



SHELTER FOR
SAGE

SAN ANTONIO FIRST RESPONDERS 9



REINA TORRES



SHELTER FOR SAGE
(POLICE AND FIRE:
OPERATION ALPHA)

SAN ANTONIO FIRST RESPONDERS

BOOK NINE

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Dear Readers,

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

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

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

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

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

He was happy to be a brother and an uncle to the growing Station Seven family, but one day changes everything.

Callan “Fish” Bass is a happy guy who loves his life. A lot. Working at Station Seven of the San Antonio Fire Department is the job he’s wanted since he was a little kid. All it took was a school field trip to the local fire station and he was hooked.

He’s seen a few of his fellow firefighters fall in love while he’s been working with them, but he’s just never found a woman who really caught his interest.

Sage Allen feels like she’s failing at everything. She tried to convince her sister to leave her abusive boyfriend, but she was too late.

Now she has custody of her nephew and his father won’t leave them alone. She struggled to prove herself as a sister and fears that she’ll fail as an aunt.

When Callan meets Sage and her nephew, he’s amazed at the strain the young family is struggling under and he wants to help them in anyway that he can.

He’s surprised how easily they fit into his life and when it comes right down to it, he finds himself in love with his ready made family. He’ll do anything to protect them and provide a loving Shelter for Sage.

CHAPTER ONE

“Aunty Sage?”

Sage Allen paused at the back of her not-so-new car and put a smile on her face before she turned around to look at her nephew.

“Hey, champ. What’s up?”

Standing at the railing of the motel, Milo looked like he was just waking up. His eyes were half asleep and he only had socks on his feet. As he rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes, he yawned.

“I woke up and you weren’t there.”

There was a hitch in his voice and Sage dropped the duffle bag that she’d had in her hands and rushed up the couple of steps to the landing where he was standing.

She picked him up into her arms and he wrapped his arms and legs around her as she walked right into the motel room, fighting off tears.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I’m so sorry.”

He clung to her tightly, almost squeezing the air right out of her lungs. “I thought you’d left.”

“No. No.” She kept one arm wrapped around him and her other hand rubbed up and down his back. “I’m right here.”

“So was mommy.”

Oh god.

A picture of her sister flashed in her head and the image was so clear and bright that it felt like she was right there.

Close enough to touch.

But no.

Her sister was dead.

And Sage had custody of her son.

Her own nephew.

“I...” He gasped in a breath. “I miss my mommy.”

If she didn't have him held tightly against her, she might have thought someone had punched her in the gut.

A sucker punch, just like the kind Milo's father used to give to his mother.

As she rocked her nephew and murmured what she could only hope would be comforting words, she couldn't help but feel hopelessly inadequate for the job she had before her.

How was she going to raise Milo?

She was barely an adult herself. Twenty-four years old meant that she could buy drinks, vote, and almost be old enough to rent a car, but be an insta-parent to a boy who'd known so little love and so much pain and fear?

‘I suck so much.’ She grumbled inside her head. ‘I'm not ready for something like this. I'm not good enough to take care of Milo the way Kait would have.’

Milo's arms squeezed tightly around her throat. “Promise me, Aunty! Promise me that you won't leave me like mommy did!”

“I promise.” Inside she winced. She said the words in a desperate attempt to calm him.

It wasn't that she didn't mean the promise. She'd do what she had to to be there for him, but she couldn't control the child welfare office.

What if they figured out that she was hopeless as a stand-in mom?

What if they decided to put him with his father and roll the dice like they were drunk on free booze at a casino?

They could screw up, too.

They'd taken over a week to decide that they were going to give her a chance to take care of Milo.

She barely had any nails left after biting through them while they were making up their minds.

And then-

“Hey. Lady!”

She didn't recognize the voice at first, but when she looked out the door, she recognized him.

He'd been in the office when she'd checked in. He was in the back room that looked like the manager's living quarters.

Startled, Sage put a hand on the back of Milo's head and turned his face into her neck.

She didn't want anyone to see Milo's face if she could help it.

Gossip rag reporters had already plastered his face on a few websites and newspapers, labeling him as the “Terrified Tot” because he was found crying beside his mother's...

“Lady, are you listening to me?”

She almost hugged him for jogging her out of her thoughts. She tried to fix a smile on her face. “Sorry, sir. Looks like we're both having a difficult morning.”

He didn't smile back.

In fact, he looked like he was anything but sympathetic to her.

“Yeah, well, we all have our problems, right?”

Okay?

“Are you planning to check out today?”

She looked out at the car she was packing out front. “I was packing the car when my... Uh... When someone needed

hugs.”

His face was stony for a moment, and then one corner of his upper lip lifted in a grimace. “I need you out of the room so I can get the maid to clean it.”

“Yeah, sure.” She wanted to shake her head at him. The sign in the motel lobby said that check out wasn’t for a few hours. Why was he pushing the issue? “We’ll be leaving soon.”

The man shrugged and his torn t-shirt stretched across his shoulders. “My mom’d like you to check out as soon as you can. We’ve got a guy up front at the office that wants a room.”

“Yeah. Sure. I just need to get... I need to get things settled before we can leave.”

She gave him a look, waiting for him to leave so she could do just that.

He didn’t move.

“What’s your boy’s name?”

She froze, her hands clutching at her nephew as if someone might try to pull him from her arms.

“I said, ‘What’s his name?’”

Something twisted in her belly, throwing her off balance.

“I’d really appreciate it if you could go and let us pack up.”

He took a step closer and a chill rushed over her. “Why don’t you just tell me? It’s just a name.”

“Just a name...” she repeated his words, but she couldn’t escape the feeling that it was anything but simple. “Tim. My son’s name is Tim.”

She felt Milo tense in her arms.

Sage gave him a gentle pat on his back and a, “Shhh.”

“Tim, huh?”

He shrugged and started to walk away, shaking his head.

Sage let out the breath that she'd been holding and started to set Milo down when the manager's son turned the corner. "The guy up front said the boy's name was Milo."

Sage felt like a cold bucket of water had been tossed in her face.

Someone drove up looking for Milo?

Oh god, it had to be Richie.

Milo's dad.

Sage turned in a quick circle, looking at the room. She kept most of their things in bags, but given the places they'd been staying, she didn't leave the bags in the car.

Thieves looked for easy things to steal. And they couldn't afford to lose much.

In her head, she quickly plotted out how far their room was from the front office.

Oh, shit.

"Milo? Sweetie? How about we play a game?"

Milo shifted against her and leaned back to look into her eyes.

"What game?"

Sage felt horrible inside, but making this into a game would help to make it easier on Milo. "Let's play... who can get into the car the fastest?"

His eyes lit up.

"Oh boy! Let's do it!"

She cringed when he almost shouted his answer. "Great, but let's be as quiet as we can, okay?"

"Okay," he whispered. "Let's do it!"

She set him on the ground and they both crouched down like runners. and she raised her hand up in the air and said "POW" as softly as she could.

They were off.

Luckily she already had the second seat passenger door open, so Milo took the handful of steps necessary to get to the car and then he started clambering up.

She grabbed one of their two bags, needing to lift the handles with both hands. It wasn't all that big of a duffle bag but it was heavy.

She moved down the steps and lost her balance, her heel scraping along the edge of the curb.

It burned, but she couldn't stop.

Sage moved to the back of the fading Equinox and with both arms, chucked the duffle on top of the things they already had in the back.

"Look, Auntie Sage!" Milo was stage-whispering from the seat. "I'm in my seat!" She could see his hands waving over the back of the seat.

"Buckled in?"

"Yes, Auntie Sage." She could hear him roll his eyes.

"Good, I-"

She stopped short when she heard a man yelling from around the corner.

"Milo? Milo!"

Dread settled in her heart.

Richie.

He was here.

She cast a look at the open door to their room and saw their other duffle bag sitting on the bed closest to the door.

Her instinct was to grab it and run for the car, but Richie sounded so close!

Sage looked over the back seat of the car and saw Milo's face.

He was smiling and lifted a hand to wave at her.

The most important thing was keeping Richie from getting his hands on Milo.

Blinking back tears, she closed the back door of the Equinox and climbed into the driver's seat.

“Okay, buddy. Here we go!”

She had the car on and turned around in a heartbeat.

“Wheee!” Milo raised his arms into the air. “We’re going fast!”

“Yeah, buddy. We’re going fast!”

Just as the front wheels dipped and lurched onto the road, she saw Richie turn around the corner of the motel.

He started to run full speed then.

And as she drove, she reached out and turned on the volume of the radio more than halfway to full.

She didn’t want Milo to hear the screams from behind them. He didn’t need to worry.

Sage stepped on the gas as she approached the intersection, but the light was already yellow.

At the last minute, she stomped on the brake to stop before the light.

“Sorry, buddy.”

His voice was a little shaky. “It’s okay, Aunty. It was a mistake.”

“Yeah,” she looked in the rear-view mirror at the street behind them. “I just realized that I couldn’t make the light.”

Her heart kicked against her ribs when she saw Richie’s sports car lurch out of the motel parking lot. She swore she could hear the car bottoming out on the concrete beneath it.

The light in front of her changed and she sent up a prayer that the turnover on the signals was so quick. With her heart climbing up into her throat, she pushed on the gas pedal and headed for the highway.

There was more room there to maneuver, not that she was a stunt car driver.

An opening in the lanes allowed her to scoot over and from the backseat she heard Milo cheering. “Whoohoo!”

Oh god.

She heard a squeal of tires and looked back into the rear-view mirror.

The sports car wove its way between two eighteen wheelers, almost close enough to peel the paint off of the ridiculously expensive car.

Sage pushed down the gas pedal and moved her car faster, but she knew she was pushing it.

The Chevy Equinox had over a hundred-thousand miles on it when she bought it, but it was roomy and she needed that for their things.

Wincing, she hoped that she could return to the motel and that they’d held onto the other bag.

They were both the same size and color, so she wouldn’t know which bag she had taken with them until she opened it.

An SUV in the left lane moved over without any flashing lights, nearly colliding with her.

Sage gripped the wheel and felt a twinge in her knuckles as she swerved and tried to keep it in the lane.

“Aunty Sage?”

She could hear a thin layer of fear in his voice.

They were on the highway, but it didn’t feel like the better decision.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’ll be fine, okay?”

“Are you sure?” His voice was pitched a little higher than normal and she didn’t blame him one bit. She was afraid, too.

“We’ll get through this together.”

He nodded, but his voice was shaking. “Okay, Aunty Sage.”

She managed a smile for him. “That’s because you’re my big, strong b-Uh!”

“Aunty?”

His voice was shrill.

Hers would have been too if she wasn’t about to swallow her tongue.

The sports car was right behind them and a moment later, he slammed into their back bumper again.

Milo sobbed and she wanted to join him, but she had to keep her thoughts on the moment at hand.

“Is that daddy?”

God, what would she answer him?

“Baby, I-”

A space opened up at the top of the off-ramp and, with only a split second to make the decision, she changed lanes.

By the time they made it to the bottom of the off-ramp, she had the beginnings of a terrible stress headache and was nearing a full-blown panic attack.

She kept hearing her sister’s pained and weakened voice in her head. *“Don’t... don’t let him take my son away. Don’t let him do it.”*

Coming down the ramp behind them, dodging in and out of the traffic, was Richie’s sports car. It made it easy that he’d added those thick black racing stripes on the top of the car. She had no idea what kind of car it was, company or model, just the overall bright yellow color and those two fat stripes climbing over the car from hood to backside.

They were never going to outrun him.

Unless something drastic or ridiculously lucky happened.

The light ahead was green, but a quick look at the crosswalk light said it was going to turn yellow in a second or two and that’s when she stomped on the gas.

They shot into the intersection and Sage put everything she had into turning the Equinox into the cross street. The vehicle felt sluggish, but she didn't have to keep it up for long.

Moments later, they were almost in the clear.

Almost.

And then they weren't.

They were rocketed sideways.

Lifting off of the ground.

Flipping over.

And over.

And...

* * *

THEY'D BEEN on the go since they'd clocked in at Station Seven. The groceries that Callan Bass had picked up to make some dessert for the shift went straight into the refrigerator, bag and all, as the first alarm sounded in the station.

“Station Seven - Car Fire White Oak Boulevard & Claussen Street.”

That wasn't bad. The family was safely out of the car long before the flames had heated the metal to the point that the glass windshield popped and cracked.

No real danger there, thank goodness.

“Station Seven - Possible heart attack at Mom's Market on Eighth.”

The firetruck beat the ambulance to the location as the EMTs had just dropped off a patient at Sagebrush Hospital. While Rook and Caddo had taken care of the older man who'd collapsed on the floor, Fish sat with the man's wife and held her hand.

He kept her mind focused on happier thoughts, like their grandkids who were coming for a visit in a week.

As they left the grocery store, Cowboy stepped up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Good work in there, Fish.”

Callan shrugged, but he smiled at his Lieutenant. “Thanks. I didn’t do much, but thanks.”

Cowboy shook his head and pushed his SAFD ball cap back off his forehead. “You kept his wife calm while we got her husband stable and loaded for transport. And what you did helped the patient too.”

Callan drew back a little, his eyes narrowing on Cowboy’s face.

For a moment, he wondered if he was making a joke as he usually ended up on the receiving end of a lot of jokes, but there was an earnestness in Cowboy’s gaze that said he was telling the truth.

Chief Blaise stepped up and gave him a nod. “Heard you did good in there, Fish.”

His cheeks heating up a bit, Callan reached up a hand to rub the back of his neck. “Glad to hear it from you too, Chief. I was happy to do what I could.”

Someone called out to Cowboy, and he jogged off toward the entrance of the store.

Looking back at the Chief, Callan gave the older man a cheerful grin. “It means a lot coming from you, Chief.”

It was the chief’s turn to look a little awkward in light of the praise. “I take pride in my firefighters. All of you are the best of men and women. You put yourselves on the line every day and I’ve never had cause to feel like any one of you would shirk your duties.” The chief put his hand on Callan’s shoulder. “Today, your ability to help people shed some of their fear and anxiety... to take a breath and relax, came in handy. I hope you know how much you’re appreciated.”

Callan felt a knot in his chest and cleared his throat, trying to dislodge it.

It didn't quite work, so he gave his chest a thump with his fist, but that didn't work either.

He saw the concern in the chief's eyes, but before the man could say anything, Abe honked on the horn of their ladder truck and shouted out the window. "Come on! Accident on the highway!"

Everyone took off at a sprint with Cowboy circling his hand over his head. "Let's go! Mount up!"

CHAPTER TWO

There was something about a traffic accident that reminded Callan of his days playing football. A football field was a kind of controlled chaos.

Everyone on his team knew what they were supposed to do. They'd planned and practiced in the academy and even after they'd become full-fledged firefighters, they still practiced at the station.

They knew their roles.

Their *plays*.

What they couldn't anticipate with any surety was how the other team was going to counter those moves.

Sometimes, the other team didn't do anything they expected. They went nuts and started playing volleyball or lacrosse.

So their team had to be really, really good at what they did so that no matter what the other team threw at them, they would be ready to work around it.

Or through it.

And as they piled out of the ladder truck at the scene of the accident, Callan knew that the other team wasn't even playing a game.

It was playing for real.

Callan and Abe moved to the side of the truck and opened up the storage compartment. Inside was an assortment of tools

that they used from time to time, a set of hydraulic tools better known as the ‘Jaws of Life.’

Cheesy name?

Sure.

But they damn sure worked.

Abe picked up the spreader and carried his axe. Callan picked up the ram in one hand and slung the cutter over his shoulder so he could bring his Halligan along. He could carry more, but it looked like the equipment that they picked up was enough to extricate from the Equinox.

They got to the accident in seconds and turned to look at their lieutenant, Noah “Cowboy” Sadler. He was just as at home on a horse as he was repelling from the roof of a building and he was rock solid on scene for emergencies.

Cowboy was on his hands and knees beside the wrecked car, but he had a smile on his face. “Hey there, buddy. You’re okay, right?”

Shit.

A kid.

Callan dropped to one knee and laid his equipment down. Peering into the car from almost ground level, he saw the little boy strapped into his car seat hanging almost completely upside down. He was biting into the edge of something that looked like a blanket.

The look in his eyes was calling out to Callan.

There was something so haunting about that look that Callan almost climbed in after him.

Almost.

He had to wait for a signal from Cowboy. While he waited for Cowboy to analyze the scene, he gave the little boy a big smile, hoping that the child could see it and understand that he was moments away from safety.

Around the edges of the cloth that the child had stuffed in his mouth, there was the barest hint of a smile.

Callan's heart started to beat, making him aware that it had stopped moments before.

"Rook? Abe?"

"Yes, Lieutenant." The two answered in unison. Their whole squad had done these kinds of things hundreds, if not thousands, of times before.

"Standby."

"Yes, sir."

"Fish?"

"Lieutenant?" Callan kept a smile directed at the boy, but his ears were focused on Cowboy.

"You think you can get in there through the back window and get the boy out?"

"Absolutely." Callan nodded as his hand reached into his pocket for the window punch. "Me and my buddy in there are going to have a real adventure. Right, buddy?"

The boy was smart and listening. He nodded his head, pulling his teeth against that mass of cloth he had in his mouth.

Callan knew he had to hurry. Cowboy was going to extract the driver, and he didn't want the boy in the car while it happened.

Besides the horrifying thought of the child watching as the driver was freed from the car, the noises that the hydraulics would make could send the child into a panic.

That wasn't going to help either victim.

Still, punching a window around a child was always a dangerous situation.

"Hey, buddy? Can you hear me?"

The child nodded, and Callan smiled at him in earnest. The waves of his hair reminded him of his own when he was a kid. "You remind me of me when I was your age. I was always hanging upside down from the branches of pecan trees when I was little."

The cloth pulled from the boy's mouth. "I'm not little."

"No," Callan shook his head, "you're not. You're a big boy, aren't you?"

The boy nodded and then winced.

Callan cringed on the inside. Being upside down for too long wasn't good.

"I need your help to get you out of the car, okay?"

The boy started to nod, but then he stopped and pointed at the driver's seat.

"Help my aunty first!"

"I gotta help you, buddy. The faster I get you out of your seat, the faster my friends can help your aunty."

His bottom lip quivered. "Oh... kay."

"All right. Now I need you to take that blanket and," Callan mimed with his hands, "hold it up over your face."

"Why?"

"It's like magic, buddy. I need you to hold that blanket over your head so I can get rid of the window in one POOF."

The boy didn't look like he was all that excited about the magic trick, but a quick look at the back of the driver's seat changed his mind.

The boy pulled the blanket over his head.

Callan didn't wait at all.

Turning his head from the window, he used the punch in his hand and hit the window in the bottom corner.

With a loud crackle, the window glass rained down like diamonds.

"Okay, buddy. Hold it right there, I'm coming."

A quick look around the window frame said that there weren't any large pieces still stuck in the metal or any jagged pieces that could cut the boy.

"Fish, here!"

He turned his head and Oliver “Rush” Quintero, one of the other firefighters on his shift, handed him a folded tarp.

“Put this down on the door frame.”

Fish nodded his thanks and did exactly that.

The little boy called out. “Can I take this off now, Fish?”

A nervous chuckle came from the group surrounding him. “Just a second, buddy. Hold it there for me, ‘kay?”

“‘kay.”

With a quick tug at the strap of his helmet, Callan pushed it back off of his head and ducked in through the gaping hole where the window had been.

“Hey, buddy, it’s me.”

The boy pulled the blanket down and tried to smile. “Hey, Fish. It’s me, too.”

“That’s great, buddy.” As he was talking, Callan made quick work of the straps on the car seat, turning the boy so that he slid out of the seat and into Callan’s arms.

Callan shook the blanket to get off any pieces of glass that might have been caught in the worn, pilly fabric and then put it over the boy as he backed out of the car.

“Hold on, buddy. I’ve got you.”

The boy sniffled and Callan felt his heart constrict for the child in so many ways.

When Callan felt a pat on his back, he stood up and one of the EMTs reached out for the boy.

“Here, Callan, I’ll take him to get him checked out.”

Before he could do or say anything, the boy made the decision for everyone.

“No!” He gripped on tight to Callan’s bunker gear and if Callan hadn’t had a good, solid hold on the child, he might have fallen when he started to climb the firefighter like a little monkey. “No! I’m staying with Fish!”

Callan walked along with the EMT toward the ambulance. “I got you, buddy. I’m going with you and our friend, the EMT.”

The boy was on Callan’s back, arms wrapping around his neck. “If she’s your friend, why don’t you know her name?”

Yowch.

That burned.

“He knows my name,” the EMT came to his rescue. “He just wanted to see if you were going to tell me your name so I could give you mine.”

Callan let out a breath and mouthed to her. ‘You’re a genius.’

She shrugged and gave the gurney a pat as she stood beside it. “So I’ll go first.” Lifting her hand, she held it out for a shake. “I’m Nicole.”

Callan helped the boy down from his back and keeping his hands on the child’s waist to ease him down onto the gurney.

He smiled as the boy reached out a hand, sans blanket. “I’m Milo.”

“Milo!” Nicole grinned at him. “I love that name. I’m hoping we can be great friends.”

Milo nodded and sat down on the gurney.

It took what felt like moments for Nicole to do all the necessary assessments of the child. It didn’t hurt that she kept a lively conversation, nearly one-sided, as she went over him from head to toe.

It was a good thing because that’s when they heard Cowboy shout.

“Bring the gurney! We’ve got the car open.”

“Aunty?”

Shoot.

Distraction wasn’t going to work then.

Nicole grabbed the rail on the gurney and he plucked Milo up and hugged him close as she ran toward the scene. Her partner, Garrett, met her at the side of the car and that's when Callan turned away from the sight.

He didn't know what condition Milo's aunt was in. He prayed that she was going to be fine, but he didn't want Milo to see until he knew what was happening.

Turning Milo around, Callan almost bumped into Chief Blaise. "Sorry."

The chief held up his hand and shook his head. "No need to be sorry, son. Who's this?"

Callan saw the chief look over his shoulder for a second and knew that he had an ally in keeping Milo's attention and eyes off of his aunt until they knew her condition.

"This," he gave the boy a gentle touch on his chest, "is Milo. Milo, this is Chief Blaise. He's my boss at the firehouse."

Milo turned to look at Callan with wide eyes. "You have a boss?"

"Yes. Actually, the guy who let me go in the car after you is my boss, too. That's Cowboy."

Milo's brow furrowed, and his lips set in a thin line. "Where's his horse?"

Callan didn't have an answer for that.

Chief Blaise saved the moment like the hero he was. "It's a bit hard to carry water on a horse to put out fires. Cowboy rides horses when he's not fighting fires."

Milo took a moment to think and then he nodded, looking thirty years older than he was. "I guess that makes sense."

Something changed in Chief Blaise's face.

Callan had seen that expression before, and he hoped that he saw it a lot in the future.

Relief.

Lifting his chin in the direction of the ambulance, the chief told him silently that it was okay to turn around.

And turn around he did.

Callan turned around and gestured toward the gurney. “Hey, is that your aunt?”

“My... my aunty?”

Milo followed his gesture and clapped his hands together. “Aunty Sage!”

Chief Blaise clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You go with them and stay with the boy.”

Callan turned his head to the side and looked at his chief. “Really? I can go?”

The chief nodded. “You have a good rapport with the boy and Nicole’s going to need to keep her focus on his aunt in the back of the ambo.”

Nodding, Callan tapped a fingertip on the boy’s nose. “You okay if I come with you and your aunt?”

He was already walking in the direction of the ambulance when Milo answered him. “Of course! She’d want to meet my friends. She tells me I have to tell her about my friends.”

Callan smiled at the boy. “That’s a good idea. You must have a really, really smart aunty.”

Milo’s expression sobered and he dropped his gaze from Callan’s face. “Aunty Sage is really, really smart,” he agreed, but spoke so softly that Callan was having a hard time hearing him. “She loves me a lot.”

“Of course!” Callan rubbed his back as they stepped up to the ambulance.

He waited while Nicole and Garrett got the gurney locked into place.

“And I bet she’d want us to make sure that we let your family know you two are going to be okay.”

Garrett gestured for Callan to climb up into the ambulance and Callan grasped the doorway and pulled himself up inside the back of the ambulance.

Garrett shut the door and with Milo secure in his arms, Callan sat down out of the way to give Nicole the room she needed.

He set Milo on his leg and gave the boy what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “So once we get to the hospital and we can find your aunt’s phone, we should give your mommy a call.”

He wasn’t sure exactly what kind of a response he’d get from the boy, but he certainly wasn’t prepared for what happened.

Milo burst into tears.

Callan and Nicole shared a look as the little boy grasped the front of his bunker gear and face planted into the heavy material, sobbing uncontrollably.

Callan could only rub the child’s back and hope that he could soothe him soon.

He had no idea what he’d done wrong, but he was determined to fix it.

CHAPTER THREE

Sage woke up in full panic mode.

The nondescript white sound paneled ceiling above her head looked like it was moving around over her head in twisting movements that made her instantly sick to her stomach.

“Milo?”

She sobbed her nephew’s name and found her throat aching.

“Mi-”

“He’s right here, Sage.”

The voice was soothing and gentle.

“He’s okay?”

She tried to turn her head, but the pain that shot through her neck made her stop.

“He’s sleeping on top of me, or I’d get up so you could see him.”

Shaking her head didn’t work either. The pain she felt at that movement was immediate, and the edges of her vision sparkled like firecrackers.

“We... We crashed.”

“Yeah...”

She heard the hesitation in his voice.

“Your car turned over a few times. They had to pry the door off to get you out.”

“But... but Milo’s okay?”

“Yeah.” She heard a soft laugh in his tone. “My shirt will never be the same, but he’s fine and asleep.”

Sage closed her eyes to ease the pain from the lights in the room.

“Is he drooling on you?”

Another laugh. “Are you speaking from experience?”

“Happily, yes.” Sage grinned, and this time, it didn’t hurt as much as it did a moment ago. “You know I’m Sage,” she let out a breath, “but I don’t know who you are.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

She heard slightly squeaky wheels move in her direction.

“I’m sorry. Hold on a second.”

She felt like her panic was almost completely gone, but not quite.

They’d been on the move for a little under a month and had dodged Milo’s dad for a third time. This time, she was fairly sure that he’d come close enough to hit her car.

She wasn’t sure that he’d intended to do it.

God, she hoped she was wrong.

Still she knew that she’d have to talk to the police soon enough. They’d have questions for her, that’s for sure.

Until then, though, she was almost enjoying the almost quiet of the room.

CLICK

“Wait. That was kind of blurry. One more time.”

CLICK

“Hmm... better. Here.”

She leaned her head to the side, using her pillow to ease the pain.

It was the screen of a cell phone. And in the image on the screen was a blissfully sleeping Milo.

And yes, his head was pillowed on a blue t-shirt marked by a pool of darkened, drool soaked t-shirt.

She laughed.

Okay, well, she almost laughed.

The pain in her head made it a little difficult.

“Don’t laugh yet,” he cautioned. “I haven’t shown you the worst of it.”

She furrowed her brow and that hurt, too. “What does that mean?”

The phone dropped down out of her sight and she heard another CLICK.

“Nope. that looks hideous.”

“Hideous?” She felt her heart kick up faster in her chest. “What’s wrong with Milo?”

“Oh sorry,” his apology certainly sounded genuine. “I’m talking about me. I’m horrible at this selfie thing.”

CLICK

Sage heard him hiss through his teeth.

“Well, it’s not Picasso, but it’ll have to do.”

Picasso?

Sage relaxed into her bedding. She really needed more medication.

“Here you go.”

The phone appeared again, almost in the same place along the side of the bed.

“Oh.”

She stared at the photo and felt her heart pound again, but this time it wasn't from worry or fear.

The photo was almost the same as it had been a few moments before, but this time it was a wider view that showed Milo's zonked out face and the face of the man who he was drooling on.

And what a face it was.

His smile was easy and told her that he was used to smiling. And the lines by his eyes said that he laughed a lot too.

He was exactly the type of guy that she'd have no trouble drooling over awake and asleep.

"My name is Callan, Sage. The guys at the firehouse call me Fish."

"Fish?" She was starting to wonder if she was dreaming all of this. "Like the guy on Barney Miller?"

There was a long moment of pause before she heard his voice again. "Fish, yes, but no, not like Abe Vigoda on Barney Miller."

Smiling, she closed her eyes to ease the ache in her head.

When he spoke again, she heard the laughter in his tone. "How do you know about Barney Miller?"

She tried to focus, but her head was pounding.

A soft knock at the door turned her head... figuratively.

"Looks like you're awake, Miss Allen. May I come in?"

"Uh-"

"It's the doctor who's been checking in on you off and on since you got here."

"Oh, thank you." She relaxed again. "Come in, doctor."

Moments later, someone was standing beside her bed wearing scrubs, a white coat, and a stethoscope. It eased some of her worry that he was smiling.

“Glad to see you’re awake, Miss Allen. I was beginning to be a little worried, but since you’re up and alert, I’m going to have to accept that your friend here should get himself on a plane to Las Vegas.”

Before she had to ask what he meant, the doctor explained. “He had a feeling that you’d be up before the shift change. And he was right, I was coming around on my final rounds and here you are.

“If you’re okay with it, I’d like to sit you up and test your eyes and ask you a few questions to make sure you’re doing all right. If everything checks out. We’ll be able to send you home in the morning.”

She tried to keep her immediate reaction from the doctor. She had to deal with the punches that kept coming. Her car was destroyed.

That, she knew based on the vague explanation that Fish had given her. She didn’t know a lot about firefighters at accident scenes, but knew that they’d had to do some damage to her car to get her out.

That meant that it was already damaged before they’d touched it.

What was she going to do in the morning?

She shoved the question aside for the moment as the doctor raised the head of her bed.

The soft, whining sound of the mechanism made her clench her teeth together to stop the aching in her head.

“If you’d like, I can prescribe some pain medicine for your headache. It should help you with your other injuries.”

“Other injuries?” She swallowed and coughed immediately. Her ribs ached and the sudden spasm of muscles in her side made her sob. “I... I’m sorry.”

The doctor stopped the movement of the bed. “Maybe we should take this a little easier on you.”

“No.” She swallowed again and bit back her instinctual reaction to cough. Sage had never been really good with pain,

but this wasn't about her.

She had to get out of the hospital.

She had to find some place to stay while she healed.

And she had to make sure that Milo was safe until she figured out the mess that his dad had made of their lives.

Sage knew that she couldn't really do that from a hospital bed.

"Let's try, doctor." She forced herself to meet his eyes and made her lips smile even though she knew that her lips were pressed thin. "I'd like to take your tests."

She saw the look that the doctor gave Fish.

She didn't have to see Fish's reaction to know that neither of them believed that she was holding herself together. The good thing was, as soon as she got out of the hospital, she wouldn't have to worry about how the doctor saw right through her pain.

And she wouldn't have to worry about how easily Fish had gotten under her skin.

She'd only seen him in a selfie photo...

Okay, that photo showed him letting her nephew drool all over his chest and she knew, more than anyone else, how amazing that was.

But she didn't think she could stay in San Antonio.

The jerk had already followed them there.

She had to get away.

She had to get Milo away from his dad until she could figure out how to keep her nephew safe from the violent jerk.

And as nice as Fish was, it wasn't like there was a snowball's chance for her to get to know him more than she already had.

As soon as she figured out how to get a car, she was taking Milo back on the road.

She had a few old friends from her studio art days that she could talk to. Maybe they'd let her crash at their place with Milo.

As long as she had things to keep him interested, he'd stay quiet.

She could make that work while she found some work.

Kait's life insurance should come in eventually and then she could hire an attorney to make sure that Richie didn't come anywhere near his... son.

She swallowed and the pain in her throat was like fire burning her from the inside out.

"I'll have the nurse bring in some water."

Sage's cheeks pinked as she realized how close the doctor was watching her.

Clearing her throat with some effort, she gave him as bright a smile as she could manage. "Sorry... My head is-"

"You don't have to apologize to me or anyone, Miss Allen." The doctor leaned closer and gave her hand a gentle pat. "I have a feeling that you've got so much heaped on your shoulders that I'm surprised it hasn't driven you down to your knees."

He turned to look over the bed. "See if you can get her to rest. Okay, Fish?"

Sage's jaw dropped open and her voice dried up so she couldn't tell the doctor that Fish didn't even know her.

Not really.

A moment later, the door closed softly and Sage wondered if the air had been sucked out of the room.

A warm laugh eased some of the tension gripping her shoulders.

"You're thinking so hard, I think I can hear it."

Sage shook her head. "I... I don't hear a thing."

“You don’t?” He sighed softly. “Well, maybe I’m psychic,” he chuckled. “Or maybe I’m just on the same wavelength as you, Sage Allen.”

Goodness.

The way he said her name made her shiver.

Or maybe it was just the air conditioning in her hospital room.

“I agree with Doctor Haslett. You should get some sleep, Sage.”

“I’m okay.” She said the words and almost believed them. “You can put Milo up here and I can take care of him. I’m sure you have somewhere to be. Home with your family?”

She didn’t know why she was pushing him so hard to leave.

No.

She *did* know.

There was something about Fish beyond his silly name. Just hearing his voice gave her a measure of peace. Hearing the smile in his tone? Made her smile, too.

So she wanted him to stay because she could really use some of his gentle spirit to ease her worries.

But she also needed him to go because the *edge* that she’d acquired to help keep them safe and on the move was in real danger of dulling with Fish around.

She was already entirely too comfortable for Milo’s good.

That didn’t mean that she wouldn’t miss him.

As strange as it seemed, just a few minutes in the same room with him made her feel at home with him.

If she didn’t push him out of the door soon, when she got them back on the road, she was going to really miss him.

There just wasn’t room in her life for anyone but Milo.

“Sage?”

She shook her head to focus her thoughts and that only made the pains in her body ache even more. “Hmm?”

“There’s something you should know.”

An ache formed in her chest and if her arm wasn’t hurting like crazy, she might have countered the pain by pushing the heel of her hand against it.

“I called a few friends of mine and they’re going to come by tomorrow.”

Panic rose in her throat, almost cutting off her air.

“They run an organization that helps women. Now, I don’t know what’s going on with you and Milo, but I know fear and anxiety when I see it.”

“Fish, please...”

Why was it killing her that he saw right through her walls?

Why did his words make her ache for him, too.

She heard the pain behind his words. It wasn’t a fresh pain, but it was one that was buried deep inside him.

Sage touched the cool sheets beside her hand and bit her lip to keep from inviting him to come up and lay down beside her.

That instinct spun her head around and made her breathless.

What was it about this man that got under her skin so quickly?

“Please, Sage? Just talk to Sloane and Hildie. If you don’t want to let them help you here in San Antonio, maybe they can find a way to help you get wherever you want to go.”

There was a hard edge to his voice, and she felt the weight of it in her own chest.

Sagging back against the mattress, she spoke to the air above her head.

“I have a feeling that I’m going to owe you a great deal, Fish.” She clamped her teeth together and struggled with

herself more than she usually did. “I’m just afraid that when all is said and done, you’re going to wonder if what you’re doing for us wasn’t worth all the effort.

“I don’t think I could stand it if that happened.”

She wanted to pull a pillow out from under her head and clamp it down over her face.

Why was she still talking?

She should just shush and get the help she needed for Milo. This wasn’t about her.

Not at all.

“Growing up,” his voice seemed to surround her in the room, “I didn’t have a whole lot of people to help me, so when I got older and I saw what it looked like... what it *felt* like to have people care about me, I made a decision that I’d give that to people just to give it.

“There’s no chance that I’d feel like helping you wasn’t worth the effort, Sage.”

She closed her eyes tightly to avoid letting her tears fall from her eyes.

“I know that you and Milo are worth it, Sage. I just worry that you don’t.”

“Oh, Milo is worth it,” she smiled, even though she was the only one who could see it. “He’s the most amazing kid. I’m just lucky I got to be his aunt.”

“I think Milo would say he’s lucky to be your nephew. I hope you’ll see how amazing you are someday.”

She was losing the fight against her tears. “How... how do you know what kind of a person I am? We’ve only been talking for... for less than an hour at the most.”

“Well,” she heard him softly soothe Milo before he spoke again, “while you were sleeping and before I got this little guy to nod off, he told me everything there is to know about you.”

Shock widened her eyes. “Everything?”

“Well, I’m sure there’s more to learn about you, but Milo gave me a pretty extensive list of the various and sundry ways that you’re a super amazing aunt, including the way you make his dino nuggets talk when he tries to drown them in ketchup. Oh, and the way you sing when you think he’s sleeping in the car because you think you can’t sing.”

“Well, I can’t.”

Fish laughed. “He doesn’t agree with you. He thinks you’re *super good* at everything.”

“He thinks that because he loves me.”

“I’m sure that’s part of it, but I think I trust Milo when he says you’re the most amazing person in the world next to his mom.”

An image of Kait appeared in her head and her breath caught in her lungs.

“He makes it easy to love him like crazy. He’s the best kid in the whole world.”

“I agree.”

Two words.

All it took was two words from this man and she knew she’d go to bat for him like she did for Milo. How could she think of doing anything else when he saw how amazing Milo was?

The door opened and Sage saw a nurse in the doorway.

“Sorry, Miss Allen. The doctor wanted me to bring you some water and pain medication. He’s hoping you’ll go to sleep soon. Your body could use the rest to heal.”

Fish must have seen her hold up her hand to refuse the pain pills.

“Take them, Sage. Please? You need your rest and I’ve got Milo.”

Sage didn’t know much more about the man than his nickname and that he was a firefighter in San Antonio. But

there was something about him that called to her. Something that calmed her.

At the moment, she didn't have a whole lot of people to turn to for help, but deep down inside of her, she knew that he was someone who she could trust.

And that made all of the difference in the world.

"Okay," she gestured to the nurse, "I'll take those pills."

"And then you'll sleep."

She heard the laughter in his tone.

"Okay. Okay, I'll sleep."

The nurse looked at her with a winsome smile on her face. "You guys are the cutest family ever."

She was gone before Sage could get her brain connected back to her mouth.

By then, it was too late to say anything.

The nurse's words had struck an odd chord inside of Sage, something she couldn't... wouldn't think too much about.

She just needed a little more rest, she decided.

If she got enough rest, then she'd stop thinking about how much she wanted to hold on to the nurse's words.

If wishes were horses, maybe she could have had a chance for that kind of connection with someone like Fish.

But wishes weren't horses and all Sage could count on in her future was doing everything she could to make sure that Milo was safe.

There wasn't time or space in her life for anything or *anyone* else.

CHAPTER FOUR

Early the next morning, Fish met the ladies out in the waiting room.

It was a little unnerving in a way.

He had the best of friends in the world and a number of those were female.

The first responder community in San Antonio was tight, but it also extended beyond fire, law enforcement, and medical.

When the group of ladies saw him, they were all smiling.

Sloane King Bravo spoke first. “That’s a big spot of drool you’re sporting, Fish.”

Looking down at his Station Seven t-shirt, he grinned. “Yeah. I hear it goes with the territory.”

When he looked back up at Sloane he saw the sweet smile on her face. She had a daughter with her husband, FBI Special Agent Vicente Bravo, and the family was blissfully happy.

Well, as blissful as an FBI agent could be. Vicente seemed to have a resting business face that had prompted some criminals to spontaneously confess.

It felt good to see her approving smile.

It was even better when she reached into one of the bags she had with her and pulled out a Helping Hearts t-shirt. “I thought you might need this when you said you got Milo to fall asleep.”

He reached out for the shirt and smiled in thanks. “Sage has been worrying over every little thing. If she saw the drool rings on my t-shirt, she’d probably want to replace it.”

Sloane’s smile faltered a little and she shook her head. “So many women feel like they have to shoulder the burden on their own. You said you weren’t sure what she’s running from?”

Callan winced at the phrasing of Sloane’s words. “I’m not even sure she’s running. Call it an instinct.”

Sloane nodded. “I get it.”

Hildie McGowan, Sloane’s best friend and co-director of the Helping Hearts Foundation, smoothed her hand over her rounded belly. “You’ve been a great help at the community center, Fish. If you’re picking up those vibes, I’d believe you.”

He didn’t want to dwell on the thought until they had some confirmation on his gut instinct. “The most important thing is getting Sage and Milo some help. I know that she’s stressing about everything since she woke up last night.

“Their car is totaled. Some of their belongings spilled out into the street when the car tumbled and some of the people on the street took some of their things.”

Both women shook their heads, sighing in sympathy for Sage.

“We can help with those things, easily,” Sloane smiled. “Don’t worry about that.”

Hildie gave him a knowing look. “I’m guessing she’s going to fight us on some of it.”

Callan winced. “I don’t think she’ll accept help easily. I get the feeling that she’s used to giving help, not receiving it.”

“Well, that’s okay. We’re awesome at nagging people into taking help. We’re moms.”

Callan turned his head toward the new voice and he felt his heart swell in his chest.

“Hey, Missus Blaise.”

“Good to see you again, Callan.” She was the only one connected to the firehouse that called him by his given name. She pulled him in for a hug even when he gestured at the drool-stained shirt. “Again, I’m a mom. I’ve seen and worn worse.”

Sloane and Hildie nodded in agreement, but it was Sloane who spoke. “Go ahead and change so you can introduce us to Sage and Milo.”

Hildie grinned. “I love that name. I’d be tempted to add it to the list of names for the baby, but I don’t want to double in our group.”

Callan grinned as he tugged the hem of his t-shirt out of his waistband and peeled it up over his head. The way that Hildie was talking about Milo’s name, she was already thinking that he was going to stay in San Antonio.

Callan wouldn’t argue with that, but first things first.

“Goodness, Fish.”

He folded his stained shirt into his waistband and looked down the hallway. Texas Ranger Jake McGowan, Hildie’s husband, was shaking his head.

“There are places where you can change your clothes that *aren’t* in front of my wife.”

Callan pulled the Helping Hearts shirt over his head and wrestled the hem down to his waist. “Sorry, Hildie. I didn’t mean anything.”

Hildie turned to glare at her husband and gave his arm a soft, frustrated tap. “Don’t be mean, honey. Fish’s shirt was dirty.”

Hildie gave Callan a wink. “It had drool on it.”

Jake smiled at his wife, raising his brows as he leaned in to touch a gentle kiss to her lips. “As long as it’s not yours I’m not going to kick his a-”

Hildie’s lips pressed tightly to his, her hands gripping the side of his face.

She pulled back a moment later with smiling eyes and a pursed-lip smile. “Language, sweetie.”

Jake leaned in, putting his cheek against hers. He must have said something because when he moved away, Hildie’s cheeks were bright pink.

Then Jake turned back toward Callan. “I need to ask Miss Allen some questions and I remembered that Hilly was coming here to talk to her. I hope you don’t mind if I come in. Maybe we can get everything out of the way at one time.”

Knowing Jake from incidents around San Antonio, Callan’s instinct was to invite him along, but a disturbing thought entered his head and Callan lowered his chin to look at the Ranger.

“I’m okay with you going in as long as you remember that Sage and her nephew are *victims*, Jake.”

There was something in Jake’s eyes that Callan hadn’t seen before. A measure of confusion and then something akin to respect.

Jake nodded. “I don’t have any indication that she’s anything but a victim, Callan, but I have to ask her some questions about the accident.”

Viviana, Chief Blaise’s wife, gave him a gentle pat on the back. “I spoke to Ethan last night when I stopped by the station. I know he’s spoken to Jake. Cowboy did to. What Jake isn’t telling you is that he’s seen the traffic camera footage. So he probably already came to some conclusions about the crash.”

Callan watched as all three women turned to look at Jake. The Texas Ranger had a rather nervous look on his face. “Ladies? What’s going on here?”

“What’s going on,” his wife grinned at him and hooked her arm through his, “is that we’re all going to walk in there and find ways to help Sage and her nephew and I know, being the fair and just lawman that you are, you’re going to help them too.”

Smiling to himself, Callan took the lead down the hallway to the elevator. He punched the UP button before he turned back to the small group.

“I want to thank all of you for coming down to help. I know that this happened all of a sudden, but... so did the accident.” He let out a breath and grinned at the others. “Thanks for coming by to see how you can help.”

* * *

ONE MOMENT she was smoothing Milo’s errant bangs back from his face as he slept, trying to enjoy the momentary calm in their lives, and the next moment there were nearly half a dozen people in her hospital room.

The only thing that kept her from panicking was Fish’s presence in the room.

He was at the head of the group and came to stand beside her when he introduced the others.

“This is Missus Viviana Blaise. Her husband is the fire chief at my station. Next to her are Sloane King Bravo and Hildie McGowan. Together, they run a foundation called Helping Hearts.”

She turned to look at the new shirt he was wearing and Fish smiled and plucked at the fabric in a self-conscious gesture.

“They brought me a new shirt to wear.”

Sage cringed, but before she started to apologize again, he continued with the introductions. “And that guy on the end? He’s Hildie’s husband, Jake.”

Hildie leaned against the man at her side with a beatific smile on her face. “He’s my better half.”

Jake’s expression, which had intimidated her at first, softened as he wrapped an arm around Hildie’s gloriously pregnant body. “Sweet words, Hilly. But you make me a better man than I was before, remember that.”

No one in the room batted an eyelash at the open affection between the two and Sage wondered if that was just how things were in this part of Texas.

The woman named Sloane took a step closer. “We’re sorry for barging in this morning, Sage. May I call you Sage?”

Sage nodded. “Sure. That’s fine.”

Sloane’s smile lit up the room with the lights at half power. “Good. I’m so glad we got Fish’s call yesterday and you were well enough to talk to us today.”

Her words brought reality crashing down around her.

Sage looked down at the arm brace that the nurse had fit her for just a little while before.

It was one of the only outside signs that she’d been cut out of a car less than a day before. Of that, she was truly grateful.

“Fish mentioned our foundation, Helping Hearts. Have you heard of it before?”

Sage gave her a weak smile. “I think you have to be a total hermit and offline not to know about your foundation.” She bit the inside of her cheek, unsure of what she should divulge to the group of people around her.

She didn’t know them very well. Not that she knew Fish all that well, either.

She just couldn’t seem to stop trusting him, though.

The way he treated her. Or more so, the way he treated Milo had quickly locked him into her esteem.

Looking between Sloane and Hildie, she explained the connection she had with Helping Hearts. “My sister Kait was helped by an organization like yours in El Paso. She was trying to keep her ex from getting custody of Milo. It was a huge mess when it didn’t need to be. Richie spent every second of her pregnancy beating her up like a punching bag.

“I put a stop to that when I moved back to Texas from Boston. I told Richie that I was done letting him beat up my

sister. Looking back on it, it was a crazy move, but I was desperate.

“Richie had a foot on both of us. He had a habit of losing control of his temper when he didn’t get what he wanted. And he didn’t want a baby.

“Not with Kait. Or anyone else. Still,” she swallowed, trying to wash away the bitter flavor on her tongue, “he didn’t like to use condoms or let her use the pill.

“How he expected her not to get pregnant, I-”

She turned her head to the side to avoid the others seeing her frustration or the tears glittering in her eyes. She felt a gentle touch on her shoulder.

Sage looked down and saw a handkerchief in Fish’s hand.

“Take it. Please.”

She nodded and took the handkerchief from his fingers. “Thanks.”

“I came back to San Antonio to see how I could help her and instead I found my sister sick and barely able to take care of herself and Milo.”

Beside her on the bed, Milo whimpered a little and turned into her leg, wrapping an arm around her thigh.

Sage soothed him with a gentle rhythmic pat on his back. She looked back up at the assembled group a little stronger.

“I did what I could to help her. She had a great job where she could work from home, but she tired easily and I did nearly all of the chores in the house while Kait and Milo slept and took a late night job at a diner open twenty-four hours a day.”

She couldn’t help the smile that touched her lips at the memory.

“The Lone Star Diner gave me extra cash that I could use to help around the house. Kait was saving all she could to prepare... for the end.

“When she passed, that’s when Richie showed up.”

“Richie,” Hildie’s husband wrote it down. “Richie who?”

“Richie...” Sage had to think. “Richie Norris. He showed up one day and said he wanted his son. We argued. I told him he’d never been in Milo’s life so why was he interested now? That got him mad. What made him more upset was the fact that Kait had named me Milo’s guardian in her will.

“And because Richie hadn’t been in his life, she’d started the process to terminate Richie’s rights as a parent.”

A memory popped up in her head and she lifted her hand to touch her cheek.

“Hey.” She turned and saw Fish’s brow furrowing in concern. “Did he hit you?”

She didn’t want to say the words. It was easier to push it back down into her memories if she didn’t give voice to the pain.

“Sage?”

This time it was Sloane. She sat down gently on the edge of the bed.

“You don’t have to tell us everything. We just want to make sure that you’re safe when you leave here. Okay?”

Sage nodded.

She wanted to be safe.

She needed to be safe for Milo’s sake. He’d already lost his mother. She was determined to be there for him for many, many years to come.

“Now,” Sloane smiled a little brighter, encouraging her to smile too, “I can feel Jake chomping at the bit to ask you some questions, but I’m going to tell you what we’re going to do for you when you’re ready to leave the hospital.”

Sage felt something akin to hope building in her chest.

“Your belongings are being kept at Station Seven, the same place where Fish works.”

Sage looked up at Fish and he nodded. "It's all perfectly safe there. We have it in a secure locker."

She nodded and turned back to Sloane.

"Once you look through your things, you let us know what you're missing and we'll take care of that for you."

"We left the motel this morning because Richie was there looking for Milo. I had to leave some of our things in the room."

Hildie's husband took a half-step forward. "If you give me the name of the motel and what room number you were in I can call them and see what I can get back for you."

Sage tilted her head to the side as she looked at him. "You work for motels?"

When Fish's hand settled on her shoulder, she was worried that she wasn't going to like the answer.

Reaching into his coat, Jake McGowan pulled out his badge. "I'm a Texas Ranger, Sage."

She drew in and blew out several short breaths. "Is this about the accident? How much trouble am I in? I wasn't trying to drive badly, but Richie was after us and I know it was stupid to drive that fast, but-

"Sage." Fish was shaking her slightly. "Sage?"

She leaned toward Fish, but she kept her eyes on Jake... the Texas Ranger.

The last thing she wanted or needed to do was get in trouble with the law. Milo needed someone he was familiar with.

"Sage. Jake's not here because you did something wrong. He's here to help."

Jake's expression was still stoic, so she hesitated.

It was Hildie who smoothed things over. She turned toward her husband and gave him a little tickle along his side. "Smile, you big goof."

Jake turned toward her with a raised eyebrow and a somewhat incredulous look.

“He’s upset because of your sister’s ex, not you. Jake gets all kinds of het up over men who hurt women. Knowing he hit you has danced all over Jake’s last nerve. So pay no attention to his grumpy face.”

She lifted her hand and squished his face around his lips.

“Smile, sweetie.”

Jake carefully peeled his wife’s hand from his face, kissing her fingertips as he did. When he turned back to Sage, he was actually smiling.

“Sorry, Sage. I don’t always think about how my face looks until Hildie gives me a reality check. You’re not in trouble. I’ve seen the traffic cam footage and several of the local businesses in the area called to offer their security footage.

“The sports car that had been following you rear-ended your car and then clipped the back corner of your vehicle. Even though your speed was on the high side, no one is pursuing charges or even a ticket for that. As soon as you can, I’d like to interview you about what Richie has done since your sister’s... passing.

“I’m going to be investigating the crash and other possible charges.”

Sage looked at Jake with a strange curiosity. “I didn’t think Texas Rangers investigated things like this.”

He smiled wider before he answered.

“Normally, no. But I have some time off coming to me, so I’m taking a few sick days to investigate as a favor to my amazing wife.” He smiled as Hildie wrapped her arms around him, as much as she could with her largely pregnant belly. “I like to keep her happy.”

Sage saw the love evident between the couple and smiled, blinking back tears.

She'd never really thought of falling in love or getting married, but if she could have something like they did... well, she'd do more than consider it. She'd jump at the chance.

But first.

She looked down at Milo who was just starting to stir awake.

She had to make sure that Milo was safe and happy. That was her only concern.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sage looked across the center console at Fish. He was smiling as they listened along to Milo belting out Alan Jackson's song about the Chattahoochee River, tapping his hand on the steering wheel.

He looked back at her as they reached a stop light. "You feeling okay? Need a pain pill? Hungry? I can drive through somewhere or," he cast a look over his shoulder and then leaned in to mouth the words, 'WAFFLE HOUSE' "or" 'IHOP.'

"Did you say IHOP?"

Sage laughed at the shock on Fish's face.

How was he supposed to know that her nephew was fluent in diner speak?

Turning her head a little further, she laughed at the excitement on Milo's face. "You just ate, Milo!"

He grabbed at his tummy and gave her a horrible hang-dog expression. "But I'm hungry..."

Bless Fish, he looked at her with the same plaintive, lip quivering, puppy-eyed expression.

Sage shook her head and pointed out the windshield. "Green."

"What?" Fish sat up and looked out the windshield with a wince, pulling at his lips. "Sorry."

He drove through the intersection along with the other cars.

He darted a look at her and she smiled.

“I really am sorry about that, Sage.”

She relaxed against the seat. “No need to be sorry. You’ve been nothing but amazing to us since the accident. What do you have to be sorry about?”

“Well, for one, I don’t know what kind of foods it’s okay for him to eat, so mentioning-”

“Mouthing,” she giggled.

“Mouthing,” he repeated with his own soft laugh, “the names of two...” He groaned. “I don’t know how to get around the things I’m not supposed to say.”

She reached over to touch his arm. “I’m still learning all about it myself,” she explained. “Before, I’d just follow along and let... other people make decisions. It’s hard being the one to make those decisions. I’m always afraid that I’m going to make a mess of things and fail miserably.”

As they cleared through another intersection, Fish lifted his gaze to the rear-view mirror and then smiled at her. “You’ve done a great job, Sage. Looks like he’s healthy and happy-”

“And hungry!”

Sage saw Fish’s expression and was pretty sure she had a similar expression on her face.

“In his defense, Sage. They brought him a hospital meal last night while you were sleeping. He ate it. Well, almost all of it-”

“Pickles, yech.”

Sage’s shoulders shook.

Fish continued. “And the breakfast meal they served both of you today was barely enough for both of you.”

Sage turned her shoulders toward Fish. “What did you eat this morning?”

“Me?” Fish looked a little shocked that she asked. “Uh... The chief’s wife brought me a breakfast burrito.”

“But you’re still hungry?” She had a feeling that Viviana Blaise was not someone to bring a skimpy breakfast for one of her husband’s firefighters.

By the silence behind them, she knew that Milo was listening in.

Fish probably did too.

And he made Milo’s day when he answered her saying. “I am a growing boy.”

“Me, too! I’m a growing boy, Aunty Sage!”

They came to another intersection at a red light and Sage looked catty-corner across the way and saw the street sign. “Okay, I’ll make you two a deal. If we turn right at the next light, it’s just a block to the Lone Star Diner. We can stop in there and I can tell everyone we’re okay.”

Maybe it was just a trick of her eye or the sunlight coming through the windshield, but Sage swore she saw a sweet smile on Fish’s face.

It was a smile she definitely wanted to see again, but once he dropped them off at the shelter, she knew there wouldn’t be much of a chance to see him again.

It sounded strange in her own head, but just the thought that she’d never see him again made her stomach ache.

She placed her left hand over her stomach as her right arm was hampered by the sling she’d been given at the hospital.

“You okay?” Fish grasped her elbow gently. “If you’re not feeling well, we can turn back around and go to the hospital.”

“I feel fine. I’m just tired. And,” she tried to muster a smile for him, “hungry. So let’s go to the diner. Okay? My treat.”

Given the little shake of his head, Fish wasn’t about to listen to her, but at least he didn’t argue in front of Milo.

She was grateful for that.

“You know,” he turned down the road toward the diner, but she saw him dart a glance at her, “I want to thank you for letting me drive you to the shelter and now the diner. I know it can’t be easy to trust someone you just met, especially after what... that other person did to you two.”

“Well, you’ve been nothing but kind and I have to admit, hearing from Sloane, Hildie, and Viviana about the ways that the firefighters have helped women and children, I don’t think we could be in better hands.”

He smiled.

Big.

Bright.

Joyous.

“You just made my year, Sage.”

“Year?” She couldn’t help the incredulous laugh that burst from her lips. “It’s December! Surely you’ve had better moments than this.”

“Nope.” Fish shook his head. “There’s something about you, Sage. You and Milo. I can’t imagine what strength you two have had to draw on to smile and laugh like you two still do.

“To love like you two still do and give me your trust. That’s an honor that I’ll never do anything to tarnish.”

An honor.

Sage felt something squeeze her heart in her chest.

Fish. What was his name again? She’d heard someone call him Callan earlier. He was a man that she’d be crazy to push out of her life. Years ago, before everything started with Richie, she would have jumped at the chance to get to know him more.

Hell, she would have asked him out because he was just that good of a man.

But...

He didn't ask for a crazy, sister's ex, Johnny Come Lately, daddy wannabe to cause trouble for him.

And she knew, just like she knew how much she loved Milo, that Richie wasn't going to just let them go.

Callan didn't deserve that in his life, no matter how much she might want him in hers.

So, she had to find a way to put up some kind of a wall to minimize how much she was attracted to him.

“Hey.”

Sage turned to look at him and he smiled at her, really smiled.

“I don't think I've said it yet, but I think you're a really great person, Sage. I'm sorry you two were in that accident, but I'm so glad I got to meet you both.”

She didn't say anything after that.

She couldn't.

She just didn't have the power to speak.

Crazy at it may seem, she was pretty sure she fell in love with him at that very moment.

Her life was crazy.

* * *

THE LONE STAR DINER had to be the most quintessentially Texas diner that Callan had ever seen.

The sign was red, white, & blue neon, even in the middle of the day. A whole side of the diner was painted like the Texas flag. The parking lot had a fence around it with oversized metal stars that had at one time, he was sure, been painted white or silver, but had faded over time.

The style of the architecture said it had likely been up since the time of the Great American Road Trip when people

got into their land yacht convertibles and took days or even weeks driving across the country.

As he pulled in to a parking spot, he looked in through one of the big glass windows and shook his head.

“It’s like a whole different era, right?”

He turned and saw Sage smiling at him and it hit him that he wanted to see that smile tomorrow and the day after that and-

“I didn’t mind the uniform all that much,” she shook her head, “but it only served to show that I wasn’t all that big anywhere.” She gestured at her body with her left hand. “We had a waitress working here at the same time who was all *va va voom* and me? I was just *v.*”

Sage got out of the passenger seat and he hurried to open the back door and help Milo out of his car seat.

The little boy already had the clips off of his belts and was holding out his arms to Fish. “Help me down?”

How could he say no?

“Come on, buddy.” He must have seen a glint in the boy’s eyes, or he just knew something was up.

Callan barely had a chance to brace himself as Milo launched himself across the interior of his Trailblazer.

He managed not to stumble back but as soon as he took a step, he felt a hand touch him.

Turning slightly, he saw Sage smiling up at him.

“Sorry,” her voice was as soft as the delicate blush on her cheeks, “I thought I’d help you with Milo.”

“I’ve got him, Sage. With your arm,” he looked at the sling on her right arm, “it’s the least I can do.”

He saw her hesitate and knew that she could easily tell him to put her nephew down.

It was probably weird that he wanted to hold the little boy, but the way Milo clung to him made Callan feel like he was

making a difference to the boy.

It didn't hurt that the little kid was as awesome as he was.

"I'll get the door then." Sage turned around and he shut the back door to the Trailblazer so he could follow her inside.

THE INTERIOR of the Lone Star diner was truly like a trip back in time. The floor was a black and white checkered linoleum, and the tables were glossy white with a marbled look across the surface.

Callan bet that as soon as he sat on one of those chairs or the bench of a booth that he'd hear the hiss of air through a hole in the vinyl.

"Sage?"

An older man came out of the kitchen, dressed like Mel from the TV Show Alice.

He saw Sage look up at him and he grinned down at her.

"You see it too, right?"

He nodded, happy to find someone who liked classic television like he did.

"So good to see you! Come 'ere." She walked up to the cook and gave him a hug.

Callan was happy to see that the man was careful about her injured arm.

When Sage turned around to look at him, Callan felt his heart melt in his chest.

Sage was beautiful. There was no doubting that, but when she was happy... she was incandescent.

She glowed like candlelight at Christmas.

He bet, if he got close enough, her eyes would twinkle like the lights on a Christmas tree.

"Fish, come here."

He saw the confusion on the other man's face, but he did what Sage said and moved closer.

“Tony. This is Fish. He's a firefighter at Station Seven.”

The older man nodded, his expression changing to one of respect instead of just curiosity.

Holding out his hand, Callan introduced himself. “Callan Bass.”

He saw the lift of a smile at the corners of the other man's mouth, but he was more interested in the surprised lift of Sage's expression.

He addressed them both.

“That's why they call me Fish. When I joined Station Seven as a candidate, the others tried out all kinds of nicknames for me. Trout. Crab. Oyster.”

He saw Sage's painful look.

“Yeah, things got pretty stupid for awhile.”

“Aunty Sage... he said the S word.” Milo's mock whisper could likely be heard a few blocks over.

Smiling at him, Sage gave Milo's cheek a soft stroke of her knuckles before she met Callan's confused gaze.

“There are words we try not to use because they are hurtful to people,” she explained and Milo nodded along with the look of a disapproving elder on his face. “So we're trying to learn to use words that are kinder to others.”

Callan couldn't argue with the idea.

“Sorry about that,” he apologized.

Milo leaned in, pressing his temple to Callan's. “So 'kay, Fish. Everyone can learn to be kind.”

He felt his heart swell in his chest.

The kid was magic, pure and simple.

The cook waved at the diner. “You folks pick your table and I'll get some menus.”

Callan looked at Sage, marveling at her. “Your choice,” he explained. “You know the layout better than I do.”

“Okay,” she turned her head as she took in the whole room. “Let’s sit over here.”

Taking his arm, she gently turned him before she started walking.

Callan followed her lead and found himself smiling at the way they looked together in a wall-mounted mirror.

With Milo’s coloring, if no one knew any better, Callan could pass for a relative. And when the summer came, if they went fishing and got out on the water in his boat, Milo’s skin would tan and they’d look even more alike.

It was crazy, wishful thinking.

It was like looking at himself with his own child.

He heard the scrape of chair legs on the linoleum tiles and turned to see Sage holding out a chair. There was a little red booster seat on the chair that must have come off of the stack he saw at the far end of the counter.

Milo eagerly took his place on the booster seat and patted the back of the chair beside him. “Here, Fish. Sit here.”

Callan looked across the table at Sage, wondering how she’d take the request. He hoped that it wasn’t something that would hurt her.

The look she gave them both made him ache.

He didn’t think she could be any more beautiful than she’d been just moments before, but as she looked at Milo patting the seat beside him, she lifted her good hand to wipe at her eyes, a bright smile on her lips.

Callan sat down beside Milo, beaming as the boy lifted his arms up above his head and cheered.

“I get to sit next to Fish!”

He wanted to scoop them both up and head home.

His home.

He wanted to ask them to stay with him.

Wasn't that just crazy?

CHAPTER SIX

The name on the mailbox said AGNES ABLEMAN and the house sitting behind it looked like Tara from Gone with the Wind.

It was beautiful.

Statuesque.

“Oh, wow.”

Callan came up beside her with Milo between them, the boy’s hand held in his. Sage reached down and tousled Milo’s hair.

“It’s huge, right?”

Milo didn’t say a word.

Sage looked up at Callan, silently hoping that he’d help smooth things over.

She knew it wasn’t Callan’s responsibility at all, but she was feeling apprehensive as well. Having Callan’s help to convince Milo that everything was okay would help her, too.

They all stood there staring at the house. Something in the back of her head prompted her to speak. “They call the architecture style Georgian. Those columns are pretty impressive, right?”

“It looks like a movie set. Right, buddy?”

Sage turned her head and saw Callan smiling and gently shaking his arm that was holding onto Milo’s arm.

She could see his overly bright smile and felt her own growing to match.

Her smile wasn't real though.

They'd had an amazing time at the diner and she'd introduced Fish and Milo to everyone on the staff that she remembered. Tony had taken care of the rest.

During the rest of the drive, Milo had been his happy chatterbox self.

It gave her hope that they'd turned a corner in their lives.

“Well, we should get settled, right, Milo?”

She waited for him to give a shout or raise his hands in celebration.

He stood still until Callan gently shook their joined hands again. “Come on, buddy. Let's go inside.”

Milo stood still for a moment before he moved, lifting his free hand, he took a hold of Sage's hand and her heart overflowed.

Then Milo turned his head and looked up at her.

She gave him what she hoped was an encouraging grin and he nodded.

With Callan on the other side of Milo, they walked up the long path to the front of the house that Sage could only manage to call a mansion.

Going up the stairs, Milo counted each step and over his head, Callan beamed at her. She imagined that he was thinking that Milo was smart. She did too.

Finally on the doorstep, Sage reached out and rang the doorbell.

It was only a few seconds before the door opened and a woman stepped out onto the mat who looked like-

Sage looked over at Callan and saw his wide-eyed look of surprise on his face.

He mouthed. Aunt Bee?

Sage held back her laughter as she wholeheartedly agreed with him.

Apparently they really did share an interest in classic television shows.

“Well, hello!” She leaned over, her hands pressed to the tops of her thighs. “You must be, Milo.”

He nodded, but remained quiet and Sage started to worry in earnest about her nephew.

“And you, dear.”

Sage looked up and saw the older woman smiling at her.

“You must be Sage.”

Determined to ease the tension for Milo by setting an example, Sage smiled brightly at the woman.

It wasn't hard. Looking into the welcoming sky blue of the older woman's eyes, she felt some of her tension bleed away.

“Yes, thank you, Missus Ableman. We're relieved and grateful that you have the room to take us in at the last minute.”

Mrs. Ableman waved her concern away. “It's a big, big house, Sage. If the rooms are empty, it feels like a mausoleum.

“And helping women and children find a safe place to stay makes my heart beat like I'm young again.”

With that, she gestured at Callan.

“If you would be so kind,” she gave him a gentle but pointed smile, “you can leave their bags here on the porch.”

Sage's stomach sank, and she turned to look at Callan first and then back to Mrs. Ableman. “Is there a problem?”

The older woman cross over to Sage and leaned in to talk to her. “This is a shelter for women and children in... difficult situations. We can't allow a man into the house. In this space, they are protected.”

“Oh.”

Well, that made sense.

“I see. Sorry,” she looked at Mrs. Ableman with a look of chagrin, “I didn’t know.”

The older woman gently patted her shoulder. “It’s all right, dear. It’s likely a new situation for you and Milo. We’ll help you two settle in as soon as possible.”

Sage felt something shift inside of her.

No, it was the floor beneath her feet.

She was off-balance and shaken.

Mrs. Ableman gave her another smile. “I’ll go back inside and let you folks say your goodbyes.” She gave Milo a pat on his shoulder and nodded her head at Callan.

The front door closed behind her with a soft click and she turned to face Callan. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think about it, but I can see why she doesn’t want you inside.”

Callan thought about it and nodded. “Because I’m a man.”

Milo looked up at Callan. “Why?”

Callan crouched down in front of Milo and looked at him with a smile. “The women and children here are trying to be safe away from men who hurt them. If I go inside,” he touched Milo’s cheek and was trying to lift his spirits, “I might scare someone or make them feel unsafe.”

Milo looked at her. “But Fish is awesome!”

“He is, sweetie.” Sage joined Callan, kneeling down beside him while she smoothed her hand over Milo’s somewhat unruly hair. “But the other people here don’t know that and we don’t want to upset them, right?”

Milo shook his head and then he stopped and dissolved into tears. “Don’t go.”

“Awww, I’m sorry, buddy. But you and your aunty will be safe here.”

“No,” Milo shook his head, tears coursing down his cheeks, “we go with you.”

Sage didn’t know what to do.

When she was living with Kait and Milo, Kait made all the decisions. She was his mom.

But, looking back on their time together, Sage wondered if she shouldn't have tried to do a little bit of it on her own. She needed practice.

She needed to know how to fix things.

Sage drew Milo into her embrace and gave Callan a look.

He nodded his head and stood up, but she saw the hesitation in his eyes.

Neither one of them were comfortable with Milo's tears, but for Sage it was something different too. She'd seen how Milo leaned into Callan.

She'd seen them bond to each other.

But had that been a problem?

Should she have put more distance between the two?

No, she'd seen that along with their growing bond, Milo's whole demeanor had shifted. He wasn't as nervous as he'd been before.

He didn't cling to her as much.

His bond with Callan had been good for Milo. She couldn't wish that away.

Callan took a breath and stepped down from the porch.

One step.

Two steps.

The third step squeaked and Milo turned around in her embrace, almost tearing himself out of her arms.

"Fish! Don't go!"

Oh god, her heart was breaking. Falling apart in pieces.

"Fish, please!"

Milo's feet were stamping on the porch and his cries were frantic.

It wasn't playacting.

Milo didn't do that.

He didn't play emotional games, which made her ache from the bottoms of her feet to the aching hole in her chest.

"Sage?"

Her gaze snapped up to meet his, but Callan didn't make a move to close the gap.

She was grateful for that, because the last thing she wanted to do was give Milo false hope.

That would just tear him apart more than he already was.

Callan opened his mouth to speak, but he looked at her first.

Sage ended up sitting on the porch, with Milo's screaming body curled up in her lap.

As he continued to cry, she covered his ears.

"I'm sorry, Sage. I should have known better."

"It's okay," she had to fight off her own tears. "I don't know how to help him." She rocked Milo in her arms. "I just keep failing him, Callan. I just--"

He groaned and dropped down to his knees beside her. "Sage. I know you're hurting. I know he's hurting, too. I want to help. I think I can help."

Callan put his hand on her shoulder and looked her straight in the eye as he murmured softly. "Come home with me. There's more than enough room and I'm gone for twenty-four hours on my shifts, so you'd have lots of room for the two of you."

Sage wanted to believe that it was that easy.

But could it really work?

"You don't even really know us. Yesterday we were in an accident and now you're saying we can stay with you?"

"Yeah, Sage. I'm asking you two to come home with me. I have the room and you need someplace to be safe and Milo,"

he reached out and set his hand on Milo's head, "I think he... I think I can help with him."

Sage settled, so that she wasn't rocking Milo back and forth as much.

It was then that she realized that her nephew wasn't sobbing and barely holding back from vomiting up his lunch.

How could it be that simple to let someone she'd met help her... help Milo.

And if there was one thing that made her lean into the idea, it was the fact that Callan's hand on Milo's dark waves had soothed her nephew in seconds.

Managing the beginnings of a smile, Sage looked over Milo's head and nodded. "Okay. We'll go with you."

* * *

FROM THE MOMENT that Sage said yes, Callan was completely aware of how much his world changed.

Without another thought, he'd climbed back up to the porch and walked over to them.

He swept Milo up into his arms and before they'd reached the bottom step, the young boy had fallen heavily asleep in his arms.

Callan easily opened the door to the back seat, but stopped and turned back to look at Sage. She looked shaken and that, he realized, was likely his fault.

"I'm sorry, Sage."

She brightened immediately and he knew that she was about to tell him that he had nothing to be sorry about, but she was sadly wrong.

He stumbled over his words, trying to explain.

"I wasn't thinking," he hated the way the words sounded, "I've worked at the community center and they don't let us near the dorm rooms there. I understand what Missus Ableman

was saying. And I can't even explain why I didn't think about it... I feel horrible." He looked down at Milo, fast asleep in his arms. "If I'd thought ahead, this could have been avoided."

The full weight of his responsibility in the matter hit him square in his chest and he turned to lean his back against the side of the vehicle, tipping his head back until it met the top of the Trailblazer.

"I'm so sorry."

He didn't know how she'd respond to his admission. He wouldn't blame her if she pulled Milo away from him and told him to get lost.

He'd really messed things up.

He couldn't imagine what Sage thought of him now.

Callan felt a slight weight against him and he lifted his head to look.

Sage leaned against his side, her cheek against his shoulder, her arms around him and Milo.

"It's okay.... It's okay..." Her soft voice flowed over him like warm, soothing water. "Callan?"

She looked up into his eyes and he'd never seen a soul that beautiful gazing back at him.

"I don't blame you for anything."

He didn't expect that. Nor did he expect the next words from her.

"I didn't want you to go either."

Something clicked inside of him. Something set itself in place. It felt like he'd just clipped himself into his safety harness and dropped off the side of a building.

The rush filled him, but he wasn't scared because he knew that he was clipped in.

But this wasn't a fire, it was a woman. Her nephew.

And the crazy certainty that he'd just fallen in love, unendingly.

He leaned in, looking her deep in her eyes.

“Then you two are coming home with me and we’ll figure out the rest of it as we go along.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Callan said a thankful prayer that he kept his house neat for the most part.

The last thing he wanted Sage to see was a mess when she walked in. He didn't think he had to worry about what Milo thought. The boy was bouncing up and down like a kangaroo version of the Energizer Bunny.

"This is so cool!" Milo barreled past him and into the house.

Sage rushed in after him. "Milo! Slow down. Let Callan come in first, okay?"

Callan stepped in after her and saw Milo take a flying leap onto the couch.

"Oh, my god. Milo! Your shoes!"

Before she could take a step in the boy's direction, Callan set a hand on her shoulder.

She turned around, her face a mask of worry and shock. "So-"

"Sage," he lifted his hand from her shoulder and gently cupped it against her cheek, "it's okay."

It took a moment of her searching his eyes before she gave him what looked like a smile. "Thanks." She shook her head. "This is all just so much."

Callan swept his thumb across her cheekbone. "Take a breath, Sage. It'll work out. We'll be-"

“Okay?”

They just looked at each other for a moment before they laughed.

“We have been making a habit out of saying that, haven’t we?”

He agreed. “I think it’s just our default answer.”

She practically glowed. At least that’s how he saw it. He’d never seen a woman so beautiful.

“But maybe we should talk about house rules so we all know, including the flying squirrel back there.” Sage rolled her eyes. “He’s just so thrilled to be here. I... I am too. I don’t want you to think that I don’t want to be here, but I also don’t want you to think that we don’t understand how generous you’re being to us. And I just want you to know that we won’t bother you for long, because-”

“Sage, honey, stop.”

He groaned inwardly. He hadn’t meant to call her honey.

At least out loud.

When she didn’t seem to react to the endearment, he continued.

“You’re not a bother. Neither is Milo. And I’m not going to put a timer on any of this. As far as I’m concerned, you’re home. Okay?”

He knew he’d shocked her a little.

Her lips were parted and her eyes had widened so he could almost see the full circle of her irises.

When she smiled at him, he felt like a superhero.

“Thank you, Callan. Thank you so much.”

“I mean it, Sage. You’re home.”

Her smile wavered a little and she bit into her lip as she drew in a shaky breath.

“I hope you won’t regret this.”

He shook his head and felt his voice deepen with the weight of his belief. “Never.”

* * *

THEY SPENT the afternoon getting Sage and Milo’s belongings sorted. They got another hit to their spirits when it turned out that the bag they’d left at the motel wasn’t in their room.

Deputy Hayden Yates said she’d go back during a different shift and ask as she had a feeling that the motel’s owner probably wasn’t eager to give up the bag. It wasn’t the best motel, nor was it in the best area of town.

And while Sage balked at the idea of writing down a list of what they were missing, Callan had asked her to do it just so they could figure out what they could get easily in the next few days.

He knew that she wasn’t going to be eager or hardly willing to ask for help, but he’d find a way to give it to her.

It didn’t hurt that Sloane had called Sage to ask what they could bring her.

After the call, Sage had followed him into the backyard while Milo was busy discovering what channels they could access on the TV.

Sage stopped on the back porch as he sat down and stretched out his legs.

Callan patted the spot beside him. “Have a seat.” He encouraged her and tried to add a little levity into the moment. “I won’t bite.”

When she sat beside him, she kept her feet on the step below where they were sitting and wrapped her arms around her knees.

“Thank you.” She turned her head and touched her cheek to her knees. “I know you said we’re not going to be any trouble, but I don’t know if you’ve ever spent an extended amount of time with a little kid. It can be... taxing.”

He leaned back, bracing his hands on the floor. “I think I can handle it. Unless you’re worried that I’m going to be like Richie.”

She hesitated, but he didn’t react to it.

She was allowed to think without him jumping on the silences.

“You’re not like him. I know that.”

He felt a smile curl up the corners of his mouth. “I don’t drink much. Maybe a beer or two when we have parties, but if it will make you feel better, I can-”

“Don’t.” She shook her head and worried her bottom lip for a long moment. “I’m not asking you to change your whole life for us, even though you already are. With any luck, you’ll probably have your place back to yourself in a week, two at the most.”

He closed his eyes for a bit, trying to school his emotions before he spoke.

He didn’t want her to see how much the idea of losing them bothered him.

“How long,” finding his lips dry, he ran his tongue over them, “how long have you been moving around trying to keep Richie from taking Milo?”

Callan swore at himself silently as she tensed up, her arms tightening around herself.

“I’m not trying to upset you, Sage. That’s the last thing I want to do.” He hated struggling for words, which was probably why he’d never become a teacher or a lawyer, choosing to work, helping people, hopefully saving lives. “I just feel like you’ve been pushing yourself, probably for weeks.”

The way she hunched over herself, he bet it felt like more.

“Consider your time here a chance to relax. You don’t have to worry about checkout times or someone giving your information to others.

“The first responder crew in San Antonio may be spread out but we take care of each other.”

“I see that.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Now that I’ve seen it firsthand. I have to say that I’m jealous. It’s been a while since I’ve felt like I had someone at my back.”

Her gaze lowered and it nearly tore his heart in two to hear how alone she sounded.

“Hey.” He smiled brighter when she met his gaze again. He moved closer and drew her to his side.

With his arm around her shoulders he leaned his cheek against the crown of her head.

“I know what it’s like to worry about the future, to think about the troubles that might come your way.”

“Yeah?” She tilted her head back and looked up into his eyes. “Aren’t you still worried about the future? You walk into burning buildings for a living. There has to be... You have to be worried in some way about tomorrow or the day after that?”

She didn’t look comfortable with what he’d told her and he understood.

Sage hadn’t just been worried about what came next, she had to constantly worry about what was behind her, too.

He’d never had that kind of weight on his shoulders.

To add more to it, she had Milo to consider.

It would have driven him crazy at some point, but Sage... she’d been a rock.

He met her questioning eyes with a look of his own. “I guess I do look ahead from time to time. I have to set my alarm to get on shift days. I go to Fire Department events and meet with my friends.

“I go to family gatherings and-”

“Family?”

He thought he heard a lift in her voice and when he looked into her eyes, he saw a spark of interest.

“My immediate family wasn’t a part of my life for long,” he explained, “but when I was older and started working for the San Antonio Fire Department, I reached out to some relatives living near here and they were happy to hear from me.”

She smiled at him. “Family drama with your folks?”

He nodded. “I didn’t ask them for details. I figured that I could see for myself what they were like, and I’m glad I did. It turns out I like having an extended family.”

He saw the moment of hesitation in her eyes.

“I’m glad you have that.”

He wanted to kick himself. He didn’t know what kind of a family she had, but given that she and Kait had been the only ones taking care of Milo, she didn’t have the kind of family he did.

And because he’d only had it for a few years after basically being alone for more than a decade, he understood how lonely it must feel.

“Would you like to meet them?”

She leaned back, putting a little distance between them, and he relaxed the weight of his arm over her shoulders.

Sage looked at him, her gaze searching his face as if she wasn’t quite sure if he was serious about the question.

So he decided to answer her unspoken question.

“They’re having a get together this Saturday and I was already planning on going. With my schedule, it doesn’t always work out. It’s on my grandparents’ farm and it’s super low key.

“You’ll get to see the crazy I come from and there’ll be kids there that Milo can play with.”

He let his words sink in while he sat there with his arm around her.

While he waited, he watched the clouds move across the sky, thinking about how amazing it was to have her there

beside him.

KNOCK KNOCK

Lowering his arm, he half turned toward the glass.

So did Sage.

They saw Milo standing at the sliding glass door, waving at them.

Callan lifted his free hand and waved back.

Milo saw the wave and turned his head to look at his aunt.

Sage, chuckling softly, lifted her hand and waved too.

Having caught both of their attentions, Milo placed his hands over his belly and staggering like an actor on the hunt for an Academy Award, or a Razzie, he pantomimed an aching hunger.

He staggered in one direction.

Then another.

Raising his hand, he placed the back of it against his forehead and swooned... fainted away to the floor.

“Oh.” Sage groaned a little. “That was...”

“Masterful?” Callan found himself more than a little impressed at the full commitment Milo had put into his performance.

“More like Monty Python,” she giggled and started getting to her feet.

He stood beside her, and the two of them applauded and cheered.

At first, Milo opened an eye and looked up at them.

Then he scrambled up to his feet and bowed like Pavarotti after singing *Nessun dorma* at the FIFA World Cup.

“Milo’s got style.” He murmured and Sage looked up at him.

“He’s a ham, that’s for sure.”

Callan slid open the back door and ruffled Milo's hair, leaving the boy giggling and trying to grab Callan's hands.

"So, I guess you're hungry, huh?"

"Duh!"

"Milo!" Sage closed the door behind her. "Don't be rude."

Callan didn't mind so much, but he knew that Sage was Milo's aunt and what she says goes.

Milo, almost chastised and fighting off a smile, gave him a look. "Sorry."

"Thanks, buddy."

Milo brightened, but also as important, he could see Sage behind the little boy, and she was smiling at him in gratitude.

If following her lead earned him that kind of reward, he had no problem doing it over and over again.

Callan wanted to be near them and help. He knew that he had to take his cues from her. Leaning in toward Sage, he put his hand around his mouth so Milo couldn't see, and he mouthed PIZZA?

Smiling, she nodded and the look in her eyes dazzled him.

Who knew pizza would be such a hit?

Looking down at Milo, he gave the boy a pointed look. "You up for pizza?"

He had to lean away as Milo started to whoop and yell, his arms raising above his head just like Rocky Balboa.

"I take that as a, yes?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Okay, then..." he walked into the kitchen, trailing two people behind him. Opening a drawer in the kitchen, he lifted out some menus. "What kind of pizza do you want?"

Something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye.

Sage, looking on with a misty-eyed smile.

He wanted her to be happy. Wanted them both to have a great life, and he'd do whatever it took to make it happen.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pizza for dinner had been a major success, but of course it would. There was something magical about kids and pizza.

Okay, who was she kidding?

She loved a thick, cheese smothered piece of pizza as much as any other person.

It was Callan that made the difference.

The pizza had arrived just as the sun was going down, so they'd eaten it inside, cross-legged on the ground.

They'd talked and Callan told Milo stories about the things he'd done on visits to the family farm when he was Milo's age.

He hadn't mentioned the trip to the farm again since he'd made the suggestion outside, but she could tell how much Callan would enjoy the trip.

She knew she could tell him to go on his own.

It would probably be easier for him.

Still, she didn't think he'd made the suggestion so they could stay behind.

Callan had been so excited talking about the event with her and then with Milo.

She was really tempted to accept the invitation.

Sage opened her mouth to give Callan her answer, but almost on cue, Milo yawned.

It wasn't just a *Hmm, I'm kind of tired yawn*.

It was an *I might just fall asleep face first in my pizza plate yawn.*

“Uh oh,” she smiled, “I think you’re going to need some Zs.”

Milo looked at her in wide-eyed shock for a moment before he snapped out of it and folded his arms across his chest. “Nope.” His bottom lip pooched out. “Don’t need no Zs.”

“Any,” Sage corrected.

“Fine.” He drew in an affronted breath. “Don’t need any Zs.”

Callan gave her a smile from where he was sitting, out of Milo’s range of vision. He made a rolling gesture with his hand and then pointed to himself.

She took that to mean that he was asking if he could roll with it.

Still, more than mildly exhausted from the last couple of days, she nodded back, curious to see what would come of it.

“I’m going to be going to sleep soon.”

Milo’s head whipped so quickly around to look at Callan that Sage was surprised the child hadn’t broken the sound barrier.

“You... You’re gonna sleep?”

“Of course.” Callan closed the nearly empty pizza box and wiped his hands and mouth with a paper napkin.

Milo followed his movements. Copying the wiping sweeps with his own napkin, he almost got the sauce off of the corner of his mouth.

Almost.

“I’m going to get a bed set up for you and your aunt, and then I’m going to take a bath.” Callan stood up with the box in his hand.

Sage wasn't surprised to see Milo get up on his feet. His head craned back on his neck to keep his focus on Callan's face.

"Hey," Callan looked at Sage and then back at Milo, "before I get my bath. I bet you could get yours, right?"

Milo nodded. "Sure. I could get my bath first."

Sage felt a little light headed at the ready agreement from her nephew.

There were many moments when she considered finding a hose outside and spraying him down when it came to bath time.

Milo genuinely thought of a bath as some kind of punishment.

Sage put a hand down to brace herself so she could get back up on her feet, but found herself struggling.

"Here. Let me help you."

She turned her head and saw Callan hold out his hand to her.

Sage put her hand in his and stood up.

Callan had done most of the work, but he didn't seem to be the worse for wear for the effort.

Smiling at him, she tried to excuse her weakness. "Sorry. I think my legs were almost asleep."

He was close.

Like her foot between his feet, close.

Like their joined hands almost touching their chests, close.

And close, like she could feel his warmth and blush at the way he was looking at her.

Sage felt like he was moments away from kissing her.

As tired as she was, she was all for it.

She'd gone years without caring about dating or even men in general.

It wasn't just Richie's horrible example, either.

No one seemed to pique her interest.

But Callan Bass piqued it.

He did more than that.

After seeing the easy way he interacted with Milo, the care he took with both of them, she found herself hoping that he would kiss her.

It was just that-

“Aunty Sage!”

Sage looked at Milo, who was standing beside them, pulling on her elbow.

“I think I need my bath now.”

* * *

THAT WAS CLOSE.

He'd almost kissed Sage before Milo had taken his suggestion to heart and almost demanded his bath.

Callan was glad that his hints had worked, but he was also glad that they'd been interrupted.

While it didn't look like Sage would have minded the kiss, he hadn't thought about what it would look like to Milo.

He had no idea how Sage's nephew would react to it if it did happen.

Callan hadn't been in their lives for more than what some of his friends called a 'hot minute.'

It probably didn't make sense to deepen his relationship with Sage, no matter how much he wanted to or how much he cared.

That didn't stop him from wanting to.

While the two were in his bathroom, Milo happily singing at the top of his lungs, Callan had changed the linens on his

bed and taken out a sheet, pillow, and blanket from the hallway linen closet and set up his bed on the couch.

When that was done, he sat himself down to wait for them to finish in the bathroom.

It was an older house in the San Antonio area with one bathroom and one bedroom, but he'd fallen hook, line, and sinker for it the first time he'd walked through it.

It wasn't all that big, the owner had told him, but it had a good chunk of land that was attached to it. *"Room to grow when you get around to having a family."*

He'd laughed about it then.

He'd been going day to day, week to week, month to month. That's how his life was.

Having his family dump him when he was a kid at some random shelter didn't make him think about planning for the long haul.

"Hey."

He lifted his head and saw Sage standing a few feet in front of him.

"You okay?"

"Sure. Yeah." He was up on his feet in seconds. "I'm good."

She turned her head slightly to the side and looked at him. "Yeah. I've heard that come out of my own mouth a few times. I don't believe it now, either."

He didn't like how easily she saw through his genial mask. The people he worked with didn't see it.

"So, it's my turn in the bathroom?"

She didn't answer him, but knew it was.

Sage wouldn't have left Milo in the bathtub by himself.

"Okay, then." Callan picked up his clothes where he'd left them on the table in the hallway. "I'll be quick. Or," he turned

around to look at her, “do you want to go next? I should let you go first.”

She was staring at the couch.

“You’re going to sleep on the couch?”

Sage turned her gaze on him, a measure of frustration in her eyes. “I’m not kicking you out of your bed.”

“Well, there’s one bedroom, Sage. You and Milo take that until I can get more furniture. It won’t take more than a day, less if I call in some help from the cavalry.”

He gestured toward the bedroom.

“Why don’t you go and shower, or bathe and-”

He stopped there.

The last thing he wanted to do was picture Sage in his tub or shower. Either image would make things pretty strained... for him.

While his friends at the firehouse were quickly joining the rest of the station house, falling in love one after another, he hadn’t been attracted to anyone since he’d become a firefighter.

He got his excitement from the job.

He got his joy from his family, both at the station and the whole extended bunch of crazies that shared his DNA.

But Sage, he wanted to hold her.

He wanted to have her whisper his name into his ear.

To-

“Callan?”

Holy-

She was standing right there in front of him.

“I’m going to check on Milo. I’m fine bathing before or after you. This is your house. Just because you’re letting us stay here doesn’t mean that you have to be put out because of it. Okay?”

“Yeah...” he said the word, but it was a slow, drawn out version of it. “Okay. I think I’ll, uh... take a shower.”

“Great.” She smiled at him and disappeared into the bedroom.

When he walked into the room, he saw her smoothing Milo’s hair back from his face.

He was deep asleep, sprawled on top of the bedding.

It looked like he’d crawled up on top of the bed and fallen asleep immediately.

Callan continued on into the bathroom and looked up into the mirror. He caught sight of Sage and Milo in the reflection before he closed the door.

That image was going to play in his head over and over, of that he was sure.

His mind went back to the comments of the man he’d bought the house from. Talking about the family he’d have one day.

What if...

The thought popped up in his head.

He’d gone so long just thinking of each day before him.

Planning as far as his schedule required.

But the sight of Sage sprawled across his bed with her nephew made him think.

Think of the upcoming weekend, hoping that Sage would want to bring Milo to his family’s party.

Think of the upcoming weeks and how they’d settle into his place.

Think of where they could be in months... years...

The rest of his life.

Their lives.

Callan draped his clothes over the towel rack and turned on the water in the shower.

A bath would be great, but he wanted a shower.

Needed to take the edge off.

An edge he wasn't used to dealing with.

He ended up, backed against the wall, enjoying the rush of the water against his skin, he tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

He needed to get a hold of himself, because the last thing he wanted to do was screw things up and make Sage feel uncomfortable.

What he wanted didn't matter at the moment .

He had to make sure that Sage and Milo were safe and happy. Anything else would have to wait.

* * *

SAGE HAD FALLEN asleep before Callan came out of the bathroom.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, but she woke up when Milo gave her a swift kick in her side.

It wasn't unusual.

When they were at a motel, Milo slept parallel to the headboard or the wall, if there wasn't a headboard at all.

She was the barrier to keep him in place.

The wall that would stop him from rolling off the bed.

Sitting up on the bed, she stretched and yawned, listening for noises.

All she could hear was the soft sound of a television in the other room.

Sage lowered her legs off of the side of the bed and slid down to the ground. Turning back, she picked up the pillows from the bed and made a barrier to keep Milo in place.

From there, she picked up a few items from the pile she'd been given by Callan. The bag that they'd left behind held

mostly her belongings. She was lucky that Callan lent her some of his things to wear.

None of it was sentimental to her. Clothes were clothes. Toiletries, well... they were just the cheapest things on the shelf. It didn't matter how she smelled. It mattered that she was clean.

And that's what she did. Turning on the shower, she stepped inside and gave herself a good wash from head to toe, dried off just as quickly, and pulled on the clothes that may stand a chance of fitting her.

She'd find a way to get to a thrift store in a day or two so Callan could have his things back.

At least, that's what she told herself until she lifted his shirt and brought it to her nose.

Her eyes drifted closed as she inhaled his scent.

Well, at least the scent of his clothes.

If she had a masochistic streak, she might dig around to find out what laundry detergent and fabric softener he used.

Then, when they moved on from his home, she might take a memory of him.

Silly?

Yes.

But she'd been serious for so long that it couldn't hurt to be a little silly.

Turning off the light in the bathroom, she opened the door and leaned out.

Milo was sleeping like a log. Mouth open, arms flung wide.

It would be wonderful to sleep like that, deep and innocent.

Shaking her head at yet another silliness, she moved to the bedroom door and listened. The TV was still on.

Sage knew that she should leave well enough alone, but she could blame her exhaustion for the way her curiosity pushed her through the doorway.

She padded into the hallway, her feet as quiet as she could make them, hoping that she wouldn't disturb Callan's rest if he was managing to get any on the couch.

It wasn't that the couch wasn't comfortable.

She'd enjoyed sitting on it earlier, but Callan was tall enough that he was probably bent in half to fit.

When she reached the end of the hallway, she peeked around the corner and saw Callan sitting up on the couch, his feet on the coffee table before him.

Sage knew she should turn around and head back into the bedroom, but she didn't want to.

It was wrong, she knew, hoping that he would be asleep so she could stare at him.

It wasn't fair to him to have invited her to stay, only to end up with a peeping Tom for a houseguest.

Wait.

Peeping Thomasina?

No, that sounded silly, too.

"You can come and sit down if you want to."

She squeezed her eyes shut and bit the inside of her cheek.

She'd been caught.

And she only had herself to blame.

This was *his* house and as quiet as she'd tried to be, she must have made some kind of noise to get his attention.

So much for getting a chance to watch him at rest to assuage her own curiosity that he was just as heart-achingly handsome as she believed he was.

With a little rest, she thought she might see him differently now.

But she hadn't planned on being caught trying to get a look.

"Sage?"

She swore she heard him smile.

"You don't have to sit with me, but if you do... We don't have to watch TV or even talk. I bet you're still in pain."

She stepped out into the living room. "I should put the sling back on," she shrugged, "but I need both arms to take care of Milo."

Sage watched as he shifted on the couch and set his feet on the ground.

"If you're hurting, Sage. Wear the sling."

He made it sound so easy.

And it sounded like heaven since her arm really was starting to hurt after her shower.

"I can handle the pain," she spoke quietly, but she was sure he heard her. "They gave me a prescription for pain medication and-"

"Come and sit down, Sage. Let me help."

Let him help.

The way he said the words, the strength of his voice, it was nearly impossible to ignore the pull he had on her.

So she didn't ignore it, because as much as she'd had to stand on her own two feet for what felt like forever, she wanted him to help.

She wanted to feel what it was like to have Callan take care of her.

If only for a little while.

Sage walked over to the couch and sat down beside Callan. He didn't immediately move to touch her, but he spoke softly into the half-dark room.

"Go ahead, Sage. Move closer. Let me have your arm."

She leaned into his warmth and held out her arm to him. It was only then that she realized he'd have to turn her into him so he could easily take hold of her arm.

“Come here.” He reached out and lifted her legs, bringing them across his thighs. He laid them over his legs and reached around behind her back to tuck a pillow in behind her.

When he sat back, he put his hands around her forearm and held them there.

Just the warmth from his skin eased some of the pain in her arm.

The two of them sat there as the TV continued to flicker with images from the show that was playing.

Just as she was about to doze off from the heat alone, he started to move his hands over her arm. His fingers delved into her aches and soothed away some of her pain.

It was strange to realize how wonderful it felt for him to touch her, and even better, how easy it was just to spend some quiet time with him.

When her sister was sick, Sage would yammer on to fill the quiet, hoping to take her sister's mind off of the pain.

With her sister gone, it was usually Milo who spoke to keep their minds off of the pain and grief that they'd been feeling.

But with Callan?

It felt like there were words enough without a single one spoken.

CHAPTER NINE

The next day, Callan went back to Station Seven on shift, and while Milo and Callan seemed to take it the hardest, a call came in just after Callan left with some great news.

Sloane was going to pick them up and bring them to the Helping Hearts Community Center.

When she woke up that morning, she found that Callan had been busy.

He'd washed her clothes so that she could wear her own things if she wanted to.

Sage didn't want Sloane to think she was wearing the same thing over again, so she borrowed one of Callan's Station Seven t-shirts to wear over her bra. It matched her pants well enough and having his shirt on gave her a kind of courage she wasn't sure she could have mustered on her own.

Sloane may be a genuinely wonderful person, but she was also something like Texas royalty. The King Family were ranchers from the early 1900s and their influence was a part of the state as long as many people could remember.

But Sloane didn't act like she saw herself that way. She was sweet. Gentle. Humble.

And she treated people in a way that made them feel... important.

Milo was the one who saw the car pull up and although he knew not to open the door unless she told him, he threw open

Callan's door and ran out onto the porch. "Missus Bravo!! Missus Bravo! You came!"

Picking up her wallet, Sage slipped it into her pocket and stepped out a moment after her nephew. "Milo..."

He must have heard her tone of voice, and his head whipped around. "The door! I'm sorry, Aunty Sage."

Sage worried that he might cry and she didn't want to hurt him like that. The rule was for his safety.

"No problem, sweetie. I know you're excited." She mussed his hair. "Can you tie your shoelaces so we can get the show on the road?"

"Right!" He snapped and bent down to tie his shoelaces. Sage waved at Sloane. "I'll grab his car seat and we'll be ready to go."

Sloane waved away her words. "I've got an extra seat in the back. Milo's the same size as Lora, I think. So they can sit in the back together." She waved them forward. "Let's go!"

Sage had a momentary heart attack when Milo all but launched himself from the porch. She took a step back and locked the door with the extra key that Callan had left for her.

And when she got out to Sloane's bright white QX60, all Sage had to do was give Milo's belt harness a tug and then close the door.

When she climbed in to the passenger seat, she gave Sloane a grin. "Lora is gorgeous."

Her hair matched Sloane's tawny tresses, but her face must look more like her father's Hispanic heritage.

"Thank you, Sage. Just wait until we get to the community center. Lora's become our child ambassador. She helps all of the kids get their bearings. Sometimes, she's a little... um... commanding, but I think she gets that from both her father and I. She's a problem solver."

"That's great. My sister used to be like that when we were younger. She really took charge of things." Sage looked into

the rear-view mirror and saw the two kids kind of sizing each other up.

“Don’t worry about them.” Sloane reached over and gave her hand a squeeze. “They’ll get along just fine.”

Sage smiled back at her. “I know... or at least I think I know. I told Callan last night that I’m worried. Like I’m failing Milo in some way, or many ways. It’s just... a lot of responsibility.”

“And you don’t think you can do it?”

“I know I’m trying my best, but I’m just not sure that’s enough.”

Sloane tipped her head back toward the rear of the car and Sage looked into the rear-view mirror.

Lora was sharing a zippered bag of crackers with Milo.

“Thanks,” his soft voice reached the front of the SUV. “These are yummy.”

“And healthy,” Lora replied. “Dad makes sure we eat healthy all the time.”

The two women shared a look and then smothered a giggle as Lora’s tone was mostly matter-of-fact, but carried a little bit of a sigh to it.

“Don’t worry too much,” Sloane gave her a nod, “even when you give birth to them, the worry is there. I’m always thinking I’m missing something. Or that I’ll make a horrible mistake, but if you lead with love, I’m sure you’ll be just fine.”

“Lead with love.”

Sage repeated the words and let them sink in.

“I think I can do that.”

Sloane came to a stop at a red light and grinned from ear to ear. “I know you can.”

THE HELPING HEARTS COMMUNITY CENTER was huge, but every inch felt like a home.

Sloane hit the ground running when they arrived and Sage found herself quickly pulled into a class in the kitchen for one-pot meals.

It wasn't a hardship, especially when she saw the teacher of the class.

Viviana Blaise made sure to bring her up to the front and introduced her to the other ladies. The class was very informal, but it was even more informative, as it included hints and tips about how to avoid kitchen fires.

When the class was over, the children were brought in from the gymnasium.

Sage was breathless after Milo pointed out the two teachers who had been giving a P.E. class and gave her a detailed rundown of all their activities, including how Lora could do cartwheels and round offs.

Sage helped Viviana and a few of the other women dish out the meals that they'd learned to make and the children all got a tasting portion.

Milo surprised her, as he always dug into his meals with what Kait had politely called 'zest.' But when Sage finally sat down beside Milo, she noticed that he was taking great care with his fork.

He didn't heap the food on the tines as he normally did. Instead, he put a decent amount of food on it so there was hardly any danger of it falling off of his cutlery.

Sage almost said something about it to him, but that's when she noticed how he lifted his gaze across the table.

As Sage reached for her water with her left hand, she knew exactly why Milo was taking such care.

Lora was a neat little girl. She probably got it from both of her parents, but she also looked like a child who just liked doing things in a certain way.

When she set down her glass, Sage noticed that Lora was looking at her.

“Milo is very nice.” Lora’s tone was straight forward and she had a soft smile on her lips. “Melissa tripped and fell, but before she could cry, Milo got down beside her and told her she was okay.”

Sage was happy to hear that.

“Normally Melissa cries a lot, but not today. She tripped again and before anything else happened, she looked at Milo and said that she was okay.”

Milo looked up at Sage and his smile was a mix of modesty and pride. “It was cool, Aunty Sage. You and mom always told me the same thing, so I said it, too.”

Sage reached over and rubbed his back. “You’re a good guy, Milo.”

There was a moment of something in Milo’s eyes, a silent question that she didn’t know how to define. Before she could figure out a way to ask, Milo spoke.

“Like Fish?”

Oh.

That got her right in the heart.

“You think Fish is a good guy?” She knew her own answer for that, but she didn’t want to color Milo’s image of Callan.

Milo leaned in and tugged on her sleeve so she could hear him better.

She didn’t think he would say anything negative about Callan, but she wouldn’t force him to speak out loud at a table full of people that he had just met.

Sage felt Milo’s breath against her cheek like a kiss.

“He’s so much better than that man.”

“You mean-”

“That man who hit our car. He scares me.”

His simple words took the air right out of her.

Milo's hand smoothed the fabric of her sleeve and his eyes dropped to watch what he was doing instead of meeting her eyes.

"Fish is super cool." He smiled. "I want to stay with him and you, like a family."

Tears threatened to flood her eyes, but she held them back... barely.

"Well, we're staying with him right now, sweetie. That's great, isn't it?"

There was a heartbreaking moment of silence between them.

"Hello, Milo!"

They both turned and saw Viviana Blaise standing beside them.

Bending down, she looked Milo in the eye. "When I first saw you, you were fast asleep in Callan's arms."

Milo's forehead furrowed in confusion.

Viviana brightened. "Sorry, Fish. I tend to call him Callan, but my husband and the other firefighters call him Fish."

Milo smiled back and snapped his fingers. "That's right."

The gesture stunned Sage, as she'd never learned to snap. That was something that Kait could do.

"I was wondering." Viviana looked at Milo first and then Sage. "After I'm done here and the kitchen is cleaned up. I'm heading over to see my husband at the firehouse. Would you two like to go with me?"

"Fish?" Milo almost fell off of his chair as he turned around. "We get to see Fish?"

"Well, it always depends on what's happening. The guys might be out on a call, helping people, but if they're there. We can see them."

Viviana turned to Sage. "I know I should have asked you first, but Ethan called me and said Callan was a little mopey."

Viviana gave Milo a gentle pat on his shoulder. “My husband said that Callan... Fish has been talking about you two all day at the station.”

Milo looked like he was the king of the world.

His chest puffed up and he looked at Sage. “So we can go, right?”

“Sure.” She was secretly pleased at Viviana’s words. “As long as we’re not going to be in the way at the station.”

“They get visitors all the time. Curious people from the community stop by to take tours. Some people come by to get their blood pressure tested.”

Milo’s brow furrowed again, but it was Lora who asked the question.

“Why don’t they go to a hospital or the doctor?”

“Smart girl.” Viviana gave her a wink. “A firehouse is always open and-”

“Hospitals are expensive if you’re just checking someone’s blood pressure, *mija*.” Sloane kissed the crown of her daughter’s head. “How is lunch, Lora?”

“Delicious, mama.”

Sloane looked at Milo with a soft smile. “How was your playtime in the gym?”

“Super cool! We had a great time!”

Sloane took a seat next to her daughter and let Lora feed her a few bites from her plate. The conversation around her continued and Sage just let the energy of the room rush around her.

It was great to see Milo smiling and talking, his energy building as he ate his lunch, but he still took care to scoop things onto his fork like Lora had done.

“Oh, Sage.”

She turned and saw that Hildie had joined them at the table, turning slightly to the side and rubbing her very

pregnant belly. “How are you feeling?”

Hildie sighed, but her smile lit up her face. “Great except for my ankles. I look like I have two tree trunks for legs.”

Sloane leaned in and nudged her friend with her shoulder. “You know Jake will rub your feet when you get home.”

Sage and Hildie blushed. She knew what would likely happen after the foot rubs. The way that Jake looked at his wife... well, it was heated.

“Oops,” she turned back to Sage, “I forgot to tell you what I sat down to tell you.” She rolled her eyes. “This pregnancy brain is getting to me.” Hildie leaned her elbow on the table. “Jake has some information for you. When you have some time where you can talk about... adult things... just let us know and Jake will come by to talk to you.”

“Adult things?” Milo’s voice piped up through the noise of the room. “What’re adult things?”

Sage could see Hildie blush at the question. She probably hadn’t anticipated the question.

And Sage didn’t have an answer either.

It came down to little Lora to save the day.

Setting down her fork, she shrugged. “Probably car registrations or insurance, but given that it’s Uncle Jake, it’s probably stuff with the Texas Rangers.”

Milo nodded thoughtfully, but before Sage could say anything, he looked up at her. “The baseball team or the TV show?”

Phew.

* * *

WHEN CALLAN SAW Viviana’s car pulling into the drive, he called out down the hall. “Chief! Chief!! Your wife is here!”

Chief Blaise walked out of the bunker gear room with a wince. “No need to yell, Fish.”

Callan gestured at the drive. “Just thought you’d like to know that your wife is here.”

The chief folded his arms across his chest. “She’s not the only one.”

“Fish!! Fish!”

The breath in his lungs rushed out and he turned to look at the driveway.

Milo was halfway out the window and he could hear Sage’s shocked voice as she tried to get him to wait.

He saw her struggling with her seatbelt, so Callan took off running.

“Hold still, Milo. Hold on, okay?”

“Hurry, Fish!”

Callan got to the side of the car and a moment later, Milo launched himself out of the window.

Callan had him securely in his arms a second later. “Hey, buddy. It’s so good to see you!”

“I know, right?” Milo giggled and pointed over his shoulder. “Aunty Sage looks green.”

Callan turned around and looked at Sage. She was leaning heavily against the open door. “You okay?”

Milo giggled again. “We’re okay, Fish. You’re okay, Fish. We’re aaaaaaall okay!”

Sage held up her hand. “I’ll be fine as soon as my heart stops pounding against my ribs.”

Callan looked at the little boy and ruffled his hair. “How are we supposed to get out of the car?”

Milo’s shoulders sagged a little. “We’re supposed to wait.”

“That’s right, buddy. We’re supposed to wait.” He gestured at the big pumper truck that was on the apparatus floor. “See that?”

“Whoa! That’s huge!”

“Well, that’s one of our trucks and everyone on the truck has an important job to do. What do you think happens if one of the guys on the truck does something if it’s fun, but doesn’t think about his safety?”

“He might get hurt.”

“And if he gets hurt?”

“Then there aren’t enough people to do the job?”

Callan hesitated. It wasn’t exactly true, but he thought it got the point across. He looked at Sage and saw her smiling at him.

That was good, right?

“I’m sorry, Fish.”

He cringed inwardly as he saw a tear slide down Milo’s cheek.

Callan didn’t make a big deal about it. He lifted his hand and brushed his tear away. “As you said, buddy. We’re all okay.”

“You look happy, son.”

Callan looked up and saw the chief standing just a few feet away with his arm around his wife. “Thanks, Chief.”

Viviana beamed at him. “Ethan said you were missing them today. So I thought I’d bring them by after our day at the center.”

He looked at Sage again and his instinct was to wrap his arm around her and walk with both of them in his embrace, but he held back, wondering if he should touch her at all.

He didn’t want to scare her or make her feel awkward, but he wanted to hold her. After their time on the couch the night before, he wanted more time like that.

“Hey, it’s that kid!”

Callan’s choice changed as the other guys on his crew came rushing out of the firehouse.

As they gathered around, Callan introduced them, starting with his shift leader. “This is Cowboy, he’s the leader of our shift.”

“I remember! Hey, Cowboy! I heard you ride horses.”

Callan cringed. Yeah, he’d talked about Cowboy. He was really nervous and a little jealous. He didn’t want to share this time with the others.

Cowboy leaned forward and gave the boy a fist bump. “Love to ride. You?”

“I’ve ridden a pony.”

“That’s great!”

Callan gestured at the other guys. “This is Rush, Peace, Rook, Caddo, Rhett-”

“Rhett?” Sage gave him a curious look.

“Yeah. His last name is Butler. And no, he doesn’t know anyone named Scarlett.” The last of the group reached in and put a toy fireman’s hat on Milo’s head. “I’m Abe.”

Rook gave Callan a chin lift. “Milo? You want to come with us and tour the firehouse? We’ll give your aunt and Fish a few minutes to say hi, okay?”

“Okay.”

Callan put Milo down on the ground and right away Rush and Rook took his hands.

He slipped his hands in his pockets and looked at Sage. “Rook is dating the chief’s daughter, Aylin and Rush, well he’s got a little girl of his own. Milo’s in great hands.”

“I’m not worried.” She shook her head. “I think everyone here is pretty wonderful.”

“Everyone?” Yeah, he was hoping for a yes. He wanted her to think he was great. That was understandable, right?

“Everyone, sure.” She turned and took a couple of steps toward the firehouse.

He made sure to catch up and walk easily beside her. “But maybe, one of us... might be your favorite?”

She paused in the opening of the apparatus floor and looked up at him with a smile. “That guy Abe gave Milo a firefighter hat.”

“So Abe is your favorite?”

He saw her hold back a giggle and he smiled ear to ear, looking at her.

Callan wanted more days like this for her. Smiling. Flirting. At least, that’s what he was hoping she was doing.

Sage deserved happy days.

Milo, too.

“Viviana said you were missing us today.”

Callan leaned in a little closer, more that ready to admit the truth. “Yeah. I hated leaving you guys at home today. If I could have gotten a replacement, I would have stayed.”

Sage shook her head. “It was fine. Sloane picked us up and Milo and Lora are becoming friends.”

He loved seeing her smile.

“I got to take a cooking class from the chief’s wife and the meal was Milo approved.”

“That sounds fun.” He licked his lips and she lowered her gaze to his mouth.

Wow.

“It was fun. Maybe I can make dinner for you the next time you’re home. It’s not fancy or anything but-”

“I’d love it.”

They both paused and looked at each other.

“I really needed to see you.”

“I missed you today.”

They both looked at each other, smiling. Almost laughing.

“Great minds?” He grinned at her.

“Either that, or a little crazy,” she lowered her gaze and her tongue swept over her lower lip, “but I’m okay with either option.”

“Yeah,” he leaned in a little more, “I’m good, too.”

“So, you’re on shift until tomorrow morning?”

He nodded and felt his heart kick hard against his ribs. Was he actually flirting?

Or at least trying.

He really wanted to flirt, but only with her.

Damn, she was beautiful.

“Maybe when I get back to the house, I can take you guys out to breakfast?”

“Sure. And then I’ll make dinner for us.” Her cheeks were pink, blushing. “And if you’re serious about taking us to meet your family. I’d like for us to go.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. If you want us to go. I think it would be great for Milo and I... I want to meet them. I know you all but raised yourself for most of your life before you started with the fire department, but I could hear it in your voice when you talked about your extended family... How much they mean to you.”

“I was hoping that you’d agree to go with me.”

She was nearly breathless, her eyes widening.

“Sage?”

He took another step closer and he was nearly pressed up against her, breathing in her scent.

She swallowed and he saw the movement of her neck just under her chin.

He wanted to kiss her there.

“Sage.”

He just wanted to kiss her.

“I...”

The siren on the apparatus floor blared above their heads and Callan took a step back from her to get his heart back under control.

“Station Seven - House Fire - Aspen Street. Station Seven - House Fire - Aspen Street.”

The whole station seemed to erupt with people. All of the men on his shift poured onto the floor.

“Sage-”

“Go.” She gestured at the firetruck. “Go. Be a hero.”

“Fish! Come on, man!”

He waved at Cowboy and then pulled Sage into his arms in a quick hug.

He whispered into her ear. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning for breakfast. Get some rest.”

“I will.”

“Come on, Fish!”

He gave her a smile and dashed off, nearly jumping into his gear where he’d laid it out beside the truck.

Even with his ‘late start’ he beat Cowboy and Abe into the truck.

As the truck pulled out of the building, he leaned his head out of the window and saw Milo in Sage’s arms, waving both hands at him.

Callan got one arm out of the window and waved back.

When they were out of eyesight of the station, he sat back in his chair.

“You’ve got it bad, man.”

Callan lifted his head and looked at Rush. “You think so?”

Rush chuckled and shook his head. “You’re already in love with her... With both of them. I know how that goes.”

Callan nodded at his friend and felt the warmth in his chest grow as he thought of Sage and Milo. Rush was right.

Rush was so damn right.

CHAPTER TEN

When they got home later that day, Sage didn't have to worry about what to make for dinner. Hildie, Jake, Sloane, and Lora stopped in. Food in hand.

And with some games.

It was hard enough to get Milo to eat when he kept eyeing the games on the coffee table. He probably only ate what he did because he was copying Lora the whole time.

When she asked to be excused from the table, it almost made Sage cry to see Milo get up and point to himself. "Can I go, too?"

Sage pressed her lips together and Milo stammered out a quick addendum.

"May I go, too?"

"Yes," she grinned at him. "You may."

Hildie was the first one to speak as Jake leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "I think Milo has a bit of a crush on Lora."

Sage's gaze flickered to Sloane's face first.

Sloane chuckled softly. "Lora thinks he's nice. And told her dad about him on the phone when he called to say he couldn't join us tonight."

Sage didn't ask where her husband was. Given the fact that he was a Special Agent with the FBI, she didn't think she should.

Jake gestured at the iced tea pitcher. “Anyone want a refill?”

Hildie held up her glass. “You’re just trying to seduce me with cold drinks, aren’t you?”

Sage watched as Jake blushed a little. “I know you like iced tea.”

He filled her glass and when he set the pitcher down, Hildie gave her husband a slow, heated kiss.

Sage turned to watch the kids over at the coffee table and thought of her visit to Station Seven. Thought about the kiss she thought she was about to get when the fire alarm sounded.

Sloane leaned in and gestured at the couple across the table. “Hildie practically lives on sweet tea.”

“Sweet tea?”

“Sadly,” Hildie sighed, “my sugar numbers are high and my OB is worried. So I’m living off of iced tea now and dreaming about the sugar.” She rubbed her belly. “It’s all going to be worth it.”

Sage smiled even though her memories of Kait’s pregnancy were filled with anxiety and frustration. Richie didn’t make any part of it easy.

“Sage? Do you want me to tell you what I found out about Richie? Or do you want me to leave it for you to read later?” He laid a folder on the table and touched his fingers to the cover. When he looked at her, Jake’s eyes were darkened with emotion.

It was hard to see him as a law enforcement officer when he was being so kind.

The officers that she’d dealt with when she was living with Kait, were nothing like him. They were cold and impersonal. But worse than that, they were dismissive.

“I don’t know.” It was the truth. Part of her wanted to read it alone, but she was also afraid of what she’d find in his research. “Maybe you could give me the Cliffs Notes version?”

Jake smiled at her. “Those were always my favorites. I wasn’t all that big on the books.” He turned to look at Hildie with love and admiration in his eyes. “I hope our baby gets your love of reading, honey.”

Hildie melted at his sweet words. “I’m so lucky to have you.”

I’m lucky to have Callan.

The words in her head shocked her, but not completely.

It seemed like since she’d met him, and before he’d crawled into her wrecked car to rescue Milo, her thoughts had been filled with Callan.

“Sorry,” Jake apologized with a deeper flush to his cheeks, “I get a little carried away. First time dad jitters.”

Sloane shook her head. “It doesn’t go away, enjoy the love.”

Jake nodded and turned back to Sage. “During the time that Richie was away from your sister, most of the time he was in prison in Nevada. He’d beaten a woman half to death, and in Vegas, there are cameras everywhere.

“He didn’t have much of a defense, so he served the better part of four years.” He held up his hand. “I know, he should have been in for a longer sentence but he turned informant and got out early.”

“Okay,” Sage nodded her head slowly.

“And I did a little digging into your sister’s will and other things related to her passing.”

Sage lifted a hand and placed it over her heart. Jake hadn’t said much, but she had a feeling that he was about to drop a bomb.

“You mentioned something about your sister’s life insurance.”

Sage leaned back, her brow furrowed. “Did I?”

Before he reacted to her question, her words flooded back into her head.

“I did.”

“Well, there’s a bit of a problem.”

Her stomach turned over. “What kind of a problem?”

Sloane put a hand on her shoulder. “Sage? Breathe.”

Hildie poured a new glass of tea and set it in front of her. “Take a sip.”

Sage did and held the glass in her hand, happy to have the cold glass against her palms.

Jake opened the folder and flipped to a page near the back. He turned it around and set it in front of her.

“I don’t know if your sister was misinformed but the life insurance was put in place by her employer.”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

“The life insurance beneficiary is her employer.”

The words went into her ears, but still, it took her a moment to understand them.

“The beneficiary is her employer. So the money goes to them.”

“Yes.” Jake nodded, but he didn’t look happy about it. “It’s something businesses are doing. They consider that if they lose an employee because... because-”

He stopped talking and Sage was grateful for it. She’d heard the words more than enough. She didn’t have to hear it again. She didn’t *want* to hear it again.

Taking in a breath, she spoke. “Because it’s expensive to replace employees.”

“Like it’s not a loss for the family.” Hildie was almost growling under her breath.

“Okay, so no insurance money. That’s fine.” She let out a breath. “I can get a job and take care of Milo. That’s not a problem.”

“And we’ll be able to help you find a job, Sage. That’s not a problem either.”

Sage looked at Sloane and swallowed at the lump in her throat. “Thank you.” She looked at Hildie and Jake, too. “Thank all of you. Having your help and support means the world to me.”

“Hey,” Jake touched the folder again. “I wanted to see if you’d let me track Richie down.”

Sage knew deep down that Jake wasn’t going to do anything that would be dangerous for her or Milo, but the panic she felt was real.

“Why?”

Sloane moved her chair closer to Sage and the soft scrape of the chair legs against the floor turned two little heads from the living room.

“Mama? Is everything okay?”

Sloane smiled at the kids. “We’re all good, *mija*.”

“Okay, mama.”

Sloane took Sage’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I told her the truth, Sage. We’ll make sure it’s okay. Just tell us what you’re worried about.”

She licked at her lips, worried. Turning to Jake, she asked him. “Why?”

Sage knew what her voice sounded like. Tight. Strained.

It was a tone of voice she tried to hide from Milo.

“What’s the point of talking to him, you mean?” Jake nodded. “I know what you’re thinking, but please, listen to me.”

She blew out a breath and hated how light-headed she felt. “Okay.”

“There’s more in the report, but I think if Richie knew that there wasn’t any money. If he had concrete proof that there wasn’t any money, he’d leave you two alone.”

Hildie stroked Jake’s shoulder. “That’s good thinking, babe, but maybe stop emphasizing the money thing. Hmm?”

Sage almost smiled. Those two were so perfect together.

“It’s okay, Hildie. I get it. I see the logic in it. And the money?” Sage shook her head. “It always sounded like some kind of pie in the sky thing. When Kait mentioned it I thought she was a little high from the cancer treatments, but she said it over and over again when she came down from the high and she was so certain.”

Sage’s thoughts turned inward and she felt like the world was pressing in on her again.

Even with her new friends around her, supporting her, it felt like she was alone.

Achingly alone.

“Aunty Sage?”

She closed her eyes, tight. Squeezing them shut.

“Aunty Sage?”

She felt Milo’s hand gently patting her on the back.

“Are you okay?”

Oh god.

Sage opened her eyes and saw Milo watching her.

In the back of her head, she remembered when Kait would put a smile on her face even when she felt like throwing up and fainting dead away. Kait told her that it didn’t matter if she felt like her guts were about to burst out of her body. She wanted Milo to feel safe.

So Sage smiled at him and it was strange how real it felt. Sage grasped his cheeks and gave him a smacking kiss on his forehead.

Instead of sounding like he might hurl, Milo leaned into the kiss.

If she wasn’t sitting down, her knees would have buckled.

“I’m okay, Milo.”

He leaned in, his eyes searching hers. “Are you sure?”

“You love me?”

He wiggled closer and put his head against her heart. “Of course.”

“And I love you, little man. I’m going to be okay, no matter what.”

“All right, Aunty Sage. We’ll be okay together.” He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight.

Sage rocked them back and forth and promised silently to make it happen.

* * *

AFTER MILO FELL ASLEEP, Sage laid awake, looking out of the window. Milo had been so excited with Lora in the house that he’d ended up running himself into exhaustion.

She was grateful for the quiet time to think.

Spending so much time with Callan seemed to put him front and center in her mind after Milo. And spending the night apart was a good idea, even if it was because of his work schedule.

Everything seemed to be working at breakneck speed. One minute she was running from Richie, scared stiff by the danger they were in and the next she was waking up in a hospital room with her nephew cradled in Callan’s arms.

Just the sight of him holding Milo, soothing the boy in his sleep, was more than she’d ever dreamed of.

“What’s going on in your head, Sage?”

She closed her eyes and with her hand on Milo’s back, Sage’s memories came flooding back.

It had gotten to the point that the light hurt Kait’s eyes and her sister hated the way she looked so much that she really liked being in a half-dark room most of the time.

One night, when Kait was so exhausted, the two of them laid on her bed together side by side talking like they used to

when they were little girls, late at night.

But they weren't little girls and they weren't talking about cartoons or the mean kids at school.

They were talking about the end of Kait's life and what was going to happen after.

"Come on, Sis. What's going on in that head of yours?"

Sage whispered the words along with the memory.

"I'm going to miss you so much, Kait. But, I'm going to do everything I can to raise Milo the way you'd want him to be raised."

"Well, we never had a great example growing up, sis. You're just going to have to do what we've been doing. What feels right."

"It sounds so easy, but we both know it's not."

"Oh, I think we do. It's one thing to go through the motions and quite another to care about each other. You and I, Sage? We didn't have people who cared about us."

Sage squeezed her eyes shut. *"I think that's why we love each other so much."*

"And why we both love Milo."

Sage couldn't argue with the truth.

"I'll do everything I can for him, Kait. That's a promise I can make to you. One I know I'll keep."

She could still feel her sister's frail hand in hers, but Kait's hand was infinitely stronger than her own. It was probably pure conviction, something that Kait had always had in spades.

"Sage?"

"Yeah?"

"Promise me that while you're raising Milo and being an amazing mom that you'll remember that you're a woman, too."

"You'll always be Milo's mom, Kait. I'm his aunt and I'm proud to be."

A tear painted a silvery line from the corner of her eye and down to the threadbare sheets under them.

“I want you to be his mom, Sage. He’ll want you to be his mom, too. Just wait and see.”

Before Sage could argue, Kait continued on, squeezing her hand to keep her attention.

“But you’ll also be a woman. Don’t forget to be that woman at the same time.”

“Of course. I get it.”

“No,” Kait tugged on her hand and Sage rolled on her side and then they were facing each other, *“I don’t think you do. I feel like I can look into the future and see you, hiding behind what you feel you promised me.”*

“I’m not just saying I want you to be a woman and a mom, Sage. You’re going to meet a man who makes you feel special.”

“Kait...”

“A man who makes you feel like a woman. Makes you feel attractive. Sexy.”

Sage had rolled her eyes.

“Don’t,” Kait sighed. *“Don’t do that, sis. You need to remember that you’re a person, too. Just promise me that.”*

“I promise, okay? I promise. Now, get some rest.” Sage lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of Kait’s hand.

When it had happened, she’d barely held back a shudder at how frail Kait’s hand had been. Now, with the memory rolling through her mind, Sage could only feel how precious it all was.

Kait may not be alive anymore, but she really did live on in her memory. And those memories would keep Kait alive for Milo, too.

But there was a part of Kait’s words that stuck with her as Sage opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling of Callan’s

bedroom.

She felt like a woman around him.

She felt attractive when he looked at her and wrapped his arm around her.

And heavens, when he was close to her, all she could do was remember that she was a woman.

They were staying with him temporarily.

Once they figured out where they were going to go, she was sure that Callan would be happy to have his place back to himself.

It was one thing to open his house to guests, but who wanted to have them stay forever?

* * *

IT WAS AROUND two a.m. when Station Seven had knocked down a car fire after an accident involving two Instafood delivery drivers, they were exhausted.

That didn't stop the next 911 call from coming in and sending them to a mom-and-pop hardware store just a few miles away. It seemed that Al Potter had fallen asleep in his 'He Shed' that he'd erected on the back lot of the store.

It wasn't so bad that he'd fallen asleep.

The problem was the cigar that he'd been smoking.

Awake, the scent bothered his wife and kept him out of the house.

Asleep meant that cigar could fall to the floor and burn up the carpeting in the structure.

That triggered the 911 call.

If they'd been any farther away from the store, the flames might have caught onto the piles of lumber that were stacked in the yard.

Still, with the amount of half filled paint thinner containers and spray paint canisters missing their spray nozzles, the ‘He Shed’ was a decent-sized inferno when they’d showed up.

Now, with the fire out, Rhett and Fish had the responsibility of doing the overhaul on the shed.

The flammables alone kept them busy until a little after five.

Callan looked at the LED clock on the side of a nearby bank and he wondered if Sage was getting a good night’s sleep.

He wasn’t going to if things kept up, but he’d run on less sleep than this before.

Peace walked up beside him and waved a hand in front of his face. “You still with us, Fish?”

Groaning, he held up his hands in a vague gesture. “Still breathing, I think. Although, I think I’m going to need to take a wire scrubber to my skin to get off the smell of smoke and chemicals.”

“Hey! Hey, you boys.”

Peace and Fish turned to look at Al Potter who had been wringing his hands the whole time that they’d been fighting the fire.

Peace answered him. “Yes, sir?”

“I wanted to thank you again for saving my lumber. It’s bad enough that I lost my office, but if we’d lost the lumber, I can’t tell you how much that would have hurt us.”

“It’s no problem, Mister Potter. I’m just glad that we were close to your location.” Callan liked the older man. He hadn’t started the fire on purpose and Callan couldn’t imagine what it would be like to see his business burn down after all of those years building it. “Our lieutenant is working on the preliminary report. He should have the final report done in a few days for your insurance company.”

“Yes, yes...” Mr. Potter didn’t seem too worried about the report. “Is there anything I can do for you or for your station?”

If there is, just let me know.”

Callan shook his head. “We’re just glad we could help.”

Mr. Potter looked disappointed. “Well, if you think of something, you just let me know.”

Callan smiled, but before he could walk away, he heard Caddo calling to him.

Caddo and the others came over to his side, holding a flier from the store.

Abe pulled the sales flier from Caddo’s hand and turned it around to show it to the older man. “Sir? You have any more of these beds available?”

Mr. Potter pulled his glasses from his shirt pocket and examined the flier. “Sure do. Just the one, though. It’s been a popular bed set and the missus is right proud of it, too. She’s the one who told me to order in a half dozen for the store.

“I made the mistake of telling her that we’d be stuck with these forever.”

Callan looked over at his friends, who were pulling out their wallets from under their coats.

It was Rush who turned around with a stack of bills in his hands. “We’d like to buy it for our friend here.”

Callan didn’t know what they were talking about when Rush pointed at him, so he took the flier from Mr. Potter’s hand and turned it toward him.

Damn. I have the best friends in the world, he thought to himself. Now he really wanted- no. He really *needed* to see Sage and Milo as soon as his shift was over.

He just couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It wasn't until he was almost home that Callan felt real anxiety take a hold of him.

Callan knew that she'd met with Hildie's husband, Jake, the Texas Ranger. He wished that he'd been there to support Sage, but he had a shift to work and he didn't even dream of asking them to wait.

He would ask her to tell him what Jake told her and he hoped that she would. All he wanted to do was help them.

After that, he hoped that they'd want to stay.

And the gift that they had on the truck? Well, his friends were the most amazing people he'd ever met. They'd taken one look at the merchandise in the window of the hardware store and even as exhausted as they were, they jumped at the chance to do something nice for him.

And for Milo.

The firetruck rolled up the street and he could see his neighbors starting to peek out of their curtains. Mister Fallon even put down his newspaper as he sat on his porch with his cup of coffee.

Callan lifted a hand to the older man and received a narrow-eyed look from the man, but a grudging hand lift.

"Hey, Fish."

He turned to look at Caddo sitting beside him. "Yeah?"

"Looks like you've got a little guy waiting for you."

Leaning out the window, he looked down the street and saw Milo jumping up and down on the porch.

Just when the truck was about to turn to park parallel to the curb, he saw Sage step out of the front door and his heart leapt in his chest.

“Buddy, you’re gone.”

Callan looked at Caddo and grinned. “It’s easy when you meet the girl of your dreams at work.”

Caddo shook his head and sighed. “I feel like everyone’s doing that.”

Callan gave his friend a close look. “You don’t think it can happen to you?”

With his blond hair, Caddo was someone who stood out of the group, but Callan didn’t know much about him outside of the firehouse.

Caddo shrugged. “I’m not going to make any bets on it.”

Abe laughed from the back facing seat. “Besides the other shift, which went from bachelors and one amazing bachelorette to married bliss, look at Chief Blaise!”

Caddo brightened at that. “Yeah, but I’m not sure I-”

Rush looked over and gave his shoulder a shove. “What about me? I went from hating to go home after shift to a family at the drop of a hat.”

“You mean at the drop of a little rain.” Abe gave him a knowing look.

Peace shook his head. “That was a full on storm, Abe. But you never know when you’ll bump into the right person.”

“Or,” Caddo was joining in on the fun as the firetruck eased back along the curb, “like Peace when his badass women broke the window on a car to save that baby.”

Callan had his seatbelt off in a heartbeat and launched himself out of the cab of the firetruck.

“I’m home-” *Oof.*

The air was pushed out of his lungs as Milo launched himself into Callan's arms. "You came home on the truck?"

Callan brushed Milo's bangs from his face. "Yep. It's a surprise."

Sage appeared at his side.

"It's certainly a surprise. We weren't expecting you for a bit, but Milo said he heard the truck coming."

"I did! I did, Fish!" He lifted his arms high above his head. "I heard the truck!"

"Hey, little buddy!"

"Hey, Milo!"

"What about us, little guy?"

Milo looked around Callan's shoulder and laughed. "It's the guys!"

Callan put Milo down and the little boy disappeared like a Looney Toons character in a puff of smoke."

He turned when he felt Sage touch his arm.

He saw the hesitation in her eyes, but he also felt her warmth.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's great." He meant it in so many ways. Having her near? Having that enthusiastic greeting from Milo? It was all... amazing.

"I thought, if the truck was coming..." She looked him over like she was expecting to find him injured.

And having her care about him like that?

"I'm all good. Actually, the guys wanted to come and deliver me home with a gift."

"A gift?" She was gorgeous when she was shocked.

She was gorgeous when she breathed.

"Yeah. We had a fire a few hours ago at this mom-and-pop hardware store," he saw her eyes widen in concern, "and when

we were done with overhaul-”

He saw her brow furrow a little and he lifted up a hand to smooth the skin with his fingertips.

“That’s when we make sure that there aren’t any hot spots that can flare up or any other dangers. In this case, the ‘He Shed’ in the back of the store.”

“Ooh,” she smiled and leaned her cheek against his palm. “I see.”

Wow. She was gorgeous.

“Anyway-”

“WOW! Is that for me?”

Callan turned and wrapped his arm around Sage to bring her with him.

They saw Milo staring at a toddler bed which was built to look like a firetruck.

“Oh, that’s amazing.” Sage leaned in against his shoulder and he felt his heart pounding in his chest.

“What do you think, buddy?”

Milo looked at the firefighters standing around him and burst into tears.

“Holy-”

Sage and Callan were at his side in seconds.

“What’s wrong, Milo?”

Callan saw Sage rubbing the boy’s back and Callan took a handkerchief that was given to him and wiped at the boy’s face.

“Come on, buddy.” He spoke softly to the child and tried to soothe him. “Please. Can you please tell us what’s wrong?”

“It... It...” Milo hiccupped and blinked before dragging his gaze around the circle of concerned firefighters. “It’s so awesome,” he wailed, “I don’t want to have to leave it here!”

“Oh, buddy.” Callan pulled the boy into his arms and Milo threw his arms around his neck. “You don’t have to leave it. It’s yours.”

“But... but...”

Callan looked over Milo’s shoulder and saw Sage crouched down with tears streaming down her face.

“You’re not going anywhere, little man.” Callan said the words on impulse, but it made all the difference because it came from the heart.

“I- I’m not?”

“No, buddy. You and your aunt can stay here forever.”

“Really?”

Callan refused to look at Sage because he wasn’t sure what her reaction was to his impulsive promise.

A moment later, Milo was almost choking him. With the little boy’s arms squeezing the air out of him he couldn’t make a sound, but he was laughing with joy.

Then Milo leapt out of his arms and Callan turned to see him tackling each of the other firefighters in turn.

It wasn’t long before Cowboy gave him a look signaling that they had to return to the firehouse in a few.

That’s when he had to finally face Sage.

Lifting a hand to the back of his neck, Callan gave her a wincing smile. “Uh... you want me to have them put it in the bedroom with you?”

Sage moved closer, until they were almost toe to toe and spoke softly enough that he didn’t think the others had a ghost of a chance of hearing her.

“You should have them put it in the living room.”

His eyes widened in confusion. “But-”

“I’ll sleep on the couch, Callan. You’re too tall to sleep out there.”

He had a feeling that he'd made a mistake, he just didn't know what he'd done so he certainly didn't know how to fix it.

He just didn't have the time.

"Sage, I-"

She put her hand on his chest and he felt his whole body tense from the simple contact.

If she ever touched his chest without his bunker gear and the shirt he had on under it...

"We'll talk about it later."

"Okay." He smiled and she smiled back.

Callan let out a breath in a rush before turning to his friends. "Let's get it inside."

Rhett put a hand on his shoulder. "We've got it. You take Milo and Sage inside."

Milo gave Rhett an enthusiastic thumbs up and grabbed Callan's hand. "Come on, Fish. Take Aunty Sage's hand so we can go inside."

Callan heard his friends chuckling at the little boy's orders. He knew that they'd probably joke around about it endlessly, but Callan wouldn't mind.

He wouldn't mind at all.

* * *

SAGE DIDN'T KNOW what to think.

She hated to see Milo cry and it killed her to think that he felt like they would leave his new bed behind when they left.

It was amazing to think that the firefighters had bought him the bed in the first place. Since the guys had rescued them out of the car wreck, firefighters were all that Milo wanted to talk about.

They were heroes, pure and simple.

Her problem was the promise that Callan had made to Milo.

She completely understood wanting to promise him the world. Because Milo was a good kid. He was the best. And he deserved to have a steady life.

A life where he knew he had a roof over his head and people who loved him endlessly.

The last thing she wanted to do was break a promise that was made to Milo, but she had no idea where they were going to go.

When they were going to go.

She felt like she was walking on the edge of a cliff. Or making her way across a tightrope.

It was scary enough on her own, but having Milo?

It was terrifying pretty much twenty-four/seven.

At the moment, though?

Milo was lying on his bed, his arms thrown out to the side, blissfully staring at the ceiling.

“You know what, Aunty Sage?”

“What, sweetie?”

“I think mommy’s looking down at us from heaven, smiling.”

Wow. She certainly hadn’t been prepared for him to say that.

“You think so?”

He nodded, smiling from ear to ear. “And I think she’d like Fish.”

“Yeah,” she bit into her bottom lip to keep the tears from flowing, “I think she would.”

“And I think I’m going to stay in bed all day long.”

“Uhhh, no.” Sage’s tears retreated as she laughed. “That’s not gonna happen, sweetie.”

“But-”

“But nothing, sweetie. When Fish gets home, we’re going to go get something to eat and then we’re going to pick up some groceries because we’re going to meet Fish’s family tomorrow.”

“Wait.” Milo rolled up on his side and lifted his head up so she could see him better over the bright, fire engine red bedframe. “Fish has a family besides us?”

The innocence of Milo’s words struck her square in the chest. It was another reason why she wanted to be cautious.

She liked Fish... Callan a lot.

She liked him more than that.

He was the only man who’d ever made her heart pound in her chest and her skin feel hot to the touch.

She didn’t want to leave any more than Milo did, but she knew that things were just crazy at the moment.

Given what Jake had told her, Richie might just be after Milo because he thought he’d get the money that came from Kait’s insurance.

She hoped that Jake could get a hold of Richie and tell him that there wasn’t any money.

Then, just maybe then, they could think about the future.

WHEN THEY HEADED out for breakfast, Sage couldn’t ignore the nervous looks from Callan, but there wasn’t really time to ask him about it.

Sage had a feeling that it was about the promise he’d made, but she certainly wasn’t going to have that conversation in a cafe with people around.

People that most definitely included Milo.

And any ideas of having that talk after breakfast went right out the window when she saw who was waiting for them as they walked out.

Viviana Blaise was outside surrounded by other women who were looking like they were on their way out to have some fun.

“Callan,” the chief’s wife gave him a knowing look, “I hope you don’t mind if we take Sage out for the afternoon.”

Looking more than a little uneasy, Callan turned to look at Sage. “Uh... What do you want to do?”

There was no way she was going to turn down the chief’s wife. She’d already been so nice to them, so Sage kind of felt like she had to say yes.

But there was also the fact that she liked the other woman immensely.

Sage moved closer to Callan and leaned in to speak to him softly. “Are you going to be okay with Milo?”

He shrugged, grinning at her. “I had him for hours in the hospital.”

“Hours,” she smiled softly as she spoke to him, almost nose to nose, “when he was sleeping.”

Callan leaned in to speak softly into her ear. “Like I said. I’ve got a big extended family. Just wait until tomorrow. You’ll see how many kids we have running around. And I’m Uncle Cal to all of them.”

She was shell-shocked when she felt his lips brush against her cheek. Even more so when his breath tickled her skin.

“Now, go and have fun. I’m taking Milo to the park.” He wrapped his arm around her in a hug, and she felt Milo wrap his arms around her thighs, leaning his cheek against her hip. “You’ve got your key, but we’ll be home before you are. Have a good time, Sage.”

As Callan and Milo walked away toward his Trailblazer, Milo waved to the women with a big grin on his face.

A moment after they climbed into the vehicle, Sage was surrounded by women.

Viviana introduced them all starting with her daughter, Aylin, who was dating Rook. Given the knowing looks of the other women, including Viviana, Aylin was likely to end up Mrs. Rook sooner rather than later. Then came Kylie, who was with Peace and Thora, who was with Rush.

Sage knew she'd be able to remember their names, but she didn't know if the ladies would end up liking her as they seemed to enjoy each other's company.

After the introductions, it was Aylin who seemed to speak for the rest of the group.

"We've been hearing all about you from our guys, and in my case from Rook and my dad."

Sage's smile was hesitant.

"Don't worry," Kylie grinned at her. "It's all good."

Thora's shy smile was sweet. "And I hear that Fish is over the moon to have you two at his house."

"Peace told me that Fish is taking you to see his family."

The other women nodded. "I heard that, too." Aylin gave her a wink.

"Well, I think he wants to reassure me that he's got a family who takes care of him."

"And a family full of kids," Viviana's smile made her feel warm and cared for too. "He's trying to make both of you feel at home with him."

Sage's brow furrowed a little. "How could we feel anything but? Callan's incredible."

The women looked amongst themselves, smiling and nodding.

Aylin stepped away from the group and hooked her hand into the crook of Sage's arm. Sage was happy to see that they were almost the same height. She was usually the smallest anywhere she went.

Before she realized what Aylin was doing, Sage had been pulled into the group of ladies.

“Today,” Aylin declared, “we’re going to find you a dress to wear to see his family.”

“Oh,” Sage shook her head, “no, I have a dress.”

Thora touched her shoulder. “We know you lost your things at that motel.”

Kylie piped up. “And yes, you got some things at Helping Hearts, but we want to do something for you.”

Viviana touched the side of her face in a mothering gesture that had Sage near tears. “We want to get you a dress. Just a little welcome gift to the family.”

“But-”

No one listened to her protest.

Aylin included. “Don’t fight it, Sage. You’ll find that once you catch the eye of a guy from Station Seven, it’s basically a done deal.”

The other ladies nodded and then broke into companionable laughter.

“Amen.”

“Crazy but true.”

“Absolutely.”

“Yeah, Sage... don’t fight the inevitable.”

Everyone had their say and then...

They went shopping.

* * *

DEPUTY HAYDEN HATCHER was just leaving a service call to a General George’s Washing Machines. For the third time in as many weeks, someone had jammed the coin machine at the 24hr laundromat.

The owner was finally going to fix the security cameras, but he was insisting that they set up an undercover sting to catch the vandals in the act.

It was hard to explain to him that they didn't have the manpower to station a full contingent of undercover officers at a laundromat.

While they did say they'd step up patrols in the area, at about the same time, she told him that making sure that his security cameras were in working order would likely do more to catch the vandals and discourage their behavior than increased presence of police vehicles on the street.

"Well, that went over about as well as a lead balloon." She climbed into her patrol vehicle and was about to turn back onto the road when a car roared by at a speed that would have blown her off her feet if she'd been standing by her vehicle instead of in it.

Hayden switched on her lights and her siren and peeled out onto the road. Switching on her radio, she called in the contact.

"Deputy Hatcher. Badge number Four Two Four." She continued on with her patrol on the road and her nearest cross streets.

It was hard to keep her eyes on the speeding car, which was picking up speed as it continued on.

Dispatch called back.

"Were you able to see the license plate on the vehicle?"

"No on the plates, but I think my dashcam caught it. Believe the vehicle is a white Dodge Charger with black racing stripes."

"Current speed?"

Hayden looked down at her speedometer and knew what dispatch was going to say.

"Approaching fifty miles an hour."

Dispatch called back a moment later. "Terminate the chase, Deputy Hatcher. Log the interaction and check your dashcam for the license plate and other identifying information for your report."

Even knowing what dispatch was going to say, it was still disappointing. Speeds like that were going to get someone hurt, if not worse.

Still, the chase on city streets could be just as dangerous.

It didn't make her happy.

Hayden turned off her lights and pulled to the side of the road, shaking her head.

She was dedicated to serving the people of San Antonio and Texas as a whole. Letting people get away with crimes, especially one that dangerous, got her dander up. The speed wasn't just excessive, it was criminal.

Working as a deputy for over a decade, she'd seen her share of street racers and excessive speeders. They didn't really care about the other citizens who were in danger from their actions.

They wanted to do what they wanted regardless of the laws put in place for public safety.

Jotting down some notes in her notebook, Hayden paused and flipped back a few pages to read a note that she'd written from a briefing.

Dodge Charger

Bumblebee yellow

Black racing stripes

LIC 6966 GZF

“Hmm.”

Working through her memories of the last few minutes, she tried to remember the details of the car. The last image she had in her head was of the tail-end of the car.

White.

Definitely not yellow.

But...

She remembered what she'd seen when the car whipped past her as she was coming out of the laundromat's parking

lot. She'd seen stripes. Thick black racing stripes.

Call it intuition, but she picked up her radio and called in. "I'm coming back to the station house to dock my dashcam. I think I might have located the car that Ranger McGowan has been looking for."

Dispatch responded almost immediately. "Drive safe, Hayden. We'll see you soon."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sage spent much of the early morning hours of Saturday baking and worrying about baking. It wasn't something that was too difficult, but it had been awhile since she'd had the time and focus to do something like baking.

Making meals in short term stay motels was a challenge in and of itself, but baking had rules and her brain had become a bit scattered.

When Callan had come out of his bedroom wearing a t-shirt and long legged, loose pants, she'd barely kept her hands to herself.

His hair was a bit mussed.

She had half a mind to ask him if he ever let his hair grow any longer than it was already. If he did, she'd love to get her hands on it and comb her fingers through his hair. If not, that was fine, she would like to give his scalp a little scratch when he...

She bit into her bottom lip as he reached for the coffeepot. Sage turned away to reach for a plastic container in the cupboard.

"That smells great."

She swallowed hard and kept her gaze on the contents of the cupboard. "I thought I'd make some bars to take with us."

Sage heard him hiss and turned around.

Callan had the tips of his index finger and thumb in his mouth. "Hot."

She winced. “Sorry. I didn’t think you’d touch it, or I would have warned you.”

Grumbling around his fingers, he pulled them free for a moment to speak.

“I should know better. We tell kids all the time not to touch pans or appliances in kitchens unless they have permission.” That said, he put his fingertips back between his lips.

Taking the oblong container with her from the counter, she moved back to the table. She had to keep her gaze off of Callan. Seeing him suck on his fingertips shouldn’t make her hot all over, but it was what it was.

He couldn’t have any idea that she was struggling with her attraction to him.

Trying to take her mind off of him and his fingers, Sage tried to make a light-hearted comment.

“I’m tempted to tell Milo that he’s got one up on you in that way.”

Callan pulled his fingers free again and the soft, wet smack of sound made her ache.

“Go ahead.” He grinned and she saw it from the corner of her eye because try as she might, she couldn’t quite ignore him. “It’s a good thing for a kid to know that adults make mistakes. And that there are consequences for our actions. Like me and my burnt fingers.”

Using a spatula, she brought out the bars and set them on a rack to cool enough so they wouldn’t stick to each other.

“You don’t want to put it under the cold water in the sink?”

He shrugged with his fingertips still held in his mouth.

“Oh,” she smiled, “is this like when doctors are the worst patients? You’re a firefighter and you don’t run your fingers under cold water after a burn.”

His fingers popped free of his lips and she nearly gnashed her teeth together.

That sound was enough to make her crazy, imagining his lips around other things.

“Don’t worry, Sage. I’ll be okay.”

“I worry, Callan. I care.”

“Yeah? That’s good.” He leaned in closer. “Because I care about you, too.”

She looked up at him and wow, it was like a preview of what it would be like waking up to his gorgeous face.

It would not be a hardship.

“Sage?”

“Yeah?”

She drew in a breath and swallowed. Just as she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, they heard a familiar voice from across the room.

“Aunty Sage?”

She couldn’t help but smile as Milo sat up in his new bed. “What’s up, sweetie?”

He raised his arms over his head. “Me! I’m up.”

The anticipation that she felt between them burst like a bubble, but it was fine.

Milo was the one she had to focus on. She’d made the promise to her sister to love him like her own. That wasn’t a hardship since she did love him like her own. This attraction?

Well, it might be temporary, so she had to focus on Milo, first.

Callan leaned in and brushed a kiss along her cheek. “I’ll take a quick shower and then the bathroom is all yours. And Milo’s, too.”

“Thanks, Callan. We’ll be ready to go on time.”

He stopped almost to his bedroom door and looked back at her. “You two take the time you need.”

She smiled at his understanding, but she reassured him. “I don’t take long and I’ll give Milo a shower. Less chance that he’ll try to reenact a naval battle in the tub.”

Callan’s shoulders shook with laughter. “We’ll get him some boat toys for the bathtub later.”

He was in his room just as Milo spoke up.

“What did he say about toys?”

* * *

FROM THE MOMENT they arrived at his grandmother’s farm, Callan took a deep, full breath of country air. It wasn’t just how much he loved being there at the pecan farm, it was the people that were gathered together.

His Aunt Jean and Uncle Chester were at the center of the assembled group and the first to come up and wrap Milo and Sage in big, country hugs.

That’s what his grandmother called them.

The type of hugs where you feel like you’re wrapped up in a warm quilt on a cold night.

As soon as they were released from the first few hugs, they were bounced back and forth from one happy, hospitable grin to another.

All in all, Callan counted thirty-eight of his extended family who’d gathered around them, including Janey who had just turned sixteen. She was apparently in charge of the children like Wendy and the lost boys.

She took hold of Milo’s hand and quickly announced that they were going to play in the yard.

Callan saw the shock in Sage’s expression as Milo blended right into the mass of children and whooped right off with the group.

Shaking her head, she looked up at Callan. “Did you know that was going to happen?”

He grinned and laid his arm around her shoulders. “I knew that Janey would take him in hand. I didn’t know how he’d take to the idea.”

Uncle Chester chuckled. “That’s my Janey. The pied piper of the family. Don’t you worry, Sage. We’ve got all the tables set up in the yard. We’ll be close enough to keep an eye on the group at all times.”

Aunt Jean beamed at her. “We take good care of our own, Sage.” Then she turned to look at him and Callan felt her gaze as a physical touch. “And we’re so glad that Callan came for a make up Thanksgiving. Not that we need an excuse to bring the family together.”

She held out her hand to Sage and Sage didn’t need his encouragement to put out her own hand in return.

“It’s so wonderful to have you here, Sage. Come, let’s go for a walk and I’ll show you the farm.”

Callan felt her tense under his arm and held onto her shoulder. “Aunt Jean? I was hoping I could spend some time with Sage, too.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, you can come along if you want.”

He felt Sage relax a little and as they walked, she moved easily beside him.

His aunt explained about the history of the farm and pointed out the various orchards by their age and who planted the seedlings over the last fifty or so years.

Sage asked some questions as they went along, but while they didn’t venture far from the yard, his aunt wove a story that took them back generations.

“You see that tree there?” His aunt pointed to one of the few trees that wasn’t a pecan, but it was close to the old farmhouse.

Sage turned and with the sun bright in the sky in that direction, she lifted her hand to shade her eyes. “I love the tire swing.”

Aunt Jean chuckled. “We’ve replaced that a number of times over the years. The kids in this family play hard and I think your Milo will fit right in.”

Callan wasn’t sure if his aunt was helping or hurting. He’d talked to her to prepare the family for their arrival and after he’d placed the call, he’d been thankful that he’d done it.

It was one thing to plan for the family to welcome Sage in a general way, but if he’d shown up without calling ahead, he would have been facing something akin to a warm-hearted interrogation of sorts.

“Later, when he gets older, he’ll likely be climbing up into the trees with the others.”

Sage had chuckled good-naturedly. “I don’t think I’ll ever be comfortable with him climbing trees, I still hold my breath and his hand a little too tightly just crossing the street.”

“Oh, my dear girl,” Jean gave her a gentle smile, “I know it’s hard to reckon with the fact that they’re going to grow up someday.”

Sage nodded and tilted her head back to give him a cautious look before she turned back to his aunt.

“I don’t know how much Callan told you, but Milo’s my nephew. We still haven’t worked through everything with my sister’s estate.”

Callan could see her strained expression.

“Not that it’s much of one, but I’m just trying to give him room to breathe and mourn for his mom. He’s not even mine officially. Not yet.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Callan lowered his arm as his aunt moved forward and took Sage’s hands in her own. “I’m not sure how much Callan told you about his family. And I hope he won’t be upset with me saying this in front of you both. But when Callan’s parents pulled him away from us, we didn’t really know where they’d taken him. We didn’t even really know if he knew how much he cared. We spent years wondering where they’d gone and hoped that we’d hear from him again.

“When he came back to see us and let us into his life, he told us about his parents basically abandoning him. It broke my heart,” she turned back to look at the front yard where everyone else was gathered, “it broke all of our hearts, but we were just so grateful to have him back in the fold.”

Jean reached out a hand to him and he took it.

“We call you son from time to time, but we’re very cognizant that even though we feel like you’re ours as much as Tommy, Zane, and Janey, I’m not sure you feel that close to us.

“But Chester and I were so thrilled when you decided to bring Sage and Milo with you that we decided it was time.”

A little tilt of her head brought Chester over from where he was standing at the edge of the group.

Chester wrapped his arm around his wife in nearly the same way he’d had his arm around Sage just a few moments before.

The similarity struck Callan square in his heart.

“We,” Jean looked at Chester and he nodded, “want you to know that as far as we’re concerned, Callan. You’re ours. We love you like one of our own and whatever we can do to help from here on out we want you to know that we’re here to help.”

Callan felt a little out of breath.

He’d expected his aunt to do what she could to help him show Sage that he wasn’t just a failure as a son. He wanted her to know that he had a loving family.

A family who could be a help to her. And Milo.

“That’s right, Callan.” Chester’s voice seemed a little deeper than normal and a little scratchy in his throat. He wasn’t used to seeing his uncle struggle with his emotions or his words. “You’re a part of our hearts just as much as you’re a part of our family. And if I’d known what my brother had... if I’d known that you’d been left alone, I would have jumped in my truck and gone to get you.”

Callan fought back the unexpected tears. He wasn't prepared to hear any of this. He knew that his aunt and uncle loved him. They'd made no secret of it.

He hadn't made a secret of his own emotions for them. Still, this was... more.

"I think I would have contacted you if I'd thought that there was a chance that you wouldn't reject me, too."

His aunt's indrawn breath was followed by the promise of tears, but he didn't want her to hurt for him.

"I knew that you loved me. Both of you. There was never a time when I felt unloved when I spent time with you or the others, but the fact that my parents just... that my parents just walked away from me had me questioning everything.

"It wasn't until I came back to San Antonio as an adult that I thought I had the courage to come and see you. I wanted to know one way or another if there was a place for me here."

"Son," Chester's voice was fraught with emotion, "our house is always open to you. Our family is yours, not just because my good-for-nothing brother is your father-

"He's no father and you know it, Chester."

Chester tugged her up against his side. "Hush, now, Jean. You know how het up you get."

"I get het up because Callan went through a good chunk of his life worrying that we would turn him away."

Chester put his hands on his wife's shoulders and leaned in to place a kiss on the crown of her head.

"You're such a mama bear, Jean. I wouldn't want to get on your bad side."

She shushed him gently, blushing as she did.

"You and Sage *and* Milo are always welcome here, Callan. And..."

Callan saw the shift in his aunt's expression and wondered what she was about to say.

“We have a room for you in the farmhouse in case y’all wanted to stay the night.”

Callan saw his uncle’s cheeks tighten as she continued on, but this time she was addressing Sage.

“When Callan was a little boy, he’d come here to spend whole weeks in the Summer time. The kids who were here would always grab their blankets and bedrolls and sleep out under the stars in the yard.

“I just wanted you two to know, in case you’re too tired to drive back tonight.”

Callan was about ready for the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

“Jean. I think you’ve embarrassed the boy.”

“Hardly! Right, Callan?” She turned to look at him and he struggled to put a smile on his face. “What? I’m just saying y’all are welcome to stay over.”

Before Callan could say anything, Chester stepped in. “You said he’s got a room. What about-”

“Sage? Of course she’s welcome, too. They’re both adults. If they want to stay in the same room, I’m not going to say anything bad about it. This isn’t the olden days, Chester. We’re just as hip as the rest of the world.”

Callan tried not to laugh when his uncle cringed openly at the word ‘hip.’

“Well, Jean,” his uncle wrapped his arms around his wife and hugged her gently, “let’s just say that they’re welcome to stay here any time they want and leave the room sharing decision to them. Okay?”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. It’s not like I was going to drag them in front of the Justice of the Peace, first. Honestly, Chester. I’m a modern woman! You’re just going to have to get used to it. After all-”

His uncle gave his wife a smacking kiss that silenced her.

Callan and Sage turned their heads to look elsewhere instead of watching them kiss.

He wasn't about to make a decision like that without asking Sage and really, he didn't think they'd be able to handle an overnight visit with his family just yet.

Hopefully in the future.

Yes, they'd barely had a few days together, but that didn't stop his heart from telling him what the other guys at the firehouse had figured out.

He was in love.

That didn't mean that he'd pressure Sage into anything, even sharing a bed in the most innocent of ways.

Their relationship had begun in a way that most people would think was shocking. Trying to protect her and her nephew from a man who had very nearly killed them in a car crash was a no-brainer for him. He liked helping people.

But that didn't mean he'd stay overnight in a hospital room for anyone in that situation.

He couldn't ignore the instant connection he'd felt the moment that he'd seen Milo strapped into his car seat, or the way his heart had locked onto the boy when he'd held him in his arms.

There was a part of him that had to make sure Milo was healthy. That he was reunited with the woman who'd done her very best to keep him safe.

And then there was Sage.

She made him want what his uncle and aunt had.

A tight-knit family.

Lots of love.

"Mom?" Zane, a teen very much on the verge of becoming an adult, came running up to them. "You said to come and get you when the timer went off in the kitchen."

Jane clapped her hands together. “I hope you folks are hungry. There’s quite a feast coming out of that kitchen.”

Callan saw the eager nod that came from Zane. “And thanks to Callan for working on Thanksgiving so we could have a second Thanksgiving now that he’s here.”

“Oh,” Sage gestured toward his Trailblazer, “I forgot the dessert bars I made.”

Callan smiled at the instant reaction from Zane.

The teen boy beamed at Sage. “I’ll go get it for you.”

Callan tossed his keys to the younger man. “Don’t eat them. Bring them.”

Zane looked shocked and disgusted by the idea that he’d sneak some sweets. “I have willpower.”

Chester’s cough almost covered his laughter.

Callan sighed. “I better go with you or no one else will get to try them. *I* haven’t even tried them yet.”

Zane gave him a chin lift and a wink. “Race you to the car. Winner gets to try ONE.”

Callan gave Sage a big grin. “I’ll protect the dessert.”

And then they ran.

Just before Callan got out of earshot, he heard his aunt invite Sage inside after the meal. “I’ve got a big box of photos of Callan when he was Milo’s age, including a few where he was hanging out of a pecan tree like a monkey.”

Sage’s laughter chased after him and Callan knew he wouldn’t want the day to be any different than it already was.

Perfect.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Deputy Hayden Hatcher parked her car in the back parking lot of the San Antonio Texas Rangers office and easily made her way through security by showing her badge at the desk.

Ranger McGowan's office was along the second floor corridor to the left of the elevator. There was a meeting room just a few doors down.

With the door closed, she had a feeling that something was going on in the building, but she wasn't there to snoop. She was there to talk to Jake McGowan.

He opened the door before she knocked, gesturing over his shoulder. "Security at the front desk called up to say you were here. Come on in."

Hayden stepped into his office and noticed that the large computer monitor was turned so that both sides of the desk could see it.

Once they were settled in their chairs, Jake played the footage from her dash cam. "What else did you notice?"

Hayden sat up in her chair, intrigued by his question.

It had been years since women were allowed in law enforcement, not only in Texas, but across the country, but there were still a number of men who saw female officers as an unfortunate trend.

She knew that Jake was one of the good guys. The fact that his wife was a co-founder of Helping Hearts spoke volumes

for how much he cared about women and issues related to them.

“The driver’s comfortable at high speeds. Even when I was pursuing him and our speeds were climbing, he kept control of the wheel. No skid marks, no awkward lurching as he went.”

Jake reached into his desk and pulled out a folder.

Opening it, he showed her an array of six mug shots, both the images looking at the camera and one facing the side wall.

Hayden didn’t rush to tell him which number it was. She’d seen the man as soon as the mug shots had been laid down before her, but she wanted to take a better look and make sure that she was right.

Impulse could be unreliable and she wanted to be sure.

“There,” she lifted her hand and put the tip of her finger at the bottom of the mug shot, “he’s the one.”

Jake turned the file back toward him and made a note.

Then he filled out part of a form and handed it to her. “If you could sign the form saying that you made the identification, that’ll be all I need from you.”

She signed the form and then looked up at him. “You mean, I still get to keep an eye out for him on the road.”

Jake smiled and nodded. “He’s already caused one accident and he doesn’t seem to care if he’ll do it again. So yes, I want him off the road. And once that happens, we’ll clue him in to the fact that there’s no insurance money connected to his son.”

“Money makes people do crazy things.” She stood up, but stopped before she moved away from his desk. “Is she in a safe place?”

Jake’s grin was curious.

“She’s staying with Fish from Station Seven.”

Hayden nodded. “There’s something in the water over there. You think she’s going to end up Mrs. Bass before long?”

Grinning, Jake shrugged. “Pretty sure they’re going to have a bunch of babies over there in the near future.” Jake gestured to the door. “I’ll walk you out.”

When she walked up to him, she asked, “How are things going with Hildie? Is she ready for the baby?”

“She’s a champion.”

Hayden heard the love and admiration in his voice.

“Hildie’s more than ready,” he sighed, “I’m pretty sure I’ll be a mess.”

Hayden gave him a good-natured elbow. “I doubt it, Jake. You’re going to be her rock.”

He turned and gave her a hopeful smile. “From your lips to God’s ears.”

Hayden stopped when they got to the door. Outside, in the hallway, a bunch of Rangers were coming out of the conference room.

She recognized one of them right off the bat. “Weston Cooper?”

He stopped short and backtracked to the door. “Hayden Yates! Good to see you.”

He gave her a hug and when she stepped back she pointed at the name patch sewn on her uniform. “Hayden Hatcher now.”

Weston gave her an appreciative nod. “Lucky man.”

“I’m damn lucky too,” she grinned. “What are you doing over here?”

A tall man with dark blond hair walked up to Weston’s shoulder. “I think we should ask you that question, Deputy. This is a Texas Ranger office.”

“I’d expect more interagency appreciation, Ranger Ewing.”

The ranger shrugged. “Just having a little fun, Ranger McGowan.” He finished off his answer with a close

approximation of Jake's tone.

Hayden's eyebrows rose at the strange conversation.

The ranger held out his hand. "Dillon Ewing. Team calls me Dally."

She shook his hand. "I bet there's a story behind that."

Weston drew her attention again. "We were just having a team meeting here in the conference room. We have two empty spaces on my SWAT team."

Two? She thought.

"I heard about Langston. Sorry about what happened." Jake crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. "He was a good man and a good Ranger."

Weston's expression had settled into a casual mask. "He'll be missed, but as much as we'll continue to mourn him, I need to fill the ranks on my team."

Hayden blew out a breath. "Criminals keep committing crimes no matter who we lose."

Jake lifted his chin. "Why is there another opening?"

"It's a field position. Fox was also injured in the takedown and he'll be working back into the team in the field, but if we want to be up to full strength, we'll get another member and keep Fox on negotiations."

Jake nodded. "Sounds good. Tell him we're thinking about him."

Weston nodded and turned to look at her. "What about you, Hayden? Ever thought about coming over to SWAT?"

Hayden shook her head. "I've thought about it from time to time, but Boone would have my head if I moved over to SWAT."

"It's not that big of a change."

Another man stepped forward, holding his hand out. "I'm Myles Harrison. If you want to talk about it, just give Wes a call. We have better toys than deputies get to play with."

She nodded, but she knew she had no interest in changing jobs. “I like what I do. I like the person to person interactions and law enforcement outreach.”

“You don’t want to blow things up?” Myles again.

Weston turned and glared at the other man into silence before turning back to speak to Hayden. “Don’t listen to the miscreants I currently have working for me. We could use someone steady like you. Someone with real people skills.”

“You mean someone to temper the testosterone over there.” She gestured at a few guys on the end. “That might be something you need. Just not from me, West.” She sighed. “If it was me, I might be tempted. But I have Boone I have to think about and we’re a good team,” she smiled at the other man.

“I’m sure you’ll find a couple of great additions.”

Weston sighed. “If you think of anyone, will you let me know?”

“Of course. Happy to help.” She gave him a wave and a smile. “I need to head back onto the streets and earn my keep. You guys stay safe out there.”

The SWAT team members all gave her a good-natured send off and she left the building, her mind working on a list of people who just might be right for a transfer to SWAT.

Things were going to get interesting.

* * *

LATER THAT NIGHT, after Callan had carried a heavily-sleeping Milo into the house, Sage couldn’t help but stand there and watch.

There was just something about watching Milo melt into Callan’s embrace that made her hopeful.

He’d had so much... upheaval in his life that seeing him so utterly trusting of a man, of Callan in particular, made her heart melt as much as it was breaking in a thousand pieces.

As much as she wished that her sister were still alive, Sage was selfish enough to want to keep Callan's attention on her.

And it was.

That much was evident to her, even though she'd rarely been on the receiving end of it before. At least from someone as kind as Callan was.

Tears sprung up and she wiped them away as she stepped back into the shadows.

Callan tucked Milo into his bed, and before he could stand, Sage retreated into the bedroom and even further into the bathroom.

She didn't turn on the lights but managed to see by the soft nightlight plugged in beside the mirror. She stripped out of her dress and ducked into the shower. She turned on the water and promptly burst into tears.

There was a weight that wasn't just on her shoulders, but her soul as well.

Her sister's death had gutted her and left her shaken, Milo, too.

But here she was, in Callan's house, watching him put Milo to bed, wanting to be as comfortable in Callan's arms as her nephew was.

"It's not fair."

The words were lost under the cascade of water and Sage ducked her face as she grumbled to herself.

"It's not fair."

Kait's voice echoed in her head. "*No one ever said life was fair, Sage.*"

A sob pulled from Sage's throat and then she shook her head.

No, life wasn't fair. Not for the Allen girls.

Others though.

She'd seen enough of life to know that there were so many people out there who were happy enough. They had whole families.

Parents who loved them.

A home where they were protected.

People who loved them.

Kait had been hurt so much, but she'd opened herself to love.

And what happened?

She found Richie.

He'd beat her. Demeaned her.

"But I had Milo, Sage. I would never change anything because I had him."

"But *he* doesn't have you."

Sage put her back to the wall and stamped her foot, sending water splashing up.

"He has you, sis. He has you to love him the way we weren't."

Sure. She loved Milo. She loved Milo as if she'd given birth to him herself.

"But I'm not sure that's enough. I almost got him killed, Kait. That accident? If the firefighters hadn't come to help us, there was no telling what could have happened."

"There are just some things you can't plan for, Sage. You know that."

Like cancer, she meant.

Shaking her head, Sage felt the water splash off of her hair. "Cancer sucks."

She heard her sister laughing and the sound felt good down deep in her soul.

"I miss you, Kait."

Her head was quiet.

Sage felt alone again.

Aching.

And empty.

When she cried out, the sounds of her loneliness echoed off of the walls.

* * *

WHEN HE WAS sure that Milo was fast asleep, Callan turned around thinking that Sage was standing behind him.

He'd been sure of it, but she moved away at some point.

Listening carefully to the silence of the house, he heard the rush of water coming from the bathroom.

A part of him was disappointed. Sage had looked so incredibly beautiful in her dress.

He'd known even before she put it on that she'd be stunning.

She was already heartbreakingly beautiful, but after their shopping trip, the women had all texted him with heart and flower emojis.

It wasn't their usual messages, but taking Sage out hadn't been usual for any of them.

Heck, having Sage in his life wasn't usual for him, but he was becoming more than accustomed to having her around. Milo too.

It was like they'd found parts of his life that he hadn't known were missing and filled them.

He was going to do whatever it took to make them feel not only welcome in his home, but to let them know that he wanted them to stay.

Callan moved over to the bedroom door and peeked in. The bathroom door was closed so he could go inside and get clothes to change into.

It was late and he knew he could take a shower in the morning if Sage took a while in the bathroom. He didn't mind in the least.

Crossing to his dresser, he pulled open the top drawer and pulled out a change of clothes. That's when he realized that he had a bit of a problem.

He didn't want to change out in the living room where Milo was. And he wondered if he had time to change in the bedroom before she opened the door.

Callan didn't want to scare her or make her think that he was trying to make her uncomfortable.

He was still hoping that she'd take his bed and let him sleep on the couch.

He hated the idea of her sleeping on the couch when the bed was much better.

Sage said she didn't want to put him out of his bed, but the beds they had at the station were just like his couch. She just wouldn't give in.

He shook his head and moved to the bathroom door.

Callan didn't want to bother her during her shower or bath, but he just wanted to know if he had time to change.

But he hesitated, hating to interrupt.

He dropped his head to his chest, smiling.

It might be strange to admit, but waiting in line for the bathroom in his own home... was kind of cool.

Crazy? But cool.

Callan lifted his hand to knock on the door, but before he could, he heard Sage cry out.

His heart fell and he swung the door open.

Sage was sitting on the floor of the shower, her hair wet and covering her face in every place that her hands didn't cover.

Dropping his clothes, Callan moved over to the shower door and cracked it open as he crouched down beside it.

“Sage?”

She gave a soft yelp and folded her arms over her knees, turning her face away from him.

“Sage? Are you hurt?”

He heard her struggling to stifle her sobs, but she didn’t answer him.

“Did you fall?”

“I’m... I’m just a mess.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” He tried to smile while he was talking to lighten the tone of his voice.

“Of course you’d say that.” She hunched even further over her knees. “You just can’t help being... being...” She turned to look at him and the pained look in her eyes almost broke him. “Perfect.”

She immediately turned away and he heard the harsh, indrawn breath that she took.

He wanted to help, but he had no idea how to do it. “How can I help?”

“Stop being so nice to me. I don’t deserve it.”

“Aww hell, Sage. You deserve the world.”

He meant the words, but he didn’t think she wanted to hear it.

She just cried more.

If she didn’t get out of the shower soon, she’d catch a chill, or worse. He couldn’t let that happen.

“Let’s get you out of there, Sage. And you can tell me what’s going on when you’re ready. I just can’t let you hurt yourself like this.”

Reaching up, he turned off the water.

“Stay there for a moment.”

He got up on his knees and pulled the bath towel from the rack.

Callan knew that he'd need more to wipe her down than that, but he had to start somewhere.

Stepping into the shower, he got down in front of her and took her hands. He helped her to her feet and fixed his gaze on her face.

Sage was still in her underwear and the torrents of water from the shower turned everything nearly see through, but that was neither here nor there when he needed to take care of her.

“Let's get you wrapped up.” He took the bath towel and wrapped it around her, tucking the end in so that she was swaddled in the cloth. He stepped out of the shower and went straight to the little linen closet to pull out a couple of towels.

Callan draped one over his shoulder and took the other towel to dry her hair. Even drenched, her hair was gorgeous. The dark waves fell across her pale skin and gave her eyes a delicate fringe to peek out at him.

He wasn't sure how much pressure to use to dry her hair, but he didn't want to hurt her either. “Let me know if this is too much. Or tell me how you want me to do this.”

She bit into her bottom lip as she stood there, letting him rub his towel against her head and hair. “Why?”

He didn't know what she was asking about, so he just kept drying.

“Why are you being so nice?”

“Because I care about you, Sage. I care about Milo, too. I want you to feel like you're family here. You're welcome to stay as long as you want to. And I'm here to help. When I heard you crying, I knew I had to try. Seeing you here, crying on the floor, it made me ache down to my soul.

“I'd do anything to make you feel better.”

She tilted her chin up and looked at him. “Would you hold me?”

If he hadn't already been in love with Sage, this would have been the moment when it happened.

As it was, all he could do was what she asked.

“Absolutely, Sage. Let me just get you warm first.”

The look in her eyes changed and he swore he saw heat in them.

He knew that heat. He felt it in his soul when he looked at her.

But this wasn't the time.

So, while she stood there, he continued to dry her off. When her hair fell around her shoulders in soft waves, he used another towel to dry her arms and legs beneath the edge of the towel wrapped around her body.

When that was done, he hesitated and looked up into her eyes.

He didn't know what to do about the rest. If he'd been a doctor or an EMT he might know how to keep his mind fixed on the matter at hand, but this was Sage.

And he wasn't a man who had a lot of experience with women.

Hardly any, in fact.

He just didn't want to make her uncomfortable with the way he touched her.

Sage took the decision out of his hands.

Literally.

She lifted her hands and pulled the wrap off of her body.

He'd dried her arms and legs and the soft cloth had done some good, drying some of her skin around her belly.

With a quick flick of her fingers between her breasts, her strapless bra opened up and dropped down to the wet tile at her feet.

She held out her hand and he put a new towel against her palm.

Sage grasped it and made quick work of drying her breasts. He kept his gaze averted, but he had a good imagination.

Sage placed the edge of the towel between her teeth and reached down out of sight.

She bent over slightly and a moment later, the sound of wet fabric hit the tiles.

Callan moved back to the clothes that he'd dropped near the door. By the time he turned back to give them to her, Sage was hanging up her towel, her bare backside before his eyes.

“Here,” he held out the clothes, “you can wear these.”

She held them in her hands and looked up at him, her head tilted to the side. “What about you?”

“There’s more where that came from. Go ahead and change. The clothes are warm.”

When she smiled at him, he turned to leave the room and get another set of clothes for bed, thinking that the clothes weren’t the only things warm.

His skin.

His heart.

All the way down to his soul, he was warm... No, hot to the touch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When she came out of the bathroom, the bedroom was empty. It was impossible to say how she felt about it.

Relieved?

Disappointed?

Lonely?

All of them.

But she didn't want to leave things that way.

Not that night.

Not after the eye-opening day with Callan's family.

Sage walked out of the bedroom and down the hall, stopping just inside the living room.

Callan was sitting on the couch, looking wide awake and really uncomfortable. His back didn't even touch the cushions and his hands were on his knees, like he was trying to hold them still.

Sage had never been much of a girly girl. She wasn't any kind of seductress.

But at the moment, she really wished that she was.

She wanted to feel those things.

She wanted to do those things.

She just wasn't sure he did, too.

Leaning in to almost kiss her?

Would it have happened if they hadn't been interrupted?

"Callan?"

His head lifted at her thin whisper. He turned to look at the bed in the corner of the room, first. Milo was deep asleep in his bed.

When he turned back to look at her, his soft smile made her heart ache in her chest. "You okay?"

Her instinct was to nod or say yes.

Since Kait had been diagnosed 'yes' and 'okay' were Sage's go to answers, no matter what.

But, standing there in the half-dark of Callan's house, with his warm eyes fixed on her, she made the decision to open up to him and hope he didn't walk away.

Letting out her pent up breath, Sage swallowed and answered him. "Not really."

She bit into her bottom lip as he stood up from the couch and walked over to her, his eyes searching her face.

Bracing his arm on the wall above her head, he leaned in close. "How can I help?"

"C-could you come and sit with me?"

"Sure." Callan's smile warmed her from the inside-out. "Come on." He stepped away from the wall and took her hand in his. When he took a step toward the couch, he didn't get far.

She stood still, keeping her feet planted where they were.

Callan turned back, confused. "Sage?"

She tilted her head back toward the bedroom. "In there?"

His hand squeezed around hers and she saw his eyes widen as her words struck home.

"Are you sure?"

She heard a slight tremor in his voice, and that same vibration went through her body as well.

"I'm sure, Callan, but you don't have to if-"

“Lead the way.”

She smiled and took a step back drawing him after her and into the bedroom.

* * *

ALL HE'D INTENDED to do was convince her to take his bed and let him sleep on the couch. He'd already put in an order for another bed to be delivered to his house in case Sage refused to take his room.

He wasn't about to let her toss and turn on his couch. He, on the other hand, had slept on his couch countless times. So many times he'd reached home after a crazy busy shift at Station Seven and fallen face first on his couch, only to wake up hours later.

Sage deserved better than what he used sometimes as his crash pad.

But when Sage told him she wanted him to go with her into the bedroom, he went with her.

He would be crazy not to, even though he had no idea what to expect.

Callan just wanted to have some quiet time with Sage.

She led him to the side of the bed and when she climbed up onto the mattress, she only let go of his hand the very moment that she had to. She sat with her legs folded at her side and smoothed her hand over the blanket under her.

Drawing in a breath, Callan got up on the bed and sat down in front of her, his back toward the wall.

Being this close to her, sitting where they were, he had to swallow down the feelings welling up inside him. He felt the cool air coming from the partially open window blow across his skin, but it didn't cool him in the least.

He wasn't like some of the other firefighters that he knew. They loved the female attention they got just for being from

the SAFD. They also encouraged women by flirting with them.

Callan had never been like that, but he'd also never had the swagger that the other guys had.

He was just a quiet guy doing his job.

But with Sage?

He wished he had some of that swagger, some of that surety in his own appeal. He could share his home with her. He could help her take care of her nephew. But neither of those things made him that kind of Alpha guy that so many women liked.

He just wanted to be the kind of guy that Sage wanted.

He was so fixed on her beautiful face that when he felt her touch his leg, he almost jumped out of his skin.

“Sorry, I-”

She started to move her hand away, but he covered her hand with his.

“Don't be, Sage. There's no need to be sorry.”

“Y-you jumped. I don't want to... I didn't want... I mean if you don't want to be touched-”

“I was just surprised. It wasn't that I didn't want to be touched by you. I just wasn't expecting it.”

Her hand flexed under his, and he felt his heart kick against his ribs.

Callan was both relieved and disappointed that he'd pulled on long pants when he'd changed his clothes to sleep. Wearing his normal boxers wasn't a good idea when he wasn't alone in the house.

“I was just wondering...”

She licked her lips and he barely managed to keep himself half-hard by thinking some very dry thoughts in his head.

“If you wanted to kiss me... earlier.”

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

“Oh... I-”

She started to move away, and he reached out and grabbed her arm. “Sage, wait.”

Sage stopped, but she didn’t look at him.

“Please, Sage. That wasn’t my answer.”

She turned her head and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “No?”

“No.” He tried to reassure her with a smile. “Please, let me answer you.”

He didn’t take a breath until she was sitting in front of him again, her careful eyes watching him.

Callan still had his hand wrapped around her forearm, but it wasn’t a hard, too tight hold.

He held her securely with his hand and slowly lowered his hand to hers.

“You wanted to know if I wanted to kiss you earlier? That day at the fire station?”

She nodded and he could feel the tension in her hand, in the way she held herself.

“I did, Sage. I do. Probably more than I should.”

He watched as she processed his words. The way her eyes widened. The lift at the corners of her mouth. Every little change in her face, her expression, just awed him. She was so beautiful.

Could it be that she really did want him to kiss her?

“I know that this... this whole situation feels like it’s going at light speed. Like one of those roller coasters where you feel like you might go flying off into the sky if it wasn’t for the way the car is clamped onto the rail.

“It’s the kind of feeling like your heart is in your throat and there’s a bit of fear under it, but more than that, you feel like gravity is almost about to let you go.

“That’s what I feel with you, with Milo. I feel like gravity hasn’t really had a hold of me since I met you. I feel, Sage. I feel so many things that I can’t even tell you all of them because I don’t think I understand them all myself.

“But I do know that I want to kiss you. I want to hold you and keep the rest of the world from hurting you. And some day I want to love you... make love to you. Make a family with you.”

She was silent when he stopped talking and he worried that he’d gone too far.

Said too much.

Oh god, he hoped not.

He should have-

“Callan?”

His mouth went dry when she flattened her hand on his thigh and brought her legs underneath her body and reached out to lay her free hand on his other leg.

“Callan?”

She leaned in closer and his heart was beating so fast he swore he was in danger of passing out right there.

“Y-yeah?”

“I want to kiss you.”

Holy-

He wet his lips and struggled to pull in a breath.

“Is that okay?”

He felt himself get hot all over. “Yeah... yeah. It’s more than okay.”

She moved her legs closer and one knee bumped into his shin, tipping her forward.

Callan reached out his hands and found her waist and hips, holding her steady. But it had the opposite effect on him.

He fought off the urge to pull her against him, set her in his lap, and slant his lips across her mouth.

But there was no way that he was going to stop her from what she wanted to do.

He'd wait until she was ready, no matter how long it took.

Sage didn't make him wait.

He closed his eyes when she did, drifting into a kind of spell at the honeyed scent of her skin and the warm brush of her breath.

The kiss was soft. Gentle.

Barely there.

He worried that he might have imagined it.

But she kissed him again and he felt it down to his toes and every inch of him in between.

It was magic. A simple press of her lips against his and then a slow, sensual rub.

His hands trembled where they held her, his throat constricted, holding back the soft moan of arousal that welled up inside of him.

When she leaned back, he opened his eyes, desperate to make sure that he hadn't imagined her touch.

Then she opened her eyes. The flutter of her lashes lifting from her pale cheeks fascinated him, but so did the look of wonder he saw in her eyes.

He hoped she saw the same in his.

"Wow."

He smiled at her assessment.

"I know," he let out a shaky breath, "amazing." He swept his tongue over his bottom lip as he thought of how he should ask her if he could kiss her, too.

"Callan-"

His eyes lifted to find her gaze again, and then it happened again.

This time, her hands moved up his chest and as she moved closer, his hands slid around to her lower back, tantalizingly close to the curve of her-

Sage wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again, falling against his chest.

His hands fumbled to hold her and one arm ended up around her waist and the other at the back of her thigh, his thumb touching the underside of her cheek.

As she shifted against him, he pulled her into his lap. He'd already been half-hard before the first kiss, but right then and there, he was hard and aching.

She slanted her lips over his and he opened his mouth under hers.

He felt the soft touch of her tongue against his and slid the arm up from her waist to cup the nape of her neck in his hand.

Sage shifted against him and he groaned into her mouth.

He regretted it the moment it happened, because she pulled away, her eyes filled with concern.

“Did I hurt you?”

Hating himself for it, he lifted his hand from her thigh and cupped her face with both hands.

She looked so beautiful and precious, he couldn't believe that she was there with him, her arms twined around his neck, his lips swollen with her kisses.

Her own lips plump and warm as well.

“Right now,” he leaned in and pressed a long, searching kiss to her lips, “nothing hurts. I'm holding you. Kissing you. The world as far as I'm concerned is a wonderful place.”

“Oh,” she smiled, her eyes a little dark and unfocused, “it sounded like you were hurt.”

“It’s...” His lips pursed together as he tried to hide his smile. “It’s a good kind of pain, Sage.” His hands lowered from her face and gently skimmed over her back until they settled over the gentle swell of her backside.

Callan drew her closer until they were flush against each other, and he could tell the moment she felt it.

Felt him.

Her lips parted on a soft gasp.

“Callan...”

“I’m not expecting anything, Sage. I just wanted you to know that yes, I want to kiss you.

“I want to touch you, too.”

His heart was throbbing in his chest and he knew he had to tell her.

“I’m not all that experienced with... with sex. I just haven’t found a woman who made me feel like I feel with you.”

Her eyes said that he’d stunned her.

Her breaths deepened at first and then they sped up, her shoulders rising and falling as they held each other.

“What if...” Her words sounded like they came from his dreams. “What if I said I wanted your hands on me?”

He floundered for a moment, forgetting how to breathe.

“Yeah?” He probably sounded like a teenage boy fumbling around in the backseat of a car. “You want me to touch you?”

“I’ve never really done much of anything before,” she explained, and her voice shook a little at her admission. “But I want this with you, Callan. I want to know what it feels like to have you touch me.”

As embarrassing as it was, he clenched his back teeth together to stave off the rush of blood that surged into his dick. One shift of her curvy backside and he’d likely come in his pants.

He wanted her so much.

“Where?” He grimaced, hearing the slight lift in his tone. He almost laughed at himself, wondering when his voice might drop. “Where can I touch you?”

She bit into her plump lip and he wanted to pull her lip into his mouth, between his teeth. “I... I don’t know.”

His heart was pounding one minute and then stuttering the next. It was no use trying to act experienced or suave. He was neither of those things.

“What if we see what you like?” he suggested. “If something feels off or ... uncomfortable, just say so.”

Sage smiled and he felt like a King or a knight in shining armor. “I can do that,” she almost whispered her words.

“I’ll never hurt you.”

She looked back at him. “I know you won’t, Callan. That’s part of the reason I want it to be you.”

He couldn’t help but smile as he laid her down on the bed, committing the sight to memory.

“I’ve imagined this,” he explained. “Imagined you on my bed, looking up at me.”

He reached for the hem of her shirt but instead of lifting it up. He slid his hands underneath.

Callan smoothed his fingers over her belly, touching her skin and feeling how she moved under him.

“So soft.”

* * *

SAGE LOOKED up at Callan in wonder.

Having his hands on her, just under the hem of her shirt, was magical.

Soothing.

And yet, her skin felt electric.

How a simple touch could make her tingle all over and make her feel like she was cherished... It was Callan.

His hands skated over her shorts and down the outside of her legs. Callan's hands touched her feet, massaging their soles, then her ankles and calves. It was heaven.

And then it was sweet torture.

He was laid on his side, looking up at her as his lips kissed the sensitive skin on the inside of her thigh.

Her breath came out in short, shallow pants. Her hands moved over her belly restlessly, coming dangerously close to her breasts.

Wasn't it amazing that even though she wasn't touching them, she felt the heaviness of her breasts, felt the tingle of sensation in her nipples.

And it was all from a kiss on the inside of her thigh.

Oh, and his fingers, tracing the skin beside his kisses, it stirred nerves... sensations up... down... everywhere.

It felt so right.

It felt right, because...

"Callan?"

He looked up at her, bracing an elbow on the bed, his hand still gently splayed on her thigh. "Too much?"

She swallowed and swore that it was audible in the room, echoing off the walls. "I feel like I'm tingling all over," she smiled at him and then bit into her bottom lip once and again, "like I'm a heartbeat from laughing and begging for more."

It was only a moment before she felt him move up beside her.

She turned to look at him and saw the hunger in his eyes. Sage felt it inside her, too.

Sage touched the side of his face. "I want this with you, Callan. I want this and more."

He reached out and wrapped an arm around her middle and moved until he was pressed gently against her.

She tangled their legs together and wrapped an arm around his neck. “I want you, Callan. I want to give myself to you, but-”

He smiled. “Milo’s in the next room. I wouldn’t want to lock the door with him outside.”

He understood.

How had she been so lucky to find a man who understood? Who cared?

“There’s time for that later, Sage.” His fingers trailed up and down her lower back, sending shivers through her body. “We have all the time we’ll ever need.”

He pulled her closer and leaned his face into her, his breath warm and wonderful against her neck.

When he pressed his lips to her skin, she sighed, her whole body taut with need.

His lips trailed up to the underside of her chin and then up to the tender lobe of her ear.

“Let me hold you, Sage. Let me hold you until you fall asleep.”

She huddled closer, bringing as much of her body as she could in contact with him.

Needing his touch.

Needing his warmth.

“Callan?”

“Yeah, Sage?”

“Hold me until I sleep.”

She felt his smile, his cheek moving against hers.

“Whatever you want.”

“And then,” she opened her eyes and looked into the soft darkness of the room, “and then stay. Don’t leave me alone.”

His arms wrapped tighter around her, gently pressing her cheek against his shoulder. “Never.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The morning came too quickly for Callan. He wasn't ready to head back to work, but he still had one more day to stay with Sage and Milo.

And he was planning to make every moment of it perfect for them.

“Fish?”

Callan opened his eyes and saw Milo standing beside the bed, his eyes wide and full of potential mischief.

Turning on his belly, he craned his neck to look over the edge of the bed.

Milo was holding a box in his hands and rocking from one foot to the other. “I wanted to see if you wanted to play a game.”

Callan looked over at the clock on his bedside table and saw that it was just past 7 a.m.

“What game is that?”

Milo's gaze darted down to the game box and then back up to him. “I dunno. It was on the shelf in the living room.” He held up the box and Callan smiled.

“Trivial Pursuit. That's a pretty tough game, Milo.”

Milo's brow furrowed and for a moment, he resembled his aunt. “I'm smart, Fish. I can learn how to play it.”

Callan reached out a hand and mussed Milo's hair. “I know. You're super smart, but let's find a game that my brain

can remember how to play before breakfast.”

Wiggling a little so he didn't disturb Sage, who was still sleeping peacefully in bed, Callan managed to slide off of the bed and took the box from Milo. “Come on. Let's see what we can find to play that we can both play. All right?”

“All right!”

Both Callan and Milo froze, waiting to see if Sage would react, but she slept on and the two crept out of the bedroom.

Callan was trying to keep things easy between them, he didn't know what Milo thought of finding Callan in bed with his aunt.

He certainly didn't know how to ask or even begin to broach the subject.

Later, he'd have to see how Sage wanted to handle the situation if it came up.

Moving to the shelf where he kept the few games he had in the house, Callan paused and grimaced at the small stack. “I don't know.” He lifted a hand and rubbed at his chin, feeling the soft scratch of his facial hair against the pads of his fingers. “I think I'm going to have to get more games for the house.”

He turned to look at Milo to ask his opinion, but he had to pause and smile.

Milo was copying his gestures, stroking at his jaw and chin in a thoughtful gesture.

The moment caught in Callan's chest, deep in his heart. Milo was copying him in a way that he remembered copying his father a long time ago.

A momentary pang formed in his gut, but Callan pushed it away, determined to focus on the situation he was in, not the one he'd escaped.

Yes. Even though his parents dumped him as a child, he had truly escaped a hell that might have killed him otherwise.

Since the moment that he'd met Milo, the little boy had claimed a part of his heart.

Then his aunt did the same.

Callan hoped that they were all heading in the same direction and that if Milo chose to copy him, that he would only pass on the best that he could to the little boy.

“You know,” Milo nodded with a gravitas that Callan hadn’t seen in a little boy before, “I bet if we wrote a letter to Santa, he might be able to help us with games.”

“Santa...”

How had he not remembered?

They’d been talking about the Community Christmas party since August.

“Hey, you know you’re going to get to meet Santa.”

“Meet Santa?” Milo folded his arms across his chest and lifted his gaze to meet Callan’s. His little pout looked a lot like his aunt when she was worried about something. “Are you joking?”

“No.”

Callan sat on the ground before the shelves and gestured for Milo to sit beside him. Instead, the little boy wiggled onto his lap.

It made Callan smile and his heart swell in his chest. “We have a community Christmas party at the Station house. Santa will be there. We’ll have games and food and fun.”

“Will there be a bunch of kids there?”

“Yeah, of course. I think you’ll see Lora there. My friend Rush will have his two kids there.”

“Your friend has kids?”

“Yeah. And I’m sure by next year we’ll have a few more for you to play with.”

“For me?” Milo touched his hand to his chest. “You mean we get to come back next year?”

Damn. He’d walked right into that.

Sure, he'd talked about it with Sage the night before, but they hadn't talked about how they'd broach the subject with Milo.

Reaching up a hand, he scratched at the back of his head, trying to come up with words that would be safe enough to say.

He blew out a breath and opened his mouth.

“Hey, what are my two guys doing out here?”

Her two guys?

Callan couldn't help but smile at that. A quick look at Milo said he was smiling, too.

Sage yawned as she sank down on the floor with them.

She leaned into his shoulder, putting her cheek against his arm. “What did I miss?”

“We were tryna let you sleep, Aunty Sage. Didn't you know that?”

Her soft laughter was beautiful to his ears.

“I had a feeling that was the case, but I wanted to come out here with the two of you. Is that okay?”

Milo thought for a moment, his expression dramatic, but his impish grin couldn't be held back.

“Fish was telling me about a party at the... at the fire house?”

Callan nodded at him and turned his head to see how Sage was going to react. He knew that she was fiercely protective of her nephew and he didn't blame her in the least. He felt that way, too.

“It's a community thing we have for the kids in our neighborhood and this year the kids from the Helping Hearts community center are coming as well. Santa will be there, and I was hoping that you and Milo would come.”

“That sounds like fun.”

He heard the smile in her voice and Milo lit up watching her, so Callan let out a relieved breath.

“Although,” he reached out and mussed Milo’s hair, “I don’t think we should wait for the party to talk to Santa about getting some games for the house. Maybe you two will come with me to the store and pick up a few games for all of us to play.”

“Games for us to play together?” Milo was bouncing. “That would be awesome! Remember Aunty? We would play games with Mommy?”

Callan tensed at the little boy’s words and waited to see how Sage would react.

She draped an arm over Milo’s shoulders and leaned in to press a kiss on his cheek. “I remember, sweet boy. I remember.”

Milo squirmed a little, but he wasn’t trying to move away, he burrowed deeper between them. “I think she’d like it if we played games together.”

“I agree, baby.” Sage’s voice was thick with unshed tears. It made him ache, but more than that, he admired the resilience they were both showing.

“Okay then,” Callan managed to hug them both in a one armed squeeze. “Let’s get changed for the day and we’ll get a couple of games from the store and then we’ll figure out what to ask Santa for when you meet him.”

“Whoop!” Milo shot to his feet and Sage was right behind him.

Callan called after her. “I’ll get him some clothes and bring them to you.”

She stopped briefly at the hallway corner and smiled at him. “Thank you, Callan. This means a lot.”

“Anything for you two.”

* * *

SAGE COULD HARDLY BELIEVE what her life had become. She'd gone from running in fear from Richie to a calm and happy existence with a huge support group of firefighters, families, and law enforcement. She'd never felt so relaxed... in years.

They were just about finished shopping in a store when she heard her phone go off in her pocket.

She just didn't want to deal with anything or anyone else.

Milo was opening up in a way that he hadn't since Kait's health had visibly weakened. He was basically dancing down the aisles beside the cart as Callan pushed it, leaving her free to just walk along with them.

Breathing in the air and listening to Milo's constant chatter, punctuated by the squeak of a wonky wheel on the cart, made everything feel so visceral to her.

And happy.

When they reached the health section of the store, Callan excused himself to use the bathroom and, as soon as he disappeared behind the door, Milo tugged at her sleeve. "I saw a sweater, Aunty Sage."

The words surprised her. "You want a sweater?"

His expression said she'd missed the mark a little.

"Okay, what am I missing here, buddy?"

He waved his hand at her to come closer and even closer than that.

"I wanna get a sweater for Fish." Before she could react or say a word, he added another thought. "And me. Matching sweaters. For Christmas."

The hopeful look on his face made her heart swell to twice its size in her chest. "You want to match with Callan? I mean Fish?"

"Yeah. That's a good thing, right? He's like... he's like my dad. Or at least that's how it feels in here." He pointed at his chest. "Can I... Can we get the sweaters?"

Looking around, Sage whispered into his ear. “We can’t get them right now.”

She saw Milo suck in a breath, getting ready to protest or worse, but she’d learned how to distract him and keep him from winding up. It was a skill she was still trying to perfect.

“If we try to get them now, there’s a good chance that Fish will find out about it and you want to make it a surprise, right?”

Milo slowly nodded his head. “But... when are we coming back to get them?”

He had a point.

Her instinct was to try and figure out a way to distract him from the sweaters and find a way to placate him in some way since her car was totaled and they were still waiting for the insurance company to get back to her about it.

But that wasn’t the end of her thoughts.

Things had changed in her life.

She knew more people.

People she could reach out to and people she could get help from.

“I’ll call one of the ladies and see who can bring us back here. Does that sound good?”

He looked like he was about to grumble before she saw his thoughts change. It was written across his face. “Okay,” he agreed. “I like the ladies we’ve met.”

She gave him a quick one-armed hug. “That’s my sweetie.”

Milo gave her a sideways look. “I’m a boy, not a sweetie.”

“Yes,” she grinned, “you’re a boy, but you’ll always be my sweetie, too.”

He looked like he was going to say something, but his mien changed to joy. “There he is! Hey, Fish! We’re over here.”

“Hey, buddy.” He gave Milo a hug like it had been days since he’d seen him instead of just a few minutes.

It was just another reason why she knew Callan Bass was a truly caring man.

He just knew how to make them both feel special. And she hoped that they gave some of that back to him.

Her phone buzzed again and she reached for it to turn it on silent.

Callan looked at her and gave her a smile. “Go ahead and take that if you need to. I can walk around with Milo for a bit.”

“Walk around with him?” Smiling was easier around Callan. “Okay. Try to take it easy on the snacks.”

Callan gave her a dramatic sigh and shook his head. “Yes, mom.”

Milo copied the gesture and then hung his head. “Yeah, mom.”

Sage turned and walked toward the front door, reaching for her phone. Hearing Milo call her mom, even as a playful joke, brought up all kinds of emotions.

She gave a smile to the security guy at the door and stepped outside.

Sage didn’t recognize the phone number on the screen, but dialed back because they didn’t leave a message.

If it was a robo-call, she’d just hang up.

The phone rang twice and picked up.

“Hello?”

“Who is this?”

“Uh,” she almost laughed. “I think that’s my question. You called me just a few minutes ago.”

“No, you tell me!”

His voice was slightly slurred and Sage was instantly on guard.

“Look, sir. I’m sorry. I need to get back to-”

“Are you Sage?”

She brought the phone closer to her ear. “Yes. I’m Sage, who-”

“This is Rob. Richie’s pop.”

Her stomach turned. “I’m... I don’t want to talk to you. I-”

“You’ll talk to me now!”

She swore she could hear spittle hitting the phone.

“I wanna know why you’re keeping my son from his boy.”

“Your son,” she barely held back a few choice expletives, “is dangerous. He almost killed us both.”

“Mike’s fine. You, I don’t care about.”

“His name,” she growled out the words, “is Milo.”

“Milo’s a pussy name. I told Richie not to let your bitch of a sister name the boy. He needs a strong name like his pa and grandpa.”

“Look, I’m talking to you about this, I-”

“Give Richie the boy! Oh, and you tell those cops that nothing happened. They’ve been lookin’ everywhere for my son. Make it stop.”

“They’re looking for him because he caused an accident. He nearly killed Milo.”

“Women,” he scoffed. “All of you are too fucking dramatic for your own good.”

“I’m not going to argue with you, sir. I’m also not going to give Milo to Richie. You should know that if Richie thinks that Milo’s getting any money from his mother’s life insurance, he should know that there isn’t any money.”

“Did you spend it all? You bitch!”

She let him spit out a few choice phrases before she tried to get through to him. “I’ve had people who know the law look at the documents.

“Kait’s insurance benefits goes to her employer. None of it goes to Milo.”

“That’s... that’s bullshit.”

She was wont to agree, but she didn’t want to prolong her conversation with Richie’s dad.

“If you don’t believe me, you can call Texas Ranger Jake McGowan. He’ll explain it all-”

“You fuckin’ turned my boy into the Texas Rangers?”

“I didn’t go to them. They came to me after Richie hit my car and nearly killed us.”

“Hey! It ain’t his fault you drove a piece of shit aluminum can. You call off the Rangers.”

“I can’t call them off. They want him to turn himself in for the crash. Then they can show him that there isn’t any money. I just want him to leave us alone.”

“You want to be left alone, bitch? Give my son his boy and we’ll leave you alone.”

“I’m not giving up my nephew. No way. No how.”

“We’ll get what we want. We’ll get the boy. We’ll get the money. And you’ll get what’s coming to you, just like your bitch of a sister.”

“Don’t.” She felt her body get hot all over. Anger. Pure rage. “Don’t you talk about my sister!”

The phone call ended, leaving her standing there on the sidewalk.

No.

She shook her head.

No.

He wasn’t going to touch a hair on Milo’s head. Richie either.

No one was going to hurt Milo ever again.

“Sage?”

She heard the concern in Callan's voice, and she turned around, wrapping her arms around him. He pulled her close.

"You okay?"

She shook her head, trying not to wet his shirt with her tears. And the last thing she wanted to do was have Milo see her tears.

Lifting the hem of her shirt, she wiped at her eyes. "I need to go inside and pay."

"No, it's all taken care of. We came out to find you and take you home."

She wanted to say something. She wanted to tell him about the phone call, but she knew that Milo would hear it.

He didn't need to know the torment she was going through.

She could keep that away from him.

She could protect him that way.

"Sage? What's wrong?"

She brightened up, pasted a bright smile on her face and gestured to the parking lot. "I think we should order pizza when we get home. And then I might need a nap."

"A nap." Callan knew something was going on. The look on his face said as much. "Okay. Let's get home and we'll take things from there."

Callan took the lead in putting Milo into his car seat which Sage was grateful for. If she could keep a little distance from him, he might not feel the tension building inside of her.

The last thing she wanted was for Milo to suffer even more for his father's decisions.

She buckled herself into the passenger seat, laid her head back, and closed her eyes.

When Callan slid into the driver's seat, she could hear the soft rustling sounds and then the metallic click of his seatbelt.

She took in one steadying breath after another and hoped that they would get on the road soon. Maybe once they were moving, she could ignore the painful thoughts ricocheting around inside her head.

Richie's dad's words were playing on repeat in her head, making her heart throb painfully in her chest.

She almost cried out, but then she felt a hand cover hers.

She knew it was Callan.

Sage could feel the familiar heat of his skin against hers. And in a way, she felt like his heartbeat was helping slow her own down to a more natural rhythm.

"It's going to be okay, Sage. You. Me. Milo. We're going to be okay."

She squeezed her eyes shut as she nodded, hoping that his words were right.

She needed Callan to be right.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When they got back to the house, Sage rallied. She might worry about being as good of a mother to Milo as her sister Kait was. Well, he didn't know Kait, but he'd seen the lengths to which Sage went to keep Milo safe and as untouched by his father's violence as he was.

They played a few of the board games that they'd bought at the store. Classics that he'd never really had much of a chance to play himself.

Sorry.

Chutes and Ladders.

And Hungry, Hungry Hippos.

Callan didn't know who was more competitive, Milo or Sage. And he found out that there was no need to worry about anyone being sad at losing. Whoever won got cheers and the other players got a hearty handshake.

It was incredible to see how they played games with each other, pushed each other to be better, and celebrated no matter what.

If he wasn't already in love with them, saw them as his family, he would have fallen in love with both of them over again.

This is the kind of family that he wanted.

Not just the *kind* of family...

This was *the* family he wanted.

By the time they'd managed to put Milo down for the night, both of them reading him a book before he succumbed to sleep, Callan was more than a little on edge.

He wanted to talk to Sage about what had happened when she'd taken the phone call, but he knew it would have to wait until Milo had gone to sleep.

But Sage was still moving around the house, busy with not much of anything.

She just moved as if she was afraid to stop and talk about it.

Callan watched as she wet the same hand towel that she'd wet and used twice before and moved back toward the dining table... Again.

He met her there, putting his hand on hers. "Sage. What's going on?"

She turned and looked at Milo who was deep asleep on his back. Then she looked at him again. "That phone call was from Richie's father."

Callan reached for his phone, but she set her towel down and reached for his hand.

He laced their fingers together. "How are you feeling?"

She looked up into his eyes and smiled even as tears gathered on her lashes. "Being here with you, I'm holding myself together."

Callan pulled her into his arms and with a hand on the back of her head, guided it against his chest. "I'll help you with that, too."

Sage wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed him tight. "I like that idea," she sighed, "but only if you let me hold you together someday."

He lifted the hand from the back of her head and combed his fingers through her hair. Barely holding back a sigh of contentment, he rocked her gently in his arms. "I'd happily let you do that, Sage, but right now, holding you makes me so happy that I never want to let you go."

“Callan?” She looked up at him and he was relieved to see that her tears were drying.

“Yeah, Sage?”

She lifted her hands up to touch the sides of his face. She tightened her hold on him and tilted his face down. She must have been on her toes, because he only had to tip his chin down to kiss her.

And kiss her, he did.

It was glorious.

Beautiful and tremulous, like the earth was moving under their feet.

Callan kissed along the side of her jaw, and the soft scratch of his beard against her skin made her shiver in his embrace.

He smoothed his hands down her sides, tracing the gentle curve of her hips, to her thighs, and then around to her back, to take her in his hands.

Her legs widened just a hint and he fit his thigh between her own.

When his lips closed over her pulse along the side of her neck, she moaned and her hands fisted in his shirt.

“Callan... oh, Callan, I-”

KNOCK KNOCK

Callan froze at the sound and let go of Sage. “Sorry, Sage. I don’t want them to wake up Milo.”

* * *

SHE DIDN’T ARGUE with him.

As thrilling as it was to be in his embrace and have his hands and mouth on her, Milo came first.

She had a feeling she knew who was at the door, but she needed a moment to compose herself.

Folding her arms across her chest, she took a quick look and knew that she should have put on a better bra. Whoever was at their door didn't need to see how she was affected by Callan.

“Sage?”

She looked up at Callan standing by the door.

“It's Jake and another Ranger outside.”

She nodded. “After the call, I sent Jake a text.”

Callan's smile warmed her all over. “I'm glad you did, Sage. I'll let them in.”

She made her way over to the door and heard Callan cautioning the men that Milo was asleep at the other end of the room.

Jake walked inside and gave her a gentle hug before he introduced the other man who'd come with him. “This is Weston Cooper.” He explained. “I thought it would be good to bring him with me tonight. I hope that we won't need his particular brand of expertise, but he might be able to give us a good idea of what we might be facing.”

Sage gave his hand a solid shake and gestured for the men to join them at the table.

She was so worried, or maybe she'd just been shaken enough, that she'd completely forgotten to offer the men something to drink.

Callan took care of it, bringing out a pitcher of sweet tea from the kitchen and filling glasses for everyone.

Jake gestured to the other Ranger. “Weston works with the SWAT team.”

Sage felt her face drain of color, but Jake reached out a hand and touched her on the arm. “It's not as bad as it sounds, Sage. We're just talking about options and contingencies.”

Weston nodded. “Jake explained that your nephew's... donor may think he's in for a payday if he gets custody of Milo.”

“Honestly, that’s how my sister, Kait, explained it to me, too. She was under the impression that her son was going to have everything she wanted for him.

“I don’t know how Richie would have found out about it. Kait certainly wouldn’t have told Richie about it. She knew he’d come around just for that.” Sage looked at Weston. “How did you describe it? A pay day? He’d likely seen dollar signs and thought of all of the things he could buy with it. He wouldn’t be concerned with Milo’s benefit.”

Jake nodded. “Have you figured out what you’re planning to do without the money?”

Sage studiously avoided looking at Callan, even though she swore she could feel his eyes fixed on her. “I’ve spoken to Sloane about a few job openings in the area. There are some early childhood day care locations that should be able to take Milo as early as two weeks from now. The seasonal employment needs are wide open in San Antonio.”

Sage felt Callan’s hand on her knee and she laced her fingers with his, trying to tell him silently that she appreciated him letting her answer their questions without adding questions of his own.

Jake nodded. “I also wanted to tell you that Richie’s car has been spotted in San Antonio.”

Before Sage could panic, he continued on.

“A deputy saw a car speeding along a road, but before she could stop the car, it sped off at a speed that made it unsafe to pursue the vehicle.”

Sage nodded, understanding the danger involved in speeding cars.

She’d been a victim of it herself and she was sure that Milo’s guardian angel had been with him in the back of her car to keep him safe.

“At least now we know that he’s repaired and repainted the car to a new color. A BOLO went out to give the first responders in the area all the pertinent information.”

Sage pulled her lower lip free of her teeth as she struggled to focus on the facts and not the fear that she felt.

“BOLO? That’s some kind of code?”

Weston answered. “Be On the Look Out.” He gave her an encouraging smile. “It gives all the law enforcement agencies in the area a good idea of the current information we have on wanted fugitives.”

His words filled in the gaps for her, but there was still an underlying fear that gnawed at her stomach.

Turning on her phone, she called up her call log and handed it over to Ranger Cooper as he was sitting closer to her. “That’s Rob’s phone number. He’s Richie’s dad. He called, trying to get me to turn Milo over to Richie. I explained about the money, but I don’t think he listened to me.”

Jake nodded. “If they think there’s money and you tell him there isn’t, he’s only going to think you’re trying to keep it all.”

Weston shook his head. “I don’t like it at all. Money, or the promise of it makes people do stupid things. Quite a few of our calls involve people robbing banks or trying to rob armored cars. Most of it is just crazy stupid, but that’s never stopped any of them.”

Sage’s emotions took a dip, her stomach twisting in her belly.

“If you want me to,” Weston offered. “I can have Fox talk to this guy, Rob.”

Sage looked up between the two rangers. “Who’s Fox?”

Jake was the one who answered. “Fox is a member of Weston’s SWAT team. He’s on medical leave at the moment-”

Sage placed her open hand over her heart. “Is he okay?”

Weston smiled. “He’s healing. He lost part of his leg when we were on a call, so he can’t go out with us on certain calls, but he’s my best negotiator.

“He can get people to listen to him. Not just because he’s a big guy, but he has a way about him that people listen to him. It’s a gift.”

“Do you think he could get Richie’s dad to listen to reason?”

Weston leaned against the edge of the table, his dark honey-colored eyes full of concern. “If anyone can, it’s Fox.”

Sage nodded and tried to mean the smile that was on her lips. “That would be wonderful.”

Weston pulled out his phone and typed a few messages to himself. “I’ll look up any of the information we have on Rob and get Fox on it.”

Jake nodded. “You have the case number?”

Weston held up his phone. “I have your text and a message that a copy of the case file is on my desk and in our shared folder in the secure database.”

Sage let out a small sigh of relief. “I’m so sorry you had to come out here tonight.”

Jake waved off her concern. “I’ve been hovering over Hildie so much at home. She threatened to kick my ass if I didn’t give her some space.”

Weston coughed softly beside him, but Sage had a feeling that he was trying to hide a chuckle.

Jake gave him a look. “One day you’re gonna fall head over spurs in love with a woman and then we’ll see who laughs the most.

Sage saw Weston’s smile dip a little bit. “Too late,” he looked at her as his lips pressed tight at the corners, “I fell a long time ago, but I have no idea where she is now.”

No one asked if he might move on in the future. Sage felt that it was because Weston’s voice almost seemed haunted by the separation.

“If there’s anything I can do to help.” Her words came out before she could think better of it, but before she could

apologize, Weston's smile eased a little.

"That's sweet of you to offer, Sage. I just... Until I know she's all right. That she's healed and happy, I'm just going to wonder." He sighed. "And worry."

"Did you ever tell her?" Sage's voice was soft, pained. "Does she know that you-"

"That I love her?" Weston sat back in his chair and shook his head. "I don't know. I don't even know if I would tell her if I could go back in time. She was going through so much before she left, I think telling her might have added to all of the things that she was going through."

Sage darted a look at Callan before she turned back to meet Weston's dark eyes. "Sometimes, love can lighten a load. While Kait was going through her cancer treatment, she would say that it was the love we gave her that kept her going.

"And near the end, she swore that it was all that was keeping her going, trying to hold on for Milo and me."

She swallowed when she heard Callan's chair move closer, and she leaned against his arm when his thigh touched hers.

Weston's gaze turned down toward the tabletop. "I always thought that I'd just be a reminder of the horrible things that happened to her family."

"Or maybe," Sage smiled at him when he looked up at her, "you'd show her that people still remember her and care about her."

She looked at Callan with what she felt was love in her eyes. "If it hadn't been for Callan, I don't know what would have happened to us after the accident. He opened his home to us and has really helped me see that I still had a heart to give and take care of Milo just like he was my own." She ducked her head, feeling her cheeks heating as Callan's hand shifted down toward her knee. "I can't tell you how much everyone's help has meant, but-"

Jake cleared his throat. "I'm going to get home to my wife." His eyes were filled with love.

“And I’m going to go and talk to Fox while I wait for dispatch to get me Rob’s address.”

He leaned over and gave Sage’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.
“You take care, Sage. We’ll do everything we can to help.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As soon as the two rangers left, Sage went over to check on Milo. He was in a deep sleep, clutching his blanket to his chest with one hand and his pillow with the other.

When she turned back, she almost expected the dining area to be empty, but Callan was still standing there waiting for her.

Sage wet her lips and saw how he watched her do it.

The man was as beautiful on the inside as he was handsome on the outside.

And rock steady.

Caring.

Gentle.

Yes, she was in love with him and after her words of encouragement to Ranger Cooper, she knew not what she had to do... but what she *wanted* to do.

She crossed the room and reached out her hand to him.

Callan didn't hesitate at all. He laced their fingers together and followed along with her as she moved into the bedroom.

“Sage?”

“Hmm?” She stopped at the side of the bed and turned to look up into his eyes.

“I think you should know that-”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

They said the words almost in unison, but neither of them seemed at all surprised.

Sage let go of his hand and reached for the hem of her t-shirt and lifted it over her head.

Callan paused with his hands, grasping the back of his t-shirt as she dropped hers to the ground.

He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Still, Sage could see his feelings in his eyes and he thought she was beautiful.

She'd never felt so powerful and vulnerable at the same time.

When one corner of her mouth tipped up in a smile, he startled and pulled off his t-shirt, too. He dropped it down on the floor at his feet and reached for the waistband of his sweatpants.

He pushed it down around his hips before his gaze tilted up to hers in a question. "Is this okay?"

Biting into her bottom lip, Sage hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her panties and shorts and pushed them down past her knees, stepping out of them a moment later.

The look in Callan's eyes was everything she'd always dreamed of seeing.

Hunger. Need. And love.

She'd brought that out in him. *She* did.

And she hoped that he saw those emotions in her eyes as well.

"Is this okay?"

She smiled at him and watched as he fumbled getting out of his sweatpants, stumbling a little until he managed to step on one leg with his opposite foot to pull his legs free.

"Are... Are you sure?"

Sage held her hand out to him and, without question, he moved to take her hand in his.

He lifted their joined hands and kissed her knuckles, then the back of her hand before his eyes lifted to meet hers again.

“I know this is all happening so fast, Sage, but I mean what I said. I love you. I want you and Milo to stay. I want to help you raise him if you’ll let me. I want to marry you and have a dozen more like him.”

She smiled and that smile turned into a soft chuckle.

“I meant what I said, too. I didn’t think I’d ever feel like this about anyone. And yes,” she grinned at him, feeling more than a little giddy, “I’ll marry you, but a dozen more kids?”

“Okay, eight.” He leaned in and kissed the inside of her wrist, making her shiver. “Whatever you want, Sage. I just want to love you. Love you both for the rest of my life.”

Sage felt like she was in a dream as he stepped closer to her, kissing his way up her arm to her shoulder and then across to the side of her neck.

“I can’t get enough of touching you.”

She heard his words and, deep in her core, she felt a rush of liquid heat.

“I think I know what you mean.” She reached between them and easily found what she was looking for. He’d already been hard and pressed against her belly. “Oh.”

Callan groaned as her hand, wrapped around his length, slid up toward the tip of his cock.

She slipped the pad of her thumb over its head and smiled at how slick it felt.

“Oh, go-”

He stopped short and she swept her thumb over his head again, enjoying the pleasure she was giving him.

His chin tipped back, putting his mouth close to her ear. “Oh, sh-”

“You don’t have to stop,” she told him, “I don’t mind if you swear. I like knowing that I’m having an effect on you.”

“Oh, you’re having an effect on me, Sage.”

Almost as if it was planned, she felt his erection twitch in her hand.

“Like that?”

He groaned and she felt his chest shudder as he drew in a breath.

“Exactly like that.”

She smiled and felt her breaths shorten and shallow in her chest. “I want to feel it inside me.”

“Yeah?” His breaths matched hers and she watched him bite into his bottom lip. “I... I want to do this right.”

Right?

She almost laughed, but not because it was funny. Because she was almost crawling out of her skin to have him make love to her.

“I don’t think you can do this wrong, Callan. I...” She turned toward the bed and climbed up on it. When she did, she turned back around and stared.

Callan had wrapped his hand around his cock.

She said the word in her head and felt herself get hotter by the second.

“That’s quite the view,” she heard the tightness in his voice, “I’m afraid I’m not going to last.”

She held her hand out to him. “We’ll worry about that if it happens.” Her heart was pounding in her chest. “Come here, Callan. I want to feel you against me.”

He moved toward her but stopped to open the top drawer of his nightstand. When he laid down beside her, he held up the foil packet and set it down on the mattress somewhere above their heads.

“One of the guys at the station gave it to me as a gag gift. I didn’t think I’d ever actual use the thing.”

Sage put her hands on his chest and traced her fingers down his chest, stopping around his belly and then she started again. "I've imagined this. You and me... with nothing between us."

"Me too," his breath caught when her fingertips travelled lower. "I love having you touch me."

"Like this?" Her hands lifted back to his chest and smoothed across his skin near his collarbones.

"Like that. When you hold my hand. When you lean against me. Anything."

"I feel the same way." She watched her fingers as they moved back over his shoulders toward his throat. "When you touch me, Callan, I feel safe. And maybe that's part of the reason why I want to be with you like this. Feeling safe also means I can feel other things. Like desire."

Her hand drifted down his chest and over his belly until her fingertips felt the slight scratch of hair at the base of his erection.

She wrapped her fingers around him there and his head fell back as his body tensed.

"Oh... Sage. Sage."

His hands reached for her and she watched his face carefully. If he started to wince or pull away, she'd stop.

But he didn't.

Callan reached for her and filled his hands with her backside. Having his fingers dig into her soft flesh released a rush of desire.

He held her tight against him, his erection pressing long and hard against her belly.

When she leaned in toward him, she felt her nipples graze his chest.

The sensations were enough to make her lose her breath.

"That feels... that feels amazing."

He pulled her against him, his lips sealing over hers, and the way he kissed her would have turned her knees to jelly if they'd been standing up.

But they weren't.

They were laid bare in each other's arms and Sage felt her whole body tingle wherever their skin touched.

She arched her back and dragged her nipples against his chest. "Oh, wow."

Then his hand worked its way between them and she felt his fingers on her skin. The slight pinch didn't cause her any pain, but it made her nerves sing.

He touched her nipple with the tip of his finger, then squeezed it, twisted and rolled.

She closed her eyes and reveled in the sensations of his fingers on her.

Sage lifted her leg and laid her thigh over his, bringing their bodies into closer contact.

Callan moaned and his hips flexed into her.

She felt him then.

Felt him between her legs.

The length of his erection against the wet folds of her own sex felt like heaven. And the movement of his hips rubbed his hardness against her clit.

Sage sucked in a breath and moaned at the intimate contact, hoping that the friction would continue on. And it did.

He moved so that one of his hands pressed against her lower back, holding her against him, his other hand cupped her breast and he ducked his head closer.

When Sage felt his tongue flick against her nipple, she nearly came against him.

Her hands moved restlessly over him. "Callan, oh... Callan."

His tongue disappeared, leaving her nipple wet and slightly cold from the air in the room, but then it changed.

He covered the tip of her breast with his mouth and the tongue that had moved against her sensitive flesh was now bathing her skin.

Incredible.

She moved her hips against him, felt the slick slide of his erection against her folds, and ached for more. “Callan... please.”

He released her breast and looked at her. “Please, what, Sage? Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“You, Callan. I want you.”

His smile both broke her heart and put it back together again. His tousled hair, his half-lidded hungry eyes, and those kissable lips made her want all of him.

Made her need all of him.

“I love you, Sage. I love you like Christmas and Valentines and Thanksgiving.”

She saw his hand move past her face and heard the soft tear of the wrapper in the quiet of his bedroom.

She looked down as his hand fit the condom over the tip of his erection, sealing in the pearly white pre-cum sliding down his slick skin.

Sage hiked up her leg over his hip and drew in a shaking breath as she felt his erection nudge against her folds.

She closed her eyes and wet her lips, thinking to herself. *Please let it fit. Please let it fit.*

Her worry never reached the level of panic as Callan put his hands on her hip, holding her still, and in one long, sliding curl of his hips, he filled her to the hilt.

Her lips parted and she drew in a deep breath.

So good.

So perfect.

So Callan.

“How does that feel?” His voice sounded tight, like he was speaking through clenched teeth.

“Incredible.” She wiggled a little. “Like heaven. I’ve never been touched like this before.”

“C-can I move?”

Of course he could! She’d been so focused on the sensations filling her, she hadn’t thought about the rest. What he needed to feel.

Sage reached up her arms and wound them around Callan’s neck, instinctively knowing she needed to anchor herself to him.

The first time he rocked his hips back, dragging his erection along the sensitive walls of her sex, she tried to pull him back in, digging her heel into the back of his thigh.

Then he did it on his own, thrusting back into her body with a soft grunt.

“Oh my...”

“That feels so good.” He punctuated his words with another thrust, slightly faster, slightly harder. “I can feel you all around me.”

Sage wrapped her arms around tighter around him, her body humming with sensations.

“Don’t stop,” she felt her breath fan along his chest. “Don’t ever stop.”

“Tell me,” his voice was deeper than she remembered it, “how hard do you want it?”

She pressed a kiss to his chest, just above his pounding heart.

“Make me yours, Callan.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m already yours, Sage. Let me show you how much.”

And he did.

Oh how he did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Two weeks later, when the fire house crew was preparing for the Community Christmas party, Callan found himself humming along to the holiday music as it was piped in over the speakers.

It was a good day, a better shift, and as soon as Viviana Blaise drove up in her SUV, Callan was sure that the sun shining down from the heavens was a sign.

Chief Blaise looked up from the chimney he was creating with corrugated paper printed with bricks on it and smiled at his wife.

“Hey, beautiful.” He got up and walked over to his wife, wrapping her up in a warm embrace and giving her a kiss on her lips. “What brings you here?”

Viviana pointed in Callan’s direction and he got up from his place on the floor where he was arranging the tree skirt and dusted off his hands.

“I picked up something for Callan from downtown.”

Fire Chief Ethan Blaise gave Callan a curious look. “My wife is giving you a present?”

“No,” Viviana gave her husband a smacking kiss on his cheek. “A present that Callan’s giving to Sage.”

Ethan craned his neck to look in the small bag that she passed over to Callan.

“Uh, Fish? You going to let me see what’s in there?”

Viviana gave Callan a wink. “I told you, he’d want to see.”

The fire chief shook his head. “Am I that predictable?”

Viviana leaned in against her husband’s chest. “I can’t help it that you’re a big ol’ fluffy romantic.”

“Fluffy?” He gave his stomach a pat. “What are you talking about?”

Viviana rolled her eyes and rubbed her hand over his practically non-existent belly. “I’m talking about how fluffy you are... romantically. You’re a big ol’ cuddly teddy bear when you’re being my honey.”

He leaned in and even though Callan was trying to focus his attention anywhere except for his chief, he still heard some of it as the chief leaned into his wife’s ear.

“Just wait until I get home, Vivi. I’ll show you what kind of bear I can be.”

Callan was about to walk away when the chief called out to him.

“I’m still waiting to see what you have in there.”

Dropping his chin to his chest, Callan reached into the bag and pulled out the little black velvet box. He moved toward the happily married couple and gave Viviana a big smile. “Viviana helped me pick it out.”

Callan saw her clap her hands together as she smiled in glee.

Holding the box out, Callan lifted the lid to show Chief Blaise. “I’ve already told her that I’m going to marry her, but I wanted to formalize the proposal.”

Callan watched as his chief looked over the ring tucked into the satin cushion inside. “The colored stone reminded me of her eyes when we were walking around the jeweler’s store. He told me that the setting was one designed by the original owner back in the Twenties.”

He heard Viviana sniffle softly. It’s timeless, just like love.”

Callan felt the chief lay a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure she’s going to love it, son.”

Viviana hugged Ethan tightly. “This family is growing by[?] leaps and bounds.”

Looking at the clock on the wall, Chief Blaise gestured toward the big bay doors at the edge of the apparatus floor. “You better go home and get changed for the party. I hear,” he gave him a knowing wink, “it’s going to be a big success.”

Callan looked down at his jeans and grimaced. “I didn’t think about where I’d put it.”

The chief held out his hand. “Here. I can lock it away in my file cabinet. The only people with keys to it are myself and God.”

Callan took one more longing look at the ring before he closed the box and handed it over to his chief. “Thanks. I hope she loves it. I know I love her and I can’t wait to make our family official.”

* * *

SAGE WAS HUMMING to herself as she wrapped the present for Callan. Milo was sitting on the floor humming along as he tapped his feet to the song on the radio.

“Aunty Sage?”

“Yeah, baby? What’s up?”

Milo lifted his chin toward the coffee table where she was wrapping the present. “Do you think he’s going to like it? Really? Truly?”

Sage grinned at him and her heart went out to the little boy who wanted to please everyone so much. His current worry was Callan and whether or not he’d like the sweater that they’d bought him.

“I think the sweater is super fun, Milo. Callan’s going to love it.”

“But if he doesn’t like it, we have that paper thingy, right?”

Paper thingy?

Milo was definitely picking up some of her vocal foibles. She’d have to take more of her cues from Callan about her word choice. Some curse words still slipped out when she was flustered, but she’d do better.

She had to.

“What paper thingy, Milo?”

“That thing that the woman at the front told us we’d need to rerun the items if they didn’t fit.”

“Rerun...” She narrowed her eyes and thought about words that sounded the same. “Return?”

“That’s it!” Milo grinned. “Return.”

“But we won’t need to, Milo. I’m sure Callan’s going to love what you got him.”

“Super awesome!” He sat there, his legs swinging over the floor.

For a moment, her thoughts trailed off and she heard the call from Jake in her head.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Sage. It’s Jake McGowan.”

“Jake? Hey. Let me step outside so I can hear you.”

Standing from the couch, she pointed at the phone in her head and Sloane smiled as she pointed toward the patio doors.

There was more privacy out there, so it was a great suggestion. ‘Thanks’ she mouthed to Sloane.

When she’d closed the sliding door, Sage continued the conversation. “Sorry. I’m outside now. What’s going on?”

“Still no word on Richie. After his brush with the Sheriffs, I think he’s gone underground waiting for his chance.”

Sage put a hand on her stomach to keep it from turning on her.

“As for Rob, Richie’s dad. Fox spoke to him, but the man turned a deaf ear to what Fox had to say.”

Sage swallowed, but the knot in her throat just wouldn’t go away. “I guess I shouldn’t expect more from Richie’s father than I would from him. What’s that they say about apples?”

Jake’s laugh was a little sour. “That they don’t fall far from the tree? Well, maybe we can hope for the apple to fall on his head and get some sense knocked into him.”

“I’d love to believe that, Jake, but I have a feeling that they’ve got their minds focused on the money. They probably think that we’re paying people to talk them out of it.”

Jake’s sigh was heavy. “He also knew enough not to say anything about their plans. So just be careful.”

“Careful? It feels like all I am is careful when it comes to Milo. And the only place we’re really going to in the near future is to the firehouse for the community party.”

She heard Jake’s hum of appreciation. “You’ll be surrounded by friends there. I hope to give you some good news the next time we speak.”

“I hope so, too. Send my love to Hildie.”

“I will. Thanks, Sage.”

The lock on the door jiggled and Milo launched himself into a run. “Fish! Fish!”

He managed to jump in the air and make a punch with his hands.

“Fish is home!”

No sooner did Callan open the door then he was dropping his duffle bag to grab Milo up in a tight hug. “Hey there, buddy! I’m home!”

Callan pushed the door closed behind him and nudged his duffle bag to the side.

“I got you a gift, Fish!” Milo pointed at her and grinned. “Aunty just wrapped it so you can open it.”

“She wrapped it, did she?”

With a wink in her direction, Fish lifted Milo until the little boy’s head and torso slipped back over his shoulder. Callan had his arm over the backs of the boy’s thighs, anchoring him in place.

Milo was laughing and giggling as Callan walked over to her side.

“Hey, gorgeous.”

Callan lightly tossed Milo on the couch and the little boy threw his arms out to the side, looking up at the ceiling for a moment. “Do it again! Do it again, Fish!”

Sage watched as Callan tickled Milo’s stomach.

“Later, buddy. We have to get ready to go to the firehouse for the party. I’ll toss you around like a potato sack another day.”

“Potatoes?” Milo frowned at him. “I don’t like potatoes.”

“You don’t?” Callan looked confused. “But-”

Milo shook his head. “Potatoes are yucky. I’d rather eat French Fries... or Tater Tots!”

Sage bit into her bottom lip and her shoulders shook.

Callan chuckled too.

Sage gave him a lift of her chin. “You can tackle that conversation later.”

“Yeah. I’ll look forward to it, too.”

She moved around the coffee table and when she tried to hand him the brightly wrapped gift box.

Callan pulled her down onto his lap, and then Milo sat down on her lap.

Milo crowed happily. “This is like talking to Santa, only this time we’re giving Santa a present.”

Sage saw Callan’s curious look and the sparkle in his eyes. She knew that Callan really would love the gift from Milo.

He was just that awesome.

When Callan lifted the top of the gift box, he let out an audible gasp. “This is for me?”

Milo clapped his hands. “Yep! And I’ve got one too!”

* * *

CALLAN WAS HAVING the time of his life.

When they’d arrived at the firehouse, it took less than a second for his friends to see him sporting the sweater gifted to him by Milo.

He walked in with one arm around Sage and her gorgeous green dress and his other hand was holding onto Milo.

The little boy was practically dancing as they made their way onto the apparatus floor.

“Hey, Fish!”

Callan walked over to join Abe, Cowboy, and Caddo as they were handing out cups of punch.

“Hey, guys.” He tugged Milo forward. “You know Milo and Sage, right?”

Abe was the one who leaned in close with a big smile for Milo. “That’s one cool shirt there, kiddo.”

Milo tilted his head as he thought through the words. “Did you say minnow?”

Cowboy joined in the fun. “I don’t think he did, but I think you’ve got a great idea there, buddy. Since Callan’s name is Bass. You can be a minnow.”

“But,” Milo’s brow furrowed, “Bass is his last name.”

“That’s right,” Cowboy grinned. “You’re one smart boy.”

Milo sniffled and looked up at Callan.

Callan squeezed Milo’s hand a little tighter as he crouched down beside him. “Something wrong, Milo?”

“No... No. I’m okay.” And he put a big smile on his face. A smile that Callan recognized all too well. He was trying to hide something.

His instinct was to fix it. To sit the boy down and talk about it. A moment later Sloane King-Bravo walked in with her little girl and Callan felt Milo tug on his hand. “Can... Can I go play?”

The little boy stopped himself short and looked up at Sage. “May I go play?”

Sage grinned at him. “You may.”

He was gone a moment later and Callan turned to Sage to talk. “Do you know what that was about?”

She grimaced. “Not really. I think we’ll have to talk to him when we get home.”

“Yeah,” Callan gave her a smile. “He probably doesn’t want to talk in front of the guys.”

“I doubt it,” she agreed. “He has more than a bit of hero worship for you and the other guys.”

Callan wrapped an arm around her shoulders and stepped in for a kiss. “You two make me so happy, Sage. I can’t wait to see what happens to us next.”

* * *

IT TURNS OUT THAT LIFE, as shit as it is, can throw a bone his way.

Richie had heard about the Christmas party at the firehouse. It was hard to miss the information about it. It seemed like everyone in the area thought that the firefighters at Station Seven were all heroes.

It was crazy.

But so was Sage, trying to keep him from his son.

He walked into the rental shop and asked for the item he wanted. The clerk looked flustered and gestured at the last

man who'd been in the shop. "He just rented the last one, sir."

"The last one."

"Y-yes, sir. This time of year, we have to turn away multiple requests because of the demand. If he hadn't picked it up, we have a list of people who want it."

Richie leaned back to look through the window. He couldn't see the other man at all.

That's what made him turn back to the counter clerk. "I need you to give me his phone number and contact information."

He saw her trying to hide the rental agreement on her desk.

"It's right there on his form."

"And for privacy reasons, we're not allowed to show that sensitive information on it. I'm sorry."

Richie stared at the woman before replying in short, curt tones. "I know just how sorry you'll be."

He silenced her moments later.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sage watched as Callan took Milo around to the different activities. As much as Callan looked like he was enjoying himself, Milo was on edge.

Sure, he was always eager to walk beside Callan or hold his hand, but at the party he was clinging onto Callan as if he was afraid of losing him.

Sage covered her heart with her hand.

“Hi, Sage. It’s good to see you again.”

She turned to see Thora Quintero standing beside her with her little boy Paz in her arms. “How are you doing, Thora?”

The lovely, blonde woman rocked her son back and forth. “Tired, but happy. Gia’s enjoying the season and she loves it when Rush carries her around like that.” She pointed out the little girl who was laughing out loud at being carried upside down by Thora’s husband.

“You guys are such a beautiful family. It’s really incredible to see.”

“You know,” Thora leaned in closer, “he adopted Gia as his own. When I met Rush, I was a single mom and I’d come to the fire station to... to surrender Gia as part of the Safe Haven law.

“I was afraid that I’d end up living in my car, unable to take care of her. It was during a storm, and Rush took us inside and let me know about the programs offered by Helping Hearts.”

“I’m so glad he was able to help you keep your daughter.”

Thora hummed as she rubbed her cheek against Paz’s soft baby cheek. “And I have a son and a husband who I love to distraction.”

Sage felt tears gathering on her eyelashes. “That’s a beautiful story.”

“I was so scared, but Rush and his family here at Station Seven... they became our family.”

Sage nodded. “I’m beginning to realize just how powerful a family this is. I still can’t believe that Callan just took us into his home on a whim.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t describe it as a whim,” Thora explained, “as long as I’ve known Fish, he’s always so calm and happy, but now that he has you and Milo in his life, he walks taller. He’s a little more serious, and I mean that in a good way. He just lights up around the two of you. And I’m so glad that you two found each other. Well, you three.”

Sage couldn’t help the bright smile that touched her lips. “This whole thing kind of reminds me of Miracle on 34th Street. Milo has fallen for Callan. He wants to spend all kinds of time with him.”

“That’s great. Rush helped me with all of the diapering and settling Gia into bed when I was exhausted. I went from scared and alone to a family in what felt like a few heartbeats.”

“That’s how I’ve been feeling,” Sage looked up at Thora. “I kept telling myself it was just a momentary thing. That Callan will decide that it’s too much for him.”

Thora giggled when Callan and Milo turned around and she got a great view of their sweaters.

“Merry Fishmas?”

Sage chuckled. “Milo saw them at the store and wanted them to wear matching sweaters. Later Milo had second thoughts about the sweaters, but when Callan unwrapped the box today, he pulled it right on and helped Milo put his on too.”

“That’s some proud daddy energy right there.”

Proud daddy.

Sage heard Kait in her head again. “*Milo deserves a daddy like Callan.*”

Sage nodded, replying in her head. *I hope we’re good for him too.*

Thora’s voice cut through her thoughts. “The three of you... it’s so perfect.”

Sage smiled but she still had that kernel of doubt in her heart. She wanted Callan to be with her, to be part of her family, but only if it was the best thing for him.

* * *

CALLAN HAD HEARD SO many of his friends and others at the community party say that they loved his sweater. Some of them laughed or chuckled a little more than others, but their reactions didn’t change how he felt about his sweater.

He loved it.

That Milo had found the MERRY FISHMAS sweaters and picked them out made the gift so much more precious to him.

He lifted his head as he got into the line to see Santa and found Sage watching him.

She was so beautiful and her face was so expressive that he loved watching her.

Right at that moment, she had a wistful smile that said she was happy, but there was an element of sadness to her expression that kicked him in the gut.

Reaching down to his jeans pocket, he felt the small velvet box that he’d tucked there when the chief had brought it down from his office.

Callan knew he wanted to ask her to marry him, but he wasn’t sure if the party was the right place to do it. He was thinking he might do it back at home since he wanted to talk to

Milo about it first because they were going to be a family together if Sage said yes.

“HO HO HO... Who’s next to visit Santa?”

The words caught Callan’s ear, turning him in the direction of the jolly old elf himself, but he looked a little off. As they approached Santa, Callan kept his hands on Milo’s shoulders.

“Hey, Santa.” Callan waited for Santa to look at him, but his gaze was fixed on Milo. “What happened to your elf, Tommy? Wasn’t he supposed to be here?”

Tommy Alworth was slated to play Santa for the party for the third year in a row, but this guy looked a little taller than Tommy and he didn’t have Tommy’s bass tones in his voice.

“Tommy?” Santa chuckled. “Is that the name of this young man?”

“Nope.” Milo shot forward and stopped at Santa’s knee. “I’m Milo.”

“Well, Milo, it’s nice meeting you. Who is this man with you? Is that your daddy?”

“Daddy?”

Milo turned to look up at him and Callan felt for the little boy who looked so lost.

“I don’t have a daddy really,” his voice was soft and pained. “He hurt my mommy and hurt my aunty when she was trying to keep us safe.”

Callan saw Santa look up at him and then scan the room.

“Well, that’s horrible, isn’t it?”

“It was,” Milo nodded. “My aunty ended up in the hospital because she was hurt. Now we’re with Fish and we’re happy.”

Milo pointed up at him and Callan smiled, proud that Milo felt happy and secure with him. He was determined to make sure that never changed.

“Well,” Santa cleared his throat and leaned down, “why don’t you whisper your wish list to me, and I’ll see what I can

do, hmm?”

Milo looked at him and Callan didn't know what to say. He wanted to hear Milo's wish list, as there was still time to get him a few more gifts before Christmas.

“It's okay, son. I'm Santa. You can tell me.”

Milo's mouth pinched a little at the corners and Callan wanted to tell the boy that he didn't have to do anything if he didn't want to, but he also wanted Milo to put some of his walls down and feel comfortable talking to people outside of his firehouse family and his extended family.

Milo took a half step closer to Santa and started to talk.

* * *

HE HATED THE SANTA SUIT. It was hot. It was heavy. It itched like fuck.

But he had to get close to Milo.

He needed to find a way to get him back.

“So, what is it you want for Christmas, Milo? You want some Pokémon stuff? I can get you all kinds of toys.”

Milo shrugged his shoulders.

“Toys are okay, but I'm happy with the toys I have.”

“Aren't they kind of old?”

Again, Milo shrugged. “I can still play with them. They're cool. I'd rather have something else.”

His son looked kind of shy. Soft spoken, too.

That would change when he got his hands on him. People didn't respect people like that. A person who can speak up gets noticed for the right things.

A man who gets what he wants is respected and sometimes feared.

Milo, well, they'd change that stupid name and give him a name with some real meat on it.

A lot of things would change when he got the boy away from that bitch.

“So, what do you want? I bet I can get it for you.”

Milo drew back a little and Richie felt his blood pressure spike.

“Seriously, son. I’m Santa! You know I’m magic, right?”

He watched Milo think about it and then shrug again.

“I guess it can’t hurt to ask.” He stepped closer and grabbed the furry lapel of Santa’s suit. “I want a dad.”

The words hit Richie like a sucker punch. “Oh, yeah?”

He grinned inside, thinking that this might just be that fucking easy.

“Yeah. I want a daddy.”

“Well, I could-”

“And I want it to be Fish.”

“Fish?” Richie felt something sticking in his throat. “Who the f- How can a Fish be your dad?”

“The guy who walked me over here. He’s really nice. His friends got me a firetruck bed. He plays with me in the yard and he’s teaching me things. He makes Aunty Sage happy, too. It’s like we’re a family.”

“That’s not a family,” he almost spit the words out. “That’s pretend.”

“Well,” Milo looked like he was thinking things through, “then I like the way he plays pretend. We’re happy at his house. I’m happy with them. Why can’t we be a family?”

Why?

The edges of his vision darkened, and Richie glared at the boy over his stolen glasses.

“Because you have a daddy, Milo. You have a father who wants you to be with him.”

“But mommy wanted me to be with Aunty Sage.”

“Your mommy was sick. She was out of her mind crazy with cancer.”

“How-”

“I told you, boy. I’m Santa.”

Milo looked at him, his little brow furrowing.

“And I’m here to take you to your daddy, but it’s a secret. A big Santa secret. One you can’t tell to anyone.”

“But Aunty Sage said-”

“Sage doesn’t care about you, she wants the money.”

“Money?” Milo shook his head. “We don’t have any money.”

“She just wants to keep all of it to herself. Your daddy wants you to have all the best toys. You should let me take you to your daddy.”

“I don’t... this is... I’m all confused.”

“It’ll be real simple, son. You just have to come with me.”

Milo started to turn away, but Richie grabbed his arm to stop him. “You don’t want to be on my naughty list, do you?”

Milo shook his head. “I’m not a naughty boy. Aunty Sage and Fish say I’m a good boy.”

“Didn’t you hear me, boy? They only want you for the money.”

“But we don’t have money,” Milo almost stamped his foot.

Richie was beyond frustrated.

How was he going to get through to the kid. Seriously, how was Milo his when he was this annoying?

Richie turned to look at the girl who was volunteering to help with the line of kids visiting Santa. She was giggling with a boy about her age.

Distracted, that was good.

And the line waiting for Santa had dried up. He’d already given candy to a whole slew of brats. Everyone was involved

with games.

Sage let the stupid firefighter walk around with Milo. She didn't care what was happening to the kid.

He just had to find a way to distract the firefighter.

* * *

AS A FIREFIGHTER, Callan was used to anything happening at any time.

That included crazy things that happened in the middle of a party.

A quick, pained gasp turned his head to the group over by the caramel apple table.

One of the girls near the table with a wooden stick in her hand was doubling over.

“Amanda? Amanda!”

Before the woman beside her looked up and called for help, Callan moved.

The little girl's face was florid with color and tears were gathering on her lashes.

“Hey, Amanda? I'm Fish. I'm going to help you.” He touched her chin and lifted it a little so he could see in between her lips. “Looks like you've got a piece of apple in your mouth.”

Callan crouched down and turned her so he could wrap his arms around her.

“Okay, Amanda. Hold on. This will just take a second.”

He brought his hands together, making a fist with one hand closest to her body. He put the knuckle of his thumb smack dab in the middle of her bellybutton and ribs.

It took two tugs in and up to dislodge the chunk of apple that she hadn't managed to chew enough.

Amanda's mother rushed forward to both console and berate her daughter, but she was nudged aside by the EMTs at their station, Nicole and Garrett. Nicole dealt with the girl's mother while Garrett took a good look at the child who'd choked.

Relieved, Callan turned around to take Milo back to Sage.

Callan rushed forward and stopped at the empty velvet chair.

He turned toward the young woman who was standing in as an elf. "Where are they?"

Laughing, she turned to look at him. "Who?"

Callan's heart was pounding painfully in his chest. "My boy and Santa! Where did they go?"

The smile died on her face as she saw the empty chair and the discarded satchel of candy canes on top of the dais.

"I... I saw you help that girl and then I turned to talk to Jase and... and... I thought they were still talking to each other."

Fuck.

"Chief! Chief!"

Ethan Blaise emerged out of the crowd. "Fish? What's-"

He pointed at the empty chair. "I think Santa took Milo."

"Santa what?"

Callan turned and found Sage's gaze in the room. As soon as she fixed on his face, her eyes rounded with concern.

Callan answered the chief as his heart was beginning to break.

"Santa left and Milo's gone. I think he's got my boy."

CHAPTER TWENTY

As soon as she heard Callan's raised voice, Sage felt her heart constrict painfully in her chest.

Sloane took hold of her hand and moved her through the crowd.

When she caught sight of Callan, the band of fear around her heart tightened.

"What... what's going on?"

Callan pulled her into his embrace and placed a kiss on the crown of her head. "Milo's missing."

She heard the words, but it all seemed so surreal.

They were at a Christmas party! How could this happen?

"He's still here," she could hear her voice climbing higher, "we'll find him! Milo?"

She stood just shy of Santa's big, overstuffed chair and looked around the room, searching every face. "Milo? Milo!"

Abe moved into view. He put a hand on Callan's shoulder. "I'll check the security footage."

Chief Blaise called out, and everyone in the room stopped to listen. "Sorry, folks, but we're locking down the station. We have a missing child to find."

Sage clung to Callan, her cheek against his chest.

She watched as everyone in the room moved around. People found their loved ones. Children ran to parents.

Everyone that had someone they loved found solace in the embrace of others.

When all of the guests had been sorted out, it was painfully obvious that Milo wasn't in the room.

“What happened?” She clung to Callan because her knees were weak, needing his strength.

“I... I'm sorry. Sage, I'm so sorry.”

The Chief stopped him. “You saved that little girl from choking, you had no way of knowing that something would happen to Milo.” The chief narrowed his eyes at the chair where Santa had been sitting. “Why would Tommy Alworth do anything like this?”

Callan felt his stomach turn and drop in his middle. “I don't think it was Tommy. I mentioned his name, but he didn't seem to recognize it. I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner.”

Viviana moved closer and held them both in her arms. “Because this is a safe place, Callan. It's supposed to be a safe place.”

“Hey! Come in here!” They could hear Abe's voice calling to them from the Operations hub down the hall.

Sage felt Callan moving and she moved along with him. They moved together, leaning on each other.

Abe was on his feet, gesturing at the monitor screens displaying their security footage from the cameras inside and outside of the station house.

“There! See it?”

They watched as Santa walked out of the side door with Milo held against his side, a hand over his mouth.

It made Sage sick to her stomach.

Santa was supposed to be a good guy. A sweet memory when you're an adult.

Something... someone to believe in.

And there he was, taking Milo away.

Her little guy was struggling, kicking, but this man was dragging him away.

“That’s not Tommy.” Chief Blaise pointed his finger at the screen. “Tommy’s got a limp and those clothes are too loose.”

Beside her, Callan tightened his hold around her waist. “Is that-”

“Richie.” Sage covered her mouth on a gasp after she said his name. “It has to be him.”

Santa was a little thinner than he should be, his height made the pants lift up out of the boot shams that he had on.

“Oh, god. It’s Richie.”

Callan held her as Chief Blaise picked up the phone. “I’m calling in the cavalry.”

Sage heard Sloane’s voice behind her. “I’m on the phone with Vincente. He’s got the FBI mobilized on this.”

“The FBI.” Sage felt the words on her tongue as surreal.

“The Rangers.” Cowboy was at Sage’s side, his phone to his ear. “I’m calling in SWAT. If Richie’s responsible, this will likely end up-”

“Noah, stop.” Callan pulled her in closer, his hands lifting to cover her ears.

“No,” Sage turned in Callan’s embrace. “Don’t stop. You’re saying that he’s got Milo and-”

“I’m saying this is probably going to end up as a hostage situation. I don’t see Richie giving up Milo easily.”

“Because of the money, you mean.” Sage heard her voice thinning as she lost the air in her lungs. “He’s going to want the money.”

Despair pummeled her like fists.

“There’s no money. There’s no money.” Sage nearly collapsed to the floor.

What else could she do?

How do you prove that something doesn't exist to a man convinced that it does?

Callan hugged her close and rubbed his hand up and down her back. "When they find them," his voice cut off on a groan, "how are they going to get Richie to give Milo back?"

"Son," Chief Blaise's voice was full of emotion, "you have to believe that we'll get Milo back."

Sage heard Callan's heart stutter in his chest. "If Richie didn't believe that officer from SWAT, who will he believe?" Callan staggered back and she followed along with him, trying to hold him up the way he'd held her. "It's all my fault."

When Callan's back hit the wall, Sage heard the tortured moan in his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Sage."

"No, no." She shook her head and grabbed a hold of the front of his shirt, forcing him to look at her. "Don't say that. It wasn't you."

"I was watching him," Callan's breaths were shallow and his eyes were shrouded in pain, "I was supposed to protect him."

"You can't say that."

"Why? Why can't I?" He tried to pull away from her. "I was supposed to protect both of you."

Sage felt herself standing taller, felt her fear turn to anger, but not at Callan.

She needed him to know that she didn't blame him, but he also needed to understand it too.

"Do you blame me for the car accident? When you had to pull Milo out of the car? When he could have died?"

Sage swore she could see Callan push aside his own despair and start to fight for her again.

"Of course not. Richie was the one who hit you. He's the one who nearly killed you."

“Then why,” she felt becoming light-headed from the building fear inside of her, “why are you blaming yourself? Richie was going to do something like this sooner or later. If you’re going to blame yourself,” she shook her head until she thought she might make herself sick, “then you have to blame me, too.”

Callan pulled her against him, his embrace painfully tight. “I was right there.”

“Me, too. I was just a foot or two away from him in the car and I couldn’t stop Richie, Callan. I couldn’t stop him! What we need to do now is figure out how to get Milo back.”

She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed until she felt like neither of them could breath. “We will, Callan. We will.”

* * *

“I DON’T WANT to go with you!”

Richie turned around and pointed a finger at the kid. “Sit your ass down and shut the fuck up!”

When he turned his head back toward the front of the car, he had to swerve back into his own lane.

“Shit!”

“That’s bad language.” The kid was sulking in the back seat. “Why don’t you have a car seat for me?”

“Shut up!” Richie grabbed the wheel, white-knuckling it. “I don’t need you talking back!”

He tilted his head up and saw the kid climb up onto the seat and buckle himself into the lap belt.

Not bad for a stupid kid.

“Aunty Sage is going to be so mad at you.”

“Well, I don’t give a fuck what your *Aunty Sage* says. She’s not your Mommy. I’m your dad.”

“You’re a fake!”

The little boy’s fists lifted by his face, shaking in anger.

“You’re not Santa and you’re not my dad!”

“Shut up, you hear me! Shut the- What the hell?”

Richie had to stomp on the breaks, locking up the wheels so they wouldn’t slam into the back of a Highlander at the street corner.

The kid broke into tears.

“I wanna go back!”

Grumbling to himself, Richie realized that he wanted to take the kid back too. He’d made a mistake grabbing the kid like he had.

He was going to be in a shit-ton of trouble.

* * *

WHEN THE CALL CAME IN, the SWAT team looked up from their conditioning workout and sprinted for the locker room.

Fox got up from his desk and followed behind them. He caught West’s gaze from the doorway of the locker room. “I want to go and get Richie’s dad.”

West was pulling on the tabs to tighten his kevlar vest. “You think it’ll help? I thought you said Rob wasn’t much help.”

“Most people like Rob don’t want someone to tell them what’s up. They don’t want to read documents or take anyone else’s word for things. If he sees his son and a bunch of guns pointed in his direction, I think he’d be willing to help.”

“Go.” West lifted his chin toward the door. “When we have an idea of where he is, we’ll let you know.”

Fox gave West a nod. “Thanks, boss.”

“Let’s just bring this boy home.”

“You got it.”

* * *

RICHIE WANTED to kick someone's ass. He'd made the mistake of grabbing the kid when he'd just wanted to get information from him.

It was a damn stupid mistake, but there'd been an opportunity to grab him and go, and like his dad always told him, he was a guy who liked the easy score.

And Milo was an easy score.

Or so he'd thought.

Richie was cursing his damn luck.

He'd seen a patrol car and taken a quick right to avoid being seen.

Only to find out that he'd turned into a small community of cottages that looked like they'd all been built in another century.

The car that he'd rented to attend the party was a decent sized sedan, but it stood out in this sleepy little neighborhood. He'd picked the AUDI because he'd like the sleek lines, but everything else that he'd driven past were bland and boring like ancient trucks or Asian imports like HONDA, TOYOTA, HYUNDAI cars.

Richie jammed on the brakes when he saw a Sheriff's vehicle pass by. When it was a safe distance away, he'd gone through the intersection only to catch sight of the Sheriff's vehicle making a U-turn in the center of the block, he had to get out of there.

* * *

ABE WAS on the phone with dispatch, feeding them information. "It's an AUDI. Newer model. Dark gray or gunmetal metallic paint. I can only make out part of the license plate. VX4 at the beginning."

The call was on the speaker and Callan heard the dispatcher repeat the information word for word.

“We’ve got someone on the traffic cams, Abe. We’ll find this car and- Wait. Hold on.”

“We have a radio call coming in from a Sheriff’s deputy a few miles away from Station Seven.

“Dark gray AUDI. On Seldon Street... between Costa and Ramsey.

“The deputy is turning around to follow.”

Callan felt Sage shake in his arms. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah... Yes. I heard it.”

Callan pulled her with him toward the hall that led to the parking lot, but Chief Blaise stopped them with a hand on Callan’s shoulder.

“Sorry, Chief.” Callan tried to shake off the other man’s hand. “We can’t sit back and wait. We need to go and be there for Milo.”

“Son,” Chief Blaise shook his head. “You’re misunderstanding me. I’m not stopping you from going. I’m going with you.”

Viviana gave her husband a quick kiss and a smile. “I’ll stay here and keep things under control. You three be careful.”

Rush pulled his keys from his pocket. “I think we’re all going. They might need our help.”

The chief nodded at the men. “Then let’s do it.”

Callan kept Sage at his side as they moved along with the others as they piled into cars and hastily secured their seatbelts.

Chief Blaise met Callan’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Think good thoughts. We’re going to find him and he’s going to be just fine.”

Callan nodded and wiped tears from Sage’s face. “Listen to him, baby. It’s going to be okay. We’ll get him back and

then no one will ever keep us from being a family.”

Sage took hold of his hand and squeezed until he could barely feel his fingers. He didn't care in the least. If it helped her feel better, in more control, she could do whatever she needed.

“A family.” Sage offered him a shaky smile. “That would be amazing.”

“It's going to be real, Sage. I promise you.”

* * *

DEPUTY HAYDEN HATCHER was barely holding back a smile. Richie Norris might be in a different car than he was last time, but she knew what he looked like now.

And just when she was convinced that she'd seen him in the little cottage community she was patrolling, a BOLO came across the radio.

Dark gray AUDI.

Seldon Street... between Costa and Ramsey

License Plate includes VX4

Hayden tightened a hand on the steering wheel when she called in.

“This is Hayden Hatcher. I have the car in sight. Following at a discreet distance. Anyone else near me?”

The dispatcher repeated the information and paused for just a moment. “SWAT is headed your way.”

Her smile was a little tight, but only because she hated to wait in situations like this. But with a young child in the car, they would have to be more cautious.

Her radio crackled to life. “Sergeant Weston Cooper. Deputy Hatcher? Where are you?”

Hayden quickly gave him her latest cross streets. “I'm two blocks behind. How close are you?”

“Five... no, four blocks. Coming from the South.”

“There’s a cul-de-sac coming up in my direction. Two roads feed into it, and there’s no way out once you’re there.”

Hayden felt good with Weston’s SWAT team on the way. Together, they could corner the car.

“I’ll take Trotter Street.”

“We’ll take Cannon.”

* * *

HE KEPT his gaze on the rear-view mirror. He kept seeing that Sheriff’s vehicle behind him.

It would disappear for a moment, obscured by a tree or some bushes, but he’d go through another intersection and there it was again.

“I want to go back.”

His gaze dropped to the kid in the backseat. He had his arms folded across his chest and a sullen look in his eyes.

Just shut up, kid.

He really couldn’t handle that kind of shit behavior.

If he’d done that to his dad, Rob would have knocked him out with one slap or punch.

Kait and her crap sister had already ruined the kid. That pissed him off.

The only good thing was that he could get the money and give the kid back. He could have more kids if he ever wanted to, but when was he going to get his hands on that kind of money?

Never again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Waiting had never been Sage's strong suit. Patience wasn't a virtue in her eyes. Or at least a virtue that she could get a grasp on.

Sitting in the back of Chief Blaise's Navigator with the blinking red lights helping to clear their way on the road, Sage still felt like she was barely clinging to her sanity.

They could hear the emergency dispatch relays happening on the radio in the car and as much as she wanted to know what was going on, they were using codes that she didn't understand.

The last thing she wanted to do was pull anyone's attention away from the matter at hand.

Hearing the SWAT team calling in and continually relaying how close they were should have given her a measure of relief and calm, but it had the opposite effect on her.

Sage felt like she might vibrate right out of her skin if she was allowed to wallow in her own fears. Instead she was there for Milo.

No matter what happened, she would have to be strong. Even with her heart beating against her ribs like a caged, wild bird, she was breathing in and out, struggling to hold herself together.

Thank goodness for Callan beside her. He'd been the one who buckled her in because her hands were shaking like leaves.

“It’s just a couple of blocks ahead.” The chief lifted a hand from the steering wheel and pointed off to the right along the road.

They were still too far away for Sage. Too far and she could only hope that they weren’t too late.

* * *

FOX LOOKED over at Rob Norris. The man smelled like he’d soaked in a tub of whiskey and his clothes looked like he hadn’t changed them in days.

“Don’t know why you’re botherin’ me. I wanted to sleep.”

“I dragged you out of your bed to get your son to see reason.”

Rob half turned in his seat to glare at the SWAT officer. “You’re just tryin’ to cheat my boy out of his money.”

“I told you the truth about it before. There’s no money for Milo or your son. But it’s not about what your son thinks is coming to him. He just kidnapped Milo from a Christmas party.”

Rob shook his head like he was trying to clear it. “He what?”

“Your son went into a roomful of children and families and dragged Milo out. He threw him into what we can only guess is a rental car and now he’s driving around with him in the back.”

“You cops just keep comin’ up with these lies.”

“It’s not a damn lie.” Fox flexed his hands on the steering wheel to keep him from doing something he might regret later. “Your son, Richie,” he sneered the name, “left Milo’s aunt in tears and he’s putting his own son in danger.”

“Fuckin’ cops.” Rob turned to stare out the window. “I’ll believe it when I fuckin’ see it.”

* * *

“FUCK!” Richie slammed his hand on the steering wheel and heard Milo gasp behind him. “Wrong turn.”

“I want my aunt!”

Milo’s voice was muffled and Richie turned around to look at the little boy. “You keep your trap shut, or I’ll kill your stupid aunt.”

Instead of scaring the boy into silence, Milo sat up and pointed a finger at him. “You stay away from my aunty! Fish is gonna be so angry at you!”

“Fish? Is that why you’re wearing that dumb ass sweater?”

Milo looked down at his sweater. “Fish likes it. He said we match like a family.”

He reached into the cup holder and pulled out a little baggy. He really needed another hit, but he had to get away first. Find some overgrown driveway to pull into. Or a garage that he could park in and pull down the rolling door.

Then he’d get a little high and ignore the little shit in the backseat.

“Well, maybe I should kill him, too. That would end all of my problems, right?”

Milo launched himself over the front seat and clawed at Richie’s face. “You leave my family alone, you big bully!”

Richie struggled to throw the boy off of him, he could barely keep an eye on the road with Milo trying to scratch him bloody.

“Get the fu-”

“Richie! Richie Norris! Put your car in park and your hands up!”

* * *

HAYDEN DIDN'T MAKE it to the intersection as quickly as SWAT did. Then again, their B.E.A.R. vehicle was big enough to block the whole street, she would have only been in the way with her sheriff's department vehicle.

She stayed in her vehicle and listened to the loud broadcast coming from the SWAT speakers.

Still, she could see the AUDI where Richie was holed up with Milo and it didn't look good.

Milo was fighting like a trooper, flailing his arms against his father.

No.

Not his father.

Richie Norris could barely be considered a DNA donor for that boy.

He didn't have any of Milo's strength or character.

"Let the boy out of the car."

"Get off me, boy!"

Milo kept scratching at Richie and Hayden silently prayed that Milo would calm down and listen.

"I won't let you hurt my family!"

Hayden's heart broke at the terror in the child's voice.

She couldn't help but wonder what horrible thing Richie had said to Milo to get the child *that* worked up.

Getting out of her cruiser, Hayden moved around the perimeter toward the B.E.A.R. to see if she could help.

There was no way that they weren't going to rescue Milo from Richie and end this today.

* * *

CHIEF BLAISE PULLED up behind the tape at the perimeter and it was the Chief that got Fish and Sage escorted to the back of the Black Betty vehicle that SWAT used on scene. Climbing

out of the back was Weston Cooper, the Sergeant in charge of the unit.

He saw them, but turned to look at another car. This one coming through a gap opened up in the perimeter barrier.

Callan didn't know who the passenger was, but it seemed like Sage did.

She gasped and tensed in his arms. "That's Rob, Richie's dad.

The man walking with him had a grip on Rob's arm as if it was a manacle instead of just a hand. Rob didn't seem to be in any condition to pull away or run, but the grip that the SWAT officer had on him wasn't going to allow it anyway.

As Weston spoke to the other officer and Rob, Callan and Sage moved closer.

Weston looked up and gave them a grim smile. "I knew you two were going to come to the scene. I just need you two to stay out of the way."

Callan saw Sage nod.

"I understand, Sergeant. I really do. I just want to be close so I can be here when you get Milo back."

Weston nodded and turned to look at Fox. "You think he'll help us talk Richie down?"

Rob tried to yank his arm away from Fox. "I'm not about to help you put my son in prison."

Fox yanked his arm back, grimacing in pain. "I've got news for you, Rob. Your son is already going to jail. The point here is how long he's going to be in jail and what the charges are. "Kidnapping to start with."

"It ain't no kidnapping if it's own damn kid!"

"He's not! I have custody of Milo! Richie didn't want to have anything to do with him until he thought there was money involved." Sage took a step forward and Callan moved with her, afraid that Rob might do something. "Why don't you

help me get my son back and try to keep your son out of even more trouble than he's already in?"

Callan pulled her back against his chest and pressed a kiss on the crown of her head.

He lifted his head as Deputy Hayden Hatcher moved into sight. "West?" She started to speak, but her eyes fixed on Rob and she narrowed her eyes. "Can I talk to you?"

Weston looked back and forth and nodded. "Let's go off to the side here." He gestured to the backside of a Ford truck. Then he raised a hand and another SWAT officer came out of the back of the truck.

Weston gestured at him and pointed toward Callan and Sage. "Take them inside and show them the cameras." He then turned to Callan. "I can trust you two not to make any trouble."

Callan felt Sage stiffen in his arms, but she was the one who spoke for them.

"I'll do whatever it takes to get Milo back, including following any rules you have."

West nodded. "Good."

The other SWAT officer gestured at the door. "Come on in. I'm McRae King, but you can call me Duval if you like."

Callan took a breath when he felt Sage move toward the steps. They just had to hold on until they had Milo back.... that's all.

* * *

"WHAT DO YOU KNOW?" He was short and to the point while things were rolling.

Hayden looked at him and nodded. "There's a small easement between the houses on the passenger side of the car."

West nodded. "You think we can get someone to the car?"

“I think so, but I don’t know how the boy will react. He’s got to be terrified.”

West agreed. “If he tried to pull away from the officer, it might put him in more danger.” He looked back at the B.E.A.R. vehicle. “Dally has his K-9 with him, but I doubt a dog would be any less scary for him.”

“What about sending Fish?”

West’s eyes widened at the suggestion. “You think Chief Blaise would be okay that?”

“I don’t think the Chief will be able to say no. If you ask Fish to do it, he will. That man considers the boy family already.”

West blew out a breath. “That’s part of my concern. That he’s emotionally involved might make him take chances that could be dangerous.”

He saw Hayden open her mouth to argue with him.

“I’m talking about dangerous to himself. Fish wouldn’t do a thing to endanger the boy.”

Hayden nodded. “I just-”

“It’s always harder when there’s a child involved. If Fish agrees to help, will you show him where the easement is?”

“Of course.” Hayden nodded. “If I knew Milo, I’d do it myself. I just don’t think he’ll go with anyone he doesn’t know.”

West nodded. “And there’s no way I’m putting Sage in that kind of danger.”

Hayden grinned at him. “Now, let’s get that boy back.”

* * *

SAGE WASN’T happy about any of this...

But she wasn’t given any other options.

Richie had Milo.

And given the set of circumstances that she'd had to endure, she had no choices here either.

The SWAT Sergeant Weston Cooper wasn't going to allow her anywhere near the car.

He gave her another tentative look. "I'm sorry, Sage. I know you want to go, but-

"No, I get it. I get it. I just don't have to like it."

She watched as Dally and Duval suited Callan up in Kevlar.

As if he knew that she was looking at him, Callan turned his head toward her and smiled. "I'll bring him back, baby. I'll bring him back to us."

"I know." She knew her voice was thin and tried to boost it up a bit. "I know."

Weston put a hand on her shoulder. "Let's go through the plan again, so we all know how this is going to go."

She refused to look up at Weston, because she knew that life didn't just happen the way people wanted to. If it did, they'd still be at the party and she'd be getting ready to go home with Callan and Milo and put up some Christmas decorations that she'd picked up.

And they still would put up those decorations, she decided.

They'd put it up. Just a little later than she planned.

"Hey, Sage?"

She lifted her head, startled. "Sorry," she whispered, "I was thinking of Christmas decorations and putting them up together with Milo."

Callan's smile melted her heart as it always did.

He lifted his hand and brushed her hair back from her forehead. "We'll do that soon. You. Me. And Milo. All of us."

She smiled at him, but tears gathered on her lashes. "We will."

"Baby?"

Sage lifted her hand to brush away the tears on her cheeks. “Yeah?”

Callan’s eyes changed. They lost some of his casual geniality, but she could see love in them. Love that belonged to her and Milo. “I’m going to do everything it takes to get Milo out of that car. I need you to know that.”

She stepped up against him, wrapping her arms around his neck. Sage pulled him down to her and looked straight into his eyes. “You’re my hero, Callan. Always. I must have done something deserving to have you and Milo in my life. I don’t know what it was, but I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to do it again after I have you both in my arms and this is over.”

She felt Callan fumble a little before he wrapped his arms around her.

“I love you, Sage. I love you like crazy.”

She blinked back tears from her eyes. “If you love me, then you are crazy.”

He kissed her and held her tight for what seemed like a split second and then he was walking away, with Duval at one side and Deputy Hatcher on the other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Richie managed to push Milo away and the little boy was sobbing against the passenger door. Glaring back at him.

“What’s your problem, kid?”

“You’re...” Milo gasped in a breath and it whooshed out in the next second. “You’re not my dad... are you?”

Well, fuck.

“That’s what your mom said, kid.”

“So... so you’re not?”

It killed him that the kid looked almost happy about it. He’d never wanted a kid and when Katie told him that she was pregnant, he’d run off to Vegas ready to disappear.

And he got drunk enough and stupid enough that what he did ended up with him in jail.

Now?

Here he was, facing down a SWAT vehicle and a bunch of other cops. He could see the cars and vehicles down both sides of the cul-de-sac.

It was just his dumb luck that led him here.

And this kid?

He wasn’t supposed to care about him.

He was supposed to get the kid, get the money and-

“Richie?”

Dad?

“Richie, son? Can you hear me?”

Lights clicked on and flooded the windshield with light.

Richie squinted at the blinding rush of light and reached his left hand down under his seat.

“Richie? Talk to me, boy!”

“Go away, dad! You’re not going to do any good here! Tell them to go away! They’ll get the boy back as soon as I get my money!”

“Son,” he heard his father laughing... fucking laughing at him, “I’ve read the papers.”

“I don’t care about newspapers, just tell them to go the fuck away!”

“You’re a jerk!” Milo kicked his legs out and covered his ears. “You say so many mean words!”

Richie turned and glared at him. “Shut the fuck up, boy.”

Milo turned and huddled against the door. “I hate you.”

“Well, I don’t give two shits about you either, so just sit there and shut up!”

“Son, come on... you’re not hearing me.” There was a little feedback in the audio that carried his dad’s voice, but it wasn’t enough to distort the sound. “I’ve read the insurance papers! There ain’t no money!”

“Yeah, well... I’d expect you to say that, you old fool! You saw the papers, right? I bet some cop showed them to you! And why would they? It’s cause they’re tryin’ to cheat me out of my money.”

“It was a cop, son. But the papers are real. You give up now and-”

“I give up now and what? You take the cash? You and that bitch in on this, dad? You and this kid’s fuckin’ *aunty*? You turnin’ on me now, *Dad*?”

“There ain’t no cash, Richie. No fuckin’ cash! Don’t be a fuckin’ idi-”

“Sir, stop. You’re not helping.”

Richie felt his anger do more than bubble up, it rushed up like a steam-driven geyser.

“See? You’re helping them!” Richie pounded his fist on the steering wheel. “I’ve never been able to count on you for a damn thing!”

Richie turned to look at Milo and he could barely see the kid. All of the light that had flooded through the windshield made everything look like it was black and white, some parts of his vision barely there.

“I’m about to save you a life full of disappointment, kid.” His eyes narrowed on Milo and he saw the anger in the boy’s eyes. “I’d say you’d thank me for this later, but you’re not gonna be able to do a damn thing later.”

He lifted the gun that he’d been holding loose at his side and pointed it toward the passenger seat, but kept it low across his belly and well out of sight of the people outside.

Richie smiled at the fear he saw in the kid’s eyes.

He meant what he said. Yeah. This would suck, but it was better than living his whole life being let down by life and the people who were supposed to love him. “If you don’t want to see it coming, close your eyes.”

With his first real smile on his face, Richie lifted the gun.

The first shot sounded like a cannon.

It wasn’t until he felt fire burn through his chest that Richie realized that he hadn’t fired his weapon.

The passenger door opened up and the boy fell backward into the dark.

No, it wasn’t into the dark.

Someone wearing the dark.

Across the back it said SWAT.

“No!” Richie screamed, but blood sputtered up into his mouth. “You can’t have him!”

He fired.

Round after round spitting from the barrel as answering shots split him open.

* * *

SAGE FELT like her spirit had separated from her body when she heard the shots.

There were just too many.

There was screaming.

Richie screaming. “No. You can’t have him!”

And more shots.

So many that she was sure she would hear them in her head for years to come, but that didn’t stop her.

She ran.

“Sage, wait!”

She pulled out of Hayden’s grasp and ran through the easement that she’d seen Callan crawl through.

Weeds and brambles caught at her clothes, tore into her skin, but nothing was going to stop her from finding Callan and Milo.

“Please... Please...” she gasped in a breath as she turned the corner and saw Callan face down on the ground.

Unmoving.

“No... no! No!”

She kept moving and stopped only when Hayden shoved her out of the way.

Sage crept forward on her hands and knees, trying to see what Hayden was doing.

“Fish? Hey... Come on, Fish.”

Hayden was trying to turn him over, but one arm was thrown out to the side as if he'd used it to brace his fall.

Sage tucked his arm down and helped Hayden roll him over toward his back. "Milo!"

The boy was curled up on his side in the fetal position and all Sage could do was reach out, wanting to hold him tight.

"Milo?"

She touched his shoulder and Milo startled, wheeling back and away from her.

Screaming.

"No! No! NO!"

"Milo! It's me! Milo, it's Aunty Sage!"

His back hit the chain-link fence with enough force to make it jingle against the posts.

"Milo... it's me."

Her hands grasped his shoulders and at first, his fingers dug into her arms, clawing at her, but she didn't let go.

"It's me, baby... It's me."

"Au-aunty Sage?"

For a moment, it looked as if Milo couldn't see her through his fear. His gaze stared through her as if the world was too dark for him to see it.

"Yes, baby. It's Aunty Sage!"

He launched himself at her, his arms and legs squeezing around her middle as if he could become another part of her.

Sobbing, she held him tight.

"Hayden?"

"Sage? Back up."

"But, Callan-"

"Sage! Back up!"

Oh god.

Sage heard the fear in Hayden's voice, not anger.

Fear.

Sage pushed herself backwards, digging her heels into the ground to push back until her own back was against the chain-link.

Two EMTs passed by Sage and dropped down beside Callan.

Hayden looked up at her. "Sage, take Milo and go back to the SWAT command vehicle."

Sage opened her mouth to argue.

She didn't want to go.

But Milo was sobbing against her neck and she knew that the last thing Callan would want Milo to see was...

Sage scrambled up onto her feet and wrapped her arms around Milo, trying to shield him from the brambles and whatever was happening behind her.

It wasn't until she was clear of the easement that everything became real to her. One look at Chief Blaise's worn and pained expression, and Sage stumbled to her knees.

"Sage, honey?"

She didn't recognize the voice she heard, but at the moment, she doubted that she'd recognize any voice except Callan's.

"Sage? It's Viviana. Come on, sweetie. Let's get you up on your feet. The EMTs want to take a look at you and Milo, okay?"

If it had just been herself, Sage wouldn't care, but Milo. He needed to be looked at.

Nodding, she accepted help getting back on her feet, but she didn't let go of Milo until they were at the back of the ambulance.

Even then, Milo didn't want to let go of her, so the EMT had her sit on the gurney and put Milo in her lap.

She let the noise and the atmosphere around her lull her. She wanted to be numb just as she wanted to be present for Milo, but there was a very real fear settling in her chest that she might lose Callan.

How was her heart ever supposed to survive that?

A rush of sound and movement burst out of the easement, and Sage tightened her hold on Milo.

Callan, strapped down to a gurney, the EMTs rushing over to the other ambulance that had been waiting.

Sage looked around at the assembled group and saw Chief Blaise nearby. “Chief!”

Chief Blaise was already running toward the back of the ambulance. Before she could say anything more, he climbed up into the back and they were gone.

Milo trembled in her embrace. “Aunty Sage? Is Fish gonna die?”

Sage leaned over and placed a kiss on the top of his head. “N... No, baby. No. He can’t.”

One of the EMTs touched her arm and for the first time, Sage turned to look at who it was.

“Nicole...” Sage’s eyes filled up with tears. “Do you know?”

She shook her head and some blonde wisps fell against her cheeks. “Let’s get you two to the hospital and you can find out more there. I’m sure Chief Blaise will let you know.”

“Okay.”

Sage cuddled Milo as Nicole and Garret secured the gurney in the ambulance and got underway.

* * *

WHEN CALLAN WOKE up in the hospital, he heard the rhythmic beeping from the machines keeping tabs on his vital signs.

His shoulder hurt like crazy, but the doctor told him it would heal up soon enough if he rested it.

And Chief Blaise had made it very clear that he was going to follow the doctor's orders, because they were also the chief's orders.

Looking down at the side of his bed, he was a little surprised to see Sage fast asleep, her head pillowed on her arms.

Callan sighed.

And before he could think of a way to take it back, Sage woke up.

“Callan?”

“Hey,” he lifted his good hand and smoothed her hair back from her face. “You can sleep.”

Sage sat up and looked at him, searching his face. “Are you in pain? Should I call the doctor? A nurse?”

He shook his head, ignoring the pain that shot up through his shoulder blade. “I'm good. Here. With you.”

Callan shifted on the bed, trying to look around the room. “Where's Milo?”

Smiling, Sage shifted and stood up from the rolling stool that she'd been sitting on. She leaned her hip against the bed and gestured over to the corner of the hospital room. “The staff had to bend a few rules, but they brought in a chair from the maternity ward that new dads get to sleep on so they can stay with their wives and babies for Milo to sleep on.”

Callan laid his hand over hers. “Why are you sleeping on this chair and not with Milo?”

“I wanted to be here for you, Callan. It's as simple as that.” Sage gasped in a breath and bit into her lip. “I saw you on the ground, shielding Milo, bleeding...” She stumbled back, but he gripped her hand, holding her beside him. “In that moment,” she swallowed and he saw the way her throat worked as she struggled with her words, “I felt torn in two. You saved Milo. You kept him from harm, but you were hurt.

“Chief Blaise said that when you turned to put Milo out of the line of fire.”

He nodded. “And that’s when Richie got lucky. It made its way in through the armhole of the vest.”

“And I nearly lost you.”

“We couldn’t lose Milo. There was only one decision to make. I did what anyone would do.”

She shook her head, almost violently. “Richie tried to kill his son.”

Callan felt his heart constrict in his chest. “Some people don’t deserve to have kids at all, let alone a kid as awesome as Milo.”

He let his words settle between them as he searched her face.

She looked up at him and frowned. Sage lifted her free hand to touch her face. “Is something wrong? Do I have something on my face?”

“Ah... no.” He blew out a breath and shifted his hold on her hand so that her knuckles were in the light. “Sage? I know this is all happening so fast, but I think... I know it’s real.”

Callan gently rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand and over her knuckles.

“I’m sorry for scaring you.”

She leaned in against the bed and shook her head. “You pulled Milo out of danger. He could have been shot if you didn’t protect him, Callan. My only fear after Nicole turned you on your side and I saw that Milo was okay was that we’d lost you.”

She lifted their hands and placed them over her heart, the back of his hand against her chest.

“After Kait p-passed, I put all of my love into Milo, trying to keep him safe and happy.” Her lips curled up in a little smile. “And I couldn’t do it all by myself. You were there making us feel at home. Making us...”

“A family.” Callan felt her heart pounding against his hand. “But I didn’t keep him safe either. He was taken from a party at my firehouse.”

“I was in that room, too, Callan. He was taken from a room full of law enforcement and firefighters. There were even a few EMTs in the room. I don’t think Milo could have been safer in Fort Knox. And still Richie, dressed up as Santa, took his hand and walked him out the door, but we got him back.”

“We got him back.” Callan smiled. “Is that enough to make you want to stay?”

Sage shook her head and his heart fell from a thousand feet to the rocks below.

“You know, I’ve been wondering why the guys call you Fish.”

Callan’s forehead pinched above his nose. “What?”

“It seems like a silly name, but I’ve only known you to be a sweet and wonderful guy. Fish... doesn’t seem to fit.”

“Oh, I earned that name in so many ways. There was the time I tripped and landed face first in someone’s kiddie pool. Or the time I ran back into a burning house to save someone’s pet beta fighting fish. I did a lot of silly things, Sage.”

“Huh,” she shrugged, “I just haven’t seen it.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” he smiled at her. “Maybe I’ve become someone different since I met you. Someone more mature. Someone... who loves you and that little boy.”

When she smiled at him, his heart swelled in his chest.

“We love you, too. Callan. Milo stayed awake as long as he could while you were in surgery. He kept asking for you, praying for you.

“He loves you just as much as I do.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Really.”

Callan let out a breath, completely ignoring the pain in his back. It wasn't as important as the woman in front of him.

“Did you ever check your pocket?”

“My pocket?” She drew back a little, her hand loosening its hold on his. “What are you-”

Callan looked down at the pocket of her light cardigan.

Sage gave him a strange look and slipped her free hand into her pocket.

Her eyes widened when she did, and a moment later, she pulled out a small black velvet box.

“I guess it's a good thing I gave that to you before I was hurt. It'll be hard to open it with one hand.”

Smiling, she opened the box and stared at the ring inside. “Oh, Callan.”

“I found it at an antique store. It was so delicate and pretty, just like you.”

She blinked back tears.

“It came with a pair of gold wedding bands from an estate sale. A couple who were married for more than fifty years.” He rubbed his thumb over her ring finger. “If you don't like it, I can get us-”

Sage leaned in and kissed him gently on his lips. When she drew back, she gave him the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. “I love them. I love you. And I hope we get to wear them past our golden anniversary.”

Callan and Sage laughed as they awkwardly managed to get her engagement ring on, and when she finally fell asleep, she was spooned up against him with his breath gently warming her neck.

* * *

TWO WEEKS LATER, when Callan had been cleared to help with little things around the house, the whole shift came over for a

party.

A Christmas tree that Milo had declared was the most beautiful tree in all the world had been set up in a stand in the corner where Milo's bed had once stood.

They'd done a little shifting in the house to make sure there was room for everything. And Callan's Christmas present for Sage was in a big poster-tube wrapped up by Aylin.

Plans for an addition onto the house.

Well, a couple of rooms, but she'd find out soon enough.

The ladies were already working on a wedding for Christmas morning, but no one outside of Fish and Sage knew the announcement they'd be making at their breakfast reception.

It turned out that the condom he'd fished out of his bedside table hadn't been all that effective.

Age might have been a problem, but since Milo was already begging them for a little brother or sister, they didn't think he'd mind in the least.

The day was filled with laughter and joy. Lots of food and games.

It ran them all ragged from all of the energy they'd spent having fun.

Milo had passed out on the couch, a little elf hat on his head.

Sage cleared her throat to stop Callan from lifting Milo up off of the couch.

"He barely weighs anything."

Sage gave him a look that brooked no argument. "I'll take Milo to bed and you are going to rest your shoulder."

Callan smiled as Sage almost had to fireman carry the boy into the bedroom.

It didn't take her long to come back, but when she did, he was ready.

The lights on the Christmas tree were twinkling, white amongst the gold and silver ornaments and thick pine branches.

As she stood there enjoying the view, Callan turned the lights down so they could see the whole effect together.

“It’s magical.” She smiled as she looked at the tree.

“You are,” Callan replied. “Milo, too. I can’t believe my luck, having the two of you in my life.”

“Well, you’re an amazing man, Callan. We’re incredibly lucky to have you.”

They grinned at each other and Callan moved to the couch. He turned his back and moved one of the cushions aside.

When he stood back up, he had a Santa hat on his head.

“Cute,” she grinned, “it really goes with the grey sweatpants.”

“And the no shirt thing. You like the no shirt thing.”

Sage’s shoulders shook with silent laughter. “You know I do.” She stepped into him and put her hands on his bare chest. “You know that when you don’t have your shirt on I can barely keep my hands off of you.”

“Good.” He grinned at her and lifted up his healing arm. “How about this?”

She leaned back a little and laughed out loud, making them both widen their eyes in shock. Sage covered both of their mouths with her hands, but her eyes never left the little trinket that Callan was holding over her head.

A little sprig of mistletoe with a fish in the center of it, all tied together with a bow.

“How about a kiss from my soon to be Missus.”

“You know I can’t resist you when you’re like this,” she giggled. “I’ll marry you this Fishmas and every year after.”

“I love you, Sage.”

“Come on then, Callan. Kiss me.”

And he did.

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER...

If someone would have told Milo that he'd be looking forward to celebrations like holidays and birthdays after his Mommy Kait passed away, he would have told them they were wrong and a total dork.

But that wasn't the truth.

Everyday, Milo looked at his Mommy Kait's picture on his shelf and gave her a kiss.

She was also on the walls of their house. Pictures of him and Mommy Kait. Pictures of both of his moms together, holding him and loving him.

He was a lucky boy.

And he could finally say that without any tears.

Aunty Sloane and Aunty Hildie had found him a really nice lady to talk to. She got him to talk about how he felt about his birth daddy and he found a whole bunch of ways to talk to his Mommy and Daddy when he was feeling sad thoughts and when he was feeling happy thoughts.

The doorbell rang and Milo sprinted out of his bedroom and across the living room floor. "I got it!"

He leaned in and looked out through the peep hole that Daddy put into the door for him and when he saw who was outside, he pulled the door open and threw his hands up in the air. "You came!"

There was a whole bunch of people outside and more pulling up to the curbs up and down the street in front of their

house.

Aunty Sloane and Uncle Vincente. Aunty Hildie and Uncle Jake. All of the super cool firefighters from his daddy's firehouse and all of their super pretty ladies.

Milo gave and got hugs and kisses and handshakes. He gestured toward the new back doors and invited everyone to, "Head on outside for the party!"

Even a few of their neighbors came to celebrate and he gave them hugs, too.

Like mommy and daddy said, neighbors could be friends.

Or was that Mister Rogers?

Anywho, he waited by the door, keeping an eye on Aunty Sloane and Lora, who were playing quietly inside.

"You ready to get this party started?"

Milo looked up and took his daddy's hand. "I can't wait!"

They locked the front door up tight and crossed the room to help Lora to her feet.

When they reached the backyard, Milo was almost bouncing with energy. "This is gonna be so cool."

His daddy cleared his throat and Milo copied it before he changed his words. "This is going to be really cool."

Aunty Sloane giggled and they walked down the stairs to the grass that they'd been carefully growing in the center of their yard. It was enough to play around on. They could do cartwheels or maybe have a trampoline someday. There was even enough room for a dog, although mommy wasn't too sure about having too many 'little' legs running around the house just yet.

Still, they had a bunch of grass and a whole bunch more of dirt that he and daddy had dug up just for the party.

Daddy helped him walk down onto the grass to stand beside mommy. She looked really pretty and he told her so.

Which was when she started crying.

When mommy said that they were going to have a baby, she burst into tears too. Now that was confusing. Since they said they were really happy about it.

The fire chief walked down to stand beside them and Milo stared up at the big man who was the closest thing to a grandpa that he'd ever had.

When Milo felt the chief put a hand on his head and mess up his hair, Milo reached up and threaded their fingers together.

“I get the honor of getting this party started off because both Fish and Sage tell me they're too anxious to say anything. And I'm just as eager as they are since they wouldn't let me see the results of the test.

“In fact,” the chief looked at his wife and gave her a look that Milo didn't understand at all, “my wife is the only one here who knows the results. And I can't believe she made me wait!” He shook his head. “I tried to take a peek at the test and she made me sleep on the couch for three days.”

The assembled group laughed and Milo shrugged.

“Now this gender reveal is one I can get behind. Goodness knows we've had our share of calls to put out fires due to gender reveals gone wrong.”

The firefighters groaned and laughed, but Milo was getting anxious.

He tugged on the chief's hand and when Chief Blaise looked down at him, Milo almost-whispered to him. “Can we get to the good part? I want some cake.”

Daddy's lieutenant, Cowboy, laughed the loudest. “I second that. Let's get to this!”

The chief's daughter, Aylin and her fiancé, Rook, walked around and passed out the cardboard poppers that Milo had been dying to play with.

“Now these poppers are all biodegradable. Good choice, you two.”

Milo smiled when his mommy leaned in against daddy's side. They looked just as happy as he felt.

“On the count of three, we'll all pop the poppers and confetti will come out.”

Abe groaned a little. “Not it on cleaning up all the paper.”

Rhett sighed. “It's biodegradable. We don't have to pick it up.”

“And,” Viviana, the chief's wife, grinned at all of them, “the confetti and the poppers have wildflower seeds inside the paper. Where they land, they'll have wildflowers all over their backyard.”

Aunty Kylie looked at Uncle Peace. “That sounds like it's going to be gorgeous back here.”

“So, when do we get to pop?” Caddo was holding it out, his hand on the string.

Milo felt the chief tug on his hand. “You go on, son. Call out the numbers. One. Two. Three. And we'll see if you're going to have a little brother or sister.”

Milo almost burst with pride.

He took a step forward so he could see almost everyone in the yard.

“Okay? Ready?”

Hoots and hollers answered him back.

“One.”

“Two.”

“And three!!”

The whole world around him exploded in pops of sound, and blue and pink confetti rained down around him.

He looked at his mommy and daddy and saw them hugging and kissing.

Viviana knelt down beside him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Do you understand what's going on, Milo?”

He put his hands out and saw that his palms had both colors on them. “We’re getting one of each?”

Viviana nodded and then he saw his mommy and daddy sit down in the grass.

They pulled him into their embrace and he got kisses and hugs from both of them.

“Are you okay, sweetie?”

Milo looked between the two and nodded, his head bouncing side to side instead of just forward and back. “I think it might be cool to have two.”

“Oh?” His daddy smiled at him. “Just might be?”

Milo thought his answer through. “Yeah. But I think we’re gonna have to get a dog, too.”

Milo saw his mommy’s eyes widen a little.

“Why a dog, sweetie?”

“Well, it’s gonna take a whole lotta folks to help take care of two babies around here. I’m gonna need a dog to help.”

“Oh,” his daddy gave his mommy a funny little smile, “when he puts it like that...”

“We’ll have to start looking at shelters, I guess.”

Milo almost jumped on mommy with a hug, but he held back remembering to be super careful. “*You mean it cuz if you mean it I’m gonna be the bestest big brother ever.*”

“Milo,” his daddy pulled him in for a hug, “take a breath.”

And that’s what he did.

He took in a big, big breath because everything was going to be just fine.

San Antonio First Responders Series

Justice for Sloan

Justice for Miranda

Shelter for Viviana

Justice for Hildie

Justice for Blyss

Shelter for Aylin

Shelter for Kylie

Shelter for Thora

Shelter For Sage

Delta Force Hawaii

Rescuing Hi`liani

A Hero For Ku`uipo

A Hero for Summer

A Hero for Olena

A Hero for Samira

A Hero for Lilinoe

A Hero for Tehani

A Hero for Mahina

The Armstrong Men

Falling for Joshua

Falling for Gabriel

Sylvan City Alphas Series

The Tiger's Innocent Bride

Too Much to Bear

The Fighter

Bear His Mark

Center City First Responders

Wild Hearts

Her Rock

The Man For Her

Silent Night (Dec 2021).

Burn for Her (March 2022).

Mystic Mountain Series

Winter

Xavier

Locke

Three Rivers Express Series

Always, Ransom

Always, Wyeth

Always, Ellis

Orsino Security Series

Her Unbearable Protector

His Unbearable Touch

Their Unbearable Destiny

St. Raphael, CA Series

Finding Home

Playing With Fire

Healing Hearts

Taking a Chance

Shapeshifters of Arcadia

Beneath the Surface

Ellingsford, Montana Series

Stay With Me

Her Gentle Heart

Hold Her Close

Big 'N Burly.

It's All About the Dad Bod

Claimed by the Dad Bod

Watched by the Dad Bod

Inked by the Dad Bod

Hidden by the Dad Bod

It's All About the Dad Bod

Roped by the Dad Bod

Aloha

Lei Aloha: Aloha Love

Howlworthy Holidays

Gingerbear Christmas

Loving Graystoke's Heir

Other

Too Much Bear

Home to Roost

Loving Graystoke's Heir

Jesse

The Mechanic

Gingerbear Christmas

Fall in Love

Sanguine Scent (Spellbound Sensuality Series).

Safe With You: Forget-Me-Not Series

Where Fate Leads: Fighting Fate

Inescapable Gravity

Cuffs and Cuddles: A Charity Romance Anthology

Bodyman: KNK Matchmaking Agency

(Sand in...) All The Wrong Places: Too Hot to Handle Series

Bring it on Home: Coming Home Series

Silver Soldiers: A Boys Behaving Badly Anthology Book #7

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Who would have thought that I'd start off as a painfully shy child writing stories and end up as a painfully shy adult writing books and publishing them for others to read? Crazy? That's me!!

When I was a little girl, I read every book I could get my hands on and if I didn't have one available to read, I'd get out my pencils and paper and write down stories and scenes. Waiting for my mom to finish working, I'd duck into the ladies' break room and use the typewriter. I'd feel like Jessica Fletcher, happily tap, tap, tapping away until I got to 'The End.' Couldn't quite get the flourish after that and end up tearing the paper, but it was cool and scary to sit down and read the book or give it to my friends to read.

Now my 'typewriter' doesn't clack the same way and the I don't even have paper to pull out of it with a nod of satisfaction, but I have the joy and excitement of sharing my characters and books with people all around the world!

I hope you'll enjoy reading my books, because I'm going to keep writing as long as the characters are feeling chatty!



There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

You can also visit our Amazon page at:

<http://www.amazon.com/author/operationalalpha>

Special Forces: Operation Alpha World

Christie Adams: [Charity's Heart](#)

Linzi Baxter: [Dangerous Rescue](#)

Misha Blake: [Flash](#)

Anna Blakely: [Rescuing Gracelynn](#)

Julia Bright: [Saving Lorelei](#)

Cara Carnes: [Protecting Mari](#)

Kendra Mei Chailyn: [Beast](#)

Melissa Kay Clarke: [Rescuing Annabeth](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Samantha A. Cole: [Handling Haven](#)

KaLyn Cooper: [Spring Unveiled](#)

Jordan Dane: [Redemption for Avery](#)

Tarina Deaton: [Found in the Lost](#)

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Dorothy Ewels: [Knight's Queen](#)

Lila Ferrari: [Protecting Joy](#)

Nicole Flockton: [Protecting Maria](#)

Hope Ford: [Rescuing Karina](#)

Amy Gamet: [Guarded by the SEAL](#)

Desiree Holt: [Protecting Maddie](#)

Danielle Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Jesse Jacobson: [Protecting Honor](#)

Rayne Lewis: Justice for Mary
Ireland Lorelei: The Detective
Kristin Lynn: Worth the Risk
Callie Love & Ann Omasta: Hawaii Hottie
JM Madden: Rescuing Olivia
A.M. Mahler: Griffin
Ellie Masters: Sybil's Protector
Trish McCallan: Hero Under Fire
Naomi McKay: Twist
Rachel McNeely: The SEAL's Surprise Baby
KD Michaels: Saving Laura
Olivia Michaels: Protecting Harper
Annie Miller: Securing Willow
MJ Nightingale: Protecting Beauty
C.K. O'Connor: Delaney's Bodyguard
Melinda Owens: Betraying Katie
Victoria Paige: Reclaiming Izabel
Danielle Pays: Defending Sarina
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
Lainey Reese: Protecting New York
KeKe Renée: Protecting Bria
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: Extracting Mateo
Ariana Rose: Chasing Paige
Deanna L. Rowley: Saving Veronica
Angela Rush: Charlotte
Rose Smith: Saving Satin
Tyler Anne Snell: Cowboy Heat

Lynne St. James: SEAL's Spitfire

E.M. Shue: Discovering Tyler

Bella Stone: Rexar

Jen Talty: Burning Desire

Reina Torres, Rescuing Hi'ilani

LJ Vickery: Circus Comes to Town

R. C. Wynne: Shadows Renewed

Delta Team Three Series

Lori Ryan: Nori's Delta

Becca Jameson: Destiny's Delta

Lynne St James, Gwen's Delta

Elle James: Ivy's Delta

Riley Edwards: Hope's Delta

Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World

Freya Barker: Burning for Autumn

B.P. Beth: Scott

Jane Blythe: Salvaging Marigold

Julia Bright, Justice for Amber

Gia Cobie: Saved from Revenge

Hadley Finn: Exton

Emily Gray: Shelter for Allegra

Danielle M. Haas: Crossroads of Betrayal

Deandra Hall: Shelter for Sharla

Jenna Harte: Dead But Not Forgotten

Amber Kuhlman: Protecting Paisley

Reina Torres: Justice for Sloane

Aubree Valentine, Justice for Danielle

Maddie Wade: Finding English

Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, Fighting for Elena

Deandra Hall, Fighting for Carly.

Haven Rose, Fighting for Calliope

MJ Nightingale, Fighting for Jemma

TL Reeve, Fighting for Brittney.

Nicole Flockton, Fighting for Nadia

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

Finding Monica

Finding Carly

Finding Ashlyn

Finding Jodelle

Eagle Point Search & Rescue

Searching for Lilly

Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (Oct 2024)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

SEAL of Protection: Alliance Series

Protecting Remi (July 2024)

Protecting Wren (Nov 2024)

Protecting Josie (TBA)

Protecting Maggie (TBA)

Protecting Addison (TBA)

Protecting Kelli (TBA)

Protecting Bree (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley

Shielding Devyn

Shielding Ember

Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

Securing Caite (FREE!)

Securing Brenae (novella)

Securing Sidney

Securing Piper

Securing Zoey

Securing Avery

Securing Kalee

Securing Jane

Delta Force Heroes Series

Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)

Rescuing Aimee (novella)

Rescuing Emily

Rescuing Harley

Marrying Emily (novella)

Rescuing Kassie

Rescuing Bryn

Rescuing Casey

Rescuing Sadie (novella)

Rescuing Wendy

Rescuing Mary

Rescuing Macie (novella)

Rescuing Annie

Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series

Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)

Justice for Mickie

Justice for Corrie

Justice for Laine (novella)

Shelter for Elizabeth

Justice for Boone

Shelter for Adeline

Shelter for Sophie

Justice for Erin

Justice for Milena

Shelter for Blythe

Justice for Hope

Shelter for Quinn

Shelter for Koren

Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

Protecting Caroline (FREE!)

Protecting Alabama

Protecting Fiona

Marrying Caroline (novella)

Protecting Summer

Protecting Cheyenne

Protecting Jessyka

Protecting Julie (novella)

Protecting Melody

Protecting the Future

Protecting Kiera (novella)

Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)

Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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