



Fallport Rescue Operations
SEARCHING

FOR

Madison

USA Today Bestselling Author

JEN TALTALTY

SEARCHING FOR MADISON
(SPECIAL FORCES: OPERATION
ALPHA)

FALLPORT RESCUE OPERATION

BOOK ONE

JEN TALTY

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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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Searching for Madison, a tale of resilience, love, and redemption, Brayden and Madison discover that sometimes, the most unexpected journey can lead to healing, second chances, and a future they never dared to dream.

In the depths of grief and despair, ex-Navy SEAL, Brayden Gibson finds solace in the wilderness as a member of a search and rescue team. Haunted by the loss of his beloved wife, he embarks on a journey to reboot his shattered life. During a poignant hiking trip to spread his wife's ashes, fate intervenes when he crosses paths with a woman desperately seeking her missing sister. Brayden's ingrained training and sense of duty kick in as he vows to help Madison find her sister, no matter the cost. His determination to bring Madison's sister home safely is matched only by the unexpected emotions Madison stirs within him.

Madison Cooper, still grappling with the aftermath of a life-altering car accident that left her unable to bear children, has been attempting to rebuild her shattered existence. A girls' trip with her sister was meant to be a respite, but Madison's world crumbles when Hilary vanishes. Desperate for answers, she must rely on the enigmatic and captivating Brayden. As they navigate the treacherous path of finding Madison's sister, their hearts entwine amidst the chaos. But danger lurks in the shadows, threatening to tear them apart.

CHAPTER ONE

Brayden Gibson slipped from his pickup and stretched. His back ached and his heart hurt. It had taken seven days to drive from California to Virginia. Not because he wanted to stop and smell the roses, but he'd wanted to leave small pieces of Sarah in all the places she loved or would have wanted to see. It killed him that they'd even had the conversation. She'd beaten cancer. They had their entire lives ahead of them until some fucking asshole got behind the wheel of a car after having too much to drink, killing his wife and unborn child.

He slammed the door of his vehicle shut with a little more gusto than planned. The anger was always right below the surface like a volcano waiting to erupt. He resented the emotion, yet he hadn't been able to make it go away. He wanted to. He wanted to move forward with his life and live in a way that wouldn't disappoint his beloved Sarah. Only, he couldn't find the strength.

It had been a little over a year since Sarah had been killed. His family and friends had all been supportive, but he was getting tired of hearing how it was time for him to move on. His sisters were the worst. They constantly wanted to fix him up with their friends under the pretense of *no pressure*. However, he couldn't stand the pity looks a second longer.

Not to mention he wasn't sure he'd ever get past losing the only woman he'd ever loved and he didn't believe for one second there was anyone else out there that he could possibly want to share his life with. Those days were gone. Besides, he'd come to appreciate the art of living alone. Meals were about fueling his body, not bringing people together. Television and movies had become acts of getting through the hours as they ticked by, waiting for

morning.

Existence had become a way of life and Sarah wouldn't approve. It was time to make a major attitude adjustment.

He scanned the street. A wave of uncertainty filled his bones. The last few years had been nothing but change. He'd made some difficult decisions, but they all had made sense at the time and this felt right.

Leaving the military had been an easy choice. He'd done that for Sarah when she'd needed him by her side for her treatments. She hadn't asked him to, but no way was he going to leave her to fight for her life alone. After she died, he'd thought about re-enlisting, but couldn't bring himself to do it. She'd always been his rock. Not once had she ever complained about his deployments. She loved being the wife of a Navy SEAL and was proud of her husband. He couldn't bring himself to go back. When his old buddy Ethan called with a job opportunity in search and rescue in Fallport, Virginia, he jumped at the chance. It meant leaving behind the only world he'd ever known.

And his family.

But if he didn't, he'd surely go mad.

He strolled up the walkway toward the Sunny Side Up Diner, where Ethan suggested they meet for lunch. The place looked like a dive, and all that did was bring his memories closer to Sarah. It was the kind of place she would have loved to stop and check out. She would have saw this little town and demanded they go exploring for an hour or two. Every time he had a few days leave, she would want him to take her to some fair or go antiquing in the middle of nowhere so she could investigate a new area she'd never been. They had both grown up in San Francisco and every time they moved, she viewed it as an adventure. She never minded packing up and going to the next Navy base. Once he became a SEAL, they landed in Coronado and she made that their home, but with even the most temporary of housing, she had a unique talent of making it feel as though it was the best place on earth—because she was there.

He pulled back the door and stepped inside. Immediately his nose was assaulted by the rich aroma of bitter coffee mixed with fried foods, sweet cinnamon, sizzling bacon, and everything that went with a small-town diner. It made him question his decision to accept the job.

“Brayden, over here.” Ethan stood and waved. He'd been sitting in the back corner. Typical Ethan. He liked to have a view of the entire building.

Hazard of the job.

Brayden strolled through the maze of tables and booths, taking in all the distinct smells and noticing the people, especially two women. They stood out in the crowd in part because of the intensity of their conversation. One leaned across the table, taking the other's hand, staring intently. Their words were hushed, but heated. He paused for a brief moment, unable to take his eyes off one of the ladies in particular. The only time he noticed anyone from the opposite sex was when they reminded him of his Sarah.

This woman did not.

His Sarah had short blond hair even before it had fallen out from the chemo treatments. She had brown eyes and was only five-two.

The young woman who had caught his attention appeared to be much taller, with long dark hair, down to the middle of her back, and her eyes were a piercing blue-green color. They reminded him of the Caribbean Sea. He scoffed at the idea that it was her beauty that made him turn his head. He decided the only reason he slowed as he passed their booth was the way in which they conversed. He got the sense they were arguing.

Sarah and her sister had been fighting right before Sarah's life had been taken from them. He'd tried not to place blame on Torrie. It hadn't been her fault. The only person who should be held responsible was the man who had gotten behind the wheel of a car after he'd been drinking.

However, Sarah had been so upset over Torrie's affair with a married man, it caused a huge rift between the two girls and he worried that Sarah might have been distracted after she'd left her sister that fateful night.

"How was the drive?" Ethan asked, pulling Brayden back to the present.

"It was good." Brayden gave Ethan a bro-hug, slapping him on the back. He'd met Ethan during SEAL training and they'd been good friends ever since. He'd been one of the few men outside of his team to understand why Brayden had chosen to leave the military when his wife had become ill, where others believed an extended leave would have been a better choice. Sarah's cancer had been caught early. Her odds were good. And she'd won. She'd even gotten pregnant when all the doctors had told her that might never be possible. But Sarah didn't believe in looking at the negative. Her world was full of the positive and she held on to what could be. That's what had made her death so meaningless in the end.

"I take it you made all the stops that you needed to?" Ethan asked as he eased back into the booth.

“Every single one.”

The waitress came by and Brayden ordered a soda along with a burger and fries. He was a creature of habit and that was his go-to lunch. It drove Sarah batshit crazy. She tried to get him to eat salads and shit with avocado in it. He hated that. Still did, but every once in a while, he would eat the crap. However, that wasn't going to be today.

“I'm glad you decided to take me up on my offer,” Ethan said.

“It was time for a change.” It had been fourteen months since Sarah had died. He'd spent the first six months sitting in his home in a drunken stupor, angry at the world. For the first time in his life, he'd been fired from a job. Not because he'd been bad at it. He simply stopped showing up. All he wanted was to be with his Sarah and his unborn child, whom he'd never gotten the chance to meet and wished he had. He knew that wasn't possible, and he'd never do anything to make that happen, but occasionally, that thought had lingered for longer than a moment in his brain. It had taken a visit from his parents—and Sarah's—for him to clean up his act and get his shit together. “But like I told you on the phone, I don't know if this will be a permanent gig.”

Ethan nodded. “A six-month trial, but that works on both sides.”

The waitress showed up with their food.

Brayden dived right into the fries. “Wow. These are good.”

“I know you don't want to discuss this, but we must.” Ethan lifted his beverage and took a gulp. “This past year, your employment record hasn't been the greatest. You've been canned from one job, and the last place you worked, your boss made a point of telling us that you're a lone wolf. That you don't take directions well and tend to alienate yourself from the rest of the team. I went out on a limb to recommend you. I explained you went through some tough times and you're back on track.”

Fucking wonderful. Brayden came to Fallport to start over. Not to have the men and women he worked with stare at him with pity in their eyes. He had gotten enough of that back in California. The only problem was that no one else would hire him because of how badly he'd fucked up. He needed to turn his life around. The shame that touched his soul for how he'd behaved would destroy Sarah and he knew she was looking down on him with a frown. That sent a shiver down his spine.

“I understand your concerns,” Brayden said. “I just wish you hadn't told everyone what happened. I'm learning how to live my life without Sarah and

it's not easy. She's been a part of my life since I was twenty. She's the only woman I've ever loved. She was everything to me and I needed to get out of California and start over. What I don't need are the people I work with waiting for me to fall apart. Or tiptoeing around me because they're afraid to say the wrong thing."

"No one knows specifically what happened, but all anyone has to do is google your name and the story will come up." Ethan held up his hand. "No one here is going to do that. We all have a past. Most everyone came here for a reason. The only issue at hand is, can they trust you during a search and rescue. Can you take a direct order, follow it, and not put anyone in unnecessary danger."

In all his years in the Navy, and as a SEAL, no one ever questioned his ability. Not once. He took personal issue that his friend was doing so now. But he comprehended the reason why. "I need this," Brayden said. "I know I screwed up badly and I need to turn this around. I wouldn't have accepted and put your good name on the line if I didn't believe I was ready."

"That's all I needed to hear." Ethan glanced at his watch. "I need to get going." He waved to the waitress.

Brayden grabbed his arm. "I've got this. Besides, I want to have some of that apple pie I saw being served. It looked and smelled delicious."

"I can't let you pay, especially since I know you planned on giving the settlement money to Sarah's parents."

"They wouldn't take it," Brayden admitted. "Something about me being her husband and how it was mine and they had more than enough money to carry them through their golden years. I'm fine, trust me."

Ethan arched a brow. "Knowing you, I'm gathering you fought them on it."

"Tooth and nail. They wouldn't budge and they frown on expensive gifts."

"They're good people," Ethan said. "Have you picked up the keys to your rental from Gretchen?"

"The email said it wouldn't be ready until three."

"It's a nice place. A little small, but the kitchen was recently remodeled."

"I don't need much." Brayden's days of having a big house with a backyard were over. All he needed was a bed, a place to heat up food, a sofa, and a television. "I'm sure it will be perfect."

"You've got a week to settle into your new digs and get yourself situated.

Lilly and I would love to have you over one night this week.”

“I’d love to. However, I was planning on camping for a couple of days. I’d like to spread the last of Sarah’s ashes here since it’s where I’m planning on turning over a new leaf. This is her kind of town and I know if she were still alive, she would have begged me to take her here.”

“How about when you get back?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Brayden nodded.

“The team would like to meet you, so before you go off camping, can you stop in the office?”

“I can do that in about an hour or so. Does that work?”

“That would be perfect.” Ethan tapped his knuckles on the table. “Call me if you need anything. I’m here for you.” He strolled through the diner and disappeared out the front door.

Brayden shifted to the other side of the table. He preferred to sit with his back against the wall so he could see the room, but he also wanted to keep his eye on the two girls sitting four booths away.

Why?

He hadn’t a fucking clue.

* * *

THE ONLY PERSON who could make Madison Cooper this angry was her sister. The six hours in the car from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Fallport, Virginia, had put Madison in the worst mood. Although, it had been brewing over the course of the last few months. It all started when Hilary began dating her boss. What a mistake, but would she listen to her big sister? Of course not. “What the hell is going on with you?” she glared at her younger sister of ten months. Lately, it felt like ten years.

Growing up, they’d been as thick as thieves. Madison had been the good sister and Hilary had found trouble at every turn. But they didn’t keep secrets from each other. Not even when Hilary had become even more of a free spirit in the dating world. However, in the last year, their relationship had strained some.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Hilary lifted her soda and slurped on the straw.

“You made me drive most of the way. You asked me to pull over a dozen

times so you could use the restroom, but twice you ducked out behind the gas station and made a phone call.” Madison waggled her finger. “It’s almost laughable that you tried to tell me you were photographing the sky or taking a selfie. That’s the worst bullshit I’ve ever heard. It was also weird that you showed up at my apartment, unannounced, and demanded to sleep there last night. Not that I minded, but you seemed on edge.”

“I was excited to get an early start.” Hilary shrugged before glancing at her cell.

Madison reached for the phone, but Hilary was too fast. “What is with you and that damn thing? This is supposed to be our girls’ trip. No outside distractions, remember?”

“Oh, and you haven’t checked your email or texted anyone since we’ve left?” Hilary shook her head. “Why is it okay for you, but not for me?”

“I’m not being all secretive about it. You’re hiding something and that always ends up ruining our girls’ trip.” Madison pursed her lips. “Why can’t you be honest with me? You never kept secrets before.”

“Because you act like you’re my freaking mother and lecture me, that’s why.” Hilary leaned back and folded her arms. “I’m not a child and yet you treat me like I’m a complete idiot incapable of making decisions.”

Madison raised her hands. “You’re the one who promised me this trip would be different from the last one we went on and yet here we are, once again having the same damn fight. Just tell me what’s going on so we can get it out of the way and have a good time.”

“Fine.” Hilary sighed. “If you must know, I met a guy on this dating app. We’ve been talking and I don’t want him to think I’m ghosting him.”

“Tell him you’re on your annual trip with me and you’ll reach out when you return. I’m sure he’ll understand this is family time.” Madison should have known her sister would pull this crap. It happened almost every damn time, but at least it wasn’t her slimy boss. “And since when do you need some ridiculous app to meet men? You’ve never had a problem finding dates before. You’re like a magnet for good-looking guys, available and unavailable alike.” While she loved her dearly, her sister had horrible taste in men. She always picked the guys who were either married, coming off bad relationships, or were just not decent human beings. Madison narrowed her eyes. “Besides, aren’t you still sleeping with your married boss?” Shit. Even Madison knew that was hitting below the belt.

“For the record, I thought he was separated when we were together.”

Hilary sighed. “But you know that ended and it’s cruel to even bring that up,” she said with a harsh tone. “Why do you always have to judge me and my decisions when it comes to men?”

Madison reached across the table and took Hilary’s hand. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.” Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a tall, broad man slowing as he passed their table. He had soulful deep dark-blue eyes. She sucked in a slow breath and turned her attention back to her sister. “I’m not being critical, but I am annoyed. This trip is supposed to be about us, and you’re all but ignoring me and for what? A new man in your life who’s going to last a month, maybe two?” Shit. She shouldn’t have said that, even if she knew it to be true.

“That’s not fair.” Hilary jerked her hand back. “At least I put myself out there. Ever since Charles got married, you’ve expected everyone around you to be as miserable as you are.”

Madison had to agree she hadn’t handled her ex-boyfriend’s nuptials well. Finding out he’d been cheating on her for months with Margo, the woman he married, had been quite a shock. It had been compounded by them getting married three months after Charles ended their relationship. Add in the fact that Margo was now pregnant only made the sting that much worse. “I want you to be happy. It has less to do with your dating habits and more to do with the fact you’re choosing to do it now. I’m not sulking about Charles. I’m trying to enjoy my time with my sister, who obviously would rather be sexting with some guy she probably hasn’t even met yet and if he randomly shows up here, I’m going to be more than a little pissed.” She wagged her finger. “And don’t look at me as if that’s never happened before.”

Most of their trips were filled with fun, laughter, and girl time. But Hilary had a thirst for men that often trumped sister bonding. They could be sitting at a bar, having an incredible conversation, and some man would catch her attention and next thing Madison knew, she’d be on her own for the rest of the evening. For the most part she tried not to let it bother her, but that had been because she had Charles. They’d been together for three years. They might as well have lived together and had talked about doing that exact thing, only Charles kept putting it off.

Now she knew why.

She couldn’t understand why he hadn’t ended their love affair the moment he’d met Margo. It made no sense.

But that was all in the past. This trip—for Madison—was about moving

forward. It was time to put Charles out of her mind, and her heart, for good.

“I had to be secretive about this guy. I knew you’d act this way. You can be insanely demanding. I’m trying to change my ways; I don’t need your judgment and opinions shoved down my throat.”

Madison had a million things she wanted to say. However, Hilary was right about the latter part of her statement. Ever since Hilary chose to get involved with her boss, Madison had been in her face. “Tell me something.”

“What?” Hilary scoffed.

“Exactly how do you plan on doing things different, because you’re already starting off on the wrong foot by keeping this man from me—your sister and best friend.”

“Because I’m only going to date this guy. I want to settle down and this one has all the things I’m looking for.” Hilary jabbed her finger at Madison. “And not telling you was because of this fight right here. You’re always so quick to judge and assume I’m making rash or poor decisions.”

“I’m sorry, sis. I find all of this hard to believe. If you wanted to start this trip off right, you should have—”

“If I had told you about him, you would have spent the entire drive giving me a lecture and asking me a million questions.” Hilary cocked her head. “I’m not ready to bring him out into the world. I want to keep him to myself for a little while and it’s important for me to keep the conversation going. I have met him and he’s kind and sweet, and I really like him. He’s asked that I let him know that I get places safely. He’s worried about us camping alone. I’ve never had anyone in my life like that before and it’s nice.”

Madison missed having someone care about her well-being. However, she struggled to believe her sister. It wasn’t the first time Hilary stated she wanted to settle down and find *the one*. It generally lasted a few weeks or a couple of months at best. Hilary had a restless soul and a wandering heart. At her core, she was a good person. The best. She’d always been there when Madison needed someone in her corner. She’d always been able to count on her sister, except in these last few months. Something strange had been happening in Hilary’s life, and it wasn’t a new man.

It all came back to her boss—Andrew Moller—and Madison hated that she couldn’t trust the words coming out of her mouth.

“I promise not to judge or be too inquisitive. Unless of course you want to talk about him, but please stop lying to me. If you want to go call him, just tell me, okay? It’s not like I don’t understand you want to keep in touch.”

Madison decided that for now, she'd let her sister continue with the charade. If she pressed too hard, it would only cause a fight and things were already tense. Once things settled down a bit, she'd get the truth out of her sister.

"I can do that starting right now." Hilary lifted her cell. "I'll meet you by the car in a bit."

Madison nodded as she watched her sister race out of the diner. She paid the bill and headed outside. The bright sun warmed her face. She glanced left and right. Her sister had managed to disappear. Figures.

She tugged her sunglasses from her purse and pushed them over her nose. Fallport looked like a quiet town where not much happened. A mother with two small children in tow strolled by. The older child lapped at an orange popsicle and the younger one slurped on a sippy cup. Madison pressed her hand over her stomach. Tears burned her eyes for what could never be. It was soon replaced with anger. She clenched her fist as she found a bench and plopped herself on it.

Her world had been changed in a fiery instant.

She remembered seeing the headlights and gripping the steering wheel, trying desperately to avoid the oncoming car. Her next memory was waking up in the hospital two days later. The devastating news that came crushed her heart and it had been the beginning of the end for her and Charles.

The sound of boots hitting the pavement caught her attention. She lifted her gaze.

"Did your friend ditch you?" the man from the diner asked.

"No, she's making a phone call." Madison shifted her gaze. Her sister was nowhere to be found.

He stuffed his hand in his pocket and pulled out a key, fiddling it between his fingers. Every horror movie she'd seen spun in her brain like a spider creating a web for its prey. Perhaps not much happened in small towns, but when it did, it happened big.

She looked him up and down, grateful her eyes were hidden by her big sunglasses. Her father had gone to West Point and spent eight years in the Army. She knew a military man when she saw one and this guy screamed armed forces. Based on the flattop haircut, she guessed Navy.

His appearance made her feel safer, but she should still keep her hackles up, just in case.

Not to mention, she had no desire to get hit on by anyone, even a man who looked like he waltzed right out of an action-packed thriller as the hero

who saved the day.

“Are you from around here?” he asked.

“We are not,” she admitted. “You?”

“Just arrived today. I’ll be living here for at least six months, working for a search and rescue team.”

“That’s cool.” She smiled. “Hopefully, we won’t be needing your services.”

He chuckled. “Going hiking and camping, I take it.”

“My sister and I go on an annual trip. Last year it was Vermont.”

“My wife and I went there about ten years ago when I was stationed in Newport, Rhode Island. It’s beautiful.”

She nodded in agreement. “Where’s your wife?”

He rubbed his left hand as if to twirl a wedding ring that wasn’t there. “She passed away a little over a year ago.” He tilted his head to the sky for a few seconds. “It’s been a pretty rough year.” There was a deep sadness that filled his eyes and seeped out across the air, landing in her lap like a heavy brick.

Her heart jumped to her throat. She remembered the first time she told someone she couldn’t have children. It had been clunky, awkward, and one of the most horrible experiences, but not because she’d said the words. The person on the receiving end had responded with pity and how horrifyingly tragic it all had to be.

The next person started off with a little better response, but then ended up discussing all the other ways in which someone could be a mother, as if they understood exactly what she’d been through, but in reality, they hadn’t a clue.

There were times in life where less was more.

She stood, taking off her glasses, making eye contact. “I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I apologize for dumping that on you.”

“There’s no need for that. Sometimes it helps to tell a perfect stranger the toughest times in our lives.”

He arched a brow. “Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“I haven’t experienced what you have, but I do have my own cross to bear that has left me a bit damaged,” she admitted.

“Is it terrible that that statement has me intrigued?” He continued to fiddle with his keys.

She chuckled. “Since we’ll probably never see each other again and you

shared something deeply personal, why not?" Her pulse soared. Knowing that her ex-boyfriend was going to be a father had crushed her soul in ways she couldn't fathom. They had discussed the accident, the surgery, and what it meant. He had been there for her through it all, but she'd felt him pull away, and in the end, he landed in someone else's arms. "About a year ago, I was in a really bad car accident. Shortly after, I found out my boyfriend was cheating on me. He recently married that woman and is now expecting his first child. He's living the life we had planned with her all because of that accident."

He tapped the center of his chest. "That's heartbreaking."

The air in her lungs depleted like a balloon popping. She left out the important details, but she still wore that pain close to the cuff. When she told people, they always tried to get her to look at the bright side of things.

The kind stranger curled his fingers around her biceps. "I'm sorry that happened to you. Having trust broken is a terrible thing, especially while dealing with something traumatic." He released his hand and pointed down the street. "I hope you have a wonderful trip. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"You as well."

He turned on his heel and strolled toward a beat-up ancient Jeep that had seen better days. It was so old that he had to insert the key to unlock it. He climbed into the vehicle, started the engine, and eased into what little traffic there was in town.

Her only regret in that exchange had been, she hadn't gotten his name.

Perhaps that was a good thing. The last thing she needed was a man who was pining for his dead wife.

CHAPTER TWO

Madison sat on the picnic table, eating apple slices, cheese chunks, and sipping wine, while her sister roamed the campgrounds, looking for a signal so she could say good night to the new man in her life.

Blech.

Madison should be happy for her sister, but something bothered her about the situation. Hilary generally never felt panicked about not being able to reach her boyfriends. Not even Andrew, the married asshole. Hilary wasn't the jealous or needy type. She had an insatiable appetite for sex, but she wasn't a demanding partner.

Two giggling teenage girls strolled by on their way to the public bathrooms. The campsites were spaced far enough apart that each one had a fair amount of privacy, but she could still hear the chatter from her neighbors. It was a reassuring sound while she sat alone, waiting for her sister's return.

The crackle of flames filled her ears. The smell of burning wood tickled her nostrils. These five days were supposed to be about leaving her troubles behind. She was supposed to be clearing her mind of all the negativity that circled her thoughts like a vulture. Instead, all she could think about were two things.

Her sister and whatever crazy relationship she'd gotten herself involved in this time.

And a perfect stranger who touched her heart.

Both disturbed her in very different ways.

She should be used to her sister's antics by now. Growing up, Madison had always been the good sister and Hilary the one who pushed the envelope. Madison preferred to play by the rules, whereas Hilary often tried to get away

with shit.

However, when it came to men, Hilary was like a kid in a candy store. She'd pick out a treat and put it on the counter, and two seconds later, she wished she'd chosen something else.

Calling Hilary fickle would be a massive understatement. But that wasn't the real problem. It wasn't even that she tended to pick bad boys. Or men with reputations for playing the field. It was that all the guys that Hilary chose to get involved with were less than relationship material.

The worst had been her current boss, Andrew. What an asshole. Not only was he married, but he treated Hilary like a sidepiece, based on what little information Madison could get out of her sister.

"Oh my God. I can't get service anywhere." Hilary stomped across the dirt path, waving her hands frantically. "I'm going to take a walk to the parking lot and call my boyfriend there."

"Is that really necessary?"

Hilary planted her hand on her hip and glared.

Madison rolled her eyes. "You haven't even told me his name."

"It's Jimmy," Hilary said.

"I'll walk with you." Madison jumped off the table. "It's dark and I don't think you should go all the way down there alone."

"I'll be fine. There are a lot of people around and this is a safe place." Hilary snagged the flashlight from the bench. "Besides, I'd like a little privacy. I promise I won't be too long. And then we can cuddle up around the fire, roast some marshmallows, and plan out our first hike." She shoved a map in Madison's face. "Why don't you take a look and see what tickles your fancy. Just not too hard to start, okay? Not all of us can run straight up a high mountain without breaking a sweat. Save the most challenging ones for the last day."

Madison took the trail guide. "Are you going to feel the need to call him first thing in the morning as well?"

"Nope. But I will want to check in at the end of the day." Hilary smiled. "You used to always do that when you were with Charles, so give me the same courtesy."

"I'll give you the nighttime phone calls as long as you swear you won't spend all day trying to get service and you won't bring up my ex again."

"Done." Hilary gave Madison a little fist pound in the arm before racing off in the direction of the parking lot, which was a good twenty-minute walk.

That meant it would be a good hour before Madison saw her sister again.

Wonderful.

Madison snagged her wine, opened the cooler, topped it off, and plopped in the folding chair in front of the fire. She positioned herself so she could see the path. Hilary had already disappeared in the darkness. Quickly, she checked her phone for the time. “What the hell?” She had three bars of service right where she sat. She tapped on the location icon. She and her sister turned them on in case either one of them got lost. They did that every time they went on a trip. “That little bitch,” Madison mumbled.

If her sister invited her new boyfriend to Virginia for a late-night rendezvous, there would be hell to pay. It wouldn’t be the first time Hilary pulled a stunt like that. Madison reminded herself that she adored and loved her sister. But the past two years they had grown apart.

Some of that had been on Madison and what she’d gone through when it came to the accident.

However, Madison had done her best to be there for Hilary. She’d put up with a lot of shit all in the name of being supportive, especially after their father had passed away, leaving them alone in the world.

Their dad was so much better at handling Hilary and her wayward attitude. He had an uncanny ability to help Hilary see how her poor decisions were making it harder for her to achieve success in life. But Madison hadn’t done much better lately. Her accident had changed everything, leaving her with an emptiness she couldn’t handle.

“Alone again?” a familiar deep voice rang out among the chatter.

She glanced up from her cell screen. “Oh. Hello.” She blinked, staring at the sexy stranger she’d seen earlier at the diner. She shifted in her chair. “I hope you’re not here on a search and rescue thing.”

“I don’t start work for a few days.” He held a beer in one hand. “I’m on a mission of other sorts.”

“I’m intrigued. May I ask what that is?” She shouldn’t engage him in any kind of conversation. For all she knew, this man followed her to the campsite. But she had a good instinct about people and she didn’t get a bad vibe about this guy. If she were being honest with herself, she knew Charles had been cheating. The signs had all been there. She chose to ignore them. She didn’t want to believe he’d do that to her after everything she’d been through.

He lifted his beverage to his lips. “It’s kind of depressing.”

“So is constantly being ditched on a sister trip.”

“I suppose so.” He ran a hand across his chin. “I’m here to spread the last of my wife’s ashes in a place I think she’d love.”

“That’s actually very sweet. But don’t you want to keep some?” Shit. That was way too personal a thing to ask.

“She wouldn’t have wanted me to.” He glanced around. “Where did your sister go?”

“To the parking lot to call her latest conquest.” She waved her phone. “She blamed bad cell reception, but I got service right here.”

“It is a little spotty.”

She laughed. “Knowing Hilary like I do, she probably told him where we are and she’s taking a booty call.”

“That’s not cool on a sister trip.”

“No, it’s not,” she agreed. “You’re welcome to keep me company while I wait for her return.” Now that was pathetic, but she really didn’t want to sit there by herself for the next hour.

He looked over his shoulder and shrugged. “Sure. I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Madison.” She stretched out her arm.

“I’m Brayden. It’s nice to officially meet you.” He shook her hand and eased himself into the folding chair in front of the fire. “I can always go look for her if you want me to. Practice my search skills.” He tipped his beer and smiled.

There was a sense of sadness that filled his eyes. It reached into her soul. While she couldn’t imagine losing a partner in the way he had, she could empathize with the grief.

“She won’t leave me hanging all night, at least not without telling me. This is her MO. She finds something new and shiny and she’s all in. Then she’ll realize he’s a dick and move on. She’s got the worst taste in men.”

“A buddy of mine was like that with women. He’d always manage to find the one chick who was only interested in him because he was Special Forces. I will never comprehend why anyone would believe that lifestyle is glamorous. It actually sucks at times.”

“It takes a unique human to be willing to put his or her life on the line for little pay.” She swirled her glass. “What branch were you in?”

“Navy,” he said. “Joined right out of high school. I didn’t know I’d make a career out of it. I was kind of a troublemaker and my parents thought I needed discipline. Turned out to be one of the best things I ever did.”

“My dad went to West Point and served eight years. He enjoyed his time in the military, but it was a means to an end for him when it came to his education.”

“It’s like that for a lot of people.” Brayden nodded. “What does your father do now?”

“He passed away a few years ago.” A pang of grief hit her like a tidal wave. However, she did her best to swallow it whole. She thought about her dad every day. Sometimes it crept up on her, slowly. Something would trigger a fond memory and her mind would take a trip back in time. She enjoyed those moments. But, when it came out of left field, startling her, like right now, the shock always brought her to those first few seconds when she’d faced her father’s death head-on.

That was the hardest.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Thanks.” She enjoyed how Brayden kept things simple. “What did you do in the Navy?”

“I started out as an Aviation Warfare Systems Operator. About three years in I became a rescue swimmer and six years in I landed in SEAL training and that’s what I did until I left.”

“That’s a tough job and thank you for your service.”

“You’re welcome and it wasn’t a walk in the park, but I loved every second of it.”

“Do you mind if I ask why you left?”

He shook his head. “My wife got sick. Cancer. I wanted to be with her and I couldn’t do that if I was constantly being deployed.” He took another swig. “She beat it. We thought we’d have our entire lives ahead of us, but…” He shifted his gaze toward the crackling fire.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pried.”

“No. It’s okay. This is good for me. And I’m the one who should be apologizing to you. I’m sure you don’t want to sit and listen to some sob story while you’ve got a wild sister to worry about.”

“Trust me. I’m not worried about her getting her rocks off.”

He burst out laughing.

She raised her glass. “I’m three drinks in. I’m feeling a little punch happy and loose in the lips.” She tossed back the rest of her drink and opened the cooler. “I’ve got beer if you want another one.”

“I don’t mind if I do.” He chugged. “You really think she had her new

boyfriend follow the two of you out here?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense at this point. She’s been so secretive. It took the entire trip down here for her to tell me about this guy.”

“Why?”

“She recently broke up with her boss, who was married.”

“That’s never good,” Brayden said. “My wife’s sister was once involved with a married man. It ended badly for everyone.”

“So did this.”

“How did she meet this one?” Brayden asked.

“A dating app.”

“Ugh. Those things suck.” He smacked his forehead. “My sisters tried to sign me up on one a couple of months ago. I went on two dates and they had to be the worst nights of my life. Not only am I not ready to even entertain the idea of having a relationship, but it felt like I was on a marriage interview that turned into a pity party. The second woman thought she could make me forget all about my late wife. It was gross.”

“No one should ever try to do that,” Madison said. “Even if you do start dating, whoever that girl is, she’ll need to understand your late wife will always be with you.”

He tilted his head. “Thank you for that. I don’t know many people who would have that attitude.”

“My mother died when I was young and when my dad got back out there, it was the one thing that he couldn’t tolerate in the women he dated. He believed our mom’s memory needed to always be in the forefront and most of the ladies couldn’t stand that. But he did find love again. They never married, but Janet was good for him and never once asked him—or us—to take down pictures or stop celebrating our mom.”

“That takes a special person.”

“Janet’s a good woman.” Madison nodded.

“What about you? Do you have anyone special in your life?”

“Nope.” She laughed. “Hilary is always trying to set me up. I hate it. I’m coming off a bad breakup, not to mention I’m still healing from that car accident that literally changed my life. I’m in a dead end job that I hate. I’m constantly looking for something different, but because I did follow the so-called rules right out of high school and got a degree in what I was good at, I’m stuck in a back room office analyzing data and helping companies make decisions. It sucks.”

“What would you like to be doing?”

“Fitness. Running my own gym. Doing something athletic outside. All of the above.”

“Sounds like you have goals.”

“But no funds.” She laughed.

“There are workarounds to that.”

“Hilary thinks that a man will be the thing that makes me happy, but only I can do that.”

“Sounds like you already know what you want and you simply need a little confidence in yourself to execute it.”

“Something like that.” She let out a long breath. “Another reason Hilary keeps pushing men at me. She thinks they are the answer to everything. That your sex will solve whatever problems I might have. She doesn’t understand that I need to deal with what happened because of that damn accident and come to terms with it before I can even think of getting into another relationship. I need time and space, not anyone’s meddling and certainly not a man.” Shit, she’d really had too much to drink. She needed to slow down before she told this guy her entire life story.

Brayden reached out and rested his hand on her forearm. “Family always think they know what we need. They mean well and whatever it is that you’re going through, know that doing it alone is about the worst thing possible. My advice is to stick to your guns about what you want and don’t want, but take it from me, isolating yourself from life isn’t the way to do it. All it serves is to make us live in the thick of it a little while longer.”

“I wouldn’t say that’s exactly what I’ve done.” She sucked in a long slow breath. “I get tired of people telling me to look at the bright side. Or give me all the solutions to a problem they have never faced. And it’s not just me. What I’m dealing with affects what I thought my future would look like.” She shook her head. “It’s hard to explain.”

“There’s no need to go into details with me. I get it.” Brayden nodded. “When the one-year anniversary of Sarah’s death rolled around, everyone in my life believed it was time for me to start thinking about finding love again. They would remind me that I’m still young. That there was no reason I couldn’t start over and have a family.”

“On the one hand, that’s true, but it’s also kind of disgusting. There is no timeline on grief.”

He nodded. “It’s compounded by the fact Sarah was pregnant when she

died.”

Madison gasped, covering her mouth. “I’m so sorry. That’s the worst.”

“I’d have to say I agree with you.” He lifted his beer and swigged. “I get that those who care about me are only trying to make me feel better and help me out of this shithole I’ve created this past year, but it’s not like I can forget. I can’t will the heartache away.” He tapped the center of his chest. “And the rage that I feel for the person who took my family from me eats at my soul.”

A tear rolled down her cheek.

He reached over and wiped it away. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“It’s not just your story that’s affecting me,” she managed. “My tears are selfish.”

“Why do you say that?” He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger, holding her gaze.

A guttural sob filled her throat. She’d never met anyone like Brayden before. He had a kind heart and seeped into her veins like wildfire. His suffering ran deep, and yet he managed to make her feel as though there was hope. That somewhere out there a man would understand her pain and her passion. “That car accident robbed me of my ability to have children.”

Brayden palmed her face. “Is that why your ex left you?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“This is not my place, but he’s a fucking asshole who doesn’t deserve someone as special as you.” He leaned closer, brushing his lips across her mouth in a soft, tender kiss. “You’re beautiful. Sweet. Intelligent. And you have shown me a sensitivity that I haven’t seen in most people in a long time. Your ex is a coward and certainly not a real man.”

She stared into his deep, dark eyes, mesmerized. She couldn’t move, much less breathe. Her pulse beat wildly out of control.

“Not only have I made you cry, now I’ve rendered you speechless.”

She swallowed. “I... I... yeah. You have.”

“We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?” He tapped his beer against her wineglass.

She collected her thoughts by checking her cell for the time or any texts from her sister. “No one has responded to my sob story quite how you have.”

“Perhaps that’s because I know what it’s like to have everyone try to tell me how I should be feeling or what I should be doing next.” He shifted his chair a little closer. “I’m not a woman, so I have no idea what you’re going through, but I know how Sarah felt after chemo and they told her she’d most

likely never be able to conceive a child. She was devastated and everyone had an opinion about surrogates or adoption and what they thought we should or shouldn't do. People even thought we should consider not having children, in case the cancer came back."

"That's rude."

"That's what I thought." He chuckled. "But the thing about Sarah, she was a ball of positive energy and she wanted to beat the odds and I was willing to do whatever she wanted to try. We got lucky, until some fucking drunk driver took it all away." He clenched a fist, then wiggled his fingers. "Sorry. Sometimes I let my emotions get the better of me."

"Trust me, I know the feeling. I wasn't hit by a drunk driver. It was considered an accident. But I remember seeing him veer into my lane. The cop thought he could have fallen asleep or been texting, but nothing could be proven."

"I don't know what to say to that."

She shrugged. There wasn't anything anyone could say to change the facts. "My only options are surrogacy or adoption," Madison said. "But it's the feeling of being less than a woman and that no man would ever want me because of it."

"Did your ex make you feel that way?"

"He never said those words, but he didn't have to. He wanted his own biological child and he made that very clear."

"I don't like your ex," Brayden said. "I wouldn't have cared if Sarah couldn't have children. All that mattered was she beat the cancer. If we never had children, it would have been okay. It's not that I didn't want them. I did. But I wanted her more. I know that's easy for me to say. She did get pregnant. There was that possibility. And I'm a man, so it's not like I'm the one who had to face it." He took her hand and squeezed. "You don't know me, so these words may mean nothing. The ability to have a baby doesn't make you a woman. It doesn't make you any less desirable or lovable. If any man can't see that, they aren't worth it."

"That's very sweet. Thank you."

"I mean it. I'm not going to go off on all the ways in which families are made because that's not the point. I have a friend and he and his wife tried for years to have kids and it never happened for them. They don't know why. They went for all the testing and not a single doctor could give them an answer. Nothing appeared to be wrong with either of them. They are the

happiest couple I have ever met. You'll find the right person. Just don't let this define who you are, because all I see is an incredible human being."

"I think we're both drunk."

He laughed. "You don't like compliments, do you?"

"Nope. Not at all." She waved her cell. "It's been forty minutes and my sister still isn't back."

"I'll go take a walk to the parking lot and look for her." He stood.

"You don't have to do that. I can go."

"I'm not letting you go by yourself." He arched a brow. "If you want to join me, that's fine." He took her hand.

"All right. Let's go." She wobbled as she rose. "I'm only agreeing because I'm a little buzzed."

CHAPTER THREE

Brayden strolled through the well-lit parking lot, shining his flashlight into each vehicle. A few people milled about, gathering a few things from their cars to bring to their campsites, but there was no sign of Hilary.

“Her cell is still going straight to voicemail,” Madison said. “Texts are delivered but not being read. Typical.” She slapped her hand to her thigh and let out a long breath. She glanced to the left. Then right. Her weight shifted from one leg to the other and she constantly ran her fingers through her hair.

Nothing about her demeanor told Brayden this was completely typical behavior by her sister. Perhaps Hilary enjoyed her sex life. Who was he to judge? At one time, he liked his, but at this point, he’d forgotten what it was like. However, this wasn’t about him, but Hilary and what would make her disappear on her sister on a whim.

Something didn’t feel right.

“Maybe she’s back at the campsite waiting for you.” He held up his hand. “The service really is hit or miss.” He hoped that might help Madison feel better, but he doubted it.

“That very well may be, but you don’t know Hilary like I do. She will marry herself to a lie, so she could have five bars of service and she’d ignore me to keep the charade going. She knows I’m already pissed.”

“That’s a childish game. And foolish on a dark night.” He lifted his phone, pulling up Ethan’s contact information. He had to do this right. There were protocols to follow. If Hilary wasn’t missing, he still couldn’t start his new job on the wrong foot.

Brayden: *I might have a situation at the campgrounds. Sisters traveling together. One may have gone off on a booty call, but has been gone longer*

than expected.

“It is, but if she were back at the campsite and I wasn’t there, cell reception would magically appear because she’d wonder why the fuck I wasn’t sitting there waiting for her return. I love my sister and for the most part, we’re close, but she can be a selfish little pain in the ass sometimes.”

Ethan: *How long has girl been gone? How did you get involved?*

Brayden: *Maybe an hour, tops. I met them at the diner in town and ran into them at the grounds. Not sure if we need to do anything yet, but I wanted to keep you informed. I’ll text you in twenty after I return to the girls’ campsite.*

“Let’s get back and see if Hilary returned.” Brayden pressed his hand on the center of Madison’s back and guided her toward the trail. “If she’s not there, I’ll contact my team.” He fanned his light on both sides of the path, shooting off about three feet beyond the trail. “What can you tell me about your sister’s boyfriend?”

“All I know is his first name is Jimmy.” Madison let out a long breath. “You might not want to walk me back to my campsite because the words that will come out of my mouth when I see Hilary are not going to be pleasant.”

He chuckled. “Trust me. I’ve heard every bad word in the book.”

“Yeah, but from a lady?” She glared.

“Sarah and her sister could go at it like two drunk sailors in a bar fight. I even learned a few new phrases from them.” He shook his head at the memory. It felt good not to have his heart plummet to the pit of his stomach at the thought of his wife. He wanted to be able to think about Sarah in a fun and loving way. To remember her without being angry at the world.

Perhaps this was progress.

However, the pull toward Madison was an unwelcomed sensation. He told himself it was because of her dynamic with her sister, but if he was honest, there was an attraction and he didn’t know where to file that.

“Are you close with your wife’s sister?”

“That’s a difficult question with a complicated answer.” He wished he hadn’t been so harsh with his words after the accident when it came to Torrie. He’d said some things that he wanted to take back, but Torrie had already taken them to heart. No matter how many times he apologized to Torrie, he’d been unable to mend the relationship.

“Why is—humph.” Madison tripped over a root.

He reached out and grabbed her around the waist, catching her before she

tumbled to the ground. "I gotcha." He pulled her to his chest. "Are you okay?"

"Just ducky." She brushed the hair from her angelic face.

He stared into her soulful eyes. The last time his heart thumped like a jackhammer had been when he'd met Sarah.

Sarah would want you to live. You know that because if the tables were turned, you'd want her to do the same.

Sarah's father's words slammed into his brain like a needle. If he'd died he'd want to Sarah to fall in love, get married, have children, and do all the things that she'd dreamed of.

Why was it so different for him?

Holding Madison steady on her feet, he questioned everything he'd come to believe about his life over the last year. It was the strangest thing that a woman he'd just met would have such an impact on his views about the way he approached his world.

"We're almost to the campgrounds." He ran his hands up and down her arms. He opted not to question his pull toward this woman. She would be out of his life by morning. "Come on." Once again, he guided her along the trail. The sounds of crackling fires mixed with conversation filled the air. They passed a couple of people and Madison raced ahead.

"Hilary?" she called. "Are you here?" She ducked her head into the two-man pup tent. "She's still not back." She pulled her phone out of her back pocket. "No messages and she didn't turn her tracking back on yet either." Holding out her phone, she stared at him with wide eyes. "I'm officially worried."

"I'm going to call my buddy with search and rescue." He tapped Ethan's contact information. It rang twice.

"Hey, man, what's going on out there?" Ethan asked.

"It's been close to two hours and Hilary hasn't returned. Her phone goes straight to voicemail and her sister stated location had been turned on until recently. The only thing I have is a first name for the boyfriend she went to call."

"And what's that?"

"Jimmy," Brayden said. "It's possible he came here to hook up with Hilary."

"All right. I'll see if I can find out if any Jimmys or Jameses are registered at that location or nearby. Do you have a picture of the girl in

question?”

“I’m sure her sister does.”

“Why don’t you walk around the campgrounds and see if anyone has seen her with a gentleman and get a description. Do your best to keep the sister calm. If she doesn’t show up by sunrise, I’ll send a few men out to start a search and she’ll need to file an official missing person report.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Is there anything else you can give me to go on?”

“I wish, but I’ll text or call if I find anything out at all,” Brayden said.

“Stay in touch.”

Brayden ended the call. “Can you text me a picture of Hilary?”

“Sure.” She let out a long breath, tapping her screen. “But it doesn’t sound like your friend is going to be much help. I should call the police.”

“Unfortunately, they won’t do anything until morning.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s ridiculous. She’s missing. I know I said it was a booty call, but she wouldn’t leave for more than an hour or so. Not without reaching out. This is *not* like her.” Madison planted her hands on her hips.

“It’s protocol. Unless there is evidence of foul play, which there isn’t—and I looked for it—all they will do is tell you to call them when it’s been twenty-four hours, and then they will call my team.”

“I’m going to call them anyway.” She turned, pressing her phone to her ear.

He couldn’t blame her for wanting to try. While she did that, he’d stop a few people on the way to the bathroom. “Excuse me.” He stopped a couple. “Have you seen this woman?” He held up his phone.

“Why?” the man asked with a hardened expression.

“She went to the parking lot a few hours ago. That’s her sister over there and she’s worried because she hasn’t come back yet. If you’ve seen her, it would be helpful to us to know where.”

“Should we be worried?” The woman leaned closer.

“I don’t believe so, but it can’t hurt to be cautious,” Brayden said.

“We saw both of them walking up the trail together,” the man said. “We pulled in at the same time, but haven’t seen either one since.”

“Her name is Hilary and if you do see her, please let her know that her sister is looking for her. She could be with a man by the name of Jimmy.”

“Is this man dangerous?” the woman asked.

“According to Madison, it’s her new boyfriend, so I don’t think so. However, if you’re concerned, you don’t have to approach them. Come find me. Outside of asking everyone that I can, I’ll be right here all night.”

“Will do,” the man said.

“Thank you.” Brayden turned.

Madison waved her hand frantically in the air. “But she said she’d be back in an hour and it’s been two.” She nodded. “Yes. Yes. She said she was calling her boyfriend and sure, she could have met him, but... but... yes. I understand. Thank you.” She plopped into the chair. “Fucking wonderful. You can tell me I told you so now.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He knelt in front of her and took her hands. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“You mentioned that Hilary has taken off on you before to meet a guy. How long does it take for her to usually show back up and what makes this different?”

“The level of secrecy and compounded lies. The last time she had the flavor of the month show up on a girls’ trip, the moment she took off to meet him, she told me so I wouldn’t worry about her being gone.”

“But she waited until after the trip began and was open and honest about the hookup for the rest of the vacation.”

Madison nodded.

That didn’t make Brayden feel any better. He could have a random perp on the prowl, which made for a volatile situation. The last thing he needed was a bunch of hikers panicking. However, he needed to get this information to Ethan. They had almost nothing to go on, but the longer Hilary remained MIA, the more difficult it would become to find her.

“Did she take anything? Does she have any other electronics? A computer? A watch that’s attached to her phone or one of those fit things?”

“Her computer should be inside the tent in her backpack. She was wearing her watch when she left.”

“Get me her laptop. We might be able to track her devices that way.” He squeezed Madison’s hands, helping her to her feet. The military had taught him many skills, including more than a basic working knowledge of cyber security. But he wasn’t an expert in hacking. What he didn’t know—or couldn’t do—he’d call in a favor.

He eased into one of the chairs and waited, deciding that it was more

important to try this than ask around.

At least right this second.

She flipped back the canvas of the tent. "Here you go."

The password screen popped up the moment he lifted the top. "Do you have any guesses?" He pointed.

"Try Jimmy or James. If that doesn't work, you could use Andrew. That was her previous boyfriend."

He tapped his fingers on the keyboard. "Okay. It's none of those."

"Try my name."

"Nope and we'll get locked out for a period of time after one more."

She folded her arms and paced in front of the fire. "It could be Michael or Maryanne. That's our parents' names."

"Pick one."

"She was always such a daddy's girl." Madison paused. "She was his favorite, even though she constantly got in trouble and was forever grounded as a kid."

"I'll give it a try." The computer made the error noise. He closed the lid and pulled out his cell. "I'm going to text a friend of mine who works cybercrimes for the FBI. He works in DC. I doubt he can do anything with this tonight, but he might be able to help us in the morning."

"I can't just sit here and do nothing." She glanced at her watch. "It's been almost three hours. It's close to eleven. My sister is a lot of things, but even if she was hooking up with this guy, she would have been back by now, especially if she didn't want me to know about it."

He pushed himself to a standing position. "Let's go walk around and see if anyone has seen her." He understood Madison's need to stay active. He'd be the same way. But it was dark and searching for Hilary now would be worse than looking for a needle in a haystack. His team would be there in the morning. The police would come, and a plan would be formed.

Until then, his job was to keep Madison calm.

And safe.

* * *

MADISON GLANCED between the tent and Brayden. "You can't be serious."

"You need to rest."

“My sister is out there somewhere. What I need is to go look for her.”

Brayden flipped open the canvas flap. “It’s not safe in the dark of night. Besides, you’ll need all the energy you can muster in the morning if your sister doesn’t turn up. The police will be asking you a million questions. My team will have their own set. Staying up all night isn’t going to magically bring your sister to this campsite.”

Everything he said made sense, but her mind was restless. She kept picturing her sister lying in a ditch or being held hostage in some dingy motel. “All I’m going to do is toss and turn.”

“But your eyes will be closed and your body won’t be vertical. You might get a couple of hours of sleep with some breathing and visual techniques that I can help you with.”

She lowered her chin. “That sounds weird.”

“Perhaps, but it’s something I’ve learned to do when my mind won’t settle down with all the thoughts of the past. Trust me, it helps; right now, your brain is your worst enemy. I can only imagine the places it’s taking you and I’m sure none of them are good.”

“You’ve got that right.”

He curled his thick fingers around her biceps and squeezed. “Climb into your sleeping bag and focus on your happy place. Or any imagery that makes you feel safe and good. It could be a childhood memory or a vacation spot. Once you get your mind there, keep playing that loop while concentrating on your breathing. When the current situation creeps back in, breathe, count backward, and start over again.” He pointed to the chairs by the fire pit. “I’ll be right over there all night if you need me for anything.”

“You’re going to sleep in a folding chair?”

“While deployed, I’ve slept in worse places. I’ll be fine.”

She chomped on her thumbnail. The connection she had with Brayden scared her. Trust with men didn’t come easily even before Charles cheated. Her childhood had taught her that people weren’t always what they made themselves out to be. Her mother had broken her heart when she’d been in middle school. She’d kept her mom’s secret for a long time. It wasn’t until she’d been on her death bed that her affair had come to light, crushing her dad’s soul. But what was he going to do? Walk away from a dying woman? He was better than that. He held his wife’s hand until she took her last breath. He honored her life during the funeral and did his best to pretend he hadn’t learned the woman he loved had been sleeping with his neighbor and golf

buddy.

Not once did he say a bad word or speak negatively about his late wife. Not even now that years had passed.

Janet had helped him see that forgiveness was the path forward. She'd shown the whole family that and they had healed together.

Janet held her close when she found out Charles had been cheating and she was the one who reminded her that what was done was done and Madison needed to find a way to come to terms with what happened on her own. Janet helped her see that this wasn't a repeat of the past. She knew it would take time, but she was determined to learn to trust men and find one that would accept all of her, including what had happened.

Her attraction to Brayden felt oddly out of place in the current situation. It didn't matter that she'd felt a pull toward him the second she'd laid eyes on him at the diner. Her sister was missing and this wasn't the time or place. However, she didn't want to be alone.

"Would you mind sitting with me for a little while?"

He arched a brow. "Inside the tent?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I don't think I can even attempt to clear my mind while you're out there and I'm in here. I know that sounds weird, but—"

"It's not strange at all." He pulled back the flap. "After you."

She kicked off her shoes and crawled inside. Quickly, she adjusted her sleeping bag, slipping inside. She rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. She took in a deep breath through her nose and let it out slowly. Images of her and her sister frolicking in the pool when they'd been small children popped into her mind. Her parents sat on the side, dangling their legs in the warm water. The picture that had formed was so vivid she could smell and taste the chlorine.

The sound of Brayden's breathing filled her ears and calmed her soul.

She rolled to her side and blinked.

He stretched out with his head propped up on his hand. "For now, I want you to focus on anything that has made you serene in the past."

"Tell me about your happy place," she whispered.

"My parents have a place in Lake Tahoe. When I was little, we would spend a month out there in the summer and all of our Christmas vacation. Me and my brother and two sisters loved to fish and go hiking, but the best part was when we would all gather around the campfire and my dad would tell us ghost stories." Brayden chuckled. "My baby sister would get so scared she

would almost always end up teary-eyed. However, she tried not to cry every single time. To this day, she can't watch a scary movie, especially ones with ghosts in it and she's kind of afraid of her own shadow. We totally traumatized her and had way too much fun doing it." He had a huge smile on his face and his deep eyes glowed in the small light that trickled from the lamp by their feet. There was a kindness and warmth about Brayden that coated her body like a soft blanket on a cold night. "If I'm home on Halloween, I dress up as the latest scary thing and freak her out."

"That's mean."

"She gets me back," he said.

"How?"

"I have a real aversion to snakes and she thinks they're cute. She'd find ways to torture me with them."

"Good for her." She reached out and palmed his cheek. "Are you close with your siblings?"

"Very," he said. "They weren't happy with me when I moved here, but they understood why I needed to do it."

She scooted closer, wanting—needing—to feel human contact. Wrapping her arm around his strong shoulders, she pressed her mouth against his sweet lips. An electric pulse flowed across her skin. For the first time in hours, her mind wasn't focused on all the horrible things that could have happened to her sister.

He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. "This isn't a good idea," he managed with a raspy voice. "You're frightened, hurting, and looking for a way to occupy your mind and body. This isn't the way to do it."

"Oh, God. I'm sorry. You're right. That was a horrible thing for me to do." Tears burned her eyes. She turned.

"Hey." He grabbed her waist. "It wasn't terrible. I think it's an honest and very real reaction to what's happening. However, you'd most likely wake up in the morning filled with regret and I'm not the kind of man to take advantage of a woman who's hurting the way you are."

"Will you stay while I try to fall asleep?"

"Sure." He smiled.

"I have one more favor to ask and I'll understand if you say no, but will you hold me?"

"I can do that." He rolled to his back, stretching out his arm, tugging her to his chest. "Close your eyes and get some rest."

“You’re a good man,” she whispered. “Thank you.” She focused on his beating heart and his hand running up and down her arm. All the tension in her muscles evaporated. Her lids grew heavy as she relaxed into his strong, comforting body.

An array of memories mixed with the man who held her close filled her mind as sleep slowly took over.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brayden jerked awake. His breath caught in his throat. He brushed the long hair across his chest and raised his arm, checking the time.

Five in the morning.

He couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep.

And with Madison in his arms. The extraordinary part was that he didn't feel strange about the experience. He was also glad she had finally gotten some rest. Now all he had to do was slip out without waking her, because if his team showed up, there would be hell to pay.

He didn't think Ethan would find his behavior professional.

As carefully as he could, he rolled her from his chest, ensuring her body stayed inside the sleeping bag. Quietly, he unzipped the flap and shimmied out of the tent. He found his hiking boots, slipped them on his feet, and pulled his cell from his back pocket.

He sent a quick message to Ethan, letting him know there was still no word from Hilary and requested official help in the form of a search party. He'd give Madison an hour before waking her to call the police.

His phone buzzed.

"Hey, Ethan," he said softly. "I hope I didn't wake you?"

"Not really. I've been in and out all night. Do you have anything at all?"

"Four people saw Hilary walking toward the parking lot last night, but no one saw her with a man."

"I came up short with the first name and people registered at the campgrounds. But there was one at another site. Talon is on his way to check it out. He's armed with a picture of Hilary."

"Let's hope this was a simple booty call and Hilary and her boyfriend lost

track of time.” The words left his mouth, but he didn’t believe them. Even with all the things Madison had admitted about her sister, something felt off about how Hilary had vanished.

“I’ll be out there with the rest of the team by six. I’d have her call the police soon.”

“I thought I’d let her sleep for a little bit.”

“They might make her wait until tonight to file the official report, but that doesn’t mean we can’t start looking.”

“I reached out to an FBI friend of mine about getting into Hilary’s laptop. Madison couldn’t figure out the password. It could give us a location of her cell.”

“Have you heard back?”

“He either needs to come here or we need to get him a satellite hookup to the computer.” Brayden made his way to the fire pit and tossed a few logs on it so he could boil water for some much-needed coffee.

“I can bring the necessary equipment to start, but if he wants to come, that would be fine.”

“I’ll let him know.”

“Looks like your few days to get settled are out the window,” Ethan said. “See you in an hour or so.”

“Thanks.” He tucked his cell in his back pocket and stared at the flames coming to life. The last thing he wanted to do was rummage through Madison’s things, but he couldn’t head to his campsite to snag his own coffee.

Movement from the right caught his eye.

Madison appeared. “You’re up early.” She tugged her hair into a ponytail. “Or have you been up for hours?”

“Ten minutes, tops,” he said. “I was about to make some coffee, that is if you have any. Otherwise, I’ll have to go to my campsite.”

“In the cooler.” She pointed. “Thank you for last night. I don’t think I could have slept at all if it wasn’t for you.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure I would have either,” he admitted. He didn’t want to examine his comfort level with this woman too closely. He’d help her find her sister because it was his job. When it was over, they’d go their separate ways. What connection he had would be easily broken. He had to believe that. Having feelings for anyone didn’t make sense. Not only wasn’t he ready, but he wasn’t capable.

She cocked her head. "I'm not sure I understand that statement."

"I have a restless mind and I don't sleep much because of it. Helping you gave me something else to focus on." He shrugged. "It allowed me to get a couple of hours where I might not have been able to and now, I'll be fresh to help my new team."

"What do we do now?"

"We start with calling the police. Once my team is here, Ethan will have a plan of action. We'll get as many volunteers as possible to start a search and dig into your sister's last few weeks for clues." He set up a pot of water over the fire and stretched out the stiffness in his back, which wasn't as bad as most mornings.

Waking with her in his arms shouldn't have felt natural. It wasn't the same as with his wife and that disturbed him on a different level. There was no comparison. They were different women and his mind and body responded in new and unexpected ways.

The weirdest part was that he felt this odd sensation of letting go, and not in a bad way. It was exactly how people in his grief group had described it could be when they finally had accepted their loved ones were gone and it was time to start living again.

It was as if Sarah had reached down from heaven and whispered in his ear that she wanted him to move on and that freaked him right the fuck out.

He reminded himself of the inappropriateness of his thoughts. Madison had become part of a search and rescue mission and he had something to prove to Ethan, the rest of the team, and to himself. He couldn't screw this up.

"The cops and my team will be asking you a ton of questions about her boyfriend and what she'd been doing the few weeks leading up to your trip," he added.

"I don't have the answers to those questions." Madison scooped out the instant coffee and dumped it into two mugs. She handed him one and sat in a folding chair. "Every time I called her, she either didn't answer or was too busy. I had to plan this trip by myself. I was worried she was going to cancel because she was so preoccupied with her boss."

"The married man she was dating before this guy Jimmy, right?" Brayden poured the hot water into each mug. He stirred the grinds vigorously. Back then, he wasn't opposed to eating coffee grinds right out of the can to get the caffeine rush. But he wasn't in a bunker in an undisclosed location. He

wanted to make this brew as smooth as possible.

“Supposedly, Andrew was separated. She had it in her head that he was going to file for divorce and commit to her officially, but I knew that would never happen. She called me about ten days before the trip, hysterical that Andrew was returning to his wife.”

“That sucks.” Brayden eased into the folding chair. “Could she have met Andrew and not this guy Jimmy?”

“It’s possible.” Madison nodded. “I would have been livid if she were talking with him and she knows it, but she wouldn’t have left me all night without telling me. She’s never done that before. She might lie to me about who she’s with, but she’d never worry me like this.”

“I’m not saying she would.” He took a slow sip of some of the worst coffee he’d ever tasted, but it hit his brain exactly where he needed it. “However, the police might view this as a sister who wanted to go off with someone who you didn’t approve of and Hilary didn’t feel like dealing with your disapproval.”

“She’s not a child and I’m not her parent.”

“I know.” He raised his hand. “But Sarah and Torrie had a similar relationship and there was one time when Torrie took off without telling anyone. Sarah called the police and after hearing the story, they concluded that Torrie didn’t want Sarah to know and that’s exactly what happened. Torrie showed up four days later after having a secret rendezvous with her married boyfriend.”

“That’s not what’s happening here.” Madison glared.

“I just want you to be prepared for the initial response by the police. It hasn’t been twenty-four hours and the fact she’s done something similar—”

“I get it,” Madison snapped. “But is that going to stop you and your team from looking for her?”

“Absolutely not.” He set his cup on the ground and inched his chair closer, taking her hands. “People go missing up here and we take that seriously. The cops aren’t going to blow this off either. But they do have procedures they have to follow. Your job is to tell them—and us—everything you can.” His phone buzzed. He pulled it from his back pocket. “Ethan, Talon, and Zeke are walking up the trail. They will be here in ten minutes.” He squeezed her hands. “Ethan is bringing equipment for us to hack into your sister’s computer. I need to call my buddy at the FBI to set that up.”

“I don’t know how to repay you for all that you’re doing.”

“This is my job.”

“But you’re not on the clock,” she said. “You don’t have to be here.”

He reached out and palmed her face, running his thumb across her cheek. “I’m not going to leave you until we find your sister.” He leaned in and brushed his mouth over her plump lips. His pulse caught in his throat. His skin came alive. His blood rushed through his body. Kissing her wasn’t the brightest move. It had taken all his resolve to pull away last night. He’d tried dating and it had been disastrous. He hadn’t wanted to be with anyone. Not emotionally, and certainly not sexually.

But Madison stirred things in him that he thought had died long ago and he couldn’t explain the pull.

Abruptly, he broke off the connection.

She blinked and he lost himself in her sweet blue eyes. There was something mesmerizing in her stare. It was as if he could see right into her soul.

He dropped his hand. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that,” he whispered, leaning back in the chair. He took in a deep breath. “I have no idea what came over me.”

“Whatever it was, it was nice.” She smiled. “I think your friends are here.”

He jerked, jumping to his feet, hoping they hadn’t seen what he’d done. He turned, thankful Ethan had just rounded the corner and it was still dark outside as the sun had yet to take over the night sky. “Hey, man,” he said. “This is Madison.” He waved his hand in her direction. “This is Ethan, Zeke, and Talon.”

“I’m sorry to meet you under these circumstances,” Ethan said. “The police are thirty minutes out.”

“What did you find out at the other campsite?” Brayden asked.

“The Jimmy that was registered there was with his wife and four kids, so it wasn’t the person we’re looking for,” Talon said. “Drew is still there waiting for people to wake up so he can ask everyone if they’ve seen Hilary.”

“Thank you.” Madison stood.

“We could also be looking for Hilary’s boss. His name is Andrew Moller. Hilary had been having an affair with him before she started hooking up with this Jimmy guy,” Brayden said.

“So, Jimmy could have been a cover.” Zeke stuffed his hands in his pockets and glanced around.

Ethan set a large backpack on the ground. “Brock is in the parking lot doing a sweep. He’ll start gathering volunteers. We’ll do a blanket search through the campsite and across the main trails for as long as we have daylight. However, before we start, I want Madison to try to call her sister.”

“I can do that right now.” Madison waved her phone.

“Do it,” Ethan said. “Put it on speaker.”

Madison tapped her cell. The call went straight to voicemail. “Should I leave a message?”

“It’s not necessary,” Ethan said. “Let’s get the computer stuff set up. The locals aren’t going to be happy about it, so why don’t we do it inside the tent.”

After pulling up Tegan Walter’s contact information, Brayden put his phone to his ear. “Hey, Tegan. How are you?”

“Doing good. Do you need me to come to you?” Tegan asked.

“My boss brought what you said you needed, so we can try it remotely. We’ll need a few minutes to set it up.”

“No worries. Just let me know when you’re ready,” Tegan said.

“Thanks, man.” Brayden ended the call. “I’ll go take care of this.” He snagged the backpack and shifted his gaze to Madison. “Tell them everything you’ve told me. It’s going to get frustrating to have to keep repeating it to us, then the cops, but it’s necessary.”

“I just want to find my sister.” She nodded.

Brayden ducked into the tent. It was going to be a long day.

* * *

“YOU CAN’T EXPECT me to sit here while you go out and search for Hilary.” Madison planted her hands on her hips and glared. She’d spent the last two hours answering questions. She couldn’t spend another second doing what felt like nothing to help locate her sister.

“I’m not going out with the team,” Brayden said. “I’m staying behind with you.”

“Why?”

“We need someone here. This is ground zero and we’re using it as a headquarters. We’ll manage the volunteers and I’ll also need to be around in case my buddy from the FBI is able to extract anything from your sister’s

computer.”

“That is if he can even get in.”

Madison had told her story twice. She’d given them all the information she had, but it felt like no one but Brayden believed Hilary could be in danger. The cops had taken the report but couldn’t do anything until it had been twenty-four hours, just like Brayden had warned. At least his team was willing to use their resources to comb the area.

“He’s one of the best. He’ll get in. It takes time and we have to be patient.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” She crossed her arms around her middle. The only time in her life she felt this helpless was when she found out she couldn’t have kids. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out and gasped. “It’s a text from Hilary.”

Brayden was at her side in a second. He pressed his hand on the small of her back. “What does it say?”

She tapped the icon.

“Sorry I waited until now to send this. To make a long story short, I fought with my boyfriend and needed to make it right. I went home, but now I need my things, specifically my computer. I know it’s a lot to ask, but can you bring it to my apartment? Today or tomorrow? I can’t imagine you want to do this trip without me, but I had to go. This is important to me. I care about him.”

Madison glanced up. “This doesn’t sound right. She wouldn’t go all the way home. It’s a five- to six-hour drive. How would she get there, unless he came here to get her. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Check to see if she turned location services back on,” Brayden said.

Madison tapped the app. “Nope.”

“Okay. Let’s go inside the tent, and then we’ll text her back.” He took her by the arm. “Tell her you want to talk and that you’re going to call. See what she says.”

“Why don’t I just call?”

“You can try, but not until I get your phone hooked up with Tegan.”

She crawled into the small tent, dwarfed by all the equipment buzzing and humming while her sister’s computer screen flashed.

Brayden tapped away on his phone for what seemed like forever. “Tegan said we can tap into his system this way.” He took her cell and plugged it into a cable that was attached to whatever the computer was hooked up to. This

was way above her pay grade, but she trusted Brayden. “You can try to call her now.”

It went straight to voicemail. “Shit,” she muttered. “I can’t believe she’s avoiding me.”

“Text her now,” Brayden said, all business.

“What should I say?”

“Whatever feels right to you with the exception that you’re going to head back to Pennsylvania,” he said. “Or that you called the cops and a search and rescue team is here.”

“That doesn’t leave me with much, does it?”

“If she brings it up, go ahead.”

Madison: *I’m so mad at you. I can’t believe you did this. I’ve been worried sick. I’m not doing anything until either you get your ass back here or you call me.*

“Now what?”

“We wait for her to respond or call.” Brayden sat cross-legged. “I know this isn’t easy, but I have my reasons for doing things this way.”

“Mind sharing them with me?” She stared at her cell. “It might help pass the time so I don’t go fucking crazy.”

He raked his hand across the top of his head and shifted his gaze. “I don’t want to scare you unnecessarily.”

“Every bad thought has already crossed my mind.” She lowered her chin. “Please don’t keep anything from me. I can’t handle that.”

“Based on everything you’ve told me, it is possible Hilary took off, but I honestly don’t believe that.” He took her hand. “If she’s being held against her will, we need to analyze her texts and any subsequent phone calls against previous ones. Voice patterns. Word choice. Anything that might give us a hint as to what the kidnappers might be looking for.” He pointed to the laptop. “She’s focused on that, which tells me there’s something important on there. Considering she works for a medical research company, she could have taken something or—”

“Hilary wouldn’t do that.”

“Maybe her boss asked her to. Or someone else. Perhaps she found something out and she’s now a whistleblower.”

“I suppose.”

“Brayden, where are you?” a male voice rang out.

“In the tent.” Brayden stuck his head out. “We got a text from Hilary and

we're waiting to hear back. I've got it hooked up to Tegan's system." He lifted the flap and took her hand, helping her out.

Ethan stood by the fire pit with a uniformed officer.

"What's going on?" Madison asked. "Did you find something?"

"Not exactly," Ethan said. "But we do have some disturbing news."

Madison glanced between Ethan and the cop. "What?"

Brayden wrapped a protective arm around her waist.

"We just learned that Andrew Moller was murdered three days ago in his office. One of the last people to see him was your sister," Ethan said. "There is video surveillance of her entering Andrew's office with an unknown man and they left shortly after. Andrew was found dead a few hours later."

"She's wanted for questioning as a person of interest," the police officer said. "That's good news in the sense that we don't have to wait the twenty-four hours to aid in the search."

"But bad news because the search for her will take on a different flavor," Ethan said.

"I don't know what that means." Madison's heart pounded. She took Brayden's hand and squeezed it tight.

"If she doesn't turn up for questioning, she'll be treated as a hostile," the police officer said. "The locals in PA are already suggesting she could be a suspect since the affair was brought to light."

"She would never kill anyone," Madison said with a shaky voice. "I should text her and tell her what's going on."

"We strongly advise against that," the cop said. "Whatever communication you have with her going forward needs to be scripted through the FBI contact you've been working with. They will be taking the lead on this. We will work with search and rescue throughout the day here."

"Thanks. We appreciate the support." Ethan shook the officer's hand before the cop headed down the trail.

"This is insane. As crazy as Hilary and Andrew's relationship was, she really cared about him. She wouldn't have killed him and while I never met him, I do know he was well respected in his company."

"But the company is controversial," Ethan said. "What exactly did your sister do for Bio-MedTech?"

"She was Andrew's personal administrative assistant. She didn't have anything to do with the actual research, but she did know a lot about it."

"Do you know anything about what they were working on?" Brayden

asked, running his hand up and down her back. “Even the smallest detail might be helpful.”

“They have a lot of things in the fire.” Madison leaned into Brayden’s strong body for support. “Hilary never got into the specifics. She always said she wasn’t allowed to talk about the things that hadn’t been brought to market yet or wasn’t in trials, but she was excited about some new drug they were working on.”

“Do you have any idea what this drug was supposed to do?” Ethan asked.

Madison shook her head. “Only that it will revolutionize the treatment of Alzheimer’s patients and they had begun the first clinical trials. This was something that was near and dear to Andrew’s heart. His dad suffered from early onset and died at sixty-one. It was something he worried about getting and she mentioned that this drug could drastically slow down the progression.”

“That would be a huge discovery,” Brayden said. “I’m surprised if it made it to human trials that it didn’t make national news.”

“I have no idea how all that works and she wasn’t supposed to talk to anyone about it, so I was sworn to secrecy.” Madison let out a long breath. “She got all weird about spilling the beans to me and made me promise I’d never tell a soul about it. She mentioned she could get into trouble and so could Andrew.”

“I did a little light reading about Bio-MedTech and they’ve had to pay out millions in fines over the years because of drugs that went wrong after bringing them to human trials too soon,” Ethan said.

“Isn’t that something that happens often in that industry?” Madison asked.

“Not as much as it does with Bio-MedTech.” Ethan glanced over his shoulder. “While the police are looking at her as a person of interest, there is also a concern on their part, as well as mine, that she may either be hiding out because she knows something, witnessed something, or is being held against her will.”

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“My team keeps up the search. The FBI and I are working with the locals here and in PA. Unfortunately, that’s all we can do.” Ethan reached out and squeezed her biceps. “I need to get back to the search party. I’ll touch base in an hour or so.”

“Oh my God. My phone. I need to check to see if she responded to my

text.” She turned and raced toward the tent. She climbed inside and lifted her cell.

Brayden peeked his head inside.

“Nothing.” Her heart broke into a million pieces. “I have to go out and look for her. You can’t ask me to sit here any longer.”

He crawled inside and took her hand. “I need you by your phone and with this computer. Once Tegan is inside, we’ll need your help with any information we might find and if your sister calls, I’ll need you to help keep her on the line. Trust me when I say the best thing you can do for your sister is to wait here.”

“I feel so helpless.”

“I know.” He palmed her cheek.

Her cell rang and she jumped. “It’s Hilary.” Her hands shook as she reached for the phone.

“Wait a second.” Brayden tapped something on the equipment. “I need Tegan to be able to hear this too. I’m going to put the call on speaker and you’re going to need to keep her on the line as long as possible. It will help us trace where the call is coming from.” He lowered his chin. “Don’t tell her that you know about Andrew, okay? If she brings it up, act surprised.”

“What about letting her know I called the police or even your team? She might think it weird that I didn’t.”

“If it comes up, you can tell her a search and rescue team is looking for her.” He tapped the phone.

“Hilary?” she managed. “Are you alright? Where are you? I’ve been worried sick about you.”

“I’m fine,” Hilary said. “I told you I went home. I’m sorry I worried you. I should have called.”

“You have no idea what you’ve put me through.”

“I’ll explain everything to you when you bring me my stuff. I need my computer. It’s important. Please, just meet me at my place,” Hilary said.

“You honestly expect me to pack up this campsite and drive six hours by myself? No. I’m not doing that. Not until you explain to me how you left in the middle of the night without telling me? Did this Jimmy guy pick you up? Was that always the plan?”

“Madison, please. Just do this one thing for me.”

“Why can’t you come back and get it yourself?” Madison asked.

“I can’t. There are things going on that I can’t tell you about right now. I

need you to trust me.”

“Trust you? Are you kidding me? Do you know I called search and rescue and they are out here now looking for you?”

“Well, you can call them off. I’m fine.”

Brayden held up his cell with his notes app opened. *Ask her to turn on her location.*

“If you’re so fine, then turn your location back on,” Madison said.

“I’ll do that as soon as I hang up. Now I have to go, so please, just come home with my computer. I’ll see you soon.” The call ended.

Brayden arched a brow. “According to Tegan, your sister is still in Virginia.”

“Where?”

“We don’t have an exact location,” Brayden said. “The cell phone pings between towers. But based on this, she’s not too far away.”

“Then why would she want me to go back to Pennsylvania?”

“That’s the million-dollar question.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Brayden hadn't expected his first houseguest to be a sexy stranger who had captured his heart so that his mind and soul turned upside down. "You can put yourself in the bedroom down the hallway." He'd yet to unpack, much less prepare the place for visitors. He hadn't even made the bed yet. The sheets were still in their packaging. The only food in the house they'd purchased at the local market on the way back from the campgrounds.

He tugged the curtains closed in the family room and did the same in the kitchen.

"I can stay in the hotel in town." Madison stood in the middle of the kitchen. All the color had drained from her face. Dark circles had appeared under her eyes.

"That's not a good idea. I can't protect you there." He set the bags on the counter.

"Protect me from what?" She tossed her purse on the table and set her backpack by the hallway. "Maybe I should just do as my sister asked."

"Everyone agrees it's most likely a trap." Brayden raked a hand across the top of his head. "Either your sister is in on whatever is happening, or she's being forced. We need to draw whoever is behind this out."

"Me on the open road might do that, especially if they are watching like you believe they are."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. They'd had this discussion three times since leaving the campgrounds. He understood Madison's frustration. If it were him, he'd be taking matters into his own hands. But he was a highly trained SEAL. His skill set was vastly different from that of a data analyst. Even so, he trusted Tegan—who would arrive in Fallport within the hour—

with a team of agents.

All the research from the clinical studies for the Alzheimer's drug had been stolen from the Bio-MedTech lab along with all the samples.

That alone put Hilary—and her sister—in possible danger.

“We need to do what the FBI tells us.” He pulled out the twelve-pack of beer and set it in the fridge with the other perishables. This went outside his duties as a search and rescue team member. Ethan allowed him to follow through because he had developed a level of trust with Madison, and Tegan—along with his supervisor as well as the local police department—believed it would be beneficial in helping to find Hilary.

Brayden wanted to stay on because he'd promised Madison he wouldn't abandon her through this trying time. He wanted to keep his word for as long as he could. Ethan agreed, but only because Tegan had made the request.

“But what exactly are they doing? My sister has texted three times since we left the campgrounds, asking me about when I'm heading back to Pennsylvania with her things. The Feds know she's somewhere in a fifty-mile radius of this town. Are they even looking for her?”

Brayden glanced out the back window. Zeke had taken the first overwatch. The locals were stretched thin; however, they had increased their presence in the area. They had decided to leave the tracking ability on Madison's phone, and they hadn't noticed anyone following them, but it was possible Hilary and whoever she was with had a lock on their location.

That made the hair on Brayden's neck stand tall.

He glanced at his watch. He'd feel a hell of a lot more comfortable when his buddy Tegan showed up.

“There are policies and procedures we need to follow.” He snagged a protein bar and ripped it open. He hated feeling like a sitting duck. If he could have only timed his arrival better with that of Tegan's, he would have felt a little better. “If your sister has the drug, and the research to go with it—”

“Hilary isn't involved in any of this.” Madison planted her hands on her hips and glared. “She's being forced.”

He sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “You watched the same video that I did. Hilary walked out of her boss' office with a large backpack, her computer tucked under her arm, alongside an unknown man. No one else came in or out of Andrew's office the rest of the night.” He held up his hand when Madison opened her mouth. “I'm not saying she killed her boss, but she was there and no one was holding a gun to her head when she scurried out of

that building.”

“If she witnessed her boss being murdered, I’m sure she was terrified she’d be next. I know I would have been.”

“I’m not saying she’s not under duress, but until we set up the next call, all—”

“You’re playing with Hilary’s life. I don’t understand why we’re not setting up some sort of sting operation with the computer. That’s what the cops should be doing. The rest of this doesn’t make sense.”

“I trust Tegan with my life. If he says this is how we have to do this, then I’m on board.”

“What if this was one of your sisters? Would you be so willing to blindly follow?” Madison inched closer.

“Yes,” he answered quickly.

“Right.” She scoffed. “You’re just saying that to try to make me feel better.”

“No. I’m speaking from experience, because that’s how I met Tegan in the first place.”

Her lips parted. “What do you mean?”

“My baby sister went missing for a week when she was a sophomore in college. She went on vacation with a couple of girlfriends and disappeared. Turns out, her ex-boyfriend didn’t like that she went on the trip and kidnapped her all in the name of proving he was the right man for her. I was on leave at the time and flew home to aid in the search, but Tegan tied my hands. I lost my shit a few times wanting to go off on my own. I even called a few friends to come help; however, Tegan stopped us and he was right. If it hadn’t been for Tegan, I probably would have fucked up his investigation and put my sister in real danger. He found her and saved her from being hurt.”

“I’m glad your sister is okay.” Madison sighed as she pulled out a chair in front of the kitchen table. “But that doesn’t make this situation any easier for me. I know Hilary. She wouldn’t hurt anyone, especially not Andrew. I might think he’s scum, but she loved him.”

For a second, he thought about getting into all the crimes of passion he’d seen in his life, but decided it was best to leave that alone. “Once Tegan gets here, a plan will be put into place. We will find your sister and we will get to the bottom of all this. You have to trust me.”

“I don’t have a choice, now do I?” She leaned back. “The police, and even your boss, have all informed me that I can’t leave.”

“That’s in part for your own safety.”

The doorbell rang.

“Don’t leave the kitchen.” He squeezed her shoulder before removing his weapon from its holster.

“No fucking way.” She jumped to her feet and grabbed the back of his shirt. “Where you go, I go.”

“Stay behind me.” He pulled his cell from his back pocket and called Zeke.

No answer.

That wasn’t good.

Quickly, he peeked out the curtains. At the front door stood a pizza delivery guy, but the vehicle in the driveway had no markings.

“Get the computer, now,” he whispered.

“Why?”

“Just do it and stay away from windows.” He sent a text to Ethan, informing him of the situation and of his plan, which was pretty simple.

To get the hell out of Dodge.

He had no idea how many men were outside, but he suspected it was more than the one man at the door.

“Got it.” Madison snuggled up to his back. “Now what?”

“We’re going to leave,” he said. “I need you to get in my truck and lie down in the back. No matter what happens, don’t sit up.”

“You’re scaring me.”

He turned, taking her by the biceps. “I don’t know what happened to Zeke, but he’s not answering my calls. We need to leave and we need to do it now.” He took her by the arm and raced toward the side door. He stuck his head out and glanced left and right.

Shoving her through the door, he commanded, “Get in.”

She did as instructed, ducking down in the back.

Bang!

Bang!

Madison screamed.

“Are you hit?” He slammed the vehicle in reverse and punched the gas, skidding across the pavement, sideswiping the delivery car.

“I don’t think so.”

Bang!

Bang!

The pizza guy shot again as Brayden shifted to drive, peeling out into traffic. Another vehicle tried to cut him off. He went up on the sidewalk, ducking as someone shot through the front of his truck.

The front windshield shattered.

“Fucker,” he mumbled.

“I left my phone behind.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “I’m sure it’s how they found us anyway.”

“How is she going to be able to reach me?” Madison asked with a tremble in her voice.

“Let’s get to a safe location, and then we’ll talk about that.” He glanced in his rearview as he took a right turn, then a quick left. He continued to head away from town, glancing around every couple of seconds to see if he’d been followed. So far, no sign of anyone.

However, since his vehicle was older and now had the front windshield shot out, it would be easy to spot. He needed to ditch the car and get a different one. Not to mention, a new hideout.

Once he felt safe, he found his phone and called Ethan, who had already tried him three times.

“Are you okay?” Ethan asked after answering on the first ring. “Are you being followed?”

“No worse for wear,” he said. “And I don’t believe so.”

“Good. I’m going to text you an address. I’m sending it to Tegan as well.”

“I haven’t been able to reach Zeke.” Brayden gripped the steering wheel.

“He was knocked unconscious. He’s going to be fine. Whoever was there took off after doing a quick search of your place.”

“Did they take my phone?” Madison popped her head up.

“Not sure,” Ethan said. “We’ll check, but even if they didn’t, we won’t want you to be anywhere near it. Either they managed to follow you without us knowing, which I doubt, or they tracked the phone. If they didn’t take it, we’ll want to use it as a decoy.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Brayden tapped the address that popped up in text and put it in his maps app. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Be safe out there.”

“Will do.” He set his cell on the dash. The location was eighteen miles outside of town. He didn’t know the area well, but he knew this place was in the middle of nowhere. “Stay down,” he said.

“Why?”

“Better safe than sorry.” He continued to scan the area for the white sedan that had been parked in his driveway.

Nothing.

“Whatever your sister has on her computer, someone wants badly enough that they are willing to kill for it. My job now is to make sure you don’t end up as collateral damage.”

CHAPTER SIX

Madison sat on the on the edge of the bathtub, running her fingers under the water, waiting for it to come to the right temperature. Her body ached. Her mind raced. Her heart broke.

Nothing made sense.

She took the bubble bath she found under the sink and squeezed. The rich scent of lilacs filled her nostrils. Slowly, she removed her clothing and stepped into the hot water. She covered her body with the bubbles and leaned back, sighing.

Tears filled her eyes.

A tap at the door startled her and water sloshed out onto the floor.

“Yes?” she answered.

“I’ve got a snack and a beverage prepared for you,” Brayden said.

Her stomach growled. Strategically, she moved the bubbles around. “You can come in.”

The door squeaked.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry.” He turned. “I could have left this outside.”

“I’m starving, and is that champagne?”

“It is,” he said. “I’ll just put the tray right here.” He set it on the toilet, keeping his back to her. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“You’re not.” She leaned out of the tub and took the croissant. “Please, stay.”

“Excuse me?” He whipped his head around and blinked wildly. “You’re... um... in the tub... um, with no clothes on.”

She laughed, looking down at herself. “And I’m covered with bubbles.” She took the flute and sipped. “Besides, you’ve got a beer in your hand. Sit

down and take a load off.”

“That would be highly inappropriate.” He leaned against the counter and swigged. “Then again, so is this.” He raised the beverage.

“Did your boss leave?”

Brayden nodded. “Tegan set up his equipment in one of the bedrooms. He was able to crack your sister’s password, but there are a bunch of encrypted files behind a firewall. It’s going to take him a while to get into those.”

“That’s progress.” She leaned back and closed her eyes, sipping the sweet drink, letting the alcohol go right to her brain. “I hope there is more of this stuff.”

“Two bottles.”

“Fabulous.”

“There’s something else you should know, but it’s not good news,” he said.

She tilted her head, raising one eyelid. “What’s that?”

“Your phone had a tracking app on it and not the same one you and your sister used. Did your sister ever have access to your phone?”

“She plugged in the routes while I was driving.” Madison sat up taller. “You can’t be suggesting that she planted that on my phone ahead of time.”

“How else would it have gotten there?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.” She glared.

His cheeks turned red and he waved his hand frantically. “Your bubbles have shifted.”

She glanced down. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. You’ve never seen a nipple before?” She downed the rest of her drink, handed him the glass, and yanked the towel from the bar. She stood, covering her body. “I don’t like what you’re implying about Hilary. Why would she make it so bad people could follow us—me?”

“I can name two reasons off the top of my head.” He held up two fingers. “The first one is she’s in on it and the second is she wasn’t given a choice. I want to believe the latter.”

Madison took him by the hem of his shirt and dragged him toward the bedroom he’d told her she’d be staying in. “Hilary had been acting strangely ever since she showed up at my apartment.” She slammed the door shut behind them, gripping the towel to her chin. “Turn around so I can get dressed.”

He turned, folding his arms across his chest. “You mentioned she

demanded staying at your place. Why was that strange?”

“Because I have a one-bedroom and she doesn’t like to sleep on the sofa, and I don’t like sharing a bed with her. It’s this whole thing. She showed up, unannounced, with her bags and she wasn’t going to leave.”

“Did she seem frightened?”

“You already asked me this.” She pulled a shirt over her head and pulled up a pair of sweats to her hips. They were a little big, but the drawstring helped. “You can turn around.”

He dropped his hands to his sides and shifted. “Look. I’m on your side when it comes to all of this. I understand it doesn’t make sense and I’m trying to help.”

“Sometimes it doesn’t feel that way.”

“There are many unknowns.” He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “We’re going to have you try your sister from a burner phone once Tegan gets it set up so it shows a different location and we can script out what we want you to say.”

“Has she tried my cell?”

“Not in the last two hours.” He palmed her cheek. “If she’s being held against her will, they need her to communicate with us and then to open her computer. Please, I need you to trust that Tegan knows what he’s doing.”

A guttural sob filled her throat. She dropped her head to his chest. “It’s not easy.”

“I know. I know.” He wrapped his arms around her body, running his hands up and down her back. “Tegan believes he’ll be into the files by morning. Once we know exactly what we’re looking at, we’ll be able to push whoever is with Hilary into making the kind of moves we want. Until then, we have to be patient.”

“Yo, Brayden. Where are you?” Tegan’s voice rattled her nerves.

“In the bedroom,” Brayden said. He pressed his lips on her forehead. “What’s up?”

“I’m ready for you to have Madison try her sister.”

“We’ll be right out.”

He tilted her chin. “Please believe we’re doing everything in our power to find her.”

“I do. But I’m scared. I’ve never been shot at before.”

He brushed her wet hair over her shoulder. “I’m sorry that happened. We’re safe here.”

“Maybe, but for how long?”

Lacing his fingers through hers, he tugged her toward the door. “We’ll be fine through the night. Now let’s go call your sister.”

Her heart pounded like a jackhammer in the center of her chest. She held Brayden’s hand tight as she followed him into the guest room where Tegan had set up three computer screens and a bunch of equipment she didn’t understand.

“This cell is attached to a scrambler,” Tegan said. “They won’t be able to triangulate our location. I will do my best to get a better read on theirs.” He shoved the phone at Madison. “Your job is to be calm and simply talk to her like you normally would.”

“Nothing about this is normal,” Madison mumbled.

“Just do your best.” Brayden ran his hand up and down her forearm. “I’ll be right here for support.”

“Should I avoid saying anything in particular?” she asked.

“I’m not here,” Tegan said. “The only person helping you at this point is someone from search and rescue.”

“You can use my first name.” Brayden lowered his chin. “You can tell her that the police see her as a hostile witness if it comes up, but try to keep it to as little intel as possible. The goal is to set up a meeting.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’m ready.” She took the phone in her shaky hand and tapped her sister’s number on the screen. “She might not answer an unknown—”

“Hello?” Hilary’s voice came over the speaker loud and clear.

“Hilary. It’s Madison.”

“Oh my God. Are you alone?” Hilary asked. “I need talk to you without the cops, so if you can’t, I’m hanging up.”

Madison stared at Brayden.

He nodded.

Madison swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. “I took a phone from the search and rescue guy here. I’m in the bathroom,” she whispered for effect. “What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t care how you do it, but you need to get my computer and meet me tomorrow at that diner—without the police. Do you think you can do that?”

“That might be hard considering I was just shot at.”

“There is no reason for them to detain you when you didn’t do anything

wrong. Tell them you want to go home. They can't keep you or your things and that computer is yours. Do you hear me? Get it and meet me at ten tomorrow; otherwise, I'm dead."

"Hilary, I—"

"Just do it." The call ended.

"Do you think they believed me when I said I was alone?" Madison stared into Brayden's warm, comforting eyes.

Tegan took the phone. "We'll find out tomorrow when we set up a sting."

"Oh no." Brayden shook his head. "We are not using Madison as bait."

"It's our only choice." Tegan arched a brow. "They don't know me and the only person they know on your team is Zeke."

"We don't know that." Brayden raked a hand across the top of his head. "Too much could go wrong."

"It's a public place." Tegan set the cell in a cradle.

"It could also be a setup. They could get her before she even steps from the vehicle." Brayden folded his arms.

"Don't I have a say in this?" Madison let out a long breath. "Because I want to do it. She's my sister and I'll do whatever it takes."

"I don't like it. This feels too easy," Brayden said.

"You might be right and before she even drives into town, we'll have a team in place. But we have to try." Tegan sat in front of all the screens. "I've got hours of work ahead of me, so if the two of you don't mind."

Madison turned on her heel and marched out into the kitchen, finding the champagne. She curled her fingers around the bottle. "I'm taking this to bed with me."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Probably not, but it's the only way I'm going to be able to relax."

"I'll be on the sofa if you need me."

"Thanks." She didn't want to get drunk; however, a good buzz was exactly what the doctor ordered.

* * *

BRAYDEN TOSSED and turned for a good forty minutes. He wished he could chalk up his restlessness to the usual. However, his mind was occupied with a million and one thoughts about Madison.

Protecting her was the easy part. He didn't question his need to do that. But the desire that ran through his veins had his heart all twisted.

The sound of feet scurrying across the floor caught his attention. He blinked, staring at Madison.

She wore a tiny pair of shorts and a tank top. She sat on the side of the sofa, resting her head on his bare chest.

"Madison, what are you doing?" He shifted to the side, making more room.

"I can't sleep." She pressed her back against him, tucking her legs against his and slipping under his blanket. "I was hoping you could help again."

He squeezed her hip. "Come on. Get up."

"Please don't make me leave."

"If you need me to hold you, then we might as well do it in a bed where there's more space and more chance we'll both get a few hours of shut-eye." He pressed his hand on her back and gave a little push. "Let's go."

This wasn't the brightest move, but that sofa was fucking uncomfortable as sin.

Gently, he closed the bedroom door, pulled back the covers, and climbed onto the mattress.

"You're one of the good guys." She snuggled into his body, resting an arm, a leg, and her head on top of him.

He loved the way she felt in his arms. It was a sensation he welcomed and resented, but only because he didn't understand why his heart reacted so positively to her touch. He had avoided the opposite sex since his wife had passed. He told himself he couldn't ever imagine being with someone else. That he only had love in his heart for Sarah.

But Madison had awakened something unexpected.

"I don't know about that," he mused. "If that were true, I wouldn't be here right now."

She propped her chin on his chest and smiled. "Why do you say that?"

"A decent man would have told you to go back to bed alone and he wouldn't be having some of the thoughts I am."

She arched a brow. "You're human, after all."

He chuckled.

"It's kind of hard not to be when a half-naked, incredibly attractive and intelligent woman is sprawled out on top of me for the second night in a row."

“I’m blushing.”

He tucked some hair behind her ear. “I shouldn’t be in here with you like this.”

“Because of your job? Or because of your late wife?” She kissed his chest. “And please, I beg of you to be honest. I’ve had enough men lie to me.”

“Mostly because I’m supposed to protect you and my boss wouldn’t think this is appropriate.”

“Have you been with anyone since your wife died?” Madison asked.

“No,” he admitted. “She was the only one since I was twenty.”

Madison arched a brow. “Before her?”

He laughed. “Yes. I had sex before I met my wife.” He shook his head. “We were not virgins, although I suppose because we were young, people want to believe that. However, I was a bit of a horn dog in my youth.”

“That’s a disgusting phrase.”

“Maybe so, but it’s the truth.” He hadn’t been this open about his life with anyone in a long time and it felt damn good. “What about you? Has there been anyone since your breakup?”

“Nope. And Charles wouldn’t even touch me after the accident, so it’s been a while.”

“Wait, what?” Brayden rolled to his side, keeping her close. He ran his hand up and down her arm. “Are you telling me that after your accident you and he were never intimate again?”

“My injuries were extensive.” She sat up, raising her shirt, showing off a massive scar in the center of her stomach.

“Jesus. What happened?” He reached out and traced the ragged edges with his finger.

“I was run off the road and wrapped my car around a tree. A branch went right through my gut. I’m lucky to be alive.”

“I’d say so.”

“My recovery took a long time, so that put a damper on things, but Charles was always afraid of hurting me. And then of course there was the fact that they had to remove my uterus. It wiggled him out, even though he said it didn’t. The idea of sex with me was a problem for him.”

“He’s a fucking asshole is what he is.”

She palmed his cheek. “You’re sweet for saying so.”

“No. I’m not. Because if I ever had the unpleasure of meeting him, my

fist might go through his nose. What the hell does a lack of a uterus have to do with making love to a woman?”

She fell back on the bed and burst out laughing.

“I honestly don’t see what’s so funny.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just the way you said it. I mean, you’re such a manly guy. I didn’t expect those words or for you to be so sensitive.”

He looped his arm around her middle and heaved her to his chest. His pulse raced. “You’ve been hanging around the wrong kind of men.” Electricity flowed through his bloodstream when he brushed his lips across her mouth. Desire filled his heart. It wasn’t simple passion. He didn’t just want to take her to bed and experience sex again.

He wanted so much more than that.

There was no doubt he wanted her in the most primal way, but his soul demanded more. Something deep inside him had come alive. She gave him hope and a reason to be a man again. She was the woman that everyone told him was out there, and yet the timing couldn’t be worse. Everything about the situation was flat-out wrong.

He should put an end to it and leave the bedroom this second.

But instead, he ripped off her shirt and stared at her breasts as if it were the first time he’d ever seen them. He swallowed. “You’re so beautiful,” he managed, tracing a path from the center of her neck down to her belly button.

She covered her scar with her hands.

He batted them away, then leaned forward and dotted tiny kisses across the damaged skin. “This is part of who you are. Don’t ever be ashamed of it or let anyone make you feel bad about it.”

She sucked in a deep breath. “It’s kind of hard not to as it’s a constant reminder of—”

He pressed his finger over her lips. “I have scars all over my body.” He sat up and twisted, showing off his back. “I was in a helicopter that was shot down. I had three bullets and a piece of the plane stuck in me.” He shimmied out of his jeans. “My team and I were ambushed and I was stabbed in the thigh here and shot over here.”

“What’s your point?” She held the covers up to her chin.

It broke his heart that some douchebag perpetuated all her negative feelings about what happened. He should have been doing whatever it took to lift her up and make her feel like a woman again.

“None of these scars define who I am. They were traumatic and in some

cases, I needed to sit down with a therapist and talk through some things, especially when good men died and I didn't." He tapped his chest. "But they don't have anything to do with the kind of person I am and neither does this." He tugged at the sheet, exposing her spectacular body, imperfections and all. "Besides being gorgeous, you are kind, intelligent, and any man would be lucky to be with you."

She cupped his face, straddled his body, and kissed him, hard. It was wet, wild, and out of control.

He lost himself in the kind of passion he believed would forever be dead. His skin ignited like a wildfire. He took her nipple into his mouth and savored her sweet moans. Flipping her to her back, he yanked her shorts to her ankles with a little more aggression than anticipated. She'd unlocked a hunger deep inside. It was undeniable and uncontrollable. He dotted her leg with kisses, starting at her ankle and moving his way up her thigh. He became drunk on her taste.

It had been a long time since he wanted something this badly.

He had no explanation for where his desire came from except Madison was special. She was the kind of woman who brought out the best in people.

In him.

She made him want to be a better man. To be the kind of person he was before tragedy had changed his world forever. There was no guilt to be found in his heart or mind. He could only find the present and the hope of a future. One that he hoped Madison could be a part of and that thought scared him, but not enough he was willing to back away. She was exactly what he needed in the moment.

Threading her fingers through his hair, she rocked her hips, rolling them with the motion of his tongue. She tasted like sweet cantaloupe and he couldn't get his fill.

"Yes, Brayden," she said with a raspy voice. The way his name rolled off her lips sent a warm shiver across his skin.

He slipped two fingers inside her, stroking gently at first.

"Oh my God." She arched her back, clutching at his head. Her body spasmed as her climax rippled out into his mouth.

Satisfaction gripped his soul. The entire experience could end right there and he'd be happy. It had been a long time since he'd felt this level of human intimacy.

She cupped his face, pulling him to her and kissing him hard. She

grappled with his underwear.

He groaned as she pulled them to his feet, tossing them to the floor.

She took him in her hands, teasing and torturing him with her gentle touch.

“Enough of that.” He batted her hands away. “Come here.” He guided her on top, straddling her legs, easing himself inside. He gritted his teeth, hoping he didn’t explode like a horny teenager.

He gripped her hips, keeping the motion slow while he caught his breath. Staring into her soulful blue eyes, he lost himself in the moment. She was more than he could have ever imagined. He leaned forward, sucking her nipple into his mouth, giving himself something else to focus on. He needed this to last as long as possible. Giving each breast attention, he concentrated on the way she responded.

Her lovemaking left him breathless.

Unable to control himself any longer, he rolled her to her back and thrust himself deep and hard.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him, raising her hips. “Brayden, yes,” she cried.

His orgasm collided with hers like a twister rolling across the prairie. It took the oxygen right out of his lungs. He gasped for air, but there was none to be had.

Her fingernails dug into his back.

He did his best not to collapse his entire weight on top of Madison, but he was weak from the exertion of what had to be the best experience he’d had in a long time. He kissed her neck, rolling to the side and pulling her tight. He wanted to hold on to this moment for as long as he could. He knew he’d have to sneak out of her room and back to the sofa before the sun rose.

She pressed her lips on the center of his chest. “I hope you don’t end up regretting this.”

“Why would you say that?” He took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Are you having second thoughts already?”

“No,” she said. “And I don’t believe I ever will. It’s just that we’re both wounded and that’s the first time either one of us has had sex in a long time.”

He chuckled. “Fourteen months.”

“Sixteen.”

“I’m serious when I say that if I ever meet your ex-boyfriend, I’d give him a fist sandwich.” He kissed her nose. “I can have a temper when it comes

to assholes and he sounds like a big one.”

“He just had an idea of what he wanted his life to look like and my accident—”

He hushed her with a kiss. “Please don’t ever belittle yourself by making excuses for his bad behavior. What happened to you was life-changing, but not life-ending. What he did was cowardice. You deserve so much better.”

“I want to believe that. I really do. But it’s hard when every date I’ve gone on since the breakup has always ended in a discussion about how that man wants kids.”

“Do you tell them about the accident?”

“Not usually,” she said. “Especially if they go on and on about how many kids they want and what a great dad they plan on being. It’s too painful.”

“I can understand that.” He tucked her head into his shoulder. “But the right man—the one who ends up loving you—he’s not going to care.”

“No offense, but that’s easy for you to say.”

“Why? Because I’m a man and I’m not experiencing what you are? Because if that’s what you’re thinking, you’re wrong.” He stared at the ceiling. His entire life flashed before his eyes. His childhood. His troubled teenage years. His father telling him it was either being cut off entirely or joining the military.

Then meeting Sarah and how his entire world changed.

It was odd how he felt no guilt at this moment, but still missed her and that was something he had no idea how to deal with or what it meant. The only thing he knew for sure was that Sarah would want him to live and Madison made his heart beat a little faster.

“How am I wrong?” she asked.

“I’m in this bed with you, aren’t I?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

He propped himself up on his elbow and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I hope it’s obvious that I’m not the kind of man who just sleeps with anyone.” He ran his thumb across her cheek. “There’s something magical about you and I can’t explain it. I noticed it the second I saw you in the diner. I’ve been trying to ignore it ever since, but I can’t. I don’t know what any of this means or what happens next. I know that you’re special and no matter what happens, I could never regret being with you.”

She palmed his cheek. “You’re a pretty incredible guy, but that doesn’t make me wrong.”

He chuckled. “Actually, it does because your ability to carry a child doesn’t dictate how I feel about you. It’s not even something I think about when I see you.”

Covering her mouth, she gasped. “You can’t mean that.”

“But I do. Maybe my personal experiences have shaped that part of me. I don’t know. I believe I’d be a lucky man to have you in my life.”

“Now you’re being a cornball.”

“I can’t even chalk it up to too much to drink.” He laughed. “Sarah used to always tell me I was a big dork.”

“She was right.” Madison patted his chest.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought up my late—”

“Hey. No. It’s okay. I’m glad you feel comfortable talking to me about her, especially like this.” She smiled.

“Most women would feel threatened or even jealous of Sarah.”

“That’s ridiculous. She’s a big part of who you are.” Madison sat up, taking his hand and placing it over her stomach. “Having a family is part of who I am and something I still want. It’s why it’s so painful for me, but I haven’t given up on the idea.”

Brayden swallowed. Hard. He’d completely given up on love. On family. He thought he’d never want to go down that road again.

Right now, he wasn’t so sure about that. In a few days, Madison had changed his entire outlook on life. He should question his emotions more, but he didn’t want to. He could examine them later. For now, he’d live in the moment. “I’m happy to hear that.”

“You’ve helped me see that there’s more to me than what’s missing.”

“You’re perfect just the way you are.” He pulled her close. “Now try to get some sleep. We’re going to have a busy day.”

“You’re going to sneak out the second I’m out, aren’t you?”

He chuckled. “It won’t look good if Tegan—or my boss—catches me in here with my pants down, so to speak.”

She turned, tucking her back against his chest, hugging his arm. “I won’t like waking up alone, but I’ll forgive you in advance.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he closed his eyes. He’d allow himself a little while longer before heading for the insanely uncomfortable sofa and a night of tossing and turning while he contemplated how he could fall so hard, so fast.

It had been similar with Sarah.

She had walked into his life and took his heart in an instant.

This wasn't any different.

Only he suspected he was going to have to let Madison go and she'd take his heart with her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brayden startled awake.

He blinked. It was still dark outside. He lifted his arm and checked his watch.

Four in the morning.

He's slept for five hours. Damn. He hadn't meant to do that.

Knock. Knock.

"Brayden? Are you in there?" Tegan called.

Shit. Quietly, he slipped from the bed and found his pants, hiking them up to his hips. He raced to the door and opened it. "Yeah. What's up?" he whispered.

"I found something you need to see," Tegan said. "Madison should take a look too."

Brayden stepped out into the hallway, closing the door. "She struggled to fall asleep. Let me take a look, and then I'll wake her up."

Tegan arched a brow. "And how is you being in there helping her rest?"

"She's scared and just wanted someone to hold her."

"Right," Tegan said. "I believe that."

"I don't need a lecture." Brayden raked a hand across the top of his head.

"Wasn't going to do that." Tegan raised his hands, showing his palms. "I'm thrilled you're starting to live again. But getting emotionally tangled up with her is playing with fire and not just with your new job."

"Drop it, okay?"

"Sure thing." Tegan nodded. "Come on. I found some things on Hilary's computer that changes everything."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that." Brayden went down the short

hallway to the guest room where Tegan had set up. He stood behind Tegan and all his monitors. “What am I looking at?”

“Nothing yet.” Tegan pounded on the keyboard. “Remember the security footage the police released of Hilary and an unknown man leaving Bio-MedTech?”

“What about it?”

“I believe it was faked and this is the real deal.” He pointed to the screen on the right. “Here you can see Hilary going in with her backpack. By herself. Check out the timestamp.” He tapped the keyboard. The screen moved in fast-forward. “Here’s where the unknown man shows up about thirty minutes later. Which doesn’t match what we saw.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

The screen continued to move quickly until Tegan stopped it. “He leaves fifteen minutes later with a box. I bet that’s the vials with the drugs in it.”

“Could be,” Brayden said.

“It gets weirder.” Tegan pressed the enter key. “Here’s where a third man comes in.”

Brayden leaned forward. “Do you know who that is?”

“His name is Geno Alton. He’s got a rap sheet a mile long and has ties to the mob. Specifically, Alfonso Leonardi.”

“That’s interesting.”

“He comes out eight minutes later carrying a laptop. But not this one.”

“And no Hilary,” Brayden said.

“She scurries out forty-five minutes later. But none of this is on what was given to the police. It was obviously doctored. So it begs the question, what did Hilary actually see and who is that other man?” Tegan turned. “I’m running facial recognition, but it’s hard because the cameras didn’t capture his entire face. I was only able to identify Geno because we have a file on him three inches thick.”

Brayden sat on the edge of the desk and rubbed his chin. “Let’s say for argument’s sake that Geno is the one who killed Andrew. Why didn’t he off Hilary?”

“My guess would be she hid somewhere and the computer he took was Andrew’s. Geno watched the footage and realized there was someone in there and doctored the feed.”

“And now he’s after her and the unknown man.” Brayden folded his arms.

“But how on earth did Hilary get the footage?”

“She was Andrew’s assistant and she had been having an affair. Her laptop could have easily been hooked up to the mainframe.”

“That doesn’t mean Geno would know that.” Tegan arched a brow. “But he would certainly know she was in the building—in Andrew’s office—and now be on the hunt for Hilary. If she knows this, it makes sense for her to be on the run.”

“Or Geno could have found her and is holding her hostage until he gets what he wants. Did you find anything else on the computer?”

“I’m still decrypting some files. The ones that I have opened are all sensitive material regarding the work at Bio-MedTech. Research dating back a few years. Failed trails. There are some word documents with digital notes from Hilary. I’ve only been able to glance at a couple of them, but if I were to take a guess at what they meant, I’d say we could have a whistleblower on our hands. Whatever the situation with Hilary, she’s in danger and so is her sister.”

“That changes things a little bit.” Brayden let out a long sigh. “I’d like Madison to call her sister in the morning and see if she can get more information about who might be with Hilary.”

“That could be dangerous.”

“If Hilary was meeting someone in the parking lot who wanted the laptop, why didn’t she bring it?” Brayden knew his buddy didn’t have an answer, but he needed to organize all his questions and thoughts. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’ve asked myself that as well.” Tegan nodded. “My first thought is it was just a phone call to whoever she went into the building with, but left before she did.”

“You believe this Geno guy kidnapped her in the parking lot?”

“That’s one theory,” Tegan said.

“But how would he know she has evidence that he was in the office?” Brayden tapped the laptop. “If it’s this Geno guy, he’s coming after her because he believes she witnessed him killing her boss, or he wants something else.”

“Or maybe this other guy is with her and now he wants the computer. It is possible he killed Andrew and took the drugs,” Tegan said.

“That doesn’t make sense. Why wouldn’t he kill Hilary?”

Tegan arched a brow. “You have to consider they’re working together.

Maybe they crossed Geno. Maybe they didn't expect Geno to come to the office and now they're scrambling."

"Okay, but then why didn't Hilary just take the computer to the parking lot?"

"That would have looked odd with her sister." Tegan stood and strolled to the other side of the room. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "I'm struggling with the idea that Hilary is doing this of her own free will." He tapped his temple. "I've run everything over in my brain and all my training tells me she went to that parking lot to make a private phone call. Probably to set up a time for her partner to come get that damn computer. I'd guess while her sister was sleeping. But something went wrong. Maybe her partner turned on her or he's in trouble."

"Why didn't she come running back and get the computer or ask her sister for help?"

Tegan shrugged. "Maybe because you were there. Perhaps Hilary got scared when she saw you. It could have gotten worse when the rest of the search and rescue team showed up."

"That's a good point. But there was about a four-hour stretch where I was asleep and the team hadn't come yet. They could have snuck up on me."

"They couldn't take the risk." Tegan scratched the side of his neck. "You mentioned the girls were pretty close and that Madison tends to take care of her sister. This could be a manipulation on Hilary's part. She might suspect that Madison will do whatever she asks because she's done so in the past."

"It's possible. If she hadn't met me at the diner before she went to the campgrounds. I absolutely believe she would have started looking for Hilary in the middle of the night and she would have met her no matter what the cops said."

"I bet her sister was banking on that and when you showed up, all bets were off."

"One thing is really off, though." Brayden rested his hand on the mouse and dragged the arrow over the video. He found the shot he was looking for and clicked. "This Geno guy. He has to be the one who altered the security footage, but it makes it appear that the unknown man and Hilary might have killed Andrew. As if he's setting her up to take the fall."

"That does make the most sense, which begs the question, why would he be involved in a kidnapping?"

"Unless she has something he wants." Tegan pushed Brayden aside and

sat in the chair, tapping at the keyboard. “Geno would have seen the footage. What if the unknown man got away.” He froze the video at the spot where the man entered the building, taking a screenshot. Then he fast-forwarded to when the man left with the box. “The way this is doctored, this man leaves with nothing. In the real video, this man left a good fifteen minutes or so before Geno got there. If we go with the theory that Geno didn’t know about him until after he killed Andrew and he’s assuming that he has the drugs, my guess is Hilary could be stalling by using her computer as bait. She might not even know she has this footage.”

“I don’t buy that,” Brayden said. “But I can see Hilary doing anything to protect her sister while doing what she must to get out of whatever mess she’s gotten herself into.”

“There’s something else I need to tell you.” Tegan leaned back.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

Tegan swiveled and brought up a messaging app. “I’ve been able to remove the tracking from her cell and I did a check on this computer.”

“Okay.” Brayden squinted as he looked at the screen. “What am I looking at?”

“Hilary has been messaging her sister.”

“That’s odd. Madison told her she didn’t have her phone.” Brayden leaned closer, scanning the words on the screen. “She’s asking for Madison to contact her when she’s alone. She wants to change the plans. Why did you wait until the end of this conversation to tell me this?”

“For starters, I knew it would upset you.” Tegan held up his hand. “And because I’m not sure all of the incoming calls and messages are coming from Hilary.”

“Why do you say that?”

“People still have speech patterns in texts.”

“Please don’t tell me you’ve been reading all of Hilary and Madison’s messages.” Brayden pressed his hands on the desk.

“It’s a necessary evil,” Tegan said. “And from what I’ve gathered, I don’t believe we’re communicating with Hilary.” He arched a brow. “That includes the phone calls.”

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

“There are unnatural breaks in Hilary’s speech when I play it back. It’s possible they used either artificial intelligence or old recordings of her voice or even a combination of both.”

“That’s fucking scary as shit,” Brayden said. “So what you’re really telling me is that you believe it’s possible that Hilary is dead.”

Tegan nodded. “We have to be prepared for that.”

“Shit.” Brayden stood tall, stretching his back. “That changes how we go into this meeting, if we do at all. Not to mention what it’s going to do to Madison.”

“Are you sure you want to share this with Madison?”

“I’m not going to lie to her.” Brayden glared at his longtime friend.

“Is that because you slept with her and have some sense of responsibility for her now?”

“Absolutely not. You should know me better than that. She has a right to know what’s going on with this investigation, especially if we’re going to be using her to bait the enemy.”

“This isn’t your first rodeo. We might have very different jobs, but you know we don’t always tell the family every aspect of an investigation. This one is no different.”

“Perhaps, but you’re asking her to go sit in a public place under the assumption her sister will be meeting her. If you suspect—”

“The key word there is suspect. I don’t know. It’s a hunch. It’s not fact. I could be very wrong.”

Brayden turned and peeked his head out into the hallway. “We should at the very least tell Madison it’s a possibility.”

“I disagree and if you’re going to keep arguing with me, I’ll pull your ass from this detail. Remember, you’re here as a courtesy. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“That’s bullshit.” Brayden jerked his head.

“You’ve been a hot mess for over a year. You’ve made some stupid-ass decisions when it comes to your career and now some chick has you flipped upside down and not thinking clearly. Don’t make me pull rank, because you know I’ll do it.”

“It’s not like that.” Brayden narrowed his stare.

“Come on, man. I know you better than anyone except maybe your brother and sisters. I watched you fall apart when Sarah died. I worried you might not make it back. And now I see that protective sparkle you get in your eye when something you care about is threatened.”

Brayden let out a nervous laugh. “I’ve known her three days.”

“You fell in love with Sarah in less than a week.” Tegan cocked his head.

“Madison is so different from Sarah and yet, I get it. She’s perfect for you.”

“Shut up.” Brayden let out a long breath. “Madison is a nice woman and I’ll admit I like her. I’ll even go as far as to say she’s helped me get through a weird transition. But I’m not interested in her that way, nor does she want to have anything to do with a relationship. So, can we drop this crap, please?”

Tegan dared to look him up and down. “You’re standing here in a pair of jeans that aren’t even buttoned, with no shirt and no shoes. You stayed in her room all night. I’m not stupid.” He held up his hand. “You’re not the kind of man who has a one-night stand.”

“You didn’t know me before Sarah.”

Tegan burst out laughing. “Oh, your siblings told me all the stories.” He cleared his throat. “But you don’t go back to being a ladies’ man after having the kind of love you shared with Sarah. You either spend the rest of your life alone, wallowing in self-pity, or you pick up the pieces of your life and fall damn fucking hard. You, my friend, just tripped over those big fat feet of yours.”

Brayden folded his arms across his chest. He opened his mouth to protest, but no words tumbled off his tongue. It wasn’t that he agreed he’d fallen for Madison, but he couldn’t deny he had feelings. It was those confusing emotions that he had no idea what to do with. “Liking someone doesn’t constitute anything.”

“With you, it does.” Tegan lifted his arms and clasped his hands behind his head. “If she wasn’t tangled up in this case, I’d be jumping up and down for joy. I don’t want to see her clouding your already suspect judgment.”

“I resent that.” However, it wasn’t that far off the mark, something that Brayden had to come to terms with.

“I say it out of love, man.”

Brayden leaned against the far wall by the door. “This entire thing came out of left fucking field. I don’t understand it.”

“You don’t have to,” Tegan said. “I’m not saying you can’t go for it, but you do have to keep it in perspective until we figure out what happened to her sister.”

If there was anyone Brayden could talk to, it was Tegan. “You know what scares me the most?”

“No. What?”

“Madison might be nothing like Sarah, but her relationship with her sister is similar to Sarah and Torrie’s. It worries me that I’m stepping in this way

because I'm trying to fix it, which I know I can't."

"Even I find that to be a little far-fetched. You always let Sarah and Torrie have their drama. You supported your wife and did your best to be there for her sister, but you always told me they were oil and water and that was never going to change."

Brayden glanced toward the ceiling, as if it had all the answers to his questions. "I went to bed on the sofa believing I'd turn her away if she asked me to sit with her again. I have this tape that I've been playing in my head for the last twenty-four hours, but it went right out the window the second she asked me for comfort."

Tegan pushed to a standing position. "You know I've never been of the philosophy that you need to put yourself back out there, but I do believe that when the time is right, it's right. Don't fight it or try to analyze it too much. However, I need you to put this investigation first."

"I can do that, but I'm still not lying to her. I want her to listen to the recording and see if she hears it too. Or if she catches anything. And I want her to take a look at the printout of the texts. Madison is smart and she's very aware of her sister's shortcomings. If we're talking to someone else, Madison will be able to help confirm it."

"I can live with that."

"I'll go wake her up." Brayden wasn't looking forward to this conversation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Madison pressed her hands on the table and blinked open her eyes. She'd concentrated on her sister's voice for the last thirty minutes. "It's her voice, but the tones change from her work voice to the one she uses in general conversation."

"What's the difference?" Brayden stood on the other side of the room with a folder tucked under his arm, giving her as much breathing room as possible.

"How can you tell?" Tegan asked. "Which parts match her work voice?"

"It goes back and forth, sometimes just a few words are in that tone." Madison reached for her coffee mug and sipped. "Hilary constantly complains about how she has to document research. It's the one part of her job that she finds boring and mundane. She will have to record the findings and a few times she's shared with me how she does this blah voice to do it. Like she's a robot or something. She says it helps make the work go by faster."

"Do you have any samples of that?" Tegan asked.

Madison shook her head. She wasn't sure why Brayden had asked her to spend such focused attention on this particular task. When she'd asked, all he told her was that he'd make it clear in a little while. "What's going on? Shouldn't we be going over strategy for this morning's meeting? Or trying to reach out to Hilary to confirm the details?" Ever since Brayden had woken her up, she felt as though something was off.

While he'd been warm and loving, he'd also put a distance between them. She wasn't sure if that was out of regret or because he didn't want Tegan to know or something else. Whatever it was, it made her squirrely.

Brayden pulled out a chair and sat close. He opened a folder, spreading a few pages across the table. “We will get to that in a minute and I promise you, I will tell you what we’re thinking in a second.”

“You’re not only making me nervous, but you’re pissing me off.”

Brayden shifted his gaze from her to Tegan, who leaned against the sink. “I don’t want to do either. However, we do have our reasons.”

“Fine.” She shuffled the pages. “What are these and what do you want?”

“Those are random texts pulled from your sister’s phone. I want you to compare them all and tell me what you think.”

The blood in her veins turned from fire to ice. She didn’t need to be a detective to know the implication. She kept her thoughts to herself and did what Brayden asked. No matter how much he currently annoyed her, she trusted him without question.

Her attraction for Brayden frightened her because it appeared from nowhere and came on so fast it made her head spin. That was her only intention when she’d asked him to hold her last night.

But the moment they touched, her connection with him ignited like fireworks. It couldn’t be ignored. Or tamed. Even the passion she shared with Charles hadn’t been that strong.

Madison pushed all erroneous thoughts from her brain and concentrated on the messages. She organized the papers into what felt like an appropriate pattern, beginning with texts she believed were sent the longest ago, moving to the more recent.

Her breath caught in the center of her chest. She lifted her gaze. “These came in last night?”

Brayden nodded.

She’d be angry later. “Hilary doesn’t engage like this.” She waved a piece of paper. “While it’s absolutely like her to be sneaky, the language is all wrong. She would never use the words *moral imperative* or this one...” Madison flipped the page. “*I implore you to get away and meet me alone. It’s of the utmost importance. Please. I know you think you’re helping me, but in actuality, you’re hurting us both. This will end badly if you don’t ditch whoever you’re with and rendezvous with me. Text me ASAP and I’ll send you the deets.*” Madison glanced up. “First, my sister is abrasive and uses as few words as possible in text. I would believe this if she said something more along the lines of *ditch whoever you’re working with. Life and death. I’ll send new meetup info. Trust me. Life and death.* Any more than that, it’s

overkill and the words, it's just not Hilary." Madison pushed her chair back and stood. "The second those came in, someone should have woken me up. Valuable seconds are ticking by."

"It's possible whoever took Hilary has been watching for a long time. Maybe even followed you all the way from Virginia," Tegan said. "He could have been at the diner, seen you chat with Brayden outside, and then again at the campsite. That threw a wrench into the kidnapper's plan."

Tears filled Madison's eyes. Her father always told her that being pragmatic wasn't bad. The more realistic she could be about any given situation, the better her chance of success. Or at the very least, the ability to cope when things got rough. "She could already be dead," she whispered.

Brayden took her into his arms, running his strong hands up and down her back. He kissed her forehead. "I will always be honest and that is our concern at this point."

"I can't believe I could have been talking with a recording." She buried her face in Brayden's chest.

"We don't know that for sure," Tegan said. "I'm still analyzing the recording as well as all the messages, but it doesn't change how we want to do things this morning."

"How so?" She tilted her head.

Brayden cupped her cheeks. "I want to go on record that I hate this plan." He brushed his lips over her mouth before turning and snagging his coffee off the counter. "I think it's too dangerous."

"What is it?" She brushed her hair from her face.

"Tegan and his team want you to send a text back, agreeing to meet alone and a different location." Brayden slammed his fist on the counter. "It's fucking crazy, is what it is."

"Would you all still be there with me?" She curled her fingers around Brayden's biceps.

"We'd have to be much more hidden. Brayden and his team would have to be completely out of sight, if there at all," Tegan said. "While I can plant some of my team out in the open, we'd have to avoid the local police. We don't want to spook whoever this is. If it turns out your sister is the one who meets you, we will swiftly move in. If not, we'll need you to do some fast talking."

"I don't like it." Brayden shook his head. "We could be dealing with a career criminal. Madison could be taken before we even know what

happened.”

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Tegan said. “Besides, she will be strapped with all the knowledge she needs.”

“I can handle it.” She squeezed Brayden’s arm. “I have to do this for my sister. I can’t leave her behind and I know you understand that.”

Brayden held her gaze. The emotion that seeped from his intense dark eyes shocked her system. No one—not even Charles—had ever looked at her with such caring and concern. It seeped into her skin, coating her muscles, melting into the fabric of her soul.

“You’re going to have to let Tegan coach you on what to say, how to act.” Brayden took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “You need to do exactly what he says. No question. And then you need to walk into the situation like everything is normal. It’s not going to be easy.”

“Nothing about my life has been easy lately. I got this.”

“All right. I better call Ethan and tell him about the change in plans.” Brayden kissed her temple. “I’ll let the two of you get to work.” He snagged his cell off the counter and headed into the family room.

Madison palmed her coffee and did her best to ignore the negative thoughts creeping into her mind. The possibility her sister was dead needled her brain like an ice pick. But another force melted that ice, bringing warmth and comfort to her heart. The opposing forces rattled her nerves.

“Why don’t you have a seat,” Tegan said. He pulled out a chair and waved a hand over it.

She sighed. “What is it that we have to prepare for?”

“A couple of different scenarios. But first I want to chat with you about Brayden.” Tegan clasped his hands on the table and tilted his head. “He’s one of my best friends. I know he told you about Sarah and what that did to him, but I’m sure he hasn’t painted the right picture about himself.”

Madison stiffened her spine. “Brayden wouldn’t appreciate you talking about him behind his back like this.”

“You’re right. He wouldn’t.” Tegan nodded. “But that man out there sometimes doesn’t know what’s good for him. Or what’s going to destroy him.”

“I’m not sure I like what you’re implying.”

“It certainly isn’t what you think.” Tegan chuckled. “Brayden has loved two things. The military and Sarah. Without them, he’s been a walking disaster. He’s been trying to piece his life back together, but it’s been a hard

road until he meets a stranger in a diner and everything changes.”

“You’re oversimplifying things and I’m not going to sit here like a child and have this conversation with you.” She found Tegan’s concern for his friend endearing, but she wasn’t going to allow herself to be scolded. She was an adult and so was Brayden. They were both broken and whatever had happened between the two of them had helped them both step through to the other side of their pain.

“You’re misinterpreting my intentions.” Tegan arched a brow. “I’m not suggesting you’re bad for Brayden. Quite the opposite. But I am concerned about what happens when we clear up this thing with Hilary. And I do apologize for my timing, which is fucked up. I know you’re worried about your sister and I want you to know I will do everything in my power to find her. However, I see a fire in Brayden’s heart that I haven’t seen in a long time and it’s not about the job. It’s about you. In a few short days he’s become protective. He cares a great deal. You’d have to be blind to see that.”

“Look. We’re two people who had some shitty things happen to us in the last year or so. We’ve bonded over that and he’s been so wonderful in helping me. You’re reading too much into this and if you’re worried about me hurting him or something, he and I already understand each other, so you can rest easy.”

“You’re both kidding yourselves.” Tegan lowered his chin. “This has all the makings of love at first sight. Trust me, I know how that works. I fell in love with my wife in a day. That’s all it took. However, I didn’t accept it for months. If Brayden is someone you want, you’re going to have to fight for him because he’s the kind of guy that will let the best thing that’s ever happened to him walk right out of his life.” Tegan tapped the table. “He almost did it with Sarah and he’ll do it with you.”

“Right now, all that matters is Hilary.”

“Understood.” Tegan took her hand. “Let’s get to work.”

CHAPTER NINE

Brayden pulled Tegan's truck into the parking lot about four miles from the new destination. He took Madison's hand and ran his thumb over the backside. His heart hammered in his throat. The last time he felt this powerless had been when Sarah was battling cancer.

It was a sensation he did not welcome.

"How are you holding up?" he asked softly.

"I've been replaying all the different conversations in my head, making sure I have them right," Madison said.

"That's good." He put the vehicle into park and slipped from behind the steering wheel. The sun warmed his face. He strolled around the hood of the vehicle, meeting Madison halfway. He took her into his arms and crushed her to his chest. "Remember that this car has a tracker on it, so if someone has you follow them or takes you in it, we'll know where you are."

"And there's a tracker in my purse and phone." She let out a long breath. "What are you going to do when I drive off?"

"Lose my fucking mind," he admitted. "I hate that you're going there without me and I'm stuck here twiddling my thumbs."

"I don't like that I have to leave you standing here."

"Ethan is on his way." Brayden checked his watch. "He should be here in ten." He pulled her close, brushing his mouth across her sweet lips. Tegan was right. He'd fallen hard and fast. Unfortunately, Madison lived a good five to six hours away from where he planned on settling.

Also, it didn't make sense for him to get involved. She had her own set of issues she was still working through. Not to mention all this shit with her sister. To make matters worse, he was beginning to believe Hilary might not

be alive. That was going to leave poor Madison heartbroken again.

That knowledge crushed his soul.

“You should get going.” He palmed her cheek. “Tegan’s already at the meet point with some of his agents. Don’t worry about a thing.”

“Hard not to when your forehead is crinkled like that.” She ran a hand across the top of his head. “I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t met you.”

“The feeling is mutual.” He kissed her temple. “Get in the car and go before I change my mind.” He opened the door. “If your sister shows up this morning, this could all be over. Hilary would be taken into custody for questioning and I’m sure you’d want to go with her.”

“I would.” She leaned into his body, resting her head on his shoulder. “You’ve shown me so much in such a short period of time. I don’t want to say goodbye.” She glanced up. “Is that crazy?”

“Not at all, but if you want to talk about something really out there.” He brushed some stray hair from her face. “Before I met you, I was barely going through the motions of life. In a few short days, you turned my world around and what’s even stranger is, I feel like Sarah is looking down with approval. I know that’s weird.”

“I believe in things like that.” She palmed his cheek. “I wonder if we would have come together had my sister not gone missing.”

“I suppose that’s a question that will never get answered.”

“What if we managed to see each other again? Date even.”

His pulse increased and his mouth went dry. He’d thought about what that might look and feel like but hadn’t the courage to consider the possibility. He’d known her for less than a week. He knew his feelings for her were real. He had no doubt about that. But emotions didn’t make for a relationship and distance made it hard.

He knew that firsthand.

“That’s an interesting concept,” he said. “I’m going to be working long hours and weird workweeks, but I would like to see you again and see if there is something to this.” He blew out a puff of air. “Wow. I can’t believe I, of all people, just said that.”

“I work from home three days a week. It doesn’t matter where I do it as long as I’m in the office on Monday and Tuesday for meetings.” She smiled. “I told myself I was going to work on me for a while before getting tangled up with anyone, so I get it. I’d be lying if I didn’t say I wasn’t scared shitless

and maybe it's in part because I'm terrified Hilary's been murdered and I feel guilty for having this little piece of comfort with you." Tears filled her big blue eyes. "What am I going to do if she's gone? I will never forgive myself."

Gently he wiped them away.

"I know your mind is rattling off a million different scenarios and it's always going to land on the worst one."

"I can tell it's what everyone believes, including you."

He hugged her tight. "I promised I wouldn't lie to you, so yeah, based on everything we've learned, it's what makes the most sense. But even I have a drop of hope and that says something."

She sniffled into his shoulder. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Having the courage to be honest with me." She tilted her head. "After my accident, everyone tried to cheer me up with all my choices except one person."

"Who was that?"

"One of the nurses at the hospital. She and I have become friends and one of the things she constantly tells me is that before I can decide how I want to form a family, I have to be honest with myself and come to terms with the fact I'll never have biological children. She didn't like Charles and believed he was making it harder for me to cope with what happened because he constantly pushed one agenda, which was for us to have a surrogate so he could have a biological child. He never took into consideration how that might make me feel."

"I agree with your friend," Brayden said. "I hope I never meet this ex of yours because I'm not kidding when I tell you, I do have a temper."

"These last few days I've realized that I'm okay with what happened. That I can have a beautiful life if I choose it."

"My baby sister has been telling me for months that I'm at the point where I need to choose a different path and if I do that, I'll find where my new happiness will be." He kissed her nose. "You need to go. I'll see you when all this is over and we'll figure out what works for us moving forward."

She leaned up on tiptoe and kissed him hard.

His knees buckled. He helped her into the driver's side, giving her ass a little slap. "Be safe." He closed the door and took a step back.

She waved before pulling out into traffic.

The sound of a horn honking startled Brayden. He turned. Ethan rolled to

a stop a few feet away.

“Hey, man,” Brayden said.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ethan stepped from the vehicle and shook his head. “How long have you been involved with this chick?”

Brayden let out a long breath. If he continued to see her, it would come out eventually. “Five seconds,” he said. “It kind of came out of left field.” Brayden saw no reason to lie. That would make things worse.

“You’re lucky this isn’t an active search and rescue.” Ethan leaned against the hood of his SUV. “Or I’d be pretty pissed off right now. But instead, I’m tempted to call your sisters.”

“Don’t you dare.” Brayden strolled across the pavement and pressed his hip against the side of Ethan’s vehicle. “I like Madison, but I don’t know what this is or isn’t. However, the one thing I do know is that while I might be ready to date *her*, I’m not prepared for the onslaught that is my family.”

“You make it sound as if you wouldn’t be interested in anyone other than Madison.”

“She’s special. Different from most women. She’s been through some things and I understand her in ways I can’t even explain to myself.”

“She has to be something to pull your head out of your ass,” Ethan said. “You know, your little sister called me while you were on the road traveling out here.”

“Why am I not surprised.” Brayden shook his head. “What did she say?”

“The usual, but she wanted me to put single women in your path. I told her I wouldn’t do that. Not right away because the way I looked at it, Sarah was the love of your life and if there was ever going to be someone else, she would have to understand Sarah was always going to be part of your life. It takes someone who’s been through some shit to be able to live with something like that.”

“Thanks for having my back,” Brayden said.

“I always have, man.” Ethan pulled out his cell and glanced at the screen. “Now, how would you like to do what you do best?”

Brayden arched a brow. “And what is that?”

“Go rogue.”

“That depends on what you have in mind,” Brayden said. “I’ve known Tegan longer than I’ve known you. Getting in his way wouldn’t necessarily be smart, but I have to admit, I’m not thrilled with the specifics of his plan.”

“You can hang back if you want. Talon is already at the diner. I’m going

to go meet him. We thought you could sit in my truck, listen in while we watch and give you a blow-by-blow.”

“I like that idea. Let’s roll.” Brayden jogged around the front of the vehicle and jumped into the passenger seat. “I get why Tegan thought it was best for us to sit this out.”

“He’s got policy and procedures to follow,” Ethan said. “So do we—when we’re on a search and rescue. But that diner is my go-to place. If I didn’t show up, it would be suspect.”

Brayden chuckled. “Tegan’s going to have my head on a platter if this thing goes sideways.”

“It won’t. We’re there to support him and give him extra manpower if he needs it.”

Brayden’s heartbeat settled a tad. The idea that he’d have a running play-by-play of the situation made him feel a hundred percent better about things. Now he just prayed that it was Hilary who showed up, and not someone else.

CHAPTER TEN

Madison sucked in a deep breath as she stopped near the diner. Tegan had mentioned that two agents would be inside, two would be outside, and he would be in a parked car down the street with a couple more.

She noticed a white van a block away. Maybe that was Tegan.

The plan was simple enough. She was to go inside and look for her sister. If she wasn't there yet, get a booth and wait.

She reached across the truck and grabbed the computer. Tegan had copied the hard drive before wiping it clean. Not only had he found the security footage, but all the encrypted files were the formula for the Alzheimer's drug. Curling her fingers around the handle, she gasped. A man stood inches from the vehicle.

He pulled open the door. "Madison Cooper?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm one of the agents. There's been a change of plans," he said.

She swallowed her beating heart. "Under whose authority?"

"Ma'am, it's not safe for you to be here," he said with a firm tone. "I'm going to hop in the passenger side and give you directions on where to go. We've received word from your sister of a new meeting place."

"Who exactly received word?" Madison needed this man to give up at least one name. It could be Tegan or Brayden. But it had to be someone she knew; otherwise, she would start screaming bloody murder.

"I'm not going to stand out here and argue with you. This operation has been compromised." He placed his hand on top of his weapon. "My partner is getting in now."

The sound of the rear passenger door opening caught her attention. She

twisted her head.

“This is Jimmy and my name is Geno.”

Madison’s heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. Like a flash of lightning, so many questions were immediately answered.

Jimmy wasn’t a new boyfriend; he was someone she had been in contact with regarding the information she’d acquired from Andrew after she witnessed his death. Geno had been the man who killed Andrew. That had been all but proven from the recording she watched.

Shit. Hilary had thought Jimmy was on her side, but he betrayed her and now she was most likely dead. Tears burned Madison’s eyes. She gripped the steering wheel.

“Give me your phone,” Geno demanded as he climbed into the truck.

“Why?” She figured if she stalled them long enough, it would give Tegan time to devise a plan to save her ass.

“Don’t ask questions. Just do as you’re told.” Geno rested his gun on the armrest and tapped it gently.

She leaned forward and dug into her purse. “Here.”

Geno tossed it out the window. “Drive south.”

That had been the direction she’d come from. Perhaps she could signal Brayden as she flew by.

“Let’s go.” Geno waved his gun in front of her face. “We’re on a time crunch.”

She glanced over her shoulder and put on her blinker, doing a K-turn in the middle of town. She noted how miserable Jimmy looked in the back seat, as if he didn’t want to be there.

“Don’t draw attention to us,” Geno said. “Drive the speed limit and obey all the traffic laws. Got it?”

“Yes,” she said. “Hey, Jimmy, you know my sister, don’t you?” Her fear had quickly morphed to a combination of anger and the need to have the rest of her questions answered. “You were with her in her office a few days ago, right?”

“So what if I was,” Jimmy said.

“Do you work at Bio-MedTech?” she asked.

“We don’t have time for a game of twenty questions.” Geno pushed his gun into her side. “Once we’re out of town, get on the highway and head north.”

“Where are we going?”

Geno held up the laptop. “We’re making one stop to ensure I’ve got what I need on this computer. After that, you will be reunited with Hilary. Unfortunately, it won’t be a joyous occasion.”

Madison shifted her gaze. “You murdered my sister?”

“Not yet. I needed her, but that little bitch isn’t very cooperative. It took some creativity on my part to make all this work,” Geno said with great pride laced to every word. “Once I have everything I need, you will come to a tragic end.”

“You’re never going to get away with this,” Madison muttered.

“Ah, but I already have,” Geno said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Ethan and Brayden drove past on the other side of the road. She kept her focus straight ahead. However, she noticed Brayden doing a double take.

She glanced in her rearview mirror. Brake lights flashed and the vehicle swerved.

There was hope.

* * *

“WHAT THE HELL? I knew this was a bad fucking idea.” Brayden slammed his fist on the dashboard. “Turn this truck around while I call Tegan.” He yanked his cell out and tapped Tegan’s contact information.

It went to voicemail on the fourth ring.

“Call Talon,” Ethan said. “He’s inside the diner waiting for me.”

Brayden was already on it.

“Yo, what’s up?” Talon asked.

“I just saw Madison drive away in Tegan’s truck. What the hell is going on?”

“No idea. His two guys are nose to nose at a booth by the front door,” Talon said. “Where are you at?”

“Ethan and I are following Madison. She’s with at least two men. I recognize one to be Geno.”

“That’s not good,” Talon said. “Give me a couple of minutes to figure out what happened here. I’ll call you back.” The line went dead.

“They snatched her in broad daylight. That’s ballsy,” Ethan said. “They must have been casing the joint and watching Tegan set up his sting.”

“That’s not helping.” Brayden’s cell buzzed. He glanced at the screen. “It’s Tegan.” He tapped the green button. “What the fuck happened?”

“We got jumped,” Tegan said. “And by an undercover FBI agent.”

“Excuse me?” Brayden set the phone on the center console, putting it on speaker.

“Jimmy works for the bureau. Quietly and swiftly, he tied up my two men that were supposed to be outside. Then he came and rendered my vehicle useless while he managed to lock me in. But he left me a note taped to the windshield.”

“What does it say?”

“It’s a location. I’m heading there now,” Tegan said. “He also informed me that Hilary is alive and has been part of his investigation from the very beginning. It went sideways when she witnessed Andrew’s death and then disappeared on him with the rest of the evidence.”

“What exactly was this all about? Do you know?”

“I called my superior who told me that Jimmy was working on the sale of drugs that were in clinical trials to the highest bidders and then placed on the black market. Andrew was one of the biggest fish in that sea and Jimmy enlisted the help of Hilary.”

“Jesus.” Brayden let out a long breath. “Ethan and I are following Madison, Geno, and Jimmy now.”

“Stand down, Brayden.” Tegan said. “I know you were once a decorated SEAL, but this is no place for you.”

“The fuck it’s not.” He glanced at Ethan who nodded. “We’ll stay a safe distance behind. Text me the address. We’ll meet you there and you best read me in on the plan. You’re going to need all the help you can get. This asshole isn’t playing around. He knows he needs to at least kill off the girls.”

“Jimmy isn’t going to let that happen,” Tegan said. “He had to let this play out until he had backup. He knew there was more of us out there, so he knew it would only be a matter of time.”

“Time is not on our side. Text me that fucking address.” Brayden ended the call.

“Will he do it?” Ethan asked.

Brayden waved his phone. “He’s already forwarded it on to us. He knows he needs our help.”

“I’m taking it he also knows what she means to you.”

Brayden blinked. The moments leading up to when the cops showed up at

his front doorstep to inform him that Sarah had been in a fatal car crash came spiraling into his mind. He had already known something was wrong because Sarah was over an hour late and she wasn't returning his phone calls. He wouldn't let his brain go to the worst places, but his heart already had. It was as if his soul knew she was gone.

He'd allowed her death to rob him of his own life. He'd made the decision to go through the motions of having a career and doing something meaningful, but he never thought that there would be room in his world for another woman.

But Madison showed him that anything was possible.

She'd been through so much.

An ex-boyfriend who couldn't—for whatever reason—be the kind of man she deserved, leaving her when she needed him most, was something Brayden couldn't fathom.

“He saw it before I did.”

* * *

MADISON SWALLOWED as she stared at a run-down motel. It looked like one of those places where horror movies were filmed. Creepy music filled her head. It reminded her of every Alfred Hitchcock movie her father ever made her watch as a small child. A flock of birds flew overhead.

She ducked. Goosebumps dotted her skin.

This was it. She was going to die here in this dingy old motel, her remains pecked to oblivion by seagulls.

“Move.” Geno shoved the gun into her back.

It felt hard, cold, and deadly.

She glanced over her shoulder while she stumbled up the three steps. She noticed that Jimmy didn't do much but follow Geno around, although he did have the computer tucked under his arm with a grim expression. More like a murderous one.

He must be the yes man. Every operation had one of those guys. The person who did whatever he was told without question. The emotionless one. The one who could do anything. Be anything.

The sociopath.

She watched one too many crime shows late at night. If she made it

through this, that would be the first change she made.

“Inside.” Geno opened the door to Room Eighteen. “Jimmy, make sure that thing has everything we need. Do that after you make sure that bitch is secure. I don’t want any issues from her like we’ve had from that crazy sister of hers.”

“On it, boss.” Jimmy gave her a good shove inside. “It will take a good half hour if this is encrypted like the other one was.”

“Hurry the fuck up. I want to take care of business and get out of this fucking place. I wish I never met these assholes, except I need that drug formulation.” He pointed his weapon in Madison’s face. “It better be on that computer.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Her heart hammered in the center of her throat. “All I know is that I thought Hilary wanted me to bring this to her.” Brayden had told her to stick with that story and not to waver.

“I don’t care.” Geno inched closer. “If it’s not there, I’ll put a bullet in your sister’s head while you watch, and then you will have to find a way to get me what I need or I’ll hurt everyone you love.” He narrowed his eyes. “And trust me, little girl, I know how to find out who matters the most.” He stepped toward the door. “I want to roll in thirty minutes.”

“You got it,” Jimmy said, slamming the door shut. He set the computer on the table and lifted his finger to his lips. “If you can be quiet and do as I say, I won’t tie you up until I have to, and that will only be for show.”

“Where is my—”

Jimmy covered her mouth.

She grabbed his forearms and pushed. She didn’t trust this guy as far as she could spit.

“Seriously. I will tie you up and tape your mouth, which is exactly what Geno wants me to do and what he’s done to Hilary.” A sadness filled Jimmy’s dark-brown eyes, but that had to be some kind of trap. “I’m doing everything I can to ensure hers—and now your—safety. I left a note back at the diner for the agents and I know we were followed. But we have to be smart while we wait for whoever is out there to put a plan into place. Now, are you going to be quiet, or are we going to do this the hard way?” He released his hand.

“Who are you?” she whispered. The warning bells had subsided. If he were truly the bad guy she had thought he was, he would have shoved her around, maybe hit her, and bound her immediately. There wouldn’t be any of

this negotiation. He had a job to do, and the clock was ticking.

“Special Agent James Hallenbeck with the FBI. I’ve been working undercover for months. Your sister has been helping me. When the human trials started, that’s when Hilary began her flirtation with Andrew. He pushed to have her cross the line, but she wouldn’t, telling him it was because he was married.” Jimmy rubbed his temples. “That’s when Andrew told Hilary he was separated.”

“Wait, what? Are you telling me my sister slept with Andrew for you and this fucking undercover whatever? You made her—”

“I tried to stop her.” Jimmy clenched his fists. “How do think I felt to have my girlfriend... shit. You can’t tell anyone. I’m not supposed to be dating my informants.”

Madison slowly sat on the bed. “This is all a bad movie script.”

“Look. Andrew was selling drugs on the black market. If it wasn’t for your sister, I wouldn’t have gotten as far as I did. I didn’t intend on falling in love with her.”

He loved Hilary? He was the Jimmy she’d been talking about? And it wasn’t new? Her head spun. “That’s a lot to take in.” She blinked. “What happened? I saw you on that footage from Bio-MedTech. You left her in the office with Andrew after you took something out. Please explain all this to me, and is my sister really okay?”

“It kills me that Geno has hurt her, but she’s a fighter and she’s fine. I promise you that.” Jimmy pulled out the chair from behind the makeshift desk and straddled it. “To make a very long story as short as I possibly can, I approached your sister because I knew she was Andrew’s assistant. I needed someone who was close to him, and the second I told her what I was doing, she was all too willing to spill what she knew.”

“Are you serious? Why?” There was so much Madison didn’t know about her sister.

“She’d figured out that Andrew was selling drugs that had failed clinical trials on the black market because they either worked short term or had benefits for other diseases but weren’t approved for them. She’d already gathered some evidence.”

Madison had been so preoccupied with her own problems that she’d failed to see her sister had been walking right into the lion’s den. For months Hilary had been acting extra weird, but Madison chalked it all up to Hilary’s bad taste in men.

What made it all worse was Hilary let Madison do it. Hilary fed Madison all the information she needed to believe that Hilary was dating a married man and then some new guy.

When all along she was working with a federal agent to bring down some weird pharmaceutical drug ring.

“Do you know how crazy this sounds to me?”

Jimmy pointed to the computer. “Hilary had some great information, but it wasn’t enough. I needed more. When Geno contacted Andrew for the Alzheimer’s drug, I wanted Hilary out, but all my bosses could see was how close I was to nailing Andrew and shutting down his company. That night I was supposed to get the last of the drug vials and the formula from Andrew’s files. Hilary’s job was to copy the file to her computer and then drop an empty one onto Andrew’s.”

“I’m confused. Andrew was there. He wasn’t just going to give it up.”

“I was the buyer.” Jimmy shrugged. “Hilary informed Andrew she was with me. She was supposed to take the computer. I had tied Andrew up. I had to get him and Geno, so I had to play the part, but I couldn’t let Geno get the computer.” Jimmy closed his eyes for a brief moment. “When I met Geno downstairs—because he didn’t want Andrew to see his face—he was pissed that I told him my girl would bring the computer later. He marched himself inside. I texted Hilary to hide. To run. To leave the computer. I thought she’d leave hers, but she didn’t.”

“You knew Geno was going to kill Andrew, didn’t you?”

Jimmy nodded. “He would have killed her too. I don’t know how she managed to stay alive, but she did and I’m so fucking thankful for that. But Geno found out about you and from there, he’s used Hilary’s love for you to make sure he gets what he wants.”

“What do we do now?”

“I’ve been doing everything in my power to fix this. The men sitting outside the diner should have all the information on me now, so they can reach out to my superiors inside the FBI.”

“Why haven’t you called them yourself?” Madison asked.

“Geno doesn’t trust me anymore. He took my phone and this is the first time he’s left me alone since this whole thing began.”

“Shouldn’t you be looking at that computer?”

“Did my FBI colleagues leave the encrypted files on it?”

“No. They are all empty,” she admitted.

Jimmy pulled a flash drive from his pocket. “This is a dummy formula. It’s enough to buy us some time. It will take three minutes to load it.” He stood and strolled to the other side of the room where he dug into a backpack and pulled out some rope.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I promise it won’t be tight.” He held up a bandana. “I need to gag you and trust me, this will be better than tape.”

“Why?”

“Because Geno will be walking through that door in nine minutes. I need to make this look right, or we’re all dead.”

She let out an exasperated sigh and put her hands behind her back.

He chuckled. “You can leave them in front.”

“Thank God for small favors.” She rested her hands on her lap while he wrapped a rope around her wrists and tied it off. It wasn’t horrible, but still uncomfortable.

“I might say some things that are contradictory to what I told you. But that’s because I’m playing a part. Always look at my eyes. Watch for them to shift. I might be trying to signal you to duck or move. I also might mouth instructions if Geno’s back is to me. If I can get the upper hand without one of you girls getting hurt, I will. I promise.”

She nodded.

“Open your mouth a little.”

“No matter what happens, thank you. My sister is lucky to have someone like you in her life.”

Jimmy smiled. “Hilary couldn’t wait for us to meet. She truly believed that we’d like each other and I think she’s right.”

“So do I.”

“I’m really sorry I have to do this.”

She opened her mouth and he placed a small portion of the fabric into it and then tied it off behind her head. She sat on the corner of the bed and watched as he opened the computer and tapped at the keyboard.

Two minutes later, Geno strolled through the door. “Well? Is the formula there?”

“It is.” Jimmy closed the laptop. “You have everything you need to recreate the drug.”

“Are you sure?” Geno asked.

“I didn’t create the drug, so I can’t be completely certain, but it has all the

Bio-MedTech markings,” Jimmy said.

“I know one way to make sure it’s right. Let’s reunite the sisters and have Hilary take a look.” Geno sauntered closer to Madison. He bent over and licked his lips. “I’m sure I can find a way to properly motivate her.” He took Madison by the hair and yanked.

She groaned.

“I’m not sure which one of you is prettier.”

She narrowed her gaze, wishing she could give him a piece of her mind.

“I’m sure knowing we have her sister will be incentive enough.” Jimmy folded the laptop. “Shall we go into the other room?”

“We shall.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brayden took the binoculars from Tegan and focused in on the two motel rooms where he'd seen Geno go from one to the other. Brayden leaned against the hood of Ethan's SUV which was parked a quarter of a mile down the road. "It's been almost thirty minutes since Madison entered the room. We need to do something, now." He lowered his hands and glared at his friend. "We've got enough men. Geno's outnumbered. What the fuck are we waiting for?"

Tegan pointed. "That."

Geno peeked his head out of the room on the right before yanking Hilary by the arm. Her hands were bound in the front. She had two black eyes. A bruised cheek. A fat lip. And she limped as he tugged her toward the room on the left.

"I needed confirmation that Hilary was actually there," Tegan said.

Brayden took a large step forward.

Tegan grabbed him by the arm. "Don't go trying to be a hero. We do this the right way." He pressed a finger to his ear. "Okay, men, this is it. We need Geno alive. I don't want our agent injured nor do we need any collateral damage. Let's roll." Tegan turned his attention to Brayden. "Your job is to stay here with me. I need your eyes and ears. Ethan and Talon are doing the same thing in the back of the building. Once we have Geno in custody, you can move in. Okay?"

Brayden nodded. He didn't like it, but he accepted it. He sucked in a deep breath. A dark SUV pulled into the parking lot. "Who the fuck is that?"

"I have no idea," Tegan muttered. "I need everyone to stand down," he said into the comms.

Brayden lifted the binoculars. “I see two men in the front seat. The windows in the back are tinted, so I don’t know if anyone is in the back.”

The driver eased from behind the steering wheel.

“Fuck,” Tegan muttered. “That’s Alfonso Leonardi. What the hell is he doing here? Jimmy’s boss’ files indicated that Alfonso had nothing to do with this. That this was Geno’s gig. Not Alfonso’s. It doesn’t make sense that he would show up.”

“Unless Geno double-crossed him somehow. Geno could have been hired to run the product, keeping Alfonso out of it. Even if that wasn’t the case, the Alzheimer’s drug was being shut down completely. The fact that Geno stole the last of it and was trying to get the formula, I can see how that would piss off someone like Alfonso. He’d want in on that action. He wouldn’t want his hired gun taking the entire pie.”

“That makes sense,” Tegan said.

“You can’t expect me to sit on the sidelines anymore.” Brayden lifted his weapon from its holster and checked the chamber.

“Shit,” Tegan muttered. “Do you see what I see?”

“Yeah, fucking machine guns sticking out the back seat window.” Brayden holstered his weapon. “That changes everything. I’m texting Ethan. We’re going in.”

“I need Alfonso and Geno alive.”

Brayden let out a sarcastic laugh. “I don’t give a rat’s ass what you need or want. I’m not letting anything happen to Madison or her sister.”

“We’re on the same page with that,” Tegan said.

“Ethan messaged back. He and Talon want to get on the roof, but they want comms.” Brayden reached into the back seat of Ethan’s vehicle and pulled out a rifle. He wasn’t the best shot, but he wasn’t the worst either.

“Fine. I’ll make that happen. I could use good men in that position, but they need to follow my orders. I don’t want anyone going rogue.”

“They’re team players. For the most part.”

“Looks like Alfonso’s going to the door first,” Tegan said. “That gives us some time. I’ll have my men move across the street. Jane is still on standby for room service appearance if Alfonso goes inside. That way we can continue with that part of the plan.”

“If Alfonso enters that motel room, all you’ll see is my backside hauling ass.”

Tegan cocked his head.

“If you think I’ll stand here and let a mobster and a hired gun be alone with my girlfriend, you don’t know me at all.”

“Well, you know I won’t shoot you.”

“I guess we understand each other.” Brayden nodded.

* * *

MADISON’S HEART dropped to the balls of her feet. She stared at her sister’s battered face and groaned, unable to say anything or reach out and touch Hilary.

“Sit down.” Geno gripped Madison’s arm while pressing the weapon into her side. “Okay, Hilary. Here’s your chance to redeem yourself.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Jimmy, open the laptop. Show our friend here the formula.”

“You got it, boss.” Jimmy did as instructed.

“Now, remember, either way this plays out, I win because either you’re going to jail for killing your boss or you get to watch me put a bullet in your sister’s head and frame you for it.” Geno pulled the gag from Hilary’s mouth.

“No one would ever believe I’d murder my sister.” Hilary narrowed her stare.

“You let me worry about how that will play out. Now look at the file.” Geno shoved the computer in her face.

“If Jimmy had to use my password, it’s legit. Not to mention it has all the proper headers and is formatted the way we do things. At the end of the file, there should be two initials. Andrew Moller’s and the lead scientist. That would CT.”

Geno glanced in Jimmy’s direction. “Are we good?”

“Yup.” Jimmy nodded.

“What else is on that thing?”

“A bunch of other encrypted files. Emails. Documents. Interoffice memos. A few personal pictures belonging to Hilary. I can’t be one hundred percent sure, but it doesn’t appear that they were able to access anything.” Jimmy raised his hand. “However, I can tell they tried.”

“How?” Geno asked.

“Bio-MedTech keeps a log of failed attempts to access company computers. I was able to see that data,” Jimmy said.

“Wonderful.” Geno shoved Madison to the bed.

She landed face down. She groaned.

“Unfortunately, you two ladies serve no purpose anymore,” Geno said.

“Come on, Geno. Do you really want two more dead bodies? Especially one that works for Bio-TechMed.” Jimmy closed the computer. “Besides, Hilary might serve to be useful with recreating the drug.”

Madison twisted and turned. She sat up and inched closer to her sister as she fiddled with the rope that bound her wrists, careful to keep her motion small. The last thing she wanted to do was alert Geno to what she was doing.

“I have my own chemists for that.” Geno raised his weapon, pointing it at Jimmy’s face. “I no longer need your services as well.”

Knock. Knock.

“Geno. I know you’re in there. Open the fucking door, or I’ll open fire and I don’t want to have to do that,” a male voice called, and it wasn’t one that Madison recognized.

“What the fuck? How does Alfonso know where we are?” Geno marched toward the window, drawing back the curtains an inch.

“I certainly didn’t tell him.” Jimmy’s eyes shifted to the floor and he mouthed, *get down, now.*

“Well, someone did and now we’re all fucked.” Geno turned. His face drained of all color.

“If you really think you can double-cross me and get away with it, you’ve got another thing coming,” Alfonso said. “Open the damn door and maybe I’ll let you live.”

Geno waved his gun at Jimmy. “If you want a second chance to live, you follow my lead. Got it?”

“Hell yeah.” Jimmy nodded.

Madison had slipped to the floor, Hilary sitting shoulder to shoulder. Both crouched as low as possible. Madison had no idea what was going to happen next, but she had to believe that Brayden was somewhere outside, waiting for the right moment to save the day.

Geno gripped the doorknob, pulling it open slowly. “What are you doing here? I told you once I found the formula I’d contact you.”

Alfonso shoved Geno aside, slamming the door shut. He drew a weapon and pointed it at Geno. “I haven’t heard from you in days and I had to learn on the news that Andrew Moller was murdered. That has your fingerprints written all over it. I can’t believe you thought you’d be able to cut me out of

my own deal.” Alfonso shook his head, making a *tsk, tsk* noise. “You disappoint me and now I’m going to have to clean up this mess.” He sighed. “Two innocent girls and who the fuck is this guy?”

“I work at Bio-MedTech in the data department,” Jimmy said. “I’m also a friend of Geno’s.”

“You’re nothing to me,” Alfonso said. “Where’s the formula?”

“We believe it’s on this computer.” Jimmy held it up. “But we need to authenticate it first and that means we need a chemist.”

“I’ve got one of those,” Alfonso said. “Leave the girls here. My men will take care of them. You two come with me.”

Madison continued to fiddle with her restraints. They were loose, but she hadn’t been able to untie them yet. She rested her hands on her sister’s lap and squeezed. She had to believe things were going to be okay, no matter how bleak things appeared.

* * *

“HE’S FUCKING GOING IN.”

“Give us a few minutes.” Tegan held out a device.

Brayden pressed the comms device from Tegan into his ear, clipping the speaker onto his sleeve, grateful to be keyed into all the action.

“We’re all set,” Ethan’s voice came over the comms. “We’ve got a clean shot to take out the tires of the SUV. Can’t see inside the damn vehicle.”

“I got a better idea,” Jane’s voice echoed in his ear. He hadn’t met her, but assumed it was her since she was the only female agent on the operation. “They are parked in the middle of the lot. The car is running. I am dressed like an employee. I’m going to go tell them they have to move.”

“I don’t like that. You’re solo. It’s you against... we have no idea,” Tegan said.

“The guys on the roof have silencers. I go to the passenger side, get them to roll down the window, leaving a clear shot, that’s one. I duck, that’s two. If there’s more, we figure it out.”

“Alfonso’s been inside for three minutes. We need to act now.” Brayden lifted his rifle and peered through the scope. “I can take out one of the tires on the driver’s side at the same time. That might draw out the man sitting on this side, and then we can make our move to gain access to the motel room.”

“Let’s do it,” Tegan said.

“Making my move now.” Jane appeared to the right of the SUV, pushing a cleaning cart. Slowly, she approached the vehicle.

Brayden lost sight of her as she stepped behind it.

“Excuse me,” her voice came over the comms.

He couldn’t hear the other side of the conversation.

“Window down only a few inches. I don’t have a shot,” Talon said.

“Sir. Hello. Please roll down your window so I can speak to you.”

Silence for a minute.

“Thank you. I have delivery—”

“One down,” Talon said. “Duck, Jane.”

“Goddammit,” Jane said. “Four silent shots fired from the SUV.”

“Fuck. He’s not coming out my side. I’m taking out the tires,” Brayden said. He fired two rounds, successfully hitting his target. “Jane, where are you? Are you okay?”

“Coming around the hood. Took a bullet in the biceps. Went straight through,” Jane said.

“You’re not safe there if Alfonso takes a shot from the window or door,” Ethan said.

“I’m blowing out the window,” Brayden said. “Then cover me. I’m coming across the street.” He took four shots. The first one went through the passenger window. The second the driver’s window. The third one the long window in the back, and the fourth one through the vehicle for good measure.

“No movement from the SUV,” Ethan said. “Go.”

Brayden double-timed it down the street and across the pavement.

“Someone take my six. I’m going to peek inside the vehicle. See if we’ve taken the target,” Jane said.

Brayden needed to focus on getting to the front door. A good five minutes had ticked by since Jane took on gunfire. Even though everyone had used a silencer, it didn’t mean Alfonso didn’t know something had happened outside. He needed to get to that motel room.

“I’m twenty paces behind you,” Tegan said.

“Both men in the SUV are down,” Jane said. “I’ve disarmed them. One is unconscious. Weak pulse. The other one is dead.”

Brayden made it to the back of the vehicle where Jane stood, holding her arm. “Let me look at that.”

“It’s fine. Just hurts like a motherfucker.”

“We need to stop the bleeding,” Brayden said calmly.

“What we need is to get into that room and I can’t be dripping red like this.”

“Are you a righty or lefty?” Brayden asked.

Jane smiled. “I can shoot both ways.” She pulled her pistol from her apron.

“He’s not going to come out first. He’ll have a human shield and it’s not going to be Geno or Jimmy.” Brayden ignored his pounding pulse. “Whatever you do, don’t miss.”

“What are you going to do?” Jane asked.

“Piss him the fuck off.”

“Brayden, don’t do it,” Tegan’s voice echoed in his ear. “Ethan, are you listening to this?”

“I’m sorry, there’s static on my end,” Ethan said. “Talon, did you make any of that?”

“Don’t fucking bother,” Tegan muttered. “Do not shoot to kill, Jane. You hear me.”

Brayden arched a brow.

Jane shrugged. “Boss, I’ll do what the situation calls for.”

“Thanks.” He squeezed her good arm. Squaring his shoulders, he marched up to the front door and pounded on the wood. Whatever happened, at least he knew he did everything in his power to save Madison and her sister.

* * *

A LOUD KNOCK at the door startled Madison. She glanced at Hilary, whose eyes went wide.

“Who the fuck is that?” Alfonso glared at Geno.

“I have no idea,” Geno said.

“Make them go away.” Alfonso waved his gun in the air.

Geno inched closer to the front of the room. “Who’s there?”

“Your worst fucking nightmare. Now open the damned door before I knock it down,” Brayden’s voice barreled through the room and landed on her ears like the sun hitting her face after days of rain.

But just because he was there, it didn’t mean this horror show was over.

Jimmy inched closer, standing in front of them as if he were shielding them from what was about to happen next.

“We’re not expecting anyone. Now get out of here,” Alfonso said.

“You’ve got to the count of three and if you fail to open the door, it’s coming down,” Brayden said.

Madison worked her restraints free and started working on Hilary’s. Her hands were tied a lot tighter.

“Who is this guy?” Alfonso asked.

Geno glanced over his shoulder. “I don’t know. Jimmy, any ideas?”

Madison held her breath, holding her hands very still.

“I took care of the guys at the diner. That voice isn’t familiar to me.” Jimmy shrugged. “We weren’t followed. You know that.”

“We’re calling the police,” Geno said. “You better leave.”

“Call them. I don’t give a fuck,” Brayden said.

Bang!

Jimmy dove on top of Madison and Hilary.

Madison groaned.

Bang!

Madison kicked and twisted her body, trying to free herself to undo her gag and see what was happening. If Brayden had gotten shot, she’d never forgive herself.

“You motherfucker. You’ve messed with the wrong asshole,” Brayden said. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“You blew out my knee,” Geno cried out.

“No, I didn’t,” Brayden said. “She did.”

Jimmy shifted his weight. “You girls okay?” Gently, he untied the gag from Hilary and then Madison.

Hilary dropped into his arms, sobbing.

“Shhh, now. It’s over, sweetheart. You’re safe now.” Jimmy glanced at Madison. “Thank you.”

Hilary lifted her head. “I’m so sorry, Madison. I have so much to—”

Madison leaned in and kissed her sister’s cheek. “You did what you had to, but if you ever lie to me again, I won’t make you cookies.”

“That’s just mean.” Hilary smiled.

“Get those cuffs off me,” Alfonso yelled. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

Pushing to a standing position, Madison made eye contact with Brayden.

Her heart swelled in her chest. It had been a long time since a man meant something in her life. She didn't know where things with Brayden would go. If it could be the kind of relationship that could lead to love and give her the forever man she so desperately wanted. The odds were stacked against them.

He had a pain deep in his soul that still needed time to heal.

So did she.

He stepped over an injured Geno and made his way across the room. He cupped her cheeks. "Did they hurt you?"

"No. I'm fine."

"I should have never let you drive off alone."

She rested her hands on his hips. "My sister needed me. I had to do it and you were right behind me anyway."

"I couldn't have survived losing you." He closed his eyes for a moment. "That's crazy. I don't have you."

"In this moment, you do." She raised up on tiptoe and pressed her mouth against his soft, warm lips. His kiss had become her safe place. It was where she wanted to be when she felt lost and alone.

He had become home.

"Um, excuse me. Who is this man and why are you kissing him?" Hilary asked, poking her arm.

"I think it might be safe to say I'm the new boyfriend, Brayden." He held out his hand. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner, but it's nice to meet you and I've heard a lot about you."

"Well, I find myself at a major disadvantage and I don't like that." Hilary leaned into Jimmy.

"I hate to break up this party, but Jimmy has reports and debriefing to deal with. Hilary and Madison need to go to the hospital and get checked out. Not to mention they need to give official statements," Tegan said.

"This is going to be a shit show, isn't it?" Madison stared into Brayden's eyes.

"It's a process. It will be easier for you than it will be for your sister. But don't worry. You're both in good hands with Tegan. After they check you out, you'll be transported back to DC."

"Can you come with me?"

"I can't be with you while you make your statement. I'll have to file my own paperwork here, and then Tegan will need me to also make a statement. Don't worry. I'll see you shortly." He kissed her forehead. "I hope I wasn't

out of line with that boyfriend comment. I have to be honest, I'm terrified about the whole thing. But I'm more scared about not trying."

"I feel the same way." She pressed her hand in the center of his chest. "I want to see what happens next."

"Brayden, I need her to come with me," Tegan said.

"She's coming." He brushed his lips over hers in a tender, sweet kiss. "I'll see you soon."

Madison stepped out of the motel room. Police cars and two ambulances filled the parking lot.

Her sister sat in the back of one where a paramedic waved her over.

"Boyfriend? In four days? Are you freaking kidding me?" Hilary said. "And didn't we see him in the diner the day we arrived?"

"We did." Madison nodded.

"Is he a cop or something?"

"Search and rescue," Madison said. "He was at the campgrounds the night you went missing and if it wasn't for him, I would have lost my mind." She looped her arm around Hilary. "Jimmy told me everything, including how much he loves you."

"Yeah, he's something special." Hilary pressed her hand over her stomach. "I'm going to have to tell him something at the hospital that's going to shock him and I'm afraid to tell you."

Madison glanced between Hilary's eyes and her stomach. "Oh my God. Seriously? You're pregnant? And it's Jimmy's?"

"Yes, and yes." Hilary smiled. "I know how hard—"

"Nonsense. If you're happy about this, then so am I."

"I've never been so thrilled about something in all my life. Jimmy is amazing and I love him so much it hurts."

Madison shifted her gaze. Brayden smiled and waved. "Do you want to hear the craziest thing in the world?"

"Sure."

"I told Brayden all about Charles and the accident and he didn't once start telling me all about my options and it didn't scare him off. He actually sees me as a whole woman."

"Sounds like he's a keeper."

"You're going to move to DC to be with Jimmy," Madison said.

"We've already talked about it."

With that piece of knowledge, there wasn't anything keeping Madison in

Pennsylvania. Her job sucked and what she really wanted to do was open a fitness center. All she needed to do was find the funding. Maybe she could take out a loan and maybe she could do all that in Fallport.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three Months Later...

BRAYDEN STOOD at one of the lookouts on the trail where he'd spread the last of Sarah's ashes shortly after he'd met Madison. So much had happened in a short period of time it made his head spin, but he felt so alive.

He sat down on his favorite rock and stared out at the view. Tears burned his eyes. He'd come to this spot at least twice a week for the last three months. Visiting Sarah allowed him to keep one foot in the past. To hold on to his old life. However, it was time to fully embrace the new life he'd created in Fallport.

He knew he'd always miss his Sarah. The love they shared didn't come around often. Many people never found it and he considered himself lucky to have found it once.

Falling in love again seemed surreal.

But he had to let go of the past in order to be all in with the future and he wanted to build a life with Madison.

"I know it's only been a few days since we talked."

It never felt strange to chat with a dead woman. He'd been doing it for over a year and figured he'd do it for the rest of his life. However, it wouldn't be as often anymore.

"Things with Madison are serious and it's time for me to make a real commitment. I know I've said this before, but you'd like her, although the two of you are so different. Madison likes to work out. She actually makes

me look like a slacker. She's in the gym every morning for a good two hours. She will wake up before I do. She likes to hike, run, and do all the things you'd roll your eyes at me over. But the one thing you have in common is exploring unique and different places. And food. God, she loves to eat."

He swiped at his cheeks.

"This long-distance thing is hard and I don't want to do it anymore. Madison and I hiked up here this weekend. She told how much she loves the view here and how she bets you love it too. She's always thinking about others that way. She doesn't want me to ever forget you and it makes me love her even more. I hope you can understand that. I want to make Fallport my home. With Madison. That is if she'll have me. I really like my job with the search and rescue team. It's different, but that's good."

He stood. "I love you, Sarah. I have since the day I met you and I will until the day I die. Madison taught me that loving her doesn't mean that I ever have to stop loving you. That there is room in my heart and soul for both of you. I'll see you soon."

He pulled out his water bottle from his backpack and took a swig.

The sound of boots hitting the dry dirt caught his attention. He turned. "Hey you." He smiled. "You made good time."

"Do you need a little more space? Because I can run down to the ridge and run back up." Madison took her bandana and wiped the sweat from her brow. She wore a pair of black spandex shorts and a black and white sports bra.

That was it.

Mentally, he groaned.

"No. I'm done. But has anyone ever told you that you're a freak of nature?"

"Yeah. My boyfriend every time we go to the gym."

"Speaking of that." He took her into his arms and planted a kiss on her lips.

"Stop that. I'm all gross and sweaty."

"I can think of one way to make you perspire and it's definitely not gross."

She slapped his shoulder. "Do you ever think of anything other than sex?"

"I do." He took her hand and walked her over to the big rock he'd been sitting on. It seemed like the perfect spot to bring this topic up. "I wanted to talk to you about something important."

“What’s that?”

“I think you should move to Fallport as soon as possible. Specifically, I want you living with me.”

She arched a brow. “We’ve talked about this.” She pressed her finger to his mouth. “I can’t move until I find a job and so far, that’s been impossible.”

“You’ve always wanted to open your own gym, why don’t—”

“I got turned down for a loan.”

“I know that,” he said. “But there’s something you don’t know about me.”

“Now you’re scaring me.”

He chuckled. “It’s not some weird deep dark secret.” He kissed the back of her hand. “When Sarah died, I took the drunk driver to court for wrongful death and won. I did it because his sentence was so light and I was angry. Anyway, I tried to give the money to her family, but they won’t take it. People who know about the money tell me I need to invest it. However, I’d rather put it into something—someone—I believe in.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I can’t take your money.”

“I’m not asking you to. I want to be your partner. You see how much free time I have with my job. I’m going to go crazy if I don’t have something else I can do during my downtime. I could be beneficial to you. I wouldn’t be a silent partner. I wouldn’t just be putting up the money. We’d be working together to create something great.”

“You want to live and work together?”

“And maybe someday, when the time is right, have a family.”

* * *

MADISON SWALLOWED HER BREATH. “What did you just say?”

Brayden took her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Do you love me?”

“That’s not the point,” she said.

“I love you and I know that having a family is important to you. It’s something that with you has become something I want.”

She jumped to her feet and paced. This was everything she could have ever wanted.

A man who loved her for exactly who she was—flaws and all.

The opportunity to have her dream career come true.

And a family. On her own terms. But fear still lingered in her heart.

“Madison, what’s going on in that pretty little head of yours?”

“I’ve barely processed moving in with you and maybe becoming your business partner and you throw at me marriage and kids.”

“I didn’t mean to toss it at you. I had a plan, but I botched it as usual.” He raked a hand across the top of his head. “I love you and I want us to be together.”

“I love you too.” She paused and caught his gaze. “Adoption or surrogacy?”

“What do you want?”

“Nope. I asked you your preference first.” She folded her arms. “It’s important for me to know.”

“All right. I’d rather adopt.”

“Baby or older child?” Her heart hammered in her throat. Not that his answer mattered. But she was curious.

“I wouldn’t be opposed to either. I have a friend who adopted a ten-year-old and a three-year-old. It worked out great for them. I think the only thing is that we both have to be on board in whatever we choose.”

How the hell did she get so lucky to find someone as special as Brayden? It almost didn’t seem fair that they both had to have such heartache to be together.

She flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his strong body. “I’ll see about subleasing my apartment as soon as we get back to your place and I’ll quit my job on Monday.”

“I have a ring in my backpack. Shall I get it out?”

“That has to be the most pathetic proposal I’ve ever heard. Even Jimmy did better than that.”

“Hang on a second.” He fumbled around in his pack and found the box. He held it open. A shiny diamond sparkled in the sunlight. “Does, will you marry me, work?”

“Yes, and yes.” And in the blink of an eye, Madison found her forever man.

EPILOGUE

THIRTEEN YEARS LATER...

Brayden sat between his wife and daughter in the auditorium. They had gone through approximately half of the high school graduation ceremony. Now it was time for the graduating class president's remarks. He leaned closer to Madison. "I can't believe our son is giving this speech. He has a tendency to be slightly sarcastic and inappropriate when he should be serious."

"I wonder where he gets that from." Madison arched a brow.

"I take offense to that." Brayden laughed.

"Did he practice with you? Because he wouldn't even hint anything about it and that's not like him. He always worked on big projects like this with me."

"Nothing. Not one freaking word." He looped his arm around the back of Audrey, his sixteen-year-old daughter's chair. "What about you? Did Tyler say anything to you?"

"If he did, I wouldn't breathe a word to the two of you." Audrey leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Shhh, it's time."

Fourteen years ago, Brayden thought his life was over. He never thought he'd love again, much less have a family. Now his life was so full, he busted at the seams with pride.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Tyler Gibson," the principal said.

Brayden jumped to his feet and clapped like there was no tomorrow. "That's my boy."

"Dad. Sit down. You're so embarrassing," Audrey mumbled.

"Wait until you graduate," Madison said. "He's going to bawl like a baby."

"I will not." He puffed out his chest.

“Trust me, Mom. He’s going to do that in a few minutes.” Audrey took his hand and squeezed. “You should have taken that wad of tissues I handed you before we left home.”

“Your brother wouldn’t give a serious speech. That’s for the smart guy, not the wiseass who spent four years getting B’s with C’s and one or two A’s tossed in so I’d buy him a car.” Brayden settled into his seat and stared at his son. He couldn’t be prouder of the young man he’d become. When he’d first met Tyler, he’d been a scared six-year-old little boy who had just lost his parents. He didn’t understand why and he felt alone in the world. Trust for him didn’t come easily and he constantly worried that one day he’d wake up and Madison and Brayden would be gone too. There had been so many other obstacles, but they had overcome them—as a family.

“Normally, the class president spends a few minutes recapping the year. And I’m sure you’re all expecting me to tell a few jokes, pick on a few teachers, and generally make you laugh. However, the end of our senior year has been marred by tragedy,” Tyler said.

Brayden hugged his daughter closer, remembering the day that he thought he’d lost his children. It had brought back so many raw emotions that still lingered on the surface.

“Two months ago, an active shooter came into our school and changed our lives forever.” Behind Tyler, the screen filled with images from that fateful day.

Brayden took his wife’s hand. Those moments had been some of the most difficult times in their lives. The dinner table had been filled with discussions of the past. As a family, they always kept their hearts and minds open to the things that brought them together. Unfortunately for them, that had been trauma. But that also made their bond stronger.

Tyler turned and faced the screen. An image of Brayden and his team appeared. “My father is part of the search and rescue here at Fallport and thanks to him, his team, and the rest of the first responders, the situation was handled as swiftly as possible. While seventeen people were injured that day, no lives were lost thanks to the bravery of these men and women as well as our staff and fellow students.”

The auditorium erupted in cheer.

Brayden rubbed his shoulder where he’d taken a bullet when he stepped in front of a student.

His wife glanced at him with tears in her eyes and Audrey rested her head

on that very shoulder.

Tyler waved his hands, calming the crowd. “I want to talk to you today about how tragedy shapes our lives.”

“Does anyone have tissues?” Brayden whispered. “I can’t believe he’s making this his speech.” He sucked in a deep breath. He should have known. Tyler had been affected deeply by what happened. His best friend had been shot right in front of him and spent eight days in intensive care. They weren’t sure he was going to make it. Tyler’s past trauma of losing his parents had resurfaced and his fears of losing those he loved manifested in generalized anxiety. He pushed through it with the help of a good counselor, but it had been a rocky road.

“Twelve years ago, mine and my sister’s biological parents were killed by a drunk driver.” The image on the screen changed to the tragic accident that changed Tyler’s and Audrey’s lives forever.

Brayden swallowed. He remembered the first time he’d seen those images. His heart broke for the two kids who lost their parents. He hadn’t even met Tyler and Audrey yet when he went to Madison and begged her if they could go to the adoption agency and ask to be introduced. He’d already made up his mind and it only took half a second for Madison to make up hers. She’d walked into that visitor’s room where Tyler and Audrey were playing, took one look at them, and her heart melted. They filed the paperwork the next day.

“For three weeks we stayed in foster care until two people—Brayden and Madison Gibson—came to visit.” On the screen was a flash of images of them together on the first day they met.

Brayden did his best to keep his sobs to himself. Then the screen changed to Sarah’s horrific accident.

Brayden held Madison’s hand so tight he feared he might break it.

“My adoptive father is no stranger to tragedy. He lost his first wife to a drunk driving accident. The same way my biological parents died. It’s one of the reasons he felt so strongly about adopting us.” Once again, the screen changed, but this time it was Madison’s accident.

Madison dropped her head to his shoulder and sniffled. “I didn’t think I could love him any more, but I do.”

Brayden understood the thought because he knew exactly where this speech was going.

“About the same time my father lost his first love, my mother was robbed

of her ability to have children of her own. A year later, the two met right here in this town in a strange, but oddly romantic way. When they heard about mine and my sister's story, they had to meet us. Now, most couples want a baby. They don't want a six- and four-year-old with a lot of baggage. But our parents saw two kids who needed the kind of love that they had to offer. The kind of love that we all understood. My parents have never asked me to forget where I came from and while I call them Mom and Dad, because that's who they are, I also have another set of parents. Just like my dad had a first wife whom he loved and he shares her with us. And my mom, she might have never been able to have children, but we're hers because she opened her heart to two little kids who needed someone who would love them no matter what past they brought with them." The screen behind Tyler flashed through their family history. Their first Christmas together. Learning to snowboard. Making family dinners. Hiking. Visiting Sarah's spot. A trip to where Tyler and Audrey were born. It was all there. Nothing was left out.

"My message to you today is that life is filled with tragedy. We can't escape it, but we can put the past in perspective, live in the present, and carve out a future by opening our hearts and our minds to opportunity. When tragedy strikes, don't let it take you and change you. Make the decision to change course and live." Tyler wiped his cheeks. "I learned that from my parents, who are here today because they were brave enough to risk their hearts. It's our turn to go out and make the most of what this world has to offer. I for one will not let the past define me, nor will I let fear rule me. And I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my parents for loving me and to tell them—because I don't do it enough—I love you too."

Brayden lifted his hand and put his forefinger and thumb into his mouth and whistled. It was either that or cry like a goddamned baby. "When you kids get married, I'm getting you back."

Audrey wrapped her arms around Brayden. "Impossible, because we're dancing to 'What a Wonderful World.'"

*

Thank you for taking the time to read *Searching for Madison*. Please feel free to leave an honest review. If you haven't checked out the Air Force Fire Protection Series I highly recommend it. The first book in the series is: ***Burning Desire***. It's the first book I ever wrote in this world.

Sign up for my *Newsletter* (<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/82gm8b9k4y>) where I often give away free books before publication.

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THE NEW ORDER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Talty is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, and Paranormal Romance. In the fall of 2020, her short story was selected and featured in a 1001 Dark Nights Anthology.

Regardless of the genre, her goal is to take you on a ride that will leave you floating under the sun with warmth in your heart. She writes stories about broken heroes and heroines who aren't necessarily looking for romance, but in the end, they find the kind of love books are written about :).

She first started writing while carting her kids to one hockey rink after the other, averaging 170 games per year between 3 kids in 2 countries and 5 states. Her first book, *IN TWO WEEKS* was originally published in 2007. In 2010 she helped form a publishing company (Cool Gus Publishing) with *NY Times* Bestselling Author Bob Mayer where she ran the technical side of the business through 2016.

Jen is currently enjoying the next phase of her life...the empty nester! She and her husband reside in Jupiter, Florida.

Grab a glass of vino, kick back, relax, and let the romance roll in...

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Delta Team Three Series

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Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, [Fighting for Elena](#)

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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

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Eagle Point Search & Rescue

Searching for Lilly

Searching for Elsie

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Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley (Oct 2023)

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

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Deserving Cora (Nov 2023)

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Deserving Maisy (TBA)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

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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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