



SAVING REBECCA

SEAL TEAM TANGO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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SAVING REBECCA (SPECIAL
FORCES: OPERATION ALPHA)

SEAL TEAM TANGO

BOOK SIX



NICOLE FLOCKTON



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: 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

To Becky, the sweetest, strongest woman I know.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Ever since his mother's death bed confession, Adam "Rocket" Coburn's life has been in a spiral. His trust has been shattered and everything he thought he knew about himself is a lie. When Rocket is injured while on a mission, he's drawn to his nurse, against his better judgement. Until the bandages come off his eyes and he sees exactly who has been helping him. Once again, someone he trusted betrayed him.

Nurse Rebecca Nelson never meant to deceive Adam. The truth was always on the tip of her tongue, but she enjoyed getting to know him without the past getting in their way. But she also knew, once her identity was revealed, their budding friendship would be tested. When she finds herself in a precarious situation, Adam is the one to rescue her.

Adam tries to keep his distance from Rebecca, but their paths keep crossing and he can't deny he *wants* her. Maybe he *can* trust Rebecca... Until a past encounter threatens their burgeoning relationship and their lives.

PROLOGUE



BULLETS WHISTLED PAST ROCKET, AND HE PRESSED HIMSELF BACK AGAINST the wall he was taking cover behind.

“Fuck!” He looked at Growler, who stood opposite him. “Where did these guys come from?”

“Fucked if I know.”

“Sit-rep?” Fort, their team lead, asked through the comms.

“Taking rapid fire from unknown source. Growler and I are trapped in the eastern quadrant of the building.”

“Hang tight. We’re on our way.”

The spray of bullets had stopped, so Rocket lifted his rifle and used hand signals to communicate with Growler, now that anything they said could be heard.

Growler nodded and raced across the small divide between them so that he was now behind Rocket.

Fortunately, no one took aim. All they had to do was wait until the rest of the team came. This was supposed to be a basic recon of the building opposite to where intel had said the head of one of the largest drug cartels in Mexico was hiding out. Instead, the asshole had been in the one Rocket and his team were currently in. Rocket suspected that the drug lord’s guards had gotten him out, but had left some men behind to deal with the SEAL team.

Getting themselves out was going to be hairy, but they’d been in worse situations, and if he was to die here, then Rocket would accept his fate. It wasn’t like he had anything to look forward to. Two years ago, his whole life had been fucked up by the one person who was supposed to protect and guide him—his mother.

Rocket determinedly buried thoughts of her. Now wasn't the time. Rapid footsteps sounded behind them, and he turned to see a man rushing toward them, wearing a vest.

A vest full of explosives.

"Fuck! Let's get out of here, Growler."

They took off. Growler got around the corner three steps before he did. The burn of a bullet bloomed through Rocket's leg, and he stumbled, almost face-planting the concrete. His training kicked in and he regained his balance, but he could hear the bomber behind him getting closer.

A blast boomed around him, throwing him back until he slammed into a wall. The crunch of bones was unmistakable.

I'm glad it's me and not anyone else on the team.

Darkness rose to consume him.

He was alone.

No one would miss him if he died today.

CHAPTER 1



AWARENESS RETURNED IN SMALL PARTS. A TOUCH OF FINGERS AGAINST THE inside of his wrist. The whisper of fabric and the soft tread of shoes as someone moved around him. The throb of pain radiating through every inch of his body.

The beeps from a machine in time with every beat of his heart.

Where was he?

Okay, dumb question. He must be in the hospital. The heart monitor was a good sign of that.

Which meant he'd survived. Somehow, and by some miracle, he was still breathing. He remembered the last few seconds of consciousness before everything had gone blank until now.

But if he remembered it all, why was it so difficult to wake up?

Did he even want to open his eyes and become aware of what was going on around him?

Right this second, he didn't.

He didn't want to face what would be there when he woke up. Didn't want to face what could be wrong with him, and the pain lancing through his body said there was a lot. Didn't want to face the lonely existence his life had become.

A soft brush of fingers across his forehead gave him comfort he hadn't even known he'd needed. He tried to turn his head toward it, but his body was heavy, so heavy that movement seemed impossible.

"You're going to be okay. I've given you something for the pain. Sleep and recuperate." The voice was melodic and somewhat familiar, yet his tired mind couldn't place it.

But he'd take the advice and seek the solace sleep provided him.

The next time he drifted toward consciousness, the pain had dulled somewhat. Still there, but not as throbbing.

He shifted and moaned as pain shot up his left leg and right arm. He couldn't seem to move either of them. They were weighted down with something...plaster casts? Strapped tightly so he didn't do more damage?

He had no idea, and until he opened his eyes, he wouldn't. Maybe it was better to keep them shut.

Although the last thing Adam "Rocket" Coburn was, was afraid to face life head-on. Hell, he'd stared death in the face too many times to count with his job as a SEAL. A job he loved and would get back to, no matter what type of injuries he'd suffered. A job that had proven to be his salvation when all other parts of his life had crumbled around him.

"How's your pain level?" The voice wasn't the sweet one from before. This voice was masculine and lacked the compassion the mystery female voice from earlier had.

How much time had passed since she'd run her fingers over his forehead? It could've been a day, or three days, for all he knew. Heck, he didn't even know what day it was or how long he'd been there.

Was he stateside or was he at the base hospital in Germany?

Determinedly, he willed his eyes to open. The message didn't seem to be getting through. Were they glued together?

"Don't try and open your eyes yet. They're taped shut." The no-nonsense voice sounded again. Where was this dude's bedside manner?

Then his words registered.

What the fuck. Am I blind?

"No, not blind." Guess he mumbled that last bit out loud. "But your eyes suffered trauma from the explosion. We'll look at taking the bandages off in a couple of days."

A puff of air drifted across him, along with the faint tread of shoes. His hearing had ratcheted up a notch now that he couldn't use his eyes—someone else had entered the room.

And like before, gentle fingers closed around his wrist. "You're awake. How's your pain?"

The sweet voice from before had returned.

"I asked, but he didn't answer." Damn whoever the other person was. He must be having a bad day. If anyone was having a shit time, it was him,

Rocket. He was the one lying in bed with no fucking idea what was wrong and unable to see.

“Pain is tolerable,” Rocket answered.

“Well, now that your nurse is here, I’ll leave you to it. Everything is looking good.”

Rocket made out the firmer steps of the man leaving the room. He even caught the click of the door closing.

“Is he a doctor? Because if he is, he needs to work on his bedside manner,” Rocket grumbled. Now that he had been awake a little longer, his brain wasn’t so foggy and he could form coherent sentences.

Light laughter tinkled around the room. He liked the sound. Much more pleasant than the sound of bullets or explosions.

Explosions.

Memories of why he was in this bed flashed through his mind. The guy running toward him, a wild harried look in his eyes. Lips firmed into a line of determination. Finger poised above a button.

The hot sting of a bullet piercing his flesh.

Well, that would explain some of the pain he was experiencing, but not all of it. Would the nurse tell him? Or shouldn’t the doctor who’d walked out have informed him of his injuries? All he knew was that something had happened to his eyes, and they had to be kept taped shut. For a couple of more days, according to the doctor.

“Can you tell me what my injuries are?”

Silence met his question. Was there a reason why she wouldn’t tell him? Had he lost a leg or arm?

No, he was pretty confident he had both legs and arms.

Was he paralyzed?

He wiggled his toes. Pain shot through his legs, but at least he had feeling in them. He did the same with his fingers.

Okay, not paralyzed, and yes, have both arms and legs. Then what? Why the hesitation?

The doc did say his eyes would be okay, so he wasn’t going to end up blind—at least that’s what he took from it. And he could hear, so he hadn’t lost that, even though he’d been close to the explosion.

He blanked his mind on that. A man had sacrificed himself for someone who didn’t deserve it. Then again, maybe the man saw his sacrifice as his rite of passage. Not to mention, he’d shown no fear. Rocket didn’t know and

didn't claim to understand how suicide bombers thought. All he knew was that even though the act always caused tragedy, to them, it was an act of bravery.

"It's a bit of a list." The nurse finally answered.

Again her voice seemed familiar, as though he'd had many conversations with her. How he wished he could see her. See if he recognized her. Would it matter if he did? After the way his mother betrayed him, he planned to never get involved with any woman again—not in a way that ended up with happy ever after. That wasn't for him. So what if he'd been celibate for the last year, it wasn't going to be permanent. He just needed some time by himself.

His teammates may have thought they'd found their *soulmates* and were blissfully happy, but that could change on a dime. He'd seen it happen. His life had disintegrated with a few spoken words. Parts of him hoped he was wrong, and that what happened to him wouldn't happen with his friends and their marriages. Life, though, held no guarantees.

He'd seen it more times than he cared to count with his job. Hell, he was living it right now.

"I got blown up. I'd be surprised if there wasn't a list," he responded bitingly. Why sugarcoat what he'd gone through? There was no point. "Just tell me, so I know what I'm dealing with."

He caught the sharp intake of her breath, as though his words shocked her. He didn't care if they did. He needed answers.

"Right. What do you remember of the explosion?"

A matter-of-factness turned her tone as sharp as his. Why did that upset him? He should be happy that she'd lost that soft tone he found all too comforting.

"I remember getting shot." That explained the pain in his leg. "The perp getting closer, and then I was thrown forward into something hard." He assumed it was a wall or the ground. Either one was as hard as the other.

"From the reports received from the hospital in Germany where they first treated you, you sustained a broken nose and a severe concussion. Broken blood vessels in your eyes, which is why they are taped shut. The bullet missed the carotid artery in your thigh, but lodged in the bone. You had surgery to remove it, and a pin was put in your thigh bone. You broke your right wrist. You suffered a lacerated liver, which caused internal bleeding. Once you were stabilized, they transferred you from Germany to the base hospital here in San Diego. In my opinion, they should've kept you there a bit

longer, but for whatever reason, the decision was made to bring you back here.”

She rattled everything off as if she was relaying a grocery list. He was impressed. In fact, he appreciated the lack of emotion in her breakdown of his injuries.

“What’s my prognosis?” With a broken leg and wrist, he’d be sidelined for at least six-to-eight weeks. Maybe longer. Then again, he was a SEAL, so pain was an old friend. He’d pushed through many injuries to do his job.

“That will be up to the doctor, your rehab specialist, and you. But I’m guessing you being you, it will be less time than the average person.”

Damn, he wished he could see her face. Not being able to see the nuances in a person’s face as they spoke, not to mention the way they held themselves, was a disadvantage he found he didn’t like.

Rocket also couldn’t deny that she’d basically voiced what he’d been thinking, so he couldn’t fault her assumptions.

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or a dig at the fact that I’m a SEAL.”

“Both?”

He heard the question in her voice and chuckled, a move that surprised him. “Nailed it.”

Rocket shifted, feeling uncomfortable. Pain shot through his leg again, and he couldn’t stop the wince.

“I think it’s time you rested.” A waft of a flowery scent teased his nostrils, reminding him of a rose garden. How had he missed that the last time she was in the room?

Was it perfume? Had she put some on before she’d come in again?

No, he didn’t think nurses wore perfume. Too much of a risk to patients if they had allergies. Maybe it was hand lotion? Or shampoo.

Why the hell was he getting hung up on her scent? The knock to his head had clearly messed with his thought processes.

“I’ve slept a lot,” he argued, even though tiredness was sweeping up from his toes.

“You need the rest, Adam.”

A beep sounded before the coolness of liquid pain relief spread up his arm and through his bloodstream. As he floated into sleep, her use of his given name registered. He didn’t recall giving it to her. Of course, it would’ve been listed somewhere she had access to. But wouldn’t she have used his rank designation instead?

Whatever. All he knew was—he quite liked hearing his mysterious nurse use it.

CHAPTER 2



REBECCA NELSON WALKED OUT OF ADAM'S ROOM, SHUT THE DOOR QUIETLY, and then slumped against the wall beside it.

Seeing him in that bed, injured, had been hard. It reminded her of his mother, Shelly, as she'd wasted away in her bed, ravaged by cancer. And him, sitting, holding her hand, holding himself rigid so that emotions didn't overtake him.

Always the unemotional SEAL, but she'd seen the cracks. Seen the tiny splinters he'd tried so hard to hide. Seen those splinters split wide open with Shelly's confession. A confession she wouldn't breathe a word of.

"Bec, you okay?"

She opened eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed and saw her supervisor, Ellie, standing in front of her.

Rebecca pushed down the emotions of seeing a man she hadn't thought she'd ever see again. Well, maybe that wasn't true. She'd thought it could be possible when she'd taken this job. She smiled at Ellie. "Yep, just taking a minute. It's been a long day."

As she'd expected it would be when she'd volunteered to do a double shift because one of her colleagues was suffering bad morning sickness.

Ellie smiled sympathetically. "You're off shift in ten minutes. Then you can go home and sleep."

"And get ready to do it all over again," Rebecca finished for her.

Ellie laughed. "Yes, but you have tomorrow off, so I expect you to sleep and do nothing."

"Doctor's orders?" Rebecca queried.

"I'm not a doctor, but as your direct supervisor, yes, that is an order.

Since you started here two months ago, you've covered for a lot of your colleagues. It's time to look after yourself."

Rebecca didn't even try to argue. Why would she when Ellie spoke the truth? "I hear you."

"Good. Now..." she canted her head toward the closed door. "How's Petty Officer Third Class Coburn?"

Rebecca had never heard Adam's full designation before. "He's resting. He woke up when Dr. Border was in there. I told him what his injuries were after he asked the doctor, but didn't get an answer."

Ellie's only reply was, "Hmm..."

Even though Rebecca had only been working there for two months, Dr. Border had a reputation around the hospital as gruff and ignorant to the needs of the patients under his care. She'd often wondered why the man had become a doctor, but then again, he was very good, so maybe he didn't believe he needed to be soft and gooey with patients, especially as they were all military personnel. But even the toughest person needed a little care.

She glanced back at the door and wondered how Adam was really doing after his mother's death. It had been two years ago, but she'd picked up on a little bitterness in his tone. Granted, it could be from his injuries, but she doubted it, though. She'd been there. Had seen how his mother's words had wounded him.

Rebecca sighed. Not her problem. Yet she couldn't shake the profound effect it had had on her.

"How did he take the news of his injuries?" Ellie's question jolted her from the past and put her firmly back into the present.

"Like any SEAL. Didn't say much."

"Not surprising." Ellie glanced at her watch. "I've got a meeting to get to. Make sure you take my advice and do nothing. I'll see you day after tomorrow."

Rebecca nodded. One good thing about this job was Ellie and the way she treated everyone under her supervision.

The change from being a palliative care nurse back to a general one had been good for Rebecca's soul. Yes, there were some tragic outcomes here, but normally, it was swift and not a long-drawn-out process, unlike what she'd previously experienced.

Time away had been good for her as well. It had re-energized her and had given her time to figure out the next part of her life. Looking after Adam's

mom, and hearing the bombshell she'd dropped on her son before she died, had been draining. The burden of a deathbed secret hadn't been one she'd ever had to deal with any of the other patients she'd cared for.

There'd been plenty of stories she'd heard from other colleagues who'd learned things that family members hadn't known. Now she had one of her own, and she didn't like it.

She opened the door of the room she still stood beside and looked at the man sleeping in the hospital bed, surrounded by machines, and prayed that he'd found peace. Or at least come to terms with what Shelly had told him.

"Not your problem, Bec," she muttered to herself again as she closed the door. Only this time, she walked toward the staff locker rooms, ready to clock out for the day.

Adam would be there when she returned, and if she was assigned to his room, great. If not, then that was for the best, too, because she imagined once he took one look at her, he'd never want her in his room again.

* * *

THE SOFT OCEAN breeze lifted the strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail and danced around her face.

Rebecca breathed deeply, the sea air refreshing. There were some perks to living near the ocean, and being able to walk the soft sands when she wanted was one of them.

She'd never considered herself a beach person, especially as her previous job had her traveling to places all over the state. But when she'd been assigned to San Diego to look after Shelly Coburn, she'd fallen in love with the place, swearing that she'd come back and make it a permanent home base. And she'd done it.

A soccer ball careened into her leg, and she had a second to brace herself before a little girl tripped over the sand and landed in a heap at Rebecca's feet.

She immediately squatted down. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

The little girl sat up and wiped the sand off her face. "Yep. Sorry I hit you."

"Layla! Are you okay?" A woman rushed up to them. "I'm so sorry. She didn't hurt you, did she?"

Rebecca looked up and smiled into the harried mother's face. She had another baby, a boy, hitched on her hip. "It's all good. No harm done."

"I'm okay, Momma. I said sorry to the lady."

"That's good. Again, I'm really sorry we interrupted you. You looked deep in thought."

There was an openness and friendliness about the woman that drew Rebecca in. "Just enjoying the ocean breeze and grateful that I can call this place home. I'm Rebecca, by the way."

The other woman smiled. "Imogene. And yeah, there's something special about this place. It does renew the soul."

"That it does."

"Momma, can you give Liam to the lady and play soccer with me?"

Imogene's face flushed a bright red, as if she'd suffered a bad sunburn. "Layla, that's rude. Sorry again. I don't know why she said that."

Rebecca laughed at the presumptuousness of little Layla. "Kids. Sometimes their lack of tact is what we need. I can play with her if you like," she nodded toward Imogene's son, who was getting a little restless with his mom standing still. "You've got your hands full."

Imogene grimaced. "I do, but I wouldn't trade it for the world. And you don't have to play with Layla. It's okay."

Rebecca looked at the little girl again. She had lovely green eyes and a dimple in the middle of her chin. Her mom didn't have one, so she must have inherited that genetic feature from her father. Her face held the look of expectation, as if she was hoping and praying that Rebecca would play with her.

"I don't mind at all. We're playing soccer, right?" she asked Layla. The girl nodded vigorously.

"Her dad signed her up for peewee league, and she's over the moon." Imogene shifted the baby on her hip and pressed a kiss to his head. The boy snuggled in, his eyelids drifting down before slowly raising again.

"It's a good sport to work on hand-eye, as well as foot, coordination and it gets children outside. Why don't you go back and sit down? Your little one looks like he's about to fall asleep."

Imogene hesitated, and Rebecca could understand why. They'd only just met, and she was asking the woman to trust her to play with her daughter. "I know you don't really know me, but my full name is Rebecca Nelson, and I work as a nurse at the hospital on the Navy base." She dug into her back

pocket, pulled out her identification, and held it out for Imogene to see.

“I know that one well. My husband is based there,” Imogene murmured. “Do you...wait, never mind.”

Her declaration didn't surprise Rebecca. The beach they were at backed onto the base, and she knew lots of families frequented the place. What did surprise her was the almost question she asked. What did she want to know?

“Miss Rebecca? Can we please go play?” Layla tugged on Rebecca's hand.

“Sure, we can. But we need the okay from your mom. Right?” Rebecca firmly put the ball back in Imogene's court, and as much as she wanted to find out what the other woman wanted to ask her, Rebecca kept the question to herself.

“It's fine, but I'm going to be right over there. And don't forget that Penni, Angela, Jennifer, and Maddie will all be here soon.”

Layla's eyes widened. “Will Maddie bring baby Kara?”

Imogene laughed. “Yes, she will, but she's still too little to play dollies with you. She's younger than Liam, don't forget.”

Layla sighed, rather dramatically, Rebecca noticed, and she bit the inside of her bottom lip to stop from laughing. “I know.”

“Come on, little one.” Rebecca pointed to the ball at her feet. “Show me how you kick.”

That was all Layla needed before she raced off in preparation to kick the ball Rebecca's way.

“Thank you again for doing this.”

Rebecca smiled at Imogene. “I've got no plans for today. Happy to help out.”

And she wasn't lying. She loved playing with kids. Hoped to have some of her own one day. She just had to find the right person to have them with. Which wasn't proving easy, but now wasn't the time to think about her single life.

Over the next twenty minutes, she and Layla kicked the ball to each other, and Rebecca gave the girl some hints on how to tackle. She'd been on her high school soccer team. She hadn't been a star player, but she'd held her own. It had been years since she'd played, but the muscle memory had kicked in after a few minutes.

Rebecca looked over to where Imogene sat beneath a large sunshade and found that she was now surrounded by other women, and she spied one

cradling a bundle. That must be the friend named Maddie with her baby.

“Hey Layla, looks like your mom’s friends have arrived. Shall we call time on our game?”

“Yes!” Layla yelled, scooped up the ball, and raced toward where her mom sat.

Rebecca followed at a more sedate pace, ready to say goodbye and head home. Although returning to her house alone didn’t appeal. Having only been in San Diego for a while, she hadn’t made many connections or friendships, as yet.

It had been fun playing with Layla, and being outside, and didn’t want it to end, but she couldn’t just invite herself to sit with Imogene. She’d only met the woman thirty minutes ago and even though she’d liked her on sight, it didn’t mean the feelings were reciprocated.

“Knox said Rocket is doing okay. But he seems down, especially because he can’t see anything at the moment.” A woman with blond hair in a high ponytail was talking as Rebecca approached the group.

“Damn, Leighton said that Rocket is lucky to be alive. That suicide bomber was really close to him. Growler got off lucky, but I bet he feels guilty that Rocket got hurt so badly.” Imogene turned. “Oh, hey, Rebecca.”

She hated intruding on a conversation. Not that she had much choice, as she was making sure Layla got back okay.

Were they talking about Adam? Was “Rocket” his nickname? There was only one patient in the hospital who’d been injured in a bombing, and that had been the man she’d tended to the previous evening.

He had to be the one they were talking about.

Not my business.

Damn that phrase was becoming her mantra when thinking about Adam and everything he’d gone through.

“Just wanted to say bye and thanks for letting me entertain Layla.”

Imogene stood. “Oh, please, I should be thanking you for keeping her entertained. You looked like you knew what you were doing with the soccer ball. Have you played?”

“I did in high school. Anyway, I don’t want to impose, so I’ll say bye and maybe I’ll see you on the beach another day.”

“Do you want to join us?” Imogene asked, then pointed to the group. “We’re just catching up.”

Rebecca looked at the women gathered, a small spark of jealousy flaring

to life at the closeness she could sense within the group. She'd had some girlfriends over the years, but they'd drifted apart. It had been a long time since she'd had a girls' lunch, let alone a girls' night.

"Thanks, but I don't want to intrude."

Imogene waved her off. "You won't be intruding. Please, sit."

A couple of the women shuffled along the blanket to make a space for her. Being rude wasn't in Rebecca, even though she'd dealt with some unruly family relatives. Sickness and death often brought out the worst in people. "Okay, thanks. Hi, everyone, I'm Rebecca" she said as she settled.

"Let me introduce you around." Imogene pointed to the woman with blond hair. "This is Penni. Next to her is Angela, then there's Jennifer and Maddie and baby Kara."

Rebecca smiled at them all. "Thanks for letting me join you all."

"What do you do, Rebecca?" Penni asked and quickly got an elbow in the ribs from Angela. "Hey," she pointed to her protruding belly. "Precious cargo here. Don't be poking me. Only Knox is allowed to do that."

"Ew," "TMI," and "Oh, no, you didn't say that!" sounded, along with a hefty dose of laughter.

"Don't mind Penni. She works with a reality TV star, so she has no filter," Imogene finished with a wink to show that this type of joking was prevalent in the group.

"Not for much longer. I'm counting down the days until I go on maternity leave." Penni held up her hand and counted down on her fingers. "Four months to go. Bye, bye Symonne."

"Congratulations on the baby. And as for what I do, I'm a nurse. I work at the hospital on the Navy base. Before that I was traveling around the country as a locum nurse. And before that, I was a palliative care nurse."

Rebecca wasn't sure why she'd blurted all that out. They didn't need to know her entire past employment history. She also didn't miss the way they all looked at each other, as if sharing a silent conversation. "What?" she asked when no one said anything.

Maddie adjusted her hold on her baby and met Rebecca's gaze. "Our husbands and partners are SEALs and one of the guys on the team got hurt recently. He's at the hospital, but we haven't been to see him. Apparently he doesn't want to see anyone. Not even the guys."

The hurt was evident in Maddie's voice, and the sad looks on the other girls' faces told the same story. They'd mentioned a man named "Rocket,"

who'd been injured by a bombing, the same way that Adam had been hurt.

"I really shouldn't talk about patients, but I'm sure he has a reason for not wanting to see you. It could be he's feeling a little vulnerable. It happens when their mortality is shoved in their faces."

"We just love Rocket and know he's hurting. Knox said he's been hurting for a while, ever since his mom died." Penni picked up her drink and took a sip. "They just want to support him. He's their brother."

It has to be Adam they're asking about. The mention of his mom dying was too close. She knew that nicknames were used by the men a lot in the Navy, so "Rocket" had to be what they called him.

"Is Rocket his real name?" Asking at least that much didn't mean she was going to tell them anything they didn't already know.

Penni shook her head. "It's his nickname. But you know, I don't think I know his given name."

"It's Adam," Imogene piped up. "I asked Leighton and he told me."

"I don't believe it," Rebecca whispered. If she'd been told this story by someone else, she wouldn't have believed it. What were the odds that the group of women she'd just met knew Adam too?

"What don't you believe?" Angela asked as she bit into a cupcake that looked absolutely delicious.

Rebecca looked out at the ocean, the waves gently rolling onto the shore before rushing out. The sound of the ocean was reassuring. The ocean was like life in a way—it ebbed and flowed. Somedays, it could be rough, and other days, calm. "I think the patient I was looking after yesterday must be the man you're talking about."

Was she really about to say this?

Yes.

Yes, she was.

"And the last woman I looked after as a palliative nurse had a son named Adam. He's a Navy SEAL."

CHAPTER 3



ROCKET'S HEAD ACHED. THE SKIN BENEATH THE TAPE KEEPING HIS EYES SHUT itched like mad, and he just wanted to get the fuck out of the hospital.

He couldn't do a fucking thing, and he hated feeling so helpless. He couldn't even feed himself. One of the nurses had to do it, as though he was a baby.

He was pretty sure he'd almost made the last nurse cry. Everything he was doing was making him a prime asshole, but his frustration levels were through the roof.

He hadn't wanted to see anyone, not even the guys from his team. When he'd been asked if he wanted visitors, he'd said no. Fortunately, the staff respected his wishes.

Rocket sighed, and using only his uninjured arm and leg, attempted to get into a more comfortable position. His ass had gone numb from lying in the same spot for days on end.

The door whispered open and he tensed, waiting to see who was walking in. He hadn't seen the doctor since the first time he'd woken up. Nor the nurse who'd detailed his injuries as if she were reciting a shopping list. He hadn't seen her—well, heard her—in a couple of days. At least he thought it was a couple of days. He had no idea how much time had passed. Not being able to tell when the sun rose and set did his head in. His admiration for the visually impaired people grew. The challenges they faced on a daily basis, along with not knowing if it was night or day? In his mind now, they were all rock stars.

He would be the first to admit he'd been short and surly with anyone who'd walked into the room. He just wanted these damn bandages off. His

leg and wrist were itching beneath their casts, and he was tired of doing nothing. Fort would laugh his ass off if he knew how much he was missing doing PT with the team.

Inactivity wasn't something he was used to. He liked being in motion all the time. Although getting back into action was going to take a while—unfortunately.

“How are you doing today, Petty Officer Third Class Coburn?”

One sentence. That was all he needed for the tension to seep out of him. She was back. He took a deep breath. Yep, there it was, that light floral scent from days ago.

His nurse was back.

His nurse.

She wasn't his. Would never be his. He wasn't going down that road. Rocket couldn't deny, though, that knowing she was nearby soothed him.

Yet, she hadn't used his given name like she had that first time. Why? Her using his rank shouldn't upset him, but it did.

“I've been better.”

Fabric whispered as he imagined her drawing closer to his side. Cool fingers closed around his wrist. “I understand you've been a bit of a grumpy bear. Not many nurses want to be assigned to your room.”

Her tone was light and teasing, and he could listen to it all day. How could one person make him feel so different from how he'd been feeling not even five minutes ago?

“Did you draw the short straw?” he asked, wanting to keep her by his side for longer than it would take for her to check his vitals.

His IV had been taken out. Now that he was more alert, he was glad he didn't have that constriction anymore.

She laughed, and like her voice, the sound was sweet and soft. “Something like that. How is your pain tracking?”

“Better.”

“Really?” Her skepticism wasn't hard to miss.

He chuckled. Damn, she really did seem to have a magic touch to make him feel better. “Yes, really. It's probably down to a three now, not an eight, like it was a couple of days ago. I've got a bit of a headache, though.”

“Eight, huh? That's really brave of you to admit that level of pain, considering.”

Was she teasing him? Or was she flirting? Either way, he was happy to

play along with her. Surprising, given how he'd been feeling for so long about women and relationships.

"Considering what? That I'm a SEAL?"

"Yup. We had this conversation the other day. I may have only been working here a short while, but I know the reputation you guys have."

"Reputation, huh? Good or bad?"

She laughed again. "Not going there. Now, you're due for your pain meds in fifteen minutes. That should help your head, along with any other discomfort you're experiencing."

Rocket shifted again in an attempt to get a bit more upright. The head of the bed was raised, but he'd slipped down a little and was feeling like a scrunched up wad of paper.

"Here, let me help." Her arm slipped around his back and supported him as he got more comfortable. "Do you want the bed a bit higher?" she asked and moved her hand away.

What he wanted was for her to put her arm back where it was.

What the fuck?

It had to be the drugs flowing through his system that had him wanting her to stay close. It didn't matter that it had been hours since he'd gotten the last ones. It was an excuse he was going to cling to.

"What's your name?" he asked abruptly. If he was trying to put distance between them, asking her that wasn't how to go about it.

"Umm..."

He sensed her moving away. Why?

All he'd asked was for her name, not her bank account details. And, like that, he was back to where he'd been when his mother's betrayal had come to light. Feeling the desolation at how her words changed his whole life. The mistrust that no one could be honest with him.

"Never mind. Don't worry about it." He turned his head away from her. Well, at least he thought he had. For all he knew, she could've moved around to the other side of the bed, and he was now facing her.

"Everything is looking good. I'll be back with your pain meds."

The door clicked closed a few seconds later and Rocket rubbed his forehead, as if it would help the dull ache there. It didn't. All he had was confusion as to why his nurse seemed reluctant to give him her name.

Would she return like she said would? Or would she send someone else?

What did it matter?

Maybe it was being laid up with nothing to do but think that was drawing him toward her. If he were able to keep himself distracted and occupied by watching TV or reading or doing anything else, he wouldn't be so quick to want to keep her around.

Pity he didn't do audiobooks. He'd tried listening to one, but found his mind drifting off and he'd have to rewind to catch the pieces he missed.

The restlessness that had been his constant friend since he'd fully regained consciousness was the issue and the main reason he appeared to have attached himself to his mysterious nurse.

You could always let your team visit.

Rocket let the thought simmer. Not letting the guys come to him had been hard, but he didn't want them to see him like this. Which was damn stupid, considering if it was one of the other guys who'd been hurt, he'd want to see them and not give a shit what was wrong. He'd just be glad they were alive and on the road to recovery.

Reaching for his cellphone was an automatic action, but he had no idea where it was, and it wasn't like he could type a message out. He wouldn't be able to see it, but he could dictate it or get someone else to do it.

Would Florence do it when she returned?

Florence?

Rocket supposed the name fit. She was a nurse, and Florence Nightingale had been a famous nurse a long time ago. How the heck did he remember that information?

Perhaps the concussion had knocked open the door to his high school years and the history classes he'd mostly slept through. Academics hadn't been his strong suit, which was why he'd joined the Navy instead of going to college—a decision he didn't regret one little bit.

If his nurse wasn't going to tell him her name, then he'd give her one.

* * *

REBECCA STOOD outside Adam's door, her hand hovering over the slim silver handle. God, she'd messed up their last encounter so badly.

How difficult was it to give him her name? Not difficult at all, and yet she'd hesitated. Her instincts screamed that the moment she gave it to him, things would change between them.

He would probably ask her to never darken his hospital room again. Which would be difficult because he'd garnered a reputation as a grumpy, surly patient in the short time he'd been there. The relief on a couple of her colleagues' faces when she'd volunteered to look after him had been as plain as the nose on her face.

Well, there was only one way to find out how he'd take her presence again, and that was to go into the room. Straightening her shoulders, she turned the handle and pushed the door open. "I'm back, and I've got your meds."

"I wondered if you'd come back, Florence."

Rebecca stilled at hearing the name on Rocket's lips. Florence Nightingale had been the catalyst for her wanting to become a nurse. Her dad had called her that when she'd played pretend with him, wrapping his arm with a bandage she'd found at the back of a drawer.

He'd told her she was a regular *Florence Nightingale*, and when he'd explained to her who she was, Rebecca had gone to the school library to see if they had a book on her. They did, and her passion was born. A passion she still had.

Her father died before she'd graduated with her nursing degree, but she knew he'd be proud of all she'd achieved.

"Florence?" she asked, hoping that her tone didn't betray how that name affected her.

"Yeah, like that nurse, Florence Nightingale, from a long time ago."

"Right, well, I'll take that as a compliment, as she helped a lot of wounded soldiers."

She placed the meds on the table at the foot of the bed, reached for the pitcher of water, and poured some into a glass.

"You should. You make me feel better when you walk into the room."

Rebecca's heart flittered in her chest at the warmth in his tone. So different from earlier, but one she'd heard from him before. The times he'd spoken to his mother before her confession, telling her about the boats he'd seen on the ocean when he was doing PT with his team. Or how the new neighbor's dog had puppies and they'd been tripping all over each other in the front yard.

Shelly had always smiled when he'd told her about his day. She had been so incredibly proud of her son—had she told Adam? Did he know that? Or did he only remember the words she'd spoken before she'd left the mortal

plane?

Rebecca suspected the latter.

But now wasn't the time to think about that. She had a patient to deal with, and then she could hightail it out of there and not see him again until she was required to.

"I'm glad I can do that for you." She pulled the rolling table toward him. "I've got your meds and a glass of water."

He lifted his arms and reached out until he hit the laminated top. "I need a little help here."

And the bite was back. No, that wasn't right. It was frustration she was hearing, not anger at her or any of the other staff members. Not being able to see left him requiring help that he wouldn't normally need. As a SEAL, he was used to being the one to help those who needed it. Having to wait to do anything had to be frustrating for him.

"Right. Here we go." Rebecca took one of his hands. A sizzle of electricity darted through her at the contact, and she couldn't stop jolting a little. "Static electricity," she muttered as she placed the small paper cup which held his tablets in his hand.

She waited until he lifted it to his mouth before she grabbed his other hand and placed it around the glass. And damn if she didn't receive another spark from the connection.

Fortunately, Adam didn't say anything, and her relief was palpable.

"Okay, that should help your head. You'll probably feel a little drowsy soon, so I'll lower your bed for you."

Rebecca reached for the remote, but his hand closed over hers. Warm. Large. And oh so right.

No, it can't be right.

When those bandages came off his eyes, he'd never want anything to do with her. Of that, she was certain. She would remind him of what was likely the worst moment in his life. And she could understand that. Appreciate it, even. Although getting to know Adam wouldn't be a hardship for her.

The first time she'd met him, she'd been blown away by his rugged good looks. His square jaw. The intense blue of his eyes, as though he could see into the depths of her soul. His friendly smile and the way he'd looked at her in appreciation for what she was doing for his mom.

However, he was her patient's son, making him off-limits. It hadn't stopped her from having fantasies about him, though. Ones that had increased

in their intensity ever since she'd walked into his room and had seen him lying flat with his eyes taped shut and his leg and arm in casts two days ago.

"You don't want it lowered?" she asked when the moment stretched between them.

He cleared his voice as though he was nervous. "I want to ask a favor."

His thumb stroked the top of her hand. Was he even aware he was touching her in a way a patient shouldn't touch a nurse?

Why wasn't she pulling her hand away?

Because I want him to touch me this way.

"What?" Her voice came out higher than it normally was.

"Do you know where my cell is? I want to text my teammates and let them know that I'd like to see them."

"Oh, they're going to be so happy about that." The words erupted out of her without thought.

Rocket pulled his hand away and she mourned the loss. "Huh? How do you know that?"

How could she explain it all without sounding like a stalker?

Should she tell him about running into his teammates' wives on the beach? How she spent a lovely afternoon with them, getting to know them? How Imogene had gotten her phone number and had already texted her, asking if she wanted to get together for a coffee on her next day off? She'd even asked if Rebecca wanted to be included in their group chat. It was far too soon for that, but she'd appreciated the offer.

Or should she leave that out and say the staff had told her about him not wanting visitors, which she had heard through the hospital gossip hotline. Not entirely the truth, but not wholly a lie either.

No, she wasn't going to lie to him. Lies had hurt him in the past, and she wasn't going to do that to him.

Aren't you lying to him by not telling him who you really are?

Yeah, she didn't want to listen to her inner voice, even though it was telling the truth. Yes, she should've told Adam who she was, but the guy had been seriously injured. He didn't need the added stress.

When his bandages come off and he saw her...well, she'd deal with the fallout then.

"It's a funny story, really," she started. "I was at the beach, and a little girl hit me in the leg with her soccer ball. Turns out her name is Layla and her mom is Imogene."

Rebecca waited to see if he would connect the dots—he did.

“Imogene, as in the Imogene who’s married to my teammate, Bird?” The disbelief was unmistakable in his voice.

During their conversation, Imogene and her friends had shared Rocket’s teammates’ given names and nicknames. The only given name they didn’t know was Growler’s, as he was a newer member of the team and hadn’t spent a lot of time with them.

“Yes. That’s her.”

His brow furrowed above his bandages. “How did you get on the subject of me? I would’ve thought there’s a certain patient/nurse confidentiality, like there is between doctors and patients.”

“You’re right. There is. But they were referring to you as ‘Rocket,’ so at first, I didn’t know it was you. But some of the things they said about the circumstances of your accident sounded too similar to be a coincidence.” She paused. Adam wasn’t reacting. In fact, his whole body appeared rigid beneath the blankets. “I asked what your given name was and Imogene said it was Adam. I knew then that they were talking about you.”

“What did you tell them?” His fingers curled around the blanket for a few seconds before he released it.

“Nothing much. Just that I thought the person they were talking about was the patient I’d looked after the day before.”

Nothing good would come of saying the rest of what she’d said to them—that she’d cared for his mother.

“Right. Well, if you could give me my phone, I’d appreciate it.”

The need to ask if he was all right lurked on the tip of her tongue, but she kept quiet. “I can do that.” She reached into the top drawer of the table beside the bed, where she knew his personal items were, and pulled it out. “Would you like me to send the message for you?”

“No, I can dictate it. But if you could help me unlock my phone, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course.” She put in his passcode and handed it back to him. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He grunted a response, and she took that to mean he wanted to be alone. With one last glance, she walked out the door, knowing that the longer she kept who she was from him, the harder it was going to be to tell him the truth.

CHAPTER 4



THE LIGHT MOMENTARILY BLINDED ROCKET, AND HE CLOSED HIS EYES quickly. The doctor had taken the bandages off only seconds ago, cautioning him to keep his eyes shut for a few more minutes before trying to open them. Rocket hadn't listened, of course. The moment the last of the restrictions around his eyes fell away, he opened them.

"I warned you to take your time," the doctor huffed out. "Try again and take it slowly."

He followed the doctor's instructions, and this time it wasn't so bad. The light didn't stab at him like a knife into his skull. He blinked a few times. Everything was still blurry, but at least he could see. Make out shapes.

Relief swept through him. Even though the doctor had assured him his sight wouldn't be affected, in the back of his mind, he'd worried that once the bandages came off, all he'd see was the blackness that he'd been dealing with the past few days.

"All good?" the nurse asked.

She wasn't his nurse, though, his "Florence." He hadn't seen her since she'd left after giving him his phone a couple of days ago.

He still couldn't believe that she'd run into his teammates' women. It seemed so farcical, but Bird had told him that Imogene relayed the same story—Layla ran into Rebecca, just like Layla had run into Bird's legs, and he'd found out he had a daughter he hadn't known about.

Rocket banished his teammates and their lives to the back of his mind. His focus was on his eyes now and answering the medical professionals' questions.

"Yes, a bit blurry, but I can make you both out."

The doctor leaned forward, a penlight in his hand. “I’m just going to flash this into your eyes to check your pupils’ reactions. Are you ready?”

“Yep.”

He endured another ten minutes of questions and observations before the doctor declared that the blurriness should disappear in a little while and his eyes would be back to normal.

“Can I get you anything before I leave?” the nurse asked.

“Nah, I’m good.” He shifted and winced. Having his leg in a cast was a pain in the ass, and he had at least another six weeks with minimal movement. At least his wrist was only a minor break and the doc suspected he could have the cast replaced with a brace in a couple weeks.

“Is your leg hurting? How’s the pain level?” While her bedside manner was nice and efficient, she wasn’t Florence, and he badly wanted her in his room.

Rocket shook his head. No, he didn’t. He wouldn’t see Florence again after he was discharged. There was no reason for him to be pining for her.

Pining.

Now he sounded like the way his teammates did when they talked about their partners. That wasn’t him.

Nope.

No way.

“My leg’s fine. My wrist is fine,” he eventually said. “I’m just uncomfortable. The pain is there, but not bothering me.”

She studied him for a moment, as if trying to determine the validity of his words. Whether he was in more pain than he was letting on. Which he wasn’t. It was a dull ache. Nothing he couldn’t handle. Besides, he hadn’t wanted to get too reliant on pain medication. He’d seen how badly that could turn out, and he had no plans for that to happen to him.

“If you need anything, just press the buzzer and I’ll come see you.” She smiled, a dazzling, flirty smile. He didn’t have the brain space to deal with a flirty nurse right now.

Liar. If it was Florence, you’d be basking in that smile.

Yeah, that voice could go and fuck off.

“Will do.” He gave her a smile, but a bland one. He didn’t want to be encouraging her or anyone.

The door closed behind her, and Rocket rested back against the pillows. He was going stir crazy in the hospital room. Memories of his mom and the

pain she'd gone through toward the end were getting harder and harder to keep buried. Not to mention Rebecca, the nurse who'd stayed constantly with his mom during her last final days. The same nurse who'd been party to the moment when the life he'd known exploded into a million pieces.

The lies that he'd been told his whole life flooded his mind.

How could Mom have done what she'd done?

How had she been able to live with herself, knowing what she'd been keeping from him?

Hadn't he deserved to have been told the truth years before he had been?

Would things have been different if Mom had told him her secret earlier? Maybe, but he'd never have a chance to find out. He'd never be able to question her motives for doing what she'd done.

It had all been too late.

Rocket clenched the sheet, anger coursing through him. What he really wanted to do was find a punching bag and pummel the hell out of it. Only that wasn't an option. Wouldn't be an option for the next couple of months.

His room door swung open and a familiar face, albeit a little blurry, appeared, smiling wide. "Safe to come in?"

Rocket chuckled. He supposed he deserved the question. He hadn't exactly been friendly from the moment he'd woken up over a week ago. "Fort, good to see you."

The door opened wider, and it didn't surprise him one little bit when the rest of the guys trailed in behind their team lead. Growler brought up the rear. Rocket was relieved to see that he was okay.

"Good to see you all," he said and was surprised to find that he meant it. *It was good to see his friends. Really see them.* Even though it'd never been touched on, he figured he was fortunate to still have his eyesight.

The room seemed to shrink in size, with five burly SEALs taking up the space.

"You look like shit. Your eyes are all bloodshot," Cricket commented.

Rocket may have rolled his eyes at Cricket, but he didn't know if it would hurt or not, and he didn't want to test the theory out. "I take it back. It's good to see everyone other than you, Cricket."

The men laughed and he relaxed. It had been so long since he'd been this way around his team. Not long after his mom died, while he'd still been dealing with his grief and his world imploding, Imogene came back to Bird. Then the rest of the guys had all fallen in love. Silver had left the team. He

hadn't liked losing Silver. He'd been a good mentor to a young Rocket when he joined the team. Growler was a good replacement, though. He fit in well.

There'd been so many changes, he'd withdrawn further and further within himself.

"You doing good, Growler?" he asked.

"Better now that I know you're okay. Sorry, man, I had no idea you'd been wounded. I should've stuck beside you." Growler looked away, his shoulders slumping.

Guilt.

That's what Growler was feeling, and if it was Growler in the bed and not him, Rocket was damn sure he'd be feeling the exact same way.

"Stop. Don't blame yourself. If you'd come back, then you could've been hurt or worse."

He didn't finish saying the words. All the men in the room were aware just how precarious their occupation was. How one mistake could be the one that changed their lives. Or even ended it.

Growler nodded, but Rocket suspected it would be a while before he truly felt guilt-free—if at all.

Rocket looked at the rest of the guys. "How is everyone?"

"Better now that you allowed us to see you. Don't do shit like that again. We're *brothers. Family*," Hank ground out, his body tense with anger.

Rocket blew out a breath. Yeah, he'd fucked up by keeping his team away from him, but he honestly hadn't felt up to facing them.

But he couldn't deny how having his friends close lifted his spirits. He almost felt normal. He'd not only been punishing them, he'd been punishing himself at the same time—only he hadn't realized it.

"I won't," Rocket promised. It wouldn't be a hard promise to keep, as he planned to make sure he never put himself in the hospital again.

Did he have ultimate control over that? Not really, but he'd do his damndest to make sure it didn't happen.

* * *

THE BUZZ of conversation was unmissable as Rebecca approached Adam's room. She'd arrived on her shift to find out that he'd had his eye bandages removed. There was no way she could keep her identity from him now.

Was she prepared for the fallout?

She didn't have much choice. She'd made her bed and she had to lie in it. Over the time Rocket had been in the hospital, there had been plenty of time for her to come clean. For reasons she didn't understand herself, she hadn't. She'd felt a connection with him, one she didn't normally experience with her patients. And it wasn't because of her knowing him from her looking after his mom.

No, it was different.

She'd sensed he'd been vulnerable, something he hated other people having to see. Him being a SEAL, it wasn't a surprise he felt that way. The times they'd talked, there'd been a freedom about it, and she hadn't wanted to lose that.

Whatever happened, she'd deal with it. It wasn't as though she and Adam were in a relationship. They were nurse and patient who had a history. A history that Adam wasn't aware of, but would be the moment she walked into his room.

The door opened, and she stepped back as five tall, muscular, and handsome men walked out, all calling farewells to Adam. It was impossible not to smile at the joy on their faces, along with hints of relief that their teammate was okay. Their presence wasn't a surprise. She'd deduced the moment they received Adam's message, they would come and see him.

Their visit was something Adam needed as well. Although he probably didn't think he did. Being surrounded by friends and loved ones helped the healing process more than it hindered it—on most occasions.

They all nodded as they filed past her, and she nodded back.

Rebecca waited for them to turn the corner before she headed into Adam's room. When she reached it, though, her hand stayed by her side and no amount of willing made it move from her side.

Dammit, what is wrong with me?

During her career, she'd faced a lot of difficult decisions. Being a palliative care nurse hadn't been easy. There were many times she'd had to face the family and tell them that they were likely to lose their loved one in the next hour.

Adam was alive and well and, in time, would make a complete recovery. Yes, she'd been there right before his mom died, when she'd told him her big secret. And she'd spent time caring for Adam while he recovered. He was a *patient*, and she needed to remember that.

She was his nurse. Her job was to look after him, and that's what she'd been doing and was going to continue to do. Resolve thrummed through her and she twisted the door handle, bracing herself for what was about to come.

"Afternoon, Adam. How are you feeling now that your bandages are off?" Rebecca waltzed in as if she didn't have a care in the world, but she kept her gaze fixed on the man in the bed, waiting for the moment when recognition hit.

It didn't take long.

"You! What the fuck?" Adam's fist curled into the sheets, pulling the fabric tight.

Rebecca paused at the base of his bed, letting her presence settle over him. "It's good to see you again," she said eventually.

Adam scoffed. "You've *seen* me a lot over the last week. *I* haven't seen you until now. And now that I have, I don't want you in my room anymore."

His reaction was as she suspected it would be. She couldn't blame him for his anger. She should've told him who she was that first night. But he'd just woken up. It wouldn't have done any good to drop another bomb on him when he'd already survived one attack.

"I know this is a shock."

"You think?" He looked at the ceiling before looking back at her. "But I'm serious. I don't want you here."

Rebecca sighed. "I'm afraid you don't really have an option today. Tomorrow, yes. I'll request not to have your room in my rotation, but I can't change the schedule today." Removing herself from his care was something she should've done when she'd worked out who he was.

No way would she have been looked down on if she'd explained the situation. But she hadn't, and here they were.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were?" he asked after the silence stretched between them until it was tighter than a surgical stitch.

"I don't know. I know I should've, but you were recovering from a serious incident. Your recovery was my main concern."

Even to her own ears, that excuse sounded weak.

"Right. Well, now I'm better than I was then. Do what you have to do, and then get out. In fact, don't bother coming back for the rest of your shift. I don't need any pain relief. I don't need anything. Especially from you."

Nothing Adam said was a real surprise to her. She'd known he wouldn't greet her with open arms. But his anger still cut deep, and she mentally

kicked herself for her silly reasons for not explaining who she was when she'd seen he was on the road to recovery.

As much as she wanted to refute his words, she couldn't. He was her patient, and his needs and wants were the most important thing.

"As you wish."

The next few minutes were going to be some of the most difficult ones she'd ever had in her career, but she'd get through them.

Tablet in hand, she pressed her fingers against Adam's pulse point on his wrist. He flinched at her touch, and she bit the inside of her bottom lip.

You can do this, Bec.

The way he was acting shouldn't upset her, but it did. So much. He'd given her a nickname. No patient had ever done that before.

Finally, she finished her checks and lifted her gaze so that she could look at him directly. His eyes were rimmed red, tearing up a little, which she put down to the lights in the room, not to him being upset with her.

"Do you need some drops for your eyes?" she asked quietly.

"They're fine. Like I am."

She nodded. "Okay, then. If you need anything, you can buzz. If someone else is free, I'll send them your way, but otherwise, it will be me."

Even though she said things couldn't be changed, the way he'd recoiled from her when she'd taken his pulse, there was no way she could consciously put herself in his presence again.

If she had to cover three other nurses' patients, so one of them could look after Adam, she would.

"I won't need anything." Adam turned his face away from her, a clear sign he was done with her.

With one last look, she walked out and closed the door, knowing she wouldn't be walking back in again.

CHAPTER 5



EIGHT WEEKS LATER.

Rocket had known it was a mistake to go to Aces Bar, but he was going stir crazy sitting at home and not being able to do anything.

His leg and wrist felt fine, yet his doctor still hadn't cleared him to get back to full-time work. Wouldn't even let him join his team for PT—which frustrated the hell out of him. He could walk without a limp. Today he'd even gone for a jog along the beach and hadn't experienced any twinges of pain. The doctor was being overly cautious, and Rocket didn't understand why. Everything showed he was more than ready to get back to his normal routine.

Sighing, he lifted his bottle of beer, grimacing at the warmth of the liquid. He should go home, because sitting at the bar by himself was no fun. Now that all the guys on his team, bar him and Growler, had found their partners, they weren't interested in going out. Not to mention, most were family men now. Although Fort wasn't yet, but Penni was pregnant.

Rocket shook his head. The team dynamics had changed so much over the past couple of years, and in a way he didn't know how to deal with. Hell, his life had changed so much. Thinking about his mom soured the beer he'd drunk, and he swallowed so as not to bring it back up.

Her betrayal stung so much.

"Hey, you look lonely. Want some company?" The voice was sultry and the implication of what she was really asking him was as plain as Monday following Sunday.

Yeah, it was time to head home. When he was younger, getting hit on was like a sport to him, and he'd loved every second of it. Now, not so much.

He glanced at the brunette beside him. Her red lips drew his attention—

they were overly plump. Her eyelashes were excessively long and thick with mascara. Yep, she was definitely looking for a SEAL to go home with. He hadn't been with a woman since well before he'd landed in the hospital, but sadly, it wasn't going to be him.

An image of another woman flashed in his mind. Her face clear of makeup. Her hazel eyes sparkling when they'd shared a joke. The look of resignation on her face the last time he saw her as he banished her from his room.

"You're thinking awfully hard there, sailor. Can I give you some incentive?" Gold-tipped fingernails tiptoed up his forearm, and he pulled it away quickly.

"Sorry. Not tonight." He smiled to soften the blow. Although there were plenty of other willing guys at the bar, so he didn't think she'd go home alone.

"Are you sure?" She pouted.

"Very."

A shrug of one shoulder, the action causing the thin strap of her top to slide down a little, gave him a glimpse of the top of her breast. "Your loss."

He kept the words *not really* buried inside of him and turned his back on her.

Was he being rude?

Yes, but he'd turned her down politely, and he really didn't give a fuck. He was done with mindless hookups, but at the moment, he couldn't see himself in a relationship either.

Not after his mom. How could he trust anything any woman ever said to him?

Heck, even Rebecca had lied to him. Had kept her identity from him when he'd been unable to see her because of his injury.

Why had she done that?

How many times had she had the chance to tell him who she was? What their connection to each other was? Many, and she hadn't done anything about it at all. She'd laughed and, fuck, she'd made him feel better when he was angry at being laid up.

He'd looked forward to her coming into his room, and all the time, she'd been lying to him. Rocket gripped his beer a little tighter.

Yeah, he needed to leave before he threw the bottle against the wall and got kicked out. He wouldn't do that to Jessyka, the bar owner. Her husband,

Benny, and his team were legends around the base. They were now imparting their skills and knowledge to all the SEAL teams. His own team had benefitted numerous times from their insights and experiences on missions.

Laughter sounded behind him, drawing his attention away from his inner turmoil. A group of women were walking into the bar, not dressed as provocatively as the woman who'd tried to pick him up, but still dressed for a night out.

"Fuck," he muttered when he recognized the second to last woman who'd entered Aces—Rebecca.

Had his thoughts conjured her up?

He should turn around so that she didn't see him, but he couldn't. She wore an emerald-green, one-shoulder top tucked into a slim black skirt that stopped just above her knees. Gold strappy sandals finished the look.

His dick twitched behind his zipper, and he cursed his body's reaction.

Not happening.

Not ever.

She was talking to the woman beside her, and part of him was annoyed that she hadn't noticed him.

How pathetic was he being? One minute he was thinking about how she betrayed him, and the next, he was wishing she would notice him.

As if she could feel his stare, she looked in his direction and stumbled. Shock etched clearly on her face, yet their gazes meshed together as though a tenuous thread linked them together. Her mouth dropped open in surprise before mouthing *Adam*. Beside her, her friend touched her arm, breaking the connection.

Rocket turned back so he faced the bar, yet he was hyperaware of Rebecca. A whisper of fabric and the scent of flowers were his only warning. He dug his fingers into his thigh welcoming the pinch. Anything to stop the wild urge swirling in him that wanted to touch her.

Damn, he should've left after the first sip of beer didn't make him feel as good as he'd hoped it would.

"Adam? How are you?"

The sound of her voice washed over him like a cool breeze. He half turned to look at her. This close, he could see the gold flecks in her eyes, highlighted by the top she wore. Her smile was tentative. "What are you doing here?"

Rebecca took a step back, as if he'd slapped her, and her smile

disappeared. He was an ass, and he wanted to change what he said to *it's good to see you*.

Except he couldn't.

Wouldn't.

It was better if she kept her distance from him, even though he wouldn't mind her joining him for a drink.

"Well, I'm here with friends, but it's good to see that you're up and about and—" She glanced down to his leg and wrist, free of the casts he'd had the last time he'd seen her. "Recovered. Take care, Adam."

Her fingers brushed his shoulder as she walked away. He wanted to reach out and grab her hand and halt her exit. Ask her to join him for a drink.

Rocket didn't do any of that. Instead, he swallowed down more warm beer and tried to ignore the laughter coming from the table behind him.

* * *

REBECCA HAD BEEN EXCITED when she'd been asked her to join a group of nurses from the hospital for a night out—until she'd walked into Aces Bar and spied Adam sitting at the bar—alone.

Damn, he looked good.

Healthy.

The bruises and cuts had all cleared up and he was just as handsome as he'd been when she'd first met him.

Knowing how he felt about her, her goal had been to avoid him, *not* walk toward him like she had done. As expected, the encounter had gone to shit, and now here she sat, smiling, looking like she was having a great time, when all she wanted to do was leave. But she wasn't going to let Adam drive her away. This was a night out for her, and hopefully, she'd make some new friends. Although the camaraderie she'd had with Imogene and her friends was lacking with this group—for reasons she didn't understand.

"We're going to dance, Rebecca. Do you want to join us?" Missy asked, her smile as false as her lip filler. She'd rolled her eyes when she'd seen Rebecca join them in front of the bar. At least Ellie and one of the other girls had made her feel welcome.

Rebecca pasted her own fake smile on her face. "Thanks, but I'm going to go get another drink."

“Whatever.” Missy grabbed Ellie’s hand and dragged her to the small dance floor.

Rebecca sighed. Tonight hadn’t worked out the way she’d thought it might, and she couldn’t help being conscious of Adam’s presence behind her. A couple of times, when she should’ve been paying attention to the conversation going on around her, her attention had strayed to him. He’d remained at the bar, nursing the bottle of beer he’d had when she’d arrived.

She drained the rest of her drink and got up, following through on what she’d told Missy. Only she made sure she went to the opposite end of the bar from where Adam sat.

That corner of the bar was busy, but she didn’t mind. Over the course of her career, she’d handle cantankerous and handsy patients, so she could handle a few Navy personnel. Besides, she’d heard that the owner of the bar was the wife of a former SEAL. The patrons wouldn’t do anything that would cause any issues.

“What can I get you?” The bartender asked. He was a young guy who looked as if he belonged on the beach with a surfboard under his arm, which was what he probably did during his spare time.

“I’ll have a virgin piña colada, thanks.” Drinking alcohol wasn’t her favorite thing, but she enjoyed mocktails and having fancy-looking drinks without the worry of having a hangover the next morning.

“Coming right up.”

The bartender drifted off, and she caught Adam’s eye. His brow was furrowed and his lips firmed into a thin line.

What the hell was his problem that he had to glower at her when she was out? It wasn’t as if she’d deliberately sought him out again. Heck, she’d gone to the opposite side of the bar to order a drink, so she didn’t have to interact with him.

Determined not to let him or his presence annoy her, she turned her back on him and looked at the men surrounding the area. Testosterone swirled around her, a side effect to being in a bar with military men. In all likelihood, there were a few SEALs among them as well.

“Here you go, one V piña colada.” The bartender’s voice sounded behind her and she turned again.

“Thanks.” She held out her credit card.

He waved it away and pointed to a man sitting in the corner of the bar. “All paid for.”

“Oh, thanks.” She lifted her drink in acknowledgement of thanks to the man who’d paid for it.

He had dark hair, wide shoulders, and his shirt stretched his biceps in a way that she worried the seams would burst if he moved a certain way. He smiled and returned her silent thanks.

Warmth flitted through her. Maybe the night wouldn’t be a bust after all.

CHAPTER 6



I SHOULD'VE INSISTED ON PAYING FOR MY OWN DRINK.

The thought flittered through her brain as *Rabbit* blathered on about how he'd crushed it in a training exercise. He'd even told her how he'd gotten his nickname—like she need to know he'd won a leapfrog competition at basic training and they thought he jumped like a rabbit. He seemed proud of it though. She'd heard better nicknames in the short time she'd been working at the hospital.

Rebecca had hoped that the girls she was with would come and rescue her, but they'd all seen her talking to a guy and had sent her thumbs-up before separating and finding their own guys—except Ellie, who'd come over and murmured that she had to go. Her young son had thrown up, and her husband was worried it could be something serious. She'd almost asked if Ellie needed some help so she had an excuse to leave too, but had kept the words to herself. She wouldn't use Ellie's sick son like that.

Rabbit took a break in his explanation of—well she didn't know what because she'd tuned him out. This was her chance to make her escape.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go. I have an early shift in the morning. It's been nice talking to you." Rebecca picked up her purse from where it rested on the bar.

"Oh, come on. I'll buy you another drink. Maybe a real piña colada this time instead of a fake one."

"I don't want another drink, real or fake, thank you." She injected steel into her voice, the same tone she used when a patient was being unruly with her. Usually, it worked. This time, though, it didn't.

Rabbit shifted closer to her, his chest rubbing against her arm. "Okay.

How about you give me your number, then?” He winked, as if that would be all the incentive she needed to give him what he wanted.

Newsflash—it wasn’t.

How did she get out of this without causing a scene?

What she should’ve done was thank him for buying her a drink and go back to the table to wait for her colleagues to come back. And then she could’ve left. But no, for some reason she didn’t want to examine too closely, she decided to stay and talk to the guy. Hindsight was always a bitch in letting her see what she should’ve done after the fact.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Inwardly, she cringed. That wasn’t the best of letdowns, but it was better than her blurting out, *Over my dead body would I give you my number.*

Clearly not deterred by her response, Rabbit reached out and trailed a finger down her face. She tried hard not to flinch, but she couldn’t help it, and tried to step back, only to find herself hitting something hard and warm and decidedly male.

What fresh hell I have I gotten myself into now?

“Problem, Florence?”

Relief swept through her—Adam.

“We’re all good here, *Rocketman*. Just getting ready to exchange numbers.” Rabbit smirked, but there was a hint of something in his tone, especially with how he’d changed Adam’s nickname.

If she’d thought Adam was an immovable wall before, after Rabbit’s arrogant response, his muscles tensed even more.

“From what I heard, she doesn’t want to give you her number, *Bugs*.”

Rebecca blinked at Adam’s nickname comeback—yep, there was definitely bad blood between the two of them.

In a flash, all the humor disappeared from Rabbit, replaced by a look of derision and a hint of hate. He took a step closer, effectively making her the meat in a sailor sandwich—the last thing she wanted. “You don’t know shit. I suggest you leave.”

Oh boy. This was going to get ugly if she didn’t do something. She’d handled cantankerous patients, so she could handle a couple of seamen—maybe.

Rebecca held up her hands, one toward each of them. “Stop, both of you.”

She gave them each a little push and, fortunately, they stepped back. She wasn’t surprised Adam did, but she hadn’t expected Rabbit to—he didn’t

seem the type. Perhaps she'd misjudged him.

Turning to look at Rabbit, she met his gaze. "Thank you for buying me a drink. I appreciate it. But I won't be giving you my number."

As if he could tell that no amount of flirting or sweet words would make her give in, he nodded. "Fair enough. I can respect that."

Rebecca had no idea if he was only saying that because Adam was there or if he truly meant it. Either way, she wasn't going to argue with his completely different attitude. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

Rabbit gave Adam one last dark look before heading back to the corner of the bar when he'd been before.

Some of the tension inside her dissipated, but it was replaced with a fissure of excitement at Adam's closeness. He stood tall, strong, and still lethal. His gaze hadn't moved off Rabbit, as though he was daring the other guy to come back.

Once again, she placed her hand on his chest, this time letting it linger, instead of making it a brief touch like before. "Adam?"

He looked down at her, and her breath caught at the intensity of his gaze. His blue eyes darkened. He didn't say anything...just watched.

They were standing in the middle of a rowdy bar, but they may as well have been in a glass chamber. The background noise faded to nothing. The rhythm of her heart beating filled her ears. The sound of her breathing echoed around her. Seemingly impossible scenarios, yet they were happening.

Her hand on Adam's chest lifted up with each of his inhalations.

I should move my hand away. Drop it to my side.

The thought went through her mind, but her brain wouldn't engage, and instead of taking her hand away, she ended up curling her fingers into the soft fabric of his shirt.

"Thank you for stepping in, but I'm okay now," she said quietly when she could finally form a coherent thought.

Like a pin bursting a balloon, the noise from the bar barreled back into her, and she found the strength to remove her hand and put a little space in between them.

"Did he hurt you at all?" he ground the words out.

Considering how Adam had treated her when she walked up to say hello to him, his concern surprised her. Then again, maybe not. He was, after all, a Navy SEAL. The need to protect was ingrained into his very soul. She'd learned that over the short time she'd been working on the base.

“No, he didn’t. He touched my face. That was it.”

His face tensed again. “He shouldn’t touch you without asking permission.”

“I touched you both without asking. I have my hand on your chest,” she countered, appreciative of his stance, but also aware that she’d taken liberties she shouldn’t have. “It’s okay, Adam.”

The need to reassure him again swept over her.

Finally, her words penetrated the wall of protection he’d surrounded himself in. His shoulders dropped and the tension appeared to seep out of him.

“He’s a player,” Adam said after a beat. “You’re better off without him.”

“Seeing as I wasn’t *with* him—and have no intention of being with him—the point is moot.”

The night really hadn’t worked out how she’d wanted it to. It would’ve been better if she’d stayed at home and binged the latest trending TV show.

Glancing over at the table where she’d started the evening, she found it filled with strangers. In fact, it appeared the girls had all left—without her.

A shaft of hurt sliced through her, but she brushed it aside. They’d probably seen her talking to Rabbit and figured she was going to head home with him. They’d all talked about how they’d picked up cute guys on a regular basis at the bar, but one-night stands had never been her thing.

“I’m heading home. It’s good to see that you’ve recovered from your injuries, Adam. Keep well.”

She brushed past him, weaved through the crowd and out the door. A fresh breeze greeted her and she shivered, wishing she’d thought about calling for a ride before she’d walked out instead of doing it now.

The closest car was only five minutes away and she could go inside to wait, but the last thing she wanted to do was walk back in and give Rabbit the idea that she’d changed her mind and wanted to hook up with him.

Now if it were Adam...

No. Not happening. Don’t even go there.

Clearly, she was getting tired if she was starting to have those thoughts. He’d made his position on her very clear, even though it contradicted the way he’d acted that night.

“Ugh, stop it. Nothing good can come from thinking that way,” she muttered, hoping that the advice would sink in if she said it out loud.

A car came cruising to a halt, and she checked her app. Thank goodness

her ride arrived before she did something reckless—like cancel it and march back into the bar and demand Adam explain why he'd reacted the way he had when Rabbit had touched her.

Yes, she'd been saved by her rideshare app.

* * *

ROCKET STOOD by the window and watched as Rebecca went down the stairs to the waiting car. As it drove away, he blew out a breath and made his own way outside.

As he reached his truck, he scraped a hand down his face, a sense of restlessness creeping over him. Part of him wanted to hop into his vehicle and race out of the lot in an attempt to catch up to the car transporting Rebecca home. The rational part told him that he should drive himself home and forget about seeing her.

Forget about the way her hand had felt resting against his chest.

Forget about the flare of anger that propelled him from his bar stool to her side, when he'd seen Rabbit run his finger down her face.

He and Rabbit didn't have the best of relationships. They'd gone through BUD/s training together. He'd smoked Rabbit in just about every exercise they'd had to do, and his fellow trainee hadn't been happy with him. Rocket was glad that they hadn't been assigned to the same team. His team had a better reputation than Rabbit's. Rabbit's was known for being a touch renegade when they went out. Although he'd heard through the grapevine that their current team lead was about to face disciplinary action for events that occurred during a mission.

"Not my problem," he said as he climbed into his truck and started it. All he hoped was that the change to Rabbit's team didn't affect his team. Growler had slotted in nicely after Silver's departure. He didn't want any more upheaval, not with him coming back from injury.

He arrived home to his empty house, the stillness of his living room greeting him like an old friend.

After tossing his keys into the basket on the hall table, he strode to the kitchen and pulled out a beer. The bitter, cold liquid slid down his throat, but didn't stop his brain from thinking.

Did Rebecca make it home okay?

Recalling the way her muscles had jumped when he'd touched her back. The way she'd stood up to him and Rabbit, pushing them apart.

"Dammit, why can't you get out of my mind?"

Yeah, he'd really lost it now that he was asking questions out loud. He also knew that if he didn't find out if she was okay, he wouldn't be able to sleep. Over the past eight weeks, he'd thought about her more often than he'd ever admit, but he'd never worried about her safety before.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he grabbed his cell and pulled up Fort's number. It wasn't that late and he was pretty sure his team lead would still be awake.

Fort answered after two rings. "What's up, Rocket?"

Now that he had his friend on the phone, he didn't know how to broach the subject. "Um, don't worry. Sorry to bother you."

"What the fuck? Are you in trouble? Where are you?" Fort fired off the questions as quickly as he fired off instructions on a mission.

In spite of himself, Rocket smiled and relaxed. His team would always be there, no matter what. That's what made them so good at their jobs. And as ridiculous as it might sound, Fort wouldn't judge him. He may give him shit at PT, but he wouldn't dismiss him.

"This is going to sound out there, but I'm chasing the number of a nurse who looked after me at the hospital, and I know she ran into Penni and the other women at the beach a couple of months ago. Knowing Penni, she would've got Rebecca's details. And so I'm asking for them."

Silence greeted his request, and Rocket cursed himself for his impulsiveness in calling Fort. He could've easily have waited until the morning and checked at the base hospital, but he had this driving need to find out now.

Tonight.

And he was annoyed at himself for it. Rebecca had *lied* to him—like his mother. She couldn't be trusted. In spite of all that, he couldn't bring himself to tell Fort that he'd changed his mind and didn't need the information.

"I'll check with Penni."

Four words.

Four little words, and Rocket suspected he'd taken a step he couldn't take back. And, surprisingly, he didn't want to.

CHAPTER 7



“I UNDERSTAND YOU HAD QUITE THE NIGHT LAST NIGHT.” ELLIE SIDLED UP TO Rebecca as she shoved her bag into her locker.

Considering that Ellie had left before the drama started, and as far as she was aware, the others had left before Adam and Rabbit had their altercation, Rebecca had no idea where her coworker had heard about it.

Ugh. She wished Rabbit had given her his real name. She felt silly referring to him by his nickname.

Again, *ugh...* Why was she letting him have so much of her brain space?
Because dreams of Adam kept you up most of the night.

She chose to ignore that thought. Again, she wished she'd stayed home instead of going out, especially before a workday.

“It wasn't that exciting. I'm sure whatever you heard was greatly exaggerated.” She tucked her phone into her pants pocket and closed her locker.

“According to Missy, you had two SEALs fighting over you. And one of them was the grumpy patient who you were more than happy to deal with when he was here. What gives?”

Rebecca sighed. Like most people, nurses were notorious gossips, and if she didn't answer, there would be no peace until she did. “Nothing. I saw Adam at the bar, said hi, and he gave me the cold shoulder. Rabbit bought me a drink and we chatted. When I wanted to go, he asked for my number, but I didn't want to give it to him. He got a bit too friendly, and Adam came up and told him to leave me alone. They exchanged words. I went home *by myself*. End of story.”

Rebecca was glad that she hadn't told Ellie that initially Adam had called

her *Florence* when he came up to her. She couldn't deny the thrill that had swept through her at hearing him call her that.

Nor did she mention how she and Adam stared at each other for a long moment—an event she hadn't allowed herself to think too much over.

“That's it? Are you telling me the truth or glossing over it all? Because Missy said that our patient had to be held back by three guys. Also... *Rabbit?*”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “I'm telling the truth. I may not have been here long, but I do know that Missy exaggerates—you can't trust much of what she says. And as for Rabbit, that is his nickname and what he told me to call him.”

Ellie laughed. “Poor guy. Imagine getting such a crappy nickname.”

The last thing Rebecca wanted to do was rehash the evening before. “He seems fine with it. Now I need to go and find out where I'm working today. I'll see you later?”

As much as she didn't want to talk about herself, she did like Ellie, and she was her supervisor, so the last thing Rebecca wanted to do was offend her.

“Yeah. You want to have lunch together? We can go down to the beach and take a walk.”

One great thing about working at the Navy base was its proximity to the ocean. It wasn't the same beach where she'd meet Imogene and the others, so there was little chance she'd see them again. Not to mention, it was a Saturday, and they probably had other plans.

“Sure. Sounds good. We can grab some sandwiches and drinks from the cafeteria,” she suggested, but Ellie turned her nose up at that.

“I'll get Gary to bring us something from my favorite deli,” she said.

“Aw, what a good hubby he is.” A spark of envy flashed through her at her friend's accommodating partner.

Would Adam do that for her if she asked him?

Whoa, where the hell did that thought come from?

The chances of her seeing Adam again and him offering to do something like that for her were slim.

“Yeah, he is. I'm lucky and the only reason he called me about Stevie last night was because he knew that I would be mad if he hadn't, even though he wanted me to have a nice night out.”

Rebecca had forgotten the reason Ellie had left. “Is your son okay now?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. He’d snuck a pack of Oreos to his room and gorged on them. Gary wasn’t happy when he found the empty package after putting him back to bed.”

Rebecca laughed. She couldn’t help it. “Sorry, I know I shouldn’t, but that’s kind of funny. And I bet Stevie won’t be doing that again.”

Ellie smiled. “Nope. He learned his lesson the hard way.”

Rebecca patted down her pockets to make sure she had everything. Satisfied she did, she headed for the door. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

“For sure.”

As she walked toward the nurse’s station to find out what her assignments were today, she hoped that Ellie would correct anyone if she heard them talking about Missy’s version of the evening before. She didn’t want to be the subject of gossip, but it looked like she was.

* * *

REBECCA RUSHED DOWN the hallway toward the exit where she was going to meet Ellie. She’d been caught up with a patient and was running late. She was looking forward to getting out into the fresh air and the walk along the beach. Sitting in the sun would be good for the soul and would re-energize her for the rest of her shift. Her restless, sleepless night was catching up with her.

She’d almost made it outside when her cellphone rang. Digging into her pocket, she pulled the device out. Not recognizing the number, she sent it directly to voicemail. If it was a spam call, they’d likely hang up. If it was someone who really wanted to talk to her, they could leave a message, and she’d call them back when she had time.

Ellie was waiting outside with her husband and son. Rebecca halted, not wanting to interrupt the family scene as her phone chimed with a notification. Her caller had left her a voicemail.

Pulling up the message, she pressed play.

Hey Flor-um, Rebecca. It’s Rock-Adam, fuck...um, so yeah, it’s Adam. I was...if you get a minute, can you call me back? Thanks. Uh, bye.

“What the heck?” she muttered and replayed the message, pinching herself at the same time to ensure she wasn’t dreaming.

Adam called her!

Why?

Was he hurt? He didn't sound hurt. If anything, he sounded kind of cute, tripping and pausing over his words.

What did he want from her?

Would she call him back?

Should she call him back?

"Everything okay? Looks like you received bad news." Ellie's voice pulled her out of her spiraling thoughts.

"Um, no, not bad news. Just a surprising call."

"Do you need to call them back?"

As much as Rebecca wanted to do that, she also didn't. She needed a little time to process two things: one, Adam had called her. And two, how did he get her number?

The second part was the troubling part. She hadn't called him or given him her number. Not to mention, this number was different from the one she'd had when she'd been looking after his mom. That phone had been a work phone and belonged to the company she'd been employed by. She'd handed it back in when she resigned.

"No. It's okay. Come on. Let's eat and walk."

Maybe a walk along the beach would clear her mind and give her the direction she needed—would she call Adam back or not?

* * *

ROCKET SAT IN HIS BACKYARD, tossing the basketball against the wall, the steady *thump* of the ball hitting it hypnotic. He glanced down at his phone, the screen still dark. No incoming call or even a text message.

Why the hell he was so hung up on if Rebecca called him back or not, he didn't know. He'd made the firm decision to not have anything to do with her, yet here he was mooning over the fact that she hadn't called him back.

Fort had given him her number, but only after he'd answered twenty questions from Penni as to why she should give it to him. She'd only acquiesced after he told her that she'd been his nurse at the hospital—which she would've known considering how Rebecca had met the girls—and he'd seen her out that night, and wanted to make sure that she'd gotten home okay.

Her not returning his call had his concern that something had happened to

her skyrocketing.

Tossing the ball on the ground, the repetition of bouncing it not as soothing as it had been, he got out of the chair and dropped to the ground to do some push-ups. He'd already done a three-mile run along the beach at dawn, not to mention some weights when he'd gotten home. None of that had stilled the restless energy coursing through him.

After doing a hundred push-ups and an equal number of crunches, he lay on the ground, his chest heaving at the exertion, sweat trickling down his forehead.

For months and months, he'd made a conscious decision not to get involved with another woman after his mother's betrayal. He'd watched his teammates fall in love and find a happiness that he hadn't known existed. A happiness he'd convinced himself he didn't want. Still didn't want, but he couldn't deny that seeing Rebecca again had thrown him for a loop. And last night, when he'd seen Rabbit get all handsy with her, he hadn't been able to stop himself. He'd done what any one of his teammates would've done, but what none of the guys who were with Rabbit had done—he'd made sure that Rebecca was okay.

Instead of leaving after his and Rebecca's initial conversation, he'd sat at the bar and been aware of her every time she laughed with her friends. Every time she spoke. And then Rabbit slid in, and Rocket hadn't been able to leave. Hadn't wanted to leave.

It was as though he wanted to torture himself to see what she would do. If she would go home with Rabbit.

He couldn't deny the burst of satisfaction that had flared inside of him at the sight of her looking as if she'd rather be somewhere else than standing at the bar with Rabbit.

So he'd jumped in like he owned her when his fellow sailor had gotten a little overbearing. He'd gone against everything he'd told himself he wanted after his mom died.

His trust in the opposite sex had been battered and bruised from the truths his mother had told him on her deathbed. And Rebecca had been there. She'd heard everything. Seen his world crumble around him.

She'd also seen him at his lowest after the bombing, stuck in a hospital bed, not being able to see. But she'd known all along who he was and had kept who she was from him. Anger at her betrayal should be burning through him, the same way it had with his mother. Yet, it didn't.

In the dark of night, when sleep was elusive, he recalled the way her fingers brushed against his forehead. When he did sleep, her gentle voice and the way all the tension that had been inside him drained away whenever she walked into the room invaded his dreams.

His ringtone burst through the quiet afternoon, and he jumped up to grab it before the call could go to voicemail.

“Hello.” Fuck keeping the anticipation out of his voice.

“Adam?”

Rocket’s eyes drifted shut, and just like always, the tension in his shoulders eased. “Florence.” Her nickname slipped off his tongue as if he’d said it every day instead of fewer than ten times.

The hair on his arms rose as her husky laugh floated through the connection. “It’s me,” she said quietly.

“You made it home okay last night.” He swallowed the words, *I was worried*. She didn’t need to know that.

“I did. Are you okay?”

I am now.

Again, he kept the words locked down. This about-face in his attitude toward Rebecca and women in general shocked him. But he would unpack it all later. Right now, he had one important question he wanted to ask her.

“Can I meet you tonight for a drink?” Like ripping off a Band-Aid, he’d gone straight to the point of what was flowing through him.

He wanted to see her again. Even though it was the last thing he should be doing.

Could he trust her?

He didn’t know, but he had to see. He could be setting himself up for a huge fall. If it did end up being a bad mistake...well, he’d chalk it up with all the rest of the shit he’d been through and remain a bachelor for the rest of his life.

“Yes. I’d like that.”

CHAPTER 8



REBECCA SMOOTHED DOWN HER SKIRT, NERVES SKIMMING THROUGH HER LIKE an Olympic speed skater.

Why had she agreed to go out with Adam?

She hadn't even questioned his turnabout in attitude. She'd been too stunned that he'd called. Not to mention how his sexy, deep voice had trickled down her spine over the phone. He could've been standing right next to her with the way she'd reacted.

Now, here she stood, in the foyer of her house, like a teenager waiting for her prom date. Determined not to be there when he arrived, Rebecca walked back to the kitchen, where she drummed her fingers on her small dining table, willing herself not to look at the clock.

He was late.

Not overly late, but still late. Weren't SEALs, and all military personnel, really, supposed to be uber punctual so that they didn't suffer the wrath of their superiors?

A knock echoed through her quiet house, and she blew out a breath, anticipation jumped around her stomach like a kid in a trampoline park. She placed her hand over her belly, willing it to calm down.

With slow, measured steps, she made her way toward the front door. She didn't want to open it breathless, because she'd rushed to it.

Plastering a smile on her face, she pulled open the door. "Hi. Did you find the house easily?"

Adam scowled back at her. "You should ask who's at the door before opening it."

Rebecca took a step back, surprised at his growly tone. "I'm sorry.

What?”

Adam’s eyes closed briefly, as though he was taking a moment to center himself. “Sorry. That wasn’t very nice of me, was it?”

Despite her annoyance, she chuckled. “Not really. Wanna try again?”

She had no idea where that came from, but it seemed like the right thing to say. And it obviously was, considering the way Adam’s mouth stretched into a wide smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Yeah, might be a good idea.”

“All right then.” She closed the door, then counted to five before opening it again. “Hi, Adam. Did you find my house okay?”

Not quite what she’d said the first time she’d opened the door, but close enough.

“Hey, yeah, I did. It wasn’t that complicated. Oh, and you know, you should always ask who’s at the door, even if you are expecting someone.”

Rebecca leaned against the doorjamb, enjoying this little interlude between them. “I’ll remember that for next time. Do you want to come in, or do we have a reservation somewhere?”

Yes, he’d asked her for a drink, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t called ahead to get a table at one of the hip bars in town. She didn’t expect him to take her to Aces again. Or would he?

Damn, she hadn’t given much thought to where they’d end up. She’d just been busy trying to wrap her mind around the invitation.

“Maybe next time. I made a reservation, and they’re pretty strict about giving away tables if the people don’t show up on time.”

“Okay. Let me grab my purse.” She left the door open as she dashed back to her room and gathered up her clutch and a jacket. Even though the weather was beautiful and warm during the day, it sometimes got a little chilly in the evenings. “All set,” she said rather brightly when she reached her front door again.

“You look lovely, Florence,” Adam murmured as she locked her front door, checking it twice.

“Thanks. You look nice too.” And he did. He wore a light-blue button-down shirt that deepened the color of his eyes. He wore it tucked into beige chinos with a line down the middle so crisp, she wondered if she might cut herself on it.

As they made their way down to his truck, she welcomed the light touch of his hand on the small of her back. Heat circled through her, and she had to

stop herself from leaning back further into it.

This reaction to Adam was something she needed to temper. Only the previous evening, he'd been rude to her, not wanting to be around her. And yet, twenty-four hours later, she was sitting in his vehicle as he drove them to their destination.

"Can I ask you something?" she blurted out once they'd cleared a stop sign.

"Sure." Adam glanced at her before he redirected his attention back to the road, something she was grateful for. As much as she expected people to pay attention to her while she talked to them, she was perfectly fine with them keeping their eyes firmly on the road in front of them while driving.

Asking the question that was burning through her could bring the date to a crashing halt. Or he'd be open to it.

"Why did you ask me out when, last night, you didn't even want to talk to me when I said hello to you?"

Rebecca held her breath, waiting to see how he would respond. Would he brush her off with a breezy *I changed my mind* comment? Or would he give her a full explanation?

After what he'd been through with his mom, she hoped for the second alternative. Not to mention, she didn't want the date to end prematurely. She *liked* Adam. Had always admired the tender way he'd treated his mother when she'd been sick. He'd been vulnerable with her at the hospital, and she hadn't been able to stop the flutters of attraction from growing while she'd looked after him. Flutters she'd known were inappropriate, as he was her patient, and she was keeping the truth about herself from him.

The silence stretched, and she began to think he wouldn't answer her at all.

"It's not something I can explain in a few words. Do you mind waiting until we get to the bar and we can talk there?"

A reasonable response, but she couldn't help the shaft of disappointment from flaring to life within her. "Sure. That's fine."

She turned her head to face the window and watched the scenery flit by.

Adam sighed. "I'm not avoiding the question. I really do want to be able to discuss it face-to-face with you. And we can't do that if I'm driving."

The disappointment she'd been experiencing faded away. She could acknowledge that she'd overreacted a little bit. Without thinking too much about the consequences of what she was going to do, she reached across the

center console and squeezed his thigh. “I understand. I really do.”

His hand closed over hers, warm and reassuring. “We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

He gave her one last pat before returning his hand to the steering wheel, and she placed hers back in her lap, closing it as if attempting to keep the warmth from that brief touch close to her.

* * *

ROCKET PULLED his truck into the parking lot, grimacing at how full it was. When he’d asked Rebecca out, he’d decided to go to one of the busier bars in town. He wasn’t going to take her back to Aces. As much as he liked the place, he didn’t want their first date to be where they could be interrupted by someone he knew from base.

First date.

He let the words float around in his mind, accepting that was what they were on. It wasn’t just a casual meet-up for drinks. This was a date. One where they shared information about each other, and he answered the question she’d asked in the car.

It hadn’t surprised him when she’d asked him about his turnaround in attitude toward her. Hell, he was still trying to come to terms with it.

“Looks like it’s going to be noisy in there,” Rebecca commented as she released her seatbelt.

“Yeah. I’ll see if we can get a table in the corner somewhere,” he said, meeting her at the front of her car. He let the fact that she’d opened her own door fall by the wayside. There was time for that discussion—later.

He wasn’t shocked at the way his thoughts were going. He already wanted to arrange a second date, and they hadn’t even finished their first one.

Probably a good idea to slow his roll and see how tonight panned out before he started thinking of second, third, or even fourth dates.

As they’d both suspected, the place was buzzing and the noise level was high. He gave his name to the greeter and they were shown to a table—in the corner. He hadn’t had to even ask. He made a mental note to increase his tip by five percent. Good service deserved a good reward.

Once they’d placed their drink orders, Rocket took a deep breath. Better to get her question answered so they could go on and enjoy the rest of their

evening. “About what you asked me in the car...”

He waited a second as she leaned closer, her floral scent swirling around him, reminding him of the first time he’d smelled it, when he hadn’t been able to see her. He’d been drawn to her then. Her laugh. Her light touch. Her husky voice. All things he may not have noticed had he *seen* her. Had known who was looking after him.

But he hadn’t, and now here they were.

“Yes?” Rebecca asked, and he realized he’d been so lost in his thoughts that a brief silence had stretched between them.

The last thing he wanted to touch on was his mother, but it was a subject he couldn’t avoid because it had been the start of his erroneous thoughts about her.

“I guess I have to go back to the night Mom died. The night her words tore up my life as I’d known it. You were there. You witnessed it, and right or wrong, irrational or not, I blamed you as well.”

Rebecca sat back as though putting up a brick wall between them. Understandable, considering what he’d just said. “Why? It was a shock to me too. In all my jobs as a palliative nurse, I’ve never had a patient make a confession like that.”

Rocket believed her. Her gaze never wavered from his. Her voice didn’t change, and there were no discernable body tics that would suggest she was lying to him.

“As I said, I know it was wrong to do that, but I wasn’t thinking straight. I’d just found out that the man I thought was my father—the one who I had loved and looked up to, mourned hard over—wasn’t my father. The worse thing about it all was that he didn’t know I wasn’t his son either. He believed I carried his DNA. Believed I would carry on the Coburn name. A name he was incredibly proud of. I don’t understand how Mom could’ve done that to him. I thought she loved him, and now I don’t even know if she did.” He clamped his mouth shut when the server arrived with their drinks.

“Would you like to order some food?” they asked, clearly not noticing the tension between him and Rebecca, or if they did, they didn’t show it.

He raised an eyebrow in query to Rebecca, and she gave a small shake of her head. “Not at the moment, thanks.”

“Well, if you do, let me know.” The server walked away, and Adam picked up his light beer, needing something to grasp as well as to moisten his dry throat.

“I’m sure your mom did love him,” Rebecca said after a few moments. “When we were alone, she talked fondly about him. How he was a good man. How he always took you camping. How he was proud of your achievements at school and then joining the Navy.”

The words should reassure him that his parents had a loving marriage before his father had died when he’d been nineteen. “I wasn’t there when he died. I was on my first deployment. I joined the Navy straight out of school. I hadn’t known what I’d wanted to do, so joining the military seemed like a good place to work that out. After Dad’s death, I decided I wanted to be a SEAL.”

Rebecca reached across the short expanse of the table and touched her fingers to his, the touch warming him like it had when she’d squeezed his thigh in the car. “I didn’t know him, but I know what your Mom told me about him. And like I’d said, he was always proud of what you’d achieved. I’m sure he is still very proud of you.”

Rocket scoffed. “I’m not so sure about that. I haven’t exactly done anything to be proud of over the last couple of years. I haven’t treated you well either.” He blew out a breath and shared the deepest part of his soul. “My trust was broken after what Mom said. I’m not sure if I will ever forgive her.”

He picked up his drink again, noticing that Rebecca was doing the same. He still hadn’t explained his change of heart around her.

“What about me?” she asked once she put her drink down. “Have you forgiven me for not telling you who I was when you were in the hospital?”

Had he?

He had, but a part of him still expected her to let him down. To do something. Keep something from him that would change how he looked at her. How he thought about her. That part, though, was being overridden by the desire to get to know her better.

He couldn’t deny that for the first time since his mother had died, the coldness and numbness that had surrounded him wasn’t there when he was with Rebecca. Hadn’t been there from the moment she’d touched his hand.

The scraping of the chair reached him. He looked up to see Rebecca standing, a sad look on her face. “I think I have my answer. Goodbye, Adam. I hope you find the peace you’re looking for.”

CHAPTER 9



REBECCA WEAVED THROUGH THE TABLES TOWARD THE DOOR, SWALLOWING hard to keep the tears at bay. She'd known that Adam's mom's confession had affected him. If it hadn't, she would've thought he was a robot.

The fact that what happened had colored his whole life was unexpected. Then again, maybe not. Parents were the ones kids relied on the most to steer them through life. To teach them right and wrong. Her own parents were wonderful, and she missed them with everything she had. What she wouldn't give to talk to her mom right now and seek her counsel. But both her parents had been dead for a few years—dying within months of each other.

She made it outside and took a deep breath, hoping it would take away her hurt and disappointment. Sadly, it didn't.

“Well, this is a surprise. I didn't expect to see you here, lovely lady. Two nights in a row. That has to be fate or something.”

Rebecca couldn't believe her luck when she turned and found Rabbit standing behind her. Why couldn't it have been Adam? The fact he hadn't come after her highlighted how much he couldn't forgive her for what she'd done.

“I don't think so.” She opened her clutch and pulled out her phone to call a car, something she should've done the minute she walked out the door, instead of getting lost in her head and finding herself in the situation she was now in.

“Aw, don't be like that. How about we get a drink and really get to know each other? I'm not that bad of a guy.”

Rebecca paused, surprised at the hint of sincerity she heard in Rabbit's voice. “What's your real name?”

“Joel ‘Rabbit’ Hartley,” he responded immediately, as if he had no issue giving her that information.

Brownie points for honesty.

The man before her looked relaxed, and the arrogance she’d seen the night before, not to mention the moment she’d turned around, was gone. “Well, Joel Hartley, I appreciate the offer, but I just want to go home.”

Concern highlighted his gaze. “Are you okay?”

“She’s fine.” Adam’s hard voice sounded behind her, and Rebecca tensed. She was far from fine. He’d hurt her, and she didn’t think he even realized it. And now he was trying to act all alpha around her and Joel.

“She doesn’t look fine to me. In fact, she looks upset. You know anything about it?” Joel questioned, his voice deceptively light.

She didn’t need this. Didn’t need two guys blustering at each other over her. Some girls may find it flattering, knowing that she was the center of attention for two men—she didn’t.

“Stop, both of you.” Rebecca resisted the urge to stamp her feet. “I’m going home—by myself.” A taxi pulled up, and she didn’t give either of the men a chance to respond as she dashed down the stairs and climbed into the cab once the other occupants vacated the vehicle. She fired off her address to the driver, relieved that neither Adam nor Joel made any attempt to stop her.

“You okay, dear?” the driver asked.

She glanced up into his kind eyes, watching her in the rearview mirror. They reminded her of her dad’s. “Yes, thank you.”

“Okay.”

While the fare might be double that of a rideshare, she was grateful that he’d arrived at the moment when she needed to get away.

The whole night had been a bust. She should’ve said no to Adam’s drink offer.

And if he called her again, that’s exactly what she would say.

* * *

“THAT’S the second time she’s walked away from you,” Rabbit commented.

Rocket looked at him, expecting to see smug satisfaction in his gaze. Instead, he saw questions. “Shut up, Rabbit.”

“I’m not sure what you said or did, but if you like her, you’re doing a

fucked-up job of showing her if she keeps leaving you.”

The last thing Rocket wanted was to have a conversation with the man in front of him, especially where anyone could hear or see them. “It’s none of your business, and I don’t particularly care what you think.”

He had, once again, missed the opportunity to follow Rebecca to make sure she got home safely—all because of the guy standing in front of him.

“You’re right. I don’t really care. And if I thought I stood any chance of hooking up with her, I’d be on it in a hot second. But I’m not a jerk, and she’s said no twice to me, and both times you’ve been lurking in the background. I find that interesting.”

There it was—that arrogant look he’d been expecting to see earlier. “Guess we’re both shit out of luck, then?”

“Didn’t peg you as someone who would give up. I mean, she was here with *you*. Clearly, she wanted to be, so why are you pushing her away?”

Rocket had had enough. He didn’t need to stand there and be lured into a pissing match with Rabbit. He had better things to do.

Do you, though? You could’ve been having a nice dinner with a beautiful woman, but here you are alone.

His fucking inner voice needed to take a vacation.

“Well, this has been fun, but I’m out.” Rocket sidestepped Rabbit, but was halted when the other man laid a hand on his arm. “I suggest you remove that before I do,” he added, a hint of menace to his voice. The last thing he wanted was to fight, but if Rabbit made the first move, he’d defend himself.

Rabbit removed his hand. “We’re not friends. I get it. But take it from an outside observer. The whole time I was talking to her last night at Aces, she kept looking over at you. She’s interested, man, and it looks like you are too. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have asked her out. But if you want to fuck it up, that’s fine. Just thought you should know.”

He walked away before Rocket could say anything.

Frustration slammed into him. He’d known he’d fucked things up with Rebecca. Had known it the second she’d gotten up, but he hadn’t moved. He’d let her walk away.

Rocket sighed. Perhaps it was for the best that she’d left. Nothing about the future was guaranteed, and it was safer not to get involved.

Less chance of getting hurt.

* * *

THE BUZZING of her phone woke Rebecca. She groaned at the fuzzy feeling in her mouth and the crick in her neck. She'd fallen asleep on the couch after eating a half pint of her favorite ice cream and watching a mindless comedy series she'd found on a streaming service—a show that still played.

Reaching for her remote, she paused it as she picked up her phone to see she'd missed a call from Imogene. A few seconds later, it chimed to signal a voicemail had been left.

Indecision warred within her. Did she listen to it or did she delete it? She'd never been able to ignore a message, so she hit play.

Hey, Rebecca. It's Imogene. Ha...you probably already saw my name on your phone ID. Or maybe not. Anyway, the girls and I are having lunch down at Café Beth today and would love it if you'd join us. It's a casual thing. If you can, we'll be meeting at twelve thirty. Let me know. Hope you can make it. Bye.

Rebecca placed her phone on the couch beside her. Did she want to go out and see the people associated with Adam? Of course, they didn't know that she and Adam had had a couple of recent interactions. They probably had no idea that he'd kicked her out of his room when his bandages had come off.

Restless energy climbed over her skin, like ants raiding a picnic basket. She got up and grabbed the empty ice cream container. Once she disposed of it, she stood at her sink, gazing out over her backyard. The plumeria's were flowering, and she loved seeing the delicate blooms, along with smelling their heavenly scent. The back yard was one of the reasons she'd picked this rental property.

If she did go to lunch and get to know the girls better, there'd be every chance she'd be invited to a group get-together, and Adam would be there. How awkward would it be to see him again? Especially after last night, when he'd hesitated so long in answering her question.

It shouldn't have hurt her so much that he didn't trust her. And, given what he'd experienced with his mom, it made some sort of sense to her. If it had been her, and she'd found that either her mom or dad had lied their whole lives to her, it would be hard to swallow. Parents were supposed to be the ones who protected and looked after you. They were the first people you trusted implicitly. Of course, real life always tended to not be rosy, and what happened to Adam was an example of that.

She'd seen the way families could be with her job. The dynamics were

always different. It highlighted how lucky she'd been.

But thinking about families wasn't helping her make a decision about whether she'd join the girls for lunch or not. She didn't have to work. The one time she'd gone out with colleagues, women she'd hoped to forge a relationship with, hadn't gone great. From the moment she'd met Imogene, the woman had made her feel welcome, and so had her friends. With her schedule, it would be easy to beg off from attending any get-togethers where the chances of her running into Adam were high.

Plus, today was just going to be lunch with the girls, so seeing Adam wasn't likely. Decision made, she went back to the living room, picked up her phone, and fired off a quick text to Imogene before she could change her mind.

* * *

ROCKET RAN along the beach with his teammates. They were doing their usual PT and, even though the doctor hadn't officially signed off and cleared him back for regular duties, he'd intimated that it was happening.

It felt good to be pounding the sand again. A light breeze brushing against his sweaty skin and the scent of salt in the air—all things that settled deep into his soul.

This run was the final part of their daily routine. Once they reached the point, they stopped. He bent and rested his hands on his knees, his breath sawing in and out. He was able to keep up with his teammates, but he'd lost some of his fitness over the past couple of months.

"You doing okay?" Growler asked as he came up to him and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, man. All good." Rocket shook his leg that had been injured. "See? No issues."

"Right. Then why are you breathing like a two-pack-a-day smoker?"

Rocket straightened, ready to give his teammate a hard shove, when he spied the huge smile on his face. "Shut up, fucker."

Growler laughed, and Rocket joined in. He had gotten close to Growler over the last couple of months. Growler had come over to his place occasionally, and they'd played some video games.

"Want to go grab some food?" Rocket asked as they collected up their

gear and made their way to the car.

“I would, but I’m meeting Ox in forty minutes.” Growler twirled his keys around his finger.

“Ox? As in, from Alliez?” That was the only “Ox” Rocket knew, but it could’ve been a newly minted SEAL he hadn’t yet met.

“Yeah. I want to talk to him about things.”

There was a mysterious tone to Growler’s voice and as much as he wanted to respect his privacy, Rocket couldn’t help thinking there was a lot going on in Growler’s life that he didn’t let on about.

“Can I ask what things?” Rocket noticed that the other guys on the team had also stopped their conversations and were looking at him and Growler.

As if sensing he was now the center of attention, Growler stood a little straighter. He looked at Rocket and then around at the rest of the team. “Yeah, I’m checking out my options. I’m coming to the end of my five years, so I gotta decide what to do. Whether I re-up or leave and do something else.”

Shock reverberated through Rocket, and a quick glance at his teammates suggested they all felt the same. Growler may have only been with the team for just over a year, but he’d slipped into the place left by Silver’s change of career direction, as if he’d always been a part of them.

“How long before you have to make a decision?” Fort asked.

Growler shrugged. “A few months. I just—I don’t know...I think I need a change.”

The indecision on his friend’s face was as plain as the sun beating down on them. It wouldn’t be an easy decision. Rocket had always known that this was his life. That he would always be a SEAL, until he couldn’t, and then he’d do what Silver was doing and help train the new recruits.

Rocket speared him with a hard glare. “Whatever you do, you’re one of us, you understand?”

Growler nodded. “Yeah, I do.”

A round of “Goods” sounded as the rest of the guys threw their support behind Growler.

“Anyone want to get some food?” Rocket asked in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere that had descended around them at Growler’s announcement.

“I would,” Bird said, “but I’ve got to get home. Immy is going out with the girls, so I’m spending the day with Layla and Liam. I think Layla’s got a tea party on the agenda for us.”

“Yeah, I’ve got Kara. I’m going to take her to the pool. Get her used to the water,” Cricket commented, a goofy grin on his face. A similar one also showed on Bird’s face.

Normally, hearing the guys talk about their women and kids would have aggravated Rocket. Today, though, a shaft of longing swept through him, wishing that he had someone waiting for him when he got home from PT. Someone he could spend time doing things with.

Where the hell is this coming from? I’m happy with my life. Sooner or later, his friends would have their trust broken by their women.

Shame pushed away the longing. There was no reason for him to think that his friends’ wives and partners would do anything like what his mother had done. He really needed to let things go, but it was so damn hard.

Why couldn’t he move forward?

More to the point, why was he continuing to blame Rebecca? Tarnish her with the same brush as his mom, just because she’d been in the same room as him when his mom had confessed her secret?

If he knew the answer to that question, his life would be so much easier.

Aware that he hadn’t responded to his teammates, and they were all looking at him, as though he’d missed a question or comment, he said, “Right, well, have fun. I’ll see you later.”

He headed toward his car, his mind drifting to the conversation he’d had with Rabbit the night before. He’d gone home and hadn’t let himself think about it.

Now, though, it was like a bull racing toward a red cape. He couldn’t stop it if he’d wanted to.

Even though he’d come to the conclusion that he was better off being alone, and that it was safer...how much was he missing out on?

All his friends had taken the leap. Hell, Bird had found out he was a father. Had missed two years of his daughter’s life. Hadn’t even asked for a DNA test. He’d trusted Imogene when she’d told him that Layla was his. If there was ever an opportunity to be distrustful, Bird could’ve been, but he hadn’t. He’d believed in his wife and his love for her. Now they were happier than they’d ever been.

Rocket pulled into his driveway and sat in his truck, exhausted. Not physically, but mentally.

The previous night, driving over to pick up Rebecca for their date, he’d told himself he wanted to move past his mom’s betrayal, but at the first

hurdle, he'd fallen and returned to what was comfortable. Only it wasn't a good fit anymore. It was restrictive, and if he was truly going to break free, he had to believe it. Had to grasp it.

The time had come to let go—for good.

CHAPTER 10



EQUAL PARTS NERVOUS AND EXCITED, REBECCA WALKED UP TO THE CAFÉ. Nervous that somehow they all knew she and Rocket had had a disastrous date, and excited that she was spending time with women whose company she enjoyed.

She walked in, and it took her two seconds to see the group. Imogene waved when she saw Rebecca, and a shaft of warmth suffused her body. The welcome by someone she'd only spent a couple of hours with so different to the one she'd received from the girls she'd gone out with the other night.

"Hey, everyone," she said as she sat in the chair Imogene indicated. "How are y'all?"

A round of "Fantastics" and "Greats" sounded before Imogene filled her glass with a pink drink from the pitcher on the table. "We're drinking virgin cosmos because we didn't want Penni to feel left out. Cosmos are her favorite."

Penni raised her glass. "I love you girls for doing this for me." She finished with a loud sniff. "Damn allergies."

Everyone laughed, and even though Rebecca was new to the dynamics of the group, she could sense the genuine love between them. They'd created their own sisterhood, and considering all their partners were SEALs, it didn't surprise her.

"Hank says they might have to go on a mission soon, now that Rocket is close to being given the all clear from the doctor," Jennifer commented with a grimace.

"Yeah, Knox said he thought they'd have to leave in a couple of weeks." Penni took a sip of her drink. "I told him he could only be away for three

weeks, max. I'm getting closer and closer to my due date, and I want him here."

Rebecca's heart stuttered for a brief moment before kicking back into gear, hearing that Adam's team may be leaving soon. A strange feeling, considering how they'd parted the previous night. She shouldn't have any feelings about Adam going into a dangerous situation where he could get hurt again. Or worse this time—not come back.

The small amount of the drink she'd consumed threatened to make a reappearance as the idea settled further into her brain. She swallowed hard before reaching for the glass of water next to her Cosmo and taking a healthy swig.

Light pressure landed on her arm, and Rebecca looked up to see Imogene studying her. "You okay, Rebecca? You're looking a little pale."

Rebecca straightened her shoulders. "Yeah, fine. Just hungry. And I probably need to get out into the sun a bit more."

Lame excuse.

So what if it was. No way was she going to explain the complicated relationship she had with Adam. Not that they had a relationship in the true sense of the word. She didn't know how she'd describe what they'd shared.

"Well, let's order. I'm hungry, too, and..." Penni rubbed her belly. "This little guy is letting me know they want some garlic bread and a nice helping of chicken alfredo."

"You're having a boy?" Rebecca asked while the others chuckled at Penni's comment.

Penni shook her head. "I wanted to find out, but Knox was adamant that he wanted to be surprised. He can be very persuasive and caught me at a weak moment, so I agreed we'd wait."

The chuckles turned into full-blown laughs. There was clearly an inside joke with the others, and for the first time since she'd met them, Rebecca felt like a fifth wheel. As if sensing her disconnect, Imogene leaned toward her.

"We're laughing because it's usually the other way around with Penni and Knox. He's such a teddy bear with her that he would give her the moon if he could. So for him to get one over her, he must have asked after they'd..." She waved her hand around in the air. "You know."

"Had sex?" Rebecca asked, amused at the way Imogene couldn't seem to say the words.

"Yes." Imogene chuckled. "Not sure why I had trouble saying that, but

yeah, that. Sorry if you felt a little left out.”

Remorse floated through Rebecca. She didn't want the girls to feel like she needed to be included in everything with them. “It's fine. You've known each other a long time. It's understandable you'd have inside jokes. I'm grateful that you included me at all.”

“You took the time out to play with Layla when you didn't have to when Liam was fussing and I couldn't. I appreciated that so much. And, well, I feel like your personality is so similar to ours that you fit right in with us.”

Rebecca let the words wash over her. It had been a long time since someone had been so genuine with her. She didn't doubt the sincerity of Imogene's words.

“Thank you, and it wasn't a hardship. Plus, I met you all, so that means the world to me.”

No matter what happened between her and Adam, she was forever grateful that she'd met these girls. Even though he hadn't been the one to introduce them. Somehow, somehow, fate had decided that she was to be a part of this group. And if, in the future, Adam met another girl and brought her to a get-together she was at, she'd smile her way through it and not wish it was her.

* * *

ROCKET PACED OUT in front of the base hospital. He'd been to see the doctor, who had finally signed off on his return to work, and he was eager to get back into the thick of things. A situation was brewing in the Middle East, and he'd heard the guys talking about a possible mission. At the time, he'd been pissed that he might have missed out on it, but now he would be able to go.

He wasn't due to report to duty for another two hours and he'd managed to find out that Rebecca would be starting her shift in half an hour. He'd told the doctor he'd wanted to thank her for looking after him. The guy hadn't so much as blinked when he told Rocket she would be in shortly.

Rocket found the fact that he'd been so free in giving out staff information so easily a little worrying. Then again, Rocket had been a patient and was active duty, so he shouldn't pose a threat, but the doctor couldn't know that either.

The thoughts swirled around his mind, and he wasn't sure if he should

say something to someone higher up or leave it. Of course, Rebecca would no doubt ask how he found out when she was working—he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

“Adam?” Rebecca got out of her car, locked it, and walked over to him. “What are you doing here?”

Rocket took a moment to center himself. After his self-lecture, he'd gone to his mother's grave and laid some flowers down. The first time he'd visited since she'd been laid to rest beside her husband. It hadn't been as difficult as he thought it would've been. The anger he'd carried for so long had faded and traces of the love he felt for her had begun sprouting again.

“Adam? Are you okay? Do you need to see a doctor?” She rested her hand on his forearm and he relished the contact.

“Sorry. I'm fine. And I was waiting to see you.” He took his time to look her over. Her blond hair was scraped back into a low bun. Her face was makeup free, save for a hint of gloss that coated her lips, tempting him to taste them.

He reined in his wandering mind. That wasn't what he came here for.

“Why?”

Rocket stuck his hands in his pockets. “I want to apologize for the other night. For the night at Aces Bar. For the way I treated you when my bandages came off. I shouldn't have acted that way or said what I did. I have a problem with trust, which I'm working through. I'm hoping that you'll give me another chance.”

He said the last bit with hope growing within him. She hadn't walked away or screwed her nose up in disgust when he started talking to her, so he considered that a win.

“I accept your apology. I was there when everything went down, and I'm glad you've acknowledged that you need to face what happened and get some closure.”

Her words seemed sincere, but she hadn't said what he wanted to hear—that she would give him another chance. After how he'd treated her, he wasn't surprised that she hadn't immediately agreed to that part of his apology. He needed to know, though, if he stood a chance. No matter what she said, he would respect it.

Respect her.

If she said no—he'd walk away, cursing himself for being a fool. If she said yes, then he would do everything to show her that she hadn't made a

mistake.

“Thank you. And the other part?”

A sigh rippled through her, and the small burst of hope he'd been harboring burst like a pin to a balloon. “I don't know, Adam. How would this time be different from the other times? All it would take would be for me to say something that I believe is innocent, but for you, it would be triggering, and you'd shut down again.”

He nodded. “You're right. None of what I've done would get you to trust me. If anything, I've done everything possible to make it the hardest thing in the world for you to believe in me. But I hope that, maybe, there's a small part of you that likes me and wants to get to know me better. The real me. Not the one you saw at my mom's place or the one you've met the last couple of months.”

Never before had he'd laid himself out so bare in front of a woman. He hadn't had to. They'd all fallen at his feet. But working harder for someone was sweeter. More rewarding.

That is, if she said yes.

“I won't deny that I do want to get to know you, but the other night you went on about trust and how hard it was for you to trust after what your mom did. So how can *I* trust *you*?”

Taking a chance, he closed the gap between them so that he was in her personal space. There was a slight hitch in her breath, but she didn't move away. He took that as a positive sign. The desire to reach out and touch her was strong, but he tamped it down. The last thing he wanted to do was risk the truce that was beginning to form between them.

“We both learn to trust each other—together.” It was the best he could come up with. Would it be enough for Rebecca? He didn't know.

The corners of her glossy lips lifted into a ghost of a smile. “That's a good way of putting it.”

Internally, he high-fived himself. Outwardly, his shoulders dropped as the tension he'd been carrying released a bit. “So, is that your way of saying you'd go out with me again?”

“Yes, Adam, it is.”

At that moment, his phone buzzed with the alarm he'd set, reminding him that he needed to get to base so he wouldn't be late for his first official day back. “I've got to go, but I'll call you later, okay? We can arrange something then?”

Rebecca nodded. “Sounds good, and I need to get to my shift or I’ll be late.”

As much as he needed to move, to go to his meeting, he couldn’t get the message from his brain to his feet. He didn’t want to leave her. “Thank you for giving me another chance, Florence. It means a lot.”

“Don’t waste it, Rocket.”

With that, she brushed past him, leaving a trace of her floral scent behind. Everything in him knew he had been granted a chance he probably didn’t deserve. But no way was he going to fuck it up.

Not this time.

CHAPTER 11



ROCKET CHECKED HIMSELF IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR OF HIS TRUCK AND smoothed down a lock of errant hair. Nerves the size of the rock he'd had to carry around during BUD/s settled in the pit of his stomach.

Over the last week, since he'd been granted a third—or was it a fourth?—chance, with Rebeca, they'd been chatting on the phone. And if they couldn't do that, they'd been texting. After the shift she'd been going to when they'd spoken, she'd had a rotation of night shifts. Tonight was the start of a three-day break for her.

So what if it was a Tuesday night and not the weekend? He couldn't wait any longer to see her.

Inhaling deeply, Rocket centered himself and counted to ten before he opened the door and stepped out of his truck. Rebecca's house was a small bungalow with a hedged garden and a bright-yellow front door, things he hadn't noticed the first time he'd picked her up. Then he'd been focused on putting one foot in front of the other. It presented a welcoming ambience and suited the woman he planned to get to know better tonight.

Two pots with petunias growing out of them hung from a beam on either side of the front porch. There was a porch swing in one corner, and he wondered how often she sat there, looking out over the garden, enjoying the stillness of an early morning sunrise or the bright colors of a sunset.

He could picture himself sitting there with her. Holding her hand as they gently swung back and forth, the image so real, he could almost hear the low murmur of their conversation.

Rocket gave his head a short shake. Time to leave the dreaming till later. If he didn't knock on the door now, his little vision wouldn't have a chance in

hell of coming true.

He rapped on the door, using the brass door knocker that hung in the middle of it. The sound echoed around him in the quiet of early evening.

“Who is it?” Rebecca’s voice floated through the wood, and Rocket chuckled softly. She’d remembered what he’d said the last time he picked her up.

“It’s me, Roc—um, Adam.” His given name stumbled off his lips. He hardly ever referred to himself by his real name since he was so used to giving his nickname whenever anyone asked.

The door opened, and his breath caught at the sight of the woman in front of him. Unlike the other night, tonight she wore a wraparound dress that accentuated her waist and full breasts. The deep purple looked stunning against her blond hair, which was down and curled around her shoulders. Her makeup was subtle and instead of a clear gloss, a soft pink colored her plump lips. And like the other time, he was tempted to close the distance and sample them. Were they as soft as they looked?

“Hi,” she said a little breathlessly, hanging onto the door as if she needed an anchor in a rough sea.

The way he was feeling, he could do with an anchor himself.

“Hi. You look beautiful, Florence. And thank you for asking who was at the door.”

Rebecca laughed, a carefree sound he wanted to hear over and over. He’d do whatever was necessary to make sure she laughed often.

“I knew if I didn’t, you’d get all growly again, and I didn’t want that to happen.”

Rocket leaned against the doorjamb, bringing himself a little closer to her. Her beautiful hazel eyes widened, and this close, he could make out the gold flecks in them. “Growly?”

“Uh-huh.” This time, when she said it, her voice was a mere whisper, and he didn’t miss the way her eyes dropped to his lips, nor the way her tongue darted out to swipe across her bottom lip.

Inwardly, he groaned at the blatant invitation. An invitation he wanted to accept, but wouldn’t—not yet, anyway. By the end of the evening, he would know how she tasted. Whether her lips were soft, like he’d speculated only moments before.

“Do you like it when I sound like that?” He lowered his voice. Was this growly enough for her or not?

Again, her tongue darted out, and his cock twitched behind his zipper. If she did that too often, he wouldn't be able to keep his silent vow to not touch her right this moment. "I do. When it's like this, anyway. Not when you're trying to tell me what to do."

This banter was moving from lighthearted into sensual, and it was way too soon for that to happen. Straightening, he mentally told his dick to settle down, took a step back, and held out his hand. "You ready to go?"

If his quick change in attitude shocked or disappointed Rebecca, she didn't show it. "Yep."

From somewhere inside, she grabbed her purse and then stepped onto the porch. As he hadn't moved, her body brushed up against him and, instead of the floral scent he normally associated with her and the one she'd worn on their first disastrous date, a musky aroma wafted toward him. The smell reminded him of a marketplace he'd walked through when visiting Marrakesh a few years ago.

Exotic.

Mysterious.

Alluring.

Everything that epitomized what he thought about Rebecca. Tonight was going to be tortuous, but exciting at the same time, and he couldn't wait to see how it panned out.

* * *

"SO THERE I WAS, standing in the middle of the common room, while every resident was in various stages of undress. I couldn't move. I didn't know where to look. It was chaotic." Rebecca chuckled, remembering the temp assignment she'd had before taking the job at the hospital base. "They'd all decided to play strip poker. They were having a lot of fun, and so the director didn't say anything. Although, I could tell he was less than impressed with their antics."

Adam laughed along with her. "I say, good on them. They deserve to enjoy the twilight years of their lives. What's a few jiggy bits between friends?"

Rebecca snorted and clapped her hands over her mouth, shocked at the sound had erupted out of her. Opposite her, Adam's eyes twinkled with

mischief.

So far, this date had been completely different from their other encounters. He'd taken her to a little Italian restaurant he told her Penni and Fort frequented regularly, along with the rest of his team and their partners. It had somehow become *their* restaurant and the owners were more than happy to accommodate them. It helped that others from the base had heard about the place, and it was doing a booming business now.

"It was definitely a fun place for the residents, strip poker aside. The director maintained a relaxed vibe around them. As you said, they should be able to enjoy their twilight years. They've done their duty to the world, so if they all wanted to play strip poker, let them."

"Did that happen often?" Like he had all evening, Adam kept his gaze directed at her as he asked the question. She found it equal parts unnerving and exhilarating to be the center of someone's attention.

Over the years, previous dates would always look like they were looking at her, but invariably, their attention was more on her shoulder and below than on her face.

"I don't think so. It only happened that one time the three months I worked there. But talking to a nurse who'd been there for a couple of years, she said that they do it every so often. Or do some other whole group activity that usually had the nurses laughing their heads off."

"Sounds like the place to retire to."

Rebecca nodded. "Definitely. Although who knows what a new director will do? Some can be very strict and by the book in terms of how they perceive care should be given to the elderly."

The server arrived with their desserts. She took one look at the crême brûlée in front of her and practically drooled. Scooping a portion into her mouth, she moaned. "Oh, this is so good."

She took a couple of more mouthfuls before she looked up and saw Adam watching her, his blue eyes dark with desire, his pie untouched. Her spoon paused midway to her mouth. Like when they'd been at Aces, the background noise faded to nothing and all that existed was the two of them.

His gaze dropped to her dessert before switching back to her lips. Did she have custard on her mouth? Self-consciously, she swiped her tongue across her bottom lip, and a strangled sound came from Adam.

An overwhelming urge surged up inside of her—she wanted to lean over the table and kiss him. To find out how he tasted.

Her spoon slipped from her fingers, clattering to the plate, breaking the spell that had fallen around them, bringing with it the noise from the other diners. The clinking of glasses. The ting of cutlery hitting fine china.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

Adam cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “It’s okay. You didn’t splatter yourself, did you?”

A quick look at her dress showed no stray pieces of crème brûlée. “I’m fine. Is your pie not good?”

The mundane conversation did little to quench the desire still strumming through her. It shouldn’t surprise her, considering how she’d been attracted to him from the moment she’d first met him when she’d been looking after his mother. But she’d pushed it down, considering he was her patient’s son, and she didn’t cross any professional lines while on the job. But she wasn’t on the job now.

Clarity hit her—the reason she’d been so upset each time things hadn’t worked out with Adam, and the reason she kept saying yes when he asked her out was that she wanted to spend more time with him.

“The pie looks fine, but suddenly, I’m wishing I got what you’re having.”

“Would you like to try some?” she asked.

He gave a short nod, and she sliced through the creamy custard and held the spoon out toward him. Adam wrapped his fingers around her wrist, the touch sending tingles of awareness down her spine. His eyes never left hers as his lips covered the spoon and he swallowed the morsel.

“You’re right. It is delicious. Smooth and silky.”

Rebecca didn’t know what to do. Sure, she’d been attracted to guys she’d gone on dates with. She’d even had a couple of serious relationships. Not once, though, had she’d ever been trapped in their gaze like she was with Adam. It was as though a single thread was being woven between them, bringing them closer and closer together.

It confused her a little. The magnitude of the rush of emotions swirling through her with a simple gaze. They hadn’t even kissed yet. What would happen then?

If she was being honest with herself—she couldn’t wait to find out.

CHAPTER 12



THE DRIVE BACK TO HER PLACE WAS SILENT AND THE TENSION BETWEEN HER and Adam had reached the point where it was going to shatter.

He switched off the engine. Silence filled the cab, and she hadn't noticed how much space the noise from the truck took up.

Rebecca released her seatbelt and turned toward him. "Thanks for tonight. I had a good time."

"I did too." His lips quirked upward into a small, sexy smile. "I consider it a win that you didn't walk out halfway through."

She laughed. "There is that."

"I'll see you to your door. Will you wait here and allow me to open your card door for you?"

"Thanks. And I will." The way he asked indicated that, to him, it was important he do this for her. He hadn't seemed to worry at the restaurant. Or their first attempt at a date. But maybe it was because the streetlight was out in front of her house, shrouding the area in darkness.

He opened the door, and she placed her hand in his outstretched one, their first physical contact since he'd held her wrist in the restaurant. And like that moment, tingles buzzed through her, warming her from the inside.

All too soon, they were at her front door, signaling the end to their evening. It had been better than she'd ever thought it could be. Adam hadn't lowered his defenses all the way, but he'd lowered them enough to relax with her.

It was a start. A start she wanted to build on. Did he, though? Had tonight changed his mind in any way? She thought maybe it had after they'd shared their desserts with each other.

Clutching her keys in her hand, she smiled up at Adam. “Thank you for seeing me to my door.”

His gaze was intense. Unreadable, even under the glow of the porch light. The humor from their exchange in the car gone. For a heartbeat, Rebecca wished she could read minds so she could know what he was thinking.

A small smile curved his lips, and she froze when he reached out and brushed his fingers against her cheek. “My pleasure,” he murmured.

Time ceased to exist. She was trapped in the moment and held her breath. Waiting.

His lips replaced his fingers, and her eyes drifted shut. There was nothing sexual about a kiss on the cheek, but desire danced through her, radiating out until her whole body was vibrating with it.

How can I be turned on from a chaste touch?

The answer remained elusive, but she wanted nothing more than to reach out and pull his head down so that their next connection was from their lips melding together.

Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be, as Adam stepped away. “Sleep well, Florence.”

“I will.”

Somehow she managed to turn her back and insert her key into the lock, the slight tremble in her fingers making it difficult. Once the door was open, she turned, expecting to find Adam back in his truck, but he still stood on her porch, watching.

“Night,” she said.

“Night.” He turned and headed down the stairs. As much as she wanted to watch him leave, she didn't. Instead, she closed the door and leaned against it, blowing out a long breath.

What the heck was that?

It was as though they'd been caught up in a vortex, where they swirled around each other, but didn't truly connect. Yet, they had. There'd been a connection there. A shimmer of a thread, but a thread all the same. One that, maybe, over time, would strengthen until nothing could sever it.

* * *

ROCKET LISTENED with half an ear as Commanders North and Rixson went

over the situation in the Middle East. It looked like they'd be heading off to Pakistan in the next few days. Chatter on the dark web had indicated a small group of rebels, close to the border of Afghanistan and China, were sprouting outlandish threats of things they were planning to do in the future. All it took was a small pocket to become a bigger one, and then for shit to really hit the fan.

He should be pumped about getting back to it after being laid up for so long, but he couldn't muster up much enthusiasm. Rocket looked around the table at his friends and teammates. They all seemed interested, but Fort had tension lines bracketing his mouth, lines that had never been there before.

He saw similar looks on Bird's and Cricket's faces as well. Hank was impassive, donning his sniper mask he used when he was homing in on a target. Growler looked bored.

What was wrong with him and his team? Were they all wishing they didn't have to go on this mission?

Rocket let the thought sit with him, trying to pinpoint the reason for why he would be feeling this way. He could understand why Fort was feeling anxious—Penni was due to have their baby soon. Like all missions, this one could range from a few days to a few months. He wouldn't want to miss the birth of his first child. And Bird and Cricket both had kids. Hank had just recently hooked up with Jennifer, so he probably didn't want to be too far from her.

Growler's reaction—well, he was single, but he'd recently talked about him coming close to re-upping again and a decision he had to make with regards to that.

Rocket's thoughts drifted to Rebecca. They'd finally had one good—no, excellent—date, and he would have to leave soon. They hadn't even kissed, yet the thought of being away from her didn't sit well with him. A thought he didn't like too much, either. Never before had he allowed another person to sway him from his job—not even when his mom had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. In fact, after her bombshell, his job had been his salvation.

Now, though...he didn't allow that thought to grow any further.

There was so much uncertainty around the group that had never been there before—including within him.

“When are we likely going to be sent?” Fort's question pulled Rocket from the troubling thoughts swirling around him.

He needed to tamp down his emotions, like he'd done for his whole

career as a SEAL.

“Tex is keeping us informed. He’s the one that heard the chatter first and brought it to our attention,” Commander North said. “But, with Rocket back, I suspect you’ll be called in the next forty-eight hours.”

“Right.” Fort tapped his pen on the notepad in front of him. “When are we expecting the next lot of intel to come in?”

“In a few hours. Why don’t we take a break and reconvene here”—North looked at his watch—“at fifteen hundred hours? By then, we should have a clearer picture of what the situation is. We are waiting for information from some people on the ground. Dismissed.”

“Yes, sir,” Rocket muttered, along with the rest of his team as they stood, and Commanders North and Rixson left the room.

North had been their usual commander, but he’d taken a long vacation, so they’d been working with Rixson. Both men were exceptional at their jobs, so the transition from one to the other hadn’t been difficult. Now they were working together with them and a few other teams.

“Well, this is fucked, but not surprising.” Fort slumped back in his seat.

Rocket had never seen his team lead look so despondent. A few weeks ago, he would’ve made a smart-ass comment about Fort being chained to Penni, but now, well he understood a little of what his teammates had been going through the last year. If anyone had told him his attitude would change so quickly, he’d have laughed at them.

“Hopefully, it will be a quick in-and-out mission, and you won’t miss anything,” he offered up.

Fort and the rest of the guys looked at him as if he’d sprouted another head. Their reaction was not a surprise at all.

“Who are you, and what have you done with Rocket?” Bird asked, a teasing glint in his eyes.

“Fuck off.” Rocket gave him the finger.

Hank pierced him with a hard, unwavering look. “What gives? And don’t say nothing, because we all know that’s bullshit.”

Rocket held Hank’s gaze. He could stare down anyone. “Nearly dying makes you re-evaluate things.”

Not exactly the truth, but when he’d been lying in his hospital bed, alone, because he’d been a dick and asked his team to stay away, he’d hated it. After they’d visited, he’d seen how important they all were to him. They were his family, and he’d been treating them like shit.

“Doesn’t have to do with a certain nurse you’ve been seen with a couple of times?” Cricket asked, a hint of amusement in his gaze.

“What have you heard?” he countered, surprised that Rebecca would’ve told his teammates’ partners about them. Sure, he knew they’d gone out to lunch recently, but on their date, Rebecca hadn’t mentioned it. Then again, why would she?

“Rabbit’s been gossiping like a girl about how you’ve been walked out on twice by a pretty girl, and Maddie mentioned that when there was talk about us going on a mission soon, Rebecca’s face paled. She tried to say it was a lack of sun, but Maddie said she recognized the signs of someone who hates the thought of us leaving.”

Rocket sat back, stunned to hear about Rebecca’s reaction to him possibly leaving. The girls’ lunch had been before their date last night.

What did it mean, though? Was he reading too much into Cricket’s comments about Rebecca’s reaction? Was he hoping it meant something deeper when it didn’t?

Then the first part of Cricket’s comments registered. “Rabbit’s an ass, who should keep his twitching nose out of things.”

His teammates burst out laughing, and Rocket crossed his arms. Perhaps he should’ve remained a grumpy asshole.

Bird came up and slapped him on the back. “You don’t need to say anything more. Immy likes her, and so do the other girls. You’ve got their approval.”

“I don’t need their approval,” he muttered. “And y’all need to keep your noses out of my business.”

His response only made the guys laugh harder—even Growler was smirking. Rocket rolled his eyes. “We going to get food before we’re stuck in another meeting that’s going to drag on?”

As a diversion, it worked, and they all got up and walked out. While he gave the impression their teasing annoyed the shit out of him, he didn’t mind it.

The spark of hope that had sprouted in him after the successful date with Rebecca shot up a few more inches. He was beginning to understand why his friends had reacted the way they had when they met their soulmates. Not that Rebecca was his, by any means.

Not at all.

CHAPTER 13



REBECCA WAS GOING OVER THE NOTES SHE'D TAKEN FOR THE PATIENT SHE'D just seen when she became aware of someone standing beside. Looking up, she saw it was Missy.

“Hey, Missy. Did you need something?”

Her colleague didn't say anything. She just kept watching her in an unnerving way.

“Missy?”

“How did you do it?” she asked.

“Do what?”

What on earth was happening here? She hadn't spoken two words to Missy since their night out. This was the first time she'd seen the other woman at work.

“Land a SEAL? I've been trying for years, and you've only been here two months and are already dating one. One who was a patient, which could be seen as a conflict of interest.”

Rebecca sighed. She didn't have time for this. She had other patients to see, but if she didn't nip this in the bud, then who knows what Missy would do or say? “I wouldn't say that I've *landed* anyone. I've gone on one date with Adam, and that was weeks after I looked after him. The first time I saw him after he'd been discharged was the night we went to Aces.”

Missy sniffed as if she'd just caught a whiff of rotting flesh. “Whatever.”

She flounced off, and Rebecca followed her exit until she turned the corner before returning her attention to the tablet in front of her. The bizarre interaction swirled in her mind as she completed the paperwork. As she headed back to the staff room to get something to drink, she tried to unpack

everything Missy had said.

The slightest doubt that she'd crossed a line shouldn't have flared to life within her, and she squashed it quickly. There hadn't been anything wrong with her going on a date with Adam. She wasn't his doctor. Yes, she'd cared for him, but she hadn't been the only one.

"Rebecca?" Ellie waved a hand in front of her, and she looked up from where she'd been staring blankly at the bottle of water.

"Sorry. Just thinking about a patient." Not a lie. Adam had been a one, just not one of the ones she was looking after this shift.

"Anything I can help with?" Ellie grabbed her own drink.

"No, it's fine. Nothing serious." How else could she put off her supervisor's inquiry, since it wasn't like she really had a problem with a patient?

"There's been some chatter going around the hospital," Ellie started, and Rebecca braced herself for what was to come.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Since our last chat about it, you and a Navy SEAL were recently seen out and about. Any truth in that?"

"Well, if it's gossip, then it has to be true, doesn't it?" Rebecca tried to sound bored, as if she didn't care that she was the topic of the day. Only her supervisor's words had a bit of bite to them.

Ellie held up her hands in surrender. "Hey, you do you, and if you can nab a Navy SEAL, then I say go for it." She leaned in and whispered, "I did, and have zero regrets."

Any anger she may have slipped out of her, and Rebecca laughed. "Good to know."

"Just ignore everyone. It doesn't matter what you do. By the end of the day, something juicier will happen and you and your SEAL will be forgotten all about."

"He's not my SEAL." Although she couldn't help liking the idea that she and Adam might progress to the stage where she could say he was hers.

Ellie laughed. "You say that now, but I give it a month before you're calling him that. Once a SEAL makes up his mind, he doesn't deviate from it. It's how they get through their BUD/s training. Their focus is on the end goal—getting their trident pin. If he wants you, he'll stop at nothing until he has you." She patted Rebecca's arm. "If you want to talk about anything, let me know."

With that, her supervisor waltzed out the door, leaving Rebecca to herself to ponder the conversation.

Did Adam want her?

She didn't know. He'd gone from kicking her out of his room, to pursuing her on two separate occasions to get her to spend time with him.

Did she think he was truly over what his mom had done to him? Not even close, but she did think that perhaps he'd accepted it and was working through both his feelings and the upheaval his mom's confession had made to his life.

Did she want to help him through that time, with no guarantee that at the end, he would stay with her?

That was a question she couldn't answer yet, but she also couldn't deny that she wanted to spend time with him. Wanted to see more of the man who'd cared deeply for his mom and always spent time with her when she'd known he had to be exhausted after returning from a mission.

There was so much to think about, and she wasn't going to come up with answers in five minutes. And not when she was at work. She had patients to see and care for. She had a job to do, and she would do it well.

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER, Rebecca's resolve to keep Adam to the back of her mind was proving harder to achieve. Every time she had a few seconds to herself, her thoughts drifted to him and wondering what he was doing. Was he on base? Or was he getting ready to go on a mission? She hadn't forgotten the conversation she'd had with the girls when they'd had lunch about how the guys could be leaving soon.

Would he tell her?

She hoped he would, but they weren't in a relationship. They may have gone out a couple of times, but only one date went well, and that didn't mean he'd tell her everything he did. Or tell her when he'd go away—no matter how much she wished he would do exactly that.

"Stop it," she muttered to herself as she glanced at her tablet to see where she needed to go next.

Rebecca paused in the hallway and read through the notes, noting that her next patient—Petty Officer Lauren Beaufort—had suffered a fall and broken

her arm. X-rays had shown that she'd also broken it previously, but hadn't had it set, so they'd performed surgery on it.

Pushing thoughts of Adam to the back of her mind, where he was going to stay for the rest of her shift, she put a smile on her face and entered the room.

“Good afternoon, Petty Officer—” She swallowed the rest of her words when she spied the other occupant in the room pointing a gun at her.

“Close the door and don't say a fucking word. If you do, you're dead.”
Rebecca closed the door.

CHAPTER 14



ROCKET LOOKED UP FROM THE REPORT HE WAS READING WHEN COMMANDER North walked into the room. The conversation from the rest of his team petered out when Rocco and his team also trailed in behind the commander.

The hairs on the back of Rocket's neck stood at attention. Something was going down, and it wasn't good. Was it to do with the rebels in Pakistan they'd been discussing all day? Or was it something different? With the other team in the room, did that mean the two SEAL teams would be heading off soon?

"Gentleman, we have a situation on base," Commander North started.

Fuck. So...not about Pakistan.

With Rocco and his team there, whatever the situation was—it was bad enough to warrant two SEAL teams to deal with.

"What is it?" Fort asked.

"We have a hostage situation at the base hospital. A patient and nurse are being held at gunpoint."

Rocket's stomach dropped at hearing the location. Rebecca was working today. She'd mentioned it on their date.

"Do we know who?" The words fired out of him quicker than bullets piercing a paper target at the range.

"The patient is Petty Officer Lauren Beaufort. She's recently had arm surgery. The nurse is Rebecca Nelson."

Rebecca Nelson.

Her named twirled around Rocket's mind like the spinning cups at Disneyland. He stood, the need to get to the hospital and Rebecca outweighing all his training.

“Rocket!” Fort yelled his name and stood in front of him. “Where the fuck are you going?”

The harshness of Fort’s tone was enough to pull him out of the darkness that had surrounded him from the second Rebecca’s name was mentioned. Everyone else in the room was also standing, and they were all looking at him.

He gave himself a mental shake, pulled the cloak of numbness around him, the one he usually wore on a mission, and faced his team lead. “Sorry. I’m good.”

Rocket held Fort’s gaze, and as if his team lead could see that he was good, Fort nodded and went back to his chair.

“Do you need to stand down, Rocket?” Commander North asked.

“No, sir, I don’t.”

There was no way Rocket wasn’t going to be involved with this mission. Rebecca was in trouble, and she needed him.

“Very well. Let me tell you what we know.” Commander North headed to the front of the room and waited until everyone sat before proceeding. “We received notification fifteen minutes ago of the hostage event in the hospital. One of the nurses noticed that Nurse Nelson hadn’t been seen for a while. They checked the patient roster, and when they went to Petty Officer Beaufort’s room, they were unable to get inside as the perp had blocked the door with something. Nurse Nelson called out to the person that everything was okay and gave the code for being held hostage.”

“Any idea who the person holding them hostage is?” Fort asked.

“Looks like Petty Officer Beaufort’s former boyfriend. From the quick chat we had with some of her crew, it seems he didn’t take their breakup too well. One of them said he suspected that Beaufort was being abused, but when he brought it up with her, she denied that anything was wrong,” North responded, anger coloring his tone.

With every word that North spoke, Rocket’s blood pressure rose, along with his need to leave the room and nail the fucker who held Rebecca and Beaufort to the wall. But if he wanted to be part of the operation, he had to keep his head.

“First step will be to try and get eyes into the room, which will be handled by Rocco and Phantom. Once we know what’s going on in there, we’ll attempt to negotiate with the perp to see if he’ll stand down. If not, then we’ll do what we do—get Beaufort and Nelson out safely.”

They spent the next thirty minutes hashing out various plans—all with a positive outcome. There was no other alternative for any of the men in the room.

The meeting broke up, and Rocco and his team exited with Commander North. They needed to get to the hospital to get the camera in place.

“You going to be okay?” Fort asked once they were left alone.

How many times had he asked that question over the last couple of years, most recently to Hank when Jennifer had been taken by her abusive ex?

“I’ll be fine.”

The situations were different. He wasn’t *in love* with Rebecca, like Hank had been with Jennifer. Or any of his other teammates had been when their women were in trouble. He wasn’t. He and Rebecca had only been out on one successful date.

Totally different circumstances.

But he was still prepared to burn the world down if one hair on her head had been harmed.

* * *

SWEAT TRICKLED down Rebecca’s back as she sat in the plastic chair beside Lauren. Muted sunlight filtered through the partially open blinds covering the window. A window which represented an opportunity to escape. One that was futile, considering they were five floors up.

Lauren had tried talking to her former boyfriend. To get him to walk out and not come back. Alfie had other ideas, and he’d pointed the gun at Lauren and told her to shut the fuck up.

Rebecca didn’t believe for one second that the staff was standing around, doing nothing about the situation they were in. When Ellie had tried to come in, she’d managed to convey that there wasn’t an issue, as per Alfie’s instructions, but also get a message across that it was a hostage situation.

They were on a Navy base. Military police were probably already surrounding the property. Would they get a SEAL team involved or leave it to the MPs? And if a team did get involved, would it be Adam’s or another one?

It didn’t matter. She just wanted out of the room. Wanted to go back to her home, where she could soak in the tub with a package of her favorite

cookies.

Alfie was pacing around the room, getting more and more agitated by the minute.

“Why don’t you leave?” she asked tentatively, knowing that it could trigger him to doing something rash, like use the gun that he kept waving around.

“Why are women such dumb bitches?” he muttered as he continued pacing.

Rebecca looked over at Lauren. The other woman’s face was as white as the sheets she lay against, her gaze tracking her ex’s movements. She reached out and placed her hand over Lauren’s. “You doing okay?” She kept her voice low so as not to annoy Alfie. She may be in a hostage situation, but her responsibility was still to her patient and her well-being.

“Okay.” Lauren licked her lips. “It’s best not to antagonize him. He doesn’t mean to do the things he does. I shouldn’t have broken up with him.”

Lauren’s response wasn’t unexpected, but it still surprised Rebecca that she could think she was responsible for the situation. She’d done the right thing by getting away from him. Alfie had to be responsible for his actions—both the physical harm he’d done to Lauren and the situation they were now in.

“You didn’t tell him to come in here with a gun. He did it himself,” she whispered fiercely.

“Maybe.” Lauren shifted. Her breath hitched and a shaft of pain flashed through her eyes, causing her lips to twist into a grimace.

“How’s your pain level?”

“It’s okay,” Lauren responded.

There was no way she was okay. Lauren had been scheduled for her next dose of pain relief after she’d done a vitals check. A check she hadn’t been able to do. “Are you sure?”

Lauren nodded, though the fingers on her good arm were gripping the sheet tightly.

“Will you two stop your fucking whispering? It’s fucking annoying!” Alfie shouted, and Rebecca watched as Lauren shrank further against the bed, as if it would protect her from whatever her ex had planned.

Adrenaline pumped through Rebecca. Her flight instinct was kicking in, and she gripped the arms of the chair to stop herself from bolting for the door. Nothing good would come of her doing something irrational like that.

God, she wished she knew if there was going to be anyone coming to help them.

A brisk knock echoed around the room, and Rebecca stilled. Was that help arriving, or just a member of staff checking to see if they needed something? No one had come by after Ellie had tried to get in.

“Fuck off,” Alfie yelled. “If you don’t, the bitches will die.”

Lauren whimpered, and Rebecca bit back a cry of her own. Alfie was erratic enough to follow through on his threat. Over the last few minutes, he’d gotten more and more jittery. Someone knocking on the door hadn’t helped at all.

“Hi, Alfie. My name is Fort. Can I get you anything? A drink. Some food. You have to be hungry.” Fort sounded relaxed and friendly, as if it were a normal day and they weren’t in the middle of a hostage situation.

Rebecca hoped that whoever Fort was, he had a better plan than just asking if Alfie needed anything.

Wait.

Fort!

As in Penni’s Fort?

As in the Fort, who was on Adam’s team?

Did that mean Adam was here too?

The questions zoomed through her mind like a hockey puck skating along the ice.

“No. I want you all to leave.” Alfie had made his way to the door.

“I can’t do that, Alfie. And you know that you can’t stay there forever. How about you open the door and come out? We can talk. You can tell me everything you want.”

Alfie pounded the door with the back of the gun. Rebecca jumped, thinking for half a second he’d fired a shot through the wood.

“I fucking told you what I want! I want to be left alone. If you don’t”—Alfie turned and pointed the gun directly at her and Lauren—“I swear these two are going to get it.”

Fear consumed Rebecca, threatening to drown her with its intensity. She wished she hadn’t been working today. Hadn’t been assigned to this patient.

If not you, then it would’ve been someone else.

Her inner voice was right. For whatever reason, fate had chosen for her to be in this situation.

A sense of calmness chased away the fear. Her racing heart returned to a

steady beat. Her breathing slowed, and a clarity she hadn't possessed from the moment she'd walked into the room enveloped her.

If this was how her life was meant to end, then she would face it head-on. She may not have achieved all she'd wanted—like marriage and kids—but she'd had a good life. A life where she'd seen a lot of the country she'd been born in. She'd helped a lot of people and provided comfort when needed during her time as a nurse.

If she had one regret, it would be that she hadn't gotten to know Adam more. Even with all their false starts, he called to her soul in a way she hadn't experienced before with her past partners.

Maybe in her next life.

Rebecca stood, her gaze zeroing in on Alfie's manic one. "Go on. Do it."

CHAPTER 15



“WHAT THE FUCK?” ROCKET STARED AT THE SCREEN RELAYING THE CAMERA feed. “What is she doing? We have to get in there.”

He made to move, but Cricket held him back. “We have to wait. Fort knows what he’s doing. We’ve got a plan. Hank is in place. You go in there now, you’ll definitely get her killed.”

Rocket pulled himself out of Cricket’s hold. “She just fucking dared him to shoot her. He’s that wired that he’s likely to pull the trigger and not think about the consequences.”

What was Rebecca thinking? Why would she put herself in danger like that?

The answers weren’t ones he knew. He was still trying to process what he’d just watched and heard.

Sitting back and watching the room for a full thirty minutes before Fort knocked on the door had been the longest half hour of his life.

The asshole who held them was walking around like he was trying to escape his skin. Rebecca was sitting beside Lauren’s bed, talking to her. He imagined she’d been trying to keep herself calm, as well as her patient.

Every time Alfie had an outburst, it had been painful to watch the way Lauren had flinched.

How hard was it for Hank to witness all this, considering he’d helped his Jennifer escape an abusive relationship?

“I know this is hard, Rocket, but you need to slow your roll, or this whole thing will go ass up,” Growler spoke beside him.

Rationally, Rocket knew his teammates were right, and that there was no way Fort was going to let the situation get out of hand. Rocco and Phantom

were still on the roof, listening and watching. They wouldn't let anything happen, either.

Irrationally, though, it was hard to sit still and let it all unfold in front of him.

"You're full of shit. There's no way you want me to shoot you," Alfie scoffed, although Rocket noticed that his finger hadn't moved toward the trigger.

"What have I got to lose?" Rebecca shrugged. "You're not going to listen to whatever is being said to you."

As much as he hated what she was doing, Rocket admired Rebecca a hell of a lot for her gumption to stand up to Alfie. To challenge him in a way the man hadn't been expecting.

"Alfie, this situation can go two ways," Fort's voice entered the conversation. "You can walk out and live. Or you can try and shoot your way out, but I guarantee you won't make it out alive. And if by some small chance you did, you'd be facing life in prison for murder. So what's it going to be?"

Rocket heard the rest of his team move a little closer to the tablet they were watching the video feed on. Were they as surprised as he was that Fort had gone off-script in negotiating a hostage situation?

"Damn, that's a ballsy move," Bird muttered.

"No shit," scoffed Rocket. Yep, they were shocked too. There was a risk it could backfire, and the knowledge that Hank would get a shot off before Alfie could was the only thing that was preventing him from racing into the room and pulling Rebecca out. Not to mention, the second he stood, he'd be surrounded by his teammates, shoving his ass back in his seat.

On the screen, Alfie turned away from Rebecca and Lauren and a modicum of relief swept through him that at least the gun was no longer pointing at the women.

"It can't be this easy," Growler commented. "After all the time he's been holed up in that room, he's not going to walk out because of what Fort said. He's not that gullible."

As much as Rocket hated it, he had to agree with Growler. "If he was smart, he would. Then again, if he had any smarts, he wouldn't have walked into a Navy base hospital with a gun."

"How the fuck did he get a gun on base in the first place?" Bird shook his head in disgust.

"That's something for the powers that be to work out when this is all

over, but I wouldn't like to have been the ones on duty at the gate." Rocket studied the screen, waiting. Alfie hadn't moved, but Rebecca had stepped back to Lauren's side. She looked composed, but he would bet that her heart was racing. Hell, his was, and he wasn't even in the room, although he wanted to be.

Abruptly, Alfie turned and raised his gun. "Fuck! No!" Rocket cried out.

Immediately, Rocket shot to his feet and was out the door before anyone could stop him. Adrenaline pumped through him as he ran toward Lauren's room. He skidded to a halt when the unmistakable percussion of bullets rent the air.

His breath came in and out in ragged gasps. He couldn't move. Didn't want to move. He couldn't stop the picture of Rebecca lying on the ground in a pool of blood from imprinting itself on his mind.

Why had he let his anger at his mother color his life for so long?

Because of his stubbornness, he'd wasted time getting to know Rebecca. They could've had more than one successful date.

If she'd been hit, maybe it wasn't a fatal shot. Maybe she'd just been wounded. Although that wasn't good, the outcome was better.

"Rocket?"

Growler's voice pulled him out of the dark tunnel he'd fallen into.

"What?" he snapped. Now that he was aware of his surroundings again, the urgency to get to the room returned.

"She's okay."

Rocket stared at his friend, not quite comprehending what he'd heard. Or if he'd heard Growler correctly. "What?"

"Rebecca. She's fine. Hank got the shot off before Alfie could. He didn't kill him. He maimed him."

The words soaked into his brain.

Rebecca was okay.

Hank got a shot off first, just like they thought he could.

Rebecca was okay.

"She's okay?" Even though Growler had told him twice, he still needed confirmation.

"Yeah, man, she is."

Rocket was off, striding down the hallway. The closer he got to the room, the louder the buzz of conversation sounded. He rounded the corner and ignored the group of people outside the room. His only goal was to get in

there and get Rebecca.

* * *

ALL AROUND REBECCA, people swarmed. Alfie was groaning on the ground, clutching his leg. Beside her, Lauren was crying quietly. Military personnel flooded the room, yet she couldn't move.

Couldn't feel anything.

Her mind played over and over the moment Alfie raised his gun and pointed it directly at her. The look of malice in his eyes. The way his lips curled into a sinister smile. Each moment was burned into her psyche, never to be forgotten.

There was no pain radiating through her body, so she hadn't been shot. But she'd heard the bullets. There'd been more than one. If she hadn't been hit, then who had?

Who had hit Alfie? Where had that shot come from?

Thoughts tumbled and turned with the replay of images of the last few moments.

"Rebecca?"

Was someone calling her name? Or was her mind playing tricks on her?

"Florence?"

Rebecca blinked, and the sounds from the room thundered back into her consciousness. She gasped and took another breath. And then another.

"Florence!"

There was only one person who called her that. She blinked again, and then she saw him. Standing in front of her. Concern highlighting his blue eyes.

Is he really here? Or am I dreaming? Has this whole thing been a dream?

"Adam?"

"Yeah, Florence, it's me."

The tears she'd managed to keep at bay during the whole ordeal welled up and one trickled down her face. "You're here."

"I am." His thumb brushed it away, a silent question shining in his eyes—*can I hold you?*

She nodded, still wrapping her head around the fact that he was in the

room with her. In the back of her mind, she'd hoped he'd find her. But all her thoughts had been on trying to survive the ordeal she'd found herself in.

Adam's arms closed around her, bringing her flush against his hard body. A sense of safety surrounded her. She didn't want to cry, but being held close, with Adam's unique scent engulfing her, the floodgates opened, and she sobbed against his chest, letting all the emotions of the past few hours flow out of her. Adam said nothing—just held her tight. Giving her his strength.

Rebecca had no idea what was going on around her, but she heard Alfie's howl of pain. Were they transferring him to a gurney?

Someone touched her arm and she froze, choking on her sob as fear welled up. Had Alfie escaped while they were moving him? She wanted to run, but like earlier, the message wasn't getting from her brain to her feet.

"It's okay. You're safe. I've got you." Adam's soft words again pierced the cloud of fear around her and calmed her.

She lifted her head from his chest, sniffing inelegantly, to find Ellie standing next to them, concern highlighting her brown eyes. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

Rebecca shook her head. At least, she didn't think she was. Then again, she was numb, so there could be blood leaking from a bullet hole, and she wouldn't know. Although that didn't make sense. If she had been shot, Adam would've said something.

"Do you think you'll be up to talking to the authorities about what happened?" Ellie glanced over her shoulder and Rebecca's gaze followed the motion. Standing in the doorway was another group of tall men who she assumed were the Navy's police.

A shiver wracked her body at the thought of reliving what she'd gone through. "I don't know," she answered honestly.

"I can stay with you, if you'd like," Adam said quietly, his arm still anchored around her, and she was grateful for the support he was providing.

"You'd do that?" she questioned.

"For you, I'd do anything."

There was a wealth of meaning in his statement, but at the moment, she didn't have the brain space to unpack it all and process exactly what Adam meant by it.

"As much as I don't want to do this, I know that putting it off isn't a good idea either."

Now that the adrenaline spike had died down inside of her, and the haze of shock was settling down, Rebecca was feeling stronger. The tremors that had consumed her after the gunshots had all but disappeared.

Ellie looked between her and Adam, speculation rife in her gaze. When things returned to normal, she imagined her supervisor was going to have a ton of questions about her and Adam.

Questions she didn't know the answers to herself.

CHAPTER 16



ROCKET PULLED INTO REBECCA'S DRIVEWAY AND TURNED THE ENGINE OFF. Halfway to her house, Rebecca had fallen asleep. He wasn't surprised, as it was now close to midnight. It had been a fucking long day for her. But he was so damn proud of her, too, for the way she'd stayed strong during the interview with the base police.

They'd asked her the same questions again and again, just in different ways. It had been hard to stay quiet. As it was, they hadn't been happy with him being in the room with her, but there was no way he was going to let her go through that alone.

Now he had to wake her, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. But he wasn't about to fish around in her purse to find her house keys.

"Rebecca, we're home." He kept his voice low so as not to startle or frighten her. He also didn't want to touch her—even though his fingers itched to run down her smooth arm—for the same reason he hadn't raised his voice.

"Rebecca?" he tried again after she hadn't roused with his first attempt. "Time to wake up."

Still no response. He was going to have to touch her and hope that he didn't scare her or make her think she was back in that room with that psycho who'd held her at gunpoint.

"Florence, we're at your place." He reached across the console and brushed his fingers across the top of her hand. Tiny tingles of electricity coursed through him at the slight touch.

I need to pull my hand away.

The thought coalesced in his mind, but he couldn't make his hand leave hers. He didn't want to. He wanted to be able to touch her all the time.

“Adam? What?” Confusion colored her voice as she sat up a little straighter, causing her hand to slip out from under his. He mourned the loss.

“We’re sitting in your driveway. How about we get you inside?”

“Hmm? Yeah, okay.”

She went to reach for the door handle, but he placed his hand on her arm. “I’ll come get you.”

Rebecca nodded and slumped back, yawning deeply. She was still so out of it, and he wanted to gather her close and hold her for the whole night. That was a feeling he wasn’t used to and one he hadn’t experienced before.

Rocket wasn’t surprised Rebecca was still groggy. She’d slumped down in the seat the second they’d pulled out of the base and hadn’t moved the whole trip to her place. Her sleep had probably been heavy and emotional.

After getting out of the car, he rounded the front and opened her door. She looked at him, and in the muted glow of the car’s small interior light, the dark circles under her eyes seemed more pronounced.

His heart clenched, thinking how close she’d come to not sitting in his truck. Alfie had gotten a shot off, but because Hank had hit him a millisecond before he’d pulled the trigger, the bullet hit the wall instead of Rebecca.

Did she know how close she’d come to being hit? He wasn’t sure and he, for one, wasn’t planning on telling her.

“You ready?”

If things were different, he’d scoop her up in his arms and carry her inside. But after everything she’d been through, he couldn’t do that to her. He would keep her close, just in case.

“I think so.” She looked around the cab of the truck until her gaze alighted on her purse that he’d tucked at her feet.

Once she grabbed it, she twisted her legs around until they hung out of the truck. Rocket shifted so that he could offer her support if she needed it. She slid out, and the second her feet planted on the ground, her knees gave out.

“Whoa. I got you.” Rocket slipped an arm around her waist and tucked her against his side.

He maneuvered them away from the car so he could close the door, the slam causing Rebecca to flinch against him. “It’s just the door,” he reassured her.

“I don’t think I can move,” she murmured.

Rocket silently cursed Alfie for causing this beautiful woman so much

distress. Anger rippled through him, but he banked it down. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten Rebecca even more.

“I’ve got you. Always, Florence. Let me help you.”

“I’d like that.”

Without hesitation, he bent and did what he’d wanted to do from the second he opened her door. He lifted her up. Immediately, her arms looped around his neck and her head dropped to his shoulder. Even after everything she’d been through, her light floral scent teased his nostrils, and he breathed deeply, he himself comforted by the smell.

They reached her front door, and he reluctantly lowered her to the ground. He couldn’t unlock and open the door with her still in his arms. If she were more awake, he’d encourage her to do the tasks so that he could keep her close.

Maybe another time.

Once they got inside, it was as if being surrounded by her familiar belongings gave her the strength she’d been lacking. Her body relaxed, her shoulders not so close to her ears as they had been only seconds ago.

“Are you going to be all right by yourself?” Rocket wanted to stay, but he couldn’t invite himself—no matter how much he longed to.

The little confidence she’d gained from walking into her house appeared to float out of her like a snowflake falling from the sky. “I—I’m not sure.”

Her hesitation was all he needed. “If you’re comfortable with the idea, I can stay for a little while. Get you a warm cup of tea. Or fix you something to eat.”

His own stomach grumbled. No one had offered her any food while she was being interviewed, and as he had no plans to leave her alone during the interrogation, he hadn’t eaten, either.

“I’m not hungry, but tea sounds good.”

Rocket was pleased to hear her sound a little less groggy and more aware of what was going on around her.

“Point me in the direction of the kitchen, and I’ll fix you a pot.”

“Just go through there.” She pointed to the large opening behind him. “You’ll find everything in the pantry. I’m going to have a shower.”

“That’s a good idea. Don’t rush.”

Rebecca nodded and disappeared down the hallway and into the room at the end. The door clicked shut, and Rocket sighed out a breath.

Would she let him stay the night if he asked? The thought of walking out

and leaving her alone left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Even if he had to stay in his truck for the night, he would. Rebecca was his to protect now, and it was a job he was going to take very seriously.

* * *

STEAM CLOUDED the mirror and Rebecca wiped away the moisture, studying her reflection.

Dark smudges ringed her red, puffy eyes, the only physical sign visible from her ordeal. Emotionally, though, she was shaky. Once the warm water cascaded over her head, the tears had come again. She'd thought she'd cried herself out when Adam held her in Lauren's room. For a moment, she wished she was back in his arms now, and he was holding her as she let her emotions out.

A rush of warmth swept over her, recalling how safe she'd felt in his arms when he carried her the short way to her front door.

If only it hadn't taken her to be nearly killed for him to hold her like that. Was he only taking care of her out of some sense of obligation?

No, that didn't make sense. It wasn't like it was one of his teammates who'd shot at her. It was Lauren's former boyfriend who was responsible.

Rebecca closed her eyes, but Alfie's evil face filled her mind, and she opened them quickly and shook her head in an attempt to dislodge the memory. Although it would take a lot more than that for her to forget his face—in all likelihood, she never would.

A shudder ripped through her at the idea that she wouldn't be able to move forward after her ordeal. No matter how many hours of counselling it took, and she was happy to take it, she would move on from this. No way was she going to allow Alfie and his misguided sense of ownership rule her life.

Rage rose up from her belly, a welcome emotion after the numbing funk she'd fallen into. It felt good to feel something, even anger. She embraced the emotion and allowed herself to wallow in it.

But she wouldn't let it rule her life, either. Staying mad required more energy than she currently possessed, but it gave the impetus to finish drying herself and getting into the yoga pants and fluffy sweater she'd brought with her into the bathroom.

The aroma of toast greeted her as she walked out of her bedroom. Her

stomach grumble, her early thoughts of not being hungry disappearing in a second. Rebecca padded her way to the kitchen, where she found Adam standing with a frypan in hand and a towel flung over his shoulder.

The way he moved, it looked as if he'd been in her kitchen a dozen times, and not tonight being his first time.

As if sensing her watching him, he turned, a gentle smile on his face. Her heart pitter-pattered in her chest, and the rush of anger that had hit in the bathroom and spurred her into action simmered down until it was a glowing ember. Not put out, but ready to be fanned to life again if she should need it.

"Something smells good." She crossed the threshold and sat down at the small two-seater table tucked into the corner of the room. Two plates and cutlery adorned the top.

"It's nothing special, just scrambled eggs with mushrooms on toast. I know you said you weren't hungry but I figured I'd make something anyway. Seeing as it's pretty late, I thought you wouldn't want anything too heavy to eat before you went to bed."

"Smelling the food made me realize I hungry. Eggs and toast sound perfect, and I'm glad you're joining me. I'd feel bad if I ate and you didn't," she said, a sudden bout of shyness hitting her.

He nodded and slipped a plate in front of her. Steam wafted from the light, fluffy eggs, and she couldn't wait to dive in. Before she could pick up her knife and fork, Adam placed a teapot and cup on the table.

"Here you go. It's chamomile, so should help you relax and sleep."

"How did you know I always have a cup of this before I go to bed?" As far as she could recall, they'd hadn't discussed their favorite beverages when they'd had their one successful dinner date.

Was that only last night?

So much had happened in the intervening twenty-four hours.

"Lucky guess."

She poured out a cup, the sweet aroma teasing her. She sighed when she took a swallow, the warm liquid floating through her. "This is good. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Mom always said there was nothing like a good cup of tea to make you feel better. Of course, I'd tell her that coffee was the elixir of the gods. And we'd banter for a few minutes."

Rebecca watched Adam. His eyes had clouded in memory as if this was the first time he'd remembered something good with his mother.

Had he buried all the wonderful memories he'd shared with her after her deathbed confession? With what he'd told her about losing all trust, she wouldn't be surprised that he'd done just that. But hopefully, he was now letting himself remember that not everything was bad with the life he'd shared with his mom.

Plus, she recalled that Shelly had also shared that tidbit of information with her—usually after Adam had visited her.

Rebecca laugh softly. “She told me about your love of coffee and how she could never get you to try tea, when I would fix a pot of her favorite flavor.”

Adam looked like he wanted to say something, but instead, he shoveled some eggs into his mouth.

Was he going to ask her if his mom said more about him?

Or was he going to say he didn't want her to talk about his mom?

The food, which looked tempting only seconds ago, didn't look so much now, but she forced herself to eat. If she didn't, she'd probably wake up in the morning with a raging headache and feeling nauseous.

For the next few minutes, they ate in silence, Rebecca's appetite slowly returning with each mouthful. She was glad she'd persevered; otherwise, she would've missed out.

When she'd finished, she placed her utensils together in the middle of the plate. “That was delicious.”

“Thanks.”

Damn, they were back to one-word answers now. She was too exhausted, though, to make a big fuss about it.

With a full belly, exhaustion engulfed her, and she yawned so big, her jaw clicked. As much as she wanted to crawl into bed, she also couldn't leave her kitchen a mess. It was one of her quirks—she had to go to bed with her countertops clear, cooktop and sinks sparkling, and the dishwasher humming quietly as it ran.

It wouldn't take her long to clean up, and she couldn't make Adam do it as he'd cooked for her.

“What do you think you're doing?” he asked, when she stood and reached over to gather up his plate.

“Cleaning up before I go to bed.”

“If you think I'm going to let you do the dishes when you're about to pass out, you need to banish that thought right now.”

At least he was speaking more than one word now. “It’s fine. You cooked, I clean.”

Adam pierced her with an unmoving look. “Not happening.”

“Be reasonable. You’re exhausted too. You’ve probably been up longer than me. And you have to get up”—she glanced at the clock on the oven, noting that it was almost two in the morning—“in a couple of hours.”

“Doesn’t matter. You need to rest. It won’t take me long to clean up, and then I’ll leave.”

Then I’ll leave.

The words echoed in her mind and tendrils of fear crept up from her feet, twining around her until she couldn’t move.

She would be alone.

In her house.

Alone.

What if Alfie got released?

Yes, he’d been shot and was likely in the hospital under guard, but what if he wasn’t? What if it was just a flesh wound?

Fingers brushed against her hand, and she startled, jumping back to put distance between her and whoever touched her.

“Hey, it’s just me.”

“I don’t want you to go,” she whispered before wrapping her arms around Adam’s wide shoulders. “I don’t want to be alone.”

CHAPTER 17



ROCKET SHIFTED ON THE BED IN REBECCA'S SPARE ROOM. HE HADN'T BEEN able to ignore the plea in her voice when she'd freaked out after he'd said he was going to leave.

He hadn't wanted to go in the first place. The thought of walking out and leaving her alone ate away at him like acid through fabric. He hadn't felt like he could ask to stay, though, not after the way he'd blown hot and cold so often with her. But the need to protect her had been strong, so agreeing to spend the night had been a no-brainer when she'd expressed her fears.

Now, though, knowing she was only a few feet away from him, his earlier exhaustion had disappeared the minute he laid his head on the pillow. His body vibrated with unused energy and the constant urge to look in on her to see if she was okay.

Having a sleepless night wasn't something new to him. There were times on missions when he and his teammates had to stay awake to gather intel. Fortunately, Fort had texted him to let him know, if he didn't make PT, it would be fine.

Rocket turned the pillow over, hoping the cooler side of it would help. He shut his eyes and tried one of the techniques a therapist had given him and his teammates if they ever suffered from prolonged insomnia.

After breathing in slowly, he held it for a heartbeat before letting the air whoosh out of him. The tension in his shoulders eased. The restlessness in his legs reduced and his mind focused on counting the breaths in and out.

He was drifting off when he heard it—the slightest whisper of fabric. Feet padding softly over the tiled floor. Then the scent hit him—roses.

Rocket sat up and found Rebecca standing in his doorway. "Florence?"

You okay?"

She shook her head, but remained by the door. Throwing off the covers, he got up and closed the distance between them with two quick strides.

"Talk to me," he said softly, noting the purplish marks under her eyes seemed even darker than when she'd gone to bed.

"Ev—" She swallowed. "Every time I close my eyes, all I see is that angry man, that...Alfie. The look of utter hatred in his eyes and the gun pointed straight at me."

Rocket reached out and brushed his fingers across her cheek. How he wanted to pummel that patient's deranged ex for causing this beautiful woman so much pain. "He can't hurt you now."

"How can you know that for sure? What if he gets out? What if he comes after me again? Finds out where I live? He knows where I work. He could follow me home any day I'm working."

With every word, her voice rose until she was almost shouting.

"Rebecca!" He raised his voice, too, not in a way to scare her, but loud enough to get her attention. "You are safe. He won't be able to get on base again. He's under guard at the hospital. He's going to be charged with numerous offenses, and his bail will be so high, no one will be able to get him out."

Rocket wasn't sure if he was correct on the last point, but he was right about the others. Alfie's picture would be put in the guardhouse at the entrance to the base. No way would he be getting past again.

Her shoulders slumped, and she swayed on her feet. "I want to believe that."

He curled his fingers around her shoulders, holding her gently. "Believe it. I'll keep you safe. You have my word. I won't let anything happen to you."

Those were bold statements he was making, but he would do anything to make them come true. Even if that meant he'd camp out in her driveway for the foreseeable future.

Unless you go on a mission, like the one that's coming up.

The fact he and his team could be called up any day now was one he didn't allow himself to think too much about. They hadn't received a call yet, and until they did, he wasn't going to borrow trouble.

"I'm so tired." Rebecca's head dropped to his chest, and he held her tight against him.

Everything about having her in his arms felt so right. She fit perfectly, and little by little, the barrier he'd put around himself and his heart since his mom's betrayal was crumbling. The anger that had given him the idea that all women should be tarred with the same brush seemed irrational now. Seeing Rebecca face down that gunman, even taunt him to shoot her, had enlarged the cracks that had started to appear when he'd seen her at Aces after he'd kicked her out of his hospital room.

If he could give her the comfort and security she needed, then he would do it for however long she wanted him to it.

Maybe forever?

Yeah, maybe.

"I feel so safe in your arms," she murmured sleepily, her body getting heavier and heavier in his arms as she relaxed.

He shuffled them to the bed. "Come on, Florence. Get some sleep."

Rocket knew he should take her back to her room, to her own bed, but she was practically asleep already, and he didn't want to wake her.

With gentle movements, he laid her down and pulled the covers up. He'd go sleep on the couch or grab a cup of coffee and watch the sunrise.

Leaning over, he pressed a soft kiss on her cheek and smoothed a lock of hair that had fallen over her face away so that it didn't irritate her.

"Stay," she mumbled and grabbed his hand.

Did she really say "stay," or was he having fanciful thoughts?

"Sleep now. I'll be nearby when you wake."

That was him staying, wasn't it? If she had, in fact, asked him to stay.

"No...stay...bed."

Okay, then. He'd heard those words clearly, and if it made her feel secure to have him on the bed with her, then that's what he'd do. Walking around to the other side, he lay down on top of the covers. No matter how much he wanted to get under them and haul her close, so that her back rested against his chest, he wouldn't. But he could hold her with the barrier of the comforter between them.

He settled behind her, resting his hand on her hip bone, and breathed deep, her sweet scent filling him. Nothing in his life had ever felt as good as this moment. He had Rebecca in his arms. Her breathing had evened out, signaling she'd fallen asleep.

If his presence kept away her demons, then he would be there for as long as she needed him.

* * *

WARMTH SURROUNDED REBECCA, and she stretched before snuggling further down under the covers. Another scent mingled with the rose body wash she used. A scent she didn't recognize, but one that cloaked her in a sense of safety.

She squirmed a bit more before becoming fully aware that a heavy weight lay across her stomach. Aware of the small puffs of warm air against her neck. Aware of the presence behind her. A presence that only increased that level of safety she'd experienced when the first tendrils of conscious thought spiked her mind.

Adam.

Bits and pieces of the day and night before came back, and she recalled everything.

Alfie.

Being held at gunpoint.

Bullets being fired.

Crying in Adam's arms.

Coming to Adam's room when she couldn't sleep.

Adam putting her to bed and her asking him to stay.

"You're remembering, aren't you?" Adam's sleep-laden voice washed over her like a warm shower.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

It was easier to talk at the moment without looking at him. She shouldn't feel embarrassed about what she'd said and done the previous evening. Her emotional state had been so out of control. Her need for human comfort had been high. All understandable after the trauma she'd experienced.

"You went from being relaxed in my arms to being as stiff and hard as some of the rocks I had to carry during BUD/s training."

Rebecca sighed and willed herself to relax, but now that she was awake, her mind was buzzing like a mosquito on a hot summer's day. "Sorry."

"Don't be. You went through a hell of a lot yesterday and forgetting that is going to take some time."

"Yeah, I know. I'll talk to Ellie about making an appointment with one of the therapists on staff."

Behind her, she felt Adam's nod of agreement. "There are some good ones. I can recommend Dr. Parker. He lets you talk and explain things in your

own way, even if it seems like you're rambling."

The urge to see Adam overwhelmed her, and she rolled over. His hair was all mussed and his five-o'clock shadow had darkened. He looked warm and snuggly, and she took a second to imprint the moment into her brain so that she wouldn't forget.

She'd like to wake up often in his arms, but they weren't at that stage of their relationship. Heck, they hadn't even shared a proper kiss.

And why was she thinking about kisses and Adam when, only a few minutes ago, she was struck with fear from remembering the day before?

Damn. She really did need to speak to someone to get her emotions back in order.

Therapist. Adam was saying he could recommend one.

Right. That was the reason she'd rolled over. She'd wanted to see if he'd been telling the truth or if was he just saying that to make her feel better. Which was entirely ridiculous. He wouldn't pluck a name out of thin air and say the doctor was good. "You have experience with Dr. Parker?"

At least she sounded sensible and clear, unlike the jumbled jigsaw of a mess her brain was in at present.

"Yep. I do. Helped me deal with some of the stuff I've seen while away on missions."

Did she dare ask him the two questions that were on the tip of her tongue? If she did, would she ruin the moment between them? Would it bring back memories Adam didn't want to recall?

"Ask whatever is going through your mind, Florence," Adam whispered as he ran his thumb up and down between her eyebrows.

There was no point in asking how he knew her mind was tumbling over with questions and doubts. They may have only spent a short time together, but Adam could read her better than her own parents had been able to.

Throwing caution to the wind, she steeled herself to accept the consequences—no matter what they ended up being. "Did you see him after your mom died?"

The arm lying across her waist stiffened and his expression closed down. Dammit. She'd known it was a risk, but her need to know had outweighed what those risks could be.

"No, I didn't." His response was clipped, and while the tension still consumed his body, he hadn't bolted from the bed. She considered that a slight win.

His answer wasn't unexpected. Though if he'd talked it through with someone, it probably would've helped him immensely, keeping it to himself was a form of self-protection. He may not have said it in so many words, but she suspected he was also ashamed of himself. Ashamed that he hadn't somehow worked out that he wasn't biologically connected to the man who was his father.

Adopted children would tell him that blood doesn't make a familial connection. Love isn't conditional on having the same DNA running through him. The man who Adam knew as his father was his father in every sense of the word. And in time, she'd tell him that, but now wasn't that time.

"What about after your most recent incident when you got shot? Did you speak to him about that?"

Why was she pushing him hard? It wasn't any of her business, but the more she talked about him, the less she recalled her own brush with death.

"No, I didn't talk to him about that, either. I didn't feel the need." While he was still holding her, he wasn't present. It was as though he'd emotionally stepped away.

She wasn't a therapist, and he'd answered her questions, even though she guessed he hadn't wanted to.

Rebecca didn't want the physical distance to grow again between them. He'd been there when she'd needed him, and she hoped that, when he needed her, he would come to her, and she could provide the same sense of safety and comfort he'd given her.

She reached up and rested her hand against his cheek, his bristles tickling her palm. "Thank you for answering my questions. And for being here last night when I needed you. I don't know what I would've done had you not stayed."

Not sleep...that would be for certain. Before she'd sought him out, she'd tossed and turned so much her comforter had fallen off her bed and her sheets had tangled between her legs.

As if her thanks had unlocked the gate he'd closed on his emotions, his body relaxed against hers, and he smiled. A smile that warmed her from the inside out and awoke blossoms of desire within her. "No place I'd rather be."

CHAPTER 18



WHEELS UP IN 24 HOURS.

Rocket stared at the message on his phone and closed his eyes in frustration. He'd known it was coming. Hell, they all had, but it had never bothered him as much as this one did.

Missions were part of the job. Ridding the world of as much evil as possible was one of the reasons he'd become a SEAL. During his mom's illness, going away had provided him with a reprieve from seeing the downward spiral of her health.

This time, though, it was too soon after Rebecca's trauma for him to leave her.

Two days.

That's all it had been and in those two days, when he hadn't been at work, he'd been with her. The hospital had given her a week's leave, and she was using that time to heal herself. The first time she'd had an appointment with the therapist he'd held her as she cried—a good thing, according to her therapist. Letting the fears and emotions out was healthy. For some people, it was hitting a punching bag. Others, it was chopping wood. But for most people, it was crying.

Who would hold her after her next appointment?

"Everything okay?" He looked up to find the woman who took up so much of his brain space standing in front of him, two bowls of steaming pasta in her hands.

The aroma of garlic, tomato, and meat wafted to him, and his stomach grumbled in appreciation. He grabbed a bowl from her, and she sat next to him. There was a perfectly good table in her kitchen they could sit at, but he

liked that she seemed to enjoy the informality of eating dinner in the living room instead.

“I’m leaving on a mission tomorrow.” He twirled some pasta around his fork, but didn’t bring it to his mouth. He was busy watching Rebecca for her reaction.

Her fingers gripped her own fork tightly, her eyes closing briefly. When she opened them, she straightened her shoulders as if she was ready to face the world and all it had to offer.

“I’ll be fine. You don’t need to worry about me. I turned a corner with my therapist today. I’m good.”

The corners of his lips turned up at her display of bravado, and he’d have believed it if her voice hadn’t wavered at the end. “I have no doubt. Besides, I’m sure Imogene and the others will bring you into their fold, and make sure you’re okay while we’re away.”

Bird had mentioned that the minute he told Imogene what had happened, she’d been ready to bolt out the door to come to Rebecca’s place. Bird had had to convince her that Rebecca was being well looked after.

She smiled. “Yeah, I’ve gotten non-stop texts from everyone. The group chat has been blowing up on a regular basis. You want to know why?”

Rocket could just imagine the texts that had been flying between the women now. And he would bet that he and Rebecca were the main topic. Strangely, he didn’t mind one bit.

“I can guess, but hit me with it.” He forked more pasta into his mouth.

“Well, let’s see...there were the obligatory ‘*Are you okay?*’ texts. Then there were the ‘*You and Rocket, huh?*’ ones. Finally, the ‘*When are we meeting up so we can gri—um, chat?*’” she finished on a laugh.

Rocket laughed, as well, his suspicions confirmed. “They mean well.”

He may not have appreciated the women when he’d first met them. And had been less than enthusiastic when his friends had found them, but almost dying had been a huge wake-up call for him. He should apologize for his behavior, and maybe on the flight, he would. Although none of the guys had ever given him any indication that’s what they wanted from him.

“Are you okay?” Soft fingers brushed his where he gripped his fork.

“Fine. Why?” His voice was brusque, and after all he’d just been thinking, Rebecca didn’t deserve his snappiness. “Sorry. I was just thinking about how I’ve been acting the last year or so. How I need to tell the guys I’m sorry for being such a jerk.”

Rebecca placed her empty bowl on the table in front of them before shifting on the couch, so she sat cross-legged and faced him. “I’m guessing you haven’t told them what your mom said.”

Rocket clutched his dinner bowl as if it were a life preserver. He didn’t know why he needed to act, say, or do anything different around Rebecca. She’d seen him at his worst. Experienced his vitriol. And still, she’d welcomed him into her home.

He could be raw and himself with her and know that she wouldn’t pass judgment. “No, I didn’t tell them. I didn’t know what to do or what to think anymore. As I said, everything I thought I knew about my life was wrong. The woman I trusted had lied to me for almost thirty years.”

“They wouldn’t pass any judgment on you or your mom, Adam. I may have only met your teammates a couple of times, but I know they’d support you with whatever you were going through. But I guess you shut them out and distanced yourself, because you thought, what if they weren’t really your friends? What if they were just being nice to you because you were a teammate?”

Fuck. How could she read me so well?

Until this moment, he hadn’t wanted to face up to the fact that those had been the thoughts that had gone through his mind at the time. Irrational as they were, now that he really thought about it.

He would die for his teammates, and he knew they would do the same for him. They all looked out for each other and how many times had they approached him? Asked him what was wrong, and he’d blown them off? On occasion, had been downright rude to them.

Yet they hadn’t banished him. They hadn’t turned their backs. They’d yelled at him, but they’d stayed by his side. They’d been upset with him when he wouldn’t allow them to see him. And the relief on their faces when he’d finally given permission for them to come to his hospital room had been visceral, like he could almost touch it.

“You’re right. Shame is a powerful emotion, and as well as betrayal, I felt shame too. I’d shared so many stories about what I’d done with my dad—like the fishing trips we used to go on. How he taught me to shoot. Tolerated my brief foray into Scouts. And I saw all of those good times as lies when they weren’t.”

“Adam, I don’t presume to understand the emotions you went through when your mom told you her truth. I did see the devastation on your face, and

I wanted to comfort you as much as I comforted your mom when her pain levels were unbearable. I also know that me being there, hearing what was said, was something that you struggled with.” Rebecca reached out and laid her hand on his thigh. He leaned down, putting his bowl on the ground. He placed his hand over hers. Her soft smile warmed him, and his heart stuttered in his chest. “But it didn’t change how I thought about you. You were a good son. A son Shelly was so proud of. Yes, she was worried every time you went away, but she talked about you constantly.

“And regardless if your father knew the truth or not, those memories you made together were real. Even the ones when you were all together as a family. Those family trips you went on. They weren’t false or faked. Your mom loved you fiercely. And I have to believe your father did too.”

Rocket let Rebecca’s words seep into his soul, filling the crevices his mother’s betrayal had left him with. They echoed the realization he’d come to himself. A little later than he should’ve, but he’d gotten there. “I know. I came to the same conclusion myself recently.”

Her smile widened, brightening the room—which was impossible—yet, that’s how he felt, as if his world and this room had gotten lighter. “I’m glad. I suppose you’ll have to leave soon to go home and get packed?”

It was the last thing he wanted to do, but Rebecca was right. He needed to get home and get organized. He always had a bag ready to go at a moment’s notice, but he needed to prepare his house because he didn’t know how long he was going to be away. His neighbor was good about keeping an eye on it. Hopefully, the trip wouldn’t be a long one, but things were so up in the air with this particular mission that anything was possible.

“Yeah, I probably should head out.”

But he made no move to get off the couch. To reach down to put on his boots, gather the things he’d brought over to her place, and walk out the door. As if she felt the same as him, Rebecca’s hand tightened around his.

“Is it wrong for me to say that I don’t want you to go?” Her thumb skimmed the top of his hand as shafts of desire lanced through him.

What would she do if he gathered her close and kissed her until they both couldn’t breathe?

“No, because I should get up and get going, but I can’t. I don’t want. Even with my mom extremely sick, when it came to me leaving to go on a mission, I didn’t hesitate. I grabbed my bags and left. This time, though...” He gave into his needs and tugged her close so that she straddled his lap.

Immediately, his cock hardened behind his zipper.

They sat there, gazing at each other, her hands resting on his chest and his on her waist. When her tongue darted out and swiped across her bottom lip, he couldn't hold back any longer.

Cupping the back of her head, he leaned forward. Rebecca hadn't moved. Hadn't pulled back. Her fingers tightened around his shirt, and she closed the distance between them, pressing her lips against his.

Tingles burst through him from the single touch. Her lips were soft and plump. Angling his head, he deepened the kiss, his tongue teasing the seam of her mouth, willing her to open to him.

Her lips parted on a groan, and he thrust his fingers through her hair, the silky softness of the strands cascading over his hand. Over the last couple of days, he tried hard not to imagine kissing her. He'd taken a couple of cold showers before heading off to work because when he'd come back to her place from PT, she'd been all sexy and sleepily rumped, and he'd gotten hard the second he saw her.

At least he would be able to recall what it felt like to have her in his arms. To have her lips brushing against his. Have her softness brushing up against his hardness. It would keep him going until he got back to her—and he would. He would do everything in his power to keep himself safe. Be more aware of what was going on around him. Every mission, he was always vigilant, but now he'd be even more so.

Now he understood when the other guys took a few seconds longer than they ever had before to gauge the situation. He never said it out loud, but their hypervigilance had gotten on his nerves. That wouldn't happen anymore.

Reluctantly, he pulled away, but rested his forehead against hers, his hand running up and down her back in a sweeping motion.

“Will you come back here tonight?” Rebecca whispered, her question answering a call deep inside of him he hadn't even known existed.

“I'd love to, Florence.”

CHAPTER 19



REBECCA, PROPPED ON ONE ELBOW, WATCHED AS ADAM SLEPT BESIDE HER. When he'd come back from his house, she'd already been in her bed—unable to sleep.

He'd tiptoed past her room to go into the spare room, but she'd called out and asked him if he would stay in her bed.

He'd asked if she'd had another nightmare, which she hadn't, but she'd just shrugged, and so he'd dumped his bag in the spare room, gone to the bathroom, and had then come back to her.

They'd done nothing but hold each other. In some ways, it was more intimate than actually making love. They hadn't reached that point in their relationship yet, because everything was still too new. Maybe if he weren't going away, things might be different. They'd have time to go on more dates and build the intimacy that came with taking the next step.

Although, some may say the two of them sleeping in each other's arms was progressing the relationship. Yes, there was a certain amount of trust in giving yourself over to someone to hold you while you were at your most vulnerable.

Last night and the night after her hostage situation were nights she treasured because they were the ones where she and Adam had slept together.

She didn't know when he had to wake up, but she hoped it wouldn't be too soon. Rebecca knew she should try and get back to sleep herself, but now that she was awake, she didn't want to waste a moment of the time they had together—even if he was sleeping.

"I can feel you watching me," he murmured, cracking one eye open.

Embarrassment should be sweeping through her at getting caught, but she

couldn't make herself feel that emotion. "I am. And I'm not going to say sorry."

He reached up and pulled her down so that her head rested against his chest. He was so warm that she snuggled closer, the steady beat of his heart reassuring. "Wouldn't want you to."

"What time do you have to leave?" she asked after they'd been lying together quietly for a minute.

"I need to be on base at oh-eight hundred. We'll go over the parameters of the mission. Work out a few game plans, and then we'll get on the plane."

"Can I ask where you'll be going?"

He stilled beneath her. "You can, but I can't tell you. This is one aspect of my job which can be frustrating for some. Our missions are top secret. We can be sent to places where we're not supposed to be. Do things that have the potential to cause international incidents, but bring safety to those affected."

"I understand. Thank you for explaining." She tapped her fingers on his chest. "I know this is vastly different, but if anyone you knew came to the hospital, I wouldn't be able to tell you their treatment plan or their injuries, because of patient confidentiality. I won't ask again. I'll worry each time you go, but I won't expect or demand you explain to me what you did or what you're going to do."

Rebecca jammed her mouth shut as what she'd said sunk in. She'd spoken as if they had a future together. As if they were embarking on a relationship. As if she expected him to come back to her when he returned.

Her eyes drifted shut when he pressed a soft kiss on her head. "That means a lot, Florence."

They lapsed into another silence. Rebecca, hypnotized by Adam's warmth and the comfort of being in his arms, floated between asleep and awake.

How she wished she had the power to freeze time. To ensure that this moment would never end. Adam would be safe from danger.

Even though she said she was okay with not knowing where he was going, and she was, the thought of what had happened to him the last time he'd been on a mission hit her hard. How he'd been lucky to come home at all.

"Promise me you'll be careful." Damn, she hated how needy she sounded.

He breathed deeply, her head rising in tandem with where it rested against

his chest. “I will do everything I can to be safe. I always do.”

Rebecca noticed that he didn't *promise* to be careful. She supposed that making promises wasn't something a SEAL did. Considering their job and the situations they went into, there was no guarantee anything would work out the way it was supposed to—no matter how careful they were.

Could she accept the “no promises”? Did she have a choice? Being with Adam was something she wanted more than she'd thought she would ever want anything. Whatever he gave her, in terms of when he went on a mission, she'd take. Outside of that, she knew it would be different.

“That's all I ask for.” Rebecca tightened her hold on him, not wanting to let go, but knowing she had to.

“I should get up and get going.” Like the previous evening, Adam didn't make a move to get out of her bed. Was it as hard for him to break the tenuous connection they were building as it was for her? “Why is it so fucking hard to move?” he said after another five minutes had passed.

“I don't know. All I know is that I don't want to let you go.”

Rebecca couldn't believe how she was acting. She'd never been this needy with a guy before, but with Adam, everything felt different. She couldn't explain it. If she could, then she wouldn't feel so discombobulated about her reaction to him leaving.

Finally, though, the little bubble that had encased them burst, and Adam shifted, his sense of duty and training obviously having kicked in.

Rebecca scooted away from the warmth of his body, and he slid out of bed and wordlessly headed into the bathroom. Reaching out, she grabbed the pillow his head had been on and tugged it tight to her, inhaling his scent, drawing comfort from it.

Another out-of-character action from her.

“Okay, time to stop wallowing. You're stronger than this.” Saying the words out loud gave her the kick in the butt she needed, and she threw the covers back and padded to the kitchen. The least she could do was send him off with a coffee and maybe some scrambled eggs.

The toast had just popped up when he wandered into her kitchen. The clock on the wall showed 6:45 a.m., so he wouldn't have to leave for another thirty or forty minutes. Plenty of time for him to eat.

“Hey, I fixed you some breakfast.” She smiled over her shoulder as she arranged the toast on a plate before piling eggs on top.

“Thanks. They look good.”

“Do you want a coffee? Or I’ve got juice.”

Could she sound any more polite?

“Wouldn’t mind some juice.” Adam sat and pulled the plate toward him, his movements sure and relaxed, as if they’d done this a hundred times before. And, in a way, they had. Not a hundred, but he’d been staying at her place for a few days, so he was comfortable around her house.

She poured a glass of juice for him and one for herself and sat beside him.

“You’re not eating?” he asked.

“I’ll have something a little later. I sent a message to Ellie while you were getting ready, saying that I want to get back to work. She said to come in for an afternoon shift.”

Adam paused in his eating and studied her. Rebecca met his gaze. Yes, she’d been given the week off, but with Adam going away, she knew she needed something to keep her mind off what he was doing. And while it would be difficult to put on her scrubs and go back to the same floor of the hospital where she’d been held hostage, the sooner she got back to it, the better.

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

Rebecca was pleased he hadn’t tried to talk her out of it. Or say that it was too soon.

“Yes, it is.”

He nodded, but there was a hint of...worry in his gaze. “You know yourself better than I do. If you say you’re ready and it’s what you want, then I’m supporting you all the way. Even with me not being here.”

Rebecca reached across the table and grabbed hold of his hand, giving it a quick squeeze. “Thank you.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were standing at her front door, her emotions clogging her throat. She swallowed, while blinking rapidly, so Adam couldn’t see how saying goodbye was stretching her thin.

“I’ve never had anyone to say goodbye to before leaving on a mission.” Adam confessed, as he took both her hands in his.

“Not even your mom?”

He shook his head. “By the time I became a SEAL, I was living on base. Had been for a few years. Then I got my own place. I would send Mom a text or give her a call, but that was it. Sometimes, we have short notice, so driving over there wasn’t an option. I think she preferred it that way too.”

“I’m glad I get to see you off.”

Adam pulled her tight and she breathed his pine scent in, committing it to memory. “Be safe,” she mumbled against his chest.

“Always.”

She lifted her head, and their gazes met a second before their lips crashed together. Rebecca clung to his shoulders, her mouth opening beneath his. Adam’s arms tightened around her, and she ran her hands up and down his back.

Desire swirled around her, and Adam’s hard dick pressed against her stomach. The need to reach down and stroke him was strong. But what was the point in starting something they couldn’t finish?

The need for air had them pulling apart. The only sound around the foyer was their ragged breathing.

“When I get back, I’m going to pick up from here, and I’m not going to stop.”

A shiver rippled down her spine at the intensity of his declaration. “I want that too.”

Adam’s nostrils flared, and he pulled her in for another the kiss, this one gentler than the one they’d just shared. A kiss that promised so much, and she couldn’t wait for him to fulfill that vow.

After he pulled away, he rested his forehead against hers, the action fast becoming one of her favorites. He reached for the door and pulled it open, taking a step out before turning back to her. “Bye, Florence.”

Her heart clenched at his nickname for her. “Bye, Rocket.”

His smile lit her up, as if her calling him the name everyone else did brought him joy. “I like hearing that coming from your lips.”

Adam brought his fingers up to his mouth before placing them over hers. Then he was gone, striding down the path toward his truck.

Rebecca stood, gazing out at the street, long after his truck had disappeared from view.

CHAPTER 20



ROCKET WIPED THE SWEAT OUT OF HIS EYES. THEY'D BEEN HIKING THROUGH rough terrain in northern Pakistan. Nothing was going right with this mission—the same thing that had been happening the last couple of missions. It was like every decision they made was the wrong one—even with all the contingency plans they had in place.

He'd lost count of how long they'd been away. He'd stopped paying attention when they'd hit a full month. Every time they believed they were close enough to the band of rebels they were searching for, they'd find out they were too late and the rebels had moved on. The group was always one step ahead.

Fort held up a closed fist before crouching down, gun ready to take a shot. The rest of the team did the same. Rocket slowed his breathing, so his heart rate would settle, and strained to see if he could make out any sounds. Something had made Fort stop.

A faint sound came to the left of where they'd hunkered down. Behind him, Growler tapped Rocket's boot. He glanced back to see that Growler was pointing in the direction of the slight noise. He acknowledged his teammate, letting him know he'd heard it too.

With some quick hand signals they'd created as a team, they began a slow crawl toward the sound. Adrenaline spiked through Rocket. There was no telling what was going to greet them.

It wouldn't be friendly, of that they were sure.

Their mission was to take out the leader of the rebel group. Intel suggested that once he was gone, the small band would break up. From the reports they'd received prior to leaving, Sayed Khamil had coerced the

villagers he'd stumbled upon to join his cause. His methods hadn't left them with any other choice. Once Sayed was taken out, they'd be free to go back to their lives—at least, the team hoped they would. Who knows what their thought processes were like now? Sayed could've used the time to brainwash them to his way of thinking.

They had to be prepared for anything.

The sound morphed into raised voices the closer they got. He and Growler shared a look—it sounded like no one was happy, which wasn't a good thing. Hot heads often created dangerous situation where someone wanted to get the better of someone else.

They would have to be careful to not get caught in any crossfire.

Fort signaled for them to fan out around the small campsite they'd stumbled upon. The voices hadn't stopped. If anything, the agitation coming from the group seeped through the foliage and cloaked itself around them.

Rocket rolled his shoulder and wiped one sweaty hand down his leg before doing it with the other.

They were close to the camp and using their comms could give their position away. However, they were spread out, so using hand signals wouldn't be practical, which meant they had to take the risk. This wasn't the first time they'd been caught in a situation like this. They were smart enough to make sure they wouldn't be overheard during a lull in the argument coming from the camp.

“Does anyone have eyes on the target? Is he in the camp?” Fort whispered.

“Almost in position,” Hank huffed out. As their sniper, he would be getting into a higher position to be able to give them a better idea of what they were dealing with.

“They're clumped together so visual from the ground is not possible,” Cricket commented. “Things are getting heated between them. It looks like they're unhappy and could be staging their own coup.”

“Fuck, that's all we need,” Rocket said.

“I've got eyes on Sayed,” Hank murmured. “He's off to the left of the group, laughing, as if they're arguing is a bit of a joke to him.”

Rocket's fingers flexed around the butt of his rifle. He would've thought Sayed wouldn't want his band of men infighting. Then again, if they were fighting about him, his ego was probably enjoying it.

“Hank, do you have a clear shot?” Fort questioned.

“Affirmative.”

Rocket held his breath, waiting for Fort to give the directive to take the target out. This is what they were there for. By taking out Sayed, they’d take out a terrorist whose plan was to create friction between Pakistan and China which could be catastrophic. Preferably, the action would happen in the dead of night, when they could get in and out without being seen. If he took the shot now, it would put them all at risk.

“We need to wait this out. It’s too risky to take the shot. We know what we’re supposed to do. We keep watching, and then when the time is right, we take out the target.”

Fort’s response wasn’t unexpected and, Rocket suspected, didn’t surprise the rest of the team, either.

“Or we hope the ones arguing turn around and take him out and then we can get the hell out of here,” Bird commented.

That would be ideal. Rocket was anxious to get back. He wanted to know how Rebecca was doing. All the time he’d been away, she’d always been in the back of his mind. Had she had any more nightmares? How were her therapy sessions going? Was she even still attending them?

It hadn’t been easy, but he hadn’t let on to the team how much Rebecca had come to mean to him. Yes, they knew he’d been at her place prior to them leaving. All he’d told them was that she’d been a little spooked after the hostage situation and so he’d stayed—nothing that they all wouldn’t have done. Or, in fact, had done for their women.

Time progressed slower than a sloth. The argument had died down and they’d retreated, so they weren’t so close to the camp. Hank had stayed where he was in a tree, reporting back now and then with information.

They now knew that Sayed resided in the smallest tent at the back of the encampment. A leader taking the least obvious accommodation was a standard move. That way, he didn’t draw attention should another group come upon them. Not that that was going to happen. In all the time they’d been in this location, they hadn’t seen anyone else.

Darkness settled, and anticipation spiked, all of them aware that it was going to be “go time” soon. This was their chance, and they were going to take it and then bug out. They weren’t far from one of the extraction points they’d predetermined prior to leaving. It was a day’s hike, but once they were clear, they would radio back to arrange for pickup.

If everything went to plan, they’d be on a transport back home in three

days max.

“Everyone ready?” Fort’s call voice came over the comms.

“Fuck, yeah,” Rocket murmured, along with the rest of his team.

Rocket and Growler got into position. They’d been tasked with taking out Sayed. Hank would cover them from above, while the rest of the team would provide support and take out anyone that threatened the mission.

“I’ll take the east side, you take the west,” Growler whispered as they crept toward their target.

“Roger that.”

The plan was etched into Rocket’s brain. While they’d been waiting, he’d gone over it many times in his brain. They’d decided to slice the man’s throat, a quick and effective way to execute him. Quieter than a bullet to the head, even with a suppressor. In the still of the night, the *pop* would be unmistakable.

He approached the tent, light on his feet, fingers gripping the handle of his KA-BAR. Growler gave the nod, and Rocket sliced the side of the canvas fabric with one quick strike. Growler did the same on the other side.

Sayed was asleep on the bed, and relief swept through Rocket that the asshole hadn’t woken when they entered. In two steps, he was beside the man and a second later, gurgling filled the tent as Sayed grabbed at his bleeding neck.

Rocket didn’t wait to see what happened next. He was hauling ass out of there. “Mission complete. Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he hissed over the comms.

Growler came up beside him, and they spared the seconds it took to fist-bump each other before they headed in the direction they’d been assigned. The team would break up and then meet up again two miles from where they’d been, before heading as a group to the extraction point.

Everything had gone to plan, and while Rocket should be elated about that, he wouldn’t celebrate until he and his team were on the plane back to San Diego.

* * *

REBECCA GLANCED at her phone and smiled. The group text was blowing up because Penni had been to the doctor and had shared a 3D image of her and

Fort's baby.

REBECCA

Very cute. Baby looks like you.

PENNI

If I was a squashed prune...LOL

SHE CHUCKLED at Penni's quick response and pocketed her phone as she walked out of the staff room and headed toward the nurses' station to get briefed on the patients she'd be dealing with. Her phone buzzed a couple of times, but she ignored it. She would check it again when she was on her break.

"Hey, Ellie. What do you have for me today?" Rebecca asked as she reached the area. She noticed Missy standing on the other side of the counter and inwardly groaned. Looked like she'd be on shift with her. That ought to be fun—not.

"Hey, Bec. Pretty quiet day today, which is nice," Ellie commented.

"Don't jinx it, El," Rebecca said with a laugh. It was well-known that the moment anyone in a hospital said things were quiet, they turned chaotic on a dime.

Ellie shrugged and proceeded to hand out tablets to her, Missy, and the other two nurses who'd just come on duty.

She glanced at her patient list, surprised to see Lauren Beaufort on it. As far as she was aware, the woman she'd been held hostage with had been discharged six weeks ago. The week after Adam and his team had left.

As quickly as the thought of Adam entered her mind, she shoved it back into the compartment of her brain she'd allocated for him. Her heart clenched in fear, thinking about him. Wondering if he and his team were okay.

No news was good news—or so she kept telling herself. His scent had long since faded from the pillow he'd slept on, but she still hugged it close each night.

"Rebecca!"

She pulled herself out of the tunnel she'd fallen into and focused back on Ellie, who'd called her name.

"Are you okay?" her supervisor asked.

“Sorry, yeah. I noticed Petty Officer Beaufort is on my list. I thought she was discharged a while ago.”

Ellie nodded. “Yeah, she came in yesterday with a swollen arm. She has infection around the surgical wound. She thought it would go away, but she passed out at work. She should be fine in a couple of days.”

“Okay, I’ll go see her first.”

Ellie nodded and continued answering any questions the others had before sending them on their way.

Rebecca relaxed as she made her way to Lauren’s room. Her first thought, when she’d seen her name, had been that Alfie had found her and injured her again. She’d heard that a family member had made Alfie’s bail. The whole week after he’d been released, sleep had been elusive, and she’d jumped at every sound during the night. During one of her sleepless nights, she’d really thought about it, and concluded that she was safe in her home. Alfie didn’t know where she lived, and even though he was aware of where she worked, there was no way he’d be able to get past security on the base.

Just because she felt safer didn’t mean that she wasn’t constantly checking over her shoulder to make sure she wasn’t being followed. Or that she didn’t take different routes home from work—because she totally did.

Knocking gently on the door, Rebecca pasted a smile on her face when she heard Lauren’s, “Come in.”

Unlike the first time she’d seen the sailor, her face was clear of bruises, although there were slashes of pink highlighting her cheeks, which Rebecca attributed to the lingering fever from her infection.

“Hey, Lauren. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Oh,” she said before she burst into tears.

Rebecca rushed over to the bed and rested a hand on her lower leg. “Are you okay? Are you in pain?”

Lauren took some deep breaths and her crying slowed down. Rebecca squeezed her leg before reaching over to pluck a couple of tissues from the box resting on the side table and handing them to her.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren started. “I’m just so sorry. So sorry that you got tangled up with everything that happened with Alfie. Are you okay? I was worried, and no one would answer my questions when I asked about you.”

Rebecca glanced at her watch. While she had a few patients on her list, none of them were critical. If she was a few minutes late getting to them, then she was late. No way was she going to rush out of Lauren’s room. She pulled

up the chair and rested her hand on the blankets. “You have nothing to be sorry about. It wasn’t your fault at all. It could’ve been another one of the nurses here. It just happened to be me.”

“Intellectually, I know that, but emotionally, guilt is eating me up.” She twisted the top blanket between her fingers.

Guilt was an emotion that wasn’t easily disregarded. Nor easily overcome. “Guilt is insidious, and even though I’m sitting here telling you that you don’t have anything to be feeling guilty about, I know it’s not something you can easily forget.”

“My therapist says the same thing. Maybe now that I’ve seen for myself that you’re okay, it will help.”

“I hope so. I won’t lie and say it’s been easy, because it hasn’t. But I’ve also been seeing a therapist, and I decided that I wasn’t going to let Alfie and what he did define me.”

Lauren looked away for a moment before looking back at Rebecca, her blue eyes shimmering with tears. “He was so nice when we first started dating. He even decided to join the Navy so we could be together, but he didn’t make it through basic training, and his resentment grew. He began to take it out on me, and every time I tried to leave, it just got worse.”

Rebecca let the other woman talk, knowing it was therapeutic for her. That it was part of her healing process.

“You’re free of him now. Time to reclaim your life and make it your own.”

Lauren chuckled. “Yeah, that’s what my therapist told me too. She didn’t meet you outside and tell you to talk to me, did she?”

Rebecca was glad to hear some happiness return to Lauren’s voice. “No, she didn’t, but I have heard it before, and it’s what I told myself I needed to do. Otherwise, I wouldn’t leave my house.”

Lauren nodded as if she agreed with it, but Rebecca wasn’t sure. She hoped she’d take the words on board and follow through.

She spent another five minutes with Lauren before heading off to tend to her other patients. The day ended up being busier than Ellie had made it out to be. Not that it was so busy that she was run off her feet, but there was a steady flow of tasks. She even spent her lunch break with Lauren and was pleased to see she seemed a little more positive than when she’d first arrived on shift.

Another good thing about being busy was she had little time to think

about Rocket and his team and if they were all right. The group chat had settled down after the initial flurry of messages from the sonogram Penni had sent. If anything had gone wrong with the guys on the mission, surely one of them would've heard something and then let everyone else know.

Unless it was bad news.

No, I'm not going to borrow trouble. I've already decided no news is good news.

She kept repeating the mantra as she handed over her patient list to the next shift and gathered her things from her locker, grateful that she had the next two days off. Tentative plans had been made to catch up with Imogene and the others, but they hadn't been finalized.

Rebecca expected they would. With the guys being away for so long, everyone was keen to meet up as often as possible. Even though she and Adam weren't in a relationship—she didn't know what they were—the girls had always included her in their get-togethers and sleep overs. A fact she truly appreciated, as she didn't think she'd have been able to deal with how long Adam had been away by herself.

Her reaction shocked her, considering they hadn't known each other long. But she missed him more than she thought possible.

The fresh air hit her as she walked out the door, a welcome reprieve from the antiseptic smell of the hospital. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, letting her lungs fill before blowing it out, releasing the tension in her shoulders.

“Hey, Florence.”

CHAPTER 21



ROCKET HAD TWO SECONDS TO PREPARE HIMSELF BEFORE REBECCA LAUNCHED herself at him. Her reaction to his presence shocked and pleased him. He'd been expecting her to smile and say *hi*. But this, this complete show of abundant happiness at seeing him, was more than he could take in.

Her arms closed around his neck, and he shifted a bit so that he could breathe. He hugged her tight, relishing the feeling of having her in his arms again.

"You're back," she breathed, as she loosened her hold on him.

"I am."

She chuckled softly. "Kind of obvious that you're back, seeing as you're standing in front of me." She reached up and cupped his cheek. "I'm glad you're here, but I'm not sure of this."

Her fingers brushed against his beard, which itched like crazy, but her touch had him forgetting the irritation. "One of the hazards of not having access to a bathroom every day—beard grows along with hair."

The second he'd walked out of their debriefing meetings, his only thought had been to go see Rebecca. He'd had no idea if she was working that day or was at home, but he'd called the hospital, and they'd confirmed she was on duty. The woman he'd spoken to on the phone had asked if he'd like to leave a message for her, but he'd declined. Instead, he'd taken some time to shower and then had hotfooted it over to the hospital.

The rest of the team had scattered, too, all eager to get home to their women. Growler had left without a word, and Rocket was reminded of how he used to be like his teammate—heading to an empty house.

"Hey, Adam. Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Rebecca began to run her

hands over his body, but not the way he wanted her to.

Rocket took hold of her hands and held them against his chest. “I’m fine, Florence. Really.”

Her hands framed his face and he met her gaze. “I’m so happy you’re back.”

The next moment, her lips were on his, and he gripped her waist tight. It didn’t matter that they were in front of her work. This was what he’d been dreaming about for the last few weeks. The moment when he had Rebecca in his arms. When nothing mattered but the two of them.

Her lips were softer than he remembered.

Plump.

Addictive.

All his.

Reluctantly, the need for oxygen overrode his basic desires, and he pulled away. “Can I take you home?”

Her hesitation, a brief moment, but enough for him to question if he’d misread everything. But then he pushed that aside. If she didn’t want to be with him, she wouldn’t have reacted the way she had.

Would she?

She was the one who’d initiated the kiss—not him.

So why the hesitation?

“Bad idea?” he asked, keeping his voice light.

She shook her head vigorously. “No, not that. Just, my car is here, and I’m guessing yours is as well.”

“It is, but it’s in a secure part of the base. It can stay there another night.”

Rebecca canted her head to the right. “Um, if that’s the case, why did you ask if you could take me home?”

Okay, this was becoming a bigger situation than it needed to be. “It’s simple. I want to be with you. I don’t want to go home alone, but even though you set me on fire with that kiss, I didn’t want to assume anything. I want you, Florence.” He reached out and hooked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “So much.”

Rocket held his breath. Would she say she wanted him to? Or would she say it was too soon? That they didn’t know each other well enough.

The last part was true, but the fact that she was all he’d been able to think about while away proved to him that he needed to see where things would go with her.

For the first time since he'd had the rug pulled out from under him by his mother, he wanted to open himself up to Rebecca. She'd seen him at his worst and hadn't run away. He was the one who'd pushed her away.

"I want you too, Adam."

She rested her head against his chest and the tension tightening his back and shoulder muscles eased. He kept her tight against him for a few moments before dropping his arms. "Shall we go, then?"

"Yep, but hang on. My phone is vibrating like mad." She smiled as she reached into her purse and pulled out the device, then started to laugh as she swiped the screen.

"I take it there isn't an emergency?" he queried, suspecting that he knew who was blowing her phone up.

"Nope, just the girls all screaming over texts that you guys are back." Her fingers flew over the phone's keyboard before she popped it back into her bag.

"Can I ask what you sent them, or is it secret girls' stuff? Which is fine. I don't want to seem like a guy who is insecure and needs to know everything that's going on with you." Rocket clamped his mouth shut.

Since when did he ramble and need to know everything that was going on in Rebecca's life?

Since the moment he'd let go of the baggage holding him back and opened himself up to letting someone into his life.

"I sent them a message saying that I knew because you met me at the hospital and knocked my socks off with an out of this world *I'm back* kiss." She hooked her arm through his. "Ready?"

"Yep." He bent and grabbed his duffle that had been sitting at his feet.

Together, they headed toward where her car was parked. Rocket spent the short walk processing her comment about their kiss. It had definitely blown his mind, and he couldn't wait to do it again, and maybe more, in the privacy of her home.

"Did you really say that about our kiss?" he finally asked once they were on the way to her house.

Rebecca glanced over at him quickly before directing her attention back to the road. "Would it bother you if I had?"

Rocket let the question sit with him, and in the end, decided that, no, he didn't care if she had told the girls that. "Not even a little bit." He reached over and placed his hand on her thigh, giving it a quick squeeze. "I have to

admit, you knocked off my socks, too, with that kiss.”

She laughed, that sweet bell-like sound he loved hearing. “Well, that’s good to know for the future. This time, though, I didn’t tell them that you rocked my world. That kiss and any other kiss, or whatever else we share, is just between us. Always.”

Whatever else we share.

Was that her way of saying that she wanted to take the next step with him? The second he’d seen her walk out of the hospital, his body had lit up with desire. Kissing her had only inflamed him more.

He could now believe the old adage that *absence makes the heart grow fonder*, because he was definitely fond of Rebecca more than he had been when he’d left on the mission.

“Goes both ways, Florence. Whatever happens with us, stays with us.”

Rebecca hummed an agreement, and for the rest of the drive, they sat in companionable silence, his hand resting lightly on her thigh, the muscle flexing every so often.

By the time she pulled the car into her garage, he was itching to hold her again. To know that she was real and that he wasn’t dreaming this encounter.

The moment they walked through her door and she flicked the lights on in her kitchen, he dropped his bag and grabbed her around her waist, pulling her close again.

Her eyes widened, not with fright or apprehension, but with desire. The gold flecks in her eyes were bright, and her breath came out in short puffs.

“I really missed you, Florence. There wasn’t a day that went by where you didn’t take up a lot of my brain space. I constantly worried if you were safe. If you were having a busy shift. If you had troublesome patients.” He smoothed his thumbs over her cheekbones, relishing the softness of her skin. “But most of all, I worried that if you had nightmares, I wouldn’t be there to help you through them. Hold you and keep you safe.”

Rocket was well aware he was opening himself up to her in a way he hadn’t done before. In a way that left him vulnerable to her laughing and rejecting what he said—not that he thought she would, but he could’ve misread things with her.

“Adam,” she whispered his name as if he were a mantra she repeated over and over. “I missed you too. I worried about and your team constantly. I tried not to think about it too much, but working at the base hospital, I had a front-row seat to what can happen to you on a mission. Heck, I nursed you after

you were hurt. Some days, I had so many scenarios going through my mind that I didn't think I could go on.

"But then I remembered how strong and resolute you and the guys are. I remembered you said you would keep yourself safe, and I believed in the depths of my soul that you would do that."

God, this woman was so strong. And she was in *his* arms. The guy who'd been a jerk to her too many times to count, and yet here they were—together. No way would he do anything to jeopardize this connection that was between them. A connection that appeared so much stronger than it had been when he'd left.

"Florence," he whispered before he lowered his head and fused their lips together.

Her arms looped loosely around his neck and she pushed herself against him—her body soft in all the right places.

Heat spread through him, the need to feel her flesh driving him to find the hem of her shirt. He moaned against her mouth as he brushed his fingers across the small of her back, an area he'd touched through her clothes. The sensation was very different without any barriers.

It could be too soon to say what he wanted to say, but he lived his life on the edge. Had almost lost it a little while ago. He didn't want to let Rebecca go. He needed her so much.

"I want you, Bec."

He peppered kisses along her jaw until he found the curve of her neck. He nipped and kissed the sensitive area, her mewls of pleasure filling his ears.

"I want you too, Adam."

Her words were music to his ears, but he needed to make sure she was aware of what he was talking about. Yes, he wanted more kisses. But that was only the start. He wanted it all. Everything she could give him and everything he could give her.

"This is it, Florence. We move from this room. Take what is growing between us and making love is the start, not the end. Not for me. If it's not the start for you, then I'll call an Uber and go home."

Was he being blunt? Yes, but she needed to know that if they took the next step, there was no going back. He didn't want to go back. Going back would mean he'd revert to being the man he was before Rebecca had stormed into his life. That was the last place he wanted to return to. As much as he'd believed it was comfortable and the better way of living, he'd been so wrong.

Not allowing himself to feel what he was feeling for Rebecca was only punishing himself. And he was tired of doing that.

“What ‘start’ are you talking about?”

She hadn’t pulled away from him. Hadn’t attempted to put any distance between them, and he took that as a positive.

“The start of you and me—officially. Of us being a couple, a team. A unit.” He kept hold of her gaze, willing her to see that he was laying himself open for her to see. Rebecca had seen him at his worst and now he was showing her his best—well, his version of his best. There was more he could improve on and he knew that, with her walking beside him, he could become an even better version of himself.

“Yes. We start now.”

Joy bloomed inside of him, and he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He laid her down reverently on the bed. Now that they were taking the next step, he was going to savor every moment of it.

Every touch.

Every kiss.

Every sigh.

After tonight, everything would be different, and he wouldn’t want it any other way.

CHAPTER 22



REBECCA WATCHED THE EMOTIONS PLAY ACROSS ADAM'S FACE.

Resolve.

Acceptance.

Happiness.

Desire.

Everything that she was feeling too.

Resolve to make what was happening between them grow into a bond that couldn't be broken.

Acceptance that this was always meant to be, even if they hadn't known at the time when she'd been assigned to look after his mother.

Happiness because he was home safely and in her arms.

Desire consuming her until she was sure she was going to combust if he didn't do anything but stand and stare at her.

Taking matters into her own hands, she grabbed the bottom of her top and whipped it over her head. Triumph filled her at the sharp intake of breath coming from the man in her bedroom.

Not stopping there, she kicked off her slips-on and wiggled out of her scrub pants, leaving her in nothing but her bra and panties—a matching set she'd decided to put on that morning.

“You're stunning.” He ran a hand from her ankle up to her knee and back again.

Darts of electricity sizzled beneath his fingers, and she couldn't keep still, arching her back as his hand trailed close to the apex of her thighs.

As much as she loved this gentle touch, she wanted all of him. Over her. In her. Consuming her.

“And you’re overdressed.”

His lips curved into that smile. The one he sparingly gave out. The one that had his eyes twinkling, drawing her in to get close and to find out what pleased him so much. “I can fix that,” he said.

Rebecca mourned the loss of his fingers teasing her, but with every part of his body he exposed to her, she knew that the best was yet to come.

Her breath caught in her throat and her desire flowed over her like a warm shower when he shucked his pants, underwear, and all, exposing himself to her.

“Now, who’s stunning?” she said, her throat dry.

His cock jutted out, hard and proud. She got up on her knees and gripped him at the base, relishing in Adam’s groan of pleasure. The contrast between hard and soft as she stroked him fascinated her.

A drop of moisture beaded the head of his hard length, and she rubbed her thumb over it, spreading it over him.

“God, Florence, you’re killing me here.” Each word was a tortuous cry.

“We can’t have that, can we? How about I kiss it better?” Rebecca didn’t give him a chance to respond and replaced her thumb with her lips.

Adam’s fingers threaded through her hair, dislodging the band she’d had holding it away from her face.

He tasted salty and sweet at the same time, and she could easily get addicted to him. To having his hardness in her mouth.

She stroked her hand up and down slowly as she traced his cock with her tongue. He groaned and gently pried himself out of her mouth.

Glancing up at him from beneath her lashes, slashes of red highlighted his cheekbones. His blue eyes were bright with desire.

She’d done that to him. She’d brought out those emotions.

“What do you want, Adam?” she asked, swiping her tongue across her bottom lip.

His nostrils flared at the action. “You. I. Want. You.”

A rush of power swept over her. She’d never been dominant in the bedroom, and she suspected that this would be the one and only time that Adam would grant her this. Without a doubt, he would take control of the situation soon. But while she had the control, she was going to revel in it.

“What do you need?” This time, she trailed her fingers over her breasts, circling her nipples until they hardened and stood to attention.

His hands curled into fists before releasing. His cock appeared to grow

even more with her teasing.

She was not only torturing him, she was torturing herself. Her desire for him dripped down her thighs.

“I. Need. You.”

She spread her legs and beckoned him closer with her finger. “You have me.”

As if he’d been waiting for her permission all along, he dropped to the bed and positioned himself between her legs. Anticipation fired through her, waiting for the moment when his mouth would close over her throbbing clit.

“I can smell you. Your arousal. It’s all for me.” His lips caressed her inner thighs, avoiding the place where she wanted him the most.

If this was payback for how she teased him, then she would take it. Because the reward at the end would be worth the wait—of that, she was sure.

“Yes, all for you.”

“You’re mine.” Using his shoulders, he pushed her legs wider, and he lay flat on his stomach.

“Yes,” she cried out when his mouth clamped around her. Bursts of pleasure zigzagged through her, firing her senses into overdrive until all she could focus on was the way his tongue stroked in and out of her. His thumb circled her clit, firing up further nerve endings.

Her whole body tingled and she was sure that every hair on her body, including her head, was standing up or sticking out.

He ate her out as though he hadn’t had a decent meal in weeks. Pressure built inside of her when he inserted one, then a second, finger into her body. The dual action of his fingers and tongue blew all thought from her mind. There was nothing there but a blank space that was being filled with colors from her growing orgasm.

“Don’t stop, Adam. I’m so close.” Rebecca lifted her hips to increase the pressure from his mouth. It was enough to set her over the edge, and she cried out her release, her body pulsing with the force of it.

Adam kept stroking his fingers in and out, prolonging her orgasm until her body shook, and she twisted her hips away.

“Give me a minute,” she panted, her eyes drifting, the action intensifying the wave of sensations still throbbing with in her.

“Look at me.”

Her eyes popped open at the gruff intensity of his command.

“Watch me,” he demanded as he licked her juices off his fingers while he stroked his cock with his free hand.

Everything about the action was erotic and something she’d never shared, or experienced, with her other partners. In the past it had been do the deed, roll over, and go to sleep.

She suspected that it would be a long while before Adam allowed her to drift off to sleep, and she was here for it.

“I need you inside me, now,” she said, as she played with her breasts again. Her body was over-the-top sensitive from her orgasm, but it only ratcheted up her desire for him.

“Yes.” The word hissed out of him as he slipped off the bed to grab his pants, where he extracted a condom from his wallet.

Her attention never left him as he slowly rolled it on. She shivered in anticipation of the moment he would enter her. “Come to me, Rocket,” she whispered.

Again, his eyes widened at her use of his nickname. She was so used to calling him Adam, but at times like this, when it was them, and only them, she’d use his nickname.

Adam crawled back onto the bed until he was lying over her, keeping his weight on his elbows.

He didn’t say anything, just watched her, and she watched him. She would never tire of looking at this man and thinking *he’s mine* and knowing it was true. That no one else would do for her.

The assuredness and finality of her thoughts should’ve worried her. Or freaked her out. The opposite occurred. Peace settled over her. The sense of rightness that, no matter what, he would always be by her side, like she would always be by his.

“Make me yours,” she said as she pulled his head down so that his lips touched hers.

The kiss started off soft. A gentle exploration. The faint taste of her release lingered on his mouth, and she wanted more. Their tongues dueled, heat building within her. A slow ember was being fanned to life until it was an inferno. An inferno that would consume her, and when it was over, she would be complete.

Whole.

Adam deepened the kiss as his fingers trailed a lazy path down her body, brushing the underside of her breasts. He smoothed over the curve of her

waist and drifted across her belly until he clutched his cock where it rested against her. When he notched himself at her entrance, she waited for the moment when they became one.

She didn't have to wait long, as he entered her with one smooth stroke. They sighed against each other's mouth. Adam stilled when he was balls deep in. Everything about this moment was perfect, convincing her of what she already knew—they were made for each other.

Then he began to move. Long, slow strokes in and out. Building the tension within her. Every time he withdrew, she lifted her hips, enticing him back in. He answered her call. The momentum built, along with the rising tide of another orgasm.

Rebecca dug her nails into his back, encouraging him to go faster. Harder. Deeper.

"Give me everything you have," she panted. "I want it all."

"Give me all you have too." He lifted her leg over his shoulder to deepen the penetration.

She loved the way they demanded more of each other. Their coming together was as a team, both giving and receiving.

How could anything be better than this moment? This moment, where they were joined and on the cusp of another momentous climax for her.

Waves of pressure grew until she couldn't take anymore, and she burst apart in his arms, her body writhing beneath his, her cries filling the room. A stroke later, and Adam came apart in her arms, his shout mingling with hers.

He collapsed on top of her. Her body still throbbing with her release, she could feel the tremors coursing through him.

They lay there until their breathing settled back into a normal rhythm. She didn't want to move, and she didn't want Adam to move away.

As if he could sense what was going through her mind, he rolled so that she was sprawled across him, the movement causing him to slip out of her.

"I'll be right back." He pressed a kiss on the top of her head and disappeared into her adjoining bathroom to dispose of the protection.

Rebecca closed her eyes, memories of the last hour running through her mind. Her body hummed in remembrance. The way his hands had traced her curves. The way it felt when he entered her for the first time.

The bed dipped as Adam got under the covers, curving his body around hers, his arm sliding over her belly.

"You good?" he asked, as he nuzzled her neck. A shiver rippled through

her, stoking her desire for him again.

She rolled over so that she was facing him. “More than good. How about you?”

Purplish shadows circled his eyes, and furrows of tiredness etched his handsome face. “Very good.” He yawned, highlighting her suspicions that he was exhausted. “Sleep, babe. I’ll keep you safe.”

She pressed a kiss to his chest and closed her eyes. For the first night since he went away, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 23



THE EARLY RAYS OF SUNLIGHT FILTERED THROUGH THE SHUTTERS WHEN Rocket woke up. His left side was warm where Rebecca lay, soft little snores coming from her.

He gazed at the ceiling, not able to believe that this was where he'd ended up. He'd hoped that this would happen. The whole flight home, he'd run through different scenarios of how Rebecca would react when she saw him.

They'd been gone for almost two months. She could've found another man, one who had a job that didn't take him into dangerous situations. Hell, she could've fallen for a doctor at the hospital. They hadn't said they were exclusive, even though they'd discussed that they wanted to explore the growing attraction between them.

Things could change on a dime. He knew that. He'd seen it happen. But here he was, in her bed, with Rebecca curled up against him. And there was no other place he'd rather be.

She stirred beside him, humming in pleasure when her hand slid over his belly. At least, he hoped it was pleasure. His dick reacted to the way her fingers were drawing small circles on his skin.

"Mmm, morning." She pressed her lips against his chest, and he was lost.

Rocket hauled her up so that they were chest to chest. "Good morning, Florence," he said as he pressed his lips to hers.

He lost himself in her. Until this moment, he hadn't known that this was how he wanted to wake up—every day.

Now he knew what the guys were talking about when they were at PT. How many times had he rolled his eyes at them when they'd moaned about how difficult it was to leave their women each morning?

Yes, he'd spent some time with Rebecca before he'd gone away, but the boundaries of their relationship had shifted now that they'd had sex.

He was grateful that he didn't have to go to PT this morning and he could savor this first morning together.

But did she have work today? Did she have to get up now and get ready?

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. "Do you have a shift today?"

She shook her head, her hair cascading in blond waves around them. "Nope. I've got the next two days off. How about you? Do you have to get to base?"

"We always have a couple of days downtime after a mission, which means..." He nuzzled her neck.

"We don't have to move from this room?" she finished for him.

He chuckled and rolled her over so that he was gazing down at her. "Exactly, Florence."

* * *

THEY'D STAYED in her room for the first day they both had off, only leaving it to get food. Now they were strolling the beach, a soft breeze rustling through her hair. Everything felt so incredibly right that it frightened her.

None of her past relationships had ever felt this good.

"There's something soothing about the tide flowing in and rushing out, isn't there?" she commented as water bubbled over their feet.

"It calls to you. It can be a beast, though. When you need it to be calm, that's when it turns into a churning mass of waves and undercurrents."

Rebecca gazed out at the ocean. At the moment, the waves were gentle and it was relatively calm. "How often do you have to swim in your missions?"

She knew the question was a risky one, considering he couldn't talk about what he did and where he went.

"Depends. Sometimes we have to make our entry via the ocean. Other times, we hike in. Other times we parachute in. Just depends on where we are and what we have to do."

As expected, his answer didn't shed a lot of light on his job, but she was grateful that he'd shared a little bit of it. "You guys swim every day, don't

you? As part of your PT.”

While Adam and his team had been away and she'd stayed at Penni and Fort's place for a night, the women had talked about the guys doing PT every day and what it generally entailed. She hadn't been with Adam long enough before he'd left to ask him in detail about it. At the time that he was staying with her, her mind had been on other things.

“Yep. We do at least two to three miles, depending on what else we've got on that day.”

They'd wandered back to where they'd placed a blanket, and the moment she sat down, Adam pulled her so that her back rested against his chest. She loved the way he seemed to curl around her, almost protecting her from the elements.

“I guess liking to swim is a bit of a requirement for being a SEAL.”

His chuckle rumbled against her back. “Pretty much. There is nothing quite like conquering the ocean when she's being a bitch.”

Rebecca twisted to look at him. “What makes you think the ocean is a woman? It could be a man, and he's being an asshole.”

“You could be right. Maybe for us guys, the ocean is a woman, and for you girls, the ocean is a man. That works, doesn't it?”

She laughed. “I suppose it could.”

They sat there for the next few minutes, enjoying each other's company and the fact that, right at that moment, they didn't have to be at their jobs and, they could just enjoy each other.

Rebecca was making the most of this time, knowing it was rare. Her eyes drifted shut, relishing the feel of Adam's strong arms around her, the way his chest rose and fell with every breath he took. Peace settled over her, and she accepted what she'd been trying so hard to fight from the moment she'd walked into a hospital room and found a banged-up sailor.

She was falling for Adam.

No, not falling...had fallen for him. She didn't want anyone else. Couldn't imagine herself with anyone else but him.

Did she tell him?

Was it too soon? After all, he'd only returned two days ago, and prior to his mission, they hadn't been together very long. But it wasn't like he was a stranger. She'd known him for a long time. So what if the circumstances of how they'd first met were different from other people's? They hadn't spoken much, but with the way Shelly had always talked about him, it was as though

she'd spent years with him, not mere months. Or days.

She'd seen the worst side of him, and when she should've walked away, she hadn't been able to.

He was her pollen and she was the bee. Unable to resist everything about him.

The words were on the tip of her tongue, ready to burst out of her.

"Hey, can we join you?" A deep gravelly voice she didn't recognize interrupted her inner battle of *should she or shouldn't she*.

Behind her, Adam stiffened a fraction before relaxing again. "Hey, Phantom."

Rebecca shifted so that she could see who was joining them. Another couple plopped down beside them. She noticed that Phantom was as protective of his wife as Adam was of her. Phantom had pulled her to his side the second his butt hit the sand.

"Rebecca, this is Phantom and his wife, Kalee," Adam said.

"Good to meet you." She smiled at the couple.

"How you doing, Rocket?" Phantom asked, but his gaze was on her as if he was trying to place her.

As far as Rebecca could recall, this was the first time she'd met him. She hadn't treated him at the hospital, but she may have passed him by if he'd been coming to visit someone.

Had he visited Adam while he'd been recovering?

"Wait." Phantom snapped his fingers. "You're the nurse in the hostage situation a couple of months back."

Rebecca shouldn't have been surprised that Phantom had heard about what she'd been through. It had happened on base, and security had been upped as Alfie had gotten in by using a very good fake ID. As far as she knew, they were still investigating where he'd gotten it from.

After she'd done her interviews, her involvement in the case had been on a need-to-know basis, and there obviously hadn't been much information she needed to know about.

"Yes, that's me."

Phantom leaned closer. "Are you okay? That asshole didn't hurt you, did he?"

Rebecca appreciated his concern, but he was a little too intense for her, and even though she was as close to Adam as she could be, she sank further into him.

Kalee gently swatted her husband at the same time a warning rumble came from Adam. A sound she hadn't heard before.

Kalee looked at Adam and then smiled at Rebecca. "Ignore my husband. He can be too intense, and if you're not used to it, it can be confronting."

Phantom smiled indulgently at Kalee before dropping a kiss on her forehead and then looking at Rebecca. "Sorry if I came on a bit strong." He then glanced at Adam. "Message received, Rocket."

Rebecca had no idea what message Phantom was referring to, but she appreciated his apology. "Thanks, and it's okay. I'm beginning to understand SEALs and their intensity."

Kalee laughed. "They only have two modes—protective, and even more protective."

"Right?" Rebecca countered with a laugh of her own.

"Hey!" Both Phantom and Adam spoke at the same time, indignation coloring their voices. It only sent Rebecca and Kalee into another fit of giggles.

They spent an hour or so with the other couple, and Rebecca learned how Kalee had been thought dead in Timor-Leste, until a memory unlocked in Phantom's mind, and he'd gone back to find her. Theirs was a love story she wouldn't have believed if someone else had told her, but coming from them, and Adam verifying it, she only shook her head in disbelief.

"It's been really good getting to know you," Rebecca said, giving Kalee a hug.

"Same. And I'm sure I'll see you around here or somewhere."

"For sure."

Adam came up and slung an arm around her shoulders, and she slipped hers around his waist, giving him a squeeze. His solid strength was something she didn't think she'd ever get enough of. "You ready to go, Florence?"

"Yep. Bye." She waved at the other couple as they headed for another walk on the beach while she and Adam walked toward his truck. Rebecca sighed heavily as they pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward her place.

"That's a big sigh," Adam said. "Something wrong?"

"Not wrong, per se. Just sad that tomorrow we go back to work, and I don't get to spend the whole day with you."

She wanted to take the words back, but also didn't. They were the truth,

and after what had happened with Adam and his mom, not to mention the beginning of their relationship, she didn't want any lies between them.

Adam pulled into her driveway, parked, then took her hand and tugged her until she was leaning across the console. He cupped her cheek with his other hand. "I don't want the real world to insert itself on us, either. I would love to be able to spend every hour and day with you too."

He finished by capturing her lips with his. She sighed against his mouth, happy knowing that he felt the same way she did. These last two days had been wonderful. They'd talked, laughed, and made love. They'd gotten closer and closer.

Like every other time they'd kissed, passion ignited, and soon they were plucking at each other's clothes.

Adam's hands grasped her wrists when she went to pull his shirt off. "There's a perfectly good bed inside. How about we continue this on a soft mattress, where we don't have to turn ourselves into pretzels?"

"Sounds like a plan."

The second the front door closed behind them, they picked up where they'd left off in the truck. Clothes landed with soft plops to the ground until she was pressed up against the wall and Adam was entering her with one smooth stroke.

"This doesn't feel like a soft mattress," she panted as he stroked in and out.

"Next time," he muttered against her neck.

Rebecca hooked her legs a little higher around his waist and clutched at his shoulders. The roughness of her wall was probably going to leave scratches on her back, but she didn't care. She wanted to lose herself in Adam. Keep the world at bay for a little longer. Morning would come soon enough, and so would the real world, where work and routines would intrude.

"You make me lose control, Florence."

"I'm not even sorry."

He paused in his motion, and his eyes sparkled with mirth. "Good." He kissed her fiercely, and she gave herself over to the orgasm consuming her. Adam joined her seconds later.

Their rough breathing filled the foyer and she dropped her head on his shoulder, her heart bursting with love for the man in her arms.

CHAPTER 24



EVERYTHING WAS GOING WELL—IN FACT, SO WELL FOR ROCKET, HE WAS waiting for the other shoe to drop. For something bad to happen, because wasn't that the way it always was in television shows and movies?

He didn't know why he was borrowing trouble. He hadn't in the past. However, he couldn't shake the lingering feeling that something was about to upend the happiness that he and Rebecca had achieved. The way his mother pulled the rug out from under him on her deathbed was never far from his mind. Although he didn't believe Rebecca was going to tell him something as major as what his mother told him. She'd been nothing but open with him ever since their false start. Like he'd been open with her.

He and Rebecca were practically living together. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept at his house. He'd stayed at her place from the moment he returned from his last mission. There'd never been any question in either of their minds that he wouldn't stay with her after they'd slept together. He hadn't wanted to leave, and she hadn't wanted him to.

Nothing was happening at work for him to be concerned that things would blow up. There hadn't been any blowback from their mission, and as far as intel was able to determine, the small band of rebels that Sayed had been leading had all returned to the village where he'd recruited them from, happy to get back to their own lives.

But just because they'd gotten rid of one possible terrorist didn't mean they could rest on their laurels. A new threat—or three—could pop up at any minute.

He walked into the conference room and bit back a groan when he saw who was sitting in the room—Rabbit and his team. Although there were also

a couple of other new faces sitting around the table.

He'd heard the talk that trouble was brewing in Rabbit's team, and that there could be some personnel movement—looked like they were true, and changes had occurred. Rocket wasn't upset exactly, but a couple of the guys on Rabbit's team had been hotheads, which caused more issues than solving them.

He nodded and expected that once Commander North arrived, the reason his team and Rabbit's team were in the same room would be answered.

“Any idea what's going on?” Growler asked, taking the chair next to him.

“None. But I'd much rather work with Rocco's team than this one,” Rocket muttered.

Growler shrugged. “I did a couple of missions with Rabbit's team before joining yours. They were disasters. It was lucky we made it out alive. But it looks like Robbo and Cliffy are no longer part of the team. They were the ones that caused most of the problems. The rest of the guys are okay, and hopefully, the new guys aren't like the other two.”

Rocket didn't know Growler had worked with Rabbit's team, but it was good to hear that the troublemakers had left.

The two teams, seated together on either side of the large conference table, chatted amongst themselves, only stopping when Commander North walked into the room.

“Gentlemen, I suppose you're wondering why you're all here?”

Humor coming from their commander? That had to mean that the reason they were there wasn't too serious. Although there had been times when North had shown some levity during meetings, right before he delivered some bad news.

“Thought had crossed my mind,” Fort remarked, as he sat back and crossed his arms.

North raised an eyebrow but didn't call him out. “Right. There's a diplomatic mission going to southeast Asia next month. Recently, we've been advised that there's been some chatter that this particular meeting is drawing the attention of groups from various locations.”

Rocket didn't like the sound of that. Usually, going to provide protection to diplomats at various world forums could be mind-numbingly boring. Everything that this particular one didn't sound like.

“How bad?” Rabbit asked, sitting a little straighter, concern marring his brow.

“That’s the thing,” North addressed the group. “Some of the groups chatting are small fry, all talk and no action. But others have made their mark, which is why we’re taking this seriously.”

“When is it likely that we’ll have to head off?” Fort asked, and Rocket could imagine he was thinking about Penni. She had to be getting close to her due date.

“The summit is in three weeks. I know the timing could be better for you, Fort, and if I could use another team, I would. But there are a few hot spots where others are needed.”

Fort nodded, but Rocket could tell that he wasn’t happy about the situation. Rocket had no doubt the girls would rally around Penni and support her should she need it. And who knows? Maybe between now and when the summit occurred, the chatter would change and the teams wouldn’t have to go.

As far as Rocket was concerned, he didn’t love the idea of working with Rabbit and company, but he would. Duty always came before personal thoughts.

They spent the next couple of hours talking things over, coming up with various strategies. By the end of the meeting, Rocket’s opinion of Rabbit’s team had changed a little, and he felt confident that if anything bad happened, they’d all be able to work together and not have any issues.

* * *

REBECCA HUMMED as she walked down the street. The sun was shining and the temperature perfect, and she’d decided to take advantage of it while she had the day off. The dinner she was preparing for her and Rocket was simmering away in the slow cooker. The bread dough was rising, and once she got back, she’d pop it in the oven.

It was a lot more fun cooking for two instead of one, and she’d been trawling the internet, looking for interesting recipes to make for their dinners together. She made more of an effort on her days off, like today, than she did when she was working her regular shifts. If she was working the day shift, Rocket would meet her after, and together, they’d make dinner. Other times, she’d come home and find he’d fixed her a meal.

They’d slipped into such a good routine, it was as though they’d been

together for years, not just a couple of months.

The sound of rapid footsteps came from behind her and so she stepped to the side to allow the person to pass. She thought she'd got out of the way in time, but the person behind her barreled into her. Strong arms wrapped around her. The intense stench of body odor surrounded her, and she almost gagged. "Sorry, didn't see you there."

Rebecca froze, the voice sounding eerily familiar. "Alfie?"

She tried to turn, but his hold was too tight. Her fight instinct kicked in, and she stomped her foot on his. It didn't make much of an impression, as he was wearing thick boots.

"I like it when you fight, but I don't want to create too much of a scene. So..."

A cloth closed over her nose and mouth, the scent of chemicals filled her nostrils, and the fight drained out of her. Her muscles turned to goo. She couldn't lift her feet or move her fingers.

"Adam," she yelled, but it was actually a whisper as darkness swallowed her whole.

* * *

SOUNDS DRIFTED into Rebecca's consciousness. The rustle of paper. The sound of a window rattling in a breeze. The shuffle of someone, or something, as they moved, as though they were walking through fallen leaves.

Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. A mouth that felt drier than the air in Death Valley. She tried to move, but her arms and legs were bound. If she wanted to go anywhere, she'd have to do an impersonation of a worm, and the pounding in her head suggested that wouldn't be a good idea right now.

Everything came rushing back then. Her taking a walk. Being ambushed on the sidewalk by Alfie.

Alfie!

The man who'd held her and Lauren hostage.

The man who'd pointed a gun at her and shot it.

The man who should've been in jail but had been bailed out by his family.

The fact her brain was able to process all those thoughts in quick succession surprised her, considering she'd been drugged.

"You're awake. Good." Alfie walked past and kicked her leg—hard.

Rebecca bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain. No way was she going to show any weakness in front of him.

"Whatdoyouwant?" Her words ran slurred all together. So her brain was firing, but her speech wasn't.

Alfie got down on his stomach on the floor so his face was mere inches from hers. She cringed at the waft of bad breath as he laughed at her. "What was that?"

She scooted back a little, inch by inch, considering she couldn't lever herself up with her arms or her legs. Taking a few seconds, she concentrated on what she wanted to say. "What...do...you...want?"

There, she'd said it clearly and precisely. Not as loud and commanding as she would've liked, but it was an improvement on her first attempt.

"You'll find out." He got up and stepped over her before a door clicked shut behind where she lay.

Rebecca closed her eyes. She needed to find a way to get out of her bindings and then out of wherever Alfie had taken her.

With slow movements, she wormed her way across the room until she backed into a wall. Her breathing was ragged, and the movement hadn't helped the pounding in her head. With one last burst of energy, she lifted her torso so that she was in a sitting position with her back resting against the rough wooden wall.

Black spots danced a jaunty jig across her vision, her tenuous grasp on consciousness slipping with each passing second. The last thing she wanted to do was pass out, but her body had different ideas. She couldn't fight the pull and slumped, unconscious, to the side.

The next time she woke, the room was dark and cold. Keeping her eyes shut for a little longer, she concentrated on trying to pick up any sounds of movements. All that greeted her was the chirp of crickets and the buzz of other insects calling to each other.

The thumping in her head had subsided and her mouth, still dry, didn't feel as bad as it had when she'd first woken up. Her shoulders ached from having her arms bound behind her and the way she lay. At least she still had the wall for support and lifted herself into a sitting position again. Her head swirled at the motion, but settled down after a few seconds.

Where was Alfie?

Was it his plan all along to leave her here—alone?

“Hello?” she called out, but the word echoed around the space. With her eyes now open and slowly adjusting to the darkness, the slivers of light from the moon coming through the gaps in the wall showed her she was in some sort of cabin.

And there definitely wasn't anyone else around.

Had Alfie taken Lauren as well?

Rebecca couldn't work out why he would take her. It wasn't like they'd been in a relationship, unlike Alfie and Lauren had been. Her only interaction with the man had been when she'd walked into Lauren's room and found him there.

Yes, she'd confronted him, but she didn't think that was a reason for him to take her.

What did he hope to achieve by kidnapping her? It would only make his situation worse.

Answers would only come from the man himself, and his lack of presence in the room made it difficult.

Did Adam know she was missing?

He had to be home from work now and know she wasn't there. He'd see her car. See that she'd prepared a meal.

A sense of calm settled over her, knowing that he would search for her—of that, she had no doubt.

Her heart thumped in time with the ache in her head. She had to get back to him. She didn't want to think that the last time she'd seen him had been that morning when he'd kissed her before he'd walked out the door.

She wanted more time with him. Wanted to love him more than she already did.

Love him more.

The words danced around her head, dulling the pain. Love for Adam had been blossoming within her, but she'd never allowed herself to really grasp it. Even though there were times when she woke up, her heart in her throat as she watched him sleep, unable to believe that he was in bed beside her.

He'd always woken up, as if he could sense her watching him, and instead of finding it creepy, like it could've been, he'd smiled, cupped the back of her head and kissed her, which invariably led them to making love.

Every touch and moment had been special and a step toward falling in

love with him.

Fire burned low in her belly. She wasn't going to let Alfie defeat her. She was going to find a way to escape, to get back to Adam and tell him that she loved him and didn't want anyone else but him.

In the deepest part of her soul, she recognized that he was hers and she was his. Not telling him that wasn't an option she wanted to live with.

CHAPTER 25



ROCKET PACED AROUND REBECCA'S LIVING ROOM, PHONE JAMMED TO HIS EAR as he waited for Penni to pick up. They'd been caught up at work with a meeting that had gone on for far longer than it should've. He'd texted Rebecca to let her know that he'd be late, but she didn't respond.

It happened sometimes when she was at work, but as far as he knew, today was one of her days off, and if she'd been called in, she would've let him know—like she'd done on a couple of other occasions.

When he'd walked in, beneath the delicious aroma of something cooking, no lights were on and there'd been an air of emptiness in the house. He'd gone into the kitchen and found the slow cooker on and a bowl containing dough that had grown so big, it spilled over the sides.

But no Rebecca.

"Hey, Rocket. What's up?"

"Is Rebecca there?" he fired the question out as if he'd just fired his gun.

"No. I spoke to her quickly this morning, but that's it. Why?"

Rocket swept his fingers through his hair and tried to tamp down on the fear bubbling up in him. Fear he hadn't let himself feel. "She's not here. The house was dark when I got home. Food was cooking, but I don't know where she is!" He yelled the last bit.

"Whoa, okay. Let me put Knox on."

Before he could apologize for his outburst, he heard the muffled sound of Penni telling Fort he was on the phone.

"Rocket? What's going on?"

Rocket took a deep breath, calling on his training so that he could get the facts across, but fuck, it was hard. This was his Florence he was talking

about. The woman who owned his heart.

Fuck!

Why was he only now acknowledging what he'd known since he'd returned from their last mission?

"Rocket? Are you in danger?"

Fort's voice had him pushing his thoughts aside. He would deal with them in a minute—after he'd apprised Fort of the situation.

"Rebecca's missing."

"What makes you say that?"

Rocket repeated what he'd told Penni adding, "She hasn't texted me to say she'd gotten called into work, so I know she's not there before you ask. And..." he paused as his emotions threatened to overtake him again. "I'm holding her phone in my hand."

His voice broke on the last word. The second he'd heard her phone ringing in the house when he'd called it, he'd known that the bad thing he was waiting to occur had happened.

"Shit. We'll be right over. Have you called Tex? If you can't get him, call Cass. Fuck it. Call them both."

Fort disconnected the call before Rocket could respond. Over the last year or so, he'd answered the call when his teammates' partners were taken, or in the case of Silver, when he was taken.

During all those times, he'd sat back and silently scoffed at how they'd let a woman work her way into their lives, and made them act as if all their training had disappeared out the window when something bad happened. He'd always been happy for his teammates when their women had been found. He'd been very glad that Silver had come out from his kidnapping with only minor injuries.

Now the shoe was on his foot, and he was frantic. He wasn't one to pray, but right this second, he said one to a deity that had sometimes treated him badly. "Whatever it takes. Whatever I have to give up, I will if you can just get Rebecca back to me safely. I'll even grovel to my teammates and tell them how sorry I am that I derided them when they fell in love. How unreasonable I've been since Mom died. I even forgive Mom for what she did to me."

Forgive Mom.

He did. He truly did. Until he'd said the words out loud, he hadn't truly believed it deep in his soul. But now he did. Whatever her reasons were, his

mom had done what she'd done. Whether Dad knew about it...well, did it really matter? They'd had a great relationship, and he'd grieved hard when his father had died. He'd lost the man who'd raised him and taught him how to be hardworking and responsible. His dad had been more than a parent, he'd been Rocket's best friend. And Mom had been inconsolable too. For all her faults, her love for his dad and for him had been pure and true.

Acceptance of the fact that he may never know who his biological father was settled over him. He'd had a good childhood and had been loved by his parents—something that not everyone had.

Amidst his worry and stress about Rebecca, he'd made peace with his past. It wouldn't hold him back anymore. He wouldn't let it.

Now he had to find Rebecca. Once he had her back, he wasn't going to let her go. He was going to make her his.

* * *

REBECCA'S LIVING room was full of people, and she wasn't there. Rocket sipped on the tea that Jennifer had made. He hadn't wanted anything, but Jennifer had insisted. He'd called Tex and Cass to explain the situation, but so far, neither one had called him back with an update.

In the corner of the room, Growler and Ox were deep in conversation, their heads close, and the discussion looked serious. Rocket recalled that Growler had mentioned having a meeting with Ox about joining his firm. Was that what they were talking about? Or were they discussing where Rebecca may have gone?

No, not gone—taken.

“You doing okay?” Fort came up to him.

“Would be even better if we had some answers about what the fuck happened to Rebecca. In our job, we've rescued women. Young girls. That had been taken from the streets without a trace. Now I know how desperate their families felt.” He looked at his team lead. “Now I know how all of you felt when your women were in trouble. I was an ass about that at times. I'm sorry.”

Fort placed his hand on Rocket's shoulder. “No need to be sorry. You were there and you helped. That's all that matters.”

Fort's words didn't make him feel much better. He'd allowed his personal

problems to affect him in ways that he shouldn't have. He was lucky that he hadn't caused his team, or himself, any harm.

Rocket looked around the room, at his teammates and their women. Penni was sitting with Angela, one hand clasped in her friend's, the other rubbing her pregnant belly. Maddie was holding Kara, while Cricket stood behind her, talking to Hank, who had his arm firmly around Jennifer's shoulder.

Silver was keeping Layla and Liam occupied, so that Bird was able to comfort Imogene, who was crying quietly—worry for Rebecca plain on her face.

His team.

His family.

They'd stayed with him when he'd tried to push them away. He was damn lucky to have them in his life.

"My mom told me, before she took her last breaths, that the man I thought was my father wasn't. It screwed with my head." He wasn't sure why he'd blurted it out to Fort, but it was the right thing to do. He'd kept it from his friends for so long, when maybe, if he'd talked about it with them, acceptance and understanding would've been easier.

"Shit, man. I'm sorry. That would've been hard to hear."

"It was. That's why I've been such an ass. Everything I thought I knew wasn't the truth, and I hated my mom for what she did to me. Not giving me a chance to ask her about her reasons for doing it."

"I'm not going to say I understand her reasons, but she must have had good ones. And from what you told me, your dad was a great guy." Fort shrugged. "But having said that, I can also understand your reaction and the way you felt and acted the way you did. I just wish you'd come to me or one of the other guys. We would've listened. We wouldn't have judged and we'd have been there for you."

Rocket scraped a hand across his chin, the bristles on his chin scratching against his palm. "I know. I was just...I don't know. Lost, I guess."

"It doesn't matter now. I can see you've come to terms with it, and I'm guessing Rebecca helped you do that?"

"Yeah, being with her is..." He couldn't finish because the thought of something happening to Rebecca and her not coming home to him was almost too much for him to cope with.

"Being with her is right and perfect, and life is not the same without her next to you." Fort may have spoken the words to him, but his attention was

fully on Penni, who looked up and found Fort watching her. Her smile was so slow, soft, and full of promise that Rocket's heart clenched.

He wanted that with Rebecca.

Wanted to look across the room and have her sense that he was watching her, and she'd glance up, meet his gaze, and they'd share a look that only the two of them would understand.

He had to get her back.

He wouldn't stop looking until he found her. If it took days, months, or years, he didn't care. He would get Rebecca back.

"Hang on, Florence. We're coming. Don't give up," he muttered.

* * *

REBECCA'S STOMACH twisted in hunger knots, and she swallowed to try to moisten her parched throat. She was still alone, but hadn't found a way to loosen her bindings. She had no idea where Alfie had gone. It was as though he'd taken her for the challenge and now that he'd completed it, he was moving on to the next one.

If that was the case, then that was good for her. She wouldn't have to worry about him coming back and doing something bad to her. The problem was, she didn't have any food or water, and without those, surviving for long wouldn't be easy. Nor did she have any idea where she was. She assumed she was still close to San Diego. At least she hoped she was.

Rebecca scooted along the floor a little longer, praying for a nail or screw to be sticking out from the wall. Anything that might be helpful in getting her out of her bindings. The place wasn't big, and it wasn't in good condition at all. There had to be a loose nail somewhere.

More frustrating moments later, the door opened, and Rebecca stilled. Was it Alfie or was it someone else?

"Got you some company."

Alfie.

And what did he mean, he'd gotten her some company? A whimper followed as he tossed someone on the ground with a loud thump. Had he done that to her? She didn't know because she'd been unconscious when he'd brought her to the cabin.

"Now that I've got the two of you here, I can finish what I started in that

hospital room.”

Alfie dragged Lauren over so that she was next to Rebecca. From the second he mentioned the hospital, she'd known the crumpled person on the ground was Lauren.

What had he done to her?

Through the dim lighting, she could make out Lauren's eyes were swollen and closed. Had he beaten her until she was unconscious, or had he drugged Lauren as well?

Did it matter? They were here, and for whatever reason, Alfie had decided that both she and Lauren had to pay for whatever crimes he believed they'd committed.

“You won't get away with this. People will be looking for me and for Lauren.” Rebecca mentally crossed her fingers. She believed with everything she had that Adam would look for her. He'd have jumped into action the moment he realized the house was empty and her phone was home. She couldn't believe she'd been foolish enough to leave her device on her bedside table, but she'd been charging it when she went for her walk.

Alfie laughed. “There's no Navy or SEALs here to save you this time. They have no idea where you are. Now sit tight. I'll be back once I've prepared everything. It's going to be so wonderful. I can't wait to see your faces.”

He stomped out of the cabin again, the door shutting in a cloud of dust. Rebecca waited for a few moments to see if he would return.

His actions were so erratic. If he wanted to get rid of her and Lauren, why didn't he just do it instead of leaving them there?

“Lauren?” Rebecca didn't know why she was calling out to the unconscious woman. She shuffled over to where she lay and rested her head against Lauren's chest, relieved when she felt it rise and fall.

The fire to get out of there before Alfie returned burned brightly inside of her. She would find a way to release her bindings, even if she hurt herself during the process.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was getting her and Lauren out. She'd worry about any injuries received later.

CHAPTER 26



“ROCKET?”

He jolted awake when Ox called his name. He couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep. Guilt flooded him. How could he sleep when Rebecca was lost?

“You've found her?” he asked. He couldn't think of anything but her being alive.

“Not yet, but Cass and Tex have worked their magic, and we have a lead.”

Rocket looked up at the ceiling and said a silent thanks that they had something to work with. While not the news he wanted to hear, it was infinitely better than anything negative.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Come into the kitchen. We've got everything laid out there.”

Rocket gazed around the living room and found that he was the only one in there. Where the hell had everyone gone?

How long had he been asleep?

He strode into the kitchen and found his teammates congregated around the small table where a map was spread out. Sometimes going old school was better for getting the whole picture rather than looking at small screens. Cass had arrived, too, and had her laptop open on the counter nearby.

“Where are the others?” He looked at Fort.

“They went home. They were all tired, and the kids needed looking after.”

“Why did you let me sleep for so long?” Rocket asked, annoyed that no one had woken him. This was *his* Rebecca that was missing.

“They only left fifteen minutes ago. You weren't out that long,” Bird

commented, looking up from the map on the table. “You looked like you needed to rest.”

That wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but there was no point belaboring the issue. They’d made a judgment call, and he couldn’t change it. “Right. How about we talk about this lead Cass and Tex may have discovered?”

Ox looked up. “Without a cell phone to trace pings, or an actual location of where Rebecca may have been when she disappeared, there wasn’t a lot to work from.”

Tell me something I don’t know.

Rocket swallowed the words. Everyone in this room was helping him, and as frustrated as he was, there was no point antagonizing them.

“I know that’s not what you want to hear.” Ox smiled ruefully, as though he was able to read what was going through Rocket’s mind.

“Not really,” Rocket agreed.

“But you know this is Tex and Cass we’re talking about. Neither one of them is happy to let things go. Between the two of them, they were able to find and hack any cameras that homeowners have around this neighborhood.”

“How many are there?” Home installed security and doorbell cameras were becoming more and more popular, and Rocket hoped that many of Rebecca’s neighbors had invested in the devices.

“There’s a lot, actually,” Cass said, her concentration still on the screen in front of her.

“And?” Frustration welled up inside of him. Couldn’t they give him the facts without the embellishments?

“We’ve managed to get footage of her walking along a couple of streets. What we don’t have yet is the actual footage of her being taken. But, before you interrupt me...” Cass looked over her glasses at Rocket. She sure had him pegged, because he’d been about to disrupt her flow. “I’m confident that I will have that soon. The last footage I have of Rebecca was when she approached a four-way intersection. I’m checking all directions to see which way she went...” She paused, her fingers plugging at the keyboard. “And... hmm. Right.”

Right what? Rocket wanted to ask but, like before, didn’t voice his question. Instead, he turned to the map. “Where are we looking? Maybe I can help. I’ve been living here a while and know the area a bit.”

Growler stepped to the side, and Rocket inserted himself into the small space. Hank pointed to a spot on the map. “This is the area Cass was talking

about. Anything in that vicinity she might go to?”

Rocket studied the map. Rebecca liked to go on walks. He'd joined her a few times. “She didn't have a set route that she traversed each time. She changed it up, but most of the times she went west at that intersection.”

“Got it,” Cass replied and went back to clacking at the keyboard.

“Got any ideas of who might want to take her?” Hank asked as he handed Rocket a bottle of cold water.

Rocket broke the seal and took a swallow. “Not really. Most of her patients are Navy personnel. It's not like one of them would do anything to her.”

At least he didn't think so. For a fleeting second, Rabbit's name flittered into his consciousness, but just as quickly, Rocket disregarded it. While he may not like the other SEAL, Rabbit wouldn't do anything like that. Besides, they'd spent the afternoon together talking through the next possible mission they all might go on.

“What about that guy who held her hostage? Would he do anything, do you think?” Cricket injected himself into the conversation, just like when they were in the planning stages of their next mission, each one butting in with ideas or thoughts.

“Alfie?” Rocket shook his head. “Nah, the guy's in custody. And if he went after anyone, it would be his ex, Lauren, not Bec. She just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Incorrect, Rocket,” Tex's voice echoed around the room. He then noticed the phone propped up next to Cass with Tex's face showing on the screen.

“Hey, Tex. What do you mean I'm wrong?” A bad feeling was beginning to form in the pit of his belly.

“Alfie made bail five weeks ago. His mother made it for him. Firmly believes that he's misunderstood, and her boy wouldn't do what he was accused of. Even though we all know and saw for ourselves what he could do.”

Rocket couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Alfie had made bail. Had Rebecca known? If she had why hadn't she mentioned it?

None of that mattered at the moment. It was done and he couldn't change it. But it changed what he thought about Alfie.

Was it possible he was mistaken and Alfie did have a vendetta against

Rebecca?

But why? It wasn't as though she'd been in a relationship with him. She was just the nurse who'd happened to come into Lauren's room. Yes, she'd stood up to him and antagonized him a little, but that didn't seem like a valid reason for the guy to take her.

"I can't fucking believe he's out. Has anyone checked on Lauren?" he asked when he felt more in control of his ability to string words together.

"No answer on her cell. I'm calling someone to see if they can tell me what her movements were for the day because she's not in her room on base."

Rocket didn't doubt Tex. If the man said she wasn't there, she wasn't there. He had ways and means to get information that even they couldn't get sometimes.

"I've got something." Cass turned her laptop in their direction.

Rocket leaned closer, his hands curling into fists at what he saw on the screen—Rebecca in the arms of Alfie in the middle of the street in broad daylight. "That fucker."

Cass pressed a few keys and the video rewound a bit before starting up again. There on the screen, Rocket saw the woman he loved walking innocently on the sidewalk. He picked up the moment she heard Alfie coming up behind her, because she stepped to the side to give him more access. The more he watched, the more the anger festered within him. "Please tell me, now that you have this, you can find out where the fuck he's taken my woman?"

* * *

WARM BLOOD TRICKLED down onto her hands, but Rebecca didn't care. She'd found a protruding nail and was rubbing her wrists up and down, hoping it would break the rope binding her. She'd seen it done in movies, so surely it could work. Sadly, all it seemed to be doing was scraping the flesh away from her hand.

"I don't understand why he's doing this," whispered Lauren. "I thought after him being arrested for what he did at the hospital that it would be over. That the only time I would have to deal with him would be during his court case."

“I wish I knew as well. There’s something very wrong with him. And he made bail so someone believes in him.”

“I can’t believe that happened. I’m so sorry you got caught up in it again.”

Rebecca paused in her attempt to loosen the rope. “Don’t be. Clearly, he sees me now as a person responsible for the shit life he’s got. But do you know what?” She began her assault on her bindings again.

“What?”

“I’m going to get this rope off, and we’re going to get out of here before he gets back.”

While she sounded confident and strong, Rebecca was feeling anything but that. No way was she going to let Lauren know that, though. The other woman was more badly hurt than Rebecca was and getting her out, without causing more injury to her, was going to be a battle in and of itself.

There was a slight tug on her wrist, and the rope gave a little. “It’s working. I’m breaking it.” It was hard to keep the excitement out of her voice. She just needed Alfie to stay away for a little while longer.

Now that she’d had some success, she increased her pace. Her stomach tied in knots from hunger and anticipation that maybe soon they’d be able to get out of this hellhole.

“I can’t believe that’s working.” Lauren scooted closer.

“For a while there, I didn’t think it was, but the rope is getting looser and looser.”

Rebecca concentrated harder on making sure that, in her eagerness to get through, she didn’t lose her momentum and cause herself more damage and not the rope. A few minutes later, it was slack enough for her to get her hands out. Immediately, pins and needles prickled her skin as the blood circulated in her extremities. She shook them to try to reduce the sensation.

Quickly, she reached down and battled with the rope around her feet. Like her hands, the moment she freed them, blood rushed back, and they tingled to life.

Aware that Alfie could return any moment, Rebecca didn’t waste any time freeing Lauren.

“Where does it hurt?” she asked, knowing that Lauren had to be in pain.

“Everywhere.”

As much as she wanted to get the hell out of the cabin, she couldn’t risk moving Lauren if she was seriously hurt.

“I can’t do much, but I need you to tell me if it hurts when I touch you. Okay?”

“Yep, that’s fine.”

Without a good light source, it wasn’t easy to examine Lauren, but Rebecca did her best. When she finished, she’d determined that nothing was broken, and it appeared that Lauren didn’t have any internal bleeding.

“Right.” Rebecca stood and helped Lauren up. “I’ve no idea where we are, but we need to get out of here. Maybe we’re close to a road, and we can flag down someone to help us.”

In the back of her mind, she thought the best thing for them to do was to remain as close to the cabin as possible, but hidden in a way that should Alfie come back, he wouldn’t find them.

She had to believe that Adam would be looking for her. Whether he would be able to use some resources from the Navy, she had no idea. Maybe, if he got his team to help him.

“Are you ready?” she asked Lauren.

“Yes.” She stood straighter, wincing, and Rebecca placed an arm around her waist.

“We’re going to get out of this, Lauren. We will be found and then this nightmare will be over.”

They shuffled their way to the front door. Rebecca opened it and looked around. She couldn’t see much, but there was no vehicle and no lights in the distance to suggest that one was making its way to them.

She had no idea what direction she headed in. All she knew was that she needed to get them away from the cabin.

They made slow progress. Slower than Rebecca would’ve liked, but she couldn’t push Lauren. What happened to her was minimal in comparison to Lauren. Alfie had used his fists and possibly his feet to pummel Lauren’s body.

“Wait. Listen,” Lauren whispered.

Rebecca stopped and concentrated on trying to hear whatever Lauren had thought she heard. There it was...the low hum of an engine getting closer and closer.

She looked around. There was a tree that had fallen, large enough that they could take shelter behind. Rebecca tapped Lauren on the hand and pointed to the tree, and the other woman nodded.

They hurried, as much as they could, toward it. Rebecca didn’t know if

she was glad that it was hollow or not. Anything could be hiding in the dark void, but for the moment, it would provide them with the cover they needed.

Without waiting to see if Lauren would follow or not, she crawled into the small space, praying that they weren't disrupting an animal's sleep. Lauren followed and the moment she settled down behind her, she heard it.

The scream of frustration—Alfie had returned.

The echo of a door slamming reverberated around the quiet night. "You can't have got far, bitches. I'm going to find you, and then I'm going to kill you both."

CHAPTER 27



THE NIGHT SKY PROVIDED NO COMFORT FOR ROCKET. HE'D GONE OUTSIDE because he needed a moment alone. They were making progress. He had to be happy with that, but it wasn't as fast as he'd hoped or needed it to be.

Normally, his patience wasn't an issue. Normally, it wasn't the woman he loved who was the focus of the mission.

Tex had found some footage of Alfie taking Lauren. It looked like the other woman hadn't put up a fight, like Rebecca had. Then again, she knew Alfie better than they all did, and considering what Alfie had put her through, she'd probably worked out that being compliant was the best way to go. But she was a sailor, and Rocket had hoped she'd show some fight. Unless Alfie had drugged her, but not enough for her to lose consciousness, like he'd done to Rebecca.

The door behind him opened, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Hank. "We've got a location."

Adrenaline spiked through Rocket as he marched past Hank and into the dining room. "Where are they?"

Fort pointed to an area that was circled. It probably wasn't two hours away from their current location—across the border in Mexico. "We've pinpointed they could be in this vicinity."

Could be...not we know for sure this is where they're located.

"How the hell did he get them into Mexico without their passports?" Rocked asked and then wished he could take the words back. Instead, he held up his hand. "Don't answer."

If anyone should know how trafficking worked in the world, it was him. There were always ways to get people in and out of Mexico without the

border patrol guards knowing there were more than one or two occupants in the car.

“When you’ve also got a Mexican passport and a US one, it’s easy to get in and out,” Fort said. “Tex is doing research to see if Alfie or a family member owns property in that area.”

Rocket absorbed the bombshell Fort had laid on him. “Alfie has dual citizenship?”

Cass looked up from where she was working. Her hair was up in a messy bun, and he picked up on the purplish bruises under her eyes behind her glasses. “In Mexico, he is known as Alfonzo Lopez. In America, he is known as Alfie Lucas. He has two sets of documents from each country. Seems he’s been keeping secrets everywhere. He’s very clever at hiding his Mexican roots when it suits. There’s records of him working with a speech therapist to lose any trace of his Mexican accent. He was born in America.”

Another million questions flowed through Rocket’s mind, but at least they knew how Alfie was able to have the documents he did.

“How long will it take to get confirmation that he owns any land there? And how are we able to get in there?”

“I’m liaising with Commander North. Alfie has kidnapped one of our own in Petty Officer Lauren Beaufort. It’s going to be a rescue mission with your team and Rabbit’s team,” Tex responded.

Rocket inwardly groaned, hearing that they’d been working with Rabbit’s team, but as there was discussion of them taking on a mission together in the near future, working with them now may be a good idea to work out any issues and get on the same page. He only wished that Rebecca wasn’t at the center of the mission. If any member of Rabbit’s team caused them not to get to Rebecca in time, then he wouldn’t be responsible for his actions.

“We’ll head to base and contact you when we get there. Hopefully, you’ll both have more information for us.” Like he did on a mission, Fort took charge, and it made sense to head to the base. That way, they could be ready to leave the moment they got confirmation of Rebecca and Lauren’s location.

Rocket clapped his hands, any tiredness that may have been threatening to overwhelm him forgotten. “Let’s do this.”

* * *

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, twelve men waited for the final confirmation that they would be taking to the air in a matter of minutes. Rocket just wanted to be on their way.

Between them, Tex and Cass had confirmed that Alfie did own property in Mexico and had familial ties to the drug cartel they'd been watching when Rocket had been injured. Another incentive to nail Alfie's ass to the wall.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and Rocket turned to find Rabbit heading in his direction. He gave the man a chin lift. They may not be the best of friends, but they were going to be working together for the next few hours. Creating animosity wouldn't do anyone any favors.

"I know we haven't always gotten along, but..." Rabbit started, and Rocket waited to hear what else he had to say. "I want you to know that I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize getting Rebecca back to you."

The sincerity was clear in Rabbit's voice. He wasn't just saying the words because he thought Rocket needed to hear. "Thanks, man, appreciate it. And same. If we're going to work together on future missions, then we have to let go of the past." If anything, he'd learned over the last few months that hanging on to anger only made his life unpleasant.

He held out his hand, and Rabbit took it. He didn't try to crush Rocket's hand. The connection was brief, but the air was cleared, and that was all that mattered.

The distinctive sound of a helicopter starting up penetrated the night air. Adrenaline pumped through Rocket, and he rocked back on the balls of his feet. "It's go time."

"Let's do this," Rabbit agreed and they bumped fists.

Rocket jogged to the helo, ready to bring back his girl. "Hang on, Florence. I'm coming for you."

* * *

"YOU CAN'T HIDE from me. I know this land."

Rebecca held her breath as Alfie's footsteps and voice faded to the right of where she and Lauren were hiding. Clearly, he didn't know it well enough; otherwise, he would've looked in the hollowed-out tree.

"What are we going to do?" whispered Lauren. "We can't stay here, but where else can we go?"

“I wish I had answers, but I don’t. What about your training? What have you been told to do in situations like this?”

Rebecca had no idea what Lauren did in the Navy, but she had to think that they would run through scenarios like this. Or did they only do that with the Special Forces teams?

“Stay where you are, and if you’ve got a distress signal device, you activate it.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve got yours on you?” Rebecca asked, even knowing the answer to that question.

Lauren snorted. “Not something I carry on myself all the time, but maybe after this, I should.”

“Adam will find us. We just need to stay quiet and stay here.” As much as she wanted to try to get as far away from Alfie as possible, Rebecca had to believe it made more sense to stay where they were. They were hidden and Alfie hadn’t found them—yet.

No, I’m not going to think that way.

If she did, then she might lose the tenuous hold she had on her emotions. They were safe, and she had to believe they’d stay that way.

“As much as I want to run, you’re right. Not that I could run far, anyway.” Lauren’s breathing appeared more ragged than it had when they’d first hidden in the tree.

“Are you okay?” she asked, which was a silly question when she’d seen and given Lauren an examination.

What had she missed, though? Was her belly distended now because their escape had aggravated an internal injury, and she was now bleeding?

“I’m having a hard time catching my breath, but if I have to run, I will. I’m not going to let him take me down. He doesn’t deserve to have that handed to him. I’ve given that to him too often. I need to stop it.”

Rebecca couldn’t help but admire the woman’s strength. She’d been to hell and back for months with Alfie. “This time, he won’t get bail. I’ll make sure of it.”

Rebecca didn’t know how, but she would. Although, after kidnapping her and Lauren again, no judge on earth would grant him bail. At least she didn’t think anyone would.

Behind her, Lauren sighed, and Rebecca didn’t like the sound of that. “You know something I don’t?”

“I found something on Alfie. Something that I never discussed with him

because, by then, he was using his fists more than words when communicating with me. I was walking out the door because of it. He didn't like that I walked out. He found me, and...well, that's when I ended up in hospital."

Rebecca noted that Lauren hadn't mentioned what she'd found on Alfie. "I'm glad you got free of him," she said instead of asking what she really wanted to ask. Anything to help them get out of this situation would be good. If what Lauren knew would help them in that way, then sharing it would be beneficial.

"Not really free, considering here we are."

Unable to help herself, Rebecca chuckled a little. "Yeah, this ain't exactly the Ritz."

Lauren laughed, as well, then inhaled deeply. "Note to self—don't laugh."

During her examination of the other woman, Rebecca hadn't noticed any bumps or lumps on Lauren's chest, but that didn't mean her ribs weren't cracked. "Sounds like you may have cracked a rib or two," she said lightly.

"It's possible. Alfie kicked me there a few times."

The fire within Rebecca to bodily harm Alfie flared to life again, and she took a couple of cleansing breaths. No point getting all fired up when she couldn't really do anything about it.

Silence descended in their little hidey hole, but every now and then, they heard Alfie yelling. Fortunately, he wasn't close to their location, so she allowed herself to relax.

"I'm surprised you haven't asked me what I know about Alfie," Lauren said, breaking the quiet.

"I wanted to, but I also didn't want to ask questions about someone who hurt you. I mean, you brought it up, but didn't elaborate, so I figured you had your reasons."

"I've kept it quiet. I didn't even tell the police when they questioned me about the attack at the hospital. I probably should've, but you never know if you can trust the people who are in authority."

There was a lot to unpack from what Lauren was saying. "You can trust me. I won't say anything."

Being a nurse, keeping a patient's confidence was part of the job. She hadn't breathed a word to anyone about what Adam's mom had said to him.

"I know. Alfie's got a connection to a drug cartel in Mexico. His uncle is

one of the top people in the organization. That's probably how he made bail. He got someone to give the money to his mom so she could pay it."

With that little bit of information, fear replaced the anger she had toward Alfie. He may have said that he wanted to kill her and Lauren, but he could easily sell them to some unsavory people. Many people disappeared from the streets, never to be seen again. She didn't want to become one of those statistics.

"We have to make sure he doesn't find us," Rebecca said.

"Too late, my pretties." Bright light lit their little cave, and Rebecca turned her face away, wishing with everything she had that they'd tried to escape instead of staying where they were.

She also mentally kicked herself that she hadn't paid more attention to what was going on outside the hiding spot. Maybe she might have heard Alfie's footsteps approaching them. There was no way he could be silent. He wasn't the type.

"Time to go." He reached in and yanked her out, then pushed her so that she stumbled and landed on her knees. He repeated the action with Lauren, but took time to kick her again in the ribs.

Lauren flinched, but didn't let out a moan or cry of pain, which Rebecca was sure she had to have been feeling.

"You're going to pay for this act of defiance. I was going to kill you, leave you here so the coyotes and other animals could pick at your flesh. But now, now I've got another idea. Your life is going to be so awful now that you'll wish that I had done what I'd originally planned."

Rebecca's heart thumped loudly in her chest. Adrenaline spiked through her, and she pulled the arm Alfie had in a tight grip in an attempt to get away.

"Don't even think it." Alfie tightened his hold again, digging his fingers in, pinching her skin.

"You won't get away with this, Alfie. Everyone will know that it's you who's taken us."

Alfie laughed at her bravado. "Keep thinking that, bitch. I will *never* be caught."

The click of a gun engaging sounded behind them. "Think again, fucker."

CHAPTER 28



ROCKET'S FINGER ITCHED TO PULL THE TRIGGER AND BLOW ALFIE'S BRAINS out, but the psycho had hold of his Rebecca, and he wasn't going to do anything to put her in danger.

"You're making a big mistake," Alfie sneered and pulled something from behind him.

A gun.

Now jammed into the side of Rebecca's head.

Rebecca whimpered, and the sound just about blew his resolve out the window.

"Keep it together, Rocket. We've got him surrounded, and I've got a shot," Hank murmured through the comms.

Having his team at his back was another reason he hadn't acted on the need to hurt the fucker.

"I'm two feet away from Petty Officer Beaufort. He's not going to hurt anyone."

Rabbit's resolve and determination reached out to him. So far, Rabbit's team had proven to be more reliable than they had been the last time they'd worked together. Shoota, Lanky, Dizzy, Donno, Castle, and Rabbit seemed to have gelled in a way the team hadn't before. Getting rid of two troublemakers and bringing in a couple of new guys appeared to have helped a lot.

They'd repelled out of the helo onto the property and spread out. Alfie yelling his obscenities had helped them narrow in on where he was. When the *all clear* had come from Bird and Shoota that the cabin was empty, Rocket hadn't known if he was happy about that or not.

"What? You guys haven't got anything to say? I thought you were all

super-hotshot SEALs. Seems like you're just pussies," Alfie mocked as he waved the gun around before putting it back against Rebecca's head.

Last time Hank had shot him in the leg. Rocket still wanted to put a bullet in between his eyes. The plan was, though, to maim Alfie again and, even though it was probably unlikely, pick his brain about the cartel and try to get some inside information that would help them bring it down.

That was the plan, but if Alfie did anything to hurt Rebecca, Rocket would be hard-pressed not to kill instead of injure.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed, Alfie?" Rocket asked as his finger caressed the trigger.

"Nope, but you know what? I'm tired of talking. Talking never gets you anywhere. Only action does and—" He pulled the gun away from Rebecca's head, and before Rocket could react, shot her in the leg, her cry echoing in the still night as she collapsed to the ground.

Red haze consumed Rocket, and he pulled the trigger, not caring where the bullet hit, only knowing that Alfie had shot the woman he loved. He became aware of people shouting, but all he could concentrate on was Rebecca, who lay in a crumpled heap on the ground.

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he closed the small gap between them and scooped her up. He had no idea where the bullet had landed. If it had hit the femoral artery or not.

"Florence!" He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"It hurts," she whispered.

"I know, honey. I know."

Around him, there was plenty of action, but all his focus was on the woman in his arms. The woman he loved. The woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. An idea that should shock him but didn't. It didn't because it was so right. Everything about Rebecca was right—for him.

"Helo will be here in ten." Fort squatted beside him. "I'm going to wrap her leg."

Rocket nodded, his gaze never leaving Rebecca's face. "Hang on, Florence. Help is on the way."

"You found me."

He smiled despite himself. "Yeah, I did. I'll always find you." He took a deep breath, knowing that he was about to utter the words he'd never said to another woman, other than his mom. "I love you, Rebecca."

She smiled, but then her eyes rolled back in her head and her body went

limp in his arms.

Panic set in. “Where the fuck is that helicopter?” He placed his forehead against Rebecca’s. “Don’t you die on me, Florence. I need you.”

* * *

ROCKET WAS BEGINNING to hate hospitals. His ass was numb, but there was no way he was moving from his spot, the spot he’d been in since Rebecca returned from surgery. Luck had been on their side. The bullet missed her femoral artery, but hit her thigh bone before lodging in the muscle. Her recovery would be slow, but she would recover, and that’s all that mattered to him.

She’d briefly woken up after surgery and smiled at him when they wheeled her into the room she was currently in.

He stroked his thumb over the top of her hand, making sure not to disturb the IV tube. The doctors told him she should be waking up soon, but that had been hours ago.

“Florence, I need to see your beautiful eyes. Wake up for me, please.”

Her eyes remained shut, and so he rested his head on the mattress beside her. Exhaustion consumed him. Except for the short nap he’d had on her couch, he hadn’t slept since the morning of the day she’d been kidnapped.

Five minutes.

A power nap was all he needed. Then he’d wake up and continue his vigil. He didn’t want to miss the moment she opened her eyes.

He’d no sooner relaxed when he felt a light touch on his head. A moment there, then gone.

Rocket lifted his head. And there she was, her beautiful blue eyes watching him.

“Hey, Florence.”

“Hey, Rocket.” Her voice was a mere whisper, but it was the best sound he’d heard in a long time.

He chuckled upon hearing her use his nickname. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been shot.”

“Looks like you didn’t lose your sense of humor.” For that, he was glad, especially after what she’d gone through.

“How’s Lauren?” She shifted and winced.

“Last I heard, she was being examined, and I would imagine, admitted. She’d looked pretty rough.”

Rocket also noted that Rabbit hadn’t left her side, either. He’d helped her into the helo and kept watch over her the whole trip back.

“And Alfie?”

He shouldn’t be surprised she was asking him these questions. She was more alert than he expected her to be, especially after the surgery she’d endured. But then again, Lauren had relayed on the flight back from Alfie’s hideout how Rebecca had found a nail and managed to break the rope binding her, enabling them to escape. Rocket glanced at the bandaged cuts—his woman was fucking phenomenal.

Rocket wished he could tell her that she’d never have to worry about Alfie again, but he couldn’t. Even though he’d been burning with anger when he’d taken the shot, he hadn’t killed the man. “He also had to have surgery, and once he regained consciousness, he was transferred to a section of the hospital under heavy police guard.”

Rebecca nodded. “He can’t be released again. It’s too frightening to think about what he’d do. But his family...”

Rocket carefully lifted her hand. “I know, and trust me, no one wants that to happen. Ox, his team, and Tex are working together to make sure that everyone involved in his case is legit and not on the take.”

“Good.” Rebecca yawned, her eyelids dropping again.

“Sleep, Florence. I’ll be here when you wake.” He kissed her on the cheek. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” she murmured.

His heart leaped at her response. Did she mean it? Or was it just a reflex response?

Would she even remember she’d told him she loved him when she woke up again?

The exhaustion that disappeared the moment Rebecca woke returned, and he laid his head down. Everything he wanted to know could be answered when he woke up.

* * *

PAIN WOKE REBECCA UP. Her leg throbbed and her mouth was dry. Glancing

around, she took in the room she was in. A room like the ones she'd walked into many times to tend to a patient, only this time, she was the one needing attention. The beep of the heart monitor was annoying, but comforting at the same time.

Beside her on the bed, Adam lay sleeping. Dark shadows lingered beneath his eyes.

How much sleep had he gotten recently?

How many days had passed since she'd been taken? Dawn had been breaking when she'd been shot.

Oh my God! I was shot.

The thought tumbled through her mind. As much as she tried to remember everything that had happened after the burn of the bullet entering her thigh, her memory was blank. Although, she did remember one thing—Adam telling her he loved her. At least, she thought she'd heard him say that twice.

And—wait—had she said it back to him here in the hospital? Or was it all a dream?

She shifted to try to get more comfortable. Blinding-hot pain seared from her wound. She was unable to stop the small cry of distress from erupting from her.

Adam shot up from the bed, looking around. His hair stuck up in all directions. He looked so deliciously ruffled, and she wanted to always wake up next to him. “What? What do you need?”

Before she could even utter a response, he was reaching out and pressing the button for the nurse.

“Do you need a drink?” Again, he didn't give her a chance to respond. He just reached for the small plastic cup and poured some water into it. He held the straw up to her mouth, and she took a couple of swallows.

The door opened behind him, and Rebecca smiled when she saw Ellie walking in.

“Oh, it's so good to see you're awake. You had us all worried.” She rushed up to the bed and gave Rebecca a quick hug.

“I'm okay,” she replied, wincing again as she wiggled her butt into a more comfortable position.

“Right. And I suppose your pain level is manageable?” Ellie used her nonsense nurse voice, one Rebecca was familiar with as she used it often too.

Even though she wanted to be strong and fight through the pain, her leg

was throbbing, and it was making it hard to think clearly. “I could use some pain relief.”

Ellie’s eyes widened in surprise. “Well then, that was easier than I thought it was going to be. I’ll go get it. Don’t run away now.”

“No chance of that happening,” Rebecca responded drily.

Laughing, Ellie gave a short salute as she walked out the door.

Rebecca reached out and took hold of Adam’s hand. “It’s just us again.”

Adam brushed his lips across her knuckles, and the hair on her arm stood to attention. His touch was one she didn’t think she’d ever tire of. “It is.”

The need to know if he’d said *I love you* to her was building inside of her. There was only one way to find out. Taking a deep breath, she prepared her thoughts. Parts of her mind were a little hazy still. “I have to ask you a question,” she began.

“Ask away.” If her request caused him any concerns, he didn’t show it. “I’ve got nothing to hide from you, Florence.”

“Did you tell me you loved me after I was shot and again here? Or did I imagine it?”

A beautiful smile broke out over his face, crinkling the corners of her eyes. “You didn’t imagine it. I love you, Rebecca. I never thought it possible, but when I came home and found you missing, my world imploded. All I could think about was that I hadn’t told you I loved you. That I hadn’t told you that you make my life so much better. *You* make me a better person.”

Rebecca’s breath hitched in her throat. Adam’s gaze hadn’t wavered during his declaration, the love he felt for her shining brightly in the depths of his blue eyes. Every word touched her soul and imprinted themselves on her.

“Oh, Adam. I love you, too, so much. Getting back to you was my entire focus. It was the reason I searched the walls of that damn cabin until I found a nail or something I could fray that rope with. I wasn’t going to let Alfie win. No matter what.”

He cupped her cheek and she turned to press a kiss on his rough palm. Being touched by him was a dream come true. One she’d clung to during her captivity.

“You’re it for me, Florence. I want everything with you. Marriage. Kids. Growing old and cantankerous together.”

Joy bloomed within her, dulling the pain in her leg a fraction. “Is that a marriage proposal, Adam Coburn?”

Adam chuckled. “A promise. But also, yes, it’s a proposal.”

A promise.

She liked that a lot. “Yes, Rocket. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“You won’t regret saying yes. Every day, I’ll make you laugh. I’ll hold you when you cry. And I will protect you always.”

He sealed his vow with a soft kiss against her lips. Tears trickled down her cheeks and she couldn’t be happier. She’d found her person and was excited for the adventures and life they would have together.

Adam rested his head against her forehead. Her stomach fluttered when he did that. “I love you, Rebecca Nelson.”

“And I love you, Adam *Rocket* Coburn. With all of my heart.”

EPILOGUE



“YOU SHOULD BE SITTING, FLORENCE.” ROCKET SWEEPED ASIDE REBECCA’S hair and dropped a kiss on the base of her neck. A shiver rippled through her, and his lips twitched into a smug smile of satisfaction. It was just as well she couldn’t see it; otherwise, she’d tell him off.

“Wipe that smile off your face,” she grumbled, and he laughed. Maybe she had eyes in the back of her head.

Rocket turned her in his arms so they were facing each other. “I’m serious, though. You should be resting. You’ve just gotten out of the hospital.”

“I got out two weeks ago, Adam. I’m fine. Plus, I’m going back to work in a week. What are you going to do then?”

Rocket hated the idea of Rebecca going back to work. Not because he didn’t think she was capable or ready. But because he enjoyed coming home to her every night. With her overnight shifts at the hospital, there would be days when they’d be passing each other in the hallway. Her headed for bed, him headed for work. No way would he ask her to give up her career, though. She was a damn good nurse, and he wasn’t that type of person. One day, if she wanted to leave her job, he would support her. Like he knew she would stand by him if he wanted a career change.

“I’m going to kiss you goodbye and worry the whole day,” he murmured against her lips before possessing them. He poured all the love he had for her into it, hoping she understood how much better his life was with her in it now.

She moaned against his mouth and opened up for him. If only they didn’t have a houseful of guests, he’d drag her back to their bedroom and show her

just how much he loved her.

“Get a room, you two.”

Rocket lifted his head to see Penni standing at the entrance to the kitchen, a huge smile on her face as she held her son, Logan Aiden, who was born a week ago.

The party they were having was a housewarming for him officially moving in with Rebecca, and a “welcome to the family” for little Logan.

They were staying in Rebecca’s rental while they renovated the house he’d inherited from his mom. A house that had sat empty for the past two years. He couldn’t wait to work on it and create new memories within the walls. Good ones that would erase the bad ones. When finished the house was going to look different but also the same.

“We would, but all y’all are here,” Rebecca quipped before greeting Penni with a hug and brushing her fingers gently down Logan’s arm, her face awash with love for the baby.

Rocket wanted to give her that—a child of their own. It was something they hadn’t talked about, but when everyone left, and after he’d worshipped her body, he’d talk to her and find out how she felt about a family.

“Don’t rush her.” Fort popped the dish of food on the counter. “But I will say it’s the best thing in the world.”

Rocket side-eyed him, noting the dark rings beneath his eyes. “Even the sleepless nights?”

Fort chuckled. “Yep, even those.” He walked over to Penni, placed his arm around her, and kissed her on the temple, before looking back at Rocket. “Best. Thing. Ever.”

Rebecca sidled up to him as the other couple left the kitchen. “What was that all about?”

“I’ll tell you later.” He laced his fingers through hers. “Come on. Let’s get this party started officially, so we can send everyone home ASAP.”

Rebecca laughed and punched him on the arm. “You’re hopeless.”

“Hopelessly in love with you,” he responded and gave her another kiss. Rebecca melted in his arms.

When they came up for air, she looked at him, eyes half-closed in desire. “How soon is too soon to ask them all to leave?”

“Now who’s hopeless?”

“Hopelessly in love with you, that’s me.” She winked and gave him another peck on the cheek before grabbing up the dish Fort had left and

headed out to the back deck where everyone had congregated. Her limp still there, but getting better.

Rocket followed, and when he got to the doorway, he paused, his gaze tracking over everyone there—his family. All his friends had found love, and with it, had brought a different dynamic to the group.

A better one.

One that made them stronger.

They'd also invited Rabbit and his team. After working with them to save Rebecca, a new respect for each other had grown. Inviting them was a sign that any issues between them were firmly in the past.

Rocket noticed the way Rabbit's gaze seemed to drift toward Lauren, where she and Rebecca were laughing together. Nor did he miss the way Lauren's attention darted toward Rabbit too.

Love was all around, and maybe there would be new love growing too.

* * *

CALLUM 'GROWLER' Taylor put the plate of half-eaten food down. What he had consumed sat like a ball in his stomach. All around him, conversation and laughter flowed. Fort and the others had made him feel welcome the second he joined their team. His most recent decision felt like betrayal, but he had to do what he had to do. And that included breaking the news to them now, while they were all together.

He'd never been one for public speaking, but he'd seen enough movies to know that the best way to getting anyone's attention was to tap a glass with a spoon. He had a beer bottle and a fork—that would work.

Conversation died down, and all eyes were on him after one clink of his fork.

Well, fuck. There was no backing down now.

“Umm, I've got something to tell you, and I'll keep it short. I wanted to let you know that I'm not re-upping, and I'll be joining Ox at Alliez Security when my current enlistment is over.”

* * *

Thank you for reading Rebecca and Rocket's story.

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* * *

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Finally to my family, your continued support is what keeps me going.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Nicole Flockton writes sexy contemporary romances that sparkle and seduce you one kiss at a time. Nicole likes nothing better than taking characters and creating unique situations where they fight to find their true love.

When she's not busy writing she's looking after her very own hero – her wonderfully supportive husband, as well as her two fabulous kids and various fur babies. Her kindle is never far from her reach. She's a flower crown wearing certified chocoholic, Cinderella lover, major BTS fan, sports lover and a glitter aficionado.

You can visit Nicole at her website www.nicoleflockton.com



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Kristin Lynn: [Worth the Risk](#)

Callie Love & Ann Omasta: [Hawaii Hottie](#)

JM Madden: [Rescuing Olivia](#)
A.M. Mahler: [Griffin](#)
Ellie Masters: [Sybil's Protector](#)
Trish McCallan: [Hero Under Fire](#)
Naomi McKay: [Twist](#)
Rachel McNeely: [The SEAL's Surprise Baby](#)
KD Michaels: [Saving Laura](#)
Olivia Michaels: [Protecting Harper](#)
Annie Miller: [Securing Willow](#)
MJ Nightingale: [Protecting Beauty](#)
C.K. O'Connor: [Delaney's Bodyguard](#)
Melinda Owens: [Betraying Katie](#)
Victoria Paige: [Reclaiming Izabel](#)
Danielle Pays: [Defending Sarina](#)
Taryn Rivers: [Savage Cove](#)
Lainey Reese: [Protecting New York](#)
KeKe Renée: [Protecting Bria](#)
Taryn Rivers: [Savage Cove](#)
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: [Extracting Mateo](#)
Ariana Rose: [Chasing Paige](#)
Deanna L. Rowley: [Saving Veronica](#)
Angela Rush: [Charlotte](#)
Rose Smith: [Saving Satin](#)
Tyler Anne Snell: [Cowboy Heat](#)
Lynne St. James: [SEAL's Spitfire](#)
E.M. Shue: [Discovering Tyler](#)
Bella Stone: [Rexar](#)
Jen Talty: [Burning Desire](#)
Reina Torres, [Rescuing Hi'ilani](#)
LJ Vickery: [Circus Comes to Town](#)
R. C. Wynne: [Shadows Renewed](#)

Delta Team Three Series

Lori Ryan: [Nori's Delta](#)
Becca Jameson: [Destiny's Delta](#)
Lynne St James, [Gwen's Delta](#)
Elle James: [Ivy's Delta](#)

Riley Edwards: [Hope's Delta](#)

Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World

Freya Barker: [Burning for Autumn](#)

B.P. Beth: [Scott](#)

Jane Blythe: [Salvaging Marigold](#)

Julia Bright, [Justice for Amber](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Hadley Finn: [Exton](#)

Emily Gray: [Shelter for Allegra](#)

Danielle M. Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Deandra Hall: [Shelter for Sharla](#)

Jenna Harte: [Dead But Not Forgotten](#)

Amber Kuhlman: [Protecting Paisley](#)

Reina Torres: [Justice for Sloane](#)

Aubree Valentine, [Justice for Danielle](#)

Maddie Wade: [Finding English](#)

Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, [Fighting for Elena](#)

Deandra Hall, [Fighting for Carly](#)

Haven Rose, [Fighting for Calliope](#)

MJ Nightingale, [Fighting for Jemma](#)

TL Reeve, [Fighting for Brittney](#)

Nicole Flockton, [Fighting for Nadia](#)

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

Finding Monica

Finding Carly

Finding Ashlyn

Finding Jodelle

Eagle Point Search & Rescue

Searching for Lilly

Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley (Oct 2023)

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora (Nov 2023)

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (TBA)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley
Shielding Devyn
Shielding Ember
Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

Securing Caite (FREE!)
Securing Brenae (novella)
Securing Sidney
Securing Piper
Securing Zoey
Securing Avery
Securing Kalee
Securing Jane

Delta Force Heroes Series

Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)
Rescuing Aimee (novella)
Rescuing Emily
Rescuing Harley
Marrying Emily (novella)
Rescuing Kassie
Rescuing Bryn
Rescuing Casey
Rescuing Sadie (novella)
Rescuing Wendy
Rescuing Mary
Rescuing Macie (novella)
Rescuing Annie

Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series

Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)
Justice for Mickie
Justice for Corrie
Justice for Laine (novella)
Shelter for Elizabeth

Justice for Boone
Shelter for Adeline
Shelter for Sophie
Justice for Erin
Justice for Milena
Shelter for Blythe
Justice for Hope
Shelter for Quinn
Shelter for Koren
Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

Protecting Caroline (FREE!)
Protecting Alabama
Protecting Fiona
Marrying Caroline (novella)
Protecting Summer
Protecting Cheyenne
Protecting Jessyka
Protecting Julie (novella)
Protecting Melody
Protecting the Future
Protecting Kiera (novella)
Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)
Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal 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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