



THE PROTECTOR'S

Mistake

RITA® AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

LEAH ASHTON

THE PROTECTOR'S MISTAKE

SHADOW TEAM SIX BOOK FOUR

LEAH ASHTON



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PROLOGUE

*THE GRANDE FOX & LAUGHTON HOTEL LOBBY—AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION IN
the Middle East*

Five years ago

“OOH! TYLER!” a woman called out in a crisp British accent.

Approaching Tyler Cerra across the luxury hotel lobby was the lovely woman who’d climbed out of his bed only about five hours earlier. She was smiling widely and dragging a hot-pink suitcase. “Before I go, let’s take a selfie. I need a souvenir.”

He happily obliged, slinging his arm over the backpacker’s shoulders and smiling for the camera as she raised her phone in front of them. Reflected in the screen was Katie, with her wild curls, and him, with his near-black hair just long enough to wave a little and a week’s worth of stubble coating his jaw. As a Delta Force operator, he had more leeway with his appearance than standard military personnel. His Italian nonna was particularly pleased about this, as she still took great joy in ruffling his hair whenever he was home in St Louis. But more importantly, if he looked more civilian and less military, he could more easily blend in on missions. His latest, concluding just before this week of rest and relaxation, had been an extremely complex covert prisoner

exchange in Afghanistan.

As Katie took several shots, the busy hotel lobby buzzed with activity. This place was fucking awesome, so far beyond Tyler's prior R & R destinations it wasn't funny. He was here with his squadron teammate Andy Torres, and they'd met a handful of other special forces soldiers in the three days they'd been here. The Fox & Laughton chain of hotels had just signed an agreement with the United States Armed Forces, and so far Tyler would absolutely give that decision five stars. He'd had three days of lazing by a spectacular pool, drinking at incredible luxury bars, and meeting some stunning women. Katie was the only one he'd taken back to his room, but the week was still young.

Torres gave him shit about how often he hooked up when on leave, but seriously—they both saw some seriously fucked-up stuff as Delta Force operators, and was there anything more life-affirming than sex? And Tyler Cerra loved sex, and he *loved* women. And he was lucky enough that women seemed to like him a lot too.

Katie dropped her arm and scrolled through the photos she'd taken. She sighed as she zoomed in on his face. "Bloody hell, you're gorgeous. You could be a model."

He shrugged but didn't respond. He'd first been scouted by a modelling agent when he was skateboarding with friends at age fifteen, but he hadn't been interested then or the half dozen other times it'd happened. Including once in Tehran while on a mission, which he still hadn't lived down with his team. He knew what he looked like, knew it had a *lot* of perks, but it was just the luck of the genetic draw.

Katie studied him. "Although I suppose the military is a far worthier cause than a catwalk."

"Hmm," he said, noncommittally. "Maybe." More recently—and because of all that fucked-up stuff he'd seen—his views on war were murkier than they'd once been. He loved what he did, but there was a niggle now that he

hadn't fully explored, that meant he wasn't about to belittle the fashion industry. If he'd been a model, maybe he would've brought a lot more joy to the world than he had carrying an M4 assault rifle?

But this was all far too philosophical for nine in the morning and absolutely not what Katie wanted from him.

"I'd better get to breakfast," he said. Torres and the others would be waiting at the same table they'd shared each morning.

She nodded, then stood on tiptoes to press a brief kiss to his lips. "And I've got a plane to catch." She dropped back to her heels as she smiled up at him. "I had a great night, Tyler."

"Me too."

She didn't ask to exchange numbers, or to add each other on socials, and he didn't either. That wasn't what this had been about—this had never been about any other connection than the physical. All he'd been to her was a hot guy who could make her come—and she was the hot girl who had made him come. Torres didn't understand how that was *all* Tyler needed, but it absolutely was. And goddamn, it was fun.

He helped carry her luggage to her waiting taxi, then headed for the restaurant.

TYLER WAS about halfway through his small mountain of bacon and eggs when a stranger had approached their table. The tall man was clearly military, and he was talking to Devin McCarthy, a Navy SEAL who'd appointed himself an activity leader of sorts to this group of special forces soldiers while at the Fox & Laughton. Five of them had been hanging out these past few days—two Navy SEALs, Torres and Tyler from Delta Force, and a younger Marine Raider, Caleb. Dev gestured at a spare chair at the table.

"This is Sam. We were on the same flight out of Kabul," Dev said. "Guys—tell him who the heck you all are."

“Tyler Cerra, Delta Force,” Tyler said, taking the lead. “Call me Cez.”

“Maybe not as loudly as that girl last night, hey?” Torres quipped from across the table, never one to let an opportunity pass to throw shade. “Need my beauty sleep, my man, and she was like a damn foghorn. *Cheeezzzzz*,” he groaned obnoxiously, attracting the attention of the neighboring tables.

Tyler threw his linen napkin at Torres, hitting him in the forehead. “Fuck off,” he said, but he was smiling. He turned back to Sam and shrugged. “Not gonna apologize for making a lady feel good. Andy here just needs to stop pressing his ear up against my bedroom door.” He dropped his voice to a mock whisper. “We all know that’s as close as he’s getting to any action.”

This was because Andy Torres was engaged—a concept Tyler found inexplicable, especially at twenty-seven. Why on earth would anyone want to settle down when there was a lifetime of brand-new experiences ahead of them?

Torres threw the napkin back with interest, although Tyler easily caught it midair.

“*Seu cu de burro*,” Torres replied. “And a total slut.”

“And proud of it,” Tyler said, because he definitely didn’t think enjoying sex was a bad thing, but then frowned. “Maybe not the first part though. What’s a burro? A horse?”

“You’re a donkey’s ass,” Torres translated. “Obviously.”

Tyler tilted his head as if carefully considering his teammate’s insult. “Nope,” he declared after a moment. “I’m a fucking work of art.”

Torres laughed as he shook his head.

This was a totally standard conversation between the two of them—they had been tight since Delta Force selection. Torres was the closest friend he’d ever had, and he trusted him with his life. Which he’d proven, on several occasions.

Andy introduced himself to Sam. “Delta Force teammate and roommate of that conceited ass.” He nodded at Tyler. “I have a fiancée back home,

which is why I'm not wetting my dick in anything that moves."

Tyler leaned back in his wicker chair and crossed his arms before replying smugly, "If she's not wet, you're doing it wrong."

They'd already drawn the attention of the adjacent table with the napkin throwing, and with his latest comment, Tyler earned a shocked gasp and the glare of a woman probably about his mom's age. He grimaced internally, imagining his nonna smacking him over the head for daring to speak like that in polite company. *I'm sorry*, he mouthed, then followed it up with a blinding smile, which resulted in an instant blush and shy smile in return.

Yep, his looks occasionally came in handy. Fuck knew how many times a simple smile and laying his Missouri accent on a little thick had resulted in a free pass. Whether he was facing a parking fine or being late to class, the Tyler Cerra smile was a potent tool. About the only time it had zero currency was as a Delta Force operator.

The conversation moved on around the table, and Tyler returned his focus to his meal. The restaurant hummed with conversation, and beyond the double-height arched windows, kids splashed happily in the resort's spectacular sprawling pool. That pool was definitely his destination after breakfast; he had plans for several hours of dozing on a sun lounger.

A change in tone at the table drew his attention back to Sam.

Garrett Walker, Navy SEAL and Dev's teammate, had kept entirely to himself these past three days, doing little more than grunt at the rest of them each morning. But the antagonism the hulking dude was directing at Sam was the most emotion Tyler had ever seen him display. Clearly he knew their new tablemate.

Tyler glanced across the table and raised his eyebrows at Torres as Garrett introduced himself. *What do we have here?*

"Garrett Walker," Garrett grunted at Sam. "Navy SEAL and former resident of Falcon, Colorado." He paused. "The dirt-poor part, which is why a Taberner would never have deigned to know my name."

Deigned? Seriously? Tyler grinned at Torres. *How goddamn dramatic.*

“You’re a Walker?” Sam asked, frowning. It appeared that whatever small-town drama this was, so far it was flying over Sam’s head.

“That’s what I said.” Garrett reopened the book in his hand.

“I’ve read that,” Sam said lightly. “I like the next book in the series the best.”

“Your parents wouldn’t want you talking to trash like me, *Sam*,” Garrett said, never looking up from his book.

Whoa. It wasn’t just animosity emanating from Garrett, but a shit ton of hurt too. Tyler’s grin dropped, and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

But Sam clearly didn’t hear the vulnerability in Garrett’s words that was suddenly obvious to Tyler.

“*Fuck, man,*” Sam replied, “Want to shove that chip off your shoulder? Don’t know what your beef is with me, but I am certain I was never in class with you, let alone took your place on the baseball team or stole your girl or did anything I can think of to deserve this hostility.” He pushed back his chair. “Thanks, Devin, but I’ll go wait for a table. I don’t have time for this shit.”

Dev stood quickly and went to follow Sam.

Andy caught Tyler’s gaze. “Man, that was randomly intense—”

But the sudden unmistakable *boom* of an explosion instantly silenced his teammate.

So loud, so shocking—and so close. A bomb—what else could it be?—had exploded in the hotel’s picture-perfect lobby, where he’d stood not fifteen minutes earlier.

A stunned moment of stillness gave way to awful, terrified screams. Tyler leapt to his feet as smoke poured into the room.

“We need to get everyone out of here,” Torres barked. “And check for casualties.”

Tyler gave a sharp nod in reply.

Underneath the sounds of panic and pain came the horribly familiar sound of gunfire.

He ran into the lobby.

ONE

FIVE YEARS LATER—PRESENT DAY

Guneo, Colorado

TYLER'S GAZE drifted to the surrounding mountains as he pumped gas into his 4x4. It was about 9am on a glorious Monday morning in Colorado. After a week spent hiking and camping alone in the nearby Flat Tops Wilderness area, he'd booked a night at an Airbnb cabin just out Guneo so he could have a hot shower and wash his clothes before his upcoming week in Falcon training with the Shadow Team.

He'd chosen to drive the 1000 miles to Falcon from where he lived in Branson, Missouri so he could use the time to clear his head. That was what he'd told himself: *Take the time to drive, go hiking, sleep under the stars—it'll help clear your head.*

Sounded good, right? Real sensible.

Yet his head was not clear. It was packed full to the brim with all its usual bullshit.

And he didn't even *like* camping. What the hell had he been thinking? He'd slept rough often enough as a Delta Force operator to know he slept like shit anywhere but a bed.

Although he slept pretty shit in beds these days too.

The arrival of a second car at the gas station drew his attention. A blue Ford Focus zipped into the lot before jerking to an abrupt halt on the other side of his pump. Barely a moment later, the door flung open and a woman rocketed out.

She was tall and more skinny than slim, with a kind of gangly appearance—as if she were made mostly of legs. Those legs were clad in dark-blue denim jeans, and she wore bright white sneakers, a snug equally bright white T-shirt, and a lightweight tweed blazer with the sleeves shoved up to her elbows. Her hair was as dark a brown as his, but unlike his own overly long, barely thought about locks, her thick hair was caught up in some neat braid-cum-bun arrangement near the top of her head, with long bangs framing her face. After untwisting her fuel cap, she tucked those long strands firmly behind her ears, before swiping her credit card at the pump.

She was only a few yards away from him, with only the little bank of pumps separating them, yet she paid him no notice. Instead, she muttered to herself as she tapped at the payment screen on the pump, just loud enough that he could mostly hear her.

“Why do I always fucking do this? What the hell is wrong with me?”

Uncomfortable, he turned back to his own truck as a *clunk* of the handle signified his tank was full. He felt like he’d just eavesdropped on something private. Which was silly, really, given he’d done nothing more than exist in the vicinity of the woman’s apparent crisis.

Or maybe his discomfort had nothing to do with her. After all, her self-admonishment: *What the hell is wrong with me?* was awfully familiar.

What the fuck is wrong with you, Cerra?

It’d been three years since Torres had shouted those words at him while incandescent with fury and flexing the knuckles he’d—quite rightly—smashed into Tyler’s nose.

What the fuck is wrong with you, Cerra?

Well, where to start?

He didn't look at the woman again as he replaced the fuel nozzle on the pump and then walked into the gas station's small convenience store to grab some snacks for the hundred-mile drive to Falcon. He paused on the way back from the register to shove his tube of Pringles under his arm and balance his pretzels and Pepsi in one hand so he could use the other to open the shop door, when he barreled the woman.

Seeing him blocking the path to the counter, she came to a sudden stop. "Excuse me," she said, barely glancing at him.

Then, as Tyler was kind of used to, her attention swung back to his face as she did an obvious double take. This was the first opportunity he'd had to look at her properly, and he was immediately drawn to her eyes: big, a deep brown, and framed with long lashes. Like the rest of her, her face was narrow and angular, with a slender, pointed nose, a strong chin and sharp cheekbones. She wasn't traditionally beautiful—her nose was probably a tad too long and her lips more thin than full. She was even taller than he'd thought, too, probably only three or four inches shorter than his six-one.

She put her hands on her hips, drawing his gaze briefly to her small breasts before he jerked it upward as he realized what he was doing.

"*Excuse me,*" she repeated, narrowing those lovely chocolate eyes. In fact, she was glaring at him.

She wasn't blushing or smiling or giggling nervously. Not to say that every woman reacted to him in that way, but well . . . most did.

He smiled as he belatedly stepped aside. Only a few seconds had passed, yet her glower suggested this brief delay was inexcusable. His standard megawatt Tyler Cerra smile only seemed to deepen her disdain.

She sniffed, muttered *thank you*, then marched on past.

Something made him turn to watch her. She had perfect posture, her spine ramrod straight as she informed the cashier in a friendly but firm tone that the pump payment wasn't working. Her blazer was hip length, giving him a view

of the bottom half of her ass—and that ass, unlike most of her, wasn't angular in the slightest. It had a neat, full curve that would provide him with more than a handful to grab onto when he . . .

Goddamn.

What the fuck?

He shoved open the door and strode to his truck without looking back.

It shouldn't be surprising, really, after three years without sex, that a woman could make the blood rush to his cock. But it was, because in those three years, not one other woman had. And why this woman? Who looked nothing like any woman he'd ever dated—and who was clearly indifferent to him . . .

He climbed into his truck and slammed the door with far more effort than necessary.

There was no point even thinking about it.

Of course he missed sex. He missed everything about it.

But you couldn't fuck up the way he had without consequences.

And after the way he'd fucked up?

Fuck, this was the least of what he deserved.

PAIGE EMMETT GRIPPED the steering wheel of her navy-blue Ford Focus hard as she drove down the I-Something, and took a deep breath.

She was running late.

This was not unusual, unfortunately. At some point in her adult life she'd accepted she was incapable of accurately estimating how long literally *anything* would take and had attempted all sorts of tricks in order to be more punctual. Like pretending an appointment was thirty minutes earlier than it actually was. Or an assignment was due two days earlier. Or setting the clocks in her house—on the oven, the alarm clock on her dresser and so on—ahead fifteen minutes.

But none of that made any difference, because she mentally allowed for all that *extra* time and still—far more often than she liked—ended up in the state she was in right now: with her gut churning, her hands clammy, and a bone-deep sense of shame for . . . yet again . . . being a thirty-year-old woman who was late for something important.

Today that *something important* was a cybersecurity workshop she was running at the Falcon County Library. Up until now, this Colorado-wide school and library tour hadn't suffered too badly from her tardiness. Sure, she'd had far less time than she'd have liked to set up for most of her presentations, but not one had started behind time.

Today she would.

Not by a lot, most likely. Based on when she'd checked her route on Google Maps at the gas station in Guneo (forgetting she needed gas was what had gotten her into this predicament, only exacerbated by the pump payment not working – wasn't that always the way? She was late and then some *new* issue made it even worse?), she'd likely rush in the door at exactly eleven am. She'd already called ahead to her contact at the library, a really lovely woman named Casey Taberner who'd assured her that her audience of mostly retirees would be perfectly happy chatting among themselves until she arrived, but still.

It was the principle of it all, wasn't it? Why the hell did she always do this? To herself and the hapless people left waiting for her?

She gritted her teeth.

Self-recrimination wasn't going to get her to the library any earlier, but promising herself that *next time* this wouldn't happen was pretty much a crapshoot.

She wasn't stupid—there was no way she could've built what once had been a side hustle into her full-time business if she were. She'd established Emmett Investigations, a specialized catfishing investigation company, four years ago. After a couple of years, she'd expanded into offering short online

courses to help people stay safe on the internet, and from there had been invited to speak at her local library in Arvada, near Denver. Since then, she'd begun to speak at schools, retirement villages, and libraries across Colorado. This latest tour had taken her as far west as Grand Junction, and she'd spent the previous week delivering several talks and workshops each day as she'd made her way back toward Denver. Her latest stop had been at Guneo Library on Saturday, after which she'd taken Sunday off to relax at a little cottage just out of town before today's visit to Falcon.

Yesterday she'd allowed herself a moment to reflect on this totally unexpected career she'd created, even toasting her success with champagne on the back porch of the rented cottage. Sure, only the surrounding wilderness heard it, but it'd felt damn good.

So, she wasn't stupid. She was an accomplished, independent woman.

Who was incapable of being on time.

She let out a long sigh as she used the controls on her steering wheel to raise the volume of her Taylor Swift playlist hopefully loud enough to redirect her brain.

Her gaze flicked up to her rearview mirror. A black truck far behind her was the only car on the highway, the only car she'd seen since she'd left Guneo, in fact.

She frowned as she refocused on the road. That car looked a *lot* like the vehicle that'd been parked beside her at the gas station. She'd nearly walked into its owner in her quest to pay as efficiently as possible, and he'd looked *exactly* like the type of man who owned such an overblown truck. The car was huge—broad and tall, just like its owner. The man had been wearing a slim-fitting khaki-green T-shirt that showcased his muscular shoulders and biceps, and had had a smile as ostentatious as the 4x4's chrome grill.

Until he'd blocked her progress—not intentionally, she knew—she hadn't even looked at him. All she'd cared about was filling her tank and getting on her way. But when she *had* looked at him, he had, admittedly, stopped her in

her tracks. He was insanely good-looking, the type of good-looking she'd usually associate with a model or movie star, not some random guy at a gas station in a tiny town in Colorado. And when he'd smiled, her stomach had done some stupid flipping thing, which she'd completely ignored.

More than anyone, she knew not to trust a pretty face. In her line of work, the pretty faces used to catfish innocent people generally bore no resemblance to the criminals responsible, but it had certainly taught her that far too many people were swayed by looks over substance. And besides, she had firsthand experience of believing in someone too good to be true. It was what drove her in her business—to do all she could to stop others from suffering the pain and humiliation that had once rained down on her.

Once again she checked her rearview mirror. The truck had drawn closer, close enough the numbers on its front license plate were clear enough to read. She was driving the speed limit, so it must be traveling at some speed to have covered so much ground so quickly.

Was it the guy from the gas station?

He'd driven off as she'd been paying for her gas, so she would've expected him to be ahead of her on the highway. Or he could've done a dozen other things before leaving Guneo that had delayed him.

She shook her head. She was putting *way* too much thought into a man she'd never see again. She was human; at some visceral level her body had definitely reacted to the man, and that was perfectly normal. But never in a million years would that man be thinking about her beyond the handful of seconds she'd stood in front of him. Men never paid any attention to Paige. It was just a reality of existing as a woman who more resembled an uncoordinated giraffe than a femme fatale. She was too tall, too flat chested, and her nose was too big. It was just how it was.

She checked her mirror again, and gasped at how close the truck was now behind her. For the first time, its proximity made her uneasy.

There was no doubt now that car was traveling dangerously fast. It

swerved a little on the road, almost like the driver knew she was watching.

She gripped the steering wheel hard yet again, but this time it definitely had nothing to do with tardiness. She was driving at sixty-five miles per hour, but she lifted her foot off the accelerator, beginning to slow down. It was only a one-lane highway, so if this idiot behind her wanted to drive like that, she was going to pull over and get out of the damn way. The loud *tick tick* of her blinker merged with the sound of Taylor telling her to “Shake It Off.” Which she would, once she was safely on the highway shoulder.

The truck was now so close she was reluctant to hit the brakes too abruptly lest it smack into the ass of her Focus.

Surely he can tell I'm going to pull over and let him pass?

This part of the highway had just shifted from a section where fields flanked the asphalt to a twistier part with hills and granite outcrops to her left and to her right a small section of cleared land that swept up to dense woodland. Down the center were double yellow lines, which could suggest why this dude was driving so close to her—but even so it was no excuse to drive like a . . .

She gasped as the truck again swerved behind her. She pressed hard on the brake and steered to the very edge of the asphalt, leaving the truck plenty of room to overtake. In response the driver leaned on his horn, and at the sudden deafening blare, she gave a panicked scream.

Only a few seconds had passed, and her car wasn't slowing fast enough. She felt like she was walking a tightrope driving so close to the edge of the road's surface, terrified her tires would hit the dirt and sunburnt grass on the shoulder, and then what would happen?

Her gaze flicked to her mirror and back to the road so fast she could barely concentrate on either. The highway took a sharp left not that far ahead. She needed to concentrate on staying on asphalt, yet the steady blare of the truck's horn was making it impossible for her to think.

Then he began to overtake.

Her heart lifted. *She was going to be okay.*

But the huge black beast of steel passed far, *far* too close to her Focus as she was attempting to negotiate the upcoming turn—and veered sharply toward her. She yanked her steering wheel to the right to avoid being hit.

And as she did so, her tires transitioned onto the gravel, dirt, and grass, and her car began to slide.

It happened so fast the landscape was a blur. Her feet stabbed uselessly at the brake, and she wrenched hard on the wheel, trying to return to the road. But the skid only became worse, and some long-ago memory from taking Driver's Ed as a teenager told her to take her foot off the brake and to stop oversteering.

But then—as her car tore through low-lying scrub and bushes, she realized that between the highway and the woodland that rose steeply to her right was a ditch.

And there was nothing she could do to stop herself from crashing into it.

All she could do was scream.

TWO

ABOUT FIFTEEN MILES OUT OF GUNEO, TYLER REALIZED HE'D LEFT HIS GOOD hiking boots on the back porch of his Airbnb.

Fuck's sake.

He sighed as he slowed his truck to a stop and pulled over on the shoulder. He was on a long straight section of the highway with farmland on both sides, so it was safe to perform a U-Turn and head back in the opposite direction.

Frankly, he didn't need to go back. Financially he was in the best shape of his life thanks to the Shadow Team, and he could easily afford another pair of boots. But the frugality lesson from his thrifty nonna to never *avere le mani bucate*—have holes in your hands—meant he dutifully turned around.

Besides, he really didn't mind delaying his arrival in Falcon.

Or delaying seeing Torres, his onetime best friend, for the first time since he had walked in on Tyler naked with Natalie, Torres's fiancée. It hadn't been the worst day of his life, but it was definitely in the top three. One of those other awful days, he'd shared with Andy and the rest of the Shadow Team. The other was his to remember, alone.

Torres had called him about a month back, but he hadn't answered. When he'd listened to the voice mail Andy had left, Tyler couldn't believe it—Andy had apologized to *him*. He'd slept with Torres's fiancée, and *Andy* had

been the one to apologize?

Which was something Tyler had never done.

Because how could he? What could he possibly say to make what he'd done okay? The whole point was that it was *not* okay. He'd known it but done it anyway. Done it deliberately, knowing exactly what would happen.

There was no coming back from that. Absolution was undeserved and unwanted.

What he deserved was for Torres to hate him.

Yet Andy had apologized for breaking Tyler's nose, and even worse, said he'd forgiven Tyler. His tone had sounded genuine, and Tyler had once known Andy better than anyone.

He'd spent most of those uncomfortable nights under the sky in the Flat Tops Wilderness trying to figure it out but had come up blank. It was insanity to him that Torres had moved on and had made it clear to Shadow Operations he had no issue working with Tyler going forward.

He didn't like it. He didn't *want* it, and he definitely didn't deserve it.

He slowed on the approach of a bend in the highway with a sheer stone outcrop to his right and undulating woodland to his left. He hadn't been to Colorado before, and despite having some expectation of how awesome the Rocky Mountains would be, in person they were really something el—

Everything happened so fast as the curve took him past the visual barrier of the granite that Tyler had no time to do anything but react.

A truck was absolutely flying toward him, swerving from the left-hand side of the road and into his lane while a second smaller vehicle shot from the highway and into low scrub and dirt at full speed.

But rather than make any attempt to avoid him, once the driver wrenched back control, they remained in Tyler's lane, bearing down on him as if they hadn't noticed him. Or as if they were trying to hit him.

What the fuck?

He hit the brakes, sending his car into a skid as he yanked at the wheel to

avoid the hurtling truck. He dodged it by impossible inches. He hauled the steering wheel once again in an attempt to straighten his vehicle, his body in autopilot, multiple advanced driving courses thanks to the Shadow Team helping him do everything possible to prevent his car rolling.

Would it be enough?

He held his breath as he stopping fighting the spin and the speed and let his truck take the lead—either giving him back control or flinging them both into the sky.

Come on, come on, come on.

And a moment later, beneath his hard grip of the wheel, the car returned to his control, and he was able to ease his boot onto the brake and roll to a stop.

He twisted back the way he'd come. There was no truck, although he couldn't see past the bend.

What the fuck was that?

But he didn't have time to figure that out—what had happened to that other car? He pushed his foot to the gas as he swung his truck around and floored it back the short distance to the point of the curve where he'd last seen that little blue car.

A little blue car he was almost certain he recognized as belonging to the woman at the gas station with the incredible eyes and dismissive gaze.

I'M . . . not dead?

Paige remained perfectly still as her brain and heartbeat slowed and her ability to focus on anything but sheer terror gradually returned.

In front of her was white—her steering wheel airbag had deployed. She was sitting on an angle, as the nose of her car was pointed down into the ditch, and she was pressed hard against her seat belt. Everywhere the seat belt touched hurt, but the rest of her seemed impossibly okay. She wriggled her

toes and fingers and then reached up to flip down her sun visor and look in the mirror. Her pale—but undamaged—face stared back at her.

“What just happened?” she asked her reflection. Then she added, with a twist of her lips, “At least now I have a good excuse for running late.”

What began as a high-pitched laugh turned almost immediately into a sob and a sudden desperate need to get out of her car. She scrambled to undo her seat belt, then needed to catch herself from falling onto the dash. She twisted to open her door, but it only opened as far as a large boulder beside her would allow—nowhere near wide enough for her to get out.

Oh my god, what if I'd hit that rock?

She brushed at the tears that streamed down her face as she awkwardly clambered to the other side of her car and held her breath as she yanked at the handle. The door fell open easily, and she half stepped, half toppled out, landing on some gray-green shrub that partially filled the shallow ditch.

She climbed to her feet on the dirt, and took in the scene of her loyal little Focus with its crumpled bumper and hood nestled against a dense pillow of sagebrush, just to the side of that boulder that surely would've meant instant death.

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god . . .

That asshole in the truck had almost killed her.

She needed to call the police.

She patted the pockets of her jeans and blazer, wincing at the pain across her chest and shoulders as she moved. With every passing second, the fog of her shock was lifting—although not all that quickly, as it took her longer than it should've to register that her phone was somewhere in her car. It had been where it always was when she drove—plugged into its charger and resting on the passenger seat.

She was on her knees in the dirt, searching along the car's footwell for her phone—clearly it had been flung somewhere on impact—when she heard something behind her.

She turned and leapt to her feet.

At the top of the ditch stood the man from the gas station, his hands on his hips.

“It was *you!*” she exclaimed in a high, strangled shriek she barely recognized as her own voice.

Now his height and width did *not* make her belly turn over because he was impossibly handsome. Instead, his obvious power made her stomach drop like a stone with fear.

“Stay back!” she said. “I’ve called nine one one. The cops will be here soon.”

A lie, of course. She had no idea where her stupid phone was.

“Good,” he said, “we need them to catch the fuckers who almost killed us.”

“*Us?*”

She grabbed onto the top edge of the car door to balance herself as a wave of dizziness overcame her.

“Stop!” she screamed as he rushed toward her. “Stay back, I said!”

He frowned but came to a stop. “Ma’am, I’m here to help you.”

“No, you tried to *kill me* with your obnoxious tiny-penis truck.”

“My what?”

Was he *laughing*? She’d almost died because of him, and he dared to laugh at her?

“You have an overblown phallic vehicle to make up for your own inadequacies,” she said in a tone she vaguely registered as oddly calm and matter-of-fact. She gripped the metal frame of the door harder, desperate to feel more in control of this situation.

“I’ve got a fuckload of things wrong with me, ma’am,” he replied, “but trust me, that’s not one of them.”

She could see the damn twinkle in his gaze even from the bottom of the ditch. “You really think I care about the size of your dick more than the fact

that you tried to murder me?”

“Nope. But I *didn't* try to kill you, so you don't need to concern yourself with that either.”

“I *wasn't* concerned about the size of your—” She huffed out a sigh of exasperation. “The point is, even if you didn't intend to drive me off the road, you drove in an unforgivably reckless way that any reasonable person would expect to result in this outcome.” She gestured at her totaled car as a wave of nausea rose in her throat.

She rested her forehead on the roof of her car and tried to regain her bearings. When she heard the crunch of a boot on dirt and gravel, she lifted her hand in his direction in a *stop* gesture without looking at him.

I almost died. I almost died.

Maybe her shock wearing off *wasn't* a good thing? With every passing second the reality of what had just happened to her—and what was happening right now—made her feel increasingly panicked.

She licked her lips and tasted the salt of the tears that hadn't abated, flavored with dust and something burnt and plasticky from the airbag.

Had that man standing above her been driving? She thought maybe she'd seen two men in the truck that had forced her off the highway . . .

She shook her head. Everything had happened so fast, and what were the odds that there were two enormous black trucks on a rural highway in Colorado?

Pretty high, actually, she acknowledged.

But then why is he here?

Abruptly she dropped to her knees again, frantic to find her phone. She was alone in remote Colorado with a man who'd possibly tried to kill her. Cell phone coverage was good along the highway, though; it was something she'd checked before her library tour. She just needed her phone and she'd be safe . . .

“Ma'am.” The guy spoke again, a little closer now. “You've just had a

serious accident. Please let me help you.” He had the hint of a southern accent, and there was a deep gravelly timbre to his words that she was certain was usually very appealing.

But, as she’d learned time and time again, *nothing* was to be gained by trusting someone just because they came in an attractive package. She saw it every day with her catfished clients. And then, of course, there were the Ted Bundys of the world. Being hot didn’t preclude being dangerous.

“Stay *back!*” she yelled again as she awkwardly shoved her arm beneath the passenger seat, desperately searching for her phone.

But he didn’t listen to her this time. Why would he? He’d just driven her off the goddamn road! She could hear him navigating the incline into the ditch.

Her phone was still nowhere to be found, and she looked over her shoulder to see the man only fifty feet away. She was out of time.

“I’m Tyler,” he called out in his you-can-trust-me accent.

Bullshit.

“Tyler Cerra. What’s your name?”

She jumped to her feet and ran.

Automatically she ran away from the man, clambering up the opposite side of the ditch and away from the highway. She grabbed at tufts of grass and bushes to drag herself up the slope, her sneakers finding purchase on boulders packed into the dirt and gravel.

“Hey!” he shouted.

She didn’t look back, just kept running. Once out of the ditch there was only flat scrubland ahead of her, sloping gently toward a dense wall of spruce and fir trees. Maybe she could lose him in the shadows of the forest?

“Please just don’t get fucking lost in the wilderness, lady,” the man said, his voice apparently unaffected by the exertion of sprinting after her.

Despite her height and lean physique, Paige was far from athletic. There was no chance she could outpace the man behind her, but if she could

hide . . .

Her lungs burned as her brain struggled to work out a plan. In her peripheral vision something moved in the distance—a car on the highway.

She stopped dead just within the shade of the nearest spruce tree. *Christ*, she was dumb. All she needed to do was flag down a passing vehicle, not hope to discover some previously unrealized forest survival skills. She turned and jumped in the air, waving her arms.

“Help!” she screamed. “Heellllpppp!”

But the car had already slowed. *Thank God*.

The man—Tyler—had also stopped his pursuit, pausing really not that far from her at all. He ran a hand through his dark hair as he studied the arriving vehicle.

“These assholes didn’t seem the type to come back just to check if you’re okay,” he said in a low voice. He glanced at Paige. “How long did dispatch say the cops would take to get here?”

“What?” she said, confused.

He pointed at the highway. “See that black truck on the shoulder with the *chrome* grill? That’s mine.” He adjusted his aim slightly to point at the arriving car—also a black truck. “And *that* one, you know, the one that drove you off the road—and very nearly did the same to me—and has a *black* grill?—that’s the one that’s pulling up right now. And babe, I don’t think they’re here to help you.”

“Don’t call me babe,” she snapped.

“*That’s* what you took out of that?”

She shrugged. “Maybe they had a guilty conscience.”

“No,” he said crisply. He’d stepped closer.

“*Don’t come closer.*” But she’d said it more out of habit. Because she remembered that black grill. Tyler hadn’t been driving the truck that had almost killed her.

He raised his eyebrows but obediently remained where he was.

Two men had stepped out of the truck, both dressed entirely in black, including matching dark sunglasses. There was no doubt they'd spotted her and Tyler on the edge of the forest.

"How far away are the cops?" Tyler asked, more urgently this time.

"They're not coming," Paige said, "I didn't call them. I couldn't find my cell phone. I was bluffing."

"Fuck."

The word hung between them for a long second.

"You don't have a phone?" She asked the obvious question.

"In my truck. Didn't think to grab it when I was racing to check on you."

"Fuck," she said.

His lips quirked up. "As I said."

"So, what do we do?"

"You got any reason to think these dickheads are anything but everyday assholes? You got anyone after you? Organized crime links? Vengeful ex-husband?" He paused. "I'm reasonably confident *you're* not a criminal mastermind."

"No," she said. "None of the above. I'm as normal and boring as it's possible to be."

Why would he even think to ask these questions?

He nodded. "Based on our interactions so far, the last thing you are is boring, ma'am," he said flatly, his attention on the two men. They were loitering by their massive truck, occasionally gesturing in Paige and Tyler's direction.

"We're on an interstate in full view of anyone who comes by," he said. "Maybe they *have* just came back to check if you're alive. Maybe intimidate you into not reporting them for their fuckery." He shrugged. "In my experience, assholes like this are real brave until confronted with someone their own size. Maybe because I'm here, they'll piss off."

"But they saw your truck, and they still stopped."

“I know,” he said, shifting his weight. “I don’t like that part.”

Paige looked over her shoulder into the woodland. “Shouldn’t we go hide, then?”

“It’s an option. But if I hold my ground, I’m not convinced these dudes have the balls to just walk up here and cause trouble.” He glanced at her. “I’m former military. I’m confident I can handle these guys if they try anything.”

Paige nodded. *Former military*. It was reassuring. Not as reassuring as having a phone would’ve been, but it was definitely better than being here alone.

One of the men opened the door to the truck. “Oh, look!” Paige said, “maybe they’re leaving?”

A beat passed.

“*No the fuck they’re not,*” Tyler replied, covering the distance between them in three big strides. “*Run!*”

“What? What’s going on?”

But he grabbed her hand instead of replying and yanked her in front of him, his arm wrapping around her shoulders as he dragged her against his chest—all while he propelled them both toward the trees. He moved so fast her feet could barely touch the ground, half carrying her into the deep shade of the forest.

Everything was a blur of tree trunks and foliage.

“Whatever happens, don’t stop running,” Tyler said between harsh breaths. “Those assholes are armed.”

THREE

TYLER HAD NO IDEA WHAT THE FUCK WAS GOING ON.

There was no path among the towering spruces and firs to follow, so they dodged between trees and the fallen branches as they ran deeper into the woodland. He kept the woman in front of him, providing her with cover of sorts, although he'd released her from his initial bodyguard-style embrace to help them move as swiftly as possible away from the random truck dudes with guns.

Were they random, though?

As his gaze searched their surroundings for somewhere to hide, his brain searched for an explanation for whatever the hell was happening.

He dealt with a lot of bad guys as part of the Shadow Team. He'd seen the absolute worst humans could do in multiple war zones. But thankfully, his experience was that in general society, most people were good. And a lot of the wannabe gangster types were all talk and no action. *That* was what he'd pegged these guys to be. Two arrogant assholes who'd taken a game of chicken too far. Maybe drugs or alcohol had fueled their idiocy.

But returning with firearms took this to a whole new level.

Were they back to clean up their mess, in some desperate attempt to fix the shit they'd created?

The crack of a gunshot didn't surprise Tyler at all, but the woman

screamed and stumbled. He caught her around the waist and pushed her forward.

Hunting two strangers down in the Colorado mountains for *no reason* was psychopath-level violence. Were they extraordinarily unlucky victims of a random crime, or was this targeted?

Could this be related to the Shadow Team?

His brain leaped in that direction because violent armed bad guys were standard when it came to his Shadow Team assignments, but shouldn't be here in remote Colorado.

Had his cover been blown? Were the thugs with guns linked to any one of the dozens of jobs he'd worked over the past couple of years? The Shadow Team had put a lot of assholes in jail and cost a lot of other criminals millions of dollars. For sure he'd have a target on his back, if any of those assholes knew he existed.

But they didn't.

But even if they did, why drive the woman off the road? And how could they know he'd turn around?

It made no sense.

The woman was obviously flagging, but he still didn't have a goddamn plan.

If he were alone, he'd would pick the first tree that gave him any cover at all and back himself to turn the tables, stalk the gunmen, and disarm them. But to do that, he needed the woman safely hidden, and this forest had given them zero options.

Suddenly she stumbled.

He wasn't quick enough to catch her, and she fell to her hands and knees on the gravel-strewn dirt.

As he looped his arms around her waist to again drag her to her feet, he glanced over his shoulder.

He'd registered long before now that the odds of this working out in their

favor were close to zero. He'd only been on the end of an ambush once before, at the Fox & Laughton, and he'd hoped never to revisit the helplessness of being unarmed and unprepared ever again. Although he *also* knew too well that even the perfect training, intel, weapons, and tactics could still result in utter disaster.

But as he acknowledged the proximity of the chasing gunmen, he *couldn't* accept that this was over. His whole life he'd been the lucky fucker who'd effortlessly dodged consequences for his actions, which he'd only learned in the past few years was not always a good thing. He'd faced death in combat; he'd seen death, and while it would never sit comfortably, he'd caused it when there was no other option. And through it all, he'd survived. Surely he wasn't going to die on some random hillside in the backside of nowhere Colorado?

"*Run!*" he told the woman once she was on her feet. "I'll delay them as much as I can. Run until you find somewhere to hide."

But she didn't move. Instead, she looked around his shoulder at the gunmen, her face streaked with dust and tears.

"I'm not leaving you here to be shot!" she said sharply. "Don't be ridiculous."

He looked down at her. "If we both stay here, then we're both dead."

"Then we should *both* run." She grabbed his hand and tugged hard.

The nearest gunman was only fifty yards away, about within the range that if Tyler were the one holding the Glock, he could be deadly accurate.

Running felt futile, and he didn't want to be shot in the back. He'd look these fuckers in the eye.

"*Run,*" he repeated.

"Not without you." She tugged harder as she stepped away from him. "Come *on!*"

"No—"

But suddenly they were both moving.

The woman screamed as the dirt and small rocks he'd been standing on cascaded toward her. The ground beneath him that had been perfectly solid a moment earlier now slid and shifted, so quickly he had no time to think, let alone do anything to stop their fall.

Because that was what was happening. They were falling. The earth had opened up beneath them, and together, their hands still joined, they plummeted into darkness.

OH MY GOD, what now?

It was a ridiculous thought to have as the earth swallowed her up, but for a split second, it wasn't fear that fueled Paige, but overwhelming frustration at how ludicrous this was. Twenty minutes ago she'd been listening to Taylor Swift, minding her own business, and now she'd been driven off the highway, shot at, and was plunging to her death.

Excellent.

All the air *whooshed* from her lungs as her fall abruptly ended on something hard—that wobbled.

She had enough time to glance at Tyler beside her as she gasped for air. He caught her gaze just as whatever they'd landed on creaked, groaned . . . and dropped them again.

She screamed as they fell, but she didn't fall far this time. She landed flush on her hip.

She looked up to see a vaguely circular hole above her, tree branches and blue sky visible through it.

She was on a wooden platform.

Where was she?

She looked to Tyler again, belatedly realizing she no longer held his hand.

Panic gripped her as she searched for him in the darkness.

“I’m here,” he said. “Below you and to your left. Don’t move. There’s a drop to your right.”

She reached out to her left, trying to force her eyes to adjust faster to the darkness. There was only empty space to her left too. She gripped at the wooden platform she sat on, realizing it was barely wider than her butt. Then there was a soft *crack*, and the boards gave a little below her.

She gasped, holding on for dear life.

Where was she?

A far louder *crack* reverberated down the hole.

A gunshot.

She looked up, and she could see the head and shoulders of the two gunmen, and as terrifying as this hole was, suddenly she felt far too exposed and close to the surface.

“What do I do?” she whispered, her voice shaking.

“Look at me.”

She did, and she could just make out his shape, not all that far below her.

“Lean toward me,” he said calmly. “I don’t trust what’s left of the platform you’re on. I want you to reach for me and fall into my arms. I’ll catch you.”

Another gunshot so close it made her ears ring shoved aside any reservations she had about leaving her somewhat stable platform.

She fell forward, and her hands landed haphazardly on Tyler’s shoulders before her body crashed awkwardly into his. He staggered backward as he steadied himself, and his back bumped against something solid, shaking dust and dirt from the walls of the hole to sprinkle on them both.

There was another shot as Paige held on tight, uncaring that she was pressed hard up against him from chest to hip. She could feel his heart beating in his chest, which was reassuringly warm, firm, and broad.

“I don’t think they can see us,” he murmured against her hair. “They’re shooting all over the place.”

“But *why*?”

He shrugged against her, but he didn’t answer her question. She supposed while being shot at wasn’t the time to conduct a detailed analysis of what the hell was going on.

“I think we’re in a mining shaft,” he said.

Of course. That made far more sense than a bottomless abyss.

“There’s a ladder system—or there *was*, I guess—that has a ladder between each platform. Maybe so that any fall was small rather than all the way to however deep this thing is.”

She glanced briefly down at the absolute blackness beneath them. She didn’t want to even imagine how far they could fall.

“I think we should climb farther down,” he said. “I don’t want those assholes to get lucky with a shot.”

She nodded. It made sense. Going up wasn’t an option—quite apart from the murderous gunmen, all the platforms above them were destroyed.

“I’m going to go first, that way I can catch you and also test out the strength of the platform below before you join me.”

“Why—” She went silent. Now was not the time to question why this stranger continued to prioritize her safety over his. It felt wrong, but she also didn’t have an alternative. It wasn’t like *she* could catch him or had any brilliant ideas. Be careful,” she said quietly, instead.

He nodded, then gently turned her until her back was against the wall of the shaft.

The gunshots had stopped, but now the murmur of furious conversation came from the entrance to the mine. She looked up as she tried to catch what they were saying, but they weren’t speaking in English. Instead they spoke in an accent she guessed was European, with a blunt, heavy edge.

There was a dull *thud* as Tyler dropped through a dark square she could just make out in the wooden boards and onto another platform below. She held her breath—would the platform hold his weight?

“It’s safe,” he whispered. “Scoot on your butt over to the hole. The ladder’s long gone, so it’s the same drop as before. I’ll catch you.”

She appreciated his instructions. They gave her something to focus on. Her brain was leaping all over the place in a panicked flurry, and his calm words she could hold onto to.

She slid through the hole and into his waiting arms without incident and then they repeated it. The next platform down still had a ladder, as did all that followed, with only an occasional missing rung. Tyler carefully tested each rung with his own weight before calling her softly downward. The farther they got from the surface, and the more wooden platforms above them, her fear of the gunmen lessened a little. But the never-ending darkness of the shaft was its own sort of terrifying. As they made their way lower, debris occasionally fell from the platforms—dirt and small rocks, but also pieces of broken wood from the collapsed levels. And the amount of time between something falling and the distant *splosh* of it hitting water far, far, below didn’t seem plausible. How deep did mine shafts even go?

Despite how far they were beneath the surface, she could still hear the men talking at the entrance to the shaft, and then a cell phone ringing briefly before it was answered.

It was such a normal, domestic sound—the same ringtone she had on her phone.

And something about it . . . its ordinariness as she existed within this extraordinarily horrifying situation so far beyond anything she could ever imagine experiencing . . . it broke something inside her.

She’d just stepped onto the latest platform, Tyler’s hand light on her back to steady her as she turned to face him. But this time when he went to move away, she reached for him instead.

“No,” she said. Or tried to say. It sounded more like a sob.

And that was that. Whatever had held her somewhat together thus far deserted her completely. She shook as she cried.

He didn't say a word, just pulled her close and wrapped his big arms around her.

"I'm sorry," she said between sobs.

"Don't be." Tyler's hands rubbed up and down her back as he held her and let her cry.

It didn't take long—maybe a minute or two—before she was all cried out. She remained in his arms and lifted her head. All she could make out were the edges of his jaw and cheekbones in the darkness.

"I don't normally cry," she said. "Ever, really."

"I think you have a very good reason to be upset. Hell, I'm damn upset too. This wasn't at all how I planned to spend my morning."

She gave a surprised burst of laughter. "Me either. I'm going to be super late for my presentation at the Falcon County Library."

She sensed rather than saw his grin.

"Hey, I'm heading to Falcon too. Catching up with a few . . . ah . . . friends, from when I was in the army."

"Now there's a coincidence," she said. "Want to hear another? A convenient mine shaft appearing in the earth to save us from imminent death."

"Absolutely."

She swallowed. "I'm sorry to cry all over you. What's the point? It isn't like crying is going to get us out of here." She sighed. "I *hate* crying, and it's all I've been doing."

"Trust me, your tears aren't the issue I'm concerned with right now."

"Is your concern existential dread at the realization you're going to die a slow, painful death in the very same mine shaft that saved us?" she asked blithely. "Or maybe a fast, painful one, I guess, if we fall."

Now it was his turn for a surprised laugh. "No," he said firmly. "No wonder you're upset. Nah, my concern is how I'm going to get you safely out of here before the patrons of the Falcon library get too worried about your

absence.”

He dropped his hands from her waist, and she shuffled back just enough to put some space between them, wary of falling through the opening to the platform below.

It was true what she’d said—she did rarely cry. But she’d barely stopped since her car had crashed into that ditch. The last time she’d cried this much had been at age eighteen, after the most humiliating night of her life. Then it had been a pointless, frustrating activity that she’d forever linked with an intense sense of embarrassment and shame. Crying hadn’t fixed her stupidity, had it? She’d cried for hours and still been stupid, stupid Paige Emmett.

But crying in Tyler’s arms had been . . . nice?

How was that possible? She hadn’t entirely been joking; she was pretty certain she was going to die in this mine shaft, and the concept made her throat tighten and her heart pound. Yet soaking his T-shirt with tears hadn’t been embarrassing? Was impending death an effective antidote to mortification?

“I’m going to do everything I can to get you out of here safely,” Tyler said, his tone serious. “I promise.”

She absolutely believed him. “But how? We couldn’t climb back out even if there were a way to. We’d be shot.”

“Mines usually have more than one entrance, so we just need to find another one.”

He spoke so calmly, like this was a perfectly reasonable plan.

“How can we without any light?”

“There *is* light,” he said. “We can see each other, kind of, right? And we’ve safely navigated all the way down here.”

She nodded.

“Did you know your eyes keep adjusting to darkness over time? Most people think that after the first few minutes, that’s it—but it’s not true. Every minute we’re down here, we’ll be able to see a little more. It takes about an

hour until your vision is as good as it's going to get.”

She held one of her hands up in front of her eyes, surprised that she *could* see more than a shadow now—she could even see the slight shininess of her fingernails.

“That’s neat,” she said. “Does that mean eventually we’ll be able to see the clearly marked *Exit* sign left by ye olde time miners a hundred years ago?”

He chuckled. “Fingers crossed.” He shifted his weight, making the boards creak a little.

Paige gasped.

He reached out to grab her hand and give it a squeeze. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d touched her, yet it felt totally different. In the absence of blind panic, her body responded—with a spark of electricity at his touch and heat low in her belly.

She dropped his hand abruptly, annoyed with herself.

She rubbed her hand against her jeans. *Really?* In near-total darkness, at least one hundred feet below the surface, her body cared about how hot Tyler was?

“So, in the absence of a clearly marked exit,” she said quickly, “what are we looking for?”

“I’m pretty sure there was a tunnel off one of the platforms higher up,” he said. “We needed to get out of range of those assholes, but if there was one tunnel, there’ll be another. Then we’ll just follow the tunnel we find and hope for an exit route.”

“And if there isn’t one?”

He shrugged. “We find another tunnel and try again, and again. And either we’ll find an exit, or we’ll be rescued by the people who’ll eventually come searching for us.”

Or we’ll die down here.

But she didn't say that. She had no doubt Tyler was perfectly aware of that possibility, but focusing on it wouldn't save them, would it?

She took a deep breath. "Okay." She straightened her shoulders. "Good plan."

He nodded.

They stood quietly for a moment. She couldn't hear the gunmen talking anymore—had they left? It was silent in the darkness of the mine shaft, apart from the sound of their breathing.

"I'm Tyler Cerra," he said brightly, surprising her. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh!" she said. "I guess I never introduced myself."

"I'd like to know the name of the woman who refused to run from danger."

She frowned. "Do you think I'm brave or stupid?"

"Both." He grinned.

"Well, right back at you."

Tyler laughed. "The difference is that it is—or was, I guess—my job to protect people."

"You were prepared to die alone just to give a stranger the tiniest chance of survival. That's a big deal. Thank you."

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat," he said.

Somehow she knew he would.

Tyler continued, "And you were prepared to die by a stranger's side rather than leave him alone."

She swallowed. She hadn't consciously made that decision, but it was true. For her, it had just been the right thing to do. It was, she supposed, the same for him. It felt a little strange to have something in common with this man so vastly different from herself in every possible way.

"I'm Paige," she said softly. "Nice to meet you."

FOUR

JUST ONE LEVEL DOWN, THEY FOUND A TUNNEL.

Tyler carefully ran his hand along the edge of the entrance, trying to judge the width and height of the void in front of him. The tunnel was carved into solid rock and was tall enough that he wouldn't have to stoop much to avoid hitting the ceiling. As Paige was a few inches shorter than him, she should be able to walk freely.

Or at least, as freely as anyone could in absolute darkness. The very limited light they had here in the shaft would disappear completely only a few yards into that tunnel. Despite all his experience and specialized training with both the army and the Shadow Team, he'd never been in a situation of darkness anything like this without NVGs or a flashlight. Even night vision goggles wouldn't have helped him in this tunnel, though—they required *some* source of light for their infrared technology to work. But a flashlight—a goddamn flashlight—would've been perfect.

He had two flashlights in his truck. And his cell phone. And even a small selection of firearms securely locked up and hidden in a gun safe in the rear cab.

Fuck. This entire clusterfuck would never have happened if he'd been near his vehicle when the assholes had returned.

Instead, he had to somehow get them both out of this pitch-black

nightmare before the bad guys came back. And they *would* return; Tyler had no doubt. He hadn't understood a word he'd overheard the two men say, but they'd be back to finish their task. And that task was to kill him and Paige. Or one of them — the other was just collateral damage.

“There was a broken board a few levels up,” he said to Paige. “I’m going to grab it. We can use it like a cane to scan the ground ahead as we walk.”

He turned and immediately bumped into her, not realizing how close she stood behind him. Automatically he reached out to steady her, and his hand landed on her hip.

It was only for a moment, but his reaction to touching her was a whole lot of blood rushing to his groin. *Again*. At least this time she wasn't sobbing in his arms when he had a completely inappropriate reaction to her. You'd think their life-and-death situation would put his cock out of action—but apparently not. He'd had to stand super awkwardly so she wouldn't notice, because the last thing a panicked woman needed to worry about was a strange man's erect penis.

Fuck's sake.

He stepped around her without a word and navigated the three ladders up to find the piece of board he wanted. He was pretty sure the shaft they'd fallen down was once used for haulage. On their side was this seemingly endless wooden construction with a pole at each corner joining the levels and small holes for the ladders in the floor. Tyler imagined that the other half of the shaft had once housed some sort of pulley system for hauling whatever the mine produced.

It was a remarkably sturdy structure, and it was probably only exposure to the elements that had damaged those uppermost levels they'd fallen through. He knew next to nothing about abandoned mines, but this mine had to be around a hundred years old—in different circumstances and with the right equipment, he reckoned it would be a hell of a lot of fun to explore.

Back on the same level as Paige, he stepped from the ladder to face her.

She stood at the entrance to the tunnel, her back straight and her chin up. Even in the shadows, her determination to hold herself together was obvious. He knew she was terrified, and he knew she thought they were both going to die.

To be honest, he also thought their odds of survival were shit.

But he wasn't about to give up, and clearly neither was she.

He liked her. He knew that didn't really matter right now, but she'd surprised him when she'd warned him off so defiantly when he'd found her in that ditch, and had kept surprising him since. He liked her directness, the edge of darkness to her humor—and the fact she even *made* him laugh given this shitstorm—and most especially he admired her bravery.

Don't be ridiculous, she'd said when he'd told her to run in the forest, refusing to leave him behind.

It was a humbling, unbelievably courageous act.

Also, she was kinda hot.

Again, not appropriate to think about one hundred fifty feet beneath the surface, but he'd had a front-row view to her unbelievable ass coming down each and every one of those ladders. Hey, it was dark, and he'd mainly been watching her in case she fell—but yeah, he could watch that ass all day.

“Something wrong?” she asked, and he realized he'd stood staring at her way too long. Her hair had loosened from her neat topknot, and strands fell down around her sharp-edged face. She was nothing like the women he'd once dated.

He could see the dirt that smeared her white T-shirt even in the dim light, and for the first time he noticed her jacket had a large rip.

“Your arm okay?” he said, gesturing at the tear.

“Oh!” She looked down. “Shit. This is my favorite blazer.” She laughed and shook her head. “Like *that* matters.”

She straightened her shoulders again. “My arm's fine. My chest is sore from my seat belt, and I probably have some crazy bruising on my hip and

butt from when we fell, but otherwise I feel pretty okay.” She paused. “Physically, of course. Otherwise I’m a hot mess.”

Again she’d made him laugh. “In general or today specifically?”

“My previously mentioned existential dread is thankfully unique to today’s events,” she said. “But the hot mess thing? Yeah, that’s unfortunately more consistent.”

He remembered what he’d overheard next to the pump at the gas station: *Why do I always fucking do this? What the hell is wrong with me?*

Personally, he’d yet to see anything wrong with Paige. “I find that hard to believe.”

She snorted. “That’s because you don’t know me at all.”

It was a factual statement, yet her words hung oddly between them. It was almost as if it hurt that she’d correctly defined them as strangers, given what they’d just experienced together.

“How about you?” she asked.

He shrugged. Probably much like Paige, he ached all over—plummeting through multiple rotten wooden platforms would do that to you. “No injuries.”

She gave a little laugh. “No, obviously I meant are you a hot mess too?”

He ran a hand through his hair as he chuckled. *This woman.* But he didn’t answer the question, because where to begin? He was about as fucked-up as a human could be.

“I think we should start looking for that exit,” he said gruffly.

She nodded. “Agreed.”

“IT’S VERY easy to become disoriented in total darkness,” Tyler said in a nonsense tone Paige guessed he’d used in the military. “And since we’re searching for light, if we end up facing the wrong way, we’ll just waste time walking all the way back here again. Or worse.”

The mine shaft they were in right now was terrifying enough. The idea of being totally lost in pitch blackness made bile rise in her throat.

“We also can’t get split up, and we don’t want to fall down another shaft. So I suggest that I walk in front with my makeshift cane and you hold on to the back of my jeans with your left hand and keep your right hand on the wall. As long as you maintain contact with that wall, if we need to turn around, we know we just follow that same wall back.”

“What if we hit a fork in the tunnel?”

“Good question,” he said. “I’m not sure. We probably won’t even know there is a fork, to be honest. But yeah, we need to be careful if we do make any decisions about which direction to take, since we can’t forget them.” He took a deep breath. “With any luck, that exit sign you mentioned is at the end of a perfectly straight, safe tunnel.” He sighed. “I know this is a pretty shit plan. This isn’t something that ever came up in my military training.”

“It’s a good plan,” she said firmly. “Makes sense to me.”

They set up close to the right side of the tunnel. The wall was firm but dusty against her fingers.

He presented his back to her, hitching his T-shirt up a little. “Just grab the back of my jeans.”

It all sounded very necessary and practical, but then her knuckles bumped against the hot smoothness of his skin, and she snatched her hand back.

She immediately felt ridiculous.

This is a safety precaution, Paige!

When she reached for him again, she carefully threaded two fingers into the beltless loops at the center of his jeans, avoiding his skin altogether. She gave a little tug, indicating her grip was firm. “Let’s go!”

And so they did. Together they shuffled forward, her hand diligently pressed against the rock wall, the wooden board scraping against the floor ahead of Tyler. After an accompaniment of nothing more than the sounds of their feet crunching on the tunnel’s gravel floor, there was a metallic *ping*

only a couple of minutes into their journey.

She waited as Tyler searched with the makeshift cane. “I think there are metal tracks along here for the ore carts. We’re walking in a gap between them and the wall.”

Automatically Paige looked down to see them, but of course, she couldn’t.

She looked back behind her, suddenly wanting the reassurance of the somewhat lighter darkness of the shaft they’d left—but the tunnel had taken a slight curve, and behind her was just as black as in front.

Urgently she looked around herself—up at the ceiling, to the other wall, down again at the ground. Then at things she absolutely knew were there: Tyler’s back, her hand on the wall, her feet . . . Nothing. Then she just looked *everywhere* . . . searching for something to break up this level of suffocating darkness she’d never, ever experienced. She willed her eyes to adjust, to see . . . *something*.

But, of course, there was nothing.

Nothing but nothingness.

“Oh my god . . .” she whispered as her knees threatened to give way. She anchored herself with her hand on the wall and by tugging hard on the denim of Tyler’s jeans as she wobbled.

“Paige,” he said urgently, “are you okay?” He began to turn.

“Don’t move!” she said. If they remained exactly as they were, she had a sense of direction. She had this sudden awful thought that if they moved, or if her hand lost touch with the wall, she would no longer know which way was up.

“Paige—”

“It’s just so dark.” She gave a huff of laughter that sounded more like a sob. “Sorry, that was a really stupid thing to say.”

“It’s not,” he said. “Not at all.”

She took several deep breaths, trying to pull herself together.

“We can go back to the shaft,” he said, perfectly calm. “We don’t have to keep going if you don’t want to. The dark isn’t just disorienting; it’s dangerous. There’s a risk, obviously, in searching these tunnels. We could get ourselves into an even worse situation.”

That was hard to imagine, but she knew what he meant.

“But if we wait in the shaft,” she said, shifting her weight as her panic began to subside, “we’re betting that our rescuers—who at this point probably don’t even know we’re missing—get back here before the bad guys.”

“You think those assholes are going to return?”

“You don’t?” she asked, surprised.

“They’re coming back, I agree. They’ve probably gone to get rope and climbing gear.”

She shivered. “They really want us dead.”

“That’s the vibe I’m getting too.”

He’d made her smile.

“Yeah.”

She swallowed. “As soon as you started to talk, it helped. I think we should keep going, but not in silence. Your voice kind of grounded me.”

That was true. There was a strength and steadiness to the way he spoke to her. A patience, too, that was a little unfamiliar. As if most of her everyday conversation made her feel like she always needed to be concise and to the point. She hadn’t really been like that at all with Tyler, and he didn’t seem to mind.

“No problem,” he said. “You ready?”

“Yes.”

“Good. So let’s make our first topic of conversation super easy. Pineapple on pizza, yes or no?”

She laughed as she took her first step behind him. “That’s only easy if you answer correctly.”

“Yes, clearly.” His tone was firm.

She gave a sigh of relief. “Correct.”

“Ever been to Australia?”

“No?” She frowned.

“Years ago my team trained with the Australian Special Forces out of Darwin, and I discovered this fast-food joint where I could get deep fried fish, fries, and pineapple fritters. It came all wrapped up in paper, and I’d eat it sitting on the beach. The best example of pineapple as a savory food, ever.”

“Sounds incredible,” she said. But she was more interested in Tyler than food. “What team were you in that went to Australia?”

“Delta Force.”

“Wow! That’s super difficult to get into, like becoming a Navy SEAL, right?”

“It’s the army’s counterpart to DEVGRU—you know, SEAL Team Six.”

The tunnel had curved a little to the right, but the darkness remained unrelenting.

That Tyler had been a special forces soldier wasn’t unexpected. She’d never met a special forces soldier before, but Tyler fit exactly what she would’ve imagined: powerful, protective, brave, calm, and competent.

“Why did you leave?” she asked.

“Ah,” he said, “now that’s a trickier question than pizza toppings.”

There were a few beats of silence before it became obvious he wasn’t going to elaborate.

“What do you do now?” she asked instead.

“I do some property maintenance for a conference center in south-west Missouri. It’s on about two hundred acres. Keeps me busy.”

That surprised her for some reason. “How did you find going from Delta Fo—”

“What do you do for work?”

The interruption wasn’t subtle, but Paige didn’t mind. This past hour had

already been far too much danger for her lifetime. She couldn't imagine having a career synonymous with it, and transitioning back to normal life afterward couldn't be straightforward.

"I'm a professional catfish investigator."

Usually at this point people responded with *A what?* Or *Excuse me?*

Instead Tyler said, "Catfishing as in creating fake identities to scam people?"

"Exactly," Paige said, pleased. "People come to me if they're worried they're being scammed or just want to double-check if their new Tinder date is too good to be true. I've also moved into cybersecurity training—I've got an online course, and I also do library and school events for communities, like the one I was supposed to do in Falcon. They're popular with retirees in particular."

"That's cool," Tyler said. "I didn't even know catfish investigators were a thing, but I'm glad they are. One of my mom's friends got scammed a couple years back, handed over a couple thousand dollars before she realized."

"I bet she was incredibly embarrassed."

"Yeah, she was. She didn't tell anyone at first because she was so ashamed she'd fallen for it."

"She was brave to tell people. I'm glad she did."

"Is that what you tell your clients?"

"Absolutely. I didn't realize that would be such a big part of what I do, but it is. I worked with a psychiatrist who specializes in shame to learn how to support victims better, and of course I encourage my clients to go talk to a therapist if they need to, as well." She swallowed. "Being ashamed because you were scammed only protects the criminals involved. It's not for everyone to tell people, but for me it was about taking my power back."

"You were scammed?"

He sounded surprised.

"It's no secret," she said. Although even after all these years, her tummy

still dropped when she thought about it. Logically she knew she was a victim, but she probably would never *not* feel a level of humiliation for her absolute naivety. As with most things, it was way easier to tell people what to do than to do it herself. “It’s why I started my business.”

“I can’t imagine you being scammed.”

Tyler’s casual comment made her stumble a little.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yep.”

I can’t imagine you being scammed.

It wasn’t the first time someone had said something like that. It came up a lot in her talks and workshops. And she knew when she was wearing her best blazer and standing in front of her meticulously prepared presentation, she *did* appear to be what most of society considered unscammable. Of course, no one *was* unscammable, however they might look.

But while she was, in fact, wearing her best blazer right now, she was also covered in dust and dirt and her cheeks were sticky with tears. Tyler hadn’t seen her as her best, polished self. He’d seen the opposite—he’d seen her at her rawest. At her worst.

Yet he still was surprised she’d been scammed.

And his surprise contradicted how she felt about herself. When she wasn’t working and presenting that professional façade—so basically when she interacted with the world in any other way: with her parents, her few friends, or—rarely—a man who showed interest in her—she felt *exactly* like the hot mess she’d referenced so casually before. In real life, Paige Emmett was disorganized, perennially late, and always socially awkward. She had always been like that and always would—it was simply who she was. She’d learned how to succeed despite her many faults. And that biggest fault had once been a foolish hope for a future she’d too late realized was not for her. And that hope had made her vulnerable, her foolishness, a victim.

“Anyone can be scammed,” she said. “A lot of people think they’re way

too smart to ever be tricked, but schemes are so sophisticated now that it can happen to anyone. Especially when we're talking about a romance scam. Our brain is already programmed to trust other humans—and when you add the lure of the man or woman of your dreams . . . ”

“I get that. Some hottie sending dirty pics won't get me thinking with my brain.”

She gave a burst of laughter. “You're not a typical catfish target.”

“Why not?”

She snorted. “If you were on a dating app, the scammers would just think you were a catfish too.”

“And why is that, Paige?”

She huffed out a sigh. “Isn't it obvious?”

“Nope.”

He was teasing her, she realized. So she said in a singsong voice, “Because you're superhot, Tyler. Happy?”

He chuckled. “Thank you. Nice to know you noticed.”

She lightly punched his lower back with her hand still tangled in his belt loops. “It's a fact, Tyler—like the sky is blue or *1989* is Taylor Swift's best album,” she said, her words dismissive. “Or that it's kind of obnoxious to fish for compliments when you look like you do.”

“It definitely is,” he said agreeably. “My apologies.”

They shuffled slowly along the tunnel in silence for a few moments. Was there the slightest *hint* of tension between them?

“Have you considered that could be the reason you were driven off the road and for all this shit that's happened since—what you do?” Tyler asked. His tone lacked any of the playfulness of earlier; it was back to his military voice. “Could you have come onto the radar of some criminal organization because you thwarted one of their scams?”

“I did consider that,” she said. “Briefly. After the gunmen left and my brain had a moment to function somewhat normally. But I doubt it. First

reason is I doubt I'm *worth* killing? I mean, I go through the catfishing stats in a slide in my presentation, and I don't think the numbers add up. In 2022 the FBI reported that more than five hundred million dollars were lost in the US to catfishing scams, but that was nationwide."

"That's a massive amount of money on the line," Tyler said. He came to a stop, and Paige heard the now-familiar sound of him exploring the darkness in front of him with his makeshift cane.

"Absolutely, and that's just from the scams that've been reported—that shame I mentioned before means they often aren't. But anyway, the individual money lost per scam is way smaller. In Colorado the total amount lost in a year is about twenty-five million, and the average per case is over fifty grand. But thankfully my clients rarely have lost anywhere near that by the time they come to me. They're coming to me after they've handed over maybe a few hundred dollars, or a few thousand, and things have started to feel *off*. Or maybe they've just been asked for cash and they want to check. And those first asks are always small amounts as the scammer builds trust." She paused. "Have you found something?" They had remained stationary for longer than usual.

"Not sure," he said.

She peered around uselessly herself, hoping it was a glimpse of light he'd discovered, but her surroundings remained velvety black.

She shivered as the panic of earlier threatened to return. "So my point is," she said quickly, trying to distract herself, "that I don't think the low-level scams I've ruined are worth recruiting two hitmen for. It seems a bit over the top for a few thousand dollars here or there. Those amounts can be devastating for the victims, but the scammers just go find a new target."

"Makes sense," he said. "And your second reason?"

"The accents of the hitmen. They sounded something like Russian to me. Catfish scammers are found all over the world, but the absolute *best* at it, and most prolific, come out of West Africa. There are scams coming out of

Russia, too, but they're generally targeting men—you know, the classic Russian bride scam. When the police or FBI has gotten involved in my clients' cases, money has been traced to accounts in Nigeria or Ghana—never Russia.”

“I'm pretty sure this is a dead end,” Tyler said.

The change of subject threw Paige a little. “What do you mean?”

“All I can feel in front of us is rock and gravel. Goes all the way to the ceiling. Either the miners stopped exploring here or it's been filled in at some point.”

“Oh.”

“I know,” Tyler replied, sounding equally deflated. “Let's head back and find another tunnel, okay?”

Carefully they swapped positions, Paige diligently keeping her hand on the wall and making sure not to let go of Tyler. The idea of not being physically connected to him in this awful darkness, even for a second, made her stomach churn.

“So,” she said, once they were walking again—more briskly now they knew the way ahead was clear, “do you have any theories as to why two men want to kill us?”

He answered immediately. “No. None at all.”

FIVE

“REALLY?”

Tyler could hear the surprise in Paige’s question. He shouldn’t have been quite so adamant—but he’d already felt like crap after discovering the dead end to this tunnel, and also like an idiot for baiting her into a compliment. *What had he been thinking?*

And now he had to lie to her.

He was such a fucking asshole.

“I keep to myself,” he explained. “I go to work at the conference center—where I interact with basically nobody while I fix fences and cut grass—and I go home. Like you, I’ve got no criminal links to myself or my family, no vengeful ex, nothing like that.”

“Surely you dealt with bad guys like this in the military?”

“Of course. But I retired more than three years ago—and to the enemy I was just another soldier in head-to-toe combat gear. Why have a beef with me specifically?”

“Hmm,” she said. “But *how* could this be random? It doesn’t *feel* random.”

“I know. And I don’t know.”

That, at least, was true. He *didn’t* know, not for sure.

But after hearing those Russian-like accents and Paige’s convincing

argument that this wasn't related to her work . . . there was a possible explanation.

It didn't make sense, because it still didn't explain why Paige's car had been driven off that highway, but he was out of other ideas. Besides, how likely was it that a week after returning from his latest Shadow Team job—he and Dev had intercepted a truck in Belarus packed full of women being trafficked into Minsk for forced prostitution—he'd hear *cyka blyat*—a Russian/Belarussian curse used similarly to how Americans use *fuck*—in rural Colorado?

An American billionaire's backpacking daughter had been one of the passengers on that truck, and her father had hired Shadow Operations when official channels had moved too slowly. All the women on board had been rescued, and the intel Shadow Ops had gathered provided several critical leads to assist the Belarussian government in prosecuting the offenders. Tyler had traveled to Belarus under a fake identity, and it would've been extraordinarily difficult to identify him and trace him back to the US, but he knew through similar work the Shadow Ops analysts did that nothing was impossible.

But even if he *had* been identified, *why* kill him? Surely they'd want to interrogate him? Find out who he worked for? Or find Dev as well?

And why involve Paige?

It was a theory riddled with holes, so there was no value in sharing it with her. To do so he'd need to reveal the existence of the Shadow Team, and he couldn't do that. In the three years since he'd joined the team, he hadn't told a soul it existed. How could he? The team didn't officially exist. Every single police or government official he'd ever worked with while on the Shadow Team would deny meeting him if questioned.

It was the whole point of the team to be in the shadows. It gave them options and advantages unavailable to those governed by policies and protocols.

Besides, there'd been no need. His family accepted he wanted to live a quiet, private life and thought the maintenance work at the conference center was his only employment. As part of his briefing before traveling to Falcon, he'd been told that three women in Falcon knew about the team—Andy, Caleb, and Sam's partners. He could imagine it being pretty tricky to hide a secret double life from your girlfriend, but as he didn't have one—and that wouldn't change—it would never be an issue for him.

“Do you really keep to yourself?” Paige asked.

“Yeah. I own a few acres of woodland in Hollister. When I'm not at work, I like the solitude.” Or when he wasn't off on a Shadow Team assignment.

“I never would've guessed that. I would've thought you were the type of guy to be out every night of the week.”

The absolute darkness had softened just a little as they approached the shaft.

“Used to be,” he said before he could stop himself.

“What happened?”

Why had he allowed the conversation to head in this direction?

“Shit happened,” he said. “A lot of it.”

He stepped out from the tunnel onto the wooden platform. Paige let go of his jeans, and he turned to face her. She was closer than he'd expected, and her chin was lifted as she studied him.

“It's so good to be able to see something.” She frowned. “Do you want to talk about that shit that happened?”

“With a stranger?”

He knew he sounded defensive, and her gaze immediately dropped to the ground.

“No, of course not, what was I thinking?” She stepped around him briskly and reached for the ladder. “Should we try that tunnel you saw a little higher up?”

“Sure,” he said, following her as she climbed upward.

In silence they made their way up the platforms, him still holding the board he’d use as a cane. At the entrance to the tunnel, they set up again—with Paige at his back, her hand against the wall. She continued to awkwardly thread her fingers through one of his belt loops rather than grab onto the waistband of his jeans. He knew she was avoiding touching his skin, which made sense given what he’d just told her: they were strangers.

But it still felt as wrong as when he’d said it.

“I shouldn’t have said we were strangers,” he said gruffly as they began the slow passage into the new tunnel.

“Why not?” Her words were efficient. “Clearly we are.”

“No. I made it sound like you were some random person I’d walked past on the street, and—”

“But I *am* the random person you walked past at the gas station, and that you stopped to help on the side of the highway. We’re the definition of strangers.”

“We *were*,” he pressed. “Now we’re not.”

“Because of an extraordinary situation,” she said, again in that nonsense tone. “The only reason we’re talking at all is because of some maybe-Russian bad guys chasing after us with guns. I forgot myself, before, asking a personal question. Why would you want to tell *me*? If we make it out of here, you’ll never see me again.”

“We *will* make it out of here,” he said firmly. “And why wouldn’t I see you again?”

Her certainty bothered him.

“Why would you want to?”

“Because I like you.” He said it without thinking, but it was absolutely true. “I only said you were a stranger because the shit that happened is awful and complicated and not something I talk about with anyone, and it was easier to push you away than explain that.”

It was a habit, he realized. Up until five years ago, he'd drawn people to himself effortlessly. Now it was equally effortless to shove them away.

But he didn't want to do that to Paige.

"I'm sorry about the awful, complicated stuff," she said, "but don't be stupid. I would be invisible to you if none of this happened."

"What are you on about?"

She gave a huff of frustration. "Seriously? You want another compliment?"

"No, I—"

"Tyler, someone whose looks could catfish someone out of their life savings does not *like* Paige Emmett, okay? I'm not offended by that. I am offended by being patronized."

"Paige, when I said I liked you, I meant—"

"That you like me as a friend, right," she said breezily. "Got it. Ha! Silly me."

"Goddamn it, Paige, are you always like this?"

"Absolutely aware of the type of woman I am? Yes. Always."

"And what type of woman is that?"

"A too-tall, too-thin one with a big nose and small boobs. Men just aren't attracted to me. I have a lot of other stuff going on for me, so it's cool."

Tyler scrambled to make sense of what she'd just said. Did she really believe that bullshit?

"So I already know what you think of me, and I don't need you to say nice things just because we might, I guess, die together in the bowels of the earth?" She gave an empty laugh.

He stopped dead, and she bumped into his back. They were long past where the hint of light had disappeared.

"*Do not turn around,*" she said. "We could end up facing the wrong way."

"I won't," he said. "But I also won't have you telling me what I think."

She sighed. “You can put that into your own words if you like.”

She spoke so calmly, like she was delivering unarguable truths.

“I,” he said decisively, “*like. You. Paige.*”

“Great.” She took a deep breath. “Forget everything I just said. Hot mess mixed with existential dread, remember? We’re just two random people in a crazy situation, and that’s fine with me.”

“What you just said about the type of woman you are is total bullshit.”

She was twisting her fingers in his belt loop, the fabric tightening and loosening slightly at his belly. She didn’t reply.

“Do you want to see *me* again?” he asked. “When this is all over?”

She laughed softly. “Does it even matter what I want?”

He turned around, hating that he had his back to her—and forgetting he’d agreed not to move. With her fingers tangled in his jeans, she tipped forward.

“Stay still, Tyler!” she gasped as she stumbled.

He staggered back to steady himself on the gravelly floor of the tunnel.

But there was nothing there.

He fell.

SUDDENLY PAIGE WAS ALONE in the darkness, her fingers burning from the speed with which Tyler’s jeans had slipped from her grasp.

“Tyler!” she screamed. “*Tyler!*”

There was a sharp *bang* and a clatter somewhere below her.

Then, a groan.

“Tyler!”

“Fuck me, that hurt,” he said. Then much louder, “Do *not* move, Paige. It’s a decent drop to where I am.”

“Where are you?”

“In the dark somewhere else in this goddamn mine.” He sighed, and she heard the sounds of him moving. “I think I landed on an old ore cart. It broke

my fall a little.” There were more shuffling sounds. “I can feel two sets of tracks down here. This could be good—this might be one of the main tunnels.”

Did that mean it could lead to an exit?

She was still standing in her tunnel with one hand pressed hard against the wall. But without Tyler, the darkness was beginning to close in again. Slowly she lowered her body to a crouch as her knees began to wobble.

“Paige?” Tyler called. “Did you hear what I just said?”

“Main tunnel,” she said quietly. “Ore cart.”

“I need you to listen to me so we can get you down here with me, okay?”

It was his military voice again, confident and direct.

“I want you to *very carefully* find the hole. My guess is it’s a ventilation shaft. It’s not all that big, I think, because I whacked my shoulders on the way down.”

Gingerly she touched the surface in front of her. Immediately before her was firm ground, and she moved gently onto her knees. She reached farther forward, sifting her fingers through the small rocks and dirt until she felt where the hole began. Then she slid her hand along the solid rock, trying to work out the size and shape of the hole.

“You’re right,” she said. “It’s not all that big.”

It was probably not much more than two feet in diameter.

But in sizing up the hole, she’d lost contact with the wall. “I’m not touching the wall.” She looked uselessly around her, then reached out blindly. The wall was out of reach in every direction. “I don’t know which way I’m facing anymore.”

She heard the panic in her voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” Tyler said calmly. “You don’t need to know which way the main shaft is anymore. All you need to worry about is getting down to me.”

“And how do I do that?”

“I’ll catch you.”

Her laugh had a frantic edge. “In the *dark?*”

“That’s the thing, Paige,” he said. “I can see.”

She felt something lighten, just a little, in her stomach. *Hope.*

“You can?”

“Not, like, *well,*” he clarified. “It’s still dark as hell. But some light is getting in here, somehow. And I can just make out the ventilation shaft, so I can stand beneath it. I’ll be comfier to land on than an ore cart, trust me.”

She nodded, then realized that was pointless. “Okay. So you want me to just drop down through a hole I can’t see and hope you’ll catch me?”

“I’ll catch you, Paige.”

She shifted onto her butt and slowly swung her legs into the hole. It was a completely unsettling experience to be maneuvering her body in the darkness. She pressed her hands hard into the stone and gravel, wanting the bite of sharp edges against her palm to anchor her. She kicked her legs out, and her sneakered toes hit unyielding rock.

“How far down does the shaft go before it hits the tunnel you’re in?” she asked.

“I’d guess at least ten feet.”

Ten feet?

“What if I get stuck partway down the shaft?”

Why was she creating new things to be terrified of?

“Well, that would suck,” he said dryly.

Her burst of laughter was a little less frantic this time.

“But seriously,” he continued, “you won’t get stuck. And I *will* catch you.”

She closed her eyes.

“Oh my god, I just closed my eyes to help me calm down,” she said. “How stupid is that?”

He chuckled. “Take your time, babe. I’m not going anywhere.”

She was certain Tyler hadn't meant to say—or even realized he'd said—the small endearment. Yet it made her shiver a little—just the simple act of Tyler calling her babe.

That was even more stupid than closing her eyes in absolute darkness.

Keeping her eyes open this time, she took a deep breath, trying to compose herself.

Too tall, too thin with a big nose and small boobs . . .

Why would she say that to Tyler? To a *stranger*, as he'd so correctly stated and then ineffectually attempted to retract? He didn't give a shit about her imperfections; he didn't know her, didn't care about her. There had been no reason for her to be so defensive, to say *any* of what she'd said.

Yet she'd said it all. All tumbling out of her, like some faucet had been turned on because . . . because . . .

She *liked* Tyler.

She was lost in an abandoned mine in a race against time to find an exit that might or might not exist before gunmen—who definitely *did* exist—returned to *kill* them.

And she was getting all tingly about a *man*?

And not just any man, but literally the hottest man she'd ever seen in real life. The type of man who could have any woman he wanted—and probably had. Because he wasn't just gorgeous. He was charming, smart, funny, and so damn brave. He was perfect, and she, unquestionably, was not.

Maybe it was the darkness that had made her feel close to him. That had made her forget how inept she was around men. It was crazy, but as they'd talked in the dark, she'd felt somehow connected to Tyler—and not just through her death grip of his jeans. When he'd hinted at whatever had happened in his past to change him, she'd had the silly idea that he'd want to tell her. Specifically her. Like she—a stranger as he'd promptly pointed out—would be the one person on this earth he'd suddenly spill his guts to.

Like she was special.

She shook her head. This was clearly not the time or place to worry about any of this.

“You okay up there?” Tyler asked.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “Just working up the courage to leap into the void.”

She wished that weren’t so accurate.

“To be fair, it’s not a void since I’m at the end of it.”

“*If* you catch me.”

“I can assure you that all my Delta Force training has prepared me for this moment.”

“I’m heavier than I look,” she warned.

“So am I.”

That made her laugh. “How is that relevant?”

“Exactly. I’m also a little disappointed you think *A*, I would ever let you fall and *B*, I’m not strong enough to catch you. You’re hitting my ego where it hurts.”

“I thought I did that with my comment earlier, you know—truck size being inversely proportional to your . . . ?”

He gave a bark of laughter. “Paige, you’re something else. You know that?”

But he made it sound like a compliment.

“I’d really feel better if you were down here with me,” he said a few moments later, serious again. “If you don’t want to jump, I think you could try to shimmy down—press your feet and back against opposite walls of the shaft and then just drop the last bit into my arms. What do you think?”

There were no ideal options here. “Okay.”

She slid forward until her butt hovered just over the edge of the shaft. Her shoes seemed reasonably stable against the slightly rough rock of the shaft, but she held her breath while she slowly slid down, the muscles in her arms shaking as she bent her body like a pretzel.

“I’m in!” she said.

“I’m right beneath you.”

She took a deep breath and carefully crept her feet down just a little, pressing hard against the wall of the shaft with her back. Then she wiggled her shoulders down until they were level with her feet.

It was impossible for her to know if she was making any progress at all. She shuffled her feet downward again, repeating her awkward descent in tiny increments.

“Where did you grow up in Missouri?” she asked, her voice a little unsteady.

“What?” He sounded confused.

“I need you to talk to me,” she explained.

“Okay, no problem.” Tyler responded immediately. “I grew up in Kirkwood—a neighborhood in St Louis—with my parents. We lived right next door to my nonna.”

“Keep going,” she said. “Please.”

She needed the distraction as her heart beat hard against her chest and sweat beaded on her brow. The farther she moved down the shaft, the less secure she felt. Either the walls were smoother or she was tiring. Or both, she supposed.

“My nonna is awesome,” he said. “She’s in her nineties now, sharp as a tack, still lives in her own place and has my mom and dad over for a three-course dinner once a week. My dad is her only kid, and I’m an only child, so I was horrifically spoiled. But she was tough on me, too. Always had the highest expectations. I think she’ll always be a little disappointed I wasn’t academic—my dad’s a lawyer, and I think she liked the idea of also having a doctor in the family, but that was never going to happen.” He paused. “You okay?”

She mumbled something vaguely positive. Would this shaft never end?

“No one in my family understood why I wanted to join the army,” Tyler

continued. “For me it just made sense. I like being on teams—as a kid it was little league, then football. I was on the varsity football team in high school, thought I might snag a football scholarship, but when that didn’t happen I lost all interest in college and joined the army instead. And I guess I’m more like my nonna than I realized, because once I was in the army, I knew I wanted to be part of the best of the best. And so Delta Force was the goal from the start.”

His voice helped her gauge how much farther she had to go in this awful shaft.

“I think I’m almost there,” she said. “What should I—”

One foot suddenly lost purchase on the shaft wall and jerked upward, sending her whole body into a jackknife—her legs and arms up and butt down - and into free fall.

She screamed—but it was barely out of her mouth when she landed in Tyler’s arms with an *oomph*.

He grunted as her momentum pushed him backward. He gripped her hard against him and steadied himself.

But a moment later, he was still.

“See,” he said. “Told you I’d catch you.”

SIX

TYLER STOOD PERFECTLY STILL AS PAIGE CAUGHT HER BREATH.

He held her with one arm beneath her legs and the other wrapped around her back. She'd flung her arms around his neck when he'd caught her, and hadn't let him go.

Not that he minded. Having Paige tight in his arms, her hair tickling his nose, was definitely not a bad thing.

Thank fuck she's okay.

She'd needed him to just keep on talking as she'd navigated that shaft, but keeping his words calm when he'd had his heart in his throat had been damn difficult. Sure, there was the hint of light in this tunnel, but it certainly hadn't given him a view of Paige's descent. He'd had to just stand there and hope like hell that when she dropped out of the darkness he *did* catch her, just as he'd promised.

She shifted in his arms. She felt so good, all soft curves and legs that went on forever.

It was too dark to see much of anything, but he thought she'd lifted her head to look up at him.

"I, uh—" She swallowed. "I like you too," she said simply. "Sorry I was weird before. I'm lucky to be stuck in an abandoned mine with you."

"I think we're making a pretty good team."

“Yeah,” she said, more softly. “We are.”

He gave her a squeeze, then made himself put her down. If the gunmen had headed back to Guneo to get climbing gear, they couldn’t be that far away from returning.

He settled her on her feet, his hands at her waist probably a beat longer than absolutely necessary.

He did like her.

It was as simple—and as complicated—as that.

But *now* was not the time to consider what that meant, or if it meant anything at all—given the decision he’d made three years ago.

But there *was* time to say one critical, nonnegotiable thing.

“You’re not too tall,” he said. In his arms he felt her flinch at his words. “Or too thin, or any of those bullshit things you said before.”

“You don’t need to—”

“No,” he said firmly. “Let me finish. I can’t have you thinking that shit you said was acceptable.”

“Tyler—”

“You have the best ass I’ve ever seen.”

She gasped, but he’d shut her up.

“An *elegant* nose, and absolutely incredible eyes.”

“We’ve been running for our lives or in the dark,” she scoffed. “You don’t even know what color my eyes are, or if they’re anything but perfectly ordinary. I know you’re being kind, but—”

“They’re brown,” he said. “A deep, dark brown, like chocolate syrup, with the slightest hint of gold.”

He sensed, rather than saw, that she was opening and closing her mouth in confusion.

“Is this a Delta Force thing?” she asked. “Attention to detail in a crisis or something?”

“Nope, it’s a man noticing a gorgeous woman he bumped into at the gas

station thing. You were *never* invisible to me, Paige.”

“Oh,” she said.

He cleared his throat. “I think it’s time we got out of this fucking mine.”

IT WAS STILL WAY TOO dark in this new tunnel, so their progress was slow.

Paige again walked behind Tyler, her fingers gripping the belt loop of his jeans. He’d found a loose part of the ore-cart tracks to use as his new cane, and she was again responsible for maintaining contact with the wall.

There’d been a few minutes—after landing in Tyler’s incredible strong, firm arms—when she’d felt almost euphoric; there was light, so there must be an exit nearby. They were going to get out of here.

And, also, Tyler had just called her gorgeous.

Obviously his compliment was far less important in the grand scheme of things, but still—it’d been so unexpected that she couldn’t easily shove that little bubble of happiness aside.

Had a man . . . had *anyone*, really . . . ever *seen* her before? Noticed her?

Once, she’d thought someone had, but it had all been a lie. Since then she’d become so accustomed to being invisible that she’d convinced herself it didn’t bother her.

But it did.

Maybe, she’d been wrong. Maybe she wasn’t invisible at all.

But after those few minutes, and as the darkness continued unrelenting—pondering any of that seemed ridiculous.

She was still lost in an abandoned mine. She was sore, hungry, and increasingly thirsty.

There was no guarantee she’d ever get out of here.

“Where did you grow up?” Tyler asked.

“Idaho.”

“Is that where you still live?”

“No. I moved to Denver years ago.” Almost ten years ago, in fact.

“What made you leave?”

She laughed dryly. “That’s a long story. But the Cliffs Notes version is that I’m not close to my family. Like you I’m an only child, but my parents and I don’t see eye to eye.”

That was an understatement.

“Really? That sucks. My parents are my greatest support—even when I don’t want it.” He chuckled. “I can’t imagine not having that.”

Tyler was right. It *did* suck. But it’d been worse when she’d tried to be the daughter they wanted. “I grew up in a town called Moscow—the University there is the town’s biggest employer, and my parents were—still are—academics. They are both kind of brilliant in their fields—my mom in mathematics and my dad in engineering.” It appeared she wasn’t just giving him the Cliffs Notes version. “They had me a little later in life, so I was their one shot at an equally brilliant kid. And, well—” she shrugged even though Tyler couldn’t see her. “I wasn’t. I did fine at school, a solid B student, but that was it. They were sure I was supposed to be more than that. I don’t know how many parent-teacher meetings they organized, or tutors for me, that kind of thing. But I was stubbornly average, despite their best efforts.”

Her laugh was a little hollow. “They even had me on a special diet for gifted children that was supposed to optimize brain function, and they always ensured my reading and television material was carefully curated. No Disney princesses for me!”

“That doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“It wasn’t. I told them that—I guess you’ve figured out I’m not always good at keeping my thoughts to myself—but that just added to their disappointment.”

It wasn’t until she’d left Moscow that Paige had realized exactly how heavy the weight of their disappointment had been on her shoulders. It was quite something to grow up with an acute awareness that your parents were

actively distressed by your lack of genius.

She didn't understand why she'd shared any of that with Tyler, though.

She suddenly realized she could see the big outline of Tyler's shoulders in front of her. "Is it getting a little lighter?" she asked.

"I think so."

"Are you also worried the light source isn't something we can use to escape? Like a crack in a boulder?"

"Or another airflow shaft but too narrow for us to fit?" he said. "Absolutely. But while walking through worst-case scenarios in my head serves me—I mean, served me well in the military, it's kind of unhelpful down here."

"It's that annoying existential dread thing, isn't it? Very distracting."

He laughed. "You're right that talking helps. Your voice grounds me too."

"You need grounding?" He'd surprised her.

"I really don't like this giant dark mine either."

"I know, it's just—you've been so steady and calm. You haven't panicked like me. Or cried or screamed. I've done all those things."

"I guess I just have more practice at being scared," he said.

"You get scared?"

That didn't seem possible. He was this tall, strong, powerful elite soldier.

"Of course I do. Some soldiers say they don't, but maybe they just call it something different—like nerves or tension. For me it was always worst before combat, because once I was *in* it, all my training would kick in and whether I was scared or not was irrelevant. But yeah, I got scared. I'm human. But I learned to be outwardly calm regardless—it helped me focus. And looking around at my teammates, who I *knew* were nervous, or scared or whatever, and seeing their strength, focus, and determination, it helped me too."

"I'm sorry I haven't been much use in that department," she said.

“Are you serious? You’ve been unbelievably strong and brave.”

“Except for the crying and freaking out—”

“No. No except for. You *are* unbelievably strong and brave.”

It was another compliment from Tyler that settled awkwardly.

“You said before that you joined the army because you like being on a team,” she said, eager to change the subject. “Do you miss having a team now? You said you keep to yourself, work alone . . . that’s a big change.”

“You really don’t like compliments, do you, Paige?”

“Everyone likes to hear nice things about themselves,” she replied breezily. “Although sometimes a little *too* much. A lot of my catfished clients get sucked in by meaningless pretty words.”

“I’ve meant everything I’ve said to you.”

You have the best ass I’ve ever seen, he’d told her. But really? This was a guy who’d definitely seen some beautiful butts.

“I know,” she said.

But she’d waited too long to reply.

“I have no reason to lie to you.”

“I don’t think you’re lying. It’s more . . . you’re being generous? I guess? Because, let’s face it, you are.”

He made a low growling noise that both surprised her and made her tummy flip over. “I’m fucking not.” He took a deep breath. “Has your job made you this cynical? Or have you always been like this?”

She held her tongue on her automatic retort: *Existing as myself in this world has made me like this*. Because she knew he’d just keep on arguing with her.

And besides, she thought she did . . . sort of . . . believe Tyler? Even as they continued their slow, cautious walk in the darkness, she felt *something* between them. Something she’d initially assumed was only on her side—that spark whenever they touched. Yet when he’d held her after she’d fallen into his arms, and when he’d called her gorgeous . . . it hadn’t felt one-sided.

So she turned his question over in her head.

“I think,” she said, what she’d told him about her parents fresh in her thoughts, “I’ve always been like this. I remember once that my grandma told me I had ‘lovely long legs’ when I tried on a pair of denim shorts she bought me when I was about eight or nine. And my mom *shushed* her. She didn’t believe in commenting on my body since she hates how young girls and women are objectified in today’s society.” She paused. “Which makes a lot of sense, but it means I’m not used to being complimented on my appearance.”

“Your own parents never said you were beautiful?”

She laughed. “But I’m not.”

“To them you were.”

Another laugh, a little awkward this time. “I have no reason to believe that.”

He huffed out a sigh. “That’s messed up. No wonder you’ve got a warped idea about how you look.”

“No,” she said. “I’m just realistic. I’m thirty years old, Tyler. Trust me, the total lack of interest that men have in me makes my reality pretty clear.”

“Bullshit, men aren’t interested in you,” he said roughly. “When did you last go on a date?”

“You said you joined the army because you like being on a team,” she said, repeating her earlier question, but more firmly this time. “Do you miss having a team now?”

THIS TIME he let her change the subject.

To be honest, he wasn’t sure why he wasn’t steering the conversation back to pizza toppings and subjects equally superficial. Maybe it was the darkness that made them both—and it was definitely both of them—talk about stuff they didn’t usually talk about? Or *ever* talk about? Because he

recognized in Paige something he did himself: shut out the world from what was really going on in his head.

So he found he couldn't stop pushing her, asking her more questions.

Why? Why did he want to know more about Paige? Or simply *know* her, at all?

Was it the darkness? The danger? Their shared realization that they might never get out of this stupid mine?

Whatever it was, it meant he didn't deflect her question.

"I miss my Delta Force teammates," he said. "A whole fucking lot."

"You don't stay in touch?"

Well, two are dead and one of the others is Andy, so . . .

"No."

"Why not?"

"Shit happened."

"The same shit you didn't want to talk about before?"

"Exactly the same," he said. "Still don't want to talk about it."

And he didn't. Even in this darkness that made him talk more than he should.

"Hmm," she said. "But before that shit, you were different. You didn't keep to yourself, like you said you do now."

"No, I didn't." That version of himself felt like a different person. "Old me was a classic extrovert. I loved meeting new people." Women, especially. "Always on a date or hanging out with friends. Used to go watch a lot of sports too. Football, baseball, anything. I loved the buzz of a big crowd."

"Can you change personalities like that?"

He shrugged. "I did. I don't do any of that anymore."

"Is it all the people and loud noises at a sports stadium?" she asked gently.

"Nothing like that," he said. "And it's not just sports. I don't do the other stuff either. I go to work and keep to myself."

“None of it?”

“None of it.”

“*You* don’t *date*?” Her tone was shocked.

“Nope.”

“Wow,” she said. “Have you—and I realize I’m overstepping here—talked to someone about that shit that happened? Like a therapist or a counselor? Because that sounds like a pretty extreme personality change.”

“Have you ever talked to someone about your parents and their ridiculous expectations?”

She sighed. “No.”

“There you go.”

He didn’t need to talk to someone to know he was fucked-up.

His life now wasn’t because of a personality change—he was still the same Tyler Cerra he’d always been. That was the goddamn problem. *He* was the goddamn problem.

But the life he had now—as opposed to the life he’d flirted and charmed his way through before—was the one he deserved. He didn’t deserve tickets to the fucking game. He didn’t deserve what had once felt like his pick of women. He didn’t deserve sex.

And he definitely didn’t deserve a woman like Paige.

“I’m sorry that whatever happened, happened,” she said quietly. “And that it changed you so deeply.”

It hadn’t though—that’s what he hated. He’d screwed up so badly, yet he was still here. Still the same.

Andy had even forgiven him. He *hated* that. Hated it.

“I hope one day you find someone you can talk to,” she continued. “Someone you can share your pain with.”

His pain. That was rich.

“I hope you find someone you can talk to too.” He meant it somewhat facetiously, dismissively, which was unfair. Paige had no idea about any of

this. But still, it didn't come out quite that way. Instead, she seemed to take him seriously.

"I hope so," she said, and he realized she did mean it. "That would be nice. Someone I could trust completely—I've never had that."

She wanted what he was so actively rejecting. She wanted closeness; she wanted that connection. She wanted trust and authenticity.

Yet she thought it wasn't available to her.

Although, even before all this shit, had he ever had someone he could talk to and trust completely? He'd dated a lot, but only a couple he would've called his girlfriend—and that had been earlier in his twenties. He never remembered having a conversation with either of them that was anything like the way he'd talked to Paige.

"This is weird, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, I'd suggest being chased by gunmen into an abandoned mine would meet the definition of weird." She delivered the words deadpan.

He laughed. How on earth had she made him laugh so much given the intensity of what had happened—was happening—to them? "I meant the way we've talked down here."

He didn't elaborate any further.

"Yeah," she said. "I know. What's weirder is I don't feel . . . embarrassed by any of it. I've cried in front of you—which I never do. I've panicked and screamed and told you random stuff about my parents I've literally never told anyone . . . and I feel . . . fine?"

"Like the sky hasn't fallen because we each told a total stranger stuff we've never told anyone else?"

"You too?"

"Yup."

They walked in silence a little farther.

"And we're not strangers," she said quickly. "Remember?"

"No, we're not." He swallowed. "I wonder, though, when we get out of

here, if things will change?”

“When we’re no longer in the dark?”

“Or in danger.”

After a long moment, she replied. “They have to, I think. Down here . . . all that’s happened . . . it doesn’t feel quite real.”

Stupidly, her words stung a little. What had he expected her to say? “You’re probably right,” he said roughly.

Of course she was right.

And why would he want her to be wrong? What would be the point? It wasn’t like whatever this was could go anywhere.

He wouldn’t allow it to.

Tyler looked down in front of him, where he was using the piece of old ore track to explore the path ahead. And—he could *see* it. He could see the rock-strewn ground, the board in his hand, and the path up ahead.

“Paige!”

“I know!” she exclaimed, and her hand fell away from the back of his jeans.

He looked over his shoulder to catch her gaze among the shadows. Her eyes shone with hope, and her smile was blinding.

“Come on!” he said, grabbing her hand.

Together, they ran.

SEVEN

PAIGE CAME TO A HALT BESIDE TYLER IN FRONT OF A TEN-FOOT-HIGH mountain of boulders and gravel.

At the top, light streamed through a gap about the size of a basketball. Definitely not big enough for them to crawl through.

“It looks like this may have been the main entrance to the mine, cut into the side of the hill,” Tyler said.

“Until they sealed it up.” Paige put her hands on her hips as she surveyed the mouth of the tunnel. It was crazy how much stuff had just been *left* here. More metal ore carts, heavily covered in dust, huddled against a wall, and there were piles of wooden boxes stacked between the two ore-cart tracks. On one wall, a miner—presumably—had painted their initials and the year - 1922.

“Will we be able to get out this way?”

The idea of walking back into the darkness made her stomach turn.

“That’s the plan,” he said.

Tyler wasted no time in scaling the larger boulders at the base of what had once been the entrance.

Against the roof of the entrance was a massive wooden beam, and the hole to the outside was between that beam and the mountain of rock.

Halfway up the mountain, Tyler’s boot dislodged a rock. She gasped as a

cascade of gravel tumbled toward her. But he easily righted himself and carried on upward until he was eye level with the gap.

“Damn, it’s nice to see something that isn’t the inside of this mine,” he said.

“What can you see?”

“A lot of trees, mostly.” He carefully tested the rocks around the opening, then looked down at her. “Stand back—I’m going to see if I can move some of these.”

She did what he asked, moving back beside the abandoned ore carts as Tyler began to toss rocks back into the mine—some with ease, a few with a lot more effort. But unlike the rest of their time in the mine, this part seemed relatively straightforward. The basketball-sized gap gradually grew larger.

Paige could hardly believe this was actually happening—she wasn’t going to die in this mine.

But as that fear lifted, the other obvious remaining fear shoved itself to the forefront.

“Is it safe out there?” she asked. “What if they’re waiting for us?”

In the darkness, she had—stupidly, really—felt like the gunmen were a distant threat, nowhere near as immediate as the suffocating bleakness of the mine.

“They could be,” he said casually, “but I doubt it. It would be extraordinary bad luck for us if they stumbled across this mine entrance just as we were escaping through it.”

“And of course, up until this point we’ve both been extraordinarily lucky today,” she replied. “Except for the being-driven-off-the-road thing. And all the shooting.”

“Which is why I’ll go out first,” he said. “But if they’re out there, they were already set up before we got here. I’ve done some personal-protection training—you know, like a bodyguard? And the safest place to take your principal is somewhere you didn’t plan to go. If you didn’t know you were

going there, neither will the bad guys.”

That made sense to Paige, but fear was already making her shoulders tense and her gut churn.

“We’re a hell of a lot safer out there than in this mine when they return with flashlights,” he said, as if he knew where her thoughts had taken her. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she said quietly.

“Hey—” He twisted from where he crouched at the top of the pile of rocks. He caught her gaze before clambering back down to the ground. He stood directly in front of her.

He reached for her hands, then stopped.

He’d held her hand while they’d run only minutes before, but it felt different now.

Would things change when they were out of the dark?

This electric connection between them?

She’d told him it had to. Because this extraordinary situation didn’t feel real. It couldn’t be real, could it? This ease between them. The way they’d talked to each other. The way she’d felt when he’d held her in his arms.

She knew all that, yet it stung when his hands fell away.

No, not just stung. It hurt—like a pang in her chest.

How ridiculous she was.

“It’s okay, Paige,” he said. “I’m not going to do anything to put you into danger, I promise. I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.”

She knew that. He’d already proven it in every one of his actions today.

She nodded. “I know. I hate this mine, but I also hate not knowing what is out there.”

“Yeah, me too. But give me a minute, and I’ll find out, then help you out of here.”

But what if the gunmen were out there? What if Tyler climbed out into an ambush?

She met his gaze, and his lips quirked before he shrugged. “Well, that would suck.”

She hadn’t spoken—but he did that, too, he’d told her. Imagined worst-case scenarios.

He knew what she was thinking—what she was worried about.

It helped. She took a deep breath.

“It *would* suck,” she said.

He grinned before pointing at their exit, now big enough to crawl through. “Can you climb up there for me? I’ll follow you, then you wait up there while I make sure we’re clear.”

She nodded.

The climb wasn’t difficult, and she perched on a large boulder near the top, one hand resting on the wooden beam. She held her breath as Tyler twisted his body through the gap, and quickly climbed down the mountain of rubble on the other side. The entrance was set back a little into the hillside, so there was a wall of stone on either side of Tyler as he exited the mouth of the mine. Ahead of Paige, all she could see was a dense forest.

Tyler walked with his back against one wall of granite, pausing a few feet from the edge before gradually increasing his angle as he—Paige presumed—carefully grew his field of vision beyond the mine. But, now that she could see the forest, she agreed with Tyler that they would be extremely unlucky to have the gunmen waiting here. She could barely see a few yards into the trees—how on earth would anyone find this mine unless they knew it was here?

After a few minutes more of cautious scanning their surroundings, Tyler turned back to her.

“We’re clear,” he said, his words low. “Can you climb through?”

She swiveled on her boulder so her feet slid through the gap first before she awkwardly wiggled her butt along the densely packed rocks beneath the beam to work herself through.

Tyler had made it look far easier. The stones were sharp and

uncomfortable beneath her butt and back, and she reached downward blindly with her legs, half in and half out of the mine, searching for somewhere stable to steady herself. Instead her shoes kicked at loose gravel and thin air.

“There’s a big rock to your left,” he said. “Down a bit . . . yep . . . that’s it . . .”

With his instructions she limbo-ed her way through until she was—miraculously—fully outside the mine.

From her perch at the top of the pile of stones, she looked down at Tyler. “Oh my god, we actually made it out. I—”

But then that rock beneath her foot wobbled, or maybe her shoe lost its grip—but whatever it was, she slid.

She gasped as she fell, tumbling forward, wildly reaching out in front of her.

And Tyler was there.

Somehow he’d covered the distance between them to catch her before she could fall against the rocks, and as he dragged her up against his chest, he effortlessly negotiated the rest of the way to the ground. Gently he turned her until her back was pressed against a wall of granite.

She looked up at him as she caught her breath.

“*Woman*,” he breathed. “Stop scaring the crap out of me.”

His hands were at her waist, keeping her adrenaline-wobbly legs steady.

She nodded. But this was the first time he’d been this close to her in the light, and his proximity was so distracting she wasn’t all that certain what he’d said.

She’d noticed him at the gas station. Of course she had. It would be impossible for Tyler to exist anywhere without everyone noticing him. He was just *that* drop-dead gorgeous.

But at the gas station he’d just been some guy who’d looked like he’d just walked off some high-fashion billboard in Times Square. Her impression of him, as fleeting as it had been, had been purely superficial. Heck, she’d

judged him based on his looks and his truck. She'd dismissed him, really.

Now . . . after all that had happened over the past hour or so . . . she was noticing him in an entirely different way. And it was even different from the sparks of awareness inside the mine. It was stronger, more intense . . . because in the darkness she could feel his touch or hear his words, but she couldn't see how he looked at her.

And right now, *damn*, he was looking at her.

He lifted one hand to her face to cup her jaw. He held her gaze with remarkable green-gold eyes. *Green* eyes. She hadn't noticed at the gas station, but she noticed now.

He'd noticed *her* eyes, though. He had, it seemed, noticed so much more than she.

Paige took her time exploring his face now. He had thick dark eyebrows that slashed and a long, straight nose. His cheekbones could only be described as chiseled—same for his jaw—and said jaw had a layer of very attractive stubble. His hair fell haphazardly over his forehead, and without thinking she reached up to push it back.

Her fingers lingered lightly against his scalp as she registered the strength of his fingers against the side of her face and the way her own hand now completed this unexpected embrace.

Although *was* it unexpected?

Even as her gaze dipped from the intensity of his eyes to the perfect masculine fullness of his lips, she couldn't talk herself out of how right this all felt.

Because her brain *was* trying—a decade or more of the stories she'd told herself wouldn't give up so easily:

Are you crazy? He'd never want you! No one wants you . . .

But this guy, Tyler Cerra, *did*.

His hands on her body felt just as good now as they had right from the start. Even when she'd known nothing about him, his hands had felt right—

whether tugging her into the forest and away from danger, holding her when she sobbed, or catching her when she fell.

She trusted this man. She trusted this feeling.

And *goddamn*, had it been a long time since she'd allowed herself to feel like this.

To trust her body like this.

Yet she knew, she *knew*, what he wanted.

What she wanted.

He ran his thumb across her cheek, and she shivered.

His hand at her waist gripped her hard as he leaned closer.

“This is not the fucking time, man . . .” he muttered to himself. But he didn't stop.

His lips brushed ever so gently against hers, and he groaned.

“*Fuck . . . Paige . . .*”

Her eyes fluttered shut as he kissed her. It was little more than the press of his lips against hers to start. Almost a question.

But Paige answered him with a touch of her tongue against his bottom lip, and that was that. The kiss exploded.

She moaned as he nipped at her lips and then as their tongues tangled.

She gasped when he settled his weight against her, pushing her against the cool granite. His big hand held her face still for his kiss as her fingers tangled in his hair and tugged him closer still.

He was delicious. Everything about this kiss was delicious, from his taste to the weight of his body against hers and the way he held her with such strength and care.

She lost herself in the sensation of his mouth and tongue against hers. She smiled against his lips when their teeth bumped, then gasped when his hand drifted downward to palm her butt.

His lips trailed kisses from her mouth to her jaw, and her head fell back against the unyielding stone. His hand at her backside slipped lower still to

hitch her upward, so she could hook her leg around his hip and he could settle his body against her.

“Oh *god*, Tyler . . .”

Honestly she didn't know what she was saying as he murmured against her skin, praising her, telling her how hot she was, how fucking gorgeous . . . and strong . . . and brave.

It shocked her how good this was, and when his mouth returned to hers, her answering kiss was desperate, and she was helpless to do anything but undulate her hips against the unyielding hardness between his thighs.

He yanked her T-shirt out of her jeans, where it had somehow remained neatly tucked through everything. He pushed it upward as her own frantic hands tugged at his clothing rather uselessly, as heat coiled where he relentlessly rubbed himself against her.

With cotton bunched above her breasts, he broke their kiss, leaning back a little so he could look at her.

As she took ragged breaths, she again had a moment of wonder at her lack of self-consciousness. She wore a simple beige bra over her barely-a-B-cup breasts, yet the way he looked at her was like she was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

He reached for her, skimming a finger down one bra strap, then along the tops of the cups, his knuckles rubbing against the swells of her breasts. She sucked in a breath when he began to tug down the satin fabric . . . but then he went perfectly still before snatching his hand back as if he'd been burnt.

The change was so abrupt she looked around in panic, certain they were in danger once again. *Were the gunmen here?*

Why else would Tyler stop?

But almost immediately it was clear that wasn't it. They remained alone at the one-time entrance to the mine. The forest around them remained silent apart from the rustle of the leaves in the breeze.

“Tyler?”

He took two steps back and ran a hand through his hair, looking everywhere but at her.

“Tyler?” she asked again.

When he again ignored her, all that previously absent self-consciousness arrived with a vengeance. She yanked down her T-shirt as her cheeks burned hot.

“What the fuck was that?” Tyler murmured, clearly to himself.

“A kiss?” She hated that he was ignoring her.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “This can’t happen. What was I thinking?”

There was a jerkiness to his tone. A hint of . . . devastation? From simply kissing her?

“Was it really that bad?” Her voice was heavy with sarcasm but laced with hurt.

Was it really that bad? Something that, to her, had been so incredible?

So heart-stoppingly wonderful?

“That’s irrelevant,” he said. “What’s important is that it should never have happened.” He gave a wholly unconvincing laugh. “Someone wants us dead, and we’re stopping to make out?” He shook his head again.

“That’s not why you’re freaking out.”

“Of course it is,” he said dismissively. He met her gaze, and his expression was like nothing she’d seen from him before. There was no flirty cockiness, no kindness or concern. No heat, no connection. No *Tyler* who only minutes ago she had been so certain wanted her as badly as she’d wanted him. Who she’d felt hard between her thighs, damn it!

Instead his gaze was flat and empty. Like she was some random woman he’d met at the gas station.

Hurt and regret were a heavy, spiky weight in her belly that smothered all the heat Tyler had created. But there was anger there too.

“What the hell is going on, Tyler?” she asked fiercely. “Because a minute

ago you had your hands up my shirt, and now you look ashamed to be near me.”

He blinked, and for a moment looked horrified. “No! This has nothing to do with you, Paige.”

She waited for him to further explain—but that was it.

No explanation, and the shutters came back down on his expression.

This has everything to do with me, Tyler. Because you were kissing me.

“We need to get out of here,” he said roughly. “That shouldn’t have happened,” he added, yet again. “It won’t happen again.”

Like she hadn’t already felt his regret deep in her bones.

He looked to the sky—for the sun, she guessed—as he walked away from her and into the small clearing in front of the wall of fir trees. With his hands on his hips, he frowned before pivoting to look at Paige, still standing frozen outside the mine.

“North is that way,” he said, pointing—presumably—toward the north. “We need to head this way”—he pointed in a slightly different direction—“to hit the interstate. I left my keys in my truck, so let’s hope my truck’s still there and the assholes with guns are not.” He gave a sharp nod like they’d just agreed to something. “Let’s go.”

He’d walked twenty feet before he stopped to look back—and acknowledge that she hadn’t moved at all.

“Paige?”

He sounded impatient.

She . . . she was still trying to recover from the amazingness that had been that kiss. How many years had it been since she’d kissed a man? Six years? Seven?

And how long since she’d been kissed the way Tyler had kissed her? That had made her whole world stop dead—and made her feel like his had too?

That was a far easier question.

Because it had never happened before. She’d never felt so wanted, so

sexy, so needed.

But what she felt right now . . . she *had* felt this before.

God, she felt *this* deep in her soul.

Rejected.

Embarrassed.

Confused.

Which were the correct emotions? The real ones?

Had any of it been real?

Tyler had been the one to ask if things would change between them once they were out of the dark. And they had.

“*Paige*,” Tyler said again. “We need to get moving.”

Things had changed. Because Paige didn’t recognize the man she walked toward after she finally pushed away from the granite wall. This man was exactly the man she’d initially pegged Tyler to be: tall, arrogant, and impossibly out of reach.

Whatever connection they’d created in the dark was gone.

EIGHT

FUCK, HE WAS AN ASSHOLE.

The biggest, hugest asshole that had ever existed on the planet.

Easily.

Tyler had thought he'd reached that pinnacle three years ago, but he'd been wrong.

Fucking his best friend's fiancée had gotten him damn close, but today . . .

He'd kissed a woman he'd wanted so bad his brain had blacked out the fuck ton of reasons he shouldn't ever touch her . . . and then he'd come to his senses far too late to avoid hurting her.

He *knew* Paige had all sorts of crazy ideas about herself. Clearly she'd been hurt, badly, and it killed him she didn't realize how smoking hot she was.

But he didn't know how to explain why he'd stopped to her.

He knew the life he was living—one of isolation and abstinence—didn't make up for his mistakes. Didn't even come close. But he needed it. *He* needed it, to have some sense of rightness and of balance in this world. If he kissed Paige, if he slept with her . . .

If he were happy . . .

That wouldn't be right. He didn't deserve that.

And Paige sure as hell deserved more than this twisted, messed-up version of himself he needed to be in order to move forward. To even exist.

But how to explain any of it?

In the darkness of the mine, he'd shared far too much. He'd forgotten himself. In the daylight, as he'd stepped back from beautiful Paige and run his fingers along the perfection of her skin, he'd known this was wrong.

And not just kissing Paige.

But the connection they'd begun to create that had been more than physical. As he'd insisted on telling her—he *liked* her.

But what was the point? He couldn't have her.

Not that she wanted him now, as she trudged through the forest beside him, emanating a dull enmity he fully deserved.

But he couldn't make this better.

There was no path for them to follow, time having long ago hidden the routes to the abandoned mine. But Tyler guessed they weren't all that far from the highway.

That also meant they likely wouldn't be far from the gunmen, if they'd returned. So he'd been going ahead to ensure their way was clear before returning to Paige, making their progress slow.

He hoped like hell his truck was where he'd left it. It had to be after noon now, and despite the shade of the towering trees, the day was warm. Apart from avoiding the gunmen, they both definitely needed water.

Twenty minutes of careful progress later, they could finally see the dull gray asphalt of the highway snaking its way along the edge of a rocky outcrop. They were a little east of where Paige had crashed into the ditch, but they didn't need to be any closer to clock the obvious.

"My truck's gone," Tyler said. "Fuck."

He'd left the keys in the car in his urgency to get to Paige's accident, so this was not all that unexpected. His phone, his firearms . . . *fuck*. Nothing in the truck would link him to the Shadow Team, but that wasn't his immediate

concern. It was how the hell they were going to get out of here.

Paige tucked the loose hair from her once-neat bun behind her ears. “The gunmen’s truck isn’t here either. Maybe they aren’t coming back?”

“Maybe,” he said. “But I don’t think we can count on it.”

“They did seem pretty determined to kill us.”

He frowned as he surveyed the scene ahead of them. Low grasses and scrubland stretched from the edge of the forest down to the interstate. Paige’s car remained mangled in the ditch, and likely out of obvious sight of any passing vehicles.

“You said your cell phone was in your car, right?” he asked.

“Yes. It was charging on the passenger seat when I crashed into the ditch.”

He nodded. “I’m going to try to get it. But I’ll need you to stay here in case the men come back.”

“And what if they do?”

“Well,” he began with a quirk of his lips.

“I know, it would suck.” Her tone was dismissive; she was clearly uninterested in reviving their earlier banter. “But seriously, Tyler, you’d be a sitting duck in that ditch if they returned. It’s basically open space between there and the trees. There’s nowhere to hide.”

“*If* they come back,” he said, matching her no-nonsense tone. “And if they don’t, we have a phone and with one call this is over. I think it’s worth the risk.”

She let out a long breath. “I guess. I’ll come with you, though.”

“No, you will not.”

“Pardon?”

“You will not. We’ll find somewhere for you to hide, and if I’m compromised, then you sit tight until help comes. And it will, eventually. By now you should’ve arrived in Falcon, yeah? It’ll take a little time, but things will swing into motion.”

“Then why don’t we both just wait?”

“Because you’re safest as far as fucking possible from here, and if I have the means to achieve that, I will.”

He had no idea what they were dealing with. Was it the human traffickers from Belarus? It still didn’t sit right with him, but if it was—well, there were many millions of dollars at stake here. He didn’t think they’d just accept that he and Paige were trapped in that mine.

“But,” she said, her gaze trained on her car in the distance, clearly reluctant, “I feel safest when I’m with you.”

He didn’t really know what to do with that. “I’ll be as quick as I can,” he said briskly. “Let’s find you a place to hide.”

THEY FOUND a place for her in a shallow indent behind a rabbitbrush, right on the edge of the forest. Fir trees surrounded her, but she was close enough to the plain that stretched down to the highway that she could watch Tyler’s progress to her car through the rabbitbrush’s blue-gray branches.

Paige felt sick as Tyler made his way from the cover of the trees and into the open. The distance felt huge now, and the space so bare. He’d tried to reassure her with his stalking skills from the army, but her heart remained in her throat as he slowly moved from a tuft of desert grasses to a low-lying shrub. In one direction on the highway, any approaching car was clearly visible. But in the other she couldn’t see beyond a curve in the asphalt. If the gunmen approached from that direction, and if Tyler was in between the little cover available to him, he *would* be a sitting duck.

She let out a breath when he disappeared into the ditch.

Please let my phone be there.

Had the gunmen cleared out her car before taking Tyler’s truck? It seemed very possible—but then, *she* hadn’t been able to find her cell phone, so maybe they hadn’t either?

It was awful, all these unknowns.

Well, the whole day had been awful, really.

Except for the kiss.

The entire slow, careful walk to the highway, it was all she'd thought about. Even as hurt and confused as she was by the abrupt end to their embrace, it refused to disappear from her brain. Even now, as she hid in the dirt, literally scared for Tyler's life—and her own—insidious memories refused to leave her alone: of the brush of his knuckles against her breast or the sensation of him smiling against her skin or the way he'd groaned with unquestionable pleasure as she'd rubbed herself against his . . .

Oh my god.

Really? Now?

A kiss was so insignificant in comparison to staying alive, and it angered her that she couldn't let it go. She'd told herself she'd worked through all this years ago—that she didn't need a man. That she didn't need anything but her own hand to scratch that occasional itch . . . and besides, she'd been far more effective at making herself feel good than her two ill-advised sexual encounters forever ago.

But Tyler made all that a lie.

Movement on the highway drew her attention and she gasped.

A truck was approaching—a *black* truck. It was coming from Guneo, so she had a clear view as it morphed from a distant blur into what was, almost definitely, the same truck that had driven her off the road.

Her gaze flicked back to the ditch. From here all she could see was her car, not Tyler.

The truck was slowing down.

Oh no. Oh no, oh no . . .

She fought against the urge to call out to Tyler—to warn him. But he had to hear the crunch of the truck's huge tires on the gravel shoulder, and what if the bad guys heard her?

But how would they hear her with their windows rolled up?

Fuck. *Fuck.* She hated not knowing what to do. She hated being so helpless.

The truck came to a halt, and the driver's door opened immediately—and any chance she could call out to Tyler was gone. All she could do was wait as sweat beaded on her brow and her heart pounded against her chest.

Please stay safe, Tyler.

Please be okay.

OF COURSE the fucking assholes returned *now*.

Tyler lay in the dirt and rocks directly beneath Paige's car.

If they came looking for him, he was toast. But the assholes had already cleared out Paige's car at some point—so while that sucked for their hopes of retrieving her phone, or even her backpack with the granola bars she'd told him to look for—it meant that with any luck they wouldn't come anywhere near him.

It was Paige, alone in her hiding place, that he was more concerned about. They'd chosen a spot away from where they'd originally run into the forest, but with no obvious pathways between the trees, he had no idea where the gunmen would go. For the limited time they'd had, Paige was reasonably well hidden. But if the men came too close . . .

His gut clenched. He couldn't even consider it or he wouldn't be able to focus.

And he needed to do that. He also needed to stay perfectly still, because the assholes were damn close. Close enough he could hear their boots on the dirt and the murmur of their voices.

Three voices.

The two Russian-sounding accents of before, but one other person, who spoke English—with an American accent.

And the guy with an American accent was *pissed*.

“You’d better fucking find them,” the guy said. “I don’t want to see you again until this is fixed, you understand?”

There were murmurings of agreement mingled with the sounds of the truck doors opening and the *thud* of what sounded like gear being unloaded.

A phone rang, but while the American voice answered it, the slam of a car door muffled whatever he said. Then Tyler heard footsteps, and this time the voices didn’t speak English.

Okay. It seemed like the American asshole was still with the truck, while the two gunmen were heading toward the mine.

Tyler could do nothing now other than wait and hope like hell they gave Paige a wide berth. He felt like he barely breathed over the next few minutes while the sounds of the gunmen gradually moved farther away. His body was tense as he waited for some shout or exclamation—or worse, a gunshot—that would indicate Paige had been discovered.

But minutes passed, and soon he heard nothing but the occasional rustle of the prairie grasses and then the *keeeee-arr* of a distant hawk.

But the American man was still at the truck.

Tyler needed to see what he was dealing with.

Progress was painfully slow as he extricated himself from beneath the little hatchback, then crept his way up to the lip of the ditch. From between two tufts of grass, he observed the black truck not fifty feet in front of him.

What he was hoping for was a distracted, unarmed man he could easily overpower.

Instead what he got was a dude with his muscular arm propped on the open window of the driver’s side, his attention focused on the trees. He held a gun loosely as he absently tapped the barrel against the top edge of the door.

Fuck. Tyler couldn’t see any way to get close to the guy without being seen.

So he needed another plan.

He considered waiting for another car to pass by and betting on the odds that the dude wouldn't shoot him with witnesses if he ran for the road shouting for help.

But apart from the fact that he could be waiting a damn long time on this section of remote highway, he'd also be bringing that new car into danger. How desperate was this guy? Would he shoot a carful of innocent people in addition to Tyler?

He had no way of answering that, and for that reason it was too high a risk.

Another option was to simply wait where he was and see what played out—was there a chance all three bad guys would simply drive away when they didn't find anything in that mine?

But doing nothing went totally against his instincts. As a Delta Force operator, he was accustomed to being the proactive party—the team with intricately planned tactics and the upper hand. Sure, he'd faced some super-dangerous situations, but he'd rarely had to deal with the unknown. The Fox & Laughton was a clear exception, and it was why it had impacted him—and the other men of the Shadow Team—so much. All their training and skills meant little when they were unarmed and had no idea what the fuck was going on.

Which was exactly how he felt today.

But at the Fox & Laughton, they hadn't just hunkered down and hoped for the best. They'd done all they could to save as many people as they could—and they had saved a *lot* of people in those awful twenty-four hours. Not as many as they would've liked, though. Not even close.

Today was different, obviously. He didn't have hundreds of hotel guests to protect. He had only one person—Paige.

Only Paige?

All innocent lives had equal value; of course they did. He'd wanted to protect Paige when he'd known nothing about her. He'd told her to run and

hide while he stood his ground when she was no more than a frightened woman with a sharp tongue to him.

And now . . . well, now it *was* different.

He'd kissed this woman when it was the last thing he should've been doing for their safety. And he wanted nothing more than to be with her now and not here in this stupid ditch. He fucking hated that she was alone and vulnerable in that hiding place.

But was being with her the smart thing to do? Because to get to her, he needed to traverse that damn annoying slope of nothingness and hope like hell that the asshole in the truck didn't notice. Because if he did, that would be the end of all this—for Tyler and for Paige.

Was it worth the risk?

Was he thinking with his head or some other, less reliable part of his anatomy?

The asshole's phone rang again. He answered and turned slightly in his seat so he was facing forward, looking down the highway.

Tyler knew what he needed to do.

This was his chance.

WHAT ON EARTH was Tyler doing?

Paige felt like she'd barely breathed ever since Tyler had left her side.

She understood why he'd left her here, but she was beginning to think anything was better than hiding alone not thirty feet from where two men who wanted to kill her had walked past. She'd been shaking so much she'd been terrified she'd made the rabbitbrush shake, too, but the men hadn't even looked in her direction. They'd been carrying ropes and backpacks—and guns—and had been walking determinedly toward the mine. One had laughed at something the other had said, and her instant rush of rage—how *dare* they make jokes when they were literally out to kill people!—helped a little to

distract her from her fear.

Until she saw Tyler move.

She watched, horrified, as he clambered slowly out of the ditch. He paused just above the edge to look back at the black truck. Even from where she was she could see the new, third man on the phone in the front seat. He was facing forward, so Tyler was behind him. But if that guy looked in his side mirror, or over his shoulder . . .

She bit her lip as Tyler stayed low to the ground and moved behind another low bush. He seemed to be holding something against his chest, a hard shape visible through the thin fabric of his shirt. Her water bottle - he must have found it in her car. He held it firm with one hand as he deftly moved up the slope.

Tyler must not have found her phone—because why the hell would he risk being seen by some guy with a gun if he'd already called 911? That realization doused the small flicker of hope in her belly that help was on its way. Now her stomach flip-flopped as she watched every move Tyler made, her gaze slipping to the truck every few seconds in the certainty that at any moment Tyler would be seen.

But miraculously, he wasn't. As he came closer still, Paige concentrated entirely on the man in the truck, as if the force of her will would keep his attention focused forward for these last few yards of Tyler's journey.

She didn't say a word when he entered the shadows of the forest. He continued to move slowly as he made his way to her, but he found her through the branches with his gaze.

With every step he moved closer, the near-painful tension in her shoulders and arms eased, just a little. She was still goddamn terrified, but with Tyler near . . . it wasn't so bad.

I think we make a good team, he'd said in the mine.

Maybe everything had changed in the daylight—and definitely after that kiss—but when it came down to who she wanted by her side when she was

scared to death?

It was definitely Tyler.

“Tyler,” she whispered when he dropped to his knees beside her. “Why did you take such a stupid risk?”

“Because you were right, Paige” he said firmly. “You’re safer when you’re with me. From now on, we’re sticking together. Got it?”

She nodded. “Got it.”

“Good. Now, let’s get the fuck out of here.”

NINE

AS PLANS WENT, IT WAS PRETTY DAMN BASIC: HIKE THE FIFTEEN MILES INTO Guneo.

That was it.

Simple—but effective. Tyler fucking hoped so, anyway.

They were already about an hour into a journey that should take no more than four hours, getting them into town well before sunset.

He'd considered a more complicated plan—one that would've taken them back up to that mine shaft they'd inadvertently discovered to see what those two asshole gunmen were up to. With any luck both would've been in the shaft, and he could've gone through their gear in search of a firearm. He'd even thought he could've sabotaged their climbing apparatus, trapping them underground and giving him and Paige even more of a head start.

But that plan was risky and would've meant leaving Paige hidden.

And—as he'd told her—he wasn't separating them again.

Plus, any delay in putting as much space between Paige and the men who wanted to kill them just felt all wrong. The idea of deliberating taking Paige *closer* to danger made bile rise in his throat.

Nope. He was keeping it simple, and hiking through the wilderness was as simple as it got. The gas station where he'd first seen Paige was right on the outskirts of the tiny town, and once they were there he'd be calling 911,

promptly followed by the Shadow Team.

He'd set their course a good distance from the highway to remove the chance that the three assholes would be able to spot them from the road. It meant he had to use the sun as his compass and his best-guess estimate of the right direction, but if he kept the mountains of the Flat Top Wilderness to his right, he really couldn't fuck this up too badly. Water was definitely an issue, as all they had between them was the thirty-two-ounce stainless steel bottle of Paige's, which thankfully had been full. It wasn't near close to what anyone would pack for a hike of this distance, but it was vastly preferable to the giardia-filled natural streams that were their only alternative.

They'd briefly discussed his plan, then a bathroom break once they were half an hour past the mine site, but otherwise had barely said a word to each other.

He wouldn't say the atmosphere was tense—but whatever they'd had underground—that unexpected ease and connection—was definitely gone. This should be a good thing—better to end whatever it was they'd had before it'd even started.

Which was what was weird about all of this. He'd insisted they weren't strangers, but they weren't much more. Yet this new dynamic between them felt like he'd lost something.

How could he lose something that'd never begun?

It was stupid. Probably as stupid as crawling and ducking his way up that hill to Paige, but he didn't regret that for a second. Whatever the hell was or wasn't going on between them, it just felt right to be by her side.

But as they hiked between the towering trees, the silence between them grew heavier, even as tuned into the sounds of the wilderness around them: birds calling and chirping, the rustle of unseen fauna, the creak of branches high above them in the breeze.

“About that kiss—” he began abruptly.

“Nope. Nothing to discuss, Tyler. You made things crystal clear.”

That shouldn't have happened, he'd told her. It won't happen again.

Both statements remained true, so he didn't know where he thought he was going with this. He just knew he hated this new . . . almost ambivalence? . . . between them.

"I meant everything I said to you in those tunnels."

"Tyler—"

He rushed on. "And I meant it when I said the reason I stopped had nothing to do with you. Goddamn, Paige, there was nothing I wanted more than to keep kiss—"

She snorted, then broke into a hollow laugh. "Leave it, okay? I'm not so insecure I need to hear your bullshit."

"It's not—"

But it was bullshit, wasn't it? The way he'd behaved.

"It's like what I said to you, that I've changed. After what happened a few years back. I don't . . ." He swallowed. "I mean, I can't . . ."

"Look," she said briskly, her attention focused on the ground in front of her. They were walking up a slope, following a path created by what Tyler hoped were human feet and not the local black bear population. "I'm sympathetic to your trauma, genuinely. But—I'm not okay with being dragged into it with a half-assed explanation and then left feeling like shit. Let's just leave it as what it was: an intense situation because we'd just escaped from that goddamn mine we both thought we might die in, and we got carried away and did something we both regret. We agreed that stuff would change out in the daylight, remember? And it has." She shrugged. "That's it."

Something we both regret.

That stung.

And besides, it wasn't true on his side, not at all. Even if it shouldn't have happened. Even if it couldn't happen again . . . he couldn't regret that it had. How could he? It'd been hot as hell.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Totally fine.”

They walked in silence for at least another half mile before Tyler spoke again. “Have you been to Falcon before?”

She stopped beneath the shade of a particularly massive fir tree and put her hands on her hips. “You’re really chatty for a guy who prefers solitude.” She gestured at the bottle he carried. “Could I please have a drink?”

He handed the bottle to her, and she carefully drank only a few mouthfuls. He then did the same.

Neither of them wiped the lid or anything before drinking, a seemingly mutual decision that given that they’d already swapped saliva, it was really too late to bother.

“There’s nothing else for us to do but talk,” he said.

“Except escape from possibly Russian hitmen.”

“And a random American dude.” He shook his head. “Kind of weird.”

“It’s all really weird.”

He agreed. “If you’d rather walk in silence and ruminate on what an asshole I am, that’s fine with me.”

She huffed out a sigh. “I don’t think you’re an asshole. I just wish you hadn’t kissed me. It’s made this”—she gestured to him and back to herself—“weird. It’s added more weirdness to an already weird situation, but it’s also really not all that important compared to our, you know, survival.”

She stepped around a small boulder in their path, and he followed close behind. Not for the first time, his gaze dropped to the curve of her ass, revealed in her snug jeans whenever the blazer tied around her waist flipped upward as she walked. It really was spectacular.

“So I guess we can talk,” she said. “It’ll distract me from wondering if those men have figured out we’re not in the mine any longer.”

And he’d thought she was thinking about him. Christ, he *was* an asshole.

“Have you been to Falcon before?” he asked again.

“No,” she said. “It would’ve been my first time. The town looks cute as a button from the photos I saw when I googled it, though.”

Tyler hadn’t even bothered to do that. The only thing he’d cared about was that Andy Torres would be there. Falcon itself had been pretty much irrelevant.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Nope,” he said. “I’m staying with a friend, Sam. He owns the local auto-repair shop.”

“Cars & Coffee?”

“Yes, actually,” he replied, surprised. “How did you know that?”

“My contact at the library, Casey, talks a lot. She is absolutely lovely, but has told me probably more than I ever needed to know about Falcon. Her brother owns Cars & Coffee, so I guess that’s your friend Sam. Small world, hmm?”

“Small town,” Tyler clarified.

She laughed. “Of course. Moscow, Idaho is a thriving metropolis compared to Falcon.”

It was so good to hear Paige’s laugh again.

“What will you and Sam be doing while you’re in Falcon?”

He liked that she spoke as if his safe arrival in Falcon were inevitable. And hell, they’d survived falling into an abandoned mine; a hike to Guneo should be easy.

“There’re six of us, actually,” Tyler said. “Four already live in Falcon, so it’s just Walker and me visiting. We, uh, met on R & R five years ago. We’re all former special forces.”

“Delta Force?”

“One of them.”

He reached up to lift a low thin branch out of their way, holding it so Paige could duck under before him.

She shot him a confused look. “I thought you didn’t stay in touch with

your Delta Force teammates?”

“I don’t. Usually.” He really hadn’t thought this through. He searched his brain for a reason why in this instance he clearly *did* stay in touch that wasn’t *we work together for a team that doesn’t exist*. “Do you remember, about five years ago, there was a terrorist attack at a fancy hotel in the Middle East? It got a lot of press coverage.”

Really, this was his reason?

Other than in army-mandated counseling, what had happened at the Fox & Laughton wasn’t something he talked about.

“I think so,” she said. “A siege, right?”

He nodded.

“You were involved?”

“Yeah. My Delta Force teammate and I were at the hotel for a week of R & R. We hung out with some other special forces guys we met. We were all having breakfast when the first bomb exploded.”

“Oh wow . . .”

“It was awful. I’ve seen some shit in combat, but that siege was something else. I’d already started to feel a little conflicted about what I did for a job before then. Up until the siege, I’d justified what we did as for the greater good—you know, to protect the American way of life. Stuff like counterterrorism, hostage rescue . . . it’s easy to classify yourself as the good guys. And we were. But a lot of innocent people are killed in wars. Maybe not directly from my actions, but I was part of it. And at that hotel—I witnessed a hell of a lot of innocent people die.”

“Did you leave the military after that?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “No. Took me another couple of years. I felt like I needed the structure—you know, needed to be part of something—after what happened. Then . . .” He swallowed. “Well, then that shit I keep talking around, that happened, and I knew I was done.”

They walked in silence for a minute or so. He expected her to ask a

question, but she did nothing but glance at him now and then.

“I don’t usually talk about this stuff,” he said.

“I know.”

Of course she did. He’d told her.

In his brain he tested the idea of telling her the rest. About what came next.

But unlike all he’d said so far, the words seemed to clog up his throat. And he knew why. *Definitely* knew why.

For all his courage and bravery in combat—even today, really—he was a coward where it truly mattered. He didn’t want to tell her about what had happened on that awful clusterfuck of a mission because it revealed he wasn’t at all the way he appeared.

“So,” Paige said after way too long, “the six of you are having a reunion of sorts?”

“Yes,” he said.

Christ, he was the one who’d wanted them to talk, but this wasn’t at all what he’d intended to say.

Wasn’t it?

He was responsible for every word he said, and he’d had no problem keeping his mouth shut for the past five years. He was the master of empty responses and unapologetic deflection.

The narrow trail they walked on reached the top of a rise. For the first time in ages they had a view of something other than a wall of conifers as a grassy space opened before them, dipping down into a valley and surrounded by craggy peaks.

Paige put her hands on her hips as she looked out to the view. “It’s so beautiful.”

So are you, he thought, but he wasn’t dumb enough to say it. Instead his gaze drank her in, appreciating the elegance of her neck, the stubborn set of her chin, and the upward tilt of her nose. She must be tired, yet she stood

straight, her shoulders back, chest out.

Obviously sensing his attention, she turned her head to look at him.

For a moment his breath caught in his throat as he just looked at her—tall and strong amid the wildness of these mountains. She raised her eyebrows.

“We need to keep moving,” he said gruffly.

“YOU WERE WRONG, YOU KNOW,” Tyler said a few minutes later, after the forest had swallowed them up again. His tone was light, with none of the weight of what he’d told her before.

“I was?”

“Absolutely. *1989* isn’t Taylor Swift’s best album. It’s *Reputation*.”

She was so surprised she laughed out loud. “You like Taylor Swift?”

“Who doesn’t?”

And just like that, the next hour of conversation was totally frivolous. They talked Taylor, TV (discovering a shared love of *The Good Place*), and food (Paige couldn’t get enough sushi, while Tyler loved a spicy curry). Then onto travel—he’d been all over the world, while Paige had never even been overseas.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Never enough money,” she said. “It’s only been the past few years my business has started to take off.”

“Where would you go?”

“Paris,” she said without hesitation. “It’s kind of cliché, I know, but I can just see myself with a glass of champagne sitting at an outside table at a café beside the Seine. Where would you go?”

“Somewhere that doesn’t involve camping. Just spent a week hiking in the Flat Tops. Don’t know what I was thinking. I like a comfortable bed and running water.”

“Yet you have such a rugged outdoorsy-ness about you,” she said—

because he did. As he strode through the wilderness ahead of her, she had absolute confidence that he knew exactly what to do out here in the middle of nowhere, and that he had them heading in the right direction.

He shrugged. “Sleeping on a one-and-a-half-inch thick mattress is—” He came to an abrupt stop, stretching out his arm to block her path as he looked over his shoulder. “*Don’t move.*”

There was a sound somewhere to the left and slightly behind them, like someone had stepped on a twig. The back of her neck prickled.

Was it the gunmen? Had they been found?

“It’s a bear,” Tyler said, his voice unexpectedly loud and clear.

“A *what?*” she whispered.

“Talk normally,” he said firmly. “We want him to know exactly where we are.”

“*Why?*”

“So he can suss us out, then, ideally, leave.”

“*Ideally?*”

He slanted her a look, and his lips quirked a little. “Black bears are rarely aggressive unless they’re provoked or feel trapped.”

Slowly Paige looked over her shoulder. Maybe thirty feet away, beyond a group of trees, was a dark-brown bear, its coat a reddish color where the sun hit it. Like them, it wasn’t moving. As she watched, the bear stood up on its back feet. Standing like this, it was at least as tall as Tyler.

“Oh my god . . .” she breathed.

“It’s okay,” Tyler said. “Look, he’s having a sniff. Figuring us out.”

The bear stomped its foot, and she gasped.

“Let’s get out of his way,” Tyler said, grabbing her hand. “Come on.”

Still facing the bear, together they slowly backed down the trail. Tyler talked to the bear the whole time.

“Hey, Bear, how you doing, dude? Nice place you got here. Awesome trees.”

The bear dropped back down to all four paws.

They continued to creep cautiously away.

“We’re just going to get out of your hair—or fur, I guess?” He laughed, and Paige looked up at him, rather stunned. He looked totally relaxed, like bumping into a bear wasn’t worth breaking a sweat over. Meanwhile, Paige’s heart clattered against her ribs. The bear continued to stare directly at them both.

“See, we’re giving you heaps of space, leaving you to enjoy your day. Sound good, Bear? You go do bear things, we’ll go do people things, and keep it all nice and sepa—”

Suddenly, the bear moved. Not toward them, though. Instead, it turned and scampered back among the trees.

Neither of them moved until the snap of branches and the soft pad of paws on dirt and gravel could no longer be heard.

Tyler gripped her fingers hard.

He looked down at her. “What the fuck was that?”

“Seriously?” she said as her tense panic dissipated. “A goddamn *bear*? After everything else?”

“A goddamn bear,” he repeated, shaking his head.

Then he caught her gaze, and the last thing she expected to happen, happened.

They burst into laughter.

TEN

PAIGE LAUGHED SO HARD SHE SAT DOWN, LETTING GO OF TYLER'S HAND AS she dropped onto her butt on a fallen log.

Tyler instantly missed her touch, but he *really* liked watching her laugh. She laughed with her whole body—her shoulders shaking and her smile wide as she hugged her knees with mirth.

She occasionally caught his gaze, and that seemed to set her off on another peal of giggles. And her giggles made him laugh again . . . and so it went on for several minutes.

He sank down to a crouch in front of her as their laughter finally drifted away. She tucked long strands of her hair behind her ears and studied him.

“A goddamn bear,” she said softly, with a sparkle in her eyes as she held his gaze. “Today has been absolutely wild.”

“The wildest,” he agreed.

“I wonder what on earth will happen next?”

It was clearly an innocuous question, but maybe it was their proximity, his knees nearly bumping hers and their faces at eye level, that gave her question an unexpected subtext.

Wait. Who was he kidding? There was nothing unexpected about where his brain went. What did he want to happen next? He wanted to lean forward and kiss that sexy-as-hell mouth. He wanted to drag her into his arms.

Paige's tongue brushed across her top lip.

All the blood in his body raced to his groin.

When they were safe, he wanted to strip off all her clothes, wash the dirt and dust from her body and—*fuck*, he didn't give a shit about a bit of dust. *Right now* he wanted to strip off her—

He stood up. "What happens next is we have a boring, uneventful hike all the way to Guneo."

"Boring would be excellent."

She stood, too, but her gaze no longer met his. Instead she seemed to take a great interest in the canopy of spruce trees that surrounded them.

"We're not far out of town, I think," he said, "only another hour or so."

She nodded, then took a deep breath. She still didn't look directly at him. "Great."

They didn't talk as they walked, but the tension between them was different from their earlier silence at the start of their hike. He'd thought, maybe, that they'd moved on from the kiss when they'd talked so easily about random shows on Netflix or silly shit like when he'd gotten lost in Hanoi on vacation. It hadn't been at all like talking to Paige in the mine, but it hadn't felt complicated either.

But he hadn't moved on. Without inconsequential banter to distract him, it was impossible to lie to himself.

And with thoughts of the kiss—and also the bear and the mine and the assholes with guns whirring in his brain – he also couldn't lie about how he *felt*.

Like, fucking lucky to be alive. He and Paige had survived—unharmred, even—against some absolutely insane odds.

Laughing with Paige in the wilderness had shifted something inside him.

Happiness hadn't been a priority for him these past three years. In fact, he'd actively rejected it. For reasons that hadn't changed and wouldn't change. Ever. That was the point.

He wasn't supposed to be happy. He hadn't allowed himself to be, because of what he'd done and who he was.

But who survived being driven off the road, shot at and *then* falling down an abandoned mine?

Being a lucky fucker wasn't new to him. But this time, he couldn't feel bad about it, because his luck and ability to survive when others far more deserving died was today all tangled up with Paige. And *Christ*, that woman deserved to live.

So now when he thought about their kiss, and his reaction minutes before as he'd crouched before her and their eyes had met . . . he felt absolute joy that he was alive, and that he got to witness Paige's smile.

And for the first time in the past three years, he couldn't shunt that happiness aside. He still felt guilty as hell about it, but he couldn't pretend it wasn't there.

Because Paige made him feel fucking good.

WASN'T she supposed to be annoyed with Tyler?

Paige tried to remember that as she trudged along the narrow trail in the dappled shade. After four hours of hiking—following a car accident and a fall down a mine shaft—she was pretty darn sore. Her feet hurt, her legs hurt, and every little jolt in their uneven path reminded her of the many bruises that covered her body.

She wasn't angry with Tyler.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't be. For all that she'd talked a big game—*we got carried away and did something we both regret*—she was absolutely full of it.

Because if Tyler had leaned forward, just a little, when they'd both been laughing on the forest floor, she definitely would've kissed him.

Even though he'd rejected her. Even though he'd literally explained *why*

he'd rejected her—just to make it crystal clear that she had *definitely* been rejected—she would've kissed him again.

She would've done a lot more than kiss him again. Possibly right here in the forest with black bears—and possibly hit men—in the near vicinity.

What the hell, Paige?

She didn't regret kissing him. All she regretted was that he'd stopped.

Ugh.

She heard rushing water a minute or so before she heard a voice and then a burst of male laughter—somewhere ahead of them.

Tyler grabbed her hand and held a finger to his lips.

She nodded. Together they waited and listened.

A minute later, Paige smiled. “That doesn't sound like our bad guys,” she said.

“Only if our assholes paused to go fly-fishing.”

With a grin, Tyler tugged her beside him down the trail and toward the voices.

Two men were discussing fly lines and then something to do with strike indicators, maybe? Whatever it was, it was a friendly discussion—and both of their accents were American.

As Paige and Tyler stepped from the forest and onto a gentle slope that led down to a picturesque river, Tyler called out and waved both his arms—dropping her hand in the process.

The fishermen noticed them immediately, turning from where they stood in the water to watch them approach. Beyond them was rolling pasture with a backdrop of snow-topped mountains. A few dots in the distance Paige thought might be a herd of elk.

“You folks doing okay?” the closest man asked, holding one hand to his forehead as he squinted in the afternoon sun. The other one frowned and took a few steps backward, his movements wary.

With their dirty and torn clothing, they must both look a sight.

“Better now,” Tyler said with his megawatt smile. “Could we bother you to call nine one one?”

And just like that, they were safe.

THE FISHERMEN—TWO brothers from Guneo—drove them the short distance into town. Tyler sat beside Paige in the back seat, answering questions from the brothers as well as he could. Given they’d heard him tell the dispatcher about the location of Paige’s accident, the gunmen, and the mine, that they were interested was no surprise.

He’d only called the police and not the Shadow Team—as that wasn’t something he could do with an audience—and he was anxious to do so as soon as he could. But for now he was just relieved Paige was safe.

The White River City Sheriff’s Department was sending a couple of deputies to meet them in Guneo and a far larger contingent to the scene of the accident. He’d provided the license plate number of the black truck, although he had no doubt it was fake or stolen. Regardless, it gave the cops something to look out for.

Beside him, Paige was looking out the window at the passing scenery. She didn’t contribute to the conversation, and when she did glance his way, there was a glassiness to her eyes that he didn’t like and was most likely shock setting in. With the adrenaline rush of all that had happened now over, it made sense that she’d begin to crash.

He’d dropped her hand to get the fishermen’s attention, and there’d been no reasonable excuse to grab it again. He looked at her hand, rested on her jean-clad thigh, and told himself he was an idiot for wanting to hold hands with a girl in the back seat of a truck.

“Group of us found an abandoned mine in middle school,” the brother in the passenger seat said. “We had weeks of fun exploring that thing until our mom found out. Then the state came and sealed it up. Killjoys.”

“Wouldn’t have been any fun to fall into, though,” the driving brother said.

“Or without a flashlight,” Tyler added.

The passenger twisted to look at Tyler. “And you said you were *shot at*?”

“Yep.”

The man’s gaze slid over to Paige. “You doing okay over there?”

Paige turned from the window and managed a weak smile. “Not really.”

So damn honest, always.

“You must have been scared as all hell,” the man said, a frown creasing his brow.

“Terrified.”

“Hmm.” He looked at his brother. “Maybe we should plan for a doctor to meet us. There’s that Doctor Saad over in—”

“No, thank you,” Paige interrupted crisply. “Really. It’s fine. *I’m fine.*”

It was obvious to Tyler she was trying to convince herself. “That’s not a bad idea,” he began. “Be good to—”

“No.” She straightened her shoulders. “I’m fine. I just want to talk to the cops or whatever we need to do, have a shower, then figure out how I can get home tonight. That’s it.”

“Paige—”

“I just want this over.” She was firm. “I don’t need to see a doctor. It’d be a waste of time.”

“And you want to hurry up and get on home,” he said, his words maybe a little flat.

“Exactly.”

Nothing she’d said was unusual. *Of course* she wanted to go home. *Of course* she wanted this nightmare of a day to be over.

The thing was, he wasn’t okay with Paige going home just yet, not until he knew exactly why she’d been driven off that highway. He didn’t like the odds that the deputies were going to find the gunmen at the mine site, since

he couldn't imagine it would take this long to explore that mine with appropriate gear. So with the men who'd tried to murder her on the loose, and no evidence that his flimsy Belarusian human-trafficking theory held up—she wasn't leaving his sight.

His sight, specifically, because his reluctance for her to leave Guneo wasn't purely about keeping her safe. In theory, local law enforcements could step in to ensure her protection until there was no longer a threat to her life, but the idea made him feel sick.

He was the only one to keep Paige safe.

And *fuck*, that was ridiculous, but he didn't give a shit.

But even if she weren't in danger—even if the gunmen had been arrested and some rock-solid intel assured him there was zero threat to Paige's life . . . he definitely didn't want her to *hurry up and get on home*.

Was it messed up that he didn't want this clusterfuck of a day to be over, purely so he could spend more time with Paige?

Yes.

The fisherman's truck came to a stop outside The Mercantile in Guneo. It was directly across the street from the gas station where he'd first seen Paige, and had several wooden boxes overflowing with flowers arranged outside its entrance. They were supposed to meet the deputies here before being driven to the sheriff's office in the next town over to make their statements, but there was no patrol car to be seen. This wasn't unexpected—they'd been far closer to Guneo than the nearest available deputies.

It gave him and Paige time to head into The Mercantile to buy water and something to eat. Through everything, his compact, credit-card sized leather wallet had remained securely in the back pocket of his jeans, so he had no issue paying for what they needed. It was lucky, in a way—although he and Paige would've been a hell of a lot luckier if it'd been his phone shoved into his jeans all those hours ago. He also would've been luckier if The Mercantile sold cell phones—which it didn't, despite selling basically

everything else from horseshoes and stock feed to board games and decorative candles. At the counter, a selection of hunting knives were displayed in a glass cabinet, but Tyler resisted the urge to buy one. The deputies would be here any moment, and he didn't want to do anything to concern Paige, who remained quiet and a little glassy-eyed beside him.

He would feel better once the police were here, *and* once he'd had a chance to contact Shadow Operations. But without a phone, that would have to wait.

Outside The Mercantile they waited with the fishermen the five or so minutes until the patrol car arrived. Paige didn't speak until the deputies stepped out of their vehicle—and only to thank the fishermen before they went on their way.

He hated how still and silent she was. There was a sharp-edged awkwardness to her that reminded him of when he'd first seen her at the gas station, but that he hadn't witnessed since. Long gone was the ease from the abandoned mine—he'd already known that. But the way things were now didn't even resemble the tension between them as they'd hiked. This was a new dynamic, and he didn't like it.

The drive to the county's sheriff's office in Meeker only took about twenty minutes.

On arrival he'd been able to use a phone to call Sam in Falcon. After Andy had been kidnapped and dumped in the Colorado River a few weeks back—and therefore separated from his cell phone with no way to contact Shadow Ops—the Shadow Team had a new protocol: *memorize important fucking numbers*. So Tyler could also have called Shadow Ops directly, but in an effectively public space, that wasn't an option. While Shadow Operations had relationships with law enforcement agencies across the country—and the world—their contacts were incredibly senior. It wasn't something he could mention to a random cop or risk anyone overhearing.

“Tabs!” he said in greeting when Sam picked up.

“Oh, thank fuck, man,” Sam said. “You’re not dead. When we couldn’t get in touch and Shadow Ops couldn’t track your phone, we were worried. Where the actual hell are you, Cez?”

“Sheriff’s office in Meeker. Long story. I’m with Paige—” He didn’t actually know her surname. His gaze rested on her, only a few feet away from him, bouncing her knees as she sat in a chair in the waiting room.

“Emmett,” she said softly, meeting his gaze.

“I’m with Paige Emmett. She was also on her way to Falcon.”

“Paige Emmett? The woman Casey and her library patrons sent the local sheriff out searching for?”

“The same.”

“I have a feeling this isn’t a simple flat-tire-and-dead-phone type situation, is it, Cez?”

“Nope.”

“Do you need our help?”

“Yes. But since I’m currently in the lobby of the sheriff’s office—”

“You can’t say much. Got it. Tell me what you can.”

“Someone drove Paige and then me off the road, then shot at us, then we fell down a mine shaft.”

“The fuck?”

Tyler chuckled. “I know. No idea why.”

“What’s the deal with Paige? Was she the target? Or you?”

“Don’t know.”

“I’ll get Shadow Ops to start sniffing around, see if there’s anything they can find about Paige that would get her shot at. You think she’s in trouble? You trust her?”

Tyler was looking at Paige as he talked to Sam, his shoulder propped against the wall. “Don’t know, but don’t think so. And yes.”

“So you could be the target. That wouldn’t be good.”

“I know. The guys shooting at us might have had Russian accents.”

“Belarusian accents? After you and Dev just—”

“Yup.”

“Okay. Will pass all this on to Shadow Ops. When will you be able to talk freely?”

“Later. I don’t have a phone, and I’m not sure when I’ll have one.”

“Leave it to me. Shadow Ops will get on the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, let them know who you are. Should be able to figure out a phone for you.”

“And Paige.”

“Sure. You still heading to Falcon tonight?”

Paige was flipping through an ancient women’s magazine from the selection on a table in the corner. “Not sure. Still have to give our statements. Paige is anxious to get home to Arvada.”

She lifted her head at that.

“Probably not a good idea until we know what’s going on, unless the CBI can sort out some protection and surveillance for her. I’ll mention that to Shadow Ops.”

What Sam had just said made perfect sense, as opposed to Tyler’s caveman preference to be personally, specifically responsible for Paige’s safety. Still . . .

“I just don’t want a repeat of Caleb’s situation.”

A couple of weeks ago, local law enforcement in San Francisco had so seriously fucked up the protection of Caleb’s girlfriend that she’d been kidnapped.

“True,” Sam said. “Want me to head over to Meeker? I can bring Walker with me.”

“Nah, wait until we speak again.”

After Shadow Ops had a chance to look into things—he didn’t like the idea of Tabs driving one hundred miles when they didn’t have a plan and he hadn’t heard from the CBI. Paige was perfectly safe at the station for now.

And he'd see to it she was perfectly safe wherever she went next, too.

ELEVEN

PAIGE TRIED NOT TO EAVESDROP, BUT IT WAS DIFFICULT IN THE SMALL waiting area.

Who's Caleb? she wondered. *And what's his situation?* But she didn't ask Tyler once he hung up and walked over to her.

"You sure you don't want to make a call?" he asked.

She shook her head—again. "Nope!" she said, deliberately cheerful.

Who would she call, anyway? Tyler had already asked his friend Sam to pass onto Casey what had happened to her, and given she wasn't expected back in Arvada until tomorrow, it wasn't like anyone else needed to know where she was. She knew she would have to make some phone calls soon—her insurance company first, probably, to work out what on earth to do about her car, laptop, and phone. And she needed a way to get home. *And* she'd need to call her bank to block her credit cards. Maybe email Casey to reschedule her visit to Falcon? Oh, and definitely a broadcast email to her clients to apologize for any delays in responding to their emails over the next few days because . . .

Because . . .

Well because she felt totally overwhelmed and almost . . . outside herself. Which didn't make any sense, but it was just that today's events were so ludicrously impossible . . . and even Tyler, standing right in front of her with

his concerned frown and intense gaze—*he* didn't fit in her life either. None of what had happened to her felt plausible, to the point that even now she dug her fingernails into her palms just in case she needed to be woken up from the most unbelievable nightmare.

“Hey . . .” Tyler said, dropping onto the seat beside her.

He seemed even taller and broader in this cramped room, and somehow even handsomer under the harsh fluorescent lighting. She didn't even want to *think* about how terrible she must look. Not that it mattered, anyway.

“You've been super quiet,” he said gently.

She shrugged. “I'm a naturally reserved person.”

He gave a bark of laughter. “Bullshit. What's going on?”

She shifted to better face him. That was a mistake, because their plastic chairs were the type that joined together in a row, so her knee bumped his, and when she looked up, his mouth was somehow *right there*.

She twisted right back the way she'd been and stared down at the article she hadn't been reading. She couldn't have said if it was about fall fashion or Crock-pot cooking. It all just blurred together.

“What's going on? Apart from the car crash? And the shooting? And the mine?” She'd meant to sound dismissive, which was a rather insane goal given what she'd just said. She failed, and her voice grew increasingly shaky with each word.

“Paige, I—”

“Sorry for the delay,” said a crisp voice.

Paige looked up, and an authoritative-looking woman with tight black curls and pink-framed glasses stood in front of them.

“I'm Detective Holman. We were just getting an update from highway patrol—your car's been located, but no sign of your vehicle, Mr. Cerra. Or anyone at the scene or in the surrounding woodland.”

Paige nodded.

“So let's get those statements from you, and we'll go from there, okay?”

Go where? she thought. That wasn't what the detective meant, but she felt like she needed to know what happened next, in a purely practical sense. Like—when would she get to take a shower? Lie down? Sleep?

She'd told Tyler she wanted to go home, and she did because she wanted that damn shower desperately. But after the shower, would she actually be safe?

As Tyler had chatted so easily with those friendly fishermen, Paige had just grown tenser and tenser. She should feel safe now, but she didn't. It was a different type of fear, different from the horror of an immediate threat to her life. But she was still scared. Really scared.

Their statements to the detectives took several hours, and it was dark outside when they finally left the interview room.

In the hall the detectives introduced them to yet another detective—this one from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. After a brief introduction—the man's surname was Barrett—he got straight to the point.

“While we can't rule out the possibility that this was a random attack, Ms. Emmett,” he began, his attention for some reason focused entirely on her, “the CBI feels it would be unwise for you to return home until we're all satisfied you're no longer in danger.”

“And that Tyler is also no longer in danger?” she asked, frowning.

“Oh. Yes, of course. That *both* of you are safe. Since it's getting late, we've arranged rooms for you both at the Pine Cone Inn, just down the street. We'll have deputies on patrol at the inn all night to ensure your safety, and in the morning hopefully our investigation will have progressed.”

“And then I can go home?”

“If we're satisfied there is no immediate threat to your life, Ms. Emmett.”

It appeared she could be stuck in Meeker indefinitely.

“We'll get you home as soon as we can, Paige,” Tyler said beside her. “I promise.”

She glanced up at him. “How can you promise that, Tyler? You know as

little about what the hell is going on as I do.”

She sighed. She was sore, dusty, and absolutely exhausted.

“And here you go,” the man said, handing a cell phone to Tyler, then one to Paige.

“You got us phones?”

“Standard procedure,” the man said quickly. “It’s unreasonable to expect you to be cooped up while we run the investigation without access to your everyday lives. While I’d ask that you refrain from discussing the investigation in any detail with your friends and family, the phone is for you to use as you wish.”

“Oh,” she said, surprised. “Thank you.”

She looked down as she turned the brand-new phone over in her hands. Honestly, the last thing she felt like doing right now was setting up a new phone, but she appreciated the gesture.

“Can you take us to the inn?” Tyler asked gruffly beside her. “I’d about kill for a shower.”

THE PINE CONE INN was within easy walking distance, but two deputies drove him and Paige there in a patrol car, and Barrett followed separately. They’d been provided with a shopping bag of clean clothes and toiletries along with the phone, and he appreciated that the CBI had come to the party as far as looking out for Paige.

He could’ve done without Detective Barrett acting like Tyler was part of the goddamn investigation, though. As far as Paige was concerned—and literally every other person at the Sheriff’s Office was concerned—he was simply a victim of a crime. It was likely even Barrett didn’t know about the Shadow Team; instead he would’ve been given some cover story appropriate for his clearance level. Previously Tyler had been cast as a member of the FBI or a military special agent. Once even a counterintelligence specialist. It

didn't really matter what Barrett had been told as long as he understood that the CBI would have additional assistance in their investigation—and that Tyler's cover was not to be blown.

And Barrett had very nearly fucked that up. Although to be fair, so had he. *We'll get you home as soon as we can.* Really? If Paige weren't clearly so physically exhausted, he was certain she would've asked more questions.

The inn was a one-story building, the type of motel built in a U-shape around a parking lot. Beneath the brightly lit *Pine Cone Inn* sign, a red fluorescent vacancy sign flashed in the darkness, lighting up a giant pine cone sculpture beneath it. He and Paige had adjacent rooms. While Paige took a shower, he and Barrett checked out the perimeter of the motel (he told the deputies he was stretching his legs), and with the only entry and exit points to Paige's room from the parking lot—without even windows facing the alleyway behind—Tyler was satisfied that the location was adequate. He did need to call Sam back, though. His early impressions of the deputies tasked with guarding them was not high—there was a casualness to the way they each stood—one near the entrance to the inn, just to the side of the reception office, and the other with a hip propped against the patrol car parked out front of their rooms.

Nothing so overt as for Tyler to discuss it with Barrett—but he'd still prefer it be the Shadow Team providing Paige's protection. He'd take Sam up on his offer to come to Meeker, and simply wouldn't sleep until Sam and Garrett arrived.

With that in mind, after Barrett left to continue his investigation, Tyler walked across the parking lot to the hot-beverage vending machine outside the drive-through reception. Its garish signage loudly proclaimed it offered gourmet coffee, which he considered highly unlikely. But it would do.

As it brewed, he kept his gaze trained on the door to Paige's room.

AT TIMES as she and Tyler had hiked through the never-ending forest to Guneo, Paige's want for a shower had bordered on fantasy-level desire. She'd imagined how good it would be to feel safe and clean. To have all the dirt, sweat, and blood sluiced away from her body beneath the sting of hot jets of water.

But her shower hadn't been like that. The shower stall itself was fine. Like her whole motel room, it was totally inoffensive. A little aged, but neat and scrupulously clean. The water was hot and plentiful. Good water pressure, even, and the towels were white, thick, and fluffy.

But—she was alone.

At first, she'd thought maybe it was just a sense of claustrophobia from having the shower curtain enclosing her in a small space—maybe too soon after the oppressiveness of the mine? So she'd tried to shower with the curtain open. That hadn't helped. She'd still been tense from her toes right to the top of her head, and her heart was beating way too fast. So she'd tried showering with the bathroom door open.

Still no dice.

Since opening the motel room door for all of Meeker to see wasn't an option, she instead gave herself a pep talk and washed her hair in record time. An attempt to dry her hair lasted milliseconds—the roar of the motel dryer was so loud she'd never hear if anyone broke into her room . . .

But why would they?

She glared at the dryer in her hand and flicked it on once again, a little defiantly.

You literally have an armed officer outside your door, Paige.

It didn't help.

She put the dryer down before gripping the edge of the laminate cabinet as she just looked at herself in the mirror. With her heavy, damp dark hair and pale face—complete with a random bruise on one cheek—she didn't think she'd ever looked worse. But more importantly, she looked scared. She

was scared.

She kept asking herself *why* anyone would break into her room and couldn't come up with any logical answers. There *was* no reason for anyone to break into her room.

But that wasn't reassuring in the slightest, because there'd also been no reason for her being driven off the road or being shot at today.

She pushed back from the cabinet, tugged up her slightly too big sweatpants, and took a deep breath. It didn't help. Some noise outside her room—a door slamming somewhere, she guessed—made her flinch.

The more she tried to calm herself, the worse she felt.

Her jaw clenched. Her toes curled in the flip-flops she'd been given. A shiver ran down her spine as her throat grew tight.

Was this a panic attack?

Another noise—it could've been literally anything—made her yelp.

Made her *yelp* while safe in her motel room with armed guards outside.

Logic wasn't helping her at all.

She rubbed at her eyes that suddenly stung with threatening tears.

Damn it, she was *not* going to cry.

She was *not*.

But if she kept standing here, staring at herself, she would. She felt like she was watching herself crumble. She felt helpless and useless.

And she hated that. *Hated* it.

She turned and walked out of the bathroom.

AS TYLER LIFTED his freshly brewed coffee from the vending machine, Paige's motel room door flung open.

The deputy outside her room jerked upright from his casual slouch against the patrol car as Paige took two steps outside, then stopped. She had her hands on her hips as she surveyed the motel parking lot.

With her shoulders back and her chin up, she looked magnificent. Two floodlights on tall poles lit the lot, and one's beam was almost directly above Paige, illuminating her like a spotlight. Her survey of the motel grounds swiftly landed on him.

"Ma'am?" the officer asked as she walked right past him.

Tyler hurried to meet her halfway. "You okay?" he asked, frowning.

Where they stood they were mostly in shadows, the light not quite reaching them.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "And it's really pissing me off."

He laughed. "You don't have to be okay."

She tilted her head as she looked up at the stars above them. She took several deep breaths.

"Hey—it's not too late to see a doctor, you know? I was prescribed some sleeping pills after—" He swallowed. "I mean, sleeping pills have helped me before. Sometimes you just need your brain to switch off."

She shook her head. "No, I—" She angled her chin downward so she met his gaze. "I'm still scared. I know I shouldn't be, but—"

"Why not?"

"Why shouldn't I be scared?" She huffed out a breath. "Because no one is going to break into my motel room while I dry my hair, Tyler. But I think they will, so my hair is still wet"—she grabbed at her hair to drape it over one shoulder—"see? And I hate sleeping with wet hair. It's right up there with how I hate crying and scammers and cucumber—"

"Cucumber?"

"Yes. Pickles are okay, though."

He liked how the more she spoke, that glassiness seemed to fade from her gaze.

"Anyway," she said. "The point is . . ."

Her gaze dropped to her feet.

She sighed. "I don't actually think there is a point. I just couldn't stay in

my room by myself any longer.” She turned on her heel, but he touched her arm before she could walk away.

“Wait,” he said.

She looked over her shoulder.

“Would you like for me to stay in your room while you dry your hair?”

She bit her bottom lip before she nodded. “Yes, please.”

HER MOTEL ROOM felt totally different with Tyler in it.

Significantly smaller, for one. And safer. *Safe*, actually.

With Tyler here, she felt safe.

As soon as the motel room door clicked shut behind them, he shoed her into the bathroom.

“Go dry your hair. No rush,” he said.

She walked in, closed the door—then almost immediately reopened it.

Tyler looked up from where he’d sat on the edge of her bed, his phone in one hand, his coffee on her nightstand.

“Sorry, I—”

Got scared again when I closed the door.

“It’s fine,” he said with a grin, clearly completely unbothered.

It was a pattern, she’d noticed, where no matter what she did or said, Tyler was cool with it. It was what had propelled her out of her room in search of him—the knowledge that he wouldn’t mind that she needed him. She didn’t have to apologize for taking up space when she was with Tyler—not that she literally did that in her day-to-day life. It was more an awareness she had—whether it was her perception or reality didn’t really matter—that because she didn’t quite fit in, she was an inconvenience to other people.

Tyler never made her feel like that.

She had so much hair it took a while to dry it all, and without any product or a curling iron to tame it, it settled in a rather wild, slightly frizzy mane that

reached about three inches past her shoulders. She tucked it behind her ears as she once again stared at herself in the mirror. She wasn't so pale now, with a pink tinge to her cheeks that might have been from the heat of the dryer or simply from how aware she was that Tyler was sitting on her bed.

But without the excuse of her hair, that prickly dread from before tickled its way back up her spine.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she said to the mirror.

"Paige?"

She turned to see Tyler standing in the bathroom doorway.

She was tall, about five ten, so she wasn't used to men towering over her. Tyler wasn't crazy tall, maybe three inches taller than her, but his muscled strength and broad shoulders made him seem bigger. But his size wasn't in any way intimidating to her. Rather, it made her feel good. Protected.

And he was going to go back to his room, and she wouldn't feel that way anymore.

"I'm fine," she said.

He raised his eyebrows.

"I've finished drying my hair."

He grinned. "I can see that."

"So . . ."

"I don't have to leave."

He said it so casually it took a moment for the words to register.

"What did you say?"

Again that gorgeous, easy smile. "I didn't expect you to stop being scared as soon as your hair was dry. I can stay, if it would help. Up to you." He shrugged. "I don't mind."

She frowned. "Wouldn't that be weird?"

"Weirder than thinking you should be okay being alone after what you went through today?" He shook his head. "I should've thought of this way earlier. I'm sorry. Maybe I could've arranged for a female deputy to room

with you or something . . . ”

“No,” she said without thinking. “It has to be you.”

“Oh.”

Oh.

Her cheeks heated up. “I mean . . . ”

She had no words to explain what she’d meant.

He cleared his throat. “There’s nowhere to sit, so I could just lie . . . sit . . . on top of the covers.”

The idea of Tyler lying next to her while she slept was overwhelming.

But the idea that he’d walk out of this room made her throat constrict.

“Um,” she said, just looking at him while she dealt with the cacophony of her body’s visceral reactions—icy fear at the prospect of being alone, a hit of lukewarm embarrassment for declaring she needed *only* him, and mostly a whole lot of unwanted red-hot heat low in her belly.

She closed her eyes and forced herself to remember the horror in Tyler’s gaze after he’d kissed her. And then the ache she’d felt at his blatant and clear rejection.

That effectively doused those silly red-hot flames.

“That would be great,” she said, her tone now light and efficient. “You’re right. I don’t want to be alone. Do you want to go grab your things?” Her gaze ran over his body. He was still wearing the jeans and dark-green T-shirt he’d worn all day. “Maybe take a shower?”

His lips quirked up. “Here?”

“Yep,” she said, again all light and efficient. “I’d rather you did. I, uh—”

“I get it. I’ll ask the deputy to grab my things.”

TWELVE

IT HAS TO BE YOU, SHE'D SAID.

Damn straight, it had to be him.

Tyler stood beneath the hot, hard spray of the shower. His cock was equally hot and hard, but he wasn't about to jerk off with Paige on the other side of the door.

She'd meant it had to be you from a keeping-her-safe point of view, you asshole.

Not anything else.

Obviously.

But his cock didn't give a shit about that. His brain didn't either, not really. Goddamn, he'd told himself he was just doing the right thing *for Paige*—that he wasn't leaving a frightened woman alone.

But that wasn't the real explanation. *He* felt better being near her. He, in fact, *needed* to be near her. And he could explain that away as it being about her protection, but it wasn't just about that. His unrelenting fucking erection proved it.

He should be focusing on the way he'd seen the tension ease from her body when he'd agreed to stay with her tonight. He should be pleased that she clearly felt safer in his company, so he'd done the right thing. He hated seeing Paige scared, and his presence helped with that. That was what

mattered.

She'd even felt safe enough for him to close the door while he'd showered.

Well, when he'd asked—*Should I leave it open?*—she'd shaken her head so hard it was near comical. *No!* she'd exclaimed.

He wasn't so clueless as to think it was entirely about her now feeling less unsafe, so he showered as quickly as possible. Then dried himself off rather violently, forcing himself to think of topics unrelated to Paige. Like the choice he'd made that had directly led to the death of two of his teammates.

That instantly cooled his body.

He yanked on the clothes he'd been given—boxer briefs, gray sweatpants, and a white T-shirt, and brushed his teeth.

On the bathroom cabinet rested his new phone, but he didn't try to call Sam again. He'd attempted to while Paige had dried her hair, but the noise had made discussing anything impossible, and he'd had to hang up. His new phone didn't have the secure messaging software that his own phone had installed, so he couldn't text Sam or Shadow Ops. He'd just need to call again later, maybe after Paige was asleep.

But now that he was sharing a room with Paige, he was less concerned about the lackadaisical demeanors of the deputies. He still needed to speak to Sam, but it could wait.

He walked back into the bedroom.

PAIGE WAS SITTING cross-legged on the bed when Tyler walked into the room. She'd spent the entire time he'd been gone trying *not* to imagine him naked in her shower.

She'd failed.

He strode directly to the small dresser, placed his neatly folded dirty clothes on it, then walked to the nightstand on the far side of the bed and

dropped his phone and wallet onto it with a slight *clunk*.

Then he climbed onto his side of the bed and propped his back up against the pillows and stretched his long legs out in front.

She'd never been one to notice a man's feet, but just like the rest of him, the bare feet below Tyler's casually crossed ankles were as gorgeous as the rest of him. For some reason, this totally unnecessary level of perfection really irritated her. He didn't even have a blister from their hike. Surely he could've at least had ugly toes?

"You don't have to perch on the edge of the bed," he said. "I won't bite."

"You've already made that crystal clear," she snapped. Then she gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "I meant . . ."

But those stupid words were out there now, hanging awkwardly between them.

Why did she always do this?

Why did she have to be so embarrassing?

"Paige, I—"

She held up her hands in a stopping motion. "No, we're not discussing this again."

She teetered on the edge of the bed as she tried to put more distance between them.

"Pretend I didn't say that," she continued. "What I did mean was what I said earlier, when we were hiking. We did something that we *both* regret."

"But you did say it," he said softly. "Paige, old me would've done anything you wanted. Including biting, if you were into that."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't patronize me, Tyler."

"That's the last thing I'm doing."

She snorted as she untangled her legs and dropped them to the floor. She wanted more space between them. "It's exactly what you're doing."

She stood up. There was literally nowhere for her to go, so she went and stood awkwardly in front of the closed bathroom door. That was what she

did, wasn't it? Be goddamn awkward?

"I'm getting tired of you telling me what I think, Paige." He climbed off the bed and strode toward her. "We've already had this conversation."

"That was *before* you . . ."

He came to a stop between her and the bed. The room was so small that only left maybe three feet between them.

She swallowed. "*Kissed* me," she said confidently, like it was easy for her to say.

"And because I acted like a dick, you've decided everything else I said in that mine was bullshit too." But he muttered it more to himself than to her. "*Fuck*, I'm an asshole."

They stood there for long seconds.

"Well," she said briskly. "With that decided—" She went to step around him and head back to the bed.

But he reached out to block her path, his hand landing on her forearm. "No."

She looked up at him and frowned. "Fine," she conceded. "I don't think you're an asshole. You've saved my life too many times for me to think that. *And* you're here in my room, which is kind of lovely of you, so, on balance —"

"*No*," he said again. Harshly enough it halted her words. "I am an asshole. That wasn't news to me." He sighed. "That's not what I wanted to say. But I need you to forget about the kiss for a minute—"

"I'll forget about it permanently, thanks."

He blinked, then cleared his throat. "Fine. That's fine. But that's not my point. My point is that me fucking up and kissing you *does not* erase what happened up to that moment in the mine. It doesn't, Paige. Okay? That was real. That was . . ." He paused. "Special, you know? *Fuck*, I'm bad at explaining what I'm thinking . . ." He laughed. "Which is what I'm getting at, I reckon. It's like we said in the dark, neither of us is any good at telling

people the complicated stuff in our heads. The difficult stuff. And we did. We *did* that, and I don't know if I'll ever talk to anyone like that again, yet it was so easy with you, Paige? And I get that the situation was bizarre and maybe we both thought we were going to die . . . ”

“I definitely did.”

He chuckled. “But I don't believe it was just—as you put it—*existential dread*—that made us talk the way we did. It was you, specifically, Paige. Not the situation. It was you.”

It was you.

His hand was still on her arm, his fingers strong and warm against her skin.

“Hate me for kissing you if you like. But don't erase all that came before because I fucked up. Please. Everything I said in that mine was real. All of it.”

She studied Tyler's face as she absorbed what he'd just said. Her instinct was to argue with him—but she'd already done that, and it hadn't worked. He'd just argue back, like he thought through pure strength of will that she'd eventually believe him.

Oh, and she *wanted* to believe him.

It was so tempting.

“You really do have the most incredible, expressive eyes, Paige,” he said, low and a little rough. “You are so damn beautiful.”

That shattered the spell. She laughed and shook her head. “Too far, Tyler. You took it too far. Nice eyes, I can believe. Nice butt, even, I guess. But beautiful? Come on.”

“It's true.”

She shook her arm free. “Please stop. You've convinced me about the other stuff. Heck, I was there too. I can believe you meant everything you said in the dark, all right? I can go with that. But we're not in that mine any longer. Please don't do this.”

“Everything in the mine was real,” he repeated.

“I know,” she said, crossing her arms in front of herself. “I believe you.”

“And everything was real after we got out. Including the kiss.” He took a deep breath. “Especially the kiss.”

“Tyler—”

“I don’t regret kissing you,” he said, taking a step toward her. “You can regret it. That’s fine. But I don’t. I regret I ended it. I regret all the reasons why I had to end it. I regret almost everything I’ve done in the past five years, but I can’t . . . ” He cleared his throat. “I can’t have you believing I regret that kiss.”

She gaped at him. “Tyler—”

He stepped even closer. Close enough her still-crossed arms brushed against him.

“And I lied to you, Paige. But not about how strong and brave you are. Or how beautiful I think you are, or how spectacular your ass is—and trust me, I spent a hell of a lot of time confirming it was spectacular on our hike.”

She gasped.

“I lied to you after that kiss—to you and to myself—when I said it wouldn’t happen again. Because, Paige, if you want me to kiss you, *nothing* is going to stop me in this moment. Do you understand? Nothing.”

This was about far more than a kiss for Tyler. Something had happened to him that he wouldn’t speak of, and *that* was why he’d stopped kissing her in the forest. She believed that now. *God*, she had to believe it, with him so close to her, and with that heat in his eyes that even she couldn’t explain away as anything but lust. He wanted her.

But what had happened to him? What was that trauma that had changed him?

Because of that, she should say no. She should step away.

“You just need to decide for you,” he murmured as her arms fell to her sides. “Not for me. I’m responsible for my own decisions. I know that better

than anyone. And kissing you—right now I can't believe that's a mistake.”

Right now. But in an hour? Or tomorrow?

But then she tilted her chin up to hold his gaze, and worrying about the future suddenly seemed ludicrous.

They'd almost died today. Multiple times.

They still didn't know why.

They had no idea if they were even still in danger.

But she did know one thing—with utter clarity.

She wanted to kiss Tyler.

So she did.

THIRTEEN

PAIGE STOOD ON HER TIPTOES AND PRESSED HER MOUTH TO HIS.

Tyler groaned at the electric sensation of her lips, even though their bodies touched nowhere else. That was all it took for him to lose his entire fucking mind with Paige—a kiss that by any measure was as simple and chaste as it got.

Although, if he were honest, he'd lost his fucking mind hours ago. From her eye-rolling disdain at the gas station to her firecracker defiance in that ditch to her refusal to leave him alone to face the gunmen. And *fuck*, all that had happened since. *All* of it. Every word, every touch. Every time their eyes met.

Every single moment with Paige had grown this tsunami of need that had crashed into the rules he'd set himself. Crashed into those rules—and destroyed them.

Destroyed *him*.

She rested one hand on his chest, above his heart. She had to feel how fast it was beating.

He shouldn't be doing this.

But as he'd told Paige, he was responsible for this decision. A decision he knew was wrong.

He'd had to be honest with Paige, but this kiss wasn't about honesty. This

wasn't about everything he'd fucked up or every mistake he'd made. This was about his own selfish needs and desires.

It was a kiss he wanted more than anything, and it was also a kiss he didn't deserve.

She opened her mouth against his, and he was lost.

She moaned as he palmed her spectacular ass and pressed her body hard against his. He needed her close. He needed to feel everything.

She kissed him desperately, and he was just as desperate right back. It was a kiss without subtlety—it was just mouths and tongues and the occasional bump or graze of teeth, and it was fucking perfect.

His hands slid upward, beneath the back of her loose borrowed T-shirt. To explore the slight curve of her waist before shifting to the flatness of her belly. She sucked in a breath, breaking their kiss.

They stood just looking at each other as his fingers traced the bottom edge of her bra.

“Touch me . . .” she breathed.

He dropped his forehead against hers and cupped her breast through the satin fabric. She caught her breath as he swept his thumb across her nipple. He kissed her again while he learned her perfect shape, loving the way she gasped into his mouth with every touch and slide of his fingers.

Her hands skated up to his shoulders and clutched at the fabric of his T-shirt as she pressed herself against him. He was rock-hard against her belly.

Goddamn, she felt good.

She tugged at his shoulders and took a step backward toward the bed. He didn't need to be asked twice, scooping her up in his arms and tossing her into the center of the mattress.

“Tyler!” she said, laughing, propping herself on her elbows as she looked at him.

He dragged off his T-shirt, then paused when she laughed again—a bit harder this time.

He looked down at himself, but everything looked in order—he wasn't into tats like most of the Shadow Team, so only a few grazes and bruises decorated his body.

“That’s not the usual reaction I get when I take off my shirt.”

Paige held a hand to her mouth as her shoulders shook with mirth. “Oh, Christ no, I’m surprised there isn’t a choir of angels singing. You are so *perfect*, Tyler, it’s ridiculous.”

“I’m the opposite of perfect.”

She sobered and climbed onto her knees, reaching for him where he stood at the edge of the bed. Her hand landed at his hip, then slid along the waistband of his sweatpants before moving upward so her fingers could trace the muscular corrugation of his stomach.

“Sorry,” she said quietly. “We’re both flawed. Everyone is. But Tyler, your body is insane. It’s beautiful, really.”

Both her hands moved over his body now, shaping his hips, his ribs, and his chest as she explored. He stood there, just watching her, his cock tenting his pants, but right now he was in no hurry. Having Paige touch his body—what it did to him—*that* was what was insane. Her touch was electric against his skin, leaving a trail of tingling sensation as she learned his body.

She leaned even closer to press a kiss in the center of his chest, her breath hot against him. His whole body shuddered.

“Paige—”

He tangled his fingers in her hair to hold her still and lift her head to meet his gaze.

“My turn?” he asked, his other hand grabbing the hem of her T-shirt.

She’d barely nodded before he’d pulled the cotton up and over her head, and she giggled as he efficiently unclipped the snap at the back of her bra.

“You’re good at that.”

He shrugged—he made it a point to be good at everything he did—and then noticed she was clasping the bra to her breasts. He frowned. “This not

okay, Paige?”

He took a step away from the bed.

“No!” she said urgently, hooking her fingers into the top of his sweatpants and tugging so hard they both tumbled onto the bed. His forearms landed on either side of her, and her hair spread like a halo around her face.

“This is *totally* okay,” she said, and he was very aware her hand remained partially down his pants. “It’s just . . . been a while since a man—”

Her cheeks flamed a deep pink.

She swallowed. “And I know you’re going to argue with me, but obviously my body isn’t at all like yours.”

“That’s a good thing, Paige,” he said in a serious tone. “Because I’m not into dudes.”

She gave a burst of surprised laughter. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t, actually.”

He kissed her ridiculously delicious mouth before she could respond. He felt her gradually relax beneath him, and he allowed his body to settle against her, his cock settling between her thighs.

She moaned and undulated against him.

“*Fuck*, Paige that feels so good.”

“I *know*,” she said, almost in awe.

He kissed his way from her lips to her jaw, then trailed kisses downward—along her neck, to her collarbone, and then lower, between her breasts.

She still clasped her bra in front of her with one hand.

“Paige?”

She moved her hand away with a sigh.

But that left the bra still tangled around her arms, so he sat up to drag it off her completely so she was finally naked from the waist up.

She bit her lip as he looked down at her.

“Your tits are hot as fuck,” he said, his voice hoarse while he fought to retain control. He hadn’t had the privilege of seeing a woman’s breasts in

three years, but that wasn't why he thought Paige's were perfect. It was because they were.

His touch as he relearned her shape without the barrier of satin and underwire was reverent. She arched into his touch when his thumb pressed against her nipple.

“You like that?”

She nodded, and her eyes slid shut as she moaned and arched again.

He replaced his thumb with his mouth, and she gave the cutest little shriek.

“Oh, god, *Tyler* . . .” she breathed.

Her fingers twisted in his hair as his teeth deliberately grazed her nipple, and she gasped as he sucked her into his mouth. He fucking loved her breasts. They fit his hands and his mouth perfectly—and he loved even more how she responded to the way he worshiped them—her little sighs and pants turned him on impossibly more.

His tongue traced its way downward, past the middle of her ribs and to the indent of her belly button.

Her fingers remained light in his hair as he grasped the waist of her sweatpants with both hands, but he looked up her body anyway—needing her to be sure.

What he saw was Paige propped up on her elbows, her gaze heavy lidded with heat and desire, her gorgeous hair tumbling around her shoulders.

“Yes—” She answered his unspoken question. “I want you . . . but I've never—”

He went still. “Paige?”

“I'm not a virgin,” she said hurriedly. “Don't stress. I've just never had a guy, you know—”

“Go down on you? What fucking losers have you been sleeping with?”

She looked up to the ceiling. “Two losers. Last one was seven years ago.” She swallowed. “Is that a problem?”

“Why would it be a problem?”

She still didn't look at him. “Because I don't really know what I'm doing, and you definitely do and—”

“Babe, you know *exactly* what you're doing to me.” He pushed onto his knees and gestured at his crotch.

Finally she dropped her gaze back to his. It dipped down to his cock, and she grinned. A kinda smug grin, to be honest.

He chuckled. “See, you know what you do to me, Paige. You can see it, feel it, hell—experience it whenever I touch you. You make me fucking shake with how much I want to be inside you.” He held up one hand, which vibrated with the effort it was taking to hold himself together. “See? I don't give a shit about your experience before me, except I think it's a damn shame this smoking-hot body wasn't looked after properly.” He grinned. “Until now.”

It was her time to shiver, and *fuck*, it made him even harder.

His hands went back to her sweatpants, and holding her gaze, he pulled them down—taking her underwear with them. Then she bent her legs to help him tug the sweatpants off her ankles so he could toss them to the floor. And then, finally, she was naked—her head resting on the pillows while he knelt between her incredible long legs.

He casually slid his hand beneath one knee before hooking it over his shoulder—one leg, then the other—before he settled between her thighs.

She gasped when he pressed a kiss on her inner thigh.

Then slowly he kissed his way upward.

AT THE FIRST touch of Tyler's tongue to her clit Paige just about levitated off the mattress.

“*Oh my god, Tyler . . .*”

He looked up, holding her gaze as he pressed his tongue firmly against

her again, watching as she reacted to every slide, flick or circle of his clever, clever tongue. It was surreal to watch him do this to her body, to see her legs splayed wide by his massive shoulders. She grabbed at his head as she arched her back, pressing herself even closer against his incredible mouth, her eyes sliding closed.

Everything he did felt good—eliciting sighs and moans and little gasps that she'd never thought she was capable of. Her limited experience of sex hadn't felt like this, instead it had been mostly silent—her memories were more of how awkward she'd felt, and how she hadn't really known what to do, or say. With Tyler, it all just *happened*. She couldn't control how she reacted, because it was simply the result of how good he was making her feel. She couldn't feel awkward, because it was Tyler, and everything she did seemed to turn him on.

She arched her back as heat gathered low in her belly and began to grow tight.

She was vaguely aware of him shifting his position slightly, her attention solely focused on the delicious sensations between her legs. He was taking her higher, and tighter, and her gasps and moans were morphing into half-spoken words:

Tyler, oh fu—

Please, yes—like that—

And then she felt his fingers brush against her folds, and *god* she'd already known how wet he'd made her, but as he pressed a finger into her she felt sure she'd drenched his hand with how turned on she was—and she didn't care at all.

His tongue paused as he smiled against her clit. “So fucking wet and hot for me, babe . . . so good . . . perfect . . .”

Greedy she pressed up against his mouth as a second finger joined the first, his thick fingers pushing in and out as his tongue relentlessly brought her body closer and closer . . . tighter and tighter . . .

Until she came in a wave of astonishing, extraordinary pleasure—as heat and sensation surged from her core and all the way to the very edges of her body.

She cried out his name, maybe, she had no idea—all she knew was that as she lay gasping in the aftermath, that she'd never experienced anything like that before.

Not even close.

He pressed a kiss to her thigh, and then her belly, before crawling up her body.

She reached for him, grabbing the sides of his face to pull him down for an open-mouthed kiss. She could taste herself on his tongue, and it felt shockingly intimate and hot as hell.

He was hard between her thighs, and she pushed up against him, desperate to have all of him.

“Fuck me, Tyler,” she whispered—not even shy.

He growled, but shook his head. “No condom. Are you on any birth control?”

None of this had even occurred to her. “No.”

She gave a little scream of frustration that made his chest rumble as he laughed against her neck.

“Well, that sucks,” he said.

Her body still tingling with aftershocks, she pushed gently against his shoulders. “Get on your back,” she said. “It’s your turn.”

His grin was wicked, and he gave no argument as he flipped over.

Did he guess she also had almost zero experience with this, either? She shuffled down the bed on her knees, her gaze on the very impressive shape of his cock beneath his sweatpants.

He doesn't give a shit about your experience, Paige.

She tentatively ran a finger along the hard shape jutting from his thighs. His cock jerked in response.

She did that. *She* made him like that.

This huge, muscular man was hers to touch—hers to make feel good. It was a heady mix of trust and power, and it gave her a level of confidence she didn't think she had.

She carefully peeled down his pants, and then the boxers underneath, leaving them shoved part way down his thighs.

She rested back on her heels as she studied him, her gaze hungry as it learnt the size and shape of his cock. Then she leaned forward to wrap her fingers around him. At the first touch of her hand he groaned.

“It's been a long time, Paige, I'm not going to last long . . . ”

Experimentally she pumped her hand up and down, please with the way she made him gasp and moan. Then she added her mouth, starting with a lick as she swiped a taste of pre-cum at his tip, then a kiss, before taking all she could of him into her mouth.

He groaned her name.

He helped her find the perfect rhythm with his hands tangled in her hair as he guided her movements. Her hand moved up and down, bumping against her mouth as she licked and sucked. She adored the sounds he was making. The hand she had rested against his stomach could feel his body grow tighter, and she opened her jaw wider, seeing if she could take even more of his hard, velvet length into her mouth.

He tugged at her hair. “I'm close, babe, if you don't want—”

But she didn't move. She wanted this—all of this—and when he jerked his hips moments later, she welcomed the heat and taste of him on her tongue, thrilled that she could do that to him. Make him feel so good.

This time she was the one to crawl up to the headboard. This time he pulled her down for a kiss.

Again it was shockingly intimate. Again it was hot as hell.

She smiled against his lips. “Wow,” she said.

His fingers traced loops and swirls on her back. “Right back at you.”

FOURTEEN

PAIGE LAY ON HER BACK, TYLER PROPPED UP ON ONE ARM BESIDE HER. HE looked down at her, one finger gently tracing the angles of her face—along her brows, down her nose, light as air over her lips, then up along her jaw. She shivered beneath his touch.

“No fucking condoms,” he muttered, and she laughed.

She almost said *next time*, but held her tongue. What they’d just done had been incredible, but surely this was all a product of the extraordinary circumstances that’d brought them together? Once the police had worked out what the hell was going on, she’d be heading back to Arvada, and Tyler would head to Falcon to see his friends—and that would be that. All done, all over.

“So damn gorgeous,” he murmured, as he held her gaze.

She bit her lip.

“And you still want to argue with me.” He shook his head.

“You must see something other people don’t,” she conceded.

“Goddamn, Paige—”

“Wait,” she interrupted. How could he not see what was right in front of him? “Let me explain. I’m not trying to be stubborn, okay? I believe that you —”

“—think you’re smoking hot.”

She laughed. “Sure. You, specifically, are into me, but I didn’t have sex for seven years through choice, Tyler.” She felt herself blush. “I would’ve happily gone on dates, if someone had asked. But no one did. In *seven years.*”

This was a cold, hard fact.

“So you’re on all the dating apps? Hitting the clubs?”

“Well, no . . . ”

“How did you meet those two dickheads you slept with?”

She frowned. “The first one I’d just turned twenty-one and had decided I didn’t want to be a virgin any longer, so I went to a bar and, I don’t know, picked him up I guess?”

“That lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

“Hmm, don’t think he thought so. I didn’t tell him it was my first time, but thankfully he didn’t notice.”

“*He didn’t notice?*”

She narrowed her gaze. “No. But it wasn’t all that great, and his apartment was kind of gross so I called an Uber straight afterward.” She sighed. “That experience put me off the idea of hooking up with a guy for a few more years, and then one night I guess I was feeling, you know, *up for it*, so I went out again—I was living in Arvada by now, so I went into Denver with a friend from the social media agency I was working at. We met this group of guys who were pretty nice. I went home with one of them, and the sex was way better. Not like . . . ” *what they’d just done*, “. . . but nice. Anyway, afterward I overheard him talking to his friend on the phone. He said something like: *no, not the hot one, no luck there. So I made do with the tall one with no boobs.*”

“What a fucking asshole.”

“Well, it wasn’t great to hear. I got out of there pretty quick.”

He was continuing to touch her as she spoke—the skim of his fingers along her collar bone, or tucking her hair behind her ears. His absolute focus

on her was lovely. She'd never said any of this to anyone before, always so embarrassed for her wasteland of a love life, but Tyler didn't make her feel at all self-conscious. In fact, it was rather freeing to let it all out.

"So what I'm hearing, is that you have no issue attracting men when that's what you want."

"What?" she said, confused. "No. What I told you is how the only time I've had sex is when I've aggressively gone and sought it. *I* approached both of those guys. They never would've looked at me if I hadn't made it clear it was just about sex."

"Yeah," he said, non-committedly. "That's not really how it works."

"For me, it is," she said. "That's my point. You probably can't go to the grocery store without some woman flirting with you, right?"

"Well—"

"See! And other woman get asked out on dates like . . . organically, in their day to day lives. Like through work, or hobbies, or friends of friends . . ."

"Are you living in 1995, Paige? Sure, that happens, but I'm telling you right now I've dated far more women through swiping right than through some romantic comedy meet-cute scenario."

She sat up, annoyed he wasn't getting this. "No. I tried. I talked myself into going to that bar when I was twenty-one. I told myself that I shouldn't let one incident from my past screw with my head like that. I mean, I'd look in the mirror, and while I'm no super model, I'm not actively repulsive—"

"One incident?"

She took a deep breath. Was this always where this conversation was heading? Where she *wanted* it to head?

"Why do I want to tell you stuff?" she asked. "Stuff I don't even let myself think about, most the time."

He sat up now, too. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

She nodded. “I know.”

She hugged her knees to her chest. The sheet only covered her to her waist, and she only now registered that she’d been sitting with Tyler, topless, for the last several minutes, and she hadn’t felt at all self-conscious. She still didn’t. Beside her the sheet fell low on Tyler’s hips, and he looked incredible—all gorgeous rippling muscle beneath the unforgiving ceiling light.

“I told you I was scammed.” As the words fell from her lips, it just felt *right*. “I was eighteen, a high school senior working at Arby’s. I had a few friends at school, but they were all like me—kind of shy and awkward. Kind of nerds, but not smart enough to really fit into that group either.” She shook her head. “Anyway, I’d never been on a date, or been kissed—nothing like that. But at Arby’s, this other server a couple years older than me—her name was Mischa—was super nice to me. I thought she was so cool as she was at college, always seemed to have some new hot guy she was talking too, and she was just so confident. Exactly the type of girl I wished I was. And she spoke to me like I was just like her—like *of course* I’d have guys sniffing around me like she did. Of course I’d know what she was talking about when she made some sexual innuendo or joke.” Mostly Paige had just blushed and laughed like she understood, when nearly all of it went over her head. “Later I looked at it all differently, but at the time I just went along for the ride. She even came shopping with me once, helped me choose a few outfits for school. I bought her a few things too—again, in hindsight, I should’ve seen what was going on.” She’s been so awfully naïve. “Then one day I found a wallet in the restaurant while I was cleaning up. There was a University of Idaho ID card in there, so I contacted Student Services, and the next day the owner turned up—an Engineering major named Bryce. He was really grateful, and chatted to me for a few minutes. He was handsome and nice—when he realized all his cash was still in the wallet, he came back a few hours later with a Starbucks gift card for me. We barely spoke at all, and I honestly wouldn’t have thought much about it again, except later that night he sent me

a message on Facebook.”

She shifted her weight on the mattress. “But—spoiler alert!—it wasn’t really Bryce. But I didn’t even question it, and over the next few weeks he started messaging me all the time. At first we just talked about college and school, but then he started being flirty. I was thrilled. One day he supposedly came to see me at work—Mischa told me he’d left just before I started my shift—but he got the shift time wrong so missed me.” She rolled her eyes. “God, I cringe just saying this all out loud.”

“I hate this Mischa person with the fire of a thousand suns,” Tyler said casually.

She laughed, surprised. “Thank you. I appreciate that.” All these years later she wished *she’d* directed her anger more at the woman responsible, rather than herself. “Bryce then had a convenient ill relative in a distant state, so for the next month or so I didn’t wonder why we couldn’t catch up, and he kept saying we would as soon as he was back home. It was all so convincing—I cried over all the stories about his sick great-aunt, even.” She dropped her knees back down again to better face Tyler. His gaze dropped to her breasts, and she saw the heat of appreciation in his gaze, and it thrilled her. “Then due to a series of unfortunate events, Bryce revealed he couldn’t afford the flight home. While he was bemoaning how frustrating it was that while he’d have the cash in two weeks, he didn’t have it now and he was desperate to get back home so he wouldn’t miss some important test he had... I of course offered to lend him the money. And then he asked if I’d also lend him the money for his mom’s flight, and I agreed to that too, without a second thought.” She swallowed. “We’d never spoken over the phone, but I’d been happy with that, as messages gave me the chance to try to be witty and funny . . . and not say the stupid shit that was otherwise likely to come out of my mouth.”

“You *are* witty and funny,” he said. “You made me laugh when trapped in a mine, Paige. It’s a gift.”

She giggled. “Thank you. But still, you’d think I would’ve noticed the

parade of red flags right in front of me? But nope.”

“A wise woman once told me our brain is programmed to trust other humans.”

Her lips briefly quirked upward, but this next part was harder to reveal. “I venmo-ed Bryce the money, and the very next afternoon while I was working at Arby’s after school, with Mischa, who walks into the restaurant? Bryce.”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah. So I’m clearing a table, turn around—and there he is. The place is super busy, and he’s there with a group of his friends from college. He wasn’t supposed to fly home for a couple more days, so I thought this was like, a surprise. For me. He caught my gaze when I walked in, and smiled. On reflection it was the smile of an acquaintance acknowledging someone who found their wallet, but I didn’t know that. Instead, I—” Oh *fuck*, her throat was getting tight and scratchy. “I ran across the dining room and threw myself into his arms. Like I was a heroine in one of those rom-coms you mentioned—because, of course I thought the lost wallet was our meet cute.”

“Oh, babe . . .”

“Poor real Bryce didn’t know what to do. He was actually pretty nice given from his point of view I’d just accosted him. He extracted himself and asked me—quietly, but his friends overheard—what the hell I was doing? I thought he just meant the public display of affection, so I said I was sorry and was just so thrilled he was home early. But by then his friends had started giving Bryce shit, making stupid comments. Maybe if I’d clicked a bit earlier, it wouldn’t have been quite so bad, but in my head everything that’d happened was real. So I got annoyed with him, demanded to know why he was acting like this. His friends were loud and we were drawing attention. They were doing this sing-song ‘ooooohhhh lover’s quarrel’ chant and Bryce clearing got pissed at it all, and basically shouted at me: *Are you insane? Why the fuck would you think we’re together?* And that’s when I realized—too late—that it wasn’t Bryce I’d been talking too.”

Tyler grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight, his big hand enveloping hers.

“There was this moment of silence in the restaurant—like, even the customers were silent. Or maybe they weren’t, but that’s how I remember it. As if the world went still as reality hit me like a ton of bricks.” She cleared her throat. “So, um, my manager came out, and all he cared about was the drama I’d caused to be sorted out. I think he even gave Bryce a free meal, I don’t know—I’d run off to the bathroom by that point. Mischa came and found me, and again—because I was so fucking dumb—I still hadn’t worked out it was her. I was properly sobbing, and she mustn’t have liked that—maybe the reality of what she’d done made her defensive. But she basically lectured me for being so gullible, asking how I could be so stupid, telling me guys like that would never notice me. She got pissed I wouldn’t stop crying, and by the time I’d left the bathroom she’d told everyone on shift that I’d been scammed for \$5000 and had actually thought Bryce was my boyfriend. I remember walking out of the bathroom and into this atmosphere of pity. I was this stupid girl dumb enough to think not only a hot boy liked her, but also dumb enough to give the scammer all my savings. My manager sent me home, and it just got worse when I told my parents.”

“They weren’t angry with the scammer, were they?”

Paige laughed drily. “No. It was like this incident was a symbol—a metaphor, even—for their eighteen years of enduring my many disappointments.”

“For fuck sake.”

She laughed again as she shook her head. “Okay, now I can see it as shitty parenting, but these were my brilliantly intelligent parents who I was *clearly* not as clever as. I mean, all my report cards proved it, right? So when I told them, and their reaction was—and honestly, this is a direct quote—*how could you be so damn stupid, Paige?*—with zero sympathy for the public humiliation and private shame part of it, it cut deep. It was like as a collective

my parents and I all finally accepted that I actually *was* stupid. My father was really fixated on how much money I'd lost. He was like *how the hell did you think two plane tickets from South Carolina to Idaho cost five thousand dollars?*" She squeezed Tyler's hand as she took a deep breath. "I went back to my room and scrolled through all the conversations I'd had with fake-Bryce. As soon as I read the messages about his attempt to visit me at Arby's—where he actually mentioned Mischa by name—it was obvious it was Mischa who'd been messaging me. How else could she have told me he'd come looking for me? So then I got to add that betrayal to all the other shit I was experiencing."

"Did you report what she did to the police?"

"No. I was too embarrassed, and my parents seemed to feel like it was mostly my fault for being so naïve, and I agreed with them. I just quit my job at Arby's and never went back."

"Wow, that's awful, Paige," Tyler said quietly. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

"Me, too. But do you get it now? As the only so-called interest I had from a guy wasn't even real, it really destroyed any hint of self-confidence I had. Like, nuclear level of annihilation. I thought I was ugly, stupid *and* gullible. A real triple threat."

"But you're none of those things, Paige. You never were."

"I get that, logically. As I said—I look in the mirror and it's not all bad. I even like my eyes, too."

"They are absolutely stunning."

She blushed. "Thank you. So after a few years that's why I thought I'd try again, but it didn't work out. I even tried *twice*, and all those experiences did was confirm what I think I already knew—that love and relationships were just not for me."

"Bullshit."

"It's not. That's what I've been trying to explain . . ."

“No, Paige. It’s not right that you’ve allowed some fraudulent bitch mess with you for all these years.”

She lifted her chin. “I have *not* allowed her to mess with me. It’s been twelve years, and literally nothing has happened to challenge that reality.”

“What about me, then?”

She looked at him, all golden glorious skin and a heart-stoppingly handsome face. “This is the result of an extraordinary circumstance.”

“You know that isn’t true. Why won’t you believe what I keep telling you? *You* are who I want. You, specifically.”

“But only until this is over, right?” she said quietly. “Then I won’t see you again.”

He took a deep breath. “*Fuck*, I wish I wasn’t like this,” he said. “I wish I could be the man you deserve, who could make you *see* what I see. Make you believe that *you* are extraordinary, rather than this situation we’re in.”

He could be, though. Tyler could be that man who made her believe in love, and trust in relationships. Who could make her believe that she was lovable, that she was worthy of sharing a life with.

But he couldn’t, because he *didn’t* want those things. Not that she expected him to commit to all that now, hours after meeting . . . but he didn’t even want to see her again. For all his pretty words, his actions meant nothing had changed. Not deep inside her, not at her core.

“I wish I could tell you *why*, Paige,” he continued.

“But you won’t.”

He shook his head. “I’m not as brave as you. You trusted me with your story, and I’m too gutless to give you mine.” He pulled his hand from yours. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “Don’t be,” she said. “I’m glad I told you.” And she knew it was true. She had a sense of lightness inside her, like she’d set something free. “I know who I am, Tyler. That’s what I keep telling you, what I keep trying to make you see. Maybe now you’ll get it.”

“I’ll never see you as anything but brilliant, brave and beautiful, Paige, even if you kept arguing with me forever.”

Her smile was sad. “But we don’t have forever, do we Tyler? We have, what? A few hours. Maybe another day or two if the cops can’t work out what’s going on?”

“Paige—”

She pushed up to her knees, the sheet falling away from her hips. She reached for him, her fingers skating down his chest.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I don’t want to talk any longer.” She forced a laugh. “Feels like a poor use of our limited time, sharing sad stories.”

He groaned as her hand explored beneath the sheet. “*You* are extraordinary, Paige.”

She knew that wasn’t true, but maybe it was okay to pretend it was—pretend that this man actually believed it—just for now. Just for tonight.

She kissed him, even as she acknowledged that while tonight she’d let go of painful memories that had haunted her for far too long—she was replacing them with new ones. Memories that were perfect, and wonderful in this moment.

But they’d still end in pain.

Because even as Tyler kissed her, even as he turned her until she lay with her back to his chest, his clever fingers at her breasts and between her thighs—there was an edge of sadness to her pleasure.

Sadness that this would end.

Sadness that for all that Tyler said she was extraordinary—it wasn’t enough for him to trust her with his past. Or to even want to see her again.

As she’d already known—as she’d always known . . .

She wasn’t enough.

FIFTEEN

PAIGE FELL ASLEEP.

Tyler knew he should get up—he needed to call Sam. But instead he waited long minutes, simply gazing at the woman beside him.

She lay curled on her side facing him, the sheets somewhere down near her ankles. She had lovely skin, with a smattering of freckles on her shoulders. Her lashes were dark and long against her cheek as she slept, and her lips were the prettiest shade of dark pink—the exact same shade as her nipples.

He was still hard, because these last few minutes had been about Paige's pleasure, not his. She'd been spectacular as she'd come around his fingers, her gorgeous ass pushing hard back against him—he still didn't quite know how he hadn't exploded all over her back. She'd turned, with heavy sated, sleepy eyes to reach for his cock, but he'd shook his head. She needed to sleep.

And fuck it wasn't like he deserved it.

He still didn't fully understand why Paige had trusted him with the pain of her past. He knew she thought it proved something—and it did, he supposed: that people were assholes. It certainly didn't prove any of the rubbish that Paige believed about herself.

Maybe he should've stopped her from telling him, because he'd known

he couldn't reciprocate. But, as he'd told her—he was gutless. He was hungry to learn all he could about Paige, but too fucking weak to tell her the truth about himself.

Earlier, after the euphoria of coming in Paige's mouth, he'd waited for the cascade of guilt. It was exactly the pleasure he didn't deserve, and his actions tonight voided the penance he'd determined years ago.

But the guilt for breaking his vow of celibacy still hadn't arrived. He could only assume that was all the dopamine still bouncing about his body. Or the distraction of the incredible woman laying before him. Right now, regretting what they'd done seemed impossible.

But the guilt would come, eventually.

With a sigh, he made himself climb out of the bed, careful not to disturb Paige. When the mattress shifted under his weight, she made the most adorable little snoring sound as she rolled from her side onto her back. He found his boxer briefs and sweatpants on the floor, then switched off the main overhead light, leaving only the lamp on the dresser. He grabbed his phone from the nightstand before heading into the bathroom, pausing in the doorway to just look at her for a moment.

The bathroom wasn't an ideal place to make this call, but he didn't want to leave the room without Paige knowing. What if she woke up and he wasn't here?

What if she woke up and overheard this call?

She gave another cute, hiccup-y snore that made him smile.

No, she was dead to the world. It'd be fine.

He closed the door with the softest possible *click*, then flipped down the lid of the toilet seat, sat down, and called Sam.

PAIGE WOKE SUDDENLY from an awful dream where she'd been plummeting into a bottomless mine shaft—alone, and without Tyler.

Her heart beating fast, it took her a moment to orient herself.

You're in a motel room in Meeker with Tyler.

She reached blindly across the bed for him, but there was nothing beside her but a still-warm sheet. She sat up, and noticed the thin line of light beneath the bathroom door.

Ah.

She smiled. He was still here.

Then she registered his voice. She was surprised she could hear him so clearly with the door shut, but then she realized it wasn't quite all the way closed, like it hadn't latched properly. She was about to jump out of bed to push it shut the rest of the way, to give him some privacy, when what he was saying made her pause.

“How did Shadow Ops go with my Belarusian theory for why those fuckers were shooting at Paige and me?”

Belarusian theory?

Shadow Ops?

The words were so bizarre she was certain she'd misheard.

A moment later he gave a low chuckle. “Yeah, figured. Let me know if they do find anything, but I'm not holding my breath. Was those damn accents, you know? Just seemed too big a coincidence after being in Minsk last week.”

She struggled to comprehend what she was hearing. Tyler had told her he did property maintenance at a conference center in Missouri for a job—why on earth would he have been in Belarus?

“Nah, Paige is fine. Has no idea.” He laughed again. “She's great, actually.”

What did she have no idea about?

A brief pause. “Shut the fuck up, Tabs,” he said, but his tone was light. “I'm not that stupid. Anyway, it isn't like she's my type.”

It isn't like she's my type.

Suddenly it was like she couldn't breathe.

She slid from the bed, her limbs feeling stiff and not really her own. Her skin was both cold and somehow prickly with sweat as she dragged on her panties and sweatpants, then her bra and T-shirt. She felt like an automaton, like her brain contained nothing but bright light—as if she was driving directly into an oncoming vehicle and was powerless to get out of its way.

She stumbled to the motel room door, her bare feet silent on the well-worn carpet.

She could still hear Tyler talking in that low, deep voice, but she no longer registered what he was saying.

All she heard was the exact same thing, again and again and again in her head:

It isn't like she's my type.

It isn't like she's my type.

She twisted open the door knob and crept outside, a finger to her lips to shush the guarding deputy outside.

Another long-ago memory added to the cacophony in her brain:

Did you really believe a guy like that would like you, Paige? A shrill giggle from Mischa in that bathroom at Arby's. How could you be so stupid? Guys like that don't even know you exist. Just look at yourself!

The door closed behind her, she looked to the deputy.

The guard raised his eyebrows. He'd been eating a protein bar next to the patrol car, a paper cup full of something steaming in his other hand. "You okay Ms. Emmett?"

"Tyler's asleep," she said in a low voice. "I just wanted to . . ." How to explain she'd rather go on vacation with Bryce and Mischa than remain in that room with Tyler Cerra even one more moment? Her gaze dropped to the guard's cup. "I just wanted to grab a coffee from the machine."

"Without shoes?"

She looked down at the chipped pink polish on her toes. Oh.

She shrugged. “I’ll just be a moment.”

The guard frowned, then glanced over to the brightly lit coffee machine near the now closed motel office. It had to be well after midnight. Other than her and the guard—she couldn’t even see the other one—the motel premises were completely deserted.

“I guess that’ll be fine. Deputy Stevens is patrolling the front perimeter, just don’t leave the premises.”

She smiled brightly, then headed determinedly off across the parking lot.

It wasn’t until she stood in front of the vending machine that she remembered she had no money, or credit cards. Not that the coffee was the point, was it? It was about putting space between herself, and the man . . . the man she didn’t know at all.

Goodness me, Paige, how could you be so gullible? We raised you to be smarter than that!

That was the voice of her parents’ disappointment. Heck, variations of that theme was the goddamn soundtrack to her childhood.

She glanced at the deputy near her room, but he was looking down at his phone, not at her. She had no doubt Tyler would be out looking for her any moment, so she didn’t have long to do whatever she wanted to do out here.

Compose herself, maybe?

Work out what the hell was going on?

Like, who the hell was Tyler Cerra? Because there was no doubt, at all, that he was not the man she’d trusted with her life, her body . . . and then with her deepest, most shameful secret.

Tears prickled. Fucking tears.

Her throat was so damn tight. Her heart . . . it hurt.

She turned her back on the vending machine to stare out to the street. The motel’s sign and vacancy light were switched off this late at night, and the single street lamp across the road provided only a dim glow. But she wasn’t really looking at anything at all. She was just trying to work out how she

could've been so stupid.

It isn't like she's my type.

She knew that of all she'd overheard, that part was the least important. The other stuff—about some shadow group and Minsk—shouldn't that be her concern? In the mine, Tyler had said he'd had no idea why gunmen had been shooting at them—but he'd lied. Was Tyler their target all along? Was Tyler the reason she'd almost died?

But then why drive her off the road, first?

She rubbed her fingers against her forehead, trying to think.

Did she need to report what she'd overheard to the deputies? Was Tyler a bad guy?

The idea didn't sit right with her. Tyler *had* saved her life, and he'd contacted the police as soon as possible. Actively interacting with law enforcement didn't feel like the actions of a criminal. She just couldn't believe that Tyler was on the wrong side of the law.

But then, you did believe him when he said you were beautiful. That you had the best ass he'd ever seen.

All bullshit.

It isn't like she's my type.

How could she believe anything he'd told her now? How could she trust her instincts about him when—once again—she'd be shown to have no clue?

What the hell was Shadow Ops?

A noise behind her made her jump.

She looked over her shoulder, to somewhere in the darkness beyond the coffee machine and motel office.

“Hello?” she asked.

A tall figure moved in the shadows.

“It's Deputy Stevens, ma'am,” the figure said, his voice a low rumble.

Paige let out a long breath. Of course.

She shivered in the cool breeze of the night.

“Did you need some cash for the vending machine?” the deputy asked.

The lights from the parking lot didn't quite reach past where Paige stood, but she could make out the broad shoulders on the tall deputy. He stood between the street and the office, and tugged a wallet out of his front pocket.

“Oh, that's really not—” she began.

Deputy Stevens dropped the wallet, and there was a couple of *ping*-ing sounds as coins fell onto the motel's asphalt driveway.

Automatically she rushed to help, crossing the short distance to pick a quarter off the ground.

“Everything okay?” a voice called from behind her.

She looked over her shoulder as she crouched close to the ground, planning to reassure the other deputy, only then realizing she couldn't see him as the motel office blocked her view.

In fact, she couldn't see much at all. She needed to go back.

But before she could stand, something hard smacked into the side of her head.

And then a hand smothered her scream.

SIXTEEN

SAM AND GARRETT—WHO UNLIKE TYLER HAD MANAGED TO ARRIVE IN Falcon without incident—were on their way to Meeker.

That was the only reassuring outcome from his conversation with Sam, as he'd learned Shadow Ops were no closer to working out what the fuck had gone on today on that interstate.

He didn't like that at all.

He wanted those fuckers arrested and Paige safe—like, yesterday.

He reached for the bathroom door handle, and saw that the door was just the tiniest bit ajar. Somehow in his efforts to not wake Paige he'd not closed it properly.

Fuck.

What if she'd heard his conversation? His gut churned at the prospect.

Surely not—she'd been deeply asleep.

He pushed the door open, hoping like hell to be greeted by another one of Paige's adorable sleepy snuffle sounds.

But he was not.

Horror froze him momentarily as he clocked the perfectly empty bedroom.

There was *no reason* for Paige to leave this room—to leave the only place she'd felt safe, with *him*—unless she'd heard him talking to Sam.

Unless what she'd heard had made her no longer feel safe.

He sprinted the short distance to the motel room door and flung it open—cursing its damn well-oiled hinges. *How had he not heard her leave?*

“Where’s Paige?” he demanded, as the door crashed loudly against the motel’s stucco wall.

But the deputy wasn’t standing uselessly beside the patrol car as he had all night. Instead he was halfway across the lot. The deputy paused to look back at Tyler.

“I was just checking in with Stevens,” the man said. “She was grabbing a coffee a second ago. Honestly. She’s been out here three minutes, maybe five, max.”

Tyler could hear the edge of panic in the deputy’s tone.

“Paige!” Tyler shouted, as he ran across the lot. “Paige!”

But he was greeted by nothing but silence.

He rounded the corner of the motel office at full speed, only to stop dead at the body slumped against the motel wall.

A bound and gagged deputy looked up at Tyler groggily. The other deputy came to a stop beside Tyler.

“Oh, fuck . . .” the deputy breathed.

“You think?” Tyler said, fury and utter panic beginning to overwhelm him. Fury at the useless deputies, but mostly at himself.

How had he let this happen? How had he let this happen?

He dropped down to yank off the deputy’s gag.

“Where is she?” he barked, as the man coughed and spluttered. He grabbed the man’s shoulders and shook them hard. “*Where is she?*”

“Black truck . . .” the man managed through swollen lips, as Tyler only half registered his battered and bruised face. “Heading east.”

He jumped to his feet and looked at the standing deputy. “Give me your fire arm.”

The man spluttered and shook his head. “Are you insane?”

“Fine. Keep your Glock, call Barrett for backup, and get some help for your partner while you’re at it. I’ll drive.”

“You’ll *what?*”

Tyler had no patience for this. He grabbed the much smaller officer by his bicep and marched him back to his patrol car.

“Now see here—”

“You got much experience safely extracting kidnapping victims, deputy? Do you have any idea what the fuck to do right now?”

“You have no authority—”

“What I have, is a woman in danger, and some asshole who’d rather have us argue in a parking lot than get in the goddamn car and go find her.” He pushed the man—not so gently—toward the car. “Unlock it. Make the calls. Let me drive.”

“I can’t just—”

“*Please*. C’mon man, please just fucking help me find Paige.” He swallowed, trying to hold himself together. “Once you speak to Barrett, he’ll have you give me your firearm. He’ll authorize me to drive this vehicle. But we don’t have time to waste. *We don’t have time to waste.*”

“Why would—” the man began, but there was a *beep* as he unlocked the car. He narrowed his eyes before tossing his keys to Tyler, as if sizing him up. “I saw you talking to Barrett. Who are you?”

“Later.” Barrett could feed the guy whatever bullshit story he’d been told. Tyler gave zero fucks. All he cared about was hitting the road. Every second that passed took Paige further away from him.

He slid into the driver’s seat, barely waiting for the deputy to close the passenger side door before peeling out of the motel parking lot at high speed.

All he had to go on, was to head east. 100 yards east, or 100 miles?

Who fucking knew?

He fished his cell phone out of the front pocket of his sweatpants and tossed it at the deputy. “Call the last number I called. Put it on speaker.”

Sam answered immediately. “Yo, Cez, what’s up?”

“Paige has been taken,” he said. “How far away are you?”

His hands gripped the steering wheel so damn hard. The streets were deserted at this hour of the morning—no sign of a black truck, no sign of Paige.

“Still another 90 minutes.”

“Local law enforcement onto it?” asked another voice—Garrett. Tyler had worked with the former Navy SEAL a handful of times, and his favored form of communication was indistinct grunts or silent disdain. Except when it was critical to an assignment.

“I’m with one of the deputies now.”

“Hi,” the hapless deputy managed, and was completely ignored.

“He’ll organize roadblocks. My contact’s Barrett at the CBI, hopefully their people have *something* for us by now. But I’m calling mostly just to tell you to get your asses here as fast as you can.”

“Onto it. Will make our own calls, too.”

Sam meant Shadow Ops.

“Gotcha.”

He hung up. “Make your calls,” he grunted in the deputy’s direction.

Deep in that abandoned mine he’d told Paige he had a lot of practice being scared. And he did.

But until now it’d been a selfish fear—for his own damn life. Or a generic fear—for innocent, faceless civilians. And not like this. Not this fear that dug sharp claws into him and wouldn’t let go.

A fear that threatened to overwhelm him, and that made functioning near impossible—when functioning at his best had never, ever been more important.

A fear, he realized, that gripped his heart.

PAIGE HAD KICKED and scratched with all her might, screaming her lungs out against the painful band of fingers across her lips. But her efforts appeared not to impede the man at all, as he dragged and carried her a short distance down the road and around the corner. Her screams simply echoed uselessly in her own skull, her kidnapper's hand muffling every sound.

At a black truck he'd stopped to open the rear passenger door, but even holding her with one hand, he was far too strong for her to wriggle free. He was even taller and broader than Tyler, his muscles popping almost comically through the tight fabric of his all-black clothing.

He'd shoved fabric into her mouth the moment he'd removed his hand, gagging her before she could draw a full breath to scream. Then she was tossed into the back seat of the truck without any care, and her head smacked against the armrest on the far door, temporarily leaving her stunned. Her wrists were grabbed roughly and pulled tight behind her back, and a second later plastic cut into her skin.

She blinked away stars as the zip ties were pulled tight, before her legs were bundled roughly into the footwell, and the door slammed behind her. As the engine roared to life and the car jerked forward, the rest of her body fell off the seat, her chest and shoulders landing awkwardly on something uncomfortable.

She blinked back tears of shock and pain, her head pounding and an object rectangular and unyielding bruising her collarbone.

It had been no time at all since she'd stepped behind the motel office. A minute, not even. She'd briefly seen a man-sized shape on the ground in the darkness as she struggled—Deputy Stevens, she assumed. How long would it take for the other deputy who'd called out to come looking for her? He couldn't be far behind them. Neither would Tyler.

Would he come after her?

Yes. She was certain of it. Despite what she'd overheard him say. Maybe only because he was a soldier who would always be driven to protect the

vulnerable, and not because it was her, specifically. But it didn't matter—he would do everything in his power to find her, and she needed that glimmer of hope right now.

Because as reality began to sink in that she was gagged and bound in the back seat of a frighteningly familiar black truck, panic began to consume her. No mine was going to open beneath her feet here to save her tonight. No passing stranger was going to prove to be a highly skilled Delta Force operator. She was alone, and she had no goddamn idea what to do.

The loud ring of a cell phone burst through the car's speakers.

"What?" the driver asked sullenly moments later.

"Did you get the woman?"

It was the same heavy European accent from this morning. It made her shiver.

"I know what I'm doing."

His accent was American.

There was a burst of laughter. "We've seen no evidence of that."

The American snorted. "Fuck off. You had one job, and you took it too damn far. I'm cleaning up your mess."

"If you'd taken our advice, there'd *be* no mess."

"Maybe, but there also wouldn't be 30 million dollars up for grabs."

She gasped around the gag. *Thirty million dollars?* What did she have to do with that type of money?

"If you fuck this up, there will be consequences." There was a cold finality now to the voice. "We always take our own advice."

"Don't you *dare* threaten me—"

But the call had ended.

"*Fuck!*" the man yelled, smacking his hands against the steering wheel.

Paige noticed that the car's interior was no longer occasionally lit by street lights, and they'd picked up speed. Were they back on the interstate?

She wiggled in the footwell, trying to get onto her knees so she could

attempt to scramble back onto the seat. She had no plan what she'd do once she got there, but surely being able to see out the window was useful?

God, she had no idea, but she needed an immediate plan at least. She couldn't just lay here passively.

She levered herself upward, and realized the object she'd landed on was her own carry-on suitcase. Last time she'd seen it had been in the trunk of her car.

“Paige,” the man said suddenly, “I’m going to need you take a seat. Then I’m going to pull over, and put on your seatbelt. It’s not safe having you bounce about back there.”

Paige. He knew her name.

And weirdly, he was concerned for her safety. *Why would a man who wants her dead want her to wear a seatbelt?*

The truck pulled over. She hadn't made much progress getting out of the footwell, and the man gave a long sigh of disappointment after he opened the door, then grabbed her without ceremony beneath each armpit, and hauled her onto the seat. The moment she was upright, she kicked him. Her bare feet glanced off his jean-clad thighs, so she aimed higher—between his legs, and at his gut. One blow landed true, so as he groaned and staggered back she threw herself at the narrow gap created between his body at the car, falling hard onto dirt and gravel. But she couldn't even get to her feet before the man grabbed her around the waist.

He lifted her effortlessly, then roughly shoved her back into the car. When she tried to kick him again, he jabbed her hard in the side with his fist.

She doubled over with pain as he clicked on her seat belt. Then he grabbed her chin and forced her up, pressing her skull hard against the head rest. His fingers were painfully firm against her skin as he brought his face down close to hers.

In a different context, he would be a handsome man—with thick dark hair and golden tanned skin. But with his jaw clenched and blood-shot eyes

narrowed, he was terrifying.

“I’m the only one who doesn’t want to kill you,” he hissed. A vein at his temple beat furiously. “If you want to live, Paige Emmett, no more of that shit. Got it? You do what I need you to do, and I won’t hurt you.”

What do you mean? she tried to ask, all mumbled against the gag.

He rolled his eyes before hooking his fingers into the gag and tugging it over her head. It twisted and tugged painfully in her hair.

“No one’s going to hear you scream out here.”

She screamed anyway, and was rewarded with another sharp jab to her gut.

She groaned and gasped for air.

“I don’t have time for this shit,” he muttered to himself, “it wasn’t supposed to be so fucking hard.” Then he slammed the door shut, and climbed back into the driver’s seat.

Once the truck was moving, he spoke again. “You can’t open those doors from the inside, okay? So don’t get any stupid ideas about flinging yourself onto the interstate.” He caught her gaze briefly in the rear vision mirror. “Also, if you reckon you can somehow overpower me while I’m driving, you’re an idiot. Don’t try it. You might kill us both, and I’d definitely have to kill you. Understood?”

She made no sound or movement of acknowledgement, but after her last attempt to escape, she agreed with the man that brute force wasn’t going to work. She needed another plan.

“How do you know my name?”

He chuckled. “Oh, I know *everything* about you. More than I ever wanted to know, trust me. Those Russians like to know way too much useless shit.”

“Why?”

That was the big question, wasn’t it? Why had any of this happened?

“I mean, did I need to know you had a college GPA of 3.4? Who fucking cares?”

She sucked in a breath.

“And the dossier on your boring-as-fuck parents. Address, jobs, photos. Your dad’s barber is doing him dirty with that lame-ass cut, by the way.”

“What have you done to my parents!” she demanded, fear draining the blood from her face.

He laughed, his gave never leaving the asphalt ahead of them. “Nothing. And nothing will happen to them, as long as you do what I say.”

“Which is?”

“Have a friendly chat with a little old lady I know.”

His tone suggested his request was perfectly reasonable. But for the first time since she’d seen this very truck in her rear vision mirror, she had the sense of something clicking into place.

“Is this little old lady in possession of 30 million dollars?”

The man laughed. “Not for much longer.”

So this was a scam—a scam on a scale far, far outside her experience. Still . . .

“What do I have to do with any of it?”

“You need to reassure the very lovely Nancy that the man she’s fallen in love with online—Aleksandr Zolotov—is not only real, but that he is a spectacularly successful Russian businessman.”

Oh god, poor Nancy.

“So she will willingly hand over 30 million dollars,” she said flatly.

“Not quite. So she will attend her scheduled appointment—” he turned his head to check the time on the car’s dash: 2:57am. “—*this* morning, with a notary to transfer ownership of her 30-million-dollar ranch.”

Paige felt sick. “Why would I help you with that?”

“Because you like being alive? Because you like your parents being alive?”

She closed her eyes.

“And,” the man continued, “if you want to remain alive after all this, you

will forget it ever happened, got it? I'll dump you somewhere random after your little chat, and you'll say you were bound and gagged the whole time. Sadly you can't identify your kidnapper."

Paige looked out to the moon-lit landscape as they flew along the interstate.

"If you needed me to convince this woman to trust this Russian scammer, why did you drive me off the road this morning? If I were dead I'm no use to you."

"I didn't drive you off that road. The Russians left me in Guneo, because they always think they know better than me, when in reality *none* of this would've happened without me . . ." He paused and rolled his shoulders back. "I never wanted you dead. I don't want anyone dead. I'm not that type of person."

Just the type who would kidnap, manhandle and punch a woman, and scam another innocent woman for tens of millions of dollars.

His gaze was back in the mirror, and in the darkness he surely couldn't read her expression—but it seemed to irritate him, regardless. "Look, lady, I know I'm not perfect, okay? I'm no angel, but I draw a hard line. These Russian dudes, they're different. The two you met—"

He said it like she'd been introduced to the gunmen at a dinner party.

"—they're the muscle, I guess. The head honcho didn't come for the trip, and these two were just supposed to be actors, for fuck sake. Aleksandr's lawyer and a business associate, some shit like that. Then Nancy tells me she'd bumped into goddamn Casey Taberner at Walgreens on Sunday afternoon, and Nancy—who is a fucking recluse—actually talks to her. That Casey bitch could talk the hinges off a gate, and she mentions some new program at the library for Falcon County seniors, gives Nancy a flyer, and guess what?"

"My cybersecurity for seniors workshop is on it."

"Bingo! And how wonderful, it's the very next day! Only a day *before*

her notary appointment.”

“And if I didn’t arrive in Falcon, there’d be no workshop.”

He sighed. “But you didn’t make it easy for us. Had to *find* you, first. You weren’t at the motel you’d booked in Guneo.”

No, she’d changed her mind a few days earlier and splurged on the cottage she’d stayed at instead.

“I just wanted to tamper with your car so it wouldn’t start. Or just the classic slash your tires thing. But when we couldn’t find you, that wasn’t an option. Then we saw you at the gas station, and the Russians had their new plan.”

“Drive me off the highway.”

“Yeah. I didn’t like it, too dangerous. I didn’t want you hurt.”

He kept stressing that point, while his threat to murder her should she disobey him—now, or in the future—was still very much in the front of her mind.

She swallowed. “How did Tyler get dragged into this?”

The man flexed his fingers on the steering wheel. “He was a witness. They don’t like witnesses.”

Yet they’d agreed to let her go after she did what they wanted?

That felt . . . unlikely.

They’d been shooting to kill this morning. It felt naïve to believe that had changed.

“Where are the Russians right now?”

“At the ranch. I’ve taken control of the situation.”

That wasn’t how it sounded in that phone call. It’d sounded to her like the Russians felt *they* were calling the shots.

She needed to clarify something. “Does this have anything to do with human trafficking in Belarus?”

“What? No. The fuck?”

“It’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head, searching for a way to explain.

“I read an article about it the other day.”

“You do realize Russia and Belarus are different countries?” he scoffed.

She shrugged, not caring what he thought about her geographical knowledge—he’d answered her question. She still didn’t understand Tyler’s conversation in the bathroom, but it had nothing to do with today’s events. He was definitely the person dragged into this nightmare, not her. He was the innocent bystander.

Well, so was she—innocent, that was. But she wasn’t a bystander. She was the target. Criminals knew where she lived, about her family, about her life.

She shivered.

And things still didn’t add up.

“The workshop didn’t happen,” she said. “Your plan, worked, really. You stopped me getting to Falcon, and Nancy never got to learn about cybersecurity. Why do you still need me?”

“Fucking Casey Taberner—*again*. She was a pain in the ass in high school, so damn *superior*. Thinks she knows everything. She got talking to Nancy at the library. Now, Nancy doesn’t tell anyone, *anything*. Ever. And she told Casey shit, too. But Casey—she’s always talking. And so while they were waiting, she shared a story about a cousin of hers who got scammed and lost a big chunk of her life savings.” The man laughed. “People are so stupid. If you’re that stupid, you deserve what you get.” His gaze flicked to the mirror again. “You must talk to all types of idiots in your job. Don’t know how you stand it.”

Paige gritted her teeth.

“Anyway, she calls me a few hours ago having second thoughts. Asked me if she should wait until she’d spoken to someone like you before she did the transfer. Now, I’m real good at thinking on my feet, so I told her I’d ask Casey if you’d do like a one-on-one consult for her. No one knows why you didn’t make it to Falcon, the cops gave some cover story about your car

breaking down out of cell service. Thankfully the fly-fishermen of Guneo are more chatty, so it was super easy for me to track you to Meeker—I didn't have to even ask anyone, it was all the buzz at The Mercantile."

The first car they'd seen this entire drive passed them on the interstate, heading back the direction they'd come.

"We're heading to a cabin just out of Falcon. Your story is you've got an early morning flight, but you've generously agreed to squeeze Nancy in before then, via Zoom. I've got your bag in the back so you can get changed and look less . . ."

. . . *kidnapped?*

"Got it?"

She nodded. "I guess."

"No," he barked, making her jump. "You need to be *confident*, Paige. You need to be *assured* and *convincing*."

"Well," she said, "in that case I need to know more."

That was true—the more she knew, the more convincing she *would* be. But she also wanted to know more about this asshole who'd kidnapped her. For all that his actions contradicted his insistence he wasn't as violent as the Russians—the more he spoke to her, the more she agreed that he *was* different from them. He wasn't a good guy, that much was clear. But there was an edge of panic to him that reminded her of how she was when she was running late for something important. Like a dawning realization that everything had gotten away from him.

Was he in over his head with these Russians? Could he be convinced to change course?

"What's your name?" she asked.

He coughed. "Why the hell would I tell you that?"

"Because Nancy would expect me to know it given you've supposedly organized this appointment with me?"

"She won't know I'm there," he said.

“What if she mentions your name?”

He rolled his massive shoulders. “Then you’ll learn something. But it kinda feels like Kidnapping 101 to *not* tell you my damn name, Paige.”

“No problem,” she said briskly. “Why does Nancy trust you?”

He glared at her through the rear vision mirror. “She just does. If you think you’re being clever trying to gather info to tell the cops, maybe think about what I said before. You know—that if you don’t forget *all* of this, then —”

“But I could just *ask* Nancy about you in our call,” she interrupted. “And besides, when she realizes she’s been scammed and reports this to the police, it’ll all come out anyway. Or will Nancy also be threatened not to tell anyone?”

“Right now my focus is getting Nancy to sign that quit claim deed, that’s it.”

“But I’m just confused about how this will work. I assume the Russian muscle disappears back home after this, but what are you going to do? Surely Nancy will realize you were part of the scam.”

“She won’t, if you do a good job when you talk to her.” He shrugged. “Aleksandr will meet his unfortunate demise shortly after the transfer. Nancy will be devastated, and we’ll spin some shit that her dear Aleksandr was the one scammed.”

“But she’ll still go to the police in that case. We’re talking 30 million dollars here; the FBI are going to get involved for sure.”

She actually didn’t know that, but it seemed to have the desired effect. The man swallowed several times.

“I have this under control,” he said. “I planned *everything*, you understand? It’s *brilliant* what I’ve done, can’t you see that?”

She didn’t say anything, but did raise her eyebrows.

She held her breath—had she taken it too far?

“This was just a normal, everyday catfishing scam until I got wind of it,”

he said, his tone boastful. “Nancy was having computer issues so I offered to help, and I saw an email from Aleksandr on her desktop. It was obvious—fucking *obvious*—it was a scam. But the old duck has buckets of money, so I didn’t say a thing. Instead, I memorized Aleksandr’s email address, and got in touch. Took a while to work each other out—they thought I was an undercover cop or something—but we came to an understanding. I let them know exactly how lucrative an opportunity they had with Nancy, and started to work with them. I fed them info, while also reassuring Nancy that Aleksandr was definitely genuine. It was all so perfect.”

Paige’s heart hurt for Nancy.

“Do you realize how many months I’ve spent to get Nancy to the point of signing over her late husband’s ranch to a Russian businessman who doesn’t exist? Only for you and Casey to swan in and fuck it up?”

She ignored his question. “What’s the split with the Russians when you—I presume—sell the ranch?”

“50/50, of course,” he said.

“And you trust them to do that? Whose name will be on that deed—yours?”

“Of course not. Even Nancy isn’t lovesick enough not to notice that. It’s one of—” he lifted his hands from the steering wheel to make brief air quotes “—‘Aleksandr’s businesses’ that will own the ranch.”

“Cool. So why would they give you any of it?”

“Because that’s our agreement.”

Paige gave a snort of laughter.

“Do *not* laugh at me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But my job is literally teaching people not to trust scammers.”

“They’ve already sent me money for my expenses, gave me the cash to buy this truck . . .”

That sounded like a cheap exchange for a 30-million-dollar windfall to

Paige.

And she suspected, at least at some level, her kidnapper knew it too.

“Shut up,” he said, although she hadn’t said anything.

They drove in silence for the next fifty miles.

SEVENTEEN

WITH LITERALLY NOTHING TO GO ON, TYLER BEGAN A METHODICAL SEARCH of the streets of Meeker. At this time of the morning, even the gas stations on either edge of town were shut, so there wasn't anyone he could even ask for quick access to security camera footage. The whole town appeared fast asleep.

The deputy—Deputy Sharp, it turned out—did a serviceable job contacting Barrett and kicking off the process of organizing road blocks. But by the time Sharp reached Barrett, and then Barrett spoke to his contacts at the Sheriff's department—almost an hour had passed. Even if you considered only the three interstates that radiated from Meeker, there was enormous scope for where Paige could be. And that was before you even thought about the backroads that riddled the mountains. Roadblocks were in the process of being set up outside Meeker, so if Paige *was* here she couldn't leave—but without something more to go on, other roadblocks just weren't possible. Logically, Tyler understood this. He also understood that both the CBI and Shadow Ops were working to get access to surveillance footage from surrounding local businesses.

But the way he felt right now wasn't about logic. He couldn't logic himself out of how fucking scared he was. His gut churned with desperate worry. And his gut also told him that Paige wasn't here. And until they had

even a hint of which direction she'd been taken, there was very little anyone could do. There was a state-wide alert to all law enforcement vehicles for the black truck—which may or may not have the license plate it'd had earlier today, but nothing had come in yet. A hell of a lot of people were trying to find Paige, yet Tyler had never felt more useless.

His phone rang.

“Want me to answer it?” Sharp asked.

Tyler simply pulled over and answered it himself, pressing the phone hard to his ear.

“Black truck with a black grill, right?” Sam said, not bothering with a greeting.

“You've found her?” His voice cracked, and he didn't give a shit.

“Maybe. We just passed a truck moving at speed on the I-70, not far out of Rifle. Big dude is driving, couldn't see much else. Doesn't have the license plate you gave me, but Garrett has had Shadow Ops look it up, and those plates were reported stolen a few weeks back.”

It's her.

“We've turned around, and are following with our headlights off. Given the number of cars driven off roads today, I'd suggest you get a road block sorted, rather than us trying anything tricky to get him to stop. We'll keep eyes on the vehicle.”

A minute later Tyler was flooring it down the interstate as Sharp made the necessary phone calls beside him.

I'll be there soon, Paige.

Please be okay.

THE TRUCK EXITED the interstate onto a narrow, winding road.

To get here they'd driven through a couple of blink-and-you-miss it towns, and Paige knew they couldn't be far out of Falcon. Her gut churned as

she struggled with what on earth she was going to do once she arrived at the cottage. It was just before 5am right now—surely she wasn't meeting with Nancy straight away? Did that give her time to work out how to escape?

A few miles off the highway they turned onto a dirt road. With her hands behind her back, she was jolted awkwardly as the truck navigated dips and rises in the road. It was still dark, but the headlights illuminated dense woodland surrounding them. A few minutes later they came to a stop in front of a small single-level wooden cabin, setting off a sensor light on the porch. The man reached across the truck to pop open the glove box compartment and grab something inside. It was only as he straightened his body that she realized it was a gun.

She gasped, and he turned to look at her between the front seats.

He waved the handgun casually. “As I said, nothing will happen to you—if—you do what I say. But if you don't . . . ” He deliberately pointed the gun at her chest. “Well, then . . . ”

She held her breath as she stared at the barrel of the gun.

She'd talked to him almost confidently earlier, sensing something in this man that could be reasoned with. Maybe.

Or maybe that had just been blind hope—or blind stupidity. As the reality of having a lethal weapon aimed at her was horrifying. In this moment, she had no trouble imagining this man squeezing the trigger.

He chuckled and dropped the weapon back to his side, and she felt like she could breathe again.

“As long as you're not stupid, you're safe,” he said, in an oddly reassuring tone. “But stupid people deserve what they get. Understand?”

Stupid people deserve what they get.

Is that how he justified stealing from people? Casting the victim as complicit in the scam?

He jumped out of the truck, then dragged her out of the back seat before prodding her in the small of her back with his gun to herd her along a

footpath and up the porch. The cobblestone path dug into her bare feet. He carried her suitcase in one hand, then dropped it carelessly while he unlocked the cabin door.

She studied him, weighing up her options. With his focus on unlocking the cabin, he held the gun loosely in one hand. Could she kick the gun out of his hands?

And then what? With her wrists tied she couldn't grab it.

But—he would have to untie her for the Zoom call with Nancy. Or even before that—when she changed her clothing. Maybe that would be her chance?

Door open, he made her walk ahead of him into the tiny cabin. Inside was an open space with a couple of cozy couches and a plush, colorful rug on the hardwood floor. A small kitchen was on the opposite side of the room, and on the counter a laptop was already set up, clearly waiting for her. Beyond that was a narrow hallway, presumably leading to the bedrooms.

“Sit,” he said, gesturing with the gun at a bar stool in front of the laptop.

He grabbed something from the back pocket of his jeans—another cable tie. Then he knelt down in front of her and grabbed her ankles.

“You don't have to do that,” she said quickly. If her ankles were tied what chance did she have of escaping?

He looked up at her and raised his eyebrows. “Do you think I'm fucking stupid?”

She kicked him. It was instinctive—a need not to be restrained by this brute of a man, and not thought through at all. After all, her wrists were still tied, what was she going to achieve?

She heard a crunch before he shouted in pain and blood spurted from his nose.

Had she broken his nose?

She had the briefest moment of satisfaction before he grabbed her leg and yanked her to the ground. With her hands tied she had no chance to soften her

fall, and she hit the ground hard, adding more bruises to the many—many—she'd already gathered in the past 24 hours. She groaned in pain.

The next thing she knew she was being rolled onto her stomach, and there was a heavy weight at her butt—he'd straddled her to hold her still while he tied her ankles.

She struggled, but it was half-hearted. She wasn't getting away right now.

Maybe not at all, now that she'd fucked up any chance she'd had of him believing he could trust her.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She didn't know what to do.

She wanted to live.

She didn't want Nancy to lose her ranch.

She didn't want to live in fear for her safety—and her parents' safety—for the rest of her life.

What do I do? What do I do?

Were the police already on their way? Was Tyler?

The man grabbed her and tugged her back onto the seat.

He leaned in close. Blood still dripped from his nose, and when he spoke there was blood coating his teeth.

Even if it wasn't the smartest strategic decision to kick him, she was glad she'd somehow landed such an effective blow. *That one's for you, Nancy.*

“Do *not* try that again, lady,” the man hissed. “I don't have time for this shit. *We* do not have time for this shit. If you fuck this up for us, it's not just me pissed with you, you got that? Those Russians will be pissed with *us*. That will not be good for you.”

Or for him. That was clear.

If you fuck this up, there will be consequences. That's what the Russians had told him.

With him this close, she knew his aim was to scare her. To intimidate her even more. But this close, she saw something in his gaze—his bloodshot eyes

were an icy blue—that looked not only like panic—but also like doubt.

“It’s not too late, you know,” she said quietly. “If you call the police, tell them all you know, I’m sure you could cut some deal—”

He threw back his head and laughed.

“Oh my god, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Let’s just say I’m quite familiar with the local law enforcement officers of Falcon County. The last thing they want is to give Clay Walker a fucking good deal.”

He laughed again, clearly unaware he’d just told her his name.

“But my guess,” she said—and hell, it *was* a guess, “is that you’ve not been involved in anything of this level of . . . criminality before, right? You said you were different from the Russians. That you didn’t agree with driving me off the road, or killing me. Or killing Tyler. You aren’t that kind of man.”

Something flickered in his gaze. She’d hit home there. This man was a criminal—a con man, she guessed—but as he’d told her, he had his own code.

“You’re doing all of this for these Russian scammers, but they’re not like you. They’re not. And I think they’re going to steal all the money. All thirty million dollars. I think you’re going to do all of this for them, and you’re going to end up with nothing—”

He started laughing. A big belly laugh, while he shook his head and straightened to his full height.

Still laughing he shoved his gun in the back of his jeans, grabbed her suitcase, chucked it onto one of the sofas and unzipped it. He pulled out a blazer—a pale pink one, and her bag of cosmetics, before returning to the kitchen counter.

He sobered as he dumped her stuff in front of her.

“You don’t know anything about me, Paige,” he said, not looking at her. “Nothing at all. Keep your stupid fucking theories to yourself, and instead focus on putting your acting skills to the test when you meet with Nancy in . . . ” He glanced at the time on the wall oven. “ . . . fifteen minutes. I’m

going to untie your wrists. If you try anything, it'll play out exactly like all your other pathetic efforts to escape—I'll be forced to hit you, and you'll still be here." He swallowed. "Put on your blazer, slap on some makeup. Work out what you're going to say. And honey—it'd better be good." He caught her gaze again. "You're not the first woman who thought I was a better man than I am." His laugh this time was hollow. "But don't think for a second I care about you, or your life, more than I care about my cut of thirty million dollars. You're not going to talk me out of this. This is happening. You need to accept it."

He cut off the cable ties at her wrists, deliberately pressing the barrel of his gun against her spine as he did so.

Then he stood on the opposite side of the granite countertop, the gun trained on her.

Now there was no panic or doubt in his gaze. Only cold, hard, unbending determination.

She put on her blazer.

She did her hair and makeup with shaky hands.

Then she followed Clay's instructions to log into the Zoom call.

A stern looking woman with slate grey hair stared at her from the other side of the screen.

She still didn't know what to do.

EIGHTEEN

“THE FUCKER’S EXITED THE I-70 A COUPLE OF MILES BEFORE THE roadblock.”

Deputy Sharp had answered Tyler’s phone, and Sam’s voice was loud through the speaker.

Tyler gripped his steering wheel hard. They were still maybe twenty miles behind Sam and Garrett. “No officers were set up at the potential exit routes?”

“They were on their way.” Sam said flatly. “But we’re still on his tail. Our perp seems to have no idea we’re here, but that will get more difficult when the sun rises. Will keep you updated.”

He hung up.

Sharp didn’t say anything. Tyler still didn’t know who Barrett had told him he was, but the deputy seemed to respect whoever he was supposed to be. The deputy had also worked out that this drive—at a speed significantly above the limit—was not the time for small talk. Tyler appreciated that.

Ten minutes later Sam called again.

“Okay, our perp has entered what appears to be a private residence, so we’ve pulled over a few hundred yards ahead of the property. Walker is about to send you the co-ordinates, and we’re going to see what info we can get about this place—who the owner is, satellite images, house plans etc. I’m

reluctant to go in without intel, given these assholes have a penchant for shooting at people. How far away are you?”

“Less than ten minutes.”

“Gotcha. We’ll have a plan ready to go when you get here.”

Tyler and Sharp drove in silence for a minute or two after Sam ended the call.

Sharp cleared his throat. “Should I source the appropriate approvals for this pending plan to enter a private property that may or may not hold Ms. Emmett?”

“She’s there,” Tyler said firmly. He couldn’t allow himself to consider the possibility she wasn’t. “And yes. Sure. Get the warrant, whatever you need.”

He didn’t need whatever authority Sharp was getting.

All he needed was Paige.

PAIGE STALLED for easily fifteen minutes while Nancy Sandover filled her in on her history with the fictional Aleksandr. Nancy was slow to get started, initially wanting to hear Paige’s investigative credentials and experience in identifying scams, before answering Paige’s own questions briefly in a clipped impatient tone. But, once she’d settled into telling the story of Nancy and Aleksandr, she began to relax. Her stern expression softened, and a warmth came to her cheeks.

It was so damn unfair that the man that made Nancy glow like that, wasn’t real.

As Nancy spoke, Clay remained in the small kitchen on the other side of the laptop. His nose had stopped bleeding, and he’d dropped the gun to rest against his thigh. He stood somewhat relaxed, with a hip propped against a cabinet. But his gaze didn’t waver from her, and she felt the pressure of his attention with every word she said. It was hard to control her facial

expressions too, as she fought not to react to the romantic anecdotes that flowed from Nancy, knowing that every single one of them was a lie.

But *should* she be controlling her expressions? *Should* she be lying to Nancy?

This all felt so wrong.

Her gaze continuously flicked from the screen to the gun in Clay's hand as Nancy spoke. Would Clay really shoot her if she told Nancy the truth?

She didn't know.

She did know if she ruined this for the Russians, that there would be consequences. Was she signing both her and Clay's death warrant if she told the truth?

But how could she allow herself to be complicit in such an awful, heartbreaking scam?

"Dear Clay has been such a support to me," Nancy said, and Paige's attention re-focused entirely on the woman in front of her. Nancy was sitting at a desk in a beautiful traditional study, with a mahogany bookcase covering the wall behind her, filled with leather-bound books.

"Clay?" Paige prompted. "The man who organized this meeting through Casey Taberner?"

"Yes. He lives in the apartment in my old barn and looks after my late husband Brian's last remaining horses for me. Those horses are well into their twenties but Clay has them looking magnificent. It's such a joy to look out my window and see them so happy."

Paige's gaze darted to Clay. He gave nothing away, but his jaw was tense.

"It was my idea to try online dating. It sounds silly, but Brian came to me in a dream and told me it was time to move on, so I thought I'd find a pen pal or something. I met Aleksandr on a dating site for seniors. I had a few issues with the site, so we started emailing. Then I had issues with my email, and that's when Clay learned about him. He was so encouraging, when I was sure he'd laugh at me." She chuckled. "A woman of my age looking for love . . ."

She shook her head. “I never would’ve thought I’d find it.” She tucked a silver strand behind her ear. “Clay helped me with my email, and asked all about Aleksandr. He encouraged me to talk to him on the phone, you know—really get to know him. I don’t think I would’ve been that brave without Clay. The whole thing might have fizzled out.”

Paige chewed on her bottom lip.

“So, you *have* spoken to Aleksandr?”

“Oh, many times. He has such a beautiful accent. I have issues with insomnia, yet he’ll talk to me for hours until I fall asleep.” She sighed. “He’s a wonderful listener, and so smart, too.”

“But you haven’t met face to face?”

She shook her head. “No. I realize that’s unusual, but it’s not through lack of trying. Several times we’ve tried to meet like this—” she gestured at Paige through the screen, “—through the computer, but even with Clay helping me there is some issue with a Russian firewall or . . . VPN, I think it’s called? And we just can’t make it work.”

How convenient.

“Has he ever asked you for money?”

“No, *never*,” Nancy said.

This was unusual. Usually the catfishing playbook had an initial ask for a small amount of cash reasonably early in the ‘relationship.’

“It’s actually been the opposite,” Nancy continued. She held up her right hand. A ring sparkled with diamonds surrounding a dark green stone. “Aleksandr bought me this for my birthday. It’s a Russian alexandrite and diamond ring. I’d never heard of this gemstone before, but it changes from an emerald green in daylight to a reddish-purple at night. Of course its name reminds me of my dear Aleks, but it is so special and beautiful. I took it to my jeweler in Vail to have it valued so it could be insured, so I can assure you it’s real. \$20,000 worth of real.”

The woman’s tone had become defensive.

“It’s gorgeous,” Paige said, because it was. And it was clearly a tiny investment for an impending massive return.

“He has sent me other gifts too—flowers, chocolates. A meal service once when I was unwell. He’s very generous.”

“It does sound that way,” Paige said. “Have you sent him any gifts?”

She shook her head. “No. I’ve wanted to, but he refuses. He is so wealthy, he has everything he needs.”

“Okay.” Paige looked down. Her hands rested on her lap, and they shook just a little. A mixture of fear and fury. “Why did you want to meet with me today? What’s been concerning you?”

Nancy looked away from the screen for a long moment, then sighed. “My favorite of Brian’s horses is a sorrel mare named Sugar. I’m just watching her graze right now. I ask Clay to keep them close to the house, so I can always see them, but Sugar always grazes closest to me.” She turned back to face Paige. “This ranch is just over 150 acres. I don’t need all this space any more, it’s become a burden. I used to walk the trails near the house, but my arthritis is making that more difficult. And this house has too many stairs. It’s time for me to think about downsizing. Aleks and I have been discussing my options, and I would like him to take over for me. He has ideas to leverage the property so I can purchase a small cottage a little closer to town.”

“What do you mean by ‘take over for me’?” Paige asked.

Clay pushed himself away from the kitchen cabinets, frowning.

“Sign over the property deed. I don’t want the ranch sold just yet, but if the property’s in Aleks’ name, he can easily manage my investments.”

This was all such scammy bullshit.

“Was that your only option?”

Clay walked over to the bench and tapped the barrel of his gun against the stone counter. It was clearly a warning.

“It’s complicated by Russian laws and citizenship issues,” Nancy said lightly. “Aleks’ lawyer flew here especially to explain it all to me.”

And then drove me off the interstate before shooting at me and Tyler.

“Did you speak to your own lawyer?”

“Well, no. Do you think I should?”

“Yes, definitely—”

Clay slammed the laptop screen closed.

“What the *fuck*, Paige!” he shouted.

She had her head in her hands, her whole body shaking now. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just couldn’t . . . I couldn’t lie to her . . . I couldn’t do that to her . . .”

“Is it more important to you to be on your fucking moral high horse than to be—I don’t know—*breathing*? Don’t you understand what’s going to happen to us now? What they’re going to do to us?”

“It’s not too late,” she said, gripping the edge of the countertop. “We can do what I said, call the police. It’s not too late, Clay. It’s not—”

The door at the rear of the kitchen flung open suddenly, banging hard against the wall.

For a split-second hope bubbled up—was it Tyler? The police? Was she safe?

No.

No, she most definitely wasn’t safe.

A man dressed in black stood in the hallway. He had dark blond hair, pale skin, and a gun in one hand.

“*Cyka blyat* Clay, I’d say it’s too late,” the man said in a heavy Russian accent. “Far, far too late for that.”

TYLER AND DEPUTY SHARP pulled over several hundred yards before the property where Paige was being held. They’d learned from Garrett that the property was a three-acre lot with a cabin and hot tub used for holiday rentals. It was currently vacant, so there was no booking to help inform them

with who they were dealing with. The lot was mostly uncleared woodland with the cabin well off the road—still, a deputy’s cruiser was easy to spot, and he didn’t want to give these assholes any warning the Shadow Team was approaching.

They met Garrett and Sam in the deep shadows of a towering spruce at the side of the road. The sunrise wasn’t far away, but for now they had the benefit of darkness to assist their approach to the cabin. Garrett showed them satellite images of the property. These weren’t live images—that wasn’t something even Shadow Ops had quick access too—but it helped them determine a plan to surround the small cottage. Photos from the Airbnb listing showed them the access points to the building.

They didn’t know if there was anyone at the property other than the kidnapper and Paige, but given there’d been three guys involved this morning, Tyler thought it was highly likely they were dealing with at least three armed men.

Deputy Sharp’s role was to organize backup and remain outside the property as a look out—Sam gave him an earpiece so they were all sharing the same comms. Then Sam handed Tyler jeans, boots, a camo-print tactical vest, ear piece, NVGs and a firearm, and minutes later they were ready to fan out and begin their slow, careful approach to the house. Once they had eyes on the situation, they’d determine how to best enter and extract Paige—but for now they just needed to get close to her.

Tyler pulled his night vision goggles down over his eyes.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Please be okay, Paige.

CLAY RAISED his gun at the Russian.

“That’d be stupid even for you,” the gunman said, his words low and calm. “You’re a lousy shot, even at close range, so you’ll miss, then I’ll need

to shoot you—it'll be such a mess. I don't want to shoot you.”

“You don't?” Clay kept his arm raised.

“No. These last few days I was ordered to follow your directions, let you think you were in charge, but we're done with that. You fucked up.”

“It isn't my fault there was a goddamn cyberbullshit course at the library the day before we got this done.”

He dropped his gun to his hip.

No, Clay . . .

“But you wasted time with this *solution*.” He glanced at Paige with contempt. “Why did you think some woman you kidnapped could be trusted? No. My plan was always superior.” He sighed. “And you know I need you for it. So no, I'm not going to shoot you. And if you shoot me, well—all of this was for nothing. All our work . . .”

“All *my* work.”

The Russian's gaze flicked to the ceiling. “Fine. All your work. You really want to throw that away? All that money?”

Clay raised his chin. “I'm still getting my cut?”

The gunmen walked across the room, clapping his hands facetiously in Paige's direction.

“Bravo, you *are* good at your job, aren't you? Even a con-man is questioning shit with you around.” The man stood a few meters in front of her, but his gaze lifted to Clay. “You'll get your cut. We need you here on the ground. Make sure your Nancy doesn't cause us any issues.”

“I don't know, man,” Clay said. “Nancy isn't a pushover. I don't know if she'll stay quiet once she's told Aleksandr doesn't exist—”

The gunman laughed. “She's 81 years old. She's not doing anything.”

“But there's still time to convince her to sign without threatening her. Get our guy who plays Aleks on the phone, get him to talk her around. It's better if she believes, then we go with our original plan for Aleksandr's untimely death . . .”

“No. Everything is set up for her to sign *today*. We’ve got the buyer ready to go. We can’t risk everything just because you don’t want her to feel bad. She’s going to find out she was scammed. She’s going to find out you were behind it. Deal with it.”

Paige’s gaze flicked between the two men as they talked, trying to work out what was going on, and what it meant for her.

“Go sit on the couch,” the Russian said abruptly. “Both of you. Set up the laptop camera so she’ll be able to see you both. You need to get back onto that call, things should be sorted at the ranch by now.”

What was sorted?

Clay dropped his gaze to the floor, took a deep breath, then put his gun in the back of his jeans and picked up the laptop. As he walked past Paige, he wrapped his other arm around her to tug her off the bar stool and toward the plaid-print couch. Paige didn’t resist, because she had no idea what was going on, and no plan.

Her fear was giving way to a bleak hopelessness. How could she escape from two armed men? And now that she’d lost her value through what she’d told Nancy, what was going to happen to her?

She was dropped onto the couch. Her hands were free to balance herself, but her ankles stung where the zip-tie dug into her skin. Clay placed the laptop in front of them on a coffee table, and flipped it open again.

The web call was still in progress, but now it wasn’t only Nancy in the picture. Seated beside her was a man with black hair and a cold expression. Nancy’s face was wet with tears.

“Clay?” she whispered.

“Nancy,” he began. “It’s going to be okay, I promise. You just need to do what Aleks’ lawyer tells you to do.”

Nancy’s sniffed. “You think I still believe Aleks is real? This man— whoever he really is—has made it quite clear how naïve I’ve been.”

Her voice was thready with tears and emotion. She looked down and

reached for something beside her. The man next to her gripped her arm.

“Sit still,” he demanded.

“I’m just getting one of Brian’s handkerchiefs,” Nancy said. “At least give me the dignity of wiping my tears.”

There was the sound of a drawer opening and closing, then Nancy dabbed at her eyes with a pale blue square of fabric.

The man beside her rolled his eyes.

“Please do what they say,” Clay said urgently. “I don’t want you hurt.”

It was the turn of the Russian in their cabin to roll his eyes. He stood behind the matching couch that faced the one she and Clay sat on. He snorted. “Bit late for that.”

“Can we get on with this?” the man in Nancy’s office said. “Get this over with so the old bitch knows exactly what’s at stake here. I don’t trust her.”

A scammer not trusting his victim. The irony.

But then she registered what else he’d said.

Get on with what?

“As I said, Nancy, you *will* sign the transfer papers,” the man continued. “And without any funny business, or your precious Clay will be next.”

“What do you mean, next?” Clay said urgently. “We haven’t discussed —”

The man behind the couch has raised his gun. It was pointed direction at Paige. At her chest. He met her gaze and smirked.

Terror froze her. “No!” she screamed.

“This is for wasting my time searching a dirty old mine—”

She had no time to think, to move, to duck—do anything—before a huge body enveloped her, and a single shot rang out.

She screamed again as she hit the floor before Clay’s heavy weight knocked the air out of her lungs as he landed on her.

The *crack* of a second gunshot made her flinch.

Gasping for air she pushed at Clay’s shoulders. Had she been shot? Had

he?

Then Clay was gone, yanked from her body.

Finally able to breathe she looked up to a man even taller and more muscular than Clay standing at her feet, snapping cuffs onto Clay's wrists.

Cuffs? Was the man a police officer? Was she safe?

"You okay, ma'am?" he asked.

She gasped. The man had almost identical eyes to Clay, although his were an intense shade of grey, rather than blue.

She nodded.

"Garrett, I can explain—" Clay began.

"Shut the fuck up, Clay. Seriously."

Garrett? When had she heard that name?

"He's dead," came a familiar deep voice from behind the couch.

"Tyler?" she breathed, hardly able to believe it.

The cabin's front door swung open, so she twisted to see what was happening. "Damn good shot, Cerra," said a man in camo gear, striding into the room. She registered the sound of distant sirens.

"Tyler?" she said more urgently, as she awkwardly rolled onto her knees, trying to get up.

And then he was there, right in front of her. He dropped to a crouch as his gaze searched her face. He wore tactical gear also, with what looked like a discarded earpiece hanging down the front of his chest.

"Are you hurt?" he said roughly. "Paige, tell me—did they hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No. I—"

"Hello?" a voice asked—from the laptop. *Nancy.*

Oh my god. Nancy was alone with the other Russian.

"Nancy!"

She turned to look at the screen.

But only one person stared back at her. "Where'd the man go?" she asked, her heart pounding. *What would that man do to her? Could the police*

get to her in time?

“He’s here,” she said calmly. She looked down to her left. “In a way. He’s dead.”

She still had the blue handkerchief in her hands, and she lifted it once again to dab at her eyes. But as she did, the fabric shifted, revealing what she also held: a tiny revolver with a polished wooden grip. It was the type of gun Paige would’ve expected a woman would store in her garter in Hollywood’s version of the wild west.

“My Brian and I had a shooting range here at the ranch for many years,” she said in a conversational tone. “He always thought it was important I was comfortable with a gun, for the times he was away from the ranch.” She shrugged. “I surprised myself and quite enjoyed target shooting. Haven’t done it for many years, mind, but this gun was a 40th wedding anniversary gift, so I’ve always kept in clean, and loaded, and in the top drawer of this desk. An—” she glanced down to the ground where the Russian’s body presumably lay, “—*old bitch* living alone can never be too careful, I always say.”

The woman placed the gun on the desk in front of her, before dropping her head into her hands.

“Oh, Nancy!” Paige said, leaning toward the screen and wishing she could reach through it and hug this incredible, brave woman.

“Where is she?” Tyler barked at Clay.

Clay immediately gave the address, and Garrett touched his ear as he repeated it and briefly gave instructions to . . . who knew? Who were these men?

How had Tyler found her?

There was a *snick* as Tyler efficiently cut through the ties at her ankles, before returning a tool to a zipped pocket in his vest. He gently grabbed her around the waist and lifted her to her feet. As they stood toe to toe his fingers skimmed over her sides, from waist to hip, then up along her spine—she had

the sense he was making sure she was still in one piece.

He tugged her toward him, wrapping his arms around her tight.

As her fear slipped away, it fleetingly occurred to her to push him away.

It isn't like she's my type.

“I was so fucking scared, Paige,” he murmured in her ear. “So fucking scared.”

None of this felt real. Maybe none of what she thought they'd had was real.

But right now, this was where she wanted to be.

Safe, in Tyler's arms.

Even though he'd definitely lied to her. Even though she had no idea who these men were who'd saved her. Even though she wasn't his type.

Maybe she was naïve, or weak.

It didn't matter. She'd been in danger, he'd found her, and he'd saved her life.

That was real.

She nestled her head against his shoulder, the thick Velcro strap of his vest rough against her cheek. She didn't care.

He held her as she cried.

NINETEEN

TYLER HAD SHOT THAT ASSHOLE THROUGH A TINY WINDOW OPENING, ON A sharp angle, and with a handgun. Almost side on to the Russian gunman, his only choice had been a headshot.

It was, without question, the best shot of his life. Not in distance or complexity—but in importance.

Because if he'd missed, Paige wouldn't be alive right now. She wouldn't be in his arms right now.

His gut twisted—his *heart* twisted—at the thought.

He'd painstakingly set up the shot while the Russian had been berating the man Tyler now knew to be Garrett's younger brother Clay. He'd known the moment the Russian had suddenly appeared—he must have been in the cabin the whole time—that he needed to prepare for a kill shot. He had first-hand experience that this fucker liked to shoot people—and well, there was no way Tyler was giving him that chance.

He'd had to silently slide the small window open just enough to squeeze the barrel of his gun through, all while remaining invisible. Thankfully, both the Russian and Clay were blissfully unaware they were being stalked by the Shadow Team, and neither had noticed him.

Paige hadn't, either. So, he'd experienced the torment of watching her terror. There'd been a moment—when Clay had tugged her from the bar stool

and she'd so easily acquiesced, that he was certain he saw that familiar fire in her gaze just . . . extinguish. Like after all that had happened to her in the past twenty-four hours, she'd finally accepted her fate.

She shook in his arms while she cried.

Local law enforcement would be here any moment, but for now it was just the Shadow Team and Paige in this tiny cabin.

Paige lifted her head.

"How did you—" she asked. Then she frowned. "I mean—*who* are you?" She took a step back, far enough that his hands fell away. She straightened her shoulders as she studied him. He watched as she composed herself . . . and as her fear drifted away her expression became more wary, her gaze shuttered.

"You heard me talking to Sam," he said. "I can explain."

She raised her eyebrows, and her lips formed into a straight line.

What part had she heard? The Shadow Team stuff, that didn't matter. She'd literally witnessed their existence, but even if she hadn't—he wanted to tell her. He wanted her to know what he did. Who he was. Who he *really* was.

Everything.

It wasn't even a shocking realization. It felt natural . . . just *right*. To be honest with Paige.

But the longer Paige studied him, the more impossible it was for him to kid himself that she hadn't heard the worst of it. His silly, automatically deflective response when Sam had made an innocuous comment about his—on reflection—obvious protectiveness of Paige.

It isn't like she's my type.

Clearly he hadn't meant it. It was reflexive—no one in the Shadow Team knew of his reclusive, sexless lifestyle. They just knew who he'd once been, who they thought he still was. In that context, Sam's subtle ribbing made sense. Instead, it'd highlighted what Tyler had continued to deny: the walls

he'd built around himself these past three years—the very structures he needed to remain upright . . . to survive each day . . . had been dismantled by Paige.

And that left him . . . in limbo.

Guilt and shame had defined him for years. Those feelings were still there. *Fuck*, they were still there.

But now there was Paige. And for the first time he questioned whether those walls hadn't been about preventing him having joy—connection, intimacy, sex—but rather simply walls for him to hide behind.

Because without intimacy, he didn't have to tell anyone what he'd done.

He didn't have to face it.

Was his self-determined penance more about his own fear, instead of some noble sacrifice?

"I'm a cowardly piece of shit," he said.

Her eyebrows drew together. "What?"

"I don't deserve you," he said. "I probably never will. But after this—after the cops arrive, after you speak to the detectives—can I have some time with you? Just to explain. No expectations."

"But—"

"You *are* my type," he rushed to say. "You, specifically. If I had to write my type down, you're the only woman who'd ever match, because my type is, exclusively, you. *You*, Paige. Just you. What you heard was . . ." He ran a hand through his hair, knowing there was no way to make what he'd said okay. "As I said. I'm a coward. That's my only explanation."

"A coward who just saved my life. Again."

He shrugged. "That's my job."

Her gaze flicked to Garrett and Sam, each on opposite sides of the room. Both men were looking at them curiously. Tyler gave zero fucks about what they thought.

"Just some time, Paige. Half an hour, even. And I'll be honest. About

everything.” He shifted his weight. “I know you have no reason to trust me.”

Outside the cabin gravel crunched and sirens became louder as law enforcement entered the property.

“Please?” he said.

Through the cabin window they watched car after car arrive, all with lights and sirens blaring.

She sighed. “Okay,” she said. “Okay, Tyler. We can talk.”

Moments later the tiny cabin was packed full of local officers and deputies. Barrett from the CBI was barking orders all over the place, and Paige was swiftly taken outside by a detective.

He took a deep breath.

Paige was safe, that was all that mattered.

His heart no longer raced with panic. He no longer feared for her life.

But he was going to tell her the truth. All of it.

PAIGE GAVE her statement at the Sheriff’s Office in Falcon. Afterward she stayed in the interview room to call her parents, as Clay’s threats toward them had really shaken her up. She might not be the child her parents had wanted, but she knew they loved her in their own way—just as she loved them. She told them everything.

Her mom cried through most of it. “Can we come pick you up?” she asked.

Paige laughed. “It’s a sixteen-hour drive, mom.”

“Maybe we could find some flights?” her mom said, clearly to her dad. “I don’t want Paige flying by herself after all this, so I’ll go collect her, we’d be home by tonight—”

“No, mom,” Paige interrupted gently. “It’s okay. Honestly, I’m fine.”

“Paige has always done her own thing,” her dad said. It wasn’t an unfamiliar phrase for him to direct at her—but for the first time, it didn’t

sound like a veiled insult to Paige. Or tinged with disappointment and pained resignation. He cleared his throat before continuing. “I’m certain she’ll be fine. I trust her judgment.”

I trust her judgment.

“Of course!” her mom said. “I forget you’re a thirty-year-old woman and not my little girl.” She sighed. “But I will call and check in tomorrow, okay? And don’t be by yourself tonight, you must be in shock, and you must make sure to eat something—”

“Mom—”

Her mom gave a teary laugh. “Fine, I’ll stop. But I *am* calling tomorrow.”

“That’s quite all right.”

“I do feel for the woman who was scammed,” her dad said. “I hope she has lots of family support around her.”

Paige doubted this, but she’d been told Casey Taberner had insisted she stay with Nancy at the ranch for a few days. Paige was keen to meet with Nancy soon to offer her own support—and also her admiration for how kick-ass she’d been.

“Absolutely,” her mom agreed.

Paige rolled her eyes, glad her parents couldn’t see her. Even a hint of support from them when she’d been catfished all those years ago would’ve meant everything to her.

“Not everyone is as resilient as Paige. Look at how she turned being scammed into such a successful life and career?” her dad continued.

Paige blinked. *What?*

“Oh yes,” her mom said. “Just the other day I was telling the new professor in my faculty about what Paige does and how proud we are of the difference she’s making. And did you know even *he*’d been scammed? Clicked a link that looked *exactly* like a PayPal email. He even showed it to me. It’s rampant, honestly. Could happen to anyone. And to specifically target an elderly woman, well . . . ”

Her parents continued to talk among themselves as Paige leant back in the uncomfortable interview chair.

She knew there'd never be an apology for how they'd treated her—or even an acknowledgment. But this casual, blithely delivered conversation was shockingly unexpected.

She'd defined herself as a disappointment her whole life. That she was *less than*.

That she was a mess. She was chronically late and disorganized. Not smart enough. Definitely not pretty enough. She was too tall, too thin, too awkward.

Too much—but also not enough.

But if she *wasn't* a disappointment, then what was she? *Who* was she?

She barely heard the rest of the conversation, and then it was over.

She placed her phone on the table in front of her and stared at it blankly.

Who was she?

TYLER WAITED NERVOUSLY outside the Sheriff's Office for Paige. The building was right at the end of Falcon's main street, across from a Vietnamese restaurant that was doing a roaring Banh Mi lunch trade. A line snaked out onto the pavement.

Garrett stood beside him. Tyler didn't know the man well, although they'd been on more than a handful of Shadow Team assignments together. As the two team members who lived outside Falcon, it was logical to pair them up regularly. But, as Garrett was a man of exceedingly few words, all Tyler knew about the guy was that he was a former Navy SEAL, an absolute beast in the gym—his enormous frame reflected that—and that he'd rather read than speak to literally anyone. Whenever they flew in Wolf's jet the guy would stick his head in a book and that was that. Suited Tyler just fine, usually.

But today it was weird. Garrett's *brother* had just been arrested.

Tyler knew Garrett had grown up in Falcon, but little else.

"You close to your brother?" he asked.

Garrett didn't even look at him as he shook his head.

"You doing okay, man? You don't have to hang around, go see your family if you—"

"No."

That was it. No explanation.

"No, you're not okay? No, you don't want to leave? No, you don't want to see your family?"

The man had been gazing somewhere in the direction of the mountains to the north of town, and he slowly swung his head around to offer Tyler a withering glare. "I don't have a family," he said. "I'm not leaving."

No mention if he was okay. Tyler was smart enough to know not to ask again.

The glass entrance doors to the Sheriff's office slid open, and Paige walked slowly down the stone steps. She appeared lost in contemplation, her brow furrowed. At the sidewalk, she ran a hand through her hair and scanned the street, her gaze finally landing on him.

She started, like she hadn't expected to see him there.

"Tyler," she said, like a statement.

There was a beat of silence, before Garrett cleared his throat. "Ma'am, I can drive you home to Arvada, if you'd like."

"No," Tyler said quickly, "if Paige wants to go home, *I'll* drive—"

"Cez, this woman's been stuck with your lame ass for twenty-four hours. Reckon she might be sick of you."

Paige shook her head. "No, it's okay. I, uh . . ." She looked across the road as if she'd only just noticed the line outside the Vietnamese café. Sam was in that line, and he was studying them with interest. Sam had attempted to ask a few questions after witnessing his little monologue to Paige in that

cabin, but Tyler had shut him down. Garrett hadn't said a thing, but apparently had his own thoughts about the situation, given here he was directing them both.

She took a deep breath. "Tyler and I need to talk, so it's fine. But yes, a lift home later would be good."

Paige didn't intend to hang around. He swallowed in an attempt to loosen the tightness in his throat.

"Fine. Tyler, you know where you're going?"

Only now did Tyler register he had no idea where he was staying in Falcon, or have a vehicle to transport himself there. Exhaustion and . . . whatever it was that Paige was doing to him . . . had taken its toll.

"I'll drive you." Garrett's tone was gruff, and he muttered something else under his breath that definitely included the words *damn fool*.

Those words were accurate, although maybe not today. These past three years—yes, definitely. *Fuck* he'd been a fool. But today . . . maybe not.

He'd guess he was about to find out.

TWENTY

“THREE YEARS AGO, I KILLED TWO MEN.”

Paige coughed as Tyler’s words registered. They’d just arrived at the two-story townhouse where Tyler was staying, right at the edges of Falcon. He’d poured them both a glass of water, and her glass had just reached her lips—so his shocking, unexpected words caused her to splutter liquid all over the place.

He rushed from his side of the kitchen countertop to hand her a dishcloth. He placed a hand on her back as he shook his head.

“Great fucking start, Tyler,” he muttered.

She placed the glass on the counter, dabbed at her face, and shifted away from his touch as she turned to face him. They stood really close, but she didn’t step back. She wanted to be this close to him—she wanted to be able to see the different shades of green and gold in his gaze.

She didn’t know what she’d expected him to say. Not that, obviously.

But then, she hadn’t expected him to be waiting for her outside the Sheriff’s office, despite what he’d told her in the cabin. She couldn’t have explained why she’d thought he’d leave—*why* she thought he’d change his mind. Even now, she hadn’t expected this—and it was clear what it was.

Honesty. Vulnerability.

She didn’t say a word, but she reached for him—brushing her fingers

down his strong forearm. She didn't know what to do next, and her hand fell uselessly away. But he seemed to understand. *It's okay. Talk to me, Tyler.*

"It was a hostage rescue," he said. "In some desert in the Middle East. I was the team leader, and six of us entered the compound. It started off smoothly, everything going exactly to plan. Our timings were spot on, everything was where it was supposed to be—you know, our access points, cameras, guards. Maybe I should've thought it was going *too* smoothly?"

He didn't look at her at all as he talked, his attention shifting from the counter top, out the window to the suburban streetscape beyond, then down to his hands, that he'd twisted together. He shoved both hands in the front pockets of his jeans, then lifted his chin until he met her gaze.

"I was the team leader, of course I fucking should've known it was going too smoothly." He shook his head. "We enter the building. Based on the maps we had, I'd assigned pairs of operators to clear different rooms as we made our way to where the hostage was being held. Problem was, there was supposed to be two doors in that first corridor, but there were three. I'd already assigned the other teams the two original doors, so logically I'd take this new door, right? But I didn't. I redirected one team to the new door." He looked to the ceiling briefly, before holding her gaze. "Opening it detonated an explosive device. Both men died instantly. I—" He swallowed. "I didn't have a scratch on me. Both men were married, one had two young kids—and they were *gone*, just like that. Gone."

He took a step backward, then turned so his butt pressed against the edge of the marble countertop. He crossed his arms and looked out to the street. A woman walked by pushing a stroller, and a dog barked in the distance.

"I'm so sorry that happened," Paige said. "But Tyler, *you* didn't kill them —"

"Army investigators agreed with you," he interrupted. "There was a full investigation that took weeks, and I was cleared of any wrong doing. In fact, I received a commendation for leading the successful rescue of our hostage."

He gave a humorless bark of laughter. “*Of course*, I fucking did.”

He pushed away from the counter and began to pace the small living room.

“It doesn’t even sound like a mistake, Tyler,” she said quietly. “How could you have known? It’s just awful luck.”

“And Tyler Cerra is a goddamn lucky fucker, isn’t he?”

He paused at the window, his back to her.

“That’s the thing, Paige. *Why me?* Why did I get to survive and they didn’t? Why did *I* get to make the fucking choice if they lived or died?”

“Would you have chosen the operator you were paired with to die instead?”

“No,” he said. He turned to face her. “I know all this already, Paige. I’ve thought about it. But I don’t accept that no one holds me accountable—even their wives. I don’t accept that I made that random call, and the consequences for me were zero, and for those men—it was their lives.”

“But you’re not accountable, Tyler?”

He ignored her. “I’m familiar with death in hostile action,” he said. “But not like this, not my team mates.”

Paige didn’t know what to say. She knew she couldn’t erase the pain of witnessing the violent death of your friends. She couldn’t comprehend the trauma, or fully understand the intense guilt he felt. How awful to know that a split-second decision had such a terrible, life-changing—life-ending—outcome. But he didn’t plant those explosive devices. He didn’t kill anyone.

“This is why you don’t date,” she said. “Why you keep to yourself even though that’s not your personality. You’re punishing yourself.”

He walked across the room until he was right in front of her. “Yes,” he said simply. “But I didn’t decide that then. Not yet. But I did know I needed to do something to acknowledge what had happened, and the unfairness of it all. I needed *something* so I could wake up and . . . function, I guess. It was unacceptable for me to carry on and have this objectively awesome life after

what I'd done."

"But Tyler, *you* didn't—"

"Stop," he said. "This was the problem. This bit, the bit where people tried to absolve me of my guilt. I didn't want that. I still don't want that, but no one could see it. After the investigation, I flew to Philadelphia to see a friend—Andy Torres. We used to be Delta Force teammates, and we were at the Fox & Laughton together that awful morning. After the siege things changed between us, and I transferred teams. He wasn't part of the hostage rescue that I fucked up." She bit her lip to stop herself arguing with him. "But the way I was feeling after the investigation, I . . . missed him. He was the closest friend I've ever had. My best friend, actually. I checked with his commanding officer, knew he'd just gone on leave, so I turned up at the apartment he shared with his fiancée. I didn't call him first, I wanted to talk face to face."

Tyler rocked his weight forward and backward on his boots as he took a deep breath.

"Anyway, Andy wasn't there. His fiancée, Natalie, didn't even know he was supposed to be on leave, and she was *pissed* about that. I'd had no idea, but it became very obvious that Andy and Natalie were going through a seriously rough patch in their relationship. For Natalie, it seemed Torres not telling her he was on his way home was enough to push her over the edge, even though I tried to convince her that maybe it was a surprise, that he had something special planned." He shrugged. "I didn't know, I was just rambling shit to her, trying to salvage things for Andy and extract myself from the situation. The last thing I felt like dealing with was drama."

Paige studied him. She'd never seen Tyler like this. Sure, she'd known him only a day, but up until now the perfection of his face had always been somewhat of a distraction. He was so impossibly gorgeous, it was difficult to see anything else. But she had the sense that now she was seeing behind his flawless façade. She was seeing *Tyler*. It was almost like they were back in

the mine again, where the darkness made appearances irrelevant. The difference now was that there was no fear of imminent death potentially driving his vulnerability. There was no extraordinary circumstance.

It was just her and Tyler.

And he was, as he'd promised in the cabin, being honest. About everything.

"Don't look at me like that," he said.

She frowned. "Like what?"

"I don't know. With sympathy, warmth, affection. Like I'm special. Stop it."

"You are special."

It was the first time she'd complimented him in the way he'd continuously complimented her. She wished she'd said something earlier. She'd wished she'd had the confidence to. And he called himself a coward?

"You're incredible, Tyler," she continued. "I—"

"No," he said. "No. Let me finish. You don't understand yet. You don't understand who I actually am."

His words were an echo of her earlier musings: *If she wasn't a disappointment, then who was she?*

"Who are you, Tyler?"

His lips quirked upward. "I'm a man who, when a distressed, angry and emotional woman threw herself at me—and kissed me—kissed her back. Natalie grabbed me as I was leaving. I'd never had a hint she was interested in me before then—although I don't think that was the point, was it? She was angry at Andy, and she wanted to punish him. And I . . ."

"You wanted to be punished."

He laughed. "No. I wanted people to see who I was. See that I was fucked up, and an asshole, and not at all deserving of the free pass in life I was inexplicably given. So I didn't just kiss her, I fucked her. I fucked my best friend's fiancée, in his own bed, and when he arrived home half an hour later

with a bouquet of flowers I was glad when he broke my nose. I'm glad that he hated me. I'm glad that the gossip ripped through Delta Force and everyone hated me for what I did. Natalie even let Andy believe it'd been going on for months, and I didn't challenge it. I deserved his hate."

"You wanted it."

He nodded. "Yes. And *that* was when I gave up women and sex. Socializing, watching football, all that stuff. After what I'd done, it was what I deserved. What I needed."

Oh, Tyler . . .

"And it was working, Paige," he said. "It was working fine. My rules for myself were *working*. Then two things happened. First thing, is that a month ago, goddamn Andy Torres calls me out of the blue, and leaves a voicemail fucking *apologizing for breaking my nose*. He apologized to me! That's ridiculous, and honestly, it screwed things up for me a bit. Especially as I need to work with the guy over the next couple of weeks while the Shadow Team trains together . . ." He shook his head. "Damn, that's something else I need to explain to you."

"It can wait."

She was curious about this mysterious team, but that curiosity paled in comparison to learning more about the man in front of her.

"I spent last week camping at the Flat Tops, not sleeping as I tried to work out why Andy's apology had pushed me off balance. Objectively, it's a good thing he's moved on, right? And he has, he's met someone else, he's in love. What I did to him is just something that happened to him a few years ago."

And he doesn't hate you anymore, Paige thought. But she held her tongue.

"And the second thing, Paige, was *you*. I met you. And I broke all my rules. All of them, and it wasn't even hard—because it was you. Kissing you, touching you . . . how could something that good feel wrong? And it didn't, not even a little bit. I kept waiting to feel bad afterward. I kept waiting for the

guilt and the shame to arrive for allowing myself something—someone—I didn't deserve. But it didn't happen—it still hasn't." He looked to the window as he took a deep breath. "I realized this morning, at the cabin, as I held you in my arms and knew you were safe, that maybe these past three years were never about some noble martyrdom like I told myself. Fuck, no one was keeping score, were they? No one was looking at my life, nodding sagely and agreeing that I was exactly miserable enough to be allowed to fucking exist." He turned back to her. "Maybe what I really needed was the protection that my solitary life gave me. Maybe I was so damn ashamed of myself that I couldn't let anyone close enough to see me. Not the guy who won some genetic lottery and breezed through life, but *me*. An asshole who lived when others deserved it more. An asshole who'd sleep with his best friend's fiancée."

Paige stepped closer, reaching out to slide a finger down the side of his face.

He flinched, but didn't move away. "Paige . . ."

"You don't have to be perfect, Tyler," she said. "You're allowed to make mistakes."

"No," he murmured. "You're not supposed to do this. You're not supposed to still look at me like that. Didn't you hear what I just told you?"

"I heard a traumatic story that led to a man blowing up his life."

She traced along his jaw, across his chin.

"You're supposed to hate me. How can you trust me after what I did to Andy?"

"Had you done something like that before? Cheated? Slept with someone in a relationship?"

"Not that I know of, but . . ."

She pressed her fingers over his lips. "Stop it, Tyler. I'm not going to give you the hate, or the pain, or the rejection—whatever it is you expect from me. That you even crave, maybe? You feeling like shit isn't going to change what

happened in the past. Your friend Andy seems to have already worked that out.”

Her fingers slid to the side, away from the fullness of his lips to his cheekbones.

“He’s a better man than me.”

She shrugged. “I see who you are, Tyler. You’re a good man.” She shook her head when he went to speak. “You’ve shown me that in a million different ways. You already know your team mates died because of a bomb, not because of you. You already know you made a terrible mistake with Andy’s fiancée—but he’s forgiven you. Seems to me all that’s left is for you to forgive yourself.”

“How . . .” his voice was all choked up. “I don’t know how.”

“You’ve spent a lot of time trying to make me see the Paige that you see, Tyler,” she said softly. “You’ve insisted I’m brave, and that I’m beautiful. That I’m extraordinary, even.” Her lips quirked at the words that still felt rather ridiculous. “I don’t think I’m quite ready to believe what you’ve said to me, just yet. Even what you said at the cabin, that I’m *exclusively* your type.” She laughed. “None of that feels real. But—I’m not going to argue with you anymore, okay? I’m going to accept what you’ve said to me, that it’s genuinely what you see, what *you* believe. And Tyler, I need you to listen to what *I* see.” Her fingers traced the shape of her eyebrows as she stepped closer still. “I see a man who was prepared to die in an attempt to save a stranger. I see a man who held me when I cried. A man who has listened to me in a way no one else ever has. A man who is patient, who makes me feel like a conversation with me is a privilege, and not an imposition. Like *time* with me is a privilege. Who lets me ramble, and say anything, and not hurry me along. Who makes me feel like I’m allowed to take up space, that I’m his complete focus. Like I’m special.” She swallowed as her fingers slid down his jaw once again. “I see a man who is brave, and who cares deeply for those around him. A man who is sensitive, and has the courage to admit when he’s

scared. A man, even when he *is* scared, will fight to save others. Who will rescue a hostage after his friends have died. Who will save as many strangers as he can in a hotel. Who will stop to help a woman on the side of the road. A man who will notice the color of a woman's eyes at the gas station."

She only realized she was crying when she tasted the salt from her tears on her lips.

He reached to wipe a tear from her cheek, and she pressed up onto her toes, bringing their mouths so very close together. Her hand rested on his jaw, and she could feel the thrum of his pulse beneath her fingertips.

"I so badly want to believe all of that," he murmured.

"I hope one day you will."

He kissed her.

TWENTY-ONE

PAIGE HAD LOVED EVERY TIME TYLER HAD KISSED HER, BUT THIS WAS different. There was a wildness to this kiss, a freedom to it, that was exhilarating. Was he letting go of those final barriers between them? Those rules he'd created built on a foundation of guilt?

Then he grabbed her butt and dragged her very deliberately against the front of his jeans—and suddenly she didn't care about rules or guilt. She just wanted Tyler.

“I need you,” Tyler said, although it was more of a groan, as he kissed her lips, her jaw, her neck.

“Yes . . .” she breathed. “Please . . .”

He grabbed her hand, lacing their fingers together as he tugged her up the stairs. He found a bedroom, then began kissing her again in the doorway. Her fingers tangled in his hair as she kissed him back, and as his hands roamed the curve of her butt and her waist. Her hand traveled down between their bodies to the snap at the front of his jeans, while his hand slid inside the rear waistband of her sweatpants to palm her ass.

He walked them to the bed, and when the back of her knees hit the mattress they buckled, and she toppled onto the mattress. He wasted no time tugging down her sweatpants, then her knickers. She was still wearing her blazer and t-shirt, and she pulled them off as fast as she could, then her bra

too.

She sat on the edge of the bed, her breathing fast and shallow. She didn't feel self-conscious being naked in front of Tyler this time, not at all. Instead, it was thrilling to watch his obvious admiration of her body as his gaze traveled over her from head to toe.

"Off," she said, gesturing at his clothing.

His grin was wolfish as he complied. He still wore the snug fitting t-shirt and jeans he'd had beneath his tactical vest, and his muscular body rippled in the early afternoon sun that filtered through the bedroom's wooden blinds as he ripped it all off.

Finally naked he reached for her, grabbing her knees to spread them apart as he dropped to his own knees between them. With her butt right at the edge of the mattress, she fell onto her back as his tongue went straight to her clit without preamble. Her hands gripped the quilt as his clever, clever mouth sent sparks and shivers to every edge of her body. Her spine arched as he quickly wound her body tighter and tighter, and she moaned his name when in a sudden burst of sensation, she came. Her eyes slid shut as she basked for a moment in how incredible he'd just made her feel, when she felt his hand between her legs.

She wiggled onto her elbows. Tyler still knelt between her wide spread knees, his attention focused entirely on her core. Her earlier confidence in his attention on her body faltered a little as she blushed, but she didn't move or push him away.

He lifted her head to hold her gaze. She bit her lip and nodded as the fingers that had been exploring her folds paused at her entrance. He pushed a finger slowly inside her as she watched. Then another. He slid his fingers slowly in and out of her, his other hand low on her belly holding her still as his thumb circled her clit.

It felt so damn good. She panted and sighed as her body rapidly came back to life.

“Tyler . . . ” she moaned.

“You’re so fucking tight.”

“It’s been . . . ” she gasped as his fingers curled up a little to rub *just* the right spot inside her. “ . . . a long time.”

“Can you take another?” He asked, his words a dark rumble.

“Please . . . ”

He groaned as he somehow pushed a third finger into her. She felt so full, so good. And she knew Tyler was far bigger than the fingers working her so skillfully. At that thought she felt herself grow impossibly wetter.

“*Good girl . . .* ” he breathed. “Fuck . . . Paige . . . you’re so damn hot . . . ”

He was taking her right to the edge again, and it somehow felt even better than before. Even more intense and overwhelming.

“That’s it,” he said. “Come for me again.”

But she shook her head as she reached for his wrist. “No,” she said. “This time with you inside me.”

“No condoms,” he muttered.

“No,” she said, with genuine horror. “No, Tyler . . . ”

“Wait,” he said. He climbed to his feet, clearly reluctant as he slid his fingers from her body. He stood magnificently naked—and impressively erect—as he scanned the room. He strode to the ensuite bathroom, but emerged moments later with a regretful shake to his head. Then his eyes lit up. “Garrett gave me a bag—you know, change of clothes, toothbrush and stuff, until my truck is located.”

He left the room at a jog.

Paige didn’t move. Instead, she stared at the ceiling as she took a deep breath. She felt ridiculous tears prickle. She was so desperate to have Tyler. She *needed* him, after all they’d been through.

But then he returned, a fucking beautiful square in his hand.

“A condom!” she shrieked, and he laughed. “Oh, thank god.”

“The Shadow Team always has my back,” he said with a shrug.

They kissed and laughed as Tyler joined her on the bed. Both on their knees she helped him roll on the condom, desperate to touch him. He kissed her again as he pressed her once again onto the mattress. He hooked his arm beneath one knee and pushed it up as he settled between her thighs, opening her for him. His clever fingers were once again at her clit, and she sucked in a breath at the first touch of the broad head of his cock.

Her back arched as he slowly pressed into her.

They both seemed to hold their breath until he'd pushed all the way in. He held her gaze as he held himself still. “Okay?” he asked.

Her body adjusted to the sensation of him filling and stretching her, and as his fingers began to rub and circle her clit, she moaned at how good it all felt.

“Amazing . . .” she sighed.

And then he moved, and she called out his name.

They found a rhythm quickly, her hips rising to meet his stroke for stroke. He leant down to kiss her as she wrapped both legs tight around his waist, dragging him closer still.

“You feel so good,” he said, “I just want you so fucking bad, Paige . . .”

“Then have me,” she whispered against his lips. “Take me . . . fuck me . . . have me . . .”

She held on tight to his shoulders as their movements shifted from leisurely to desperate. As their breathing became ragged, and as their cries grew louder.

And then once again she came, and it was like an explosion. She screamed his name as waves of pleasure and electric, perfect sensation utterly overwhelmed her.

Then among all of that he groaned her name, and she felt him stiffen in her arms as he lost himself in her body.

For long moments they lay there, his cock still inside her, their breathing

gradually slowing back to something resembling normal.

He pushed up onto his forearms to look down at her.

He tucked her hair behind her ears, then pressed a kiss to her lips.

“I love you, Paige,” he said.

TWENTY-TWO

“*WHAT?*”

Paige wriggled out from under Tyler, inadvertently kneeling him in the stomach in her haste.

He groaned, clutching his middle, as she clambered out of the bed, her feet landing hard on the plush carpet. Desperately she searched for her clothing, before yanking on her underwear, then her sweatpants.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” she said, as she searched for her bra and T-shirt. *Where were they?*

“Paige,” Tyler said, sitting up. “Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving,” she said firmly.

“Why?”

She spotted her bra hanging off a cream-fabric wingback chair she hadn’t even noticed was in the room until right this moment. She turned her back to Tyler as she put it on.

Her hands shook, and she couldn’t hook the clasp closed.

“Stupid, stupid, thing . . .” she muttered as she tried again. And again.

Until Tyler was suddenly at her back. Efficiently, he did up the clasp.

She let out a slow breath. “Thank you.”

She didn’t move as she heard Tyler walk around the room, tugging on clothing. She was trying to compose herself, but it wasn’t working—so she

turned around anyway. Tyler stood at the foot of the bed, shirtless in his black jeans.

“Why are you leaving, Paige?” he asked again.

“Because you just said something really stupid, so I think it’s best I go. I mean, it’s been a crazy day, hasn’t it? We’re both exhausted. We’re both probably in shock, right?” She forced a laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll pretend you never said it. You’ll thank me after you’ve had a decent sleep and come to your senses.”

“I don’t think loving you is stupid, Paige.”

“Ha!” she said. It wasn’t a laugh, just an awkward single, disbelieving syllable.

He ran a hand through his hair, and shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Got to say, this isn’t how I ever imagined telling a woman I loved her to play out.”

“You haven’t done it before?” she asked in a softer tone.

“Nope.”

She hugged herself. “Oh.” She swallowed. “Well, I’ll just find my shirt and be on my way, I guess? Do you think Garrett would still be happy to drive me home?”

“Yes, of course he will. But can you please *stop* for just a second Paige? What is going on? Why are you running away?”

“Because you don’t love me, Tyler. It’s impossible. You’ve known me not much longer than twenty-four hours.”

“It’s been a hell of a twenty-four hours, Paige,” he said. “Don’t you think?”

“Hmmm,” she said, spotting her T-shirt near the ensuite door and hurrying over. “That’s what I was getting at before. You’re in shock. Utterly exhausted.”

“Please don’t minimize what we have. *Especially* after what just happened.”

T-shirt on, she turned to face him. For the first time since this all started, he actually *looked* tired. There was a bleakness to his eyes that wasn't familiar.

Did I do that?

His declaration of love had launched a visceral panicked reaction—it was just too ludicrous to be true. She took a deep breath.

“I don't mean to minimize anything,” she said, a little more calmly now. “What we just did was amazing, Tyler. And everything that's happened between us—except for the almost dying bits—has been just . . . extraordinary. You trusted me to share my true self with you, and I am honored that you entrusted me with your story. It's crazy that a span of time where we were almost killed multiple times was also one of the best experiences of my life.”

“Me too.”

She sniffed, and she felt her throat begin to tighten. “But Tyler, only a handful of hours ago I overheard a conversation where I learned that a big chunk of what you told me about yourself was a lie.”

“The Shadow Team is the six of us who were having breakfast that morning at the Fox & Laughton,” he said quickly. “Two years after the siege, we all received a group text from a man we now know as Wolf. He runs Shadow Operations. The Shadow Team sometimes works with law enforcement, sometimes with the military. Often on our own. But it's always the type of work that needs our ability to move more swiftly, because we don't have the same rules—the same laws, really—to follow that the police do, or the army or whatever. We work for individuals and business, sometimes the government. Often it's for free, if the individual has nowhere else to turn.” He shrugged. “That's it. That's the team. And now you are only one of four people outside of Shadow Operations and some extremely senior people in the government and law enforcement, who know that we exist. The other three are Sam, Andy and Caleb's partners.”

Caleb. She remembered his name from the call he'd made at the White River City Sheriff's Department. "What about the deputies and detectives tonight?"

"They were fed some cover story. I think I might have been a CIA operative." He ran his hand through his hair again. "I couldn't tell you about the Shadow Team at first," he said. "As I said, not even my family knows about it. So, I also couldn't tell you about my pretty crap theory that the job I just did in Belarus might be linked to what happened today."

She nodded.

"I understand why you did it," she said. "But it still shocked me. After what I'd just told you, I felt just like I had at Arby's all those years ago. Worse, actually. I felt so unbelievably stupid, so betrayed. I can see that you had no other option, but it still fucking hurt, Tyler."

"I promise you that the line about you not being my type was bullshit. Like I said in the cabin, you are exactly, perfectly, my type. You, Paige."

"I believe you," she said quietly. "I mean, I believe that you mean it now. Just like you mean that you love me right now. But once all the adrenalin wears off . . ."

"How I feel about you isn't going to wear off."

She smiled. "But Tyler, I've experienced a thousand emotions today. I feel like my world caved in multiple times. When my car was driven off the road. When we were shot at, when we fell into the mine." She swallowed. "When I was kidnapped. When the Russian pointed his gun at me." She held his gaze. "But worse than all of those moments, Tyler, was when I overheard you say that I wasn't your type. And it's that just ridiculous? We're talking life and death here, and yet being hurt by you was the worst."

"I should've told you earlier. When you shared your story with me. I'm so damn sorry."

"It's okay," she said. "I don't think you did anything wrong, really—that wasn't even my point." She stepped closer to him. "Today has been a *lot*,

Tyler. I will never forget it. You've changed me, forever, and in the best possible way. Maybe I've even changed you, just a little."

"Of course you have, Paige. You've changed everything. *I love you.*"

She shook her head. "No, please, don't say it again. I mean it. Don't. I want to believe it, and I can't, because if I do and it isn't true . . . and it can't be true, because you've known me for a day . . ."

Was she crying again? She swiped at her cheek. *She was fucking crying again.*

"I need to go," she said. "Please."

His eyes were red, she realized. Her Delta Force operator was fighting back tears.

No, not hers. She barely knew him, not really . . .

Yet she'd told him her darkest secrets. He'd bared his soul to her. They'd just had earth-shattering sex that she'd never, ever forget.

She shook her head. She knew Tyler wasn't scamming her, but this was all too fantastical to be real. In love after a day? In love with *her* of all people?

No. She needed to give him space. Let him recover from the drama and emotion of this single, extraordinary day. And once he felt more like himself, he'd be glad she'd been so level-headed and sensible. Glad that she knew the dangers of falling too hard and too fast and believing in something that wasn't actually there.

"When will I see you again?" he asked.

"You live in Missouri and I live in Colorado," she said breezily. "It'll probably be a bit tricky to catch up."

Her heart twisted with pain.

"I'll be here in Falcon for two weeks," he said. "I can come see you in Denver."

"No," she said quickly, before she could change her mind. "As I said, today has been a lot. I think we both need some space."

He shook his head. “Paige, I need you to give me something. Can I call you?”

She let out a long breath. “You can email me. It’s on my catfishing investigations website. Emmett Investigations.”

“Seriously, Paige? You won’t even give me your number?”

“That’s on my site, too.”

He looked toward the doorway as he swallowed, his jaw tense.

She’d hurt him, she knew that. God—she’d hurt herself.

She hurt so bad.

“Can you please call Garrett?”

He nodded.

Three hours later she was back in Arvada.

Alone in her bed, she cried.

TWENTY-THREE

ONE WEEK LATER

FROM: Tyler Cerra
To: Emmett Investigations
Subject: Hey
Paige,
Is a week enough space?
Tyler
PS Call me any time: 314-555-2237

EIGHT DAYS after that

FROM: Emmett Investigations
To: Tyler Cerra
Subject: Re: Hey
Hi Tyler,
I hope you enjoyed your visit to Falcon.

Paige

FROM: Tyler Cerra

To: Emmett Investigations

Subject: Re: Hey

Did you wait until I'd left Colorado to reply?

Tyler

FROM: Emmett Investigations

To: Tyler Cerra

Subject: Re: Hey

Yes.

Paige

PAIGE'S HIT *SEND*, then settled back into her desk chair. She owned a tiny brick ranch house at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac in suburban Arvada. It had been all she could afford a few years earlier, and she'd set up one of its two bedrooms as her office space. A minute after replying to Tyler—a one word reply that had taken her *hours* to compose—her cell phone vibrated loudly on her oak desk.

She glanced at it briefly, knowing it would be Tyler. It was—he'd texted her.

She'd added his number to her contacts not because she'd intended to call him, but for exactly this situation—so she'd know if he tried to contact her.

At least, that's what she'd told herself.

Short messages work better as texts—Tyler

Why had she even told him to email her?

Because you thought he'd never bother to look it up on your website.

When he *had* emailed her a little over a week ago, her stomach had turned cartwheels.

Her phone vibrated again, and another message appeared. This one was a photo of an idyllic scene—a flowing narrow creek surrounded by towering trees. Sun filtered through the leaves to dapple everything below it.

This is where I am right now, he wrote. Near the east boundary of my lot. Where are you?

She took a photo from her desk—of her window, and the view to her modest courtyard beyond. A potted lime tree took up most of her view—a rare gardening success story for her black thumbs.

View from my office, she replied.

Limes for gin and tonics?

She smiled. *Yes. And Batangas—lime, salt, tequila and Mexican cola. Amazing, trust me! What do you like to drink?*

He took a few minutes to reply.

She had that time to work out where she thought this conversation was headed.

The decision to not reply to his email until he'd left Colorado had been sound. If he saw her again so soon, and before he'd returned home, he wouldn't have had a chance to return to normality. She imagined that what they'd had—for him, anyway—was like a holiday romance—a relationship accelerated because of the intense events of one totally unexpected day. That was how she'd managed to parse his words into something that made more sense, because *I love you Paige*, certainly didn't.

Once he was back in Missouri, he'd realize that. He'd move on, and that would be that.

Her plan had been to stop replying to his messages while he worked all that out without dragging her into it . . . but what harm could a few messages cause, really? This man had saved her life, after all. Being friendly was the

least she could do.

Her phone buzzed as Tyler replied: *I haven't the past few years, but Andy made me go with him and the rest of the team to this bar in Falcon called The Roost. I just stuck to bourbon, but I'd definitely give a batanga a try.*

He went to a bar with *Andy*? She'd wondered how Tyler's first meeting with his one-time best friend had gone, hoping like hell Andy had genuinely moved on. She also noted Tyler's reference to *the team*, rather than the Shadow Team . . . a reminder of his covert, mysterious life that she'd wished she'd had the time to ask more questions about. And then there was the pretty obvious hint that he was open to trying her current favorite cocktail with her. Well—her comment had been a pretty unsubtle invitation, hadn't it?

She sighed. She didn't like the way her heart kept lifting with every message Tyler sent. *She* needed to move on, too. She was already having enough trouble sleeping what with all the memories of Tyler's clever hands, and mouth, and tongue . . .

She shook her head.

Where did she think this conversation was heading? Nowhere.

Or more specifically, to a ton of pain—hers.

She could be friendly to Tyler without encouraging anything more.

She nodded to herself, pleased with yet another sound decision.

Paige texted Tyler a thumbs up emoji, turned her phone over, and got back to work.

A FUCKING THUMBS UP?

Tyler stared at the single yellow emoji than shook his head as he laughed. *Goddamn* he loved this woman.

He didn't reply. He didn't know exactly what was going on in that clever, complex brain of Paige's, but he was smart enough to know when to back off. That she'd emailed him at all had felt like a miracle. It'd fucking hurt

having his email ignored day after day. Not as much as having her crush his heart in that townhouse in Falcon, but not far off it.

Still, he couldn't regret his declaration of love, even if it had spectacularly backfired. No one deserved to know they were loved more than Paige Emmett. And he'd told her with no plan or expectation—in that moment it had just needed to be said.

It had hurt that she'd so easily disregarded the connection they'd shared in her certainty his love for her wasn't real. He'd been pissed, to be honest, that she'd dismissed what had been one of his most honest and vulnerable moments.

But after she'd left he'd looked at it differently. Garrett had taken one look at Paige's tear-blotched face and demanded to know what the fuck he'd done to her. Paige had briefly explained only after Garrett had offered to dismember Tyler if required. *No—it's fine. He just said he loved me but he couldn't possibly.* Then Garrett had looked at Tyler like he'd lost his mind, before exiting with Paige a minute later.

Had he lost his mind? Then, and now, he had the same answer—no.

But in the hours and days that'd followed—hell, in the minutes after—he begun to understand her reaction. Here was a woman whose only experiences of love had either been fraudulent or conditional. Plus, her work illustrated to her every day the dangers of believing empty declarations of love.

He just said he loved me but he couldn't possibly.

That's what got him—*he couldn't possibly.*

Paige didn't believe she was loveable.

Now that she'd finally responded to his messages, he knew what to do: prove to her that she wasn't just loveable, but that she was loved. Desperately.

Then hope like hell she loved him back.

TYLER MESSAGED her again the next day. This time a photo of an adorable grey squirrel who'd visited him on his back porch. She replied with a heart emoji.

The next day the photo he sent was of him holding a huge slice of pizza in one hand. Pineapple was one of the toppings.

Paige laughed, but not before being momentarily stunned by how she'd reacted to seeing Tyler again. Somehow she'd minimized him in her memories—she'd forgotten how tall, how strong—how damn gorgeous he was. Her tummy had flipped over, and she blushed as her lower belly went liquid. *From a photo of a man holding a slice of pizza.*

She'd replied though, with a photo of her much less interesting lunch.

Tyler's daily messages continued from there. Never anything too personal—random photos, or memes. They had discussions about Netflix series, or what they were having for dinner. Wordle. Occasionally she was tempted to ask something *more*. Like how things had gone with Andy. Whether he was sleeping okay. Whether he regretted telling her his deepest secrets.

If he missed her. If he was okay.

But of course she didn't ask any of those things. Instead, the nothingness of their messages continued—comforting in their own way. Making her heart leap just the same every time her phone vibrated, even as seeing Tyler's name flash up on her screen became familiar. Just seeing his *name* gave her tingles.

It was silly, really.

Then one day the photo he sent her was of an adorable cottage with crisp white wooden siding and a royal blue front door.

Howdy neighbor! He wrote. *I've just moved into my new rental in Falcon. Really enjoyed my time training with the team, just made sense to relocate.*

Tyler had moved to Colorado?

She'd been shopping at Walmart, and she stopped dead in the middle of the aisle, gripping the cart like her life depended on it.

She sent him a thumbs up emoji.

TYLER GRINNED at his phone and shook his head. He'd pretty much expected that response from Paige for his little bombshell.

He flopped onto his over-stuffed couch and surveyed his room full of packing boxes. *Why did he have so much shit?*

His blue front door swung open, and in walked Andy Torres. He had a six pack of beer dangling from one hand, and a large brown paper bag in the other.

"Thought you might need a beer and a cheeseburger," Andy said a little gruffly. "Moving sucks balls."

It'd been a month since Tyler had apologized to Andy. The morning after Paige left, Sam had picked him up and taken him straight to Cars & Coffee. Andy had met him with a cup of cold brew—Tyler's coffee of choice—and an unreadable expression. Tyler had greeted him with *I'm so fucking sorry, man.*

Since then, they'd trained together well, and had socialized awkwardly. Andy was clearly head over heels for his girlfriend Violet, but that didn't erase the size of Tyler's betrayal, even though Andy had proclaimed his forgiveness.

"Want to watch the game?" Tyler asked. The only thing he'd bothered to set up so far was his massive TV.

Andy nodded. "Sure."

They watched the Colorado Rockies playing at Coors Field in a silence that started off strained, but slowly relaxed into something a lot closer to comfortable. The beers probably helped with that.

"Just call her," Andy said at the bottom of the seventh inning.

Tyler raised his eyebrows. "Huh?"

"You've either been checking your phone or glaring at it the whole game. Call her. Or text her." He took a swig of his beer. "Is it the girl from the mine? Tabs mentioned something went on between you too."

Tyler nodded. “Yeah.”

“That why you moved? Garrett said she lived near Denver.”

“No,” Tyler said. “I guess I’d had enough of living alone in the woods, and I like being around the Shadow Team. Reminds me of the best bits of being in the army—you know, the camaraderie, the sense of belonging to your team.” He paused and grinned ruefully. “And also because now I’m only a couple of hours away from Paige.”

Andy grinned. “Thought so.” He settled into the plush sofa cushions. “But that’s two things I never thought Tyler Cerra would do—live like a damn hermit, *and* not be a 100% confident of what to do with a woman.”

Oh, Tyler knew *exactly* what he wanted to do with Paige. But at the top of the list, above a whole lot of infinitely dirtier wants, was to simply see her again.

“It’s harder when you’re in love,” Tyler said.

He hadn’t meant to say that.

“I get it,” Andy replied with a low laugh. “I totally get it. I wasted so much fucking time with Violet. Took me almost losing her to get my head screwed on right. You’re way ahead of the game at least admitting you’re a lovesick idiot.”

“I told her I love her.” *How had this conversation ended up here?* Baseball and beers and now . . . love? This was a world away from the conversations he and Torres used to have years ago. “But she doesn’t believe me, because I’d only known her a day.” He finished off the last of his beer. “We’ve been texting for a few weeks, I’m trying to take it slow.”

“Bit late for that,” Andy said, with a smirk.

He ran a hand through his hair. “*Fuck*. I shouldn’t have said it should I?”

“Nah,” Andy said. “If she’s the one for you, it won’t make any difference. Either she loves your stupid perfect face and bang average personality—” Tyler tossed a hamburger napkin at Andy. “—or she doesn’t.”

Andy held the napkin he’d caught just before it’d hit his head and caught

Tyler's gaze. For a moment they were both back in the restaurant at the Fox & Laughton. They were best friends ribbing each other, and their world hadn't yet splintered apart.

"For what it's worth," Andy said quietly, "I make it my policy to tell Violet I love her as often as I can. Life's too short, you know?" He screwed the napkin into a ball and tossed it back to Tyler. "Call her."

After the game was over, and Andy had headed home, Tyler again returned to his couch. It was late, but he called Paige anyway. He so desperately wanted to hear her voice.

She didn't answer.

AFTER NAVIGATING A LONG, long driveway, Paige parked her hire car outside Nancy Sandover's palatial home. Located just outside of Falcon, Nancy's ranch was utterly spectacular, a picture-perfect Rocky Mountain's ranch—all rolling hills, lush green valleys, and a backdrop of snow-tipped mountains.

Casey Taberner jogged down impressive stone steps to greet her.

"I'm so sorry I'm a bit late," Paige said hurriedly.

"Not even ten minutes, big deal! I'm just so glad you could come." It was the first time Paige had met Casey face to face. Casey was tall—although not as tall as Paige—and she was slim, but without Paige's sharp edges. She had wavy brown hair and a mega-watt smile, and she'd been keeping a close eye on Nancy. It was Nancy who'd invited Paige to visit today.

Casey led her inside and through to an enormous living room. Nancy sat perched on a leather wingback chair that faced a large picture window, through which a small herd of horses grazed nearby.

After she'd been introduced and taken a seat beside Casey on a sofa across from Nancy, Paige gestured towards a rotund chestnut horse. "Is that Sugar?"

On a low table between them were several platters of sandwiches and

cakes.

“Oh yes,” Nancy said. “Isn’t she beautiful?” She leaned forward to place her tea cup onto its saucer. The woman wasn’t at all frail in her movements, but there was a tiredness to her gaze. “You must think me terribly naïve.”

Paige knew she wasn’t talking about Sugar.

“Not at all,” she replied firmly. “I think you’re amazing. That move with the gun and the handkerchief? Seriously, wow.”

“I know!” Casey laughed. “Nancy is so kick ass. I’ve learned so much about her over the past few weeks. Did you know she was a prima ballerina before her marriage?”

From there the conversation flowed easily. They talked about everything from ballet, to cattle, to catfishing. Casey talked about a new community art space that a friend of hers had just opened, and how Nancy would be attending an upcoming still life class.

“It’s easier to agree with Casey than to argue,” Nancy said with a quirk of her lips.

Casey and the Falcon community had rallied around Nancy, and she now had reliable, trustworthy help with her horses, and a plan to meet with a financial advisor to progress moving to a small residence in town. Casey was clearly also trying to drag Nancy into the Falcon community, and while Nancy was obviously skeptical, she didn’t appear entirely against it: *I don’t mind the sound of the cozy mystery book club at the library*, Nancy conceded at one point. *I’ve agreed to go at least once.*

It was such a relief to see Nancy well and supported—that after such a devastating betrayal that she was moving forward. Still—Paige recognized a sadness in the older woman’s gaze. A sadness that of course made sense, but it made Paige damn furious with Clay.

“Are you okay?” Nancy asked suddenly.

Paige blinked, surprised. They’d been talking about something else entirely unrelated. “Of course.”

“You’re lucky you have your young man,” she said. “In my experience, love gets you through just about anything. I’m so grateful to have had that with my Brian.”

“My young man?”

Nancy looked at her like she was an imbecile. “I didn’t have anything else to do with only a dead Russian for company but listen to you two,” she said. She shook her head. “You honestly didn’t realize I could hear your conversation? Could only see your legs because of where the laptop was, but I could hear every word.”

Paige blushed, feeling silly. “I’d had no idea.”

“Don’t feel bad, I caught a glimpse of him, and he is rather deliciously distracting.”

“Tyler, you mean?” Casey asked, before placing a tiny cupcake onto her plate. “He is the *talk* of Falcon. Was rather embarrassing at The Roost the night he joined the Cars & Coffee boys for a drink. There was practically a queue of women throwing themselves at him.”

“I get it,” Nancy said, nodding sagely, making Paige laugh.

“Me too,” Paige said. “So, was anyone successful at The Roost in their efforts?”

She chewed her lip, totally failing at nonchalance.

“Were *you* there?” Nancy asked pointedly.

She frowned. “No. I was one hundred and fifty miles away.”

“There you go then,” she said efficiently. “I didn’t have to be there to know he wasn’t interested.”

Paige looked to Casey. Casey shook her head. “Nancy’s right. He barely said a word to any of them.”

Clearly that didn’t mean anything. “We’re not together,” she said, trying to explain.

Nancy lifted her chin as she studied Paige. “I hope you haven’t become cynical dealing with so many scammers,” she said in a serious tone. “It must

be difficult to still believe in love when you see it used to manipulate people every day.”

“I believe in love,” Paige said, a little defensively. As a concept, sure. Absolutely.

“Do you love your Tyler?”

Paige scoffed. “How could I? I only knew him for a day. You can’t fall in love in a day.”

“That *does* seem very sensible and wise,” Nancy said. “And if you never heard from him again, it unfortunately sounds like you were correct. Does surprise me though, he seemed so . . . ” She shrugged. “I think given the circumstances it’s reasonable I may have misinterpreted things.”

“I did hear from him again,” Paige found herself saying.

“Oh?” both Nancy and Casey said together.

“He’s been messaging me every day. And last night he called for the first time, but I didn’t answer.”

“Why not?” Nancy’s tone was stern.

“Because . . . ”

*If he talks to me he’ll realize he’s having some month-long delusion and will instantly lose interest? He’ll regret that he ever bared his soul to me, or listened to all the mess in my head and never want to see me again? He’ll—
He’ll tell me it was all a mistake, and that he doesn’t really love me.*

She took a deep breath. Suddenly the answer was obvious. “Because I’m a scared, cynical catfish investigator who finds it impossible to trust that anyone would ever love me.”

The raw, honest words hung for a long moment in the air.

But, Paige realized, those words weren’t really for Nancy or Casey. They were for her. She was finally being honest with herself.

“I—” she began, before fumbling in her handbag for her phone. She scrolled rapidly through her messages before presenting the screen to Casey. “You wouldn’t happen to know where this house is?”

Casey's smile was broad. She took the phone from Paige's hand. "Here, I'll show you on the map."

Nancy smiled. "I know that place too. If you leave now, you'll be there in fifteen minutes."

TWENTY-FOUR

TYLER HAD JUST LOST INTEREST IN UNPACKING HIS FOURTH BOX OF KITCHEN crap—*again, why the fuck did he have so much shit?*—when there was a knock on the door.

It wasn't the first knock of the day. Earlier he'd met his neighbor, a hairdresser named Pauline who began rattling off a list of Falcon's single women and men (*I don't like to assume*, she'd said) shortly after she'd handed him a tray of homemade snickerdoodles, so he approached the front door with some degree of trepidation. Cookies were welcome, speculation about his personal life, not so much. Particularly not today.

Paige hadn't called him back this morning, or texted him. He'd let her be, and instead streamed Taylor's Swift 1989 album as he'd unpacked—exactly like the lovesick idiot Andy had correctly pegged him as.

As he approached the door, through the living room window he saw a tall woman standing on his front porch. His heart skipped a beat.

"Paige," he said, as he swung the door open, his tone disbelieving.

She stood with her shoulders back, her hair in a neat high pony tail, and wore blue jeans and a short boxy white T-shirt that revealed a tiny strip of skin when she took a deep breath.

"*I'm the fucking coward,*" she said.

He kissed her.

HER BRAIN SHORT CIRCUITED as Tyler's lips touched hers.

She moaned into his mouth as she leaned into him, her hands looping around his neck. His hands were firm and possessive at her waist and hips, and his kiss was so damn sure. He *knew* she wanted this, and he was absolutely right. She kissed him back desperately.

His hand moved down to her butt as he pressed her hips against his, and he was hard against her belly.

"Tyler?" she asked when she took a shuddering breath as he kissed his way up her neck. She shivered as he licked the sensitive skin below her ear.

"You're right," he said. "We should take this inside."

"Wha—"

But he was kissing her again, and she allowed him to draw her inside, and then press her back against the wall as he slammed the door behind them.

When his hand skimmed under her T-shirt, she arched against his clever fingers for a minute . . . maybe two . . . before she tugged his hand away. He took a step back instantly, frowning as he took several harsh breaths.

"Paige?"

"Don't I need to apologize?" she asked. "Explain why I was so damn stupid? You told me you loved me, and I stomped all over it."

"It did suck."

"And then I didn't reply to your email?" she continued. "And I sent you my stupid Wordle results rather than asking if you were okay? What the hell is wrong with me?"

He stepped closer and landed his hands at her hips, rubbing his thumbs gently against the bare skin above her waistband. "As I've been trying to tell you, *nothing* is wrong with you, Paige. *Nothing.*"

"Aren't you angry with me? Don't you want me to grovel?"

His grin was wicked. "Does that involve getting on your knees in front of me?"

She laughed despite her confusion. Desire and . . . uncertainty powered through her veins. She still couldn't quite believe this was real.

"But seriously Paige, no. I'm not angry with you. Sure, I wish you'd hung around a bit longer after I handed you my heart with a bow, but . . ." he shrugged.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm sorry you wasted your first *I love you* on a woman who didn't deserve it. I—"

He gripped her hips hard. "Wait," he interrupted. "Paige, *why* are you here if you believe that *I love you* was wasted? That it wasn't deserved?"

"I screwed it up."

"No," he said. "You freaked out a little, and that's understandable. Maybe it wasn't the best time for a declaration of love, but I don't regret it."

"You don't?"

He curled his fingers into the top of her jeans, tugging her a little closer to him. "I still don't understand why you're here if you don't believe what I said."

"I'm here because I wanted to see you," she said. "Because I missed you. Because I finally worked out that keeping my distance to avoid getting hurt is pointless if it hurts this much."

"I missed you too," he said. He held her gaze. "I love you, Paige."

Automatically she shook her head. "No, you don't have to say that—"

"I'm quite aware of that," he said firmly. "I'm saying it because it's true. You not believing me, or arguing, doesn't make it any less true."

"But—"

"You know what also doesn't make it less true? Freaking out and telling me loving you is stupid and that *it'll wear off*." Paige cringed at the memory. "Or not replying to my email. Or being late to something. Or being a hot mess—whatever that is." He shrugged. "I didn't need a groveling apology when you turned up on my doorstep, because I love *you*, Paige, *all* of you. And that includes the shit that happened in your past that makes freaking out

the way you did perfectly understandable. I came on a bit strong, I guess—but the way I feel about you is fucking strong, Paige.”

The way I feel about you is fucking strong.

Those words bounced about in her brain.

“The way I feel is strong enough that it can handle going it alone. I don’t need you to say you love me back, not yet. You can be sensible and logical, that’s totally cool. Just know it won’t change how I feel, not at all.”

Oh, she so wanted to believe that.

His eyebrows drew together. “You’re still a skeptic,” he said quietly.

“It’s my job.”

He tugged her suddenly toward him, so she ended up pressed against him chest-to-chest and hip-to-hip.

“Do I feel real, Paige?” She nodded. “I *am* real. I’m not the construction of some scammer in Ghana or Russia. I’m not some probably jealous college student you worked with at Arby’s. I’m *real*, and the way I feel is real.” He bent his head to whisper harshly against her ear. “You’ve *felt* how real I am, Paige. You’ve had my hands on your body. *In* your body. My cock inside you.” She shuddered. “And I’ve *been* real with you, too. I’ve been *me*, in a way I haven’t been for years. In a *better* way than I was before because my me with you is true, authentic—and flawed. My realness is so fucking flawed Paige, but I’m okay with that now, because of you.”

She held his gaze, and it was impossible to see anything but truth in his incredible eyes.

Why couldn’t she let go and believe him? Because even now, something held her back.

“I didn’t come here today expecting you to love me,” she said softly. He frowned but let her speak. “I came here because I realized I’m a scared, cynical catfish investigator who doesn’t trust that anyone would ever love me.” She laughed. “Casey Taberner and Nancy Sandover hoped me work that out.”

“Huh?”

She took a deep breath. “I’ll explain later. What matters is I know that I’m cynical, I know I find it so hard to trust that anyone could love me—let alone unconditionally. I know who I am, and I realized it’s holding me back. But, I can’t just switch it off, as badly as I want to. Especially with you.” She reached up to trace the shape of his eyebrows, and then his cheek, and his jaw. He was so beautiful—and in so many ways far beyond his physical appearance.

“Why especially with me?”

Her gaze flicked away from him, absently landing on piles of packing boxes further down the hall. She registered music playing in another room. “Because until you, Tyler, what I was missing out on was just an idea, you know? A concept that other people had, but not me. Now . . .”

She dragged her gaze back to him. “Now I’ve had it. I’ve experienced it, I’ve experienced this connection, this intensity . . . this *electricity* with you? And I agree, it’s real. So goddamn real. And that makes it so much scarier to lose.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Paige.”

“But—” She stopped herself, and closed her eyes. “See? It’s so hard to turn that off. That’s the thing. I didn’t come here needing you to love me, I came here needing to love myself enough to risk that you didn’t.” She opened her eyes, only working this out as she stood here with the strength of his arms around her, and subject to his full, thoughtful attention. “That’s what you’ve shown me, Tyler. That I am worthy of love—and most of all my own.”

“You are so worthy of love, Paige.”

Her throat was tight, and her eyes prickled with tears. She didn’t care. “So are you.” She took a deep breath. “So, I’m here not needing you to love me now, or tomorrow, or in a week, a month or a year. Even though I want that more than anything. I can’t control it, no matter how cautious or cynical I am. But I’m strong enough now to try. Because of you.” Her cheeks were

damp with tears. “I love you, Tyler.”

“I love you too, my beautiful, brave, Paige.”

He kissed her, and kissed her—for ages, just standing there, gentle kisses that covered her face, her lips, her neck. She held onto him tight, knowing absolutely that she loved this man, that she loved him more than she thought was even possible.

He kissed her mouth again, before taking the tiniest step back.

His lips quirked just a little as he studied her. “You’re not quite there, are you Paige?”

“What do you mean? I love you so damn much.”

He laughed, and she saw a sheen of tears in his gaze. “I know. And that’s fucking amazing. But you . . . you haven’t quite let go, have you?”

How could he know?

He smiled. “I can see it in your eyes. Like you’re waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Or for everyone to start laughing at her at Arby’s.

“You don’t need me, Paige,” he continued. “If I fuck this up, you will still be wonderful, amazing you. But you *do* have me, do you understand? You have me heart and soul. You *had* me heart and soul, I think, with your look of disdain at the Guneo gas station—or if not then, definitely when you wouldn’t leave me behind when those assholes were shooting at us. Do you know how incredible that was? How incredible you are? It kills me that you can’t see it.”

She watched as a single tear slid down his cheek. A tear *for her*. For them. From this amazing, strong soldier who . . . who *loved her*.

“You love me,” she said, with a laugh. “*You love me.*”

“So damn much.”

And finally, finally, she believed it.

EPILOGUE

FOUR WEEKS LATER

PAIGE WALKED INTO THE KITCHEN, hugged herself, and took a deep breath.

“Hey, you okay babe?”

She turned to see Tyler in the doorway of his kitchen. *Their* kitchen, really, given she’d moved in this week. It was late on a Sunday afternoon, and Tyler had invited the Falcon-based Shadow Team and their partners for a pot luck barbeque on their back porch.

“Of course,” she said. She was fine, really.

He wrapped his arms around her, tugging her against his chest. “It’s been a hell of a week, maybe this wasn’t my best idea.”

Packing up her little house so it could be let out, moving here, unpacking, and still trying to run her business . . . yes. It had been a big week. Tyler had been by her side every step of the way—in fact with Sam, Caleb, Dev and Andy he’d led the strongest and most efficient team of home movers in existence. Still, emotionally it was a lot.

“Everyone is so nice,” she said.

Casey had also come along. Paige had been told Casey didn’t know about the Shadow Team—the only person here tonight who didn’t—which was a

little weird to adjust to, but it had been wonderful having a familiar face.

“I’ll send everyone home? They won’t mind. Everyone was just excited to meet you, and I was desperate to show you off.”

She looked up at him and smiled. *I was desperate to show you off.* She believed him. Every day since she’d turned up on his doorstep, her love for Tyler had only grown, and as had her trust in his love for her. He was desperate to show her off, it was obvious in the way he spoke about her, how he touched her, and how his face had lit up as he’d introduced her to his friends. At times it still felt unreal—this new life of hers. Not his love, though. That always felt 100% real.

She stood on tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I love you,” she said. “And your friends are great.”

Cherry, Violet and Lucy were three absolutely gorgeous women, and she’d felt a little intimidated on meeting them. But they’d instantly done all they could to make her feel at ease, and there hadn’t been one disbelieving gasp at the idea of Tyler choosing a woman like Paige.

Ah, she realized. That’s it.

“What are you smiling about?”

“Something really silly I didn’t even realize I was worrying about.” She shook her head. “But it’s gone now, I promise. I just needed a moment, I think, to absorb everything that’s changed in my life. To define myself differently, you know? I’m still me, obviously . . .”

“Do *not* change,” he murmured, and she laughed.

“I won’t. But now I’m me . . . with you. You loving me is one thing, but these past few weeks it hasn’t been like this, I guess—it’s been messages, and phone calls, and all those nights you stayed at my place. We haven’t *been a couple*, but tonight, we are so a couple.”

“We are coupling so hard.”

She laughed. “Exactly. And it’s awesome. You’re awesome, we’re awesome—this house is awesome, your friends . . .”

“Sometimes assholes, mostly awesome.”

She kissed him again. “I’m just so happy, Tyler. And it’s overwhelming.”

“I meant it when I said I’d send everyone home.”

She shook her head. “No, definitely not necessary.”

He kissed her, and somehow they’d moved, and her back was pressed against the refrigerator as their kiss became something lush and heated.

His kisses trailed up to her ear. “Starting to feel very necessary that I send everyone home . . . ”

“Cez!”

They broke apart and turned to see Andy and Violet.

“Sorry!” said Violet. “We were tasked with taking the sides outside, Sam has determined that he has grilled everything to perfection. He even checked with a thermometer—I’m impressed, actually.”

Andy just looked at Tyler with an unreadable expression.

Paige opened the fridge and started handing out salads. Violet efficiently exited the kitchen, but Andy paused, potato salad in hand.

“You’re happy,” he said, looking at Tyler.

He nodded. “I am.”

Andy turned to her. “He’s a good man, Paige,” he said, his words a little gruff. “You look after him, okay?”

She nodded. “I know, and I will.”

Andy clapped a hand on Tyler’s shoulder, then strode abruptly from the room.

Paige looked up to catch Tyler’s gaze. “You okay?”

He nodded, then smiled—his attention flicking to where Andy had exited, and then back to her. “The best.”

“I know that feeling,” she said.

And uncaring of the bowls of corn bread and coleslaw between them, Tyler kissed her again.

THANK you for reading The Protector's Mistake! Would you like to spend more time with the Shadow Team? [Join my newsletter for free bonus scenes and more!](#)

Next up in the Shadow Team Six series will be Garrett's book, The Protector's Return, which will be out in 2024. While you're waiting, for more hot protector romance, check out my Elite SWAT series.

Happy reading!

Leah xx

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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RITA® Award-winning author Leah Ashton writes fast-paced, sexy romantic suspense and smart, modern contemporary romance. All her books feature strong heroines, deliciously heroic heroes and swoon worthy happily ever afters.

Leah lives in Perth, Western Australia with her gorgeous husband, two amazing daughters and the best intentions to meal plan and have an effortlessly tidy home. When she's not writing, Leah loves all day breakfast, rambling conversations and laughing until she cries. She really hates cucumber. And scary movies.



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