



SAVED
FROM
Peril

BLADE & ARROW SECURITY

GIA COBIE

SAVED FROM PERIL
(POLICE AND FIRE:
OPERATION ALPHA)

BLADE & ARROW SERIES

BOOK THREE

GIA COBIE



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Cover art by Angela Haddon Book Cover Design

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Police and Fire: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

I never expected a real-life action hero would come rushing in to save me...

I've never relied on anyone else for help. Living on my own, grad school, getting my PhD—those are all things I can handle on my own. And that works for me.

Then someone tries to abduct me right outside my apartment.

The first time could have been a fluke. *Wrong place, wrong time*, like the police said. But after the second terrifying attempt, it was clear—I was targeted. And this is one thing I *can't* handle on my own.

I'm not sure what to expect from Blade and Arrow Security—I'm just hoping they can help me. But one thing I'm definitely *not* expecting is the real-life action hero who comes rushing in to save me.

Zane is like *no one* I've met before. But I'm just trying to get back to my regular life, and Zane is just doing his job. So why can't I stop thinking about him?

I'm supposed to be protecting her. *Not* wondering what it would be like to kiss her.

The *last* thing I'm looking for is a relationship.

A casual hookup is one thing, but a relationship? Sharing all of my secrets? *No thanks*. I have my former Green Beret teammates, my job at Blade and Arrow Security—I don't need anything else.

But when I'm tasked with keeping Elle safe, there's just something about her that draws me.

She's vulnerable, but still so strong, even in the face of her fear. She's sweet and funny and for the first time ever, a relationship doesn't sound so bad.

But my feelings about her shouldn't matter. My job is to protect Elle, not pursue her. Until I'm faced with losing her, and everything changes.

Protecting Elle isn't just a job anymore. It's *everything*.

Saved from Peril is the third book in the *Blade and Arrow Security* series. It's a full-length novel about a former Green Beret and a courageous heroine who must overcome a perilous threat to find happiness together. No cliffhangers and a happily-ever-after guaranteed! (*Can be read as a standalone novel*)

CHAPTER ONE

ELLE

“How long are you going to sit in the car before you get up the nerve to go outside again?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh, glancing at the dashboard thermometer, hoping it will have magically gone up by at least thirty degrees since the last time I looked at it.

It didn’t. In fact, it’s actually *colder* than before, now officially resting below zero.

“So what’s the plan?” My former favorite cousin is snickering, clearly taking pleasure in teasing me. “Are you going to stay in your car until spring? How cold is it, anyway? It can’t be that bad.”

Yes. It *is* that bad. Which is why I’ve been sitting in my idling car for the last five minutes, dreading the walk from the far end of the parking lot all the way to my apartment. Because of course by the time I got here, the lot was completely full except for the very last row, which is a quarter mile to my front door.

I know it’s that far because I measured it one time. It’s not bad in nice weather—or during the day—but in the winter, after dark? Not fun.

“It’s negative five,” I tell Dean glumly, narrowing my eyes at the dashboard. “Wait. Negative six. It just went down another degree.”

“Eesh.” I can almost see him wincing. “That’s brutal. You want to know what the weather in San Antonio is like right now?”

“No.” I make a face at him even though he can’t see me.

“It’s sixty-five,” he says cheerfully, “and sunny. Adeline and I are going to grill later. Sit out on the patio for dinner.”

“Dean...” My tone is a warning. “That’s not nice.” But I’m smiling, anyway. After everything my cousin and his new wife have been through, I’m glad to hear that they’re enjoying a bit of normalcy. “That reminds me, how is Adeline’s new job?”

“Good.” His voice warms, going soft and affectionate. “She really likes the new office, her coworkers, her boss...”

“I’m so glad. And everything is good with the seizures?”

“Yes. She’s only had one in the last three weeks, and it was minor. This far out from the surgery, it’s a really good sign that it’s still working.”

Adeline had brain surgery last year to treat her epilepsy, which was terrifying. And that happened right on the heels of being pursued by an obsessive and homicidal boss, so it’s about time she got a break.

“I know I’ve said it before, Dean, but I am so happy for you guys.”

“Thanks, Elle. Maybe you can come visit us once you finish your dissertation. I know Addie would love to see you again.”

“I’ll try. And you guys are welcome to come visit here.” I sigh as I stare out the window at the rows of frosted cars. “Just maybe not in the winter.”

Another glance at the dashboard tells me the temperature is still dropping. Ugh. Gathering my courage, I grab my knit hat from the passenger seat and yank it over my head. “I’m doing it,” I announce. “I’m venturing out into the Arctic tundra.”

Okay. Not the Arctic tundra. Just Yonkers. But New York in January is still brutal.

“You can do it,” Dean cheers. “Think warm thoughts.”

“Thanks,” I say dryly. Then I push open the door and step out of the car.

“Ack!” The blast of frigid air is a slap in the face, making my eyes water and my nose tingle. As soon as I get out of the car, my body starts protesting. The skin on my face is prickling, my lungs are half-frozen, and I’m worried my eyeballs may actually freeze open.

How have I not gotten used to the cold yet? After twenty-eight winters in New York, I should be used to this by now. And I grew up in the Adirondacks, which is even colder than here. But every winter, as soon as the temperature dips below zero, I’m shocked all over again.

Why didn’t I go to grad school in Florida? Or New Mexico? Or literally anywhere that isn’t so cold my breath freezes as soon as it hits the air?

“You doing okay?” Dean’s voice is muffled, and I realize my earbud got messed up when I was putting on my hat. Reaching under the fuzzy yarn cap, I push it back into place.

“Yeah,” I gasp, the cold sucking the air away from me. “I’m out. And it’s damn cold!”

“Be careful,” Dean warns, going into protective firefighter-saving-the-world mode. “Walking alone in a parking lot at night... Maybe you should get off the phone so you can pay attention to your surroundings better.”

“Dean.” I shake my head at him as I trot across the parking lot, head down against the frigid chill. “It’s too *cold* for anyone to be lurking in parking lots. They’re all at home, staying warm, like I should be doing.”

Except I was assigned the last tutoring session of the evening, and the student I was helping was in a panic over her assignment that’s due tomorrow, so I stayed late to help her. So now it’s past eight-o’clock on Sunday evening, and I am more than ready to get home, get a hot shower, and curl up on the couch with my favorite fleece blanket.

“Still.” He’s not laughing. “Do you have your pepper spray out? Keys? Remember what I told you—”

“I know.” Rummaging around in my bag, I find the little can of pepper spray and clutch it tightly in my right hand, my keys still held in my left. “I have both of them. And I remember—spray, jab, yell, kick.”

“Exactly. I know you think I’m being overly cautious, but you can never be too careful.”

I understand why Dean worries after everything that happened with Adeline. But I’m halfway across the parking lot and it’s silent and empty—no one else out here, no cars running, no one driving, just the faint tap of my feet as they hit the pavement. “I’m being careful,” I tell him. “But there’s no one around. Trust me.”

“Hmm.” Dean still sounds suspicious, but he changes the topic. “How is your dissertation going, anyway? Almost done?”

“Not quite.” The wind picks up, making the frigid air feel even worse. Speeding up, I’m moving at a near jog, breath huffing out in silvery clouds. “I’m getting close, but I still have at least a month to go, plus the defense. But I’m ahead of schedule, so I’m not too worried about it.”

“That’s great, Elle. Or should I say, Dr. Evans?”

Grinning, I say, “I’m not a doctor yet.” As I get closer to my apartment building, I notice the streetlamp closest to it is out, leaving the entrance in shadow. “Darn it.” This isn’t a bad apartment complex—I checked all the safety reports before moving in—but it doesn’t mean I enjoy messing around with the door in the dark.

“What?” Dean’s tone is sharp.

“It’s nothing.” I rush towards the entrance, keys at the ready, eager to get inside and out of the cold and the dark. “Just a light out. It’s fine. I’m nearly home.”

“Elle...”

“It’s *fine*, Dean. I’m steps away from the door to my building. I’m practically inside already.”

And then.

Something heavy slams into me, and I pitch forward, off balance, falling.

Before I hit the ground, a gigantic arm clamps around me, yanking me back to my feet.

But my feet aren’t on the ground, they’re dangling. This person—huge, strong, terrifying—has me pinned against his chest, his arm a vise-grip around my chest.

Oh shit. I don’t hear Dean’s words in my ear. I don’t hear whatever this giant is saying. All I can hear is the whooshing sound of my heartbeat, a train out of control with no brakes.

I open my mouth to scream but a mitt-like hand flattens over it, pressing hard enough to make my teeth bite into my lip. Coppery blood fills my mouth—some drains down my throat and nausea surges. Shit.

All my synapses are misfiring. I’m not thinking straight. It’s all just shock and horror and breath-stealing fear. *This isn’t supposed to be happening.*

I’m supposed to be in my apartment, saying goodbye to Dean, getting ready to take a shower. Not out here, in the dark, trapped by a menacing stranger.

Who is now trying to carry me away from here.

Isn’t trying—he is.

He’s already moving away from the building and towards the darkened lawn. Which leads to a road, and if he gets me into a car, I’m in even more trouble than I already am.

I need to stop this. But how?

Through the haze of stunned fear and panic, I know I need to do something. So I start twisting, bucking against the man holding me, but it’s like fighting stone. I’m barely a hundred pounds, five-foot-one on a good day, and he’s carrying me like I weigh nothing.

Where is he taking me? Nowhere good. There's no place he could be taking me that's good. It's only bad and *worse*.

I don't feel the cold anymore. I'm hot and sweating and my heart is bursting and my lungs are shriveling in terror. *What is he going to do to me?*

NO. Just because I'm small doesn't mean I'm helpless. There are other tools I can use.

Spray. Jab. Scream. Kick. I can do some of those, at least.

Forcing my mind to focus, I visualize what I need to do.

Then I move.

First, the spray. I duck my head and aim the spray above it—I catch some of the residue and my eyes burn, but from his shocked gasp I know I hit him.

Then the keys. His grip has loosened, so I twist enough to thrust my keys over my shoulder and back, jabbing at something solid but meaty. The metal is cutting into my fingers and I feel sick at the terrible sensation, but I don't stop.

He yells, a shout of angry pain. His hand lifts away from my mouth and I scream. I'm a banshee, screeching at the top of my lungs. Wriggling, squirming, kicking behind me, I'm a frenzy of movement until he drops me.

"Fucking bitch," he growls at me, voice dark and filled with hate. I crashed to my knees when he dropped me but I'm up and stabbing my keys at the door—my heart is exploding and the only words I can think are *get away, get away, get away*.

I sprint down the hall, up the stairs, not even breathing. I don't take a breath until I'm in my apartment with the door double locked behind me.

Is he still out there? I have no idea. Maybe he ran after I hurt him. After I screamed to wake the dead.

It's only now that the tears start to come, as I sit crouched on the floor, my arms wrapped around my bleeding knees, shaking.

“ELLE!” The shout echoes in my ear and I bleat with fright. “ELLE! TALK TO ME!”

It takes a second for all my scattered thoughts to connect. Dean. The call. My earbud. He’s still on the phone with me.

“Dean.” It’s a wheezing gasp. “Someone... someone attacked...”

“Elle. Are you hurt? What happened? Where are you?” His voice is strained, urgent, worry bleeding through his words.

“I’m in... my apartment. A man... grabbed me.” I’m shaking harder now, my words coming out in scattered bursts. “I used... the spray. Keys. I...”

“Shit. Are you locked inside? Elle?”

“What?” My brain switched off for a second.

“Is the door locked? Are you hurt?”

“Yes. It’s locked.” Is it? Panic races through me. What if I thought I locked it, but I didn’t? What if he’s coming in right now?

I scramble to my feet, checking the locks frantically. “Locked,” I repeat. “I’m not hurt. I don’t think.”

“Elle. You need to call 911. Okay?”

I nod, still staring at the locks, not entirely believing they’re working.

“Elle.”

I jump. “What?”

“You need to call 911. Right now. And then call me right back. Okay? Can you do that?”

Yes. I need to shake off this fog clouding everything. “Yes.” My voice gets stronger. If I could escape from that man, I can do this. “Yes, Dean. I’ll call 911.”

“Call me right back, Elle. If I don’t hear from you in five minutes, I’m calling you.”

“Okay, Dean.” My brain is slowly coming back online. “I will. And you were right.”

“About what?” He sounds confused.

“The pepper spray. I did need it.”

CHAPTER TWO

ELLE

I've been staring at the same sentence for the last five minutes, wondering why it's mocking me.

Can't you come up with something to follow me, it seems to be asking. You've written thousands of words already. Surely you can come up with something halfway intelligent already?

Apparently not, because I've stared at these same twenty words until they blur together and none of them make sense anymore.

The cursor is the final taunt. *Just type, it says, and I'll stop this incessant blinking for a second.*

I wish I could, but my brain is mush. Worse than that, because now I'm creating imaginary conversations with my writing. Is this the first step into insanity?

Except I *know* why I can't seem to concentrate on anything.

For the last two hours I've been sitting at my desk—surrounded by Post-its and books with tabbed pages and stacks and stacks of printed journal articles—and I've written two paragraphs. *Two*. That isn't good if I have any intention of finishing my dissertation any time in the next year, let alone by the end of the semester.

But every time I start to type something, to make sense of my thoughts, I hear a noise. The refrigerator kicking on. The

faint sound of a car unlocking in the parking lot. The shuffle of footsteps walking down the hallway past my front door. All innocuous noises that shouldn't cause me to tense up, for my breath to quicken, my heart to skip a beat.

They wouldn't have bothered me before. But in the week since I was nearly abducted outside my apartment, a lot of things have started to bother me.

Like the noises. The dark. Leaving my apartment. Walking to my car. Being alone at all.

Which is why I haven't left my apartment except in the middle of the day, and only when I can find a neighbor to walk with me. And coming home is even worse—I've been driving around the lot until I find something close and then waiting until I see someone else headed to my building. It took half an hour of waiting yesterday, but I'd rather do that than the alternative—walking back to my building alone.

I was scheduled to work nights at the tutoring center this past week, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. The thought of coming home in the dark again was enough to give me a minor panic attack, so I called and told them I was sick with the flu.

That's not going to hold up forever, though—working there is a part of my fellowship—so I'm going to have to get over my fears. And I will. Soon. Hopefully, this suffocating feeling of terror will ease and I can move on with my life. Get back to walking in the dark and not being afraid and actually getting something done on my dissertation.

It was just random. That's what I keep telling myself, at least. The police seemed to think so—the officers who came after I called 911 said it was probably someone trying to take advantage of the light being out to rob me. That it wasn't a targeted attack, just terrible luck.

I want to believe that, but then why was the man trying to take me?

There's no way to know, because there's no evidence, and no way to catch him. The camera outside the entrance was broken. The keys I used to stab him with didn't have enough

blood on them for a DNA test either—all the blood smeared away while I was holding them and trying to get into my apartment. And I never saw his face, so I can't even give a description.

Knowing that he's still out there is the worst part of it. Wondering if he'll be out there again, waiting for me to walk out alone. Waiting for me to drop my guard, and the first time I think I'm safe, he'll be there to prove me wrong.

I hate thinking this way. And I hate feeling like this—afraid and weak. It's not who I am.

I've been independent since I was sixteen—paying my own way through private school and college and grad school. I worked whatever jobs I needed to cover what the scholarships didn't, and I never got scared of any challenge thrown at me.

Not enough money? I picked up another job. When I had appendicitis? I drove myself to the hospital. So I should be able to get past this, too.

Ugh. Sitting here is accomplishing nothing. Pushing away from my desk, I head into the living room and flop onto the couch. Maybe I can find something mindless to watch to get my mind out of this rut.

After aimlessly flipping through Netflix, I finally settle on an old favorite—*Fellowship of the Ring*. Surely elves and hobbits and orcs can take my mind off things. Right?

They do, sort of. I'm still tense but I'm at least following the story, not that it's hard since I've seen this movie at least ten times over the years. But I can sink into the fantasy and half an hour in, I'm getting relaxed enough to feel drowsy. Since I've been sleeping like crap the last week; it's not a surprise that I'm tired even though it's not even seven-thirty at night.

My eyes are getting heavy, and I snuggle into the couch, grabbing the blanket off the back of the couch and tugging it over me. Ah. *This* is what I need.

I'm nearly asleep when I hear it.

At first I think the noise is coming from the movie. But it doesn't make sense. It's a rattling sound, metal on metal, and that doesn't fit with what's happening on the screen. A cold ball of ice forms in my chest—heavy and foreboding.

Something is wrong.

Jerking upright, blanket spilling off me, I snatch up the remote and punch the mute button. For a moment, there's silence. The ice starts to thaw. It's just my imagination running away from me. Everything is fine.

Until the rattling starts again, followed by a terrible click. As I realize where the sound is coming from, I watch in horror as the doorknob to my front door turns and the door pushes open.

It only moves a few inches before being stopped by the chain lock. And I am so glad I ventured out of my apartment on Monday to buy that lock and watched four YouTube videos on how to install it.

A low curse follows, rough and angry.

I'm relieved the lock worked, but I need more locks between me and whoever is on the other side of the door. But I need my phone first. Leaping up from the couch, I race across the room to my desk, wondering distractedly why in the world I left it over there.

I'm halfway across the room when I hear an even worse noise than before. There's a sharp snap, and I'm afraid I know what it is without even looking. So I keep running instead of looking back. I'm at the desk and the phone is in my hand and I'm so close—

NO!

I'm yanked off my feet again. Arm around my neck this time, cutting off my voice. Dangling, gasping through a compressed throat. My heart drumming heavy and fast. Tears of frustration and anger and fear springing to my eyes.

NO. Not again.

“If you try anything this time”—a voice growls, sandpaper and stone rubbing—“you’ll regret it. You don’t need all your fingers for where you’re going.”

It doesn’t stop me from wiggling, arching back against him, but I can’t breathe, so my movements are weak. Gray spots are dancing across my vision and my head is pounding and terror is clawing at me.

Then something jabs into my neck. It’s a quick pain followed by a terrifying realization. Everything dims. And black closes in.

* * *

THE FIRST MOMENT after I drag myself awake is a blessing.

There’s a moment when I don’t remember what happened. When my only thought is a foggy, *why did I drink so much?* I don’t feel anything but the mattress underneath me and the throbbing in my head and the nausea breaking over me in waves.

I feel sick, but it’s better than how I feel a few seconds later when reality slams into me, stealing my breath. My heart jackhammers in my chest, echoing in my head—making it hard to think about anything other than wishing the pain would go away.

But I need to focus. Figure this out. So I take long, deep breaths, forcing the nausea and rising panic to heel. Sort of.

At least I don’t think I’m in danger of vomiting, so that’s a first step. And I can focus on something other than the pain in my head.

Like the mattress, hard and covered with something scratchy—a cheap blanket, maybe. The faint rise and fall of voices nearby, but not in the same room as me. I pry my eyes open to scan the room, wincing as the fluorescent light overhead stabs into them. A dresser, a chair, dusty blinds, rusted radiator. A cheap hotel at my best guess.

And the last thing I notice, by far the worst. A handcuff around my wrist. Oh, crap.

This is very, *very* bad.

Part of me—the primal, trapped animal part—wants to scream, fling myself around, do something to get away from the metal trapping me.

But the logical side, the part I've relied on for most of my life, tells me to do otherwise. To stay quiet, to observe, to get as much information as possible before trying anything. So I test the handcuff, carefully rotating my wrist to judge its tightness. Nope. Not pulling my way out of it.

Next, I strain to listen to the conversation in the other room. The door is slightly ajar, a TV blaring, one man's muffled voice working its way towards me. "You shouldn't have bruised her neck. He's not going to be happy about that."

"She was almost to her phone. And she would have yelled. Anyway, it's not like some bruises will impact her use."

"Idiot," the other one snaps. "The client wants her in good condition. Bruised from where she was choked isn't in *good* condition."

"Whatever. I got her here, didn't I? And she deserved a little roughing up after what she did to me last time."

The other man barks a short laugh. "I still don't know how that little girl got a jump on you."

"Shut up," the man grumbles. "Anyway, I'm hungry. And we don't have anything else to do until the drop-off tomorrow. I want to get some food."

"Is she still out?" Footsteps come closer and my heart almost explodes in fear.

They can't know I'm awake. Not yet. I don't know why I'm so sure of it, but I am. So I slam my eyes shut and try to breathe as evenly as I can, hoping this man will think I'm still asleep.

One of them pauses by the bed. Fabric shifts as he leans closer to me. A hand grabs my breast and squeezes, and I use

every bit of control not to react. He squeezes again, hard enough to bruise, then pulls away with a frustrated huff.

Back in the other room, he grumbles, “Wish I could test them out.”

“Well, you can’t. Deal with it.”

Shit. This is so bad. Horrific scenarios are flashing through my head, each one more terrible than the last.

“Go pick us up some food,” one of them orders. “There’s a movie on pay-per-view that I want to watch.”

As the two debate which fast-food restaurant to go to, I’m laying there still and silent and terrified and desperate to figure out a way out of this.

When the door slams and the channel changes from loud chatter to guns blasting, I wrack my brain for some sort of solution. Whatever is planned for me is set for tomorrow—some client is waiting, whatever that means—and I don’t want to be here to find out what it is. So I need to escape. But how?

Ideas are being discarded as fast as I can come up with them. Nothing is even close to doable. Maybe if I was twice my size, I could break the wooden headboard. If I were double-jointed, I could slip my hand out of the handcuff. But I’m neither of those things—just a small woman with normal joints and below average athletic ability.

But. The handcuff. I can’t get my hand out of it, but what if I could get it off?

I know there are ways to pick a handcuff with everyday materials. In fact, there was a documentary I watched late one night, if I could only remember what the guy in it said...

My shoelace. That’s it. Now I remember.

And I’m still wearing my shoes. I wouldn’t normally have been wearing them in my apartment, but I was feeling anxious and paranoid—which I had good reason to be, obviously—and I kept them on in case I needed to run. Which didn’t do me any good in *that* sense, but now I remember how the guy in

the documentary used the tip of his shoelace as a shim to pry open the handcuff.

It's a long shot, but I think it's my best option. So I carefully, quietly, try to replicate what I saw on that documentary several years ago, hoping I'm not remembering it wrong. Hoping I don't end up tightening the handcuff even more and end up cutting off my circulation.

Pull the tip of the shoelace—the aglet, that's what it's called—off without ruining it. It's agonizingly slow as I wiggle at it with my free hand and wish I had longer fingernails.

But finally, as my heart beats quadruple time, it comes off.

Then I insert it between the locking mechanism and the teeth, tighten the cuff, and push the aglet forward. And listen for the tiny click of the handcuff releasing.

Please.

Time seems to freeze as I push the piece of plastic forward, never wanting something to work more in my life.

And it does. *It does*. The handcuff opens and I yank my hand out of it, grabbing my throbbing wrist instinctively. I want to cry from the relief of it, but it's fleeting. This is only part of the battle. I still need to get out of the hotel room.

There are three doors in the room, though I suppose it would be too much luck to have one of them open to the outside. I know one leads to the room where the man is watching TV, so I need to stay far away from that one.

I'm terrified, tiptoeing across the room, imagining him crashing through the door and seeing me. Catching me.

This is the most scared I've been. If he catches me...

No. I can't think about it, or the fear will paralyze me.

So I force myself over to one door—a quick peek shows an empty closet. I push the other open, squeezing my eyes shut as I plead with the hinges not to creak.

And then I see the best thing I could have hoped for. In the bathroom, there's a window. Not just a tiny little six-inch thing that is good for ventilation, but nothing else. This window is small, but so am I. It just needs to open, and I *will* get through it, no matter how I have to contort myself to do it.

When I push at the window the first time, it doesn't budge, and I almost burst into tears. But then I see the makeshift lock—a wood dowel wedged along the side. Pulling it free, I place the dowel gently on the floor, and this time, when I try to open the window, it works.

It works.

My heart is now going even faster than before—hopefully I don't have a heart attack before I get through this—and I start to work my way through the window. I hadn't even thought about it before, but thankfully the room is on the first floor, though I would have jumped out no matter what.

It feels like an eternity, but I know it isn't, and then time speeds back up once I spill out of the window and onto the ground. I tumble into the snow and I'm immediately cold and wet, but I don't care. All I can think is *I got out. I can't believe I got out.*

Tears are streaming down my face as I crouch close to the ground, quickly scanning my surroundings. Spotting a gas station across the street, I bolt for it. I know I should stay in the shadows, but I don't know how much time I have before they notice I'm gone. So I sprint through the snow, tears freezing on my cheeks, my breaths cold and harsh and gasping, not stopping until I reach the bright lights of safety.

CHAPTER THREE

ZANE

I think I'm getting too old for this.

There's a small group of women crowded at the door, all flashing bright smiles at me. One of them steps closer and her perfume wafts by my nose, making me wonder briefly, *why wear perfume to the gym? Aren't we all going to be sweating, anyway?*

"Zane." She practically purrs my name, white teeth flashing and her extremely long lashes dipping as she looks up at me. "I loved your class today. It was just so... amazing."

"And when you demonstrated that palm strike," says a brunette with alarmingly long fingernails, eyeing my biceps, "it was just so impressive."

"It was," adds another woman, this one wearing tight pants and a top that hides nothing. She pulls her long blonde braid across her shoulder so it drapes over her very impressive breasts. "I feel so much more confident now. Like I could take on anyone."

The two other women in this small huddle bob their heads in agreement, echoing in unison the first woman's statement. "So amazing."

"These are self-defense techniques to be used only when absolutely necessary," I say, inwardly shuddering at the thought of one of them trying to *take on* someone. Smiling to cushion my words, I continue, "The best defense is to stay aware and never have to use these moves to begin with."

“Of course,” agrees the blonde braid, smiling even wider at me. “But I was thinking, maybe we could get a drink later? And you could give me some more advice?”

The three other women frown at her while I debate my answer. A year ago—even six months ago—I would have said yes to her offer without hesitation.

I enjoyed the attention from women, the flirtation, the possibility of casual company for an evening. Never anything serious, and the expectations were clear from the start. If the woman was okay with what I could offer, we could have fun and go our separate ways when it was done.

It was all I wanted. Nothing serious. And I could meet this woman that I don’t really know for a drink, spend the evening with her, and it would never go any further. But I’m just not sure I want that anymore.

It feels kind of empty.

Casting about for a reason to refuse, I end up making up something. “I’m sorry,” I say, my tone apologetic, “but I can’t. I’m dating someone.”

“Oh. Okay.” Her face falls and I feel bad for hurting her feelings, but I couldn’t think of any other excuse that wouldn’t have done the same thing. She mumbles a quick goodbye and rushes out of the room, the other three women close behind her. And I have a hunch I won’t be seeing her at any more of my classes.

But at least she learned something from the lessons already, which is the reason I’m here to begin with. I’ve been teaching a weekly self-defense class at the local gym for the last two years, and each time I come, I just hope I’m making some kind of difference. Giving at least one woman the tools to escape from an attacker; to protect herself when there’s no one else around to help.

It’s the least I can do, considering.

But I’m not going back down that rabbit hole now. So I heft my workout bag higher on my shoulder and head out of the fitness room into the hall. I’m thinking about all the things

I need to do today—get gas, pick up groceries to fill my empty refrigerator, do some paperwork back at the office, check in with the rest of my team—so I’m actually taken by surprise when I hear my name being called.

I’m spinning around in a defensive stance before the voice registers, my muscles tensed and ready to fight. My heart is pounding and my adrenaline is surging—I’m always hyper aware of my surroundings, so I must be more distracted than I realized for someone to get close without me noticing.

“Whoah, Zane. Easy.” His hands up in surrender, the director of the gym grimaces apologetically. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, Chris, I’m sorry.” I force my muscles to relax and flash him a rueful grin. “Still in the self-defense mindset from class.” *Sort of.*

“No worries.” He lowers his hands, stuffing them in the pockets of his athletic shorts. “I just had a quick question for you, but it can wait if you’re busy.”

Now I feel guilty for the second time today. First, I reject a woman and then I almost attack my friend just because he startled me. “I’m good, Chris. What is it?”

“Well, we’ve had increased interest in self-defense classes over the last few months. I was wondering if you’d be willing to teach an extra one, maybe once a month?” His expression clouds, and he hesitates before continuing. “Money is tight lately with operations costs going up, so I’m not sure how much I could pay you, though.”

My response is immediate. “You don’t need to pay me anything. I’ll have to work it out with my team, see which day will be best, but don’t worry about the money.”

“Zane, you’re already teaching the other classes for free.” He frowns. “I don’t want to take advantage of your generosity. I’ll find the money. I just wanted to know if you could do it.”

“No, man.” I meet his gaze, keeping mine steady. “I’ll teach the extra class. And I don’t want money for any of them. Really. I’m happy to help.”

“Thanks, Zane. I really appreciate it.” Then the walkie talkie on his hip goes off, and he’s dashing off towards the pool, apparently to do some damage control after there was an unfortunate accident during the Mommy and Me swimming lessons.

Yuck. Better him than me. I’ll take my job any day.

As I walk across the parking lot, my thoughts drift back to my conversation with the blonde from my class. And the strange feeling in my gut when I realized I didn’t *want* to go out with her. Didn’t really want to go out with any of those women.

It’s not that I want a relationship. Settling down? Moving in with someone? Sharing all my secrets and feelings? I’m not interested in any of those things.

But a casual one-night thing doesn’t seem very appealing either. Maybe it’s because I’ve watched two of my friends find something so much deeper. Cole and Maya, Leo and Georgia—they would do anything for each other. And it makes me feel kind of like... if I’m not going to have that, why bother?

But then what? A life of celibacy? That hardly seems like a good solution, either.

“I’m just going through a phase,” I tell the rearview mirror as I back out of my parking space. “It’s just because I watched my friends fall in love and I’m feeling sentimental. Another month or two, and I’ll be back to normal.”

And now I’m talking to myself in my car, which is clearly the definition of normal.

I’m headed to the grocery store when my phone rings. It’s the ringtone all my teammates use, and I glance at the dash to see Cole’s name blink onto the screen. Since Cole isn’t just my friend, but the founder of the company I work for, I tap to answer his call immediately.

“Hey, what’s up?” Turning into the grocery store parking lot, I slide into a spot and put my SUV in park, stretching as I lean back in my seat. “Everything going okay with the case?”

“Yeah, we’re wrapping things up here. We should be done in a few days.” Cole pauses. “Everything going okay back home?”

Back home is the Blade and Arrow headquarters in Sleepy Hollow, New York—a renovated office building that serves as not just the hub of our company, but also where my teammates and I all live. When Cole decided to start Blade and Arrow Security, he thought it would be helpful to include an apartment for each member of the team, so we wouldn’t have to worry about finding housing if we joined him.

Since all six of us—Cole, myself, Leo, Rylan, Finn, and Nora—were all on the same Green Beret team for years, none of us mind living in the same building. I still have my own apartment, privacy, but with the perks of a short commute and people nearby that I can always rely on.

“Everything is good here,” I say. “Although I’m sure you knew that from talking to Maya. She and Georgia are keeping each other company and bugging me to watch cheesy movies with them every night.”

We always like to have at least one person staying back at headquarters, especially now that Cole’s fiancée, Maya, and Leo’s fiancée, Georgia, are living there too. So this time, when everyone else left to work jobs out of town, I stayed here to make sure everything was taken care of at home.

And to make sure the women are safe. After Maya was attacked by her dead ex-boyfriend’s brother and Georgia was abducted by a guy who’d been obsessed with her since high school, our entire team is more than a little protective of them.

Cole chuckles. “She did mention something about watching *Pretty Woman*. And *The Notebook*.”

“Yes. We watched both of them. I suggested watching the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but they said no.” I shake my head, smiling at the memory of it. “I don’t know how they can’t like those movies.”

“I don’t know,” Cole agrees, still laughing. Then his voice sobers. “I did call about something else, though.”

My smile wipes away in an instant. “What is it?”

“I got a call from a friend in San Antonio. You might remember him. His name is Dean, but he goes by Crash. He’s one of the firefighters I used to work with—I think you met him during one of the training exercises we did in Texas a couple of years ago.”

“Yeah, I remember him. Nice guy. Is he in trouble?”

“Not Crash.” Cole pauses, his tone going even more somber. “But his cousin is. Elle lives nearby, in Yonkers, and she’s a PhD student at Fordham. She was attacked outside her apartment last week, almost abducted. She got away using pepper spray and stabbing the man with her keys.”

“Damn.” My gut clenches; the same sick feeling I always get when I hear about a woman being assaulted. “Is she okay?”

“She managed to get away with only some bruises,” Cole answers. “But it gets worse. Last night they came back. A man broke into her apartment, drugged her, and took her to a hotel in Port Chester. She woke up handcuffed to a bed, two men in the adjoining room.”

“*Fuck.* Was she—”

“No.” Cole’s response comes out in a relieved gust. “She was able to escape, but I’m not clear on the details. She ran to a gas station, called the police, and for some reason they ended up telling her to go home.”

My jaw clenches. “Go home? After she was just abducted from there? What the fuck?”

“I know.” Cole sounds as pissed as I am. “She was terrified, didn’t feel safe going home, so she got a ride to the Fordham campus instead. She’s been in hiding since then, too afraid to go to her apartment or put anyone else in danger.”

He doesn’t even need to ask. “I’ll head there right now.”

“Crash said she’s in the library. I’m sending you a photo of her, basic info, and a codeword to give when you meet. She’s

understandably scared about people approaching her after everything that happened.”

“Of course she is.” I pull out my phone to look at the messages Cole is sending. “Don’t worry, I’ll find her, bring her back to B and A. Make sure she’s safe.”

“I’ll be back in a day or two,” Cole says, “and Leo and Finn will be back in a couple of days. Once the four of us are there, we’ll come up with a plan. In the meantime, keep Elle at Blade and Arrow, make sure she gets medical attention if she needs it—”

“I know. I’ll take care of her.”

Elle. I look at the photo Cole just sent me.

She’s posing in front of an ornate brick building, smiling broadly, her cheeks pink and amber eyes sparkling. Dark red hair is blowing away from her face, turning gold and bronze as the sun hits it. And there’s a glow about her—she just looks so damn happy and proud to be there.

And I’m not going to let anyone take that away from her.

“I’m heading there now,” I tell Cole as I finish scanning the rest of the information he sent me. “I’ll text you as soon as I make contact.”

“Thanks, Zane. I’ll call Crash, let him know you’re on the way. He’s been worried sick about her.”

I’m already in mission mode as I hang up with Cole. As I shift my car into gear and head back to the road, my mind is focused on Elle.

On how scared she must have been when she was attacked outside her apartment. And again when she woke up in that strange hotel room. How incredible it is that she escaped not just once, but twice on her own.

But she’s not on her own anymore. She has a team of former Green Berets behind her now, and we’re not going to let anyone hurt her again.

* * *

HALF AN HOUR and a few broken speed limits later, I'm heading through the glass doors of the library, an imposing and impressive stone building with dozens of windows. It looks like the kind of place only very intelligent people would study, and from what I read about Elle Evans, she definitely fits in.

Thanks to the file Leo pulled together on Elle, I know she received her Bachelors and Masters at Cornell, and is now in the PhD program for applied developmental psychology at Fordham—all paid for with academic scholarships and fellowships and on-campus jobs. Not to mention straight As, Summa cum Laude, and a handful of honor societies.

Now that I know how smart she is, I'm less surprised that she figured out how to get herself away from her captors. But unfortunately—and I've learned this the hard way in the past—there are times brute strength wins out no matter how intelligent you are.

So this knot of worry won't go away until I see Elle, make sure she's not hurt, and can get her back to Blade and Arrow safely.

According to Crash, she's supposed to be on the main floor of the library, sitting at one of the tables near the reference section. I spot the large reference sign on the wall and start scanning the space, searching for Elle's bright auburn hair. But there are only a handful of people sitting nearby, and none of them look even remotely like Elle.

I make another loop around the reference section, my gaze sweeping from one person to the next. Curious eyes meet mine—a girl with jet-black hair in a ponytail, a tall man in a baseball cap and a scruffy goatee. The librarian calls over from her desk in a low voice, asking if I need help, but I just give her a quick shake of my head.

It's only been a minute or two since I got here, but I'm already worried. Part of it is logic—if Elle knows we're coming for her, looking for her *here* specifically, she wouldn't

sit somewhere else. The other reason I'm worried is pure instinct. That feeling I've gotten before when something was about to go sideways.

I'm getting *that* feeling now, and I'm not going to ignore it. I don't think Elle would pick another place to sit. So why would she leave?

Then a thought strikes me. If she's been here all day, maybe she just got up for a minute to use the bathroom. It would make sense. I can just stay here and wait for her to come back.

Except. There's that alarm blaring in my head, a red flag waving, a voice telling me that something is wrong.

So I look around until I see a sign for the restrooms and head there at a speedy clip, not running but definitely not walking, either. My senses are heightened, on high alert, and I'm noticing everything.

I can hear the couple over by the window arguing quietly, the girl sniffing softly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a man in a blazer with elbow patches leaning over the checkout desk and flirting with one of the librarians. The scent of tuna wafts over from somewhere—it's faint and I'm guessing it's someone eating in an adjacent employee lounge.

All those things are noted and tucked away for reference if I need them. But my main focus is the long hallway beyond the restroom sign. Several doors, a few large plants between them, a large man at the end of the hall, facing the wall—

Then I see *her*. A pale hand clutching at dark fabric. A flash of red. A small foot kicking. He's so large, she's almost hidden behind him.

Fuck.

I sprint towards them, and as I get closer, a haze of red washes across my vision. She's so tiny—struggling valiantly against a man easily twice her size, not making it easy for him, kicking and squirming and bucking against him. His hand is clamped across her mouth, almost completely covering the

lower half of her face, but I can hear faint cries as she tries to call for help, anyway.

Rage burns hot in my chest, ready to explode in a furious roar. But I want the element of surprise so I can incapacitate him without taking the chance of Elle being hurt. The last thing I want is this man trying to use her as a shield or making a run for it and injuring Elle in the process.

As I race up behind him, my mind ticks through the moves. Leg sweep to unbalance him. Arm chop to release Elle. Spin to move her out of the way. Palm strike. Shoulder throw to knock him to the floor. Another kick to keep him down.

There's no worry, no hesitation. It's one thing I'm one-hundred percent confident about. I've been practicing martial arts for so long, once I visualize what I want to do, my body does it automatically.

There's a moment after I start moving but before I make contact when everything seems to move in slow motion. When my muscles take over and my brain takes a back seat. I can almost see myself moving from a distance, watching a stranger as he leaps into battle.

Then I hit his leg with mine and everything snaps back to full speed.

Seconds later, the man is sprawled out on the floor, stunned but conscious, and Elle is tucked safely behind me. She's pressed against my back, her hands clutching my shirt, breathing in shaky gasps and trembling all over. I want to deal with this guy, but I'm worried about Elle and I really want to get her out of here to make sure she's okay.

And then the decision is taken away from me.

I checked my moves when I attacked because I didn't want to take the chance of the man moving and seriously hurting Elle. I wouldn't change how I did it, but it means the guy isn't incapacitated the way he'd be if I attacked at full strength. And it means he's able to scramble to his feet, pushing past us, running in a stumbling gait that gets faster the further he gets away from us.

There's no debate about going after him, not when I nearly lost Elle already.

I have one arm wrapped around her now—I pulled her against my chest as the man rushed by—my other arm flexed and ready to defend if I need to. It's unlikely that the guy is coming back, but I'm still itchy and uneasy about everything that happened, and I want to get Elle out of here as quickly as possible.

But first, I need to know if she needs medical attention. Grasping her upper arms gently, I take a step back to inspect her, scanning her face and body. Her eyes meet mine, wide and scared and the most incredible mixture of amber and gold. She swallows hard, and I can't miss the bruising on her neck. It's obvious she was choked and my rage ignites all over again.

“Do you...” She swallows again, wincing as she does it. “I mean. Thank you. But do you...” Her voice trails off as she looks up at me. “The code word?”

Of course. I could smack myself. I should have said that right away. “Sorry, Elle.” I rush to reassure her, “It's chimera. That's what Crash told us.”

She blinks at me, her brows pinching together for a second before relaxing. “Yes. It is. Sorry. You threw me off when you called Dean, Crash. I forget he goes by that nickname.”

“Well,” I say, smiling at her, “I just go by Zane. Zane Costa. I'm with Blade and Arrow Security. And while I'm sorry about the circumstances, it's nice to meet you.”

“Zane.” She says my name like she's testing out the sound of it, her gaze sweeping across my face. Then the tiniest of smiles appears, even though it's wobbly, and she says softly, “Thank you, Zane. I'm *really* glad to meet you.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ELLE

I feel like I've stepped into the scene of an action movie.

Tall hero with thick, tousled black hair and Romanesque features? Check. Ice-blue eyes that are impossible to look away from, coupled with a breathtaking smile? Double check. Muscled and fit and apparently a martial arts expert? Check, check, and check.

Unfortunately, he's the only good part of the plot so far.

Being attacked three times now? Not so great. Having no idea who's behind it or why? Also, not great. Being scared and sore and still reeling from this most recent attempt to abduct me? I could take a hard pass on that, too.

When I was grabbed as I came out of the restroom, I couldn't believe it. Terror warred with disbelief—I was so sure at least this place would be safe. After the horror of last night, the relief of getting free, the exhausting journey to get here just as the library opened this morning—I couldn't believe it was happening again.

And nothing I did worked this time. I couldn't yell, I didn't have any weapons, just this giant man completely controlling me with his size and strength. I was so scared of being taken and this time not being able to escape whatever horrible fate awaited me.

Then Zane. This blur of motion from out of nowhere. Helping me. *Saving me*. If he hadn't come along when he did...

A shudder grabs hold of me, shaking my body.

“Elle?” A big hand touches my shoulder softly. “Are you with me?”

I’m too busy staring at Zane and having a small meltdown to realize he asked me a question, and his expression has shifted from concern to outright worry.

“Maybe we should go to the hospital.” His brows wing down in a V, tiny lines forming between his eyes. “Are you having a hard time breathing?” His voice drops, low and urgent. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

I give myself a mental shaking. This isn’t the time to fall apart. Later, when I’m not in the library where I’ve spent hours studying and I was just shoved against a wall and nearly abducted and I don’t know how I’m going to feel safe coming here again—

Crap. I’m still shaking and not doing a very good job of regaining my composure. Zane is gently rubbing his thumb on my shoulder in little circles, so I focus on the small soothing motion, waiting until I can speak without my voice wobbling.

“No. I don’t need to go to the hospital,” I say, relieved that my words are steady. “It’s just bruises. I’m sorry. I spaced out there for a second.”

“Elle.” Zane leans down so his face is level with mine. “Do not be sorry. You’ve been through a lot, and you are absolutely entitled to react however you want. And you are holding up amazingly. But if you’re struggling, that’s alright too. Just don’t be afraid to ask for anything if you need it. Okay?”

I nod at him silently, clinging to his words.

“Now,” he continues, his gaze still holding mine, “I want to get you back to Blade and Arrow, but first, let me call Crash—Dean—to let him know you’re okay. And so you feel safe coming with me. Does that sound alright with you?”

My gut tells me that Zane is exactly who he says he is, but after everything that’s happened, I’d be stupid not to check with Dean. “Okay.”

Zane guides me out of the hallway and back towards the main entry of the library. His hand is lightly touching my lower back, and even though I've only just met him, it makes me feel safer. Although I suppose it's not too surprising—he did just pull some crazy ninja moves to rescue me. But it's more than that.

It's how his gaze is constantly moving, checking for any possible threat. How he pulled me against him instinctively, making sure I was protected. And it's the way his eyes shifted from dangerous to gentle as reassured me in the midst of my panic.

Even though I'm accustomed to taking care of things on my own, right now I'm content to let Zane take the lead—calling Dean, leading me out of the library, taking me to his car, even buckling me into the seat. Aside from giving Dean a few short answers—*I'm okay, I'm not hurt, I'll talk to you later*—I haven't had to do much of anything other than go where Zane takes me.

Now we're in Zane's SUV heading north on the Saw Mill River Parkway, headed to Sleepy Hollow and his company's headquarters. Zane is focused on the heavy mid-afternoon traffic while I've been staring out the window at the colorful blurs of cars moving past us.

Although I feel a little guilty not talking to him, I need this silence to wrangle all of my emotions back under control. Try to make sense of how I came to be here, running for my life, in the company of a man I met only half an hour ago.

I thought when I escaped the hotel room, that would be the end of it. I got to the gas station, had the attendant call the police, and waited for the inevitable capture of the men who abducted me. But in the hours it took for the police to get there, bring me to the station, check the hotel room to find it empty—my hopes of a quick resolution faded away.

When the police got to the hotel, there was nothing to find. No men, no handcuffs, no prints, no evidence that I had been there at all. Room completely wiped clean, linens stripped

down, even the snow below the window I fell from was trampled over so no footprints could be identified.

“I’m sorry,” the officer told me apologetically, “But without any evidence, our hands are tied.”

He told me to get extra security at my apartment, or to stay with a friend. And that if anything suspicious happened, to call him again. But I wasn’t going back to my apartment—*no way*—and I certainly wasn’t going to put one of my friends in danger. Exhausted and scared, I asked for a ride to the one place I *thought* would be safe.

“What did Crash—sorry, Dean—tell you about Blade and Arrow?” Zane’s voice yanks me back to the present, and I let out a little yip of surprise. “Sorry.” He glances over at me, his features creased in apology. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay.” I force a smile that I hope looks reassuring, though it probably looks more like a grimace. “He didn’t tell me a lot when I talked to him, but I was using someone else’s phone, so there wasn’t much time to get into it. He just said that Blade and Arrow provided security and that he trusted your team. That I could trust you to keep me safe.”

“Well, that’s all true.” Zane throws me a crooked smile before focusing back on the road. “But there’s more to Blade and Arrow Security than that.”

“Will you tell me about it?” Not only would I like to know more about the company that’s supposed to be helping me, but it would be a welcome distraction from all the unpleasant thoughts in my head.

“Sure.” He pauses as he checks the rearview mirror, changing lanes to take a right onto a narrow, tree-lined road. “So, Blade and Arrow is a private security company that serves two purposes. Half of what we do is for profit—providing security services to CEOs, celebrities, and other VIPs. We train their security teams and assist with high-risk events and travel.”

“We do those jobs to pay the bills, but also to allow us to do our pro-bono work. When someone is in trouble but doesn’t

have the resources or connections to get the assistance they need, they can come to us. For example, if the police have turned them away, or they can't afford a private investigator or security."

"So you help them for free?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, more people come to us for help than we can handle, so we have to make some hard choices about which cases to accept." Zane frowns, pressing his lips into a firm line. "We're happy to help those we can, but it's tough turning down people in need. Maybe one day we'll expand, but for now, we're keeping Blade and Arrow small."

"Who do you work with, then? Dean mentioned Cole—he's the one who worked as a cop in San Antonio, right?"

"Yes. It's six of us—we all served together as Green Berets on the same team. When we left the Army, we went our separate ways at first, but then Cole had the idea to form Blade and Arrow, and he invited us to join him. It sounded a lot better than the martial arts instruction I was doing at a local dojo, and when he told me about the pro-bono work... I knew it was where I wanted to be."

Green Berets. I know they're an elite Special Forces group and it makes a lot more sense why Dean wanted me to go to Blade and Arrow for help. "That's really amazing," I say, turning to look at Zane. "And I owe you two thank yous. First for helping me, and also for your service."

Even in profile, I can see Zane's eyes narrow for a moment, shuttering. Something dark flickers across his gaze, but it's gone before I can figure out the emotion, and he's smiling at me again. "We're happy to help you, Elle. And we *will*. We'll figure this out for you."

The SUV slows, and I realize we've pulled into a long driveway—I've been paying such close attention to Zane that I hadn't noticed my surroundings. But now that I'm aware, my eyes are everywhere, taking it all in.

As we move down the driveway, we pass a large, nondescript building—it could be any of a thousand other

office buildings I've seen, except this one has a small sign on the front that says Blade and Arrow Security. There's a black metal fence around the perimeter of the property, tall with thick rails and security cameras at regular intervals all along the top of it.

We pull into a large garage at the rear of the property with half a dozen cars parked inside. The door shuts with a heavy clang behind us and fluorescent lights come on overhead automatically. It's clean and bright and I notice cameras in every corner, which makes me feel even better about being here.

Zane is out of his seat and at the passenger side before I have a chance to move, opening the door and holding his hand out to me. I'm short and it's a big hop down to the floor from his SUV, so I only hesitate for a second before taking his hand.

What I'm *not* expecting is the sizzle of electricity as I touch his skin, my heart skipping, the surge of heat radiating through me. His fingers tighten around mine for a second, and I watch as his eyes turn from an ice blue to a darkening steel. Then I'm out of the car and he pulls his hand away and I'm staring up at him, hoping I'm not blushing.

The curse of a redhead—my traitorous skin always shows whatever I'm feeling. Any discomfort, embarrassment, anything that throws me off balance and my cheeks turn a very unsubtle shade of fuchsia.

Thankfully, Zane's gaze doesn't linger on me; instead, he turns and gestures towards a doorway at the rear of the garage. "This takes us through a tunnel to the main building. It's a bit longer than if we go outside, but it's nice to use when it's cold. Or if we need a secondary egress in case of an emergency."

"Oh. That's... helpful." What kind of answer was that?

I'm still feeling unsettled by the strange connection I felt, but I quickly decide it was just my emotions getting the best of me. I'm tired and stressed and close to my breaking point and it's natural that a small bit of kindness would have an exaggerated impact on me.

And coupled with Zane being the one to save me in the library? *Of* course I feel some kind of connection with him. How could I not feel gratitude and affection for the person who saved me?

As Zane leads me through the tunnel, I shiver—I had forgotten about the cold while we were in the car with the heat cranked, but now that we’re underground, my thin shirt and yoga pants don’t do much to keep me warm. He glances at me, brow furrowing, and says, “I’ll get some clothes for you to wear once we’re inside. Maya is a little taller than you, but I’m sure she’s got something that will fit until we can get the rest of your clothes.”

I don’t know who Maya is—his girlfriend, wife?—and I don’t know why I feel disappointed at the thought of it. “That’s nice of her,” I say, staring at the gray cement floor of the tunnel, almost crashing into Zane when he stops in front of me.

He grabs my arm, steadying me, his gaze sweeping across my face. His features tighten like he sees something he doesn’t like. As I haven’t slept in almost thirty-six hours, I’m sure I look horrible, dark circles under my eyes and ratty hair and dirty clothes. I shouldn’t care what I look like—I’m safe, that’s all that matters—but it bothers me, anyway.

And if I’m not feeling unsettled and insecure enough, my stomach decides to let out a horrible growling sound, loud enough to echo down the concrete hallway. Lovely.

“Sorry,” I mumble, clutching my stomach in the vain hope that I can force it to be quiet.

“Elle.” Zane rubs my arm, his thumb making the same soothing circles as before. “I’m guessing you haven’t slept or eaten in over twenty-four hours. It’s okay. As soon as we get to the apartment, you can take a shower, get some sleep, and I’ll get you some food. Everything will feel better after that.”

I’m swallowing hard past the lump in my throat, trying to force back the emotion welling up, when he adds, “And Maya is Cole’s fiancée. She lives here with him. We all have our

own apartments here. So I'll be right upstairs from where you're staying. If you need anything, I'll be here to help."

"Thanks," I whisper, relief washing over me. Because I know I'll have Zane here to protect me? Or because Maya isn't...

Stop it, I tell myself sternly. It doesn't matter if Zane has a girlfriend.

We move quickly through the basement of the building, Zane pointing out the expansive gym and the door to the firing range and the small panic room with access to the tunnel. "You won't need to use this room," he reassured me. "The building is extremely secure. Twenty-four-seven surveillance, alarms, bulletproof glass in the windows, steel doors—no one is getting in here if we don't want them to."

From the basement, we move to the main floor of the building—Zane doesn't show me all the rooms, but he gestures at a series of doors as we pass them. "Conference rooms, offices, a lobby though we don't have a receptionist, and there's a medical clinic where we can take care of first aid, basic treatment that doesn't require a hospital visit. And here"—he stops in front of another door—"is the apartment we keep for clients to use. Though we don't use it often; most of the time we travel to the client to help them."

"So I'm a client?" My words come out strained, though I'm not sure why. Of course I'm a client. It's not like I'm here for a casual visit.

"Well," Zane replies as he punches a code into the smart lock. "Yes, and no. You're Crash's cousin, and he's a good friend of Cole's. So there was never any question of us helping you. Just like Crash would help any of us. It's kind of like an extended family."

The next question that's been looming in the back of my mind since we got here pops out. "How... how long can I stay here? I'm not sure about my apartment..." My stomach clenches and my lungs get tight at the thought of going back there.

“As long as you need, Elle.” Zane gives me a kind smile. “Until we’ve gotten this all figured out, you have a place to stay here.”

The relief is overwhelming. I’ve only just gotten here, and it’s the safest I’ve felt in over a week.

“Oh. That’s... I...” And I’m saved from continuing that brilliant statement by Zane pushing the door open and stepping through. His hand touches my back again—just the lightest of touches—as he guides me into the cozy living room.

It’s decorated all in pale browns and blues, a large squashy couch dominating most of the space. I barely notice anything else, my body crying out to lie down on the oversized cushions and finally get some rest. But Zane is still talking, describing the rest of the apartment, so I drag my eyes from the couch to glance around the rest of the space.

A compact kitchen at the far end of the living room, all white and gleaming silver. Next to it, there’s a small dining area with a round table and chairs and a modern-looking chandelier hanging over it. A window looks out to a stretch of snow, the black fence rising tall beyond it.

Then we head down the hallway to see the two bedrooms, each with its own queen-sized bed and a desk and dresser. On one of the beds there’s a stack of clothes waiting—leggings, jeans, t-shirts, a sweatshirt and a sweater. Courtesy of Maya, I’m guessing, and Zane agrees.

“Cole must have called her. The clothes will probably be a little big, but we’ll get your clothes from your apartment soon. And I’m sure Maya or Georgia would be happy to buy some new things for you in the meantime.”

I run my fingers across the stack of clothes, feeling even more thankful than before. Just a few hours ago, I was hiding at the library, sick with fright, no idea what to do next. And now I’m here at Blade and Arrow, safe, with a place to sleep and clothes to wear and this extremely attractive and kind man taking care of me.

“Thank you.” I turn to face Zane, touching his arm for emphasis. “Truly. I don’t know what I would have done—” My voice drifts off as my throat gets thick again.

His gaze shifts to my hand on his arm, then back to me, softening. “You’re here now. So don’t worry about what-ifs, okay? Now—” He pauses, glancing at his watch. “I need to check in with Cole. I’m sure you want to get changed, maybe take a shower?”

Shower! A chance to wash off the dirt and sweat from the last twelve hours sounds like heaven right now. “Yes. A shower would be amazing.”

“I thought so.” A smile quirks his lips. “I’m sure you’re tired and hungry, too. I can get you some food, but do you want to sleep first, or eat?”

I’m tired, but there’s still some residual adrenaline running through me, plus my mind is too chaotic for me to get any sleep yet. Maybe after a shower and a meal and some time on the couch... maybe then I’ll be able to shut my brain off and sleep.

“Food first, if that’s alright? I don’t need much, just a sandwich or soup or something.”

“Elle.” His voice is low and intense, and it resonates through my body. “After the day you’ve had, I think you deserve something better than that. Now, what would you like? Italian? Mexican? Chinese? Pizza? New American? Indian? Name it, and I’ll get it for you.”

Damn it. Now tears are prickling behind my eyes. “Pizza. Please.”

“Okay, Elle.” He brushes his hand down my arm before he steps away from me. “I’ll get the food; you take a shower. I’ll be back soon.”

It slips out without thinking, a whispered plea. “Promise?”

Zane stops in the doorway and turns back towards me. “Yes, Elle. I promise.”

CHAPTER FIVE

ZANE

There's just something unexpected about her.

I've helped lots of people over the years—people I met on my missions for the Army, clients with Blade and Arrow—but none of them have affected me the way Elle has. I've been sympathetic to their struggles, angry about what they were facing, determined to do whatever I could to help. But in all those times, I've never had the overwhelming desire to comfort like I do with Elle.

To touch her arm, just to let her know I'm supporting her. Touch her back as she walks ahead of me, reminding her she's not alone. And to reassure her as many times as she needs, to take the scared look from her eyes and make her feel safe.

When she stood in the bedroom and asked me if I promised to come back, she looked so small and vulnerable and hopeful I wanted to hug her instead of just answering yes.

It's not that I haven't felt protective before. When Maya was being threatened by her ex-boyfriend, I would have done anything to help Cole protect her. And when her ex's psychotic brother abducted her, beat her, I wanted to hurt him as badly as he hurt her.

But this is different, though I can't pinpoint why. There's just this weird feeling I get around Elle, like I'm the one who needs to keep her safe. Maybe it stems from being the one to rescue her at the library, from the guilt that I was almost too

late. Whatever the reason, I'm damn well going to make sure that I don't let her down again.

Starting with making sure she's fed. It's not that she's too thin—I didn't miss her small curves pressing against me when I held her—but she's still tiny, and with all the stress of what's going on, not eating for so long isn't good for her.

Isn't good for anyone, really. I'd be just as concerned about anyone I was helping.

And if I believe that, there's a bridge in New York City that someone is ready to sell me.

Shaking my head, I lean back in my chair; the leather creaking as I move. I'm sitting at the conference table in our meeting room, feeling slightly odd at being the only one there. Normally when I'm in this room, it's with my entire team, or a few of us meeting with a client. But since I'm waiting for the pizza to arrive, it made more sense to wait downstairs instead of running down from my apartment to meet the delivery person at the gate.

Plus, I need to call Cole to give him an update about what happened at the library. I sent him a quick message to let him know I had Elle with me, but I wanted to wait until I could talk to Cole alone to give him the details. She was there—she knows what happened, obviously—but there's no need to make her go through it again.

Propping my feet on the glossy wood table—Cole would be giving me the stink eye if he could see me—I tap his contact and wait for him to answer.

“Zane. What's the sitrep?” All business, Cole's voice is calm but commanding.

“Elle is in the apartment, taking a shower. I'm getting food for her. She's doing okay, considering.”

“That's good.” He pauses, and his tone drops as he continues. “There's something else, isn't there?”

After working so closely together for almost a decade—first in the Army and now with Blade and Arrow—my teammates and I have almost a second sense when it comes to

each other. So I'm not surprised that Cole knew there was a complication without me even telling him.

"Yeah," I say, my voice going tight. "When I got there, a man had her trapped by the restrooms. Had her pinned against the wall. He was waiting for her when she left the bathroom."

"Shit." He bites out the curse. "I'm assuming you took care of him."

"I did. Got some good blows in, but I had to hold back in case he tried to use Elle as a shield." My jaw clenches as I think about it, and I grit out, "If I was going full out, he wouldn't have been able to move, but as it was, he got up and ran off. I couldn't go after him, not with Elle with me."

"Damn." He takes a deep breath and sighs it out. "It's not your fault. I would have done the same thing. While it would have been helpful to question the guy, get him in police custody, the more important thing is making sure Elle is safe."

"I know. But I'm still pissed. He shouldn't have gotten his hands on her at all."

"Zane. You got there as soon as you could." There's a low rumble of voices on the other side of the line, and Cole says, "I have to go. We need to take the client to meet with her attorney. But it's looking like we have the evidence to prove her ex-husband is blackmailing her. I'm going to have Rylan and Nora stay for the rest of the week to get everything settled, but I'm heading home tomorrow morning."

"Okay." A notification pops onto my screen—the pizza is only a couple minutes away—and I get up from my seat to head out to meet him. As I walk, I ask, "What about Leo and Finn?"

"They're finishing up the security upgrade today. So they're taking the redeye back from LA and will be back tomorrow morning. We can all meet in the afternoon to discuss Elle's case."

"Sounds good." I shiver as I leave the warmth of the building, making sure the door is locked before heading to the gate. "Pizza is here. I'll see you tomorrow."

Once Cole clicks off, I shove my phone in my pocket so I can manage the driveway gate and the stack of pizzas. I wasn't sure what toppings Elle liked, so I ordered half a dozen pizzas to make sure there was something she'd eat. And whatever is left over, I know the rest of the team will finish when they get back.

I'm hustling back to Elle's apartment, juggling six steaming pizza boxes in my arms, strangely eager to see her again. It hasn't been even an hour since I left her, but I'm already worried. What if she *is* hurt and doesn't want to tell me? Or she was so tired she passed out in the shower? If I left her and she's hurt...

But she's not. After a soft rustling at the door, she pulls it open and her mouth drops open as she sees me. "Zane," she gasps. "All those pizzas aren't for me?"

"Well. Yes. Sort of." I place the boxes on the kitchen counter and smile at her. "I wasn't sure which toppings you liked, so..." I shrug my shoulders. "I got a lot. But don't worry, whatever you don't want, the rest of the guys will eat."

Elle comes up next to me, lifting the lids of the boxes and sniffing, an expression of ecstasy on her face. And I take a moment while she's distracted by pizza to inspect her, to make sure she looks okay.

She looks more than okay. Her hair is still damp, hanging in soft waves past her shoulders, a blend of deep reds and bronzes and fiery crimsons. She's wearing a sweatshirt that's definitely too big for her, and it makes her look even more petite and delicate. And while she still has dark circles under her eyes, her cheeks are pink and she looks slightly less stressed than before.

"Zane, thank you," she breathes, a smile stretching across her face, dragging in a deep whiff of a pepperoni and mushroom pizza. "I'm starving. I think I could eat an entire pizza myself."

I don't know where she'd fit it, but I just grin at her. "Eat as much as you want. They're all for you."

Elle freezes, and her smile drops away. She takes a step back from the counter and looks up at me, uncertainty swimming in her amber gaze. “Are you—” she starts, then swallows hard. “Never mind.”

“What?” The sad look on her face makes my gut twist. When she doesn’t say anything, I touch her arm gently, keeping my tone low and soothing. “What, Elle? Tell me.”

“I just...” Her lips pinch together, and she hesitates before she blurts out in a rush, “I thought maybe you’d want to share the pizza with me?”

Oh. I hadn’t really thought about it before I got here; I was focused on getting her the food and making sure she was okay. But now that I’m here, seeing how hard she’s trying to mask her fear—of being alone, of everything that happened, of what might come next—there is absolutely no way I’m leaving her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, her shoulders sagging. “I’m sure you’re busy. I’ll be fine. Thanks for getting me some food.”

“Hey.” I slide the pepperoni and mushroom pizza towards me. “You think I’m going to pass up pizza? And this one is my *favorite*. You can have one of the other ones.” I raise an eyebrow at her so she can tell I’m kidding, and she visibly relaxes.

“But that’s my favorite too.” A little smile pulls at her lips. “Maybe we could share?”

And now that she’s smiling again, the knot in my gut unclenches. “Sounds like a good idea.”

Minutes later, we’re both on the couch, a row of pizza boxes spread across the coffee table in front of us. We both have plates on our laps, and Elle has already inhaled her first slice of pizza. She glances over and smiles at me—a big, genuine one, not the tight, stressed ones I’ve seen.

My chest does something funny, somehow squeezing and expanding at the same time.

Fumbling for something to say—which is odd since I’m usually the first one to make conversation—I remember her

choice of codeword, which struck me as unique. Holding her gaze, I say, “Chimera, huh? Interesting choice.”

Elle looks puzzled for a second, her brows pulling down, and then she lets out a soft laugh as it connects. “Yeah. I liked the imagery. Being able to breathe fire would have been pretty helpful.”

“That it would,” I agree. “Do you like fantasy? It’s not a word I hear very often.”

Her cheeks go pink. “Yes. I love fantasy, actually. When I tell people that, they’re surprised. Like because I’m getting my PhD, I should like something more... academic. High-brow.” Elle pauses, her nose wrinkling. “*Boring.*”

I have to chuckle at her obvious disdain. “So, what’s your favorite movie?”

“Hmm.” She takes a bite of pizza, chewing as she thinks. “It’s tough. There are so many good ones. But I think I’d have to put *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy at the top.”

Putting my plate on the coffee table, I shift on the couch so I’m facing her. “Ah, but which one?”

Elle gnaws on her lip for a second before she says, “I love them all, but I think I like the first one the best.”

I grin at her. “Me too. There’s something more hopeful about the first one. The other two are great, but definitely darker.”

A bright smile lights up Elle’s face. “You’re a fan too?”

“I am. In fact, that’s *my* favorite movie.”

“I never would have thought—” She stops, turning even pinker.

“Did you think I liked action movies?” I arch an eyebrow at her. “Kung Fu?”

“Oh my gosh, Zane. I’m sorry.” The pink spreads from her cheeks to the tips of her ears. “Here I am saying how everyone assumes what I like, and then...”

“Hey, it’s fine.” She looks cute all embarrassed, but I don’t want her feeling bad about something so minor. I touch her arm gently. “What other movies do you like? Maybe we can watch some of them while you’re here.”

I hadn’t planned on entertaining Elle while she stays at Blade and Arrow—but suddenly the idea of watching a movie and having takeout with her holds new appeal.

Elle inspects my face like she’s trying to make sure I’m not insulted. After a moment, her features smooth out and she gives me a little smile. “I really like the older ones. Like *Labyrinth* and *The Neverending Story*. And *The Princess Bride*.”

As Elle talks about all the movies she loves, the stress eases from her body. I keep asking her questions about favorite characters and which scenes and quotes she likes the best—many of which are the same as mine—and she visibly settles in front of me. The lines of stress bracketing her mouth smooth away, her shoulders loosen, and the haunted look fades from her eyes.

I know it’s not a permanent solution for all the worry and fear she’s carrying, but hopefully, this brief respite will help her get some rest. She’s clearly exhausted, with dark shadows under her eyes and lids that keep drooping. There are longer pauses between her answers to my questions, and I can tell she’s fading.

When I get up to put away our plates and the pizza, Elle makes a weak move to help me, but I brush it aside, insisting she stay on the couch and watch the movie we had playing in the background while we were talking.

By the time I come back into the living room, Elle is fast asleep, still sitting up, her head tilted at an uncomfortable angle against the couch cushions. In sleep she looks soft and innocent and vulnerable and I’m so freaking relieved that I got to her in time and she’s safe here instead of wherever that asshole wanted to take her.

I should just leave her as is—we haven’t known each other for much more than a handful of hours and I don’t know how

she'd feel about me touching her when she's not awake. But I also don't want Elle to wake up sore and cold and uncomfortable. So I move close to her and tap her shoulder lightly, whispering, "I'm just going to help you get more comfortable. Is that okay?"

Her eyes flutter open and she smiles groggily when she sees me. She's definitely half asleep, but she wakes up enough to mumble, "Okay, Zane. I trust you," and then she sinks back into sleep.

My heart does another strange, drunken somersault, but I focus on moving Elle so she's laying down on the couch, touching her as little as possible. There's a blanket on the back of the couch and I drape it over her carefully, making sure it covers her completely. Then I turn off the TV and dim the light on the table—if she wakes up in the middle of the night I don't want her to be freaked out by it being pitch-dark.

I go into the kitchen to write Elle a quick note—how to get a hold of me, the code for the door, other basic info she might need—and bring it back into the living room to leave on the coffee table so she'll see it right away.

And although I know rationally that Elle is fine, I check on her one last time before I head back to my apartment. She's curled into a ball now, blanket wrapped around her, the edge clutched tightly in one hand. A few strands of hair have fallen across her face and my hand twitches towards her, wanting to brush them away.

No. That would definitely be weird. And I'm not sure why I wanted to do that, anyway.

She's fine. I remind myself of that as I leave the apartment. And when I'm back at my own place, brushing my hair after my shower. *She's fine. She's safe.*

As I sit down on my own couch and start to scroll through all the emails I missed today, my mind goes back to Elle again. Is there more I can do for her? A way to make her feel more at home? Something else to keep her smiling like she was when we talked earlier?

Yes. And I think I know exactly who to ask for help.

I scroll through my contacts until I find the name I'm looking for, and my call is answered almost immediately. "Zane. Is everything okay?"

"Georgia. You know a lot about clothes and makeup and stuff, right?"

A light laugh floats over the line. "Yes, Zane. What do you need?"

CHAPTER SIX

ELLE

My first thought when I wake up is *where did they take me?*

Heart pounding out of my chest, lungs seizing, I don't recognize this place and I'm certain those men finally got me. The terror is so great I can't even move—all I can do is lay here, wheezing for breath, every muscle in my body trembling.

It's not the hotel room, but it could be wherever that client wanted me brought.

Panic is rolling over me, crushing my chest; lack of oxygen is making it hard to think. It's just the same two words on repeat. *Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no.*

Then I see something out of the corner of my eye. A piece of paper.

I try to move my frozen hand towards it, but I'm stuck. No. Am I handcuffed again?

A whimper is rising up in my throat, but I don't want to make any noise. Don't want anyone to notice me.

I want to see the paper. Maybe it has a clue. If I could only get free.

This time I yank my arm away from whatever is restraining me, and my hand comes free, almost smacking me in the face. And in a flash of clarity, I realize what I was caught in. A blanket.

Not handcuffs or rope. A blanket. I grab for the note, snatching it off the table beside me.

As my eyes sweep across the writing, I almost cry from relief. Zane. Blade and Arrow. I'm safe.

Pulse gradually slowing, I read through the note again as all the scrambled pieces in my brain rearrange to make sense.

Elle-

I left right after you fell asleep- I hope it's okay that I helped you lie down and covered you with a blanket. Hopefully you were able to get some sleep. I left some coffee and breakfast stuff for you in case you don't want pizza again. If you need anything, there's an intercom by the door- just push it and I'll answer. We'll get a phone for you soon so you can get in touch with everyone on the team. Cole, Finn, and Leo are coming back this morning, so we'll all have a meeting this afternoon to come up with a plan for your case. I'll come by to get you before. Try to relax, watch some good movies. (But not Labyrinth. I want to see that one.)

Zane

PS- I'm in the building, just getting some work done. But if you need anything, let me know.

PPS- If you need to leave the apartment, the smart lock code is 5873.

Zane. Now that my panic has subsided and all my brain is functioning normally again, I remember everything about yesterday. Last night. How he was so nice. Getting me pizza, staying, talking to me about fantasy movies probably much longer than he wanted to just to distract me.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I do remember him waking me up and asking if he could help me get comfortable. Hopefully, I wasn't snoring or drooling or something equally embarrassing.

Staring at the note in my hand, one word jumps out at me. Coffee. The rest of the day still feels too intimidating to tackle—this meeting with Zane's teammates, making a plan, telling them everything that happened to me—but coffee I can handle.

I end up heading to the shower first—I still feel slightly unclean after being touched by those men in the hotel room. I'm fairly confident they didn't do anything other than carry me there, and when the one guy grabbed my breast, but it's still yucky and makes me feel sick to my stomach to think about it.

Once I've scrubbed myself clean several times and dressed in another too-big sweatshirt and leggings, then I check out what Zane left for me in the kitchen. A laugh bursts out as I see all the food in the refrigerator. Just like last night when he got all those pizzas because he didn't know what toppings I liked, it looks like he used the same tactic when he brought me breakfast options.

There's a double carton of eggs, three different coffee creamers, two kinds of cheeses, and sausage of three varieties—pork, chicken, and tofu. Bags of grapes, strawberries, cherries, plus a plastic container of pineapple and melon. Bottles of water are lined up on the door, along with juices and regular and almond milk.

That's not even counting the stack of pizza boxes from last night. And on the kitchen counter, there's even more food waiting. Bagels, English muffins, white and wheat bread, and two boxes of cereal. And the best of all, three bags of coffee set in front of a fancy coffee maker.

I'm not sure when Zane came in to leave all this food for me, but the thought of him picking all this out just so I'd have something I like to eat makes me a little teary. The difference between how I felt this time yesterday to today is so drastic I still can't quite wrap my head around it.

I don't really want to, if I'm being honest with myself. I don't want to think about yesterday when I was grabbed in the library, or the night before, or the week before that. It would be so much nicer to pretend I'm just staying with a friend, and that my most pressing concern is what to make for breakfast.

So I force out all the uncomfortable and scary thoughts edging their way back into my mind, and I focus on breakfast. On forcing myself to eat something, even though my stomach

feels kind of queasy. Stress has always taken away my appetite, but after Zane made the effort to get all this food, I'll feel guilty if I don't eat any of it.

After I've choked down some cereal and fruit and contemplated whether to have another cup of coffee or not, a knock at the door nearly gives me a heart attack. Clapping my hand to my chest—I'm not sure what that would actually do, but it was instinctual—I walk cautiously towards the front door. Though the logical part of my brain is saying it's got to be Zane or one of his teammates, that there's no way the men coming after me could have gotten inside, there's a panicked voice whispering to me, *what if they did?*

There's a little screen on the wall near the door, presumably showing whoever is waiting in the hallway. It's on and my heart is still skipping in an uneven beat as I get close to it—please don't let it be them—so when I see who's actually there, my knees feel weak in relief.

Not Zane, but two women, one with raven-black hair, the other a rich butterscotch, and they're both smiling at the camera that must be installed just over the door.

But now that I'm standing here, I'm frozen in indecision. Should I open the door? Zane mentioned a woman named Maya, and she might be one of them, but I'm not *sure*. But if she is and I don't open the door, how rude is that? I should let them in—my manners are telling me to—but fear still has its terrible claws holding onto me.

“Elle.” The taller one with the prettiest hair color I've ever seen looks directly at the camera and her eyes are warm. “I'm Georgia. And this is Maya. We both live upstairs—I'm with Leo and Maya is engaged to Cole. I'm sorry if we startled you, but we have some clothes and some other things you might be able to use.”

The dark-haired woman—Maya—adds, “If you don't feel comfortable with us coming inside, that's totally fine. We understand completely. We can leave everything out here if you'd prefer.”

Well. They might be lying and axe-murderers, but they both seem so friendly I'm going to take my chances, anyway. At least if I end up dead, I'll have died being polite.

After fumbling with the three locks on the door—three, but I'm not complaining about it—I finally manage to yank it open and say a little breathlessly, “Sorry. The locks took a while. And I was... not trying to be rude... it's just...”

“It's okay.” Maya gives me a reassuring smile. “We've been there. Neither of us are insulted by you wanting to be careful.”

“Definitely not.” Georgia grins at me and I'm literally struck speechless for a moment. She's absolutely beautiful—tall and slender with perfect features and eyes the color of the sky. There's a long, thin white scar running down her cheek, but it doesn't detract from her beauty at all.

Maya is stunning too. She's curvy and fit and looks kind of like a real-life Snow White, with dark blue eyes and creamy skin and inky black hair falling around her shoulders. But her smile is bright and open and she's looking at me like she really does understand why I hesitated before opening the door.

“Is it okay if I put these in the living room?” Georgia is holding several shopping bags on each arm, and she glances at me for approval before carrying them into the living room and setting them on the coffee table.

“We wanted to introduce ourselves,” Maya says as she sinks onto the couch, “and bring over some things to hopefully make you feel more comfortable.”

I follow her lead, sitting on the other end of the couch, and Georgia settles down between us. She gestures at the bags and says, “It's mostly clothes, but I picked up some other things I thought you might need, too. Body wash, razors, lotion, moisturizer, and a little makeup, but just things like lip gloss and mascara since I didn't know your coloring.”

“When Zane called,” she continues, “he didn't know your size, obviously, but he described you to me and I think I found clothes that will fit you. Plus, he said you have beautiful red

hair, so I found some tops that I think will really complement it.”

“There’s a new phone in there, too,” Maya adds. “Zane said they would try to get your phone back from your apartment to transfer the contacts, but it’s better if you have a new one. This one is all set up and ready to use.”

“Oh. Wow.” I know I’m gaping at her, but this is not what I was expecting when I opened the door. “Thank you. And Maya—” I turn to her. “Zane said you left the clothes for me to borrow. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course.” She smiles, but a moment later her expression sobers. “When I was first dating Cole, my house was set on fire. I lost everything. So I know how hard it can be in a new place without any of your things.”

I’m grabbing her hand without thinking. “Maya, I’m so sorry. That’s terrible.”

“It’s okay.” Her face brightens. “Everyone at Blade and Arrow helped, giving me a laptop, buying me clothes, making me feel safe... and Cole supported me through all of it.”

“Maya was a client,” Georgia jumps in, her lips curving up and her eyes teasing. “And then Cole fell in love with her.”

Maya raises her eyebrows at Georgia. “You’re one to talk. I wasn’t technically a client anymore.” She turns to me. “My ex was threatening me, and the police wouldn’t help. So I came to Blade and Arrow and they took me on as a case. But Cole and I didn’t start dating until after my ex was dead. So I wasn’t really a client anymore. Not like *this* one.”

Georgia grins back at Maya, her cheeks turning slightly pink. “I came here for help, too. I had a... stalking situation. That’s how I ended up with this.” She gestures at her cheek before continuing. “Leo and I did start dating during all of it, though he tried to keep it professional in the beginning.”

“And then he couldn’t resist you anymore,” Maya teases. “But it all worked out. Leo rescued Georgia from the guy who was obsessed with her since high school. And Cole saved me

from my ex-boyfriend's half-brother, who was out for revenge."

"It sounds crazy, doesn't it?" Georgia leans over and pats my shoulder. "But trust me when I tell you that these guys will help you. You're safe here."

"They're not bad to look at either," Maya adds with a mischievous smile. "Cole and Leo are off the market, but Rylan, Finn, and Zane are still available. Just saying."

"What?" I'm shaking my head at her. "I'm not trying to date anyone. I just want to figure out who's coming after me, so I can get back to my normal life."

My normal, non-dating, non-socializing, always-focused-on-school life.

"Of course you are." Georgia gives me a sheepish smile. "Leo keeps telling me to stop trying to be a matchmaker for the other guys on the team. Zane was just so sweet when he called last night, wanting to make sure you had clothes and food..."

My cheeks get hot—damn it—and when I hear another knock at the door, I'm glad for the distraction. *He's just being nice*, I tell myself as I walk to the door. *I literally just met him. I'm here for protection, not a relationship. And it doesn't matter because I'm just another case.*

A quick glance at the screen shows Zane on the other side of the door and I yank it open, already smiling. And as the door opens, I'm reminded that yes—he is as good looking as I remembered.

He's wearing a pair of worn jeans and a charcoal-gray sweater, a thin weave that clings to his biceps and chest. His hair is almost the same black as Maya's, except there are threads of deep brown and red scattered through it. A few-day-old scruff sets off his strong jawline and full lips. And his eyes...

As he looks at me, his eyes shift from cool ice to a warm blue. "Elle," he says, his voice a comforting rumble. "Did you sleep okay? Was there something you could find to eat?"

“Yes.” My smile grows even wider. “Thank you, Zane. It was so nice of you to bring all that food. It made my morning so much better.”

There’s a strange pause before he responds, as his gaze turns appraising, lingering on my face. Then his eyes go flat, his smile dimming, and his voice is more clipped as he says, “It was no problem, Elle. All part of the service.”

Like a switch flipping, his expression shifts to all business. And I’m not sure what I said to cause it. But I don’t have a chance to think about it because he’s looking behind me and nodding to Maya and Georgia. “Thanks for stopping by. I really appreciate it. But I’ve got to get Elle to the meeting. Everyone is waiting.”

Crap. Even though I knew this was coming, I’m still dreading having to go through this again.

After saying a quick goodbye to Maya and Georgia, I’m making the all-too-quick trip down the hall and into a large conference room. Zane walks silently next to me, his expression clouded and eyes stormy. I’m trying to figure out what I said wrong and my pulse is fluttering in my throat and I don’t know why I’m so nervous aside from meeting three strange men and talking about all the awful stuff that happened and wondering why Zane seems like he’s angry with me and—

Right.

That’s why.

Zane guides me to a leather chair at one side of a conference table and sits down beside me. Across the table are two more men, and a third is sitting at the end. Each stands up to introduce themselves and as I meet them, I’m more than a little intimidated.

The one at the end goes first—he’s tall with brownish-bronze hair and just the right amount of stubble, and he looks like he belongs on a romance novel cover. But his smile is kind as he shakes my hand and says, “Elle. I’m Cole Mitchell. I’m the founder of Blade and Arrow Security. It’s nice to meet you.”

Next up is Leo, who is huge and good looking, and his hand completely engulfs mine when he shakes it. But his eyes are gentle and when he reassures me, “We’ll figure out who’s behind this,” I believe him.

Finn is also incredibly good looking—*is it a requirement to work here?*—with gorgeous dark brown eyes and thick, wavy black hair. But he shakes my hand carefully and his gaze is sympathetic as he says, “I’m sorry for what happened to you. But we’re going to make sure it never happens again.”

Once everyone is introduced, Leo pulls out a tablet and taps it a few times before saying, “Crash. We’re just about to start.” Then he sets the tablet at the end of the table opposite Cole, so the screen faces everyone. Dean’s face appears, a little out of focus at first, but then he moves and I can see him clearly.

Even on the small screen, I can see his worry. He glances around the table until he spots me, breathing out a soft sigh before he asks, “Elle. Are you doing okay?”

I give him my standard *I’m okay, I’m fine* and then Cole clears his throat, clearly ready to get down to business. He opens a folder in front of him and looks across the table at me. “Elle,” he starts, “I’ve heard some of it from Crash. But can you tell us what happened from last week until now?”

Taking a deep breath for courage, I start recalling the start of this nightmare.

“I was coming home from tutoring, and the light by the entrance to my apartment building was out. That’s when I first started to feel nervous.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZANE

I feel sick hearing what Elle went through, and I've only heard half of it.

She told us about the man waiting outside her apartment, how much bigger he was than her, and how she used pepper spray and stabbed him with her keys to get away. Elle gave Crash a wobbly smile after that, her voice shaky as she told him, "You were right, Dean. If I didn't have that pepper spray..."

When she told us about the man breaking into her apartment, grabbing her, choking her, that's when she started to shake. Small tremors she tried to hide by clutching her hands together under the table, but I was close enough to see her trembling.

As Elle recalled waking up in the hotel room, the absolute panic and helplessness she felt, a quick glance around the table showed matching clenched jaws and angry expressions and gazes filled with determination.

When Cole gently asks her if she recognized either of the voices, she whispers, "I tried to, but the TV was too loud," and ducks her head like she did something wrong.

As she recalls the conversation about a client waiting for her, I know I'm not the only one in the room tensing, thinking we know exactly what that means.

Then she tells us about the man grabbing her breast, bruising her—stammering through it, her eyes on the table and

her cheeks flaming red—I'm torn between wanting to race out of the room to hunt the man down or pulling Elle into my arms to hold her.

“So, how did you get out of the hotel room?” Cole’s gaze is locked on Elle, his pen poised above the paper he’s been taking notes on.

Her eyes jump up from the table to meet his. “I used an aglet.”

Finn frowns. “A what?”

“It’s the end of a shoelace.” Elle glances at Finn. “I remembered a documentary that explained how to get out of a handcuff and one of the ways was using the aglet as a shim.”

Finn gives her an approving nod. “*Nice*, Elle.”

“So what happened after that?” Cole prompts. “Once you got the handcuff off?”

“I knew I needed to get out of there before the other guy came back. Once there were two of them... and I didn’t know if he’d try to...” Her voice trails off and she takes several deep breaths. “There were three doors. One was open to the other room. I was just hoping I could find a way out... if he saw me off the bed, though...”

Elle shudders and wraps her arms around herself. Her voice drops to a whisper. “I was so scared. It was hard to move. My muscles... I couldn’t breathe... but I had to... do something. But if he saw me...”

She hunches over, breathing fast, caught in the memory. Her face is pinched like she’s in pain and her pulse is jumping at her throat. It’s awful, watching her suffering as she relives this all over again.

I touch Elle’s arm lightly, drawing her attention to me. “Do you need a break? It’s okay if you do. Something to drink? Fresh air?”

As she meets my gaze, her brows draw down, hesitation darkening her eyes to a burnished amber. She starts to say

something but cuts herself off immediately. Then, with a quick shake of her head, she whispers, “I’m fine.”

She’s not fine. I think she wanted to agree. To take me up on the offer. But I hurt her feelings when I cut her off at the apartment and now she’s guarding herself from me.

And I could kick myself for it. I shouldn’t have reacted that way, especially not when Elle is so vulnerable. But the way she was looking at me like I’d done something great, something special—all I could think was *I didn’t deserve it*. Not just for almost letting her get taken, but for all the mistakes I’ve made in the past. And I felt uncomfortable and my skin felt tight and I hurt her feelings and now I feel bad about it.

I have to fix it. I don’t want Elle thinking she did something wrong when the only person who screwed up is me.

“Are you sure you don’t want a break, Elle?” Cole echoes my question, his voice low and soothing. “We can stop for a bit.”

“No.” Elle sits up straight and meets his gaze. Determination tightens her features as she says, “I just want to get through this.”

In a quiet but steady voice, she finishes the rest of her story. About how she squeezed through the window and ran to the gas station, sure that the men would catch her at any moment. She tells us about the police coming—finally, after what seemed like hours—and finding nothing at the hotel, all evidence gone.

“They told me there was nothing they could do,” Elle says, staring at the table again. “That I could either go home and add more security or find a friend to stay with. I couldn’t go home, and I didn’t want to put someone else in danger. So I asked the police for a ride to the library. And I hid behind the bushes until it opened.”

“What about when you were attacked in the library?” Cole glances from Elle to me. “Before Zane found you.”

“I just wanted to wash my hands, my face... I thought it would be safe. I couldn't imagine that someone could do that in a public place.” Elle swallows hard. “When he grabbed me, and I didn't have anything, and no one came along...and he was so angry...”

Cole leans forward. “Was it the same man as before?”

“Yes.” The word comes out in a whisper. “And he was really mad at me. He said... he said he had *ways* to punish me...”

Fuck. I glance around the table at the rest of my team, and everyone looks as furious as I feel.

“Okay.” Cole clears his throat. “Elle, thank you for sharing all that with us. I know it was difficult.”

“So what's the plan?” Crash's voice is strained. “How do you plan to keep Elle safe? And how are you going to find the traffickers?”

Elle sucks in a sharp breath. “The *what?*”

Even halfway down the table and on the tablet screen, I see Crash's face go pale. “Shit. Elle—”

“Traffickers?” Her voice pitches up. “Is that what you think?”

Shit. This is not how any of us wanted to broach the topic.

“We don't know that for sure,” Leo answers, his tone gentle, “but it does seem the most likely reason this is happening.”

Amber eyes shoot to mine, desperate and pleading. “Zane. Is it—”

I wish I could lie to her, but I can't. “I'm sorry, Elle.”

She flinches and covers her mouth with her hand, muffling a tiny cry. Several seconds go by before she uncovers her face and says in a small voice, “Okay.” Her jaw goes tight as she tries to rebuild her defenses. “What do I need to do to stop them?”

“*We* are going to stop them.” Cole fixes his gaze on Elle, his tone calm and confident. “You’ll stay here until this is all resolved. It’s the safest place for you. And you’ll have a tracker to wear—it will send us your location and it can be used to send a distress signal if you’re in trouble.”

“Not that we think you *will* be,” I add, watching as Elle’s eyes go wider and wider. “It’s just an extra precaution.”

Cole nods at me. “Zane’s right. Our objective is to find out who’s behind this and eliminate the threat. So a lot of what we’ll be doing is investigative work. Leo will be in charge of that.”

“I’ll be searching security and CCTV footage,” Leo adds, “and hopefully we can find and identify the men who took you through facial recognition. I’ll also be looking into your friends, family, classmates... anyone who might have a connection to this.”

Elle grimaces. “So you think it could be someone I know?”

Leo’s expression is apologetic. “We have to consider it. So over the next day or so, I’ll need a list of everyone you’ve been in contact with—classmates, friends, family, relationships, even small encounters, like someone you met at the bar last month. Think about if there’s anyone who’s expressed an interest in you. Personal questions, asking you out, maybe they seemed overly interested in your activities.”

“It’s going to be a short list,” Elle says quietly. “All I do is go to school and work—even when I’m home, I’m working on my dissertation. Once a month I might go for coffee with a classmate, but that’s about it.”

She flushes, voice dropping even lower. “I’ve been focused on getting my PhD for so long, I haven’t made time for relationships. And my family isn’t involved at all.”

“It could be someone you had very little contact with,” Leo says. “A professor. A barista at the coffee shop you visit.”

Cole adds, “Or someone from your past. We can’t rule out anyone.”

Elle's gaze is bouncing around the table as each of us talks. She looks scared and overwhelmed, but she's holding it together and paying close attention to what everyone is saying. And I'm impressed, but also more than a little worried about her.

I haven't known her long, but this amount of stress and fear takes a toll both mentally and physically. If Elle tries to hold everything in, it'll eat away at her. That's one thing I have firsthand knowledge of.

"What if you can't find them?" There's a little wobble to her voice, but she pushes past it. "What if they aren't on the cameras? Do I hide forever? Or go back home and hope they forget about me?"

Cole says, "If we don't find them, we'll reassess. Adjust our plan."

And Elle, being as intelligent as she is, immediately figures out what it would be. "Like using me as bait. And catching them when they come to get me."

"No!" Crash erupts, his voice blasting from the tablet. "*Absolutely not.*"

Cole looks between Crash and Elle. "We're a long way from that point. So let's not worry about that right now."

Elle sinks back into her chair, all her strength sagging out of her. She looks small and breakable and utterly exhausted. Quietly, she asks, "What about my job?"

Cole frowns. "It's better if you take a break from it. I know you're working on your dissertation, and we can take you to any meetings for that, but we really want to limit your exposure."

"But..." Elle pushes herself up straight. "I *have* to work. It's part of my fellowship. If I don't do my tutoring, my tuition won't get paid. And then I can't afford to finish my degree." Her voice rises and gets wobblier with each word. "I'm almost done. I can't give up now."

"I'll take you." It pops out without thinking, but I don't regret it in the least. As Elle looks at me with eyes welling

with tears, I meet Cole's gaze. "I can escort Elle to tutoring and sit in the room with her."

Cole pauses, then lifts his chin at me. "That should be okay. But stay in the room with her. If the students don't like it, they'll need to find another tutor."

When I turn back to Elle, the first few tears are spilling down her cheeks. "Thank you"—her voice cracks, and more tears spring free—"I'm sorry. I just..."

"I'm sorry," she repeats, "I appreciate everything. I'm..." Another crack. "I'm..." *Shit*. Her face is wet and her shoulders are shaking and she's trying so damn hard to stay strong in front of us.

My chest squeezes. "Elle." I get up from my chair and gently tug Elle along with me. "Let's go outside. Get some fresh air." This time it's a command and not a request.

She blinks up at me, still hesitant, but she doesn't resist as I lead her to the door. I exchange a quick look with Cole, and he acknowledges it with a jerk of his chin. She needs support right now and since Crash is just a face on a screen, I'm the one of us here who knows her the best.

I take Elle to the back door, pausing to grab a fleece off one of the coat hooks next to it. As I wrap it around her so she doesn't freeze, she stands passively in front of me; her face working as she tries to contain her tears. It pulls at something deep inside me to watch her crying silently, biting her lip hard, still trying to hold everything in.

"It's going to be okay," I tell her once we're out on the patio, the cold air turning her pale face pink again. Her cheeks are still wet so I wipe the tears away so they don't freeze, belatedly thinking maybe I shouldn't have touched her so intimately. But Elle doesn't flinch away, she just keeps staring at me—her eyes big and haunted and achingly desperate for the pain to go away.

"It's going to be okay." This time when I say it, I loop one arm around her back, drawing her into my side. She stiffens

for a second and I think *oh shit*, but then she's leaning against me, her head resting against my arm.

I didn't plan to hold her, but after hearing what Elle went through and watching her struggle to stay strong and admiring the fuck out of how she saved herself multiple times, it was impossible *not* to.

We stand in silence for several minutes, Elle sniffing back her tears and me rubbing my hand up and down her upper arm. It's cold out but the fresh air always helps me when things feel like too much and I'm hoping it's helping her too.

"Thanks." Her voice is soft. "I keep saying that."

"You don't need to thank me for going outside." I don't like the gratitude, but I'm not going to push Elle away again because of it. "Anyway, I had an idea."

"What?"

"Well, now that you got me thinking about some of those old movies... I was thinking of watching *Labyrinth* tonight. Maybe ordering some food. Would you like to join me?"

There's a long pause, long enough to make me think she's going to say no.

And then a little sigh, a little more weight leaning into my side. "Yes. I'd really like that."

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELLE

Today I almost felt normal again.

Walking across the picturesque campus, freshly dusted with a layer of snow, trails of footprints in straight lines down the sidewalks and meandering curves on the lawns.

Looking around at all the heavily bundled students kicking up snow and puffing out silvery clouds.

Watching the bright spots of color from hats and scarves and mittens, the snowballs flying, a small huddle of undergrads laughing as they built a snowman.

Greeting my first appointment of the day, conferencing with her, helping her outline the structure for her essay.

Those things were just like I remembered. But then there were the other things. The things that reminded me that my life is anything but normal right now.

Small things, like my borrowed laptop from Leo—top of the line, but without all my funny stickers decorating it. And the new winter coat I was wearing, comfortable, warm, but without my favorite chapstick and hair ties stuffed in the pockets.

And then there were the big things. Like Zane, tall and imposing and never leaving my side—distracting in ways I don't want to think about. And the library. The place I used to love but now can't look at without shuddering.

But I had to go in there—that’s where all the tutoring is done. Even though when I got to the front doors, my chest froze and I felt like throwing up or turning around and running. Zane looked at me with the kindest expression, keeping his voice low as he asked me, “Do you want to leave? You don’t have to do this. It’s okay if you’re not ready.”

I wanted to leave. My body was screaming at me to go. But I insisted on tutoring, so there was no way I wasn’t going through with it.

Zane rubbed my arm after I told him I was staying and gave me a crooked smile. “I kind of figured that’s what you’d say.”

Once I got started with the actual tutoring, it wasn’t so bad. I got wrapped up in notes and outlines and annotations and citations and all the other minutia of writing an academic paper. I could focus on solvable things instead of the scary unknowns and fears looming over me.

I couldn’t stay one-hundred percent focused, though—not when Zane was sitting at the next table over, watching me. And even though I know he’s just doing his job, when I’d glance over and meet his icy blue gaze... it was hard not to be drawn into it.

After my last tutoring session was done—the girl staring longingly at Zane before she reluctantly left the room—Zane escorted me back to his SUV, constantly watching, keeping his hand on my back, making sure I felt completely safe. I tried to thank him again, but every time I tell him thanks, he gets a weird look on his face so I’m trying to remember to stop it.

Now we’re headed to Yonkers and my apartment, so I can pick up my laptop and some clothes. Not that I don’t love what Georgia picked out for me—I do—but I miss *my* stuff. When I’m in the apartment at Blade and Arrow and I’m all alone, I need something familiar to comfort me—like my cozy flannel PJs and perfectly worn jeans and my favorite Cornell sweatshirt.

“How did the tutoring go?” Zane shifts his gaze from the road for a second to look at me. “It looked very... productive.”

“It went well. I helped one girl finish her English lit essay, and then I showed another student how to create an annotated bibliography.”

Zane chuckles. “I don’t even know what an annotated bibliography is.”

“Well, it’s a list of resources—” I stop myself, mentally smacking my forehead. *He doesn’t care what an annotated bibliography is.* “It doesn’t matter. It’s not that interesting.”

“Elle.” His tone is low, soft, but commanding my attention. “If you’re interested in it, it does matter.”

Oh. The flutter in my stomach must be because I’m hungry. That’s it.

“It’s just a list of all the resources you use when you research a paper,” I say, feeling slightly breathless for some reason. “And then you add notes to it, to describe each one. I have one for my dissertation.”

Zane clicks the directional and turns off the Parkway, then glances at me again. “How’s your dissertation going? It seemed like you were busy working on it the last couple of days.”

“Yeah, I was trying to catch up. I’ve been kind of... distracted.”

“That’s understandable, Elle.”

“Maybe.” I frown, gritting my teeth in frustration. “But I have to finish it. Fortunately, I have everything saved online, so I can use the laptop Leo gave me. But without all my notes at home, it makes it more difficult.”

Difficult is an understatement. I’ve been sitting in the apartment for the last three days doing a lot of staring and getting very little done. Part of it is the memories sneaking up on me—out of the blue, I’ll remember the smell of the man who grabbed me, or the feel of his arm across my neck. Another part is this restlessness that keeps my legs jumping, my attention constantly being pulled elsewhere.

And the people... but that's a welcome distraction. Like all the guys stopping by the apartment, checking on me, asking if I need anything. Georgia and Maya insisting on some girl time, bringing over a bottle of wine and a movie. And Zane, showing up each night for dinner with huge bags of takeout and asking me to share it with him.

I know everyone is being kind and they don't want me to feel lonely, but I also don't want to be a burden to them. Zane, Leo, Cole, Finn—they're already doing so much for me. Especially Zane. And the last thing I want is for Zane to feel obligated to spend time with the pitiful, scared woman he rescued.

"Hey, you okay?" The SUV slows as Zane pulls off the street into what I now realize is my apartment's parking lot. I keep spacing out at inopportune times and I hope that's only a temporary condition brought on by stress.

"Yes. I'm fine," I say, infusing confidence in my voice. "Just thinking about my dissertation." *Liar*. And now that I'm looking around at the familiar parking lot, I'm starting to feel the complete opposite of fine.

Zane's brows go up, but he doesn't argue with me, just parks near the entrance—sure, of course he gets a spot this close right away—and turns to face me. "Are you ready for this?"

"Yes." *Not really*.

My heart is jackhammering and I feel hot all over and for a second I wonder, do I *really* need my stuff? But I'm here and I'm the one who wanted to come, so this is another thing I'm not backing down from. Nerves sparking, I need to move, so I push out of the SUV, hopping down before Zane can come around to help me.

"Elle, hang on." Zane touches my arm, wrapping his fingers gently around it. "I know you want to get this over with." His eyes hold mine, calm and steady. "But we need to do it right. You stay right behind me the entire time, and I'll go into the apartment first to clear it. Don't separate from me for a second. Okay?"

My fear is rising, strangling my throat. But I force out a strained, “Okay.”

I know I shouldn’t be this frightened. No one knows I’m here. It’s the middle of the day. Even if someone was there, which is highly unlikely, Zane wouldn’t let anyone take me. But knowing it doesn’t stop me from being afraid.

We head up to my apartment, passing several other residents as we go. Everything looks normal and they smile pleasantly at me, but I’m still pressed so close to Zane I’d be embarrassed if I could think past my fear.

When we arrive in front of my door, it all looks the same as the last time I saw it. Plain beige, scratched in a few places, the apartment number slightly crooked as it’s always been. Even the welcome mat is the same, which surprises me. I don’t know why I had this image in my head of the mat being gone—maybe subconsciously I don’t want anyone feeling welcome to come in anymore?

Zane tests the doorknob, and it turns easily—apparently the man who took me wasn’t concerned about locking up after himself—and another jolt of fear spikes through my body. There’s no reason to think anyone is waiting in here, but still. I’m scared.

“Stay behind me,” Zane repeats as he pushes open the door and enters the apartment. He reaches into his pant leg to reveal an ankle holster and pulls a gun from it, holding it steady. I’m gaping at it like a stunned fish out of water—I’ve never seen a gun other than on TV and movies.

Not that I’m against guns. I have no problem with them. And if there’s someone waiting in here for us, I’m more than okay with them.

It doesn’t take long for Zane to clear my small apartment, and within a few minutes, we’re back in the living room. Now that we’re not moving, I scan the room and everything looks the same until—

“Zane.” I clutch his arm and he spins around, his eyes flashing dark and dangerous.

“What?” His gaze skips across the room, assessing, before landing back on me. “What’s wrong?”

“My desk.” I point at it, dimly noticing my hand is shaking. “My laptop, my phone, my tablet, they’re all gone.” My chest feels hollow and aching. I know I shouldn’t care about it so much—it’s just *stuff*—but it’s still a blow. And it’s worse to know it was stolen.

Zane tenses. “Shit.” He looks around the room again, this time searching the walls, windows, and furniture. As he turns to face the front door, he stiffens. “Shit.”

“What?” Did he see something worse?

He wraps a strong arm around me, pulling me into his side. “Elle. Did you install a security camera over the door?”

“What? Why would I do that?” I look up at him and his jaw could cut glass.

“If you didn’t,” he grits, “then someone else did. Someone who is probably watching and waiting for you to return.”

My heart stutters. “What?”

“Elle, we need to leave.” His voice is controlled but urgent. “Grab a few things from the bedroom, and I’m taking this camera with us.” I’m still staring at him, unmoving, until he nudges me. “If one person comes here for you, even two or three, I can take them out. But I’m not risking your safety. If there are things you want, get them *now*.”

* * *

I WISH I had never asked to go back to my apartment.

Then I wouldn’t know that my stuff was stolen, that the laptop I saved for was gone, my privacy invaded again, that someone put a camera inside my apartment to *watch* me. Watch and wait and come back to take me.

This is a nightmare.

The entire ride back to Blade and Arrow, all I keep thinking is *why me?* Clutching my duffel bag in my lap, clothes thrown hastily into it—I couldn't find my Cornell sweatshirt and it's one more little thing jabbing at me—I can't bring myself to speak.

Why me? Did I do something to catch someone's attention? This client... I feel sick thinking about it.

"Elle. Are you okay?" Zane has been casting quick worried glances at me ever since we left my apartment. His forehead is creased, and his mouth is pressed into a tight line.

"Um." *Think.* My brain feels shaken and shattered, but I have to pull it together so he doesn't get even more worried. My voice is flat but fairly steady as I answer him. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Mmm." He narrows his eyes at me, then wraps his arm around me again. "Come on."

And next thing I know, we're upstairs walking into what I assume is Zane's apartment. It has a similar layout to the one I'm staying in downstairs, with the living room opening to the kitchen and a dining area. A hallway leads off to the right—two doors are shut and one is open enough to give a peek at a large bed inside.

The apartment is decorated in muted blues and grays with sleek lines and brushed steel and abstract wall art in matching tones. There's a long, modern couch in charcoal fabric that faces an enormous TV, bookshelves stacked with fantasy novels flanking it on either side. The space is impeccably neat, no dust on any surfaces, no clutter; even the large area rug still has the telltale vacuum lines still showing.

A flicker of a question—*why am I here*—floats through my head. But everything is still fuzzy, scrambled, and it's easier to just let Zane take charge right now.

He guides me to the couch and deposits me there before grabbing the remote off the coffee table and flicking on the TV. After several seconds of scrolling, he finds *The Princess Bride* and hits play, then crouches down and meets my gaze.

His tone is kind but leaves no room for argument as he says, “I’m going to make some food. Then we’re going to eat and watch the movie and that’s all you need to think about right now.”

I don’t want to leave, but I also don’t want Zane to feel like he has to do this, so I force out a weak refusal. “It’s okay. I can go back downstairs.”

“You *can*. But you’re not.” The corner of his mouth twitches. “You’re staying right here.”

And I don’t have it in me to refuse again. Not when I so badly want to stay here in Zane’s comforting presence. So I lean back on the couch and give him a little nod of acceptance. “Okay.”

By the time we’ve finished grilled cheese and soup and made it halfway through the movie, I’m finally feeling more like myself again. My stomach has stopped lurching, my nerves aren’t raw and jumping, and the suffocating fear has released its grip on me. I’m actually chuckling at the funny parts of the movie, which I would have thought impossible only a couple of hours ago.

Zane is sitting next to me, not touching, but close enough that his scent—orange and musk and spice—wraps around me, comforting and tempting at the same time. The lights are dimmed and when I glance over at his profile, his features are all strong lines and shadows. Whenever he laughs along with me, a tiny dimple appears beneath his dark stubble and my heart should know better, but it still does a little flip.

No, I tell myself sternly. I’m a job to these men. And I should be grateful for it. Not lusting after a man who’s gorgeous and thoughtful and kind and—

Crap. This is so not the time to develop an unrequited crush on someone.

We watch the rest of the movie in companionable silence, except for the times we quote the characters in stereo. But once the movie is over, I don’t want to leave. The credits are

rolling and now my stomach is churning again and I'm fidgeting with anxiety when Zane saves me all over again.

"What made you decide to get your PhD?" He shifts so he's facing me on the couch, his knees now brushing mine. "If you don't mind me asking?"

Relief washes over me, cool and soothing. "No, I don't mind."

I turn towards him, and our knees are pressed together, the small contact making my skin tingle. "It wasn't my plan originally. When I was in undergrad, my plan was to get my Masters in social work and become a school counselor. But then I took a class in developmental psychology, and I was just fascinated by it."

"So what exactly *is* developmental psychology?" Zane gives me a crooked smile, his eyes teasing. "Can you figure out why I do things? Shrink my head?"

"No," I laugh. "Hardly. It's more studying human development and figuring out how we can use that knowledge to impact people's lives in a positive way."

Zane raises his eyebrows at me, giving me an impressed look. "Sounds like a pretty admirable goal. So what will you do once you get your PhD?"

"Ideally? I'd love to find a job at a college or university. Then I could teach and do research. But I have to get my PhD first, and that's..." A heavy knot forms in my gut. "It's been tough focusing on it lately."

"Elle..." Zane touches my arm, his expression clouding. "It's going to get better."

I hope so. The alternative is unthinkable. All the years I've spent working towards this, making it my only focus, and it could all fall apart at the end.

But I'm sitting with Zane and enjoying his company and I don't want to let this topic ruin it, so I quickly change the subject to something I'm much more interested in hearing about.

“What about you? What made you decide to join the Army?” As soon as the questions come out, worry seeps in—just because he asked me about school doesn’t mean he wants to share personal things about himself. “I mean, if you don’t mind telling me.”

His features tighten for a second and I’m already backtracking. “Never mind. It’s none of my business. I’m sorry.” I’m flustered and I’m afraid I just stuck my foot in my mouth and ruined the evening.

“It’s fine.” Zane smiles at me, all the tension disappearing almost like I’d never seen it. “I don’t mind you asking. It’s not a very interesting story, though.”

A burst of laughter pops out. “A former Green Beret and martial arts expert? I can’t imagine how that could be boring.”

His dimple comes out again. “Well, when you put it that way...” He pauses. “I joined the Army because I thought it would be fun. I know that sounds crazy, but I was a dumb teenager. I never thought about the hard stuff that would be involved, just that I could travel and serve my country and meet lots of interesting people.”

“Halfway through basic training, I realized how hard it was. But by then I was hooked. The structure, the discipline, the camaraderie, pushing myself to be the best—it was all the things I never knew until then would make me a better person.”

“Was that when you decided to join the Green Berets?”

“No. It was after my first deployment and I was back at the base; I saw a team of Green Berets training. I couldn’t believe how skilled they were and how well they worked together as a team. It was incredible. And I knew right then that I wanted to be one of them.”

“How long did it take?”

“A long time.” Zane chuckles. “There was a preparation course, assessment and selection, a qualification course, plus some additional training—I was a jumpmaster, so that was extra, for example. Over a year, easily.”

“How long were you in the Army?” My questions just keep spilling out. I don’t know a lot about the military, so I’m fascinated to learn about it.

His smile fades. This time, his answer is short. “About twelve years. I got out four years ago.”

I’m being too nosy. Heat creeps into my cheeks. “I’m sorry, Zane. Sometimes I get carried away asking questions.” Scooting to the edge of the couch, I move to get up. “I should go back to my apartment, anyway. I’m sure you have other things to do.”

“Wait.” His hand comes down on my leg, gently stopping me. “You don’t need to leave.”

“I don’t?” My voice is soft, uncertain.

Zane’s gaze holds mine, intense and filled with something unspoken. “Not unless you want to leave. But if you want to stay...” His expression turns hopeful. “We could watch another movie. And I think I have some ice cream...”

Yes. My chest swells with a happy relief. “It depends,” I tease, my smile returning along with my confidence. “What kind of ice cream?”

“Chocolate chip cookie dough, I think.” His eyes crinkle up at the corners. “Is that acceptable?”

“Hmm.” I tap my lips, thinking. “I suppose that would be alright.”

I sink back onto the couch, smile stretched wide, Zane’s knee still brushing against mine. When he grins back over at me, my heart jumps and my cheeks go warm.

“I’m glad you’re staying, Elle.” His eyes are a pale and captivating blue.

Ignoring the crazy fluttering in my chest, I tell him, “Me too.”

CHAPTER NINE

ZANE

I can't stop thinking about Elle's face at the meeting.

I knew she'd be upset, but it was still hard to see it. It was hard to watch her shoulders slump as Leo gently delivered the news that he'd yet to find any leads on her attackers. It hurt to watch as the color faded from her cheeks and her rosy lips pressed into a pale and trembling line.

When her gaze turned dull and dark and disappointed, I wanted so badly to comfort her. The lines of stress that had partially faded over the last couple of days came right back, tiny lines etched between her brows and across her forehead.

The Elle who smiled and laughed and quoted movie lines with me disappeared as Leo solemnly told her, "There's nothing yet, Elle. I'm sorry." He said more after that, about possible witnesses and hacking Ring doorbell cameras and she nodded somberly along with him, but the hope she carried into the meeting was gone.

She tried to hide it—the disappointment, the renewed fear—even forcing a smile as we wrapped up the meeting. But she couldn't disguise the strain in her voice or the way it wobbled as she thanked us for our help. And I know I'm not the only one who feels like crap about it.

"This sucks," Finn grumbled, "I can't believe there's nothing yet."

Leo frowned, his brow pulling down. "I've been searching, but there's nothing on any of the cameras at her apartment, the

hotel, or the library. I'm going to keep looking, but..."

"It's not your fault." Cole met Leo's frustrated gaze. "You'll find something. It'll just take more time."

"Yeah, I know. It's just—"

I jumped in, completing his sentence. "She looked crushed."

And I've been feeling bad about it ever since. It's been two hours since Elle left the meeting, and even though I wanted to follow her, I figured she just needed some time alone. But I've been imagining her in the apartment feeling lonely and sad and scared and fighting with myself about whether to go see her or not.

It's driving me crazy.

Maybe she wants to be alone. Just because it seemed like she felt better after we spent time together doesn't mean she wants me there now. Elle doesn't know me that well yet, and who am I to presume she wants my company?

But I feel like I know her. She didn't fake those smiles and her soft laughter all the times we watched movies and ate dinner and talked together. I didn't imagine how she relaxed on the couch next to me, enough to let her leg graze against mine.

And that's why I'm following my gut and heading to her apartment. And whether she wants to be alone or watch another movie or just sit in silence, I'm going to make sure she knows I'm there for her.

As I knock on her door, I'm preparing myself for a range of possibilities. Elle recovered, smiling, happy to see me. Elle with her shields up, grim faced and pale. Or worst of all, Elle red-eyed and crying.

What I'm not expecting is no answer at all. I knock several times, announcing myself softly at the door, my worry ratcheting up the longer she doesn't respond. She could be in the shower or taking a nap, but something in my gut is telling me the apartment is empty.

Elle has always answered the door right away before. And for this silence on the heels of that meeting... I'm worried. Not that something happened to her exactly, but that she's upset and doesn't have anyone to support her.

But she could be somewhere else in the building. The gym, or maybe visiting with Georgia or Maya. After one more try at her door, I head down to the basement to look for Elle. She could have decided to get some exercise to help with the stress. That's what I do when there are things I'm having trouble dealing with.

She's not there. Not in the gym, the sauna, even the firing range. Not in the panic room, not that I thought she'd be, but I checked anyway.

I text Georgia and Maya to ask if Elle is with them, but neither of them has seen her.

After another circuit of the building, my worry is edging on panic. Could she have left? Decided that since we hadn't made enough progress, she would try to solve things on her own?

No. That would be crazy. Wouldn't it?

My next stop is checking the security cameras. I didn't want to do it first off because it felt too much like spying on her. But now? My only concern is figuring out where Elle went.

When I spot her standing in the snow a few feet from the back door, relief slams into me, followed by a rush of anger. Why would she go outside on her own? We made it clear that she shouldn't go anywhere without one of us to protect her. Does she want to put herself in danger?

Granted, she's on our property, surrounded by a fence with alarms and cameras, but still. Something *could* happen to her.

I'm pushing the back door open and storming outside before I have time to think about anything other than getting to Elle. So when she turns towards me with startled eyes—safe and unharmed—a rush of emotion makes my words come out sharper than I intended.

“You’re not supposed to be out here alone.” I don’t give her a chance to say anything, barreling on. “We told you not to go *anywhere* by yourself. What were you thinking?”

“I...” She takes a step back, wrapping her arms around herself. “I thought it was safe out here...”

“It’s not safe for you anywhere,” I snap, heat building in my chest, “Not alone. You should never have come out here.”

My heart is thundering, and I don’t know why I’m so upset. The logical part of my brain is telling me to calm down, but I can’t seem to do it.

Elle is staring at me, her eyes wide and liquid amber in the midmorning sun. She swallows hard and her lips part like she’s about to say something, but freezes halfway.

And then tears start spilling down her cheeks, not just a few but a torrent of them. A shaky gasp comes out and her delicate face crumples. She’s turning away from me to hide her face in her hands and shit, shit, shit, I made Elle cry.

It’s a sledgehammer to my chest. *I made her cry*. All the heat of my anger fades as the cold realization takes over. Elle is crying, and it’s because of me.

“Elle.” I’m aching as I reach for her, no debating it, I just need to fix this. When I touch her shoulder to turn her around, she stiffens, and it’s another blow to my chest. But then she turns into me and I pull her into my arms and I breathe out through a tightening throat, “Elle, I’m *sorry*.”

She’s sagged against me, her arms snaking around my waist, not just crying but sobbing into my shirt. I’m rubbing her back and stroking her hair and murmuring to her, “I’m sorry, Elle, please don’t cry,” and I feel absolutely horrible.

I don’t know how much time goes by, but it’s enough to twist my heart in a knot.

Eventually her sobs turn to sniffles and shaky breaths, but she’s still clinging to me and I have no intention of letting her go until she wants me to.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, her voice muffled against my chest. “I didn’t mean to... to cry all over you.”

“No, Elle.” I stroke my hand down her hair, the strands like silk between my fingers. “*I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. I was worried—” I shake my head, pissed at myself all over again. “It’s not an excuse. I’m so sorry that I made you cry.”

“You didn’t.” She tilts her head back to look at me. Her cheeks are pink and damp and her lashes are glistening. “I know you were worried. It’s just... I’ve been trying to stay strong... It just all hit me. And I couldn’t stop the tears this time.”

I brush the dampness from her cheeks again, this time noticing how soft her skin is. It’s satin and her hair is silk and her soft curves feel so perfect in my arms and—

Shit. I shouldn’t be thinking this way about Elle. I don’t do relationships and she’s scared and needs me to support her, not lust after her.

Though it’s more than that. Elle is gorgeous, but she’s also smart and sweet and funny. And she’s so brave but small and fragile too—as I hold her in my arms there’s a need to protect her that’s so intense it nearly steals my breath.

“I should probably go back inside.” Elle drops her arms from my waist and pulls out of my arms, but her gaze is sad and conflicted. “I’ve already taken enough time... and I cried all over you...”

No way. I didn’t want her alone in her apartment before and I definitely don’t now. “Stay,” I tell her, catching her hand in mine. I cast about for a reason. “You haven’t seen the patio yet.”

“The patio?” Her brow wrinkles. “Isn’t it a little cold for that?”

It *is* cold and our breaths are visible, but I know something about this patio that Elle doesn’t. “Not for our patio.”

Still holding her hand, I guide her down a short path along the back of the house. It leads to a large gazebo-like structure

that's enclosed on three of its sides. The walls are made of reinforced steel and the open side faces the back of the house so it's protected just like the rest of the property. It doesn't look like much on the outside—more like a storage shed than a place to relax—but I think Elle will like what she sees inside.

As we walk onto the patio, Elle takes a quick breath, her hand tightening around mine. "*Zane*." Her eyes are darting around, taking in everything. "This isn't just an ordinary patio."

It's not. It's fully decorated with couches and high top tables and a long bar along one of the walls. On the opposite wall is a huge outdoor kitchen complete with two refrigerators, a sink, and a flat top grill. A hot tub sits flush against the third wall, large enough for at least six people.

It's basically like a living room outside, but with enough fresh air to light a fire or do some grilling. I tug Elle over to one of the outdoor couches and say, "Hang on, I have to turn everything on."

Once I've turned on the heat lamps and the gas fire pit and the strands of lights strung from the ceiling, I grab a blanket and come back to the couch to sit next to Elle, draping the thick fleece over our legs. It's still chilly, but the combined heat from the lamps and the fire will make the space feel warm in just a few minutes.

"This is amazing." Elle turns to look at me, her eyes now dry and bright with interest. "I would never have expected to find this out here. And it's already getting warm. Soon it won't even feel like winter."

"Yeah. We've grilled out here during snowstorms before and it's still been comfortable. But in the summer, it stays pretty cool since it's all shaded."

Elle's gaze shifts to the hot tub. "I bet it's nice going in there when it's snowing. All warm but being outside in the snow."

I haven't actually done that before, but now that I'm thinking about sitting in the hot tub with Elle... it sounds

pretty appealing. And now I'm imagining her in a bathing suit, all wet and flushed from the heat and—

Crap. This is *not* the time to think about that. Not when I'm sitting right next to Elle and she'd have to be blind not to notice me getting aroused.

"Cole did all this for Maya." *Yes. Think about literally anything other than Elle in the hot tub.* "When he asked her to move here, he offered to put in a hot tub. It was just a plain patio then—concrete, a regular grill, a couple of chairs and a table. But then Maya got hurt, and while she was recovering, Cole wanted to do something to surprise her."

"That's so sweet." Elle's features soften, the slightest hint of a smile pulling at her lips but not quite succeeding. "But..." Her brows draw together. "They won't mind me being out here? What if Cole and Maya want to—"

"They wouldn't care," I reassure her. "Once in a while, maybe once a month or so, Cole will let the rest of us know not to come out here so he and Maya can have a date. But the rest of the time, it's for everyone to use."

"Okay..." Her expression is still doubtful.

"So." I want to get Elle thinking about something positive. "You've been living in Yonkers for three years now, right?"

She shifts closer to me, her leg rubbing against mine. "Almost. I moved just before starting at Fordham, so it'll be three years in August."

"Do you like going to school in the city?"

"Most of the time." She pauses, her forehead wrinkling. "Driving there I don't like very much. And it was pretty overwhelming in the beginning. I had always lived in smaller towns, so New York City was intimidating. But once I got used to it, I started to like it."

"Have you spent much time exploring the city?" I'm watching Elle and I'm relieved to see the haunted look in her eyes fading and her cheeks getting color again.

She shakes her head and as her hair moves, the deep red catches glints of copper and gold. “Not that much, just a few museums, mainly. I didn’t know anyone here when I moved and then I got so busy with school and work—” She shrugs, raising her eyebrows at me. “I kept thinking I’d explore more but never got around to it.”

“Where would you *like* to go?”

“Well,” she cocks her head, thinking, “I never made it to the Museum of Natural History. Or a Broadway show. And I know it’s cheesy, but I’d love to go to the Harry Potter store. And one of those big bookstores, too.”

She goes silent but starts again a second later. “Oh. I’d like to see the Statue of Liberty. And the New York Public Library. I’ve seen photos and it looks beautiful inside. Did you know people get married there? How cool would that be?”

I can see her stress melting away as she talks and she’s so freaking cute; it’s all I can do to keep myself from pulling her into my arms again.

“That would be cool, Elle.” I’m smiling broadly at her, my cheeks actually hurting a little.

Her cheeks go pinker than before, the flush touching the tips of her ears. “I’m rambling. Sorry. What are your favorite places in the city?”

“I haven’t spent much time exploring either. But I like your ideas.”

“Maybe when all this is over...” she trails off, shifting her gaze to the crackling fire.

“I’d love to go to the museum with you. And the *Harry Potter* store.” The words burst out before I can think about them. *What am I doing?*

She stares into the fire for a minute or so, and I wish I knew what she was thinking.

But then Elle looks away from the fire pit and smiles at me. “When I left the meeting this morning, I felt so defeated.

But being out here, talking with you...it's just what I needed. Thanks for sharing this perfect spot and being here with me."

Her smile settles something inside me. "I like being out here with you, Elle. And anytime you want, I'll come out here with you."

As I tug the blanket closer around us, Elle leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder. "I would love that, Zane."

So would I.

CHAPTER TEN

ELLE

I never realized a man could look so sexy while he's scowling.

But somehow Zane has mastered it. His brows are drawn down and his jaw is rigid and he's tugging his hand through his hair with frustration. His eyes have darkened to slate as he narrows them at Cole.

"I don't know why you agreed to this." His arms cross his chest, muscles stretching the fabric of his dark blue Henley. "This is *not* a part of our plan."

Cole stares evenly at Zane, not bothered by his complaints in the least. "Because the women made a good argument. It's just a couple of drinks. And we're going to be with Elle the entire time. I don't think there's anything to worry about."

"Come on, Zane." Maya's voice is wheedling. "It's going to be you, Cole, Leo, and Finn. And we're only going to the Hop-less Horseman. We'll have a few drinks, play some pool, and most importantly, Elle will get a chance to unwind."

"I don't like it." Zane glances at me before meeting Cole's gaze again. "There's no reason to take any chances with Elle's safety. They can have a few drinks here. We can set up a dartboard in the basement. Or play one of Georgia and Leo's board games."

"We want to take Elle out," Georgia says, gently soothing. "She needs a break from being here all the time." She turns her head towards me, adding, "Right, Elle?"

“She gets a break. I take Elle to campus a few times a week.” Zane steps closer to me, still glowering at the rest of the group.

I’d like to go out, but I don’t want Zane arguing with his friends over me. “It’s okay.” I pat his arm, feeling the tension in his muscles. “I don’t need to go.”

Zane’s eyes move to mine, and his expression softens. His lips press together for a second before relaxing. “No. They’re right. You should go.” He sighs heavily before adding, “But you need to have someone with you all the time. I mean it.”

“Okay, Zane.” I beam at him, bubbles of excitement filling my chest. I’m going out and I’m going to have fun and feel like a normal person for a few hours at least. “I promise.”

He grumbles under his breath, but his hand is gentle as he grazes the small of my back. As we walk through the tunnel to the garage, Zane doesn’t stop touching me—just a little contact reminding me he’s nearby, protecting me. And when we get into one of the SUVs, he buckles my seatbelt before I can reach for it, his fingers lightly brushing my waist.

It’s a tempting and torturous anticipation. I’m so aware of him that even the smallest of touches sends tingles rushing across my skin.

Stop thinking about it. I have to keep reminding myself. Just because it feels like there’s something between us doesn’t mean that there is.

I’ve grown closer to Zane over the last couple of weeks—dinner together most nights and watching movies and talking for hours. We’ve hugged and I lean against him on the couch, tucked under the same blanket, even falling asleep on his shoulder sometimes. But he’s never crossed any boundaries, never said anything to hint that he wants to be more than friends.

But when he touches me...

When he touches me, it feels like more.

Like when we both reach for the remote and his hand lingers on mine before pulling away. The way his palm lightly

rests on my back whenever we walk together, searing and electric.

And when he looks at me, there's a heat, a desire that feels like more than professional interest or friendship.

I could be projecting my own feelings on him entirely, and in reality he views me as just a friend, or even worse, just a job obligation. But I can't believe it. There's just this pull between us. I can't be the only one feeling it. Am I?

Ugh. I haven't dated in so long I have no idea how to even imagine what a man is thinking. And what's going on in Zane's head? It's a complete mystery.

But I'm not going to spend my entire night thinking about it. I'm going to have a couple of drinks and talk with Maya and Georgia and not worry about anything.

* * *

OKAY, maybe not thinking about Zane and my complicated feelings for him was unrealistic.

We've been at the pub for a couple of hours now and it's impossible to stop thinking about Zane. He and the other guys are sitting at the table next to us, and I can't keep my gaze from sliding towards him every time there's a pause in the conversation. I like talking to Maya and Georgia—they're both lovely—but with Zane so close by, it's like there's an invisible magnet drawing my attention to him.

I glance over again and this time I'm busted. He sees me looking at him and his lips curve into a small smile. My cheeks flush—dammit—and he's on his way over to my table.

"I'm going to steal Elle for a bit," he says, reaching his hand out to me. "If that's okay—" His gaze shifts to mine. "I thought you might like to play darts with me?"

I am *horrendous* at darts, verging on deadly, but I'm not passing up the chance to spend time with Zane.

But maybe I should have warned him.

After I fling three darts into the floor and nearly hit an innocent passerby in the ass, I'm beet red and Zane is barely holding back his laughter. His shoulders are shaking and his lips are quivering and if I wasn't so embarrassed, I'd be impressed with his control. Especially because when I glance over at the Blade and Arrow tables, the rest of them are nearly in convulsions because of me.

"Um." I hand the darts to Zane. "I'm not very good at darts. Maybe I should have said that first."

He chuckles, eyes all crinkled and sparkling. "I think I figured that out." Then he cups my hot cheek with his hand and his gaze goes all soft and he says, "It's okay, bug. I can teach you."

His hand is gentle and cool on my face and little zips of electricity are shooting through my body and then it registers. "Bug?"

Zane stares at me, his smile sliding into something more serious. "Yeah. Because you're so little and you have beautiful red hair and then when you blush..."

I'm horrified. "You think I'm like a *red bug*?"

"No." His thumb strokes across my cheek. "Ladybugs are beautiful. And cute. And everyone likes them. That's why I said it." Concern tightens his features. "I didn't mean to insult you. I won't say it again, Elle."

Oh. Beautiful and cute?

"It's okay." I smile at him, my heart fluttering. "I like it." Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I pluck the darts out of his hand. "Now, will you teach me how to play without killing anyone?"

By the time we leave an hour later, I'm definitely not good at darts, but I've improved enough to hit the board more often than not. Zane was a good teacher, though it was hard to concentrate on what he was saying when his presence was so distracting.

It was hard to think about angles and trajectories when my body was a riot of sensations.

The heat of his body behind mine, the press of his hard chest against my back, his big hand on my arm as he helped me to aim.

His breath a whisper along my neck as he leaned over to give me instructions. The scent of him beside me—orange and musk and the faint aroma of hops from the one beer he drank. That hidden dimple appearing whenever he smiled at me.

And when Zane touched me... Never obvious, but I was hyper-aware of each contact just the same. When his hand slid down my back and lingered there, I felt a throbbing at my core. As he brushed my hair away from my face and let his fingers trail across my neck, my nipples tightened to hard points and I was never more thankful for wearing a thick sweater.

I don't think I'm the only one feeling it. Zane didn't have to touch me like that. His eyes wouldn't have held mine so long, dark and intense. He didn't need to spend all that time with me, ignoring his friends and all the women I noticed looking at him.

And when I went to the bathroom with Maya—Zane and Cole guarding right outside—she whispered to me, “I've never seen Zane like this with a woman before. He won't take his eyes off you.”

Does he have feelings for me? I keep running through the events of the evening in my head as we walk back to my apartment. All the touches, the glances, the smiles and my new nickname... It seemed weird at first, but each time Zane called me bug in his affectionate way, my heart did a little skip.

I don't want the evening to end, but Zane has to teach a class early tomorrow morning. He'd probably come in to watch a movie if I asked, but I'm not going to be selfish, no matter how much I want to be.

We make it to my door and I unlock it with the code, feeling strangely sad and empty. I had such a great night and now that I have to be alone, I'm dreading it. Steeling myself, I turn around to face Zane, ready to say goodnight, and he's gazing at me with an inscrutable expression.

“Thanks for tonight.” Part of me wants to drag this out, but the other says to rip it off like a Band-Aid. “It was really nice to get out, and spend time with everyone, and the darts lesson...”

He’s still staring at me, not saying anything, his eyes glued to mine. “So, um...” *Just do it.* “Goodnight. I hope your class goes well tomorrow...”

“Are you going to be okay tonight?” He touches my cheek, and that traitorous flush heats it again.

“Yes...” Is his face closer to mine? Could he be leaning in for a kiss or am I imagining things?

My heart is pounding and I’m hot and tingling and his hand is like a brand on my face. I want to kiss Zane, but I’ve never been the one to initiate it. What if I do it and he rejects me? On top of everything else going on in my life, I don’t know if I could take the humiliation.

But. Zane’s eyes have gone nearly black, and he’s definitely closer now. I can see his pulse jumping in his neck and the tight set of his face and his thumb is stroking along my cheekbone and my body is on fire for him—nipples pebbling and my core aching and—

I’m doing it.

Reaching for his face, I take it in both hands. His stubble is softer than I thought it would be. Zane is so much taller than me, so I have to stretch and pull him towards me and for a terrifying, frozen second, I think he’s going to pull away from me.

Except he doesn’t. Oh, *thank goodness*, he doesn’t.

Our mouths meet and everything around us fades into nothingness. All I can feel are his lips on mine, warm and soft, but quickly taking command. He nibbles at my lower lip, tasting and sucking and teasing. His arms come around me, one hand cupping the back of my head, the other at the base of my spine, pulling me into him.

His erection is long and hard, jutting into my belly. His hands are gentle but possessive, tilting my head as he devours

my mouth, sliding down to cup my ass as he lifts me. He's supporting me with one hand, raising me up so our faces are even.

Zane's tongue plunges into my mouth, and I breathlessly follow his lead. The kiss is hot and intense and he's swallowing my moans and oh my—

I have never been kissed like *this*.

My arms are twined around his neck, and I wish I could get even closer to him. My lungs are burning but if taking a breath means stopping this kiss, I'll go without breathing. Zane's heart is pounding—I can feel it through his chest and into mine.

I don't know how long the kiss goes on for. But eventually Zane ends the kiss and lowers me to the ground, cupping my cheek one more time before stepping away. We're only a foot apart, but it feels like a mile and I'm flustered and off balance and I wish I knew what to say next.

Zane is quiet, too. He shoves his hands in his pockets and looks down at the floor for a second before raising his gaze to mine. His jaw works, his brow lowering, and a spike of fear stabs into my chest. Is he regretting the kiss already?

“Zane...” It's forced out as my lungs fight for air. *Please. Don't reject me.*

“It's late, Elle.” I've never thought much about how much bigger Zane is than me, but now he has the power to squash me.

I can feel my chest squeezing into a hard knot. “Okay.” *Don't cry. Don't cry.*

“Ah, bug.” All his features soften, and Zane sweeps me into a hug. He presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Everything is fine.” Setting me back from him, he holds my gaze. His voice is gentle. “It's just late, and you've been drinking.”

“Just a couple,” I rush to answer. “I'm not drunk. Not even a little.”

“I know.” He takes my hands in his, brushing his thumbs over my palms. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Elle. Don’t worry. Everything is fine.”

He’s smiling at me—a small one, but it looks genuine. And nothing that Zane is saying is wrong. But there’s a premonition of something bad, and I’m scared, anyway.

“Go to sleep.” Zane pushes my door open and nudges me inside. He drops another kiss to my head, then says, “It’s fine. We’ll talk tomorrow. Don’t worry.”

I nod at him, heart lodged in my throat. “Okay, Zane. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He leaves with another half-smile, and I make a beeline for the couch as soon as the door shuts. Yanking a throw blanket over myself, I burrow under it, hiding.

Zane said it was fine. But I’m worried.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZANE

When I screw up, I *really* screw up.

And I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. About all the mistakes I made last night.

Coming up with the brilliant idea to teach Elle to play darts, knowing I'd be touching her and seeing her sweet smile, and that blush across her cheeks that just does something to me.

Calling her bug. Nicknames are for teammates and girlfriends and Elle isn't either of those. But it slipped out and after I explained why I called her that, she looked so pleased, I couldn't stop myself from saying it.

Kissing her. That was a big one. Not that I didn't want to do it. I had been thinking about it all night and I was already halfway there when Elle took the initiative—blushing again, so freaking cute—I was powerless to stop it. And I wanted more.

She felt so right when I held her. Feeling her nipples pebbling and how she shifted against me, her heat calling to me. Her breathy sighs into my mouth, her fingers clutching at my shoulders, and her ass... small, but like a perfect peach in my palm.

And now I'm hard all over again. At least I'm not in public this time. When the memories of Elle in my arms hit me at the gym, I had to quickly turn to re-stack a pile of mats so no one would see my arousal. And again when I was leaving—that

time I was able to duck into the bathroom before I ran into anyone.

She's all I've been able to think about. Not the women in my self-defense class—none of them hold a candle to Elle. I don't want to look at tall women with big breasts or blondes with carefully applied makeup or listen to harsh laughs and sharp giggles.

Now, all I think about is shining red hair and freckles and bright amber eyes and a soft laugh, all in a cute little package that I want to tuck into my arms and carry with me.

Crap. The things I'm thinking about... It's like what I heard from Cole and Leo when they were dating Maya and Georgia. How they didn't even look at any other women. How they thought about them all the time. How everything about their women was *perfect*.

But I'm not looking for a relationship. And I clearly wouldn't be good at it. Case in point—how I screwed up one last time last night with Elle. After we kissed, I shut her out and I know I made her feel bad about it. Made her feel like *she* did something wrong. And I feel shitty about it.

But the truth is, I wanted that kiss as much as she did, and I want more of them. It's not a good idea, and I'll have to talk to her about it. But I'm just not sure what to say.

Once I get back to Blade and Arrow, I head to Cole's office. He sent me a text while I was in my class asking to meet when I got back so we could go over Elle's case. Leo and Finn are there too; Leo tapping away on his laptop and Finn leaning back in a chair.

I slide into the empty seat next to Finn and tip back, resting my feet on Cole's desk. He eyeballs me, a tiny smile twitching, before knocking my feet off the worn wood. "Get your damn feet off my desk."

But he's laughing—we've known each other so long we know exactly how to push each other's buttons.

Grinning at him, I sit up and dust off the edge of the desk, wiping at imaginary smudges. "Better?"

“Yes.” He shakes his head. “How was class?”

Finn leans forward, smirking. “How many women asked you out this time?”

“None.” At their raised eyebrows, I say, “I ducked out as soon as class ended. There wasn’t time to talk to anyone.”

“Not interested in any of them?” Finn looks at me meaningfully. “Thinking of someone else, maybe?”

“No.” My voice is tight.

“Come on, Zane. We all saw you last night.” Leo looks up from his laptop. “And you’ve been spending almost every night with her.”

“We’re just watching movies. And I showed her how to play darts.”

Cole leans across his desk, his gaze calm but sober. “There’s nothing wrong with spending time with her, Zane. Or being friends with her. And after Maya and Georgia, I’m certainly not going to say you shouldn’t date her. But.”

He sighs, his brow going down. “If you aren’t interested in Elle that way, you’re going to end up hurting her. So be careful.”

“We’re just friends.” At his doubtful look, I double down, even though I don’t know why I’m doing it. “You know I don’t do relationships. And I’m going to make sure Elle understands that.”

“So you won’t mind if I spend some more time with her.” Finn’s statement yanks my attention towards him.

My voice is sharp. “What do you mean?”

“Well, when I stopped by earlier to bring her some donuts and coffee, she mentioned she was just about to finish her dissertation.” Finn shrugs at me. “She might want to celebrate. So if you’re not interested in her...”

Fuck. There is no way I’m letting Finn celebrate with Elle. Have dinner with her. Sit next to her and watch her smile and maybe hug her and—

“No way.” I scowl at Finn. “Don’t even think about it. If she’s going to celebrate, it’s going to be with me.”

“Mmhm.” Finn eyes me knowingly, his mouth twitching. “Just as I thought.”

Damn them. Sometimes these guys are real assholes.

“So now that we have that out of the way.” Cole’s tone dips; now back to business. “We need to talk about the progress on Elle’s case.”

Everyone in the room straightens, faces going grim.

“I haven’t found anything,” Leo says, frustration bleeding into his words. “I’ve checked security and CCTV footage all around the apartment, hotel, and library. There are too many people around the library to pinpoint anything suspicious. And the interior cameras only picked up one person who could have been the one who grabbed Elle, but the angle of his face makes him unidentifiable.”

Leo sighs heavily, his features creasing. “The apartment is a bust, no CCTV cameras nearby, and the security cameras were broken.”

“On purpose?” Cole asks.

“Probably. And it’s the same at the hotel—no coverage or the cameras are broken.” Leo shakes his head, then continues, “In my opinion, someone took out the cameras ahead of time. This obviously has been planned out from the start.”

“What about the guy who attacked Elle outside her apartment? That seemed risky.” My fists clench as I think about it. “Someone could have come by any time.”

“My guess,” Cole says, “is that the plan was to grab Elle inside her apartment. But when the guy saw her outside... he decided to take advantage.”

Finn jumps in. “What about the camera you found in Elle’s apartment?”

“Nothing,” Leo replies, frowning. “No fingerprints, standard interior camera, and it was deactivated by the time I got to look at it. Whoever placed it there probably turned it off

as soon as they realized Elle wasn't coming back to the apartment on her own."

Damn it. I knew it was unlikely that we'd get any information from the camera, but I was hoping. "Anything suspicious from her friends? Family? What about students and teachers in her PhD program?"

Leo shakes his head. "Nothing yet. And it's possible none of them are involved. Elle being targeted could be random, or it could be someone she barely knows." Leo's expression darkens, and I know he's thinking about the man who terrorized and abducted Georgia. The man had been obsessed with her since high school, but he wasn't a friend or even an acquaintance, just a classmate she rarely spoke to.

"I think we need to consider other options." Cole's gaze moves to each of us, ending on me. "We may need to use Elle to draw them out. As long as she's protected, they aren't going to make a move."

"No." Heat flares in my chest. "We can still find out who's behind it another way. It's not worth putting Elle at risk."

Cole regards me evenly. "Even if it means this drags on for months? Putting Elle's life on hold? And we have other jobs, other cases. We can't dedicate months to this."

"So you want to throw Elle to the wolves?"

Leo answers me. "Zane, that's not what Cole is saying. None of us are going to abandon Elle."

"Of course not." Cole frowns at me, his eyebrows pulled in a deep V. "That's not what we do here, and you know it."

I'm still pissed, but I grumble, "I know."

"Elle has protection here for as long as she needs it," Cole says. "But there's going to be a point where we all need to take other jobs, other cases. And she'll be stuck here if there's no one to take her places. And that's not fair to her."

I want to deny it or insist that *I'll* stay with Elle. But I know that's not how this company works, no matter how I feel about her. Forcing my jaw to unclench, I say, "Let's just give it

a little longer. See if anything pops up this week. Then we can talk to Elle about changing the plan.”

Cole glances at Finn and Leo, and they each give a brief nod. Then he lifts his chin at me, accepting my suggestion. “Okay, Zane. One week, and we’ll reassess.”

I love my teammates like brothers, but I’m still feeling on edge about last night and now Cole’s suggestion. So I’m glad to leave the room and even though my initial plan was to head to the gym, that’s not where I end up going.

Standing in front of Elle’s apartment, I’m suddenly nervous. After last night, I’m not sure what to expect. Will she want to talk about the kiss? Will she be upset with me and not want to talk at all? Or will she pretend it never happened?

I’m not sure which of those options I want. And I’m not sure what I’ll tell her, either. There’s a part of me—my heart, my selfish desires—that wants to claim her, if she’ll let me. But then there’s the other part—the guilt, the quiet voice reminding me of how many mistakes I’ve made—that says I’m better off being alone.

So I still haven’t knocked; I’m just standing here like an idiot when Elle pulls the door open anyway. Concern is etched into her features. “Zane. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, of course.” Great. It’s not bad enough that I confused her last night, but now I’m doing it again. “I just...” *Get it together.* I’ve gone on dozens of missions and never felt this rattled. “I heard you finished your dissertation.”

“Yes.” All the little lines of worry smooth out and Elle beams at me. “I still have some editing to do, but it’s all written.”

“That’s great, Elle.” She looks happy, but there’s still a hint of uncertainty darkening her eyes. And I bet I know what—who—put it there. She should be enjoying this victory, and I don’t want anything I did to ruin it.

“Are you coming in?” The uncertainty is still there and I’m feeling it too. Last night as I lay in bed, I was sure I’d tell Elle we could only be friends. But now, looking at her, I know I’m

not ready to make that decision. I'm not ready to lose what I feel when I'm with her.

So I say a mental *fuck it* and I pull Elle into my arms instead, picking her up and hugging her. I don't kiss her, even though I desperately want to. But I do let my lips brush across her hair, closing my eyes and breathing in the light scent of her shampoo.

Once I put her down, she looks completely happy, and the relief is overwhelming. "Do you want to celebrate tonight?" I smooth her hair down from where I messed it up. "After tutoring, we could have a movie marathon with popcorn and candy. We could go out to the patio. Or we could have a game night with Leo and Georgia, if you want."

Elle smiles up at me, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks pink and so cute it makes my heart ache. "I'd love a movie marathon. But the patio... do you think..." She trails off, going even pinker.

"What?"

"Maybe we could go in the hot tub?" The words all slide together and Elle stares down at the floor, the tips of her ears bright red.

Going in the hot tub with Elle? It may kill me to sit next to her and not drag her into my arms and touch every inch of her body, but if that's what she wants, we'll do it. So I tip her chin up and hold her gaze, not letting her look away. "Okay, bug. After tutoring, we'll go in the hot tub."

CHAPTER TWELVE

ELLE

This is turning out to be a great day.

I wasn't so sure about it when I woke up this morning. Everything that happened with Zane last night was running through my head on repeat. The amazing kiss, but then the disappointing reaction afterwards. Not knowing if he was happy about the kiss or regretted it.

But then Finn came by with donuts and coffee, joking and teasing me about darts and offering to set up a board outside so I could practice without maiming anyone.

And I somehow focused enough to finish my dissertation. Maybe it was getting to relax at the bar last night, or maybe the kiss got all my synapses firing. Whatever it was, I blew through ten more pages and now all I have to do are the edits and revisions. Which is still a lot, but the hardest part of the dissertation is done.

Then Zane came by. At first I got scared; he looked so serious I was sure he was about to give me the *we're-better-off-as-friends* spiel, or worse, the *we-need-to-keep-this-professional* talk. I was mentally shoring up my defenses—anticipating disappointment—when he hugged me and I felt him kiss me on the head.

Not the same as last night, but much better than outright rejection.

Now we're going to celebrate tonight, in the hot tub, and I can't wait. I'm scared and I know Zane is still holding back,

but maybe once we're together in the water and we only have bathing suits on and I can see all of Zane's body and his muscles I've been envisioning...

"Are you okay, bug?" Zane glances away from the road to look at me. "It sounded like you were in pain."

Oh. OH. Did I just moan? In the car? Next to *Zane*? My face gets hot so fast I think I might explode from embarrassment.

"No," I mumble, staring with great interest at the scenery passing by. "I'm fine."

I think I hear a little chuckle, but I'm *dying* here. So when my phone rings I'm so desperate for a distraction, I yank it out of my bag and manage to send everything else in there flying. Wallet, chapsticks, scrunchies, tissues, a tampon—could this get any worse—

Yes. Yes, it could. There's the condom I got when one of the college clubs was handing them out on campus. And I'm scrambling to pick it all back up while the phone is still incessantly buzzing at me.

"Bug." Zane's hand comes down on my leg, gently squeezing. "Relax. Just answer the phone. We'll pick everything else up once we stop."

Face flaming, I tap to answer the call. "Hello?"

Zane takes my free hand and squeezes it, resting our entwined hands on my leg. It helps me settle a tiny bit, eases the flustered feeling, so I can concentrate on whoever is calling.

"Elle?" I hadn't checked the caller ID when I answered, but I recognize the voice immediately. But she sounds stressed and worried—an awful lot like I've sounded lately.

"Anya, what's up?" Zane is stroking his thumb across my hand and my attention is split in two. Anya and I have taken a few classes together and gotten coffee after, but I'm not sure she's ever called me. We usually just meet up right after class or send a quick text.

“Have you seen Chloe?” There’s a wobble to her voice that draws my full focus.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve been... off campus a lot. Why?” Chloe is Anya’s long-term partner and I’ve met her a few times, but we’re in different PhD programs, so it’s rare that I would just run into her on campus.

“She’s missing.” Anya snuffles, her voice cracking as she continues, “I haven’t seen her in three days. I contacted the police, but all they said was she’s an adult, maybe she wanted to break up... They didn’t think there was anything to worry about.”

“Anya, I’m so sorry. What can I do?”

“I don’t know—” She takes a shuddering breath. “I’m just calling everyone that knows her. Asking the last time they saw Chloe.”

When *was* the last time I saw her? “I think... The last time I saw Chloe was for a study we both volunteered for. One of the developmental psychology professors was running it. But that was probably three months ago.”

“Oh.” Her breath gusts out. “Okay. Well... if you see her, tell her to call me. Even if she doesn’t want to see me. I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“I will, Anya.” I feel terrible for her. And I hope it’s just a relationship issue and not something more sinister. “And let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

By the time I hang up, we’re on campus, and Zane is parking the car. He puts it into park and turns to me, concerned. “Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know. That was a friend of mine—she hasn’t seen her partner in three days, and she’s worried. But I haven’t seen Chloe—her partner—in months. So I’m not any help, unfortunately.”

“That sucks. Hopefully, it’s just a fight or a misunderstanding.”

“I hope so.” I’m still thinking about Anya until I look down and see all the contents of my bag strewn across the floor of the car. *Eeep*. I’m an adult and I should not be embarrassed for Zane to see a tampon or a condom, but somehow my inner pre-teen has taken over temporarily.

Fortunately, by the time I’ve gotten everything put back in my bag and we’re headed to the library, my mind is back to tutoring and events afterwards. Three hours of tutoring sessions and then the rest of the evening with Zane. Maybe I shouldn’t be so excited about it—he hasn’t said anything about commitments or relationships—but I can’t help it. There’s just something about Zane that I’ve never come close to feeling with anyone else.

We get to the library and I’m less freaked out there than I was before. It’s still a little nerve-wracking going in there, but with Zane beside me, I feel so much safer. He gives me a little side hug before we go inside, his hand rubbing my arm in small circles, helping release some of my tension.

I’m getting better at pretending Zane isn’t in the room while I’m tutoring. Not that I want to ignore him, but the students I’m working with deserve my full attention. I follow the same routine each time I get into the room: put my stuff on one of the tables, open up my laptop and pull out my supplies, organizing notecards and post-its and pens in tidy piles.

Once I’ve done that, I head to the small refrigerator they keep for the tutors to use. We all stock it with our favorite drinks and there’s an unspoken understanding that none of us steal anyone else’s. It’s been a while since I thought about restocking, so I’m relieved to see that I still have one peach iced tea left.

Reminder to self—buy more iced tea. I tap a quick note in my phone before settling back into my chair and waiting for the first student to arrive. Zane gives me a little wink from his seat nearby and my heart lifts again—a balloon I really hope won’t get popped.

My mood is still glowing, and tutoring is going well halfway through the first hour. My student remembered to

include his in-text citations in his draft essay, and he's coming up with some good arguments. Zane is doing his sexy protective bodyguard thing and I've only stolen a few glances towards him, meeting his intense gaze every time.

The first signal that something is wrong is the lurch in my belly. At first, I try to ignore it.

Then my stomach squeezes, flips over, and starts to churn. It comes on fast, nausea pulsing in waves and my body breaking out in a cold sweat. My face is clammy and hot and my heart is pounding. Saliva fills my mouth, and the nausea gets stronger, rising into my throat.

Crap. This is bad. I'm going to be sick and I can't do this in front of my student, and definitely not in front of Zane.

I stagger to my feet and rush to the door and oh, crap, I'm terrified I won't make it. Zane runs after me, his voice worried and urgent. "Elle, what's wrong?"

Jogging to the nearest bathroom, my hand clapped over my mouth, I can't say anything to him for fear of losing it right in the hallway. It's only once I'm in one of the stalls, hunched over, stomach constricting painfully, that I'm able to call out a weak, "Zane?"

"Elle." He's in the bathroom, but not right next to the stall, so I'm guessing he's standing in the doorway. "Bug, are you okay? Do you need a doctor?"

Another wave of nausea sweeps over me, and this is awful. I don't want Zane nearby; we were supposed to have a nice night and now I'm throwing up and he can *hear me*.

"I'm fine." Tears burn behind my eyes. "I will be. Can you... just wait outside, Zane? *Please?*"

"Bug, it's alright, you don't have to be embarrassed." His voice is so kind and soothing and it's all I can do not to weep. "I don't want to leave you alone, though."

"Just right outside." I'm going to throw up again and I plead with him. "Please. You'll be right there. Please?"

There's a pause, then a heavy sigh. "I'll be right outside the door. But call out if you need me. And if I don't hear from you soon, I'm coming in."

I can't answer. As soon as the door shuts, I'm throwing up again. It's painful and violent, something wrenching inside me, but thankfully it passes somewhat quickly. After another few minutes, it feels like everything has passed and I'm slumped on the cool tile feeling weak and wrung out.

Zane's voice floats through a crack in the door. "Elle?"

"I'm okay." I drag myself out of the stall and over to the row of sinks. "I think it's over. I'll be out soon." Then I look in the mirror and recoil in fright. My hair is all limp and my face is chalk white with shadowy smudges under my eyes. I splash water on my face and rinse my mouth several times, patting my cheeks in an attempt to get some color back.

My stomach seems to have settled, though my chest is sore and my throat feels raw. I'm tired and all I want to do is go home and curl up on the couch. My hot tub plans for the evening are definitely ruined now and the disappointment makes me want to cry.

I really don't want Zane to see me looking like this, but I can't hide in here forever. So I rinse my face off one more time, the cool water a relief to my heated cheeks. Just as I'm turning away from the sink, a tiny noise makes me freeze.

My neck prickles. Something is wrong.

But before I can move, yell, do anything, it happens again.

NO! Please, no. Not again. NO.

A hand on my face, clamped over my mouth. Bruising and painful and suffocating.

An arm around my chest, tight as a vise. Hot breath on my ear, quietly chuckling.

I'm silently screaming. *NO. It's not fair, why me, I can't do this again, please don't touch me, please stop.*

I'm fighting against him, but it's like kicking a wall. I'm powerless.

Then something needle sharp pricks at my neck.

NO! Fear is shaking me, claws ripping. I can't breathe, and the terror is paralyzing. Over and over in my head, shouting—*I can't. I can't. I can't.* Please, don't take me again.

The needle plunges deep and panic rips through my body. Why did I make Zane leave? He's right out there but he can't hear me and oh, no—there's a window in here—

Whatever was in that needle is already dragging at me, pulling me towards the dark. But there has to be something. Zane is so close.

The earring. The tracker. My thoughts are scattered, sleepy, but I force myself to focus. What did Leo say about the tracker?

“Press it in the center.” Leo's voice comes back through a fog. *“Press it hard, and it will signal that you're in trouble. We'll get the alert right away.”*

Yes. The earring. My muscles are slow and moving them is so hard, but I manage to reach up and grab at it. With the last of my waning strength, I push at the earring as hard as I can.

Please, Zane. Please save me again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ZANE

I should have insisted on going in there.

Holding her hair, getting wet paper towels, rubbing her back—I should be in there making sure Elle is okay. I know she doesn't want me to see her getting sick, but it's nothing to be embarrassed about.

The second the alert sounds on my phone, I know I made a mistake. Elle is sick, and she needs me to take care of her.

Why didn't she call out? She talked to me just minutes ago. All the things that could be wrong—food poisoning, internal bleeding, appendicitis—fly through my mind with frightening speed. I've trained in first aid, but what if that's not enough?

How close is the nearest hospital? Is there a clinic on campus? Do I trust just anyone to treat Elle?

Worry is swamping me as I rush into the bathroom, the door ricocheting off the wall. My pulse is racing double time, fear shortening my breath, my mind already ticking through possible scenarios and questions.

And then.

It's the last thing I expected to see.

A large man, my height but a good fifty pounds heavier, dressed all in black. Unruly brows and a bulbous nose and a satisfied smirk on his bearded face.

And *Elle*. Rage is an inferno, setting me ablaze.

My *Elle*—so small and vulnerable and *how DARE he touch her*—trapped behind a thick arm, locked against his chest.

She's dangling in his hold, barely moving, her struggles weak and uncoordinated. Her eyelids are drooping, fighting against sleep but quickly losing. A trickle of blood runs down the side of her neck, violent crimson against her pallor.

His other hand is gloved and holds an empty syringe.

Behind him, a tall frosted window cracked open.

Elle's eyes flutter open and she looks at me, dazed and unfocused.

Elle!

Fear and rage combine into a supernova, all my fury exploding as I sprint towards him. All my decades of training culminate in this moment. No checking my blows, no non-lethal methods; I'll do whatever it takes to stop him.

I'm across the bathroom in seconds, eyes blazing, locked on the other man with an unspoken message. But there's no mistaking my intent. Every muscle flexed and ready to attack, my strategy set; there's no doubt in my mind who will win.

He's backing away, but he's slow and no match for my speed. His features go tight and fear ripples across his face and his eyes flash with recognition. "*You,*" he hisses.

It's the same man as before—the same one I took out without breaking a sweat. As my arm cocks back to make my first move, my smile is deadly. "*Yes.*"

My hand is flying towards him—eye strike first, inside chop, leg sweep, groin—when he *flings* *Elle* at me.

She's barely conscious, boneless, collapsing towards me. Fuck. There's no following through on my attack. Without thinking, my muscles react, and instead of striking him, I check my blow and lunge forward to catch her.

Elle is helpless and limp in my arms and the fucker runs to the window and shoves it wide open. He's squeezing out and I hear him shouting at someone outside—an accomplice?—and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. My mind is going a thousand miles a second and I'm vibrating with rage.

He touched her. Hurt her. Terrorized her. Tried to take her again. Anger and terror and guilt and worry snake their way around me, tightening and stealing my breath.

I lift Elle against my chest, one arm under her legs and the other behind her back. Her head falls onto my shoulder and she's not moving and my heart is seizing with fear. What did he give her? What if it was too much? Elle's so tiny, the wrong dosage could kill her.

As I curl her body into mine, Elle moans, a soft sound that's a dagger slicing into me. "Zane?" It's a slurred whisper filled with fear.

"Yeah, bug." It's hard to get out the words, my throat thick with emotion. "I'm here."

Jogging back into the tutoring room, I bark at the startled student still waiting for Elle to return. "Grab her stuff. Follow me to the car." He stares at me but doesn't move, his gaze jumping to Elle.

He stammers, "What happened to her?"

I don't have time for this. So I use the same voice I mastered as a commander in the Army and snap, "She's sick. Get her stuff quickly." It jolts him into action and as he's hurriedly jamming Elle's things in her bag, I glance at the table and add, "The drink too."

Each second I'm waiting to get Elle to the hospital feels like a terrifying eternity.

"Zane." This whisper is even weaker than the last, barely audible.

"It's okay, bug." I hug Elle closer and kiss her forehead, feeling panicked and as rattled as I've ever been. "I've got you. You're safe."

* * *

GUILT IS a terrible and suffocating thing.

It chokes me as I stand in the doorway of Elle's hospital room watching her sleep, the terror of almost losing her hitting me over and over, knowing I could have stopped it.

"Fuck, Cole. I should have been there." My voice is low, a harsh whisper ripped out of me.

Cole's expression is grim. He sighs, then says quietly, "There was no way to know, Zane. None of us thought they'd go that far... But it's done, Elle is safe, and the doctor said she'll be fine."

"Except she's *not* fine." I gesture towards Elle, pale and still and so tiny beneath the sheets. "She was drugged, bruised"—my jaw clenches, sending shooting pains through my teeth—"and so fucking scared, Cole. When she looked at me..."

I have to take several deep breaths before continuing. "It shouldn't have happened. I failed her."

"No, you didn't. You got her out of there. And she was sick, begging you to stay out, embarrassed..." He shakes his head. "If it had been Maya asking me, I would have done the same thing."

It's not enough. "I feel so fucking guilty."

"There's no point." Before I can argue, he raises his hand, stopping me. "Do you know how many times I've relived the day Maya was taken? Beat myself up for not being there?"

My response is immediate. "It wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not." Cole's eyes darken with the same guilt I'm feeling. "But either way, holding on to the guilt was hurting me and Maya. It didn't accomplish anything. We're human, Zane. We can't know everything."

I look away from Cole, my gaze going back to Elle. "I'm not leaving her again."

There's a long pause, then he asks, "So you've made your decision?"

"Yes." There's no hesitation. All the reasons for holding back—guilt, self-doubt, my stubborn resistance to relationships—I don't care about them anymore. The only thing that matters is being with Elle. "I can't lose her. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her."

"Good." He gives me a quick smile before sobering. "Now. One good thing about this recent move is it gives us more to work with. Leo is running through all the security footage in the library, and Finn is questioning potential witnesses."

"What about the iced tea?" The doctor who examined Elle said it was possible the rapid onset of her sickness could have been from some kind of drug. The iced tea is the only thing I know of Elle having today aside from the donuts and coffee Finn brought her, but since he had them too and was okay, it's unlikely they're the culprit.

"Rylan just got back from a job this afternoon—he picked it up from Leo and dropped it off at the lab. If there's something in it, we should know by tomorrow."

"We have to find something." Frustration beats at me. "It's been too long without any progress."

"We will—"

A quiet moan has me rushing to the side of Elle's bed, my heart in my throat. The doctor said she'd be okay, just needed time for the drug she was given to wear off, but what if he was wrong? What if Elle is sick, in pain...

Amber eyes open, confusion and fear darkening them. Her gaze bounces from the monitors to the IV bag to the windows before landing on me. Recognition flares, and her lips start to tremble. "Zane? What..."

The fear in her voice slays me. "It's okay, bug." I take her hand, the one without an IV in it, and stroke it tenderly. "You're safe, you're in the hospital, but you're going to be fine."

Elle stares up at me, eyes too big in her face, so damn pale and fragile. Light bluish smudges in the shape of fingerprints mark her jaw on both sides from where that fucker grabbed her. A small bandage is stark white on her neck, and it makes me feel sick to look at it.

Too close. It was too damn close.

“How are you feeling?” Elle woke up briefly about an hour ago, still groggy and flinching against the dimmed lights in the room. I stroked her head until she fell back to sleep and I’m hoping she’s in less pain now.

“Um.” She blinks, taking stock. “Better, I think. My head doesn’t hurt as much.” Then a long pause, and there’s a hitch in her voice as she asks, “Did he... did he get away?”

Guilt rises up, icy cold and poisonous, but I ruthlessly shove it down. Elle is more important than my feelings. “I couldn’t leave you to go after him. But we’ll find him, Elle. I promise.”

She swallows hard, her chin jutting out, face working to control her emotions. “It’s okay, Zane.” Her fingers tighten around mine and she says quietly, “I was thinking about you. When I pushed the earring. I was hoping you’d come. And you did.”

“Of course, bug.” I’m stroking her hair and holding her hand and my heart is so full of emotion I don’t know what to do with all of it. “I’m just sorry I didn’t get there sooner.”

Elle goes quiet, her eyes fixed on mine, the fear slowly fading. “When can I go home?”

“Tomorrow morning. The doctor just wanted to observe you, make sure there isn’t a reaction to the medication you were given. He said you may be tired tonight, but by tomorrow you should be feeling back to normal.”

Brow furrowing, Elle narrows her eyes at me. They’re clear and alert and it looks like the effects of the drug are fading. “How do you know? The doctor isn’t supposed to—”

“I told him you were my fiancée.” And I don’t feel the least bit bad lying about it. There was no way I was letting

Elle out of my sight and if telling the doctor a little white lie meant I could stay with her, I'd do it again in a second.

Before Elle can say anything, I explain, "I'm not leaving you alone, bug. Not for a second. And this way, I can stay with you all night."

Hope brightens her face before fading. "You want to stay? All night? You don't have to..."

"Yes, Elle." I lean down and brush my lips across hers. "And not just tonight. I'm taking you back to my apartment tomorrow, and I'm going to take care of you. The way a man takes care of his woman. Because I'm done trying to deny how I feel about you."

"Your *woman*?" Her delicate brows arch up. "How *do* you feel?"

How do I explain a feeling? How do I express something I can't put words to?

"I know I feel more complete with you than I've ever been with anyone. And I think about you all the time. Not just how beautiful you are, how sexy, how much I want you—but your smiles and your laughter and how damn smart you are. I like everything about you, Elle. And I want you to be mine. If you'll have me."

"*Zane*." A hint of pink touches her cheeks and a smile pulls at her lips. Her eyes call to me—soft with affection and hope and happiness amid all the stress and fear. "Of course I will."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ELLE

I guess there really is a silver lining to everything.

Nearly being abducted for a fourth time? I never could have imagined a silver lining to that.

Not that I'm happy about what happened yesterday. Getting sick, that horrible man, the absolute terror and helplessness, being drugged again—

I'm trying not to think about it because every time I do, my heart races and my chest goes all tight and I start to shake all over. Every time I think I can't be scared more than I was before, something worse happens to prove me wrong. And what happened yesterday...

I was petrified. All-encompassing, breath-stealing, heart-stopping fear. Words like *traffickers* and *clients* and all the horrible things I've seen on the news were beating at me, trying to break me.

But there's Zane. My Zane.

It's hard to believe that something good has come out of this nightmare.

At first I thought it was only gratitude to the man who saved me. But it's become so much more. Zane isn't just my savior and protector—though he's both of those—but he's also become my friend. He watches movies with me and pigs out on ice cream and seems to always know when I need to be cheered up or distracted.

Not only is Zane kind and thoughtful and achingly gentle, but he's stealing my heart.

I was attracted to Zane from the start—who wouldn't be? Tall, dark and handsome with those gorgeous eyes and his cheekbones and that dimple... That's not even getting to those hard muscles I've felt through his clothes when I've touched him but have yet to see.

And that kiss? I've *never* had a kiss like that.

But what my heart does when I'm with Zane? The intensity of it is almost frightening. I feel vulnerable and I've never trusted someone so quickly and I know he could break my heart easily. But I don't care. He's worth the risk.

I had hoped, but I still tried to keep my heart guarded. Reminding myself over and over that Zane might never see me as more than a job. That my feelings might be one-sided. I thought he felt something, but he was holding back and when he left after the kiss...

Then last night happened. And Zane isn't holding back anymore.

Holding my hand all night, never leaving my side, only napping briefly as Cole stood guard at the door. Pulling me into his arms when I woke up from a nightmare, rubbing my back and murmuring, *you're ok, you're safe, and I've got you.* Tucking me into his side and nearly snarling at anyone who came near us as he escorted me out of the hospital.

And now at his apartment, he's insistent on coddling me. Tucking me under a blanket on the couch, fluffing up pillows, rushing around to make sure my every need is met. I told Zane I'm feeling fine, but his worried eyes keep following me and I have to admit it feels nice to be taken care of like this.

"Elle. I told you I'd do the dishes." I bleat out a tiny yelp of fright as Zane's voice cuts through the sound of running water. A plate slips out of my hand and crashes into the sink, cracking in half.

Before I can even grab at the broken pieces, Zane is swooping in, pulling me away from the sink and reaching past

me to turn off the water. Not a moment later, he's lifting my dripping hands, inspecting them with the focused gaze of a surgeon, his forehead creased and lips pressed together tightly. Water drips on the floor as he brushes his fingers across my palms.

"I'm okay." I squeeze my fingers around his. "Really. You just startled me. Sorry about the plate."

"The plate isn't important." His eyes are still locked on my hands, searching for some hidden cut or scratch. When his gaze pulls back up to mine, he's frowning. "This is why I wanted you to let me take care of everything."

"Zane. I feel fine today. There's no reason I can't wash some dishes." I was released from the hospital this morning and I've been laying on Zane's couch for the last several hours, the only physical side effects from yesterday a raw throat and sore chest.

Zane plucks a towel off the counter and dries my hands carefully, some of the worry easing from his face. Then he wraps his arm around me and leads me back over to the couch, sitting down and pulling me onto his lap. My breath catches—this is the first time he's held me so intimately—and I can feel his muscled thighs beneath me and the hard ridges and planes of his chest.

I must have stiffened because he cups my face and gazes down at me with concern. "Is this okay, Elle? I didn't ask—I probably should have—just because we talked some last night doesn't mean I should presume..."

It's strange but reassuring to see Zane anything less than confident. "It's okay," I tell him, snuggling into his embrace. "It's more than okay. This is perfect."

My head is resting on his shoulder and I sigh contentedly, breathing in Zane's freshly showered scent—citrusy soap and woody shampoo and peppermint toothpaste. Tucked into his arms like this, I feel completely safe, like the terrors of *out there* can't touch me.

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright, Elle?” He shifts me around to search my gaze. “I can have Cole come check on you.”

“Yes. I’m fine.” My response is short. I’m not mad at Zane but I don’t want to keep thinking about why I wouldn’t be.

“Bug...” He raises his eyebrows at me, skepticism clear. We stare at each other and seconds drag by and I don’t want to go there—I’m so much happier curled up like this, absorbing all the details and sensations of being held by Zane.

Zane exhales heavily and says, “I’m calling Cole. There’s no way you’re fine after yesterday.”

He starts to move me off his lap, and I clutch at his arm. “Wait.” Once he’s settled back against the back of the couch, I tell him, “My throat is sore. And the muscles in my chest hurt. But other than that, I feel okay.”

“And what about—” Zane trails off, his expression shadowing. “Everything that happened in the library?”

“I’m trying not to think about it,” I admit. “When I do, it’s hard to breathe. And I feel sick. So it’s... I just want to think about being here with you.”

“I’m so sorry, Elle.” Tortured eyes reach to me, begging for forgiveness. “I should have been there with you.”

“No, Zane.” I don’t want him taking the blame for this. “It’s not your fault. I told you to stay out of the bathroom. I was... I was embarrassed. And it was silly. I didn’t want you to see me like that. So I insisted you stay out. If anyone is to blame, it’s me.”

“Bug, no.” He’s adamant. “I’m the professional. I should have known better. I should have—” His mouth snaps shut, and he goes silent for a few seconds. “Anyway. It’s not your fault. And the next time you’re sick, I *will* be taking care of you. Holding your hair, getting you water, whatever you need.”

My heart twangs, pulling at memories I’ve tried to bury. Me sick in the bathroom, my parents arguing over who has to take care of me. Chilled and feverish in the school nurse’s

office, miserable and embarrassed when neither parent would pick me up, insisting it was the other one's responsibility. Eighteen and waking up from surgery on my appendix, calling my parents and no one coming.

"Elle?" Worried eyes peer down at me. "What's wrong?"

Not now. I can't deal with anything else. "Nothing's wrong." Forcing a smile, I reassure him, "I've just... I usually have to take care of myself."

"Not anymore." It's a fierce declaration. "You have me."

My heart swells, but there's a niggling of uncertainty. I want this to be real between us; it feels real, but what if Zane changes his mind? My voice is small as I ask, "Are you sure?"

"Sure about what? Taking care of you when you're sick?"

"Sure about me." I drop my eyes to my lap, suddenly afraid to hear his answer. "I don't want you to feel... obligated. Or..."

"Elle. Listen to me." Zane lifts me, turning me so I'm straddling him. His eyes are a hot, fiery blue. "I *am* sure about you. Pushing you away after we kissed... that was a mistake. A huge one. I've had... trouble opening up to people for a long time. And how I feel about you..."

"I was afraid," he admits, giving me a sheepish look. "I wasn't doubting how I feel about you. I was doubting myself. But I realized I'd have to get past that or I'd lose you."

A rush of relief sweeps through me so quickly I feel lightheaded for a second. "So I wasn't imagining it."

"No." One hand cups my nape, the other sliding to the small of my back, tugging me into him. A bulge is growing beneath me, thick and hard and nudging at the apex of my thighs. My breasts are rubbing against Zane's chest and my nipples are tightening into little points that send electricity straight to my core.

Zane tilts my head back as he descends, capturing my mouth with his. His tongue runs along the seam of my lips, teasing, before plunging inside and tasting me. He's sucking

on my tongue, stroking the inside of my mouth, changing the angle of our kiss to go deeper and I'm completely absorbed by it.

His big hand palms my ass and squeezes gently, lifting, settling me so my folds are positioned over his erection. Even through layers of fabric I can feel him reaching for me, straining—I'm wet and opening for him, and he'd slide right inside if our clothes were gone right now.

I'm clutching at Zane, my hands slipping under his shirt to feel hard ridges and smooth, hot skin and *holy cow, how many ab muscles does he have*, and my heart is pounding a staccato rhythm in concert to his. He's swallowing my moans with his talented mouth, and I have never been more aroused than I am at this moment.

After minutes or hours, Zane pulls back and brushes his thumb across my swollen lips. His gaze holds mine, hot and hungry and filled with something deeper than affection. "You weren't imagining it, Elle. Not for a second."

"Okay." I'm still breathless. "I believe you."

Zane is still staring into my eyes and he's stroking my cheek and he's rock hard beneath me but not moving back in to kiss me. He's just watching me with this intense look on his face. So I decide to take the lead this time and lean in to kiss him, but a knock at the door interrupts me.

We both freeze, me inches from his face, Zane's hand cool on my heated skin.

"Can we ignore it?" I give Zane a pleading look, widening my eyes at him.

Zane sighs. "I wish we could, bug. But I'm sure it's someone with news." He kisses my forehead and lifts me off his lap, setting me down and heading for the door. I have to stifle a groan of frustration—I would so much prefer kissing to whatever news I'm about to hear.

And when Cole and Leo come into the apartment, grim-faced and somber, I know I'm really not going to like the news they have.

Zane sits back down next to me, pulling me into his side. Leo and Cole sit in matching recliners opposite us, both of them quickly glancing at Zane's arm wrapped around me. A tiny smile flickers across Cole's face and he gives Zane a tiny chin lift before his expression sobers.

Leo looks at me, his eyes warm and concerned. "Are you feeling alright, Elle?"

"Pretty much. Just nervous." Zane hugs me closer and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"I know this is hard, Elle." Cole's tone is low and soothing. "And after yesterday, if you don't want to hear this right now..."

"I need to hear it." Even if I don't want to.

Cole jumps right into it. "The lab tested your iced tea. They found ipecac in it."

Zane's tone bleeds worry. "What's that?"

"It's an emetic," Cole explains. "It can be used to induce vomiting, especially after a poisoning. It's very fast acting, so if someone wanted to make sure Elle left the room during tutoring..."

"Shit." Zane bites out the curse. "Will it hurt Elle?" He squeezes me even closer to him.

"No." Cole's eyes move to mine. "It's out of your system. You'll be fine."

Someone poisoned my drink. I can't wrap my head around it.

"What about the security footage?" Zane frowning, his features all hard lines and angles.

After exchanging a look with Cole, Leo says, "I was able to hack into the security cameras inside the library. Finding what we were looking for was a little tricky. Most of the cameras are located near the special collections, computers, entrances and exits—not hallways or meeting rooms."

“But,” Leo continues, “I found something interesting on a camera outside the building. Its intent isn’t to film the inside of the building—it’s just an exterior security camera—but with the blinds open, I was able to see footage inside the room you use for tutoring. And see who used the refrigerator.”

“And?” Zane leans forward.

“And I found the person who tampered with Elle’s drink.”

“How?” It seems impossible. How can a camera dozens of feet away, filming through a window no less, give enough information to identify anyone?

“With some manipulation, I can get a pretty clear image of the person,” Leo answers. “And from there, I used facial recognition technology to identify him.”

“Who is it?” My heart is pounding, thundering in my chest. Who’s behind this? Could this be the end of it? My fingers dig into the couch cushions. “If we catch him—is it over?”

“Elle, hang on.” Cole’s mouth pinches, his brows drawing down. “There are still a lot of things we don’t know. Like the identity of the person who attacked you. It’s clear from the footage that it’s not the same person. And there may be other people involved, as well. In these situations, it’s often more than—”

Zane snaps, “*Cole*. That’s enough.”

Disappointment crashes down on me. “Oh.” I’m shrinking; hope sucked back out of me.

Zane’s tone gentles. “It’s okay, bug.” He touches my chin, turning me towards him. “We’re going to find out who’s behind this.”

“We will,” Cole echoes. “I know it’s disappointing, but we have more information now. And someone to get answers from.”

Zane’s head whips in Cole’s direction. “I want to talk to him.”

“Rylan is going to do it.” Cole looks at Zane evenly. “You know why.”

“Fuck.” It’s a low curse under his breath. After a second, Zane says more clearly, “Fine.”

“We’ll meet as soon as there’s more information.” Cole stands up, Leo following. “It’s going to be okay, Elle.”

I wish I could believe him. It’s not that I don’t trust these guys, or Zane—I do. But it’s one hit after another and this last dashed hope is crushing me.

The door shuts, and Zane drags me into his arms, hugging me tight. My face is tucked under his neck and his lips are pressed to my head, his breath rustling my hair. “It’s okay, bug,” he murmurs. “I promise.”

Tears burn behind my eyes, and this time I don’t hold them back. They’re hot on my cheeks and Zane’s neck and I keep burrowing closer into him. “Promise?”

“I promise. I’m not letting anyone take you away from me.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZANE

Is this what my friends went through with their women?

We're all waiting at Leo's apartment for Rylan to get back from interrogating the man who drugged Elle's tea. I've been scrolling through my emails for the last fifteen minutes and haven't read a single word.

I've never been this distracted. I could always focus on the mission, no matter how shitty the circumstances were. But now? I'm worried and stressed, and all I want to do is take Elle home and keep her there so I know she's safe.

I can't stop thinking about her.

All my muscles are tense and I should have worked out this morning, but I didn't want to leave my bed. Not with Elle sleeping beside me, one leg stretched over mine, her head tucked under my chin.

I look across the room at her. She's sitting on the couch with Georgia, and they're huddled over a laptop, both smiling—Georgia's wide and relaxed, Elle's small and tighter. It's not the smile I'd like to see, that big grin as we both quoted *The Princess Bride* at each other, but it's much better than her tears after she woke up from another nightmare.

Leo glances up from his laptop and tilts his head at me. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

“Okay.” He gives me an if-you-say-so expression but looks back down at his screen.

My first instinct is to brush his question aside, but for some reason, I find myself confessing, “I didn’t expect this.”

His eyebrows go up. “Expect what?”

I jerk my chin towards Elle. “This.”

I never talk about stuff like this with my friends, never needed to, and it feels weird, but if I can’t talk to them, who *can* I talk to? Turning back to Leo, I say, “Wanting to know where she is all the time. Worrying about her.”

There’s a long pause, and then Leo nods at me in understanding. “Trust me. I know.”

I pitch my voice low so the women can’t hear me—they’re talking about clothes and Georgia is helping Elle pick out some new things, so I don’t think they’ll hear me, but still. “I’ve never felt like this before. Never thought I wanted to. But now...”

Leo gives me a wry smile. “Now you do.”

“Yeah.” My eyes jump over to Elle again, for probably the fiftieth time since we got to Leo and Georgia’s apartment half an hour ago. She’s pushing her hair behind her ear, the deep red turning to fire as it catches the light coming in through the window.

Leo follows my gaze. “How’s she doing?”

“As good as to be expected, I guess. Physically, she’s okay.”

Except for the faint bruising on her jaw, which makes me want to kill someone.

“And mentally?” Leo looks over at the women, his eyes softening as they linger on Georgia. Bringing his attention back to me, he says, “I remember how hard it was on Georgia. The fear. The stress. The memories of being attacked.” His jaw clenches. “It’s still hard on her. She still has nightmares.”

My chest aches thinking about Elle's haunted eyes and the shadows beneath them. The little jut of her chin as she's trying to hold her emotions in. The trembling when she flashes back to one of the times she was attacked, only settling after I hold her.

"She's struggling. I've been trying to help but—" It's been less than forty-eight hours since I pulled Elle from that fucker's clutches and I keep seeing the horrifying minutes over and over in my head. Elle trapped, barely conscious, bruised, and bleeding. Falling towards me, helpless. Holding her small body limp in my arms.

She hasn't complained, keeps insisting she's fine. But her eyes tell me otherwise.

After the disappointing meeting yesterday with Cole and Leo, I made it my mission to cheer her up. Anything I could think of to make her smile.

Like sending Finn out to the store to buy ten flavors of ice cream. Watching a *Harry Potter* marathon all afternoon. Kissing her every chance I got. Cuddling her—I never imagined I would even use the word cuddle with a woman—but there I was, contentedly cuddling with Elle on my couch, rubbing her back, tucking her body into mine.

And even though I was more than happy staying in my apartment all night with her, I arranged a game night with the other two couples instead. Cole and Maya came over to Leo and Georgia's apartment with us, and we played games and the women sipped wine and I heard Elle laugh for real at least a few times.

Like when she beat everyone in Scrabble, playing these ridiculous psychology words that none of us would ever have thought of. Complementarity? Psycholinguistics? My bug is so freaking smart and I love it.

"It's going to take time," Leo says. "Just make sure she knows you're there for her."

"What are we talking about?" Cole joins us at the table, dropping into the chair across from me.

“Zane and Elle,” Leo says, his voice pitched low. “Helping her.”

Now Leo and Cole are staring at me, and I’ve somehow been transported into an alternate universe where I have deep, meaningful conversations about women with my best friends. A year ago, I would have laughed myself silly to imagine it.

But now? With Elle? I’ll take any advice if it helps her.

Cole nods. “Maya didn’t tell me about her nightmares for weeks. She was suffering and I could have helped her. But she didn’t want me to think she was weak. Not that I’d ever think that.”

I check on Elle again. She’s still on the couch talking to Georgia, but this time she catches my eye and a smile spreads across her face, so sweet and beautiful I can’t breathe for a second.

When I look back at my teammates, they’re watching me with matching shit-eating grins.

“Shut up.” I smack each of them on the back of the head. Shoving away from the table, I head towards the living room. “Isn’t Rylan supposed to be here already?”

I sit down next to Elle and draw her into me, slanting my mouth over hers and giving her a quick kiss. Her cheeks go pink, and she relaxes into me, her hand slipping into mine.

“Did you pick out some nice stuff?”

“Some bathing suits.” Elle drops her voice. “For the hot tub. Since I missed it last time.” Her lower lip sticks out in a little pout. “I really wanted to go in.”

New bathing suits. Hot tub. Elle. All wet and soft and—

“Soon,” I tell her, while mentally running through gun schematics to keep myself from getting hard in front of my friends.

Then Rylan comes into the apartment and the brief respite of shopping and talking about normal things comes to an end. He’s stone faced, gaze shadowed, and tension is still rolling

off him in waves—he’s the best interrogator of all of us, but it takes a toll on him.

Without speaking, everyone quickly gathers in the living room. Cole takes one of the armchairs and Rylan takes the other—Leo is at the other end of the couch with his laptop balanced on his lap. Georgia gives him a quick kiss and whispers something in his ear before heading into their office and shutting the door. Finn and Nora are the only two not here—they’re in Boston for the week helping a FinTech CEO upgrade his company’s security.

We’re all glancing around at each other, waiting for Rylan to start. He rotates his neck and stretches his back, wincing almost imperceptibly as he does it. I hate seeing his pain and knowing the reason for it, though he never complains about the residual pain that’s lingered for years since his injuries.

But I know. I was there, and I’ll never forget about it.

“I’ve got Crash.” Leo sets his laptop on the coffee table and spins it around.

“Hey guys.” Crash raises his hand in greeting and looks across the screen. “Where’s Elle?”

“Here,” Leo says, moving the laptop so it’s at the far end of the table, angled so Crash can see her.

Crash starts to smile at her, and then his expression freezes. “Zane?” His gaze burns through the screen. “What are you doing with my cousin?”

“Um.” Elle flushes. “We’re together, Dean. So please don’t be weird about it.”

He huffs out a long sigh and finally says, “Fine. But Zane... You know what I’m going to say.”

“I’m not going to hurt her.” I kiss her cheek, my lips cool on her skin. “Ever.”

“Now that the cat’s out of the bag,” Cole says, flashing me a quick grin before sobering. “Let’s hear what Rylan discovered.”

Rylan shifts in his chair, rolling his shoulders and straightening. He takes a deep breath before starting, his gaze sweeping around the room before landing on me. “I found the guy at a bar near the campus. Not a nice one, a real dump, lots of illegal stuff going on.”

“It was noon by the time I tracked him down, and it’s a good thing I didn’t find him later or he would have been completely useless. Line of empty shot glasses in front of him already.”

Cole leans forward. “Can we take anything he says seriously?”

Rylan smiles grimly. “Oh, yes. I made sure he sobered up enough. And he was *very* motivated to tell me everything he knew.”

Features hardening, he continues. “So this guy was trolling the campus bars a few nights ago, looking to score some drugs. A man approaches him, says he’ll give him five hundred bucks to sneak onto campus and replace the iced tea with a different one. One that this stranger will give him.”

“It was a simple exchange. Meet just off campus that morning; this stranger gives our guy the iced tea, detailed instructions for where to go—” Rylan glances at Elle. “Even tells him to throw out the rest of the bottles so there’d only be one left.”

Elle clutches my hand, her nails digging in.

“Can he identify the man who approached him?” It’s Leo, hovering over his laptop, ready to start searching.

“Unlikely.” Rylan grimaces, his brows pulling into a deep V. “I got a description, but the guy was definitely trying to hide his identity. Dark glasses, hat, scarf, and it was in a dark alley.” He shakes his head again. “Not much to go on.”

“Shit.” Anger is clawing at me from the inside out.

Cole’s visibly pissed, but his voice is calm as he directs his next question to Elle. “How often do you drink those iced teas?”

“Every time.” Elle squeezes closer to me, trembling. “I always have one. I don’t know why...” she trails off. “It just turned into a routine.” Her eyes go dark and haunted. “Why did I have to be so predictable? It’s so *stupid*.”

“It’s not stupid, Elle,” Leo jumps in to reassure her.

I rub her back in small circles. “He’s right, bug. You didn’t do anything wrong.” I’m so fucking angry it’s a struggle to contain it. But Elle is ghostly pale, her breathing quick and shallow, and her pulse is jumping at her throat. She doesn’t need a raging and vengeful boyfriend; she needs me to be calm right now.

Cole is watching Elle carefully, assessing. He wants information, but not at the risk of pushing her past her limit. I’m worried about it too. Elle is strong, but she’s been through so much, I don’t know how much more stress she can take.

“There aren’t many people who would know,” Elle says, anticipating his question. Her voice is quiet and shaky, but her face tightens with determination. “The other tutors. We all talked about it at the beginning of the semester. We all buy our own stuff, and the understanding is no one else takes it.”

Elle has a death grip on my hand, but she’s not backing down from what needs to be done. She shouldn’t have to be doing this, but I’m so damn proud of her.

“Would anyone else know?”

Elle meets Cole’s gaze, her features creasing as she thinks. “Some of the professors use that room. So they would know. And a few of the library staff. Maybe some of the students, too...” She pauses, realization sinking in as she sighs quietly. “A lot of people.”

“I’ll look into all of them,” Leo tells her. “Just get me a list of everyone you can think of.”

I want to tell Leo that Elle needs a break, a night off from all of this, not to spend more time coming up with lists of people who might be trying to hurt her. But I know as well as he does that we need this information if we’re ever going to

catch the people coming after her. It doesn't mean I don't hate it.

"Elle, I think it's time you came to stay with me." Quiet up until now, Crash jumps into the conversation. "No offense to you guys," he says, "but we're not getting anywhere here. Elle is still in danger and it's escalating."

"Dean, no." Elle's response is immediate. "I'm staying here."

"Elle, come on. Think about it. You were in the hospital two nights ago. Almost taken again." Worry laces his words. "If you come here, you'll be away from it. We can keep you safe here."

Elle's fingers convulse around mine. "No." It's forceful, no sign of hesitation or doubt. "My life is here, Dean. My degree, my friends, my—" She glances over at me, flushing. "Zane. And I trust these guys. I love you Dean, but I'm staying."

The words almost stick in my throat, but I force them out. "Are you sure?"

I want her here, but maybe Dean's right. She *was* almost abducted when I was supposed to be protecting her. What if I fail her again?

Hurt flickers in her eyes. "You want me to leave?"

"No." It comes out louder than I intended. Gentling my tone, I say, "No, Elle. I don't want you to leave. But I don't want to be selfish and put you at risk."

Her chin juts out. "Then I want to stay here." A pause, and then more quietly, just to me. "With you. Okay?"

How could I have ever considered telling Elle I only wanted to be friends? I kiss her forehead and murmur between us, "Yes, bug. More than anything. I want you to stay."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ELLE

“That’s enough, bug. We’re taking a break. You’ve been working for hours.”

Before I can contradict Zane by pointing out I’ve been staring vacantly at my computer screen for the last several hours and not actually working, he scoops me up off my chair and into his arms. I grab at his neck more in surprise than anything else—I know there’s no chance of him dropping me. I’ve seen Zane work out, and he’s crazy strong, easily lifting weights that are twice as heavy as me.

Not to mention all his martial arts training. When I watch Zane practice, he demonstrates Krav Maga and Taekwondo and Judo and this insane hybrid that makes him look like a superhero ninja. And I’m glad he’s showing me in the private gym in the basement instead of somewhere public where all the women would stare at him.

It’s not that I’m the overly jealous type. But they would. I’m sure of it. Because Zane doing spinning kicks and leaping somersault rolls and cross body punches is hot. He’s ripped and with no shirt on and all his bronzed muscles flexing—I know I’m hot and bothered after watching him practice.

And I’ve been thinking about that a lot. Not just kissing Zane, or the very enjoyable make out sessions we’ve been having, but sex with my insanely hot boyfriend.

I’ve loved what we’ve been doing, but I want more.

I loved it when Zane peeled off my shirt and suckled my breasts, while his thick fingers plunged into me, hitting just the right spot, and his thumb rubbed and flicked my swollen nub until I came apart in an explosion of stars.

And I adored it when I took Zane along with me, my hand wrapped around him, stroking the hot silk of his skin and feeling how hard and hungry he was for me.

But each time I think we might be taking things to the next level, Zane slams the brakes on it. He'll pull me into a hug, kissing my head—which is sweet, but not quite what I had in mind at the moment. Or he'll jump up to get something—a drink, a blanket, a snack—that I don't really need.

I can tell he's trying not to rush me, but he won't be. I'm ready.

But I'm also a big chicken and as many times as I tell myself, *I'm a grown woman, I can tell Zane what I want*—I wish he would just magically know.

Zane brings me into the bedroom and sets me back on my feet, his king-sized bed behind me. For a moment I think—*this is it, he really is a mind reader*, but then he says, “Okay, Elle. Get dressed.”

I blink at him in confusion. “I am dressed.” Unless jeans and a sweater don't count as clothes anymore?

“You need to change,” he elaborates, reaching around me to grab something off the bed. A moment later, he holds out a brightly colored knit bundle to me—a fuzzy hat in my favorite shade of green.

“Are we going somewhere? I still need to work on my dissertation...” It's a weak excuse, but flutters of anticipation war with heavy ambivalence. I haven't left Blade and Arrow since I came back from the hospital, and I'm not sure how I feel about leaving now. When I tentatively brought up tutoring, Zane's face went stony and he flat-out refused to bring me.

“It's not safe, Elle,” he said grimly. “You know that.”

I did, but it doesn't change the fact that if I don't finish my tutoring obligations for the semester, I'll have to pay back my tuition. And as terrified as I am about leaving the safety of this building, let alone stepping near that library, I don't have that kind of money. But somehow Leo worked some magic with the university administration and now I'm allowed to do virtual tutoring from Zane's apartment instead.

Zane's apartment, because I'm not staying downstairs anymore. We never talked about me staying here, but I felt better sleeping in his bed and Zane was going out of his way to make me comfortable and after a few days, all my stuff just appeared here. Which I don't mind, because I much prefer staying with Zane than on my own.

"We're going outside, Elle." His eyes crinkle up at the corners. "I thought it was time we got that date in the hot tub."

Oh. Not getting any work done on my dissertation or the hot tub with Zane? I grin at him. "You know what? You're right, it *is* time for a break."

"I was hoping you'd agree with me." His grin widens. "So get a bathing suit on and there's a robe for you in the closet. I'll be waiting in the living room."

Once Zane closes the bedroom door, I rush over to one of the drawers Zane cleared out for me and peer down at my selection of bathing suits. There's the old and conservative one-piece that leaves plenty to the imagination, or the new bikini Georgia picked out for me—small and black with sheer cutouts and much less fabric than I'm used to wearing.

In the past, I would have picked the one-piece immediately. But with Zane? Imagining his gaze hot and hungry as he looks at me? Bikini it is.

I feel nearly naked once I have it on, but once I add the thick robe that reaches to my toes and the fluffy hat, I look like I'm prepared for an Arctic expedition. Not sure how sexy that is, but it *is* freezing out and I'd rather not be an icicle by the time we get out to the patio.

Zane is wearing a matching robe, but somehow he manages to make it look sexy. Maybe it's the way the fabric stretches across his chest and shoulders, the tiny glimpses of bronzed skin peeking out. Or his dark hair all tousled and his hint of dark stubble with that tempting dimple winking at me.

When I walk over to him, my heart is pounding. Anticipation has definitely won.

His hands come to my shoulders and move down until they're lightly holding the belt at my waist. He brushes a kiss across my lips and asks quietly, "Can I see what's underneath?"

This is much sooner in the evening than I thought I'd be revealing myself to him, but I nod at him, my face flushing.

"Is that a yes?" Zane holds my gaze, questioning.

"Yes." I swallow hard, pulse throbbing at my throat.

Then he unties the belt and pulls my robe open.

Not fully, just enough to expose a few inches of my belly and my thighs and cleavage. Against the black fabric of the bikini, my skin is pale and sprinkled with light freckles that have been the bane of my existence. All my life I've wished I had skin that tanned in the summer instead of burning or freckling.

"So beautiful," Zane breathes, and he trails a finger feather-light across my stomach, tracing a constellation of tiny freckles. His skin is bronze to my fair, a hint of roughness as he touches me, leaving a trail of sparking electricity. I've never been so aware of someone's touch before, as if my skin is desperate for it.

A charged silence hangs between us. I'm breathless, frozen, waiting for his next move.

Inhaling sharply, Zane hastily pulls my robe closed, carefully retying the belt. Then he kisses me again, longer but still soft and gentle. When I look into his eyes now, they're liquid metal, a fiery silver-blue heated with desire.

“Outside first.” He takes my hand, leading me towards the door. “I have something...” He pauses, his lips curving slightly. “You’ll see.”

As we walk through the building and out to the patio, my heart is thrumming with nervous excitement. I’ve been thinking about being with Zane, building it up in my head, but I’m nervous and eager and a little scared, too.

We’re both quiet and I’m lost in my thoughts and the sensations of being with Zane. His scent, the feel of his skin, the comfort of his arm around me, this feeling of completeness when he touches me.

Until we get to the patio and oh my—

Is this real? My heart—

It’s stuttering, expanding huge in my chest, hopeful but not yet believing.

Finally, I gasp, “Oh, Zane.” Did he really do all this for me?

The patio was nice before, but now it’s magical.

The strands of white lights along the ceiling are twinkling and the firepit is crackling, small streaks of orange and yellow and blue flaring into the air. Steam rises from the hot tub and the wooden edges are lined with tiny flickering candles. All the heaters must be going because it’s toasty warm even though one side of the sheltered patio is wide open to the cold and snow.

Large silver lanterns are placed in each corner, casting blocks of soft light on the floor. Evergreen arrangements in various sizes decorate every spare surface—boughs of spruce mixed with birch branches and gorgeous white flowers.

There’s a table set for two near the firepit, another small lantern atop it. Luxurious white throw blankets are draped over each chair, with a matching crisp white tablecloth covering the table. The sultry rise and fall of instrumental jazz plays softly, just enough to set the mood.

I'm clutching Zane's hand with numb fingers, taking it all in. My eyes keep moving around the patio, each time noticing a new little detail. Like the slippers I've never seen before, set on the floor next to the hot tub—one pair small, the other large. And the small box placed in front of one seat at the table.

Just one thing would have made it special, but this is incredible. It's like someone took a Pinterest board and brought it to life right here in front of me. And Zane did this for me.

"Zane." Words are getting stuck in my throat. I'm happy, but this is so beyond anything I expected. My heart is so big it's hard to breathe.

"You don't like it?" Worried eyes jump to mine. He cups my face and gently turns me to him. Fingers brush away the wetness I didn't realize was there. "Bug. I'm sorry. I should have asked... I never meant to make you sad..."

"No one has ever done something like this for me." I don't want to be crying, not when he's done something so amazing, and I don't want Zane thinking he did anything wrong. "It's incredible. I love it. I just..." A maelstrom of emotion is building inside me. "I love it, Zane. I don't mean to cry. They're happy tears. Not sad."

His breath comes out in a rush. "Okay. You scared me."

I hug him hard, wrapping my arms around his broad chest. My face is smooshed against the bare skin exposed below his neck, warm and musky and brushed with a soft dusting of hair. His hands rub up and down my back while he kisses my head.

After inhaling his scent for another second, I pull back. "Zane, it's wonderful. How did you..."

A crooked grin pulls at his lips. "I asked Georgia and Maya for some help coming up with ideas." Twin spots of dull pink appear on his cheekbones. "I wanted something special and romantic, but I don't know much about that kind of stuff."

The idea of Zane asking for help to arrange this evening for me is so sweet I feel myself melting into a puddle. "Oh,

Zane,” I whisper, my heart actually aching from the joy of it. And then I loop my arms around his neck, stretching up and tugging his head down to mine.

Zane lifts me into his arms as we come together, his mouth capturing mine. Our kiss is deep and passionate, and his tongue is wicked, tempting me with a taste of what could come later. My legs are around his waist, and I can feel him growing thick and hard against me.

Heat is building at my center and I’m getting wet for him. I’m throbbing and empty and I push my hips against him, desperate to be filled. Zane groans and moves one hand from my ass to the back of my head, adjusting the angle of our kiss to take it even deeper.

Zane moves to the couch and sinks down while I cling to him—my arms and legs twined around him like some kind of lust-crazed monkey. Now I’m straddling him, our chests and mouths and hips fused together. Fiery electricity is snapping through my body, hot jolts of desire and need.

He’s even thicker and harder, his length insistently prodding at me. Our robes are splayed open; all that separates us is the thin fabric of our bathing suits. I rub my breasts against his chest, gasping as the sensation tightens my nipples. I rotate my hips and oh my—

As his thick head nudges at my core, I’m opening for him, the thin fabric a cruel tease. One hand covers my breast, big and warm, and I arch back, thrusting into it. Fingers deftly slide my bikini top down and now—a rough thumb flicking at my nipple, more lightning streaking down to my core.

My hands are all over Zane’s chest, tracing the lines of his muscles, moving down to his taut belly and then following the line of dark hair lower. He’s like touching a living statue—hard and defined, but silky soft and quivering each time my fingers trail across him.

“Zane.” It’s a breathless whimper edged with need. I know this is usually at the end of the date but I’m burning for him.

Zane is kissing down my neck, one hand still at my breast and the other cupping my ass. He drags his mouth away and gazes at me with eyes nearly black, just a thin circle of pale blue around his dilated pupils. He's breathing heavy, flushed along with me—my confidence surges at the confirmation he wants me as badly I want him.

“The date,” he grits out, his voice strained and rough. “I have dinner—”

I slide my hand under his bathing suit and run my fingers down his thick girth, wrapping around it and stroking. My nerves are gone and I feel sexy and wanton, and I want this more than anything.

“Can we have it after?” I nuzzle his neck, dropping soft nibbles and kisses up to his jaw. “Please?” All my fears of telling Zane what I want have disappeared, chased away by this desperate need.

“Are you sure?” He's watching me carefully, eyes hot but appraising; all his muscles tensed as he waits for my answer.

“Yes.” I stare into his eyes, more sure of this than anything. “Please.” My heart is speeding rocket fast, every inch of me wanting to feel Zane inside me.

“*Elle.*” Zane kisses me again—fast and frenzied—before pulling away from me. I'm cold at the loss, but he's back before I can call out to him.

His gaze is fire and ice as he lifts me off the couch so I'm standing in front of him, then pulls my robe off in one fluid move. His robe flies off equally fast and now we're only in our bathing suits which ironically—considering my earlier perspective—is entirely too much fabric.

I'm fumbling at my straps, but Zane takes over and has it off in a flash. He's naked a moment later, and it's my first time looking at all of him. The candlelight glances off his bronzed muscles and his very impressive length, and he's not just sexy, Zane is beautiful.

While I'm staring at him, he's not wasting any time touching me. His hands are all over, running down my thighs,

caressing my breasts, searching for those hidden constellations again. When his fingers slide between my damp folds, my legs almost collapse under me and it jolts me out of my stupor.

“You’re...” I grasp his silken heat and stroke it again, feeling it surge thicker in my hand. “I...”

All words have left me. All that’s left is this need.

Zane pulls me back onto the couch, settling me on top of him. Straddling him, wet and ready, his tip nearly slips right into me. “Shit,” he murmurs, and grabs the packet on the cushion next to us. A second later, he’s sheathed and ready.

When I thought about this before—in the shower, in bed, trying to work on my dissertation—I thought it would be slow and full of lingering touches and longing glances. But now that we’re so close, I don’t want slow. I want to feel Zane inside me.

Zane is supporting me above him, waiting. “Is it okay this way?” he asks. “The couch... It’s a little small...”

“This is more than okay,” I say, and sink down onto him.

He’s big, and it’s been a long time, but I’m so ready for him, there’s only a brief spark of pain as he fills me, then absolute completion. I’m so full, every tiny movement is an exquisite pleasure. Moving slowly at first, then gradually faster, I rock against him, hitting my sensitive bundle of nerves each time.

Heat is building, a needy ache is growing inside me, but there’s something I’m still missing. Something more than gentle. Something powerful and urgent.

“I need—” I look at Zane pleadingly. “Will you—”

“Yes,” he breathes. And he takes over.

Lifting me above him, plunging me back down, bottoming out each time.

Rotating his hips, angling me, so he rubs in that devastatingly perfect spot.

Thrusting into me, flicking at my swollen nub, capturing my cries with his mouth.

It builds—a star about to supernova. And then. One more connection. One more collision. Our bodies become one.

And I explode around him, muscles rippling and convulsing, energy and heat and this incredible emotion filling me.

Zane plunges up into me one more time and he freezes, pulsing, thickening even more inside me. He cries out—a guttural, primal groan—and his gaze locks on mine. There’s a moment when something more passes between us. Something beyond words.

His arms encircle me, pulling me into his chest, my head tucked under his chin. Lips press against my hair, and I kiss Zane’s neck as I cuddle against him. Everything feels right in his embrace, a comfort I never knew I could have.

“Bug...” One hand strokes up and down my back. “What you do to me...”

He means that in a good way, right? “What do you mean?”

“Wait here.” Zane pulls out of me, and I miss him already. Settling me back on the couch, he tugs a soft throw off the back and drapes it over me.

I watch him walk naked to the table, admiring the flex of his muscles. Even though I feel languid and satisfied, my core throbs with need.

Zane comes back and sits down, lifting me onto his lap. He’s holding the box I saw earlier, small and robin’s egg blue.

“I wanted to give this to you right away,” he says, his gaze flaring hot as he looks at me. “But you distracted me.”

“Sorry.” But I’m smiling as I say it.

“Open it, Elle.” A flicker of worry crosses his face. “I hope you like it. I thought... Well. Maybe it’s silly...”

Zane is watching me intently, motionless, his body tense under me. My stomach is spinning, flipping with nervous

excitement as I lift the top off.

“Oh.” It’s all I can say, as Zane turns me speechless again.

It’s the most perfect gift he could have given me. A tiny silver ladybug—no bigger than my pinky—hangs from a delicate chain. I’m gaping at it, nose prickling and eyes burning, clenching my jaw and determined not to cry this time.

“Do you like it?” It’s the most uncertain Zane has ever sounded.

Forcing the words over the lump in my throat, I whisper, “I love it. I love it, Zane. It’s so... it’s beautiful.”

Zane’s gaze captures mine. “Not even close to as beautiful as you.”

Oh. This feeling.

Can I be falling in love with him?

Or has it happened already?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ZANE

I can't believe how much has changed in such a short time.

Until I met Elle, I enjoyed waking up alone. Alone meant there was no one to ask me why I was tossing and turning all night. I didn't have to explain to anyone why I got out of bed before daylight to head to the gym, needing the physical exertion to push away the nightmares.

I liked mornings by myself, always following the same routine. First, bed made perfectly, with military corners. Coffee and reading the news on my phone for exactly fifteen minutes. Another thirty minutes of conditioning before jumping in the shower, then off to whatever work obligations I had for the day.

It was predictable and solitary, just the way I wanted it.

But now... I like this new way of waking up so much better.

Waking up to Elle in my bed, snuggled up against me, her limbs tangled with mine. Her hair like fiery silk spread across her pillow or draped over my chest. Kissing her awake, watching her long lashes flutter open and her eyes brightening when she sees me.

Then we cuddle—something I've grown to like a lot. We don't rush out of bed. We take our time, using our hands and mouths to drive each other crazy. Only then do we get up and start our day together.

I still have coffee and do conditioning and shower, but now I do those things with Elle. And it's so much more fun with her company. We read each other crazy news headlines—the more insane, the better. She watches me as I do my sit-ups and pull-ups, her gaze dark and appreciative. Or she sits on my back while I do push-ups, giggling as she tries not to fall off.

This morning has been the best of them all, so far, and it's only just started. Because this morning Elle is naked beside me, all creamy skin with those tantalizing freckles and her breasts pink-tipped and marked faintly from where I nipped and kissed them last night.

Once we got back to my apartment last night—after reheating dinner and a long dip in the hot tub—I took Elle straight to my bedroom. We almost didn't make it there, our robes gone the second the door closed behind us, Elle clinging to me like a koala and kissing my neck.

We finally fell asleep after going through two more condoms. And then we used two more before sunrise this morning. Each time was amazing and thinking about sinking into her tight heat has me hard all over again. But I don't want to hurt Elle. I could tell it had been a long time before me, and even though Elle looks soft and so damn tempting, I think her body needs a break.

I should feed her. We had dinner last night, but all that sex burned a lot of energy. And Elle hasn't been eating as much as I'd like, anyway. I can tell the stress is affecting her appetite. She doesn't finish her meals, and when she's working on her dissertation, she rarely stops to eat unless I remind her.

This protectiveness I feel towards Elle is all-encompassing. It's not just needing to protect her from the people intent on hurting her—though that's the biggest part of it—but protecting her from anything that could harm her. Making sure she's eating enough, comforting her when she can't sleep, getting anything that she needs—

I'd do anything to protect my team, my family, but this is different.

Is this what falling in love is like?

I can't be in love with Elle. It's too soon.

But.

There's the way I feel when I'm with her. Happy. Complete. She makes me think maybe I'm more than my failures.

Her smile. Her laugh. The feel of her lips and her hair and that adorable blush. How I felt when I carried Elle to bed last night, her slight weight so right in my arms.

I didn't think about love. Didn't think I needed it. And deep down, I didn't think I deserved it.

Loving means another chance to let someone down.

But with Elle... the more time I spend with her, the further she burrows into my heart.

Staring at a tiny chip in the paint on the ceiling, I try to sort through the tangle of my emotions.

"Zane?" A small hand touches my cheek. Elle is propped up on her elbow, watching me, eyebrows arched in a V. "Why are you smiling at the ceiling?"

Turning on my side, I grin at her. "Just thinking about you, bug." Her new necklace hangs just below her collarbone, and I trace the line of it, lifting the tiny ladybug off her skin. "Do you really like this?"

"Yes, Zane. I really *love* it." She leans towards me and brushes her lips over mine, just a quick touch before pulling away. Before I can lean back in, she slaps her hand over her mouth and yelps, "Morning breath! Oh, Zane—you shouldn't be exposed to this."

I smirk at her. "You didn't seem too worried about it a few hours ago."

A flush spreads across her cheeks. "Yes. Well. The way you woke me up... I was distracted."

Elle looks so freaking adorable with her pink face and those freckles and her amber eyes sparkling at me. But she's

sexy too—the blanket draping over the swell of her hips and exposing one delicate shoulder.

Fuck. I want her all over again. But Elle needs food, and she loves her coffee made just the right way—extra cream in flavors like caramel macchiato and white chocolate raspberry—so that’s what I’m getting her.

After giving her a quick kiss on the forehead, I slide out of bed. “Coffee. And food. You need to recover some of that energy we spent last night.”

By the time I come back, Elle is sitting in bed, propped up against a stack of pillows and wearing one of my shirts. “It was closer,” she says as my eyes drop to the large ARMY lettering across the front. “You don’t mind, do you?”

I place the mugs of coffee, a bowl of cut fruit, and a plate with English muffins on the nightstand next to her. “Of course not. I like it better on you.”

Elle reaches for a mug, her nose wrinkling as she spots my black coffee, bypassing it for her extra sweet one. After a sip, she sighs in contentment. After another, she says, “Did you see what it’s doing outside?”

Settling beside her on the bed, I glance out the window. Snow is coming down at a steady pace, turning the trees to white. Judging from the speed the snow is falling, it looks like we’re going to end up with at least a few inches. “Do you like the snow?”

“I like looking at it. Actually going out in the snow?” Elle gives me a wry smile. “Not so much.”

“Didn’t you grow up in the North Country? I’d think you’d be used to it.” I know Elle grew up in Potsdam, which is a small town upstate, nearly at the Canadian border. I haven’t been there myself, but I know some people who went to college in Potsdam, and they’ve told me the winters up there are brutal.

“Unfortunately not.” Her gaze shadows. “I think...” she trails off, going quiet. “I didn’t have great memories there. Growing up. So I think anything that reminds me of those

years...” She shrugs lightly, forcing a tiny smile. “It’s not my favorite.”

Things Elle has said in the past have made me think she didn’t have the best childhood, but she’s never come right out and said it. I haven’t pushed, but the possibilities of why have bothered me. Was it something at school? Her health? Her parents? Did someone *hurt* her?

“Do you want to talk about it?” I slide my arm around her waist, tugging her closer.

“It’s not that awful.” She pats my arm, reassuring. “Not like what you’re imagining, if your face is any indication. I wasn’t... abused or anything.”

But something put that sad look in her eyes. “Tell me. Let me carry the burden with you.”

Elle sighs. “My parents... they weren’t very good at it. Being parents, I mean. Neither of them were interested in the responsibilities of having a kid. They were always busy doing something else, and I was just this... annoyance.”

“When I was younger and couldn’t take care of myself, they would fight over who had to watch me.” Pain bleeds into her voice. “And whoever lost the argument would complain about it the entire time. Or just ignore me. Which was actually better.”

“As I got older—eight or so—they started leaving me home alone.” At my sharp inhale, Elle glances up from her lap at me. “Not overnight. They never ignored me enough to be neglectful. One of them would eventually come home and tell me to go to my room. And I’d stay there the rest of the night.”

“When I was twelve, they got a divorce. And then they had more reasons to ignore me. They both started dating again, and I was definitely a complication neither wanted. By then, I just figured out how to handle things on my own. Forge signatures so I didn’t have to ask. Go to appointments on my own. Work after school so I could pay for field trips and supplies because my parents were never around to ask.”

“*Elle.*”

“It’s okay, Zane.” Elle pats my arm again. “I had to learn how to be independent, which wasn’t a bad thing. I applied to private school, got a scholarship, and I left when I was fifteen. You know the rest. I worked and got more scholarships and I lived on campus, so I didn’t need to go back. I didn’t have to ask them for anything anymore.”

My heart is aching for her. “Are you in contact with them at all?”

She curls into my side, leaning her head on my shoulder. “No.” Even softer, “I haven’t spoken to either of them in ten years. I used to email them, try to call, just quick updates—I thought I should, I guess. But they never came to see me in high school, never asked me to come home. And in college...”

Elle’s voice wobbles. “It was freshman year, and I had appendicitis... neither of them would come when the nurse called them. I was just out of surgery, groggy, and when she asked if there was someone she could call, I just told her... but they both said they were busy.”

“When I was graduating from Cornell, I tried again. I sent both of them invitations, along with their new spouses. Neither answered. No call, no email, nothing. And then I stopped trying.”

I’m angry and I hurt so badly for Elle, I’m torn in two. Part of me wants to find her parents and rail at them, demand to know how they could neglect their daughter that way. Because it *was* neglect, emotional and psychological abuse, even if Elle doesn’t want to admit it.

And then there’s the part that’s desperate to fix things. To take away Elle’s pain, to tell her over and over again how fucking amazing she is. How much I admire her strength. And I want to stand in front of her always, shielding Elle from anyone who might hurt her.

“It’s okay,” Elle repeats, drawing my attention back to her. Her delicate features are creased with concern. “*I’m* okay. It’s in the past.”

“It’s not okay, bug.” Hauling her into my lap, I press kisses to the top of her head. “You’re so amazing, and no one should have treated you that way.”

“No, they shouldn’t have. But it happened.” She tilts her head back to meet my gaze. “They made their decision. I can’t change what they did. The only thing I can control is what *I* do. And maybe... I can figure out how to help other kids who go through something similar.”

It all makes sense. Elle’s degree. Her interest in developmental psychology. All stemming from her past, and how she can use that to help others.

She’s too damn good for me.

Here I am, clinging to my failures, ignoring the family I have that loves me. Closing myself off to them. While Elle is overcoming all the mistakes of the parents who failed her.

“I don’t see my family either,” I admit, a heavy blanket of shame falling over me.

“Oh, Zane.” Elle grabs both my hands. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not the same,” I tell her. “It’s my fault.”

Elle’s eyes are soft, kind, melted honey mixed with copper. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

How can I hide from Elle when she’s been so open with me?

But when she hears all I did, will she still want to be with me?

Each word is a jagged rock forced through my throat. “I don’t see my family because I’m ashamed. They think I’m someone I’m not.”

Slender fingers tighten around mine, encouraging. “My parents, three sisters—I haven’t seen any of them in two years. It’s not because I can’t. My parents are still living in Gaithersburg, in the same house where I grew up. I could get there easily.”

“And my sisters, they’re all in the DC area, too—their husbands, kids—so I have no excuse not to see them. But...” I’ve never told this to anyone, not even my team. “They think I’m a hero, Elle. They all brag about their son, their brother, the Special Forces soldier saving lives overseas.”

I’m silent, sinking back into the past. Elle keeps her eyes on me, patient and still. “I’m not a hero. I’m the furthest thing from it.”

“Zane.” She lifts my hand to her mouth, kissing my palm. Softly, she says, “You don’t have to tell me.”

But I do. She needs to know all of it. “You know I left the military about four years ago.” At her nod, I continue, “It was the six of us—Cole, Leo, Rylan, Finn, Nora, and I—we had been on the same team for years. Then we were sent on a mission in the Middle East.”

“I can’t give specifics because it’s classified, but basically, we were there to train foreign allied soldiers. That was one of the things we did as Green Berets, assist and train allies in other countries.”

“We grew close to some of the men we trained, and on this mission, there was one man we became friends with. We trusted him. *I* trusted him. And that was my mistake. Because he betrayed us, sabotaged the mission, destroyed the camp—dozens of people were injured or killed.”

“Oh, Zane.” It’s the softest of whispers as Elle kisses my hand again.

This is the worst part, the part that still haunts me in sleep. “My teammates were hurt—Rylan, Finn, Nora—so badly they had to be medically retired. You wouldn’t know it by looking at them, but Rylan has constant pain from his injuries. Finn lost his hearing in one ear. And Nora...”

My throat closes for a moment before I can continue. “She was attacked. When Leo found her...” I take a deep breath, pushing to finish. “We all left the Army. With three of the team out, we didn’t want to continue. So we went our separate

ways for a year until Cole decided to start Blade and Arrow. From there..."

"But Zane, that's not your fault."

"It is." And the final harsh truth. "I was commander of the team, Elle. I was in charge. Of course it was my fault."

Silence drags as Elle stares at me, her gaze unreadable. Fear claws at me, icy cold tears at my chest. Have I ruined things between us?

"It's not your fault, Zane." When I start to shake my head, she stops me. "It's not. I *know* you. You are more aware of your surroundings, of people, than anyone I've met. Which is why I *know* that if there had been *any* sign, any *hint* of betrayal, you would have known."

"And not only that," she continues, "but your entire team trusted him. If none of you noticed anything suspicious, then there wasn't anything. It happens. So many times, a tragedy happens and there wasn't any sign. You're not a mind reader, Zane. That man was a monster, but that's not your fault."

Elle's eyes are steady on me, certainty blazing. She looks so convinced, I can almost believe her. Almost.

"I know you don't believe me," she says. "But you will. Because I'm one-hundred percent sure of it. You are a good man, and a hero." She stops, presses closer to me. "I'll keep telling you, Zane. Over and over until you *do* believe me."

"Elle." Tears prick at my eyes, but I blink them back. "I don't deserve you."

"Yes, you do." Then she kisses me, tender and sweet and perfect. "You deserve everything good, Zane. I promise."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ELLE

“Are you sure you’re comfortable doing this, bug?”

I pull my attention away from the dingy snow banks and salt-covered cars, turning to look at Zane. “What do you mean?”

He glances away from the road for a moment, his eyes dark with concern. “I just want to make sure you’re okay with all this. Leaving headquarters, being out—it’s already a lot of stress. And then talking to Anya...”

“I’m fine.” Sort of.

“Mmhm.” One hand moves to my leg, gently squeezing.

Only now do I notice that my leg is jumping, foot tapping nervously. Sighing, I admit, “Maybe I’m a little nervous.” *More than a little.* Ever since I got Anya’s call last night, I’ve felt sick to my stomach, jittery, a chilling premonition of doom hanging over me.

Even in profile, Zane looks worried. “We can go home, Elle. You can call Anya instead. It’s not necessary to go there in person.” He moves his hand to the back of my neck, rubbing at the knotted muscles.

I so badly want to take up Zane on his offer. To go back to the safety of his apartment, cuddle on the couch with his arms around me, confident in the knowledge that no one can get to me. I don’t want to be in Zane’s SUV, headed to Anya’s

apartment near campus, so close to the memories I wish I could forget.

It's not just the proximity to where I was almost taken—*twice*. It's the raw feeling that comes with having to talk about it again. But how can I not?

“I have to see her face to face, Zane. She asked me to come.” My stomach makes another sickening swoop, nausea rising. “Her girlfriend is dead. What she must be going through... even if it makes me uncomfortable, it's the least I can do.”

When Anya called me last night, I knew it couldn't be for anything good. If Chloe had returned, I might have gotten a relieved text at some point, but a phone call? In my experience, phone calls are for bad news and disappointments, and my gut knew before I ever heard Anya's words.

When I answered the call, at first I was only greeted with silence. Then a shaky sob. Another pause, and then, “Chloe's dead.”

Before I could say anything in response, Anya continued, her words interrupted by stuttering sobs. “They found her... in the Catskills... animals... the police...” Trailing off, the phone went silent again.

Several seconds went by before she came back, her voice stronger. “They said... it looked like an accident. But it can't be.”

As I stumbled over my apologies, Anya said something that sent icy chills down my spine. “She thought someone was following her. On campus, outside our apartment, even in the library late one night.”

My heart stuttered to a stop. I must have made some sound because Zane came rushing over to me, kneeling in front of me, hands on my knees. “What's wrong?” he asked, his features tight with worry.

Throat constricting, I whispered to Anya, “I was almost abducted in the library.”

Which is why I'm going over to Anya's apartment to talk to her, to see if what happened to me and Chloe are related. And I'm sick about it—not only about Anya's loss, which is horrible—but about the possibility that whoever is trying to get me actually *got* Chloe and killed her.

Zane miraculously finds a parking spot on the packed street and maneuvers his big SUV into it effortlessly. Turning to look at me, he says, "I know you want to help. But it doesn't need to be at the expense of your health. You barely ate anything for dinner and you skipped breakfast this morning."

Just the thought of eating makes my stomach lurch queasily. "I will. After..."

"Bug." Zane cups my cheek, his hand warm on my chilled skin. His voice is soft, gently coaxing. "I don't want you to get sick. When we get back home, I'll make whatever you want. Just eat something, okay?"

"I will, Zane." I force a smile and try to reassure him. "It's just nerves. I'm fine. Really."

Zane's mouth pulls down and tiny lines etch into his forehead, clearly not believing me but thankfully not calling me out on it. Instead, he hops out of the car and comes over to my side, only opening the door once he's scanned our surroundings several times.

As we make the quick walk to Anya's building, Zane is more bodyguard than boyfriend, his body tense and his eyes constantly moving. Tucking me into his side, one arm wrapped around me, he hustles me down the sidewalk with a focused urgency. Several people quickly move out of Zane's way, no doubt intimidated by the intensity and banked threat radiating from him. His gaze is dangerous, a warning to anyone who might think of approaching.

I thought I'd feel scared to be out in public, but it's impossible with Zane beside me. I feel safe, at least physically. I know no one is going to try to grab me on this busy sidewalk with Zane protecting me. Once we get inside, though, and I'm

faced with the reality of Chloe's death and Anya's suspicions? That, I'm scared of.

Once we're inside Anya's tiny studio apartment, I feel even worse. The sorrow inside is a tangible thing, a heavy, poisonous fog that makes it hard to breathe. And it's a mess. Piles of books and unfolded laundry draped over chairs, papers filled with messy script strewn all over the floor, empty glasses marching in staggering lines on the coffee table.

The smell... I didn't realize despair had a scent until I experienced it. Damp, slightly mildewy, a faint hint of sweat and salt, with just a tinge of spoiled milk.

And then Anya. Eyes swollen and red, dark shadows under them, her skin so pale it looks translucent. Baggy, mismatched clothes, bare feet with chipped polish on her toenails. And her expression—shocked and devastated and disbelieving.

Fear expands so fast inside me I feel dizzy. I cling to Zane, squeezing up against him, his strong arm around me the only thing keeping me standing. "Elle?" He murmurs my name so only I can hear him. "Are you okay?"

I give him a jerky nod, but don't say anything. I'm not okay, but what right do I have to complain when Anya is suffering?

The next few minutes are terrible. Leaving the security of Zane and hugging Anya, feeling her coming apart, her sobs raw and painful. Whispering *I'm sorry* over and over, because what else can I really say after she's lost her girlfriend? And the niggling thought worming its way through my head—*it could have been me*.

It still could be.

By the time we all sit down—Anya huddled in a ball in a papa-san chair, Zane and I on the couch—she seems to have pulled herself together again. The despair in her gaze is still there, but it's mixed with a fierce determination. After blowing her nose one more time, she fixes her gaze on me.

"You said someone tried to abduct you. What happened?"

Bile rises as the memories resurface, but I grab hold of Zane's hand for strength and tell her everything.

I tell her about the man outside my apartment, waiting. And the man who broke in a week later and took me. Pulse hammering, I tell her about the third attempt by the restrooms in the library, and then Zane saving me in the same building for a second time.

I'm breathing fast and shaking, trying to hide it, but not very successfully. It's in the past, but the trauma is still so vivid and the fear of it happening again is petrifying. Zane is stroking my hair and rubbing my back in slow circles, and I keep pushing through my story until it's complete.

Anya is staring at me, her gaze contemplative. Once I've stopped talking, she says, "A couple months ago, Chloe said she was being followed. At least several times, but she was able to get to someplace safe each time. Before anything happened. Did that happen to you?"

"Not really. I had a sort of strange feeling before it happened, but I never noticed anyone following me." I frown, thinking back on it. "Maybe I'm just really unobservant. Maybe they *were* following me, and I didn't notice."

Zane makes a small growling sound beside me.

"Were there any other things?" Anya unfurls herself, resting her elbows on her knees, leaning towards me. "Other interactions? Things that seemed... off?"

"Um. I don't know..." Were there? Was there some clue I missed? Something that would have warned me that danger was coming?

"A few weeks before she disappeared, Chloe told me about a guy that hit on her." Anya grimaces. "She said no, obviously. He was pissed and started insulting her. She finally left the library, and he followed her out. He only walked away once she approached a security guard."

I shake my head. "Nothing like that ever happened to me."

"Maybe it's unrelated. But maybe not." Her jaw tightens. "Chloe was followed, a few times on campus. She was

accosted by an aggressive guy in the library. Then she disappeared. You were attacked, twice on campus, both times in the library. Someone was trying to abduct you, too. It seems suspicious to me.”

Ice is snaking through my veins, chilling my body.

Zane hugs me to his side, then focuses on Anya. His tone is gentle as he says, “I hate to ask this, but what makes you so sure it wasn’t an accident?”

Anya flinches, but holds his gaze. “Chloe wouldn’t just go off hiking in the mountains by herself. She didn’t even like the outdoors. There’s no way she’d just decide to go off on her own.”

“What did the police say?”

“That her car was parked near one of the trailheads. There was a backpack with hiking gear near where they”—her voice cracks—“found her body.”

Anya starts to cry again, soft sniffs and sobs. “They said... the... the animals got to her... There was... barely enough...” She buries her face in her hands, crying hard.

I want to get up and comfort her, but my legs are frozen.

Finally, Anya lifts her head from her hands, her expression tortured. “I know she was killed. I *know* it. And I’m going to keep telling the police until they believe it.”

There’s not much more to say after that.

We stay for another five minutes or so, offering our condolences, asking if she needs any help, telling her to call if she needs anything. She tells us her sister is coming to stay with her and will take care of everything, so at least I don’t feel quite so guilty about leaving. But it’s a relief to escape from the suffocating sadness, the fearsome reminder that it could have been me.

The same thought keeps spinning in my head—out to the car, on the way home, back to Blade and Arrow and Zane’s apartment—*it could have been me*.

It could be a coincidence. But I don't really believe it. Like Anya said, it happened on campus, in the library, right around the same time. What are the chances of it being random?

Not great.

Finally back in the apartment after a quiet trip home, Zane locks the door behind us and spins to face me. His expression is as fierce as I've ever seen it, all his features tense lines and hard angles. Dark brows are pulled down over eyes blazing a fiery blue. He stares at me, his jaw the edge of a blade, tiny muscles on each side working.

For a moment, he's frozen. His gaze sweeping from my face and down, desperate. Then he exhales, relief filling his eyes, and he pulls me into his embrace.

This isn't like any other time he's held me. This time, Zane is the one trembling. He's patting my hair, my back, kissing my head, keeping me clasped to him the entire time. His heart is pounding hard and fast against my chest.

"Never," he breathes, then more intensely, "*Never.*"

Cupping my nape, he tilts my head back and captures my mouth with his. It's a hot and hungry kiss, our teeth bumping, tongues plunging and ravenously tasting. Then he pulls back to look at me, and my heart actually stops for a second.

The look in his eyes. It's more than lust. More than affection. It's all the feelings I have for Zane but still haven't dared say out loud.

"Never," he repeats, lifting me into his arms, peppering my face with kisses. "I'll never let anyone take you, Elle. I swear it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ZANE

It's not a coincidence.

I know it, just like I knew when there was a tango sneaking up behind me, or when a mission was about to go sideways. With the exception of *that* mission, when everything went FUBAR, my gut has always told me when something is wrong.

And it's telling me that the death of Anya's girlfriend is related to what happened to Elle. There are too many similarities for it to be a coincidence. Even though there's no proof yet, I'm sure. Whoever killed Chloe is the same person—people—who want to get their hands on my Elle.

And she *is* mine. I knew it already, but this slammed it home for me. There's no more wondering if I could be falling in love with her so soon; it's already happened.

I'm not falling in love with Elle. She already has me.

In that apartment, watching Anya grieve her girlfriend, the question horrible and unavoidable—*what if that had been Elle?*

Inconceivable. I don't want a life without Elle in it.

And that's when all my feelings came into laser sharp focus. I love her.

She captured me from the moment I met her. She melted the ice around my heart, and I gave it to her without even

realizing. Elle found a way past my defenses, and she's become the very best part of me.

Which is why the meeting this morning was so terrifying.

When we went to meet with Anya two days ago, I had hoped to discover some new information that would help us end the threat to Elle. Some missing puzzle piece that would pull it all together—a name, a place, something. But instead, we left with more suspicions and fears.

I had a bad feeling about the outcome of the meeting before it started. Leo still hasn't found anything useful—nothing from the security cameras, no witnesses, no new clues from Elle's history. And Rylan's been keeping on top of the guy who poisoned Elle's tea, but there haven't been any new requests for services.

In short, we have a big, fat, nothing. And as much as I love having Elle here with me, she can't stay under twenty-four-seven protection indefinitely. So it wasn't a surprise to hear Cole tell Elle solemnly, "At this point, without any new developments, it may be time to consider a new strategy."

Leo sat at the dining room table, hunched over his laptop, his expression carved from stone. "I'm so sorry, Elle." Guilt seeped through every word. "I've been looking, but without a new direction..."

But it's not Leo's fault. Elle looked stricken, but she got up and hugged Leo, anyway. She echoed my thoughts, saying, "Leo, don't apologize. Thank you so much for trying."

As Cole outlined his idea for a possible trap, using Elle as bait, it took everything in me not to lose it. To not yell at Cole for even suggesting it. The thought of my Elle willingly putting herself in danger?

How can I stand by and let it happen?

Yes, I'm fully aware if this were anyone else, I'd be in favor of it. But when I think about Elle hanging limp in that man's arms, what could have happened if I'd been even a minute later...

I feel sick even thinking about it.

By the end of the meeting, Elle was agreeing with Cole. “It’s the best way,” she said softly, fear making her voice wobbly. “If this is the only way to stop them...”

“It’s not.” I glared at Cole. “We can wait for new information. Using Elle as bait isn’t safe.”

She grasped my hand, easing my clenched fist open, her fingers so fragile inside mine. “It’s okay, Zane. I know you’ll all protect me.”

But what if we fail?

I never used to doubt myself. Not when I was deployed, not as a Green Beret, not with other cases with Blade and Arrow. But the stakes have never been this high. Now that I’ve finally found Elle, I can’t take the chance of losing her.

Cole and Leo left my apartment a couple of hours ago, after Cole reluctantly agreed to give it a few more days before moving on to the next stage of the plan. A few days to hope for some new bit of news, something that will eliminate the need to use the woman I love as bait. As Cole left, he stopped in the doorway, dropping his voice so only I could hear him.

“I know it sucks, Zane. If there was any other way, trust me, I’d be suggesting it. But you know we’ll protect her with our lives. We won’t let anything happen to her.”

I’d trust Cole with my life, and have, many times. It’s not that I don’t believe in him now.

But it’s *Elle*.

Since the meeting, she’s been curled up in the same spot on the couch, alternating between staring at her laptop and frowning at it. I’ve been pacing the apartment, my stomach in knots, wracking my brain to think of some clue I’ve missed. The silence hangs heavy, but I’m not sure what to say.

Don’t agree to be bait? Tell me about everyone you’ve ever met for the tenth time, in case I missed something the first nine ones? Move to a deserted island with me, so I know for sure you’ll be safe?

I’m not sure any of those will go over well.

I stop in front of the window and stare out at the blanket of snow covering the lawn. There are winding trails of footprints across it, and a little snowman sits in the center. I'm not sure if it was Cole and Maya who went out there, or Leo and Georgia, but the sight of it jabs a little sliver of pain into my heart.

I don't begrudge my friends' happiness—far from it. But I wish I could give Elle carefree moments like those—okay, maybe not the snow, but something like it—without this constant fear looming over her.

As I start another circle around the room, Elle glances up from her laptop to look at me. Fatigue has drained all the color from her face, and her features are pulled tight, lines of stress etched between her eyes and across her forehead.

“Zane?” Even the way she says my name is strained. “Are you okay?”

Then it hits me. *I'm an idiot.*

It couldn't be more clear that Elle is suffering and what am I doing? I'm in my own head instead of talking to her. Comforting her. Distracting her from the shitshow going on around us.

I knew I wasn't very good at this boyfriend thing.

Taking a seat on the couch next to Elle, I move her laptop to the coffee table and slide her onto my lap. Turning her so she's facing me, I say, “I'm sorry, Elle.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Why?”

“Because I should be supporting you instead of pacing around the apartment. I should be making sure you're okay after that meeting, not leaving you to deal with it on your own.”

“You didn't leave me alone.” She's still looking at me in confusion. “You've been right here.”

Guilt makes my voice rough. “No. I should be here”—I gesture to the couch—“with you. I know you're stressed and scared and I should be making you feel better.”

“Oh, Zane.” She hugs me, tucking her head under my chin for a few seconds before pulling away. “It’s okay. I know you’re stressed, too. I don’t expect you to be at my side every second.”

“Not every second. But when you need me—”

Her hands come to my face, soft and delicate, her thumbs tracing along my jaw. “I know you’re here if I need you, Zane. You’ve proven that to me time and again.”

“Still.” I want to erase the tiny lines bracketing her mouth, the sad pull of her lips, the purplish shadows under her eyes. “I should be building a snowman with you.” *Why did I say that?* “Or something.”

”A snowman?“ Elle cocks her head at me, a tiny smile appearing. “Why?”

“To distract you,” I mutter, wishing I’d never said anything. Somehow, when I’m with Elle, I say things I’d never imagine myself saying.

Her smile grows broader, brightening her face. “Well. I’m not sure about a snowman. But... I could think of something else we could do for a distraction.”

Just like that, my guilt is shoved aside, desire replacing it.

I can do that kind of distraction.

“Oh, really?“ I arch an eyebrow at her. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather go outside? Play in the snow? Have a snowball fight?”

Shuddering slightly, Elle laughs. “I am definitely sure. But if you wanted to distract me... in the bedroom, maybe... I wouldn’t be opposed to that.”

Standing up with Elle still in my arms, I flash her a wolfish grin. “I would be more than happy to, bug. As many times as you want.”

* * *

WHO NEEDS snowmen when there's a better kind of distraction?

Like peeling Elle's clothes off layer by layer until she was standing bare and gorgeous in front of me. Running my hands up her legs, to her stomach, cupping her breasts and caressing her nipples until they were tight peaks, dipping my head to suckle them. Tracing patterns between freckles, Elle shivering with pleasure.

And laying Elle back on the bed, pulling her to the edge of the mattress and kneeling between her slender thighs. Seeing her spread open for me, her arousal dampening her folds, using my fingers to tease her little bud until it was pink and swollen with need.

It was the best kind of distraction when I tasted her, using my tongue to flick and stroke, her muscles fluttering around me. And when I plunged one finger inside her, then two, curving and pressing them against her inner wall, hearing Elle's breathy moans as she hovered right at the edge of exploding.

Then when I sank into her, looping her legs over my shoulders and tilting her hips, filling her completely. There were no other thoughts except the squeeze of her muscles tightening around me, thickening and throbbing inside her, desperate for release. As I thrust faster, filling Elle to the hilt each time, all I could do was feel.

The slick glide of her walls as they clutched at me. The sound of our bodies coming together, Elle gasping out, "Zane, oh *please*."

Her breasts, soft and full, dusky pink nipples arching up to my mouth. My thumb finding her swollen nub as I surged into Elle faster and harder, each time increasing the desperate need for release.

And then, when Elle cried out, her hips jerking, fingers digging into my skin, all I knew was how beautiful and perfect she was.

When I flew off the cliff along with her, everything disappeared except the woman beneath me.

And when I rolled over, draping her small body across mine, Elle's languid, satisfied smile eased the hard knot of worry lodged against my heart.

We're still in bed, Elle tucked up against me, her features finally relaxed as she sleeps. She's using me as a pillow and soft little breaths brush across my chest. Over the last few nights, her nightmares have returned with a vengeance, so I'm glad to see her getting some much needed rest.

So when my phone rings with our custom Blade and Arrow ringtone, I can't help glaring at it for a second before reaching over to grab it. While I wish this brief reprieve didn't have to be over, there's no question of answering it. If it were something minor, my teammates would text instead of calling, so I know this must be important.

I answer quietly, trying not to wake Elle. "Leo. What's up?"

He gets right to the point. "I just received some news. I think both of you will want to hear it."

Despite my attempt not to disturb Elle, she's already wide awake and watching me silently, her eyebrows arched into a little V of worry.

"Leo..." There's a warning in my voice. The last thing I want is to lay more bad news on Elle's shoulders.

"Put me on speaker, Zane." He's calm but commanding. "It's not bad news. Trust me."

"It's been a rough few days, Leo..."

"Trust me."

I sigh at him. "Fine." Turning to Elle, I tell her, "Leo has news. He wants to share it with both of us. Are you okay with that?"

Wide-eyed, she nods at me. First, I place the phone on the bed in front of us, then pull Elle into my arms before tapping the speaker button. "Okay, Leo. What is it?"

“The police made an arrest.” Leo pauses, letting it sink in for a second. “They believe it’s the man responsible for Elle’s abduction and Chloe’s death.”

Elle sucks in a sharp breath. Her eyes search out mine, hope brimming.

“Last night, there was a report by a witness of a man assaulting a woman on campus,” Leo continues. “The witness recognized the suspect, identified him to the police.”

Elle leans towards the phone. “What about the woman?” Her voice is shaky. “Is she okay?”

“The woman took off, and the witness didn’t recognize her, apparently.” Leo sighs before adding, “But it was a credible witness. A professor at the university knew the suspect from a class he taught. So the police felt it was enough cause to track down the suspect and question him.”

“And?” This doesn’t sound like enough evidence to prove this person was the one who came after Elle.

“The police went to the guy’s apartment yesterday evening. He wasn’t home, but a neighbor said the guy usually arrives home from work around nine o’clock, so they came back and were waiting for him when he arrived.”

“Once they got inside, there were some suspicious items in plain view. Suspicious enough for them to take the guy to the station and get a search warrant.”

I ask, “What items?” as Elle’s grip on my arm tightens.

Leo’s voice goes tight. “Photos of Chloe. Elle. Their schedules. Addresses.” He pauses, tone lowering dangerously. “Lots of photos. Some of them were apparently... taken through windows.”

Fucker. My teeth grind together painfully, sending little darts of pain through my jaw. I grit out, “And in his apartment?”

There’s another pause, and Leo says heavily, “Enough to arrest him.”

“Tell me.” Elle is staring at the phone, her body tense, tone softly urgent. “I need to know, Leo. I need to know if this is really him.”

A gust of air comes through the phone. Grimly, he says, “Supplies to restrain someone, Elle. Gags, zip ties, ropes. Tarps.”

Elle shudders against me, a tiny gasp of shock escaping.

My stomach lurches, bile rising at the near miss. “Did he confess?”

“Not yet. He’s claiming it’s not his.” A low snort of disbelief accompanies his words. “Of course.”

“What about—” Elle stops and swallows hard. “What about the other man? There were two of them.”

“The police said there’s evidence of an unnamed accomplice,” Leo answers. “But it looks like the man they arrested was behind all of it. The other one was just being paid for his services.”

My heart is tripping along, hopeful, but not yet believing. Can this really be it? Is the danger to Elle really over?

“What’s his name?” I’m already running through people I know who have ties to the prison system, wondering if I can arrange for this piece of shit to have an unfortunate accident.

“Elle.” Leo’s voice gentles. “Do you want to know who it is?”

“I... I don’t know.” Her voice wobbles, then strengthens. “Yes. I do.”

“His name is Bill Quinn. He’s a PhD student in the Clinical Psychology program.”

Elle gasps, going pale. “I had a class with him... but we didn’t talk. Maybe a hello, in passing. But that’s all. Nothing to...”

“It’s nothing *you* did, Elle.” I tip her chin towards me, holding her gaze. “Nothing you did caused this. Nothing.”

“Zane is right, Elle.” He pauses, murmurs something away from the phone. “I’ll let you know as soon as I find out anything else. But according to what my source at the department said, the case against this guy is strong.”

“Does that mean...” Elle’s voice pitches up. “Does that mean it’s over?”

I wrap my arms around her, hope blossoming. But until this piece of garbage is locked away for good, I’m not making any promises. “I think so, bug. I think so.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

ELLE

I never imagined myself making noises like these.

Deep moans of pleasure without worry of embarrassment. High-pitched cries of desperate need. Small grunts and groans as Zane thrusts deep inside me, bottoming out, my core squeezing hard around him.

Whimpering when he pulls out to flip me over. Rasping out, “Zane, deeper, oh, please, I’m so close,” when he sinks back into me.

From behind, Zane feels even thicker and longer—I don’t know how he’s fitting inside me, but I never want him to leave. His fingers are strumming just above where he joins me, flicking and rubbing my sensitive bundle of nerves, sending pulses of heat into my belly. He plunges deep, then pulls nearly out of me before repeating the maddening motion, and I almost lose my mind.

My thighs are shaking, quivering—I’d fall flat on the mattress if not for Zane holding my hips up as he drives into me, his big hand spanning my waist.

Then he leans over to kiss me, hot and hungry and his tongue moving in the same rhythm as his hips. Now my arms are shaking too, and I sink to my elbows, the change in angle pushing my ass against Zane’s abs.

He sucks in a harsh breath, then breathes out, “Elle, you feel so—”

I tighten my muscles around him, and he groans.

Each movement is a sensual drag of skin on skin, heat building, electricity sparking and filling my body.

Zane surges forward again, then holds still, rock hard inside me, breathing deep. “I’m so close,” he says, voice low and rough. “I need you—”

His thumb presses harder on my throbbing bud, rubbing faster, and he rotates his hips so his length hits just the right spot inside—

“Zane!” I explode into space, flying past stars, my vision going black for a second. My toes, my fingers, every muscle tenses with the sensations rushing through me.

As my inner walls are fluttering around him, both his hands come to my waist and pull my hips back towards him. Several more thrusts and he’s pulsing and twitching inside me, his mouth by my ear, groaning, “Only you, Elle. Only you.”

I’m boneless, breathing hard, aftershocks rippling through my body. Nothing in my life has prepared me for this feeling of absolute completion.

Zane is braced over me, his breath hot on my neck, his chest heaving. He presses his lips to my nape, then he shifts, quickly disposing of our protection before lifting me, adjusting us so we’re on our sides facing each other. One arm comes around my back, pulling me close, his other hand gently cupping my cheek.

His eyes are molten silvery-blue, hot with emotion and lingering need.

I rest my hand on his chest, the rapid thump of his heart echoing mine. And a singular right-ness washes over me. I love everything about being with Zane.

I love him. But does he love me? I think he does. But I’m not *sure*.

Can I say it first, overcome the fear of rejection? Maybe.

Zane is stroking my face, his touch so tender it makes my heart squeeze. Still gazing at me with that same intense look,

he says, “I think waking up next to you is my favorite thing in the world.”

Oh. My heart does this weird, flippy-flop in my chest. Smiling at Zane, feeling light and happy, I say, “I love it too.”

Then a less pleasant thought intrudes, and my good mood fizzles. I’ve been waking up next to Zane every morning, falling asleep in his arms every night, but what about *now*? Now that the danger is over and I don’t need to stay at Blade and Arrow anymore, what happens next?

Go back to my apartment in Yonkers, the one that feels tainted? See Zane on the weekends and occasional weekdays, spending the other nights and days on my own? It’s no different from what many other couples do, except I hate the very thought of it.

“Bug? What’s wrong?” Zane’s expression creases with concern.

“Nothing’s wrong.” I don’t want to ruin this moment. Forcing my lips up, I give him a little smile. “I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t.” His gaze sharpens. “You were smiling, then it just disappeared, and now you’re giving me one of your fake ones. So I know something is wrong. Tell me.”

“I just—” A weight settles on my chest, and I push my words out in a rush. “I was thinking about how I have to go back to my apartment, and it won’t be the same, but it’s okay. I understand I can’t stay here forever.”

Zane stares at me silently for a second before asking, “Do you want to leave?”

What’s the right answer? The truth? No, I don’t want to leave. But he’s been with me nearly twenty-four-seven for weeks. Should I give him some space? Give him time to decide if he definitely wants to be with me?

“If you want to leave, Elle, I understand.” Zane’s voice is carefully neutral, but his jaw is tight and hurt flickers in his eyes. Does he want me to stay?

Should I tell him the truth?

Stop being a chicken. After everything else I've been through, am I going to be defeated by this? "I don't want to," I blurt out. "I just don't want to impose."

"Impose?"

"Um." He doesn't sound happy. "I mean. You've had me here all the time... and I don't... I want us to work out... but..." Flushing, I mumble the rest. "I don't want you to get tired of me, either."

Surprise ripples across Zane's face. Then he sits up, pulling me along with him, settling me sideways across his lap. "Elle. Have I done something to make you think I'm tired of you? If I have, I am so sorry. I would never—"

I rush to reassure him. "No. Never. I just... I worry. I love being here, but I don't want to put pressure on you."

"How can I get tired of you, bug?" All his features soften, and he brushes a quick kiss across my forehead. "I love you. I will *never* get tired of you."

It takes a second for the words to register. Did he just say what I thought he said?

After a pause, a sheepish grin stretches across Zane's face. "I thought I'd say that in a more romantic setting. Flowers. A fancy dinner. Something like that."

"You love me?" My heart is thrumming hummingbird fast.

"Yes." He swallows, and his voice thickens as he says, "I love you, Elle. I didn't even know it was possible to feel this way about someone. But from the first moment I saw you... a part of me already knew. My heart knew you were mine from the start."

"Zane." My nose prickles with emotion.

"If you don't—" Zane starts. "If it's too soon..."

"It's not too soon." I grab his face, brushing my fingers over his soft stubble, searching for that little dimple. "I love you. I think I started falling for you from that first night when you brought me all those pizzas."

A smile appears, along with his dimple. “You didn’t think I was crazy?”

“No. I thought it was wonderful.” Scooting even closer to him, I nuzzle his jaw, trailing a line of kisses along it. “I love you so much, Zane. I love the pizzas and the insane amount of breakfast food you left for me that first morning. I love watching movies on the couch with you, our special date, falling asleep with you, the amazing sex...”

“It is amazing,” Zane agrees, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“I love everything about you,” I tell him, my heart overflowing.

Zane touches my cheek. “I love you, bug. You *are* my everything.”

* * *

I DIDN’T THINK my day could get any better than hearing Zane say he loves me.

It’s still the high point, but the rest of the day is turning out pretty great, too.

After another round of sex—we had to celebrate, after all—Zane told me we were going out on a real date. Even though I still count the night out on the patio as our official first date, this is our first date in public.

Not that I’ve minded our dates at home, but getting to go out with Zane like a regular couple? That’s pretty awesome, too.

Now that the guy who was after me has been arrested, it’s only a matter of time before Zane has to go away on another job. And even though I’ll miss him, I can’t complain—not when I know how important what they do is—and I’ll be waiting right here when he returns. Waiting at Zane’s apartment, which I guess is my apartment now, too?

It won't be so bad when he's away, because I have Maya and Georgia to hang out with. Plus, I've been thinking about taking Rylan up on his offer to teach me how to shoot. And I have my dissertation to finish editing. So I won't be sitting around missing Zane too much. I hope.

But he has the next few days off at least, so we're going to make the most of it. Starting with an overnight date in the city. Zane said he'd been thinking about it for weeks, waiting until it would be safe to take me. And even though I begged him to tell me, he insisted on keeping the plans a surprise.

We took the train into the city, first stopping for an early check-in at our hotel. Zane reserved an incredible suite with a view of the park, the biggest bed I've ever seen, and a shower I'll definitely be sharing with him later. I'm sure he spent way too much on it, but when I blurted out something about the price, Zane just looked at me and said, "I haven't been able to take you out until now, Elle. I want it to be special."

And then my heart melted into a puddle of mush.

Just walking around in the city was incredible, holding hands with Zane, enjoying being out in the world again, nothing to think about but spending time with the man I love.

The man I love. I still can't believe it's real.

Our first stop was the Museum of Natural History. Zane remembered.

We went through the museum like wide-eyed tourists, taking selfies in front of the dinosaur skeletons and making silly poses with the giant blue whale hanging behind us. We cuddled as we watched the stars in the planetarium and made whispered plans about taking a trip to one of the parks out west to go stargazing.

Now we've just entered the most amazing bookstore. As we walk inside, I have to stop for a second just to take it all in. There are dozens of tables stacked high with books, each with a brightly colored sign announcing themes like road tripping and angsty romance and books turned to movies. Tall shelves

climb up to the ceiling with sliding ladders to reach the top of them.

Mixed in with the books is an array of literary accessories—shirts and bags decorated with bookish quotes, hundreds of bookmarks, beautiful journals and elegant pens—and I immediately see at least a half-dozen things I want. The tote bag covered with the text from one of my favorite books? Or what about that T-shirt with a dragon reading on it?

And that's not even counting all the books. I love my Kindle, but there's just something about print books—smelling that new-book scent, the comforting heft of it in my hand, adding it to my bookshelves...

“Zane!” I squeeze his hand, spinning to face him.

He tenses, going on alert. “Is something wrong?”

It just occurred to me. “We need more bookshelves. In your apartment. Otherwise, where will all my books go?”

Zane stares at me for a second before laughing. “Elle, you freaked me out. I thought something was really wrong.”

I pin him with a serious gaze. “Zane. Not having enough bookshelves is a real problem.” But my lips are twitching up as I say it.

He grins, shaking his head. “Bug.” Zane tugs me off to the side and wraps his arms around me, leaning down to brush his lips across mine. “We'll get as many bookshelves as you want. We can turn the spare room into a library if you want to.”

“As many as I want? Hmm...” Tapping my finger on my mouth, I squint at him. “In that case, I'd better start buying some more books, too.”

“Why do you think we're here?” Zane winks at me, his eyes flashing a sparkling blue. “Buy whatever you want. Let's start stocking that library for you.”

I'm with the man I love, *and* he's telling me to buy as many books as I want?

“Zane,” I whisper, my chest squeezing. “Thank you for doing this. The museum, the hotel, here... I'd be happy in

your—our—apartment, but this is wonderful.”

“You’re wonderful, Elle.” Gaze soft and loving, Zane strokes his thumb down my cheek. “I’ll do anything to make you happy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ZANE

“I still don’t like not being in the room with you.”

“I know.” Elle hugs me, resting her head on my chest. “But I have to meet with Dr. Feinstein. He’s my dissertation advisor. And it would be weird to have you sitting there in our meeting.”

I run my hand down her back, holding her to me, not really wanting to let go. “Still.” I can’t keep the tension from bleeding into my voice. “The last time... I just want to be *sure*.”

We’re back on campus for the first time since Elle was drugged and almost taken from the library, and I’m honestly not sure who is having a harder time with it. The meeting isn’t in the library, but one of the other buildings on campus, but the memories are still hitting me hard.

Before we got here, I was ready to support Elle. To comfort her if it got to be too much, reassure her she’s safe, whisk her back home the second she got upset. But now that we’re here, I’m the one who’s being comforted. Which isn’t how it’s supposed to go.

“Zane, it’s just a short meeting.” Her tone is soft and soothing. “An hour at most. And you’ll be right outside the room.”

That’s what we thought last time. And look what happened.

It's not that I think Elle is in danger, exactly. But I'm not one-hundred percent sure she isn't. And until I'm certain that the threat to her is eliminated, I'm not comfortable leaving her alone. Yes, the suspect is still in jail and awaiting trial. But his accomplice—the man I had multiple run-ins with—is still out there.

The police have said all the evidence points to the man in jail—Bill Quinn—being the mastermind behind it. That the other man was simply someone hired to be the muscle and has no motivation to come after Elle now that he's no longer being paid.

And that's probably true.

But until I know for sure, I don't want to take my eyes off Elle. I've been trying to keep my concerns to myself—she's been so happy ever since the news of the arrest and I don't want to ruin it. Which is probably why she's handling this separation so much better than me.

"I've known Dr. Feinstein for years," Elle adds, tilting her head back to meet my gaze. "He's a sweet man, and completely harmless."

"Maybe," I manage through a clenched jaw, "but I'd still be happier if I could be there in the room with you."

Elle's eyes darken to a burnt honey, worry creasing her forehead. "If you really want to... but I'm just worried I'll insult him. And with my defense so close..."

Shit. I don't want to make her upset. "No, it's okay. I'll just stay right outside." I smooth my hand down her hair, satin soft on my fingers. "But if there's anything off, Elle, and I mean anything, you call out. Promise?"

"Yes, Zane." Her eyes flicker to her watch. "I have to get to the meeting. Maybe afterwards, we could do something fun? Since you have to leave for a job tomorrow?"

Something else I'm not thrilled about. Now that the threat is considered over, I have to head out of town to help provide security for a CEO in Chicago. It's only a few days, and I wouldn't usually mind, but leaving Elle... I know she'll be

safe at my apartment and Cole will be staying at headquarters to keep an eye on all the women, but I'm still not happy about it.

Forcing that worry aside, too, I smile encouragingly at Elle. "Okay, bug. Think about what you want to do, and once you're done with your meeting..."

"Okay." Brightening, Elle loops her arms around my neck and stretches up to kiss me. I gently lift her by the waist and capture her lips with mine; just a hint of the kiss I'll give her later, when we're in private.

Once Elle disappears inside the professor's office, I lean against the wall and settle in to wait. My posture is deceptively relaxed, but I'm fully alert and ready to fly into action if I need to. I'm observing everything—the dull tick of the clock on the wall, the hum of the heating vent blowing, the rumble of voices down the hall, heading towards me.

And especially the room I'm standing next to. The sounds are muffled, but I can pick out Elle's voice alternating with a lower, masculine one. The man she's talking to sounds older, soft and raspy, but his voice pitches up in a friendly tone.

One ear on Elle's meeting, I pull out my phone to check my texts. Rylan went to meet with the suspect in Elle's case, hoping to convince him to give up some information about the accomplice. So far, the police aren't getting anywhere—this Bill Quinn just keeps insisting he's innocent—but Rylan tends to pull out information that the police aren't able to.

It doesn't hurt that we're not law enforcement, so we can approach the questioning from a different angle. We can offer help if the suspect talks to us, legal assistance, strings pulled, assurances... or we can hint at more intimidating consequences. Nothing illegal, nothing harmful, but more in the range of grays than the police can venture.

Not that I want to help this piece of garbage who targeted Elle. I want Rylan to scare the truth out of him. If I really got what I wanted, it would be to face off with him, and I know who'd be walking away from that fight.

My phone is still frustratingly silent. Rylan should be back by now. Why hasn't he gotten in touch with me yet?

Two women walk down the hall, headed towards me. They're chattering at each other, high pitched and shrill. As they pass, one giggles and jabs the other with her elbow. The one that just got elbowed stares at me, fluttering her eyelashes and sending me a flirtatious smile. I give them a brisk nod and look back down at my phone while I try to tune out their laughter and focus on Elle's voice.

Still there. The light rise and fall of Elle's voice, calm and steady.

Then another interruption, this time my phone buzzing. It's not Rylan, but Leo calling. I don't want to answer and not be able to hear Elle, so I quickly silence it and shoot back a text.

Can't talk, waiting for Elle. What's up?

Three dots blink for a second.

Ry said the guy sounded like he was telling the truth.

What is he talking about? I tap out a response, fingers flying over the screen.

What about the evidence? What did the guy tell Rylan?

The dots blink again, longer this time. While I'm waiting, the door next to me opens, and an older man walks out, pulling the door closed behind him. He looks to be in his mid sixties, thin, dressed in khakis and the stereotypical blazer with patches on the elbows. His face is genial, heavy creases at his laugh lines, with a neatly trimmed silver beard and mustache.

Elle was right. He does look harmless.

Leo's message blinks onto my screen.

The guy was insistent. Ry's gut says it's the truth. I've been looking at Quinn's finances and searching his internet history since. It's not him, Zane. It can't be.

What the fuck? How?

And where is Elle? If the meeting is over, why hasn't she come out yet?

Stepping in front of the door, I cock my ear towards it, listening. After a terrifying pause, I can hear her lilting voice rising and falling, but now there's a different person responding.

I don't like this.

My phone buzzes again with another message from Leo. Shit. My attention is split, and I need to be totally focused.

Quinn has no money to pay for an accomplice. He has an assistantship that pays for grad school. He works another part-time job off campus, all the wages from that go to child support. His bank account is almost empty. There's nothing extra.

Another text appears.

On the night Elle was abducted by the two men, it couldn't have been Quinn. He was in a chat room all night, using his IP address. No VPN. He couldn't have been there.

I checked the security cameras in his apartment building. Someone went into Quinn's apartment the night he was arrested. All in black, face hidden with a scarf and glasses. I think he was set up. Working on finding more proof.

Fuck. I don't want to believe Leo, but if he says the guy didn't do it... Dammit.

Jaw clenching, I reply to Leo.

Find out who set him up.

He replies immediately.

Working on it.

I can't believe this. I wasn't one-hundred percent sure, but I thought Elle was safe.

And if the man in jail didn't do it... Icy fear wraps around me. Who's in the room with Elle?

My heart leaps into my throat, pounding madly. NO. I can't—

Is he in there with her?

My muscles are sluggish; I'm reaching for the doorknob, but it feels like everything is moving in slow motion.

My body isn't obeying me, but my thoughts are frenzied. *How did someone else get in there? Who is it? Is the professor a part of it? Did I make the worst mistake of my life? Am I too late?*

When the door finally opens, I crash through it and my heart stops for a moment, terrified of what I'll see inside.

Elle hurt? Unconscious? Gone?

Except. It's not what I see at all.

It's just Elle, unharmed, leaning forward in a chair, her surprised gaze jumping to me. Across from her sits another academic-type, but younger—fortyish, short brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses, skinny pants and a corduroy jacket.

The relief is so overwhelming, I almost fall to my knees. I was so sure. So afraid.

"Zane?" Elle's looking at me in alarm, her eyes wide and brows arching up in question. "What's wrong?"

It takes a few seconds before I trust myself to speak. "Something came up. We need to leave."

Confusion washes across her face, and right now, I don't blame her. But I can't exactly explain in front of this stranger—who, I notice, is glaring daggers at me.

"Zane, this is Dr. Peterson. He's on my dissertation *defense committee*." Her tone is strained, and her last words are heavy with meaning. "He was just telling me about my defense date."

"Dr. Mark Peterson," he says smugly, lifting his chin at me. "Professor of neuroscience and neuropsychology."

My nerves are jangling, but now that I know Elle is safe, I don't want to mess this up for her. "Sorry for the interruption," I say, leveling an apologetic look at Dr. Peterson. "But something urgent came up, and I need to speak with Elle about it."

His gaze hardens, but he gives me a thin smile. “Certainly. When Dr. Feinstein was called away, I thought I’d check in with Elle regarding her dissertation. Her defense date is being moved up due to a committee member’s upcoming surgery.”

“But”—he stands up and shakes Elle’s hand, hanging on to it just a little too long—“I’ll let you get to your urgent matter. And Elle, if you need anything, please, don’t hesitate to contact me.”

He walks to another door, this one on the right wall about halfway down, and opens it. A little peek through shows another office, which answers the question of how he got in there. Nodding at me, his gaze moves back to Elle, lingering, almost possessively. “See you soon, Elle.”

I don’t like him.

Once he’s through the door, I’m at Elle’s side, pulling her into my arms. She stiffens and whispers sharply, “What the *heck*, Zane? I have to impress these people. Why did you come rushing in like that?”

Emotion is crashing over me in waves. All I can do is hold Elle against me, pressing my lips to her head, so fucking grateful she’s okay. My throat is thick, and it’s hard to get the words out, “*Fuck*, Elle. I was—”

“Zane?” More uncertain now, Elle asks quietly, “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you outside.” Not in this office, where I nearly had a heart attack.

Loathe to let go of her, I walk out of the office with one arm around Elle’s waist, keeping her securely tucked into my side. She’s throwing little worried glances at me, her expression getting more concerned by the second.

“Zane.” She plants her feet at the end of the hallway, forcing me to stop or pick her up and carry her the rest of the way. “You’re scaring me.”

Shit. I don’t want to tell her until we’re out of the building—she’s going to be upset and I know she won’t want anyone she knows seeing her that way. “Please, Elle.” I pitch my voice

low, gently coaxing. “Trust me. I’ll tell you when we get outside.”

After a pause, she says, “Okay.” But she looks even more worried than before, and I hate it.

When we finally get outside, it’s lightly drizzling, and I’d like to get to my SUV first, but Elle isn’t having it. She stops dead on the sidewalk and faces me. “Tell me.”

I flash to Elle’s brilliant smile when we were in the city, visiting the bookstore, going to the museum, how happy she looked, and I feel like total shit that I have to ruin it. Taking her shoulders gently in my hands, I grit my teeth and say the words that will yank away her feeling of safety.

“Leo found evidence that Quinn didn’t do it. Financially, he didn’t have the money to hire someone. And he had an alibi for the night you were abducted. Leo thinks Quinn was set up.”

Elle flinches like she’s been physically struck. “It’s not... It’s not him?”

The look of devastation on her face is shattering. Each word hurts as I say it. “I’m sorry, Elle. It doesn’t look like it.”

“I don’t... I don’t understand.” She swallows hard and her voice is tiny. “I thought... how...”

“I’m so sorry, bug. But we’re going to figure it out.”

“Zane—” Her voice wobbles and her chin juts out. “I thought it was *over*.” Tears start sliding down her cheeks, each one a razor slash to my heart.

Seeing Elle cry is the worst kind of pain.

I pull her to me and she sags into my arms, shuddering and crying softly. Her quiet sobs are horrible, and I’ve never felt more helpless. Stroking her hair, kissing her head, holding her small body against me, I whisper fiercely, “I’ll fix this, Elle. I promise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ELLE

I don't know what I would do without Zane.

After being forced into independence as a kid, accepting and embracing it as I grew older, I didn't know what it felt like to have someone to rely on other than myself. Whenever there was an obstacle, a problem, I tackled it on my own. There was no other choice.

I've had friends over the years that I talked to, even confided in sometimes. But ask any of them for help? No way. I didn't want to be a burden on anyone, or for a friend to feel uncomfortably obligated to help.

And boyfriends? Of the few I had, I never trusted any of them enough to really open up, to leave myself vulnerable to rejection. Being alone was just easier.

I never knew how it could feel to have someone like Zane. Someone who offers help without being asked, worries about me, who will do anything to make my day better. He does more than protect me from danger—he protects my heart. He feels my pain like it's his own, and I'm not scared to be vulnerable with him.

And I want to be the same person for him.

Something else I learned about relationships is it's about giving and taking. Right now I'm leaning on Zane more, and I know he's happy to be my support. But once this is all over, I'll be the one he can lean on, too.

I *hope* it's over soon.

Since the crappy news of yesterday, I've been trying to mentally prepare myself for the next step. The terrifying but necessary step we need to take to finally catch the people coming after me. I don't want to do it, but if I'm going to have any chance of a normal life—being with Zane, getting a job—I'm going to have to suck it up and do it.

Which is why I'm having another meeting with the Blade and Arrow team. We're in the conference room this time, so Dean can join in using the wall monitor instead of a tablet. It feels more official in here, more serious—which I guess it is. After all, it's not every day you plan to use yourself as bait to trap suspected traffickers.

I'm sitting next to Zane on one side of the long conference table, our chairs squeezed together, his hand resting on my leg. Every so often he strokes my thigh with his thumb, the small movement helping settle my nerves. Sort of.

I still feel like I'm about to throw up all over the table, but at least I haven't actually done it. So that's something.

Nora and Finn are seated across from us, and Cole is at the far end of the table. We're waiting for Dean to connect—in the meantime, Finn has been texting funny jokes to all of us, lightening the mood a little. Nora is quieter, more subdued, but she gave me a quick side hug when she came into the room and whispered, "Let me know if you need anything," which I really appreciated.

Zane leans close to me, pitching his voice low. "Are you doing okay, bug?"

Not really. But I reach under the table and lay my hand over his, whispering back, "I'm okay."

His gaze tells me he knows I'm lying, but he just kisses me on the cheek instead of calling me out on it. Melting my heart, he says, "Once the meeting is over, we'll go order some bookshelves. More books. Start getting things set up for your library."

I love him so much.

I'm smiling back at Zane, debating whether it would be appropriate to kiss him, when a loud crackle erupts from the speakers, making me jump.

"CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Dean's voice booms through the room, blasting through the speakers. Cole jumps up and tries to turn them down, grumbling, "Where's Leo when you need him?" while the rest of us glance around, snickering.

"HELLO?"

Dean's confused voice is echoing around the room.

We're all full on laughing now, Cole is muttering under his breath at the computer, and Dean's frowning at us from the giant screen on the wall.

"Got it," Cole pronounces loudly, giving everyone a crooked grin. He chuckles and turns to Dean. "Sorry, Crash. Technical difficulties. That's what happens when our tech genius goes out of town."

The tension in the room has decreased immensely, and I've never been more glad about a video call going wrong.

Dean breaks into a smile and says at a much lower volume, "I get it. We've had some real disasters at the station when we've tried having virtual meetings." Searching me out, his expression sobers. "How are you doing, Elle?"

"I'm doing okay." Dean looks doubtful, narrowing his eyes at me. Blowing out my breath, I concede, "Fine. I'm freaked out about this. Is that what you want to hear?"

Zane makes an unhappy noise beside me.

"No, Elle, that's not what I want to hear." His gaze shifts to Zane. "What I *want* to hear is how you're all going to keep my cousin safe."

"I know this isn't what we wanted," Cole says, looking first to Dean, then me. "But we talked about the possibility of setting a trap before. And given the lack of progress, it seems like the best course of action."

“I don’t like it,” Dean says. “I still think Elle should come to Texas. If she stays here a few months, chances are the interest in her from these people... will wane.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Nora leans forward, her long braid sweeping the table. “And then Elle comes back here unprepared, *unprotected*, with no idea if or when someone might make another move on her? That’s assuming they don’t track her to Texas.”

“Elle’s not going to be unprotected,” Zane snaps, his eyes sparking fire. “Anywhere she goes, I go with her.”

Dean raises his eyebrows at Zane. “So if Elle decides to come to Texas, you’ll come with her? Leave Blade and Arrow?”

“Yes.” Zane’s hand tightens on my leg, and he turns to me. “If you want to go to Texas, if that’s where you’ll feel safer, I’ll go with you. I’m *not* leaving you.”

“So you want Elle to leave our protection?” Finn sounds incredulous. “Leave her graduate program when she’s almost finished? Do you have somewhere as secure as our headquarters for her to stay?”

“Yes,” Dean retorts. “She can stay with me. Or one of my friends in law enforcement.”

The tension is ratcheting up, frustrations and tempers flaring. My stomach is lurching, and tears are burning behind my eyes.

Zane snaps back, “Someone she doesn’t know? And that’s going to make Elle feel safe?”

“Guys—” Cole starts. “This isn’t accomplishing anything.”

Finn jumps back in. “What about what *Elle* wants?”

“Elle wanted to stay and nothing has changed.” Dean gestures at me, adding, “She’s still hiding out. How is that a good thing?”

It feels like the air is being sucked from the room, making it hard to breathe. And I feel like crap. Dean, Zane, my new

friends—all arguing about me.

Arguing over me, really.

Enough. “Stop.” It came out quiet and wispy, so I repeat myself, this time louder. “*Stop*. Does anyone care what I want?”

In unison, all eyes jump to me. Zane is the first to speak. “I’m sorry, Elle.” His voice drops, going rough, regretful. “I just want you safe... but that’s no excuse.”

Finn and Nora echo his apology, followed by Cole, who continues, saying, “You’re right, Elle. We all care about you, and everyone’s emotions are running high, but it’s your decision.”

“I’m sorry, Elle.” Dean gives me an apologetic look. “I shouldn’t be pushing you.”

Zane moves a hand to my nape, gently massaging. “What do you want, Elle? Texas? Here?” He pauses, holding my gaze. “If you want to stay here, no traps, just waiting it out, that’s okay. Your home is here now. If you still want it to be.”

Dean coughs, muttering something unintelligible. I ignore him, keeping my eyes focused on Zane. *I know what I want*. I knew it before I got to this meeting, and it hasn’t changed now.

“I want to stay here, Zane. With you. In our apartment.” That was the easy part. Now for the hard one. “And I want to set a trap for these people. I’m terrified, but it’s the only way I’ll be able to have a normal life.”

“You don’t have to,” Zane starts. “There are other ways...”

“But how long will it take? Will other women be taken? Killed? Those other women don’t have the protection I do.” Touching Zane’s rigid jaw, I say, “I know you’ll protect me. It’s scary, but I know Blade and Arrow will keep me safe.”

Zane sags, his mouth pulling down. But he leans forward and kisses me, anyway. “I won’t pretend I like it, Elle. But if it’s what you want...”

“We *will* keep you safe,” Cole states, conviction strengthening his voice. “We’ll have a solid plan in place,

plenty of protection, and we'll catch these guys."

"When?" Dean asks, huffing out a resigned sigh.

Straightening in his seat, Cole flips through the folder in front of him. "Leo and Rylan are in Vermont until next week, working on a case. The plan was for Finn, Nora, and Zane to head to Chicago tomorrow on a security job for the next few days, but given the circumstances, I'm going to take Zane's place."

Lifting his chin at Zane, Cole continues. "So Zane will stay here to protect Elle, Maya, and Georgia. Once the entire team is back in Sleepy Hollow, we'll set a date to put the plan in motion."

"In the meantime, I think it's best if Elle stays at headquarters." Cole shifts his gaze to me, his brow pinching into a V. "I know it's not ideal, Elle. But it'll be safer this way."

"Thanks, man." Zane nods at Cole, gratitude thickening his voice.

"Um." I gulp as everyone's gaze swivels back to me. "My dissertation defense is in a week. I know you don't want me leaving... but I *have* to go. Otherwise I won't get my degree."

Cole looks at me, eyebrows raised. "What does that entail? Who's there? Where is it?"

"Well, it's a committee of four people—all professors at the university—and they'll ask me questions about my dissertation. It's going to be in one of the small lecture halls on campus."

"Just you and these four people? Anyone else?"

"And me," Zane adds, "I'll be there with you."

"You can be there," I tell Zane. "It's open to the public. Although I don't think anyone else will come. It'll probably just be the six of us in there."

"That sounds fine," Cole agrees. "As long as Zane is in the room with you, that shouldn't be a problem." He pauses,

scanning the room. “Any other issues or questions at this point?”

Does trying to concentrate on preparing my dissertation defense while thinking about all of this count?

After a few seconds of silence, Cole says, “Okay. We’ll work on the plan and meet again once everyone is back. Crash, if you think of anything, let me know.”

“Will do.” Dean lifts his chin at Cole, a tiny gesture I see all the guys doing. “And Zane—” his tone drops, low and slightly threatening. “Take good care of my cousin. Got it?”

“I will.” Zane drops his hand from my neck, moving it to clasp my hand under the table. “I promise, I *will* keep Elle safe.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ZANE

Who knew ring shopping was so complicated?

Not that I'm proposing to Elle. But I thought it couldn't hurt to be prepared. Just in case.

I can't believe I'm even thinking about it. Proposing. Getting married. Committing to being with another person for the rest of my life.

My parents got married after being friends for years. My sisters dated for ages before getting engaged. And here I am considering proposing to Elle after only months of knowing her.

But if I already know she's the one, why wait?

I'm not going to propose yet. Not with everything else going on. Like Elle's dissertation defense, which she's been trying not to freak out about for the last week. And this plan to trap the men who've been after her, using my Elle as *bait*, something I've been having nightmares about every night.

And there's the worry that works at me when I have too much time to think. When I'm watching Elle typing on her laptop, or she's curled against my shoulder, fast asleep in the middle of a movie, I worry.

What if, after everything, Elle changes her mind about me?

I know she loves me—she shows it in dozens of little ways each day. Snuggling next to me in the morning, kissing my neck, whispering how lucky she is to have found me. Making

a protein shake for me every day after my workout. Reading about Krav Maga and Taekwondo so she can identify the moves while I practice.

And her soft voice each night before we go to sleep, reminding me, “You’re a great man, Zane. And I love you so much.”

She loves me, but what if she decides she doesn’t want a reminder of this traumatic time in her life? What if Elle wants to move away once she’s finished with school?

Would I follow her if she wanted me to?

Yes. I love my team, but I love Elle more.

Which is why I’m looking at a Pinterest board of engagement rings that Maya made for me. I made the mistake of asking her how big an engagement ring should be, and it all took off from there.

I asked her the other night when Maya was visiting our apartment. Elle was in the bathroom, and I asked what I thought was a simple question.

Keeping my voice down, I asked, “How big should an engagement ring be?”

“Zane!” Maya whisper-screamed, clutching my arm—she’s shockingly strong and actually left little fingerprint sized bruises. “Are you going to *propose* to Elle?”

“Um. Maybe.” One eye on the bathroom door, I said quietly, “I was thinking about it.”

Maya did a little skip. “Zane, I’m so excited for you! Are you going to surprise her? Do you need ideas for rings? Someone to go ring shopping with? I can help.”

“I’m not sure if I’m there yet,” I told her, second guessing my initial question. Maybe I should have figured it out myself.

“I’ll send you some ideas,” Maya whispered, her face beaming.

And she did. Now I have dozens of rings to look at, plus figuring out what the four C’s are and what I’m supposed to do

with them.

If I buy a ring. And the more terrifying part—if I propose, will she accept?

“Zane, I think I’m ready to go.”

Elle comes out of the bedroom and I quickly close out of the browser on my phone, hiding the ring I was just looking at. I jump up, smiling at her. “Okay, bug. Do you need anything before we leave?”

“I don’t think so.” She worries her lower lip with her teeth. “I have extra copies of my dissertation, plus all my notes... but... do I look okay?”

As I walk across the room, I take in Elle’s sexy-librarian look—slim black skirt, black heels, white button down top, her hair pulled into a sleek bun—and feel myself hardening. “You look great.”

Being careful not to mess up her clothes, I pull Elle in for a hug. She’s tense in my arms, her features strained, little white teeth digging into her lip. “You’re going to do great,” I tell her, kissing the tiny indentations away, gently cupping her cheek. “And after, once you’ve wowed everyone, we can come home and celebrate.”

Elle relaxes slightly. “How will we celebrate?”

“First—” my gaze rakes up and down her body. “I’m going to peel off these sexy clothes and ravish you. Then we’ll have champagne, and order whatever takeout you want, then we’ll go to the hot tub...”

“Oh.” A pink flush spreads across her cheeks. “I like that plan.”

She’s so cute. And—as I admire her curves in that black skirt with the tiny slit in the back—sexy.

Not now, I remind myself sternly. Later.

“Let’s go, bug.” I take Elle’s hand and start towards the door before I lose my self control and take her into the bedroom.

As we pause in the hallway so I can lock the door, she glances below my waist and a tiny smile creeps across her face. “Maybe I should dress like this more often.”

Leaning down to slant my lips over hers, I linger there for a moment before pulling away. “If you want to. But I make no promises about letting you leave the apartment next time.”

Elle laughs, her smile stretching wide. “I’m okay with that.”

I keep holding Elle’s hand as we head to campus, rubbing her palm when she starts to tense up, only letting go long enough to signal or change lanes. She keeps shooting little nervous smiles at me, and I keep telling her, “It’s going to be fine. You’re going to do *great*.”

We’re making good time; the traffic has been light since it’s a Saturday morning—not the typical time to do a defense, Elle tells me, but since it was rescheduled, this is the only time all the committee members are free. I’m glad we’re doing this on a weekend, since that means there will be fewer people on campus to watch out for.

I’ve already checked out the building we’re going to be in—I know the locations of all the exits and stairwells and security cameras. We’ll be in a small lecture hall with two points of egress, one leading to the main hallway, the other to a secondary hallway lined with offices.

It’s quiet in the car—Elle staring down at the notes in her lap, her lips moving silently, while I alternate between concentrating on the road and sneaking brief glances at her. A few little tendrils of hair have sprung free from her bun and I’m noticing a few more freckles on her cheeks, probably from when we had a picnic out in the yard the other day, enjoying an unseasonably warm March day.

When her phone buzzes in the silence, it even makes me jump a little. Elle jolts in her seat, clapping her hand to her chest, then gives a little laugh. “That scared the crap out of me!”

Reaching into her bag, she says, “I hope it’s nothing about the defense. We’re not late, are we?”

Checking in the rearview mirror, I change lanes to move around a slow-moving truck. “Nope. We still have plenty of time to get there.”

“Maybe it’s one of the guys wishing me luck. Leo and Finn already texted. And Nora called last night.”

I love that my friends have embraced Elle as one of their own. In their own ways, they’ve all taken the time to make her feel accepted—Rylan showing Elle how to shoot, Leo and Georgia inviting us over for game nights, Finn sending funny texts and pictures to cheer Elle up.

“Maybe,” I start, but Elle gasps, cutting me off.

A quick glance away from the road shows Elle clutching her phone, staring wide-eyed at the screen. My pulse accelerates to double speed. “What is it?”

“It’s Anya.” Her voice is tight. “She said another woman is missing. Another student.”

Shit. It’s bad news in general and selfishly I don’t want this to ruin Elle’s concentration during this defense she’s worked so hard towards. “Do you know her?”

“Not really.” Elle hesitates, “I’ve never had any classes with Hillary. But I’ve met her before.”

“Where did you meet her?” I’m trying to stay calm and not make Elle more worried than she already is. But the fact that Elle’s met this woman, knows her by name... I don’t like it.

“She’s in one of the Masters programs in my department. So I’ve seen her around campus.” Elle pauses, her face creasing as she thinks. “But I actually talked to her during this study we were both doing. That was... maybe four, five months ago?”

Icy fingers are trailing down my neck. “What study?”

“It was run by a couple of the professors in my program. That’s why I volunteered. The study was to help determine how certain physical and genetic traits influence human

development. It was pretty simple, really. We just filled out a questionnaire, gave a blood and saliva sample, and that was it.”

Elle goes quiet, frowning at the road in front of us. Then abruptly, “Zane. That’s the study Chloe was in, too.” Her tone is thoughtful and quiet. “Could it... that would be crazy... but...”

“It could be.” It’s one thing we didn’t look into. And now I’m furious we missed it. But when it was just Elle and Chloe, it seemed such a flimsy connection. Universities have hundreds of studies going on each year, many of them using student volunteers. But adding this new missing woman to the mix...

Elle grabs my leg. “We should talk to Dr. Peterson. He was one of the lead investigators for the study. He might be able to help.”

I remember him. Eyeing Elle like he wanted her for himself, touching her hand a bit too long... My jaw clenches as I say, “He’s the one I met, right?”

“Yeah.” Elle nods at me. “I’ve had him for several classes, and he’s on my dissertation committee, too. I don’t want to ask him about it today, but maybe we could set up a meeting with him next week? I’m sure he’d want to help.”

“Elle,” I say evenly, not wanting her to pick up on my concern. “Can you call Leo, please? I want to get him on this right away.”

I wish I wasn’t speeding down a highway right now, so I could give this my full attention. It might be nothing, mere coincidence, but my gut is telling me it’s something.

After a brief conversation between Elle and Leo, Elle telling him as many details as she can remember about the study and the two women, mixed with a series of *okays* and *I’ll tell him*, she hangs up and says, “Who’s Beth?”

We come to a red light and I turn to look at Elle. “Beth is married to one of the firefighters Dean works with. She’s a

computer genius, and she's helped us with some cases in the past. Did Leo say he was calling her?"

"Yes. He said he wanted an extra set of eyes. Is that good?"

"It's good," I reassure her. "Beth is brilliant. Between Leo and her, if there's a connection with the study, they'll find it."

Elle lets out a heavy sigh. Her features are tight with stress and worry is darkening her eyes. "I hope so. And I hope we can figure out where Hillary is."

* * *

I REALLY DON'T LIKE this guy.

Dr. Peterson gives me another smug little smile as he repeats the same thing he just told us seconds ago. "Like I said, the defense is going to be closed to the public today." His hard gaze shifts from me to Elle, softening as he looks at her. "I'm sorry, Elle. It's policy."

"I don't understand." Her brows pinch together, tiny lines forming between them. "The public has always been allowed to attend."

"I don't make the policy, unfortunately," he says. "Having the defense on the weekend, when classes technically aren't in session..." Shrugging, he gives Elle another obnoxious smile. "It's out of my hands. Your boyfriend will have to wait outside."

"Or," he says, eyeballing me, "you could leave and come back when Elle is done. It will take a few hours, at least."

There is no way I'm not going into that room with her. No way.

"That's not going to work." I straighten to my full height, a good six inches taller than him. And at least fifty pounds, mostly muscle. Not that I'm trying to intimidate him, but still. "I'm going in with Elle. Period."

Elle's gaze is bouncing between us, she's gnawing on her lip again, and I hate that she's being put in this position right now. But I went against my instincts in the library and look how that turned out. I'm not going against them now.

"Zane, maybe I should go in by myself." It's more a question than a statement, her words pitching up at the end. "I don't want to cause problems."

Dr. Peterson smarms at Elle. "That would be best."

This guy is really pissing me off. "No." I break out my commander's voice. "I'm going in with Elle. It's a security issue. If I need to speak with the administration about it, that's no problem." I'm sure Leo can pull some strings and smooth things over.

I stare him down for several seconds before he huffs out a heavy sigh. "Fine."

Elle waits until he's entered the room and then grabs my arm, tugging me down to her level. "Zane, he's going to be mad at me now. What if he doesn't pass me?"

"He won't." I'm confident this guy is all bluster. "He's just on a power trip. And Elle, there is no way I'm leaving you in a room unprotected for hours. I *can't*. You know why."

After a long moment, her shoulders sag. "I know," she says softly, "I want you there, too. I just wish..."

"It's going to be alright, bug." I gather her to me carefully, trying not to wrinkle her crisp white shirt. "Don't worry about anything else. Just concentrate on kicking ass. Okay?"

"Okay." Flashing me a tiny smile, Elle squeezes my hand.

We walk into the lecture hall and Dr. Peterson wordlessly gestures at me to take a seat in the back. Elle heads up front and takes a seat at a long table, spreading her papers out in front of her. She's tapping her foot nervously, every so often throwing a quick, worried glance at the professor.

Now that we're all inside the room, he hasn't said another word to either of us. He's just pacing around the room, eyes glued to his phone, typing out long messages and frowning.

He's twitchy, if I had to pick a word for it, and I wonder if he's worried I'm going to actually contact his boss and get him in trouble for his little power play.

Ten minutes have gone by and no one else has come in, so I send Elle a quick text asking if she has any idea what's going on. She looks up at me and gives a little shake of her head, then says, "Dr. Peterson. I was just wondering when the rest of the committee is getting here?"

He jerks his head up from his phone and stares at her. "They'll be here soon. Just some holdups." Then, sharply, "You're not in a hurry, are you?"

Elle ducks her head, but not before I see the flush spreading across her cheeks and up to her ears. "No," she says softly. "There's no hurry."

Now I'm really pissed off. The last time I saw him, I thought he was too nice to Elle. Now he's being rude to her.

I send Elle another quick text, this time a series of heart emojis and smiley faces. She smiles as she looks at her phone, then turns to mouth at me, *I love you*.

After all this is over, I'm taking Elle on a vacation. No worries, no stress, no rude people, just me doing whatever it takes to make her smile all the time.

It's been another ten minutes of awkward silence when my phone vibrates with a call. Leo's name flashes across the screen—I can't answer in here, so I quickly send him a message.

Can't talk. In room with Elle. Update?

Half a minute goes by, the three dots blinking the whole time. Is Leo writing a book?

I look up from the screen to check on Elle. She's still sitting there, absently flipping through her papers, smiling when she sees me looking. I return her smile, but mine is forced—I know Leo isn't writing an essay to wish Elle luck on her dissertation.

The three dots are still blinking, and it's making me crazy. I've always been able to stay calm, maintain complete control over my body, but those three dots... whoever invented them is a sadist.

Then Leo's message pops up, and my body turns to ice.

It's Peterson. He's the one behind it. Beth found records connecting him with a trafficking group. He has millions stashed in shell companies around the world. Once we had the study connection, we found more studies he's been involved with. And people that disappeared after taking part in them.

He's been doing this for years, all over the country, using the studies to screen for targets. There was never a connection before. But this guy is the key. Beth is hacking his email, bank statements. We're taking him down.

Oh, fuck. I need to get Elle out of here.

Steeling my expression—I can't let on that I know something—I send Leo a reply.

In the room with him now. Will get Elle out and keep him here. Get here ASAP to help.

Elle glances at me again, her brows arching up in question. Dr. Peterson stops his pacing to stare at Elle. His expression hardens, something sinister slinking across his features.

Fuck. I need Elle out of here. Now.

Heart sledgehammering in my chest, I text Elle.

Stay calm. Don't let on. It's Peterson. You need to get out of the room now. I'll keep him here for the police. Just say you need to use the restroom. Hide. I'll come get you when it's safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ELLE

How is this possible?

Fear is exploding inside me.

My lungs are desperate for air, but I can't breathe.

I'm frozen. *How can this be?*

Zane's text stares at me, insistent. Shocking. Nothing I could have ever imagined.

Dr. Peterson—my teacher, someone I admired—a monster.

How did I not know? That night in the hotel room, he was there. But I couldn't recognize his voice past the fear and the panic and the TV blaring.

If only I had figured it out back then. And now I'm in danger, Zane's in danger, and what if he gets hurt because of me?

My heart is pounding so loudly I'm afraid Dr. Peterson will hear it.

I need to calm down.

I trust Zane. And I can do this. Just get out of the room and let Zane do his job. Zane can easily take Dr. Peterson down. And then it'll all be over.

Fear is not going to control me. I got away the first time outside my apartment, and in the hotel room. I used the earring

to call for help after being drugged. I can convincingly go to the bathroom without letting on that I know.

I can do this.

So I moderate my breathing, forcibly relax all my muscles, smooth my features into what I hope is a calm, I'm-just-nervous-about-defending-my-dissertation expression. Then I send Zane a short text.

Okay. Moving in a second. Be careful. I love you.

Making sure Dr. Peterson isn't looking, I tuck my phone under my waistband, adjusting my shirt so it covers it. I stand up but my legs are wobbly—I have to take a second before moving so I don't collapse to the floor.

Once I'm confident my legs are working again, I take several steps towards the door at the front of the room, repeating to myself silently, *don't run, be calm, don't run.*

The door is maybe fifteen feet from me, but it seems like fifteen miles.

"Where are you going?" Dr. Peterson pauses in his pacing and turns to face me.

"The restroom." Is my voice shaking?

"Now?" He walks towards me, frowning.

Every muscle in my body wants to flee, but I force myself to stay still, pasting a smile on my face as I look at him. Commanding my voice to remain steady, I say, "Yes. I'll just be a minute."

He's even closer now, close enough that I can see the fine lines around his eyes and across his forehead. His gaze is cold as it sweeps over me. "It's not a good time, Elle. The rest of the committee will be arriving any minute. If you're not here"—his tone dips, almost menacing—"it's *not* a good first impression."

I want to glance over at Zane, get some reassurance from him, but I don't dare look away from Dr. Peterson. Corralling my rampaging fear, I try to arrange my features into a sheepish expression. "I understand," I tell him, "but it's quite... urgent."

He's still walking towards me—too close, my breath is stuttering and my skin is crawling, he's *too close*—and I take a few steps backwards before I can stop it.

Something dark and poisonous ripples across his face, turning his eyes to hard chips of ice. "Elle." This time when he says my name, it sounds like a threat. "You should *really* stay here."

He knows. I'm not a good actress and my traitorous face is giving me away. All the horrible memories are slamming into me, making me dizzy. Being grabbed, choked, a needle jabbing into me, the heart stopping fear—

"I have to go," I stammer, taking a few more steps towards the door. I'll just run. I'm on campus; there have to be people around; what can Dr. Peterson do to me here?

Out of my peripheral vision I see Zane standing up, his features like stone.

An oily smile spreads across Dr. Peterson's face. "I don't *think* so, Elle."

And then one second changes everything.

Reaching into his jacket, he pulls out a gun.

Holding it steady in his hand, he points it at me. Inches from my chest, the barrel huge and black and deadly.

I thought I knew fear. That was nothing compared to now.

His gaze bores into me. "Don't move. And don't make a sound." Flicking a quick glance in Zane's direction, he says, "And the same for you. If you try anything, I'll shoot her."

I look over at Zane—he's still standing at the back of the room, tense, stiff, his eyes blazing with fury.

The gun jabs into my chest and a tiny bleat of fear escapes. "Quiet," Dr. Peterson snaps, "Or I'll shoot your boyfriend, too." His eyes narrow, then he snatches the phone from my waistband and tosses it across the floor. "Now lock the door, Elle. And don't think about running. I'll shoot you before you even get out the door."

This can't be happening. My brain doesn't want to accept it. I can't be locking myself into this lecture hall I've had classes in while my professor is threatening to kill me.

Panic is a wild animal inside me, clawing and tearing in its attempt to escape. My heart is thundering and my lungs are squeezing and I'm lightheaded—the only thing keeping me standing is my worry for Zane.

What if I do something wrong and Zane is shot? Killed? What if I'm killed right in front of him? Zane will never forgive himself.

Calm down. *Calm down.*

There has to be a way out of this. Zane is trained for situations like these, and so is his team. They have to be on their way—Zane must have contacted them.

I hope.

“Tie him up.”

A handful of zip ties are thrust at me and I'm shoved towards Zane, the gun now poking into my spine. “Hurry up, Elle,” Dr. Peterson snaps, digging the barrel into my back hard enough to bruise. “You don't need to be able to walk for what's coming next. And quite frankly, I'm tired of waiting for you.”

What's coming next?

I can't bear to think about it.

In front of Zane, I hesitate, meeting his gaze. There are so many things I wish I could say to him—*I'm sorry for dragging you into this, please be careful, don't let this man take me*—but all I can do is mouth a quick *I'm sorry*. He gives me a quick look, soft for a second, before turning back to stone.

He looks more dangerous than I've ever seen him—rage just barely tamped down, jaw like granite. This is the Zane I don't see, the one from his missions, completely focused on eliminating his enemy.

“*Do it,*” barks the man behind me, jabbing the gun into the base of my spine. “Stop wasting time.”

With shaking hands, I zip tie Zane's wrists together, flinching as Dr. Peterson smacks me in the back of the head and says, "Tighter."

I nearly throw up as I wrap the ties around Zane's ankles, binding him to the chair.

Can Zane break out of them? He's so strong, and I'm certain there's a way to do it, just like how I escaped from the handcuffs. But with this gun pointed at me, Dr. Peterson watching everything, there's no way Zane will try.

Once Zane is restrained, Dr. Peterson jerks me away from him, grabbing my hair and yanking me backwards. Then the gun nudges back at the base of my spine, sliding up under my shirt, hard and cold on my skin.

My fear is still a powerful thing, but a strange sort of numbness is creeping in. It's like my body reached its limit on terror and is locking it away, protecting me.

With the numbness comes an opportunity to think. What is he going to do next? This can't be the extent of his plan?

Then a door opens, a voice entering, hard and cold and terrifyingly familiar, answering at least part of my questions.

"For a second I thought the key wasn't going to work... what the... why the FUCK do you have *him*?"

NO. Please, no.

I want the numbness back. But it's impossible. Not when I'm facing *him*. The man from outside my apartment, the one who pinned me to the wall in the library, the one who choked me and drugged me and—

I can't breathe. Desperately, I search out Zane's face. I need to see him, need to know I'm not alone in this, that there's still hope, however slim it might be.

If anything, Zane looks even angrier than before. Now, his eyes aren't just dangerous, they look murderous.

Which actually makes me feel a tiny bit better.

The man storms over to us, glowering, his huge body rigid with anger. “What the fuck, Peterson? It’s just supposed to be the girl. Not him! Do you know how much trouble he’s given me?”

“I didn’t have a choice.” Dr. Peterson pushes me toward the man, sending me stumbling. A meaty hand clamps around my upper arm, fingers digging in painfully. Then he thrusts some zip ties at him, snapping, “Put these on her. I’m sick of hauling her around.”

Gray dots are filling my vision as my lungs struggle to pull in air. This man’s hands on me—*oh, please, I can’t stand it*—brushing across my breasts, my neck, running up my legs as he yanks the ties around my wrists and ankles. My pulse is thundering in my head, a storm of terror and panic and revulsion.

I’m tossed into a chair a row away from Zane, a rag-doll thrown aside. My ankles are trapped together, so I fall hard against the back of the seat, smashing my elbow, a flare of pain shooting up my arm. For a moment, hope ignites again—maybe now Dr. Peterson will put the gun away. If he does, Zane might get an opening.

But he doesn’t. The gun—even larger than the last time I looked at it—aims back at me, pointing at my heart. I cringe back in my seat, trying to stifle the whimper that escapes unbidden, and a low growl rumbles from Zane’s direction.

“This is going to complicate things.” The man who tied me up, the giant one, crosses his sausage-like arms across his chest and glares at Dr. Peterson. “We had the whole thing planned with *her*. She’s easy to get out of here. But what about *him*?”

“He wouldn’t leave.” My former teacher turned monster shoots an angry look at Zane. “And I didn’t know when there would be another chance to take her. After you fucked up—multiple times, I may add—she never went anywhere alone. And the client is waiting. We’re running out of time.”

“This one was supposed to be an easy grab,” sausage-arms snaps. “She wasn’t supposed to be guarded by a fucking ninja

warrior. And now we have to figure out what to do with him.”

“Maybe we can take him, too. Guy like that, healthy, he’s got to be a match for one of our clients.”

“And how do you propose that? Look at him.” The man from my nightmares jerks his head towards Zane. “We’re not getting him out of here in a fucking duffel bag like we planned with her.”

A duffel bag? They want to put me inside one? My breathing goes even faster, and another whimper escapes. I don’t mean to, but my body is in full-on panic mode, imagining myself inside a bag, in the dark, tossed in a trunk, taken—

“Shut up!” The gun rises, pointing at my face. Dr. Peterson snarls at me, “I said to be quiet. Or I’ll shoot both of you.”

A moment later, his face smooths back into a thoughtful expression. “We can drug him. Put him in something…”

Sausage-arms shakes his head. “We don’t have enough of the sedative for him. I brought enough for her, but her boyfriend is twice her size. It wouldn’t even knock him out.”

“Shit.” Dr. Peterson frowns. “We’ll have to call in some help.”

“This is turning into a fucking disaster,” his partner says. “You should have just found a different match instead of insisting on taking her.”

Match? That’s not the first time they’ve used that word. And we thought this was all about sex trafficking, but if they want Zane?

The two men are focused on each other, so I take a quick glance at Zane. He’s watching the two men intently, but when he sees me looking at him, his eyes flash at me, a silent reassurance.

He has a plan. I’m sure of it. But his hands are tied—literally and figuratively—with this gun pointed at me. There’s no way he can make a move without them noticing. Unless...

My mind is a tornado of ideas, spinning too fast for me to pluck one out and examine it.

“I don’t know that I could have found another match for this client,” Dr. Peterson says. “Not in time. To run another study, hoping to find a perfect match before the client’s condition deteriorates too much? And needing that rare tissue type? We need *her*.”

Tissue type? Condition? Match?

Then it hits me. Oh, shit.

“I’ll call Blake,” the bigger man says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a phone. “He’s not too far away. When he gets here, we’ll drug both of them and move out once it’s dark.” He pauses, then asks, “You can still turn off the cameras, right?”

Dr. Peterson nods at him. “Yes. I’ll take care of it.” Then he glances at me and smirks. “Oh, *Elle*. Did you finally figure out what’s going on? For a smart girl, you’ve been so oblivious.”

The storm of fear is pierced by a white-hot flare of anger. Glaring at him, I give a tight nod. This *monster*.

“You’re going to make me a lot of money, Elle.” Sneering, he says, “Lungs are the most expensive organ, you know. And when the client has a rare tissue or blood type, I can charge more.”

“You’ve caused a lot of trouble,” he continues, “and the client is getting very impatient. Understandable, since his daughter doesn’t have much time left. He’ll be thrilled to find out the surgery will happen soon.”

“And—” He chuckles, and the gun drifts away from me for a second. “Now I’m getting a bonus. Another donor. I’m sure your... Zane, is it... will be a match for one of our clients. Maybe even several of them.”

Zane!

NO! I can’t let that happen to him.

Fear and anger coalesce into a determined fury. Not Zane. I won't let it happen.

Zane. The man I love more than anything. My protector since the day we met. I won't let him get dragged into this. I'm not sure how, but it's my turn to make sure *he's* protected.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ZANE

I'm going to kill them.

No. That's too much mercy.

I want to torture them over and over to get my vengeance for what they've done to Elle.

They've hurt her, terrorized her, traumatized her. Given her nightmares that she wakes up screaming and crying from. They stole her life from her, chased her into hiding. They almost took her from me.

And now, *this*. This monstrous act they want to do to her.

My rage is an inferno, demanding to escape. If not for the years of training, hours of silent surveillance, of careful movements and intentional action, I couldn't keep it together. It's still barely enough—keeping myself still while that gun is pointed at Elle, seeing her tremble in fear...

I'm furious. And I'm also terrified for her.

And I feel so fucking guilty.

My team is on the way, but I need that gun away from Elle first. I can't take the chance of that asshole shooting her when shit starts hitting the fan. He's a novice, too twitchy with the trigger—the wrong move, and I'm worried he'll shoot first and regret it later. Not that he wants to kill her, not when he needs her alive to get his money. But he could hurt her, badly.

I know a hundred ways to incapacitate both of them. I just need an opening. A moment when they let down their guard. And then—

Once I let my rage loose, let it feed, those men are done.

I can break these zip ties easily, as long as they aren't watching me. But they aren't giving me the opportunity. They know I'm a threat. The big one especially; he knows how fast I can move, and he's barely taken his eyes off me since he got here.

Peterson is different. Smug. He thinks he's won. As he jabs the gun into Elle's soft skin, there's a satisfied sneer on his face. And when Elle whimpered in fear, he threw a quick glance my way, maliciously triumphant.

"Blake is on his way," the big man announces. "He'll be here in about half an hour. And he's bringing more sedatives, plus a laundry bin, one of those big ones on wheels. We should be able to throw him"—he gestures at me—"in there and get him to the van."

Elle tears her eyes away from the gun waving around in front of her, shifting her gaze to me instead. Her expression is like a punch to my chest. Pain slamming into my heart, cracking it, shattering it into pieces. She's so fucking scared, but trying to control it, and I want to hold her so badly it physically hurts.

Just hang on, I try to tell her without saying a word. I can't risk even mouthing something to her. *Hang on*, I promise her with my gaze, *it's going to be okay*.

"You think we'll be able to use him with multiple clients?"

Peterson glances over at me for a second before answering the other man. "Probably. He's in peak shape, and I bet some of the clients will pay extra for that." He pauses, then pokes Elle with the gun and says, "How does that feel?"

She blinks at him, lips pressed tight.

"I know it's eating at you, Elle. Knowing your boyfriend is going to end up the same as you, and it's all your fault. If you

hadn't called in those security guys, your precious Zane would be safe."

That *fucker*. How dare he blame her for this?

Elle shudders, a tear streaking down her cheek, and I want to break my ties right now and end him.

I need to get them away from her. If I can draw both men over to me, in arm's reach, I should be able to break free from the zip ties and disarm Peterson in seconds. And once the gun is taken out of the equation, I'm confident I can take them down easily.

But as long as that gun is inches from Elle, I'm helpless. If I break my ties now, rush Peterson, there's no doubt in my mind that he'll use Elle as a shield. Possibly even shoot her.

Fuck. How can I get them over here?

The big guy walks closer to Elle and pinches her chin, pulling her head up to look at him. Scowling, he says, "I think I should get some kind of compensation for all the bullshit you put me through. After all—" He trails his other hand down her neck, grazing over her breast. "I got a broken nose because of you."

Elle cringes, trying to pull away, but his hand is a vise on her chin.

My vision goes red. "Get your hands off her!"

Peterson turns to me, his eyes snapping. "What did I say about talking?"

His gun swings towards me, and I think, *maybe this is it. This will be my chance.*

"Don't touch her," I growl, holding his gaze.

He stares at me, incredulous. "Do you want me to shoot her?" A second later, his features twist into something dark and sinister. "Or maybe... I should shoot *you*. We don't really need you, anyway."

Elle whimpers, an almost inaudible cry of fear. She's shaking her head, yanking it free of the other man's punishing

grip, her eyes wide and pleading.

“Maybe I will shoot you,” Peterson says, his tone going contemplative. “Just in the leg, to start. And then...”

I smile at him, baring my teeth. “Come over here and do it, then.”

Elle’s eyes are calling to me, begging me to stop.

The bigger man lets go of her, his eyes bouncing between Peterson and me.

Peterson sneers at me. “Do you think I’m that stupid? I know who you are. What you are. I can shoot you from *here*.”

Fuck. That’s not what I want.

I glance at Elle again, expecting fear, wanting to somehow reassure her. But her fear is wiped clean, replaced by a steely determination. Her gaze is steady, intense, and—*oh shit, what is she planning*—waiting for something. Then she lifts her chin at me, a tiny movement that turns the fire in my veins to liquid ice.

Then she does something I never expected.

Elle completely loses it.

She hunches into herself, rocking back and forth, her entire body shaking.

Gasping for air, much too fast, each breath desperate.

Whimpering, sobbing, moaning, “Oh please no, no, no, no don’t,” over and over.

Seeing her break down like this is devastating.

A big hand smashes into her jaw, nearly knocking her to the floor. “What the fuck is wrong with her?”

“It’s a panic attack,” Peterson snaps. “Get the sedative.”

Already loud, Elle pitches her cries higher.

“Make her shut the fuck up!”

“Get the damn sedative, you moron! You can’t *make* someone stop having a panic attack!”

Elle moans and collapses to the floor, curling into a fetal position.

The two men are snarling at each other; my heart is on the floor, smashed and bleeding, and then—

A quick glance. Amber eyes meeting mine, not panicked, but full of intention.

Oh shit. I know what she's doing. Crazy and so fucking brave.

This is the opening I need. Peterson hunched over Elle, barking low orders at his partner, the gun hanging limp to his side. The other man fumbling with a syringe, frowning, cursing at it. Elle still making noise, disguising the sound of me moving.

I've never moved faster in my life. Every moment, all my training, thousands of hours of practice, all culminating in this moment.

Zip ties snapping, my fury breaking them easily.

Like a shadow, I approach my target, then leap at him.

Arm pulled ruthlessly backward, cracking, the gun falling to the floor.

Strike to the carotid, knocking him out instantly.

Then the other one, a chop down on the arm, knocking the syringe out of his hand. Hammer fist to the nose. Uppercut to the jaw.

In less than ten seconds, it's over. Both men are sprawled out, unconscious, Elle hunched into a ball between them. The syringe, half empty, lies on the ground next to her. And a sudden silence, as all Elle's cries and gasps and whimpers cut off abruptly.

I want to wake up both men, hit them again and again. The moves I used were too quick for them to suffer. Rage is still surging through my body with nowhere to go.

But *Elle*.

First, the gun. I snatch it up and engage the safety before sticking it into my waistband. I don't anticipate needing to use it against these men now, although I'm tempted to.

I'm desperate to grab Elle, but I need to restrain these assholes first. Moving quickly, I zip tie the crap out of them, binding their ankles, wrists, and elbows. Peterson must have bought a jumbo pack, so I have plenty to use, and I double up the zip ties for good measure.

I'm just finishing up with the big one when one of the doors opens and Finn says, "Damn, Zane. Leo said you needed help. Sure doesn't look like it."

Elle unfurls herself, poking up her head to look at my teammates coming in. Then she turns to me, eyes wide, white showing all around the amber. Hoarsely, she whispers, "Zane?"

Finn and Cole come jogging over, dropping to their knees beside me. Finn pulls out two sets of handcuffs and snaps them on the unconscious men, tightening them a little more than necessary, glaring at them as he does it.

"Nora is with the third tango," Cole says, "waiting for the police."

Elle pulls herself to a seated position. Her voice is small as she asks, "Is it over?"

I can't speak for a moment. All I can do is look at her.

Her jaw is already swelling, she's still in zip ties, half of whatever that sedative working its way into her, but she's *alive*.

"Elle." It's all I can get out.

Gathering her in my arms, I pick her up and carry her to the front of the room. She curls against me, face in my neck, her fingers clutching at my shirt, shuddering.

Holding my heart and soul in my arms, I carefully sit down on the floor, not letting go of her—I'm not sure if I can ever let go of Elle now.

Cole crouches down in front of us and quickly cuts the zip ties binding Elle, and I bite out a low curse when I see the red marks left behind.

“Is it over?” Elle asks again, her voice slurring slightly.

I start to speak, but my words get caught in my throat. Swallowing thickly, I squeeze out, “Yeah, bug. It’s over.”

Cole touches Elle lightly on the arm, and she flinches—I know she’s not scared of Cole, she’s overwhelmed, and the fear is still too fresh and raw—and he quickly apologizes. “Sorry, Elle. I just need to know where you’re hurt.”

She’s shaking more now, the adrenaline dump coming, and I rub her arm while cuddling her small body to me. I hate that she’s still frightened and hurt, but the sheer relief of knowing she’s safe is enough to dampen my rage. Any anger needs to be put aside—Elle needs tenderness now, and that’s what I’m going to give her.

I kiss the top of her head, the silken strands on my lips another physical reassurance that she’s here, that they didn’t shoot her, they didn’t take her from me. Gently, I ask, “What hurts, bug? Can you let Cole take a quick look?”

Pulling her head away from my neck, Elle flashes Cole an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I just... for a second...”

“It’s okay, Elle,” Cole soothes, cautiously inspecting her jaw. She winces when he touches it and I have to bite my tongue to keep from snapping at him. “It doesn’t look broken.”

“They got half of whatever’s in that syringe into her.” And I’m fucking pissed about it. If I had gotten there a second sooner...

Elle tilts her head up to look at me. Her eyes are slightly glazed, lids drooping heavily. Her lips purse into a little pout. “I’m tired of being drugged. I don’t like it.”

Rage flares, but I tamp it down. “I know, bug. But it’ll never happen again.”

Her gaze holds mine, trusting, loving, even amidst all the chaos. Slurring a little drunkenly, she murmurs, “I love you,

Zane.” Her eyes flutter closed for a second before reopening.
“Is it okay if I go to sleep now?”

My heart flips over. “Yeah, bug.” My eyes burn as I stand up, Cole supporting me, Elle still safe in my arms. “Go to sleep. I’ve got you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ELLE

I can't believe how much has changed in just a few days.

Three days ago, I was scared for my life, tied up and held at gunpoint by traffickers who've been tracking me for months.

Three days ago, I was betrayed by someone I've known for years, someone I respected, a man I never could have dreamt of being so evil.

Three days ago, I was terrified that I might lose the man I love. That he could be killed because of me.

And now—

Now I'm in an adorable cabin in the Catskills, just me and Zane, with nothing to do but spend time together.

We can bundle up and go hiking on the snow-covered trails—I've found I don't mind the cold so much when I'm here—Zane giving me a piggyback ride for part of it. We can snuggle by the giant fireplace in the living room, making s'mores and drinking wine and kissing marshmallow off each other's lips. And we can laze around in bed all morning, watching a movie and then having to rewind after we miss half of it because we decided to make love instead.

It's been wonderful. And exactly what I needed. Not that I minded going back to Blade and Arrow after everything went down—everyone was so sweet and jumping to do anything they could to make sure I was okay.

Like Cole checking on me every few hours the first day, though I think that was more for Zane than me. And Finn bringing over a literal buffet of ice cream the first night, six different flavors and a variety of toppings. Nora stopped by and even watched a movie with us, though I saw her rolling her eyes at the dragons when she thought I wasn't looking.

Maya and Georgia stopped by to inform me that I'm officially in the club now—the requirement for membership being an escape from a dangerous enemy. Maya escaping from her ex's brother, Georgia from her obsessive stalker, and now me escaping from my organ trafficking professor. I think I'd prefer not to be in that club. Although—

I would never have met Zane. And I'd go through all of it a hundred times over for him.

The deck creaks behind me and I turn to see Zane coming out of the cabin, smiling, two steaming mugs in one hand, a blanket in the other. He joins me on the loveseat where I've been looking out at the lake, handing me one of the mugs and tucking the blanket over my legs. As he looks at me, his gaze is appraising—checking the bruising on my jaw, the pink abrasions that peek out from my sleeves, my expression—his eyes darkening at the evidence of my injuries.

Feather light, he brushes his thumb across my swollen jaw, his mouth pressing into a tight line. “Do you need more ice on it? The swelling isn't going down as fast as I'd like. Maybe we should call Cole and ask him.”

I touch his arm, pulling his hand down and squeezing it. “It's okay. Just a little sore, but nothing to worry about. Really.”

“I can't help it.” Zane turns my hand over and traces the lines on my palm. “I just keep seeing—” His mouth snaps shut. “Anyway. I just want to make sure you're okay. That you're not in pain, or if you're struggling...”

Brow furrowing, he searches my gaze. “You know you can talk to me, right? About anything that happened. Even if you think it'll upset me, I can handle it. Or if you want to see a

counselor, we can set that up too. Whatever you need, Elle. I'll get it for you."

"I know I can. And I will," I promise him. "I think the last two days here, I've just been... I think I was still a bit in shock. My brain was still trying to wrap around everything. But as it really sinks in, I'll talk to you. And maybe a counselor, too."

It's not that I've been actively trying not to think about it. It's just that the last few days have been a whirlwind and I've had so many other things going on. First, I had to get checked out at the hospital and wait for the sedative to wear off before talking to the police. Then sleeping for the next twelve hours—once everything caught up to me, I passed out in the car and Zane had to carry me inside.

The next day, everyone on the Blade and Arrow team came to visit me at our apartment, bringing gifts and hugging me and saying how happy they were that I was okay. There was Zane jumping up every few minutes to make sure I had a drink, a snack, a blanket, or getting a fresh ice pack for my jaw. And packing for a mystery trip—Zane wouldn't say where we were going, just what I needed to bring.

Then first thing the next morning, we made the drive to the Catskills, and I've been soaking in everything great about being here since. There have been a few nightmares, but Zane holds me and I fall right back to sleep.

And the relief.

Knowing the men coming after me are in jail, that they can't hurt me—hurt Zane—again.

I touch Zane's arm. "Are *you* okay?" I know he feels guilty that we ever got trapped in that room to start with. He hasn't said anything about it to me, but I overheard him talking to Cole while we were at the hospital, beating himself up for not figuring out that Dr. Peterson was behind everything sooner.

It's not his fault, not in the slightest. The blame could as easily fall on me. Why didn't *I* think of the professor and his study? I was there; why didn't I make the connection?

Zane stiffens. “Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because I heard you at the hospital. When you were talking to Cole.”

Zane stares at me, his jaw working. Then he sighs, shoulders slumping a little. “I’m alright, Elle. But”—his voice thickens—“rationally, I know it’s not my fault. But then I see you in there, a gun pointed at you, so scared, crying—”

“You know why I did that.” I knew Zane needed an opening, and faking a panic attack was the only way I could think of to convincingly distract Dr. Peterson and sausage-arms.

“I do, Elle.” His fingers convulse around mine. “But you scared the shit out of me. Putting yourself in danger like that... he could have *shot* you.”

“He wouldn’t have.” Probably. “At least, he wouldn’t have killed me,” I amend, my chest tightening at the memory. “He needed me alive.”

“Elle.” Pain washes across his face. He takes several deep breaths before saying, “I know why you did it. And I think you’re so fucking brave. But please, don’t ever put yourself in danger like that again. Please.”

If I have to, I will. But I’m not telling Zane that, not when he’s holding my gaze so desperately, all his residual fears still running high.

Kissing his cheek, I tell him, “I won’t. And we won’t be in a situation like that again.”

I hope.

Zane wraps his arm around me, his hand settling at my waist. “Never.”

Leaning my head against his chest, I snuggle into his warmth and strong embrace and that familiar scent that always makes me feel like I’m home.

We’re both quiet, holding each other and staring out at the lake. It’s early and the morning sun is shimmering on the water, a lone kayak streaking across it, leaving a thin trail in its

wake. Birds are chattering and the faint aroma of coffee surrounds us. I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be.

After a few minutes, Zane says, "I got an update from Cole. Do you want to hear about it? If you'd rather not talk about it now, we can wait."

"I want to hear it." *I do*. There's still a tiny sliver of fear that's worked its way deep—I'm not one-hundred percent convinced that there isn't someone else out there looking for me. I don't think so, and the evidence Leo and Beth found so far doesn't indicate there is, but I'd really like to know that everyone responsible is in jail.

"Well. We already knew that Peterson was the one in charge of everything. The other guy we saw—"

"Sausage-arms?"

Zane cocks his head, eyebrows going up. "Sausage arms?"

"Yeah. I nicknamed him sausage-arms in the lecture hall. Because his arms..."

"I get it." He chuckles and kisses my forehead.

Sobering, he continues, "So sausage-arms was Peterson's partner, and they sort of... subcontracted other employees through the dark web. People who weren't directly involved in the trafficking part of it, just hired to abduct people and deliver them."

"Peterson has been giving up anyone he can think of, desperately trying to give the FBI enough information to get some kind of plea deal."

Fear blasts through my chest. "Will he?"

"No, Elle." He hugs me closer, rubbing his hand up and down my back. "Cole said there's not a chance. Beth and Leo gave the FBI everything they found; there's a huge investigation—Peterson has been running these studies for over ten years, dozens of people taken—there's no way he's seeing the light of day again."

All those people.

“What about Hillary? Did they find her?”

“Yeah, they did. The other guy—sausage-arms—gave the location where Hillary was being held, trying to pin it on Peterson. They’re essentially ratting each other out.”

I put my mug on the table in front of us and snuggle into Zane, needing his comforting warmth to chase away the chill of the conversation. “So it’s really over?”

“It’s *really* over, Elle.“ His lips brush the top of my head. “You can have a normal life again.”

A normal life. Dates in public. Shopping. Going out with friends. A job that doesn’t have to be done virtually.

Except. There’s one thing still dragging at me.

“What’s wrong, bug?” Zane touches my chin, tilting my head up to look at him. “You looked all happy, and then—”

”I am happy,“ I reassure him. “I can’t wait to go on dates with you, and go to the Hop-less Horseman with everyone, and go to the city again...”

“But?”

“It’s my dissertation. And my degree.” Dr. Peterson told the committee that I withdrew my dissertation and wasn’t going to be defending it, rescheduling a fake defense to trap me. “It’s all messed up now. I don’t even know if I can defend it anymore. And if I can’t... I won’t graduate.”

“Oh, Elle.“ Zane lifts me onto his lap so I’m facing him. “I’m so sorry. I should have said something already. With everything going on—” He shakes his head. “Anyway. Leo is working it out with the administration at Fordham. They’re going to schedule a new defense in a month or so, to give you time to recover.”

My heart jumps. “Really?” The last of my worries, gone.

Zane grins at me. “Yes. And then you’ll pass, and we’ll have a big celebration...”

“Oh.“ I raise my eyebrows at him. “What *kind* of celebration?”

“Hmm...” He dips his head, trailing a line of kisses up my neck. “First the hot tub...”

He nips at my lower lip. “That sexy librarian outfit.”

His mouth slants over mine, teasing it open, dipping inside and licking and stroking. Pulling back, his voice low and rough, “Then you, naked, spread out before me. Tasting you...”

His hand goes under my shirt, sliding up to cup my breast. “Celebrating over... and over... making sure you know how proud I am of you...”

Kissing me, his fingers plucking at my nipple, bringing it to a tight peak. “Showing you how much I love you...”

My heart is exploding.

More certain of anything in my life, I say, “I love you so much, Zane.”

His gaze holds mine, a depth of emotion saying so much more than words. “I love you, Elle. You’re everything to me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ZANE

“I love it here so much.”

As I join Elle by the window, she tilts her head up and smiles at me—one of the many relaxed smiles I’ve seen from her since we got here. Each one loosens the knot in my chest a little more, another reassurance that Elle’s okay, she’s safe, and she’s healing.

I don’t think I’ll ever forget what happened in that lecture hall, or the other events that led up to it. The memories sneak up on me when I least expect it—when I’m taking a shower, cooking dinner, just about to drift off to sleep—and I have to remind myself again that it’s over.

Even though I know the threat to Elle is gone, I’m still having a hard time accepting it.

The protectiveness I feel towards Elle is like nothing I’ve felt before. Now I understand how Cole felt after he brought Maya home from the hospital, hovering around her, not wanting to leave her side for a second. And Leo, who looked tortured the first time he had to go out of town for a job and leave Georgia behind.

The thought of not being around Elle, not being able to protect her? It’s terrifying.

But Elle deserves her freedom, especially after months of forced isolation. I don’t want my fears to hold her back from doing what she wants, whether it’s going out with her friends,

starting a new job, or—worst of all, and I hate to even think of it—*leaving*.

“I bet it’s gorgeous here in the summer,” Elle says, slipping her arm around my waist. She glances back outside at the sun dipping into the water, surrounded in a vibrant wash of golds and oranges and reds. “Swimming, grilling on the porch, taking a canoe out on the lake...”

“That does sound nice.” Pressing a kiss to her head, I close my eyes, thinking about the question that’s been tagging after me all week.

Turning so she’s facing me, Elle lifts her gaze to mine. “Would you want to come back here? In the summer? If this cabin is booked, maybe a different one?”

Does that mean Elle plans to be here in the summer? I haven’t asked, partly because I didn’t want to push, and partly because I’m afraid of the answer. Once she graduates, the obvious next step is finding a job, and I don’t know if she wants to stick around the city or not. Maybe the memories of what happened here are too much, and she wants a fresh start somewhere else.

And if she chooses to leave, where does that leave us? Long distance? Do I leave my team and move with her? The thought of proposing is *right there*—I’ve even decided on the ring I want to give her—but will that pressure Elle into staying here if she doesn’t want to?

“Zane?” Her brows arch up, little worry lines forming between them. “If you don’t want to come back here, that’s okay. I won’t be upset. Would you rather go to the beach? Or the city?”

I need to stop this pointless speculation and just ask her.

“Come sit down.” I take her hand and lead her over to the couch.

She settles next to me, draping her legs over mine, looking at me with a puzzled expression. “Is everything okay?”

Why am I so nervous? After dozens of dangerous missions, commanding men for years in the Army, why is it so

hard to ask a simple question? Letting out a deep breath, I ask, “What do you want to do after you graduate?”

Surprise ripples across her face. “Well. I haven’t thought about it much, with everything else going on, but I’d like to find a job. Hopefully.”

“I guess I was wondering...” *Spit it out, already.* “Are you going to try to get a job near the city? Near Sleepy Hollow?”

“Yes?” She hesitates, her face clouding. “Unless you don’t want me to?”

Somehow I’m messing this up.

I take her hands, enfolding her slender fingers inside mine. “I do. More than anything, Elle. I just wasn’t sure what you wanted. After... well, I didn’t know if you’d want to stay or start fresh somewhere where there aren’t any bad memories.”

She stares at me, silent and thoughtful, while my heart freezes mid-beat. Then she smiles, and my heart thaws and starts beating again. “Zane. It’s not all bad memories. Sleepy Hollow, New York City—those are places I spent time with *you.*”

Shifting onto my lap, Elle strokes her hand across my cheek. “Sleepy Hollow is where I fell in love with you, Zane. It’s where I finally felt safe. Not just physically, but I know my heart is safe with you, too. And I found friends there, and a home...”

“I want Sleepy Hollow to be my home, with you. If you want me there. I know it might take a little longer to find a job, but I can find something outside my field, I can wait tables, or do online research like Maya does, or—”

I silence her with a kiss, pouring all my love for her into it. Tracing the seam of her lips, teasing her mouth open and tasting her sweetness. Peppermint and sweet coffee and that unique *something* that’s only Elle. Our tongues in a sensual dance, cupping her nape, sliding my fingers through her hair, tilting her head back to take the kiss deeper.

When we’re both gasping for breath, I finally pull away. “I want you to stay in Sleepy Hollow with me, bug. More than

anything. And don't worry about how long it takes to find a job. I can support you."

Her features crease, and I can tell she's about to argue, so I quickly continue, "Not forever, though I would, but I know you don't want that. But I want to do this for you. I want to give you the time to find the perfect job, and trust me, I have enough money. I saved a lot while I was in the Army, including combat pay, and my expenses at Blade and Arrow are low. I can afford to support both of us for a while, if you'll let me."

"I don't know, Zane. I've been paying my own way for a long time."

"Well, you could try finding some online work," I offer, "like you said. I bet Maya could point you in the right direction."

"What about waiting tables?" Elle quirks an eyebrow at me, a slightly devious look in her eyes. "I could try to get a job at the Hop-less Horseman."

I bite back the immediate denial I want to say and try for something gentler.

"Elle, it's going to be hard enough for me to watch you leave for a couple of hours," I admit. "I'm not trying to be overprotective, but the idea of you working there at night, around all those people, especially when I have to go out of town for a job..."

"I get it." Elle snuggles into my neck. "I'm not sure how soon I'm going to feel comfortable on my own, either. But if I do some work online, to at least help with the bills, I think I'd be okay with staying home for a while."

"Thank you," I breathe, pressing my lips into her hair. "I'll work on my overprotectiveness. But it's going to take a while."

Elle turns, arranging her legs so she's straddling me, her hands on my neck. "I don't mind." Her eyes go a molten amber, capturing mine. "I love it when you protect me. And when you take care of me."

Leaning even closer, her breasts are soft against my chest, and she starts to trail little kisses up my neck. Fingers tunnel through my hair as she moves her mouth up to mine, lightly nibbling, sucking on my lower lip, so sweet and perfect and *mine*.

Then Elle wraps her legs around my waist, her heat calling to me. She's thrusting against my growing length, and I cup her ass and lift her so I'm nudging at the apex of her thighs.

Needing more, I plunge my tongue into Elle's mouth, no longer gentle but hungry, devouring. Her nipples tighten into hard peaks that I can feel even through layers of clothing. I slide one hand up her smooth belly and palm her breast, plump and perfectly filling my hand.

Her hands drop from my neck to my back, slipping under the fabric, trailing lightly along my waistband before dipping lower. Each touch is searing heat and tingles of electricity, setting my skin on fire.

I'm rock hard, straining towards her core, needing to feel Elle convulsing around me.

"Zane," she complains, dragging her mouth from mine. "We have too many clothes on."

Dropping my head to suckle at the base of her neck, I leave the slightest pink mark behind. Flashing a quick grin at her, I say, "I agree. We should do something about that."

Then I kiss her neck again, and Elle arches back, moaning, pushing her breast into my hand, thrusting her hips, her fingers digging into my skin.

There's nothing more erotic than watching Elle so uninhibited, her desire taking over, hearing the soft sounds of her arousal.

Now she's at my zipper, pulling it down, one hand reaching inside. She wraps her hand around me, soft and cool against my throbbing heat. Stroking, caressing, trailing her fingers along my sensitive skin, the need to sink into her turns to desperation.

I need to see all of her. Feel all of her.

Sweeping Elle into my arms, I nearly sprint to the bedroom.

Once we get to the bed, Elle yanks her clothes off, tossing them aside. No hesitation, shyness, just a hungry gaze as she looks at me. I almost tear my clothes off in my eagerness—like a teen instead of a grown man—but there’s a new desire for her, something deeper than before. A word resonating inside me. *Mine*.

Elle reaches for me, lust and longing and love in her eyes, and I go to her.

Then I worship her.

I kiss all her freckles, from the few dotted across her belly to the smattering of them across her chest and shoulders.

I plump her pale breasts in my hands, plucking at her rosy nipples and taking them into my mouth as Elle arches her back, moaning.

I dip my head to her center, kissing her there. Flicking at her small bud with my tongue and using my fingers until her hips are jerking towards me uncontrollably.

When she explodes the first time, I draw it out, plunging my fingers in and out of her, pressing my thumb on that sensitive bundle of nerves, loving how wet and ready she is for me.

As Elle grips my arms while I brace myself above her, I kiss her over and over.

Then I bring her to the edge again, and she groans, “Zane. I need you inside me.”

How can I say no to that?

I sink into her, so tight and hot and perfect for me. We’re an exact fit.

Her inner walls clutch at me, making me thicker, longer, throbbing, the pressure increasing. I keep thrusting into her welcoming heat, feeling her muscles rippling around me. I tilt Elle’s hips, canting them up so I can plunge even deeper, filling her to the hilt.

Faster and harder, we move together, and I press at the little bud again; this time Elle cries out as she comes apart around me, all her muscles tensing, squeezing me—

And I pull out, plunge deep one more time, and I go racing over the edge with her.

Minutes later, or maybe hours—I got up to get rid of the condom and immediately gathered Elle back into my arms, cuddling her body into mine—Elle’s stomach lets out a little growl.

“Oh!” She claps her hand to her belly. “I guess we missed dinner, didn’t we?”

Her hair is a silk curtain on my chest. Stroking my fingers through it, I tell her, “I’ll make us something. Pasta? Stir-fry? What would you like?”

She’s quiet for a second. “Hmm. Do we have anything to make pizza?”

“I think so. Pepperoni and mushroom?”

I can hear her smiling as she says, “Well, that’s *my* favorite.”

“Good thing it’s my favorite, too.”

Elle presses a soft kiss to my chest. “Maybe we can watch *Fellowship of the Ring* again? While we have pizza? In bed?”

Turning on my side to face her, I trace the lines of her nose, her cheeks, her eyebrows, the delicate curve of her lips. I love everything about her.

My heart is full.

“I think that’s a great idea.”

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

ELLE

“You did it, bug. I’m so happy for you.”

Zane stops and kisses me for at least the twentieth time since we left campus, lifting me up and swinging me around until I finally gasp out, “Zane! You’re not going to be happy if I throw up all over you.”

But I’m laughing, and I don’t care if I throw up, because life is awesome right now.

“Sorry, bug.” Zane puts me down, giving me a sheepish grin. “I’m just really excited for you.”

“It’s okay.” I tuck my hand into his, giving it a little squeeze. “I’m excited too.”

It’s one of the first true spring days in Sleepy Hollow, leaves just starting to bud on the trees scattered around the Blade and Arrow property, the sun shining in a cloudless sky, its heat chasing away the last vestiges of winter.

We’re back home at the Blade and Arrow headquarters, which is also my new home with Zane. And I couldn’t be happier about it.

I love living with Zane. I love our apartment that he’s given me free rein to decorate, my new library with bookshelves lining each wall and stretching to the ceiling. I

love waking up next to him; his muscular arm curved around me, his lips gently kissing the top of my head when he thinks I'm still asleep.

I love having a new family, too. Cole, Leo, Rylan, Finn, Nora, and of course, Maya and Georgia—they've all become more than just friends. Everything I was missing growing up, support, love, comfort... I've found them here. Whether it's learning how to knit with Georgia, taking shooting lessons from Rylan, or heading to the Hop-less Horseman with whoever is free, being here with them is so much better than being on my own.

And when Zane had to leave on his first trip out of town, and I didn't want anyone to know how upset I was, Nora came over to my apartment and kept me company. I never asked; she just knew. And that's family, too.

"Are we going to celebrate tonight?" I raise my eyebrows at Zane as we walk towards the back of the building.

"Of course we are." Zane kisses me again, this time leaving out the spin. "You passed your defense, Elle. I promised you a celebration once you finished."

"Champagne? Ice cream?" As Zane types in the passcode to the back door, I trail my fingers along his back, tracing his muscles. "Sex?"

"Yes, to all of those," he answers, "but some will have to be later."

"Which ones?" I fake a pout at him, widening my eyes. "I want to do all of them now."

"Calm down, Dr. Evans." Zane chuckles, slipping his arm around me as we walk inside. "I have something to show you first."

Then he leads me past the stairs and the elevator to the front of the building, steadfastly ignoring me as I keep asking him where we're going. When he pauses in front of the conference room door, I think I have it. "Are we going to talk to Dean? Did you already tell him?"

Smiling at me, his eyes pale blue diamonds sparkling, he says, “Something like that.”

And then he opens the door to so much more than that.

The large room is filled with people clapping. Balloons in the Fordham colors bounce all over the ceiling, matching streamers draped over every available surface. Congratulations signs are tacked on all the walls, all custom printed to say *Congratulations Dr. Evans!*

The conference table is laden down by food—pizza and wings and at least ten salads. Bottles of wine and beer are lined up on a table by the wall, with Finn as the self-appointed bartender stationed beside it. On another table, there’s a stack of gifts and cards propped against them.

And the *people*.

Cole and Maya, Leo and Georgia, Rylan, Nora—all of them cheering, “Congratulations, Elle!”

Next to Maya is another dark-haired man—her brother, Oliver—who arrived for a visit yesterday. He was polite when I talked to him, and he wished me luck so genuinely I couldn’t help but like him immediately.

And Dean and Adeline. Dean rushes over to me, pulling me into a giant hug, his voice thick as he says, “I’m so proud of you. And I’m so glad you’re okay.”

As soon as Dean lets go, Adeline hugs me hard while her adorable companion dog stands by obediently. When I look down at his happy labrador face, even he looks like he’s smiling at me.

“I’m so happy for you, Elle.” Then she glances at Zane, her eyes crinkling up at the corners, adding, “Not just about the dissertation. It looks like you’ve found a *lot* to be happy about.”

”I have.“ Turning to Zane, I hug him hard, resting my head over the reassuring thud of his heart. “But Zane,” I say, pulling back to look up at him, “what if I hadn’t passed?”

“Impossible, Elle.” He gazes at me, pride written across his features. “I know how hard you worked. And how smart you are. I knew you’d pass. And”—he pauses, his smile going crooked—“if you didn’t pass, we’d make it into a make-Elle-feel-better celebration, anyway.”

It’s hard to argue with logic like that.

Over the next hour, everyone comes up to me, hugging me, calling me doctor—I have to keep reminding them I don’t technically have my PhD yet, but they don’t seem to care. Finn asks if there’s a doctor in the house at least four times, until Cole smacks him on the back of the head and tells him to stop.

I talk with Dean and Adeline, catching up on everything that’s been going on in San Antonio and promising to come visit soon. I tell them about the plans for the summer, heading back to the same cabin for a week in July, and going to visit Zane’s family in August.

Because after a lot of reassurance, I convinced Zane that his family is proud of him no matter what, and he’s the only one hanging onto his perceived failures. I’m a little nervous about meeting his family—I want to impress them, of course—but Zane said his mom would be so thrilled to see him settling down that I could dance around naked and she wouldn’t care.

I think I’ll take a hard pass on trying *that*.

Maya and I are chatting about our next girls’ night when the music lowers and Zane comes to my side. Touching my arm lightly, his smile just the slightest bit strained, he says, “It’s time for your presents.”

“You want me to open them now?” My cheeks go hot. I’m not used to getting gifts, let alone opening them in front of a room full of people.

“Well.” Zane hesitates. “One of them, mainly.”

Leading me to the giant pile of presents, he pulls a large envelope from the back. It’s plain, just white with my name written on it, not wrapped in graduation paper like the rest. As he hands it to me, his hand shakes a little. “This is from me.”

Everyone is watching and I'm a little embarrassed, but this is my family, so it's not as bad as I anticipated. And Zane is looking at me with the oddest expression on his face, scared and hopeful at the same time. "I'm sure I'll love it," I reassure him, as I open the envelope and reach inside.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but a photo of the New York City Public Library wasn't it. "Zane?"

"I know," he says. "It doesn't make sense yet. But you told me something a while ago. And I never forgot it."

What did I tell him about the library? I think back to that conversation months ago. I told him it was beautiful, that I wanted to go there, and people—

Oh. *OH.*

Zane goes down to one knee, his handsome face tight with emotion. "We can get married there, Elle, if you still want to. I already contacted them; I reserved a date for next summer, but Leo can help us find another date if that doesn't work..."

He shakes his head. "I'm doing this in the wrong order." Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ring.

And everything stops.

It's just me and Zane, the sparkling ring between us.

His eyes searching out mine, overflowing with love, wet with tears.

His hand, trembling, holding the ring out to me.

"I love you, Elle." He swallows hard, his voice thick. "I never dreamt of finding that one person who fit me. A person who loved me even when I didn't love myself. Who thawed my heart. And you have it, Elle. My heart. My soul. All of me."

And then. "Will you marry me, Elle?"

"Oh, *Zane.*"

All my dreams, coming true in front of me.

Tears spilling over, I lunge at him, flinging my arms around his neck, nearly knocking him over. “Yes. *Yes*. A thousand times, yes.”

As Zane slips the ring on my finger, I keep kissing him. “I love you, Zane. And you have my heart. You’ve had it from the start. As soon as I saw you, I knew.”

Everyone is cheering and Zane lifts me into his arms, his gaze fierce and so full of love I can barely breathe. “I love you so much, Elle.”

As he lowers me to the ground, I whisper into his ear, “How soon before we can sneak off and do the rest of our celebrating?”

A wicked smile stretches across his face. “Soon, bug. And I can’t wait.”

*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gia Cobie is a librarian in Upstate New York. In her spare time, Gia enjoys reading, writing, and spending time in the Adirondacks. She has a soft spot for cheesy reality romance shows, although she also loves paranormal and fantasy. *Saved from Peril* is the third book in her military romantic suspense series, *Blade and Arrow Security*. Gia's other works include her romantic suspense series, *Heroes of Sleepy Hollow*, and paranormal romance series, *Tenebris Desire*.



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Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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