



The Hero
Next Door

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
J.M. MADDEN

THE HERO NEXT DOOR

JM MADDEN

CONTENTS

Foreword

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Epilogue

Also by JM Madden

FOREWORD

Several years ago, Siobhan Muir and I thought it would be a good idea to have a bit of a crossover book. If you haven't read her, she's an amazing writer, and we each shared a few characters.

My hero and heroine met at the wedding of one of Siobhan's couples, and if you'd like to read the book, it's available everywhere. It's called *Star Spangled Banner*. This link takes you to her website!

It was hard not to be bitter around all these happy fuckers.

Brian took a swig of beer and set the bottle down, swirling the base around the corner of the drink coaster. There was a vent right above him, pumping out cool air, but he was close enough to the doors that he was still a little warm. He wanted to be ready to go, though. As much as he appreciated the people he worked with, it was sweet torture to be with them.

John Palmer tipped back his head and laughed at something Zeke said, and Chad nodded his head and made this weird motion with his hands, even using his bad one. Brian was too far away to hear who exactly was telling the story, but it looked damn funny. Aiden rested a hand on his brother John's shoulder and the two of them laughed like they'd grown up together, though they'd only known each other a few years. It was a joyous occasion.

Brian glanced at Shannon, John's wife. In her arms, she held her niece, baby Fallon. She was a cute thing, though he'd only seen her at a distance. She'd grown a lot since Zeke's wedding at Christmas, though, her eyes bright and watchful. And Aiden's wife was holding John and Shannon's baby, Sophia, her dark curls obvious from here. This entire Fourth of July weekend seemed to be devoted to babies and birthdays and strengthening family ties.

It only made him feel more alone.

Parker Quinn was there too, looking thoughtful as he watched the interactions. He was one of the newer guys, but Duncan had enough faith in him to start a Lost and Found branch in Columbus, with Parker at the helm. Parker, a former Navy SEAL, was a damned good interpreter of middle eastern languages and Columbus had been dealing with a wave of terroristic activity. For the past year and a half, he and his girlfriend Andromeda, a prosecutor, been working cases and doing what they could to help local law enforcement.

There were half a dozen guys out there in Columbus, both newbies and vets, and it sounded like both branches were balls-to-the-wall busy. Brian had been doing some forensic accounting work for the Columbus branch recently, in addition to his own investigator duties. The Vail office was busy enough, but Brian was thinking about change. He'd been out there for years, separate from the big LNF group and separate from the men he worked with in his own office. Grif, his boss, and Kendall had their family, and Diego and Lilly as well. As much as he loved the guys, he felt... disconnected. When five o'clock rolled around, they were gone, off to see their families. He didn't have that luxury. Most of his family still lived in Michigan, a long way from Colorado, and it had been a long time since he'd been in any kind of relationship.

So, what did he do with himself, other than mope and play too many video games? He wasn't even sure anymore. Dating sucked as bad as being alone. There were a couple of younger guys in the group that didn't mind putting themselves out there for public consumption, but that wasn't Brian's way. At least, not anymore.

Duncan came out of the back office and made his way around the room, smiling at his men and stopping for an occasional comment. Eventually, he made his way around to Brian. "Mind if I sit down?"

" 'Course not. Help yourself."

Duncan sank into the chair, grimacing at the hard seat. About two years ago he'd had his hip replaced and Brian knew he preferred the softer cushions.

“I’m glad you could make it.”

Brian snorted. “It wasn’t like I had much choice,” he said, voice dry. “Grif closed up the Vail office.”

Duncan grinned and cocked an eyebrow at him. “Are you complaining about our Fourth of July party?”

Brian looked around the garishly decorated Frog Dog bar. “Not at all.”

Twice a year, the partners encouraged as many of the employees as possible to come home for the ‘team building’ Fourth of July weekend and Christmas weekend. Brian knew what it was, though. The July weekend was actually a way to get the men together so that they wouldn’t be traumatized by the holiday celebrations. Several of them still struggled with PTSD and the weekend was usually the worst of the year with firecrackers and mortars going off at random times. And he had to admit, it was nice hanging with buddies rather than flashing back when the occasional boomers went off. They would stay here and shoot the shit with the music too loud until the wee hours of the morning, then head to wherever they were staying for the night.

And Christmas gatherings were a given. Most of the men had families out here, now. They’d all started at the Denver branch, so it was natural to come back here.

The Vail crew had rented an AirBNB for a couple of nights and they’d just hang. Their schedules had been cleared and it would be a nice break for everyone.

Tonight, it was a true celebration. There were babies and friends they hadn’t seen in a long time. Shannon was beaming over her daughter, who was six months old now. The kid was damn cute, with her curly hair and dimples. He could understand why the Palmers were so smitten with her. Even their twins doted on the little one and Brian had no doubt they would all three be wreaking havoc in no time.

He glanced at Diego across the way. His buddy used to be the most affected by sounds and people, but it had been a good while since anything had affected him that way recently. Diego

had been incredibly happy with Lilly and their little one, Carmen, and his secure home life had translated to his entire being. Same with Grif and the kids. He'd known Grif for years, but Kendall and the two babies rounded out his life better than anything else. Both families were growing like crazy. Jameson was a walking, talking version of his dad, but little Zoe was already taking after her stunning mother, batting her golden lashes at anyone who would look at her.

This wasn't the first time Brian had thought about leaving the Vail office and looking for something better. No, not better. Just... different. He needed a change of pace. Something to shake up his life. He'd thought more than once about transferring to the Buckeye Brigade, as John liked to call them. His family was in Michigan, and he wondered if he wasn't feeling a little isolated from them as well. It wasn't as easy to get back to see them anymore, with the way he was working. Maybe if he was closer, it wouldn't be as much of a trial.

Even working with the Dogs of War in Virginia might be cool. Brian knew they were actively rehabilitating the men they'd retrieved from the jungle prison camps. It seemed like they kept finding more prisoners, though, scattered around the globe. Dr. Elizabeth Cole had taken on an incredible challenge, assuming the head of the Collaborative and making reparations to all of the men involved, as well as their families. That had been such a dirty deal and Brian knew if a guy had come to him with the same recruitment spiel, it would have been very tempting. He couldn't blame any of them for taking part in the testing—it was fascinating actually—but the government had completely turned on those men. And the Silverstone Collaborative had been the tool to do it. Wulfe and Fontana had stayed in Virginia with the men. From what Brian understood, they were creating a secondary location outside of the Elton building, a place where they could all rehabilitate the way they were meant to. Men that had been trained by the government could only stay inside a hospital for so long, but safety measures had to be considered. The property had to be vast enough to house them all, because many of the men

chosen to participate in the original program had had no family to speak of.

A hand waved in front of his face and Brian jerked. “Oh, sorry, First Sergeant. I didn’t hear what you said.”

Duncan lifted his brows at him. “I was just asking how you were doing? You seem a little reserved tonight.”

Brian looked out at the excitement around him, all friends, all willing to risk their lives for one another, and guilt swamped him. Duncan and the guys had done so much for him. He shook his head. “I’m good, sir. Just... restless.”

Duncan tipped his head and took a swallow of beer. “In general, or just tonight?”

“In general,” he admitted.

Nodding, his boss braced his elbows on the table. “There’ve been a lot of personal changes over the past several years, and you’re kind of feeling left behind?”

Brian blinked at Duncan, not surprised that the man totally understood where he was coming from. But why should he be surprised? It hadn’t been so long ago when Duncan had been alone. For several years, he’d made no bones about being a bachelor. And now, when Duncan looked at Alex, Brian could still see some wonder in his eyes, as if he couldn’t believe his luck. And when he looked at his little girl running across the room, his face melted into a loving smile. Brian had seen it happen repeatedly tonight.

Brian wished he could find someone that would inspire even a hint of that kind of reaction. “Totally,” he admitted, knowing that Duncan would understand.

“You know,” Duncan murmured, sitting back in the chair, “a couple of years ago, I was exactly where you are.”

Smiling slightly, he shifted on the chair. “I know, sir. I was just thinking about that.”

“You’re still young,” Duncan told him. “What are you now, thirty?”

“Thirty-two,” he corrected.

Duncan waved a hand. “You have plenty of time for life stuff.”

Brian grimaced. “I don’t know,” he said eventually. “It’s hard getting knocked down over and over again. I mean, I go on dates, but it just doesn’t feel right. I think I’m going to take a break for a while. Just quit looking.”

Duncan frowned, meeting his eyes. “It takes a hell of a woman to accept what we are. You should take your time.”

Brian glanced at him, surprised. For some reason he’d thought Dunc would argue with him. “Really?”

“Of course. It’s not something you can force. There has to be a connection there. And it has to be strong enough to deal with the issues in your life. As a double amputee, you know you’re going to have health issues until you die.”

Brian nodded, taking in the words. He’d been attracted to many women over the past several years. He had a healthy libido. It was the emotional connection that always seemed to be lacking. Maybe he just expected too much. Twice he’d revealed himself to women and twice he’d been dumped.

A sudden urge moved him, a need for something more. “I think I’d like to go to Columbus for a while. Work with Quinn and the guys. See something different.”

Duncan lifted a brow at him. “Have you talked to Grif about this?”

Brian glanced across the room. “He knows I need a change. I told him that. Not that I wanted to move across the country.” Brian laughed a little, realizing how much of a shift it would need to be. The thought of packing up all his crap was daunting. Maybe he would get a storage garage and just try to find something already furnished. He had a lot to think about, but it already felt like the right decision.

“It’s not going to be immediate, but I’d like to change some things up. And since I’ve been helping the Columbus crew so much, it might be nice to be there helping them with the cases, you know?”

Duncan nodded, taking a swig of his beer. “I think that’s completely okay. Have computer, will travel, right?”

Brian laughed. Yes, he didn’t go anywhere without his computer anymore. When he was assigned guard duties, he didn’t need it, but those assignments had taken a bit of a back seat to his forensic accounting work. It was work he loved, though, so he wasn’t complaining.

Duncan waved a hand, catching Quinn’s attention. The other man limped over, nursing a beer. Rather than scoot in beside one of them he grabbed an empty chair and swung it around backwards to straddle. “What’s up?”

Duncan bobbed his chin toward Brian. “Our man, here, needs a change. Have room at the Columbus office?”

Quinn’s expression lifted, almost into a grin. “Are you kidding? Absolutely. It would save us a lot of communication if you were actually in office. Welcome to the Buckeye Brigade.”

Quinn reached out a hand and Brian took it, smiling as he felt his future shift.

S eptember, 2 months later...

Brian glanced around, wondering why the hell he was even here.

Yes, he'd helped country star Henry Bright out a few years ago, but he wasn't sure he needed to come to the man's actual wedding. Did he? But Bright hadn't let up, and he'd sent a first-class ticket to make sure Brian was there.

Brian wasn't a groomsman or anything though. If it all went to plan, he would sit in the back, watch the nuptials and kill some time before the reception started. His legs were aching today, and he wasn't sure why. Maybe the pressure changes from the flight on his amputations. And then yesterday he'd clipped the edge of the hotel wall with his right foot, and even though the foot had been gone for several years, his brain made him imagine the hurt. He would never understand why his body continued to broadcast pain notifications.

Brian shifted in the chair, easing his weight over to his other hip and stretching his arm along the chair beside him as he observed the venue. It was a barn. He supposed it was actually a horse arena. No lie. But it was cool. Scrupulously clean, it had the little twinkle lights blinking everywhere. They were cute, and it gave the huge room an ethereal feeling. Right now, it was decorated for a wedding, but directly after the service, a team would move in and convert the space to the reception area. There was a wooden stage set up on the other

half of the arena where the grooms would stand for their nuptials. Pretty ingenious. There was a white curtain on his side of the room, just a few feet away, and he assumed that was where the caterers were hiding, because the smells coming from that direction were killing him. Last night's dinner had been a long time ago...

The curtain rippled, hard, drawing his attention. Then it rippled again, and it began to shift from the back. There was a small body on the other side looking for the opening in the curtains, it looked like. Finally, he found it and flung the two sides apart, like he was popping out onto a stage. The kid grinned, looking like he wanted to take a bow for the half a dozen people seated and watching him. Most of them were grinning as well. The kid glanced around and obviously decided 'what the hell...', because he threw himself into a theatrical bow. His audience laughed, and even Brian found himself grinning. The kid's brownish red hair flipped forward, then back as he straightened, and he pushed wire-rimmed glasses up his nose. Brian heard a hiss from behind the curtain and he wondered if it was the kid's mom getting after her son. The boy, no more than ten or eleven, looked back, shrugged and gave an adorable grin, then took off running, letting the curtains fall together again. Brian was close enough that he could hear a sigh from the other side, then footsteps retreating. The boy had run from the barn, obviously on a mission.

Brian remembered being that age. He hadn't had a care in the world. Dirt had been his favorite thing and every chance he'd gotten, he'd been outside, either playing with his dog or riding his bike. His mother had made him clean up for church, but other than that, he'd been as dirty as possible.

More people began to wander in, and recorded music started to play from speakers in the rafters. Some of it was Henry Bright's music, interspersed with other country music artists. Brian had a feeling he was going to see some popular faces today. This was a hell of a production.

He glanced at his Oris watch and debated pulling his phone out. They still had almost an hour before the official start time. There were other people chatting and surfing on

their phones, but it was such a beautiful day. Maybe he should take advantage of it while he could.

Pushing up from his chair, he headed through the big double doors at the back of the arena and out into the sunlight. He didn't see Enrique Sanchez, the petty officer that had seated him, so he continued on through the doors.

Brian had never been to Wyoming before, and the scenery was fascinating, long sweeping hills and waving grassland. There was a golden hue to the area, as it began to shift into fall. This was a working ranch so he could see cattle in the distance, and it looked like there was a guy on horseback pushing them toward the hilltop, away from the festivities. Expensive cars were pulling in and parking on the right in a big field, so he headed to the left and around the barn. There was a paddock of horses on this side a little way down, and a couple of catering trucks. Walking to the paddock fence, he held his hand out to a brown horse with a black mane and tail. Was it called a bay? He couldn't remember. He'd never really been around them much, but this one seemed okay. It lipped his hand and seemed content just with a few strokes along her head.

His dad had never been much of a pet person. The most interaction he'd had with animals had been on his newspaper route. Dogs of all kinds had barked at him and chased him. Three years ago, at Chad Lowell's wedding, he'd had a chance to get on a horse for the first time. Jackson, the Blue Star Ranch manager, had put together a trail ride for some of the people that had gotten there early. Brian had worried that he wouldn't be able to do it with his prosthetics, but it had worked out really well. His thighs had ached like a son of a bitch from the odd position, but other than the getting on and getting off, he'd really enjoyed it, and he'd gone a couple more times since then. There were several veteran programs that did horse therapy and he'd thought about partaking, but he just didn't seem to have the time, recently. He'd been bouncing from one job to another, and then with the move to Columbus he'd lost all free time. The move was going to be good, though, he could feel it. Parker had given him an office to work from and he'd already begun to dig into a couple of

businesses, one for a death benefit and the other for a possible embezzling case. It was interesting work, and he looked forward to getting out and interviewing some people.

Brian glanced at his watch. A few more minutes and he'd go back in. He wandered down the fence line, taking care to watch his footing. The ground sloped toward the paddock a little, and he needed to keep his feet. The same brown horse followed him, leaning her head over the fence whenever he paused. Brian grinned, liking the animal. "If I had anything in my pockets, I would totally give it to you, babe."

A hand popped out from his side, holding a beautiful, shining red apple. Brian glanced down and around to the reddish-haired boy grinning up at him, his hazel eyes shining in the light. He wiggled the apple as the horse leaned over the fence for it. "She really likes these ones. I tried giving her one of the green ones earlier and she'll eat 'em, but these are the ones she likes. This is Calliope."

Brian took the apple from the boy and with a one-handed motion, removed the Kershaw knife from his pocket, snapped it open and cut the apple in half. "We can both give her a piece."

The boy grinned even wider, nodding as he took his piece. "I've given her a couple already, but she's a nice horse. There's a gelding in here that picks on her, but he's dozing on the other side right now."

Brian glanced around. There was indeed another horse on the other side of the paddock, head lolling toward the ground as he lazed in the sun. The mare, Calliope, gently took the piece of apple from his outstretched hand and began chewing noisily. Brian wiped the knife off in the grass, then his lower pants, and folded it away. The boy watched him closely, eyes wide.

"That's a neat knife. I tried to get my mom to let me have one, but she thinks I'll cut my carotid or something."

Brian looked at him. "That's a pretty big word for a young man."

“Yeah,” he sighed theatrically. “I’m gifted.”

Brian smothered a laugh. It was obvious from his expression that the boy was serious. “Gifted, huh?”

The boy nodded. “Yeah. Supposedly, my dad was smart, which made me smart. Mom says it’s a good thing. It might get me out of trouble later.”

Brian did laugh then and held his hand out to the boy. “Brian Calvert.”

“Adam Harrison,” the kid said, shaking his hand, grinning slightly.

“Your mom is right.”

“Yeah,” Adam said, resigned. “It’s kinda irritating. She’s right, like, ninety-eight percent of the time.”

Brian nodded, laughing inside. “Moms are like that.”

Adam gave him a look. “No, you don’t understand. She’s a cop, so she’s seen all kinds of crazy and stupid. It’s almost like she has ESP or something. I can’t do anything without her knowing.”

This kid was cracking him up. “I’m sure.”

They talked about Wyoming and knives, then Adam asked about his job. “I’m a bodyguard and a forensic accountant. I work for an investigation company based out of Denver called Lost and Found. Recently we opened a branch in Columbus, Ohio and I just moved there.”

Brian watched the kid’s eyes widen and could almost see the questions stacking up in his mind. Brian glanced down at his watch, then at the ‘church’. “Think we should get back in there?”

Adam sighed, frowning, obviously frustrated. “Yeah, I guess,” he sighed. “My mom is waiting for me to get something from the truck, anyway.”

The boy took off at a run toward the catering vans parked down the way and climbed into one. Brian turned for the arena, placing his feet carefully. He remembered those days of

just turning and taking off running. He could if he absolutely had to, but it wasn't pretty. He looked like a galloping gorilla when he ran.

Returning to his chair, he was surprised to see how crowded it had become. There were several famous faces in the crowd he recognized, which was kind of cool. He settled into his seat and leaned back, glad that he still had the empty chair beside him. It gave him room to stretch his legs out.

Adam jogged in along the side of the assembled chairs and looked for the opening to the curtains again. With a final wave at Brian, he disappeared.

The wedding ceremony was surprisingly beautiful. He hadn't known what to expect, seeing a marriage between two men. They both wore suits, though Henry's was a little more elegant. Were they always this long? He'd heard that Catholic ceremonies were a lot longer, but he didn't plan on attending one just to confirm that.

The happy couple walked down the aisle to thunderous applause and Brian could tell by the look on their faces that they were ecstatic. What would it take to find that kind of happy? He'd been looking for it for a long time and it just kept evading him. Was he cursed or something? It seemed like every woman he dated wanted an easy ride. And honestly, he couldn't blame them. If there was a way, he could float through life he would too, but it just didn't work that way. When he'd joined the Marines, he'd had it easy, but he certainly hadn't realized it then. Oh, to roll back time to ten years ago, he'd take a day and just bask in being whole again. Then he mentally shook his head at himself. No, he didn't think he would. He'd gotten used to being an amputee now and mostly he was cool with it, but it seemed to always cause him issues with other people. He shifted in the chair as people headed out of the arena, following the newlyweds. He wasn't sure what the couple was doing next, only that the guests needed to shift out of the way so that the caterers could set up the tables.

Brian headed for the big double doors. Maybe he'd go sit in his rental car or something. No, he found himself sitting on

the bank outside the paddock again where the mare was, just watching her graze. Guests had to kill a half hour before they could reenter the barn/reception area as attendants shifted from wedding to reception. Brian was content to sit right here. It was shaded and there was no one around.

Then he heard a woman gasp and start cussing a blue streak. He grinned, listening to the creative linguistics. Apparently, he wasn't the only one out here.

Curiosity forced him to crank his head around and try to see who it was turning the air blue. It was one of the caterers. She was leaning into the back of the van, one leg kicked up, tossing things from side to side, but it was obvious she wasn't finding what she was looking for. Brian took a second to admire the length of her back and her cute little behind. Even as he watched, that behind flexed as she pulled out of the vehicle and stood vertical, hands on her shapely hips. Her back was straight and narrow, and as soon as he saw the thick, reddish-colored braid trailing down her back, he knew this was Master Adam's mother. He probably shouldn't be looking at her like he was a hungry man. He started to look away. Then she turned around and Brian forgot about propriety and just stared, his instincts going on high alert. Something about the woman triggered something within him, some alertness. Maybe it was because she was stunningly beautiful, more than he'd expected. Deep pink lips were pursed with annoyance as she surveyed the back of the van, and her deep russet brows were lowered over pale eyes. From this distance, he couldn't tell if they were green or blue or something in the middle, but he wanted to know. He needed to know.

Brian shifted to roll to his feet, forgetting for the moment that he couldn't really do that anymore. It was more of a shift and shove, then find his balance and pray no one was watching. If he stumbled, he would be going down in the Wyoming dirt. Somehow, he gained his feet, though, just as she glanced in his direction. Brian thought she might be a little embarrassed that she'd been caught cussing like a Marine, but instead she grinned, and he could see echoes of the son in the mother. Adam had ginned just like this about forty minutes ago and it was easy to see where he'd gotten the hutzpah.

“Didn’t realize anyone was out here,” she admitted. “Sorry,” she shrugged lightly, her apron shifting over her body.

Brian shook his head as he forced a solid step forward. “Don’t apologize. I was adding to my vocabulary. I’ve been around the block but even I learned some new words just now.”

The woman snorted, laughing lightly. The frustration he’d seen in her expression disappeared, replaced with consideration. “Are you the one Adam talked to earlier?”

Brian grinned slightly. “Great kid. Gifted, I hear.”

The woman sighed, shaking her head ruefully. “Yes. He told you that, I’m sure. We need to work on his modesty a little.” She walked forward and held out her hand. “Sage Harrison.”

“Brian Calvert.”

She smiled at him, and Brian held her hand just a moment too long, but he couldn’t help himself. Now that she was this close, he could see how stunningly brilliant her eyes were. He’d thought hazel green, but in the sun’s light he could see half a dozen different colors in the mosaic of her irises, predominantly blue and brown right this second. There was green, though, and he had a feeling they would change with her emotions. Brian had to force himself to let her hand go. He popped his fists into his pockets and looked around for something to talk about. “Can I help you with anything?”

Sage blinked and glanced around, and he wondered if she wasn’t a little out of sorts like he was. “I, uh, was looking for a black tablecloth that Gert swears is in the van, but I don’t see it.”

“Want me to look?”

She shook her head, glancing back at the van. “Nah, that’s all right. I think we can survive without it.”

Turning her head, she looked at him again and Brian recognized the look. It was interest and it made his gut hurt. This woman seemed to be amazing. He didn’t want to see the pity or disgust in her eyes he’d seen in others when he

admitted that he wasn't whole. Gritting his teeth on the sudden gut check the thought caused, he glanced at the arena. "We should probably get in there."

She glanced at the arena as well and he was a little gratified to see disappointment in her expression, and resignation. "Yeah, I guess you're right. It was nice meeting you, Brian."

His heart thudded painfully in his chest. "And you as well, Sage."

Turning ever so carefully, he walked along the drive and into the front entrance of the arena, forcing his walk to look as normal as possible. He'd gotten pretty good at appearing normal, but it took concentration. And for some reason he didn't want to do it for her, but he did...

What an odd meeting.

Sage stared after the guy, wondering what the hell she'd done wrong. For a moment she'd thought... well, she didn't know what she thought, other than that the guy had been sex on a stick. Damn. There had been several good-looking men around today, and famous ones, too, but this one had strummed something in her. He definitely wasn't a cowboy — no boots or hat — but he looked like he could do manual labor with the best of them. His shoulders had strained the fabric of the gray suit he wore, and the paler silver shirt beneath. His lavender tie was askew, like he'd tugged on it to breathe. His thick blond hair was perfectly styled, though, and had a slight wave.

When she'd walked outside to look for the tablecloth, she'd seen him sitting on the bank watching the horses, but she hadn't really noticed him. Not until she'd been cursing the missing tablecloth. Then, when she'd turned around, the force of his focus had been... significant. His gaze had warmed as he'd looked at her, his dark brown eyes the shade of melted semi-sweet chocolate she used to coat her peanut-butter fudge balls during the holidays. There had been a strength in that gaze, though... She'd dealt with alpha men before, every day in fact, but this one was different.

She'd felt aware of his attention very pointedly, and it made her heart race. Sage wasn't one to get excited about much of anything. She prided herself on being level-headed and as practical as possible about everything. So why had her

heart taken off like crazy when she'd spotted him watching her? It was out of character. For a moment she'd thought there would be more, but something had cooled his expression. When he'd walked away, there'd been a bit of a hitch in his stride, and she wondered if one of his legs had gone to sleep or something. Adam seemed taken with him and she could understand why. Turning back to the truck, she began tossing containers, looking for the elusive cloth. Then it was right there in her hand, as if it had been there the entire time. She shook her head, exasperated, and headed inside to help with the food and finish setting up.

Sage didn't see the man again until he was moving through the buffet line they'd set up. He was laughing with another guy, and she wondered for a moment if he wasn't gay. The wedding was for two men, so she thought it was a reasonable suspicion. But as soon as he looked up and caught her gaze, she knew for a fact he wasn't gay. Not with the way he was looking at her. For a moment, her breath caught at the look in his eyes, and she wondered what the hell he thought about her. She almost asked him, but there was a line of people behind him. And this wasn't the place. She wasn't a guest, just part of the catering contingent. Before he moved on, he gave her a slight smile, sending a thrill through her belly again.

Sage frowned, not liking the way she was reacting to the man. He was in town for a hot minute for the wedding, probably, then he would be gone. And she and Adam would be left behind, like always. She needed to concentrate on her son and their future and getting him the schooling that he needed. Right now, he was in this amazing school on the north side of Cheyenne, but it was for elementary age students up to sixth grade, and he had outgrown it. As sweet as the teachers were there, they were not equipped to deal with a child like Adam, who was reading college textbooks in his spare time because he was bored. His teachers had started calling him a prodigy.

Sage wasn't sure where the boy had come from. Yes, she'd carried him to term, doing her due diligence to care for her pregnancy the best she could. She liked to think she was above average when it came to intelligence, but she was nowhere near Adam's intellect. His father, the asshole, had been

average. No more than that. Of course, she'd told Adam his father had been amazingly intelligent, but only because she wanted him to feel like he had a connection to the man who'd left him. Adam was exceptional, and she didn't know why she had been gifted with him, but she was going to make sure that he received the best care and learning she could provide.

Which meant that she needed to find him an alternative school. Cheyenne, unfortunately, was limited. She was having to look for schools around the country and she knew they would be leaving Wyoming soon, which made her sad in a way. It had been her home for thirty years and her family was still here, but Adam deserved a chance to thrive. As soon as he'd shown how far ahead, he was of the average student, they'd tested him, finding that he was reading and understanding at a college level. He wasn't old enough to take the SAT or ACT, but she'd bought him practice books. He'd aced every practice test she'd given him and asked for more material.

Three intermediate schools out east had offered him scholarships to join their rosters, as well as one in California. Sage wasn't even sure how they'd learned of Adam, but she was flattered on his behalf. And she needed to decide soon because the offers they'd extended to her were amazing. They deserved an answer.

It was too soon for colleges to be interested in him, but Adam already had several on a list he liked.

Sage watched Brian's broad back disappear into the crowd and knew that as intrigued as she was by him, she didn't have time to be a woman. Being a mom had to take precedence. Smiling, she looked to the next guest. "Chicken?"

Brian stayed as long as he needed to before slipping out of the arena. Henry was nowhere to be seen, so he sent him a text that he was leaving. The guy had more important things on his mind right now. Brian didn't expect a response.

It was hard being at a joyous celebration and not knowing anyone, though. He wasn't part of the wedding party or even part of the family, just an acquaintance. A name to tick on a seating chart. Rather than trying to drum up small talk with people he didn't know, he could be working on the current case Parker Quinn, his new boss, had given him.

On the surface, it didn't appear to be hard, but the further he dug, the more convoluted the money trail became, and he needed to get it all arranged in his head. As he pulled out onto the road in his rental, leaving the ranch behind, he marveled at the incredible Wyoming scenery. Horses and cattle dotted the landscape, a pleasant change to his normal suburban city scape. Columbus was a beautiful city, and he'd settled in well there, but he didn't make it to the rural parts very often. He rolled down the windows on the car as he headed into Cheyenne, letting the warm air roll around him. It had a bit of a bite to it, like fall was lurking around the corner. That was fine. He was ready for the change. With that though, Sage's face appeared in his mind. There was something about her that had really appealed to him. And the boy had been cute, too. Gifted, indeed. He chuckled, thinking about the way he'd

pushed out of the curtains. The kid had owned his mishap rather brilliantly.

Brian returned to the hotel room and kicked off his shoes, then ripped off the tie. His stumps were aching, and he foresaw an early night in bed with the computer. Once his prosthetics were parked and his sleeves airing out in the bathroom, though, the laptop on his legs, he couldn't concentrate on work. Instead, he fell asleep dreaming of a russet haired woman.

The next morning, Brian woke up with the boner from hell. He'd dreamed of Sage all night. Her chagrined smile as she'd been caught cussing, and the interest he'd read in her big, beautiful eyes later. At some point he'd had a downer dream, though, where she'd looked at him in horror as his prosthetics fell off his legs when he ran toward her. That one had woken him up shaking, with perspiration dotting his forehead. It had taken him a long time to get back to sleep, but once he had the pleasurable dreams had come again. He stroked himself leisurely, remembering the shape of her as she bent into the back of the van. The baggy catering clothes had done nothing for her. The sexy smile, though. That had really been something. The orgasm came quickly but seemed a little flat. Jerking off was never as satisfying as actual sex, but he doubted he'd be getting any of that in the near future.

Checking out of the hotel, he loaded his bag into the rental car and headed for the airport. The flight wouldn't even board for another few hours, but he could sit in the lounge and get onto his computer to work for a while. Brian turned right through a stoplight and accelerated. His gut clenched when blue lights suddenly flashed in his rearview mirror. He looked down at the speedometer. There was no way he was over the limit. The light had been yellow when he'd gone through it. Flicking his blinker on, he turned into a gas station and dug into his wallet for his ID. Luckily, he wasn't carrying a weapon, so that was one less aggravation. He turned off the ignition and sat back in his seat, waiting with his window down for the cop to appear. When the dark-clad form came up on his left shoulder he held the car rental agreement and his

license out the window. Then he craned his head to look up at the cop.

Sage Harrison grinned down at him.

“Well, isn’t this an interesting development. Hello, Mr. Calvert.”

Brian grinned, the memory of his recent orgasm rolling through his brain. And here she was in the flesh, so to speak, looking fucking fantastic in the form-fitting black Cheyenne PD uniform. He swallowed, feeling a surge of heat roll down through his gut and into his dick. Fuck, this was bad.

“I thought you were a caterer,” he said. Wait. The boy had said something about her being a cop.

Sage grinned. “No, I was just helping out a relative when she had people call off. This is my day job.”

She made a sweep down her body, motioning with her fingers. Brian followed the motion, his eyes getting stuck on the swell of her hips and breasts. She wore a bullet-proof vest, but she still had a shape that couldn’t be hidden. Her thick hair was twisted onto the back of her head somehow. He coughed into his hand and faced forward. “I see. This uniform looks much better on you than the catering one.”

Sage laughed and handed his paperwork and ID back to him. “Thank you very much for that.”

Brian took his paperwork, curious. She hadn’t even run him. “Why did you pull me over,” he asked her curiously. He craned his head to look at her, but it was awkward. “I know it’s not procedure, but do you mind if I step out of the car?”

In answer, Sage stepped back, giving him room to open the door. For the first time he noticed stripes on her shirt sleeves. “You’re a sergeant.”

She nodded, moving to stand with her dominant leg back. Brian recognized the positioning and didn’t mind that she took it with him. He was still an unknown entity to her.

“Well,” she said, her eyes narrowing a little as she looked out at the flowing traffic. “You did kind of roll through that red

light, but I'm not going to bust your balls about it. I just wanted to let you know I appreciated you taking the time to talk to my son. He hasn't shut up about you in the past twelve hours."

Brian chuckled, leaning against the side of the car and crossing his arms. "I enjoyed talking to him as well. I think he's going to be an amazing young man."

She nodded, glancing back at the traffic, then at the customers flowing through the gas station. "If I have anything to say about it, he will," she said.

"I'm curious," he admitted. "Where is his father?"

Sage gave him a considering look. "Not sure anymore. Adam's dad was one of those foolish hookups you live to regret. Tim seemed like a decent guy when he rolled in to assistant teach a class while I was at the university. We married because I was pregnant, but he had the emotional intelligence of a gnat. And he was a closet alcoholic. I only found that out afterward, of course. We tried to make it work, but he couldn't stay out of trouble. And then he came out of the closet and started drinking more heavily. We divorced a few years ago. He hasn't seen Adam since."

Brian grimaced, hearing the story unsaid. It sounded like the guy had left her bitter. "Not all men are equipped to not be the center of their own universe."

She tipped back her head and laughed. "So true! It was a hard lesson to learn. When I got pregnant, I had a job lined up with the PD I had to delay. My parents had to help me for a while because Tim was usually lost in a bottle. I wouldn't change anything about my son, though."

There was a fierce look on her face, and he shook his head. "I wouldn't expect you to. Everything happens the way it's supposed to."

Sage tilted her head. "Yes, I suppose you're right." She took a step back. "Well, I need to get back to work. I just noticed you pulling out and I wanted to thank you for not brushing him off."

Reaching into his back pocket, Brian pulled out his wallet, digging through until he found a business card. It still had his old Denver Lost and Found address on it, but the email and phone were the same. He handed it to Sage. “If he ever wants to talk, or something.”

She took it with a lopsided smile. “Thank you. This will mean a lot to him.”

Surprisingly, she leaned up to give him a kiss on the cheek, bracing herself on his shoulder. Brian wasn’t sure if it was accidental or some instinct taking over, but somehow his head turned, and her lips brushed his own. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the world held its breath. Then, when she didn’t immediately pull away, he cupped her head in his hand and pressed harder. Her taste sent a thrill through him, and he wondered if she was as struck as he was. When she tilted her head and her lips became more demanding, he thought that perhaps she was feeling it as intensely as he was. She rested her weight on him, and Brian’s body responded, even though her uniform and gun belt were poking him.

Then a horn blared, and they jerked apart, looking at each other, dazed. Sage’s eyes were huge in her face, and her lips plump. She blinked and pulled back. “I’m so sorry,” she breathed.

Brian grinned. “I’m not.”

Her mouth curved up in a smile and she nodded once, turning toward her cruiser. She flashed his business card at him. “Maybe next time I want to talk...” Brian grinned and nodded, feeling exhilarated as he watched her settle into her car. There was an excitement flowing through his blood that he hadn’t felt for a long time. Like, a really long time. Then reality hit him between the eyes. He was on the way to the airport for his flight back to his new life in Columbus. Fuck...



ADAM GAVE his mother a week before he asked her about contacting Brian. She had told him about the conversation

they'd had, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. Glad, mostly. And excited. Flattered that Brian didn't seem to mind being around him. Adam had noticed the looks from adults when he asked questions. They either didn't think he needed to know whatever answer he was after, or they didn't know the answer. Those people, well, it would be easier if they just said they didn't know the answer rather than rolling their eyes and either trying to distract him or fobbing him off onto something else. Mom always answered his questions, no matter what he asked about. Sometimes she tried to soften the answer to protect him, which was to be expected, but for the most part she always gave him the truth. Brian had done the same thing. Going into a conversation with an adult, Adam was always a little guarded. He tried not to be offended or hurt when they gave him that look, or outright lied to him, but it was hard sometimes.

Brian... well, Brian was neat. They'd talked less than an hour, but his mind was still thinking about the things they'd talked about. As soon as he'd had a chance, he'd started researching forensic accounting on his laptop, and he'd fallen down the rabbit hole, as Mom liked to tell him when she made him shut down for dinner. Once he started, though, he couldn't stop. He started researching cases and he had a mountain of questions. He'd constructed an email with links and notations, as well as the questions he wanted to ask, but he hesitated to hit send. Would Brian even respond? He left it in drafts for now.

Brian had mentioned that he'd been in the Marines for a while, and that had sent Adam off on another tangent, researching and learning. When they'd been sitting on the bank watching the horses Adam had noticed the shine of a metal leg beneath his pant leg and he'd been about to bust with questions, but he didn't want to hurt Brian or be insensitive. He'd never met an amputee. The injury had to have been from his military career.

The curiosity was going to eat him alive.

Late October 2023

BRIAN TRIED NOT to laugh as he caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. The smoke rolled from the grill, and he wondered if it was the smell of the cooking meat that had drawn his watchers. He'd noticed them a couple of weeks ago, when they'd first moved in. Actually, he'd noticed the dog. She barked at him occasionally when they let her out. There was a six-foot fence around each back yard, but the boards were staggered, giving flashes of visibility between the planks.

This was a new housing development on the near west side of Columbus, several stories tall and trendy. Brian had taken a bottom apartment, just for the sake of his legs. As much as it grated on his nerves, the handicapped-accessible apartment was the smart choice. He could do stairs fine, but the issue came in when he had to carry items up the stairs, obstructing his view and shifting his balance. And sometimes, if he'd been pulling long shifts and didn't take care of his stumps correctly, they developed irritations and sometimes actual infections in the skin. That didn't happen very often, but when it did, it made his life hell. His left stump gave him more grief than the right, which he didn't understand. His left leg was the below-the-knee amputation. The right was above the knee. He always thought the right would be more of a pain, but that hadn't been the case. Whatever.

There were a series of buildings circling to the right, same design and everything. Each of the lower apartments had a small, fenced yard, giving the illusion of privacy, and there was a paved walkway from the middle of each building to a large park in the middle of the complex. There was a children's playground as well as a shaded, fenced dog park.

The realtors had pushed that the complex was in a safe area, and that they all had their own security system and cameras. The cameras were monitored by an app on his phone. He doubted he needed it, there wasn't much in his apartment to steal, but it was nice to have.

Brian also had his own concrete patio and yard, but if he went through the back fence gate, he could go to the central park. There were several groupings of picnic tables and grills. It was all positioned to give the buildings a feeling of community. At least, that's what the realtor had told him. But the fence between his building and the next had an access door as well. He could see a boy playing with a dog, an occasional tennis ball flying higher than the fence. The dog's name was Diamond, he thought. At least, that's what it sounded like the kid was saying. Brian had noticed that anytime he was on the patio, the kid came out with the dog, like he was trying to get Brian's attention. Or maybe he was reading too much into it.

Glancing at his watch, he pushed up to his feet. Time to flip the steak. As he lifted the lid on the grill and the hickory smoke rolled out, he felt a sense of peace settle over him. He'd settled into the Columbus job like he'd thought he would, and he was enjoying the city. It was vibrant and active, although the humid summer was a lot to get used to. It made him sweat in uncomfortable places. Years ago, he'd been sent on a mission to Thailand, and it reminded him of the humid jungles over there.

It was fading into fall now, though, and he was really enjoying the area. There was a nature trail just to the east of the apartment complex and he'd walked it a few times.

A tennis ball landed inside his fence and bounced a couple of times before coming to a rest.

Brian snorted. He'd known it would only be a matter of time. Bumping the temp down on the grill, he headed out into the yard, careful of the terrain. It wasn't the flattest ground, so he had to be careful where he put his feet. Leaning down he retrieved the ball and tossed it over the fence. "There you go, buddy."

"Thanks, Brian."

Brian had started to walk away, but he slammed his head around. Wait, had that kid said his name? The voice had sounded familiar. "Adam?"

He peered through the stagger-planked fence, trying to catch a glimpse of the kid. Was it really him?

Adam's head popped up above the top of the fence. He grinned crookedly and pushed his glasses up on his nose. "Thanks for returning the ball."

"No problem. Um, not to be rude, what the hell are you doing here?"

Once he'd left Wyoming, Brian had thought his chances of seeing the kid, and his beautiful mother, at slim to none. Adam had emailed him several times, though, asking random questions and sometimes very pointed, specific questions about accounting. Or military life. Or the wars he'd fought in. Brian looked forward to his emails because it made him think about how far he'd come. Adam had also asked him about Columbus. A lot. How he liked the area, amenities, etcetera.

Never, not once, had Adam intimated or stated they were *coming* to Ohio. "Is your mom here?"

Adam glanced behind him. "Well, not physically right this moment, but yes, she lives here with me. We're kind of a package deal."

Brian snorted. "I didn't expect you to move out here on your own. But why are you here?"

Adam's eyes shifted to the side. "Well, Columbus has a well-respected accelerated learning school. They offered me a scholarship."

Brian waited for more, but on this subject Adam seemed a little reluctant to divulge the details. “So, you moved out here?”

Adam nodded, shifting his feet. His head suddenly dropped below the fence and there was a woof of clattering sound. “Adam!”

Brian went to the gate in the back corner of the fence. He’d never used it before, but he had tested that it would open, and it did. He hurried into Adam’s yard.

A dark-faced German Shepherd met him, barking. Brian went still, hands out. “I’m not going to do anything to him, boy, girl. Whatever you are.”

“Diamond, he’s okay,” came the muffled voice.

The dog backed down and Brian limped forward, fighting a laugh. Adam had been standing on top of a 64-gallon trash dumpster to talk over the fence, and the weight of the boy had eventually pushed the plastic lid in. Adam was butt down, legs and head up, scrabbling at the sides of the can to pull himself up.

“Dude,” Brian laughed. “This is not a good look.”

Adam’s face turned even redder, and Brian felt bad about teasing him. Planting his feet, he leaned into the big dumpster to pull him up. The kid was heavier than he looked, and it took them both a minute to get him situated and on his feet. Then Brian lifted him out under the arms.

The dog sat patiently beside them, whining softly. As soon as he was out, Adam crouched down beside her. “I’m okay, girl.”

He twisted his arm to look. There was a long scrape on the back of his elbow that was seeping blood. Adam gasped and he looked up at Brian. For the first time he looked like a scared ten-year-old kid, something frantic in his expression.

“Hey, it’s no big deal,” Brian said calmly. “Let’s go clean you up.”

Adam blinked at him, eyes big behind the glasses, and turned his head away from the arm wound. His face had gone pale at the sight of the blood, which was starting to drip down his arm. “Um, Brian...”

Brian cupped his shoulder and guided him through the back gate, then up the yard to his French doors and into his kitchen.

“Hey, yours looks like ours,” Adam said, his voice faint. He scanned the apartment, avoiding his arm.

Kid obviously didn’t like the sight of his own blood.

The dog followed them inside and sat at Adam’s feet as Brian parked him in a kitchen chair. He snatched several paper towels off the roll and pressed them to the back of Adam’s arm. “Hold this here while I go get my first aid kit.”

Adam blinked and did as he was told. Brian limped and maneuvered his way through the apartment as fast as he could to his bedroom, and the master bath. He remembered throwing the kit underneath the cupboard. Yup, there it was. Just out of reach. Growling, he glanced around, looking for something he could reach in with so that he didn’t have to go down on a knee. Toilet brush? Nasty. But it was kind of new. He’d only used it once.

No. The back scrubber thing he’d bought at the home store the other day! He limped to the tile shower and retrieved the brush, then used it to pull the first aid kit out. He headed back out to the dining room a few moments later.

Adam was still holding the paper towels to his arm and his head was turned away, as if he didn’t even want a glimpse of the blood. “You okay, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Adam said, voice pitched a little higher than normal.

“Let’s go to the sink and wash that arm off. Then I’ll see what I need to do to bandage it.”

“Okay,” he said, standing carefully, arm stuck out like it was made of glass.

Brian guided him to the sink and started the water. Once it was warm enough, he guided Adam's little arm under the stream, setting the paper towels aside. They stuck to the skin a little, making the boy gasp. "Sorry, Buddy. We have to get this clean. It's hard to tell what kinds of creepy crawlies are in a garbage can."

"Salmonella, E. coli, Listeria," Adam said immediately. "The average kitchen trash can has 400 bacteria per square inch."

"Is that right?" Brian asked, grinning. "Probably not good in an open wound."

"No," Adam said, leaning into him.

Brian felt bad for the little dude, but the scrape wasn't too bad. "I think a couple of big bandages will cover this," he said reassuringly.

"Really?"

"Yup. When will your mom be home?"

"Not till ten. She's doing a weird shift today to get afternoon experience."

"Well," Brian said. "Maybe we'll call her then."

Adam nodded against his side and let Brian do what he needed to do. "The blood has mostly stopped. Wanna see it?"

Adam looked up at him, grimacing. "I'm not sure that I do."

"Well, maybe we can take a pic of it for your mom. That way she can see that it's okay."

Adam reached into his pocket. "I can FaceTime her."

Before he could say anything, the phone was ringing through. Brian wasn't sure how he felt about seeing the woman again who had kissed him on the side of that busy Cheyenne road. He still wasn't exactly sure how they'd come to be here, living directly beside him, without him knowing. Great investigator he was. He'd seen the family moving in, but hadn't seen the people, just the big moving truck.

After a couple of beeps, the line was picked up. “Adam, what’s wrong?”

“Um, I kind of fell. In a trash can.”

“What?” Sage’s husky voice raised with incredulity. “Why did you fall in a trash can?”

“Because I was standing on the lid to talk to Brian. I obviously overestimated the yield strength of the plastic, because it gave under my weight.”

Silence stretched on the other end, and Brian leaned close enough to see Sage, but stay out of view himself. It was like a punch to the gut. She was as beautiful as he remembered. Her rust-colored hair was drawn back into a tight bun, with some wispy bangs on the front. Her mouth was open a little as she absorbed her son’s words.

“Did you say Brian? Adam Blake Harrison, what did you do?”

Adam winced and turned the phone toward him, catching him staring. Blinking, Brian lifted a hand and waved. “Hey, Sage. Nice to see you again.”

“Hey,” she said faintly, tucking some stray hair behind her ear. “Um, I’m not sure what to say right now. Adam, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he grumbled. “Brian had to help me out of the can and I kind of scraped the back of my arm. He’s cleaning it up for me.”

“Thought you might want to see it before I covered it up,” Brian said. He took the phone and positioned it so that Sage could see the arm.

“Oh, buddy. I think you’ll live. Do you need me to come home?”

Adam hesitated, his gaze flicking to Brian. “No, I’ll be okay.”

“He can hang here if he wants,” Brian said before he could think better of it. What the hell was he going to do with a kid under foot?

“Are you really right next door?” she asked, voice incredulous.

Brian turned the phone and nodded at her. “Literally, across the fence.”

Sage sighed, rubbing her forehead. “Adam, you know we’re going to have to talk about this.”

Brian turned the phone toward him, and Adam shifted, looking down. “I know, Mom.”

“Then Brian, I would appreciate it if you would watch over my son for a few hours.”

“Got it.”

“I have to go. We just got a call. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

And she hung up. Brian handed the phone to Adam, who slipped it into his pocket. He finished bandaging the boy’s arm and threw the trash away. Adam hadn’t bled very much, but he didn’t need to see the bandages.

“Shit, my steak!”

Brian hurried out to the deck and the grill. The top had been open when he’d gone for the ball and that was the only thing that saved the steak. It was a little more well-done than he liked, but edible. “Have you had dinner?” he asked the boy as he carried the plate in.

The kid’s gaze latched onto the steak. “Not yet. Mom left me something in the fridge but I’m not sure what.”

Brian headed to the freezer. He had some veggies he could microwave. And he could add an extra potato. Oh, wait, that had been his last one. Well, he could cut it in half and share with the kid.

Adam kept looking down at the bandage on his arm.

“Did I make it too tight?” Brian asked.

Adam shook his head, bending his arm at the elbow a few times. “I just... it sounds like I’m a weakling, but I don’t like blood. My mom? She can look at anything and not flinch.

She's been a cop for like eleven years, so she's seen a lot. Bad car crashes and death scenes and stuff. But my dad had a weak stomach, she said."

Brian felt for the kid. "It's no big deal. Not everyone can do the stuff your mom does."

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "She says there's a job for everyone, and that she can't do half the math stuff I do."

Brian nodded. "Exactly. So, don't worry about the blood. It's no big deal to me."

"I bet there was a lot...." Adam's voice trailed away, and his cheeks flushed. Brian knew what he was asking about, and he found he really didn't mind.

"When I lost my legs? Probably. Luckily, I don't remember a lot about that particular point in time. But I had someone like your mom there to take care of me."

"So, what do you remember?"

Brian looked at him. "You sure you want to know?"

Adam took a moment and really seemed to be thinking about the question. "Yes."

Brian looked down at the resting steak, his hands going still. "I was blown up in a Humvee accident. Pretty much blew my legs off. I'm thankful it knocked me out. By the time I woke up I was in a helicopter on the way to a Forward Operating Base. They triaged me there, then sent me on to Germany. I woke up two weeks later, missing two legs. One above the knee," he tapped his right thigh, which echoed, "and one below the knee."

He wiggled his left leg.

"Wow," Adam breathed. "Do you have phantom pains and all that?"

Brian smirked. "I do. And it hurts when I stub my toe."

Adam tilted his head, making a funny face. He pushed his glasses up his nose. "Seriously?"

"Yup. My brain expects hurt, so that's what it transmits."

“That is so weird...” Adam breathed. “But fascinating.”

“Yeah,” Brian sighed. “I still wake up and roll out of bed, expecting my legs to be there. A couple of times I’ve landed on the floor.”

Adam snorted. “Seriously?”

“Yup.”

Brian portioned out the meat and potatoes and veggies onto plates, then handed one to Adam. “Go sit down.”

Adam did as he was told, digging into the food. Brian watched him for a minute, curious at the direction his life had just gone. Two months ago, he’d been resigned to never seeing the boy and his mother again, though he’d been disappointed. Especially after the kiss on the side of the road. That had come out of nowhere, but it had been amazing. It replayed in his mind nightly. He’d regretted the move to Columbus, then, but it had already been done.

“This is really good,” Adam said, mouth full of steak.

“Thanks,” Brian said, sitting down across from him. He handed Adam a bottle of water, then cracked one open for himself.

The steak was a little over, but still good. Next time he’d watch it better, and hopefully wouldn’t have a neighbor kid distracting him. “So, what are you doing here?”

Adam’s gaze lifted. “What do you mean?”

Brian had seen the guilt, though, in the flash of his hazel eyes behind the lenses of his glasses.

“You knew I was in Columbus. Seems like a pretty massive coincidence that you literally land right next to me, a thousand miles from Wyoming.”

Adam was chewing, chewing, obviously trying to give himself time to come up with a reasonable explanation for why he was there. “I wanted to go to this school,” he said finally, swallowing. “And eventually OSU.”

“But how many schools were you looking at?”

He shrugged negligently. “Three or four, something like that.”

Brian didn’t know if he could trust what he said. Knowing Adam, the kid could probably reel off a dozen details about each one. “And how did you pick this particular housing development?”

Adam shifted on his chair, avoiding his eyes. “It was very highly rated. New construction. And it allowed pets. We had to have a place for Diamond.”

The dog perked her ears up at the mention of her name but didn’t shift from the floor.

“Ohio also has one of the best library systems in the country, with the highest statewide usage per capita. There’s a branch a couple of blocks away.”

Brian continued to look at the kid. Eventually he would tell him.

Adam grimaced, looking down at his hands in his lap. “Well, after I found out where you were going, I might have used some voice tech to contact Lost and Found, acting like I was your old landlord, and that we needed your new address to ship some stuff to you that had been left in the apartment.”

Brian scowled, leaning in. “Shannon would never have given out my address.”

“It wasn’t a woman,” Adam said, his eyes flicking up, then away. “It was a guy, and he sounded mad. Like he had other things to do.”

Someone must have been filling in for Shannon. “When was this?”

He shrugged his narrow shoulders. “Couple months ago.”

So, directly after they’d met at the Henry Bright wedding. Brian supposed he could admire the kid’s gumption. “Okay, Adam. Here’s the big question. Why?”

If possible, the kid shrank down in the chair even more.

Brian leaned in even closer. “Adam?”

“Because you made my mom smile,” he admitted softly.
“More than I’ve seen her smile in a long time.”

Brian sat back in the chair, a little shook at the direction the conversation had taken. He thought Adam was going to say he liked talking to him, or something more centered around himself. Instead, he’d done what he’d done for altruistic reasons, which was commendable.

Hell.

At just after eleven, Sage knocked on the door that looked remarkably like her own. Each of the apartment buildings had a different generic theme, but they were all a cohesive palate. Brian's building was a pale blue, while hers was a pale grayish color, with black accents. It was a trendy little place, and when Adam had mentioned to her that he really liked the look of it, and it was within their budget, she'd taken his words to heart.

The little shit.

Was she too lenient on him? She didn't like feeling like she was being played by her ten-year old.

Brian answered the door almost immediately and Sage lost her breath. Fuck... In spite of the November chill, he wore a skin-tight t-shirt which lovingly hugged every swell and bulge of his chest and abs. It was soft gray and well-worn, with some kind of faded red logo on the chest. The short sleeves strained around his biceps, and the edge of a dark tattoo peeked from beneath his right one. His veined, muscled hands were planted on his hips. He also wore dark-gray joggers, low-slung around his hips. Adam had said he was a double amputee, but she couldn't see anything to indicate that.

She looked up at his face and realized he was checking her out, as well. Thoughts of his lips on hers rushed through her mind, and she forced herself to look away, out toward the parking lot, so she could catch her breath and control her face. Then, taking a calming breath, she turned back to him. "I just

want you to know, this isn't some fatal attraction shit. I had no idea you lived here. I mean, I knew you lived in Ohio, but I had no idea he was going to park us right next to you. Literally. I don't even know how he did it."

Brian's dark blond brows furrowed over his skeptical brown eyes, but she thought there was some humor dancing there.

"I swear," she said firmly. "I learned a long time ago that Adam loves research. I told him to find us a place he could get to school easily. That bus stop," she turned and pointed at the far corner, "is exactly three-quarters of a mile from the school. He could walk there if he needed to."

Brian still didn't say anything, and his face was implacable. Self-righteous anger began to build in her gut. Why was she explaining herself to this man?

That was when he grinned at her and reached out to rest a hand on her shoulder. "Sorry, I couldn't help but give you a raft of shit. If I didn't know Adam, I would totally be getting serial killer vibes. You're definitely the type."

Sage huffed out a laugh, shaking her head. "That kid is going to be the death of me."

"Come on in," Brian said, easing back from the door.

The floor plan was almost exactly reverse of theirs, which was a little strange. Brian had a big, comfy couch and a recliner sitting across from a huge TV mounted on the wall. He didn't have a lot of decor, though. Or anything really personal. "Haven't you been here for a while?"

He followed her look and shrugged. "Several months. I don't decorate much, and the stuff I do have is in storage. I guess I was kind of waiting to see how I settled in. My previous job was in Vail, so it's been a big change coming out here."

Yeah, that was understandable she supposed.

She followed him to the kitchen, and she realized he was limping a bit, but it wasn't very noticeable. How did he know

where to place his feet? Was he trying to walk normally for her?

Adam was in the kitchen, sitting at the kitchen table. He was polishing off a cup of yogurt.

“Oh,” Sage said, warning in her tone. “You never should have fed him. He’s like a gremlin. Now he knows where to come for food.”

Adam grinned up at her. “Quit it, Mom. This is nothing. You should have seen the steak we ate earlier. And the potato. He made peas, too, so that should make you happy. I ate a vegetable.”

Sage’s eyes widened and she looked at Brian. “I am so sorry,” she started, but he shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it,” he laughed. “Probably didn’t need to eat the whole thing anyway.”

He patted his muscular stomach, and Sage almost groaned. “Are you seriously saying you need to lose weight? Right...” she drawled.

Brian gave her a sideways, flirty grin. “Gotta keep in shape to pull young men out of dumpsters.”

“Aw, come on, Brian,” Adam cried. “That lid would have held if there hadn’t been a crack in one corner.”

“I know, buddy,” he said, moving forward to clap a big hand on Adam’s narrow shoulder.

The boy grinned up at him. “Although it never would have held your fat...”

“Stop right there, young man,” Sage said, before he could finish the sentence.

Adam giggled and she wasn’t even mad at him. Sage loved the sound of laughter from her very serious young man.

“Let’s finish your yogurt on the road, buddy. You’ve taken up enough of Brian’s time and it’s way past your bedtime.”

Without protest, he stood, quickly spooning out the rest of the cup and swallowing it down. “I’m done.”

Tossing the cup in the trash, he turned to Brian. “Thanks for the rescue, Brian. And just so you know, Mom likes Oliver wine, and anything, and I mean a-ny-thing, with chocolate in it. And pasta, though she complains after she eats it.”

“Adam!” Sage snapped, mortified. “That’s enough.”

Brian pounded fists with her son and met her gaze as Adam walked out. He gave her a wink, and she could tell he was trying to keep his laughter in. For the first time in years, Sage turned away from a man, her face on fire with embarrassment. She seriously needed to talk to her son.



BUT, talking to Adam about how inappropriate the afternoon had been didn’t go exactly the way she wanted. He sat in the chair, head bowed, and listened to her rant for a minute, before looking up with his brows cocked. “You’re always talking about time efficiency. I just saved you potential hours or days of getting to know one another. You should be thanking me.”

Sage sighed and looked out the window into the night, before turning back to him. “You didn’t, though. Two people learning about those kinds of things naturally is much healthier, and funner, than someone spoon-feeding them the info. Now,” she hesitated, and he looked up. For the first time, he appeared worried.

“I was just trying to help, Mom.”

Sage’s heart melted, but she had to draw boundaries.

“I know, buddy, but I need you to cool it with the info-dumps. If something is meant to develop between us, it needs to happen naturally, not because you manipulated the situation. And you manipulated the crap out of this one. You know that, right? You crossed several boundaries.”

He seemed to chew on that for a few minutes. “Yeah, I know. Okay. I’ll not do anything to throw you guys together, if you keep an open mind about him. Not all guys are like my dad.”

Sage sank down onto the sofa, feeling drained. “I know, buddy. I really do. Our life has been kind of topsy turvy for a while, though, and I haven’t been stressing about meeting someone, you know? I have you to keep me busy, and my new job,” she said, smiling. “It’s the two of us against the world, right?”

Adam leaned against her and reached out for one of her hands. “Right, but I’m not going to be around forever, and I feel like you’ve sacrificed a lot for me.”

She wrapped her arm around her son’s narrow shoulders, pulling him tight. It made her heart hurt how much he had matured in the past few years. He would be eleven in a few months, and the time seemed to be going faster. “I think we have a few more years, bud.”

Adam pulled back and looked up at her, face serious. “Mr. Ringold at my school is already talking about me shifting to OSU. He said he’ll put in a good word so I can start auditing early. He’s collecting the paperwork. He said he would message you about a meeting in a few days. I think he just doesn’t know what to do with me.”

Sage sighed, but she forced a smile and pulled him back under her arm. “Well, lucky for you that OSU is minutes away, even on a bus. It was one of the reasons why we moved out here, remember?”

The Ohio State University was one of the five biggest in the nation, and it was also a research university, which Adam had expressed an interest in. As well as engineering. And business. Sage frowned, wondering if the interest in OSU had been feigned in an effort just to get them out here next to Brian. She didn’t think so. There was a sparkle in Adam’s eyes when he talked about attending the huge school. Even at ten, he knew where he wanted to go.

It was daunting to Sage, because on a single cop’s wages, she could never have paid for his schooling if he didn’t receive scholarships. The accelerated learning school he was attending now had waived their tuition fee just to have him on their roster, and she was so thankful for that. After Adam’s dad had

cleaned out their accounts and left, it had been a struggle to bounce back. She was still putting money away here and there, just in case she was hit with unexpected expenses when he went to school. Or if he needed it for a trip, which the scholarships generally didn't cover. Or braces, which were in the very near future, according to their new dentist.

They'd gotten permission from OSU to start auditing classes after Christmas break, and they'd already offered Adam a full ride scholarship if everything went well. Which, she had no doubt that it would. Her son loved learning, and maybe at OSU he would finally be challenged.

They'd left everything safe behind in Wyoming, and they were plunging into a new life. Sage had decided years ago, when Tim had left, that she would fight to create the best life she could for her child. Sometimes it meant scraping pennies, but she'd done it. There was a child-support ruling against Adam's father, but Tim never had the money to pay it. She couldn't even remember how many tens of thousands he was behind. Sage had learned very soon after they'd gotten married that he wasn't to be depended upon.

She was independent by nature and in a way, she thought that was one of the things that had driven them apart. Tim wanted someone to dote on him, like his own parents, and she wasn't that kind of woman. She was too independent and hard-headed.

Brian didn't seem to be the type to need that kind of attention, either. Her ears burned at what Adam had told him. Good gravy, what did he think of her? She knew what he probably thought of her. After flirting at the wedding and then that crazy kiss at the side of the road in Cheyenne, he had to think she was hard up and looking for sex. And no matter how much she defended herself, Adam had put her in a difficult position, parking her right beside the man. How had he even done that?

Her son was one of a kind and he constantly surprised her. And occasionally horrified her. If she didn't make an effort to keep his brain busy, he came up with his own distractions.

Maybe if she got him into the college classes he would stay out of trouble. And he would finally be challenged.

Sage scrubbed a hand over her face. There was so much to do, and she had very little free time to do it. Since she was new on the department, she absolutely had to shine. And she was, but she also had to find time to squeeze in Ohio Criminal Justice classes for herself. The Ohio Revised Code was very different from Wyoming's.

Overall, though, she was hopeful. Their life was in a state of flux, but they'd gotten used to dealing with anything thrown at the two of them.

Brian was a bit of a wrench in her plans, but it was okay. The thought of him made one side of her mouth kick up, and she wondered when she could see him again.

Thanks to Adam, she definitely owed him a dinner.

Brian loved his office. The Thornberry Park Office Center was a new development just north of East Broad St, near the Center of Science and Industry. It was a block from an on-ramp, and only about a mile to the Columbus Police Department downtown, where they did a lot of business. Plus, he could leave his office here and be in his own apartment on the north-west side within fifteen minutes, as long as he didn't get tangled in traffic. The never-ending construction Brody had warned him about was no joke.

The office building, a renovated, repurposed warehouse, was a broad expanse of gleaming sealed-brown concrete, trendy black office chairs and natural lighting from the expansive glass front. The open-air stairs to the second-floor offices were black iron and natural wood, as well as the window treatments, and he appreciated the trendy, industrial feel to the place.

The clients seemed to appreciate it as well, because their office downstairs was always busy. When he'd first started a few months ago, they'd had a few regular heavy-duty clients, most notably the police department and the prosecutor's office. Parker did a lot of translating for them, and it helped that his fiancée was one of the prosecutors. Now the company was picking up more random cases, people that were referred to them with difficult situations. They hadn't even begun to advertise yet, and they already had more work than they could handle. Brian doubted they would ever have to advertise.

There were eight investigators in the office, not including their boss, Parker Quinn. There was a shared assistant to help the investigators out with clerical work, as well as a physical assistant for odd jobs. As with the main office, all the men hired were former military, and all had a disability of some type. Austin, the ‘gopher’, helped the guys out that had mobility issues, and he always seemed to be on his phone, running from place to place with the kind of energy Brian envied.

All eight of the investigators were rarely in the office at once, and some of them could do their jobs remotely. Post Covid, they were lucky to be able to do a lot of their job from home.

Brian had found that he worked better in the office, though. Every morning he got up and went to the gym, then headed to the office, and he loved the regularity. Even if his stumps were killing him by the end of the day and he wanted to kick his own ass for being so motivated.

A few weeks ago, they’d hired the downstairs front desk receptionist, and poor Morgan also seemed to be busy all the time. They had an assistant up here on the office floor for dictation and other jobs, Shiloh, but Parker had turned over the day to day running of the office to Morgan. The two women were quickly becoming indispensable to the team and were creating their own little wonder duo.

Brian glanced at the corner of his screen as his email pinged. Then he snorted. Adam had started emailing him daily. Sometimes it was just to say hi, and other times it was to ask him a detailed question about some conundrum he was dealing with. Brian felt like he was a well-read, experienced, intelligent individual, but Adam’s questions sometimes made him feel stupid. He would have to go searching for the answer. This one did not require work on his part, just a response.

No, he typed out. I’ve never seen “River Monsters” on Animal Planet. That seems crazy that he caught so many fish that he put himself out of a job. Wonder if he knew he was doing that?

He sent the email, grinning. Tomorrow morning there would be a response, then in the afternoon, some kind of challenge.

Brian appreciated that the kid was reaching out. It was a challenge to not ask about Sage, even when Adam mentioned her.

Email pinged again, and he glanced at it in surprise.

Mom wants to know if you would like to have dinner with us tonight. It's her day off and she says she owes you a steak. 7pm.

Brian stared at the words for a few minutes, wondering if he should just accept gratefully or come up with some excuse.

If he were honest, he would say hell, yes, he'd like to go to dinner. The thought of seeing Sage again sent a tide of warmth through him, warmth he had no business feeling. Because even though they'd kind of had a moment together, he wasn't sure about the future. He refused to tie anyone to his future. Or even his present.

If he didn't go, though, she would offer again in the future. Maybe it was better to go and get it over with. The email pinged again, and there was just one word on the screen. *Please.*

Sighing, he knew he was going to give in. He would just have to make it clear to them that this was a one-time thing, and that there was no more obligation.

I'll be there.



SAGE KNEW SHE WAS OVERREACTING, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She threw the most current shirt into the bottom of the closet. The thought of seeing Brian again sent butterflies racing through her tummy, which was ridiculous. She was a mature woman. A cop, for God's sake, and suddenly she was nervous to see a man.

A man you thoroughly kissed on the side of the road, a little voice whispered in her mind. A man who made your toes curl in your ugly uniform boots, and made you want to throw caution to the winds. A man who treated your son with respect and care.

“Stop it,” she growled to herself. “He’s just coming to dinner. Not for anything else.”

She had to be building him up too much in her head.

That didn’t keep her from going through four more outfits, though, trying to decide what was best. She should be more worried about the food, but everything was prepped and waiting. Eventually, she settled on a pair of jeans that were a dark plum color, and a long-sleeved light, teal-colored button-down with the sleeves rolled up a little. Then she curled her hair a little and added some eye makeup. Not too much. She didn’t want to make him feel like she’d gone to a lot of trouble for him. It was just a casual night. Casual.

Once he got here, she would start the steaks. The parmesan potatoes were already in the oven roasting, and they would be done at about the same time as the steaks. There was a chocolate mousse in the fridge chilling... what else? Something green, definitely.

The apartment was okay, but she still had a ton of boxes to unpack. She just hadn’t had the time to do it. Between settling into the new job, meetings with Adam’s teachers, meetings with the college to see where they could place him, this week had been crazy. She’d managed to make the living room cozier, though.

The big gray sectional had been with them a couple of years and she was glad she’d invested the money in it. It was holding up well. She’d tossed some throw pillows and a couple of blankets over the backs of the couch, then arranged some lamps and knickknacks on the end tables. There was a big geometric rug under everything, stretching most of the width of the room. It was dramatic and gave the room some character and matched the giant picture on one wall.

Adam had been after her to invite Brian over, and it had motivated her to unpack some of the boxes. Besides, she felt obligated to replace the meal he'd shared with Adam. That had not been his responsibility, to feed her child. She appreciated that he'd done it in the moment, but she needed to pay him back.

Plus, she wanted to see him.

It was stupid to even think about any kind of relationship right now. She already had so many draws on her time and energy. Some days when she got home, she barely had the energy to cook dinner, or the mental energy to deal with Adam. The boy could try a saint, sometimes, but she wouldn't give him up for anything. He was her heart, and her total reason for everything she did.

"Uh, Mom, I think you're out of time," Adam called from the other side of the door.

With a final glance in the mirror, she headed out. "How do I look?" she asked before she could help herself.

Adam planted his hands on his hips and looked her up and down, giving the question serious consideration. "Good, I think."

"You think?" she asked, frowning.

He nodded, face thoughtful. "The clothes are casual, so it doesn't look like you spent a lot of time on yourself. You curled your hair, though, which I know takes a long time. He probably won't know that. The makeup is subtle, but effective." He grinned at her, showing the mouthful of teeth he was slowly growing into. "I think you look perfect."

Sage tugged him into a hug. "I love you, buddy."

"Love you too, Mom."

She headed to the kitchen to make sure everything was ready, and when the doorbell rang right on the dot of seven, she went to answer it, taking a deep, supportive breath.

It didn't help.

Brian was an imposing figure, broad and a few inches taller than herself. Solid. She could see his military history in the way he carried himself, upright and direct. His blond hair was shorn tight in the back, and a little longer on top, just enough to take advantage of a small cowlick at the left corner of his forehead.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at her, and Sage grinned back. Damn, he was good-looking. Her heart fluttered, and she had to force herself to step back. “Come on in,” she murmured. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“Thank you for having me,” he murmured, stepping into her space.

Thoughts of the kiss she’d given him at the side of the road in Cheyenne hit her then, and she remembered the flavor of his mouth. The firmness of his lips. And she had to force herself to stay where she was. Instinctively, she wanted to step forward and drag him into another kiss, as if she were greeting him home.

That was absolute bullshit. She’d done that a few times with her ex, but never anyone else. Why did she feel the need to do it now? Was her body recognizing something her mind didn’t?

“Brian,” Adam cried, running into the room and skidding to a stop in front of him. His hands opened and closed, and Sage got the impression her son wanted to reach out to Brian as well. After she closed the door, she rested a hand on his shoulder.

“What’s up, bud?” Brian held a hand out for a fist bump, and Adam complied. “How’s the arm?”

Adam twisted, showing him the scrape that had all but faded. “It’s fine. Almost gone, actually. I was hoping it would scab over, but it just kind of faded.”

Brian snorted. “Well, maybe next time you’ll get a good scab. I have a feeling you’ll be in another scrape in no time. In the meantime,” he said, bringing something out from behind his back, “here’s something to occupy you for a few minutes.”

Adam took the paper bag and reached inside, pulling out a book. "1000 Fun Facts for Immature Adults."

That sent him rolling with laughter, and even Sage giggled. She loved the play on words, and she knew that her son would be up late tonight reading. She glanced at Brian, and he was grinning at Adam's delight.

"I thought you might like that," he said, then handed her a bottle of wine.

Sage blinked, appreciating the gesture. Oliver, of course, and a flavor she loved. She very rarely indulged, but maybe they would have a glass tonight. "Thank you," she said, heading to the kitchen to put it in the fridge. "Come on in and make yourself at home. I'll get the steaks on."

Brian followed her. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Sage glanced at him as she turned the burner on for her cast iron pan. "Nope. The potatoes are about done, and these will only take about fifteen minutes. Have a seat, please. Can I get you a beer, or a water?"

"I'm good, right now," he said, taking a seat at their kitchen table.

Adam wandered in, his head already buried in the book. "Brian, this is cool. Thank you."

He settled into one of the chairs and continued to read, and Brian smiled at her. "He's easy to please."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't get too excited. It will be read cover to cover by tonight, and you're going to have to deal with the information dump tomorrow. He says he emails you every day."

She turned back to the stove and the hot pan. The ribeye steaks had already been oiled and seasoned, and she put them in the cast iron, then set her time. Four minutes on each side, then five minutes in the oven, and they would be perfection. When she glanced up, Brian was leaning against the counter just a few feet away, arms crossed over his broad chest.

"I've never seen them done in cast iron."

Sage smiled. “Then you’re in for a treat. I love them this way. Crispy on the outside and tender pink on the inside. Unless you’re one of those that needs their steak well-done,” she frowned.

Brian held out his hands. “Oh, no. Medium rare is perfect. And I’m okay with the emails. He’s a smart kid. You’ve done a fantastic job with him.”

Sage took his words to heart, nodding a little. “I feel like I have, but occasionally he catches me flat-footed. I feel like I’m always trying to get ahead of that brain of his,” she laughed.

The timer beeped, and she flipped the steaks, then turned the microwave on. There was a bag of broccoli in there, and she would cheese it up when it was done. “If he ever gets to be too much, just tell him you have work to do. I don’t expect you to entertain him.”

Brian shrugged, his smile crooked. “I don’t mind it. Kind of reminds me of my little brother.”

“And where is he?”

“He’s stationed in New Mexico, at Holloman Air Force Base. He does something with guided missiles, though I’m not sure what exactly. Not sure he can even tell me.”

Sage nodded, assuming Brian meant he did something top secret. She’d never dealt with the military, per se, other than some of the vets she dealt with on the streets. Seemed like a lot of the homeless they dealt with were veterans.

“Does he like what he does?” she asked and poked at the steak. Yup, it was getting there. Grabbing an oven mitt, she picked up the cast iron pan and slid it into the oven, pulling the glass 13x9 of potatoes out. Oh, they looked delectable.

Brian leaned in and sniffed appreciatively. “That smells so good. I was hungry before, but now my mouth is watering. Is that parmesan?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I cut the little potatoes in half and mix a parmesan, butter and seasoning paste on the bottom of

the dish. Then I put them face down to bake and they make this delicious crust.”

Using a fork, she picked out a small one, and held it out to him. He took the fork from her, his fingers brushing her own. He blew on the bite, then popped it into his mouth. Sage watched him chew, fascinated, when she really shouldn't be.

“That is fantastic,” he said around the bite.

Sage grinned, ridiculously happy that he enjoyed it. Cooking for a man had never been a priority to her. Feeding her son was a priority, and she'd gotten good at it for him.

When the steak timer went off, she pulled it from the oven and transferred the steaks to a cutting board to rest. Then she added cheese to her steamed broccoli. Adam sighed as she set the bowl of broccoli on the table. “I knew there'd be something green,” he grumbled.

Sage smirked. “Well, yeah. Duh. You always have something green at dinner.”

Adam glanced up at her. “I know, but I hoped that since Brian was here, we would skip it tonight.”

“What's wrong with broccoli?” Brian said. “I love it. Not much of a cauliflower fan, but broccoli is good for you.”

Proving action to words, he reached out and plucked a cheesy bit out of the bowl, tossing it in his mouth. Sage grinned, watching Adam. He scowled, like his hero had just done something terrible. He shook his head sadly and went back to his book.

Sage shared a look with Brian, and he winked at her. And for the first time in a long time, she felt like part of a team.

Brian was torn about the dinner. The longer he was with the two of them, the more he enjoyed them.

Sage was a wonderful mother, and he could see the challenges she'd probably faced in bringing Adam up alone. From the way they talked, there had been no one since Adam's father had left four years ago.

That fact was astounding to him, because she seemed like such a fantastic woman. Or maybe he had lost his objectivity since all he could think about was repeating that kiss from Cheyenne.

Several times he found himself just staring at her, wondering how soft her skin was, or what she bathed in, because the scent was bedeviling him. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman, so maybe he was just hard up.

No, he wasn't going to disregard what he felt that easily. He enjoyed her, specifically.

Adam inhaled his food like every other growing kid he'd seen and started reading his book under the edge of the table. He would listen to their conversation, though, and pepper in the occasional wry comment. The kid had a fantastic sense of humor and Brian knew it had to be because of Sage.

"I'm stuffed," he said eventually, and he truly was. The steak had been phenomenal, and he wanted more of the potatoes, though he had no room for them. "You have more than paid me back."

Sage grinned. “Good! And I’m glad you enjoyed everything. I do have dessert, too. We can wait a bit for that.”

Brian groaned, hand on his gut. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Oh, you’ll make room for this,” Adam warned, looking up and pushing his glasses up his nose. “Why do you think I got done so quick?”

Sage snorted and stood from the table to retrieve something from the fridge. She grabbed a stack of little decorative glass dishes and carried everything to the table. Then she dipped out a scoop of something chocolate.

“This is Mom’s famous mousse. She only makes it about once a year, so consider yourself lucky.”

Brian’s brows raised at the words, and he looked at the cup she set before him. He dipped a spoon into the mixture and took a bite. “Oh, wow...” he moaned.

Adam nodded. “Yup. Told ya.”

“I’m not normally rabid for chocolate,” he admitted, “but this is amazing.”

“Thank you,” Sage said primly.

“So, where are you guys from originally?” he asked as he scraped the little cup clean. “I know I met you in Wyoming, but is that where you’re from?”

Sage nodded. “That was my aunt I was helping at the wedding. She owns a small catering company, and she needed help because of the size of the event. I told her I could pitch in. My parents live about fifty miles away from there. Lifetime ranchers. What about your family?”

“Michigan. They own a small bed and breakfast in the UP. They bought it after my father retired. He’d been a tugboat captain for many years.”

“I would love to go up there,” Adam said suddenly, lifting his head from the book. “There’ve been like 25000 shipwrecks up there, and most of them have never been found.”

Brian nodded. “Yes. My mother was very happy that Dad retired. He had a couple of close calls, but he’s happy he ‘landed’, he says.”

Adam snorted and dropped his head to his book again.

“And you were in Vail before?” Sage asked, setting her own empty cup on her plate.

“Yes,” Brian confirmed. “For several years. Lost and Found has been around for about ten years, now, and I’ve been with them about eight. Nine.”

“I love Vail in the autumn,” Sage mused. “The ex took me there one year, and I loved it.”

“Yes, the aspens are amazing. But I love the color changes out here, as well. Some of the red oaks are stunning.”

The doorbell rang, and Sage looked up in surprise. Then she glanced at Adam. “Did you invite someone over?”

Adam shook his head, barely glancing up from his book.

“Excuse me,” she murmured, rising from the table.

Brian stood with her and nudged Adam. “Let’s start clearing the table while your mom gets the door.”

Adam closed his book, and they started cleaning things up. Brian took directions as the boy showed him where things were, and how Mom liked the dishwasher loaded. When Sage returned, she held a single red rose in a glass vase, and there was an odd frown on her face.

“Adam, have you seen anyone around recently?”

Adam cocked his head, frowning. “Here? No, not really. Like who?”

Sage shook her head, her glance skimming over Brian. She set the flower on the counter and turned to help them clean up.

Brian was curious as to what she was thinking. He also was a little concerned. It was obvious she didn’t know who the flower was from. When Adam went back to his book, he caught her gaze. “Are you okay?”

She smiled for him, but he could see it seemed forced. “I’m good. Just odd. There’s no card or anything, and the delivery driver had no info. I’ll call my family later and see if they sent it.”

Brian gave her a nod, wondering if she would let him know if it wasn’t from her family.

What business was it of his?

With thoughts of creating distance in his mind, he crossed to Adam. “You’ll have to let me know how you like the book, later. I’m going home.”

Adam looked up, his face crumpling into disappointment. “But you just got here,” he said.

Brian laughed. “No, I just got here almost two hours ago. I have some work to do at home before I can go to bed.”

“Okay,” Adam sighed. Walking close, he gave Brian a hug around the waist. “I’ll email you tomorrow.”

“Okay, buddy,” Brian patted him on the shoulder and let him go, then he headed for the front door. Sage followed along.

“Thank you for being patient with him,” she murmured softly. “Adam struggles with anxiety sometimes and it’s been a big change, coming out here. I don’t think he’s made a lot of friends, yet.”

“He’s a good kid, Sage. He’ll find his footing. And he’ll find friends.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “I want you to know I enjoyed you being here, as well,” she said softly. Stepping close, she leaned up and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Brian wanted to turn his head to catch her mouth like he did in Cheyenne, but he didn’t. Distance, he reminded himself, though it took everything in him to not pull her close. “Thanks for having me, Sage. It was a good meal and good company. Have a good night.”

Then, before he could do anything reckless, or call something else ‘good’, he walked out the door.

Sage didn't know what to think about the dinner. Yes, she'd repaid Brian for feeding her kid an expensive steak, but she'd kind of been hoping for more of an end-of-night goodbye. When they'd kissed in Cheyenne, she hadn't mistaken the enthusiasm in his kiss. There was no way. But tonight, he'd seemed... distant.

For the first time, she wondered if he was attached. Maybe that was why he hadn't responded the same way. If he had a girlfriend, this could be hard to explain to her, coming over to hang out with a single mother and her kid. A single mother and kid who had followed him home from Wyoming.

The thought of him being taken didn't sit well with her and she shook her head. Why the hell was she so interested? She hadn't been interested in a man for a very long time, and the two of them had done very well without a man in the picture. She knew that Adam would be all for the two of them getting together, though.

Maybe there was another reason why he hadn't shown interest.

Huffing softly at herself, she locked the door and gave him a minute to cross the grass before she turned out the porch light and set the alarm. She turned and leaned back against the door, her body humming. Having him in her home had been stimulating and now she had to come down off the buzz.

What would have happened if he'd actually kissed her?

Even though he didn't make a move on her tonight, she wasn't discounting the meal. They'd had a good time and Adam had as well.

Heck, Adam had latched onto him like a tick. She would have to make sure he didn't bother him too much.

Sage pushed away from the door, heading toward the kitchen. She had laundry to change and a big cast iron pan to scrub. And a boy to chase to bed.

Her gaze fell to the rose. And a mystery to solve.

Sage put Brian out of her head for a few days and she warned Adam that he needed to not be a pest with his questions. Adam looked a little crestfallen, but he'd nodded. Sage knew that look. He'd probably already *been* pestering him.

Thursday, she went back to work and lost herself in her job. Columbus PD was busy. So much busier than Cheyenne PD. And the calls were very different. Sage had never been much of a city person, so getting used to the miles upon miles of downtown asphalt was hard.

And the demographic was different. She was used to a laconic, more laid-back lifestyle. The bumper-to-bumper traffic and impatience, and just general rudeness was a lot to get used to.

Her training officer was a long-time veteran that seemed to know most of the people in Columbus personally. Gary Blake, who'd been with the department thirty years, was nearing retirement, and he was an absolute font of information about the city. Both good and bad. Sage was very glad she'd paired with him. He and his wife had even been over to their apartment for dinner one night and Adam had fallen in love with Gary's wife Candice. She was the epitome of grandmotherly energy, and he was missing that out here.

Sage's parents had lived north of Cheyenne almost an hour, but she'd made sure to make the trek to see them at least every couple of weeks. She'd made the trek more often after

she told them they were moving just so they could get as much time in with them as possible.

Her mother understood why they had to move, but she hadn't liked it. Her father, on the other hand, had railed against it, telling her Adam could do college classes online.

It had been one of the biggest fights they'd ever had, and she understood why he hadn't wanted to give up his grandson. She had a brother on each coast, and they had left a few years ago, building their own families. Adam had been the closest grandchild to their home property, and he'd been her father's buddy.

It had broken her heart to leave, but she had to do what was best for Adam. Yes, online college courses were getting better, but there was still a practical aspect he needed to experience. In her eyes he would always be her baby, and he'd lived a pretty sheltered life in Cheyenne. Now he was in a very urban environment, just on the outside of central Columbus. She worried about him every day, but she'd gotten him a cell phone, as well as a GPS tracker she kept in his bag. Adam was a smart kid, but he was a little naive sometimes. He might wander off his path just reading historical markers. He'd done that in Cheyenne once and she'd lost him for a couple of hours. Adam hadn't realized it, but the entirety of the Cheyenne Police department had been looking for him that day. Once one of the guys had spotted him, they'd radioed Sage and told her where to pick him up.

As soon as they'd moved into this apartment, Sage had hired a woman in the apartment building next to theirs to keep an eye out for Adam. Jane Smalls had two little kids of her own, and was down at the bus stop anyway, so she just made sure Adam made it off the bus and into the apartment. The single mother needed every dollar she could scrape together, and Sage liked feeling like she was helping them both out. Adam would kill her if he found out Jane was watching, because he was 'almost eleven and too old for a sitter'. Sage had to have that reassurance, though. When they'd lived in Cheyenne, her best friend had lived next door. Adam had gone

to Bet's house every day after school, and he'd loved it because Bet had three boys close to Adam's age.

Sage missed Beatrice. They'd always been at each other's houses, and it had been as hard to leave her as her parents. Adam had to be her priority, though.

"This guy's going to cause a wreck," Gary mumbled.

Sage had been watching the erratic driver and was already compiling a list of infractions in her head. The beat-up old Honda may have been red at one point, but now it was a faded, chalky pink, and the back bumper was black, dented and hanging off one corner. Obviously, the driver had an exemplary driving record. He wove through traffic, shaving corners and even though he appeared to be under the speed limit, he was taking risks. Then, someone slammed on their brakes as he pulled in behind them, and the driver's response was delayed. He crashed into the back of the silver Hyundai, his car coming to a rocking stop.

Sage flipped on the overhead lights and called in their location as she positioned the cruiser to block the lane. It was nearing rush hour, and they would need to get this cleared as soon as possible.

"Someone will probably join us but go ahead and call it in for a second unit," Gary murmured. "If only for traffic."

Sage called their final location in and requested assistance, called in the out-of-state plate, then moved to step out of the car. Traffic was a large part of her job in Columbus and if they hadn't stopped for this crash, they probably would have been sent to a different one. They had very little downtime.

Sage knew this was going to be a doozy when the guy who instigated the crash hopped out of the car, stomped up to the other car and started yelling at the other driver, a young Indian woman. Her window was rolled up and her eyes were wide with fear.

"Hey," Sage called out. "You need to get back into your car."

“Fuck that!” the guy said. “She caused the crash, and she’s going to pay for it.”

“Get back in your car,” Sage commanded. “I need your license, registration and proof of insurance.”

“I didn’t cause the crash, bitch. She did!”

“I need information from you both, so get in your car,” she commanded, getting aggravated that he wasn’t listening.

The guy rounded and stalked toward her. Casually, Sage rested her hands on her gun belt, then remembered that she didn’t yet have a Taser. She hadn’t been through the training yet. Fuck! She shifted her hands. She still had her Asp baton and her mace. And if all else failed, her Glock.

She’d only ‘cleared leather’ half a dozen times in her career and in each incident, there had been clear and present danger. She’d never had to shoot anyone, but she was ready to do so if the situation warranted.

Gary shifted forward to take the man’s attention and she appreciated that he did that. Columbus PD generally patrolled with two-man cars, so he was acting as he should with a partner.

The driver, a younger man who appeared to be in his thirties, didn’t let up, though. He stalked toward them, escalating the danger of the situation. If they felt like they were in fear, or the general public was in danger, they had a responsibility to act. Yes, his emotions were heightened because of the crash, but if he didn’t get himself under control, they would have to control him.

Sage held up a cautioning hand. “Listen, we saw the crash, get us your information, we’ll get the report rolling and we’ll get you out of here.”

“Fuck you. I’m late for work. I don’t have time for this.”

The man moved to get into his car.

“You are not free to leave, Sir,” Sage said, her voice loud over the noise of the passing traffic. “This is now the scene of

a crash, and you have to supply your information. You are officially detained.”

“You people act like you own everything,” the man said, throwing up his hands. “You’re always after the little guy. I’m going to lose my shitty job if you don’t let me go.”

Sage positioned herself at the window of his car as he climbed in and slammed the door shut. Now that he was in his own space, maybe he would calm down. Gary went to the opposite side and Sage waited for the man to supply his documents. He wasn’t doing anything, though. He was just sitting in his car, and she could see him muttering to himself, his hands shaking. She tapped on the window, trying to get him to roll it down.

Just then, dispatch radioed that the registered driver, Paul Freer, had a felony warrant out of Indianapolis. The man in the driver’s seat lifted his head. He didn’t look at her, but Sage knew he’d heard the call, and she had a gut feeling it was going to go bad. She looked up at Gary and she could see in his face that he thought the same thing. Glancing behind her cruiser, she saw backup was about a dozen car lengths away. Traffic was already beginning to pile up because they had a lane and a half blocked.

When the man started his car and began to shift into gear, Sage knew she had to act.

“Bust out the window,” Gary yelled.

Sage grabbed her Asp, expanded it with a flick of her wrist, and smashed it into the glass, but it didn’t shatter the first time. The car began to move, and she had to jump back. Gary jumped back as well. Sage slammed the baton into the window again, and it shattered. She reached in, grabbing for the ignition of the car, and the man slammed on the gas. Her feet came off the ground as the car carried her back. They slammed into her cruiser, then he shifted into drive. She heard glass smash on the other side, then Gary yelled out ‘taser, taser, taser,’ and the man jerked in his seat. Before she could grab the keys, the car jumped forward again, and Sage glanced around in fear. They were going to run into oncoming traffic.

Fuck!

For a timeless second, she glanced across. Gary was hanging onto the passenger side of the car, continuing to squeeze the trigger of the Taser. Sage wondered if that wasn't what screwed them, because a split second later, the driver hit the Indian woman's car again in the rear, then scraped on through. Sage heard Gary cry out and she wondered if he'd been pinned. Something popped in her shoulder, and she knew she was going to be in pain, but she held onto the steering wheel for dear life.

She could no longer hear the snap of the Taser, but she heard the siren behind her. Whoever their backup was, they were screaming around the traffic through the median. Then the backup car pulled directly in front of the car dragging her and the suspect finally stopped. Sage got her feet under her and elbowed the man with her right arm, several times, then ripped the door open. She grabbed him by the neck and dragged him out of the car.

The man rallied, though, and he started swinging. Sage took a fist to the temple that completely rang her bell, and she went down hard on her ass. Her head snapped back against the roadway, and she prayed that traffic had completely stopped. The backup officers were running toward her, and one split off toward the suspect, who was trying to run. He wasn't going to get away.

Dragging in oxygen, she pushed to her feet and took off after the driver. She and the backup officer tackled him at the same time, and they went rolling. Sage took another fist to the gut before they managed to overpower the driver. Then the third officer piled on and they forced the guy's wrists into cuffs.

For a second, Sage just sat on the debris-strewn road, catching her breath and waiting for the world to stop spinning. Her entire body was throbbing, and she knew she was more hurt than she could catalog at that moment.

Years ago, she'd been sitting at a red light, on-duty, when a drunk driver had plowed into her. That had been about four

years ago, right around the time Tim had left them. She'd ended up with a broken arm and a broken collar bone from that crash and she remembered the all-consuming pain. Every time she'd breathed, she could feel the pain in her collar bone.

She hadn't broken it this time, but she felt as beat up as she'd been then. One of the backup cops kneeled beside her, his eyes concerned. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she croaked out. "Thanks for getting there when you did. He would have kept dragging me. Did you see Gary?"

She lifted her head, looking around. They had ended up about fifty feet in front of the Indian woman's car. She was still in the car, sobbing, with her hands to her face. Sage's gaze drifted past her, looking for Gary.

Then she saw booted feet near the guardrail. Sage immediately radioed for squad, reporting an officer down, and she ran for Gary.

Brian looked down at his buzzing phone, and his heart picked up speed. He debated not answering, because they were trying to create distance. Or he was, at least. It had been a week since the steak dinner, and he still thought about Sage every chance he got. Actually, thoughts of her intruded at completely inappropriate times, and it had created enough of a problem that Parker had snapped at him to pull his head out of his ass yesterday. That hadn't been all he'd said, but Brian didn't want to think about that.

Giving in to the inevitable, he answered the phone. "Yes, Sage," he said, rocking back in his chair.

"Brian," she said, her voice so rough he barely understood what she was saying. "I hate to ask, but I have a bit of an emergency."

Brian rocked forward, alarm slamming through him. "What's going on?"

"I can't reach the lady that kind of watches Adam for me, and I need someone to stay with him tonight. I had... a bit of an accident at work, today."

Brian flashed back to the Newsbreak article he'd seen on his phone for Columbus. "Were you part of that crazy crash out on Hogue Ave.?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I'm okay, but I'm at Mt. Carmel and they want to keep me overnight. I have a slight concussion. Gary is here, too, but he got pinned. He's not doing as well."

Brian could hear the pain in her voice, and it made his heart ache for her. “I’ll go get Adam. Did you tell him you were hurt? You know he’s going to want to see you.”

“Yes, I told him. Don’t worry about bringing him in. He’s been struggling with worry, recently, and I’ll be out tomorrow morning. I’d probably scare the crap out of the kid, because I don’t look really great. Just tell him I love him.”

Brian frowned at that. Adam loved his mother, and he had a feeling he would want to make sure she was fine himself, even if she didn’t look great. “Don’t worry about him, then. I’m leaving work now.”

He suited actions to words and started gathering stuff up, propping his phone between his shoulder and cheek. He shoved the Demetri file into his laptop bag to work on later. Parker was out of the office right now, so he wouldn’t even notice Brian had left. “Do you have clothes when they release you tomorrow?”

“No,” Sage admitted, and he thought he might have woken her. She might be mildly sedated, or maybe it was just pain he heard in her voice. “I’ll find something,” she said, voice soft.

“Okay,” Brian said quietly. “Go rest. It sounds like you need it.”

“Thanks, Brian.”

Fuck. He got his legs moving and headed out of the office, jogging to his truck. It was a testament to how concerned he was, because he didn’t even look where he was jogging. He just did it. Tossing his stuff inside, he headed for home.

His heart was racing, and he didn’t like the nauseated feeling. When he’d read the article on his phone, he’d never imagined that Sage would be part of the injured. Apparently, a drugged out former felon had been driving like an idiot, and when they tried to pull him over, he’d gone crazy, crashing into other cars. Then, when they got him out of the car, he’d resisted arrest because he had a warrant. Three cops had been injured in the altercation, one seriously and one critically. The third had already been treated and released.

It made him ill to think of Sage being injured.

Adam met him at the door when he walked across the grass yard, and his big hazel eyes were dark with worry. Without a word, he walked to Brian and wrapped his thin arms around his waist.

Brian hugged the boy back for a moment, then pushed him back with his shoulders. “Hey,” he said, bending down to eye level. “I just talked to her and she’s going to be okay. She says she’s beat up and not very pretty right now, but she’s okay,” he stressed.

There were tears in Adam’s eyes, but he nodded his head. He pulled his glasses off and wiped his eyes. “That’s what she told me too, but I want to see her. Will you take me? Please?”

Brian had known the boy was going to want to see her, so he nodded. “Let’s pack her a bag first, okay?”

It was weird going through a woman’s closet he didn’t know well. He relied on Adam to point out a few things he knew she liked to wear. Then he grabbed a pair of neatly folded underwear from her top drawer. She probably had a bra, so he didn’t even go looking beyond that first drawer.

Adam found him a small duffel to put everything in.

“Shoes,” he said, just before they left the apartment.

Adam ran to the back French doors and grabbed a pair of tennis shoes. “She likes to run in these, so I know they’re comfortable.”

“Perfect,” Brian said, opening the bag so they could put them in. “Anything else you think she’d like to have?”

They’d grabbed deodorant, a toothbrush and toothpaste from her bathroom. They probably had that stuff in the hospital, but he knew from experience the more of your stuff you could take in, the better and more comfortable you’d be.

“Does she have a tablet?” Brian asked, glancing around.

Adam winced. “No. I dropped it when we were moving, and she hasn’t replaced it yet.”

“Well, how about a charger for her phone?”

Adam raced off again. Once they had everything, they thought she might need, Adam closed and locked the door behind them.

Mt. Carmel Hospital was just a couple miles away. Brian headed to the emergency room side, just because he had no idea where she might have been taken. She was probably already in a room.

The attendant at the front desk was very helpful, sending them through a maze of corridors and elevators to get to the patient rooms. They found 719 not by the number, but by the number of uniformed cops spilling out of the waiting room just outside the elevator. There was an older woman pacing the hallway and Adam ran to her.

“Candice!”

This must be the wife of her partner. Brian walked up to them and waited.

“Is Gary okay? Do you know where my mom is?”

Candice cupped his cheeks in her hands and Brian could see her forced smile. “Yes,” she said firmly. “Gary is going to be okay. They just took him into surgery. And your mom’s room is right down there.” She pointed and Brian could see the room number.

Candice looked up at Brian, and he could see her trying to pull her emotions together. “Are you...”

“Just a friend of the family,” Brian cut in, and introduced himself.

“Maybe you should go down first and make sure she’s awake. Adam will stay here with me for a minute while I explain a few things to him.”

Brian nodded, understanding what she was trying to tell him. Go prepare Sage, if she was awake.

Adam looked aggravated at the delay, but Brian caught his eye. “I’ll be back for you in a few minutes, okay?”

Adam nodded, lips tight, and Brian headed down the hallway. At 719 he paused, but there was no noise coming through the cracked door. He knocked, very quietly, and pushed the door open.

Sage lay in the bed, her face turned away from the door, and he couldn't tell if she was awake or not. Brian stepped further in. "Sage?" he whispered.

Her head rocked toward him, and Brian grimaced. Oh, hell. His gut hollowed out at the bruises that covered her face. Her head was wrapped in a bright white bandage, and her lip was split.

"Oh, hell, Brian," she moaned, echoing his thoughts. She chuckled, then held an arm across her stomach. "You're not catching me at my best."

"Um, I would say not. I'm just hoping it looks worse than it is."

She grimaced, then gasped. "Yeah, not so much."

Brian moved to the side of her bed and reached for her hand. That, at least, didn't appear to be bruised. "Well, your son was worried about you, and even beat up he needs to see you, I think. Just to reassure himself."

Sage sighed, her fingers lightly wrapped around his own. "Yeah, you may be right." She glanced around. "Maybe you can turn off the overhead and just leave the nightlight on. Maybe that will shadow me a little."

Brian moved around the room, doing as she requested, then he returned to the side of the bed. She reached for his hand again and he gave it to her. They both seemed to need that point of contact.

"So," he said, clearing his throat. "What's your list?"

She smiled crookedly, and her beautiful eyes were heavy lidded with pain. "Well, concussion. That's the big thing they're worried about. My right arm is severely strained, and they're not sure about tendon damage. He dragged us with his car for about fifty feet, and I was holding on with that side. My

right knee is cranked, but nothing obviously broken. Just swollen. We fought him. That's why I have the shiner."

It was more than a shiner, though. Her eye was purple, and it extended down over her cheekbone and jaw, and looked incredibly tender.

"And I have this sexy voice from screaming at him, and traffic and Gary," she sighed. "Did you see Candice out there? Gary is in surgery. He was pinned between the suspect's car and the one he hit, and Gary was between them. He has a severely broken leg they're trying to save. And a broken shoulder from the way he landed." Her eyes filled with tears, and she gasped. "I'm really worried about him. It was bad."

Brian squeezed her hand. "I know you're worried about him. Columbus has some of the best surgeons in the country, though. You know they'll do everything they can for him."

She nodded and swiped away the tears. "I was the last one he was training before he retired."

Brian sighed. "Yeah, it happens that way a lot. I had my orders to go home when I got blown up. What's that saying? Man plans and fate laughs. Or God laughs. I can't remember."

"Yes," she breathed, and she closed her eyes for a moment.

Brian could see she was fighting sleep, but she rallied. She blinked her eyes open, as much as she could, and forced a smile. "I'm going to scare my boy, aren't I?"

"Well," Brian admitted. "It's definitely not your normal beautiful, shining face. But he'll be happy to see you're okay. I'll go get him."

Brian opened the door and Adam was already standing there. He walked into the room, saw his mother in the bed, and started to cry. Sage sat up as much as she could and reached for her son. "Oh, buddy," she murmured. "Come on up here."

Brian saw her grimace in pain as she pulled Adam up onto the bed beside her, but she held him as he cried. "I'm okay," she kept telling him as she stroked his hair.



THEY STAYED for about an hour before Brian gently tugged Adam out of the room. Sage had fallen asleep, and it was obviously what her body needed. “We need to let her rest, Adam,” he said gently.

Adam nodded and headed out of the room. Candice had gone inside the waiting room to sit tensely in a chair, and there were a few other women around her. Obviously, wives of other cops. The room was still stacked with cops in navy uniforms, and a few in white uniforms. Brian assumed they were higher ranked. Everyone looked up as they entered the room and he realized they were waiting on an update.

“Sage is fine. Concussion and some sprains and strains. She’s more worried about Gary.”

Candice nodded, looking relieved. “No word on Gary, yet. They said it would be hours.” She looked down at Adam. “You need to go home and get some sleep. Your mom will probably go home tomorrow, while you’re at school.”

Adam scowled. “I don’t want to go to school with my mom hurt.”

Candice nodded. “I understand. I wouldn’t either. Maybe you can play hooky tomorrow to help your mom out.”

Adam nodded and Brian thought it was actually a pretty good idea. He could miss a day of school. And Brian had no plans on working tomorrow. Sage had no family out here, so he would take care of her.

They headed back to the apartments, and he parked in his space. They walked to Brian’s apartment, and he opened the door. “If you chill here for a bit, I’m going to pack a bag. I’ll sleep on your sectional.”

Adam scowled. “I’m not a baby. I don’t need a sitter.”

“I know you’re not, buddy, but it’s an easy thing to do to set your mom’s mind at ease. She’s dealing with a lot of stuff

right now and she needs to heal. We're going to not stress her out or argue about anything, okay?"

Adam nodded, waiting as Brian packed a bag. Then they crossed the grass to the Harrison apartment.

Diamond whined excitedly as they entered and Adam went to his knees in the entryway, ruffling her fur. It was obvious the dog knew something was wrong.

"Why don't you take her out back and play with her for a while," Brian suggested. "She's been locked up a long time."

Adam turned and went through the apartment, and out the back door with the dog. Brian closed the door and set his bag down by the front door. He didn't need a lot of stuff. He'd brought a change of clothes for morning and some shorts and a shirt to sleep in. He should probably be covered in case Adam came out of his room. No sense in scaring the boy more than what he already was.

He remembered what Sage had said about Adam's anxiety. Did he struggle with it a lot? Maybe that was why they had the dog. He looked out the back door. Adam was sitting in a patio chair, and Diamond's head rested on his lap. She knew he was hurting.

Grabbing his laptop bag, he set it on one of the kitchen chairs, then he planned dinner. Pizza, more than likely. There was no way he was going to try to cook in her kitchen.

When Adam came in, Brian was set up at the kitchen table, his files spread across the surface and his laptop open.

"What are you working on?"

Brian looked at the boy. He debated whether or not to show him, but what the hell. Maybe the kid would see something he couldn't.

"I'm working on an embezzling case. Or maybe just a theft case. I'm not sure yet. There was a wealthy old gentleman being cared for at home. The family hired around the clock nurses and attendants so that the old man didn't have to go to a nursing home. Well, after the old guy died, suddenly there's a big discrepancy in the money being given away in the will. It's

my job to go in and figure out who stole a big chunk of the man's money. He has several living relatives, and the will is on hold until I can straighten it all out."

Adam looked at the stack of file folders on the table. "Those are all people that had access to his money?"

Brian shook his head. "Not directly. But someone was funneling money out of the account. I'm trying to backtrack and see who did it."

"Wow," the boy breathed. "You told me what you did, but I guess until you see it practically..." his voice trailed off. "Can I look?"

Brian nodded. "And this is just one case. I have three I'm working on right now. Parker just sent me a text that the complainant on one is breathing down his neck, demanding answers."

Adam's eyes got wide, then he looked at the stack. Reaching out, he opened the first file folder.

"This is Annette Blair. She's a certified nurse assistant..."

They worked for a few hours, and Brian was impressed with Adam's ability to grasp a financial situation. "Yeah," he said eventually. "Mom has talked to me about our situation a lot. When my dad left, he stole all our money. And he stole my college fund. So, I set up a budget for us to stick to and we're putting money away. Our budget is nothing like Old Man Ridge's, though."

Brian scowled at the thought of Sage and her son struggling. Man, if he ever met her ex... "Yeah, most budgets aren't," he agreed, "but the basics are the same."

Adam nodded and reached for a file. "I think you need to dig into this lady more. She has a big family, and I bet she's sending them money, somehow. And I don't like her smile," he said, pointing at the employment picture.

Snorting, Brian set the file aside. "Okay, I'll look into her. I think you need to head to bed right now."

Adam nodded, rubbing his eyes under his glasses. “Yes. You’ve done a good job sidetracking my anxiety. Thanks, Brian.”

Brian grinned and leaned over to give the boy a one-armed hug. “No problem, buddy. We’ll go get your mom in the morning.”

Adam nodded and headed to bed. Brian felt bad for the little man. He’d had a traumatic day today, and tomorrow could be worse, because he would actually have to be helping her. It had already been decided that he didn’t have to go to school tomorrow.

Speaking of... he grabbed his phone and texted Parker, telling him that he would be working from home the next two days. That would get him into the weekend and leave him free until Monday. Four days to make sure Sage was going to be okay. As the survivor of a couple of epic crashes, he knew the days following the event were usually the most painful.

If she needed the help, he would be here for her.

Sage was living in a loopy dreamworld, and it was pissing her off.

The doctor had just been in for a final visit, and they were doing the discharge paperwork now. They didn't want to tell her a lot about Gary. He'd made it through surgery, but he was still touch and go. The surgeon had been able to save the leg, but she got the feeling, just from their shared glances, that it wasn't guaranteed to stay.

A crush injury to a leg was devastating and she couldn't imagine how long it would take to repair. Gary's career at Columbus Police Department was over, and she could almost see Candice's relief. She'd been after her husband to retire for years.

Now he was being forced out, medically. Not the way he'd wanted to leave.

At least he was still alive, though.

Sage sat on the side of the bed and tried to get up the gumption to get her clothes on. They'd given her a stack of prescriptions to fill for pain, anti-inflammatories and muscle relaxers, as well as a follow-up appointment with her own practitioner. They'd already warned her that she was probably going to have to go to physical therapy for her arm, but her GP could determine that when she saw him in a few days. She was officially on medical leave until approved to go back.

Just talking about it all made her head hurt even worse.

She'd explained that she had a son to take care of and the doctor had shaken his head. "You'd better let him take care of you this week," the guy said, which pissed her off. It was her job to take care of her son, not the reverse.

With that thought in mind, she pushed to her feet. The nurse had warned her to wait, but that had been a long time ago. She'd probably gotten distracted and didn't even remember Sage was waiting for her.

The world swayed around her, but she held steady. Her knee was bandaged in a thick Ace bandage, and it accepted her weight reluctantly. She'd gotten up a couple of times to go to the bathroom, but she'd always had a convenient nurse standing by or lending a hand. Very carefully, she leaned on her bad leg. She had to see what it would take. Eventually, she decided it would get her around, just not fast or gracefully. Her arm, on the other hand, was useless. There was a sling around her neck to brace the elbow high, and it hurt like a sonofabitch, even with the pain meds on board that made her head foggy.

She would just have to take it easy.

The air flow shifted behind her, and she turned, carefully. Adam cringed as he caught sight of her purple face, but he crossed the room to give her a gentle hug around her waist. "Morning, Mom."

"Hey, buddy," she said, her voice still raspy.

Brian stood in the doorway, looking more handsome than anybody had a right to. His brown eyes were so clear in the morning light, and he'd recently shaved. He wore a blue T-shirt and a flannel over jeans, and he looked so strong.

Maybe it was just the dichotomy between the two of them that made him seem more handsome right now, while she felt like a trampled piece of wet cardboard. And she just wanted to sag into his arms. "Hey," she said softly.

"Hey," he returned, grinning slightly as he looked her over.

She knew from the response of the other people that had come to visit her how bad she looked. Candice had cried when

she'd come to see her. Sage had cried as well, but because of Gary's condition. They had hugged for a few minutes and Sage had promised to be back to see him as soon as she could. Gary was such a vital, enthusiastic cop. He loved his job, and she couldn't imagine him not being able to do it.

Her lieutenant had also stopped in. They'd gone over the body camera tapes of the arrest and determined that there was no fault other than the suspect. They'd followed procedure and done their job perfectly. Sage had felt a knot of tension ease in her belly when she heard that. She'd felt like she'd done everything correctly, but that doubt had still been there. And if Gary had been hurt because she'd fucked something up? It would have crushed her.

Not a great way for a rookie to make a splash in the department.

They were both out on medical indefinitely.

"Give me a few minutes to get dressed and they should have my discharge papers done."

Brian gave her a nod. "We're in no hurry."

Sage limped to the bathroom with the bag they'd brought her the night before and sank down onto the shower stool. This was going to take a while. Eventually, she had to pull the cord for the nurse to come help, because she couldn't get things maneuvered around the arm brace. It was almost twenty minutes later when they left the bathroom and Sage was near tears. That had been so painful. She sank down into the waiting wheelchair to be rolled out and closed her eyes.

When they reached the front of the hospital, Adam waited with her while Brian pulled his black truck around. The Chevy wasn't jacked up, or anything, but Sage knew something was going to hurt getting in. She took a deep breath, bracing for the pain. Brian held up a finger and produced a stepstool from the back seat. It made it so much easier to get inside the vehicle. She sagged into the seat and barely noticed Brian lean across her to fasten the seatbelt.

Sage dozed on the way home and she heard Brian telling Adam that she was okay.

“I’m okay, buddy,” she whispered. “Just... my head hurts, and it’s better if I close my eyes. And the medicine they gave me makes me loopy.”

“Okay, Mom,” he said softly, resting a hand on her shoulder.

The next time Sage woke, it was because the truck rocked a little. When she opened her eyes, she chuckled. Brian had bumped up the parking lot curb and driven her straight to her door. She glanced at him out of her good eye. “Bless you, child.”

He laughed and circled the truck to help her down. Adam ran ahead to throw open the door as Brian guided her inside. Sage was touched to see that they’d made her a blanketed nest on the couch. She sank down gratefully and allowed Adam to push the button to lift her feet on the electric recliner. She tipped her head back and slipped into sleep.

When she next woke, the windows were dark. Had she seriously slept through the entire day? Her full bladder said she had, and she reached for the button at the side of the couch. Unfortunately, she reached with her right hand, not even thinking about the injury. She gasped and tears started in her eyes.

“I’ll get it,” Brian said, appearing from the kitchen. “Too bad this isn’t one of those with the control on the cord. Then we could put it on your good side.”

“Didn’t know I was going to need it when I bought the couch two years ago,” she said dryly.

Once the foot section was down, Brian reached for her good arm. He helped her up and didn’t let her go until she was steady. Sage hobbled into the bathroom and kind of fell onto the toilet seat. But she did her business. Then she had to finish her business with her left hand, which was incredibly awkward to do, and she had to laugh at herself.

Leaning forward, she pushed up with her left leg and pulled her sweat pants up, then moved to the sink to wash her hands. Hand. Such normal things were now so hard. She couldn't imagine being permanently disabled. Then she felt guilty, because Brian *was* permanently disabled, and *he* was helping *her*.

That was what she was going to remind herself of when things got hard.

She hobbled out into the kitchen and sank down into one of the chairs.

“Are you hungry?”

Her stomach growled in response and Brian grinned at her. “I guess so.”

Reaching for the microwave, he pressed a button. He must have had a plate in there waiting for her.

“Adam already ate. He's in his room doing some light astrophysics reading, it looked like.”

Sage grinned, though she knew it was lopsided. “He reads stuff for fun you couldn't pay me to get through.”

Brian nodded. “Your voice is sounding better.”

“Well, that's something, at least.”

When the microwave beeped, he removed the plate and set it before her. Sage was surprised to see cut up pork chop, some kind of noodle side dish and a pile of broccoli. “This looks good,” she murmured, reaching for the fork.

“While you were sleeping, I went out and got your meds filled. I apologize. I had to go through your wallet to find your insurance card.”

She snorted. “Don't apologize for anything. Hell. I'm sorry you got roped into doing all this. I promise you, tomorrow I'll be better.” Maneuvering the fork around with her weak hand, she stabbed a piece of pork and got it into her mouth. “Oh, this is good.”

Her body needed the protein. It had been a long time since she'd eaten, and her body needed fuel to heal.

Brian was watching her, and she wondered what he was thinking. He was probably counting down the minutes before he could get the hell out of there. Any attraction he'd had to her at one time had surely been burned away. He was staying because he was an honorable man, and not the type to leave a person stranded.

"I think you need to take it easy and not create an unrealistic timeline in your head. Because you'll only be disappointed. I can tell you that from experience."

Yeah, he was probably right. She wasn't superwoman. And no matter how much she wanted to get better, it was up to her body to heal when it could. She wondered how long it had taken him to heal and if she should ask him. He seemed to sense what she was about to do, because he stood from the table. "I'm going to go check on Adam."

Sage finished her meal, chewing slowly. Even that hurt up through her cheek. Brian had given her a glass of water, along with her next dose of pills. She'd slept through the last dose, and the pain was gaining quickly. She had a feeling she was going to get done with this meal and head back to the couch for another nap.

Diamond came over, nudging her gently with her nose. "I'm okay, girl."

Once she was done, she carried her plate to the sink, washed it one-handed, set it in the drainer, and refilled her water glass. Very carefully, she walked back to the couch, her knee screaming with pain. Adam came out to tell her goodnight, and she let him push the button to lift her feet again. He kissed her on the forehead and Sage wished she could wrap him in her arms for a big hug. She would never take that tiny thing for granted again.

Then, completely drained, she closed her eyes.



BRIAN WAS TIRED. He wasn't used to caring for other people like he had today. Strangely, though, he found he liked the way he felt. He felt *needed*. It had been a long time since he'd been a part of a family environment, and he'd certainly never lived with a child. Adam was an experience in itself and the boy touched his emotions in a way that he hadn't felt before.

Years ago, he'd planned to marry and have a family, but his circumstances had changed. Once he'd been blown up and released from the military, he'd had to put those dreams aside. Yes, he'd seen men find partners after they were injured. His buddies at LNF were perfect examples of that. But the partner they found had to be exceptional.

He glanced at Sage. She was passed out in the recliner at the end of the couch, snoring lightly. After she'd taken her pain pills, her face had eased into sleep, which had to be the best thing for her, and it gave him leave to watch her. Adam had gone to bed, and now it was just the two of them in the living room, on the big sectional couch. He'd like to lay down and take his prosthetics off, but he also wanted to be available in case she needed anything.

She was so deeply asleep, he doubted she would be waking for a good while, so he stripped down to his athletic boxers and removed his legs, setting them to the side where he could pull them on quickly. Then he removed the sleeves and liners from his stumps to let them breathe.

The sectional was incredibly comfortable and within just a couple of minutes of dragging a blanket over himself, he was deep asleep.

Brian was woken by someone calling his name. He blinked awake and looked at Sage.

"I'm so sorry to wake you," she whispered, "but I can't get the button to lower my legs. I need to use the bathroom."

Brian sat up and turned, reaching for his legs. His face flamed in the mostly dark room as he fitted each stump into their respective cup and stood.

“Can I tell you something?” she whispered into the dark as he walked toward her.

“Of course,” he said, voice gruff.

“I thought I was having a weird pain pill dream when I saw you without your legs. I’m glad my mind wasn’t playing tricks on me.”

Brian leaned over her, reaching for the button on the side of the couch to lower her legs. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” he said. He was surprised when she lifted her good hand and rested it on the side of his face.

“I’m not. It’s just part of you.”

Brian didn’t say anything as the foot reseated itself into the couch and he reached for her arm to help her up. They hobbled together to the bathroom, and he waited outside the door for her to finish, then he walked her back to the couch.

“I think I just want to sit for a while, not lay back,” she murmured.

“Okay,” he said, letting her arm go. Then he returned to where he’d been sleeping and sank down into the cushions. He glanced at the clock by the TV. Just after three am. “Do you want to watch TV or something?”

Sage sighed and shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Maybe I’ll play games on my phone or something. My mind is kind of racing even though my body feels like one big bruise. You know what I mean?”

“I do,” he admitted. “After they took my legs, I was in a hospital bed for weeks. Mental stimulation is one of the hardest things to deal with when you’re recovering.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” she said softly. “Do you mind if I ask what exactly happened?”

The darkness seemed to encourage secrets and he supposed it was fair of her to ask. Actually, he figured Adam would have told her by now.

He shrugged lightly. “My Humvee got blown up. We’d been blown up before, but this time it knocked me out

immediately. When I woke up two weeks later, my legs were gone and several of my buddies were dead.”

“Wow,” she breathed. “What a shock to wake up to. I can’t imagine.”

“I mean, you kind of know when you go over there that there’s a very good chance you’ll be killed or severely injured. It goes without saying when you sign up. We were in a hot spot, and we had a list of men we’d lost, so we knew our chances were higher than most.” He choked out a laugh. “I was so close to getting out, though, that I’d begun to hope that I could make it out relatively unscathed. That didn’t happen, obviously.”

She didn’t give him platitudes, which he appreciated. He’d heard them so often. His family was the worst. When he’d first moved to Columbus, he’d made a couple of trips to Michigan to see his family. His father was the same, but his mother had started treating him differently. It was like she was angry, or something. He didn’t understand it and when he’d asked his father, he’d intimated that she’d been mad at herself for suggesting he join the military.

“That’s ridiculous,” Brian had said.

Dad had shrugged, his big hands never stilling as he sanded the piece he was working on. “Makes sense to her.”

So, he found himself walking on tiptoe around her, so to speak. He didn’t talk about the vets he worked with, or any of his appointments. He just talked about Columbus and the weather and how the rest of the family was doing.

He’d been back for visits before, obviously, but the last couple of times had been different.

It made him sad, because his mom had always been one of his greatest supporters. He didn’t know how to make her let go of her guilt.

“And how long ago was that?”

Brian counted back. “It’s been nine years since I returned home. I started at Lost and Found almost as soon as I got out of the hospital.”

“From what Adam says, it’s a fantastic place for veterans.”

He nodded, though he doubted she could see him in the dimness. “It really is. It filled a spot in my life that needed filled.”

“And then you moved to Columbus...”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “It was time for a change.”

Sage waited, but he didn’t want to talk about it anymore. It was three in the morning, and he technically had to work tomorrow, even if it was on his computer at the kitchen table. “Do you need anything else right now?”

“No,” Sage murmured. “Thank you, Brian. I know this isn’t what you planned on when I called you yesterday, but I truly appreciate everything you’ve done for Adam and I. I promise you, I’ll be back on my feet as soon as I can so you can get out of here.”

Saying the words and putting them into action, though, was a lot harder to do than expected.

Brian stayed with them for two more days, cooking random food when she was hungry and occupying Adam as she napped and recovered. They gave him a key so that he could come and go as he needed. Sunday, he went home, and the apartment echoed with the loss. Yes, he was literally right next door, less than fifty feet away. She'd gotten used to him being a *room* or less away and sleeping on the couch beside her at night. Whether she realized it or not, it was nice sleeping with someone close at night.

Gary was still hanging in there, but the leg wasn't healing. Candice had called this morning with an update, and they were taking him back into surgery. Sage wanted to run down to the hospital to see him, but she wasn't supposed to drive for a few days, at least. Her knee was getting better, but the arm was going to be a longer recovery.

Gary was a weight on her heart, though, and she really hoped he did well.

On Monday, Sage tried to get back into their regular schedule. She got up early enough to make Adam some breakfast and see him off to school, then she went back to the couch for a nap. Mid-morning she got up and knew she had to try to take a shower. It had been days, and she couldn't stand her own stink anymore.

She did fine taking everything off, for the most part. As soon as she ripped open the Velcro on the arm sling, her shoulder began to ache, but it had to be done. The bra had been lost long ago and she'd resorted to an array of sweatpants and flannels she could button one-handed. Her panties rolled and tangled, but when she first stepped under the hot stream of water, all the aggravation was worth it. She rocked under the water for as long as she could, letting it run over her strained shoulder and down her back. That was bliss.

When the water began to cool, she stepped out of the stall. She'd hung two towels on the rod, and she very carefully wrapped one around her body. She was getting some movement back into her arm, but it still hurt. In the middle of the action, she hadn't realized how much she'd hurt herself. But, in the end, they'd gotten the bad guy off the street.

Unfortunately, it had also probably taken one of the really good guys off the street as well. She would bounce back, but she didn't know if Gary would.

The second towel she draped around her shoulders to wick water from her hair. Then she limped out of the bathroom. She picked clothes from her closet and dropped them on the bed, then started toweling off. Everything was so awkward with one hand. Then the towel started to slip, and she grabbed for it. Unfortunately, automatically, she used her right hand.

Sage cried out. Seconds later, there was a clatter at her bedroom door and Brian flung it open, lurching inside.

They were quite the pair. They stared at each other for a long, timeless moment, before Brian's glance drifted ever so quickly down her body, then slammed back to her face. Sage dragged her hair towel down over her body.

"Are you okay?" he gritted out.

"Yes," she breathed. "Just grabbed for my towel with my bad hand."

"Okay," he said, and spun away, closing the door softly behind himself.

Sage didn't know how to feel. She had a good body she'd worked hard to maintain, but she didn't go around flashing random men. Well, Brian wasn't random, but she hadn't even realized he was in the apartment. He must have come in to check on her and heard her cry out.

Very carefully, she bent down and retrieved the towel, thinking about the look that had been on his face. Normally, he was stoic, but she'd seen appreciation in his expression before he'd spun away. She would bet her paycheck on it.



BRIAN HAD a mind full of random data he'd memorized over the years, and now the sight of Sage's naked body would be burned into his brain right beside it all. On top of it all. Those breasts...

When he'd heard her cry out, he'd reacted immediately, terrified that she'd been hurt when he should have been watching her. For a split second, he'd worried about opening her bedroom door, but again, he thought she'd been hurt.

Her fucking beautiful breasts....

Over the past four days he'd gotten very close to her. He'd seen her with no makeup, and it was obvious she preferred no bra. Or maybe she couldn't fasten it right now. When he'd helped her up, there had been a few instances where they'd brushed against each other, and her unbound breasts had taunted him. When he should have been caring for her, his body had been responding to hers. It had been a constant battle.

Finally, he'd had to return home. Being close to her, whispering in the dark at night, had created the closeness he'd so desperately been fighting against, and all he wanted to do was kiss her. And touch her. And be a part of her life.

The thought of her breasts made his mouth water. The sight of her soft pink nipples, flushed with heat from the shower, made him want to reach out and touch. Her skin was so fair.

Moving out to the kitchen, he went to the sink for a large glass of water. It did nothing to cool him off, but it gave him something to do for a few seconds. He washed the glass and put it in the drainer, then didn't know what to do. Sitting down at the table, he pulled out his phone and started surfing, trying to get his body to settle down.

She walked into the kitchen a few minutes later and Brian had to avoid her eyes. He knew if he looked at her, she would see what he wanted and it wasn't fair to her right now. She was injured, and it wasn't the right time to even bring it up.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, glancing up at her. She'd dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and had managed to pull jeans up over her hips. Her hair was down, and it looked like she'd tried to dry it a little. But she had foregone the sling.

She sank down into the chair across from him, smiling gently. "It's okay, Brian. I know you thought I'd hurt myself and you were coming to my rescue."

He winced, not liking that she was giving him an altruistic out.

"And I'm also okay with you seeing me." She laughed lightly. "We've had to be a little intimate this week. I think when I woke up the other night and you'd taken your prosthetics off, you felt as exposed as I did, so it was only fair."

Brian sat back in the chair, amazed that she understood that. He nodded slowly. "Agreed."

Sage grinned at him, and she lifted her chin, as if she was about to say something hard. "And now that we're over that hurdle, maybe you can tell me why you've been drawing back recently. I felt like more could have happened when we kissed in Cheyenne. Was I wrong?"

"No, you weren't wrong," he said after a minute, weighing out what he wanted to say. "It was a great kiss. I'm not a great prospect, though."

"A great prospect?" Her brow furrowed. "I'm not sure exactly what you mean by that, but no one is perfect. And I'm

certainly not looking for anything major. I've been married, and it left me wanting. I would rather have someone that I can have fun with. And who gets along with my kid."

Was that really all she wanted? Brian wasn't sure, but the thought of continuing to be a part of her life was so tempting. He'd been thinking about that the other night, laying on her couch and listening to her breathe. Yes, he was helping her, but for the first time in a long time he wasn't as lonely. That sounded ridiculous, even in his own mind, but it was true. More often than not, when he got off work, he went to his austere apartment and tried to lose himself in something. Or he went to work out in the complex's gym, working himself into exhaustion. Then the next day he'd get up early and head back to work. His life revolved around work and the gym, but finally, over the past couple of weeks, since he'd gotten to know Adam and Sage, he hadn't felt as lonely.

It sounded ridiculous, but it was true.

And here she was, offering him exactly what he craved. "Let's see where things go after you've recovered," he said carefully.

Sage grinned and nodded. "I look forward to it."

She pushed up from the chair and moved to the Keurig, popping a chai cup into the machine. Then she put a mug under the spout and turned it on. Brian watched her do the mundane action and he wondered if her heart was racing as much as his was, right that moment, and she had to get up and do something. They'd just agreed to explore some kind of relationship and his system was bouncing around like crazy.

Taking a deep breath, he looked out the back French doors, trying to calm himself. "How are you feeling today?" he asked as she sat down in front of him.

She winced a little as she settled into the chair. "Not too bad. It was bliss finally getting into the shower. But I'm a little achy now."

"Do you need a pain pill?" He started to get up, but she waved him down.

“No, I’m not that bad. I might put the arm sling on later, but I wanted to move it around a little. I start rehab this week and I have a feeling I’m really going to be feeling it.”

He nodded. “Rehab is no joke. But it has a purpose.”

“I know,” she sighed.

“You had a box at your front door.” Pushing up from the chair, he retrieved the box from the living room. “Want me to open it?”

“Please,” she said, eyeing the label. “I don’t know anyone in Louisiana.”

Brian cut the tape with his pocketknife, then sat back down in his chair. Sage dug into the box, pulling out bright red tissue paper. Then she pulled out a teddy bear in overalls. She looked at the bear for a long moment, then leaned to look into the box. She pulled out a card in a white envelope and ripped it open. Brian watched her face pale.

“What’s wrong?”

She blinked, shaking her head. “I’m not sure. This is from my ex. I literally haven’t spoken to him in years, and suddenly he’s sending me a bear and wishing me well? How the fuck did he get my address? He’s supposed to send all correspondence through my attorney in Wyoming.”

Brian looked at the gift, anger surging in him on her behalf. The box wasn’t remarkable— they could be bought at any big box store— so he looked at the label again. It didn’t seem remarkable either, but he took a picture of the label with his phone.

“If you give me just a few details, I’ll run a background check on him.”

Sage frowned, looking up at him. Automatically, she shook her head. “No, you don’t have to do that.”

Brian scowled. “If he knows your *new address*, what’s to keep him from showing up on your doorstep one of these days? You haven’t seen him since the divorce?”

She shook her head. “No. I threatened him with theft charges if he didn’t sign the divorce papers. And there’s a judgement against him, so he has no visitation until he comes up with back child support or makes a commitment to start paying.”

“So, how did he get your address?”

Sage frowned and reached for her phone. She keyed in a text message and sent it off. “My mother said something about Tim the other day, out of the blue. I’m checking with her. I don’t think she would ever tell him where we were, though.”

Brian stared at her for a moment, wanting to grab his laptop. “With a few keystrokes, I can figure out where he is.”

Sage blinked, pursing her lips, before she nodded. “At one time he was in Florida. But that was years ago, as far as I know.”

Brian pushed up from his chair. “Back in a minute.” He grabbed his backpack from beside the front door, where he’d dropped it when he heard Sage cry out. When he parked across the table from her again, he opened the laptop. He logged in with his fingerprint scanner and navigated to the website the company used to run background checks. “What’s his full name and date of birth?”

Within just a few minutes, they had Tim Roe’s life spread before them. “Looks like he is in Louisiana.”

Sage scowled and sat back against the kitchen chair. “Seriously?”

“He’s had run-ins with the cops in Florida and Louisiana, and it looks like he still has something pending in Florida. I bet he left because he has a warrant or something.”

Brian opened another tab and logged into a different website, scrolling before he entered Tim’s information. “Yep. He has a felony probation warrant out of Florida. Original charge was theft over five thousand dollars. I would say he got into trouble, was put onto probation and skipped out because he thought he was going to jail.”

Sage shook her head, and he could tell she was upset. “You know,” she said, “Tim used to be a decent guy. He wasn’t the smartest guy in the room, ever, but once he started to drink, everything changed.”

Brian scrolled through the background info. “Looks like he headed to Florida right after your divorce. If he got used to the money he stole from you, I’m sure he did what he could to get more. And apparently stealing was easier than actually working.”

“He always tried to take the shortcut,” she murmured, her eyes going unfocused. “This is pretty ballsy, though.” She motioned to the bear and box.

“Not if he thinks you’re alone and hurt and vulnerable. Obviously, he’s looking for an in. Did you ever figure out where the flower came from?”

She glanced at him and shook her head. “That just occurred to me as well.”

Her phone buzzed and she swiped through the screens. “Mom says she hasn’t talked to him or anyone in his family. Although she wants to know who she can let know. She’s very concerned we won’t get Christmas cards this year.”

Sage rolled her eyes and Brian chuckled. “Well, cards are important.”

She shook her head and set her phone aside. “I’ll call her later.”

Sighing, she fiddled with her untouched cup of coffee. “I’ll have to let Adam know.”

Brian could see the dread in her eyes, and he reached across to touch her hand. Almost automatically, she turned her fingers to hold his, and something warmed in Brian’s chest. It was like when he’d first seen her in the hospital. He’d had to touch her. And she seemed to need the connection as well.

“Adam is a sharp kid,” he said softly. “You’ll just have to tell him to be aware. You don’t think Tim would try to take him, do you?”

Sage shook her head. “Definitely not. That would be too much responsibility,” she laughed. “I could see him making contact just to let me know he could, and then leveraging that information for his own benefit.”

Brian smiled at her, and he knew it had an edge, but he didn't care. “I'd like to see him try,” he murmured, fingers tightening on hers.

Sage blinked and looked away, but not before he saw the shine of tears in her eyes. She let go of his hand so that she could wipe her cheeks. “I'm not sure why I'm so emotional. But thank you for the words.”

“They're more than words,” Brian promised, and he realized it was true. He'd do damn near anything for this hardy little family. “There's nothing you can do right now, though, other than heal. Why don't you go lay down and I'll work here.”

Sage blinked and nodded, her eyes going weary. “I would appreciate you being here. Thank you, Brian.”

He watched her limp out of the kitchen toward her bedroom. Then he focused on the laptop. Maybe, if he was lucky, Lost and Found had a contact in Louisiana.

Two days later, Sage walked into the hospital under her own steam. Gary was recovering and she was determined to see him. Thank goodness they lived in an area with a thriving Uber system. With the sling on, there was no way she could safely drive herself. She planned to see Gary, then go to her doctor's appointment a few blocks away.

When she arrived at the floor he'd been assigned, she wasn't surprised to see Candice standing at the nurse station, talking to a man in blue scrubs. Sage didn't want to interrupt, but Candice waved her close when she saw her.

"Sage, this is Dr. Neat. He's the one who worked on Gary's leg."

"And how is he?" she asked.

"Gary is a character and he's fighting," the doctor said, his eyes sharp, "but the process is going to be a long one. We have his leg suspended and pinned, and a large part of his recovery is going to be staying still."

Sage winced. "You obviously didn't know him before the injury. He's not going to like being immobile."

Candice was frowning, but she shrugged. "If he wants to keep his leg, he's going to have to get used to it."

When Sage let herself into his room a few minutes later, she could see the fear in her training officer's eyes, though, and she had a feeling he would behave. "Hey, old man," she said, forcing a smile as she walked in.

Gary blinked at her, his face creasing into a smile. “Oh, man, Harrison. It looks like you went ten rounds with Muhammad Ali.”

Sage grinned and she knew it was a little lopsided. If she’d tried to apply makeup with her weak hand, she would have looked like a circus clown or something. “Yeah, I’ve been getting some seriously dirty looks. So, how are you feeling?”

Gary’s expression dimmed a little. “I’m doing okay. Kind of getting used to what I have to do. Or not do.”

She nodded, sinking down into the chair beside the bed. “Candice said you have to stay just like this for a while.”

Gary looked down his leg, then up the contraption holding it suspended above the bed. The leg was wrapped in bulky dressings, but there were silver wires sticking out along the side. “Those are external fixators. They’re hoping I don’t develop an infection in one of the little bone pieces. They added a plate and screws, but some of them were too small for that.” He grinned at her. “Let me tell you, though, they have some of the most amazing pain medicine on board.” He thumbed toward a pump, off to the side. Then his expression dimmed again. “I know how serious it is, so I’m going to roll with the pain medicine and be a good boy.”

“Well, I brought you something.” Sage reached for the bag she’d carried in and retrieved the card she’d written the info on. It looked weird because she’d had to write it left-handed, which sucked. She walked across and handed it to Gary. “You were always talking about the trip you want to take to Germany when you retired, so if you download this app,” she pointed at the link on the card, “and enter this code, I got you a subscription to start to learn the language.”

One side of Gary’s mouth tipped up. “Now, that’s something I can do. Thank you, Sage. That’s a hell of a goal, in more ways than one.” He held his hand out, and she clasped it with hers, then she returned to her seat.

They talked for a solid half-hour before Gary’s eyes started getting tired. Sage said her goodbyes and called an Uber on

her app. Brian had gone into the office today, but he'd promised to check on her after her appointment.

She'd only been to the doctor once since she'd been to town, to talk to him about continuing her medications. She tended to be low in iron, and she was flirting with hypertension. As she walked into his office, Dr. Remmo lost some of his polish. "Oh, Ms. Harrison, they said you'd been in an incident, but wow..."

He checked her over thoroughly and agreed to let her start physical therapy later in the week. He also agreed that she could wean off the pain meds, using them only when she needed them. Sage didn't like the way they made her feel, so she promised herself she would be off them quickly. The doctor took off her sling and manipulated her arm, and she was very glad she'd taken them that day, because she would have been yelling in pain.

Sage called the Uber to take her home and she wasn't surprised when Brian came over to check on her a few hours later. He knocked on the door, then let himself in. She was glad he had the key, because he'd saved her a couple of times. She looked at his concerned face and smiled, her heart jumping in her chest to see him. Her body reacted that way every time, now.

"So, what did the doc say?"

He sank down on the couch beside her and she related the details of the visit. Then she related the details of her visit to see Gary.

"Infection is the big danger, in injuries like that. Any time you have external pins going into the skin, they really have to be careful about cleaning them," Brian said, voice soft.

"I bet," she murmured, but she was looking at him. Something wasn't right. She could see it in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Brian sighed, rubbing his palms on his legs. "I think your ex may be planning a move. I found him on Facebook and he's selling a bunch of crap. He doesn't have a lot of friends, but

one of them said they were going to miss him, but that they understood how important family was.”

Sage frowned. “His family is in Wyoming. That had better be where he’s going.”

The thought niggled at her that he was coming up here, though. After the flower and the bear, it was like he was preparing her.

Brian didn’t seem convinced either. “You might call your lawyer out there, and make sure he hasn’t made plans with child support or something,” Brian told her.

She nodded and heaved a sigh. “I seriously doubt it, but it’s worth a call.”

She looked at him for a moment. Today, he was dressed in business casual, with khaki pants and a blue button-down shirt that strained over his pecs. She wanted to run her hands through the golden hair at his temples. Soon, she promised herself. She would get into physical therapy and things would straighten out. Today, she was sore from everything she’d done, and tiredness was tugging at her.

“I have some calls out, trying to narrow down a few things. Why don’t you kick back and relax, and I’ll work at the table.” He motioned toward the kitchen.

Sage sighed, wishing she didn’t have to rely on him as much. She’d thought about calling her family, but they had their own medical issues, and the ranch to care for. “Okay.” She moved into the recliner space and reached her bad hand down. Her fingers worked a little and if she was careful, she could do this without hurting herself. Once she was settled, he draped a thick blanket over top of her, then leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Tears started in her eyes, and she swiped them away. She looked up at him, emotion thick in her veins. “Thank you, Brian. We’ve kind of sucked you into our world, but I’m so thankful for you.”

He brushed his hand over her good cheek. “Believe it or not, I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

She hoped he meant those words because she tucked them very carefully into her heart. “In a week and a half, I’ll be able to motor like normal. And I’ll be cooking us a Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings.”

Brian grinned at her as he straightened. “That sounds phenomenal. I can put away a turkey,” he said, patting his flat stomach.

Sage blinked and dragged her gaze away from his body. “I bet you can,” she said, smiling. In spite of her injuries, she was the happiest she’d been in a long time.



BRIAN WAS IMPRESSED at how quickly Sage recovered.

Within a week, her cheek bruise was mostly gone, and she was walking completely without a limp. She was going for longer stretches of time without her arm sling, and she was using that arm a little. Sometimes too much. One day he’d come over to check on her and he’d found her braced against the counter, tears swimming in her beautiful eyes.

“What did you do?”

“Grabbed for the spatula,” she nodded her head at the utensil on the floor.

Brian reached down and tossed it into the sink, then reached out to rub her back. “You okay?”

She nodded, straightening. Man, the woman had grit.

“Yeah, it just took me by surprise. I’ve been doing really good, and it hasn’t been hurting so bad, so I forgot.”

He rubbed her back and ran his fingers down the length of her ponytail. “Well, stuff like that will set you back if you’re not careful.”

She nodded, forcing a smile. “I am aware. I’m being as careful as I possibly can while still doing what I need to do.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple and reached for a new spatula. “Want me to take over?”

And that was how they went. He was support staff in her home, and honestly, he loved it. He came over every day after work to check on her. Sometimes he found her asleep on the couch— usually after a physical therapy appointment— and other times she was up and moving around. It took her a little longer to do things with her left hand, but she managed amazingly well.

Then he came over one day, and she was beaming.

“Gary is improving. Candice says that infection he was fighting has receded and he’s feeling a lot better. They think he’s going to keep the leg.”

“That’s wonderful,” Brian said, and he opened his arms. It wasn’t even a conscious thought. He just did it and she walked into them, happily, squeezing him with her left arm. Her injured right arm rested at his waist, her head under his chin, and he could feel her touch like a brand.

These past two weeks had been hard for him because he was always conscious of not taking advantage of her injured and more emotional state. But it was so easy to reach out and touch her now. The forced proximity had sped them through a lot of emotional and physical minefields. He’d seen her naked and she’d seen him without his legs, and he was in her home every day, checking on her and helping her out. They talked for hours about important and trivial things, and she had one of the most amazing intellects. Obviously, she was the source of Adam’s genius, though she didn’t give herself enough credit.

The only thing he hadn’t done was kiss her again, though the ache to do it was there every time he saw her. Yes, he’d given her little pecks on the head or temple, but he’d forced himself to give her time to recover from her injuries.

It was getting harder, though, and when she pulled back, he looked down into her face, and he knew he was a goner.

And she seemed to be encouraging him a little, because she tilted her mouth up to his, and he knew he had to kiss her. Lowering his mouth, he gave her time to pull away, but her lips curved in anticipation. Then she cupped his neck and pulled herself up to meet his kiss.

Brian had dreamed about her lips ever since Cheyenne. That kiss had rocked his world and made him hunger more than any other kiss ever had. He'd been upset that he was leaving, and for the first time he'd thought about changing his plans. And when he'd returned to Columbus, he'd thought about calling Sage and maybe flying out to meet her or something. She'd thrown him for a loop he didn't know what to do with.

Then fate had handed him new neighbors and he'd thought maybe he could have what all those happy fuckers in Denver had, that love that was almost visible between all the couples. After he'd gotten over his own hang-ups.

Then the accident had happened, and his needs had had to take a back seat.

Sage was recovering, though, and she was obviously of the same mind he was, because she kissed him like she was starved for his touch. Brian cupped her face in his hands and kissed her back, loving her taste. This time though, there was no traffic in the background, or schedule pushing at them to move quickly. He took his time, learning what she liked and the way she moved her mouth.

Sage melted into him, and he braced his legs, thrilled to have her in his arms. He moved cautiously, though, very aware that she was still bruised. Maybe in another week or so he could pull her into his arms like he wanted to.

The woman kissed like he was her first, all tender innocence and gentle nibbles. Then she moaned and leaned into him, her intensity changing. Heat rolled down through his body, and it took everything in him not to grip her hips and grind into her.

Go slow, he kept reminding himself. It was hard to do when she was so enthusiastic.

Then they heard the key in the front door lock. Adam was home.

They drew back slowly, and Brian wished he'd had more time. Adam walked into the room and his eyes flicked over them. And he grinned.

Brian wanted to grin as well, but he didn't want Adam to think it was okay that he'd manipulated them all. And he wanted anything that progressed between he and Sage to be natural. Unforced. So, he stepped back and turned away, praying that no one noticed his erection.

"I need to respond to an email, if you don't mind," he said, clearing his throat. And he headed toward the table to open his laptop.

Sage grinned at him and turned to the stove.



SAGE WAS in a weird state of emotions, and she didn't know how to break herself out of it.

On the one hand, being near Brian, touching Brian, kissing Brian, was sending her emotions haywire. She walked out of that kitchen, earlier, more turned on than she could remember being in forever. If Adam had had plans to go somewhere, she probably would have been willing to try to make love. That may not have been fair to Brian, though.

She shook her head at herself. No, they wouldn't do that until she was healed enough that she could lift her arms, both of them, to hold him against her. No matter how horny he made her.

Then, on the other hand was the stress of thinking that Tim may be coming to Ohio. It just seemed damned suspicious that she was suddenly getting presents. She needed to ask Adam if he'd noticed anything recently. Tim did not have visitation, and she would not break the rules for him.

Hopefully, when they got into the office Monday, her lawyer would call her and they could talk about a few things.

She was going to be pissed if Tim thought he could let himself back into their lives. She'd worked too hard to get them balanced to even think of it.

This was going to freak Adam out. And that's exactly what she didn't want to do. The kid had enough on his plate already.

So, she did a little investigating of her own. She called her mother.

"Sage, I'm so glad you called! How are you feeling? I was just telling your father about the dream I had about you. I felt so guilty not being there to help you when you were hurt."

Sage sighed, regretting telling her mother she'd been hurt. And if she didn't head her off at the pass, they would be lost in her mother's dream forever. "Don't worry about it, I'm fine. I'm not sure I have enough time to hear about the dream, though, Mom. I do have a question for you, and it's important."

"Oh, okay, dear. What's your question?"

"Have you seen anything on Tim's family's socials about him coming back to Wyoming?"

"No, not really," she said thoughtfully, and Sage could hear tapping in the background. Her mother had picked up her tablet and was paging through her friend's newsfeed.

Sage didn't mind social media. It had its purposes and its pitfalls, but her mother took social media to a whole new level. After she'd retired from her job as a teacher, Claire Harrison had wanted to stay in touch with the people she'd worked with and the kids she'd taught. Sage couldn't even remember all the platforms her mother was on. She had to be very careful to tell her what was for public consumption and what was not.

"I don't see anything, dear. His mother is as dotting as ever, and I'm sure she wouldn't have been able to keep it a secret if he was coming home."

"I wonder if his mother knows he has a felony warrant out of Florida," Sage said, very aware she was planting a seed.

Her mother gasped. "No! Does he really?"

Sage grinned, feeling a little guilty. If Tim had hidden that detail from his family, and she had just let it out... There was no way her mother wouldn't tell somebody, and then it would be all over town. Tim's mother wouldn't believe it, though. She thought her son could do no wrong. "Yup. A felony probation warrant for theft."

She could feel the anticipation building on the other end of the line, and she grinned. Her mother, bless her heart, couldn't resist a titillating piece of gossip.

"Well, with the way he was raised, I'm not surprised he's gotten into more trouble. I wonder if Iris knows."

"I have no idea," Sage murmured. "Okay, I have to go Mom."

"Okay, dear. Give that boy a hug for me. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

Sage felt marginally guilty about that call. She had no doubt that Tim's indiscretions would be all over the county by nightfall. But it was his own fault for getting into trouble in the first place.

Brian headed into work the next day dwelling on the kiss.

Had it really been as good as he thought it was? Or was he reaching for something he hoped was there? He tried to think objectively about their situation. Sage was dependent upon him. Was she developing feelings for him because he was taking care of her? Like Stockholm Syndrome.

No, that didn't seem right. She was too clear-headed for that.

Morgan handed him several messages on the ridiculous Buckeye Brigade stationary. It had a buckeye-headed private eye, sneaking across the top of the page. They had three boxes of notepads, so they had to use it. They just made sure the clients never saw them. He appreciated the internal joke, though.

Parker gave him a wave as he climbed the stairs. His office was directly ahead of the stairs, and he could see everyone coming and going if his door was open. Most of the time it was. "What's the status on that Ridge case?"

Brian leaned against the door jamb and jammed his hands in his pockets. "I found the siphon. The housekeeper was using the house allowance to buy her own family food. And she has a huge family. They would meet her at the store and they would all go shopping. Racked up tens of thousands of dollars. I'll have the report to you in a couple of hours. And the Taylor case is all but done. Renee Taylor is coming in for a

follow-up interview today at eleven. She's not going to like what I'm going to tell her."

Parker leaned back in his chair and the pose reminded Brian of Duncan Wilde. "If I hear yelling, I'll send backup. How is your neighbor?"

"Getting better every day," he said. "Though I think she tries to do too much sometimes."

Parker cocked his head. "Well, if she's a single mother she's probably used to doing everything on her own. And even though you've been spending time over there helping her out, she's probably preparing herself for you not being there."

"True," he murmured. But he didn't like the feeling that thought caused.

Parker narrowed his pale gray eyes, considering. "Or do you want her to rely on you?"

Brian winced, looking down at his shoes. "I don't know what I want exactly." But he heard the lie in the words. And apparently Parker did too, because he chuckled.

"Oh, buddy, are you falling for this woman?"

He glanced up, shocked at the words. "No! Definitely not." Then he paused. "I don't think so. How do I know?"

Parker grinned and stood from the chair to round the desk, leaning on the front. "Well, if you can't wait to get home to her, and thoughts of her are distracting you at work, you may have an issue."

Fuck. "Is that how it was with you and Andy?"

His boss cocked his head. "No, it was a little different for us. We had a prior history. And we were thrown into danger, so we had to rely on each other quickly. It created a bond." He shrugged lightly, a small smile on his mouth, and Brian could tell he was thinking back. Did he get that look on his face when he talked about Sage?

"Anyway," Parker said, refocusing, "if you think it's the real thing, there's nothing wrong with exploring it. I've seen

you talk about her kid, and you seem to like him, so that doesn't seem to be a hurdle."

Brian shook his head. "No, I like Adam. He keeps me on my toes," he laughed. "Actually, I was talking to him about the Ridge case, and he pointed out the housekeeper. He didn't like her smile."

Parker snorted. "Maybe we need to hire him."

"In a couple years, I think he would love it," Brian said, pushing away from the jamb. "Okay, if you need anything I'll be in my cubicle."

Parker gave him a wave and turned back to his own computer. "Don't forget the meeting at noon."

Brian waved to acknowledge he'd heard. Every Friday they had a catch-up meeting with Parker and all of the investigators that were free. They each gave a recap of what they were working on, and what was coming down the pike. It was a good team-building exercise, and he enjoyed getting to know the people he worked with. It gave them a chance to joke around a little.

Brian got the Ridge report done and emailed it to Shiloh, the office manager, and Parker. They would read it and get it filed with the courthouse. At ten till eleven, Morgan buzzed him to let him know that Renee Taylor was in the lobby.

Brian sighed. "Send her up."

Renee Taylor was one of those women that were very happy letting others take care of her. She was beautiful and poised and had outlasted two husbands. Both had been in their seventies, more than thirty-five years her senior. The first husband had left her fairly secure, and the second would have, as well, if she hadn't gone through his money while he'd been alive. They'd gone on several trips around the world and Mr. Taylor had cashed out a lot of his investments to keep her in the lifestyle she demanded. Obviously, he hadn't told his new, young wife how much they'd spent, because when it came time to read the will, Mr. Taylor's three children had received a trust he and his first wife had created, while Renee had only

received the rest of the money available in the household accounts. The discrepancy had been glaring, and Renee was now protesting the will.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much that could be done. The trust had been set up years ago and funded from the sale of a business. Once it was set up, Mr. Taylor hadn't been able to touch the money, and it had grown for his children. Renee thought that since she'd been caring for Mr. Taylor at the end of his life, she deserved more.

Obviously, Renee had never gotten along with her stepchildren. Two of them were older than she was, so Brian assumed it was incredibly awkward when they got together as a family. *If* they ever got together as a family. They certainly wouldn't again if she tried to sue them.

Renee walked in looking like she'd just left the salon. And maybe she had. Her blond hair was curled, and her face was made up like she was going to the opera, or something. More than what some random errands needed. Her blue eyes were thickly lashed and beautiful, but too much.

Brian stood and circled the desk, holding his hand out. "Mrs. Taylor, welcome. Can I get you a coffee or a water?"

"No, thank you, Brian," she beamed at him, holding his hand just a hair too long. "I'm hoping you have good news. Please, call me Renee."

Brian sighed as he returned to his seat. "Well, I've gone through everything you gave me, and I'll be honest. The trust is ironclad. We have two attorneys on staff, and they both agreed that there's not much you can do about the money allocated to the children. Mr. Taylor was a thorough man and there are no loopholes. Unless they magnanimously decide to support you, contesting the trust is not an option. They were of sound mind when they created the trust, and they weren't under any undue influence."

Renee sank back into the chair, her blue eyes going dark and her lips pouty. "There really isn't anything I can do?"

“I don’t believe so. Please feel free to talk to your own attorney.”

“I have,” she admitted. “They basically said the same thing. I just thought maybe you could dig deeper and find something irregular when they set it up.”

Brian shook his head. “I didn’t. Their marriage was solid, they weren’t drug users, and no one was sick or mentally ill. I interviewed people that knew them years ago, and no one voiced any concerns.”

Renee still looked crestfallen.

“Mrs. Taylor, you’re not destitute by any means,” Brian said, leaning forward on his desk. “Talk to a financial planner. If you invest what you have, it will support you the rest of your life.”

Renee cocked her head at him. “But it’s not going to support me in the way I’ve become accustomed.”

Brian wanted to shake his head at the ridiculousness of it. The woman had a couple million to invest, and she wasn’t happy with it. If he had a couple million, he’d probably quit his job and... do something. No, he wouldn’t. He liked his job.

Renee leaned forward and he could tell she was trying to guide his gaze toward her cleavage. She’d done it before, and he didn’t understand what she was thinking. The flirting wouldn’t help him find her more money.

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to find you better options, Mrs. Taylor,” he said, standing, trying to signal the end of the meeting.

Renee stared at him for a long moment, as if trying to understand why her skills weren’t working. Then she forced a smile, though it looked a little brittle. “Thank you, Brian. I appreciate everything you’ve done. I’ll leave a card downstairs where you can send the invoice.”

“We’ll do that,” he promised, guiding her out of the office.

At the last minute, Mrs. Taylor turned into his arms, drawing him into an awkward hug. Brian felt her lips at his

neck, and he fought not to scowl. He set her back, very carefully. “If you need us for anything else, we’re available.”

And he would make damned sure that one of the other men in the office drew the short straw with her.

Mrs. Taylor sniffled, but there were no tears. Brian maintained his polite smile as she gave him a last, lingering look, then tottered on her heels toward the stairs.

“Well, that was awkward,” a deep voice murmured.

Brian turned. Severn Moran stood leaning against a doorjamb, his long legs crossed at the ankles. There was a smirk on his face and Brian knew what he was thinking.

“Whatever,” he laughed. “I’m not rich enough for her blood.”

“I don’t think she was looking for long-term,” his buddy said. “She was giving off serious lonely widow vibes.”

“You can have her,” Brian said, crossing toward the breakroom. He needed a coffee after that mess.

Severn followed him. “I don’t know. They get desperate enough they overlook certain things.”

Brian glanced at Severn. His buddy was several inches taller than him, leaner, dark haired, almost his opposite in every way. Severn had been in a bomb blast, though, that had left him marked for life. He’d been walking through a doorway when the blast had ripped through, burning his hands, arms, neck and lower jaw as he was blown back. Brian didn’t feel like the scars were that bad, but Severn hated for people to look at him for too long. He acted like he didn’t care, but Brian had been around enough former military to recognize the signs.

Severn was in charge of field operations and coordinated resources. He reported directly to Parker and was out on the street more than in the office. Brian was glad to see him here.

“Are you busting my balls for a reason?” he asked him, and Severn grinned.

“Well, maybe. I have a new case for you. I’ll tell you at the meeting.”

Brian made his coffee and followed Severn to the open-air meeting area. They had an enclosed meeting room as well, but they didn’t prefer the space and used it mostly for clients, when they had to divulge private information. The circular grouping of soft chairs was a popular gathering place for them all, and Brian loved the vibe. In many ways the Columbus branch of Lost and Found was more laid back than the other branches, though they were no less dedicated to their jobs.

“How is that woman you were helping?” Severn asked him, dropping into an overstuffed armchair.

“She’s doing really well,” Brian said, sitting carefully as he cradled his cup.

“Is that why you didn’t...” Severn’s voice trailed off, and he made a motion to the stairs Mrs. Taylor had gone down.

Was that why he hadn’t responded to the widow? Because it had felt wrong to even consider the idea. “Maybe,” he said softly. “I like her, Sev, I’m not gonna lie.”

“And she doesn’t mind the prosthetics?”

Brian shook his head. “Not a hint that it even bothers her.”

Severn stared at him, hard, before he tipped his head. “Well, I wish you luck, then.”

Ruby rushed into the space, her pale brown hair wisping around her face as she grinned at them. “Sorry to keep you waiting, guys,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Had a minor emergency to deal with.”

Brian always smiled when he encountered Ruby. At a whopping five feet and one-half inch, she was a force to be reckoned with. As a former Army linguist, it was ironic that she had no more than a whisper of a voice. She’d lost the ability to speak when a sniper’s bullet had almost taken her out. She hadn’t told Brian the whole story, but he was sure she’d had a harrowing recovery. Now she faced every day with a smile. Sometimes it was a little forced, but it was there.

Bear Stevens strolled into the space, wraparound sunglasses firmly in place, and dropped into the chair beside Brian. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Brian said, surprised he’d even been acknowledged. Bear was taciturn on the best of days and Brian hadn’t yet found that opening to create a dialogue. So, he’d quit approaching Bear. Maybe that was the trick. Back off and give him space.

Parker joined them, settling into one of the other chairs. They were arranged in a loose circle, with a long table between them. The table was scattered with professional magazines and catalogs for Galls, a law enforcement equipment company. Anything they needed, they filled out a form and it magically appeared a few days later.

Gabriella Stone strolled into the space and dropped into a chair. Gabbie was one of the most competent IT people he’d ever met, and he wondered if she hacked in her spare time. The woman lived well, better than an average investigator paid, but nobody seemed concerned. Since Brian investigated money, he was used to being curious about how people made it.

Gabbie looked at Bear. “You owe me ten bucks. I told you who that woman was, and you didn’t believe me.”

Without a word, Bear pulled out his wallet and handed a ten-spot over.

“What woman?” Ruby asked.

“The Real Housewife. She was a secret blogger who liked bashing the women.”

Ruby’s eyes widened. “Oh, I saw that. Nobody knew. That was such a shocker.”

Brian snorted, shaking his head. If someone had told him the trained former military investigators he worked with would be wrapped up in reality TV, he would have denied it to the day he died. But they all watched it. He’d tried, but it was hard keeping track of them all.

And maybe Gabbie made money on bets. He glanced at Bear. “You lose to her a lot?”

“Too much,” the man admitted, mouth quirking slightly.

Two more men arrived. Dan Stirling was another former Marine and they got along well, though Brian hadn’t interacted with him much. They were both lower leg amputees, though Dan had only lost one leg. He was usually on graveyard shift, and this week he’d been protecting some out-of-town socialite.

Remy Prince dropped into the chair beside Dan, laughing at something he murmured to his buddy. Remy was a former Army Ranger who struggled with PTSD. He’d been captured in Afghanistan and tortured. Incredibly, he’d escaped on his own, and no one knew the exact story. Obviously, he’d told some of his higher ups what had happened, but there had been no fallout.

Brian looked around the group. There were a couple of other guys not present. Austin, their runner, must be on some errand. And Brody Bennett must be on some assignment. He was on graveyard shift too, but he generally always made the Friday meetings.

Parker glanced around. “Looks like that’s all of us. I just have a couple of things to go over.”

Brian took notes on his phone, but he was only listening with half an ear. Nothing directly pertained to him. Then Parker called his name. He glanced up. “Yes, sir.”

“Good job on the Ridge case. Andy says they’re filing charges on the housekeeper. And as many family members as they can track down.”

“Excellent.”

Damn, that had been quick. He’d just sent in the report.

The meeting wrapped up with Sev handing him a new file. “This one’s going to take you a while.”

Great. Brian carried it back to his office and started reading. By the time he looked up, it was past his usual clock-

out time, and he was starving. He'd managed to work through lunch and everything else. Packing up his backpack, he stuffed the folder in beside his laptop. He could look at it this weekend.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was time for a date with Sage.

Think you can find a sitter for Adam? I'd like to take you on a date tomorrow.

Sage stared down at the text, her heartbeat taking off in a gallop.

The stars must have aligned for this date, because Adam has been invited to spend the night at a friend's house tomorrow.

Well, how convenient is that? Pick you up at 7.

Sounds good!

Sage fell back onto her bed with a squeal. Holy crap, she was going on a date with the most handsome, stimulating guy she'd ever been in the same room with!

She needed to wax. No, that was too much. It would be nice if she could get her hair done...

Plans raced through her mind, one right after another. Then she had a disheartening thought. Since they'd made plans for tomorrow, that meant she probably wouldn't see him tonight.

Damn. She'd gotten used to Brian slipping into the apartment to check on her after work every day.

They would make up for it tomorrow.

Adam grinned when she told him about the date and he nodded his head, looking a little too self-satisfied. "Don't go

getting a big head over this, young man.”

Adam giggled and dodged her hair ruffle. “I won’t.”

“Do you have any homework this weekend? You’d better get it done before you head to Max’s house tomorrow.”

Sage tried to keep herself busy that night and the next day, but it was hard. She’d been on many dates in her life, and she hadn’t been a hermit after Tim had left them, but that had been in Wyoming. She hadn’t had any dates out here, though there had been opportunities. Any time she thought about going on a date, though, the memory of Brian’s kiss would pop up, and she knew it wouldn’t be fair to the other guy.

Now she was going on a date with him, and her libido was already jumping to the night ahead. Maybe that was presumptuous of her. No, she didn’t think so. That last kiss had been something, and if Adam hadn’t interrupted them...

She was going into the night with an open mind and an open heart.

Sage took Adam to meet his friend just after noon. It was the first time she’d driven since the accident, and she maneuvered her 4Runner carefully through traffic. The boys were going to some seminar at the Center of Science and Industry. Max was in accelerated classes like Adam was, and they’d apparently found common ground.

“Do you have your money?”

“Yes, Mom. You already asked me that.”

“I know, but I don’t want you to be a burden. Pay for your own ticket and lunch, okay?”

“I will.”

She pulled up in front of the center. Max and his mom Lucy were there, waving. Sage had met Lucy at a school function and the boys seemed to enjoy each other, so she was comfortable letting Adam stay with them.

“I love you, buddy,” she said, pulling him in for a quick hug.

“Love you too, Mom. Have fun tonight,” he said, grinning. “Better stop and get new condoms at the store.”

“Adam Blake Harrison!”

Sage’s face burned, but her son had already slammed the door and was running up the steps to his friend. Sage took a breath as she pulled out of the parking lot, muttering. Someday, that kid was going to kill her.

On her way home, she stopped at a place Jane had recommended for a haircut. When she walked out of the shop, she felt lighter. The woman had cut five inches off her length, but it had needed done. Sage couldn’t even remember the last time she’d had a decent cut. It was still long in the back, but layers had been cut in, some short enough to swing around her cheeks. It was a big change for her, but she loved the lightness.

Her tune could change next time she went to work and had to scrape it into a bun...

As Sage pulled into the apartment complex, she glanced down the line for Brian’s truck, but it wasn’t in the spot he normally used.

The past day and a half had dragged, but the last hour before her date flew. It seemed like she didn’t have enough time to do anything, although all she really had to do was change her clothes and put some makeup on. She had no idea where Brian was taking her, and it was kind of blustery outside, so she settled on a nice blue and black blouse and a pair of black jeans. She could wear her leather coat and little black boots that matched.

Putting makeup on really tested her bad arm, but she forced herself to take her time. The physical therapist had told her to use it as much as possible for fine detail work, and it was getting easier. She just had to move slowly and deliberately. Lifting her arms, she measured. Yup, she could hug him now.

Sage liked the way the hairstylist had blown out her hair, so she left it as it was. She ended up having to redo her left eye makeup because her arm was quivering, but it was okay. Then

she sat on her couch, her anxiety building. She flipped through an e-book, but she couldn't concentrate on the story.

Normally, she was laid back and dead calm. There was something about Brian, though, that intrigued her and taunted her. After everything he'd done for her over the past couple of weeks, she was kind of amazed that he was still interested enough to ask for a date.

At seven on the dot, her doorbell rang.

Sage pushed up from the couch and brushed her hair back, surprised again at the lack of length. She moved to the door and swung it open.

Brian stood on her threshold, looking far too handsome for her sanity. The man was banging hot and for a split second, she wondered what he would say if she dragged him inside and ripped his clothes off.

No, she wouldn't do that. They needed to get at least one date under their belts before they lost their belts.

His dark blond brows popped over his eyes as he looked at her. "You cut your hair."

He reached out, fingering the lengths.

"Just a few inches. I needed a bit of a change."

His grin widened. "I think it looks fantastic. The long hair looked good too, don't get me wrong, but this suits you." Leaning down, he kissed her cheek. He drew back before she had a chance to do anything and pushed a bunch of dark blue and purple carnations toward her.

Sage blinked, wondering how he knew what she liked. Leaning down, she inhaled. "Adam?"

Brian laughed and shook his head. "No. Did I get it right? You seem too practical for roses."

Sage shook her head. "No, I love carnations. They're my favorite. Let me put them in water and we can go."

Brian followed her inside and watched as she looked for a vase. When she couldn't find the vase, she grabbed a Mason

jar she used for her iced coffees instead. They fit perfectly. With another slow inhale, she set them on the kitchen table. They looked beautiful there.

“Thank you, Brian. It’s been years since I got a real bouquet like that.”

“Well, I’m glad I got that right. I hope I get the rest of the date right.”

Sage snorted. “I think you’ll be fine.”

They headed out the door, Sage locking it behind them and setting the alarm. Brian opened the door for her when they got to his truck and closed it behind her. It was already warm, and she shivered, pulling her coat tighter around herself. “Any hints on what we’re doing?”

Brian glanced at her. “Nah. You’ll see.”

Sage laughed, enjoying the mystery. Since they lived in the city, it didn’t take them long to get to a restaurant. Brian parked in a pay lot in the arena district, paid the fee on his phone, and escorted her down the street. When they rounded a corner and Sage looked ahead, she saw the name of a popular, higher end Mexican restaurant. “Oh,” she breathed. “I’ve heard about this place. I think Gary has talked about it.”

Brian held the door open for her and they went in. The hostess seated them almost immediately, though there were a bunch of people waiting. When she looked at him, he shrugged. “I had a reservation.”

They were seated in a cute little booth and almost immediately a server came for their drink order. Sage ordered a margarita and an ice water. Luckily, she was off her pain medication now.

Brian ordered a margarita as well, and a chips and salsa starter. Sage glanced over the menu. “I have no idea what to get.”

Brian grinned. “Parker has been here. He says damned near everything is good. That’s why I made the reservation.”

“I’m willing to share if you are,” she said, and he nodded.

When the server returned with their drinks, they placed their order, then dipped into their chips.

“So, how is Gary doing?” Brian asked. “Did you talk to him today?”

“Just texted him. He’s bored out of his mind right now, and I’m not too far off, so I started a word game with him a few days ago. We bounce back and forth, and I’ve beaten him twice already. So, now he’s out for blood. I think they’re going to move him to a rehab place next week.”

“Well, that’s good. Hopefully he’ll thrive there.”

“If Candice has anything to say about it, he will,” she said.

Throng of people were heading toward Nationwide Arena, which was right up the block. “There must be a concert or something going on tonight.”

“Hockey, I think,” Brian said, watching the people flow into the venue. “Parker said the Blue Jackets are playing.”

“Hm. Wonder if Adam would be into a game. He’s not generally into sports, but since it’s his new city, maybe he’d make an exception.”

She opened her mouth to tell Brian what Adam had said getting out of the car earlier, then smacked her lips together. That subject might be a little too leading for what they were doing. “Have you been to one of their games?”

Brian shook his head, leaning back as the server brought their food. “No, I haven’t.”

He peered down at his steak quesadilla. It looked good. Her chicken chimichanga looked really good too. Before she started eating, she cut him off a piece and put it on his plate. Grinning, he did the same.

“Oh, man,” they said together, sinking into the food. They grinned at each other, then continued eating.

Sage was struck with the fact that this was their first date. And possibly the first of many firsts with Brian. Her eyes suddenly filled with emotional tears, but she fought them away before he noticed.

But he did anyway.

“What’s wrong,” he asked, reaching across the table to take her hand.

She looked into his melted-chocolate eyes and lost her words. She just shook her head. “It’s stupid. Just... this date is already better than any other I’ve ever been on. And it just started.”

Brian grinned at her, his smile a little lopsided. “I still have plenty of time to mess something up. Don’t set the bar too high for me.”

She shook her head and ran her fingers over his. He had broad, gentle hands that had seen some history. They’d helped her son, and they’d helped her, and she had a feeling they would feel wonderful on her skin later.

“I know,” she sighed dramatically, and let his hand go. “You probably have a girlfriend and five kids hiding out somewhere, and warts on your ass or something. I’m sure you snore.”

Brian barked out a laugh, his eyes twinkling. “No kids, no girlfriend, no warts. Yes, I snore a little, and I probably have too many pocketknives, but...” he shrugged. “I’m a pretty good guy, in general.”

“So why haven’t you settled down?”

“Why haven’t you? It’s not as easy as just deciding to do it.”

“True,” she murmured.

He nodded at her plate. “Better finish that. We need to go soon.”

Her interest piqued, she ate the last few bites of her delectable dish while he waved for the check. She didn’t say anything about him paying, but the tally in her head said she owed him. Several times over the past couple of weeks he’d bought them takeout since she’d been hurt. Sometimes he’d let her pay and other times he hadn’t. More often, he hadn’t. She needed to come up with a way to pay him back.

They left the restaurant, and he turned her to walk up the block. Into the flow of people heading into the arena.

“Wait, are we going in here?”

Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he grinned down at her. “How do you feel about a hockey game?”

Sage blinked, looking up at the huge building. “Seriously? Sure, why not,” she laughed.

“You’re not carrying, are you?”

She shook her head, grinning. “Nope. Can’t while I’m on medical.”

“I almost said something earlier but figured that was the case. Let’s go, then.”

Brian walked her into the flow of traffic. Within a few minutes they were through security and walking around the concourse, then they were getting onto an elevator. Brian produced two tickets for the Club Level, and they walked further around the concourse until they found their section. It was semi-private, with a table and stools, and it had a fantastic view of the ice. Almost immediately, a server approached them, offering drinks and snacks.

Sage blinked, looking around. “This place is amazing!”

Brian grinned and before she could think better of it, she leaned over and kissed him. It wasn’t a deep kiss, just a quick press of the lips, but she could tell he liked it.

“This is thanks to my boss Parker and his fiancée Andy. They have season passes for the Club Level and they let me have them, tonight.”

“You’ll have to tell them thank you, from me. Seriously. I’ve never been to a hockey game.”

“I’ve been to a football game in Denver, but never hockey. This will be interesting.”



TWO HOURS LATER, Brian decided he was in love.

The hockey game was riveting. The Blue Jackets were playing the Seattle Kraken and it was a close game. With every goal the Blue Jackets made, the crowd went wild, and the arena shook with excitement.

Fans pounded their feet and cheered, and he was amazed at how rabid some of them were.

Even more riveting than the game, though, was Sage. They'd shifted their stools around to sit side by side so they could watch the game better, but more often he found himself watching her. She threw herself into the excitement, cheering and clapping until her healing arm gave out. Even then she stomped her booted feet when the crowd cheered, just to show her support. Her beautiful eyes shone with excitement, and when she turned to look at him, smiling that perfect smile, Brian decided she was, hands down, the most beautiful woman in the arena.

They cheered until they were hoarse, snacking on popcorn and beer. Brian slipped out to the bathroom at one point and bought her a jersey, because he planned on bringing her here again. He bought Adam one, too, because he would be coming to the next game with them, he decided. He handed her the bag, and she peered in. When she looked up, her brilliant eyes swam in tears. Without a word, she reached up and kissed him, lingering this time as she cupped his face.

The screaming crowd around them faded away as he focused on her mouth, and the way her body leaned against his. Hot and sweet, she pressed against him, then pulled back. Then she kissed him again, harder, and angled her head for better contact. Brian cupped her head in his hands and sank into her. It had been a long time since he'd kissed anyone like this, but Sage was very different. His gut was clenched with nervous emotion, something he'd never felt with any other woman. Or if he had, he certainly didn't remember it.

They explored each other for several long moments, until someone pounded him on the back, jostling him away from her. Laughter echoed around them, and Brian blinked, pulling

back. Some guy he didn't know was pointing up at the big center display hanging from the rafters of the arena. There, for all the world to see, were he and Sage, paused in the middle of their kiss.

“Oh, my god...” Sage moaned.

A bunch of people were looking at them, so Brian wrapped his arm around her shoulders and waved. Sage did too, but he could feel her embarrassment. “If this makes it to the department, I'll never live it down.”

Brian laughed, pressing a kiss to her temple. “There are CPD cops everywhere. If any of them recognized you, you know it'll make the rounds. That's what cops do.”

They kept their hands to themselves for the most part, then, but it was hard. Brian reached out a couple of times just to brush her hair back from her face or touch her elbow when she shifted on the stool. And she did the same thing. When he first felt her hand on the back of his neck as they were watching the game, he kind of jerked in surprise.

“Oh, sorry,” Sage said, pulling her hand back.

Brian caught her, shaking his head. “No, I want you to touch me. It just surprised me. I love your fingers on my skin.”

So, that was how they stayed the rest of the game, more lost in little intimacies than what was going on on the ice below them. By the time they walked out of the arena and back to the car, Brian was humming with need. He seated her in the car and climbed in beside her.

As he shifted into reverse, she rested her hand on his. He looked at her, and she just smiled. As he pulled into traffic, her hand slipped to his right thigh, along the edge of his prosthetic. Her touch didn't make his gut clench, though, like that of other women. Sage had already seen him without his prosthetics. Granted, it had been dim in the room, but she hadn't freaked. He wasn't worried about her seeing him that way, because he didn't think it mattered to her.

Sage was buzzing. She'd never been one to imbibe in drugs in any form. Tonight, she'd had a few drinks over several hours, but the buzz from them had long ago faded away.

No, she was buzzing because of Brian's touch. And his kiss, holy crap... She'd immediately gone wet and loose... in the middle of five million people watching her kiss him.

Whatever. It was worth it.

Brian drove like a determined man, but his right hand covered hers on his leg. Every once in a while, he would glance over, and they would grin at each other. It was like they were sharing a very private secret, and it was exhilarating. They both knew what was about to happen.

Brian parked in front of her building and circled the truck to get her out. She was too anxious, though, so she went ahead and let herself out. He held her hand as they walked up the walk and as she slipped the key into the deadbolt, he snugged in behind her and nibbled at her neck.

Sage's fingers went nerveless, and she fumbled the key ring. "Stop it," she gasped, but there was no force behind it. In fact, she kind of went still and tilted her head to let him explore. Oh, man, his lips were doing wild things to her body.

Shaking her head, she forced herself to concentrate on the key. She pushed the door open, tossed the keys onto the side table and punched the code in on the alarm panel. She had to do it twice because she fumbled the first time. Then she turned

to him. He was already reaching for her, his strong hands gripping her hips to pull her tight as he kissed her. Then he started walking her backwards, toward the hall.

Sage pulled away and led him to her bedroom, kicking her boots off along the way. Brian closed the door behind them, glancing around, then reached for her. "I want to undress you," he whispered. "Very slowly."

Sage nodded and he bumped her back toward the bed. Somewhat inelegantly, she bounced backward, giggling. Then he was lying beside her, his big body blocking out the light from the bathroom as he propped up on his elbow. His right hand settled on her tummy, and he looked at her. "Are you sure about this Sage? I'm not in a rush. You're worth waiting for."

Her heart melted at his words, and she smiled at him. "I've been ready. And if this is too fast, I'm willing to wait for you, as well."

A grin quirked his lips. "Oh, I'm ready. I'll be honest, though. With my legs, I can't really go up on my knees. I might have you ride me this first time."

"Oh, damn," she huffed, laughing as she rolled her eyes. "I think I can manage. Actually, that might be better for my arm anyway."

Brian leaned down and kissed the hell out of her, his hot tongue gliding inside. Sage had never been one for a lot of open-mouthed kissing, but Brian was so different. Everything he did she enjoyed, and the taste of him was so unique. She breathed him in, and it made something in her body release. Was it a pheromone that her body was responding to or something? She had no idea. What she did know was that she was so wet he would have to peel her panties away.

That hand that had been on her tummy glided up to brush against the bottom of her breast. Oh, yes...

Fuck. So far, they'd only kissed, and she was more aroused than she could remember being ever.

Sage shifted, trying to get him to either rip her bra off or shove it out of the way. She wanted his hand on her body. Now.

In an effort to make it easier, she rolled toward him, hiking her leg over his hip. Immediately, Brian pulled her into him, and she could feel the erection behind his jeans. She groaned, her body arching toward his. She knew, without a doubt, that they could make love this way.

Sage gasped as he ground into her, stroking *almost* where she needed him to be.

Fingers fumbling, she reached for his belt and the delicious straining length. It took her a minute to undo everything with her bad hand, but she managed it, and was rewarded with the nicest erection she'd ever held in her hands. Brian huffed out a breath, going still at her touch. Sage explored him from root to tip, finding a few slight imperfections. Her fingers paused over them.

“Scar tissue,” he murmured, voice rougher than normal. “I had some damage besides the amputations.”

Leaning forward, she pressed a kiss to his neck, and nibbled her way to his mouth. “Doesn't feel like it affects performance,” she murmured, giving him a squeeze.

Brian chuckled. “I promise you, it does not.”

Sage wanted to feel him inside her. Sitting up, she peeled her shirt over her head. Then tossed her bra away. Slipping off the bed, she shucked her pants and panties, then she turned to him.

Brian was watching her undress and his eyes had gone almost completely black with arousal. Sage cocked her hip and gave him a smile. “Can I take your pants off?”

Grinning, he nodded. “Take the shoes off, then we can shimmy the pants down. We'll leave the legs on for right now. I don't think I can take the disappointment if you change your mind.”

He chuckled, but there was something in the sound of his voice that made her think that had actually happened. She

would let him keep them on this time, but they were coming off tonight. They might as well get used to doing things au natural.

Sage did as he instructed, pulling his shoes off first, then tugging on his pants as he lifted his hips. Her gaze snagged on the beauty she revealed at his hips, then moved down. His prosthetics looked like others she'd seen, one high on his leg and the other a little lower, so she didn't linger on them long. She tossed his pants away, and he tossed his undershorts away. Then she went still, rocked at the sight of the man in her bed. Brian Calvert worked out a lot, she knew that, but he was also just a naturally big guy. Not tall, but broad. Solid. As he'd helped her through her injuries, she'd been aware that he was very strong. His shoulders strained every shirt he wore and now she could see the striations of muscle in those shoulders. And the way his abs bunched as he rocked forward into a sitting position.

Sage blinked. He was holding his hand out to her, and she responded, spreading her thighs to sit on his lap. She rested her arms on his shoulders, putting them almost face to face.

The light from the bathroom hit his smiling brown eyes. "Thank you for that look. You do my ego good."

She glanced down at his erection. "You do my ego good, too. We all have issues with our bodies." She kissed him, her tongue darting out to brush at the seam of his lips. Brian opened his mouth for her, and his thighs spread underneath her a little. Next thing she knew, one of his fingers were dancing against the edge of her pussy. As she slipped her tongue into his mouth, he slipped a finger between her folds.

Sage gasped at the invasion and lost track of what she was doing as that finger explored.

"I can't believe how wet you are," he growled, and his finger went deeper.

Sage cried out as he learned her shape and feel, and when he found her clit, she almost jerked out of his arms. It was like she'd been struck with a bolt of electricity. Her body had been

humming for most of the night, and now that he was touching her, she could feel the orgasm rolling toward her.

“Brian,” she sighed, her head falling to his shoulder. Her hips twitched against his touch, and as he settled into a rhythm, so did her hips. Then, just on the verge of orgasm, he pulled away. Before she could protest, Brian spun her down to the bed. Then he was shifting, pressing her thighs apart as he buried his mouth where his hand had been. With three languid swipes of his tongue, her body exploded. Her thighs wanted to clamp against him, but his strong hands held her spread as her body quaked. He let her catch her breath, looking up the long line of her body, then he went in again.

“No,” she gasped, “not yet. I can’t...”

But he didn’t listen. He shifted, flicking at her clit in a different way, and a thick finger slid inside her wetness. His other arm clamped across her hips, keeping her still to accept his touch.

Sage clamped her eyes shut and let him do what he wanted. It was what she wanted, as well, so she gave herself up to his touch.

“Oh,” she panted, her body trembling. “You’re... right... there...” she hissed, as he moved his finger inside her. He kept a steady rhythm, building her up, up, and she was done. The orgasm crashed over her, sending spots dancing before her closed eyes as her whole body clenched. Sage grabbed at the sheets as she cried out, her body not her own any more. She’d never felt pleasure like this before. Brian had very definitely made her his.

She felt the bed shift and he crawled up over her, his shoulders straining deliciously. He settled between her thighs, his erection resting at her folds. With a deliberate arch of his back, he slid the head of his cock into her.

Immediately, the orgasm that had been receding crested again. Holy fuck, he hadn’t even moved yet. Just his size had triggered something in her. Her whole body trembled, and she waited for him to fill her. “You’re going to kill me,” she gasped, wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

Brian grinned down at her and watched her face as he very slowly, inch by inch, pushed his length into her. Sage wanted to cry at the delicious fullness. Her thighs fell open even more and she arched her hips up. Then she gripped his ass, urging him to move. She squeezed her internal muscles as much as she could, though they were stretched so far...

Her body was getting used to him and now she wanted him to move. That first mini orgasm had receded, and she was ready for her next one, which she knew would be epic. His fullness made her body respond in a way she'd never felt before.

In desperation, Sage found his mouth. She moved her head back and forth, kissing him from different angles and with different pressures. If she could have crawled inside him to be closer, she would have.

Then he began to move, and her mind went blank, focused solely on the pleasure he was giving her below. Brian glided into her, then back out, then in again. He was setting up a hard rhythm, and she could feel his fervor building. She thought that she would have to ride him, but he was doing an excellent job this way.

Brian shifted his hips, bringing one knee higher to get leverage, and the movement struck her deep. "That's the place. Right there, babe."

Brian was fighting his own need, his whole body quivering, and she felt a little selfish to make him wait, but he did it without a word, moving rhythmically.

"Come for me again, Sage," he said, voice rough in her ear. Then he began running kisses along her jawline to her mouth. He pleased her mouth the way he pleased her body, and within moments the orgasm grabbed her again, sending her up a peak she'd never felt before. Sage keened, her body jerking.

Brian started moving harder, obviously spurred on by her own release. Sage sought his mouth for a kiss, holding him to her as he finally lost control. He jerked into her hard, moaning, and she could feel heat spreading through her.

Then he collapsed in her arms like a ton of bricks, and it was the most wonderful feeling.

“I know I’m heavy,” he murmured, trying to get his elbows under him.

“Quit moving. We’re okay for a couple of minutes,” she said softly, and he let himself go without argument.

Sage was devastated. But in a completely good way. This guy had walked into her life, making her want things, and he’d totally delivered for her. She’d learned a long time ago not to rely on a man, but maybe he was different. He showed up and he stepped in, even when she didn’t ask. It should have made her bristle, but he didn’t do it in a way to make her feel bad about herself. He did it to help her. And her son.

And now he’d shown her what being with him could be.

She didn’t ever want to let him go.



BRIAN EVENTUALLY PULLED out and shifted to the side. More than anything he wanted to stay exactly where he was, on her body, *in* her body, but he was too heavy. Sage protested, but he didn’t go far. He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her flushed face.

She gave him a lazy smile, her beautiful eyes somnolent. “You’ve done me in,” she murmured. “I might need a nap.”

Brian gave her a smile, running his finger down her shoulder, across her chest and to the tip of her breast. He circled the nipple and it puckered. God, her body responded so beautifully. “Well, we need to talk about something. I didn’t even think to grab my wallet or the condom I put there.”

Sage smiled, shifting her body to lean toward him. She pressed a kiss to his chin. “Thank you for thinking of it, but I’m not worried. I have an implant.”

“Well,” he said, “I want you to know I’m clean. I’ve never had any kind of STD and I haven’t been with anyone

recently.”

“Same,” she murmured, cuddling into his chest.

Brian wrapped his arm around her and pressed a kiss to the side of her face. Her long hair was a mess behind her, and he ran his fingers through it along the mattress. It clung to his fingers, electrified in the cool air. “I think we created some friction,” he murmured.

Sage looked up at him, grinning. “We did. Hey, I thought I was going to be on top?”

Brian’s mouth quirked and he shrugged. “My body took over. What can I say?”

“I’m not complaining,” she said quickly. “I think we’ll have plenty of time to try out new positions.”

Brian felt a spark of interest light in his blood. “Give me a little bit and we’ll see what we can do,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her. Sage moaned, cupping his cheeks, as she kissed him back, and ran her fingernails along the hair of his ten o’clock shadow.

Eventually, she pulled away. “I need to hop in the shower,” she murmured. “You’re welcome to join me.”

Brian felt a stab in his gut. “I would love to, but I don’t think you’re set up for an amputee. I may use a washcloth, if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Sage said, sounding flustered. “I’m sorry. I spoke without even thinking.”

Brian shook his head. “No worries. I appreciate the offer. Maybe I’ll stand outside and watch you shower.”

She snorted, rolling out of bed. Then she turned and gave him a saucy grin, cupping her breasts for him. “I’m not going to stop you.”

Brian followed along, because he was helpless not to.

Sage didn’t take long to shower and when they met back in the bed a few minutes later, she was flushed from the heat of it and gorgeous. She’d piled her hair on top of her head so that

she didn't have to wash it, explaining that it took forever to dry, but Brian thought she looked beautiful with the messy bun, tendrils of her rich colored hair trailing down her pale neck. When she'd climbed into bed, she'd stripped off her robe. She wore a threadbare pink T-shirt.

He'd pulled his underwear back on, and they lay in the bed, heads on the same pillow, just looking at each other, touching each other. They were learning each other in a way they hadn't before. The blankets were pulled up around them in the chilly room, and they'd created a quiet little cocoon.

"Tell me about this," she said, brushing her fingers over his deltoid tattoo. It was a tattered flag with names and a date in the middle.

"End of watch," Brian said softly, "June fifteenth, twenty-twelve. And those were the guys with me in the Humvee. They didn't make it."

She pressed the tattoo, then brushed her fingers over his cheek. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

He knew by the sound of her voice that she truly meant it. "It's okay. They were good guys doing what they wanted to do, serve their country. We just couldn't all make it back."

They were quiet for a minute, thinking about the losses in the Middle East. Then he had to brush it off and switch subjects. "I noticed in the shower most of your bruising is gone," he murmured, reaching out to touch her ribs. At one point she'd been purple, bruised from being dragged by the car.

Sage grinned. "And my arm is strong enough to hold you now." She lifted both arms to show him, then folded them between them, tugging the blankets back in place, and he was impressed.

"When do you think you'll go back to work?"

She frowned, brushing her fingers across his chest. "Not sure. I have an appointment with my doctor next Tuesday, and if he releases me, I can check with the department's doctor. Maybe next week for light duty? I don't know if they'll put me

straight on the road again. I never technically finished my training with Gary, so everything is kind of up in the air. I'm supposed to call my supervisor after I talk to the doctors."

"Are you ready to go back?"

"Oh, absolutely," she said, nodding. "I'm okay for lazing around a day or two, but any more than that and I go crazy. I did accelerate through a college class, at least."

"Excellent! Only a couple more before you can test, right?"

She nodded, her eyes shining with excitement.

Brian knew she loved being a cop, but he also knew he was going to worry about her. He would probably worry about her more than he'd ever worried about anyone else. Sage Harrison had crawled into his heart and latched on. "Any more word from your ex/secret gift giver?"

She shook her head against the pillow, her eyes dimming a little. "No and I'm tired of being worried about it. If Tim shows up here, I may have to kick his ass. He left us on the verge of ruin, and I don't want to be there again."

"I'm literally right next door. I want you to call me at the slightest hint that something is off. Do you understand? Keep your alarm and cameras on."

She nodded again and humor danced in her eyes. "My hero next door. I may need you to bail me out if I kick his ass."

Brian lifted a brow at her. "Not sure that would guarantee you a road spot on the police department again."

"Might be worth it," she sighed. "But with my luck, Adam would be there. I don't want to stress him out any more than he already is."

"I think the lack of knowledge stresses him out more than anything," Brian murmured. "Let me take care of kicking Tim's ass."

"Hm. You're right about Adam, though." She brushed her fingers through his chest hair. "I try to be open with him with everything I can. I'd like to tell him we're dating."

Brian chuckled. “Well, I think he knows we’re doing something. He’s too smart not to have picked up on the way we’ve been looking at each other.”

“You’re probably right,” she sighed.

Sage brushed her hand over his. It was very intimate, laying on the same pillow and staring at each other in the dimness of the room, but he wasn’t uncomfortable. This felt right.

Sage was grinning when she woke up the next morning. She had to pee like a bitch, but her body was sore in places it had been for a long time. And it wasn't the achy-bone kind of soreness she'd dealt with the past two weeks.

When she reached across the mattress, though, Brian was gone. She listened, trying to hear if he was in the bathroom, or maybe the kitchen. No, the apartment was quiet. Hm. Reaching out, she snagged her phone off the bedside table. Had he texted her?

No.

Sighing, she rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom. She did her business and took a minute to brush her teeth, just in case he came back. It was Sunday. Surely, he wasn't working today...

They'd made love several times last night. The first time had been hot and heavy, the second much slower, but no less satisfying. She got her cowgirl stint in. Then, in the depths of the morning, she noticed his legs shifting like he was uncomfortable. She suggested that he take them off and talk to her about them.

Sage had seen many things in her career as a police officer. She'd helped veterans in the freezing cold, and she'd even seen some wrecks that had taken limbs, but she'd never really had prosthetics explained to her. She'd never had a reason to research them.

Brian's face closed down and the sigh he released was a little defeated, but he did as she requested. Sitting up, he showed her how the sleeve rolled over the stump of his leg, then the liner, then the prosthetic itself. He had two different ones. Both had artificial feet on the ends, but they fit very different.

"What the heck is that?" She pointed at a channeled strip of iron on the side of the right leg prosthetic. It looked to have been added later.

He grinned slightly. "Well, when I want to carry concealed, my buddy John created a mount for one of my holsters. I just lift up my pant leg and I have my weapon."

"Okay, that's ingenious."

Yeah, it was. And John had a list of guys waiting for the same modification.

The right leg was a lot wider at the top to accommodate his thigh. But they both worked by utilizing suction.

"When my legs are seated," he said, voice quiet, "I could probably hang by my feet, and they wouldn't come off. The suction is that tight."

"Damn," she breathed, and reached for the below the knee prosthetic. It was very well built with a carbon fiber cup and sticky neoprene top. She could see why it would grip like it did.

"After a while they start to hurt, so I have to take them off."

She nodded, handing the leg back to him. "I bet they can be incredibly painful. I mean, you're kind of walking on your skin. And I bet the skin gets irritated."

Brian nodded. "It can. A few years ago, I got a bad infection. I couldn't wear my left leg for weeks, and I worried it would spread to the right leg. It didn't, thank God, but for a while it was touch and go. I keep a wheelchair on hand in case of something like that. It's also why I took the bottom apartment. If I have to use the chair, I don't want to have to deal with finding a way up to the apartment."

Sage ran her hand down his right leg, brushing her fingers over the stump. It was red from being in the cup so long today and most of the night. He still had muscle, here, but it was shaped different. The left, longer leg still had the knee, though it was dimpled with scar tissue. As she looked across his skin, she could see several silvery marks of scar tissue. They lessened the higher up she looked, but they had to have been painful, too.

“I can’t imagine the pain you went through,” she murmured, leaning forward to press a kiss to his clamped lips.

Brian seemed surprised at the movement and cupped her face. “Don’t they bother you,” he asked, and she could hear the incredulity in his voice.

Sage shook her head. “Not especially. I mean, I’m sorry for everything you went through and that you were injured, but if you’re waiting for me to kick you out of bed, it’s not going to happen. That’s not the most important part of your body,” she grinned, kissing him again. This time, he opened to her, allowing her to push him down onto the mattress. They were a little too tired to fuck, but they weren’t too tired to cuddle, and she settled into his arms happily. Yes, she was sure they would run into issues, but he was more than just his legs.

Even though it had been so early in the morning, she remembered every word, because it had been an important conversation. She’d almost told him she loved him then, but it was too soon. Probably. She hadn’t been in this kind of situation before. Hell, now that she’d felt the way she was with Brian, she doubted she’d ever loved Tim. There was no comparison.

She heard noise out in the living room, and she waited, looking toward the doorway. When he ducked his head in, she grinned at him. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he responded and came to sit on the side of the bed. She could tell that he’d just taken a shower. His blond hair was dark with moisture, and his jaw freshly shaved. “Did I wake you?”

She shook her head against the pillow. “Nope. My bladder did.”

“Well, you can close your eyes for a few more minutes. I’ll take care of breakfast.”

Sage widened her eyes. “Oh, really? Well, I may let you then.”

Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to her mouth, lingering for a long moment as he tasted her. When he drew back, there was a puzzled expression on his face. “I thought maybe last night had been a fluke, but you taste even better today. I don’t understand it.”

Sage grinned and cupped his smooth cheek. “I don’t either, but I’m going with the flow.”

Grinning, he winked at her and left the bedroom.

Sage rolled over onto her back. The man was sexy as hell, and she was so happy she’d met him at that wedding.

When she couldn’t go back to sleep, she got dressed and headed out to the kitchen. Brian stood at the stove, flipping a pancake or something. She could smell bacon in the oven.

“If you can cook, I may never let you go,” she murmured.

Brian turned to her and quirked a brow. “Okay,” he said simply, and Sage fought not to blush. When he turned back to the stove, she winced. What had she been thinking? That had sounded kind of desperate.

She pulled out her phone and started scrolling, but her gaze wandered back to him. He moved back and forth in front of the stove, shifting pancakes to a plate and it looked like he was stirring fried potatoes in her cast iron pan. There was a rug in front of the stove and one corner was flipped over. It was making her worry. “How do you know where you are stepping,” she asked, curious. “Watch the corner of the rug.”

Brian barked out a laugh. “I don’t always. If you’re with me for any length of time, you’ll see me go down.” He kicked at the corner, and it flopped back into place. “Those are the days I really miss my meat feet.”

Sage barked out a laugh and walked across to him. “Your meat feet? Seriously?”

Brian grinned, his eyes laughing. “You’ll find that amputees sometimes have a warped sense of humor. Somebody in rehab called them that and it stuck.”

“I suppose it’s appropriate though.”

Nodding, he turned back to the stove. “Even though I have phantom pains if I kick something, the synapses don’t connect enough to keep my feet right. It’s kind of fucked.”

She stroked his back, wishing he’d never had to deal with this.

He nudged her back and slipped on her purple oven mitts. Then he pulled the bacon from the oven and her mouth watered. He set it on a couple of trivets and began moving the strips to the paper-towel lined plate. Then he placed the other half package of bacon in the same pan, strip by strip, and put it back in the oven.

“What’s your favorite food,” she asked him.

“Bacon is pretty high up there,” he said, stealing a hot piece from the plate. “Pizza, of course. A lot of things I’m not supposed to eat,” he grinned.

She sighed. “Same. They make them so good, though.”

Brian pulled one more pancake off the pan and turned off the burner, then he pulled her into his arms. “Did you sleep well?”

“Well, for as long as someone let me,” she said, leaning in for a kiss. Brian shifted in front of her and leaned in, pressing her hips against the counter behind her. And just that quick, breakfast was forgotten. Their hands roved over each other. It had only been a few hours since they’d made love, but it seemed longer. Sage felt her body ready for him, and she reached for the tie of her robe.

Brian drew back enough to watch it fall open. She still had her sleep shirt on, but her peaked nipples were so evident. Leaning down, he licked at one through the fabric. Sage

gasped, loving how he did that. Just a few touches and she was ready to go at it.

Brian ground into her and she nibbled up his neck. Then, surprising the crap out of her, he lifted her up by her ass and turned to set her on the marble island. Suddenly, his hips were aligned with hers. She spread her thighs, regretting having put underwear on. They were just in the way now. As his strong arms held her tight, she reached for the fastening of his jeans. It took her a few fumbles, but she managed to get the button open and the zipper down, and then he was filling her hand. She stroked him, loving the feel of the super soft skin of the outside, and the rock hardness within.

Brian reached down with one hand and tugged her panties to the side, then, shifting to the left, he aligned their hips. Catching her gaze, he gave her a crooked smile and sank into her body.

Sage had never had sex on a counter before, so she was surprised at how good it went, and how easily they meshed. They lined up perfectly, and he stroked something deep inside her that was going to make her melt.

“Oh, fuck me,” she breathed, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. Then she had to lean back, propping her arms on the marble. Brian’s hands held her hips, pulling toward him as he pushed into her. Sensations were crashing through Sage faster than she could register them.

Then one of his hands moved and something brushed at her clit. Oh, his thumb. Sage cried out, her body jerking as he brought her orgasm that much closer. Her attention focused on his touch and the fire he was sending through her body. “You’re driving me crazy, Brian. But don’t stop, please. Don’t stop.”

He pounded into her and teased her body until she couldn’t take it anymore. With a cry, Sage fell back against the island, pleasure slamming through her, making her twist against his touch. But he kept gliding deep, and that touch was enough to keep little mini orgasms rolling.

Brian obviously felt her release, because his movements sharpened, and he hit deeper. Sage cried out as he gripped both her hips with his strong hands and pulled her tight into his own body. He rocked, there, obviously savoring the feel as her body pulled at his. With a hard moan, he came, his head rocked back on his shoulders and his teeth clenched.

Sage thought she might have bruises on her hips by the time he was done, but even if she did, it would be so worth it to see him come so hard. He sagged against her, his legs going weak, and she thought he was going to go down for a minute. Then he braced his legs, looking up at her.

“I think I...”

That was when the smoke alarm went off.



ADAM WRINKLED his nose as he walked into the apartment. “Why does it smell like burned bacon in here?”

“Well,” Sage said, fighting not to blush, “We might have burned some bacon, earlier.” He stared at her for a long minute, but she didn’t expound on it. “Did you have fun at Max’s?”

Adam launched into a long, detailed story and it sounded like he’d had a lot of fun.

Maybe not as much as she had.

Brian had left about an hour ago, promising that he would be back later tonight. She invited him for dinner, though she had no idea what she was cooking. It didn’t matter. Even though they’d spent all weekend together, she found herself glancing at the clock, wondering when he’d be back.

She was so hooked on him.

Adam was looking at her oddly. “You okay, Mom?”

“I am” she assured him, “just distracted. So, you think you’ll want to do it again? Stay at his house?”

He nodded. “Oh yeah. Max is cool. I think he and I will be friends for a while.”

She reached out and pulled him in for a hug. “That’s excellent, honey.”

“Did you have a good date with Brian?”

He looked up into her face and she smiled. “I did. He took me to a Blue Jackets game at the arena. It was incredible. You know I’m not much of a sports fan, but when you’re in there, it’s very different. You get swept up in the excitement. I had a lot of fun.”

Adam was watching her very closely. “And did he kiss you?”

“He did,” she told him. “But don’t go getting a big head, young man. I liked him before you got it in your head to set us up.”

Adam grinned, shaking his head. “I’m just glad you’re happy, Mom. That’s all I wanted.”

Sage’s heart constricted. He was such a good kid. “I love you buddy. Brian may be good for both of us.”

Adam nodded. “I’m going to my room. Max and I are going to play some video games online, if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine, but why don’t you start a load of laundry first. I saw that tower in the corner of your room.”

Laughing, Adam ducked his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Man, she loved that kid. The worry was still in the back of her mind, though, that Tim might show up and create an issue. Well, if he did, she would fight him tooth and nail to protect Adam.

Brian was bored when he went home. He took another shower, rinsing the scent of Sage from his body, and he immediately regretted it. No, not regretted it. Missed it. He wanted to walk over and see her again, even if they didn't make love. Adam was probably home now, and he was tempted to just call over and see if they wanted to go out. Maybe they could run to North Market, or something.

What the hell. Before he could change his mind, he sent Sage a text.

Wanna go play?

Lol. What kind of play?

She added an eggplant at the end of the text, and he snorted.

Well, not that kind if Adam is home. Thought we might go bum around and eat some decent food. Have you guys been to North Market?

Nope. I've heard of it but we haven't gone.

Well?

Okay, Adam says he's in.

Cool. I'll come get you in 30 minutes.

And she added a big kiss.

Brian glanced at his backpack on the kitchen table. He was supposed to be familiarizing himself with a new case he'd been assigned, but he really didn't want to. Tomorrow would be soon enough. He cleaned up and got dressed, at the last minute adding the Glock to his prosthetic holster. He shook his jeans leg out and couldn't even see the shape. The prosthetic holster wasn't much different from a regular ankle holster, and it made him feel better about taking them out.

It was a little chilly today, so he remote-started his vehicle to warm up. Thanksgiving was just a few days away and the temps had been dropping. Ohio had been known to have snow by now, though he hadn't seen it yet. When he crossed to Sage's door, a light mist was falling.

When he knocked, it swung open almost immediately. Adam grinned at him in welcome. "You made my mom smile," he said, first thing.

Brian grinned and he gave the boy a nod as he stepped inside. "I did. She has a beautiful smile, so I want to see it all the time."

Adam cocked his head, then nodded. "I think you can do it," he said, closing the door behind them.

Sage arrived then, looking fresh and delicious. Her hair was back in a low ponytail, and she wore a soft gray sweater over blue jeans and dark boots. Brian's mouth watered as he looked at her, and he was suddenly struck with insecurity. Should he walk across and kiss her? Had she talked to Adam about them? Hell, what were they to each other?

She decided for him, reaching up and giving him a sweet kiss as she stroked his jaw. "Hey," she murmured.

"Hey," he said back, hands on her waist. "You look fantastic."

She grinned. "Thank you. This is the first time I've been able to get my arm high enough to do a ponytail."

She swished it for him, and he flipped it, laughing.

Adam was staring at them, his head cocked, like he was trying to figure something out. They must have met with his approval, because he grinned and grabbed his jacket from the back of the couch. He stroked Diamond on the face and promised her they'd be back soon.

They loaded up into the truck and Brian navigated them North. Adam talked about his sleepover and Sage promised to look for something different to cook tonight. For a minute, Brian felt like they were a family and it kind of sent him reeling. For a long time, he'd wanted this kind of connection. Yes, it was new, but it felt strong. The three of them were meshing like they were meant to be together.

Maybe that was a stupid sentiment, but it was how he was feeling.

They pulled into the lot of North Market and parked. "Short North is cool, too. Artsy and different. I love the market, though, because it has such a range of things."

They walked into the trendy, renovated warehouse and Adam immediately went to a vibrant cupcake display. Sage looked around, her eyes wide. "Oh, this is really interesting."

Brian loved this place. Any time he didn't feel like cooking he would run up here for something decadent and different. There was a ramen shop, a Vietnamese place, Italian, BBQ; basically, anything he could imagine eating was here. There was a fish market and a regular market, two coffee shops, a spice market, and a candy store.

They wandered from stall to stall, tasting samples and enjoying the atmosphere. They all ordered a gourmet pastry at one stall, then sampled each other's. It was fun and silly, and they learned what the others liked.

For something different for dinner, they decided on two different types of fish, as well as some scallops. Sage talked to the fishmonger for several minutes, jotting notes down on her phone about how to prepare them. Then they went to the locally grown garden stall. Even in almost-winter, he had a

broad variety of vegetables available, and they picked out a couple of things to try with their dinner. On the way out, they grabbed a tender loaf of focaccia with seasonings.

“My mouth is already watering,” he murmured into her ear at one point. He had his arm around her shoulders, and it felt so natural to walk that way. He hadn’t even noticed the pain in his legs today.

Something pricked at his awareness, and he glanced around. Nothing obvious stood out to him, but he had the sense that someone was watching them. They wandered through the rest of the wide store, mingling with the crowd. Occasionally, Sage would stop to handle an item.

Then he felt the pressure again. Just the sense that he was under surveillance.

“Do you feel it too,” Sage murmured.

Brian glanced down. “Yeah. What are you getting?”

She shook her head slightly, giving him a glance. “Not sure exactly. It’s been about the past half hour. I think it might be someone upstairs.”

Brian was surprised, and impressed, but he really shouldn’t have been. Sage was an excellent cop, and she would always be aware of what was going on around her, especially with her son present. Carefully, he glanced around, focusing on the upstairs balcony area. If the food stalls downstairs didn’t have enough seating, there was a broad second floor that did. There were probably a hundred people up there right now, eating and laughing. It was a Sunday, and people were out before the holidays.

“You about ready to go?”

She nodded, and they fell in behind Adam, herding him toward the door. “Mom, I was...”

“I know, buddy, but we have to go.”

He gave her an odd look but headed out the door with the crowd. Brian followed along behind, protecting their backs. If someone was targeting them, he would protect them.

They made it to the truck fine and loaded up. Then they both watched the front of the market. There were two designated entrance and exit doors and maybe they could see who had made them uncomfortable.

Brian already had an idea.

Pulling out his phone, he checked his messages. Yup, there it was, buried in his email. Tim Roe had arrived at John Glenn International Airport two days ago.

Fuck. He'd been so distracted with Sage that he hadn't taken enough care with her safety. And now they were caught off guard. He showed Sage the email, and she scowled.

"What's going on, Mom?"

Sage sighed and he could hear the frustration in the sound. It had to be infuriating, getting away from the ex, re-establishing your life and then having to deal with him again. She turned to look at Adam.

"Your father is in town, and it just seems fishy."

Brian shifted into gear as Sage told Adam what had been going on. They were going to head back to the house, and he was going to get on his computer to do some research.

"Why did he come here?" Adam asked. "We've done fine without him."

Brian hated the fear he could hear in Adam's voice.

"I don't know," she said, "but knowing Tim, he assumes he's going to be coming into money or something. Don't worry, buddy. I'm going to take care of you."

"We're going to take care of you," Brian said, meeting Adam's gaze in the rearview mirror. "Believe it or not, I was a bodyguard for many years before I switched to money. He will not get close to you."

Adam turned to look out the window and Brian knew this had to be hard. On the one hand, Adam knew that Tim had fucked them over when he'd left. But he was still his dad and Brian had a feeling Adam would want to talk to him. And

maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. Then he could see Tim's true colors.

He glanced at Sage. Her face had closed down and her lips were pursed. The worry was there in her eyes, and he reached out to squeeze her hand. "It'll be okay. We know he's here and we know he doesn't have altruistic purposes. Just be sure to always keep your security system and cameras on."

She nodded her head and gave him a smile. "Thank you for today. It was nice while it lasted."

"We can go somewhere else, but I have a feeling he'll contact you sooner rather than later. If he's following you, he's making plans."

"He used to follow me at home," she murmured, glancing at him, "back when we were married. It was like he couldn't take anything at face value. He was always scheming and doing things behind my back, and he assumed I was as well. He would just pop up in weird places, usually drunk, trying to catch me cheating or doing something wrong."

Brian sighed. "A woman can't live like that."

"Yeah, I know, and once I got away from it I realized how abusive it was. He tried to control everything."

"I think Brian should move in with us," Adam said suddenly, leaning forward as far as the seatbelt would allow. "Maybe if Tim thinks you're involved he'll leave us alone. And he would protect us."

They slowed for a light and Brian looked at Sage. She had an odd expression on her face, and she blinked several times. Then she looked out the passenger window. "Um, I don't know buddy... That's putting a lot of pressure on Brian, and we've already imposed on him enough."

No, that wasn't flying. Brian turned his blinker on and pulled off into a convenient gas station and parked the truck. Then he turned to her, fully. When she wouldn't look at him, he gently turned her chin toward him. "Hey, it's not a bad idea," he said softly. "I already dread going back to my own

place after I've been with you guys. If you haven't figured it out yet, I really like you guys. Both of you."

He wanted to tell her he loved her, but he didn't want the words to be because of the situation they were in. She would never believe them.

Sage frowned, hard, and she shook her head. "I don't want to rope you into this, Brian. You've done so much for me, us, the past couple of weeks and there's no way I can ever repay you. Seriously," she said, meeting his gaze. Her mosaic eyes were greener today, stunning in the bright light of outside.

He gave her a lop-sided smile. "What if I want to be roped in? I can guarantee you I have not done anything in the past three weeks that I didn't want to do." Sage looked leery, but she didn't pull away when he took her hand. "We were already in a relationship. We're just speeding it up a little."

She rolled her eyes. "Seems like I'm always speeding things up," she sighed. She glanced back at Adam. "Are you sure you're okay with this? I mean, we haven't gone into detail, but you know Brian and I like each other."

Adam snorted, grinning. "I think you more than like each other. I've seen the way you've been looking at each other. It's obvious you've had sex."

Brian barked out a laugh and Sage slapped a hand over her face, her cheeks going pink. She forced herself to look at her son, though.

"Adam! There's no need to be crude."

Brian tried not to laugh, but it was hard. "He's ten, Sage. You don't think boys talk about that stuff?"

She shook her head, resigned. Then she looked at him and gave him a soft smile that twisted his heart. "Brian, I would love it if you moved in with us. But there's no obligation to stay," she said quickly. "If, when, we figure out the Tim situation, I don't expect you to stay."

Brian sighed, wanting to shake her. She was so careful to always give him an out. Though he was fairly certain he

wouldn't want to ever get out. But he could see in her eyes the fragile hope that something lasting might be built.

He had that same hope and despite the way they were going about it, he was going to take advantage of it.

“I would love to, Sage.”

He held his fist over the back seat to Adam, and the boy bumped his knuckles, grinning.

Sage didn't know how things had progressed so quickly.

Two days ago, they'd decided that Brian was going to move in with them, to help protect them. That night he'd crossed to his apartment, packed a suitcase and moved in. There was plenty of room in the closet for his things, and within a few hours he'd unpacked and settled in.

They cooked up the fish they'd bought that day and had a wonderful dinner. Then they'd watched some TV, played with the dog, and headed to bed to get ready for the next morning. Adam had school, so Brian volunteered to drive him and pick him up during the day. He'd spoken to his boss Parker about the situation, and Parker had agreed that he needed to be there. The new case Brian had been given needed to be researched and he could do that from anywhere.

Going to bed that night was a little surreal. It had been years since Sage had been part of a couple, and making room for him in her life and her bed was a little discomfiting. Once he'd pulled her into his strong arms, though, all those concerns drifted away. They made love quietly, conscious that there were young ears just across the hallway. It was late enough that he was asleep, though. Probably.

When they were done, they cuddled. "I can't believe he said that today," she whispered.

"Well, I hate to tell you, but he's going to be noticing girls soon, too."

She groaned but nodded slightly against his arm. “He reminded me to buy condoms before our date the other night. Smart-mouthed kid,” she grumbled, but Brian just laughed.

They slept together surprisingly easy. Brian was a warm heater and several times through the night he’d pulled her against him. It was a little strange bumping into his leg stumps occasionally, because they hit in different places, but by night three it was like they’d always slept together. In the mornings she retrieved his sleeves and liners from the bathroom, where their drying pegs were on the counter, and gave them to him. She got used to the shower chair and the shower legs propped outside the glass doors, and they’d found a fun, new way to use the shower chair that made them both happy.

Brian fit into their little family like he was meant to be there, and it scared her to death. Once Tim did whatever he was going to do, she had to prepare herself for Brian moving out. The guy was a handsome bachelor, and any woman would want him, even with the disability. There was no way he wanted to take on their crazy little family.

Until then, though, she decided she was going to enjoy the situation. And him.

When she got approval from the doctor to go back to work part-time, things got a little more interesting. While she was on light duty, she was assigned to substation nineteen, off Sullivant Avenue, researching missing persons cases. It was only a mile from Brian’s office, so after they dropped Adam off at school, Brian dropped her off at the station. Brian would leave work a little early to pick Adam up, and she would Uber home.

They would cook dinner together, laughing and playing, and Adam would egg them on. It was obvious from the way he interacted with Brian that he loved him being there. They talked constantly, and when Brian brought one of his game systems over, they took over the living room and would battle online for hours.

It was surreal to Sage. Actually, it was like a dream. They got along together so well...

Sage watched for Tim constantly, but she never saw him. There were no more strange gifts, and no word out of his family on social media. Sage had her mother watch Tim's socials, but so far, he'd been pretty quiet on there, as well.

Sage let herself think that maybe he'd moved up here for some other reason, and not to bedevil them.

Then the shoe dropped.

It started with a random email from the admissions office at OSU. They were looking forward to their meeting, next Wednesday. Sage scanned her planner and her phone, but she hadn't made note of any meeting. When she called the office, they said that Mr. Roe had set up a meeting weeks ago.

"I need to speak to a manager. Someone in charge," she said softly, anger surging through her.

Randall Parks, deputy director of academic services, eventually answered the line.

"Can I help you, Ms. Harrison?"

"Yes, you can. I just received notification that Mr. Roe set up a meeting this week. I assume to talk about Adam's coursework."

"That is correct," he said, and she could hear the excitement in his voice. "Adam is an exceptional young man, and we look forward to have him be a part of the student body."

"Mr. Parks," Sage said softly, "Mr. Roe does not have custody of Adam. I do. Mr. Roe does not even have visitation, because he is so far behind on child support payments. I sincerely hope you haven't allowed Mr. Roe access to Adam's personal information."

Silence rang on the other end of the line, and her stomach sank.

"M-Ms. Harrison, I assure you we would never want to endanger any of our students, but when we contacted him, he did not explain your situation properly."

"Hold on," she snapped. "You contacted him?"

“Y-yes, ma’am. We understood it was a divorce situation, but somewhere our wires got crossed. We must have contacted him to welcome your son to the campus and set up a tour.”

“We already did that, Mr. Parks, weeks ago. Why would we do it again?”

Parks stammered on the other end of the line. “We generally invite both parties, separately. I’m sorry, Ms. Harrison. There was nothing in the file to indicate that the situation was this delicate.”

Sage huffed out a breath. “Because I never expected you to try to contact the man. Adam hasn’t seen him for years, and now, suddenly, we’re being approached.”

“Ms. Harrison, on behalf of the school, I offer my profound apologies. I sincerely hope that this doesn’t alter your plans with Adam’s schooling.”

Yeah, they didn’t want their little prodigy slipping away.

“I don’t know, Mr. Parks. I suggest you cancel that meeting and inform Mr. Roe that he is not permitted on the grounds of the school or to contact my son.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will do that directly.”

Sage hung up. Then she felt bad that she hadn’t told the man goodbye. That was rude. She was so pissed, though.

Once again, Tim was trying to ruin Adam’s future. She wasn’t sure why he’d come all the way up here to do it, but as soon as she saw him, she was going to demand answers.



BRIAN COULD TELL something had happened as soon as he walked in the door. Sage was sitting on the couch, staring into a cup of tea. She looked up and smiled as Adam came in and rose to meet them.

“Hey, buddy. Did you get your project turned in?”

“Yup,” Adam said, grinning at her. “And he was impressed. I got an A, of course.”

She laughed at the confidence and circled the couch to draw him into a hug. “Of course you did. Why don’t you head outside with Diamond? She’s been waiting for you to go play.”

Dropping his backpack on the floor, Adam took off through the back French doors with the happy dog.

“What’s wrong?” Brian reached out to stroke her hair behind her ear.

Sage sighed and sagged into him. Brian wrapped his arms around her, loving the feel of her against his body. He kept waiting for the sensation to abate, but it hadn’t yet. Every time he saw her, he wanted her more, and he treasured the times like these when she let her guard down and needed his support.

She explained about the meeting notification and related the conversation. Brian guided them to the couch, and they sank down, but he still held her. She seemed to need it.

“I’m amazed you didn’t lay into him more. I admire your restraint.”

Sage snorted, shaking her head. “I’m still pissed. They never should have called him. He has no paternal rights, so it should have stopped there.”

“I agree. Hopefully they get him on the line and explain the situation to him.”

“It may piss him off,” she murmured, resting her head on his chest. “It may provoke him to come after us.”

“Then we’ll be waiting,” he promised her. “Adam is covered. If he’s not in school, you or I are with him. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving, so he’ll be with us at least until next week. When does he start his college classes?”

“After Christmas break. He’s going to start with two classes and gradually transfer over to full-time. If he can hack it.”

Brian peered down at her face. “Do you think he won’t? That kid’s going to kick ass.”

“Yeah, I know,” she sighed. “I also know he’s going to have to deal with a lot of hazing, probably. At the very least, teasing from the older kids.”

“Well,” Brian shrugged lightly, “if he does, he’ll deal with it.”

“His anxiety has gone down a lot, recently,” she whispered, running her fingers over his chest, “and I don’t want this to affect it.”

“Well, I think you know that he does better when he has all the information. You should talk to him at dinner about it.”

Sage sighed. “Yes, I will. How was your day?” She lifted her head, grinning at him. “Did Bear talk to you today?”

Brian was very aware he had his own anxieties about fitting in. Obviously, she’d picked up on them. “He said ‘hey’, which is better than nothing. Parker is very easy to get along with, even though he’s a former SEAL.” He said the word like it was a disease and Sage grinned. That was what he wanted to see. “Severn is scary smart. Ruby has always been cool. Brock is like the frat brother that goes to all the parties. And Gabbie is interesting. I still don’t get their fascination with the bitchy women, though. She and Bear go at it every day.”

“The housewives?” Sage laughed, wrinkling her nose. “I don’t watch them either, but if it will help you fit in at work...”

Brian grimaced, giving her a narrow-eyed look. “They’re watching some kind of tropical island series. I’m not even sure what. Not sure I want to get invested.”

“Well, up to you. Might be a change from *How It’s Made*.”

Brian grinned. “I think Adam has seen all of them. I mean, he *knows* all of them.”

“He’s been watching shows like that since he was a baby. And loving them. I turned them on one day for him to fall

asleep to, and it never happened,” she laughed. “I don’t mind, really.”

He didn’t either, but he hoped Adam had enough of a grip on pop culture to help him fit in later. “Maybe we’ll play some games, later.”

Even though he was supposed to be doing up a report on a case... Brian had realized that once he left the office, work thoughts stopped, and home thoughts took over. He’d become wrapped up in the Harrisons’ life, and he didn’t hate it. Quite the reverse. He loved being with them. Yes, he’d moved in under exigent circumstances, but that amorphous danger took a back seat to enjoying his time with them. It wasn’t how an investigator should think or be, but it was.

When he had Adam with him, he scanned the area, looking for anything out of the ordinary, but it had been quiet. And he always carried, now, at his waist and his concealed leg holster. Adam was surprisingly aware, as well. He looked around and was curious, asking questions about the area and things he saw people doing. The kid had a brain like a sponge and Brian enjoyed the challenge of keeping that sponge busy.

“I’ll go out and throw the ball around with him. If it’s not too muddy.”

“Be careful. I was out there this morning with Diamond, and it was a little sloppy.”

Yeah, if the ground was bad, he could have issues. Brian let himself out the back doors, stepping onto the concrete patio. Adam was throwing the ball down the yard and Diamond was retrieving it, the flag of her tail waving in the wind. Brian could see from where he was standing that Diamond had found mud. Sage would be pissed if they didn’t wipe her feet off before they went in.

Adam’s tennis shoes weren’t doing much better. Brian pointed it out to the boy.

“Yeah,” he laughed. “And I was supposed to keep these nice.”

“Today might not be the day to test your mom, buddy,” Brian warned, and Adam looked at him.

“What happened?” the boy asked, drawing close.

“It’s not my place to say. Your mom will talk to you in a bit about it, okay?”

“Yeah,” Adam grimaced, picked up the ball Diamond had dropped and tossed it down the yard. “Must be something about my father.”

Brian moved to one of the chairs of the patio set and sat down. “Kind of,” he agreed, “but it’s not an emergency.”

Adam trudged toward him, his russet-colored hair blowing in the wind that had picked up. He dropped into the chair opposite Brian, pushing his glasses up his nose. “I don’t like him coming around.”

“I get that.”

“I mean, Mom is just getting back to the way she used to be before, laughing and happy. I mean, we were happy in Wyoming, after he left, but she’s been way more relaxed and excited out here. Even more so since you started dating her.” The boy tossed him a grin. “And I think you’ve been happier, too.”

“I won’t argue that,” Brian said. And he couldn’t. He felt more elevated with them, and more enthusiastic for the future than he could remember in years.

“Well, just so you know,” Adam, said, turning to him fully, “you have my permission to marry my mom.”

Brian blinked, then rocked back in his chair. Had the kid heard his thoughts? “Damn, Adam, you don’t say stuff like that to an old man like me.” He pounded his chest and grimaced like he was having heart trouble.

Adam giggled, the worry easing from his expression. “Oh, whatever. But seriously. I know you probably didn’t ever see yourself getting a dysfunctional family like ours,” he said, but Brian held up a hand.

“Now, stop right there. Just because your relationship is different doesn’t mean it’s dysfunctional. It works for you guys and that’s all that matters. And I’m happy to be a part of your little family, right now. As for the future,” he said carefully, “we’ll have to take it a day at a time. Your mom may get tired of me slowing her down or having to go to the hospital for a new surgery every couple of years. I’m not a perfect marriage prospect, buddy. I’ll always be disabled, which can be a challenge to a new relationship.”

Adam waved a hand. “I don’t think that matters to her. I’ve seen the way she looks at you, and I’ve never seen her look at anyone like that before. So...”

Brian let the sentence hang. “We’ll see,” he said eventually. “I’m getting hungry. Let’s go see what your mom has planned for dinner. Do you have homework?”

Adam shook his head. “Not for regular school. I’m in the middle of a white paper by Dr. John Hirsh, on recombinant DNA safety procedures the federal government has handed down. It’s interesting.”

Brian snorted. “Well, when you’re done with that maybe we can play some Farcry.”

“Sounds good, Brian. Thanks for talking to me like a normal person.”

“Oh, buddy,” Brian said, reaching out to rest a hand on Adam’s narrow shoulder. “I’ll always do my best to treat you like a normal kid. Okay?”

Adam nodded, grinned, and dashed into the house, calling Diamond. “Don’t forget her paws,” Brian warned.

“Got it!”

He shook his head. That kid was amazing, and not just because of his intelligence. He had an open, emotional understanding that seemed to surpass them all. Brian had a feeling it would be a pleasure to watch the boy grow into a man with the same understanding.

When he stepped into the kitchen, Sage was just picking up a muddy towel from the floor. “I warned him,” Brian

laughed.

She shared a look with him. “Well, he tried before they took off. He said something about getting some work done so he could play games with you after dinner.”

“Yes. He knows you want to talk to him about something, too, but I didn’t tell him what.”

She nodded and carried the towel down the hall to the laundry. When she came back, she looked around the kitchen. “I don’t know if I want to cook tonight.”

“Okay. What are you thinking? Pizza? There’s a pretty good little Chinese place I order from.”

She cocked her head. “Chinese sounds good, actually. Let’s do that. I’ve got the turkey breast defrosting for tomorrow. Are you sure your family is okay with you staying down here? It’s not too late to head North. We’ll be fine here.”

Brian cocked his head at her. “We already talked about this. I planned on staying home anyway.”

Brian scrolled through his phone and found her the menu he’d downloaded. “Now, what do you want?”

She made a list and called it in.

“How are the cases you’ve been working on? Did you track down that kid?”

She shrugged, lightly. “Not bad. You can tell a lot of the missing are homeless, and some of them are just babies. I mean, like, kids Adam’s age disappearing and never being heard from again. I sent a patrol unit out tonight to see if they can track this ‘friend’ down. I have a feeling he may have been the girl’s pimp or something.”

They chatted for a while, and Brian appreciated that they had common ground. They were both investigators and they thrived on being in the midst of things. And they thrived on righting wrongs.

Adam came into the kitchen and peered into the fridge. “What’s for dinner, Mom?”

“We have Chinese coming. Can you wait half an hour, ish?”

He nodded, grabbing a bottle of water.

“Come have a seat, Adam, I need to talk to you about something.”

She related the conversation with Randall Parks.

Adam was frowning. “I got an email from them, but I thought it was redundant. Like you said, we’d already done the tour.”

“Yes. Well, now we know why. I know I told you before, but you need to watch for him. I don’t know what he’s planning, but I seriously doubt it’s anything good.”

Adam shook his head, looking down at his lap. “Why won’t he leave us alone?”

“I don’t know buddy. If anything else happens, I’m going to look at getting a protection order to keep him away.”

That wasn’t a bad idea, Brian thought. Pulling out his phone, he sent Parker a message, recapping what Roe had done, and he asked him to run it by his fiancée, Andromeda. As a prosecuting attorney, she would know better than any of them what was possible.

The Chinese food was as good as Brian had promised. Sage sat back in her chair, hand on her tummy. “I think that was the best Mongolian Beef I’ve ever had.”

“No, the General Tso’s was definitely better,” Adam said firmly. “What’s for dessert?”

Brian smiled at the exchange, shifting on his chair. This was his favorite part of the night, hanging with these two and eating good food, and catching up.

The doorbell rang and they all went still. He met Sage’s gaze. “I’ll get it,” he said, pushing to his feet. “You guys stay in here.”

Sage caught his arm. “No. Stay with Adam. Please. I’ll handle this.”

He could see the need in her eyes to do something about this situation, so he nodded.

“Let’s clean things up, buddy,” Brian said, motioning to Adam to help him.

Adam didn’t want to do anything other than see who was at the door. Brian could see the anger and fear in his eyes, but he trusted his mother. And he trusted Brian, because he started gathering up the remains of their dinner.

That was when they heard a very distinctive, *you’re a fucking idiot, Tim*. Without even considering if it was any of his business or not, Brian crossed to the living room doorway.

He parked himself on the threshold, legs braced, wiping his hands on a dishtowel.

A man was standing in the open door, tall and lean. He had dark, shaggy brown hair and pale blue eyes, and he didn't look like he was very healthy. There was a sallowness to his skin that Brian didn't like. It normally came from advanced sickness or drug use.

"I have a right to see my son," he said, leaning over Sage.

Brian started to step forward. No one had the right to try to intimidate a woman like that. Then he noticed that Sage seemed supremely unaffected by the move. She probably had men do that all the time to her in her job.

"No, actually, you don't," she countered, voice calm. "I don't know what the fuck you're thinking, coming here like you have a right. The court has denied your parental rights unless you follow a process to get back in line with the child support. It's not that hard to figure out, Tim. I know I've told you several times, and your parents have told you several times. The world does not revolve around you. When two people get married and have a child it revolves around the child. You get that, right?"

Tim shook his head. "Stop shooting words at me, bitch. What did you tell the school? Why did they cancel?"

"I told them what I just told you, Tim, that you had no rights to act on anything in Adam's life, or even be a part of it. You're toxic."

He blinked and swayed, and Brian wondered if he'd had to drink to build up his courage to come here.

"How did you even know to come up here," Sage asked him. "We didn't tell your family."

His smile turned oily, and some clarity returned to his eyes. "Well, you put me down as the father, with an old phone number. That's why they called me and invited me up. Told me how brilliant my son was and that they were thrilled to have him. When I asked more questions, imagine my surprise when they told me there was a grant to relocate. Obviously, I

took advantage of that grant because I wanted to be close to my son. But Ohio? Really?"

Sage was furious. Brian could feel the anger radiating off her, and he wondered if he would need to rescue the asshole at the door.

"Let me warn you of something, Tim," she said, voice low. "That is fraud you just committed. And I have it all on camera. You are going to pay back that money, because you are not Adam's legal guardian. That was one of the stipulations of the grant money, asshole. You have to be the legal guardian of the student receiving the scholarship, and you are not. If I have to, I will go to the university and have them file fraud charges against you. I'm on the Columbus Police Department, and I'm meeting new people every day, like attorneys and vice detectives. All I have to do is drop a word into one of my new colleague's ears, and suddenly you're having to explain yourself. Again. In front of a judge. Again."

Tim's face closed down, and he pointed a finger in her face. "You're such a bitch. Why can't you let the goody-two shoes act go? Why can't you let me have a little bit of luck?"

Sage threw up her hands. "Because it's illegal, you idiot. And I'm not teaching my kid to skate through life looking for every loophole and side hustle he can get away with."

A small hand slipped into his and Brian looked down. Adam was staring at the altercation, frowning. He held the kid's hand and gave him a smile. "You're all right," he whispered.

Tim must have heard him, because he shifted his attention. As soon as he saw Brian, his expression shifted to anger. "Oh, and who is this? You've only been here a few months and you've already got a fuck buddy."

"That's enough, Tim," she snapped. "It's time for you to go."

She started to close the door, but Tim's gaze landed on Adam, and his expression lifted. "Oh, hey, son." Without regard to Sage, he pushed through the door, shoving her out of

the way, and crossed to kneel in front of Adam. Brian tightened his hand on the boy's, ready to jerk him out of reach if he needed to. Adam held on just as tight, but his feet were planted.

"Mom is right," the boy said, voice quivering just the tiniest bit. "You need to return that money. All you do is steal. From us, and your mom and dad, and Mom's mom and dad. Why are you here?"

Tim blinked, letting his hand fall. "I'm here for you, son. It's Thanksgiving."

"No, you're not," Adam said softly. "You're here to make trouble and upset Mom, and potentially endanger my future at the university. I know you are my biological father, but I don't want to see you. And I especially don't want to see you like this." He waved a hand. "There's an excessive amount of bilirubin in your blood, which is causing the whites of your eyes to turn yellow. Your breath is heinous, another marker of liver disease. That's why your belly is swollen. It's called ascites. You're a long-term alcoholic and if I had to guess, you don't have a long life ahead of you. Why would you think I want that in my life?"

Tim blinked, looking shocked, and swayed. Then, pushing to his feet, he rounded on Sage. "You've poisoned him against me."

Sage's arms were down at her sides, and she was ready to respond to anything he did. "No, I didn't. You did that yourself."

Tim looked down at the floor for a long moment, before he glanced around at them. "Fuck you all, then. I thought we could be a family again. I know I screwed up, but I'm trying to do better."

"If you were trying to do better, you'd take care of your child support obligation," Sage snapped, holding up a finger. Then she led up a second. "And you'd make a legal effort to see your son. You'd make an effort to stay out of trouble, but you obviously haven't. You'd make an effort to get out of the bottle once in a while." She shook her head, frustrated. "You

know, I think there's some glimmer of care in you for Adam, but you're too self-centered to nurture it. Get out, Tim."

She waved at the open door. Tim stared at her for a long moment, before he turned toward the door. He looked back once, at Adam, and Brian's hold on him, then he left.

Sage closed and locked the door behind him and opened her arms as Adam ran to her. The boy broke into tears, and it tore at Brian's heart, seeing him so upset. Sage cried as well, and he had to go to them. He wrapped his arms around them both and held them tight as they fought through their hurt. Then they all three slipped down to sit on the floor in front of the door, in a little huddle. Diamond came over, concerned, and snuffled at Adam's hair.

"I don't want him here, but I don't want him to die," Adam cried, reaching up to scratch his dog. "He looks bad, Mom."

"I know buddy, but there's nothing we can do about that. He's making the choices in his life, and we have no say over that. He's an alcoholic and sometimes it's just too hard for them to overcome."

Adam nodded, and his tears seemed to ease. "Children of alcoholics are four times more likely to be alcoholics themselves."

Sage nodded. "The possibility is there, but it's not a definite outcome. You know that."

"And I read that his alcoholism may be part of why I'm so anxious sometimes."

She nodded again. "I've seen that statistic too. But Adam, we all make our own choices. Now that you know the dangers of alcohol, you can avoid it."

"Luckily," Brian said, trying to ease some levity in, "you're too young to go to any frat parties while you're in college."

Adam gave him a weak smile. "True. I plan to be done with college before I'm seventeen."

Sage laughed and pressed a kiss to her son's forehead. "I have no doubt that you will, buddy." Then she reached up to Brian's jaw. "Thank you for being here with us."

Brian shook his head, his gaze bouncing between them. "I wouldn't rather be anywhere else," he said honestly. "If you haven't figured it out, yet, you two are very important to me. I hate that you have to go through this with Tim, but now we know. There's no more looking over our shoulders or feeling creeped out when we go somewhere. Sage, I suggest you call and file a police report to document everything that went on here tonight. Someone is going to have to follow up with OSU and perhaps get charges rolling."

Sage nodded, sighing. "More drama. I really hope this doesn't affect my job."

Brian made a sound in his throat. "You're a hero, and I don't think they can hold it against you. Everything is on camera. Plus, he admitted to taking the money. I have a feeling Parker's woman will jump on this."

Sage looked at Adam. "Are you okay, buddy? You know none of this is your fault, right? None of it ever was."

Adam wobbled his head. "Yeah, I guess. I kind of feel guilty because he wouldn't have come up here if it wasn't for me."

Sage tipped up his chin. "No. That is not on you. Period. Your father has always tried to scheme his way through life. This is another perfect example of that. He probably has trouble chasing him from Louisiana, just like he took off from Florida."

"Okay," Adam said, leaning against Brian. "I think Brian is right. You need to file a report."

"I know buddy," Sage said softly. "Gonna do that now."

With a final kiss to Adam's head and Brian's mouth, she stood up. Then Brian boosted Adam up, making him laugh. Brian swung his left leg around and got his good knee under him, then pushed up. It was a challenge getting his big ass up off the floor, but he managed it.

Sage watched him with a smile. “Just waiting to see if you needed help.”

He waved a hand at her. “Nah, I’m good.” He gave her a big, smacking kiss and swatted her on the behind. “You were awful sexy, standing up to him that way.”

Sage grinned and led him into the kitchen. “Really? I was worried it was going to lead to a fight or something. I’m still not a hundred percent.”

“I think we both could have taken him,” Brian murmured.

“Yeah, probably. Now I don’t have to worry about the mental scars on my child from seeing that though. Tonight was bad enough.”

Brian turned her with a hand on her arm. “But he saw you stand up for yourself and remedy the situation. And he got to say his piece too. That was a badass little dude, there.”

“Yes, true,” she sighed, and looped her arms around his shoulders for a hug. Brian pulled her tight, swaying slightly. Then smaller arms looped around his waist, and Brian pulled Adam tight as well. “You guys did perfect tonight,” he said, and he meant it.



THE COLUMBUS PD Sergeant that arrived was no one she knew, but he gave her a look when he walked in the room. “You’re the one that got banged up over on Hogue.”

“Yeah,” Sage sighed. “That’s me.”

The man held out his hand. “Derek Lane. Gary Blake was my T.O. ten years ago. I’ve been following the news on him. It’s a damn shame.”

“Yes, it is. Now he finally has to retire, which I hear he’s been threatening to do a long time.”

Sergeant Lane laughed. “The man was old when he trained me,” he exclaimed. “Now, what can I do for you?”

Sage explained the situation and showed him the footage on her phone of Tim pushing through the door and past her.

Lane nodded. "I can trespass him if you want, and I have a feeling we could scrape assault charges off that too, for him pushing you."

Sage shook her head. "I don't want to be the one to charge him. He does have a pending felony warrant out of Florida, though. If, by chance, you find him and speak to him, you might keep that in mind when you run him. And he didn't say how much the grant was from OSU, but it's probably at least five grand."

Lane jotted down notes and called several things in. Because they were heading into the holiday, he warned her, they may not be able to contact anyone at the college for a report for a few days.

"That's fine. I just wanted you to have all the details."

Lane promised to do what he could tonight to try to track him down, but again, no promises. He took Adam's statement about what had happened and seemed shocked at the boy's recall. Then he took Brian's statement, and they seemed to connect over shared former Marine chatter.

The officer handed her a card. "If you don't hear anything from me tonight, I'll contact you Friday, at the latest. Turkey day is usually a shitshow of domestic violence cases, so I doubt I'll be able to do anything tomorrow."

"That's fine," Sage said, for the first time feeling guilty for being off. She was low woman on the totem pole, and if the accident hadn't happened she probably would have been working tomorrow. And Adam would have been home alone. Sigh.

Once the officer left, she sagged onto the couch. Brian and Adam had started up the game system, but they paused when she came in.

"You had to do it, Mom," Adam said, coming over to her.

"I know, buddy. I don't think he'll ever learn."

Adam shook his head and turned back to the screen. Brian leaned down and gave her a kiss on the forehead, and she could see the approval in his expression. “Don’t beat yourself up about it,” he whispered. “It had to be done.”

Yeah, she supposed it did. Sage took a deep breath and turned to look at what the boys were doing. “So, what’s the point of this game?”

Thanksgiving was a sedate affair. Sage went through the motions of cooking the monster dinner because it seemed wrong not to. She'd been raised in a household that celebrated Thanksgiving with more food than could ever be eaten, even with the large family gathering. She had two brothers, their kids, and a bunch of cousins and they all usually gathered on the ranch for the holiday. It had been some of the best times of her life, hanging with them in the barn with the animals and getting into trouble.

Adam didn't have that, and she was very conscious of the lack. Their family had shrunk when they moved to Ohio.

Adam didn't seem concerned, though. He gushed over everything she made, especially the pecan pie at the end. She watched Brian taste everything she made as well, and by the end, he seemed more than full. "I know we're supposed to watch a game or something after this, but I'd rather just take a nap," he said, grinning.

So, once the food was put away, they curled up on the couch with blankets and watched a movie. If they fell asleep, no one said anything.

Sage loved these relaxed times in their home, because there was too much not-relaxed time. Adam's course schedule was going to be bananas after the holidays, and she wasn't looking forward to it. She was going to go back to the road full-time, and she wasn't even sure which shift yet.

Would Brian be around? She wasn't sure. She didn't want to count on his presence, then him not be there.

The thought of him leaving made her feel ill.

But she would hold to her word. Once they figured out what Tim was doing, and Adam was safe, she would let him go if she had to.

The movie was supposed to be a comedy, but suddenly, she felt like crying. Brian had moved into their apartment, and her heart, and it was not going to be easy to lose him.

You're looking for trouble, girl. Just wait and see what happens.

Glancing at Adam, who seemed content in the moment, she wrestled with the conflicting emotions within her.

"I was thinking," Brian spoke up, breaking the sleepy silence that had settled over them. "Maybe we could all go for a hike tomorrow. Get some fresh air. Avoid the Black Friday crowds."

Sage looked at Brian, grateful for the distraction. The idea of spending time outdoors appealed to her, and it could be a welcome break from the looming worries that clouded her mind.

"That sounds like a great idea," Adam chimed in, his eyes brightening at the prospect. "A bit of nature therapy. And maybe we can go see Gary afterward."

As they discussed the details of their impromptu hiking plans and visit, Sage couldn't help but feel a mix of gratitude and apprehension. The normalcy of the suggestion provided a temporary escape from the tension of their current situation. But she still worried.

After the movie ended, they headed for bed. Sage found herself lying awake, staring at the ceiling, thoughts swirling like a tempest. The uncertainty of the future weighed heavily on her, and the desire to protect those she cared about warred with the fear of losing them.

"What's wrong, babe?"

She rocked her head on the pillow to look at Brian. The cracked bathroom door let enough light in that she could see his strong face, and the concern furrowing his brows.

“Just worrying,” she admitted. “My dad didn’t want us to move out here. He wanted Adam to do online courses and stay close to family. I’m wondering if I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You can’t keep Adam from growing,” Brian said. “It would be a disservice to him and possibly the world. Think about that. He has the ability to make a significant difference in people’s lives, depending upon what he goes into. I know he has a lot of interests, right now, but once he gets more experience, he’ll narrow it down.”

“Yes, you’re right, I know. I think I’m just feeling the crunch of everything, and not being with family over the holiday. A lot has happened in the past couple of months.”

“I get that,” he murmured, pulling her against his chest. “But sometimes it’s just not feasible to be with family.”

“What about your parents,” she asked, propping her chin to look up at him. “Do you miss them?”

One side of his mouth pinched in a grimace. “Of course, I do. But the past couple of times I went home it was a little weird. I think my mother regrets encouraging me to go into the Marines. Because if she hadn’t encouraged me, I wouldn’t have been injured. Now I’m disabled and it’s like every time she looks at me and my limp, I see this regret in her eyes. Plus, I think she thinks no one will ever love me like this.”

Sage sat up on the bed, the emotion bubbling in her gut boiling over. Anger slammed through her, hot and sudden. “Are you fucking serious? Did she tell you that?”

Brian stared at her. “No, she didn’t. It’s just a feeling I get.”

Sage shook her head, truly angry. Angrier than when Tim had been at the door. “How could anyone *not* love you? I mean, look at us.” She motioned between them. “Between the accident and you taking care of me and moving in with us to protect Adam from Tim, I don’t know how she could even

think that. Shame on her for not having faith in you. I appreciate the fuck out of you, Brian. You've stepped up more than any other man I've known, and I love you for that. More importantly, I love you for being a man my son can look up to."

Brian sat up slowly, staring at her hard. And that was when she realized what she'd said.

Fuck.

"You're getting very angry on my behalf," he murmured, mouth tipping in a smile.

"Well," she huffed, "I consider you part of my family now. And I want you to know that even when you leave, I will always be here for you. And Adam will always be here for you. There's no..."

Brian held up a hand to stop her flow. "Wait a minute. Why do you think I'm leaving? Have I hinted in any way that I'm not happy here, with you? Or with him?"

Sage blinked. "No, you haven't, but you got tangled up with us because you're an honorable man and there was no easy way to get out. You knew I didn't have family around to help when I got hurt, and you'd never leave a child defenseless."

"Have you seriously been thinking that this entire time?"

Sage winced, looking away as tears filled her eyes. Brian reached out, turning her face to his. "Babe, I want you to look at it from my perspective. And this is no bullshit. Imagine my surprise when I realized that the new next-door neighbors were the two most interesting people I could remember ever meeting. And the woman was the one I'd been fantasizing about and jerking off to for the past two months."

Sage giggled, a ridiculous sound, even as her eyes overflowed.

"Imagine my emotions," he said, "as they invited me into their lives and I saw first-hand what an amazing mother she was, and woman, to have taken care of her son alone for so long. I'm truly sorry you got hurt, but it gave me an opening to

learn more about you and fall even more in love with you. I was in no way obligated, but I wanted to be here for you. Then, that night you woke up and saw my legs, I was worried that it would turn you off, but you didn't care."

"They're just part of you," she said. "They're like Adam's glasses. Just something you need to get through life."

He smiled at her and shook his head. "It was sweet torture, though, not being able to hold you and kiss you the way I wanted to when you were hurt."

He leaned toward her, running kisses across her face. He kissed her tears away and made sure she was looking at him. "Then, when you progressively got better, I knew my time with you was ending. And I was really torn on that." He snorted softly. "I'll tell you a secret. If Adam hadn't suggested I move in, I would have. And I'd have convinced you that it was in all our best interests. I don't feel that Tim is much of a danger anymore, honestly, but I've been dreading hearing from Officer Lane that he'd been arrested or something. Because then my reason for being here, with you, would evaporate."

He let that sink in for a moment, then continued. "All this is to tell you I love you, Sage. You've given me a taste of something I've been looking for a long time, and I don't want to give it up."

Sage burst into tears, shocking them both. Chuckling, Brian pulled her tight against him, his arms strong around her shoulders. "Oh, babe, I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I'm sorry," she said, reaching for a tissue from the box beside the bed to blow her nose. "I've been dreading you leaving. You've ruined me for other men, Brian," she laughed, forcing the tears away.

"Well, how about I don't ever leave, then? When all this calms down, let's talk about getting married. I'd love to find a house and really settle down. Maybe give Adam a brother or sister..."

Her eyes welled again, and she nodded, too choked up to speak.

“Breathe, Sage.”

She took a breath, then another, and leaned in to kiss him. “I love you, Brian.”

“I love you, too, Sage. More than I ever thought possible. Now,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “Let’s consummate this pact,” he said, swinging her down onto the mattress. Sage giggled and wrapped her arms around his huge shoulders.



THEY BUNDLED up and went hiking the next day at Indian Run Falls in Dublin. Diamond jumped into his truck like she’d been doing it all her life, making Adam giggle as she batted him in the face with her tail.

Sage looked sensational today, in jeans, a warm looking cream-colored sweater and serious looking hiking boots. There was also a knit headband around her head to keep her ears warm.

Her gaze followed him, and it was almost like she was waiting for him to backtrack what he’d said last night, but there was no way he was going to. He was in love with Sage, and he was going to convince her that he was going to stay.

Brian was surprised at how many people were in the park, but it didn’t stop them. He very carefully watched where he placed his feet, doing his damndest not to screw up. At one point, in an especially rocky section, Sage stepped close and pulled his hand up on her shoulder, to help brace him. Brian appreciated that, and he accepted her help, then they kept going.

Adam talked almost non-stop, to the point that he made them laugh. “I think he could talk the hide off a cow,” Brian laughed.

Sage just shook her head. She was used to the constant flow of chatter.

They were hiking back to the truck when Sage's cell phone rang. She shared a look with Brian. "It's Lane," she said, answering the line.

Once she confirmed who she was, Sage went silent, with only the occasional 'okay'. Adam had gone silent, and he watched his mother carefully. When she hung up, she held an arm out to pull him close.

"Tim has been arrested," she said. "Florida wants him, so he's in jail until they come get him. Ohio State has been notified and they are talking to legal counsel."

"But he's not going to bother us anymore?" Adam asked, voice smaller than it had been all day.

"That is correct," she confirmed. "He is in jail waiting for Florida to come get him."

Adam nodded and leaned his head against her. "Good. Maybe they'll be able to help him."

"Maybe, buddy. Let's hope so."

Adam was quiet as they loaded into the truck, then he seemed to change. The motormouth came back, and he started giggling more. Though he didn't say it out right, Brian could tell that Adam was relieved not to have to worry about his father anymore. And Sage fed on Adam's improved mood.

They cruised by the apartment to drop Diamond off at home, then they went to see Gary. Candice was at her husband's side, of course, crocheting something with dark blue yarn.

Brian liked the couple as soon as he met them, and he understood why Sage and Adam enjoyed their company. They were easy to be around, even in the hospital setting. Gary had been a Marine many years ago, so they had common ground.

Adam leaned into Candice's arms. "Is this the one you told me about," Candice murmured, nodding at Brian.

Adam grinned. "Yes. He's going to marry my mom."

“Adam,” Sage snapped. “That’s not polite.”

“But it’s true,” he said, and he reached out to bump Brian’s fist.

EPILOGUE

Brian grinned as he pulled up his texts, scrolling through till he found Duncan Wilde.

Hey, boss man. Thought I'd be the first to invite you to the wedding.

Wait, what wedding? WTF are you talking about?

Brian laughed and pulled up his pictures. He sent Duncan one of he and Sage at the holiday party last night. It was just a long-armed selfie, but the Christmas lights gave her an ethereal glow. And *she* made him look good.

She's beautiful! Are you seriously getting married?

Next summer sometime. I'll send you the details as soon as we pull something together. I just wanted to thank you for letting me change things up. It was exactly what I needed.

I'm glad, Brian. You deserve every single happiness. Can I tell the crew?

Yup. I already talked to Grif and Diego. Tell the guys to be prepared to make a trek out here to visit the Buckeye Brigade.

LOLOLOL! Roger that!



SAGE GASPED, staring at the screen. “I can not believe she said that!”

“Oh, just wait. It gets better,” Brian said, scrolling forward through the commercials.

They were curled up on the couch, watching the reunion of the most recent housewife iteration. “These women are so over the top.”

“Can you imagine how Bear and Gabbie would lose their shit if they ever did a Columbus show?”

Brian snorted. “I think Gabbie would do her best to be on the damn thing. She has her fingers in so many pies around here. I’ve decided she must be running the Columbus mob. Or maybe just doing their books.”

Sage snorted, pulling the blanket up over top of them. Now that they were an official couple, they were making time to do couple things, which meant watching TV together. Sage never thought she’d be pulled into the over-the-top dramas, but it served two purposes. It let her cuddle against Brian’s warm, delicious chest, and it gave him some street cred at work.

Street cred by watching housewives. What the hell...

“I don’t even think Gabbie and Bear like the housewives,” Brian said thoughtfully. “I think it just gives them something to bicker about, and they’ve pulled the rest of the office into it.”

“Sounds like a little unwanted attraction, maybe?” Sage suggested.

Brian winked at her. “Kind of what I was thinking too. But I may be wrong. It’s too early to say.”

Sage had met the group last night at the Lost and Found Columbus holiday party. It had been a glorious, glittering affair at an exclusive restaurant downtown, and it had been the first time Brian had introduced her as his fiancée. She looked

down at the glittering ring on her finger. She didn't like to wear it at work, but she couldn't not. It meant the world to her.

Sage had gone back to full-time this week and it was kind of kicking her ass. The higher-ups had decided that her training was complete, and they'd partnered her with another veteran, a woman this time, and she continued to learn. Men and women taught differently, and she appreciated having both Elise's and Gary's perspective on the way the law was carried out in Columbus.

They'd gone to visit Gary the other day, and he was improving steadily. With Candice by his side, he'd moved to a rehab facility. It was more homey and less sterile, and he was getting used to the idea of not going back to work. He and Candice were planning their trip to Germany, though it would be a couple years down the road. That would give him, and Candice, plenty of time to heal from this mess.

Adam shifted on the floor. He'd passed out an hour ago, and Sage had just covered him up where he lay, gently removing his glasses. For about the past eight years, he'd done the same thing every Christmas Eve. He would curl up on the living room floor in an effort to catch Santa and prove he wasn't real.

Luckily, he fell asleep every year. He didn't still believe in Santa Claus, but he did like the tradition of sleeping near the tree. Diamond enjoyed it too, so Sage indulged them. It didn't hurt anything.

She was sure they would do it at the new house as well.

This Christmas was going to be even more fun. Brian had steadily been building the stack of presents under the tree. When Sage had admonished him to stop, he'd given her a dour look. "I've never shopped for my son before. I'm making up for lost time."

Those words had made her eyes fill with tears, and she hadn't said any more about what he brought in for Adam.

She and Adam had gone hunting as well, and they'd found several fun things for Brian. Tomorrow was going to be

amazing. It already *was* amazing.

“I have to pinch myself sometimes, to believe this is real,” she breathed. “I never imagined I would find a love like this,” she said, turning to him. She looked into his warm, smiling eyes. “I love you, Brian, with my entire being.”

“I love you too, babe. I won’t pinch you, but if you need some loving to prove it’s real, I’m more than happy to do that for you.”

She gave him a saucy grin. “My hero,” she said, and tugged him up off the couch.



ADAM SMILED as he listened to his mom and Brian leave the room. According to all the statistics he’d read, a healthy sex life was vital to a strong marriage. He had no doubt that this would be one of the strongest.

“I told you we could do it girl,” he said, rubbing Diamond’s fur.

Sighing, he closed his eyes.

ALSO BY JM MADDEN

There are three books set in Lost and Found Columbus now!

Flat Line

Slow Burn

The Hero Next Door

If you would like to read about the 'combat modified' veterans of the **Lost and Found Investigative Service**, check out these books:

The Embattled Road

Duncan, John and Chad

Embattled Hearts-Book 1

John and Shannon

Embattled Minds-Book 2

Zeke and Ember

Embattled Home-Book 3

Chad and Lora

Embattled SEAL- Book 4

Harper and Cat

Embattled Ever After- Book 5

Duncan and Alex

Her Forever Hero- Grif

Grif and Kendall

SEAL's Lost Dream-Flynn

Flynn and Willow

SEAL's Christmas Dream

Flynn and Willow

Unbreakable SEAL-

Max and Lacey.

Embattled Christmas

Reclaiming The Seal

Gabe and Julie

Loving Lilly.

Diego and Lilly.

Her Secret Wish

Rachel and Dean

Wish Upon a SEAL

Drake and Izzy.

[Mistletoe Mischief](#)

[Cass and Roger](#)

[Lost and Found Pieces](#)

[Lost and Found Pieces 2](#)

There are two Lost and Found Spinoff series, the Lowells, a western series, and the Dogs of War, which heads in a bit of a paranormal direction.

[The Lowells of Honeywell, Texas Box Set](#)

[Forget Me Not](#)

[Untying his Not](#)

[Naughty by Nature](#)

[Trying the Knot](#)

[The Dogs of War](#)

[Genesis](#)

[Chaos](#)

[Destruction](#)

[Retribution](#)

[Catalyst](#)

If you love dogs and would like to read about a concierge service helping military personnel out of difficult spots, check out:

[Healing Home](#)

[Wicked Healing](#)

[Healing Hope](#)

If you would like to read a Navy SEAL book with more mature characters, check out

[**SEAL Hard**](#)

[**Flat Line**](#)

[**Shadow of the Moon**](#)

[**Shadow Games**](#)

Other books by J.M. Madden

[A Touch of Fae](#)

[Second Time Around](#)

[A Needful Heart](#)

[Wet Dream](#)

[Love on the Line](#)

[The Billionaire's Secret Obsession](#)

If you'd like to connect with me on social media and keep updated on my releases, try these links:

[Lost and Found Series Discussion Group](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Facebook Like page-](#)

And of course you can always email me at authorjmmadden@gmail.com