



ARGUING FOR
ALEXA

A HEROES OF LONE STAR NOVEL

ELIZABELLA BAKER

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Acknowledgments

Also By Elizabetha Baker

Chapter 1

Her sister, Lucy, was going to kill her; one cryptic text message before she was forced to destroy her phone. Alexa could only imagine the worry she caused, but after everything Lucy had been through, she owed it to her sister to let her know she wouldn't be around for a while.

Fuck, fuck, fuckity. That was the only thing that could accurately express the amount of trouble she was in. And she didn't just mean with her sister.

“You have the right to remain silent.”

She ignored the rest of the Miranda rights that the officer read her. She knew them by heart, so she didn't need him to tell her that she had the right to an attorney, not that she could call one, or that anything she said could be held against her. She was more than willing to keep her mouth shut. She had to. She was a CIA operative operating on American soil. She

knew the consequences if she got caught. It wasn't good. The only question she had to ask herself was did her cover get blown or did someone from the agency rat her out? Only a select handful of people knew she was heading to the small town in Texas.

Alexa winced from having her arms yanked behind her back. It wouldn't do her any good to fight back, but damn, did that hurt. She was tempted to tell the deputy to take it easy. They were on the same side of the law. The dead body just a few feet away meant that probably wouldn't happen and the chances of him believing her were slim to none.

Alexa looked down into the lifeless eyes of the woman she was meant to meet. Shannon had been her CI and the reason she was back in Texas. This should've been a quick stop, a chance to get the information she needed, and then pop in to see her family like she had done a dozen other times. She was overdue to see her brother Zack and her adorable nephew.

Except when she rolled up to their usual meeting spot, Alexa found Shannon dead. Her neck snapped, eyes completely glazed over.

She had been checking the body for information when the deputy slapping cuffs on her showed up. Alexa had only a few seconds to send out a quick text to her sister and smash the phone. Not her finest moment, considering now her family had no way of contacting her, but she had panicked. Even with all her field training, seeing her CI dead had paralyzed her for the moment. Precious seconds she should've used to prove her innocence were wasted and she would never get them back.

“Do you understand each of these rights I have explained to you?”

Alexa had zoned out, and by the irritation in the deputy's voice, she was going to assume he had asked her that question already. Oops. She quickly agreed, doing her best to fix the already screwed-up situation.

It didn't help. She was still stuffed into the back of the police car, still taken to the county sheriff's office because the small town didn't have its own police department. How did

she know it was a small town? How did she know that the only police department in the town belonged to the school district? Because she'd researched this town within an inch of its life.

Alexa purposely picked this area because of how small it was. Barely two square miles and less than five thousand people would normally cause a problem. Most people would assume small-town life would lead to the locals being suspicious of all outsiders. But she knew exactly how to circumvent that. Alexa did the opposite of hiding. The locals knew her as the woman who traveled a lot for work—not a lie—and stopped for some of Ms. Benson's honey every time she passed through, plus a few other goodies from the local stores or the occasional Saturday farmer's market. Alexa had inserted herself into this little town, but now it just might blow up in her face.

Once at the sheriff's office, she mindlessly went through the motions while she was fingerprinted, her picture taken, and eventually tossed in a cell. She declined her one phone call. Her family was off-limits for the moment, not until she had a game plan. They would rush to her side without any questions, but she couldn't put them in danger before she knew what was happening.

She contemplated her handler but thought better of it. She needed more information before she blew her cover, and he was one of the few who knew she was in Texas today.

Lying back with one foot planted on the ground and the other bent and firmly situated on the bench, Alexa locked her fingers over her belly and thought about what led her to where she was now.

For three years she worked with Shannon as her CI. The woman was a truck stop waitress by day and a call girl at night. The information that people shared when they thought no one was listening was astonishing. Working straight over the Texas/Mexico border, Shannon heard it all and was more than willing to share what she learned.

Oftentimes, it was related to drug trafficking. That information she passed to a friend she had in another agency.

Sometimes, it was about human trafficking, and again, she passed that info along to the right people. But this time it was something bigger. At least that's what the cryptic text Alexa received had said.

Think "national secrets" big.

Now that Alexa thought about it, something was off. Never had Shannon given details when she reached out. It was always just a date and time. *Idiot!* Alexa had let her need to prove to her handler that Shannon was worth keeping as a CI distract her and she missed something crucial. She made the ultimate screw-up as an agent and now was paying the price.

Alexa was still formulating a plan when the clomp of boots down the tiled floor caught her attention. She braced for what was coming next but she didn't do it well enough.

"Alexa Lynch."

Her entire body locked up at the mention of her legal name. *Fuck, fuck, fuckity!* Her cover was already blown; that wasn't the name she took with the CIA. Her only request when she joined was that her old identity be scrubbed and a new one formed to help protect her family. Something was wrong, and she had a bad feeling it would only get worse.

Chapter 2

Colt Allen looked down at the perfectly pressed uniform and sighed for the tenth time that morning. He didn't regret the career he chose, but he expected it to be different. He became a corrections officer because he wanted to make a difference. He wanted stability after his life had been turned upside down during his senior year of high school. It wasn't every day that someone realized they wouldn't be using their free ride to the university of their dreams.

He didn't regret for a single minute the choices he made. His parents praised him for his maturity. His football coach had been disappointed, but he understood. His small town had mourned, but that was more because they lost the bragging rights they had hoped to earn. Now thirteen years later, most had forgotten that he was an almost football star and just treated him like a regular guy.

“All set for Makenna’s birthday party?” Greg, his former football teammate, current co-worker and best friend, asked.

“Ha. ‘All set’ isn’t exactly the phrase I would use.” Colt straightened his uniform once again.

Their shift was just starting and already he was looking forward to it being over. He had a million things to do and yet nothing was getting accomplished because he spent every spare second fighting with his ex. It was exhausting, to say the least.

“Makenna giving you a hard time about it or the bitch?”

The bitch, as his friend so affectionally called Amber, was his ex, and Greg never liked her. Amber was Colt’s high school sweetheart. She’d been the captain of the cheerleading squad and the most popular girl in school. They had started dating their freshman year after the town soon realized his potential as a running back. Everyone loved to brag that they were the quintessential couple. If only they could have seen the future.

“My bitch of an ex. Nothing is ever good enough for her and she can’t understand that Makenna doesn’t want to do the things Amber is trying to do. The two of them are polar opposites, and it’s like Amber can’t see that.”

His daughter was the light of his life, the reason he was willing to give up everything he ever dreamed of. Amber had it in her head that he would still go to college, play football and eventually make it pro just like they always talked about. He could still remember the fight the day he told her he had changed his mind.

“What do you mean you’re not going to Texas A&M? That was the plan! College and then pro. I was going to be a pro football player’s wife! Not some farmer’s wife.”

Amber had screamed for two hours straight and he had been so worried that she would hurt the baby. Greg had hinted at the time that he thought Amber purposely got pregnant so Colt wouldn’t leave her and, until that moment, he had thought his best friend was just jealous. But something in his mind clicked

that day and just maybe his friend wasn't far off on his assessment.

That didn't stop Colt from providing for Amber or marrying her when her parents pushed for it, but it wasn't a happy marriage. They fought often and most nights slept in separate beds. It wasn't until he caught her cheating for the second time that he finally put his foot down and demanded a divorce. He would do just about anything for his daughter, except become the laughingstock of his small town while his wife hopped from different man to different man. Yeah, he refused to do that. Not even for Makenna.

"I knew I loved my niece. That little girl might give you a run for your money but it won't be because of boys or getting into trouble."

No, not his almost thirteen-year-old daughter. Makenna was everything her mother wasn't. Sure, she hung around with boys, but his little girl would punch one of them in the face if they ever tried anything with her.

"You got that right. Pretty sure Henderson's boy is scared shitless of her. The other day she challenged him to ride one of his father's bulls. I thought both father and son were going to shit a brick. Needless to say, Makenna got a good laugh in." He shook his head.

That was his daughter. A farm girl through and through. It didn't matter that he hadn't followed in his own father's footsteps and taken over the family farm, even if it was only a part-time farm. Makenna was over there each day, helping take care of the cows, horses, and whatever other animals his parents bought on a whim. By the time the girl was five, she was out in the field on the combine with her grandfather.

"Thatta girl. Show those boys who's boss. Maybe she could come speak with Junior. I think my boy needs a little hardening up."

Colt laughed. Greg's boy was only three and a hellion in his own right. But like any good son, he was also a mama's boy. Greg's wife, Sadie, spoiled that kid rotten.

A sharp whistle reminded them that it was time to start working, and Colt felt lighter after his talk. He often needed to remind himself that just because things didn't turn out as he wanted, it didn't mean they weren't exactly how they were supposed to be. His own mama had told him that the day Amber confessed she was pregnant.

Colt was two hours into his shift when he got word that he would be receiving a prisoner transport from the county sheriff. The county jail was a separate building from the one where they initially processed those brought in. By the time they made it to him, charges had been filed, and the prisoners were awaiting trial. The county jail didn't house hardened criminals, not for long anyway, which was why when he looked down at the paperwork he was sent, he was mildly surprised.

There was no way the young, innocent-looking woman in the picture could be a murderer, but that's what it stated. She was found standing over the body of another young woman in his little town. He wondered who the murdered woman was. There were barely five thousand people that lived here, and almost every one of them knew each other. Generations after generations stayed.

Colt was still staring at the paperwork in shock when the woman whose golden eyes he couldn't look away from appeared before him. Not like a fantasy, but the real, flesh-and-bone kind. Her mug shot didn't do her justice. The gold in the picture was more intense in real life and right now they were burning a hole right through him.

This woman wasn't shying away. Her head wasn't held down in shame. Confidence poured out of her, but there was something about her eyes that transfixed him. It was almost like she was sad.

Colt shook his head. It was highly inappropriate to be staring at her the way he was. She was a prisoner, and it was his job to process her paperwork. He nodded his head to Deputy Sampson that he had it from there. Grabbing a drab jumpsuit from the pile, he passed it to her, and a shock of electricity caught him off guard when their fingers touched.

His gaze flew to hers to see if she felt the same. If the confused look she gave him was any indication, she had.

Silently, he passed her along to one of the female guards, but one look back as she walked away was all it took for him to know that he was in way over his head. This woman was going to be trouble.

Chapter 3

Inappropriate. The word had been on repeat inside her head since she was transferred. It was entirely inappropriate that the second she walked into the jail and was turned over to the corrections officer, her body had been focused on one thing. She couldn't help but notice the way his body filled out his uniform or the fact that she didn't see a ring on his finger. Yes, she looked. Again, inappropriate but necessary. It only took one time for her to learn that lesson the hard way. One disastrous relationship her freshman year of college and Alexa had sworn off dating. Hook-ups with single uncomplicated men were the only way to go.

It was a good thing Alexa hadn't seen him again since she was handed over to the female guard to search her, but that didn't stop her from thinking about his dark eyes. The hint of confusion she had first seen. If she were in any other situation, she would have asked what the look was about, but she wasn't.

Their situation was *inappropriate*. There was that word again but she didn't have a better one. And really, she should be thinking of something other than the way the guard looked.

Like perhaps, who she could call. Her first instinct would normally be her handler, but just the thought gave her pause. Antonio had been the one to suggest she cut Shannon loose, and now, just two days later, the woman was dead. It could be a coincidence, or it could be the CIA's way of blacklisting her. Just the fact that they knew her real name when she was fingerprinted was assurance enough. The day she joined, she stopped being Alexa Lynch to everyone but her family and became Alexa Smith, a new identity her employer was happy to give her. Were they just as happy to take it back?

There was only one way to find out. At the first opportunity, she was calling her handler; she wanted to hear Antonio say it. Facing problems head-on was her specialty. She wasn't going to stop now, and if they were blacklisting her, then it gave her time to formulate another plan.

All these thoughts crashed around in her head as she was escorted to her cell. Alexa had to bite back a chuckle when she finally stepped through the opening and listened as the door closed and locked behind her. The situation wasn't funny, not in the literal sense, but if only her siblings could see her now.

From the time she was born, she was nicknamed the wild child, a moniker she earned more and more the older she got. Before she finally confessed to her sister what she actually did for a living, and why she was constantly traveling, Alexa was sure her family assumed she frequented a jail cell often. They would constantly tease her about the trouble they thought she was getting into. The joke was on them; she worked for the CIA, but suddenly the tables were turned and now she really was the wild child they teased her of being. She wasn't sure if the laughter she felt bubbling inside her was because her family would be shocked, or if she was finally cracking.

Alexa dropped onto the thin mattress, if that's what she could call it. The thing was so damn thin she was probably better off sleeping on the floor. Well, maybe not. The hard

concrete didn't look all that comfortable and was likely very cold.

She listened to the noises around her, and the mumbling of other inmates. She was fortunate that she didn't have a cellmate, but she knew she could get one at any moment. She just had to hope that her circumstances would change before that happened. With any luck, she would be released once they learned that she wasn't the one to kill Shannon.

She thought back to finding Shannon's body. Other than leaning down for a quick assessment, she didn't remember actually touching the body. There shouldn't be any fingerprints or DNA to connect to her. Plus, it had been weeks since she'd last had met Shannon. However, there was the fact that they had texted to set up the meeting. While she had wasted her time paralyzed, she should've been removing evidence. Now it was likely the sheriff's office had Shannon's burner phone. There would be a text thread of all the times they met. The only saving grace was the burner phone she used wasn't the same one she smashed. That phone was hidden in her car and, if things would just go right for five minutes, the officers wouldn't find it. She doubted she would get that lucky, but stranger things had happened.

The rest of the day both flew by and dragged on all at the same time. Alexa was introduced to her young assistant district attorney. One look and she knew damn well that the man representing her likely passed the bar within the last six months. He was as green as they came. His upbeat and positive attitude grated on her nerves despite him only being a few years older than her twenty-five years. It was blatantly obvious the man had yet to see the true nature of the legal system. Otherwise, he wouldn't be so peppy.

Alexa had refused to talk to him other than to say that she wasn't guilty. His presence did help her in one way though; she finally got the one phone call she so desperately wanted.

Turned out, it was a wasted call. Alexa knew it the moment Antonio answered the call, saying he didn't know any Lynch gal and to never call that number again. Considering even her handler didn't know her true name, it was a clear sign that

something was going on, and that something was the CIA was
fucking her over. Or at least, one someone within the agency.

Chapter 4

The workday was over and Colt was more than happy to get away from the county jail. To get away from a pair of golden eyes that made him feel things that he had long since pushed away. He didn't need to see her again to remember the hint of sadness behind the stubborn stare.

Thinking about Alexa Lynch, yes, he peeked at her name when he was handed the transfer papers, was inappropriate on so many levels. She was a prisoner. A criminal. Charged with the murder of a woman. And he was a corrections officer. His sole job was to supervise inmates, not lust after them. Something he was ashamed to admit he needed to remind himself of countless times in the past few hours. And again, the closer he got to his parents' house.

His mother was great about watching Makenna after school. Colt was fortunate that his job at the jail was first shift. It was rare that he was called in for overtime which would lead to

him working nights or weekends. As the primary care provider for his daughter, he needed that stability. Something his ex-wife could never understand. While all the overtime and extra shifts would be great, financially he was fine. Neither he nor his daughter cared about all the extras. They lived simply and were happy.

His problems with his ex melted away the moment he drove down his parents' long dirt driveway and watched as his daughter ran out to meet him, her pigtails bouncing in the wind behind her. Despite her mother's attempt to make her grow up, his little girl still loved to run around looking like Laura from the *Little House on the Prairie*. Colt knew it wouldn't last forever, so he would cherish the time while he could. He would be thrilled if she never grew up.

"Dad!" Makenna's enthusiastic giggle greeted him when he opened his truck door. "Gramma let me ride Thunder today!"

He stopped mid-step and looked over his daughter's shoulder to meet his mother's gaze. Her unapologetic smile should've pissed him off. Thunder was a thoroughbred with a temperament; not exactly the kind of horse he wanted his young daughter to be riding.

"Thought we talked about this, Ma."

He gave his mother the best stern face he had in his arsenal, but he knew it didn't faze her when she merely chuckled and waved him off. Claire Allen wasn't a woman easily intimidated. Not after her nearly forty-year marriage to Buck Allen.

"You've got no faith in me, son," his mother chided him. "Makenna is more than capable of handling any horse she wants. She's not your little baby anymore."

He looked down at his daughter's sweet face. His mother had one thing right, Makenna wasn't a little girl anymore. As an almost teenager, she proved just how capable she was each day. Just that morning, he was bragging about how she challenged Henderson's boy to ride a bull, and now here he was complaining about her riding a horse that, deep down, he knew she could handle.

“You’re right, Ma, but maybe next time you could wait until I’m around. I love seeing my girl show off.” He winked down at his daughter.

“I don’t show off, Dad.” Makenna rolled her eyes and all he could do was laugh. Everyone said that having a teenage daughter was going to be tough, but secretly he couldn’t wait. Not if she continued to be this fun-loving.

“Of course not, sweetie.” He gave her a smile and a tug of her ponytail. “Now where is Papa? I have a question for him.”

“Did someone say they were looking for me?”

Colt turned at the sound of his father’s voice. In a pair of dusty jeans and a dirty shirt, a stranger wouldn’t realize that the man walking up to him was actually the county sheriff. The whole reason Colt chose to be a corrections officer after he learned that he was going to be a father was because of the position his own father held. From a young age, he was taught to protect others. Which was why Colt struggled with just the mere thought of speaking with his father about his job. He hadn’t planned to ask about Alexa, but now that he was here, he had to try.

“Makenna, sweetie. Can you go grab your stuff while I speak to your grandfather? Then we can get home and have dinner.”

“Make it lasagna from the diner and you have yourself a deal,” she answered sweetly.

Colt shook his head. He was being played and he knew it, but he was still going to cave. His daughter knew damn well he had a weakness for lasagna. Especially when Mrs. Nancy made it.

“You’ve got yourself a deal. Now go on.”

Makenna ran inside, followed by his mother. He didn’t even have to ask her. Ten years in the same field as his father and his mother knew when shop talk was coming. Unlike most women, his mother hated gossip and never bothered to listen in on what was happening in town.

“Now that you’ve effectively gotten rid of everyone, what’s this about, son?”

His father wasn’t stupid either. While most of the time they kept work business away from the home, it wasn’t unheard of for them to talk about things that crossed for them.

He rubbed his hand along his beard as he thought of the best way to broach the subject. Directly asking about a prisoner didn’t seem like the best course of action, so instead, he tried a different tactic.

“The woman who was murdered today. Was it someone from town? I figured if it was someone local, we would’ve heard some talk.”

Colt avoided mentioning that he had been the one to process the suspect, although it was likely his father already knew. Deputy Sampson was a good friend of his father and had been the one to transfer Alexa.

“The woman’s name was Shannon Hart, and no, she wasn’t a local. Her driver’s license shows she lived about two hours south of here, so not sure what she was doing in town. Actually, not sure what either woman was doing in town. The woman we found standing over the body didn’t have a license, but when we fingerprinted her, her last known residence came back to a place in Houston.”

“So likely not traveling together.”

“Two separate vehicles and no one in town saw them together. Not that my deputies have had a chance to interview everyone, but like you said, small-town people talk and so far no one has, except to say they would never have expected that nice woman was a murderer. Apparently, she passed through town every few months and always made sure to shop locally. Her favorite place was Ms. Benson’s.”

Ms. Benson’s honey was the best and the old woman refused to sell it anywhere but through her own stand at the farmer’s market, despite many of the local shops offering her space. He could see how that would be a favorite. But what really shocked him was that, if Alexa stopped into town so

often that the people knew her, how was it he missed her all those times?

“So, maybe there’s more to the story,” he tossed out in an offhand comment.

“Nope, don’t do that,” his father snapped.

“Don’t do what?” he asked, even though he already knew what his father was going to say. It was always the same. His father felt like Colt needed to find the good in people. It wasn’t inaccurate, but he wasn’t nearly as gullible as his father made him out to be. It only took one lesson for him to learn that his ex-wife would never change. Correction, two. But still, he learned. He had hardened over the years.

“Don’t go thinking you can save her. That woman was found standing over the dead body. She didn’t call for help. In fact, she smashed her phone when my deputy showed up. If that doesn’t scream guilty, then I don’t know what does.”

Colt tried to heed his father’s warning, but a flash of golden eyes popped into his head. Was he letting himself be manipulated? It wasn’t like he had the chance to speak to the woman. She didn’t have the slightest idea about what he was thinking. Hell, she probably didn’t even remember that he was the guard who passed her off.

Luckily for him, Colt didn’t have the chance to say more before Makenna was bouncing down the front steps and headed his way.

“Dad, are you and Papa done talking? I’m hungry and Grandma said I could only have one cookie while I waited.”

So much sass in one simple statement. Even his hard-ass father cracked a smirk. But he supposed there wasn’t much that Makenna could do that his father wouldn’t indulge. She was his only grandchild and probably the only one he would ever get; a drawback of his parents having just one kid.

“Yeah, we’re done talking, kiddo. Grab your stuff and say goodbye.”

Makenna wasted no time hugging her grandparents, and Colt didn’t miss the fact that his mother snuck her a bag full of

cookies.

They were halfway to the diner when Makenna spoke up.

“Mom called me today.”

He gritted his teeth at the uncertainty in her voice. The only time his little girl ever sounded unsure of anything was when she spoke about her mother. It made him hate his ex-wife that much more.

“Oh yeah? What did she have to say?”

Colt tried to keep his voice upbeat. He had promised himself a long time ago that he wouldn't speak badly about Amber. She was still Makenna's mother and he would never have it said that he was the reason his daughter didn't have a good relationship with the woman. It sucked that Amber didn't live by the same code.

“Am I being selfish because I don't want to have a big party?”

He cursed his ex-wife for the millionth time. This not speaking badly about Amber in front of Makenna was getting harder and harder.

In Amber's opinion, it was all about her image. In high school, he had thought it was great that she was invited everywhere and constantly had plans, but now he understood the difference. None of those people ever cared about Amber. They only cared about being popular. He didn't want that for his daughter and he liked that she didn't care about those things. But if Amber had her way, she would certainly make sure Makenna followed in the same footsteps.

“No, kiddo. You're not selfish at all. You have every right to choose the type of party you want, and if only a few friends is what you want, then so be it. I will back every decision you make.”

“It's just that Mom says I need to invite all the girls in my class. Especially the popular ones so that I can start high school on the right foot, but those girls are mean and they make fun of Sarah. I don't want those kinds of girls at my party.”

Some days, the maturity of his daughter surprised him. Sarah was his daughter's best friend and he could see why the popular girls were mean. The little girl still had her chubby cheeks and, now that she was entering puberty, acne was starting to mar her face. Something that was completely normal for pre-teens but unfortunately there were more Ambers in Makenna's class than nice girls, like his daughter.

"I'm proud of you for sticking by your friend. Sarah is lucky to have you, and vice versa. Don't worry about your mom. She'll come around."

Colt flat-out lied to his daughter, but it was better than telling her what he really thought. There was no way Amber would ever change. She was a grown woman stuck in her teenage years, who wanted to live vicariously through her daughter. The same way Amber's mother lived through her. He would do his best to make sure that never happened.

A short time later, they were seated inside the diner, surrounded by the smells of warm bread and homemade marinara sauce. Mrs. Nancy herself appeared at the table the moment they were seated.

"Well, if it isn't my two favorite people," she cooed. "Makenna, sweetie, you get more beautiful every time I see you. And look at your handsome daddy! Being a good man and bringing you here for your favorite meal. Lasagna for the both of you tonight?"

A simple, enthusiastic *yes, ma'am* and Mrs. Nancy was off to get them drinks and bread, just as she did every week when they came in. It was his and Makenna's Tuesday night ritual for as long as he could remember.

Colt enjoyed his evening with his daughter and pushed all thoughts of a dark-haired beauty out of his mind. At least, until he saw her during his next shift.

Chapter 5

Alexa looked around her cell and sighed. She had slept like shit last night. She might as well have been sleeping on a piece of wood. Someone farther down the cell block had been tapping on the metal bars all night. She didn't know if they were nervous or simply suffered from insomnia, but either way, it didn't help her sleeping situation. Each time Alexa had thought she was about to finally fall asleep, the noise had woken her back up. If she were anywhere else, she would've demanded they stop, but since she was doing her best not to draw any more attention to herself, she quickly shut those urges down.

Now she was miserable, tired, and desperately wanted a hot shower. Years of living on the road hadn't prepared her for jail. Sure, she didn't have an actual bed or home to call her own, but at least she knew she would go to sleep in a relatively decent bed each night. That wasn't the case anymore.

She longed to see one of her brothers. She didn't care which one. It didn't matter that Brooks, Zack, or Garrett annoyed the shit out of her. Alexa would never complain about their bullshit again. It had been years since she had the chance to exchange more than just an email with her fourth brother. Rhett was deployed, and the few times he was free, she had been busy with work. Now she wished she had taken the time. Besides her big sister, Lucy, Rhett would feel her imprisonment the most. Growing up, they were the youngest and close. Irish twins, as people liked to call them. Only ten months separated them, and because of the way their birthdays landed, they had been in the same grade. It threw many people for a loop. She missed that carefree time in her life. The revelry with her siblings.

With the exception of Lucy, her family had no idea whom she worked for. It had felt good to finally confess that secret. For six years she was forced to lie to her family. At first, it was fun. The thrill of it was like nothing she had ever felt before, having a secret that no one knew about. Her family thought she was off job-hopping and traveling the world. While Alexa knew they worried about her, it was almost expected she would live the life she portrayed. She wouldn't fault her family for those thoughts. Not when she had carefully laid the groundwork early. Even in high school, she hadn't been like other high schoolers. She wasn't popular, not in the traditional sense. Yes, she attended parties but mostly because that's what people expected of the wild child. Little did they know she went there to people-watch. To observe the behaviors of her fellow classmates. People intrigued her, so when the CIA recruited her, she was more than happy to join the cause.

Now she was thinking maybe it wasn't the smartest choice. The individuals she thought she could trust were proving her wrong. It was a harsh lesson to learn.

Alexa moved through her day on automatic. When she was confined to her cell, she used the time to think and prepare. When she was out of her cell, she kept her head on a swivel. One word about who she worked for, or used to, and things would go from sucky to worse in a heartbeat. It didn't matter that the place was only the county jail and most people here

were simply waiting for their trial. If she could be housed there with charges of murder, then so could someone else. Except that person might not be innocent, like she was.

Thinking of her innocence had her thinking again about Shannon. Did her CI set her up or was she an innocent victim as well? Alexa wanted to think that Shannon wouldn't do that. They had worked together for years. She had brought Shannon on as her CI when she realized the woman had the knack for finding the worst men. But it turned out those awful men shared secrets when they thought Shannon wasn't paying attention. And those secrets helped Alexa do her job just a little better. At least they did until something changed. What that something was, well, that was still to be determined.

“Alexa Lynch.”

She jolted at her name. What was even worse was the fact that the guard also happened to be the same one from the day before. The one whose touch sent an electrical shock through her entire body.

Using the excuse of keeping her movements slow so as not to appear threatening, Alexa took the extra seconds to admire the man. The name on his badge read: Allen. She assumed it was the last name and wondered what his first name was. She would like to think it was something strong like Thor or Bruce. Okay, that was extremely unlikely, and it was obvious she needed to lay off the *Avenger* movies for a bit, but a strong name fit his rugged look.

There was just something about his squared jaw covered in black scruff that made her want to run her fingers along the area to see if it was as soft as it looked. But also made him look tough in the sense that he could easily toss her over his shoulder and carry her away to have his wicked way with her.

Alexa could feel the heat in her cheeks and forced the unwelcome thoughts away. If the guard noticed the way she flushed, he didn't let on. Actually, he didn't look at her face at all. Probably a good thing too. The last thing she needed to be thinking about, in any way, was this man. It was wrong on so many levels. Yet, the second his hand made contact with hers

to slap the cuffs on, she felt it again, the shock that put her whole body on hyper-alert. A small gasp escaped her parted lips. Any thought she had of the guard not noticing the change fled her mind when their eyes locked.

His chocolate-brown gaze was a contradiction to her gold one. Alexa held her breath and waited for him to say something. Anything. But she was met with only silence and what she could've sworn was pity before his eyes hardened and he looked away.

She didn't want to admit even to herself how much that hurt. Then she remembered where she was, and just as quickly as the feelings emerged, she shut them down just as fast. Locked 'em away in a box to never be opened again.

Maybe in another life, she would have pursued the handsome guard, would've flirted and seen where things went. Possibly shed her no-serious-boyfriend rule. But that wasn't this life. Not the one where she was in jail awaiting a court date because she was about to be on trial for murder.

Chapter 6

Colt left Alexa with her lawyer. *No, not Alexa. The prisoner.* He needed to stop thinking of her as anything other than just another prisoner in jail. He needed to forget the zap he felt in his body both times he touched her, and he really needed to stop thinking about how pretty her damn eyes were.

His life was complicated enough with his ex. The last thing he needed was for Alexa to be added to the mix. Amber would have a field day. It would be just the ammunition she needed to claim him an unfit father. A task she not so secretly had attempted multiple times over the years. The first few times he had worried Amber would succeed. A judge was more likely to grant custody to the mother. It might not be right, but it was often the way things worked. But even a judge couldn't look past the fact that several of Amber's boyfriends served time. One had been a registered sex offender. That had gone over like a fart in church. Both he and his father had fought hard

after that. Amber wasn't fit to be a mother, and that was before she started using drugs. Supposedly, she was getting her act together, but he would believe it when he saw it.

Not exactly the nicest words to have about the mother of his child, but considering the way she treated Makenna some days, there was no sympathy left.

So no, he doubted that if Amber knew he was harboring thoughts about a prisoner, she would just let it slide. His ex would be screaming about it from the mountains with a smirk on her face.

Colt walked back to his post, but paused when he saw the look on Greg's face. He knew that look and knew it could only mean one thing.

“Where is she?”

He didn't even need to say her name for his friend to know exactly who he was talking about. Just like he didn't need to ask Greg why his friend looked ready to commit murder.

“Out front,” Greg hissed. “Thomas wouldn't let her inside but called me to let me know of the situation when she wouldn't take the hint. I went down myself while you were escorting the prisoner and tried explaining you were busy, but she's not having it. Something about you ignoring her messages regarding *her* daughter.”

Fury blossomed in his chest. Colt knew damn well there were no messages, but if he didn't go see what she wanted, she would continue to stand outside and make a stink. Something he hated outside of his place of employment. Not that the other guards didn't know all about Amber. It wasn't hard to see that she got enjoyment out of making his life a living hell. The few co-workers who sympathized with her at first quickly learned otherwise. If there was one thing Amber was good at, it was burning down bridges.

“I'll handle it. Let the boss know I'm taking my break early.”

He didn't wait for Greg to answer. He knew his friend would make sure his boss knew what was happening. Colt was

lucky his supervisor had his own run-ins with his ex. It saved him from having to explain the shit storms that followed Amber. While Benson wouldn't like it, no employer would, he knew just like everyone else in town that no matter how hard Colt tried, Amber did what she wanted.

Colt barely got one foot out the front door before Amber started in on him. He wondered, not for the first time, if she was using again. After her last stint in rehab, he was sure she had gotten better about her drug of choice. He would bet it was pills but he had no way of knowing for sure, and he refused to call in favors to have her tested.

"How dare you?" Amber screamed. "I called the school to let them know I would be picking Makenna up early today for a little mother-daughter time and they informed me that I wasn't on the approved list!"

No, she wasn't, and he wasn't about to remind her that she had, in fact, known that when the judge, just months before, had taken away that right after she was picked up on a traffic stop and the guy she had been in the car with had both drugs and cash on him. It was her third strike.

Amber had bitched at the time that she's been set up. She accused him of having his father and his deputies purposely harass her. The judge had disagreed, and since Amber had been pulled over while on the way to pick up Makenna from school, Colt had requested that the privilege be taken away. The judge had agreed only because this wasn't the first incident. Just last year, Amber had entered the school intoxicated and demanded to see her daughter.

Of course, he didn't get the chance to voice any of that because Amber continued to rant.

"Do you know how it looks to my friends when I promise to join them for a day and then have to cancel because of your high-handedness?"

"I thought you said you wanted to take her out for a mother-daughter day," he seethed. "Why would that include your friends? And if I remember correctly, you need to inform

me ahead of time when you want to take Makenna. Not just show up unannounced.”

How did this become his life? He never once regretted his daughter. She was the best part, but there were plenty of days that he wished he could have gotten his amazing daughter without the help of the vicious snake standing in front of him.

“*Having to inform you is bullshit!*” Amber screeched, a literal ear-piercing one. “She’s my daughter! I deserve to be able to see her whenever I want and the fact that you keep me from her is insulting! If it wasn’t for your father and his friends, you wouldn’t have even been awarded custody!” Amber stomped out the last few words like a petulant child.

The little control he had over his anger finally gave way. Leaning into her space, he kept his voice low as he said, “NO! Me having custody has nothing to do with my father and *everything* to do with you. A judge awarded me custody because at every chance, you royally fucked up. The arrests, the rehabs, the bad choice in men. That’s all on *you*. You had the opportunity multiple times to straighten yourself out, and each time you screwed up. Now leave before I’m forced to call my attorney and let him know about this incident.”

He turned around and walked back into the building, tuning out the hysterics and doing his best to calm himself down before he went back to work.

It pissed him off even more that he let her get under his skin. He had promised himself numerous times that for Makenna’s sake he would stay civil. Letting the anger consume him was the opposite of everything he taught his daughter. But Amber could make a priest curse.

The anger slowly started to dissipate when Greg approached him. A lift of the eyebrow was the only indication his friend was curious about what happened.

“Apparently Amber thought she would take Makenna out of school early for some bonding time.”

“And I’m guessing she forgot that she doesn’t have permission to do so, and that’s why she was here making a

scene,” Greg correctly surmised.

“Pretty much. As usual, I’m the bad guy for her shitty choices.”

He tried not to let that bother him. He knew he wasn’t responsible for what she did. He stopped being responsible after the third time he checked her into rehab. He had tried to help, had given her more chances than he felt she deserved, and likely would’ve continued to give her chances for Makenna’s sake if it weren’t for his own mother talking some sense into him. His mother truly felt that the only way to help Amber was to stop giving her the crutches. That had been three years ago, and still, his ex had yet to straighten up. He honestly wondered if she ever would.

“You plan on letting Doc know what happened?”

Doc was his attorney. The man wasn’t actually a doctor, but he earned the name because he was constantly fixing up his other siblings. As the oldest of twelve kids, Doc had taken on the role of caretaker regularly. So much so that in his senior year of high school, the guy had gone on to take EMT classes. Everyone in town had been convinced he would attend medical school. But in true Doc fashion, he had surprised them all by attending law school instead. So now, he still fixed stuff, just in a different way.

“As much as I don’t want to, I know he’ll only be pissed if I don’t. He keeps harping that we need to have a running record of these occurrences in case of a custody hearing. I’ll shoot him a quick email after shift.”

Just the thought of his attorney had him thinking once again of a certain prisoner whose golden eyes caught his attention. If anything, the visit from his ex reaffirmed one thing. He needed to stay as far away from Alexa as humanly possible. If not for him, then for his daughter. He refused to do anything that would give Amber the advantage she needed.

Chapter 7

Saturday mornings in a small town meant time spent at the farmer's market. Like clockwork, he and Makenna would have breakfast at his parents' farm and then head on over. And every week they grabbed the same things. Fresh eggs from Henderson's farm. Fresh fruit from the Ryans' family farm. A sweet old couple who were now in their eighties and were finally passing their stand down to their grandchildren. Cookies from A Sweet Tooth's Bakery because they're Makenna's favorite and how could he say no? And he couldn't forget about Ms. Benson's honey.

Thoughts of his favorite honey reminded Colt of a woman he'd been trying to desperately forget for the past few days. Wasn't it his father who commented that was one of the things Alexa stopped for every time she was in town? He wondered how many times he unknowingly passed her in the farmer's

market. Were they in the same place at the same time and he just didn't know it?

Colt didn't believe in fate or any of that nonsense. He didn't believe that everyone had a soulmate they were just waiting for. He did believe some people were lucky enough to find love, and with hard work and commitment, they could live a great life together. He just didn't think that was in the cards for him. He'd had his chance at that and it was clear he had chosen incorrectly. Now, the only woman he needed in his life was Makenna.

They were still strolling through the farmer's market when Makenna tugged on his arm. He looked down at his daughter and it made him sad to think that his little girl wasn't so little anymore. She was only about a foot shorter than his six-foot frame. And considering her mother was pushing five and a half feet tall, he figured his daughter still had plenty to grow. He missed the little girl who clung to his leg when they walked through this same market.

"Yeah, sweetie?"

He assumed that while he was lost in his thoughts, he had missed a cue that she wanted to stop at one of the stands. He wasn't prepared for the words that left her mouth.

"How come you don't have a girlfriend, Dad?"

His step faltered, and he vaguely heard himself mumbling about a rock, tripping him up. If Makenna thought the excuse was bullshit, she was kind enough not to call him out on it or give him an eye roll. Praise Jesus for small favors.

"Uh ... that's a really random question. Why do you ask?"

Deflect. Deflect. Deflect. Warning bells were going off in his brain. There was no way that his daughter could know that just moments before she had tugged on his arm, he had been thinking about a woman. Since divorcing Amber, Makenna had never seen him with another woman. The few times he tried his hand at dating, he made sure it was while his parents were spending time with his daughter or the nights Amber had her. He never wanted his daughter to know about those dates.

He didn't want any expectations and it was a good thing because they never made it past the one night.

"Sarah's mom was telling Sarah's dad that she knew the perfect woman to set you up with. Sarah and I weren't eavesdropping or anything," his daughter quickly clarified which meant that was exactly what they were doing.

He would've laughed if the situation weren't so serious. Sarah's parents weren't the first ones in their small town to try their hand at matchmaking. Between his friends from high school, his parents' friends, his daughter's friends (seeing a pattern here), and just random people like Mrs. Nancy, everyone knew someone that he would be perfect with. It was both exhausting and annoying. He knew their hearts were in the right place, but he just wished everyone would stop.

"While I'm sure Sarah's parents meant well," he explained. "I'm perfectly happy with my life just the way it is. I have you, Gramma, Papa, and my friends. Adding another person into the mix would just complicate things. And besides, if the right person is meant to come along, then they will."

What he didn't say was there was no way he would bring someone else into the shit show he called his life. All the things he mentioned were good points, but there was plenty that would have a woman running for the hills.

"By 'complicate things' you mean Mom, since she's always yelling at you."

Damn, his daughter was too smart for her own good. Any other time, as a parent, that would make him proud, but there were times like right now that he wished he could still pull the wool over her eyes like he did when she was younger.

"That among other things," he vaguely replied.

"Well, just so you know, I wouldn't be upset if you dated. Actually, I think it would be awesome because I know whoever you chose would be special and would like me just for who I am," Makenna replied confidently.

He pulled his daughter into his side and hugged her tightly. Too choked up to say anything, he just let the love he felt for

her pour out of him. And just as he did almost every day since the moment she was born, he asked himself how he got so lucky. Makenna's heart was filled with nothing but love, and he hoped with all his might that it would stay that way. Her mother's cynicism be damned.

Chapter 8

She was getting released. Someway, somehow, she was making bail and Alexa didn't know how she felt about that. Relieved should've been her first instinct, but something didn't feel right. No one knew she was there. While her lawyer practically begged her to give him some information, she held true and stayed quiet. Being locked up allowed her a certain amount of protection that she wasn't sure she could get on the outside. It didn't matter now because someone had made bail for her and she was seconds away from learning just who that was.

Alexa stepped outside the jail and was greeted by a man she'd never met, but somehow looked familiar. She couldn't say from where and his jeans and flannel gave nothing away. Based on the hint of gray at his temples and lines around his eyes, she pegged him for late fifties, or early sixties. Fit in a

way that said he either worked out regularly or served at some point in his life.

She was still sizing him up when he spoke for the first time, and she found that his gruff voice matched his look.

“Pleasure to meet you, Alexa Lynch. I’m Sheriff Allen.”

That’s why the man looked so familiar. She had briefly researched him when she had chosen this part of Texas to use for her meetings. Buck. Sheriff Buck Allen. Then the last name registered. Something she hadn’t put together until she was standing in front of the man. Allen. The same as the guard, she couldn’t quite get out of her head. Were the two related? Upon closer inspection, she would say yes. Similar bone structure. The same chocolate-brown eyes. She couldn’t say much about their jaws since the sheriff was clean-shaven while the guard sported a beard, but she thought they might be the same shape. If not father and son, then certainly a family relation of some sort.

“Not really a fan of standing out here all day,” the sheriff huffed, cutting into her musings. “How about you get in and I explain why I bailed you out.”

Not sure how to respond, Alexa opted to do as he asked. She couldn’t understand why the sheriff of the same deputies who arrested her would suddenly bail her out. She wouldn’t question a gift horse in the mouth, but she would stay on guard. She still didn’t know who she could trust.

The silence of the ride confused her just about as much as the route they took. The town wasn’t big. A few square miles, and yet it would seem like the sheriff had no plan of stopping anytime soon. She started to wonder if this was a setup. Her initial assessment was that the man in the driver’s seat wasn’t a dirty cop. Her background check on him had come back clean, but the information she received came from her handler, and knowing what she did now, she wondered if maybe that wasn’t accurate.

Alexa surveyed her surroundings. It would appear they were getting farther away from civilization. Something that wasn’t hard considering all of the nearby towns were mostly made up

of farms. The closest city was nearly thirty minutes away but she doubted that was the direction they were headed.

Just when she was about to break her vow of silence and demand to know what was happening, the sheriff finally spoke.

“Bet you’re wondering why I brought you out here?”

“The question has popped around in my mind a few times since we left the jail. While I would like to think that you’re an upstanding officer of the law, I will say, this driving out to the middle of nowhere does have me a bit worried. And questioning my initial assessment,” she tacked on.

Not one to mince words, she called it as she saw it. If he didn’t appreciate it, then oh well. She had the feeling that his mind was made up about her either way and nothing she said would matter. If his plan was to bring her out and kill her, then she would just need to be faster.

“Blunt,” he responded rather strangely. “I like that, and to answer your question, yes, I happen to think I am an upstanding officer of the law, which is why it took me a few days to make up my mind after my discussion with my son.”

So the guard was his son. At least, that’s who she assumed he was talking about. Although, that was weird considering she never actually spoke to the man other than what was required when he escorted her. Alexa never actually had a conversation with Officer Allen, so she couldn’t see why she would come up in discussion. The puzzlement on her face must have shown, because he continued to speak.

“My son seemed rather curious about your case, and after talking with my deputies, I was as well. It got me looking a little closer, and I will say, Alexa Lynch, you aren’t who you appear to be.”

She schooled her features and did her best not to let his words affect her. It was a combination of her name and the fact that he mentioned his son being curious that had her heart racing a million miles an hour.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Alexa was proud that her voice sounded even. Her training had paid off.

“Oh, I’m sure you do. The youngest daughter of six children. All who joined formidable careers. A nurse, a firefighter, a police officer, and two who serve in the Army. Correction, one left and now works for a security company. And don’t even get me started on your parents. That’s a lot of service for one family.”

Alexa kept her mouth shut as the sheriff spoke about her family. She didn’t need the reminder. She was well aware of their accomplishments and was proud of the family she had. He was right. There was a lot of service, and for years she had wondered how she would fit in. Unlike her siblings, she didn’t know as a young kid what she wanted to be when she grew up. She didn’t play dress-up and pretend she was saving the world. If there wasn’t an adventure to be had, then it wasn’t for her. In high school, she had struggled immensely, but with college came clarity. Hence, the CIA. It was her way of feeling like she still fit into her family but allowed her the leeway to travel, as her heart called to her.

“Which got me wondering about you,” the sheriff continued. “How did the occasional drifter who popped into my little town every few months fit in?” Alexa didn’t miss the pop of his eyebrow as he commented and she waited to see what he would say. “So I searched. Heavily. And I must admit that if the CIA hadn’t burned you, I’m guessing I wouldn’t have learned as much. That is who you work for, isn’t it? Or did at least.”

There was no use hiding any longer. As he said, she was burned. Her handler made that blatantly obvious and she didn’t have anyone else to confide in. She considered calling her family. Every one of them would drop what they were doing to help her but they had families of their own to take care of. She couldn’t add to their plates.

She wasn’t sure she could trust this man. But she wouldn’t be who she was if she didn’t jump into something with both feet first.

“It is, or as you said, was. They *did* burn me.”

A picture of Shannon, dead on the ground, flashed through her mind. Her CI had become more than just someone she gained information from. She had been an almost friend. A bit strange considering their dynamic, but there were very few people Alexa would consider herself friendly with. She hadn't properly mourned the loss and wanted to ask about the arrangements, but didn't think it would be appropriate.

“Did you kill that girl?”

The question rocked her foundation despite knowing it was coming. The man was the county sheriff. The head honcho. It didn't matter that he bailed her out. His reasons had nothing to do with her and everything to do with protecting his family. He would've gladly left her to rot if it hadn't been for his son. So yes, she expected the question and she fully expected him to find a reason to arrest her again if he thought at any point she was lying to him.

“Would you believe me if I told you no?”

Alexa turned in her seat and looked at him head-on. She was trained to pick up on the littlest of clues, but she had to give this man credit. He didn't let on to whatever he was thinking when he answered.

“No,” he replied honestly. “I wouldn't take you at your word, but considering the evidence is pointing that way, I'll take what you say into consideration.”

A political answer if she ever heard one. Alexa hated political answers. Hated people who used them rather than saying how they truly felt. All her life she preferred people who were honest. Ironic, considering she joined an agency that relied heavily on secrets. Maybe she had thought that she could be better, or prove it wasn't how people really were. It was stupid and idealistic now that she thought about it. The CIA was just a bunch of liars.

“No, I didn't kill her. Now, do you plan on telling me where you're taking me yet?”

“Awfully curious for someone who should just be glad they are no longer sitting in a jail cell.”

Her frustration level was rising to dangerous territory. As the youngest of six kids, she was known to be the calmest of the group. At least a majority of the time. But her siblings would also say she was the one who could turn on a dime. Calm to full-on pissed in under five seconds.

“Sure, I’m glad to no longer be in that cell,” she snapped. “But as you so kindly pointed out, I do actually give a fuck about my life, and my family would be upset if I suddenly fell off the face of the earth, so stop with the vague bullshit and tell me where you’re taking me.”

It took several deep breaths to rid the red haze that surrounded her vision. Flying off the handle wasn’t the way to prove that she hadn’t killed Shannon, but damn if she wasn’t sick of being judged. In less than a week, her entire world was turned upside down, and she didn’t know how to handle that. No, that wasn’t true. She knew exactly how to handle it. She just needed to be rid of this small town and on her way to finding out why the fuck her cover was blown.

“There’s that fire I’m sure my son picked up on. I was beginning to wonder if I was wrong.” Sheriff Allen smirked at her. “To answer your question, I’m taking you to my hunting cabin, and before you get any ideas, it’s secure. Not as locked down as a prison but enough security for me to know if you move. I too have a family to protect.”

Great. So she was trading one jail for another. She should be upset, but she didn’t have it in her right now. She would take in her situation and formulate a plan. And maybe, since the sheriff was so hell-bent on her staying away from his family, she could avoid seeing the sexy guard who occupied her thoughts just a little too much.

Chapter 9

Colt looked around his bedroom and sighed. Today was his day off, and while that would normally make him happy, he was starting the day by picking up his daughter from a sleepover at her mother's. One that Makenna wasn't thrilled about, but because it was supposed to happen while Amber was staying with her parents, his daughter had begrudgingly agreed.

To make it up to his daughter, he planned to take her out to their hunting cabin and get some fishing in. Makenna loved the little pond that bordered the property and this would be the perfect way to flush out whatever negative thoughts his daughter always came back harboring after such a visit. He was a shitty-ass father for having to flush out her thoughts rather than stealing her away, but as his lawyer reminded him constantly, that would be a crime.

Not wanting to make Makenna wait any longer, he quickly packed all the supplies he needed into his pickup truck and backed out of the driveway. Amber's parents lived just a few minutes from his own property; they were one of the few families in town whose large house didn't sit on a few hundred acres of land. Having moved to Texas when Amber was in middle school from a big city up north, he could never understand why they continued to live in the tiny town. They complained about it constantly.

Case in point, the moment he pulled into the driveway, he saw Amber's mother standing outside, hands on her hips and a scowl on her face. He braced for the verbal onslaught the second he stepped out, and Amber's mother didn't disappoint.

"When was the last time my grandbaby had a proper haircut? It's practically down to her ass and the only way she wears it is up in a ponytail. A young lady needs to learn to style it."

Colt bit his tongue to avoid tossing back that if Makenna wanted her hair cut, then she would ask. He took her three times a year to make sure that the split ends were cut off, as recommended by her hairstylist, but the rest he left up to his daughter. She wanted the long hair and who was he to argue with her? Makenna was soon to be a teenager, not a toddler. There were some things his daughter could decide for herself.

"I'll be sure to speak to Makenna and ask her," he said instead.

That answer only seemed to infuriate the woman more. "Makenna is too young to make that decision," she tore into him. "It is your responsibility as her father to ensure she has what she needs. If my daughter were the primary guardian, she would know that and make sure it was done."

If his ex-wife were the primary guardian, then his daughter wouldn't have a say in her own life. Makenna would slowly lose her identity at her mother's hand because his sweet daughter didn't want to make waves. She often caved to her mother just so she didn't have to feel guilty for having her own thoughts. It was why he fought so hard for his daughter's

independence. She deserved a life where she got to make her own choices. He doubted Amber ever did. He almost couldn't blame his ex-wife for the way she was. Amber stood no chance against her own mother, but the cycle needed to stop somewhere.

Colt snapped his mouth shut in a retort when he saw his daughter walking out the front door with her mother in tow. A sad smile spread across Makenna's face and it took every ounce of patience he possessed not to demand to know what her mother did to her in the sixteen hours she had her. Instead, he plastered a smile on his face and opened his arms wide. Just as he knew she would, his daughter ran straight to him and squeezed him tight.

Picking her up, he whispered into her ear, "Would you like to spend the day fishing at the cabin?"

Her eager nod nearly did him in, as did the way she buried herself so far into his chest that it was almost like she was trying to crawl inside him and hide from whatever happened. He wanted so badly to ask, but figured he would wait until she was ready to tell him.

"Makenna!" his ex-wife hissed. "You're not a baby. Stop hanging on your father like one and start acting like a young lady. I didn't raise you to be this dependent on your father."

Since Colt was holding his daughter so close, he could feel as if each barb was like a physical blow to her body. Deciding that the best course of action was to ignore the venom rather than start a fight, he kept a tight hold on Makenna as he responded, "Amber, a pleasure as usual. Makenna and I have plans for the day, so we better get going."

He set his daughter down on the ground and watched her hesitantly walk back to both her mother and grandmother to say goodbye. He could see that whatever closing remark her mother gave her made her shoulders sag just a little more. Colt wished he could stop these visits, but he had no reason. The best he could do was advise his lawyer of both Makenna's state of mind when he picked her up and whatever information she provided him. It usually wasn't much and was often

filtered. He sometimes wondered if he did more damage by asking her, since his daughter always seemed to gloss over any details.

The ride to the lake was quiet. He even stopped at Mrs. Nancy's for some to-go food. He realized how bad things were when his normally chatty daughter only spoke to Mrs. Nancy with a curt thank-you. The stern, maternal look from the diner owner was enough to make him realize that he would need to speak with his daughter sooner rather than later. Even if he hated knowing that it would cause her pain. Makenna needed to know that he would always have her back no matter what she told him.

Colt pulled into their usual spot at the fishing hole and hopped out. He and Makenna were setting up their poles when he finally asked, "Want to tell me what happened with your mom?"

Makenna answered with her own question. "Why am I not good enough for Mom and Grandma?"

Shot. To. The. Heart.

Colt tried to think of the best response that didn't involve him calling his ex-wife a stupid cunt for the way she treated their daughter. Normally he would never use that word, but at the moment, it was the only one that seemed fitting.

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with you," he finally started once the lump in his throat finally dislodged. "And you certainly are good enough. The problem isn't with you. It's not even with your mother." *Liar*. "It's just that your mom and grandma view life differently. They prioritize things differently than you do. That's not to say it's bad." *Yes, it is*. "It's just different. To them. They believe solely in outer beauty and feel that's how everyone should feel, while you and I believe that it's about what's inside that truly matters. You *are* good enough and it's just one of those life lessons that unfortunately we have to learn. Everyone is going to have a different outlook on what's important in life. It's all about how you handle it."

And clearly Amber handled it like the bitch he knew her to be. If it weren't for his beautiful daughter sitting next to him, he would find someone to invent a time machine and go back to the day he met the horrible woman. Since that wasn't an option, he would continue doing his best to bring joy to his daughter's life whenever he could. Like right now, while they did one of their favorite activities together.

A glance over at Makenna told him that she was mulling over what he said, so he gave her the time to work through her thoughts. She might only be twelve, but so many times she had proved that she was smart beyond her years. Case in point, her next statement.

“Grandma wants me to cut my hair. She showed me a picture of what's trending.” He stifled the laugh that threatened to come out at the strange face she made as she said “trending.” “But I don't like it. I explained that to her, and she said it was because you raised me to act like a boy and not a girl. I don't think that's true. There are plenty of girly things I like to do, so I'm not going to listen to her.”

So damn grown up it almost hurt. That one statement was all he needed to know he was making the right choices in raising her. He often wondered if he was failing, but it was times like this that made him realize that he didn't need to know everything to be a good father. He just had to do his best, and as long as his daughter was happy and healthy, then he hadn't failed miserably.

Colt made a mental note to contact Doc. He might not be able to change the way Amber spoke to Makenna, but he could ensure that it was documented. Makenna deserved not to have to worry about what would be said every time she went over there. Unfortunately, at the moment, Amber was living with her parents because her latest boyfriend kicked her out, so Amber and her mother doubled up on the comments. He hated that for his daughter.

“You do whatever makes you happy. If having long hair is what you want, then I will back you all the way. If at any point you want something else, you have only to ask. I might not be

a girl but that doesn't mean I won't try my hardest to understand.”

He knew his time of understanding his daughter was limited. She would be hitting her teenage years and there were just some things as a father that he would never be able to relate to. Fortunately for him, he had his mother. And unlike his ex-mother-in-law, his mother actually listened and allowed Makenna to express herself while providing guidance, not directives.

His mother was an amazing role model for his daughter, and despite Makenna's question about a girlfriend just a couple of days ago, he couldn't imagine bringing another woman into his daughter's life. Not after the way Amber spoke to her. It would be too much pressure to find someone who could be just as great of a role model as his mother. No, it would be best keeping the status quo.

The early morning progressed slowly. They caught and released a few bluegills. With each toss of the fishing line, the more relaxed Makenna became. His father had once said that fishing could heal the soul, and right this very second he had to agree. To watch the tension leave his daughter's body was cathartic. He would cherish these times forever and hopefully so would she.

“Did you want to eat lunch out here or over at the cabin?”

Their favorite fishing spot was about a quarter of a mile away from the cabin that his father used to hunt. It was the place he and Makenna went to when either of them needed bonding time or just to get away for a bit. It was the same as what he had done with his father as a kid.

That got him thinking about something Amber's mother said. Maybe he was raising his daughter as if she were a boy. The two of them had been doing these types of things for so long that he never thought about it before. Was he harming his daughter by having her participate in the same traditions that he shared with his own father?

“At the cabin. I want to squish my toes into the bear rug while I eat,” Makenna said giggling.

He shook his head and all thoughts about raising her like a boy drifted away. His daughter had her girly moments, as she liked to call them. He needed to remind himself of that when his ex questioned things.

“I’m sure Papa would love to hear that his prized bear is used to squish your toes into,” he teased her.

The bear Makenna was talking about was the same one his father had hunted when Colt was just a teenager.

“Gramma agrees with me and we both know Papa would never go against her,” his daughter explained with only the attitude that a pre-teen could pull off.

But she was right. And they both laughed at that knowledge as they put everything away and hopped into the truck. His father might be the sheriff of the county but it was his ma who was in charge. There wasn’t a damn thing the man wouldn’t give his wife. When Colt first found out Amber was pregnant, he distinctly remembered wishing for a marriage like his parents’. Too bad he got the complete opposite.

He was still laughing when he pulled in front of the cabin because every time he looked at Makenna, she would burst out her own giggle. He couldn’t fathom what she found so funny but he would keep doing it as long as that smile never went away. It wasn’t until he stepped out to help his daughter that he noticed someone walking out of the door.

His steps faltered and his jaw nearly hit the ground before his mind caught up enough to bark out, “*Did you fucking break out of jail?*”

Chapter 10

Alexa heard a vehicle approaching; a quick look out the window told her it wasn't the sheriff. The truck was different from the one he picked her up in. Since no one was supposed to know she was staying there, Alexa contemplated hiding and waiting to see if they left. When it was clear the cabin was their final destination, she stepped out onto the little porch. Little did she realize how big of a mistake that was.

One look at the person stepping out of the truck and her entire body tingled. One look at the little girl sitting in the front seat and suddenly she wanted to hide again.

The truck was barely thirty feet away, and there was no mistaking the resemblance between the man and child. That little girl was either his daughter or he had a twin and that person was the parent. A tiny part of her hoped the kid wasn't his. Not that she didn't like kids, but it made all the inappropriate thoughts she had that much worse. No wonder

he barely looked at her. To him, she was a criminal and there was no way he would want someone like her around his daughter. Hell, neither would she if it were her child.

Alexa imagined all the words he was about to throw at her, but she still physically flinched when his accusation hit her.

“Did you fucking break out of jail?”

“No.” She wrapped her arms around her midsection and raised her chin as she answered, doing her best to keep herself physically steady. “You can check with the jail. I was released on bail.”

“Don’t think I won’t.”

She watched him stomp over to the passenger side of the vehicle, with his phone up to his ear, and she could hear him talking to someone. She assumed he was doing as he said he would and was calling the jail. Someone was bound to confirm what she said.

Alexa scrutinized him as his attention focused on what he was hearing on the other end of the line. If she thought he was attractive in his uniform, it was nothing compared to the dark jeans, tight t-shirt, and boots on his feet. It should be a sin to look that good. She admired the way his ass filled out the back of his jeans. It sucked that he had been moving too fast for her to get a good look at the front of him. She would bet his front was just as spectacular as his backside. Especially if the muscles rippling in his arms while he held the phone up to his ear was anything to go by.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up, the same as it did when she knew someone was watching her. It wasn’t the sexy guard. His focus was solely on his phone and he had yet to turn back to her.

Shifting her gaze ever so slightly to the right, she found the source. She wouldn’t say the look she was getting from the little girl could be classified as sweet, but it was certainly curious, with maybe just a hint of mischief. It reminded her of herself at that age. Well, at least of the age she assumed the girl was. If she had to guess ten or eleven. Maybe a little older

but what did she know? Other than her adorable nephew, Alexa didn't know a damn thing about kids, never having spent any time around them.

“Turns out you were telling the truth.”

Alexa had been so engrossed in thinking about the little girl that she hadn't even realized the sexy guard was no longer on the phone. Snapping her attention back to him, she didn't miss the narrowing of his eyes. Was the cold stare because she had been looking at the little girl? Or because he still didn't trust her?

She was about to say *I told you so*, but figured that might just be a bit too childish, considering he had every right to think as much.

“I don't make a habit of lying. Not if I can help it,” she finally answered.

She should've kept her mouth shut. CIA operatives were known to lie. It was actually a skill she'd honed over the years. The guard didn't know that though, he knew nothing about her. Still, it was because of her job that she avoided lying in her personal life. She knew all the dubious behavior was slowly eating at her soul. Something she would've had to re-examine in a few years. *Not anymore. You're jobless now.*

“You just prefer to not say anything at all, from what I hear.”

Such viciousness in a simple statement. She should tell him to shove it and turn his high and mighty ass back around so he could go back to wherever he came from, but then she remembered who his father was, whose cabin she was staying in, and suddenly all the blood drained out of her face.

Fuck. This was probably the exact opposite of what the sheriff wanted. The whole point was for her to be away from his family and here she was chatting away while the guy's granddaughter was probably in the truck. *Fuck, fuck, fuckity.*

“That would be correct. So how about I just do what I do best and keep my mouth shut while also going back into the cabin to hide?”

With a quick thumb pointing in that direction, she spun on her heel and started to skedaddle back inside. She didn't get nearly as far as she wanted before he spoke up again.

“You going to tell me why my father, the *sheriff* of this county, bailed you out?”

She didn't really have the answer to that question, so instead, without turning around, she answered, “You'll have to ask him yourself.” And without another word, she stepped back inside and locked the door behind her. Sliding down onto her ass, all she could think was how did her life suddenly get so complicated?

Chapter 11

It was taking every ounce of control Colt possessed not to hightail it like a NASCAR driver over to his parents' house. Not that he could get his truck up to those speeds on the twisty mile-and-a-half commute, but he was tempted to try. Maybe if Makenna wasn't sitting in the passenger seat, her eyes completely bugged out of her head, he just might have.

"Dad, who was that woman staying in the cabin?"

It was the first time she'd spoken since he had stormed back into the truck and thrown it into reverse. His behavior was completely out of the norm for him, at least in front of his daughter, and it pissed him off that the fiery little brunette back at the cabin was the reason for it. So much for keeping his cool and staying away from her.

Colt wasn't sure how to answer the question. He figured telling his daughter that the woman was the same person who

was charged with the murder that everyone was talking about in town wasn't the smartest choice. Although with any hope, Makenna would never see her again.

Not wanting to lie to her and not wanting to tell her the truth, he settled on, "Someone Papa knows."

If his father was going to insist on butting in, then he could answer Makenna's question. And what the hell was his father thinking, anyway? As the boss of the deputy who arrested said woman, it had to be some conflict of interest for him to bail her out. Yet that was exactly what he had learned when he called the jail. He nearly dropped the phone when the supervisor on shift had read off his own father's name as the person posting bail.

He slowed down in just enough time to avoid his mother's wrath. She would have his ass if he kicked up rocks and hit her carefully planted flowers. It was no secret she loved those damn things just as much as she loved her family. Maybe a smidge more.

Coming to a complete stop, he turned his attention to his daughter and did his best to put a smile on his face when he said, "Do me a huge favor, sweetie, and head on in. Tell Gramma we wanted to surprise her with a visit."

His almost teenage daughter wasn't dumb. She knew something was up. But instead of questioning him like he was sure she wanted to, Makenna simply nodded before jumping out.

Taking a few extra seconds to calm himself down, he tried to rationalize a reason for his father's choice but continued to come up empty. Every thought he had, he quickly disregarded. Fortunately for him, he wouldn't have to wonder much longer. The man he came to find was headed in his direction. Stepping out of the truck, he met his father halfway.

"What has you stopping by unexpectedly? Not that you need an excuse, but my granddaughter looked a bit spooked, and that's not like her."

His father wore his take-no-shit face. The one that, as a kid, had him confessing his sins within seconds. The longest secret he ever kept was the one about knocking up Amber and even that one he spilled within a few hours.

“She was likely spooked because we were supposed to be spending the rest of the afternoon at the cabin, but when we got there”—he stopped and used his own take-no-shit face—“we found an unexpected *guest*.”

It annoyed him to no end that his father was able to keep his expression neutral. It had always been that way. But just once, he wanted to know he could rattle the man. Especially since he himself felt extremely rattled.

“I didn’t expect you to go out there. Not before I had the chance to talk to you, anyway.”

“Now would be a great time to have that talk,” he bit out.

Why was he so mad? It wasn’t like his father ever made rash decisions. The man was known for thinking every decision through. It was what made him such a good sheriff. And he never knew someone who lived more on the straight and narrow than his father. There had to be a good reason behind the decision.

At least that’s what he kept telling himself the longer his father stayed silent. What was going on and why did the air suddenly change? Get more electrified?

“When you came here asking questions about the murder, it got me thinking. And the more information I gathered from my deputies, the more I thought about it. Something was off, so I made a decision. Turned out it was the right one. Well, I’m pretty sure it was anyway. Only time will truly tell.”

Seriously? His father *thought* it was the right one. Since when did that happen? Who was this man right now?

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Colt snapped out. “Makenna was with me. Do you really think that was smart? We know nothing about her. Why in the hell would you bail her out just because I made a comment? It was simple

curiosity. Nothing more. And I certainly don't want her anywhere near Makenna."

Colt didn't miss his father's scrutinizing look. It was the same one he used when he was trying to figure out if someone was telling the truth. He was slightly appalled that his father even needed to question it. Every decision Colt ever made in the past twelve years was in the best interest of his daughter. He couldn't remember the last time he decided on something that wasn't directly in the best interest of Makenna. Okay, yes, he could. His divorce. That was the only selfish decision he'd made in a very long time. Even knowing it would upset his daughter, he couldn't continue to be cuckolded.

"I had my reasons, and believe me, I thought about my granddaughter when making them. Now, I understand you're frustrated, but until you have all the facts, don't pass judgment."

That take-no-shit tone was back, only this time it was laced with a don't-question-my-decisions attitude. Put the two of them together and there would be no budging his father. But that didn't mean he planned to just drop it. He hadn't been able to get Alexa out of his mind since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. And that was when he knew damn well she was off-limits. He would never cross the line with an inmate, and definitely not a criminal.

But now with her out, things were even more complicated. Colt needed the forbidden. He needed to know that she was off-limits and out of his reach. It was the only way he would be able to stay away from her. Far, far, far away from her.

"Then how about you share those facts?" he challenged his father.

As much as he needed to keep Alexa at a distance, he also needed to know that he could still trust that his father was the man he always thought he was. A person who never bent the rules and who always lived in the black-and-white areas. Growing up, his father was his role model, the reason that, when he knew football would no longer be a part of his life, it was an easy decision for him to enter into a career in law

enforcement. It was his father who showed him what a noble career it was.

“I think some of those facts need to come from her,” his father said.

Colt didn't stop the frustrated growl that bubbled up through his throat. Tossing his hands in the air, he slapped them down on the hood of his truck. He didn't need to look over to know that his father would be pissed about the outburst. Well, too fucking bad. The level of cryptic answers he'd been receiving over the last hour was just a little too much. He just wanted one fucking person to be honest with him.

When he had a chance to cool down, he would likely regret his behavior. He would also look back and realize that his behavior had nothing to do with his father or even Alexa. This was just the point when everything finally boiled over and his life no longer felt like he had control over it.

“Lead the way.”

Chapter 12

Alexa wasn't sure how long she sat on the floor with her knees pulled into her chest. Long enough for the guard to peel out of the area with his daughter. And even longer yet for her to hear another vehicle pulling up.

Digging deep down for the strong-willed woman her family knew her to be, Alexa dried her face and pushed herself up off the floor. A quick glance out the window next to the front door and she knew precisely who was coming to see her. Was it a social call, or was the sheriff pissed that his son had shown up and seen she was staying there? There was no way the situation could be construed as her fault, but she learned early on in her career that sometimes, no matter how hard she tried, she would still be blamed. She wondered if that would happen this time as well.

Alexa donned her mask of indifference and walked outside to meet her visitors. The cabin was small and the last thing she

wanted was two very pissed-off alpha males making the place feel even smaller. Growing up with four older brothers, who were exactly the same way, she learned a thing or two about putting them back in their place, and never giving them the upper hand in any situation.

“Looks like the cat’s out of the bag,” she quipped.

Humor usually worked when she needed to lighten the mood. But not with this audience, it would seem. Too bad. She would’ve liked to see the sexy guard laugh. She would bet it was the kind of laugh that drew people in, that made them want to be around him when he did it.

“Not helping the situation,” Buck grumbled.

Alexa shrugged. She was outnumbered here and wasn’t above playing dirty, something else she learned as the youngest child. There were just some situations when playing fair wasn’t the best course of action. And right now, being at a disadvantage, she felt was a good time to test those skills. Since vulnerability wasn’t something she was comfortable with, she was going to rely on sarcasm and humor to hide how she felt.

“Guess you have a lot more to learn about me.”

“Excellent idea,” the sexy guard, whose first name she still didn’t know but really wanted to learn, responded with just as much snark. Alexa had to give him credit for matching her level of sarcasm. Few people could. At least enough for her to respect them. “How about you actually start talking this time rather than walking away?”

Someone had their panties in a twist. Or would it be boxers, since he was a dude? She didn’t see him as a tighty-whities kind of guy, but the expression sounded weird in her head when she changed the word from panties to boxers. It was probably best if she stopped thinking about what he wore beneath his clothes and focused on what it was he wanted from her.

Since she made a deal with the sheriff to keep her mouth shut, she turned to him and raised her brow in a silent

question. With a heavy sigh, Buck nodded, and she understood that he wanted her to spill what was going on. What he didn't realize was that she had no plan of confessing everything. Not until she knew she could trust the son. He already seemed to have a prenotion about who she was, and she'd be damned if she begged him to listen to her side of the story. So the bare minimum was all he was getting until he earned her trust. No amount of sexiness or thinking about him naked would override her good sense.

"I didn't kill that woman. She was one of my CIs and I was scheduled to meet up with her when I found her dead."

He looked at her like he didn't believe a word she said. Oh well. While it was nice fantasizing about him, nothing could happen between them. They were what authors liked to call "forbidden." The criminal and the guard. Even if the criminal part wasn't true, it was the way he saw her, and she doubted that opinion would change just because of what she had to say. It was better that way, anyway. Her life was clearly too screwed up to drag someone into it. Especially someone who might have a daughter. Talk about a bad influence.

"You seriously just took her at her word?"

The question wasn't directed at her, even though he never looked away. They were locked in a stare-down, each of them wondering who would cave first. The sexy guard was about to learn just how much she liked to win. There wasn't a chance in hell she'd look away first.

It was a solid minute later and Alexa didn't hide the smug look when he finally looked away first. The fact that his father had yet to answer him might have had something to do with it, but Alexa would take the win where she could.

Buck Allen, on the other hand, didn't seem to have the same impatience as his son. The sheriff continued to look at her as if he was trying to see right through her. Good luck. Years of pretending to be someone else left her with a bit of a split personality. Only she was conscious of both and could switch between them at will. Her family never saw the ruthless side

of her, and her work never got a chance to know the carefree woman she really was.

“No, I didn’t completely take her at her word. It’s why she’s here and not completely running free. We’ve come to what most would consider a mutual agreement.”

Sure, that was a good word for it. Or, more accurately, she was still a prisoner, just no longer behind bars. It didn’t mean she could move around freely. She couldn’t call anyone. That was more her choice than anything Buck had decreed. She wasn’t allowed to wander far from the cabin. But she was no longer sleeping in a jail cell on a shitty mattress, worried that someone would discover just who she was or who she used to work for.

“You said CI. Who exactly do you work for? And what’s the plan for this agreement?”

The first question was directed at her, but she was almost positive the second one was meant for his father, considering she had very little say in this so-called agreement.

She waited for the sheriff to answer first. She still wasn’t sure she was ready to tell his son anymore about her. Not while he continued to look at her like she was the bottom of the barrel and didn’t deserve to be out of jail, let alone standing in front of him.

“My deputies will continue to look into the case and prove her innocence. If she is, in fact, innocent. Something I very strongly believe she is. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have bailed her out. And to answer your other question, because I know Alexa here won’t, she worked for the CIA. They burned her when she got arrested, or likely before, and the murder was their way of trying to deal with her.”

She didn’t bother to hide her displeasure with him sharing that part with his son. She was keeping her mouth shut until she was ready, but as with everything else in her life for the past week, the choice was taken out of her hands. She didn’t particularly like the trend and really needed to find a way to make it stop. But how to do that was still a mystery.

Alexa's first thought was to bolt, leave the small little town and never look back. Sadly, that wasn't an option. There was no way she could leave the sheriff hanging out in the wind that way. He had taken a risk bailing her out and she wouldn't repay the kindness by skipping out on him. No matter how uncomfortable the situation was.

She met the guard's eyes. She thought for the briefest second she saw a hint of softening but it was gone so quickly she must've imagined it. It was probably a good thing he didn't trust her and now likely wanted nothing to do with her. Her infatuation with him needed to be erased and what better way than for him to shut her out?

Chapter 13

“CIA?”

Colt didn't hide his disbelief. He wasn't sure if that confession helped or hurt her cause. The CIA were notorious liars. It was practically what they were trained to do. Yet, here his father wanted him to believe the woman.

“Yes, CIA and I can tell what you're thinking.”

“Oh, so now you can read minds, too? Is that something they taught you?”

Inwardly, he gave Alexa credit. She didn't back down from his surly attitude. Nope, not this little spitfire. She met him head-on in everything he threw at her. Any other time, he would admire the hell out of the person, but instead, he found it slightly annoying. Or maybe it was that, out of the three of them, he was the only one even slightly rattled. It didn't make him feel good, and he was lashing out because of it.

“No, it’s not,” she bit back. “But their reputation is no secret. Liars, right? So, if I work for them, then I must be one too. Newsflash, I don’t work for them anymore and, as I stated earlier, I don’t make a habit of lying if I don’t need to.”

Although she had left out a minor detail. When she told him she was released on bail, at no point had she mentioned it was his own father that had let her out. So was that considered not lying or just skirting the truth? Either way, it pissed him off for reasons he wasn’t ready to confront.

“I wasn’t lying before. I didn’t mention your father was the one to bail me out because he didn’t want his family involved. And it didn’t take much for me to put together the two of you were related.”

Colt couldn’t decide if she really could read minds, something he knew damn well wasn’t possible, or if he was just that easy to read. The latter option really ticked him off. He didn’t like anyone knowing him that well, outside of his family or a few close friends. He looked over at his father, to gauge his reaction to this information, and he was no longer surprised to see his father wasn’t affected by anything Alexa said. Colt was the only one out of the loop here, and it was clear he needed to either catch up fast, or be left in the dust.

“How about we go inside and I can hear the rest? It’s obvious my father knows a lot more about you and I’d prefer to be on the same page.”

He gestured towards the door, but Alexa held her position.

“No.”

“No?” he asked with surprise.

“That’s correct. I said no. I met you out here for a reason and I plan to stick to it.”

That tingling he got around her was back, but he figured this time it had nothing to do with touching her and everything to do with the finality in her tone. She was standing her ground, and he found that too damn sexy.

“There a reason you don’t want us to go inside *our* own cabin?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Nope, head in and look around. I got nothing to hide. But if you want to have this conversation, then we do it out here.”

He could see from the stubborn set of her jaw that she wasn't kidding. She had zero plans of moving the conversation inside. And because he refused to take her word for it, and without bothering to provide her with a response, he passed by her and stepped inside the cabin.

Everything was exactly as he remembered, and not a single thing was out of place. As he moved from one small room to the other, he had to admit, if he hadn't known that the tiny woman outside was living there, he would never have guessed. Truly intrigued, he stepped back out onto the rock driveway.

“Clean. Almost as if you weren't staying here at all.” It was the only thing he could think of to say.

Her response was the most obnoxious snort he'd ever heard come out of a woman, and it was kind of adorable, much to his dismay. He was tempted to ask her to do it again, but thought better of it and pushed all thoughts of the noises she made back into the dark corners of his mind.

“Couch surfing for six years will do that to you,” she strangely replied.

When she didn't explain further, he merely waited her out. Alexa let out a long, frustrated huff as she ascertained that he was waiting for her to continue and wouldn't keep trying to drag the information out.

“I haven't had a permanent address in six years. It was easier to have crash pads wherever I went, and when I happened to be in Texas, I stayed with my family. So yes, I got used to leaving places as if I was never there. I didn't want to be a burden, not that my family would ever consider me that, but still, I refused to overstay my welcome and leave places a mess.”

There was a lot to unpack in that simple explanation. So much so that he wanted to feel sorry for her. To have nothing to call home for so long must've been hard. Not even an

apartment that she visited once every few months. How did someone live like that? Personally, he needed his own space.

“You and your family must be close.”

Although something she said stuck out. She didn't want to be a burden to them. Did her family make her feel that way without meaning to?

“Very. Keeping a secret as large as my employment from them for six years was tough. It was another reason why I made sure not to stay with them for too long. I told you, I don't like to lie in my personal life. I couldn't tell them what I did for a living, so staying away was the best course of action. But there were times when that got to be too much for me. So I would pop in for a day and get my fill, and when the pressure of not telling them the truth got to be too much, I slipped away again.”

Now it was official. He felt bad for her. That soft heart his father always commented on was rearing its ugly head. He wanted to fix her life for her. It was a dangerous avenue. He couldn't be her savior, not when his own life was such a mess. But damn, he really wanted to and sometimes life made choices for you. Something he would learn a lot sooner than he liked.

Chapter 14

Well, fuck! Now the sexy guard felt bad for her. She could see it very clearly in his eyes. That wasn't what she wanted. She hated pity, she didn't deserve it. She made her choice, and while yes, some days it sucked royally, she didn't regret it.

Alexa had learned a lot over the past six years, lessons she would carry with her for the rest of her life, even if she never worked for the CIA again. Something she was pretty damn positive was the case.

“That doesn't sound fun at all,” he said softly.

Yup, it was official. He felt bad for her. *Fuck, fuck, fuckity.* This wasn't how any of this was supposed to be going. It was inappropriate. The word of the week and something she needed to hold on to with both fists like it was her lifeline to survival.

“No, it wasn’t, but believe me when I tell you, there’s no reason to feel bad for me. I made those choices because they were what I wanted. I’m the type of person who needs an adventure so I don’t get bored. Joining the CIA allowed me to do that and I don’t regret it. I would never be happy just sitting around playing house.”

The words had the desired effect. Any hint of pity the man was harboring was easily erased by her not-so-careless statement. Alexa never said anything she didn’t mean and right now she was saying what was needed so the guard had an easy out. If he didn’t know it yet, everything about him screamed protector. He would argue until he was blue in the face that it had to be him who showed her a different side of life. She refused to let that happen. It was better he thought her a flake than a damsel.

“I see,” he clipped. “Then, I guess it’s good that you’ve been living like that for years and now have a cabin to yourself. No one to bother you.”

The disgust on his face hurt, but again, she pushed it away; locked it down just like she did every other emotion in her life. It was for the best and one day he would realize that.

She almost forgot that it wasn’t just the two of them standing outside until the sheriff cleared his throat. She glanced in his direction and was surprised to see sheer contemplation written all over Buck’s face. Embarrassment crept up her neck; he had witnessed the exchange between her and his son. She could only imagine what he was thinking. She would like to think that he would be happy that she was making it clear she didn’t want his son’s help. If that little girl that was with him earlier was indeed his daughter, then the grandfather would want her as far away from the man as humanly possible.

“We need to figure out who murdered that young woman.”

Alexa interrupted the sheriff before he could continue. “Shannon. Her name was Shannon.” She refused to allow her former CI to just become some other woman whose murder they were investigating. Shannon deserved more than that.

Especially if the reason behind her murder had something to do with Alexa.

“Okay, Shannon.” Both men gave her a look she couldn’t quite describe. “We need to figure out who murdered Shannon and why. Any thoughts?”

It was now or never. She could shut the two of them out and say she didn’t want any help from them, but it was likely they would be pissed and the sheriff would find some reason to make sure she was sent back to jail. Or she could accept help from these two strangers and hope she wasn’t shooting herself in the foot. Neither option really appealed to her, but the result that she wanted to avoid more than anything was the one that put her back in jail. Back behind bars where she couldn’t be free at all. At least here at the cabin, she had the illusion she was free. Even if it was only a mirage.

Besides, contacting either Brooks or Zack wasn’t an option. At least not until she had no choice. Brooks was a police officer, but this wasn’t his jurisdiction, and with him came his crazy but very lovable fiancée. Alexa would never put Charlotte at risk. And the same went for Zack. Only he wouldn’t bring his family, he would bring Wes and his team. That would be way worse. She didn’t need his team wrapped up in her problems, even if fixing things was likely what they did best.

It took her a while, but finally, she answered, “My handler. I would start there. When I used my one phone call, he addressed me by my given name. Something he shouldn’t have been privy to. I made sure when I joined that only a select few superiors knew who I was. My handler was provided the name I use for the CIA. There was no way he should’ve known my real name, so I think he might have something to do with it.”

Again, the two shared a look she couldn’t exactly describe, a silent communication she wasn’t a part of. It was probably for the best that they kept themselves distant. She didn’t need them getting too close.

“Give me the number you called and I’ll look into it. I’m going to assume you had another burner phone besides the one you smashed.” When she merely gave him a questioning look, Buck further explained, “My deputies didn’t find one in the other abandoned car but I’m assuming you have two based on the way you spoke about your family. There’s no way you’d mix business with family, so there’s another one floating around. I’m just curious which one you smashed.”

Alexa hid the smirk regarding her second phone. It was good to know that her hiding spot wasn’t discovered. Although, now she would need to come up with a better one, since she was about to spill the location. Carefully explaining with hand gestures and probably too much enthusiasm, she told Buck exactly where he could find her second phone.

“I’m not sure if that’s brilliant or extremely devious of you,” Buck responded when she was done, his face was full of awe. “No wonder my deputies didn’t find it.”

“I’ve learned a thing or two along my travels. Obviously, the spot wouldn’t work for drug smuggling because a K-9 would sniff it out, but a small phone or cash ...” She shrugged.

“As I said, devious, but something I’ll be adding to the training I give my deputies. Maybe while you’re here, I can pick your brain about a few other things. You seemed to have learned a lot and I’m always looking for new information. A mutual benefit for both of us. Now let me head back and get that phone so we can get a start on things. No reason to keep you here longer than needed.” Buck started to walk back to the truck, but stopped suddenly and turned back to her. “Where are my manners? Alexa, this is my son, Colt. I know the two of you met, but I doubt you had a proper introduction, considering everything.” And with that, both men climbed into the truck, leaving her behind to think about all that happened.

Colt. She let the name roll around on her tongue a few times. A strong name, just like she knew he would have.

Chapter 15

Colt looked across the dining room table at his father. The man he admired more than anyone else in life, and asked himself for the tenth time that day if his father was making a mistake. Was he blindly trusting everything that Alexa said? Her story sounded extreme and plausible in one shot. He wasn't sure how that could be.

“You’re finding it hard not to believe her, aren’t you?”

Any other time it would’ve ticked him off that his father was insinuating that he had a soft heart. Except right now, he thought his father meant that Colt was finally coming around to his way of thinking, something he would admit was true. One conversation with Alexa and he was having a hard time finding fault in what she said.

“She was very convincing,” he agreed. “There’s still a lot of concerns that I’m struggling with but I don’t think she’s a

murderer. Now, I reserve the right to change my opinion at any time, but right now, I don't see it."

His father merely smiled. Colt felt like he was set up and happily stepped into the trap that his father laid out. That would worry him more if he wasn't so damn concerned about everything going on.

"That doesn't mean I want Makenna around her. Until we know what's going on, I want my daughter far away from any danger. You're about to stir up a lot of trouble looking into Alexa's handler. I don't need the backlash hitting Makenna."

He barely got halfway through what he felt was both a necessary and unnecessary speech when he noticed his father's face turn to stone.

"I would never do anything to put my granddaughter in danger. And if you hadn't noticed, it was the entire reason I left Alexa out there on her own. It's not my fault you stumbled upon her. Had I known you were going out there, I would've warned you."

"Since when do I need to tell you I'm using the cabin?"

He'd never asked to use the place because his father never made him feel like it wasn't something they shared equally. And he planned to do the same with Makenna.

"You don't." His father let out a frustrated exhale. "That's not what I meant. I just thought I had a few days to figure things out before I had to tell you about her. I didn't expect you to take Makenna out there. Believe me, our family was my first priority this entire time."

Properly chastised and not in the mood to argue, Colt held his hands up in defeat. His father always put family first and this would be no exception. He would just make sure to protect his daughter the best he could from any backlash that might come from the situation they were in.

"Alexa kept mentioning her family. Something we need to worry about or not?"

"Definitely something to worry about," his father replied honestly. "The oldest brother is a police officer in Austin."

She's got a sister who's a nurse, another brother who's a firefighter, one in the Army. But it's the last brother who worries me the most. Retired Army sniper turned private security. The man her brother works for is known to hire the best and to be a bit ruthless when something affects those he's close to. I'd be surprised if we don't have a few visitors before this is all over."

Well, that was an interesting bit of information. He couldn't remember what he envisioned when Alexa spoke about her family, but what they all did for a living wasn't it. He knew that some families had a few members that were first responders, but it wasn't usually all of them. Now Alexa joining the CIA made sense. He wondered what kind of parents she had that all the children chose such noble professions.

Their conversation was cut short when Makenna and his mother joined them in the kitchen. His daughter hadn't commented on the woman she saw back at the cabin and he was glad about it. He didn't exactly know how he was going to explain the situation to her yet. Maybe with any luck, she would forget about it and he wouldn't feel obligated to tell her anything.

"Will the two of you be staying for dinner?" his mother asked. "I know your lunch got a little derailed but I'm hankering for some burgers and potato salad."

Just as his mother knew it would, his daughter instantly perked up. His mother's burgers were infamous, and she refused to tell anyone what seasoning she used, claiming that if she shared, then she would have no reason to sucker them into staying. And she would be right. He and Makenna could never say no to a proposition like that.

They stayed for dinner, and the conversations stayed on neutral topics. Makenna talked about her upcoming birthday party, her plans for the rest of the school year, and the presents she hoped to get. As usual, her modesty always surprised him.

As the only grandchild, both he and his parents spoiled her rotten, but no one would know it based on the things she asked

for; a new book that was coming out just before her birthday, a pair of shoes she had been eyeing in the store a couple of towns over. They were expensive, but she promised to only wear them for school or special events and to even work to pay for part of them. Little did she know they were already purchased. The second her eyes lit up when she saw them, he knew exactly what he would buy her. Not because she asked, but because she hadn't. His daughter rarely asked for anything and it made him want to give her the world.

Just the thought of giving someone the world had him thinking back on Alexa. As the youngest daughter of six kids, had she ever felt like she couldn't ask for something? She was adamant that she didn't want her family involved, not to be a burden, he thought she said. Was that because her family made her feel like one, or did the thought stem from something else?

Even when he didn't want to, he felt himself thinking of her. It worried him. Long ago, he shut off his feelings for anyone outside his family and here was this little slip of a woman whose golden eyes called to him and made him want to protect her from life. It wasn't rational or sane, but he was quickly learning that anything to do with Alexa never was.

Chapter 16

Being locked inside the cabin was not the adventure Alexa thought it would be. She was going stir-crazy, and if she didn't get out and do something soon, she was likely to get herself into trouble. As a person who was used to living every day as if it were her last, sitting still just didn't appeal to her. No longer able to take the walls caving in on her, Alexa grabbed her shoes and was out the door just moments later. She barely made it ten feet when she heard a vehicle approaching. Since she doubted either Colt or Buck were just hanging out nearby waiting for her to screw up, one of them must've decided it was time for a visit.

Alexa waited to see which one it would be. She didn't hide her trepidation when the truck pulling up was Colt's. Staying away from him was the safer option, but that didn't mean her body or mind didn't yearn to have him around. She was a

walking contradiction and didn't have the slightest idea how to fix it.

“Going somewhere?”

Why did his voice have to do crazy things to her body? Just two words and she wanted to know what it sounded like when he roared his finish after giving a woman a multitude of orgasms because, of course, he would be that kind of man. She had no doubt.

“Yes, in fact, I am. I'm going for a walk because if I sit inside that cabin for another minute, then I'm likely to crawl the walls and no one wants to see that. Think woman-crawling-out-of-the-well-in-the-*Ring* kinda crazy. Not fun and certainly not something you want to bear witness to.”

“Well, we don't want that.” He chuckled. A nice hearty one that she was sure would be amazing if he did it against her skin. *Fuck, fuck, fuckity*. She needed to get her head out of the gutter. “I guess it's a good thing I came over to see if you wanted to go fishing. Give you a chance away from this place for a little bit.”

“Yes!” Alexa jumped at the chance without hesitation.

She didn't care that it had been years since she fished, or that she was never really a fan. Fishing meant time out of the cabin and that sounded like heaven. The fact that it was time alone with Colt was something she would deal with later, when she wasn't so desperate to breathe fresh air.

“You either really like to fish”—Colt laughed again while pulling out the rods—“or hate being alone that much.”

“Hate being alone,” she confessed. “Well, not really. Sometimes I crave solitude, but this is the longest stretch for me. You wondered why I couch surfed. Well, here's your answer. Just the thought of a place to myself has me itching for another adventure.”

They walked in silence. The chirp of a bird in a nearby tree and the swish of the grass beneath their steps were the only surrounding sounds. Every now and then, the clank of the two

fishing poles would add another melody to the peaceful harmony.

Alexa soaked up every smell and sound like it might be the last time she had freedom.

“So, is that the way you prefer to live your life? One adventure at a time?”

She thought about Colt’s question. Thought about what she told him the last time he was here. If it were any members of her family who asked, or anyone from high school, her immediate answer would’ve been a resounding yes, because that’s the image she wanted them to see. But that wasn’t the truth. At least, not the full truth.

“Yes, and no.” She thought of the best way to describe what she felt she needed from her life. “As a teenager, that’s what people thought, what my family thought, because it’s all I wanted them to see. I guess you could say I was still finding myself. It wasn’t until I was working for the CIA that I learned it wasn’t just about the adventure. I didn’t need to be moving from place to place to be happy. I just needed to be busy. I like challenges. Either self-made or thrust upon me. I love pushing myself to the limits and living outside my comfort zone.”

“So, you’re an adrenaline junky.”

The seriousness as he came up with that deduction had her snorting out a laugh. It was such an overly bland statement for how she lived her life but yet coming from him felt almost like a curse.

“You make it sound bad. I promise you I’m not out catching the next high, and I always end up back at my roots. Might only be for a few hours or a couple of days, but either way, my family is what grounds me. I could never be away from them for long.”

“But you’ll always seek the adventure.”

That sounded almost accusatory. A glance in his direction, and the set of his jaw confirmed what his tone already said.

“There are different ways to have an adventure. Not all of them require someone to leave. I just haven’t found the right

one for me yet, but I'm sure it's out there.”

Alexa couldn't understand if the accusation was because of what someone did to him in the past, or if it centered around her specifically. She knew nothing about his life. Was he married? She doubted since he didn't wear a ring, but someone had to be the mother of that sweet girl she saw in the truck. Was her mother the reason Colt seemed to have a displeasure to adventure?

If he were anyone else, she would've just asked, but there was a clear line in the sand between them and asking personal questions seemed like something that would cross that line. If she were being honest with herself, it was better she didn't get that close anyway. The moment she learned who was behind Shannon's murder and her blacklisting, she was gone. No longer being employed meant she had to start over. Having not exactly finished her degree because the CIA pushed her along meant she didn't know what she would do with her life, just like when she was in high school. It was funny how things came back full circle. She was still the baby sister who didn't know how she fit into the lifestyle that the rest of her siblings chose.

Maybe that was it. Maybe she wasn't supposed to follow the same path they did. Maybe she was supposed to be the one who broke free and did something else. While their careers were noble, there was nothing saying she couldn't find another way to help people. Teachers helped people. She would make an awful teacher considering she sucked at censoring herself and never spent any time around children, but still a noble career. It sucked that she couldn't think of any others at the moment. Her brain was too muddled by the mess she was in and the man next to her. Mostly, it was the handsome man. She could feel how close he was, and it was messing with both her brain and her body. She simultaneously wanted to pull him close and yet push him away.

Chapter 17

Coming here was a bad idea. Offering to take Alexa fishing was a bad idea. Spending any amount of time alone around her was a bad idea. Clearly, he was just chock-full of bad ideas this morning. Colt was going to blame it on the fact that Makenna was at her friend's house and he didn't have work. Therefore, there was nothing to keep his thoughts from wandering, and who did his thoughts travel to? None other than Alexa herself. It was maddening, and he was going to drive himself insane if he kept this shit up.

Then, to make matters worse, she had to go and remind him that not only did he need to stay away from her because of the position she was in, but she wasn't a forever type of woman. Alexa preferred adventure, and hooking up with a man who had a daughter probably didn't fit into those plans. So if he were smart, he would stay far, far away from her.

“Are you always this quiet when you fish?” Alexa teased.

He took the opportunity to look at her from his peripheral vision. His sunglasses and hat pulled low allowed him to check her out. She looked at ease, casting the fishing line. When he decided to drive over, he didn't have a plan, just the strong urge to see her. Then, when he pulled in and found her outside looking ready to jump out of her skin, an idea immediately popped into his head. Fishing was his escape, and just maybe it could work for her as well.

“Sometimes.” He let the smallest smile form on his lips. “It helps me think, and is usually a great way for me to get Makenna to talk about what’s bothering her.”

“Is that your sly way of telling me you want me to confess all my thoughts?” she asked chuckling.

The sweetest sound hit his ears. Colt had to force himself not to openly stare at her and just soak up the sound of her laughter. But he couldn't lie to himself. Her laugh was like a warm blanket wrapping around him and he wished it was something he could listen to every day. *Stay away!* The big flashing neon sign he needed right now was nowhere in sight.

“I mean, if you want to confess something to the fishes, who am I to stop you?” He laughed right alongside her. Enjoying the feel of just being carefree for a few minutes.

“Isn't it fish who have a short attention span? They probably wouldn't even remember what I told them.”

Damn, the woman had the cutest thinking face. Colt didn't hide it this time when he looked at her, giving her his full attention when he answered. “I guess they're perfect, then, to confess all your sins to.”

He waited to see if she would meet his gaze. When it was evident that she needed more time, he went back to watching his own line. The water was crystal clear and calm today. A perfect day to just sit back and relax, to let nature do its thing and heal the worries away. He hoped that's what it was doing for Alexa.

“If I make a confession, promise it just stays here with the fish?”

“Promise.” The words were out of his mouth before he’d fully thought it through. Which was a big mistake considering there were some things that he would be obligated to pass along if it came to that. He hoped he didn’t just intentionally lie to her.

“Growing up I always felt like an outsider. My sister and brothers all knew what they wanted to do when they grew up. For as long as I can remember, they talked about how they would save the world. Modern-day superheroes, they would joke. But that wasn’t me. I never knew what I wanted to do. Even the adventures I liked felt more like I was pushed that way. I can remember my siblings joking about how I could never sit still and always wanted to learn about the most random things, so that’s what I embraced. The wild child, and as a teenager I did what people expected of me, not really what I wanted. Take partying, for example. Everyone figured my outgoing personality meant I liked to go out and party every weekend. Want to know what I really did at those parties? People-watched. I watched how people acted because their behaviors were far more entertaining than getting drunk. Lame, right?”

Colt forced himself to stay with his line. This was a discussion for the fish, a way for Alexa to get things off her chest without judgment. But it didn’t stop him from giving his opinion.

“I think the fish would agree with me when I say there’s nothing wrong with that. Not everyone knows what they want to be when they grow up, not at a young age. And sometimes you can have one goal, but then life takes over.”

He didn’t plan to talk about his own life. Had steadily avoided it. Yet it felt pertinent that she understood not everyone had a careful plan.

“Is that what happened to you? You didn’t always want to follow in a similar set of footsteps as your father?”

A sadness he hadn’t felt since the day Amber confessed she was pregnant washed over him.

“No, a corrections officer was not what I’d planned to be. I had a full ride to play football as a running back. Voted by the town most likely to go pro. As you can see, that didn’t happen. It was just after the start of my senior season that I found out my girlfriend was pregnant with Makenna. She was born before I graduated high school. Turned down the offer to play football with Texan A&M and floundered a bit before I decided I needed a steady job that would provide for my family. I settled on becoming a corrections officer, and obviously, that’s where I stayed.”

“Do you regret it? Not taking the full ride, that is.”

The million-dollar question. One he had tried not to think much about over the last thirteen years. Did he regret it?

“Confession to the fishes? I will never regret Makenna. She’s the best part of my life. But do I regret that I married her mother? Every day. Do I regret that I never got to fulfill my dream to play college ball and maybe go pro one day? A little. I wished I would’ve given myself the chance to try, if I could’ve done both, but then I remember that was exactly what Amber wanted. Makenna’s mother wanted the bragging rights of being a pro football player’s wife, and do I honestly think I would’ve been happy with that? No, but I’ll never know for sure.”

He’d never admitted out loud that he wished he’d taken the scholarship. Never, in all the conversations with his parents about the decision he made. Never in any of his fights with Amber when she would rant about him giving it all up. Never to his best friend to whom he confessed almost everything. Colt always felt that if he said it out loud, it would make him a horrible father. People would think he regretted giving it all up for his daughter.

“She’s lucky to have you. And there’s nothing wrong with wondering what could’ve been. You’re human and it’s only natural. That doesn’t make you a bad father, or even a bad person.”

Colt let her words wash over him, let them heal the jagged parts he didn’t even realize he still held on to.

“Thank you for that. There are some days I question it while raising her.”

He found Alexa easy to talk to under the guise of talking to the fish. Somehow, in just a matter of minutes, she had him opening up more than he ever had before in his life.

“How old is she?”

“She’ll be thirteen in a few days. But she acts much older, wise beyond her years. Unlike her mother.”

That last part was barely a whisper. Alexa didn’t need to hear about his troubles with his ex.

“And just for clarification purposes, are you still with Makenna’s mother?”

The question took him by surprise. Everyone in town knew the story, so it was refreshing to meet someone who didn’t automatically know about all the things she put him through.

“Yeah, that would be a hell no. Don’t get me wrong, I tried to make it work for Makenna’s sake, but after I caught her cheating the second time, I decided enough was enough. Now she just torments my life in other ways.”

His smile was so full of sarcasm that it was not a shock when Alexa burst out laughing. “Sorry,” she sputtered. “I swear I’m not laughing at her tormenting you. It was just the way you said it.”

He couldn’t stop his own laughter from bubbling over when she tried desperately to apologize, but only managed to snort and then laugh some more. If anyone were to walk up on them now, they would see two people bent over, laughing so hard that their fishing poles were abandoned.

“Oh ... oh ... I think you caught something!”

Alexa’s laughter was now a plea for him to grab his pole as it bounced along the grassy shore. Struggling to grab it, Colt tripped in his attempt and landed with his ass in the water. Sputtering and trying to regain his composure was pointless. Especially when the woman who should be helping him get up

was bent over, with her forearms on her knees, too busy laughing at him all over again.

Knowing exactly how this situation should be handled, he reached out and snagged Alexa's hand. The second their fingers locked, he tugged her none too gently until she was lying in the water on top of him.

"Did you ... just ... pull me in ... with you?"

This time, he could feel the laughter rolling through her body. He liked feeling it about as much as he liked hearing it. Actually, he simply liked having her body against his. The way her wet shirt clung to every curve. A body he could feel beneath his fingertips, which tingled to lift her shirt just a bit higher to see if her skin was as soft as it looked. *Danger zone!*

He disregarded his brain's warning. "I did," he murmured in her ear. "I couldn't be the only one wet in this hypothetical discussion with the fishes."

Just like he could feel her laughter, Colt felt the moment her body tensed at his playful banter. Every muscle in her body locked up and the softness just seconds before he had been admiring was now hard as steel. He might've ignored the warning, but it was clear Alexa was listening to her own.

"We should probably get going," she said coolly.

Alexa was shutting him out, and he couldn't blame her. Everything in him was begging him to keep his distance. For a few minutes, he had forgotten that and let his guard down. He had to make sure not to do so again in the future.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

He pulled himself up and helped Alexa out of the water. He didn't miss the tingle that sparked to life at the touch of their hands. He also didn't miss how she pulled away just as fast as it happened. Keeping space between them, he packed up their gear and walked her back to the cabin where, with nothing other than a simple goodbye, Alexa slipped inside.

He wished he could regret what happened, but like so many other things in his life, he couldn't regret something that made him laugh. Even if it was only for a short while.

Chapter 18

Alexa hightailed her ass back into the cabin like it was on fire. What the hell had she been thinking getting that close to Colt? When would she learn? Nothing good could come of the two of them starting anything. He had a daughter. If for no other reason, Makenna needed to be the reason she stayed away.

She continued to tell herself that all through her shower and changing into new clothes. The shame she felt grew with every passing minute until once again she was ready to come out of her skin. And if her day couldn't get any worse, the sound of another approaching vehicle caught her attention. Letting out a very audible groan, she prayed it wasn't Colt returning. She had yet to shore up her defenses enough to deal with him.

A quick glance out the window and she thanked the universe for giving her even the slightest break. Instead of meeting Buck outside, she let him come to her.

“Not on guard duty today?” he asked, after giving a couple of quick knocks and letting himself inside.

Alexa couldn't even muster up the humor to give the man a half smile.

“Saw it was only you and figured there was no point in wasting either of our time. Since I doubt you're here just to hang out with me, does that mean you have some information to share?”

Or something to keep me busy? Anything to take her mind off the fact that she was stuck in this place with nothing to do. Or better yet, so she could stop thinking about his son in ways that would make a stripper blush.

Alexa was regretting the decision to not get her phone back. She used the excuse she didn't want the temptation of reaching out to her family but it was more than that. Alexa was too afraid whoever set her up wasn't done, and if they succeeded, she didn't want the jolt of having everything ripped away again. It was best to get used to the loneliness gradually.

“I do, and I figured since you're stuck out here, I might as well put you to work. Brought you a laptop that can access the sheriff's databases. Mind you, everything done on it is monitored, so keep it clean.”

Any other time she would've rolled her eyes or responded with some kind of smartass remark, but even that was just too much.

“I didn't expect you to hand me the secrets to the bat cave.”

Okay, so maybe her sarcasm wasn't completely gone. That was good to know. Some days it was the only thing that got her through and it would suck to know it failed her now, when she needed it the most.

“If only I was cool enough to have a bat cave,” Buck joked.

This time she did smile at the older man. He had the same sense of humor as his son, except without the guilt attached to it. She could laugh with Buck and not feel guilty that she was potentially messing with the man's life.

“It’s probably overrated but what do I know.” She shrugged. “So, what kind of information do you have for me?”

“Not as much as I would like, but I figured we could start with Shannon, since the identity she gave you was real. Your handler will be trickier considering there’s a good chance that, like you, he used a fake name. I’m having my tech people look into the burner phone, but it’s taking some time.”

She was grateful he would be giving her something to do. Anything to take her mind off the fact that the walls of the cabin were getting smaller and smaller each day. She wasn’t sure how much longer she would be able to hold out and not contact her family. Lucy was likely freaking out, which meant so were the rest of her siblings.

If she didn’t at least let them know she was alright, Wes would be taking over the town and questioning everyone in the process. It was just how her brother’s boss operated.

“Was it something I said?” she heard Buck say.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Alexa was embarrassed to admit she had nearly forgotten the man was still in the room. There were times when she got so lost in her head that everything around her just faded away. It was a bad quality to have in her line of work. Luckily, it only ever happened around her family.

“You completely spaced on me and I wasn’t sure if it had something to do with what I said,” he told her, his brows dipped with concern.

“No, I was just thinking about my family. I should probably let them know I’m okay before they send out a search team.”

“You mean send in W.J. Protective Services?”

Now it was her turn to frown. Did she really think that he didn’t check into her? Of course he did. If the situation were reversed, she would’ve done the same damn thing.

“That’s right. You mentioned my brother’s career. It would make sense that you looked into his place of employment.”

“Hard not to have heard of Westley James in my line of work. He makes it a point to be familiar with law enforcement agencies throughout the state of Texas, and others I’m sure.”

Alexa didn’t know the extent of Wes’s reach, but she could imagine it was wide. He was a formidable person and having connections with law enforcement agencies would make sense. She just never thought his control would be this far across the state.

“So you agree I should probably contact him? The last message I sent my sister before smashing my phone was that I would be unavailable for a while, but I know her. She’s going to get anxious the longer I’m out of touch. It’s only a matter of time before she advises the rest of the family.”

“Does she know what you do for a living? You mentioned you changed your name to protect them.”

“She’s the only one who knows and she only recently found out.”

But that confession had felt so good that she had considered telling the rest of her family. They would understand and not judge her for the choice she made. They would support her in any way they could, even if that meant keeping her secret. Yet, she had stopped herself again, choosing instead to meet Shannon, thinking it was fate’s way of telling her it wasn’t time to confess. She highly doubted fate had anything to do with her going to jail.

“I could reach out in your stead. Let her know you’re working a case with me and you asked me as a favor to let her know you’re okay. It could keep her off your back for a little while longer, give you the chance to look into your handler without worrying that your family will blow things for you. Not that I’m saying they will, but you know what I mean.”

She did know, and it made sense. She could give Lucy the reassurance she needed without having to actually speak to her sister. It was the cowardly way to handle things, but she wasn’t ready to confront her family and tell them until she was cleared, technically she was still a criminal. That didn’t sit well with her at all.

“That would be great, and really appreciated.”

“Don’t mention it. In the meantime, put those skills of yours to work. We all gotta pull our weight if we plan to keep your ass from going back to jail.”

With a wink and a chuckle, Buck walked out just as confidentially as he walked in. The first real smile, outside of her incident with Colt, broke out on her face. The older man was hilarious and not at all as she expected him to be when she pictured a sheriff. Colt was a lucky man to have him as a role model.

Chapter 19

Alexa stopped mid-typing at the sound of a soft knock on the cabin door. She knew there was no damn way she was so engrossed in her research that she missed the sound of gravel kicking up from a vehicle pulling in. Softly closing the computer, and with ever-slow movements, she crept to the front of the cabin. Doing her best to stay hidden, Alexa peered out the window. Who she saw standing just on the other side of the front door nearly had her falling over. Rushing forward, she whipped the door open so hard it crashed back against the wooden structure. She would apologize later for any damage done.

Reaching her arm outside, she yanked the little girl in with a yelp. After a quick look around to make sure no one followed the child, Alexa slammed the door closed and locked it. Her search for Antonio and whatever illegal dealings he was involved in was getting thick. While she doubted he figured

out where she was, Alexa refused to take a chance with Colt's daughter. He would murder her no matter how much of a non-verbal truce they had come to.

"It's Makenna, right?"

The little girl nodded, her eyes as big as saucers. *Good going, dipshit! Way to scare her.*

"Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. My name's Alexa. I know you were here that first day with your dad, but we never formally got to meet." She shoved her hand out for a shake. Not surprisingly, it took the little girl several moments before she finally accepted it.

"Makenna." The little girl cleared her throat. "You were right. That's my name."

Alexa had to stop thinking of Colt's daughter as a little girl. She knew from their brief conversation while fishing that his daughter would be thirteen soon. And there was nothing little about the girl's height. Only a few inches shorter than her own five-foot-three stature, she was sure Makenna would pass her in the next few years.

"Not that I'm not thrilled with having a visitor because, you know, it's been a bit lonely, something I never thought I would say, but umm ... what brought you here?"

It wasn't the most adult way to speak to a teenager, but Alexa didn't know the first thing about them. Having not stepped foot into a middle school or high school since her own time, she didn't know what the hell was appropriate. And this was in a lose-lose situation. Colt wouldn't be happy that she was anywhere near his daughter. Which begged the question, how the hell did Makenna get to the cabin?

"I overheard Gramma and Papa talking about you, so I waited until Papa left for work before I asked. Gramma said you weren't a bad person, just misunderstood."

Well, *fuck, fuck, fuckity*. Why did Colt's mother have to go and be nice like that? She hadn't even had the pleasure of meeting the woman and already Alexa felt like she owed the woman a damn hug.

“That doesn’t explain what brought you here, or how you got here, for that matter. Your father has made it very clear he doesn’t want me around you, and I’m pretty sure he would be pissed if he knew you were here. I’m assuming he doesn’t know you’re here?” she asked as an afterthought.

She truly looked at Colt’s daughter for the first time. That day she had seen her in the truck, she hadn’t had the chance to really see all the comparisons. Obviously, Alexa didn’t know what Makenna’s mother looked like, but it was safe to assume the girl favored her father. She had the same dark hair. While Colt’s was nearly black, Makenna’s had the softest of browns running throughout. And there was no mistaking that she shared the same eyes as her father. She wondered if Makenna got any qualities from her mother, or if the little girl was just a beautiful version of her father.

“No, Dad doesn’t know,” Makenna finally answered with her eyes cast to the floor. “And he’s likely going to be mad, but I had to get away. My mother and grandmother were on one of their tangents and fussing about my hair and how Dad lets me dress like a boy. So I waited until they were distracted online shopping for me and slipped out the back. I didn’t know where else to go. And then I remembered Papa had said you were here and my curiosity won out.”

The last part was said in such a soft voice that if Alexa wasn’t leaning in, and if the cabin wasn’t so silent, she was sure she wouldn’t have heard what the little girl said.

Having zero experience with kids but channeling every discussion she ever had with her mother, Alexa pulled Makenna over to the couch and plopped them both down. Colt would likely strangle her for not reaching out to him immediately, but it was obvious Makenna needed someone to talk to. Besides, she refused to have a phone, and the last thing she wanted to do was ask Makenna to use hers. Almost thirteen-year-olds had a cell, right? She felt like it was something Colt would make sure she had.

“I’m new to all this, so bear with me for a few moments, but I’m sure your mother loves you very much. And I’m sure their comments about your hair and the way you dress weren’t

something they said to hurt you. I don't see anything wrong with the clothes you're wearing or your hair. In fact, I love the natural colors you have going on."

Maybe she didn't suck at this kid thing after all. They were just tiny adults. As long as she went into it like that, she couldn't fuck it up too badly.

"You don't know my mother," Makenna said with such sadness. "All she ever does is blame Dad for the way I am. She says the only reason he has custody is that Papa is the sheriff, and no one wants to go against him. She says my hair is long and ugly, and if I lived with her, then I would be sure to see a stylist regularly, and I would already know how to wear makeup, even though I think the stuff is gross, and she would never let me hang around pimple-faced girls like my dad does."

Alexa took it all back. This shit wasn't easy at all and right now the anger she felt toward another human being wasn't natural. Makenna's mother was a bitch. Who the fuck spoke to their daughter like that? It was a good thing the "c you next Tuesday" wasn't in the same room, or Alexa would give her a piece of her mind. She still might. One search was all it would take to see where the bitch lived, but she doubted Colt would appreciate that.

"First off. I doubt the reason your father has custody of you has anything at all to do with your grandfather." It was no wonder Makenna lived with Colt, especially if that was how the mother treated the little girl. If Alexa were to have a daughter, there was no way she would want the child living with such a vile person, either. "Secondly, I know I already said this, but I'll say it again. I love your hair. I love the colors, and if that's all natural, then I know plenty of people who would be jealous. People pay a lot of money to have colors like that."

"You have pretty colors, too. I like how the gold in your hair matches your eyes."

The childish innocence with which Makenna spoke was so sweet. People complimented her all the time on her hair and

eyes, but never has it meant as much as hearing it from this adorable little girl. She was stealing her heart, and while Alexa knew that could be dangerous, there was no way she was going to deny the girl anything, not after hearing how her mother treated her. If anything, she wanted to hand her the world. Colt was wrong. He was doing an amazing job raising his daughter.

“Well, thank you, sweetie.” A real smile formed on her lips. It had been so long since she wore one that wasn’t forced. Alexa almost wondered if it looked as funny as it felt. “Now, how about you tell me about this friend your mother doesn’t like? Because she sounds like a friend to hold on to.”

For the next thirty minutes, Makenna told Alexa all about Sarah and their friendship. About the birthday party she was having in a few days and how her mother insisted she needed to invite the popular girls because she needed to start high school off on the right foot and Sarah was definitely not it.

The more Makenna spoke, the more Alexa wanted to punch her mother in the face. How the hell did a woman like that end up with a man like Colt? Granted, they were divorced, but it was still something she couldn’t wrap her head around.

Makenna was still talking when Alexa heard the sound of a vehicle moving at a fast clip on the gravel outside. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that Colt knew where his daughter was and wasn’t happy. Alexa would gladly take the brunt of his anger if it meant his daughter didn’t get in trouble for her little adventure.

What Alexa wouldn’t realize until days later was that this was the turning point for her and Colt. Everything before this was just fluff.

Chapter 20

Colt wasn't sure who he wanted to strangle more; his ex-wife, for what he was sure was some nasty retort that resulted in his daughter running away, Makenna for actually running away and giving him a heart attack, or Alexa for not calling him the second his daughter showed up at the cabin. Although that last one was a bit irrational, considering he knew damn well Alexa didn't have a phone. She refused to keep the burner phone and had put her foot down when his father offered to buy her one.

That didn't change the fact that he knew Makenna had her phone on her. It was how he was able to pull up her location when Amber called in a fit of rage, thinking he had swooped in and snatched his daughter while she was too busy primping herself or buying useless shit. That's all she was ever doing.

A couple of hours. That's all it was supposed to be. Just enough time for him to run and pick up Makenna's birthday

presents and a few supplies he still needed for her party. Yet his ex-wife could turn those few hours into something bad enough that Makenna felt the need to flee.

His anger had yet to dissipate when he finally tore down the gravel road that led to the cabin. There was no mistaking his agitation as he pulled in. If Alexa wanted to be mad at him, then tough shit. Maybe she should've thought of that when she chose not to notify him of his daughter randomly showing up.

Colt expected Alexa to meet him outside, just as she did any other time he or his father stopped in. He learned pretty quickly that she didn't like to be boxed in; like a prized fighter, she'd always come out swinging. When she didn't appear at the sound of him arriving, he was slightly concerned at the change in behavior, and it did nothing to tamp down the initial panic he felt when Amber first called him.

Rushing inside, the sight before him took him by surprise. Makenna was curled up on one side of the couch with Alexa sitting in the middle. The two of them leaned close, as if they were sharing secrets. Colt noticed both of their bodies tense when they looked his way. Alexa, he understood because she knew damn well he wouldn't be happy with the current situation, but he hated seeing Makenna that way. He never wanted to be the reason his daughter tensed up.

"Hi, Dad," his daughter whispered. "I know you're mad, but as you can see, I'm fine."

He let her sweet words wash over him. All of the anger he was harboring slipped away when he took the time to actually look at her. Just as she said, his daughter was fine. Physically. The few miles she walked to the cabin was nothing she hadn't done before, especially with him. She knew the way and everyone in the area knew who she was, so yes, physically she would be safe to walk there. But with Alexa looking into her handler, things could've gone differently. He stopped those thoughts where they were. Living in what-ifs wouldn't help.

"I see that, but it didn't stop me from worrying when your mother called me."

He failed to mention the part where she chewed him out, blaming him for every single thing wrong with his amazing daughter. If he hadn't been so worried about finding Makenna, he would've told his ex just where she could shove her false concerns. Not once during her entire rant had she expressed that she was worried, nor did she ask to be notified when he found Makenna. No, Amber had simply blamed everything on him. As usual.

“Are you going to yell at me?”

He wanted to. He wanted her to understand the panic he felt, but one look at Alexa's stern face and every thought fled. Alexa looked like a mother bear ready to attack.

Running a hand along his beard, he let out a puff of breath when he answered. “No, bug, I'm not going to yell at you. As you clearly pointed out, you're safe. And while I wish you would've texted or called me to let me know where you were, I found you and that's all that matters. How about you tell me what made you leave your mother's so suddenly and we go from there?”

He approached the couch. Since it was the only piece of furniture in the room, he had no other choice but to join them. Alexa moved over to the one side but instead of Makenna allowing him to sit between them, his daughter moved so she was close to Alexa again. He would examine that move at a later time.

He listened as his daughter explained her morning with her mother. The nasty retort he was so confident had come from his ex-wife was more than even he expected. Colt wanted to race back out of the cabin and confront his vile ex. The expression he saw on Alexa's face told him he wasn't the only one. He was sure if she was left to her own devices, the woman would defend his daughter. Something else he would need to think about later.

“I get why you left, but do me a huge favor. Next time, call me and I promise to pick you up. No wandering away without telling anyone where you're going. Deal?”

“Deal,” his daughter agreed quickly.

Colt looked between his daughter and the woman who he tried desperately not to think about. He was a sucker for a set of sad eyes, and right now, he was getting double the dose. There was no missing the sadness lurking below the anger in Alexa's intense gaze. He would love to say he was immune to it, or that he could look away and not let it affect him, but he would be a liar.

Another question about the whole situation nagged him. "Why did you decide to come to the cabin and not your grandparents' house?"

The fact that his daughter couldn't look him in the eyes all of a sudden was telling enough. He wasn't going to like the answer she had to give.

"I might've overheard Gramma and Papa talking about Alexa and was curious about her. No one would tell me anything, so I figured the best way to meet her was to come myself. When I decided I needed time away from Mom, this seemed like a logical place to go."

Makenna's answer was a mixture of stubbornness and awe. He figured the first part was because she hated to be treated like a little kid. Despite her mother pushing her to act older, what his daughter really wanted was to be treated like she mattered and was respected; two things he always tried to do, but realized he fell short when it came to the Alexa matter. He did indeed ignore it and tried his best to keep it from her. That was his mistake and one he owned up to.

"I'm sorry you felt the need to sneak away. That was never my intention. I wasn't necessarily hiding Alexa from you, the situation is just complicated."

"Because some people in town think she murdered that woman, while others say she's too sweet to murder anyone," his daughter interrupted.

Damn small-town gossip. He heard a quiet gasp slip from Alexa. He could also see, from the corner of his eye, her pulling away. Likely because she thought he was about to snatch Makenna up and run away with her, a move he

would've made in the past, but had to physically resist right now.

“You knew all that, and you still came out here on your own?” he asked in utter disbelief.

“Gramma said that Alexa wasn't bad just misunderstood. I figured if Gramma and Papa didn't think she did it, then those naysayers in town were probably wrong.”

Colt couldn't find fault in that logic. Not when he raised his daughter to believe that her grandfather was a good man who followed the law. It was to be expected that if he thought Alexa was innocent, then so should Makenna. That didn't mean he was happy the two of them were spending quality time together. He wanted his daughter around those who would be a good influence. The jury was still out on whether or not that description fit the woman across from him.

Chapter 21

Well, shit! Of course there would be people in town who thought she murdered Shannon. She was arrested for it, for Christ's sake. And yet somehow, the thought never occurred to her that people would actually be talking about it. Small-town life. She had seen enough Hallmark movies to know that everyone knew everyone's business.

“It sounds like you have one really smart grandma and I'm flattered that both she and your grandfather have such faith in me. It's warranted, don't get me wrong, but your father is right. Maybe next time you wait to speak with him before rushing out to meet someone you don't know.”

The crestfallen expression on Makenna's face had her quickly adding, “Not that I don't love your company because truly I do. This place really was starting to get too lonely, so I'm truly happy you came, but maybe don't do it in the future.”

Was that a squeak that came out with that last word? Certainly not. Talking to Makenna came much more naturally before her father showed up. Now she felt like he was judging everything she said.

“Does that mean you wouldn’t mind if we hung out for a bit longer? You said you were getting lonely. Maybe we could keep you company for a bit?”

There was so much hope in that question; she wanted to say “sure!” but she refused to do anything without first asking Colt. This was way out of her league.

“I think that’s up to your father. I wouldn’t mind, but I’m not sure what his plans were for you.”

Gah, hopefully, that didn’t sound as bad as she thought. Chancing a glance up, Alexa found Colt staring at her, but not with the anger she expected to see. No, he looked more intrigued than anything. She wasn’t sure that was much better. She didn’t want anyone analyzing her, especially Colt. She was trying to stay away from him. Something she was obviously failing miserably at, if the current situation was any indication.

“We could stay for a bit. Maybe you can go grab some of the games out of the closet, bug.”

Makenna jumped up before her father could change his mind and ran over to the closet. Alexa used the time to lean in and whisper, “I’m sorry I didn’t call to let you know she was here. Everything kinda happened so fast, and the next thing I knew, Makenna was telling me what her mother said and I got so wrapped up in listening that I completely forgot about notifying you. That was all on me.”

Alexa wanted to make sure Colt realized this was more her fault than his daughter’s. From everything she’d seen, she doubted Makenna would get in trouble once they left, but she still wanted to make sure he fully understood what happened.

“Thank you for being there for my daughter when she needed it. Her mother is overbearing and some days I wonder what’s the best way to handle things.”

She didn't get the chance to respond before Makenna was back with an armful of games. All three of them laughing at the sheer insanity of the young girl trying to juggle so many at once.

There was a nice mixture of both new and old games, from Scrabble to something called Zombie Kidz and everything in between.

They gave Makenna the first choice and Alexa secretly loved that the girl chose Scrabble. It had always been her favorite game growing up.

For the next two hours, they played round after round. About halfway through, Colt suggested they make some popcorn. It was the perfect afternoon filled with laughter, food, and good company. Alexa was almost sad when Colt mentioned that he and Makenna needed to get going. They were expected for dinner at his parents' place.

"Why doesn't Alexa join us? It can't be any fun having to eat alone all the time."

Oh boy. They were hitting dangerous territory now. It was one thing for the three of them to have a few hours together here in the safety of the cabin, but going to Colt's parents' house would mean the chance for people in town to see her.

"I'm not sure that's the best idea. Your grandfather wanted me to stay here for a reason and I don't want to go against his wishes."

Alexa did her best to make an excuse before Colt was forced to deny his daughter. She didn't want him to be the bad guy in this story. She would gladly lie down on the sword knowing she was only in the girl's life for a little while.

"Actually, I think that's a great idea. I doubt my father would mind you leaving as long as it was only to go to his house. That, and my ma would kill me if she knew Makenna offered and then I took it back."

Well, damn. Why did he have to go and be rational when she was trying to give him an out? There was no way she

couldn't go now. She would seem ungrateful and her own mama raised her better than that.

“Alright, you convinced me. Let me just go and change. I'll be back in a minute.”

Alexa ran out of the room before either of them could say anything. She needed several minutes to compose herself. Rummaging through the meager belongings she had brought from her car, she picked out a pair of shorts and top that didn't scream “trying too hard.”

This seemed like a big step and she really didn't want to do it in a pair of ratty cutoffs and shirt that was two sizes too big.

Chapter 22

Why did he think bringing Alexa to dinner was a good idea? Now he was forced to sit across from her and watch as she laughed with both his mother and daughter, a sound that went straight to his cock each time she did it. Colt was in a hell of his own making, and he didn't have the first clue what to do about it.

The first chance he got, he would pull her into an empty room and kiss the hell out of her. He needed to know what her lips tasted like. Would they be as sweet as the pie she was eating? He really needed to find out. Maybe if he allowed himself just one indulgence, it would get rid of this excessive need to taste the forbidden fruit.

“Dad?” His daughter's innocent voice brought reality crashing back down. “Can I show Alexa the farm? I really want her to see the horses.”

Just hearing Alexa's name had his brain short-circuiting and trying to formulate a sentence. While the rational part of him begged his brain to answer his daughter, his mother swooped in for the rescue.

"How about we give your father and Alexa a few minutes to find something appropriate for her feet? We can't have her walking the stalls in sandals while the rest of us start on our afternoon chores."

With a nod, he thanked his mother. He didn't miss her knowing look or the sparkle in her eyes. And Makenna seemed to accept the request without so much as a protest. He wondered, as he did often, how he got so lucky with this wonderful daughter. It was his father's questioning look that gave him the briefest pause and had him pondering not for the first time about his sanity.

"Come on." Colt pushed his chair back and reached out his hand to Alexa. "Let's go see what we can find for you."

Alexa didn't protest, but she also wouldn't meet his stare. He had no idea what that was about. She was hot and cold with him, sometimes facing him head-on with a challenge and other times running away from him as fast as possible, like the time he took her fishing.

Colt moved out of the dining room and into the mudroom. It was his mother's dream room. It was nearly as big as a bedroom with a washing machine, dryer, and folding area on one wall, and the other wall had a large industrial sink and shower. It was where they could hose down, so all of the mud wasn't brought into the house. Growing up, that was always his mother's only complaint about living on the farm. When his father finally agreed to add this room onto the house, he allowed his mother to go all out.

Reaching for a pair of his mother's muck boots, he swung around to ask Alexa what size she wore, but ended up crashing into her instead.

"Shit!" He grabbed her arm and hauled her to his chest to keep her from falling over. Dropping the boots, he used his other arm to snake around her back.

“I’m sorry,” they both said in unison.

A soft giggle escaped Alexa’s lips and once again all Colt could think about was wanting just one taste. Her plump red lips were a beacon he was drawn to.

Before he could change his mind, he leaned in a little more. “I’m going to kiss you now. Say no if it’s something you don’t want.” He could hear the huskiness in his own tone. He waited for her to put up a fight, but he knew the wait was pointless when she leaned in just a bit further, bringing them so close he could feel the heat of her breath fan across his face.

One brush of his lips across hers and he was done for. There was no way in hell he would ever be satisfied with just one kiss. Running his tongue along the seam of her lips, he encouraged her to open up and let him in. She was sweeter than he expected, sweeter than he could ever dream of.

It was a soft and sensual kiss; not at all what he expected from the woman whose eyes lit with fire more times than not. It was a kiss of exploration and learning about a new lover. It was his tongue stroking against hers as he discovered what made her moan.

Never wishing for the kiss to end but also knowing that he needed to get going before they were discovered, he slowly backed off and dropped his forehead to hers.

“Confession time,” he puffed. “But this time there are no fish to listen to me.”

Colt waited until he was sure he had her full attention before he started again. “I thought I could have just one taste and that would be it, that the fire burning to kiss you would extinguish and I could go back to my original plan to stay away from you. I was wrong. One kiss will never be enough. From the second I saw you, I knew there was something different about you. *Something* about you calls me in. I have no idea what the future holds, but mark my words, Alexa, I’m not going to be able to stay away for much longer.”

With a kiss to her forehead, he bent down and slipped her feet into the muck boots. Alexa was clearly stunned silent, and

he used that to his advantage to press a hand to the small of her back and guide her out the door.

Colt found his family down at the paddock. His daughter was riding one of the tamer mares, Ginger, named by his daughter when she was only six years old. It was the first horse his parents bought her, and the collection had only grown since then.

“Alexa!” His daughter waved her arms over her head. It was a good thing Ginger didn’t spook easily. Makenna knew better than to yell when she was riding one of the horses. It just showed how excited his daughter was and he could never be upset by that.

“Come meet Ginger. She’s the sweetest.”

“I’ve ... I’ve never been this close to a horse before ...” Alexa stammered.

If he didn’t know any better, he would think that was trepidation in her tone. But that wasn’t his Alexa. Not the one he had come to know. “Think of it as another adventure. Ginger is gentle and a great horse for you to meet the first time.”

She didn’t look the least bit convinced, but just as he knew it would, she straightened her back at the challenge. He stored that little tidbit of information away for later.

“Make sure you know damn well what you’re doing before someone gets hurt.”

Colt was too busy watching his daughter help Alexa and introduce her to the horse to hear his father approach. The warning tone was obvious, even if the words didn’t say it.

“I know the risks,” he replied.

And he did. He knew there was the possibility that the moment Alexa was cleared of all charges, she would leave. He’d accepted that for what it was. That was why he wouldn’t let Makenna get too close. He would guard her heart in ways that were too far gone for him.

“I’m not talking about you,” Buck scoffed. “Hell, I’m not even talking about my granddaughter. I can see the wheels turning in your brain, you’d do anything to protect that little girl. You have all her life. No, I’m talking about Alexa. Take care of how she feels, because I’ve seen the way she looks at you. Don’t break that girl’s heart.”

Colt didn’t say anything when his father walked back to his mother. The two of them watched as their granddaughter demonstrated just how much she loved horses. He looked at Makenna as well, but it wasn’t his daughter’s smile that kept him watching for longer than it should. It was Alexa’s, and the way she hung on every word his daughter said like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

Colt had never been jealous of his daughter, but he was right now. He wanted that undivided attention from Alexa, just not out here in the open. He wanted it focused on him in the bedroom.

As if Alexa could hear his thoughts, she looked up from underneath her lashes and he smirked at the blush that crept over the apple of her cheeks.

Oh, yeah. He was getting her alone as soon as he could, and he was going to see exactly where he could make that blush spread to.

Chapter 23

How did she get here? It was like they went from turtle's pace to NASCAR fast in less than a day. After having dinner with Colt's parents, Makenna stayed to finish the chores while Colt drove her back to the cabin, where he kissed her for the second time. That one was much more desperate than the kiss they shared in the mudroom. He wasn't lying when he said one wouldn't be enough. And Colt was a good kisser. No, a *great* kisser. Both times, she was transported to a completely different world. One where nothing could interrupt what was happening between them.

That was the only thing she could blame her temporary insanity on. She had allowed Colt to pick her up for their non-date because she was smart enough to draw that line. Just not smart enough to stay away from him like she knew she should. Nothing good could come from this. Colt was the type of man she could easily lose her heart to. She would lose herself to

him and then be cast aside when he realized she wasn't someone he wanted around his daughter.

Even so, she was sitting in his living room, after sharing dinner, because Makenna was at her friend's house for the evening. She was a glutton for punishment. And a sucker for a leg massage. A weakness Colt picked up on quickly when he reached for her leg twenty minutes into the movie and heard the moan escape her lips.

"I would've taken you for an action flick kinda chick," Colt commented as his thumb dug a little deeper into her calf. "Surprised me a little when you turned on a Hallmark movie. Not complaining, just intrigued."

It surprised her as well when she chose to share one of her deepest secrets. No one knew her secret love for the sappy movies. Growing up, when her mother would turn them on, her brothers would joke about how all the movies were exactly the same, just with different actors. Maybe that's why she loved them so much. They were a guaranteed happily ever after.

"Have to keep you on your toes." She tipped her lips up in a small smile. "Can't have you thinking I'm that easy to figure out."

Alexa was sliding down a slippery slope. One that, if she weren't careful, would end with a broken heart. She was opening herself up more than she ever had before.

"I'll take that as a challenge. One I look forward to."

It wasn't just his hands on her legs that caused her entire body to tingle. It was that, plus the seductive smile he was giving her. The one that made the throbbing between her legs intensify. Every second his hands were on her body, it lit up just a little more.

"Those little whimpers you keep making are going to get you into trouble, baby."

Ah, fuck. She wasn't the kind of woman who took to pet names. In fact, they annoyed the shit out of her. But there was something about the way Colt said "baby" that made her want

to crawl on top of him and beg him to say it again, but this time, while his head was between her legs.

“I’m not a fan of pet names.”

She tried to put as much conviction in her voice, but figured she missed the mark by a long shot when her response was met with a deep chuckle.

“Is that so?”

Before she could continue her protest, he was tugging her calf. Letting out a surprised squeal, Alexa attempted to keep her shirt from riding up, but all she managed to do was get her hands caught between her and Colt’s rock-hard stomach.

“I thought you didn’t make a habit of lying?”

How the hell was she supposed to answer when the question was so closely followed by him nibbling on her earlobe?

Swallowing down the moan that would clearly make her sound like the hussy she was turning into, Alexa challenged instead, “Who said I was lying?”

She didn’t miss the huskiness in her voice, and she doubted Colt did either.

“The first clue? The hint of pink on your cheeks and neck.” He kissed the area he was referring to. “The second? I would bet my truck the reason you’re rubbing those pretty legs together right now is because you’re trying to make the ache just a little more bearable.”

Damn, she hadn’t even realized that was *exactly* what her body was doing. Moving of its own accord because, of course, he was right, and the throbbing was worse now that she knew what his body felt like.

“But the last and most obvious one? The way your voice hitches just as you finish telling a fib.”

Gone and done. There was nothing left of her. A few simple words and Alexa was ready to throw caution to the wind. To hell with her broken heart. She would gladly take it if it meant this man continued to speak to her as someone who actually understood her. No other human being had ever done that. Her

heart was lost and there was nothing she could do about it except go along for the ride.

“I think you need to kiss me again,” she panted.

“I’m going to do more than kiss you, baby. I’m going to worship your body and have you screaming my name. I’m going to leave you so satisfied that you won’t even think to hide from me again.”

Alexa was so lost in the sensation his words created that she didn’t even realize he was working her jeans down her legs until they were already at her ankles.

“I thought you were going to kiss me?”

Was that her voice? It sure sounded like it, but it had never gone that low before, never had that much need in it. What was he doing to her?

“Oh, that’s where I plan on starting.”

Colt’s lips trailed up her right leg, leaving soft kisses along the way. An involuntary shiver took over when he hit a sensitive spot she hadn’t known about just behind her knee.

“Ah, someone’s a little ticklish. Saving that little nugget of information for later use.”

“Don’t even think ...” She went from giggling to moaning in a heartbeat when his next kiss landed just centimeters away from where she desperately wanted his mouth. “... about it.”

She banged her head back on the armrest and let yet another moan escape her lips. He was so damn close. His hot breath teased her sensitive lips.

“Eyes on me, baby. I want you to watch me feast on you.” His tone left no room for argument.

She snapped her head up and was rewarded with the sexiest smile. Alexa was mesmerized by his tongue. The way he flattened and licked straight up her center like she was a damn ice cream cone.

Alexa lost all coherent thoughts as he continued to lick, suck, nibble, and devour her. Torturing her by bringing her

close to the edge, only to back off again and again. Thrusting her hips forward and grabbing his hair, she stopped letting herself just feel and took control of the situation.

“That’s it, baby. Ride my face. Show me exactly what you want from me.”

The deep rumble of his voice vibrated her clit. Sending her close to the edge again but this time she didn’t allow him to let up. Squeezing her thighs tight, she probably courted suffocation for him but she was past caring. Her release was all that mattered.

And when it finally came, there was no stopping it. Her entire body lit up. One second she was holding on to him for dear life, and the next she was floating on a cloud, completely unaware of how it happened.

A chuckle in the distance was the only indication that she was still on earth.

“What’s so funny,” she panted.

“Pretty sure you came so hard you blacked out there for a few seconds.”

She was sure he was right. That had never happened to her before, but she wasn’t about to stroke his ego more.

“And you think that’s funny?”

She tried for an evil eye, but considering he still smiled at her, she figured she missed the mark. Probably because she was still floating on that damn cloud.

“I think it makes me happy knowing I was able to give you an orgasm so intense that it happened. Especially considering it took me teasing you into oblivion before you finally let loose enough to truly enjoy what I was doing to you. Not sure if that was the first time someone went down on you, or if you’ve just never had someone enjoy doing it so much, but damn, it was fucking hot when you took control.”

No, it wasn’t her first time, but Colt was the first person who seemed to enjoy doing it. A couple of guys who did it in

the past made it seem like it was just an obligation, something they felt they needed to do, rather than enjoy doing to her.

“You mean when I nearly killed you by suffocating you with my legs and ripping your hair out of your head?”

She quirked up her eyebrow to make sure she understood what he was saying.

“Fuck, yeah. Don’t ever hide from me. There’s nothing hotter than a woman who takes exactly what she wants.” He crawled his way up her body as he continued. “And don’t think for a second I didn’t enjoy every single thing I did to you. I was enjoying it before you rode my face. But once you did, things only got infinitely better. I loved every sound you made.” He kissed her neck. “I loved the way your fingers pulled the hair out of my scalp.” Another kiss, this time behind her ear. “And I really loved the way those sexy thighs nearly squeezed me to death.”

This time, the kiss was a simple peck on her lips. She could taste herself on him, and it was the best aphrodisiac. She wanted more. More of him and more of the orgasms he seemed so willing to give her.

“Not right now,” Colt groaned.

She was so caught up in the moment, Alexa didn’t understand why Colt suddenly stopped kissing her. She wanted to scream in frustration. Then reality hit. Someone’s phone was ringing. Wait, not *someone’s*. Colt’s.

“I’m sorry.” He slipped back down her body and sat up at the other end of the couch. “Makenna’s at her friend’s house and I just need to check this real quick,” he mumbled while simultaneously digging into his pocket.

Alexa watched with dread as he looked down at who was calling. Whoever it was clearly warranted him to answer.

While he was talking to whoever was on the other end of the phone, she took the time to pull her pants back up. Even if the call didn’t result in Colt needing to leave, the mood was dead. She had to be crazy for letting things go as far as they

did. Colt was a father, and she was a woman out on bail. The two didn't mix.

“Yeah, I'll be right there.”

Alexa almost let out a sigh of relief. Maybe this was for the best. Then there would be no regrets later. She would take this for what it was. A sign that nothing more was to happen between them. She would chalk this whole experience up to a lesson learned because as soon as she was a free woman, it would be time to move on. To find a new career.

The last thing she wanted was to leave with a broken heart because this man and his adorable daughter were fast worming their way in.

“This doesn't change anything. I'm not done with you.”

It changed everything. Colt just didn't realize it yet, and Alexa wasn't about to correct him.

Chapter 24

He looked around his house at the half dozen giggling teenagers and smiled. Makenna was having the time of her life. The handful of friends that she invited over to spend her birthday with were currently making bracelets, snacking on popcorn, and making a mess of his living room with their pillow forts. He had a huge variety of chips, snacks, and cupcakes at the ready. Colt managed to pull off everything his daughter requested. The party was a huge hit and all the stress he allowed himself to feel merely slipped away.

Until his doorbell rang.

There was only one person that could be. Dropping his head back, he tried to get an answer of “why him” from the ceiling, but of course, it failed him. He had hoped after all her bitching she simply wouldn’t show.

The doorbell rang for a second time. This one was more insistent than the first.

With one last look at his daughter and her friends, he moved toward the door. His entire body locked up when he got a glance at an unfamiliar man standing next to Amber through the peephole.

With more force than necessary, Colt whipped the door open.

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

He didn’t bother to hide the sarcasm that dripped from his tone.

“What?” Amber looked shocked that he would be questioning her, like bringing a stranger to his daughter’s birthday was no big deal. “Today’s Makenna’s birthday party, so of course, I was going to be here, even if I didn’t agree with the party she chose. Did you really think I wouldn’t show?”

Colt crossed his arms over his chest and did his best to tamp down the rising anger. He refused to be the reason Makenna’s day was spoiled.

“Oh, I knew you’d show. I just can’t believe you thought it would be okay to bring a complete stranger into my home. Did you forget the arrangement we had regarding new people in our daughter’s life?”

It wasn’t so much of an arrangement as it was a court order. After three disastrous men in Amber’s life, the judge felt it was necessary that before Amber could bring a new person around, his ex-wife needed to run it by him. It was one of many restrictions the judge put on her and each one Amber bitched about to great length. She’d even gone so far as to curse the judge out. Probably another reason the judge threw the book at her.

“Oh, please. Tony here works with law enforcement agencies around the country. Even that stuck-up judge your father keeps in his pocket wouldn’t be able to find fault in him.”

Amber didn't wait for a response. Pushing past him, his ex-wife dragged the so-called Tony farther into his home.

Something about the stranger felt off. Maybe it was the slick comb-over. Or the super expensive loafers that didn't, in any way, fit into the rugged small town. Either way, warning flags were going off for Colt, and he'd learned long ago never to dismiss those.

He pulled out his phone and sent his father a text message. Doing his best to take a covert picture, he sent it off to his father to hopefully find out what he could about the man.

The calm he felt before Amber's arrival had completely dissipated, along with it, most of the happiness he had knowing how excited his daughter was. One look at Makenna and he could see her formerly relaxed body now consisted of tense shoulders and a watchful eye.

He hated that for her.

Not for the first time and likely not the last, he mentally cursed his ex-wife.

Noticing refills were needed, Colt walked into the kitchen to grab the things he saw Makenna and her friends were low on.

He was piling everything into his arms when a commotion from the living room erupted. Dropping everything back onto the counter, Colt rushed to see what was happening. His mouth dropped open at the scene in front of him.

Makenna was going toe-to-toe with her vile mother. Sarah was hiding behind her friend, tears in her eyes, while the rest of Makenna's friends formed a circle around the poor girl.

"She needs to toughen up if she plans to survive high school," Amber snapped.

"Or maybe people need to learn to be nicer," Makenna snapped back even louder.

This wasn't happening. Colt tried to wrap his head around what was really going on, but his mind was drawing a blank.

"Oh come on. I know I didn't raise such a naïve daughter. There's a hierarchy in schools, and at the rate you're going,

you will be at the bottom of it with your little friends over there.”

From the corner of his eye, Colt saw Tony with a smirk on his face. That was all it took for his heart to dislodge from his throat and for him to find his voice again.

“Enough! Amber, outside now!”

When it was clear his ex-wife wasn't going to move fast enough, he stomped to her, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her ass out. The satisfaction he found in hearing her squeal like a stuck pig did nothing to calm him down.

“How dare you?” Colt seethed, inches from Amber's face. “You bring a complete stranger into my home and then have the *nerve* to bash Makenna's friends in front of her and them? What the hell is wrong with you?”

Colt didn't miss Amber's new boyfriend joining them on the porch. If his daughter and five of her friends weren't back in the house, he would call his father and have him send over deputies to escort the two off his property. Instead, he tried to do things in a more civil manner.

“Nothing's wrong with me! But there sure as hell is something wrong with you and the things you're teaching our daughter. How *dare* she disrespect me! I'm her mother!”

Was she high? That was the only explanation he could come up with why this grown woman would purposely be mean to a young girl. And he wasn't even talking about his daughter. Based on Makenna's reaction and Sarah's tears, he could only assume Amber had said something nasty to her.

“No, right now you're just a bitch and a bully. Now leave before I'm forced to call for a deputy. You can't afford to have another arrest on your record.”

Before Amber could spout off something else that was likely to have him ready to rip her head off, Tony stepped in. Whatever he whispered in her ear was enough to have her backing down and walking away. But not before she got in one last jab.

“You’ll be sorry. You’re not nearly as much of a Goody Two-shoes as you like the world to believe. Your time is coming and I can’t wait to watch you lose everything.”

What the hell does that mean? He thought about calling her back so she could explain herself, but he needed to get back inside and try to salvage whatever situation he could.

What he found when he returned made everything worth it. Sitting on the floor in a circle was his sweet daughter, holding a now half-smiling, half-crying Sarah and all of their friends had created an impenetrable force around them. It made him proud to be her father.

Not wanting to interrupt, but also not wanting them to think he just blew the situation off, Colt stepped forward and in a gentle voice asked, “Is there anything I can do? Anyone who wants me to call their parents?”

Like a well-practiced symphony, all of the girls shook their heads “no” and responded in kind with each other.

Colt backed away with a small smile on his face. No matter what Amber said, these were the best friends his daughter could have. If this were any of the girls his ex wanted Makenna to make friends with, he was sure the situation right now would consist of drama and a lot of texting folks about what happened.

Back in the kitchen, he sat down and thought about Amber’s parting shot. What the hell had she meant by her comment? There wasn’t a single thing about his life that he felt embarrassed or worried about that needed to be hidden.

An image of Alexa, spread out on his couch with her glistening pussy just inches from his face two days ago, popped into his head.

Amber couldn’t mean that. No one but his father knew where she was staying, and when he brought her over, Colt made sure to park in his garage so his neighbors didn’t snoop.

Alexa wasn’t his dirty little secret. He was protecting her while they figured out who was behind Shannon’s murder.

So why did he suddenly feel very guilty about what he was doing, and the possibility that it was Alexa his ex-wife was talking about?

Chapter 25

There had to be something on Antonio. Alexa was hitting dead end after dead end and she was getting frustrated. There had been a time in her life when working for the CIA was invigorating; the thrill of not knowing the real identity of her handler, the excitement that no one knew who she really was. At one point, she had lived for that adventure. Not anymore. Now she just saw it for what it really was.

Lies.

Deceit.

And a shit ton more lies.

She would be fine if she never had to hear another lie again. Did she think that was possible? Hell, no. Antonio was still out there and she highly doubted that when she finally found him, he would be willing to tell her the truth. In fact, she could

probably guaran-damn-tee that the sheer number of lies he would say to her would make her head spin.

Alexa was still searching when a notification for an email popped up on the screen. Her first instinct was to clear it out. She wasn't logged into any email system, and since this wasn't her computer, she didn't want to violate anyone's privacy.

Five minutes later another notification popped up. This one was more insistent with the subject line reading **STOP IGNORING ME, ALEXA, AND OPEN THE DAMN THING!**

Now she was really confused. If someone were watching her right now, they likely thought she was strange. She was looking around the cabin just waiting for someone to jump out at her and say "gotcha."

Obviously, no one did.

I MEAN IT, ALEXA.

Okay, it was obvious whoever was trying to get her attention wasn't going to give up. Clicking on the latest email notification, she opened it up and found two simple lines in bold letters.

IT'S ABOUT DAMN TIME. GO BACK TO MY FIRST NOTIFICATION.

Now she was invested. That childish part of her that insisted on touching things that clearly said "Do Not Touch" was activated. There was no turning back now. She needed to know what was so important that someone was willing to hack into a sheriff's computer. That's what this had to be. There was no other explanation for how whoever was reaching out to her was getting through.

She found the first email and started reading. With each new sentence, her heart rate picked up. If she believed what was written, then everything she thought she knew suddenly changed.

The email was signed, *fairy godmother*. She had no idea who this fairy godmother was, but she would kiss them on the mouth if she ever got the chance to meet them.

Rushing over to the tiny kitchen where Buck left a disposable phone the last time he stopped by, Alexa quickly sent a text message to the sheriff requesting that he and Colt come over.

She reread the email five more times before she heard the crunch of gravel outside. Alexa was practically bouncing on the couch when Buck walked in.

“Took you long enough.”

“I headed over here the moment you texted me. Shy of speeding, I got here pretty quickly,” Buck grumbled.

“Next time, you should consider speeding, but that’s neither here nor there right now.” She waved the conversation away. “Come read this.” She urged him over, shoving the laptop at him as soon as he was close enough.

Alexa couldn’t sit for another minute. Her mind was going a million miles an hour, and she needed to think. The best way to do that was to pace.

She took five steps and was forced to turn around. The cabin wasn’t very large, and before she knew it, she was forced to turn around yet again. That’s how it went. Five steps one way, five steps another, until all Alexa wanted to do was scream at the lack of space.

“Who sent this?” Buck’s question pulled her from her wayward thinking.

“I have no idea,” she answered, with a hint of frustration.

Alexa hated not having answers. Several times, while she read the information over again, she had been tempted to email the person back and ask who they were, but then she thought better of it. If they wanted her to know who they were, they would have told her. And if the person was risking their own job by passing along some of that information, then who was she to try and get them into trouble? Even if that wasn’t her objective.

“So if, and that’s a big if, we believe this person, then our original thought about you getting blacklisted is wrong. At least, the timing of it. Whoever this is seems to think it wasn’t

until *after* you were arrested that the CIA blacklisted you, days after you spoke to your handler. So how did he know your real name?"

"I don't know." This time, there was no hiding the level of frustration in her tone. It was the same thing she'd asked herself a dozen times. "Whoever this fairy godmother is clearly thinks my handler is behind my arrest and wants me to go over everything Shannon has ever given me. Every piece of information which, mind you, is a lot."

"A lot" was an understatement; several years' worth of information and most of it was handed over to other agencies because it wasn't relevant to the CIA.

"What are the chances that you kept that information handy? Say, in a file?"

The hopefulness in his tone made her smile. The man was so much like her own father that it was like being home, a place she realized she missed more often these days.

"Do you still have my car at an impound lot?" she asked.

He looked at her with a hint of suspicion. She couldn't blame him. He was about to learn that her cell phone wasn't the only thing she hid in her car.

"I do. Why?"

"Then I guess it's your lucky day, because I *do* happen to have a file with my notes on everything Shannon has ever told me."

That hint was now full-blown suspicion. Oh, well. Could he blame her for not giving up all her secrets? Things didn't exactly start out on the best foot between them, and in her defense, not that she voiced it, Alexa remembered most of what Shannon ever passed along. So the files were more for someone else rather than her.

"I should be upset you kept this from me, but I get it. I don't like it, but I get it. Just tell me where I can find it so we can look it over."

Alexa spent the next few minutes explaining yet another hidden location inside her car. By the time she was done, she could've sworn she heard him mumble something about her being a Houdini of hiding spots. That thought made her smile.

"I'll be back in a bit with it and we can look over the information."

"Sounds good. I'll let Colt know where you went when he shows."

The air in the room suddenly felt like someone turned on a vacuum and sucked all the life out of it. It might have had something to do with the fact that Buck refused to meet her gaze and looked like he would rather be anywhere else on the planet.

"Actually." Buck cleared his throat. "My son said he couldn't come over and had some stuff to deal with the next few days."

"Oh, okay. No problem. See you when you get back with the drive."

Alexa went back to looking at the email, which was unfortunate because it meant she missed the pity written clearly across Buck's face as he slipped back out the door.

It was probably best that Colt stayed away. Wasn't that what she wanted after what happened between them a few nights ago? Distance. She already decided it was in both of their interests that what happened on his couch never happened again. Her mind knew it. Now it was just time to convince her heart to get on board.

Chapter 26

Colt checked his phone again. His father had promised to call after he met with Alexa, but that was nearly two hours ago. Why the hell hadn't he called yet?

When he saw the message that Alexa had news, his first reaction had been to rush over there and see her. It had been four days since he'd invited her over while Makenna was at her friend's house. Four days since he had the best night of his life, but it had been interrupted when Sarah's mother was forced to take her elderly grandfather to the hospital after a fall. Then the next day he worked and was busy making sure he was prepared for Makenna's party. And then, of course, there was Makenna's actual party in which Amber dropped that little bomb.

Colt hadn't set out to ignore Alexa, or put any distance between them, but it became essential after his ex-wife's offhanded comment.

He was walking a thin line. One that could cost him his daughter, and that just wasn't acceptable. So despite the need to see her, Colt had opted to stay away, to let his father find out whatever information Alexa gained.

Finally. His phone barely made it through one ring before he snatched it up.

"What did she have to say?" Colt answered, not bothering with pleasantries.

"A rather rude way to answer the phone, considering you couldn't be bothered to join me like she asked."

He let out a frustrated breath. This wasn't an argument he was in the mood to have.

"I told you earlier, I need to do what's best for Makenna. My daughter was spending too much time with her, and until we resolve Alexa's current issue, I think some space is best."

"That's horseshit and you know it. I warned you not to break that girl's heart, and I'm betting that's exactly what you're doing."

The words were a direct shot. It wasn't Alexa's heart on the line. He was the one falling for a woman who would leave the second she could, to chase the next adventure or find something new to do with her life now that she was no longer with the CIA. What would she want with a man who lived in the same small town he grew up in? Who had a crazy ex-wife and a teenage daughter? His life was settled and Alexa was still exploring hers. He would never want to tie her down. She would come to resent him.

"Can we please drop this for now? Tell me what she had to say."

"I shouldn't tell you shit," his father barked at him.

He deserved it and knew his father was right. He shouldn't tell Colt anything. He walked away and had no right to know what was happening in Alexa's life. But he *needed* to know. Like he needed his next breath to live.

"Please? I just want to know everything is okay."

Colt wasn't above pleading. Hiding anything from his father was pointless, always had been.

"Fine," his father huffed out. "But to be clear, I think you're making a mistake." Buck sighed, giving in, and continued. "She received a cryptic email from someone she thinks she used to work with at the CIA. It explained that Alexa wasn't blacklisted, at least not at first. According to this mystery person, the blacklist came days after she was arrested. After her handler knew her real name. The message also said she should look over everything Shannon ever passed along. That's what took me so long. Alexa had information hidden in her vehicle, her notes on Shannon. I went and got them to start looking them over."

Pride welled up in his chest. Of course, Alexa would keep information hidden. She proved over and over again how good of an operative she was. While the thought of her lying didn't sit well with him, he learned enough about her to know she never did it on purpose. She was always honest when it mattered.

"Does she trust this anonymous person?"

He didn't know how he felt about anyone from the CIA reaching out to her. They've proven once that they were willing to screw her over; he didn't want it to happen again. He might be putting distance between them, but that didn't mean he stopped caring about her.

"She's skeptical, but doesn't think it'll hurt to look back over the information. That was basically her plan anyway, just before she planned to look at Shannon's life. Now she's going to focus on the info she provided."

Colt hoped whatever she found would help them find her handler and clear her name. He hated an unsolved murder as much as the next person, but he hated more that it was Alexa who was being blamed. Even if she was out on bail, she was still charged and eventually would face trial. There was no way around that.

"Keep me posted. I'm taking Makenna to do a little shopping."

The second Sundays in their small town were great for sidewalk shopping, as all of the stores on the main street would have sales. It was Makenna's second favorite day of the week outside of Saturday's farmer's market. The once-a-month shopping excursion soon became a tradition for them.

An hour later, he and his daughter were walking past one of the newest stores on the block, Small Town Sheik, when a conversation caught his attention.

"Have you seen the new guy in town?"

"The city slicker with the awful comb-over? I have. Saw him coming out of Amber Allen's mama's house just the other day."

It grated on his nerves that his ex-wife still kept his last name, especially with all of the trouble she caused. He thought for sure she would've changed it the moment the ink was dry on their divorce papers, considering she hated everything about him.

"That woman's been trouble since the moment her family moved into town. I'm not surprised she's hooking up with the likes of that man. One look and I could tell he was gonna be a problem."

"There seems to be a lot of that in town lately. Outsiders and trouble. Just look at what happened to that poor woman. Murdered! She wasn't from these parts either."

"Too many outsiders. Look what it's doin' to our quiet town."

Colt steered Makenna in a different direction, moving her away from the three older women. He recognized them from where they normally gossiped at the salon. If there were rumors to be had in town, those three surely started it.

"Mrs. Davidson was talking about Mom's new boyfriend, wasn't she?"

His daughter's quiet question caught him off guard. Colt had been so absorbed in trying to find out what he could, he completely forgot that his daughter could also hear what those old biddies were saying.

“I think so, bug.”

“I don’t like him, and I don’t like the way she acted around him. It was almost like she was trying to show off in front of him at my party. I wish she’d never come.”

Damn, Amber. Why did she have to be such a fuckup? It made trying to defend her that much harder. Not that he should. Some days, he wished he could just tell his daughter how he really felt. Then he remembered that he needed to be the bigger parent in all this.

“I know, bug. I really do. Papa and I are going to look into him.”

It was the best he could do and the only information he was willing to give her. He didn’t want to get her hopes up, but if Amber’s past was any indication, the man was likely trouble.

“They were also talking about Alexa and that woman that died, weren’t they?”

Fuck. He just wanted to hang his head down in shame. How could he not realize how much his daughter was going to overhear? He wasn’t winning any awards for father of the year today.

“It sounded like it, but remember what you said the last time people in town spoke about her?”

“If Papa believes her, then they must be wrong.”

He nodded in agreement but wondered if he was making matters worse. Just that morning, he was doing his best to convince his father that it was probably better that Makenna and Alexa didn’t get any closer, and here he was doing the opposite.

Colt needed to get his head on straight and figure out the best way to handle the Alexa matter. Because this back and forth wasn’t helping anyone.

Chapter 27

Her eyes were going to cross if she continued looking at the damn computer screen anymore. For three days she'd examined every single thing Shannon ever told her, but now the lines of notes were starting to blur. Alexa doubted she was going to find anything new if she kept this up.

Shoving the laptop aside, Alexa dropped her head back on the couch with a loud huff. The sound echoed throughout the empty cabin.

Now that she wasn't working, her mind began to wander back to just over a week ago, the last time she saw Colt. As much as sifting through old notes was tiring, it had its benefits. It kept her from thinking about the one man who dominated her thoughts far too much. Or, more accurately, the one night they spent together.

After Colt kissed her that first time, she'd expected him to be one of those gentle lovers. The kind who made sure she came first but didn't get down and dirty. Boy, was she wrong. The way he spoke to her, no, *demanding* she look at him as he went down on her. Holy sexiness. So much so that for the first time, she let herself go with a lover.

The experience had been hot and something she would think back to on those lonely nights when she needed a little something extra while using her vibrator.

She was still thinking about Colt ten minutes later when the man himself showed up. At first, she was convinced it was her imagination playing tricks on her. There was no way that after a week he would suddenly show up just when she was allowing herself to actually think about him.

“What're you doing here?” she asked when he walked it.

That wasn't even close to the first thing she wanted to say to him after so long, but it was the only question her mind could come up with.

“I needed to see how you were.”

There was something behind his tone, but before she could ask him about it, he cut her off.

“My father mentioned you were looking into the information Shannon shared with you. I thought maybe I could help.”

It was an olive branch, one she was more than willing to take.

“Uh, yeah. I've been looking over all of my notes for the last few days, but I can't tell if there's nothing to find or if I'm trying too hard and just missing something important.”

“Mind if I look over it with you?”

Alexa didn't hesitate to slide the laptop back over. She did her best not to pay too close attention as Colt sat just a few feet away. She had to remind herself there was only one couch in the small cabin, so obviously he would have to sit next to her.

That didn't stop her from feeling his presence, or smelling the pine scent she associated with him when it hit her nose.

One night.

Not even a full night.

A handful of hours.

Yet she couldn't get this man out of her head unless she worked herself to the bone and fell flat on her face from exhaustion.

"I thought the CIA didn't handle things here on American soil."

Damn, just the deep rumble of his voice made her body shiver.

"They don't. But occasionally, when we get info, we pass it along to other agencies, or well, to our handlers anyway. They're the ones who pass it along."

It was the whole reason Antonio wanted her to stop using Shannon as her CI. Lately, the majority of the information she was getting was drug-related. Not something the CIA handled or cared about.

"So, all of this drug activity over the last year and a half would've gone through your handler?"

Alexa slid closer to Colt and looked over his shoulder. He had highlighted all of the dates where the information included drug activity. She hadn't realized just how much until he laid it out that way.

"Yeah, it would've. I guess that's why Antonio wanted me to dismiss her as a CI. I hadn't realized until now that the info she was providing was more drugs than national security."

"I'd say it's a bit more than just drugs. Something changed a year and a half ago. These are regular intervals of shipments being moved over the same routes. Whoever Shannon was hearing the info from must've been heavily involved."

That wasn't just something small she missed.

"Let me see that."

Alexa grabbed the computer back and looked at the dates he highlighted more carefully. Needing to be sure she was correct in what she was seeing, she pulled up a map. Sure enough, all the stops Shannon told her about were right off the same major highway.

“Son of a bitch. I didn’t even put that together. I just turned the info over and never followed up on it.”

She looked at the dates more carefully, not realizing at the time that Shannon had been providing information on a more regular basis than in the past.

“Do you think this is what got her killed? She was requesting meetings more often. Did someone find out what she was doing?”

“I think it’s a strong possibility and something to look at more closely. You said you never followed up, so what happened after you passed along the intel?”

Alexa thought about it. This type of info wasn’t her area. Technically, she didn’t need to pass it on. The CIA wasn’t big on interagency cooperation, but she wasn’t the kind of person who could just forget what she heard, so, despite Antonio’s many requests to end things with Shannon, she couldn’t. Not if it meant getting drugs off the street.

“I mean, it’s not that I never followed up. I would usually just ask Antonio if he relayed the intel. The one time I asked him what ever came from it, he yelled at me that it wasn’t our job to police other agencies. Needless to say, I never asked again.”

“Sounds like a real winner,” Colt snorted.

She had thought the same at the time, but then realized Antonio was right. How would she feel if someone from another agency was constantly checking over her shoulder to see what they did with the information they learned? She would likely be pissed and feel like someone was micromanaging her job.

Alexa looked over the documents again to see if there was anything else her tired eyes had missed. She suddenly felt

rejuvenated after Colt's discovery.

When she was sure there was nothing more that slipped past her, Alexa looked back over her shoulder to ask Colt a question, but it slipped from her mind the moment she saw the look in his eyes.

It was the same look he gave her the night they hung out.

Full of longing.

Full of want.

Full of need.

Alexa couldn't look away and she sure as hell couldn't get her lungs to work properly.

"I tried, Alexa. I really did. For a whole week, I tried to forget what happened but I can't do it. Not anymore."

Chapter 28

One touch of his lips to hers and he was lost, and the need to have more of her consumed him. Slanting his mouth, he took the kiss deeper. Tracing his tongue along her mouth, he begged her to open for him; with each move, he brought them closer.

He ran his hands down her back until he was cupping her ass. With one tug, he was lifting her up so her legs could wrap around his waist, just where he wanted them.

Four long strides were all it took to eat up the small space, and he stopped when his boots hit the end of the bed. He kicked them off, never breaking the kiss. With one knee on the bed, Colt slowly dragged Alexa up, placing her head down on the pillow, finally forcing himself to pull away from her.

“So damn beautiful.”

Just seeing her lying on the bed, with her hair fanned out over the pillow and her lips plump from his kiss, made him want to keep her locked in this cabin forever.

His compliment tinged the apple of her cheeks the sexiest shade of pink.

“I thought I could make myself forget the way you screamed my name, but I can’t. I can’t forget your taste on my tongue, your hands in my hair, your thighs squeezing me. I want to feel that again, but this time, while I’m deep inside you.”

Their bodies were so close, he felt a shudder run through her.

“Cold, baby?” He leaned down to place a kiss and whisper in her ear. “Or was that anticipation of what’s to happen?”

Another shudder, but this time accompanied by her pulling him even closer.

“I want that too.”

He ground his painfully hard erection against her core. Their clothes did nothing to hide her heat.

“Tell me exactly what you want. I want the words.”

He nibbled along her jaw. Allowing his beard to tickle the sensitive spot at the base of her ear.

Just as he knew she would, Alexa met his challenge head-on. Cupping his erection through his pants, she answered in a seductive voice.

“I want to feel your cock pounding inside me.”

“As you wish, baby.”

Sliding back down her body, he tucked his fingers inside her pants and slowly peeled them down her legs, placing soft kisses along the way. His mouth watered as he thought of her irresistible pussy beneath his lips again. It would have to wait. He needed inside her.

“You sure know how to make a woman feel cherished.”

Backing off the bed, Colt quickly doffed his own clothes. Grabbing a condom from his pocket, he placed it on the bed before slowly making his way back to Alexa, whose eyes never left him.

“Did you enjoy the show?”

The lust made him feel larger than life, that this beautiful woman would even give him the time of day.

“I will never turn down a striptease. Not from you. And certainly not when it unwraps a body like that.”

Helping her sit up, he pulled the shirt over her head and unbuttoned her bra, leaving her completely exposed beneath him as he laid her back down.

Her rosy-pink nipples called to him. Taking one into his mouth, he kneaded the other. Switching to give them equal attention, Colt took his time to build them both up.

The way her body arched into his ministrations had his cock weeping to be inside her.

Refusing to release her nipple, he fumbled blindly to find the condom. With a frustrated growl, his fingers finally locked on the foil wrapper.

The wet sound of him releasing her nipple filled the cabin. Followed quickly by the ripping of the condom wrapper. He made quick work of sheathing his throbbing member before lining it up with her soaking core.

“I’ve thought about this moment far more than I should have,” he admitted as he slowly entered her.

Her tight pussy felt like heaven. He was finally home.

“Me too.” Her purr hit him square in the chest.

Everything about making love to Alexa felt natural, like their bodies were puzzle pieces, snapping into each other.

Colt pulled nearly all the way out before sliding back in, eliciting a moan that had him wanting to come long before he was ready. With each glide, he brought her closer and closer to the edge until Alexa was panting below him.

“Do you need more, baby?”

He was so close, but he wanted her with him.

“Yes.” Her answer was barely more than a whisper.

“Reach down and touch yourself. I want you to feel me entering you.”

His girl didn't need any encouragement. Her hand snaked down her belly and he felt the moment she found her clitoris, how her body jumped at the combination of his strokes and her rubbing her most sensitive spot.

The brush of her fingers against his cock as he thrust into her brought him that much closer to finishing.

“Need you to come for me, Alexa,” he growled.

“Almost ...”

She didn't get to finish her statement before he could feel her channel walls tightening, pulling his own release from his body. She screamed his name as he filled the condom, coming harder than he ever had in his life, and finally collapsing on top of her.

It took both of them several moments to stop shaking, for their hearts to no longer pound a million miles a minute. Not wanting to suffocate her, he rolled off her, bringing her with him, so she was lying across his chest.

“I don't want to move, but I need to get rid of this condom.”

He made quick work of removing it before sliding his arm back under her, and getting Alexa back into the position she was in before.

They lay in complete silence, just enjoying the feel of each other. Colt traced the line of Alexa's spine with the tip of his finger, enjoying the way her naked body draped over his. Her own thumb rubbed along his hip.

“When you showed up, it looked like something was bothering you. Would you like to talk about it?”

He should've realized that he wouldn't be able to get anything past her. As much as he hated speaking about his ex

while Alexa was wrapped in his arms, he found he wanted to share what was going on with her.

“Amber made a spectacle at Makenna’s birthday party. She came in with her new boyfriend and trash-talked Makenna’s friend to her face. It was awful and I’ve never felt so bad for the girl in my life. I tried to tell her I would call her mom, but Makenna and her friends wouldn’t let it happen. They banded together until Sarah was laughing so hard that she didn’t remember the things Amber said.”

Colt still hadn’t spoken to his ex-wife, but he made sure to have plenty of discussions with his lawyer. The verbal abuse needed to stop. His daughter had put up with enough of it over the years. What kind of parent would he be if he didn’t do everything in his power to end it?

“That’s awful. I don’t understand how a mother could be so cruel. It’s horrible that she does it to Makenna, but then to one of her friends as well? That’s even worse. I just can’t fathom doing that.”

No, he couldn’t see Alexa ever acting like that to a child. She would be kind and supportive. The kind of woman he wanted his daughter to be around and learn from.

Alexa would be loving, and a sudden picture of her popped into his mind. Her sitting on a rocking chair while reading to her pregnant belly. Something he wished Amber had done for Makenna.

“And her new boyfriend wasn’t any better. The second she introduced Tony, I had this bad feeling about him.”

Alexa’s entire body went stiff. Worried that something he said made her upset, he pinched her chin between his fingers and guided her to look at him.

Concern laced his tone. “Alexa?”

Chapter 29

Colt's use of her name snapped her out of her temporary paralysis.

Bouncing up onto her knees, she slapped her hands down on his naked chest and asked, "What does this Tony fella look like?"

"Ah ... a bit of a douchebag to be honest, but that's normal for the men Amber brings around. Slicked-back greasy black hair. Clean-shaven. Really tan. Bright green eyes."

"Kinda looks like the actor from the Hallmark movie we watched the other night?"

Not that they actually watched a whole lot of the movie, but the reference was the same.

"Actually, yeah." Colt nodded his head vigorously. "Now that you mention it."

She knew it. The moment he said the name she had this strange feeling. Tony was easily a nickname for Antonio.

“I need to see a picture to be sure, but I think you met my handler.”

Colt stared at her for what felt like an eternity before a curse fell from his lips.

“Why the hell didn’t I put that together?”

Tossing the covers off, Alexa watched as he padded across the cabin and grabbed his jeans. She expected him to pull them on, but soon realized he was digging for something instead. A moment later, he walked back to where she was still sitting on the bed, his cell phone in his hand.

“I happened to take a picture to have my father run it through facial recognition, so you’re in luck.”

Alexa took the phone from his outstretched hand. She didn’t need more than one glance to know the person was indeed Antonio.

“That’s my handler all right.”

A million questions ran through her mind at once; the first being why the hell was Antonio with Colt’s ex-wife? There was no way it could be a coincidence.

Sliding off the bed, she went in search of her clothes. If they were going to be talking about this, then she needed to be wearing something.

Colt followed her lead, only slowing down to express how he felt about her answer.

“I’m not sure what pisses me off more. The fact that he had the balls to show up, or that I didn’t put it together that Tony could be short for Antonio. It took you only one second of us lying here to figure it out.”

“Pretty sure I looked at the same notes for three days straight and didn’t pick up on the pattern you did, so we’ll call it even.”

It was probably longer than three days, but she didn't want to make it sound like she was obsessed.

“Touché. I need to call my father, see if he's found out anything about him. He hasn't said anything, but now that I know he's not just Amber's new fling ...”

The way he said *fling* told her that this wasn't the first time Colt had to deal with one of Amber's boyfriends. She wondered how much trouble they all were. Based on what she knew of the woman, she could only guess she didn't exactly have the greatest taste in men.

Alexa listened to the phone ring as they waited for Buck to answer. Four rings in, the man finally picked up.

“Kinda busy, son. Is this important?”

“Sorry to bother you, but it is actually. That picture I sent you the other day of Amber's new boyfriend? Turns out the man is actually Alexa's handler, Antonio.”

The line was silent for several beats. Afraid that they'd gotten cut off, Alexa leaned forward to check the screen. The increasing time on the call was a clear indication that the call was, in fact, still connected.

“Uh ... Buck? Did you hear what Colt said?”

Maybe the sheriff really was busy, and while the information was important to her and Colt, the man on the other end of the line could have been dealing with something drastically more important.

“I'll be there soon,” was the only answer before the line went dead.

Alexa looked up to find the same concern on his face that she was sure was written all over hers.

This wasn't good.

Chapter 30

He was doing a piss-poor job keeping the anxious feeling locked down since his father's cryptic reply.

A half dozen scenarios played through his mind at warp speed. Add in the endless loop of them playing over and over again, and he was sure he was just seconds away from losing his mind.

Amber and her damn fuckups.

Could he really blame her this time, or was she an innocent bystander caught up in the man's scheme, whatever it was?

"How convincing is this Antonio?"

The question popped out before he could think better of it. But Alexa didn't look the least bit fazed by it.

"Are you asking because you think Amber is innocent, or in general?"

Why was he asking? Did he even really know, or was it a way to keep himself occupied while they waited for his father to show up and deliver whatever news he had?

“Both,” he responded unsurely. “Maybe?” He then tossed his arms in the air. “Hell if I know!”

“Either way, my answer would be the same. Antonio is very convincing. I think the CIA trained him well, and if he does have something to do with all this, it’s because of the skills he learned.”

Nothing about her response made him feel better. His ex-wife was potentially dating a dangerous man and all he could think was *Am I really surprised?* And the answer to that would be hell no, not after Amber’s track record. Danger seemed to be a turn-on for her lately.

He was saved from having to say anything more by his father’s arrival.

“This shit just keeps getting worse,” Buck spat as he stormed into the cabin.

His father’s brash tone did nothing to help his current mood. One look in Alexa’s direction and it was clear she was feeling the same way. Instinct had him moving to her; the sudden urge to protect her from the news overwhelmed him.

If his father noticed the subtle change between him and Alexa, he didn’t comment on it. Colt would need to speak to his father about it, but that would have to wait. Plus, he doubted his father would care. The man had already threatened him if he broke her heart, so it wasn’t like his father would object.

“Did facial recognition give you anything?”

“Oh, sure, it gave me a ton.” There was no mistaking the sarcasm. “A ton of BS, that is. You folks over at the CIA sure do love to add a bunch of shit to people’s identities.”

Alexa didn’t look the least bit offended or fazed by his father’s tone.

“I wish I could argue with you, but it would be pointless. They do love to do that.”

“So basically we know nothing about him.”

His father’s loud snort took him by surprise. Normally, Buck was professional and unaffected. Neither of those two words described the man who stood across from him.

“I’ve got a bogus address here in town. How do I know it’s bogus? Because the street numbers don’t go that high. Triple-checked that, despite living here my whole life. The job listed is also bogus. Claims to be a remote business. You know, the kind where you work from home but the company doesn’t have an office? Did a much better job with that I’ll say, but the person I spoke to on the phone screwed a few things up. Don’t know their geography real well.”

The more his father spoke, the less confident Colt felt that they would ever catch Antonio. He was slippery, just like the CIA taught him to be.

“I think we figured out why Shannon was killed,” Alexa spoke up for the first time. “I pored over my notes, but it was Colt who finally found a pattern. For the past year and a half, Shannon’s intel has centered around drug shipments going through the same route every few weeks.”

“But the CIA doesn’t handle those types of incidents last time I checked.”

“No, they don’t, but I made sure to pass the information on to my handler ... Antonio,” she clarified. “And *he* was the one who wanted me to cut ties with her because he felt she was no longer useful. At first, I just figured it was because the information wasn’t relative to our agency, but maybe it was for another reason. If Antonio is dirty, maybe he had a reason to get rid of Shannon when I refused to cut her off.”

“A reason like, maybe he knew who was moving the drugs.”

His father’s assumption made sense. If Antonio was involved, and Shannon continued to provide information that could shut down the operation, then it was motive. Especially

if Antonio stopped passing along the information. It would only be a matter of time before Shannon caught on that nothing was happening. He didn't know the dead woman, but he had a feeling that it wasn't something she would just forget.

“Or he was involved,” Colt threw out.

He was slightly surprised to see Alexa didn't argue with him. She didn't exactly look fully on board with his theory, but he could see her weighing the potential.

“Anything is possible. All I know is that Shannon died to cover up secrets. And her last message to me was ... off. Normally, when we set up a meeting, the only thing she would tell me in the text was a date and time. No need to give a location since we had a pre-planned spot. Except for this last time, her message almost seemed eager, like she couldn't wait to share what she knew.”

“She was never eager before?” His father also appeared to be thinking heavily about what Alexa shared.

“Not written down. Sure, in person she was animated, but that was just Shannon's personality. Bubbly, even with the life she lived.”

“So, something changed,” he was thinking out loud.

“Yes,” Alexa confirmed. “And if I was paying more attention, I would've realized something was off, but with Antonio breathing down my neck about cutting her loose, I jumped when she mentioned national security. In hindsight, I should've known it was a trap. It was completely out of character for Shannon.”

Alexa had been mentally beating herself up for what happened to Shannon, probably not even realizing that Shannon's fate was long determined before she ever sent that message out.

“Hate to break it to you, dear, but from what you've just said, this last meeting was a setup. Someone knew you would be desperate enough to meet with her, and they used that to their advantage.”

Damn his father. The stricken look on Alexa's face was a direct stab to the heart. She might've thought she understood the underbelly of the CIA, but it was clear she didn't understand just how ruthless some of the people working for them could be.

"Antonio."

Her voice was barely more than a whisper as reality set in.

"That's my guess. The man is probably elbows-deep in whatever this shit is, and Shannon was messing that up. He tried to stop the flow of information by having you cut her off, but when he realized that wouldn't work, murder was the next best option. Except he needed someone to frame, and that's where you came in. He knew exactly what needed to be said for you to come running. After that, it wasn't much. Kill the girl about thirty minutes before you showed up and hope we didn't look too closely. Now, I can't say any of that for sure, but the evidence points to it."

He wanted to kick his father for the harsh truth. There had to be an easier way to say that.

"You're right. It all makes sense. I played right into Antonio's hand. If I would've just stopped pushing to keep Shannon on as a CI, she would be alive right now."

Guilt was written all over her face. Colt refused to stand for that. Walking over, he bent down until she was forced to look him in the eyes.

It took several seconds, but he waited her out. His headstrong woman never could back down from a challenge. It made him want to smile when she proved him right.

"None of this is your fault. There was no way to know what Antonio or Shannon would do. For all you know, even if you cut her off, she would've still turned the information over to someone else. And there was no way Antonio would allow someone to continue living if they knew what he was up to. His cocky attitude wouldn't stand for it. So stop blaming yourself. The only person who deserves the blame here is Antonio."

He watched the realization hit. A few more seconds passed before he saw that fire light up again in her eyes. The one that was always burning just below the surface. The fire that first caught his attention and the reason he fell in love with her.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that. Part of me knew it, but sometimes I just need the reminder.”

With the softest brush of her lips, she thanked him again before moving past him.

“So, now we need to find the son of a bitch. He’s taken enough away from me already and I refuse to give him anything more. You said Shannon died a half hour before I arrived.”

“That’s correct. The coroner’s time of death puts her death twenty-five minutes before we received a call to check out the area for suspicious behavior. Now I doubt you decided to hang around for thirty minutes after you killed the woman. It was one of the arguments I used when requesting bail. The judge agreed but only while we continued to build our case. Plus, I promised you wouldn’t be a flight risk. Thanks for not making me a liar in that.”

The smile that had threatened to come out before finally made its appearance. Colt knew damn well his father had two sides. The serious one that most people in his line of work saw on the regular, and the jokester one. But that one was reserved for those he was closest to. Alexa might not realize it yet, but she was already a huge part of this family.

“Didn’t exactly have anywhere else I wanted to be. Antonio took a lot from me and I plan to get it back. Well, not my job. Those fuckers can kiss my ass.”

Stepping up behind her, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back until she was flush against him. He was claiming her right in front of his father, but he didn’t care. He was sick of hiding how he felt.

He didn’t get to relish in the feeling for long.

Colt pulled his ringing phone out of his pocket. His heart dropped to his stomach when he saw that it was Makenna’s

school calling him. He knew before answering the phone that something was wrong. He just didn't know how bad it really was.

Chapter 31

Colt charged into the middle school with both Alexa and his father fast on his heels.

Makenna was missing.

Three words and his entire world stopped dead.

Mr. Anderson, the school principal, stood just inside the front office and waved him back the moment he walked through the door.

“What the fuck, Brian? How the hell could my daughter be missing?”

Colt had gone to school with the middle school principal. He was two years Colt’s senior, but considering they played football together, they were well acquainted.

“I know you’re upset, Colt, but remember this is still a school and my office. Show some respect.”

He wanted to tell his former teammate where he could shove his respect, then he thought better of it. There was no way he would get the answers he needed if he continued to yell at Brian. The man was tough. Years on the defensive line made him that way, and now, as the head coach of the same team, Brian didn't take anyone's shit.

Bringing his temper down a notch, Colt asked again through gritted teeth, "Please explain to me how my daughter is missing. This school is supposed to have the best security. They have their own police force, for Christ's sake."

Their little town might not have a police department, so they have to rely on the sheriff's department for coverage, but the school was known state-wide for having the best police force on the premises.

"Our normal receptionist in the main office was out today, so we had to bring in someone to cover. All of our normal substitutes were unavailable, so we had someone new come in. Somehow she missed the note that Amber was no longer allowed to sign Makenna out. I called you the moment the bulletin hit my inbox advising me of everyone who signed out this morning."

Son of a bitch.

Pulling out his phone, he found his ex-wife's contact information and hit the green button. The anger only intensified when instead of a ringing sound, he was sent straight to voicemail.

"I tried calling her as well. No answer."

Colt didn't bother to answer Brian. Instead, finding his daughter's number and going through the same process. Only this time, instead of feeling angry that the call went straight to voicemail, he was consumed with dread. Makenna never turned her phone off. He had stressed the importance of always having it on and available.

"Makenna's not answering either."

His voice didn't even sound like his anymore. It was hollow and full of remorse.

“I’ll let my deputies know what’s going on,” Buck said. “Make sure everyone knows to be on the lookout.”

He could hear what his father was saying, but the words meant nothing. His daughter was missing, and in the hands of his crazy ex-wife whose sole mission was to hurt him.

Colt was snapped back to reality when Alexa’s tiny hand touched his arm.

“We’re going to find her. Someone has to know where Amber might be. Who would that be?”

Her question snapped him out of the pain that tried to drown him. His daughter needed him and he sure as fuck wouldn’t let her down again.

“Amber’s parents. She’s staying with them now after she lost her apartment because of one of her many ex-boyfriends. They would know exactly where she is.”

He turned to leave, but stopped in his tracks.

“I’ve always respected you, Brian, from the second we played together until now, but believe me when I say this. Anything happens to my daughter because of this fuckup and I will rip this school apart. Friendships don’t mean shit when it comes to my little girl.”

He didn’t stick around to hear his former teammate lecture him on respect again. He gave the man that when he first arrived, but that was before he knew how badly the school fucked up. There were reasons Amber wasn’t allowed to take Makenna without his permission, and he expected them to be understood for their importance.

He thought about those reasons while en route to Amber’s parents’ house. Neither he nor Alexa spoke, but Alexa’s hand in his showed her silent support.

He pulled into the perfectly manicured driveway, with his father’s vehicle just seconds behind him. He had seen his father on the phone the entire drive, likely coordinating with his deputies as he’d promised. This wasn’t just any missing child. This was his granddaughter, and if there was one thing

Colt knew, Buck Allen wouldn't let anyone slack on the job while Makenna was missing.

Colt slammed the truck door and ate up the short distance to the front door in no time. Not bothering with the doorbell, he banged his fist on the heavy oak door.

“What the hell is with all the banging?” Amber’s mother cursed as the door opened. “Oh, it’s you. No wonder it sounded like a Neanderthal was at my door. What do you want, Colt?”

“Where’s Amber? She took Makenna out of school even though she knows she isn’t allowed to and neither of them is answering their phones.”

He watched as Amber’s mother looked over his shoulder. He could tell when the realization of who Alexa was dawned on her by the glint in the woman’s eye. It was the same one Amber would give him when she thought she said something that would put him in his place. Usually, though, he would just give up because the argument wasn’t worth the effort.

“I have no idea where my daughter and granddaughter are, but I’m sure they’re fine. You’re overreacting as usual. That rule that my baby couldn’t even get her own daughter from school was horseshit. It should never have been allowed.”

He did his best not to grab the self-centered woman and strangle her. That wouldn’t get him the information he wanted.

“A judge clearly didn’t think it was horseshit, considering he was the one who ruled on it.”

With one hand on her hip and enough attitude to drive any person crazy, she spat, “We both know that only happened because of your daddy there. They’ve had it out for my daughter since the second she told you she was pregnant. They didn’t want her in your life and they made it known.”

His father had definitely made it known, but only because the man saw something Colt’s young self never did. How much of a lying, manipulative bitch Amber really was. His parents had hoped that when he took the scholarship, the young love would fade. Then Amber spilled that she was

pregnant and everything changed. But not once had his parents not supported his decision. Even when he told them he planned to marry Amber so his daughter could have a family. They told him to watch out, but were there for him every step of the way.

“We aren’t here to rehash the ruling. I’m here to find my daughter. Amber knows she can’t take Makenna without prior approval, so right now this is considered kidnapping. Tell me where they are and I won’t have to involve the sheriff’s office.”

“You mean you won’t have to involve your daddy.” The bitch looked over his shoulder once again. “Seems you already did, so this conversation is pointless.”

This was getting him nowhere, so he tried a different tactic.

“Amber brought a new boyfriend to Makenna’s party.” He left out the fact that he had to kick them both out because of Amber’s behavior. “Any chance I could speak with him and see if he knows where Amber might be?”

That sadistic smile was back on her face. He had hated when Amber wore it and hated it even more now.

“Yes, Tony. Nice boy Amber’s got there now. Unlike the present company she’s tied to.” He didn’t miss the insinuation that he was that company, or that she clearly thought something was wrong with him. “He’s polite to me and considerate. Brings flowers when he picks Amber up. I don’t have his information, and even if I did, I wouldn’t be giving it to you. You would just try to ruin it for my girl.”

His ex-mother-in-law started to slam the door shut, but stopped and looked him in the eye before glancing back to Alexa. “Maybe you should think about the company *you* keep rather than harassing my daughter. Seems the person you should be concerned about is the one you’re spending time with.”

This time, she did slam the door in his face.

Chapter 32

Amber's mother was a bitch. She'd made that decision in the first ten seconds. And it only solidified the longer Alexa was forced to be in the woman's presence.

Yes, *forced* because there was no way in hell anyone in their right mind would be willing to spend any amount of time with this woman. If this was even a small glimpse into Makenna's mother, then Alexa understood why Colt hated her and why Makenna had been so upset that day she ran away.

But it was the parting shot just before she slammed the door that sent Alexa over the edge. She knew there were people in town who thought poorly of her, but to comment on Colt's choice of who he associated with just wasn't called for.

"On a scale of one to ten, how much does it go against my bail if I were to punch that woman in the face?"

She turned around and addressed the question to Buck, who looked equally pissed off.

“I’d say the chances of being arrested are high, but since I’m feeling like punching her myself, the odds are sitting more in your favor at this point.”

She could work with that. Not right this moment, because finding Makenna was top priority, but she would make sure to circle back to it. Someone needed to teach that vile woman a lesson.

“Let’s go.” Buck motioned for both of them. “It’s clear we won’t get the answers we want here, and since I’m really not in the mood to call my deputies to arrest me when I lose my temper, I think it’s best we speak elsewhere.”

If she hadn’t liked the sheriff before this, she would have after that statement.

Alexa followed a silent Colt back to his truck. She wanted to help him, but wasn’t sure how. She was starting to think things were her fault. She was the one to bring Antonio into their lives. Without her, he wouldn’t know anything about this little town. And while she wasn’t ready to voice her opinion, she had a strong feeling Makenna and Amber’s disappearance had less to do with the crazy mother and more to do with Antonio.

“I should’ve done a better job.”

Alexa wasn’t sure what Colt was talking about, or if he was even speaking to her. He seemed lost in his thoughts.

“A better job at what?”

From everything she saw, he was an amazing father to Makenna. The little girl wanted for nothing and was both polite and kind. She doubted Amber had anything to do with that.

“Keeping Makenna safe. I knew I couldn’t trust her mother, but I had no reason to cut her out of her life.”

Now she understood. He was blaming himself for Amber’s actions.

“You wouldn’t have been able to cut her out. Not without potentially doing more damage. Makenna might have grown up to resent you for that. Besides, from what I can tell, you’ve done everything you could, had every safeguard in place. It’s not your fault a system that should’ve worked, failed. Beating yourself up over it won’t help.”

“But she’s my daughter. It’s *my* responsibility.”

Colt slammed his fist against the steering wheel, causing her to jump for a second before realizing he would never hurt her. The man just didn’t have it in him to purposely hurt anyone he cared about.

He might not realize it now, but he was a truly spectacular father. The kind of man she would want for her own kids if she ever had them. Just knowing the lengths he would go to in order to protect Makenna tugged at her heart. She was falling for this man and seeing him hurt right now killed her.

Alexa didn’t say anything again until they pulled onto his father’s farm. With the truck parked, she turned to face him.

“She *is* your responsibility, and just seeing how much you love her, I know you will find her because, to you, there is no other option. Makenna’s lucky to have that and Amber’s an idiot for thinking for even a second that you wouldn’t rip the town apart to find your little girl.”

The small smile he gave her in return was enough but then he leaned his forehead against hers and wrapped his hand on the back of her neck.

“Thank you.” His whispered breath fanned her face. “I didn’t realize just how much I needed to hear that, so thank you. And I don’t care what anyone says, I would rather have you by my side any day of the week.”

The kiss on her forehead was more a brush of his lips than an actual kiss. It still amazed her that this strong man who dominated so much in his life could show such a soft side when it was needed.

She followed him out of the truck and into his parents’ house where his mother was waiting. The matriarch of the

family looked ready to kick some ass of her own.

“Your father called and filled me in. I reached out to a few of the ladies in town, they will keep an eye out for Makenna and Amber. If anyone sees them, they’ll call you immediately.”

The power of everyone knowing everyone else. They banded together. If this were Houston, she would be lucky if her neighbor even knew who she was. The suburbs were a little better, but not much. Nothing compared to the connections Colt had here.

“Thanks, Ma. I just can’t figure out why Makenna’s phone is off. Amber, I understand. She would do it just to spite me, but not my bug. Even if her mother asked, there’s no way Makenna would ever do that.”

“Are we sure her phone’s charged? I mean, as a teenager, maybe she forgot to put it on the charger last night.”

Alexa doubted it even as she spoke. From the little interaction she had with the girl, Makenna appeared extremely responsible.

“No, I checked this morning just like I do every morning. We have a routine and Makenna is great about following it.”

She smiled at his confession. Of course, the man had a routine with his daughter that included him checking to make sure she had a charged phone. It was just one more way he showed how much he loved his daughter.

“I don’t think I can just sit around and wait to see if someone calls. I need to be out looking for her,” Colt huffed, turning toward the door.

“I’ll go with you.”

Alexa couldn’t just sit around and wait, either. Not while Colt was this upset. People might not be willing to speak with her as they would him, but she could support him.

They didn’t get more than two feet before his phone beeped. She could tell even before he pulled it out of his pocket that

just the sound worried him. She didn't know what he would do if he was given more bad news.

She didn't have to wait long to find out how he would react.

“Son of a fucking bitch.”

The hostility was rolling off him in waves and she understood why when he turned the phone to her.

In a text, from an unknown number, was a picture and one simple sentence.

SEND ALEXA WITH THE INFORMATION ON THE DEAD WOMAN AND YOU GET YOUR LITTLE GIRL BACK ALIVE.

The picture was of Makenna and her mother bound and gagged to a chair.

Alexa knew one thing for sure. If that message was from her handler, he was a dead man walking.

Chapter 33

He couldn't take his eyes off the picture of his little girl. She was tied to a chair. Tears were in her eyes and her mouth was gagged.

When he found the motherfucker, he was going to rip the person's heart out.

"Son, we need to be smart about this," Buck tried.

Colt didn't want to be smart. He wanted to rush in and save Makenna, then kill Amber for her part in it. He didn't care that she was tied up right next to their daughter. This wouldn't have happened if she left her in school where she belonged.

"Colt, are you listening to me?"

He was not listening. He was doing the opposite of listening. He was deciding the best way to make the person suffer.

“Colt.” He barely heard Alexa approach him. “We need to get to the cabin so I can get the information I have on Shannon and bring it to the meeting spot.”

That stopped all of his thoughts.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he snapped.

Alexa didn’t flinch. She stood her ground, not the least bit affected by his attitude.

“Whoever sent you that text wants me and my files. I need to go pick them up.”

She was talking about trading herself for Makenna. For the second time in the past twenty minutes, his heart dropped into his stomach.

“No way. Absolutely not.”

He shook off Alexa’s comforting touch and started to pace. There was no way he was going to trade one life for the next. He couldn’t do it. His daughter meant everything to him, but so did this woman. In just a couple of weeks, Alexa had turned his world upside down. Showed him what it was like to feel something again besides hatred. She soothed every hurt left behind by years of Amber’s shit.

“It’s the only way. My guess is that the text came from Antonio and he already knows what I have on Shannon. He’s not going to settle for anything less than me, so let’s give it to him. I can handle myself. I’ll get Makenna out and deal with my former handler.”

No! Everything in him revolted at the thought of sending the woman he cared about into a dangerous situation.

“He thinks he wants you, but he’ll have to settle for me. There’s no way I’m allowing you to go.”

“And that, Colt, is where you’re wrong. No one *allows* me to do anything. I’ve done well on my own for years and managed just fine.”

Panic was setting in. Something he never thought he would feel.

He stepped to her and grabbed her hands. “I know you can, but you don’t need to do it alone anymore. I’m here and together we can conquer anything.”

He saw it in her eyes before the words even left her mouth. “You’re right, we can and this is us doing it together. One time. That’s all I needed to meet that amazing daughter of yours and know that anyone lucky enough to be in her life would cherish her. I hope one day you’ll let that person be me, but until then, I’m still going to make sure she’s safe.”

Her words were a direct shot. His heart shattered into a million pieces and it would take a miracle to put them back together again.

“Buck, if you don’t mind giving me a ride and maybe texting that number back to see where the coward wants me to meet him.”

Colt watched Alexa walk away. Watched as she held her head high the entire way.

“Dad, you have to know this isn’t a good idea.” He tried to plead with the man who helped him through every major problem he faced in life.

He knew without his father having to say anything that, like those other times, Buck Allen wasn’t going to go easy on him.

“Sorry, son, but I agree with Alexa. She’s a trained CIA agent and you need to let her handle it.”

Was an agent. A burned agent who no longer had the support of the agency and the man she was going against was just as trained.

“So is Antonio.”

“Colt, listen to me and listen good. That woman out there is strong. If you see any future with her, then you better accept that because she won’t tolerate a man holding her back. And that’s exactly what you’re trying to do now.”

He never wanted to hold her back. Alexa admitted she needed an adventure. Needed to feel free. His father was right. If they were going to have any kind of future, then he needed

to let her do what she felt was right. Even if that meant he was standing by, hoping she came back to him unharmed.

And she better return because otherwise, there wasn't a force in the world that would stop him from killing the person who harmed her. Like his daughter, Alexa was his, and he would protect them at all costs.

Chapter 34

Alexa walked up the gravel path leading to the old farmhouse just outside of town. The place where Antonio was supposedly holding Makenna and Amber.

Buck had convinced Colt to text the number back, agreeing to the demands. She could only imagine what the sheriff had to say in order to convince him.

She loved that he wanted to protect her, loved that he considered her important enough in his life not to want harm to come to her, but this wasn't about her anymore. It was about saving an innocent child.

Antonio could have the information. Alexa no longer had use for it; she had no intention of going back to the agency. She could try to turn it over to Buck, but what would be the point? The CIA would handle Antonio as they saw fit, and no one would be the wiser. It was just how they operated. It was

silly to think she could get justice for Shannon. Not after she put the pieces together.

Alexa walked to the back of the house as instructed and waited. It didn't take long for someone to acknowledge her.

"I had my doubts the guard would let you come alone."

She would recognize his voice anywhere. She'd spent years talking to him. She wouldn't exactly call them "friends," but by working together, she would've at least considered him an acquaintance.

"No one tells me what to do. You should know that better than anyone."

"I do know," Antonio hissed, finally stepping out of the shadows. "It's why I had to get rid of Shannon. You refused to listen when I told you she was no longer providing valuable intel."

"You mean intel that would shut your organization down," she clarified. "That's what all this is about, isn't it?" She held the files up for him to see. "Moving drugs up from Mexico?"

"You were always too smart for your own good. I should've gotten rid of you long ago."

That didn't scare her like it probably should have. Alexa wasn't delusional. She understood the dangers of her job. She just didn't expect that the person she would need to be worried about would be her own handler.

"Do you plan to stand out here and talk to me all day, or are you going to let me see that the girl's okay?"

"I should just kill you all and take the information I want."

She was pushing his buttons; better for him to be focused on her and not Makenna.

"You could do that, but then there would be a manhunt out for you, and I'm guessing that amount of heat isn't good for business. I mean, if you're going to kidnap someone, maybe it shouldn't be the granddaughter of the sheriff."

She raised an eyebrow to fully drive the point home. If Antonio thought he would get away with killing any of them, then he was more stupid than she realized. It wouldn't just be Colt who was after him. Buck would call in every favor he had to make sure the person who harmed his granddaughter was dealt with.

Alexa figured Antonio fully understood the situation when he cursed before turning back around. Taking that as her cue, she followed him inside.

Sitting off in the corner next to each other were Colt's daughter and ex-wife. The hatred she expected to see from the woman was surprisingly nonexistent.

"Let Makenna go," Alexa started. "You have her mother and me. That should be enough."

Antonio looked to be debating her request. She let him weigh his options. It would do her no good to rush him.

It didn't take him nearly as long as she expected to finally make his decision. Alexa watched as he walked over to Colt's daughter and stood ready to defend the girl who stole her heart right alongside her father.

"I don't enjoy hurting children," Antonio spoke loudly. Alexa was poised to run across the room when she saw the knife in his hand.

"No ..." She was halfway to them when the binds holding Makenna fell to the floor. She skidded to a stop and met Antonio's intense stare.

"I'm letting her go, as you requested."

Alexa let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding as she looked Makenna over. While the girl didn't look to be harmed, there was no mistaking the fear in her eyes.

She hated Antonio that much more for it.

"Come here, Makenna."

She reached for Colt's daughter and pulled her into a hug. "Your father isn't far away. Follow the driveway out and he'll find you," she whispered.

“I don’t want to leave you.” Makenna’s small arms wrapped tighter around her middle.

Alexa wasn’t prepared for how good it felt to hear her say that. Squeezing just a little tighter, she did what she knew was best. “Your father is worried about you. Please go let him know you’re okay and tell him I’ll be just fine.”

With one last show of reassurance, she pushed the young girl in the direction of the door. Makenna gave her another look before taking off at a dead run.

She was proud of the girl’s bravery. If she made it out of this situation in one piece, she would be the best role model for her.

“Looks like it’s just the three of us now.” Antonio moved closer to her.

“Tell me something. Why did you do it? And I don’t mean killing Shannon. That part is obvious. Although I’m still a little curious about what brought on the sudden change, but no, what I really want to know is, what made you turn?”

“You know if I tell you, it means I have to kill you. I can’t jeopardize everything I’ve worked for.”

She merely raised her shoulder ever so slightly and let it fall again. “You were going to kill me anyway, so what’s the difference?”

Colt would lose his mind if he knew how she was talking. He would say her life mattered, and to some degree, it did.

“That’s true, so I guess it doesn’t hurt if I tell you.” Antonio shrugged like it didn’t really matter anymore, and to him, it probably didn’t. “Money. Isn’t that what everything’s about in life? They offered me a shit ton more than the CIA with a lot less work. All I needed to do was make sure I could keep them out of the hot seat if anything happened. Then Shannon,” he said, her name uttered with such disdain, “had to ruin it. Snitching to you. They were supposed to handle the problem. Kill the guy that was blabbing and everything would be good. Except they fucked up and got caught meeting with me. I knew I needed to dispose of her, but I couldn’t have it traced

back to me. Oh no, that wouldn't do. So what better way than to frame you."

The way he spoke about Shannon like she was nothing more than a piece of garbage he needed to be rid of bothered her. Shannon was a person. A decent person who only wanted to do something good, and it got her killed.

"You're a disgrace to everything the CIA stands for," she hissed.

Antonio just laughed. "You mean the same agency that had no issue blacklisting you? That CIA? Come on," he scoffed. "Do you really think they care about you, or anyone else for that matter?"

Alexa did her best not to let what he said affect her. She joined the CIA because, like her family, she wanted to make a difference. Knowing how quickly she could be discarded hurt, and listening to him talk like everything she'd done didn't matter, really hurt.

"I was blacklisted because of you."

Now Antonio just looked pissed. "No, you were blacklisted because that's what they do. The agency uses people until they are no longer valuable and then throws them away like trash. I did you a favor, got you out before they completely fucked you over."

"So, you want what? A thank-you?"

Was he fucking delusional? How could he really think he was doing her any favors?

"Nope, it's too late for that. Now I just want you out of my life."

The last word was barely out of his mouth before Antonio was pulling a gun on her. She stood perfectly still at the weapon aimed at her chest.

"I've heard you're not a fan of guns. A fitting way to die I think."

It was true. Her dossier mentioned her displeasure with guns. That didn't mean she never shot one, or that she wasn't

comfortable around them. She just preferred other methods of dealing with people.

“So ... you plan to shoot me? What about Amber there? You plan to kill her as well or let her go before she’s forced to witness a murder?”

She hated to bring attention to the other woman, but she needed her gone. Alexa didn’t bring her own gun in, fully expecting for Antonio to take it away from her anyway, so fighting was her only other option. That could only happen if Amber wasn’t a liability anymore.

“That bitch?” Antonio jerked his head over to where Amber was still tied up. “I’m going to kill her just for making my life hell these past few days. Nothing but a whiny bitch, that one is. *Boohoo, my ex is an asshole. Boohoo, my daughter refuses to be just like me.* I’m sick of listening to her shit. I’ll be doing the world a favor getting rid of her.”

Alexa watched the next few seconds unfold like a slow-motion movie. Antonio swung the gun in Amber’s direction. Amber’s wide eyes pleaded for someone to help her. The loud bang of the gun. Alexa took off at a dead run and tackled Antonio to the ground.

The force of the hit knocked the wind out of her as they both crashed to the wooden floor and Antonio’s gun slid across the floor. She tried to scramble off him but his arm snaked around her one leg, attempting to drag her back.

Using her other knee, Alexa jammed all of her weight into his cheek, pressing his face into the hard floor. The sound of his screams and the crunch of cartilage spurred her on until his grip finally loosened.

She scrambled across the floor on her hands and knees, grabbing for the gun when it was within her reach. Her finger was on the trigger by the time Antonio caught up to her. Twisting her body, she squeezed over and over again until the slide locked back in place, signaling that she was out of ammo.

After a silent beat, Alexa took the time to check Antonio’s pulse. Relieved when she didn’t find one, she dropped her

head back on the floor. She needed a minute to gather her wits before she checked on Amber.

This was her first time killing someone and no amount of training prepared her for it. Which was probably why, in the next moment, she was leaning over and puking her guts out.

Chapter 35

Colt and his father were parked at the end of the road, waiting for Makenna. Everything about this situation felt wrong.

Alexa's plan was to get his daughter out first and then work on taking out Antonio by any means necessary. He didn't like the plan. He had argued with both his father and Alexa the entire way there, but in the end, he lost. Nothing he said would convince her to let him handle it.

So now he was stuck, sitting there twiddling his thumbs while he waited to see what happened.

"You need to relax. Alexa can handle herself."

He didn't doubt that she could, but that didn't mean she should have to. Colt didn't care what her job used to be, putting herself purposely in danger didn't sit well with him.

Movement up at the house caught his attention. He leaned forward in his seat. The second he recognized the figure running at a fast clip toward him, he hopped out.

Makenna was leaping into his arms in no time. Pulling her close, he jumped back into the truck with her on his lap. Something that wasn't as easy as it used to be when she was younger. He doubted his daughter was comfortable cramped in with him, but she would need to just deal with it for a few minutes.

Makenna's face was buried in his neck and he could feel the splash of tears hit his skin.

"Makenna, I need you to talk to me, bug. Tell me what happened."

He feared the worst. What was she forced to witness?

"She saved me." His daughter's voice was on the verge of hysterics.

"Who, bug? Alexa, or your mother?"

He hoped more than anything that her mother had nothing to do with the kidnapping. He held on to that thought after seeing the picture. For Makenna's sake, he wanted that to be the case.

"Alexa! She convinced Tony to let me go. I didn't want to leave her, but she made me! She told me you were here, and that I needed to run straight for you. We have to go back and get her, Dad! It's important. He's going to kill her!"

Colt was having a hard time keeping up as his daughter's words rushed out. She was talking so fast that some of it ran together.

"We *are* going to help her, but I need you to tell us everything that happened first."

He listened carefully as Makenna went through her day, how her mother showed up at the school to pick her up. She tried to refuse, but then Amber made up some story about him being hurt and it was important she went with her. The hope

that he felt earlier that Amber wasn't involved slowly slipped away the longer his daughter spoke.

Makenna explained that when she got into the car, Tony was already there, and before her mother could even pull away, he was threatening to kill her. He said that he needed her to get Alexa to the house because she had the information he wanted.

He was relieved when his daughter explained that other than being tied to the chair, Tony hadn't hurt her. Unlike her mother, who got punched when she whined about being used.

Colt struggled between feeling angry at Amber and concerned that she was hurt. She was Makenna's mother, and while there were times he wished she just left, he knew it would hurt his daughter.

Makenna was still talking when he heard the first gunshot.

"Get up there now!" he yelled.

His father was already throwing the truck in drive before the first word left his mouth.

"Stay here and lock the doors!"

He was slipping out of the vehicle and securing his daughter back inside it when more shots rang out, this time in rapid succession. With one last check that Makenna was secured in the truck, he took off.

The scene he walked in on stopped his heart.

A man, who he assumed was Antonio, lay on the floor, blood pooled under his prone body. Alexa lay on the floor just inches away from the chair that Amber was still tied to, a bullet in the center of her forehead.

Colt rushed to Alexa's side just as a sob escaped her lips.

"I tried to save her. I really did, but he just shot her. I could see the remorse in her eyes when she realized what was going to happen."

She was concerned for his ex-wife. A woman who likely did nothing but bitch and complain. Who probably shared in the

same rumors he heard. It just showed what a better person she was.

“I know you did,” he soothed.

He pulled her closer, checking to make sure none of the blood on her was her own.

“Ambulance will be here shortly!” his father called out.

Colt looked down at the woman who, in such a short time, had turned his life upside down in such a good way. Before her, he was barely living and only for his daughter. He didn’t want to be that man anymore, but feared now that the danger was gone, she would leave and he would be right back at square one.



Alexa sat in the back of the ambulance, letting the paramedic check her over for what felt like forever, but was really only a few minutes. All because of the little girl tucked next to her who demanded to know that Alexa was unharmed.

“I told you, sweetie, I’m fine.”

Makenna’s shaking head brushed along her ribs. From the moment Colt carried her out of the house, Makenna was glued to her side.

“He could’ve killed you.” Her words were muffled, but Alexa didn’t need to hear them to know what the little girl said. “Just like he killed my mom and that other woman.”

Alexa looked over the little girl’s shoulder and right into Colt’s intense stare. As far as she knew, Makenna hadn’t actually seen her mother’s body, but considering Alexa was the only one to walk out, it was safe to say the girl knew what happened.

She eased Makenna so they were looking at each other. “Is that what he said?”

Makenna sniffled. “He told me and Mom that he killed that lady and blamed it on you, and that he planned to do the same to you and Mom.”

She pulled the girl back in as the tears poured down her face. It was one thing to know her mother died, but another to be told it was going to happen.

Buck climbed into the back of the ambulance as Alexa continued to cuddle her. He was in full-on work mode.

“I’m sorry to do this, but I need a statement from you both.”

Alexa continued to hold Makenna as they both explained what happened. Every now and then, Buck would interrupt and ask for clarification, but for the most part he let them get it out, not saying anything until they were finished.

“Well, Ms. Lynch. It’ll take a couple of days to go through the courts, but I think it’s safe to say you’re cleared of all charges related to Shannon’s death. You’re a free woman once again.”

The words should’ve brought happiness to her, but for some reason, they didn’t, and she had a feeling that reason had something to do with the frowning man sitting across from her.

She noticed Colt pulling away as soon as Makenna buried herself deep at her side, and Alexa didn’t know why. Did he regret telling her he wanted her in their lives? Or did he no longer think she would be a good influence in Makenna’s life?

Chapter 36

Colt wasn't sure he was prepared to start the day. Yesterday, he and Makenna had come home after visiting the morgue where Amber's body was being autopsied. His daughter hadn't said a word, just stood there as silent tears ran down her cheeks. He didn't know what to do besides offer her his support, something she didn't seem too keen to take.

So here he was, after a sleepless night of sitting outside his daughter's room, listening as she cried herself to sleep. He still wasn't sure what he could do to help her.

He flipped the last pancake and tossed it on the plate. He started making them when he heard her wake up, needing something to keep his hands busy.

His heart broke all over again when she walked into the kitchen, her eyes puffy and red.

"I made pancakes for you, bug."

He announced breakfast like a peace offering, one he had no idea how to even begin. Grief was hard to process as an adult. He couldn't imagine having to do it at such a young age.

Makenna sat down at the table without a word, her head hanging low. Doctoring the pancakes just as she liked, he slipped the plate in front of her.

“You need to talk to me, bug. I'm not sure how to help you, but I want to try. Tell me how I can make it better.”

He wasn't above pleading; he had zero issues begging his daughter. He was so far out of his element it wasn't even funny. Last night he spoke to his mother whose advice was to just give her time and offer her support. He was trying, but he wanted to fix it, wanted to take the pain away for her.

“Do you think Mom loved me?”

Oh, fuck. She was killing him. He thought back to yesterday when Alexa explained the events that led up to Amber's death. How she could've sworn that right before Amber died, Alexa saw remorse in the woman's eyes. He used that to guide his answer.

“I think your mother loved you very much. Sometimes I think it was hard for her to show it, but deep down? I really do think she loved you. I also think she would've done anything to protect you.”

His daughter nodded and whispered, “She begged him to let me go when we first got to the house. It's why he hit her.”

Colt wanted to bring Antonio back to life and then kill him for the scars he left his daughter with. He also wished he'd had the chance to thank Amber for protecting his daughter until the end. She might've been a shitty mother while she was alive, but in the end, she showed that maybe she wasn't as selfish as he thought. Colt would remind his daughter of that often.

“And that just proves how much she really loved you. People make mistakes, but we can't dwell on them. Instead, we need to remember all the happy times. And remember that up until the end, she loved you so much she would've done anything to protect you.”

Makenna jumped out of her seat and into his arms. He held her just a little tighter, knowing that yesterday, he could have lost her.

“Are we going to go see Alexa today?”

Her question was muffled in his neck, but it still stopped him in his tracks. It was the one topic he had been trying desperately to avoid.

“I don’t know.” He said each word slowly, unsure of the best way to respond.

He wanted to go see Alexa, to make sure she was okay, but there was just one little problem. Alexa was free. She was no longer forced to stay in his cabin, no longer required to live in his town. And what kind of man would he be if he asked her to stay? To take away the life she so willingly embraced? She said herself she didn’t have her own place for a reason.

Her head popped up and the confused expression hit him square in the gut. “But we have to, Dad!” Makenna insisted. “We need to make sure she’s okay.”

“Grandpa’s over there getting things situated now that she’s free.”

That last word stuck in his throat, making it hard for him to say the rest of what he was thinking.

“So that’s it? We’re just going to leave her by herself?”

Since when did his sweet daughter learn to make two questions sound like such accusations?

“Maybe we can head over there later.” Colt couldn’t bring himself to lie and promise they would, but he needed the disappointed look in her eyes to go away.

“Fine.”

Makenna was off the chair and moving back to her bedroom before he could fully comprehend what just happened.

“Where are you going?” he hollered after her.

“To lie down. I didn’t sleep the best last night, and I only came out because I smelled food, but I’m not hungry

anymore.”

Seconds later, the door slammed shut, and he was left wondering where the conversation went wrong. How was he supposed to tell his thirteen-year-old that he was just protecting her? That it would only be worse if he let Makenna get closer to Alexa than she already was, only for Alexa to turn around and leave?

She needed time. That’s all. He would give Makenna some time and then try talking to her again.

It was obvious after a few minutes that he didn’t have the patience to wait that long. Pulling out his phone, he dialed the one person who might be able to help him with his daughter.

“Hey, Ma.”

“How’s my grandbaby?”

He smiled. It never ceased to amaze him just how in tune his mother was to everything. It was likely she already knew why he was calling.

“Struggling. Probably mad at me.”

“Because you’re not with Alexa right now?”

Bingo. Just as he knew she would.

“How can I when I know there’s a chance Alexa could leave any moment?”

Was no one else thinking about this? Alexa wasn’t from here; she was simply passing through. Of course, she would leave when she had the chance and then his daughter would be heartbroken all over again.

“Has she said that? Has Alexa told you that’s her plan, or are you jumping to conclusions? Who are you afraid of getting hurt? Makenna or yourself? Because right now, this seems more like you’re afraid of starting something.”

A slap to the face would’ve hurt less. His mother was right. Sure, he wanted to protect Makenna, but there was no denying he was trying to protect his own heart at the same time. He hadn’t set out to fall in love with her.

“Talk to her,” his mother urged. “First to Makenna and then Alexa. Don’t just assume you know what Alexa plans to do.”

“And if she wants to leave?”

He sounded like the same scared teenager he had been when he found out Amber was pregnant, asking his mother if he was making the right decision.

“Then it wasn’t meant to be. But it’s better than living with regret.”

He let out a slow exhale, taking the extra second to really think about what his mother was saying.

“Is Dad still over there?”

“He is, and so are Alexa’s siblings. The way your father describes it, there is nothing short of chaos going on. Those Lynch children sure do love hard.”

They loved their baby sister and wouldn’t be happy if she left them out of what was happening. He imagined they’d also want to keep her close.

Colt steered the conversation away from Alexa and to the plans for Amber’s funeral and dealing with his ex-wife’s parents. For Makenna’s sake, he just wanted to get through it with very little drama. Amber’s mother wouldn’t have the same idea, so he knew the next few days were going to bring a headache.

After two hours of silence, he couldn’t take it anymore. If Makenna was still sleeping, then he would busy himself with housework. But if she was awake, then it was time they talked more about Alexa.

“Makenna?” He knocked twice on her bedroom door. No answer. “Bug?” She normally wasn’t such a heavy sleeper, but he knocked a little harder anyway. Still no answer.

The slight agitation he felt that she might be ignoring him quickly transformed into concern. Not bothering to knock for the third time, he threw the door open.

Makenna wasn’t in bed. In fact, after a quick search, it was evident she wasn’t in her bedroom at all.

Chapter 37

Why did she think she would miss her siblings so damn much? They were just as infuriating as she remembered when they got together. Well, all except Rhett, who she just found out was re-upping in the Army. Again, it would be years of only seeing him once in a blue moon, of endless emails and the occasional video call when they both had a few free moments. Hopefully, now that she was ready to give up traveling, she would have more time for those calls.

At least, that was the plan, until yesterday when Colt effectively shut her out. She thought they were making progress, moving ahead in their relationship, if that's what it even was. But then Makenna was kidnapped because of her. Sitting in the back of an ambulance, she could see Colt slowly pulling away. With each second that passed, the distance became greater.

“Are you ignoring me?” Garrett’s aggravated tone grated on her nerves.

“I’m trying to, but I can’t do that if you continue to speak.” Alexa tossed her most charmingly fake smile over her shoulder.

It was obvious her big brother didn’t find her sarcasm very funny. But if the look he gave her didn’t convey his message, the cracker he threw at her head certainly did.

“That was rude.” She picked the cracker up and threw it back at him, shaking her head when he merely caught it in his mouth and smiled in return.

“So’s being a brat.”

She rolled her eyes. Then laughed when both Charlotte and Chloe snickered at the childish behavior happening in the cabin right now. The place wasn’t big enough for the nine of them. Ten, if she counted Buck who kept stopping in, but conveniently left every time she and one of her siblings started arguing, mumbling something about having an only child wasn’t as bad as he thought.

“Stop encouraging her,” Brooks snapped at his soon-to-be wife, Charlotte.

It was clearly the wrong thing to do, considering Charlotte was savage and currently pregnant. Something she learned three seconds after her almost sister-in-law walked into the cabin.

“Snap at me again, Brooksy, and see what happens.”

Alexa wasn’t sure which was better. Charlotte using the nickname her brother hated from childhood, or her open-ended threat. It could’ve been both that made everyone in the cabin start laughing.

“I swear none of you actually ever grew up.” Lucy attempted to sound like the mature older sibling she was, but the hidden smirk kinda lost the effect she was probably going for.

“Growing up is overrated,” Chloe, Garrett’s girlfriend, piped in.

A knock at the door stopped them from continuing the immature argument that always seemed to erupt any time they all got together.

“Ah ... baby sis? There’s a kid here to see you, but I don’t see any parent in the area.”

Alexa was bounding off the couch at Zack’s confused declaration. There was only one child who knew where she was staying, and no parent meant Colt had no idea Makenna came to see her again.

“Well, don’t just make her stand outside, you dingbat.” Leslie’s voice carried from where she was standing in the kitchen area.

The suggestion didn’t matter. Alexa was already at the door and dragging Makenna inside, her eyes as wide as saucers, seeing all the people packed into the small space.

“Yeah, I know there’s a lot of us, so I’m going to give you the quick rundown before we talk about why you’re here. The guy who answered the door is my brother Zack. His wife is the one in the kitchen who called him a dingbat. She’s an author, and that’s an accurate description of him. The woman on the couch who looks way too excited to see you is Charlotte. She’s engaged to my brother Brooks. He’s the one leaning against the wall with a highly suspicious look. That look is probably because he’s a police officer and wondering how you got here on your own. Next to him is my brother Garrett and his girlfriend, Chloe, is next to Charlotte on the couch. And lastly is my older sister, Lucy. She’s currently cuddled up with her boyfriend, Derek,” she rushed out.

“Now that introductions are over, please for the love of God tell me your father knows you’re here?”

Alexa already knew the answer because there was no way Colt would let Makenna out of his sight after yesterday but she still prayed she was wrong.

“He doesn’t know,” Makenna confessed.

She dropped her head into her hands with a groan.

This was probably why Colt pulled away from her. She was a horrible influence on his teenage daughter. Twice now she had snuck out to the cabin.

“Why didn’t you tell him?”

“Because he’s being hardheaded,” Makenna replied in a way that only a teenage girl could. “I asked if he planned to come here today and he practically avoided answering. Then I overheard him talking to Gramma about how he thinks you’re just going to leave now that you can.”

Alexa held her breath and waited for the accusation, or maybe condemnation, to appear, but it never did. Makenna seemed so certain Alexa would never do that to her, and the teenager was right. Too bad she couldn’t say the same for Colt, or her family.

Her staying was the argument they’d been having all morning. Each of her brothers wanted her to move closer to them, while Lucy was supportive of her staying in the small town.

“Okay, but you know we need to let him know where you are. After yesterday, he’s probably freaking out, and with good reason.”

Makenna didn’t argue, something she was more than grateful for. If Colt already thought she wasn’t a great influence, this wouldn’t help. Plus, it was clear she really needed to have a conversation with the man about his assumptions of what she planned to do with her life.

“I know.” There was no denying the remorse in her voice. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Damn, this girl knew right where to hit her. “That was so kind of you. Let’s go sit on the couch.”

The two of them squished back into the spot Alexa vacated. It was a tight fit now that there were three of them sitting on it but no one seemed to mind.

“I love that you wanted to check on me. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t have let your father keep you away for long. Not when I, too, wanted to make sure you were handling things alright. Yesterday was a bad day for all of us.”

Alexa didn’t know the first thing about how to handle a teenager’s trauma. She didn’t have her own growing up and, even as an adult, it wasn’t until she saw Shannon’s dead body did she truly understand what trauma was. She’d barely had time to process that before her life became a shit storm, so she wouldn’t consider herself a qualified individual in the least. But she would try for Makenna’s sake.

“I cried most of the night,” Makenna admitted. “Mom and I fought a lot, and there were times she was mean, but she was still my mom. I still loved her.”

“I know you loved her, and she loved you. That’s what you need to remember most. Your mother loved you very much.”

She would believe that until her dying breath. There was no way not to love the girl who wore her heart on her sleeve.

“That’s what Dad said to me this morning.”

She almost forgot. Grabbing her phone, she sent off a quick message to Colt, letting him know Makenna was safe and with her. Turning her phone facedown on the table in front of her, she gave Makenna her attention once again.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to forget to text your dad, and your father is a smart man. This is going to be hard for the both of you.”

Up until Makenna showed up at the door, she had every intention of seeing them and helping them through it. Now she wasn’t so sure. Colt was giving off mixed signals, and until she spoke to him, she wasn’t going to start planning out their future.

“You’re in good hands with Alexa.”

Lucy was the only one of her siblings to speak since Makenna showed up. Other than hellos, they all stayed quiet and likely eavesdropped. She wouldn’t put it past any of her siblings and certainly not any of their significant others.

Except for Derek. He was chill, and fast becoming her favorite.

Everyone was saved from having to say anything more when an angry truck roared up the gravel road. How did she know it was angry, or that a truck could sound that way? Because there was only one person who would be flying up like the world was coming to an end.

Colt didn't bother to knock before he stormed in. The only thing throwing him off his angry tirade was probably the sheer amount of people packed into the small cabin.

Chapter 38

Colt was going to be gray if his daughter kept this up. His sweet, even-tempered teenager was fast proving that she could be just as rebellious as any other teenager. Sneaking out to see Alexa just one day after she was kidnapped and held hostage was the most asinine thing she could do. Yet, a small part of him blamed himself.

Makenna expressed her interest in visiting Alexa, had practically demanded it. So how could he fault her for doing what he was too afraid to do himself?

Fear.

Fear of rejection.

Fear of Alexa walking away and him never getting to see her again.

That's what the whole situation boiled down to. He was afraid, and instead of facing his fear, he tried to hide from it. It

sucked to know his daughter was braver than he was.

Colt barely gave a second thought to the four other vehicles surrounding the cabin; his mother mentioned Alexa's family was visiting. He didn't bother to knock. The anger at being forced to do something before he was ready propelled him forward, but it all came to a crashing halt at the vision before him.

His father once mentioned Alexa was the youngest of six children. What he failed to mention was that each of them came with their own significant other. At least, that's what he assumed. Four large men with equally pissed-off expressions turned in his direction. A woman, who looked to be a spitting image of the woman he couldn't get out of his head, was perched on one of those men's lap, but he counted at least three other women; he had no idea who they were. And that two of them were protectively laying a hand on his daughter.

"Hey, Dad."

All eight adults looked ready to throw down with him, ready to come to his daughter's defense in a heartbeat. The thought sobered him.

"Ah hey, bug. You know, you could've just waited a few hours and we could've come here together." He tried to insert as much cheer into his voice as he could.

One glance around at the people in the cabin and he knew he didn't do nearly as good of a job as he hoped.

"I didn't want to wait. I wanted to see Alexa now."

The desperation hit him hard. He promised to always do what was best for her and just that morning he had broken it. He should've been able to push down his own insecurities and do what his daughter needed.

"You're right. That was my fault. We should've come right over. I'm sorry I forced you to sneak out and come here on your own."

He looked from his daughter's sad face and met Alexa's confused expression. It was the first time since he walked in that he allowed himself to drink her in. She was beautiful, as

always. It hurt to know that this could all be over tomorrow. That she could just walk away and he would never see her again.

“Oh, crap.” Alexa scrambled off the couch. “I should probably introduce everyone, considering they are all hanging out with your daughter. On the couch are Charlotte and Chloe. Charlotte belongs to my oldest brother, Brooks, although most days she probably doesn’t claim him.”

Alexa pointed to them respectively but he wouldn’t have needed it considering the guy she pointed to threw a cracker followed by a “hey now” and the woman Alexa was referring to didn’t deny the accusation.

“Chloe is shacking up with my brother Garrett and the guy who looks like he might be plotting the best way to shoot you is my brother Zack. Don’t take it personally, it’s sort of what he does for a living. His wife is Leslie, and last but not least is my older sister, Lucy, and her boyfriend, Derek.”

It was overwhelming, but he still managed to smile and shake everyone’s hand. He tried not to take it personally when Zack did indeed look like he was considering shooting him on the spot. He wondered if it had more to do with the man’s little sister or Colt’s daughter. Everyone in the room seemed to take an instant liking to his little girl.

“So, you’re the reason our baby sister doesn’t want to come back home.”

Colt’s head whipped around to where Alexa stood next to the couch.

“Zack!” Alexa snapped. “Butt out.”

Oh, no. He didn’t want Zack to butt out at all. He wanted to know just how much Zack had to say.

“I think maybe we should go outside and give them a little privacy.” Leslie started to herd everyone before she finished with, “And then share all the details with me later, so I have some inspiration.”

That last part didn’t come out nearly as quietly as he was sure Leslie meant for it to, and since it made Alexa chuckle, he

decided not to ask. Not yet anyway.

“Will Makenna be okay out there with them?”

His first instinct was to demand his daughter stay inside where he could keep his eyes on her, but the conversation he needed to have with Alexa probably should be just between them.

“Yes, she’ll be fine. I promise. None of my siblings will let her out of their sight.”

That made him feel better. He couldn’t keep his daughter under lock and key as much as he wanted to. His panic wouldn’t help her get through everything that happened.

“So, is what ...”

“I’m sorry ...”

They both started to speak at the same time, causing both of them to chuckle.

“Ladies first,” he insisted.

He loved to listen to her talk and wanted to see what she was going to say before he grilled her about Zack’s declaration.

“I’m sorry Makenna rushed over here. I was going to come to visit her today anyway if you didn’t stop over, but I was busy dealing with my siblings. If you couldn’t tell, they can be a bit of a handful when they all get together. Well”—she waved her hand—“almost all of them. Rhett is deployed, but I assure you, if he were here, he would be just as bad.”

She called it a “handful” but all he witnessed was the love her siblings had for her. No wonder they didn’t want her to stay. They were going to be sadly disappointed when he did his best to persuade her otherwise.

“Don’t apologize. It was my fault. I should’ve listened to her demands.”

“Why didn’t you?”

It was an honest question. One that shouldn’t have made him feel guilty to answer but did.

“Confession to the fishes?” He smiled when her lips tipped up at the reminder of their day at the lake. “I was hiding. I realized yesterday that while your freedom is something awesome, it now meant that there was a good chance you would choose to leave and I wasn’t ready to face that.”

“So, you assumed that was my plan.”

It wasn’t a question, and he was pretty sure her tone was laced with an accusation. One she rightfully deserved to have.

Instead of answering what he figured wasn’t a question anyway, he went back to what he originally wanted to ask her before. “Did Zack mean what he said?”

He waited anxiously while Alexa looked to be debating her answer. He didn’t want to jump to conclusions a second time. However, the anticipation was killing him.

Just when he thought he would be the first to cave and beg her to put him out of his misery, Alexa nodded.

“I told them this morning that I wanted to stay here.”

Colt closed the distance between them. Snaking his arm around her waist, he hauled her against him. Threading his fingers from his other hand into her hair, he tugged slightly, so she was forced to meet his eyes.

“Does staying here mean staying with me? Giving us a chance that doesn’t involve hiding in the cabin or sneaking back to my place?”

That sounded worse coming out than it did when it happened. Keeping Alexa a secret always felt wrong on so many levels. He was more than ready to show her off, to let the town know that she was his. Screw the naysayers. Those who actually mattered would accept her and, if not, oh well. It was his life.

“I was hoping so, but then you started pulling away and I figured it was because you thought I wasn’t good enough to be around Makenna.”

He was such a fuckup. He let this amazing woman doubt her worth because he was too afraid of getting hurt again. How

did he ever deserve her?

“You are *more* than good enough. I knew it the moment she snuck out here the first time, and you looked like a mother bear ready to defend its cub. You only solidified that thought when you protected her from Antonio. Makenna and I would be lucky to have you in our lives.”

Her eyes held him locked in place, searching for the truth. He did something he promised himself never to do again and completely opened himself up to someone, trusting that Alexa wouldn't break what he was offering.

Colt knew he made the right decision when her hand came up to cradle his cheek.

“I'm not going anywhere. I've found my latest adventure and I happen to think it will keep me satisfied for years to come. And besides, I now have two amazing people to go on them with. What more could I ask for? Thank you for believing in me this whole time.”

The worry he felt at not being enough melted away. He would gladly take every adventure with her and show her she didn't make a mistake in staying with him.

“I'll always believe in you, and I'd be more than happy to argue with anyone who tries to think otherwise.”

Not able to resist her any longer, he leaned down and captured her lips. This was just the start of the rest of their lives and adventures.

Epilogue

Five Months Later

Alexa smiled down at Makenna playing on the blanket with her three-year-old nephew. It was the first time since the shooting that all her siblings were again in one place, minus Rhett. He was scheduled to be on leave, but something happened and his unit was deployed. She didn't have all the details; she'd gotten all the information secondhand through Zack.

“Do you think you and Dad are eventually going to have a baby?”

A year ago, that question would've had her running for the hills. A baby was the one adventure she wanted no part of. She

figured the rest of her siblings would do a damn good job of giving her parents all the grandchildren they could handle.

“Would you be okay if we did?”

Things had gone at warp speed over the last five months. She’d moved in with Colt and Makenna within weeks, though Colt had been afraid of how Makenna would take it so soon after her mother died. It had surprised both of them when Makenna all but demanded it happen because she was sick of spending half her time at the cabin.

Makenna was also the one to discuss marriage for the first time, wondering what was taking her father so long to make an honest woman out of her. It had been Alexa who shut that particular conversation down. She didn’t need a marriage certificate to know how much Colt loved her.

Now it would seem Makenna was moving on to the discussion of children. If she didn’t watch out, Makenna was going to give her father a heart attack with all these discussions.

“Well, I was kinda hoping you would give me a little baby sister or brother. I mean, I’m happy with all the cousins I’m going to be getting, but a sibling would be nice.”

There would be no shortage of cousins, that was for sure. Besides Charlotte being pregnant, Leslie just announced she and Zack were finally going to make Jr. a big brother. And Lucy was wasting no time now that she found a man who would treat her right. Three more babies to love on.

“I’ll let your father know your opinion on the matter,” she chuckled.

“What are we letting me know?” Colt snuck up behind her and wrapped his arms around her middle.

“I think I need a little brother or sister,” Makenna shamelessly declared.

Alexa could’ve sworn Colt nearly choked behind her, but somehow managed to respond in an even tone. “Is that right? And what are your thoughts, my love?” That last question was whispered only for her.

It sent the good kind of shiver straight down her body, the kind only he could bring out in her. “I’m not opposed to the idea.”

“We’ll have to start soon if we plan to keep up in this family. Your siblings don’t waste any time.”

Alexa snorted out a laugh. No, they didn’t. Unless she counted Garrett. She had a feeling he and Chloe weren’t in any hurry. Charlotte made Brooks wait the longest, but if Zack had his way, Leslie would never stop being pregnant until he had his own mini football team.

“So, are we joining the rest of them and taking things out of order on this as well?”

Colt turned her slowly until her palms were resting on his chest. There was a gleam in his eye. “We have a surprise for you. Well, you, Lucy, and Charlotte, that is.”

Now she was really curious. What surprise could he have that would involve both her sister and soon-to-be sister-in-law?

He didn’t make her wait long. Once again she was being turned around, only this time it was to see her mother standing there, three beautiful bouquets in her hands.

“Alexa Lynch.” Colt slipped back in front of her and dropped to one knee. “My love, the woman I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with. To grow old with. Will you do me the honor of marrying me to ...”

“Yes!”

The word was out of her mouth before she even had the chance to let her racing heart slow down. Jumping into his arms, she nearly knocked Colt over as he stood up.

“So, this is my surprise?”

“It is. I hope you don’t mind a joint wedding. It was planned with the intention that Rhett would be here as well, but while he can’t make it physically, he will be FaceTiming shortly.”

Alexa didn’t know she could be this happy.

“I love you so damn much.” She pulled Colt in for a quick kiss, one she wanted to drag out but could sense her mother waiting for her.

“I love you too, and I plan to spend the rest of my life showing you.” Colt kissed her forehead. “Now go with your mother and change into the dress she brought for you.”

Alexa walked away like she was floating on a cloud. And that same feeling lasted all throughout getting dressed, throughout the ceremony, and continued until after the “I do’s.”

The day was everything she could ever hope for, and more. Made even more special that she could share it with those she was closest to. Alexa couldn’t wait to see where her adventures took her, knowing that Colt and Makenna would be by her side.

I hope you enjoyed Alexa and Colt’s story! The final Lynch brother, Rhett, wants to stay a mystery for now but if you are new to me and curious about Wes, please check out my [Charlie](#) and [Bravo](#) Team Series.

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