent thoughts amidst his skilled fingers expertly bringing her to the brink of ecstasy. “Don’t stop.”

He chuckled, a low rumble that sent shivers down her spine. But he didn’t stop, his touch becoming more insistent and urgent as she raced toward release. She clung to him, unable to contain the overwhelming sensations coursing through her body—until finally she broke free, riding his fingers while she fell apart.

“God, you’re amazing,” Hawke muttered sometime later, and then opened his belt with one hand while he grabbed a condom from his bedside drawer.

He shed his pants and boxer briefs, stepping out of them. She stared at him, flesh and metal—this man who was beautiful, and brave, and honorable, and she couldn’t understand why she denied him for so long.

He watched her, a smirk playing on his lips, as he sheathed himself in the condom.

“You look hungry, Larson,” he said, his voice deep and husky.

“Starving,” she rasped.

He took a step closer, closing the space between them. She could feel the heat radiating off of him, and she drank it all in.

“Good,” he growled, pulling her toward him and crushing his lips against hers in a fierce kiss.

She moaned into his mouth, her hands roaming over his smooth, hard skin.

He laid on his back and helped her straddle him. She climbed him, and his moan echoed hers, as she sank down, taking in every inch of his hard cock, slowly, eagerly.

They moved together, limbs tangling, skin sliding against skin, each touch sending waves of pleasure coursing through them. The world ceased to exist, fading away until there was

only this moment—raw, intimate, and nothing she'd ever felt before.

She rocked her hips, grinding against him, getting closer... and closer... and closer.

He grasped her hips and thrust up into her. She threw her head back, pleasure becoming all-consuming.

“More,” she begged, her nails digging into Hawke's chest. She felt his cock hardening, signaling his impending release, heightening hers.

He quickened his pace. Harder. And harder yet—

Until he slapped her ass. “Come for me, Red,” he commanded, his voice thick with need.

With a cry that didn't even sound like herself, she let herself go, shattering into a million pieces as pleasure consumed her entirely.

Not a second later, he roared his release, bucking and jerking beneath her.

As the last tremors of ecstasy faded away, she breathlessly lay on his chest, entwined in his arms, their bodies slick with sweat and tangled together. The pain in her shoulder, forgotten for the moment.

A long moment passed before Hawke broke the silence and said, “We could be good together. Really good.”

As if the best sex of her life didn't make that glaringly obvious. “I know,” she agreed. “But—”

“No buts, Red.” He gave her bottom a firm slap. “Unless we're talking about this spectacular ass.” He squeezed her cheek, emphasizing his point.

She chuckled, and in this moment, with tiredness creeping in, she was content with that.

The next morning, Hawke struggled with the urge to take matters into his own hands and confront Romano. He knew he could handle the problem easily. The only reason he didn't act last night was because Penny needed him. She had given him everything, and there was no way he would have left her side.

As they sat together in Rhys's office on the main level of the cigar lounge, Hawke fought against the need to hold Penny close and keep her safe. He resisted, aware that Julia was sitting on the other side of Penny, her face filled with worry despite her attempts to hide it.

Rhys loomed over the mahogany desk, his towering form an intimidating force. Hawke had called him last night and updated him on the situation. The danger to Penny had Rhys was no longer taking a backseat and he decided to face Julia head-on today. The stark shadows played across in the sharp contours of Rhys's face, deepened the gray storm clouds brewing in his eyes.

"Julia," he said firmly. His chest heaved beneath the crisp white shirt that clung to his torso, betraying his barely controlled fury. "We are going to skip the dance. Penny was hired by me to investigate a bug we found planted in the club."

Julia shot Penny a look of betrayal.

"Take your eyes off her," Hawke growled, a similar fury burning through him. "Look to Rhys, the person you owe an explanation to."

Julia's eyes, usually warm and inviting, were now wide with fear. "Rhys, I—" Her voice cracked, the words dissolving into the charged air between them.

"Save it," Rhys cut her off with a flick of his hand. "I trusted you, Julia. And you betrayed all of us."

She flinched, bowing her head. "I'm sorry."

"I don't give a shit if you're sorry," Rhys began, each syllable a thunderous crack against the silence, "Are you working for Victor to ruin me?"

"Rhys, please," Julia implored, her voice a fractured whisper, as she shook her head repeatedly, "it's not that simple."

"Simple?" he spat out, his laugh devoid of any real humor. "Betrayal never is. I need answers, and I need them now. Because Victor's men targeted Penny last night."

Julia shot Penny a look of apology before she shifted in her seat, uncrossing, and recrossing her legs. "Victor"—she faltered—"he has something on me. Something I... I can't—"

"Can't or won't?" Rhys cut in, his gaze sharpening, as he leaned over his desk toward her. "Is your loyalty so easily bought, Julia?"

Her breath hitched, tears welling in her eyes. "I—" She hesitated, desperation bleeding into the air around them. "I'm trapped. I wish I could explain everything, but—"

"Then let me help you," Rhys countered, his anger momentarily eclipsed by something that looked aching like concern. "You should have come to me first when someone as fucking dangerous as Romano approached you."

"I..." She hesitated again, drawing in an obvious breath to control herself. "I didn't know who I could trust."

Rhys said through gritted teeth, "Explain to me what in the fuck is going on."

She wrung her hands, her fingers trembling. "I met Victor through my younger sister, who worked for him and owed him money. I paid that money back from what I got from Phoenix."

Her voice broke on a sob she fought to repress, unshed tears glistening in her eyes. “But he’s blackmailing me now, telling me that he can always get to my sister. She has a gambling addiction and he’s been holding it over me, threatening to... he said he’d kill her if I didn’t comply with what he wanted.”

Rhys stood motionless, his features hardening into a mask of stoic stone as he obviously absorbed the gravity of her confession.

Christ, even Hawke was absorbing it. He’d never sell Rhys out, but he understood the fear of being on Romano’s bad side.

“Victor Romano, that fucking snake,” Rhys muttered under his breath. He dropped down into his chair, watching Julia closely. “Where is your sister now?”

“I put her on a plane to Paris and she’s in rehab for her addiction,” she said, still not looking up. “I sent her far, far away.”

Hawke asked, “And took all the heat your sister caused?”

“She’s my baby sister,” Julia said softly. “It was always just us, and she was terrified.”

Rhys crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair, studying Julia.

Hawke got his hesitation. The sight of Julia, so vulnerable and ensnared in a web not of her making, pulled at him, a tug-of-war between wrath and mercy.

“I can’t ignore what you’ve done,” Rhys started, the conflict etched deep in the furrow of his brow and the tight set of his jaw. “My club, the trust of every soul within these walls—it’s sacred to me.”

“I know, I know,” Julia whispered. “And I betrayed that. But I was so scared. I still am.”

“You should have come to me,” Rhys muttered. “We could have dealt with this together.”

She finally looked up, her gaze connecting with Rhys. “Could we?” Her question hung in the air. “What could you have done?”

“Protected you,” Rhys said, the ferocity of his response leaving no room for doubt. “I don’t abandon my people. I would have done whatever I needed to do to ensure that you or your sister were not targeted by Romano.”

“I didn’t know what to do,” she implored, tears now running down her cheeks.

Penny shifted in her seat, before she spoke, her voice cutting through the tension like a knife. “We need to focus on how we move forward. Victor’s not going to stop until he gets what he wants, which is apparently enough evidence against the influential clientele so he can blackmail them.”

Julia added, “Mostly the political figures. He wants to use Phoenix for as long as it can serve him.”

“Of course, he wants access to Phoenix,” Rhys ground out. “He wants to get his dirty hands all fucking over the members, because of what they can give him.”

Penny nodded. “Which is why we have to be one step ahead.”

“Agreed,” Hawke chimed in.

Rhys took a deep breath. He locked eyes with Julia, his gaze softening. “We will bring Romano down,” he vowed. “If you’re willing to help us, to really end this—”

“I want to,” she interjected. “More than anything.”

“Then we’ll protect you,” Rhys promised, and the sincerity in his tone filled the room. “You have my word.”

Her relief was palpable, a visible softening of her features as the burden she’d been carrying began to dissipate.

“Every detail, every transaction, everything I know about him... I can give it all to you,” Julia replied.

“Even if it puts you at risk?” Rhys pressed, his eyes scanning hers.

“I’m at risk already,” she affirmed, her voice finding strength as she locked eyes with him. “I want to be rid of him

just as much as you do.” Her chin quivered. “I want this to be over. I want to feel safe again. I want to be with my sister.”

A muscle twitched in Rhys’s jaw as he shot a glance at Hawke. “I assume you have an idea.”

Hawke nodded, gesturing toward Penny. “We do.” In bed last night, while she was wrapped in his arms, they’d talked it through. Every little detail. And all he had to do was keep her safe, a task he wasn’t taking lightly.

“What do you need from me?” Rhys asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“We need Archer, Ronan, and Jett,” Hawke replied. Hawke had met Ronan during hell week and had gotten him the job at Phoenix when he left the SEALs, and Jett was a retired SEAL too. With Archer being Army Special Forces, Hawke knew there was no one else he’d want on his team. “And a meeting space to plan.”

“You’ve got what you need,” Rhys declared. He grabbed his cell from his desk and fired off a text. “They’re on the way.” Right as he lowered his phone, a knock sounded on the office door. “Come in,” he called.

The door opened and Nico, a stoic-faced, well-muscled member of the security team, entered the room. “What’s up, boss?” he asked Rhys.

Rhys gestured to Julia. “Nico, I need your assistance in keeping Julia safe. Would you be willing to take her to your home until I say otherwise?”

“Of course,” Nico said without hesitation. He studied Julia a moment before glancing to Rhys again. “Any information I should know?”

“I suspect she’ll soon be hunted by Victor Romano. You’ve heard of him?” At Nico’s nod and deep frown, Rhys added, “Don’t let your guard down.”

Hawke added, “We have no idea if he has eyes on Julia.”

Nico acknowledged the advice with a nod, as Rhys said, “We will contact you when it’s safe to do so.”

“Affirmative.” He set his hard gaze on Julia. “Let’s go.”

She turned to Rhys. “I am sorry. Truly.”

“I know that you are,” was all Rhys said.

Hawke knew their friendship was over. He would do what he could to protect Julia. But when Romano was behind bars and she was safe, Julia would become a faint memory to all of them.

She blinked, more tears falling down her cheeks, before she turned to Nico. “Can I go home and get clothes?”

“No,” he said, coolly. “You can borrow something from me for the time being.”

With that, he ushered her out of the room, and Hawke released a sigh of relief. Having one less person to worry about was one thing off his mind, and he had no doubt Julia was in grave danger.

Rhys said, “I need to call Zoey, and update her on all this, so she and Elise can go over to Hunt and Lottie’s where they’ll be safe.”

Hawke nodded. “We’ll meet you downstairs.” He waited for Penny to leave the office before following her out into the hallway.

As Penny went to walk away, Hawke grabbed her hand, holding tight. “How’s the pain?”

She moved her shoulder a little. “Sore.”

“Come on.” He gestured toward the bar in the cigar club. “Pain pills first, then we strategize.”

Penny scoffed. “I told you, I don’t need a babysitter.”

He met her gaze and grinned mischievously. “And I told you what I’d do if you called me that.”

Despite the tension about Romano, there was still an undeniable heat. She smirked and leaned in close to his face. “Babysitter.” Then she sauntered past him, and he resisted the urge to press her up against the wall and playfully show her why she shouldn’t taunt him.

“You’ll pay for that,” he called, noticing the huskiness in his voice.

“I’m counting on it,” she replied, looking back at him over her shoulder with a grin.

Damn, this woman.

THE AIR in the security meeting room was thick with a blend of tension and focus, like the calm before a storm. Hawke’s senses were heightened, his gut coiled tight. He stayed focused on the extensive blueprints unfurled across the mahogany table before him that Penny had hacked from Romano’s home builder’s server. She sat at the end of the table, working on her laptop, away from the blueprints and the men huddled around the desk, currently having spent the last two hours hacking into Romano’s security system.

Archer informed Rhys, “I’ve dispatched a few men to Hunt’s and Lottie’s.”

“Excellent,” Rhys replied. Addressing Hunt, he added, “They’ll remain with you until this situation is resolved, along with Zoey and Elise.”

Hunt chuckled, “I pity anyone who enters our house uninvited with Lottie there, but I’ll never turn down an extra set of eyes.”

Rhys acknowledged that with a nod.

“All right,” Penny said, her voice cutting through the low hum of male baritones, warm yet laced with an unspoken urgency. “I’ve confirmed that blueprint is the most recent layout of Victor’s mansion.”

“Good,” Hawke said, and began pointing at the blueprint. “From what we’ve learned from Julia,” which was all information that Nico had obtained and relayed, “Victor’s office is here, past the second-floor living room. His private security detail is always stationed inside and outside.”

“Cameras?” Archer asked, his voice a low rumble.

“Every corner, every conceivable angle covered,” Penny said. “But those can be dealt with easily enough.” Her fingers flew over the keyboard until every surveillance feed was showing on the television monitors attached to the wall. “That’s every camera on the property.”

Hawke was in awe as he looked at Penny. She never failed to impress him, but it was especially rare for someone without a military background to command the attention of a room filled with highly trained soldiers. Penny didn’t just hold her own; she owned the entire room.

“Is that all the guards?” Archer queried, glancing from screen to screen.

“From what I can tell, there are rotating shifts,” she answered, tapping another key, which pulled up the logs of all the employees. “Give me another hour and I’ll put together files on every guard that will be working tomorrow.”

“That’s more than we could ask for,” Hawke acknowledged.

She gave a soft smile in response.

Hawke’s chest lightened under the warmth of it. He noticed an unfamiliar slight tenderness in her expression, when Archer said, “Victor’s not going to expect an incursion.”

“Underestimating us could be his biggest mistake,” Rhys replied.

Archer leaned in, eyes scanning the layout with intensity. “Precision is key. We get in, we get what we need, we get out.”

Standing next to him was Hunt, who said firmly, “Make no mistake, you need to do this clean. No deaths. We don’t want to bring more heat to Phoenix.”

Hawke nodded. “Affirmative,” he said, then glanced at the two men next to Hunt. “Ronan and Jett can disable then inject Ketamine.” The dose had to be high enough to render the

guards incapacitated long enough to tie up and silence, while they got in and got out, but not kill.

Every head around table nodded agreement, their faces etched with the same determination that Hawke felt coursing through his veins.

“Let’s talk entry points,” Jett, a thickly built thirty-year-old, said with a Boston accent. His brown eyes scanned the blueprint with a sharp gaze as he tapped a spot near the estate’s rear garden. “This could be our best shot at getting inside undetected, given the guards stationed around the main entrance.”

“Agreed,” Ronan, a dark-haired man with green eyes, chimed in. “But Victor’s got surveillance covering every inch of ground.”

“That’s where I come in,” Penny interjected from her spot at the head of the table. Every set of eyes snapped to her, and she added, “I’ll have control of those cameras, so you’re not going in there blind. Just before we go in, I’ll temporarily disable the cameras long enough for us to slip through and get out.”

Hawke couldn’t look away from her. *Before we go in.* He suddenly realized this brilliant hacker held pieces of his heart he’d never realized he’d given away. She was their ace in the hole, the one person capable of breaching Victor’s cyber defenses. But the thought of her in danger made something primal stir within him—a protective instinct that roared to life.

Obviously, Hawke’s expression revealed his worry, since Hunt asked, “And Penny needs to go along?”

Hunt’s question caught her off guard, and for a moment she looked surprised that he cared. But then she replied with determination, “I have to do it. I need to hack into Romano’s computer. If you try to take it, there could be safety precautions in place that will wipe the hard drive. It’s too risky. I have to go.”

“We’ll cover her,” Archer promised.

Hawke gave a firm nod, and said, his stare locked on Penny, “And we’ll make damn sure she comes out safe.”

Again, she smiled.

“Time will not be on our side,” Rhys reminded them, his words slicing through the haze of Hawke’s concern. “You will need to act fast.”

“Fast and clean,” Hunt emphasized again.

“Let’s talk contingencies,” Hawke said, straightening up, pushing his concern to the back of his mind for now. “If things go sideways, we need options.” He wouldn’t take any chances, not with Penny there.

“Escape routes, fallback points,” Ronan suggested, tapping different areas of the mansion layout. “And we should have a secondary extraction plan if Penny gets compromised.”

“Comms need to be secure. Encrypted channels only,” Jett added, his analytical gaze not leaving the intricate web of rooms and corridors. “No risk of interception.”

“Every angle covered,” Archer confirmed, the intensity in his eyes mirroring the resolve in his stance. “Every scenario planned for.”

The dialogue continued, as they dissected Victor’s mansion piece by piece. Hawke’s mind raced with tactical assessments, but beneath the surface, a darker current of emotion surged—the primal fear for her safety, the burning desire to end this once and for all.

Because when they ended this, not only would Phoenix and his friends be safe, as would Julia and her sister, but Penny would no longer have a reason to keep that final guard up. The excuse that the job came first would no longer be hanging between them. And he wanted to give their relationship a real shot.

He snapped back into focus as Rhys pressed his hands against the table, his eyes alight with the fire of determination. “If things go south, you pull the plug. We’re not here to play heroes.”

Every head around the table nodded in agreement.

“Then let’s finalize this,” Hawke declared, feeling the adrenaline beginning to pump through his system. He looked to Penny. “You got this?”

Penny agreed with a nod. “I got this.”

He inclined his head in understanding. “What do you require from us?”

She leaned back and ran a hand through her hair. “I need some equipment,” she said. “But I assume it’s too risky to go to the warehouse?”

“It’s not off the table,” Hawke clarified calmly, “However, it’s likely that Romano is still monitoring the warehouse.”

She let out a frustrated sigh. “Then I’ll have to reach out to”—her gaze landed on Hunt before flicking back to Hawke — “an acquaintance for a password cracker and an encrypted flash drive to extract data from Victor’s computer.”

Archer said, “Going with the latter option is the smarter choice. Elise informed me that if anything else happens to you, Romano won’t be our biggest concern.”

A warm smile spread across Penny’s face as the room filled with laughter.

“I wouldn’t doubt her,” Penny said.

“I don’t,” Archer said, dead serious.

Hawke chuckled and turned his attention back to Penny. “Is that all you need?”

“That’s it,” she confirmed.

Archer asked, “How long do you think it will take from when you sit down in Romano’s office to when we leave?”

“Only five minutes,” she answered.

Rhys raised an eyebrow. “Just five minutes?”

Penny nodded. “The majority of that time is spent cracking the passwords and downloading the data. With the right equipment, it doesn’t take long.”

“And the right person operating the equipment,” Hawke added, wanting to remind Penny how crucial she was to this mission.

She laughed quietly. “Yes, and *that*.”

Archer moved away from the table and crossed his arms, casting a quick glance toward Rhys. “To prepare for the mission, we’ll need a room to practice in.”

“Consider it done,” Rhys replied confidently. “I’ve got an office building a few blocks away that has an empty basement you can use.”

“Good.” Archer locked eyes with Hunt. “We’ll make sure the evidence gets to you without revealing our identities.”

Hunt nodded in agreement. “As long as I’m at the station. There will be less questions if the package comes to me there.”

“That’s settled,” Archer concluded confidently.

A heavy silence descended upon the room as Hawke’s eyes scanned each person at the table, making sure he had their undivided attention. “We strike at midnight. No hesitations. No second-guessing. We’re bringing this bastard down.”

“Hooyah,” the Navy SEALs cheered in agreement.

Back at Hawke's condo later that night, Penny hung the damp towel on the hook in the bathroom, glad to finally shower after what felt like the longest day. She checked the clock on her cell phone and saw that it was still six hours before midnight. When Hawke suggested taking a break after the meeting, she couldn't have been more relieved. They still had to make a quick stop for equipment from her supplier before heading back, but at least they got a moment to shower and eat before Hawke began practicing for the mission.

He had taken a shower before her, while she waited for one of the security team to deliver a bag of Elise's clothes. Penny was thankful that she and Elise were the same size, and even more so, that there was a pack of new underwear and a bra in the bag.

She quickly changed into Elise's dark green jogging pants and white hoodie. Pulling her hair up into a ponytail, she caught a whiff of a delicious scent wafting from the kitchen, causing her stomach to growl in anticipation and urging her to hurry along.

The scent quadrupled when she opened the door and headed into the hallway. With each step she took, the more she felt pulled forward.

When she took the final step into the living room, her breath hitched. Candles were lit on every possible surface, two iced teas were set out on the coffee table, and cozy blankets were on the couch.

“This is... unexpected,” she exhaled, the words barely escaping.

“A good surprise, I hope.” Hawke’s voice was rich with satisfaction. He emerged from the shadows, every inch the formidable Navy SEAL, yet softened by the tender gleam in his eye. “You like it?”

“Like it?” She laughed. “It’s a great surprise.”

“I’m glad.” He grinned. “I would have preferred cooking for you for our first date, but pizza will have to do, and we can’t drink, so iced tea it is.”

She froze on the spot, only dwelling on one thing he’d said. “First date?”

He placed the plates next to the pizza box and then closed the gap between them. His eyes flared as he entwined his fingers with hers and spoke softly, “As a SEAL, I’ve learned to never wait. We have no idea what will happen tonight, the danger we’ll face. I want a first date with you.” He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you want that?”

She hesitated to consider and realized he was right. If she looked past all her worries and all the bullshit, she’d want a date with him. “I do,” she agreed.

His smile was sweet and warm, and not one she’d seen from him yet. “Not so hard to admit that, is it?”

She rolled her eyes and laughed softly.

Chuckling, he tugged her toward the couch. “Sit. Get comfy.”

She did just that, and as she settled into her seat, the warmth from his fingers brushed over hers, leaving a trail of heat that lingered far longer than the touch itself.

“If I’m being honest,” she admitted, “this might be the best first date I’ve ever been on.” It wasn’t the candles flickering or the cozy atmosphere. It was him. The raw intensity that radiated naturally from Hawke, like an unspoken promise that he’d always put her first. That he *wanted* to put her first.

“Then your first dates must have been terrible,” he replied with a laugh. “Which, I admit, makes me thrilled.”

She barked a laugh, shaking her head at him. Though, she realized, for tonight, she didn't want that guard up that kept him at a distance. Because he was right, tonight was dangerous. She'd figure out the rest later.

“Hope you're hungry,” Hawke said, opening the pizza box.

“Starved,” Penny confessed, as he handed her a plate. She added two slices of the wood-fired pizza and dug in a second later. The flavors burst upon her tongue—richness, a hint of oregano and garlic, and the sea salt—and she moaned loudly before she could stop herself.

He responded instantly with a wicked grin. “I'm growing rather fond of that sound.”

Her breath hitched at the implication, her body responding with a surge of heat, and her belly warming for reasons that had nothing to do with the food.

As they ate, Penny felt herself unwrap further, the shell she'd built so meticulously beginning to crumble in the presence of this man who deserved to see a little more of her. “Have you gone on a lot of first dates?” she asked.

“Too many,” he chuckled. “I was always away on duty, never home long enough for anything more than a brief affair. The military consumed my life. But after losing my leg, my perspective changed. I crave something more meaningful than just serving in the military. And I crave that with someone doing their best to keep me at a careful distance.”

Her heart shuddered as he just threw the truth out there without hesitation. She'd known this. She knew it nearly immediately. She could see in the way he stared at her. Yes, there was hunger there, but there was also something... *more*. Hawke wasn't a screw 'em and leave 'em type of man. “You want kids, marriage, all that?” she asked.

“I do.” He arched his eyebrow. “You don't want that?”

“In a perfect world, I suppose, maybe,” she admitted. “But we don't live in a perfect world, and people are never what

they seem. Trust is an illusion, so easily broken.”

He held her stare, and then finally nodded. “For some people, yes, that’s true. But others believe trust is unbreakable.”

“Yes, I know a couple who do,” she said, and realized her list of those people was getting longer since she’d met Elise.

A thick weight of silence seemed to hang between them, until he finally spoke up. “Can you tell me about it?”

“About what?” she replied.

“The reason behind all the barriers you’ve put up. Only as much as you’re comfortable revealing,” he assured her, placing his slice down and focusing entirely on her.

“Comfortable isn’t exactly how I’d describe it,” she confessed.

His gaze never wavered, a silent pillar of strength that beckoned her to trust, to open the floodgates. It was disconcerting, this desire to be seen, truly seen, by another person.

But, she realized, she wanted him to know her.

“Growing up,” she began, “I always thought my mother was this impenetrable force of nature. Unshakeable. She was a single mother—it was just the two of us. But when I was ten years old, she met Richard...” Her words trailed off as she mustered the courage to continue. “It’s like I ceased to exist. Suddenly, there was just no room for me in her life anymore.”

Hawke’s eyes never left hers, his gaze steady and inviting, urging her to release the demons of her past.

“Richard,” she spat out the name, “he never wanted a stepdaughter. And my mother—she chose him over me. Just like that.” She snapped her fingers. “Gram was the one who picked up the pieces. She became everything my mother wasn’t.”

“Your grandmother sounds like she was an incredible woman.”

“Was, and still is,” Penny corrected gently. “She sees me. The real me. And she’s never once made me feel like I’m second best.”

“Everyone deserves to be seen,” Hawke replied, his voice laced with an intensity that matched the depth in his gaze.

“As for the guards I’ve got up, I understand manipulation,” she explained. “I’ve seen how easy it is to exploit vulnerabilities, to weave into systems and lives, unnoticed...”

“Does that scare you?” Hawke asked.

“Terrifies me,” she admitted. “Because I understand it, the allure of control. But Gram, she showed me the power of choice, of using my skills for good. That’s why I became a hacker on the good side of things—to even the scales, to protect those who can’t protect themselves from being manipulated.”

Hawke’s expression softened.

Her heart thrummed in her chest as he reached out, his fingers brushing her cheek, the contact grounding her swirling emotions.

“Your grandmother gave you a gift,” he said, his thumb tracing circles on her skin. “Not just in skill, but in purpose.”

She drew in a shaky breath, feeling the truth of his words settle in her bones. “I think you’re right,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The warmth of Hawke’s hand lingered on her face as he pulled his hand away.

“Being in this field, doing what I do,” she continued, “it doesn’t exactly lay the groundwork for trust, you know?”

He nodded. “I can understand that,” he said, his voice low and steady. “You see the worst side of people, the secrets they hide.”

“Exactly.” She swallowed hard, her chest tightening. “Gram was my rock. But outside of that? I’ve never let anyone get too close, except Elise, and that took a long time. I’ve never had what you’d call a ‘serious relationship.’”

“Serious relationships involve taking risks,” he offered, his tone not one of judgment but of empathy. “They require us to lay down our armor. For someone like you, who has spent so much energy building those walls, it must feel like an impossible task.”

She observed him intently, unable to speak. For the first time, she felt seen, a feeling she’d only had with her grandmother. “It does feel impossible.”

He squeezed her hand firmly, his words dripping with determination. “I’ll earn your trust, Red.”

Her laughter broke the tension that had been building in the air. “You’re really that sure?” she asked, teasingly.

“Absolutely,” he replied confidently, taking a bite of his pizza. “And do you know why?”

She raised an eyebrow in question. “Why?”

He flashed a self-assured grin. “Because I’m a SEAL and when I have a mission, failure is not an option. You will be mine; whether it takes months or years, only time will tell.”

She couldn’t help but remark, “Military men... never lacking in confidence.”

He grinned again, flashing a playful salute. “Hooyah.”

HAWKE’S SHOULDERS sagged under the pressure of the danger ahead as he made his way to the kitchen. He had explored every avenue to prevent Penny from joining tonight, but he knew deep down that it was just his ego talking. They needed her. She was irreplaceable.

He pushed aside any worries and concerns. They had a strong team, all skilled soldiers, and a well-crafted plan. Tonight, his problems with Romano would all come to an end. And he wasn’t going to let anything ruin the moment with Penny. It felt like something had shifted between them, and he wanted to explore that further.

They had *now*, and he wouldn't waste it.

As he entered the kitchen, he found her bent over, loading the dishwasher. He leaned against the doorway, crossing his arms over his chest. "We still have a matter to deal with." Even he heard the huskiness in his tone.

"What's that?" she asked, turning to face him with a fiery look in her eyes.

"Have you forgotten what you called me?" he asked.

Her eyes searched his. Until... "Oh," she breathed out, the heat rising in her cheeks.

He grinned in response. "A punishment is in order, don't you think?"

She playfully leaned against the counter, gripping the edge and replied, "What type of punishment will I receive?"

"Hmmm..." he murmured, closing the gap between them.

A hairsbreadth away from her, he tugged her close. He traced the delicate lines of her jaw, neck, and collarbone. The soft moans that escaped her lips sent heat roaring into his groin. He was sure that single sound could ruin him.

Taking his time, he slowly pulled the sweatshirt over her shoulders, revealing a lacy black bra that barely contained her perky breasts. His fingers brushed against her silky skin as he trailed kisses down her neck, earning a gasp.

"Hawke," she moaned, arching into his touch, eagerly wanting more.

"Not yet, Red," he said against her skin. "This is a punishment, remember?"

With a grin, he positioned her so that she was bent over the kitchen island, her hips pressed against the cool surface, arms outstretched on either side of her. He traced a path down her spine, stopping as he tugged her sweats and panties down, until she was stepping out them.

Trailing his fingernails down her spine, he took a moment to admire her. *Fucking stunning*. He rested his hand on her

lower back and kicked her legs open. A shudder ran through her as his hand came down in a quick slap on one cheek and then the other.

Again... and again, he continued, until her bottom was warm to his touch, and she was moaning, wiggling against him.

His cock twitched in his pants as he nudged her legs wider, exposing her fully. He danced his fingers up her inner thigh, meeting her hot pussy, finding her soaking wet. "You have no idea how fucking crazy you make me," he groaned.

Her throaty moan was her response.

He gave her one more hard spank, and she gasped loudly, a shivering mess of need, as he soothingly kissed the redness left behind. Another moan later, and then he stepped back. She turned her head to look at him, her eyes dark with desire, mirroring his own.

He couldn't help but brush his lips against her neck, tasting the sweetness of her skin as he breathed in her unique scent. His lips found hers again, this time with more urgency. Their tongues tangled together, exploring every inch of each other's mouths.

His hand trailed down to cup her sweet ass, pulling her body flush against his. He could feel the warmth seeping through her, igniting a fire within him. She moaned softly against his mouth, her hands tracing his jawline before threading her fingers through his hair, and he devoured the sound, deepening the kiss.

Until her perfect mouth tempted him for *more*.

He pulled away suddenly, both breathless. He unbuckled his belt and let his clothing fall to the floor, his rock-hard erection springing free. She didn't hesitate, wrapping her fingers around him, stroking skillfully, teasing the head with her thumb. He released a deep groan, his hips jerking forward in response.

"Get on your knees for me, Red," he commanded softly.

Doing as he asked, she sank to her knees and took him into her mouth. He ran his hands through her hair, guiding her up and down as she took him deeper, her throat working to take every inch.

When she sucked deep, he groaned louder this time, thrusting his hips toward her hungrily. She moved faster, her mouth working up and down along his shaft. Every inch of him was wet and hot, and he couldn't get enough. Her tongue swirled around the head, circling the sensitive spot, and his eyes rolled back into his head. His muscles tensed, his skin flush with pleasure. "Fuck. Don't stop."

She increased the pressure, taking him all the way down her throat. His moans grew louder, more urgent. Until his balls tightened. He stepped back, yanking himself from her reach.

"I need you," he growled, helping to her feet, bending her back over the counter. "Now."

She arched into him, a soft gasp escaping her lips. "Then take me."

Once he sheathed himself in a condom from his wallet, his breath fanned across her skin, and she shivered against him. "What do you want, Red?" he murmured.

"Fuck me hard," she begged, wiggling against him.

He didn't need another invitation. He pinned her against the island, and she gasped as he entered her, filling her with one hard thrust.

He pulled her wrists closer together, pinning them behind her back, as he began thrusting harder, faster. The sound of skin slapping against skin echoed in the room, filling it with an almost primal intensity.

His thrusts became fast, furious, desperate. Their breathing mirrored each other's, their gasps filling the small space between them. His lips found her neck, his teeth grazing the tender flesh there, marking her as his. She moaned, pushing back against him, demanding more.

She thrust her hips up, meeting his every stroke, grinding against him.

He didn't stop.

She fucking unraveled him.

His hand found its way to her pussy, teasing her clit as he continued to thrust, and her screams of pleasure filled his ears. She arched her back, beginning to tremble, begging for more. He groaned, driving deeper inside her with each powerful thrust, his hips meeting hers in perfect synchrony.

Until the pleasure stole his control.

“Hawke,” she cried out, shattering around him.

He buried himself fully inside her, holding her hips in place as he came with a roar.

Penny was still riding the high Hawke sent her on in the hours since they'd left his condo. She had all of her equipment with her and had opened every necessary application on her laptop.

She was *ready*.

Penny observed the four-member team—Hawke, Archer, Ronan, and Jett—rehearse their mission strategy in the basement of a building that Rhys owned. They had constructed fake hallways to mimic those in Victor's house, along with mock security guards they would encounter. Initially, she found amusement in their use of Nerf guns during practice, but her laughter turned into awe as she watched them work with precision and determination.

After which, they returned to Phoenix for their final preparations. Through all of it, she couldn't help but study Phoenix with its stone walls, feeling a slight pang of jealousy. Hawke had shared this space with other women before, indulging all sorts of fantasies. She'd never imagined herself partaking in something as daring as a sex show, but here, *now*, the idea was creeping into her mind: *what if?*

Before that thought ran away with her, she shook her head and took a deep breath to steady her nerves and whatever the hell thought that was, as the team readied themselves for the mission. She checked her watch: *eleven o'clock*. In an hour, they would step into the devil's den, and she needed to stay razor-sharp.

Hawke turned to face Penny fully, his expression unreadable, and then he left the team, approaching her with powerful strides. He held out a bundle of black fabric—her combat gear for the mission ahead. “Go change and meet us back here,” he instructed. “There’s a changing room down the hall.”

“Okay.” Penny reached out and accepted the gear, smoothing her hands over the tough material. She met Hawke’s eyes again and gave a single, curt nod.

Without wasting any time, she rushed into the changing room and swiftly donned the gear, throwing her hair up in a ponytail. When she turned and faced the long mirror, she gasped, sliding her hands over her thighs. The sleek black gear hugged her frame like a second skin. She was no longer just Penny Larson, hacker. She was a soldier, ready for battle.

As soon as she entered the room, all conversations came to an abrupt halt and every pair of eyes turned in her direction. However, there was one set of eyes that stayed fixed on her, gaze burning with intensity.

Hawke strode forward, his gaze piercing with each determined step. He came to a halt in front of her and boldly declared, “Once this is all over, I plan to peel that off of you, inch by fucking inch.”

She smirked in response. “Only if I can peel yours off first.”

“Done.” His wicked grin slowly disappeared, replaced by a serious look of determination. “When we breach, you stick with me. Don’t take any unnecessary risks.” His jaw clenched, emotion cracking through his stoic facade. “If anything happens to you...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “Promise me you’ll put your safety first. If I give an order, you follow it. No questions asked.”

His piercing eyes implored her. She could see the depths of his feelings, and it warmed something very fragile in her heart. “Believe me, I will most certainly not take unnecessary risks,” she replied steadily. She took his hand, squeezing tight. “I promise, I’ll be careful.”

His shoulders relaxed slightly as he nodded. The warmth of his touch lingered even after he pulled away. He turned to the team. "Let's roll out."

They quickly piled into a white van, with Archer taking the driver's seat and Penny sitting in the passenger side, as they drove the near hour drive to Irvington, and the secluded mansions on the Hudson River. She let out a deep breath as she opened her laptop. This was it. Time to put her skills to the test and shut down Victor's surveillance system.

She expertly navigated layers of encryption and security protocols. The system was complex, but nothing she hadn't faced before. Like Hawke had told her, failure was not an option.

As she probed deeper into the network, she had to be careful, not leaving a single trace. Victor's hacker, which he no doubt had on staff, could detect her intrusion at any moment. Her eyes darted back and forth, analyzing code, searching for vulnerabilities.

The van was silent on the drive except for the rapid tapping of keys.

Until she sensed the van had come to a stop. Archer had parked in the shadows across from Victor's imposing mansion, nearly invisible in the dark of the night.

Penny's pulse pounded in her ears. Her mouth felt dry, her palms slick with sweat. She took a deep breath, willing her nerves to settle. She had to stay focused. Lives depended on it.

"Do it," Hawke ordered.

Her breath caught as she located the central controls. With a few swift keystrokes, she could shut the entire system down, blinding Victor's men and allowing Hawke's team to infiltrate undetected.

"Comms check," Archer said. Each member sounded off that their communication devices were online, including Penny.

She hesitated only a moment, steeling her nerves. Then she rapidly input the kill commands, initiating the shutdown

sequence. Lines of code streamed by as she watched, tense and unblinking.

A notification flashed—the surveillance system was offline.

She had done it.

Adrenaline still pumping through her veins, Penny began wiping her digital tracks, removing any trace of her presence in Victor's system.

Penny let out a shaky breath, relief washing over her. She looked up at Hawke. "Done."

Hawke gave a curt nod.

The van doors were thrown open and the team mobilized, weapons in hand. She followed them out, the password-cracking tool and the flash drive tucked away in a pocket in her pants.

Hawke's dark gaze flicked to hers, holding for a breathless moment. She saw emotion she'd never seen from a man.

Something she suddenly wanted to hold on to.

The team assembled behind her, coiled tight as springs.

"Go," Hawke ordered.

She followed, as Hawke hoisted her up and over a tall stone fence. She landed on all fours, Hawke helped her up by the arm, settling her behind Archer, while he followed behind her.

Archer led them through the shadows, using back routes and blind spots they'd found to avoid detection. Her body moved on instinct, following closely behind, all her senses hyperalert.

They approached the garden door—one armed guard blocked the entrance. Archer signaled Jett. He neutralized the guard with brutal efficiency, dragging him inside the door, and jabbing him with an autoinjector in the neck. The man's eyes rolled back into his head.

With swift movement, they were inside, and not a second later, a groan sounded when Ronan took down another guard at the top of the staircase with lethal speed. They were the only two guards that were in their way to the office. Penny glanced back, finding Ronan and Jett dragging the guards toward a closet.

Hawke took her elbow, urging her forward. They approached the final corridor leading to Victor's office. Penny's heart hammered against her ribs. They were so close.

Four steps later, they were in Victor's immaculate office, full of cherrywood, expensive art, and sculptures. She immediately rushed to the computer on the desk, while Archer remained at the door, and Hawke came to stand behind her, a strength she held on to.

Minutes ticked by like hours as she connected her password cracker. She shut out the pressure, drawing on her years of experience.

With fast keystrokes, she cracked the password, breaching the network. Data spilled across her screen. She was in.

She remained fixed on the screen as the progress bar crept forward. She was acutely aware that time was slipping away. At any moment, Victor's team could regain control of the surveillance system.

Seconds felt like minutes.

Until a ding had her gasping, "Download complete."

"Let's move," Hawke ordered as she handed him the flash drive.

She settled between Hawke and Archer again. Her heart pounded as they made their way back to the stairwell. She tried to exude calm confidence, though her mind raced with everything that could go wrong.

When they nearly reached the staircase at the garden's doorway without incident, she sighed in relief.

But suddenly, a door burst open and two armed guards appeared, firing deafening shots. Adrenaline surged through

her veins.

Hawke shoved her toward the staircase. “Run,” he yelled.

Doing as she had promised to do, she pelted down the stairs, the sounds of fighting echoing behind her. Jett and Ronan were nowhere in sight, but she knew the plan was they would hold the perimeter for the way out.

Sprinting down the stairs, she spotted the door ahead. Freedom was so close, she could taste it.

As she flung the door open, her gaze landed not just on the vast expanse of the night sky, but also on the glinting metal of a gun pointed directly at her head.

“So, you’re the pain in the ass hacking into my system,” Victor sneered.

Hawke's grip on his gun was tight, slick with sweat. The evidence they'd found against Romano felt heavy in his pocket, the weight of what it represented sitting like a stone in his gut.

In front of him, Penny kept close, one hand drifting back to brush against him every few steps, as if to reassure herself he was still there.

They were so close to making it out with the evidence intact. So close to finally bringing Romano to justice. But until they stepped outside into the fresh night air, the knot in Hawke's chest wouldn't loosen.

He kept his breathing even, steady. Listening for any sound out of place among their soft footfalls. *Almost there.* Hawke repeated it like a mantra, the promise of freedom glowing brighter as they approached. A few more steps and it would all be over.

The tension was palpable as they moved silently through the dim hallway. Hawke's senses were on high alert, attuned to any potential signs of danger. His grip on his gun tightened reflexively at each echo of their footsteps, the sound reverberating off the cold walls.

Without warning, the heavy silence exploded into chaos as Romano's security burst from a room. Gunshots cracked through the air, muzzle flashes briefly illuminating the darkness. His ears rang from the deafening noise. "Run!" he

shouted at Penny, pulse thundering, shoving her toward the stairs.

Penny was a blur of motion as she charged forward.

He dove behind a pillar as bullets peppered the walls around them. They were surrounded, but Hawke refused to go down without a fight. After coming this far, he would be damned if he let Romano stop them now.

Rage boiled up inside Hawke, hot and visceral. He started forward, heedless of the danger, consumed by the need to get to Penny and keep her safe. He took down one assailant in quick succession, and Archer the other, and they charged forward to the stairs.

Hawke's heart hammered against his ribs as he sprinted out the door, spotting Jett and Ronan running from the west, three bodies lying moaning on the ground behind them. They rushed into the shadows and toward the truck. The stale air burned his lungs with each ragged breath, but he pushed his muscles to their limit. He had to get to Penny.

Each second that passed came with another spike of worry.

But nothing could have prepared him for arriving at the truck, finding it empty.

"They have her," Jett said in the comms.

Hawke fought to spin around, but Archer shoved him into the van. "Going back there is a death sentence. The best way to help her is to get that evidence to Hunt and form a plan to get her out."

Sitting in the passenger seat of the van ten minutes later, safely tucked away next to the historic town hall, Hawke could not stop replaying the mission in his mind, desperately searching for where he had gone wrong. He needed to find his mistake, the one that had led to Penny being captured.

Seated and with rage coursing through his veins, he knew this was why he yearned for a life free from danger. The sound of her laughter echoed in his mind, and he couldn't help but recall the sensation of her soft, lush body against his. Her smile, brimming with intensity, consumed his thoughts. All he

wanted was to shower her with love and create a new existence far from harm's way. Yet, here he was once again, thrust back into the midst of it all, with Penny now facing grave danger.

Cursing, he stared at his phone, after barking commands at Rhys to show him the surveillance feed of Romano's reactivated cameras that Penny had set up back at Phoenix to allow Rhys and Hunt a bird's eye into the mission.

His pulse roared in his ears as his eyes darted over the screens, desperately scanning for any sign of Penny. *Where are you?*

His gaze raked over every monitor. Most showed empty halls or deserted rooms. Others showed Romano's security scrambling to secure the mansion. With each passing second, dread knotted his gut.

"You need to meet us," Archer snapped. "No, Hunt, the situation has changed. They have Penny. We need reinforcements."

Hawke heard nothing after that, because something caught his eye. A screen flickered. Steeling himself, he narrowed his eyes. The hazy image resolved into a stark holding cell. And there, tied to a chair, was Penny.

Hawke's breath caught at the sight of her. Even through the grainy footage, he could see the fear in her piercing eyes. Her hair fell across her face in tangled strands as she struggled against the ropes binding her.

"Penny," he whispered, his fingers barely grazing the screen. A mix of anger and protectiveness coursed through him. He had finally located her, but he couldn't just rush in blindly. He had to come up with a plan that would ensure her safety.

Romano must have had something in mind for Penny. Otherwise, why would he have bound her to a chair?

This gave Hawke the one thing he needed most: *time*.

His mind raced, taking in details—the sparse room, the heavy door, the two armed guards stationed outside. The

situation was precarious, but he had faced worse odds.

Hawke watched her, grappling with his swirling emotions. He had to trust her skills, her instincts. But if anything happened to her...

No. He shoved the thought away. She was a survivor. And he would do everything in his power to get her through this alive.

“Just hold on, Red,” he muttered through gritted teeth. “I’m coming for you.”

PENNY’S HEAD throbbed as two men hauled her down a dim corridor. Adrenaline shook through her veins. She had to get free. But the men’s grip on her arms was viselike, their faces rigid.

She desperately twisted in her captors’ hold, but their fingers only dug in harder. “Let me go, you bastards,” she gritted out.

“Shut the fuck up,” the one on her left growled.

They turned a corner and met a nondescript door. As it swung open, Penny smelled musty concrete and rust. Her breath quickened. Wherever they were taking her, she knew it was nowhere good.

With a shove, the men propelled her inside. She stumbled, barely keeping her feet under her. The room was small and windowless, lit by a single harsh bulb. A chair sat in the middle with ropes.

Before she could fully grasp the situation, the men had already dragged her to the chair and securely tied her to it, the coarse rope digging into her skin.

The other man glared her way with intense hatred. “Make any trouble in here and you’ll regret it.”

With a loud slam, they exited the room, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she took in the cell around her. The cold, damp air enveloped her, raising goosebumps on her bare arms. She tried to move but her hands were tightly bound behind her back. Blinking in the dim light, she took in her surroundings—a small cell with concrete walls, with what appeared to be blood stains on the floor.

Fear stole her breath away as the reality of her situation sank in. She was trapped, at the mercy of Victor Romano. She strained against the restraints, the rough rope biting into her wrists, but it was useless. She was well and truly stuck.

Drawing in a shaky breath, she steadied her nerves. She had to keep it together, had to think. She closed her eyes, retreating into her mind, blocking out the discomfort and panic. She was a fighter, a survivor. And Hawke would come. But even she knew he wouldn't ignore Hunt's demand to keep this clean. He wouldn't be coming in shooting to rescue her—

Scratch that, she realized, *yeah, he would do just that*. The fact he hadn't yet done that, told her that he knew she was presently not about to die.

Penny's eyelids fluttered opened and she scanned her surroundings again. Her gaze landed on a small light mounted on the concrete wall, indicating the presence of a camera. She held the camera's stare, feeling as though she could sense Hawke's reassuring gaze on her from behind it. The relief in that had her slowing her breathing, calming the racing of her heart.

Many, *many* minutes later, the heavy metal door suddenly swung open with an ear-piercing creak, and her pulse quickened all over again.

A hulking silhouette filled the doorway, then stepped inside. Victor Romano. His expensive Italian suit seemed out of place in the dingy surroundings.

Victor's mouth curled into a smug grin as he eyed her helpless form. "Well, well... look what we have here," he purred, his voice smooth yet sinister.

Penny met his icy gaze unflinchingly, determined not to show any weakness.

“Did you really think you could infiltrate my organization and I wouldn’t find out?” Victor tsked, shaking his head. “This has truly been fun, but the game is over.”

He crouched down in front of her, his face inches from hers. She recoiled instinctively from his hot breath.

“Thanks to you, everything is falling perfectly into place,” he whispered. “Soon all of this city will be mine. I don’t need Julia. Rhys Harrington brought you right to me.” He cupped her cheek, and she yanked her face away from him. “I will trade your life for a partnership with the club to gain some photographs and audio clips that I need; sounds like a fair trade, don’t you think?”

Penny held Victor’s icy gaze, refusing to be intimidated.

Victor leaned in closer, his eyes glinting with malice. “And once I have total control, anyone who has crossed me will pay the price,” he purred.

His words sent a spike of fear through her heart. But she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing her panic.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said coldly.

Victor let out a dark chuckle. “Oh, but you should be.”

Hawke's gaze was fixed on the screen, his heart pounding as he watched Romano talk to Penny in the cell.

Though he couldn't hear the words, Romano's predatory gaze and Penny's tense expression told him everything he needed to know. She was being threatened, and he had to get to her. Fast.

The next course of action was being debated in the van as Archer parked a block away from the mansion, and while the team was finalizing the plan, Hawke knew enough to ensure Penny's safe escape.

When Romano reached out to touch Penny's face and she flinched away, Hawke had reached his limit. "I'm not waiting any longer," he said, bursting from the van.

Archer yelled his name, but he was already on the move. He ran the block back to the mansion, arriving in a few short minutes.

"Hawke," came Archer's voice through the earpiece. "I've got eyes on the surveillance and the blueprints in front of me."

Hawke's jaw tightened. "Tell me the way," he said, jumping over the fence, lifting his weapon and blending into the shadows. A team of men were hard to hide. He was not.

"Garden door," Archer said. "Up the stairwell, to the right, down another staircase into the basement and then down another hallway."

A gunshot echoed from his right, and he recognized it as either Ronan or Jett creating a diversion. He slipped through

the doorway again.

“Two hostiles approaching from the east,” Archer said calmly in his ear.

Hawke raced up the staircase then pressed himself behind a pillar as they passed, unaware of him.

“Go,” Archer ordered. “Basement is clear. End of hallway, two hostiles.”

Hawke slipped into the basement and moved with swift precision, his senses heightened. Every muscle tensed, ready for confrontation. Failure was never an option, but especially when Penny needed him.

He strode silently down the hall, his footfalls making no sound, his weapon aimed, ready to disable any threat. Every sense strained for clues—the scuff of a boot, the click of a safety being disengaged.

Up ahead, the two guards flanked Penny’s door, assault rifles held loosely. Sloppy.

Hawke measured distances, calculated angles of attack. When he was ten feet away, one of the guards turned, just beginning to register Hawke’s presence. Too late.

Hawke exploded into motion, his fist crashing into the first guard’s throat. The man choked, staggering back. Before he could recover, Hawke spun and slammed his elbow into the second guard’s temple. He dropped like a stone.

The first guard lunged, trying to bring his rifle to bear. Hawke grabbed the barrel and twisted viciously. The guard cried out as his finger bones snapped. A swift knee to the gut doubled him over. Hawke grabbed the guard’s arm, twisting it sharply until he cried out in pain, then knocked him unconscious with an elbow to the temple.

Both guards were neutralized in seconds. Hawke disarmed them quickly, then turned to the door, shoving it open.

“Penny,” he called.

She snapped her head up, her eyes locked with Hawke’s, filled with a swirling mix of relief, residual fear, and

something even sweeter.

“Hawke!” she gasped. “Help. I can’t get free.”

He raced forward, using his knife to cut her loose.

Footsteps pounded down the hall, distorted shouts growing louder. Their window was closing fast. Hawke helped Penny to her feet.

“We need to go,” he said, wrapping an arm firmly around her waist. They moved swiftly down the hallway. He was hyperaware of every sound, every shadow, ready to neutralize any threats.

Static crackled in Hawke’s earpiece followed by Archer’s clipped tones. “You’ve got a hostile converging on your position.”

Hawke gave Penny a tight nod. “Stay behind me. We’ve got company.”

Penny gave a curt nod back.

The guard appeared a hairsbreadth later and came at Hawke with a knife. He deflected the blade, twisted the man’s wrist until he dropped it with a grunt, then swept his legs out from under him. The guard hit the ground hard, gasping for breath. Hawke stomped down hard on his solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him.

“Move,” he told Penny. He kept his eyes peeled as they continued making their way through the hallway.

“Clear,” Archer said, urgently. “Go.”

Hawke swiftly guided Penny up the stairs.

“Hostile,” Archer barked.

Hawke spun Penny around, pressing her against the wall with his body. He pressed a finger against her mouth, gazing into her wide eyes.

“Get outside,” one of Romano’s guards yelled. Thunderous footsteps followed, as more gunfire erupted outside, with Ronan joining in on the distraction to give them a clear exit.

“Go,” Archer said.

Keeping Penny close, Hawke guided them up the staircase, down the hallway and down the next staircase. “Run to the van,” he told her.

He watched for a second to ensure she did, before turning around with his gun aimed for any threat coming their way. He made a promise to Hunt not to kill anyone, but it was a promise he’d break if it meant a bullet might hit Penny.

Suddenly, he heard it all. Sirens wailing loudly, tires screeching against the pavement. A voice shouted, “Police! Put your weapons down!” without warning.

Hawke’s instincts kicked in and he took off running. He leapt over a nearby fence and cleared another one before hitting the ground and quickly scrambling into the open van, with Jett yanking him inside.

As Ronan quickly shut the door, Archer sped away. Without hesitation, Hawke rushed forward and gathered Penny into his embrace.

“Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” His eyes sweeping over her swiftly, assessing for injuries.

She shook her head, trembling. “I’m all right.” She blinked. Once. Twice. “Was that the police?”

He nodded.

“How—”

Archer said from the driver’s seat, pride heavy in his voice, “They were alerted to a shootout happening at Romano’s by an anonymous source.” He glanced her way and winked. “Me.”

He heard the team celebrating their victory, but he pulled Penny close again, feeling her shivering, the adrenaline still coursing through her veins.

“It’s over now,” he muttered into her hair. “You’re safe.” He stroked her hair and she sighed, some of the tension leaving her shoulders.

Hawke pressed a kiss to her temple, his lips lingering there.

Her tremors eventually subsided, and she tilted her head back to meet his gaze. The raw emotion in her eyes made his chest constrict. “Thank you... thank you for coming for me,” she said, reaching up to cup his face.

Hawke’s jaw clenched, arms tightened around her possessively. “I’ll always come for you.”

A moment seemed to stretch on endlessly as he gazed into her eyes, relieved and grateful to have her safely in his hold again.

Finally she broke the silence and said, “Just in case I forget to say it later, you are the hottest fucking man I’ve ever met in my life.”

He burst out laughing, feeling all the remaining tension melting away.

Penny’s lips parted in invitation, and he took it. His mouth descended on hers in a searing kiss. All the longing, the anguish of his worry, the bone-deep relief at her being back in his arms, he poured into that kiss.

The October breeze carried a chill that wrapped around Penny as she stepped from Hawke's truck, but the sprawling retirement home—resembling a grand white Victorian mansion—exuded a warmth that seemed to reach out to her.

Hawke ever the soldier, surveyed the building with a protective gaze before turning to Penny and softening.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Definitely,” Penny replied, feeling like she'd been on an emotional roller coaster since the day Rhys had hired her to investigate the bug.

So much had happened in the month that had passed since the night at Victor's house. The evidence they had collected was strong enough for the FBI to detain not only Victor, but also all his partners in crime, on a multitude of charges. It was the largest crackdown on organized crime in New York City, resulting in one hundred and twenty-seven individuals being arrested.

She'd received the largest paycheck of her life from Rhys, enough to cover Gram's expenses at the retirement home for the rest of her natural life, and as far as she knew, Julia was safe, now living with her sister in Paris.

Penny inhaled a deep breath of the crisp salty ocean air, then firmly grasped Hawke's outstretched hand and fell into step beside him. The moment they headed inside, the facility welcomed them with a warm glow of gentle lighting and a hint

of lavender mixed with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. The interior was designed to exude an air of timelessness, inviting guests to sit and chat in cozy armchairs while taking in the gorgeous ocean views.

As they rounded the corner, Penny was greeted by the sight of her grandmother, standing with open arms, her smile bright. Her silver hair framed her face, and her light blue eyes sparkled.

“Gram!” Penny exclaimed, rushing forward to fall into her grandma’s warm hug.

“Penny, my dear,” Gram cooed, squeezing tight. “How I’ve missed you.”

“Me, too,” Penny said, emotion catching in her throat. When she eventually backed away, Penny turned. “Gram, this is Hawke Foster. Hawke, my grandmother, Edith.”

“An honor, ma’am,” Hawke said, extending his hand.

“Please, call me Edith,” she responded, swatting his hand away to give Hawke a hug.

“Edith,” Hawke corrected himself with a smile that reached his eyes as he returned the hug, “It’s really nice to meet you. I’ve heard so many wonderful things.”

“Then Penny has only told you the good things.” Gram laughed softly. “Come, let’s go to my apartment.”

Penny followed, watching the exchange, her heart swelling with an emotion she couldn’t quite name. Something akin to healing.

Once they entered the apartment, Edith led them to a cozy nook by a gas fireplace. “Let’s sit.”

Penny sat on the couch next to Hawke, while Gram took the chair closest to the warm fire. Her gaze swept over the room, a shrine to the passage of time, each photo and trinket a waypoint in Gram’s life.

On the small table next to the chair, a younger Penny, all pigtails and freckles, beamed out from a picture frame, her eyes bright with youthful mischief.

Gram caught her looking. “Oh, I found this the other day and framed it.” She picked up the picture frame, tapping a finger against the glass covering a photograph of a young Penny mid-climb on a towering oak tree. “Look at you here, such a determined little thing.”

“I remember that day,” Penny said, drawn to the image, feeling the rough bark under her small palms and the triumph of reaching the top as if it were yesterday.

“Never one to back down, even when Pa said it was too high for a little girl.” Gram’s voice swelled with pride.

Pa passed away not long after that photo was taken.

“Only made me want to climb higher,” Penny replied with a laugh.

“Of course it did,” Gram said, her kind eyes twinkling. “You never did like being told what you couldn’t do.”

Hawke chuckled. “She hasn’t changed much, has she?”

“Oh, no,” Gram said, “not one bit.”

Penny laughed. She accepted the photo and grazed her fingers over the glass, tracing the outline of her younger self. “Sometimes, I think that stubbornness is what saved me,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Saved you more times than just up in that tree,” Gram agreed.

Penny nodded, smiling at Gram, who smiled in return.

She had always been there for Penny, making sure she never felt inadequate despite what her mother’s leaving had done. And as Penny gazed at her gram, she realized that she didn’t need anyone else to fill the role of a mother in her life. Her gram was a treasured presence that Penny would forever cherish and be grateful for.

Hawke smiled, gentleness in his gaze. “Tell me,” he said to Penny. “Did your mischief ever end?”

“Hardly,” Gram answered for her, eyes alight with secrets only grandmothers keep. “She once—”

“Gram!” Penny cut in.

“All right, all right,” Gram relented with a soft chuckle. “Some stories are best kept between us girls.” She turned to Hawke. “Now, you tell me, Hawke,” she said, “do you know the story of how our Penny faced down a bully twice her size in fourth grade?”

He leaned in. “I can’t say that I do, but I’m not surprised.”

“Let me tell you...” Gram began, her words a soothing balm to Penny’s soul.

The soft glow of the afternoon sun filtered through the sheer curtains, casting a golden hue over the room. Hawke watched as Gram carefully opened a leather-bound album, its spine creaking with the weight of memories held within, a gentle expression on his face.

“Look at this one,” Gram said. “This was a very special day.” She turned her smile toward him. “This was taken on her twelfth birthday. She wanted a detective-themed party, can you believe it? Even then, she knew what she wanted to be.”

“Born for the job,” Hawke said, his lips curving into a smile.

“Ah, here’s one of my favorites,” Gram announced, pausing on a photo that captured a teenage Penny, mid-guffaw, her hair a wild cascade around her shoulders.

“Gram, why do you keep that?” Penny asked. “Can’t you keep the good photos only?”

“It is good,” Gram countered.

“It’s beautiful,” Hawke interjected. “You’re beautiful.”

Penny shot him a look. “Flatterer.”

He grinned. “Always.”

Gram chuckled, glancing between them, and then continued sharing stories of Penny’s past.

Penny kept waiting for the concern to surface as she let her final guard down with Hawke and welcomed him into her world, but it simply never came. She wanted him to truly

understand her, all of her—the good and the bad. And she wanted him to get to know Gram, too.

“Thank you for sharing the photos and the stories with me,” he said genuinely, meeting Gram’s gaze. “I’m certain I could listen to you talk all day.”

“Don’t be silly, I’d bore you to death,” Gram said with a laugh. “Though, I am curious”—she glanced between them—“is this a serious relationship... or are you just friends?”

Hawke studied Penny. Then he said to Gram,

“I can’t say for certain, ma’am. That decision rests with your granddaughter.”

Penny felt every wall shattered under the warmth and strength of his gaze... and the future filled with love staring back at her. She kept thinking she’d have to make this big choice about allowing herself to fall in love, but the reality was that it happened effortlessly with Hawke. She fell for him before she even realized it. She smiled. “We’re serious.”

Later that night, Hawke pushed open the heavy wooden door, its hinges creaking as he and Penny stepped into the dim interior of the cigar lounge. He held her hand tight, a move that seemed so normal he wondered how he'd ever lived without it. She was giving him a chance, and he was damn glad of it. The air was thick with the earthy aroma of tobacco and leather, the low murmur of conversation humming in the background.

As the door shut behind them, Penny leaned in close to Hawke, her voice dropping to a playful whisper. "I have a little surprise for you tonight."

Hawke raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Oh? And what might that be?"

Penny just smiled mysteriously. "You'll see."

She nodded subtly to Archer, who had just entered the cigar lounge from the door that led to hallway and Rhys's office. Archer gave her a knowing look and nod, hefting two black bags over his shoulder.

Hawke's pulse quickened as he took in the bags.

"I'll see you in Phoenix," Penny said, eyes dancing, as she gave his hand a final squeeze before letting go. She approached Archer, taking a bag from him, and headed toward the door.

With his smile still in place, Archer approached and handed him a bag, telling Hawke all he needed to know. He

wouldn't need a bag if he were watching a show tonight, only if he were participating.

"Penny's sure about this?" he asked Archer, trying to get his bearings.

Archer nodded. "She's the one that planned it. Her only stipulation was that no one she knows can be there."

"I see," Hawke murmured, heat spiraling down his spine at the idea of doing a show with Penny. He didn't need the excitement, but the thought of having eyes on him with her, hardened him to steel. He unzipped the bag and chuckled, as he found the same black gear they wore to Romano's. "My mission for tonight?" he asked, glancing at Archer.

His friend smiled. "We've got a spy in our ranks. She has a password that a client needs. Get it."

Hawke accepted the plan for the show with a nod, then headed for the same door Penny vanished through.

"Enjoy yourself," Archer mused.

"I will," Hawke said. He headed into Rhys's empty office, using the tunnel behind Rhys's bookshelf to get to the lower floor, by access of a keypad.

As he descended the stairs, the air seemed to crackle. Adrenaline fueled him as he headed for the changing room, quickly showering as was preparation for every show. Then he dressed in the gear, leaving the shirt and boxer briefs off, and put on the black face mask that only left his eyes exposed.

A chime sounded, telling him the show was about to begin.

Anticipation and desire powered his steps as he headed down the hallway. He thought he was prepared for anything, but nothing could have prepared him for when he opened the door, finding Penny bound to the X-shaped pedestal with black rope, dressed in the same gear she'd worn, but this time, wearing a black lace mask with her hair in red curls around her face.

He froze, stunned by her beauty.

The mood inside Phoenix was thick with anticipation. The dimmed lights cast an alluring glow over the room, creating shadows that danced on the bodies of those present. The music was seductive... hypnotic.

Hard and ready to explore every inch of her, Hawke approached Penny on the stage. The spotlight illuminated her, casting harsh shadows against the black backdrop. When he reached her, heat radiated off her skin, and the scent of arousal permeated the air.

He cupped her face, leaning in, and whispered into her ear. "Why?"

She turned her head, whispering, "I want the last memory you have in this room to be with me."

Hawke leaned away, looked down at Penny, his heart thudding in his chest. She held his gaze, determination etched on her face. How had he gotten this fucking lucky?

Dropping himself in the show, he stepped back and said, loudly, "You have a password I need."

Her breath hitched. "I'll never give it to you," she called.

"That's your first mistake." He grinned, lowering his voice to a rumble. "Let's see what secrets your mind holds." Turning, he found the tray with the items left for him—scissors, black latex gloves, a vibrator, and a condom. All things she'd consented to for tonight's show.

His cock twitched as he slid into the gloves and then grabbed the scissors. He ran them gently down the side of her side of her face, over her neck and further down between her breasts. "Tell me the password," he demanded.

Her chest heaved. "No."

"Your second mistake." He reached forward and began cutting her shirt open from the center and then down her arms. When he had the fabric in pieces on the ground, he did the same with the pants.

Once finished, he reached between her legs, slipping a finger under the lace of her black lace panties and over her

pussy. She gasped, her body arching into his touch. He groaned when his finger came back drenched. *Just full of surprises.* Her muscles tensed as he felt her warmth seep into his finger. A rush of heat spread through him, and he knew she was ready.

“Tell me the password,” he demanded again.

“No,” she snapped.

The crowd fell silent behind him. With a smirk, he grabbed her chin and his mouth crashed down on hers, claiming her lips in a possessive kiss that spoke volumes about his intentions. Her tongue danced with his, and he could taste her desire, and wanted it all.

He broke away, leaving her gasping, and his fingers traced the outline of her panties. With one swift movement, he cut them off, followed by her bra, until Penny was naked before him, her piercing eyes never leaving his. He couldn't help but admire the perfection of her body—the curve of her breasts, the softness of her stomach, the delicate folds between her legs.

“Tell me the password,” he said, hearing the hunger in his own voice.

She snarled, “No.”

His hands roamed her body, and he trailed kisses along her collarbone, down her stomach, and over her thighs as he knelt. He paused at her sex, teasingly leaning in, glancing up at her. She trembled against the bindings, and gasped as he slid his finger between her folds.

“So fucking wet for me,” he murmured, pressing his lips against her thigh. And that comment had nothing to do with the show, it was all for himself.

Any sex with Penny rocked his world, but the possibility of showing her all he had to offer was a sweet temptation he couldn't ignore.

Leaning in, with her legs spread wide, bound at the ankles, he pressed his lips to the throbbing bud of her sex, eliciting a needy gasp from her throat. He ran his tongue over her, tasting

her sweetness, feeling her shudder beneath him. He sucked gently, her taste like honey on his tongue, a mixture of desire and possessiveness filling him. His right hand found its way between her folds, gently circling her clit as he flicked his tongue, coaxing out soft cries of pleasure.

Her hips moved in search of more, and he complied, grinning against her pussy. His free hand cupped her ass and pulled her closer. A groan escaped her lips when he penetrated her with one finger. And then another, curling his fingers. She was tight and hot, squeezing him.

He increased the rhythm, his fingers plunging in and out as he lapped up her arousal, his cock throbbing against his pants in need. He could feel the pulse of her desire, the heat emanating from her core, and it only made him want more.

“You will give me the password,” he whispered, his voice rough with need. “And you will give me *this*.”

Her legs trembled, her back arching off the X and straining against the bindings, her moans becoming louder, more desperate. He added another finger, stretching her slowly. She tasted so good, so damn addicting. His tongue teased her clit as his fingers found her G-spot, causing her to cry out again.

Her inner walls squeezed around his fingers, her juices dripping down his hand. She was close, so close, and he wasn't done yet. As she neared her peak, he backed away, leaving her panting and wanting more.

“Tell me the password,” he ordered.

She whimpered, her hips trying to find his fingers again, but he pulled them gently away.

“Tell me,” he growled, trailing kisses up her stomach and chest, nipping at her breasts.

She shook her head from side to side, eyes shut tight.

His nose buried in her neck, nuzzling her skin, he growled against her skin, “Tell me.”

“No,” she finally managed in a hoarse whisper.

Stepping back, he picked up the small vibrator. He went down to one knee in front of her. The vibrator hummed to life, and he spread her folds, placing the vibrator directly on her clit.

He said firmly, “You will give me what I want.”

Her hands fisted as he increased the speed. Her breath caught in her throat, and she gasped, eyes widening.

His rough hand roamed her body. He cupped her breast, teasing her nipple between his thumbs and forefingers, making her arch into him. He pressed harder against her clit with the vibrator, and she let out a scream.

Her gaze snapped to him and she spit out, “I. Won’t. Tell. You.”

He grinned at challenge at her words, knowing she had him by the balls regardless of this show. She did from day one.

Pressing the button on the vibrator, making it buzz more intensely, she cursed. She arched against the wood and threw her head back, screaming.

Only then did he turn it up to full speed, and she went wild beneath his touch, thrashing against the bindings.

He slid his finger inside her, finding her tight and soaking wet. He slipped in another, and thrust his fingers, once, twice, and her breath hitched, inners walls clamped against his fingers. And as she fell into the pleasure, he yanked his fingers out and released her from the vibrator.

She cursed at him, repeated expletives that made him chuckle.

“Let’s try this again,” he told her, placing the vibrator back onto the tray, before turning back to her. “Tell me the password.”

She panted, finally opened her eyes, revealing uncontrolled lust burning in their depths. “It’s 123456789...”

He snorted but didn’t move away. Instead, he kissed her neck and nibbled down to her collarbone, and cupped her

pussy, as she ground against his hand. “That’s not going to work,” he said. “Give me another one.”

She shivered under his touch, her body still humming with pleasure. “I... I don’t know any others.”

Hawke lifted his head to look her in the eye. “Lie.” He turned to the tray, taking his cock out, and sheathed himself.

When he returned to her, he didn’t hesitate. He grabbed her hips and entered her in one swift stroke, groaning against the tightness. She buckled under the intensity of the sensation, her back arching off the X as he thrust hard and deep, claiming her. Her sounds of pleasure echoed through the room, drowning out the murmurs from the crowd.

She surrendered completely to him, and he fucking relished every moment. He pumped in and out of her, each stroke deeper and harder, driving her closer to the edge. She whimpered, pleading for more as he pinched her swollen bud.

Her eyes shot wide open—her pussy clamping against him, signaling her impending orgasm. Again, he yanked himself out of her, and she screamed in frustration.

He grabbed her chin and snarled, “I can end this. Right now. Tell me the fucking password.”

When she didn’t reply, he captured her lips in a soul-searing kiss.

Her breath came out in rough pants when he backed away and ordered, “Tell me.”

She finally roared, “Phoenix.”

“Now that’s the truth,” he praised, grasping her hips, and surged into her. “Good girl.”

The crowd was forgotten, the show no longer on his mind. One hand moving to her clit while the other held on to her waist tightly, his thrusts became harder, faster, causing her to bite her lip. Her back arched again in response, pushing herself deeper onto his cock. He growled, his hands gripping her hips tighter.

He pulled out almost completely before slamming back in with hard, hungry strokes that filled the air with her screams and his groans. He held on to her hips as he drove into her, deeper and harder, his breathing harsh and ragged. His fingers danced over her clit, and her walls clenched tight around him.

“I—” she gasped.

“Yes. Come,” he growled, his voice low and commanding, as he pushed deeper still.

She cried out as pleasure washed over her, shaking from head to toe.

“Fuck,” he roared his pleasure, Penny’s walls clenching around him, drawing out every last drop, as they finished to the loud applause of the crowd.

EPILOGUE

Four months later...

HAWKE LEANED against the kitchen doorframe in the two-story redbrick home in New Rochelle, a suburb twenty-five-miles from Manhattan. His gaze fixed on Penny as she bent down to grab a bottle of wine from the rack. “Red, those jeans are going to be the death of me,” he groaned.

She stood up and laughed playfully. “Why don’t you take them off then?”

He chuckled and made his way over to her. “Don’t tempt me,” he replied, wrapping his arms around her.

Their lips met in a fiery kiss that he never wanted to end. But luck wasn’t on his side, when suddenly they were interrupted by a chorus of cheers and whistles. They broke apart to see Elise and Archer grinning at them.

“Get a room, you two,” Elise teased.

Penny took a step back, while Hawke just laughed and pulled her tighter against him. It was no secret to their friends how their love had bloomed. They’d all seen the whirlwind of the last four months. They’d also bought a house together. He would have proposed by now. He already bought the ring, but he didn’t want to rush her. They had forever. She was *his*, and she needed time.

“Come on, lovebirds,” Archer said, gesturing to the backyard. “Rhys is about to give his speech.”

As they stepped outside, he was wowed by what Penny and Elise had done to their yard. Paper lanterns in vibrant hues swayed from the trees, casting a warm glow over the whole backyard. Upbeat music pulsed through the air, as every person Hawke had met through Rhys came to celebrate his and Penny’s housewarming. Ronan and Nessa, Kieran and Hazel, Hunt and Lottie, Rhys and Zoey, as well as all their children, and all of the Phoenix security team filled the backyard with laughter.

Rhys suddenly whistled. All eyes turned to the man who had brought them all together. The very reason he now had this wonderful chosen family.

“We are so glad to be here celebrating Hawke and Penny’s new house,” Rhys began, his smooth voice carrying easily across the yard. His gaze swept over his friends, landing for a moment on Hawke and Penny. “But I also have an announcement to make, and with Hawke and Penny’s blessing, and with all of us together, now seemed like the best time.” Rhys’s expression grew serious, though his eyes remained warm. “As you know, my priority is protecting my family. With everything that has happened, I’ve made the difficult decision to sell Phoenix.”

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. Hawke knew why—the club had been the cornerstone of Rhys’s empire for over a decade.

“This wasn’t an easy choice,” Rhys continued. “Phoenix has been my passion and my refuge. But some things are more important.” Rhys’s eyes flicked to his wife and children and softened. “The club is where we all came together. It will always hold a special place in my heart, as I know it does in yours. But now, it’s time for new adventures for us.” Rhys raised his glass, looking across the crowd. “To the future, and the family we choose.”

“Hear, hear!” Glasses clinked in agreement—the end of an era, and the beginning of something new.

As the chatter of the crowd resumed, Hawke turned to Archer, putting a voice to a thought he'd recently had. "Perhaps it's time we start that private security company we've joked about."

Archer paused and nodded. "It's not a horrible idea for us to go into private security. And with Phoenix closing, we have a whole team at our disposal."

Penny smiled. "You know I'm in."

"We'd be lucky to have you," Archer said, wrapping an arm around Elise's shoulder.

"Thanks, Archer," Penny said with a sweet smile.

Hawke pulled her close, pride swelling in his chest. With Penny by his side, he knew they could build something great. Something that made a difference.

"And me too," Elise said. "It'd be a new start for all of us."

As Archer and Elise began talking about the new undertaking, Hawke gazed at Penny, his heart warming as he saw her beaming smile at Elise and scanned all the faces around her. He'd remembered what it felt like to find his chosen family. First, in the Navy SEALs, and then with his friends in Phoenix.

He cradled Penny close and pressed a kiss to her hair, breathing her in. "You're happy," he stated.

Penny melted into his embrace, her body molding against him. "I'm happy."

Tilting her chin up, he asked, "You ready for this new adventure with me?" he murmured. "Whatever the future holds for us?"

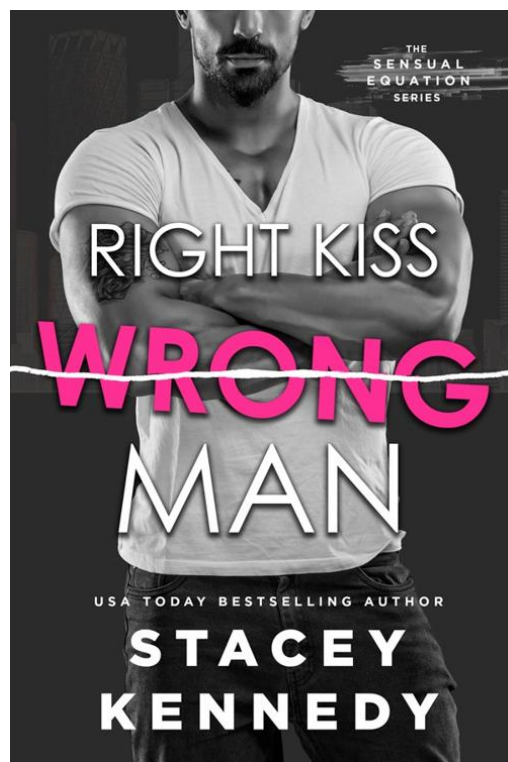
She smiled up at him. "Always. I love you," she whispered.

Hawke cupped her chin, brushing his lips against hers. "I love you, Red. Always."

Thank you for reading!

CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE TO MY MAILING
LIST TO NEVER MISS A NEW RELEASE &
YOU'LL GET A FREE READ TOO!

DON'T MISS STACEY
KENNEDY'S NEW SEXY
SERIES, THE SENSUAL
EQUATION:



Escape into *USA Today* bestselling author Stacey Kennedy's darkly sensual world of romantic intrigue, where dark fantasies can turn into reality...

Boston is abuzz with the arrival of Aphrodite, an AI program that revolutionizes the way people connect. It claims to have an unbeatable matching algorithm, but there's a secret that lingers within this flashy new app—a flaw that could shatter the illusion of true love. The program matches based on sexual attraction, not on emotional connection.

When Aphrodite pairs Quinn with Theo, a devastatingly handsome businessman, she finds herself tangled in a web of irresistible attraction. Their first date ends in a scorching encounter, leaving Quinn breathless and craving more. But when dawn breaks, she discovers their differences run deeper than their sizzling chemistry.

Theo, a determined developer with ambitious dreams, has worked day and night to transform a park into a modern high-rise. Unyielding in his pursuit of success, he sees no value in preserving an old, rundown park. But Quinn, the stunning woman who melted under his touch, turns out to be the passionate environmentalist fighting him fervently to protect the park from destruction.

With their opposing beliefs clashing at every turn, sparks fly as Quinn and Theo engage in fiery debates. Yet, beneath the surface, an intense attraction leads them back into each other's arms, allowing Quinn to live out her hottest fantasies with a man determined to fulfill them. But soon, Quinn and Theo discover that their desire is as relentless as the forces that pull them apart. Caught in a whirlwind of emotions, Theo and Quinn will have to decide if their undeniable connection is worth risking their careers... and their hearts.

COMING SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

Pre-Order Your Copy Today!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today bestselling author STACEY KENNEDY has written more than fifty romances, including titles in her wildly hot Club Sin, Phoenix, and Devil's Bluffs series. Her books are about real people with real-life problems, searching for that special thing we call love ... in a very sexy way. When she's not burning up the pages and setting e-readers ablaze, she's living her happily-ever-after with her husband and two children in southwestern Ontario, Canada. She's a firm believer that wine, chocolate, and sinfully sexy books can cure all of life's problems.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my husband, my children, family, friends, and bestie, it's easy to write about love when there is so much love around me.

My readers, I adore your enthusiasm for this series, and I can't put into words how much I appreciate your support. It means the absolute world to me! Thanks for being a part of the Phoenix series and going on this journey with me.

Lexi, I'm going to miss your insight and you sprinkling your magic on my stories. Thank you for all you've done for me—crazy deadlines, endless emails—your incredible support—I appreciate it all, and will miss you like crazy.

My cover artist, Regina Wamba, this whole series blew me away. Your talent amazes me.

Paula and Terry, I can't thank you enough for bailing me out of tight deadlines to always make sure my work is clean.

Kennedy Layne, Shayla Black, Sierra Cartwright, my sprinting buddies, who keep me focused and make my writing days fun; Carrie Ann Ryan, for her endless help and advice no matter the question; to all the fabulous authors in my life who make this job the best job ever. Thank you.

WANT MORE SEXY READS
FROM STACEY KENNEDY?
CHECK OUT THE FIRST
BOOK IN THE THREE
CHICKS BREWERY SERIES:



CHAPTER 1

Maisie's paintbrush swept across the canvas, mixing the darker green paint in with the lighter, creating depth to the trees of the forest. The sun's beams warmed her face, the wind swishing the long grasses behind her, while her painting of the sweeping meadow flowed easily. "Not Picasso yet," she noted, leaning back to admire her work. She caught a hundred things wrong with the painting, but nothing that couldn't be fixed at home. Few things made her feel content, but replicating the beauty in the world was one of them.

The slight heaviness in her eyelids from waking up at the crack of dawn was worth the spike of happiness painting gave her. She wiped off her paintbrush, tucking her supplies into her tote bag with COOL AF ARTIST written on the side, a present from her sisters for her birthday last year. The last letter from her grandfather peeked out from the bag. She reached for it as she heard the flapping of wings overhead. She unfolded the piece of paper and revealed the quote by Michelangelo: *The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.*

Even after two years, Maisie still didn't know what Pops meant by this or why he'd chosen this quote as his very last thing to say to her. She'd never asked what Pops wrote in her sisters' letters, and neither Clara nor Amelia had offered the information up.

Thinking of her sisters, and knowing she had a mile-long to-do list today, Maisie checked the time on her phone that rested on a fallen log next to her.

“Shit!” She jolted up, grabbed her bag and canvas, and took off running. The alarm she’d set to remind her about work hadn’t gone off. Her footsteps were muffled in the grass, but a squirrel ran away from her as she charged up the small hill. When she reached the top, she spotted the long driveway that led to the house and the black barn—now turned into a brewery—off to the right of it.

Prepared for a lecture, Maisie stopped at her MINI Cooper and deposited her tote bag and canvas onto the passenger seat before she hurried into the barn. Rows of huge steel tanks filled the space, with a main walkway that led to a room in the back for tastings. Some days the brewery held a metallic scent. Other days, it smelled earthy. As Maisie sucked in a breath, she realized today, it smelled fruity.

As she made her way through the tanks, she caught sight of Amelia, bent over the rim of a tank. Maisie held her breath and tiptoed past. Amelia must have been brewing last night and was now cleaning out the tank. She’d gotten into the habit of brewing Foxy Diva—their top-selling beer that had won over the locals—at night, since the brewery was part of local tours for travelers during the day.

“I see you,” Amelia called.

Maisie stopped dead and said in a ghostly voice, “I’m a figment of your imagination.”

Amelia laughed, straightening up. She had grain covering her ugly yellow apron with matching latex gloves. “Nice try,” she said, wiping the sweat beading on her forehead with her covered arm. “You better hurry before Clara sees you’re late. Again.”

“What do you mean, late?” Maisie asked, fluttering her lashes. “I’ve been here for an hour already. You need sleep, Amelia. Seriously, you need to take better care of yourself.” Before Amelia could respond, Maisie booked it, walking faster now. Clara only understood punctual. Maisie missed that gene.

“Hey, Maisie,” Amelia called, just as Maisie reached the door to storage room. “You’ve got paint on your cheek.”

Dammit. Maisie went to swipe away the paint when she walked straight into something hard. She bounced back and glanced up into something harder. Clara's stormy blue eyes. "Hi," Maisie said with a tight smile. "Oh, you look so pretty today."

Not falling for it, Clara frowned, crossing her arms over her lacy blouse. "Three festivals. That's what you've got on your plate for this week."

Maisie nodded. "Yup. Got it."

She slinked away when Clara's cold voice stopped her. "You know what these festivals mean for us? This is our chance to take Foxy Diva and actually make something happen. If we screw this up, we need to start all over. You get that, right?"

Again, Maisie nodded. "Yes, I know how important the festivals are. Don't you worry one bit. Everyone will know Foxy Diva's name by the time I'm done with the festivals." It took two years for Amelia to perfect their grandfather's homemade brew. Maisie had come up with the name and the logo, which at least fed Maisie's creative side, but now, she was expected to go on a road trip through Colorado to give their beer exposure. "I've got this handled. Promise. And I'm sorry I was late."

Clara swiped at Maisie's cheek, pulling away with a green finger. "You were painting again."

It wasn't a question. "A little, but the sunrise today was absolutely gorgeous. Besides, blame this one on my phone. I set my alarm to get here on time, but it didn't go off. This time, it's not my fault."

Clara softened a smidgen. Like, a miniscule. "I don't mean to be hard on you, but we can't make mistakes now. You two put me in charge of running this company, so you have to trust me to do that, and take my advice seriously. We need to make sure we stand out at these festivals to get a buzz going. Without that, Foxy Diva cannot and will not take off." Which was the only thing anyone thought about lately.

To be successful, Foxy Diva needed to become a staple across North America. So far, locally, they'd made it a huge success, but they needed distribution across North America to actually make decent money. They wanted Foxy Diva to be in every restaurant. Every bar. Every beer store. Or at least, Clara and Amelia did, and Maisie just followed along, doing her part to make the beer a hit.

Clara uncrossed her arms to take Maisie by the shoulders. She dropped her gaze to Maisie's eye level. "I'm going to ask you again: Are you sure you can do this? No one is going to fault you if this is too much."

Maisie could barely hold Clara's fierce stare. Part of her wanted to run and hide, mortified her sisters were gliding through this brewery gig, while Maisie was basically drowning. She was an artist, not a business-minded person. But she owed this to Pops. He'd left them everything to make this dream happen. His final wish. And heck, she'd bartended for years. "It's not too hard. I've got this. One hundred percent. You don't need to worry."

The look Clara gave her said she didn't believe her. Though blessedly, she let Maisie off the hook and changed the subject. "I need to go to the post office. I've got Foxy Diva entered into five more contests, so I need to mail in the samples." Which was how beer contests happened. Now all they had to do was wait to see if Foxy Diva won any awards.

"That's great news," Amelia cut in. "I'm crossing my fingers something comes of the awards. That will help us nail a distributor more than anything else."

Maisie rolled her eyes. "Oh, sure, now you're part of the conversation." What about helping her out when Clara cornered her?

Amelia shrugged. "Just 'cause I'm the middle sister doesn't mean I need to get in the middle of everything, including your conversations." To Clara, she asked, "How long do you think it'll take before we get the results?"

"Months," Clara said with a long sigh before her voice perked back up. "But getting the awards is really just step one."

We need to get buzz going, and social media is our greatest tool for that.”

“Which is where I come in?” Maisie asked.

“Exactly.” Clara nodded. “When we finally go to the distributor, we need all the ammunition to stand out from the other hundreds of craft beers sent their way.”

“And,” Amelia added, “if we get enough buzz going, they might come to us.”

Great. If that wasn’t a reason to drink, Maisie didn’t know what was. To avoid the pressure that became near suffocating, she grabbed the door handle to the storage room. “Well, I’ve got a four-day road trip, and a trailer that isn’t going to pack itself. See you later.”

“Maisie.” At Clara’s soft voice, Maisie froze. “I know today has to be hard for you. Are you okay?”

Maisie shut her eyes and breathed deep. She’d avoided thinking about what today was ever since she’d woken up. It was why she’d gone and painted, to bring a little brightness to a very dark day. But there was no running away. The articles that splashed across the media two years ago haunted her: *Murder Rattles the Small Town of River Rock. Young Woman Brutally Murdered. Officer Hayes Taylor Leaves Denver Police Department After Wife’s Murder.*

Laurel’s murder had been declared a robbery gone wrong at their home in Denver. Hayes had hunted down her killer, and after a shoot-out, the killer was dead. After that, he quit his job and moved back home to River Rock. But even with the justice of finding Laurel’s murderer, nothing had been the same since. For a month, Maisie could barely breathe, function. Her sisters had come to her aid. They’d fed her, forced her to shower, brought her out of the darkest place Maisie had ever gone. Laurel’s absence felt like half of Maisie’s body was missing, and she’d struggled to learn how to walk again. But slowly, through her sisters’ love, things had gotten better, and Maisie remembered how to take one step in front of the other. More importantly, she remembered life was a one-time deal. The loss of her parents, of Pops, and of Laurel

had taught her that. The world, her life, was far too beautiful and special to waste the time she had.

For Laurel, for her parents, and for her grandparents, she looked for the beauty every day, until the beauty was all she saw. She drew and painted and never stopped until that ache in her chest, while still there, didn't shadow her happiness.

"I'm okay," she told her sisters, glancing back at them with the smile she knew they needed to see. "Thanks for worrying about me, but really, I'm remembering the good stuff about Laurel, not the bad memory that took her away. I know she'd want that."

Amelia gave a gentle smile. "You're right, she would."

Clara added, "We're here for you."

Maisie glanced between her sisters. She'd always felt so different from them growing up, but Laurel's death had changed that. And the best friend that gave so much love to Maisie, in death, had brought Maisie closer to her sisters. They'd loved her hard through her grief and brought her back from that unforgiving pain. For that, Maisie had stuffed her dreams of owning an art studio far away, giving all of herself to the brewery, even if she was late and didn't always get things right. "Thanks," she said to her sisters. "Now let me get back to work, would ya? Geesh, you're always holding me up. Don't you know I have a thousand things to do today?"

Amelia laughed softly.

Clara rolled her eyes.

Maisie chuckled, reminding herself that laughing was good. Especially on days like today. Smiling, enjoying life, was the best way she could honor Laurel's life. She finally pulled the heavy door open and hurried through, when the reality of what was ahead of her hit her like a brick to the face. The first festival was in Fort Collins, then Colorado Springs, finishing up in Boulder. Panic crept up like icy fingertips along her spine. She was in way over her head, never having done anything like this before. Her pink Converse scraped

against the rough floor as she moved farther into the storage room, her nose scrunching at the musty air.

Pushing aside her fear of failing—since failure was not an option—she pulled out the note in her back pocket of her blue jeans, scribbled with her to-do list. The first item on that list: *kegs*. She grabbed the dolly, moving toward the kegs with the Foxy Diva label. She smiled at the label of the vintage sexy pin-up woman with *Foxy Diva* written in calligraphy around her. Maisie was proud of the design, and she was still surprised Clara approved the logo. But Foxy Diva was an Indian pale ale with a buttload of spices that Maisie knew nothing about, and Amelia had said the spiciness of the woman fit the beer inside perfectly. That had been the first time Amelia had ever taken Maisie's side, and Maisie still felt the high from that.

Determined to get the trailer packed and the workday behind her, Maisie shoved the dolly under the keg and pulled back, her arms shaking as the dolly caught the edge of the keg.

She wobbled once.

And again.

Then she was falling. And something metal and shiny and *big* was coming with her.

Hayes Taylor refused to acknowledge today's anniversary and kept his focus on this work, like he'd done every day for the last two years. The past was behind him, and he stood firmly in the present at Blackshaw Training, a horse training facility. Over the past sixteen months he'd worked there, he had seen a dangerous horse now and again, but nothing like the chestnut gelding with the white stripe currently staring him down. *Threat*. The gelding's black eyes screamed at Hayes. *Danger*. And at the particular moment, Hayes was dangerous to the gelding. Horsemanship wasn't about breaking an animal. It was about communicating, and somewhere in this horse's life, that communication crossed a line it shouldn't have.

“First thoughts?” Hayes asked, turning to Beckett Stone, his good friend since high school. Beckett’s sandy-brown hair didn’t seem to have a style, and his face needed a good shave. But Beckett’s rough edge was what the ladies liked most. Or so the gossip around town suggested.

Beckett removed his Stetson and ran a hand through his hair. “I think you’ve got your hands full with that one. And if it were me, I’d be wearing full body gear anytime I was near him.”

Hayes snorted, hooking his boot up on the fence railing. “That’s why you don’t ride the troubled ones and instead handle the young ones.”

Unbothered by the remark, Beckett barked a laugh. “Yeah, ‘cause I’m not looking to die at thirty.”

While they were the same age, and Beckett hadn’t meant the remark as a dig, two years ago, Hayes *was* looking for that. Even he could admit that he’d taken risks a sane man wouldn’t. He gravitated toward working with mentally broken horses because he felt equally broken himself. He hadn’t recovered from Laurel’s death. When his wife was murdered, Hayes lost it. As a cop, he should have stopped it. After Laurel’s murder, he couldn’t protect anyone anymore. He walked away from the badge and his job at the Denver Police Department, moved back to River Rock, and found a home at Blackshaw Training. Getting back to a simpler life had been his salvation.

Hayes took a deep breath, letting go of the tension rising in his chest. The west wind picked up the floral scents of wildflower and ringing wind chimes in the distance. Hayes glanced back at the two-story log house with the wide, covered deck where Nash Blackshaw, the owner of the farm, lived with his wife, Megan, and son. A black-roofed barn housed injured horses or horses needing stabling for the night. Next to the barn was the sand ring used for training. Every sound, from the hooves stomping the ground, to tails swooshing, to the horses whinnying, all brought Hayes back to a place before Laurel’s murder. His childhood. He’d grown up working on the Blackshaws’ cattle farm during his summers throughout

high school and police training. Those years held some of his favorite memories. His happiest for sure, when things with Laurel had been quiet and good, and she'd come out to the farm to go on a ride.

"Let me see exactly what his owners want from us," Hayes finally said to Beckett.

Beckett slid his hat back in place. "Good luck. Remember not to sign your death warrant. You are allowed to turn down a job."

Hayes nodded but didn't reply. Saying no was near impossible after one look at the heartbroken teenage girl who came out of the barn to meet them. She wore fancy equestrian gear, beige breeches, tall, shiny black boots, and a black T-shirt. Her long blond hair was pulled up in a tight ponytail and her makeup was heavy. Hayes entered the ring, moving toward the horse that kept a close eye on him.

Colin Calloway, the father of the teenage girl, approached. He wore a suit, looked fancy, and he'd paid a good chunk of cash for a horse who was trained in show jumping and suddenly decided it didn't want to do its job anymore.

"What did you see?" the father asked when he reached Hayes.

"A dangerous horse," Hayes stated simply.

Colin's dark eyebrows went up. "You got that from one look?"

"I got that from the way he's sizing me up."

Colin sighed and glanced back at his daughter, who had walked up to the horse and stroked his face. "Every trainer I've taken him to doesn't know what's wrong with him. It's like a switch goes off. One second, he's approachable. The next, the devil gets into him."

Hayes started to explain that the problem wasn't the horse, but the communication between the horse and the human, when suddenly Hayes caught the pinning of the horse's ears, the tensing of his muscles. He jolted forward in the same second the horse went in for a bite. Hayes none-too-gently

shoved the teenager aside, sending her toppling over, and rammed himself into the horse, getting his attention off the girl.

The gelding's head shot up and his nostrils flared as he flew backward. Hayes grabbed the lead line, noting the girl getting up and out of the way. He acted immediately, using the end of the lead line to circle in the air and make the horse's feet move. Hayes moved hard, fast, not stopping, until the only thing the horse was looking at was him. Without glancing behind him, he led the gelding to one of the individual paddocks, away from the other horses, and closed the gate. He took a few steps back, ensuring the horse didn't ram the gate, then turned back, finding the girl brushing the sand off her pants. "I'm sorry about that. Are you okay?"

"Don't apologize," the father said firmly, offering his hand. "You saved her from an injury, but now, you can see what we're dealing with."

Hayes returned the shake and then moved closer to the girl, noting her curled shoulders. "You're all right?" he repeated.

She lifted her head. Her smile looked forced. "Yes, I'm okay. Thank you."

He got that pain in her eyes. Pain that came from a situation where a person had no control. "We'll get him right for you. Don't worry about that. Okay?"

Her chin quivered and her green eyes welled with tears. "Was it me that did this? I...I just keep thinking maybe I worked him too hard or something."

Hayes dropped a hand on her shoulder and brought his gaze down to hers. "Nothin' you've done caused this. The wires in his head aren't firing right. We'll get him straightened out."

"Yeah?" she barely managed.

He gave her the firm nod she needed. "Without a doubt."

This time when she smiled, there was warmth there. "Thank you."

“Any idea how long it will take?” Colin asked.

Hayes tucked his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “The gelding decides that.”

They both seemed all right with that answer and confident in him, since they left a few minutes later, with Hayes’s promise of a daily email updating them on the progress. Hayes grabbed a few flakes of hay from the barn and the sweet scent infused the air as he tossed the flakes into the gelding’s paddock. He rubbed the fallen strands off his T-shirt when his cell phone rang. He smiled when he saw the name on the screen. “What trouble are you in now?”

A pause. “How do you know I’m in trouble?” Maisie asked.

Laurel and Maisie had been the best of friends since elementary school. Not bound by blood, but what they held had been deeper. And Maisie had been that type of friend to Hayes ever since Laurel’s death. “Because it’s midmorning and you never call me midmorning.”

A beat passed. The horse came over and began eating the hay.

Maisie finally spoke, her voice tight. “Fine. You’re right. I’m stuck under a keg and need your help.”

Hayes leaned his arm against the top of the coarse wooded fence. “Say that again?” He had to have heard her wrong.

She sighed heavily. “Please don’t make me repeat it.”

He grinned. “Sorry, I’m going to need you to.”

Another sigh, even more exaggerated this time. “I’m stuck under a beer keg in the storage area and need you to come help me.”

Unsure if this was serious or not, since on any given day, Maisie always seemed to get herself in unusual situations, he decided not to drag this along. “I’ll be there in ten.”

“Thank you. Oh, and Hayes?”

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t say anything about this to Clara or Amelia.”

Hayes chuckled. “Mum’s the word.” He ended the call and approached his black RAM truck.

Maisie was the most accident-prone person he’d ever met. If something went wrong, she was usually involved. Hayes had tried to distance himself from Maisie after Laurel’s funeral. Hell, he’d tried to distance himself from everyone. Only Maisie and Beckett hadn’t allowed it. Hayes was pretty sure he’d be lost or dead without them.

The drive to the brewery took him eight minutes, and when he reached the farm, he drove up the long driveway, pulling in next to Maisie’s MINI. A beautiful landscape painting sat on the passenger seat. Maisie had more natural talent than Hayes had ever seen. He, for one, thought she wasted it working in a brewery, but who was he to argue with her life choices? He certainly had no idea where his life was headed anymore.

When he entered through the side door, he caught Amelia’s curses. She was bent over in the tank, looking like she belonged in a chemical lab. “What’s the brew this time?” he asked.

Amelia jerked up in surprise, covered in spent grain. She smiled when she realized who stood before her. “It’s a fruity beer I’m playing around with. You’d hate it.”

“Then I won’t ask for a sample,” he said. Playing cool, he asked, “I’m here to see Maisie. She in the back?”

Amelia wiped the sweat off her forehead with her arm. “Yeah, she’s getting ready for some festivals.”

“Nice.” He gave an easy smile, hoping to hell Amelia didn’t pick up on his urgency, and gestured at the tanks. “Hope your day gets better.”

“You and me both.” She laughed.

Hayes loosed the breath he didn’t know he was holding as he left her behind. Luckily, Clara wasn’t in her office when he strode by. She was the toughest sister, and he really didn’t want to lie to her. When he passed the last rows of tanks, he

lengthened his stride. The second he walked into the open storage area, he called, "Maisie."

"Shh," she said to his right. "Close the door."

He shut the door gently and followed her voice, stopping short when he saw her. He didn't initially see the problem. She was lying on her back, like she was waiting for *him*. His body temperature rose, his groin filling with heat. That wildly inappropriate reaction to her had started happening a few months ago. It was the day he remembered he was a man. Maisie had come to see him at the farm and wore a sexy, short dress. The hard-on that followed, and every single one after it when she came near him, told him how truly fucked up he was. She was his friend, not his to lust over. But when he finally spotted her hand stuck under a keg, he rushed forward. "Shit, Maisie. What happened?"

She gave him a lopsided smile. "I tried to move the keg. It didn't like that."

He circled her, getting a good look at the keg. "How hurt is your hand?"

"It's fine," she said. "Not hurting one bit. Get this off me."

He doubted she wasn't hurt but settled in front of the keg to free her. "I think there's only one thing to say now."

"What's that?"

He grabbed the top handle of the keg. "This might sting a little." As fast as he could, he yanked the keg up until she could pull her arm out.

Her eyes shut, lips parted in a silent scream, and her skin lost all of its color. "I'm okay," she gasped, breathing deep. "I'm okay."

He set the keg down and took one look at her hand. "Hate to break it to you, Maisie, but you're definitely not okay."

She slowly opened her eyes and looked at her finger that was bent in the wrong direction. Her eyes flicked to his and became distant. "Uh-oh." Then she cried out in pain, those same eyes rolling into the back of her head.

He dropped to his knees, placing a hand on her head.

The door whisked open and Amelia rushed in, breathless.
“Oh my God, what’s wrong?”

“It’s safe to say that no matter how bad you think your day is, Maisie’s is worse.”

[Start Reading Today!](#)