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FOREVER *Lies*

— FOREVER BLUEGRASS SERIES —

**KATHILEEN
BROOKS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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FOREVER BLUEGRASS #17

KATHLEEN BROOKS

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Moonshine & Masquerades

CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Kathleen Brooks](#)

[About the Author](#)

PROLOGUE

Six year old Sebastian Abel stood tall and straight-faced as a single tear slid down his face. His mother, Elaine, leaned down and whispered in his ear, “Don’t let him see you cry. This could be the last time we see him and all he needs to see is our love and support.”

Sebastian wiped the tear away just in time. His father stopped at the foot of the plane’s stairs and turned around. Sebastian smiled and dutifully waved to his father.

“It’ll be okay, Seb,” his best friend, Birch Stratton, said, putting his arm around Sebastian’s shoulder. “Our dads will be back by Christmas.”

The two boys stood shoulder to shoulder with their mothers flanking them, with fiercely determined smiles on their faces as they waved their husbands off to defend the United States. It had been like that since Sebastian had been born. His father hadn’t been there for his birth, but Birch and his mother had been. Birch was a couple of years older than Sebastian, but that didn’t stop them from being so close they were like brothers. Their mothers were the same, so close they were practically sisters.

They didn’t move from their place beside the runway until the plane was out of sight. Then, with a rush of air as if they’d

been holding it back the entire time, their mothers let the tears come. They hugged each other tightly while whispering that it would be all right to each other. Less than a minute later their tears were dry and they smiled down at the boys. “Ice cream?”

It was their tradition. Ice cream at their favorite shop after their fathers left for another tour of duty. Sebastian’s mother was a firm believer that ice cream fixed everything. Sebastian nodded and he and Birch ran for the station wagon they’d all driven over in.



“Get off of me,” ten year old Sebastian tried to yell, but his lip quivered with fear as the bullies shoved him into his locker.

“Who’s going to stop us? Your daddy? The one who doesn’t exist,” Brandon, the leader of the pack, taunted. “Aw, look. Are you going to cry, Sebastian? Are you a little cry baby?” Brandon and his pack laughed and Sebastian wished, not for the first time, that his father was here to teach him how to fight.

Sebastian might be small and he might be crying as they punched him, but he would never give up. He tried to kick. He tried to punch. He just tried but the fight went out of him as his lip split and he tasted his own blood.

“Not again,” his mother sighed, her face full of pity and anger, as she cleaned his split lip. “I’m so sorry, Sebastian. I’ll call the school again and this time I’ll also call their mothers. Maybe it’s time to take this into my own hands.”

“No! Don’t do that, Mom,” Sebastian yelled, yanking away from her soft hand gently cleaning off the blood from his lip and chin. “That will only make it worse.”

His mother stared down at him, but finally relented. “Okay, but if this happens one more time, I’m stepping in.” His mother took a deep breath and pasted on a smile. “Come on, let’s get ice cream. Mint chocolate chip?”

“Of course. Is there any other flavor?” Sebastian asked as he slid from the countertop.

“My chocolate peanut butter cup beats your mint any day.” Sebastian made a gross face as they grabbed the car keys and headed out.

Sebastian knew after that day things would change. And they did. He would never again tell his mother when he’d been bullied. His mother had enough to worry about. With his father always away, it was up to his mom to keep things running at home. He saw how hard she worked at the base’s post exchange, basically the “big box store” of the base, to help put extra money in her pocket to send Sebastian to the private school near the base. He’d tested off the charts and the local school didn’t know what to do with him and had suggested the private school—one that cost more than his mother could afford.

“The best gift I can ever give you is the gift of an education,” his mother always told him when she gave him only one birthday gift and one Christmas gift each year. It was all she could afford. She’d grown up poor, in a rural part of California that wasn’t even categorized as a town. She and Sebastian’s father had started dating when they were thirteen

and got married the second they both turned eighteen. They'd both dropped out of their senior year of high school to get married and with no job prospects, his father enlisted. Years later, Sebastian's mother had a better life for herself but was determined to make an even better one for her only child.

Sebastian pretended not to have seen his mother begging the principal of the small private school to allow her to make monthly payments instead of paying for each semester in full. He didn't want her to feel bad when she'd come out of the office with a triumphant smile on her face. She'd smiled and said that he was going to go to the best school around and that someday her son would make a name for himself. They'd celebrated with ice cream that night.

Sebastian also never said anything when he heard his mother slip from the house in the middle of the night to pick up extra shifts stocking shelves.

After the day she cleaned his lip, Sebastian never told her of the bullying again. Instead he blamed the broken nose on a fall from the swing. He blamed the black eye on the tetherball hitting him in the face. Instead, he focused on how his mother was the first to leap up from her seat and clap at all of his assemblies. How she was the only mother to cheer at his chess matches. How she always hugged him when he got home from school each day and kissed his forehead each night. And how she told him not to worry about his small size because someday he'd grow into a strong man, but most importantly into a smart man.

"You can be the biggest, baddest athlete of them all," his mother would tell him when he felt left out for not being athletic enough to play sports, "but one injury and you're done. Your whole career is over. That's not true when you flex

your biggest muscle—your brain.” Sebastian listened and studied during recess to avoid the bullies. He studied after school instead of playing sports. He studied when he sat at home alone most nights because his mom was working. And he wished that one day he might be smart enough to get a good enough job that he could help pay the bills so his mother wouldn’t have to work so much.



The sound of gunfire sent a shiver down Sebastian’s body. He didn’t cry. He didn’t move with the next round of shots. Instead, he stared blankly at the flag-covered coffin that held his father.

Birch stood rigidly next to him as Birch’s mother held Sebastian’s mother while she cried with each of the twenty-one shots.

At thirteen, Sebastian was now the man of the house. Now it was his job to take care of his mother. The bruised ribs from Brandon’s punch just two days ago reminded Sebastian of his place in life. He was four inches shorter and thirty pounds lighter than Brandon, but that couldn’t be an excuse any more. He was a man now and men dealt with their problems.

“I’ll never be weak again,” Sebastian whispered as the last shot echoed across the military cemetery.

“What did you say?” Birch whispered back.

Sebastian turned to his friend who stood a foot taller and was never bullied. No one messed with Birch Stratton. “Can I work out with you?”

Birch shrugged. “Sure. If you help me with calculus.”

“Deal,” Sebastian said, turning to look back at his father’s coffin. “I’ll take care of Mom, Dad. I promise.”



The feel of skin and bone smashing together had never felt better. Sebastian smiled with satisfaction as his fist broke Brandon’s nose. The uppercut sent Brandon flying backward, his head snapping as he collided into his friends.

“This dork has changed,” Sebastian said, now towering over Brandon.

Sebastian’s mother was right when she’d said he would become a man one day. It had taken until he was seventeen, but he’d done it. He was now six feet tall, and while he was still on the skinny side, there was strength in him. He’d grow into his frame but more importantly he was still working out his mind. He’d just gotten a full scholarship to MIT that covered everything from meal plan to lab fees, allowing his mother to use the small savings she’d put aside for his college fund to buy a car that wouldn’t break down every month. He was holding true to the promise he made his father—he was taking care of his mother.

“Remember this, Brandon. I’m bigger, I’m stronger, and I’m a hell of a lot smarter than you. I’ll come after you in ways you’ll never see coming if you don’t leave me and everyone else you pick on alone,” Sebastian threatened.

“Yeah, right. You’re nothing but a chess club dork,” Brandon said as he used the back of his hand to wipe the blood from his nose.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. You got a full ride to State for football, right?” Sebastian asked.

“Something a dork like you wouldn’t know anything about,” Brandon sneered as he high-fived his teammates. Then turned quickly to try to surprise Sebastian with a haymaker.

Sebastian grabbed Brandon’s hand and twisted with the self-defense move Birch had taught him. Brandon yelped and dropped to his knees in surprise. “I twist just a little bit more and your wrist is broken. You think you’d still be able to be the quarterback when your throwing arm is destroyed? Leave the others and me alone or I’ll destroy any chance you have of playing football ever again. Got it?”

The realization of what Sebastian could do finally sunk in and fear blossomed on Brandon’s face. Brandon’s reign of terror ended there and then. He never bothered Sebastian or anyone else again.



“I’m sorry, Mr. Abel. I told you last month and the month before that, your mother’s insurance won’t cover experimental treatments,” the hospital doctor told him as Sebastian stood outside his mother’s hospital room.

“But I’ve researched it, Doctor. It helps her type of cancer. She’s the perfect candidate,” Sebastian argued, trying to rein in his anger.

The doctor shook his head. “That may be, but it’s not covered by her insurance. It’s a hundred thousand dollar treatment. You’re just a college kid about to graduate. Do you have that money? Does your mother?”

“You know we don’t. I can’t just sit here and watch her die.” Sebastian was beginning to lose what little hold he had on his anger. No longer the scrawny teenager who’d been

bullied through life, he was six foot two and two hundred pounds of muscle. No one bullied him anymore. He worked out religiously, but no matter how hard he could punch, it wouldn't save his mother. Only money could do that. The one thing they'd never had.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Abel. There's nothing we can do for Elaine. I think you should consider hospice. I'll send someone to talk to you." Sebastian watched the doctor walk away as if the whole world hadn't just stopped spinning.

"Sebastian!" Mrs. Stratton cried from the hospital room.

Sebastian saw Birch's distraught face first and knew it was too late. There would be no hospice. There would be no more time for him to find a way to save his mother.

Sebastian straightened his back and bit the inside of his lip. He put a gentle smile on his face as he approached his mother. *Don't let her see you cry. This will be the last time I see her and all she needs to see is my love and support.* His mother's eyes were focused outward, but turned toward him as Sebastian took a seat opposite the Stratton family and took his mother's frail hand in his.

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm right here and everything is going to be okay now," Sebastian said as tears ran down Birch and his mother's faces. Sebastian refused to let his tears flow. Instead, he smiled down at his mother and brushed a gentle hand over what was left of her hair. "I love you, Mom. You've been the best mom a son could have and that deserves ice cream. Chocolate peanut butter cup for you and mint chocolate chip for me," Sebastian said calmly as his mother's lips turned up into a small smile and then she was gone.

Nurses swarmed the room as Birch and his mother came to hug him. He was all alone now. The woman who had worked

day and night to give him every chance at life didn't make it because he couldn't find a way to come up with a hundred thousand dollars.

Sebastian roared in anger as the doctor who refused to help him find a way to save his mother came into the room. Sebastian's fist would have connected with the doctor's surprised face if Birch hadn't grabbed him. "You killed her!"

Anger and hatred filled him with helpless fury. "You killed her because of money. I would have paid it. I would have found a way to pay for it, but you wouldn't even help me!"

"Seb, not now," Birch said softly, but it was enough to bring Sebastian back to the fact his mother's body was still in the room and he'd never disgrace her by acting like this.

Sebastian shook off Birch's hold and walked toward his mother, sending the nurses and doctor stepping back. He picked up her hand and brushed his thumb over it. "I'm sorry I failed you and Dad. I'll never fail again. I swear it."

Washington D.C., one year ago . . .

Sebastian Abel swirled the rich amber bourbon around in a crystal tumbler as he sat on the patio of his mansion and looked out over the Potomac River. He was fifteen minutes from the White House but this house was a world away for him. The house sat on the river, surrounded by Fort Marcy National Park from the front and the river from the back. Snow sprinkled the rocks below but had melted everywhere else. The fire pit roared in front of him, providing warmth and comfort when the last thing he felt was warmth and comfort.

He'd bought this house because his mother had once mentioned how it was her dream house after seeing it in a magazine. What was he to do with fifteen bedrooms? Birch was the only person to ever visit. If Sebastian had an evening with a date, he spent it at the penthouse of his hotel in downtown D.C. This was his private mansion of solitude.

He tried to pull his mind from thinking about the emptiness and the loneliness of his life. He was constantly surrounded by "yes" people, yet always alone. Sebastian's phone rang, the tone indicating it was the front gate. The

interruption drew him from his lonely thoughts. Sebastian looked at the screen and gave a sad smile. He never forgot. Not once.

He opened the gate and sent a text that he was out back. A couple of minutes later, Birch Stratton, president of the United States, walked out onto the back patio in jeans and a thick navy blue winter coat with the seal of the president embroidered on the chest. He held the familiar bottle of cheap whiskey and set it down on the granite table before dropping into the chair across the small table from Sebastian.

“No Secret Service?” Sebastian asked his one and only friend. Well, maybe not *only*. Lately, and against all odds, it seemed as if he’d added the newlyweds Abby and Dylan Davies to his list of friends. The two badass soldiers from Keeneston, Kentucky, were on Birch’s black ops team that Sebastian funded privately to keep completely off the books.

“They’re out front. Now, pour out that swill you’re drinking. I got the good stuff,” Birch said, pouring a glass of Drunk Dog Whiskey into his glass. “This shit’s gotten expensive. It’s up to ten dollars a bottle.”

Sebastian gave a snort of amusement as he tossed back his ten thousand dollar bourbon. “It’s doubled in price since we first had it. Back then it was just five bucks.”

Sebastian remembered it well. He’d been on the front porch of the small two-bedroom house he’d lived in with his mother on the night she’d died when Birch had sat down next to him, pulled out the bottle, and the two of them hadn’t said a single word as they drank the entire thing.

“You should have invested in it,” Birch said as he waited for Sebastian to pour himself a drink. Then with a deep breath

Birch raised his glass. “To Elaine. The best damn second mom a man could have.”

“To the best mom,” Sebastian said, holding up his glass. “May she be enjoying cocktails with your mother in the garden they always dreamed of having.”

“To our moms.”

Sebastian and Birch clinked glasses and then tossed back the Drunk Dog. Sebastian tried not to groan at the horrendously rough taste that felt as if a fire demon clawed its way down his throat before setting a bomb off in his stomach.

“To tradition,” Birch choked out between coughing fits before they tossed back the second glass.

They sat quietly as they drank the bottle. Luckily, Sebastian’s throat went numb after the third shot. His head swam and his memories threatened to overtake him. He shoved them back down and gave credit to Birch’s idea of buying Drunk Dog Whiskey.

“I hate to ask on Elaine’s anniversary, but I need a favor,” Birch said, interrupting Sebastian’s thoughts of his growing empire. An empire he’d built fueled by the anger and guilt over not being able to save his mother.

“Do you need a favor or does the United States need a favor?” Sebastian asked, sighing. He already knew he’d do it. He’d do anything for his brother and that’s what Birch was, the best damn brother a man could have.

“The United States, I guess, but I think you’ll find it impacts you too. You know about the race to space and all that from the sixties, but what you don’t know is the unpublicized space arms race,” Birch said with a slight slur to his words. “The Chinese government is determined to become the most

powerful force in the world. You know how they, along with some others, are stealing technology, bullying other countries in the South China Sea, and making some alliances with other like-minded countries. Thank goodness Crusina and Bermalia have stepped away from them and become our allies.”

“Yeah, I know all about that. What does this have to do with space?” Sebastian asked.

“There are satellites in outer space . . .”

“No shit. My company has four up there,” Sebastian said with a snort.

“Well, the Chinese government is developing their own satellites to go up and steal information from other satellites. Sometimes it’s just sidling up to one of ours and taking pictures of the technology. Others use lasers to disable ours. Worse, we know they’re figuring out a way to intercept the messages we send through satellites. Other countries have already been hit by that. As you know, that tends to be classified military and government information. Something we don’t want the Chinese government to have.”

“No, we don’t. Nor do I want them seeing the technology I have on mine. So, what do you need?” Sebastian asked.

“That technology you have on your satellites, which I’m sure is light years ahead of government tech, is what I need help with. We have plenty of spy satellites in the Orion program. Heck, the US National Reconnaissance Office just launched the biggest and worst-kept secret spy satellite this month. The sucker weighs five tons and has a hundred-meter antenna that we use to zero in on our enemies.”

“And now China wants that,” Sebastian said, tossing back the last of his drink.

“And Russia. France has already called them out for espionage for trying to intercept military communications from their satellite. But lots of countries have satellites up there, just not in the numbers the US, Russia, and China have. Between governments and private sector there are almost three thousand satellites in orbit and until now, we’ve followed ‘the bigger, the better’ mentality. We use the big satellites to spy on Earth instead of putting people in danger on the ground. Now I want a satellite to spy for us in space and to protect our satellites up there from other countries.”

“Interesting, but satellites are constantly monitored. You want to put one up there so if another one gets too close to you, you can disable it? But say someone like North Korea decides to get mad you disabled the Chinese satellite that gives the dictator Internet? They can fire up a nuclear weapon and take down everything from television to communications to GPS. They have nothing to lose, but you’re playing the ally game. Suddenly space is a battlefield?” Sebastian asked. He knew one well-placed shot with a missile, a laser, or an EMP could knock out communications for most of the world, sending everyone back to the 1950s.

“That’s why I don’t want anyone to know we have it,” Birch said with a nod. “A silent killer, patrolling space.”

“You can’t hide a satellite, Birch. You can see them with strong telescopes and track them on radar.”

“I know. I want an invisible one. I don’t know how, but I know you can figure it out. That’s why I’m here. I want you to work with DARPA.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is cute and all, but I’d still have to

report to the Department of Defense, and I don't report to anyone but myself."

"Please, Seb. I need your help. Dr. Erwin Hoggard is the leader of the team and they've hit a wall. At least take a look at the research and see if you have any ideas. I won't make you part of the official team, but a consultant. Does that work?" Birch asked.

"You know I'll do anything for you. Let me look it over and see what they have and how I can help. Next time, get me drunk on the good bourbon before asking me a favor. I know the governor of Kentucky has given you the good stuff. Don't be a bourbon hog, it's not a good look."

Birch snorted and pushed himself up. He swayed on his feet, or maybe it was Sebastian who was swaying? They stood smiling at each other, teetering on their feet, before giving each other a back-thumping hug.

"You're a good friend, Sebastian."

Sebastian watched Birch stumble toward the house and through the opened glass door before sitting back down to look out over the river. He heard glass break somewhere in the house and chuckled. The Secret Service would help Birch home.

Sebastian closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the river. His mind went back to Keeneston and to the wedding he'd just attended. The bride had been beautiful. Abby Mueez, now Davies, had literally glowed with happiness. The tough-as-nails Dylan had looked at her with such unabashed love it had made Sebastian uncomfortable. Sebastian and Abby had helped each other out in the past by being each other's dates. It had been easy. Neither had wanted anything but a date with no strings so they wouldn't have to answer questions about their

private lives. There was the one time they'd both needed more, but it wasn't because of feelings they had for each other. It was because of their loneliness.

Abby had returned from a mission, excited to be alive, only to find herself alone. Sebastian had found himself drunk and alone late at night a year ago today. With the turbulent emotions and grief over his mother's death coupled with the horrible bourbon he'd consumed, he had accepted what she'd offered. One night to not be alone. Now Abby was happily married and here he was, sitting once again, drunk and by himself.

Sebastian played back the wedding in his mind. No matter how beautiful the bride was, Sebastian's eyes hadn't been on her. Instead they were on a pair of silver-green eyes that looked as if they were almost a metallic sage color.

Sebastian let out a sigh. Greer Parker, Dylan's cousin, wasn't for him. She was a nice woman with an easy smile and would end up with the boy next door. He would crush her spirit in a week.

He'd talked to Greer for the first time at the wedding. She'd been dancing and drinking. Her cheeks had the perfect natural flush to them and her eyes shone with pure happiness. She'd tossed her head back and laughed with utter abandon. Sebastian hadn't been able to turn away.

He'd seen Greer head for the bar and cut through the crowd to join her there. Most women would drop at his feet if he even looked their way. He was rich, he was handsome, and he wielded his power like a sword. However, Greer didn't seem to care. In fact, no one at this wedding did. He had tried to think of a way to introduce himself when Greer did it for him. She'd turned that sweet smile on him and had said,

“You’re Sebastian Abel. Abby’s friend with benefits. I’m surprised you’re here.”

Her forthright greeting had thrown him for a loop, and he had to admit he liked it. Most people he met only said what he wanted to hear. “Of course I’m here. She’s my friend.”

“Speaks highly of you to be able to stay friends,” Greer had said. “Want to dance?”

“I don’t dance.”

She’d laughed again as if calling him on his bullshit. “Right. See you around, Bash.” She’d shot the tequila, sent him a saucy grin, and left.

She hadn’t tried to talk him into it. She hadn’t tried to suck up to him. She’d just left him standing there. But that was probably a good thing since Sebastian didn’t do relationships. He couldn’t afford to. With Abby, he’d known he was safe. Safe to not care. Safe to not call the next day. Safe to be too busy to answer the phone. Safe to put business first. One look at Greer Parker and he knew he’d never be safe again.

Every relationship he’d tried before had resulted in whining, tears, and things thrown at him for not paying enough attention, not spoiling them enough, not taking them on vacation . . . Hell, Sebastian hadn’t ever had a vacation. He worked constantly. Even if he traveled to someplace tropical to his own resorts, he wasn’t there to lie on the beach. He was there to work. His previous girlfriends didn’t get that. That’s why he’d just decided to let the idea of a relationship go.

Then why couldn’t he stop thinking of Greer?

Washington D.C., present day . . .

“You figured it out, didn’t you?” Birch asked with a grin that almost made Sebastian smile.

“You know I did.” Sebastian had never failed after his mother died. Never.

“Tell me about it,” Birch said as he eagerly leaned forward over his desk in the Oval Office.

“I think it can be improved on greatly, but Erwin wants to use his design so I made the best from what I was allowed to do with a stupid idea. I don’t know how invisible it will be, but it’s smaller than your other spy satellites. The goal is to use a retractable arm to attach to the satellite and mimic their antenna so that we can basically steal anything they are sending or receiving,” Sebastian said, simplifying it to very basic terms. “I developed the code that will trick the satellite relays and the ground antennas into thinking our satellite is theirs. I could do better if this was a private-sector thing and I didn’t have to disclose my project to the government. And if Erwin would let me do it my way.”

“I understand, but at least we have progress and not a moment too soon,” Birch said, leaning back in his leather chair. “The NSA is getting reports of the Chinese trying to build their own new weaponized satellite, and we’ve also caught someone trying to hack DARPA. The sooner we get this up and running, the better. I feel as if I’m about to walk into battle blind and that’s not a good feeling.”

“I’m on my way to DARPA headquarters in Arlington right now to meet with Erwin and the team to enter my code into the programming,” Sebastian said, pushing up to stand.

“Where’s the code now?” Birch asked, his brows creasing as if Sebastian should be carrying a briefcase with the detonation codes handcuffed to his arm.

Sebastian tapped his temple. “Right here. The safest place in the world. I memorized it and then burned all the paper I used to develop it. Tech guys like me are always deeply suspicious of technology. Look at what we’re doing—creating a digital space spy. Gone are the days of passing coded messages. If I don’t want anyone stealing info, I keep the only copy right here in my head.”

Birch shook his head and grinned. “Paranoid much?”

The door opened and Sebastian immediately tensed, but relaxed when Birch’s wife, Tate, came in carrying two packages under one arm and their newborn daughter in the other.

“Oh good, you’re still here,” she smiled up at him. Sebastian liked Tate. He’d thought she was a pushover when he first met her, but she was nothing of the sort. She and Birch were a great team.

“You just caught me. How’s my goddaughter?”

“Spoiled rotten with the gifts you send her. Here you go,” Tate said, handing him a package.

“What’s this?” Sebastian asked as she set the second one on the desk and Birch practically lunged for it.

“Marcy Davies’s apple pie. She must want something from you for you to get one,” Tate said, grabbing a fork and practically fighting Birch for the first bite.

“Wait, she sent this to me? Why would Dylan’s grandmother send me a pie? What could she want from me?” Sebastian asked as he looked at the box with suspicion. “Oh, I bet I know. She wants to stay at one of my hotels and they’re out of rooms. Sure, tell her I can make a call.”

Tate shrugged and took another bite of her pie. “I’d sell out my husband for one of these pies. Do whatever she wants.”

Sebastian stood up and took the box with him as he began to leave the oval office. He didn’t want to show it, but his mouth was watering at the smell of the pie. “I need to get going.”

“I’ll see you at your place tonight,” Birch said, stopping Sebastian in his tracks.

He pushed down the emotion and nodded without turning around. Another year and another bottle of Drunk Dog Whiskey as he thought about the one time he failed. If only her illness had come two years later. If only his mother was still here. She was his light, his goodness, his only family, and his support. And now all that fueled him was pain, anger, and revenge.

Sebastian strode through the White House as if he owned it. It was decorated for Christmas even though that had been a couple of days before. Tate liked to leave the decorations up until after New Year's Day. Secret Service nodded to him, the staff smiled at him, the aides looked nervously at him, but he never slowed until he was out the door.

His car was waiting for him and he set the pie on the front passenger seat before getting in and heading toward Arlington.

Sebastian decided to take Interstate 66 across the river when his car told him there was an accident on Interstate 395. Sebastian veered onto the ramp toward Arlington Boulevard/George Washington Memorial Parkway exit when traffic came to a stop. A beat-up rental truck's engine was smoking up ahead. Sebastian gripped the wheel in irritation. He looked around the Y-shaped exit ramp to see if he could somehow go to the right and just get off onto the Memorial Parkway. It would be out of the way, but there were plenty of ways to get to DARPA.

Sebastian glanced in his rearview mirror and saw a group of men in suits get out of the sedan behind him and move forward. Well, hopefully they knew how to fix the truck or at least help push it out of the way. Only there was something wrong with how they only looked at Sebastian's car.

Sebastian called up his voice assistant and was about to tell it to call Birch when the driver's side window was smashed. Sebastian was grabbed by two sets of hands as they tried to hold him still against his seat.

Sebastian was caught by surprise, but it only lasted a second. He fought to grab the wheel, but his hands were being held back. He tried to yell for the car to send an SOS, but tape was slapped over his mouth.

His nose flared as he fought the panic from his childhood. He wasn't a helpless child any more. He had to think. The passenger window was smashed. Sebastian fought against the hands holding him. He head-butted the one man who leaned through the window to try to get a better hold on him, but it was all for nothing when the man who came into the passenger seat shoved a needle in Sebastian's neck and everything went black.



Greer Parker laughed as she passed the empty dessert plates to the next person to collect them all at the head of the table. The dining room table in her grandparents' house had expanded over the generations. It had once been big enough to fit Marcy and Jake's six children, which included Greer's mother, their one and only daughter. They'd even managed to stuff in the spouses. But when her eldest brother, Ryan, had been born, they knew they were out of room.

Thus began the first addition to the table. They were now on folding table number four to accommodate all the cousins and their spouses and children. The table, with extensions, now ran the entire length of the farmhouse and her grandparents wouldn't have it any other way.

Tonight wasn't just the extended Davies family at dinner, either. Their parents' close friends, Will and Kenna Ashton, Dani and Mo Ali Rahman, and Ahmed and Bridget Mueez were there along with their children who were friends of Greer's and all the Davies cousins. In fact, Will and Kenna's daughter, Sienna, was married to Greer's brother Ryan. Their son, Carter, was married to Greer's cousin Reagan. Then Ahmed and Bridget's daughter, Abby, was married to Greer's

cousin Dylan. It was one big happy family where everyone had been welcomed and enveloped in love.

Tonight had been fun. It had been full of teasing, stories, laughter, and lots of not-so-sly references to those like her who dared to be single.

“I’m just saying, there are some players on the Lexington Thoroughbred team who would love to go out on a date with you,” Ryan’s wife, Sienna, said to Greer from down the table. Sienna was the pro football team’s sports psychologist as well as Greer’s sister-in-law.

“No way,” Jackson instantly said, shutting down the topic of Greer’s dating life. For once she didn’t mind her brother’s interference.

Ryan nodded in agreement. “Greer is too young to date.”

A leftover roll hit Ryan’s head and Greer laughed as Ryan looked around to see who did it. “Mom? What the heck was that for?” he asked of their mother, Paige.

“I agree with our son. She is too young to date,” her father, Cole, said with a shrug.

“Son, after all these years have you not learned anything from me?” Grandpa Jake groaned.

“Cole Parker, your little girl isn’t so little anymore. She just turned *thirty*, for crying out loud. I already had Ryan by that age! Don’t you dare deprive me of more grandchildren or I swear I will make that time you gave me a vacuum cleaner look like a cakewalk. Got it?” Greer’s mother threatened with a finger wagging in her father’s face and all.

The phone rang in the kitchen and everyone froze. “I didn’t know you still had a landline,” Greer’s Uncle Marshall said to his parents as he stood to go answer it.

“I don’t use it anymore, but I figured in case of emergencies it was good to have,” Grandma Marcy said with a shrug.

“Mom,” Uncle Marshall said, coming out of the kitchen with the phone stretched as far as it could on the long spiral cord. “The president is calling you again. Oh, sorry. It’s for Dylan, Abby, or Greer.”

Greer pulled out her phone and saw the series of missed calls, texts, and news alerts. It was a family tradition to mute their phones at dinner and apparently all hell had broken loose over the past ninety minutes.

Abby stood up and took the phone from Marshall. A second later she said okay and hung up. Greer was already prepared to be sent on a mission. Her go bag was in the SUV ready for the next adventure. Greer had been the first woman to lead an FBI Hostage Rescue Team and her family had high hopes of her becoming the next FBI director and in reality, she was at the top of a very short list to do just that. However, the more involved she got in the interview process, the more uncomfortable she grew with the politics of it all.

When Abby and Dylan had offered her a short-term contract working with them on the president’s black ops team, Greer had leaped at it. In fact, she loved it so much she extended it another couple of months.

“We need a secure link. Dylan, where’s our satellite phone?” Abby asked.

“Don’t worry about that,” Uncle Cy, a former spy, said as he and his son Porter stood and headed over to the television.

“Channel 1600, right?” Porter asked as he turned the television onto the channel.

“Yup, then enter your code,” Cy ordered as Porter entered a series of numbers on the remote.

“What’s this?” Uncle Cade asked as everyone crammed into the living room after removing the folding tables.

“Spy stuff,” Porter answered.

“Honey, you were a spy for all of two weeks,” his new wife, Willa, said with a roll of her eyes.

“It has its perks,” Porter said. “There you go.”

Greer looked at the television and there was President Stratton, looking completely distraught. “Sir, what happened?”

President Stratton’s head shot up to his computer. “I see we have everyone tonight. No wonder I couldn’t get a hold of you. Family dinner. We have a problem. A big problem.”

“What is it?” Dylan asked from where he stood between Greer and Abby.

The president looked around at the packed house and then ran a hand through his hair. “Screw it, you all have top-secret clearance. DARPA was bombed tonight. Someone stole a top-secret spy satellite and we don’t have any leads yet.”

“Casualties?” Greer asked.

“Most of the team working on the satellite. Dr. Erwin Hoggard and Sebastian are missing.”

“Sebastian Abel?” Greer asked, thinking of the arrogant thorn in her side. Sebastian funded their program, but he always treated her as if she didn’t know what she was doing. He constantly lectured her about taking too many risks. She shouldn’t run into danger like that. She shouldn’t be getting shot at. Blah, blah, blah. *Then* the arrogant ass had gone and kissed her. She was being stitched up after a completely

inconsequential stab wound from her last mission, and Sebastian had been ranting at her when he suddenly stopped and kissed her hard before just storming off. Damn him. She hadn't been able to stop thinking of the arrogant, best-kisser-ever jerk since then. "What was he doing at DARPA?" It felt like a punch to the gut at knowing Sebastian was taken. Just because he annoyed her didn't mean it didn't hit close to home. He was always so serious, so in charge . . . he seemed indestructible.

"Sebastian worked for the past year to help fix the satellite programming to get it to work. He was on his way there with the final bit of code to complete the project when someone kidnapped him. At least, I hope he's just kidnapped. We have video of Erwin Hoggard being dragged out of DARPA thirty seconds before the research facility where the satellite was being worked on exploded. I need your team to find them right now, go in, and rescue them," President Stratton ordered.

Greer was already nodding when Humphrey Orville, the president's chief of staff, came running in while shoving his round wire-rimmed glasses up his nose. "Hoggard is dead. They found his body in a hangar at a private airfield outside of town." Humphrey turned and looked with surprise at the screen filled with people. "Oh, hello all. Mrs. Davies, the pie you sent this week was your best yet."

"Thank you, dear. Birch hasn't said a word about his."

"Sorry, ma'am. It was so good Tate and I finished it in one sitting."

Greer's lips tilted up in a smile at the men fawning over her grandmother's apple pie even during a crisis. Neither would risk not getting one the next month. "So, we need to

locate Sebastian and rescue him. Let's go," Greer said, getting everyone back on track.

Dylan cleared his throat. "We'll help find him, then Greer and I can go rescue him. I think a small rescue would have a better chance here. I would think they would expect the entire US Army to rescue an asset like Sebastian. Slip in with one or two people and be out before they even know it is the way to go."

Greer looked at Dylan with a raised eyebrow. What was her cousin talking about? Not that she minded. It had been her job to go in and rescue people in hostage situations, but she always had a team and after leaving hostage rescue, every mission Greer had gone on Abby always went too.

"No," President Stratton said. "I want the whole team. You three go in and get him out."

"You got it, sir," Abby said with surety. It would be done.

"No," Dylan whispered back to his wife with just as much certainty. "I'll go with Greer and that's it," Dylan said to the president.

Greer cringed when she saw Abby's jaw tighten.

"My best friend is missing!" President Stratton yelled, drawing everyone's attention.

Dylan turned and stood at attention with his back straight and his hands clasped behind his back. "Sir, I request you put my wife on immediate desk duty."

"Aw, shit, son," Ahmed whispered. "You've been a good son-in-law until now. Know I'll be slightly sad when I help my daughter bury your body in the woods."

“What the hell is going on?” the president slammed his hands on his desk in irritation.

“Don’t do it,” Abby warned Dylan. “It’s fine, sir.”

“My wife is pregnant. She needs to be relieved of active duty immediately,” Dylan told the president. And that’s what he did. Dylan told the president. He wasn’t asking.

Greer sucked in a breath with surprise at the same time Ahmed’s roar mixed with Dylan’s mother’s joyous cry.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Dylan's mother, Tammy, shoved Greer out the way at the same time Ahmed began to stalk toward Dylan, calmly standing across the room from him. Tammy was the complete opposite of Dylan. She was a tiny sprite of a woman with short blonde hair and full of sweetness. She stood barely five feet tall, but that didn't stop her from launching herself through the air and onto Ahmed's back.

"Oh, sweeties," Tammy said through happy tears as she slid her forearm across Ahmed's throat, trying to get him into a headlock. "I am so happy for you both!"

"Tammy," Ahmed warned as he easily charged forward with her on his back. "I'm going to kill your son."

"Dad! Don't you dare!" Abby yelled, putting her hands on her hips and giving Ahmed a glare he'd be proud of.

Greer watched as Dylan stood his ground, but reinforcement was on the way. It wasn't the uncles. No, Greer's own father, Cole, and all his brothers-in-law were nodding their heads as if agreeing with Ahmed that it was perfectly natural to kill Dylan. Only Dylan's dad, Uncle Pierce, looked thrilled. Stupid men. Did they really believe

their daughters were all virgins and would remain so forever? Apparently so, judging by their reactions.

“Ahmed.” Bridget’s warning cut through the room like a knife even as Greer’s mother and all her aunts leapt between Dylan and Ahmed to form a protective wall.

“Enough of this nonsense!” Greer’s mother, Paige, yelled, surprising everyone in the room.

“We want grandbabies and we want them now,” Bridget added. “Do not mess this up for me, Ahmed, or so help me I’ll make you pay for it.”

Aunt Tammy had both of Ahmed’s ears in her hands as if they were reins and she tried to stay on his back. She was almost tossed over Ahmed’s shoulder at his sudden stop.

“That’s right,” Aunt Gemma said with a nod of her head. “We want lots of them and we’re sick and tired of this no-sex-with-our-daughters nonsense.”

“But,” Uncle Cy began to say but Gemma cut him off.

“Just *don’t*, Cyland. Go ahead and believe in the stork if you want. But I want more grandchildren. You hear me, Matt, Carter, and Willa?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the three in-laws said immediately.

“But,” Uncle Miles started to say, but Aunt Morgan cut him off.

“No, Miles. No buts. No harassment, no choking, no threatened castration. Nothing but unlimited offers to babysit.”

“It’s been decided,” Aunt Katelyn said next.

“What has?” her husband, Marshall, asked.

“Your wives are putting our collective feet down. You are to do nothing to prevent us from getting grandchildren or you’ll have to deal with us,” Aunt Annie said, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at the men.

Greer looked to where the uncles had Ahmed’s back. They didn’t look too worried and Greer shook her head. Bless their hearts. They were about to learn just how serious their wives were.

“Congratulations, Abby. You’re off active duty,” President Stratton said, cutting into the family fight. “And so are you, Dylan. I won’t put this baby’s father’s life in danger. Family changes everything.”

“I’ll help my sister,” Jackson said into the shocked silence. No one had expected Dylan to be taken off active duty too. “My hostage rescue team is here and ready.”

“I can’t have a whole team on this mission, but I’ll take you,” President Stratton said to her brother.

“May I request Talon Bainbridge and Lucas Sharpe? They’re two of my most trusted men and they’ve helped Keeneston plenty of times in the past on, um, delicate jobs,” Jackson asked.

“Do you trust them, Greer?” President Stratton asked her.

“I do,” she replied immediately.

President Stratton nodded. “Jackson, you and your team are now under Greer’s command. You do what she says when she says it. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now go find and rescue Sebastian. Do whatever it takes to bring him back alive.”

The video link went black and everyone stood quietly for a moment. The aunts were still in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder, while Tammy was still hanging on to Ahmed's back.

"Congratulations, you two," Greer said into the silence. "But we have work to do. We'll celebrate when I get home. Nash," she said to her cousin Sophie's husband, "you and Kale do your computer thing and see if you can find Sebastian. There has to be a digital trail somewhere. Jackson, get Talon and Lucas ready to go. Mo, can we borrow your plane when we have a location?"

"I'll have them ready it now," Mo said, taking out his phone.

"Greer," Jackson said, taking her attention away from issuing orders. "I have to ask. Is Sebastian even worth saving? He isn't a good man."

"It doesn't matter if he is or isn't," Greer said, not liking the anger she felt toward her brother for pointing out the exact thing she'd thought before. She'd deal with that strange reaction later. Freaking Sebastian and his freaking kiss. It messed everything up. "It's my job."

"But it's not all of our jobs. I volunteered not for Sebastian, but for you. I'm your brother and I refuse to let you go out there alone. If he's not worth it . . ." Jackson told her.

Greer put her hand on his arm and smiled up at him. "I won't let him die just because we don't get along." Well, at least their lips had gotten along really well. "Jackson," Abby said as she joined them with Dylan by her side. "Sebastian is a great man. Greer knows what to do. She needs to save him."

"I agree. He's a good friend. Greer knows what to do. Let her do her thing," Dylan added.

Jackson shook his head at Dylan. “How can you say that? He slept with your wife?”

Dylan’s eyes narrowed. “Not cool, Jackson. I know what happened before she and I were together. I slept with other women too. I also know there were no feelings involved, and he’s been nothing but supportive of our marriage. Can you say you’ve never slept with the same woman one of the rest of us slept with?”

Jackson blushed. “You know we’ve slept with the same people on occasion. It’s too small a town not to at some point.”

“Then how is this different?” Dylan asked.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m going to need details,” Abby said with a smirk that caused Greer to smile. She’d been thinking the exact same thing—who had slept with more than one Davies? But it also did the job of ending the conversation and turning it back onto the mission.

“We’ll help,” Greer’s oldest brother, Ryan, said. “I’ll get my FBI informants on it.”

“Come on, son, let’s get to work,” her dad, who was retired FBI, said as he and Ryan headed to the dining room table.

Nash and Kale ran out the door to head back to Mo’s Desert Sun Farm and the massive security center located there. Soon her grandmother’s house was a hive of activity.

“I’ll reach out to some assets and see if we can find out who is behind this,” Cy told her as he headed to the table to get to work too.

“I’ll do the same with the DEA,” Annie added.

Soon her entire family was working the phones. Everyone from her younger cousin Cassidy reaching out to friends she

had in foreign countries from her time as an interpreter, to the entire Rahmi royal family using their political power, to her cousin Parker talking to the US marshals, and then to her grandmother offering pies to anyone with information.

Three hours later the entire group had moved to Mo and Dani's farm. Since they were royalty of the small island nation of Rahmi, the main house on their farm was designated an embassy. They had state-of-the-art security resources and the ability to claim diplomatic immunity for the laws everyone was breaking trying to find Sebastian.

Greer stood in the back of the security building's large monitoring room, looking at the wall of large television screens hooked to the computers everyone was working on.

She tried to keep calm as her eyes scanned the data, the videos, and the flight plans flashing up on the screens. Abby stepped away from a computer her brother Kale was working on and joined her against the back wall. "We'll find him."

"I know," Greer said. "I just hope he's still alive when we do." Greer's gut clenched as she admitted her worse fear. After all, the only other hostage was already dead. Why would Sebastian still be alive?

"He won't crack easily. If they're after the code, we have time. He's strong, Greer. I wish you'd spent more time getting to know him. He's a good man, well, some of the time. You'd never find a more loyal friend than Sebastian. I hate not going with you. Please do whatever it takes to bring him back."

"I will," Greer promised Abby, wondering if she should mention the kiss they'd shared and deciding to put it on the back burner when Kale jumped up.

“I got something!” Kale called out and everyone whipped their heads to the mounted television screen connected to Kale’s computer.

Black and white video of masked men tossing an unconscious Sebastian onto the concrete came into view. “Where is this?” Greer asked, moving forward to get a closer look.

“The hangar that Dr. Erwin Hoggard was found in. It’s not uploaded to the cloud so I had to have the owner find it and send it to me. That’s why it took so long to get. Wait for it,” Kale said.

A moment later, a man who must be Dr. Hoggard was tossed to the floor, only he was awake as he pushed up to his knees and begged for his life. Greer didn’t need audio to know that was exactly what he was doing. Two men stood before him with a gun pressed to his head. Greer watched as the doctor shook his head, tears running down his face. His mouth moved as he spoke quickly and with jerky hands as if trying to explain something. Then he pointed to Sebastian. Erwin nodded over and over again as Greer assumed the masked men talked to him. Then Erwin’s eyes widened and he opened his mouth, but before he could say anything the man fired the gun. Erwin fell back, landing on the floor dead.

The man with the gun pointed the gun at Sebastian and Greer held her breath. However, he didn’t shoot. He used the gun to motion toward Sebastian. Two other men rushed into frame and picked Sebastian up. They propped him up between them and then rushed off screen.

“Where did they go?” Greer demanded.

“Here,” Kale said as his fingers flew over the keyboard.

The video changed to the exterior of the hangar as they shoved Sebastian into a helicopter.

“I’m running the tail number now,” Nabi, the head of Rahmi security, said as Greer watched the helicopter take off. “Dammit. It’s not coming up. It’s a fake number.”

“What about the transponder?” Nash asked.

“Working on it,” Cade said as his fingers flew. “Nothing. Radar at that time doesn’t match the location. They must be flying under radar with a dismantled transponder.”

“Give me a map with the range of that helicopter,” Greer ordered. A map with a circle appeared on one screen. “Mark all private airports. The hangar they left from is private. If they’re going to land, it might be at another private location.”

Greer saw all the dots light up the screen and her heart sank. The helicopter had a four-hundred-mile range. There had to be another way. “Okay, search all emergency calls. See if anyone is complaining about a low-flying helicopter.”

Greer tried not to pace as everyone went to work. She watched the clock and knew with each minute that passed the chance of saving Sebastian decreased. When hours passed, her stomach filled with dread.

“This is strange, listen,” Kale said as everyone went quiet.

“Coast Guard? This is cargo ship *Faulkner 712*. I have a low-flying helicopter that just buzzed us,” a deep voice said over the radio. “Are you running drills or something?”

“Negative, *Faulkner 712*,” the Coast Guard responded. “What’s your location?”

The captain rattled off his coordinates and Nabi entered them on the screen. “That’s off Cape Cod. What the hell were they doing up there?” Greer asked.

“Landing on a boat?” Dylan asked. “I’m calling cousin Ryker. You heard the name of that cargo ship. It’s one of his. Let’s see if his boats can tell us anything else.”

Greer nodded her agreement and Dylan walked into the conference room to call their cousin who ran a shipping company near Charleston, South Carolina. Dylan began to pace and then he rushed back out. “They were turning inland,” Dylan called out.

“Boston. Search private jets leaving within an hour of that Coast Guard call in case they carried on with their travels. Also, pull all video to see if we can find out what happened when that helicopter landed,” Greer ordered as she felt hope flare. They had a lead and they were going to grab it with both hands.

“Okay, we got several planes taking off in that time,” Kale told her as they all came up on the screen.

“On it,” Nash said as they got to work tracking them down.

“I’ll work on the helicopter,” Nabi said as his head went down to the computer.

Greer waited as they put the destinations up on the board along with who owned the planes and who was on the flight log. London, Paris, Iceland, and the Bahamas were quickly filled in. That left two flights that were unaccounted for.

“Who owns these?” Greer asked, pointing at the two planes. “And where are they going?”

“The first one is going to Grand Cayman. The second is going to Newfoundland. Both are listed as corporate, not

private ownership. I'm searching through the shell corporations for the Grand Cayman one now, but it's taking a bit," Kale answered.

"I'll get the Newfoundland one," Uncle Cade said, getting to work.

Long minutes passed, but Greer couldn't wait. She picked up her phone and made a call.

"Dude, I heard about Sebastian. We've been helping Kale just like you asked. What can Roxie and I do?"

"Alex, I need satellite imaging of two planes. I want to see exactly where they are and who gets off of them," Greer told the computer genius who worked with her on the black ops team.

"Dude," he said absently as Greer heard his fingers already flying.

"Tell Abby and Dylan we're so happy for them," Alex's wife, computer hacker extraordinaire Roxie, said. "I got the plane in Grand Cayman. It's not there yet. Here it is."

A screen on the wall went black and then it flashed back up with a live satellite feed of the plane in the air.

"Hey, who did that?" Nabi asked as his head shot up.

"I did," Greer answered absently. "Thanks, Roxie. We won't know anything until it lands. Keep an eye on it."

"Dude, the plane in Newfoundland just landed," Alex said into the phone. A second later another screen went black and then filled with a live satellite feed of a private jet taxiing on the runway.

"Okay, seriously, who is doing that?" Nabi asked again. "And how did you get a live satellite feed and break into our

system?”

Greer ignored him as the plane taxied to the private jet area of the airport. “Looks like they’re meeting some people. Zoom in on them.”

Alex did as she said and even though he grumbled, Nabi grabbed imaging and began running it through his system.

“Duuuude,” Alex said over the phone. “The guy in the middle is Dr. Nils Olsen, who was kidnapped yesterday from this town I can’t pronounce.”

“Who is Dr. Nils Olsen and where the hell is this town?” Greer asked, losing patience.

“Seriously!” Nabi said, standing up to stare her down. “Who are you talking to and how do they have that information before . . . oh, it’s that *Dude* guy, isn’t it?”

“Put me on speaker. Dude, I got this.” Greer put Alex on speaker and let him explain. “Dr. Nils Olsen is an astrophysicist. He works at a satellite station in northern Norway. He was kidnapped on the drive back to his house after his shift. He’s not married, so that’s why it took a while to know he was kidnapped. They thought he had crashed, but then they found his car empty with a bunch of footprints in the snow that led to tire marks from a second car.”

Greer watched as the door to the plane opened and the steps descended. Dr. Olsen was dragged forward even as he fought. He was no competition for the two men holding him.

Suddenly a figure appeared in the door and was yanked back, but Greer knew the identity of the figure in that split second. He’d tried to escape.

“Dude!” Alex yelled.

“He’s alive,” Greer gasped in relief.

Greer's heart began to beat wildly as she watched the doctor being shoved up the stairs of the plane. "Jackson! Let's go. We're flying to Newfoundland." Jackson, Talon, and Lucas jumped up from where they'd been seated and hefted their gear onto their backs.

"We'll need cold weather gear," Lucas said. He'd know. He was from northern Alaska. "Well, I won't need it, but you two will."

"You'll have it by the time you get to the airport in Lexington," Dylan told them as he was already picking up his phone to make a call.

"Keep tracking that plane and tell me exactly where it goes," Greer ordered as she hurried from the building.

"Greer."

She turned to face her father who had followed her outside. "Yeah, Dad?"

"Be careful." Her father kissed her cheek as her mother came up to join her.

"Remember, the cold will alter your reaction time when shooting and air will be thinner up there. You'll need to

calculate that into your shots,” her mother said before kissing her too. “I love you, Greer. You four protect each other.”

Her mother and father kissed Jackson and then they were finally off. Greer’s blood strummed with the need to hunt them down and strangely, she had a very strong desire to protect Sebastian. Not just to rescue him, but to keep him safe from harm.

“They’ve taken off and are heading north. Newfoundland might not be our final stop,” Greer told her team the update she’d gotten from Alex as they got out of the SUV to board the private jet at the Lexington airport.

A man stepped forward with three huge bags. “Dylan said you needed arctic gear. Here you go.”

Lucas and Talon grabbed the bags as Greer and Jackson took the weapons from the SUV. One look at the guns and the man bolted for his truck.

“Eat and drink as much as possible when you’re not sleeping,” Greer told her team as the plane prepared to take off. “We don’t know how long we have or what the conditions will be when and where we land. We need to take this opportunity to rest up as much as possible.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Lucas said with a big grin. He was a sweet guy. He hid his abilities under a big goofy grin, but there was no one she’d rather be there with than this team. “I sure hope I get to see a polar bear. I’ve been missing my Bertha something fierce.”

Bertha was a polar bear near his hometown. Greer had seen more pictures of them together than she thought was

right. Some pictures looked as if Bertha was trying to eat him. In others she was letting him rub her tummy.

“You know, there’s a Bertha in Shadows Landing. She’s this big old alligator. I bet she could take your Bertha,” Jackson said with a smirk. Talon rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“No one can beat my Bertha! Take that back right now,” Lucas said before launching into a tirade about why his Bertha was better than the alligator.

Greer closed her eyes to the debate and her mind went to the last time she’d seen Sebastian. He’d been yelling at her for putting herself at risk after she got a little scrape. Okay, it was a stab wound, not a scrape, and set Sebastian off on a tirade questioning her ability and her intelligence. She’d yelled at him and called him a stuffy suit and asked what he knew about fighting for anything. Then he’d kissed her, glared at her, and stormed out.

She knew she’d made him mad but after he stormed out, Greer realized something about herself. Right now she was struggling with a real love-hate relationship with Sebastian Abel. She just hoped she could get to him in time to figure out if it was more love or more hate.

Greer had ordered her team to rest, but knew she’d never be able to fall asleep. Instead she’d texted with Alex, Abby, and Dylan. They were closing in on landing in Newfoundland when the call she’d been waiting for came through.

“They’ve landed. Pond’s Inlet, Nunavut, Canada,” Abby told her. “It’s Inuit land that’s across Baffin Bay to Greenland.”

Greer pulled up imaging and looked at the tiny airport. “We’ll be spotted the second we land.”

“It’s Dylan,” Dylan said as if Greer couldn’t figure it out. “There’s a cargo plane about to leave Newfoundland for Thule Air Base in Greenland. I think you should take it while we track exactly where they take Sebastian. Then you can take a helicopter to rescue him.”

“Agreed. Landing a plane in Pond’s Inlet will be a big flashing light drawing attention to us. Contact Thule and let them know we’re coming,” Greer said before hanging up and waking her team.

Greer opened the bags and tossed out the thick down jackets the man had delivered. There were also pants, goggles, hats, gloves, snow boots, and more. “Here you go, Lucas,” she said, handing him the jacket as the plane touched down.

“Thanks, but I don’t need it.”

“You’re in a T-shirt,” Greer said, feeling silly for pointing out the obvious.

“Yeah,” he smiled. The door to the plane opened and Lucas bounded down the stairs as she, Talon, and Jackson gathered all their supplies.

“Brrr,” Talon, who had been born in Australia said as he shivered.

“This is fantastic!” Lucas called out from the bottom of the stairs as he spun around in the snow with his arms outstretched.

An Air Force pilot stood nearby looking at Lucas with confusion. “Are you all the people I’m transporting to Thule?”

“Yes,” was all Greer said. He waited to get more information, but Greer didn’t supply it.

“Okay, then. We’re leaving now. Let’s go.”

The pilot turned on his heel and left them to follow. She didn’t doubt that he’d seen the load of weapons as they followed behind him. In a couple of hours, they’d be in Greenland and hopefully they’d have an idea of where Sebastian was. There was a need building in her to get to him as quickly as possible.

Sebastian’s head and arms were killing him. His head pounded as he came back into consciousness. The first thing he realized was he was freezing cold. The second was his neck was throbbing where he’d been stabbed multiple times with needles. The third was that he was well and truly bound, strung up like a side of beef with his arms stretched painfully up and over his head.

Sebastian’s eyes fluttered open and he found himself in a twenty by twenty foot industrial-looking room. The floor was concrete and two stories above him was a warehouse-looking ceiling. There was a mezzanine of industrial steel rails and metal mesh walkways halfway up the exterior walls. Several rooms were off the mezzanine walkway, but they appeared empty.

Sebastian looked around the room he was in and figured it was a cafeteria. Long tables were stacked up against one side of the wall and what looked like a kitchen was situated off the other side.

He shivered and looked up and down at his strung-up body. His hands were bound and a hook suspended from the

ceiling kept him stretched out. His feet were bare and cold against the concrete. His chest was bared to the cold air as well. Sebastian was wracked with another shiver as he struggled against his restraints.

“Mr. Abel, I see you’re awake.”

“Who are you?” Sebastian didn’t need to know why he was here. He guessed it had to do with the code he had in his head.

“Who I am is not important. It’s what I want that is important.”

Sebastian looked the man over. He appeared to be in his late forties, was around five feet nine inches tall, and didn’t appear to be a killer. However, Sebastian knew better than anyone that looks could be deceiving.

“Let me guess, a general in the Chinese army?” Sebastian asked, but only got a smile in return. The man was dressed in a thick fleece and Sebastian desperately wanted it.

“As I was saying, you have something I need.”

“I hear that a lot,” Sebastian said in a neutral tone.

The man gave a slight nod of his head and someone Sebastian hadn’t seen behind him whipped his back with something that felt like a metal cable. Sebastian cursed as his body swung on the hook. Pain unlike anything he’d ever felt before erupted across his back. Then a second man whipped him in tandem so that there was no break between the painful blows.

“Mr. Abel. We’re going to become very intimately connected if you keep this up. The sooner you tell me what I want, the sooner we take you down.”

Sebastian knew better. He knew he wasn't leaving this place alive. "I hate to disappoint you, but you're not my type. I'm flattered by your offer, though." Sebastian sounded as if he was giving a would-be date a gentle brush-off as the next stroke of the wire whip connected.

"The code to the satellite, Mr. Abel."

"Most dates like a little foreplay before becoming intimate," Sebastian said with mock disappointment.

The man nodded to the torturers behind Sebastian, so Sebastian took his mind elsewhere. To Greer. To her easy smile and the way she laughed with wild abandon. For as much as she infuriated him, the only thing he knew to do was to kiss her. And what a kiss it had been. It had been short, hard, and never to be repeated. If he had thought it would get her out of his system, nothing was farther from the truth.

Greer, Jackson, Talon, and Lucas looked over the night-vision satellite feed Alex was streaming them. “What is that?” Greer asked from the makeshift work area in the back of the cargo plane at two in the morning. She squinted at the image on the north side of the island across from Pond’s Inlet. The group had used snowmobiles to cross the frozen Eclipse Sound from the airport to Bylot Island. They continued to use snowmobiles to travel on the thick ice around the eastern point of the island and then turned north until they reached their destination about fifty miles away.

“It’s an abandoned research facility. Bylot Island is uninhabited, but ten years ago the Canadian government used this facility to monitor the weather. They abandoned it when Norway took over satellite tracking for a variety of countries at their northern facility,” Alex answered. “But, dudes, it’s not abandoned anymore. See those things that look like white snowballs?”

“Yeah,” Greer said at the rows of five-by-five white balls.

“Dudes! Those are antennas for sending and relaying satellite data and most of them are new.”

“So they did take Sebastian for whatever code he was working on for DARPA. How many men?” Greer asked as

different images flashed around.

“Looks like only a couple patrolling the ground,” Alex answered. “Lots of polar bears, though.”

“I’m so happy I could cry,” Lucas said with a big smile.

“Dude,” Alex said as if Lucas were nuts. “I did count eight men with Sebastian and Dr. Olsen. I’m sure there’s probably more inside.”

“What’s that?” Greer asked, her body suddenly tight. The door opened and out came two men dragging something large behind them with a man who stood by the door and watched. Whatever they were dragging was fighting like a tuna caught on a fishing line.

“Dude,” the fear in Alex’s voice confirmed her worse suspicion. “It’s eighteen below zero right now.”

Greer stared in horror as they watched a man throw something on Sebastian.

“Water,” Jackson said tightly. “It’s a form of torture in cold weather like this. He won’t have long if they don’t get him warmed up.”

Greer couldn’t stand it anymore. She turned and ran toward the cockpit. She startled the pilots when she burst into the cockpit. “Where are we?”

“Over Baffin Bay, ma’am,” the pilot responded.

“How close are we to Bylot Island?” Greer demanded.

“Bylot? We’re not going in that direction.”

Greer took a deep breath to calm herself. “If you were to immediately head to Bylot Island, how long would it take you to get there?”

The pilot and co-pilots looked at each other as if deciding to answer or not. “Twenty minutes,” the pilot finally answered.

“Head that way. Now!” Greer ordered.

“Sorry, ma’am, but we don’t have approval to deviate.” The pilot practically rolled his eyes and Greer saw red.

“Did it never occur to you that we must be pretty important for you to be ordered to pick us up?” Greer asked sweetly.

“Just some rich researchers,” the pilot said with a shrug. “Always acting like we’re your personal staff.”

Greer pulled her satellite phone out and it was answered on the first ring. “I need you to tell the plane to veer off course and drop us over Bylot Island.”

“Look, ma’am, no rich donor is going—” the pilot began to say before his radio interrupted.

“This is Thule Tower, the president is on the line. Go ahead, sir.”

“This is President Stratton.” Birch sounded pissed over the radio and Greer only got a little pleasure seeing the pilot’s shocked look. “Take that woman wherever she wants to go. While anyone of that group is on your plane, it’s theirs and they’re your senior commanders. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” he snapped back and the radio went dead, but Birch came back onto her phone.

“Tell me everything,” Birch ordered as she left the cockpit after feeling the plane turn toward Bylot.

“I’m going to jump down. He doesn’t have much time. Not enough for us to land in Thule and get a helicopter to take us there. We’ll rescue and then have the helicopter extract us,”

Greer told him as she grabbed her cold weather gear and started to pull it on.

“Be safe, Greer. Let me know the second you have him and you’re safe.”

Greer hung up with the president and joined the men who looked surprised to see her dressed in cold weather gear. “Three of us are HALO jumping. Talon, I want you to go on to Thule and organize our evac. This is what we’re going to do.” Greer laid out the plan for the military style high-altitude, low-parachute open jump as the guys dressed, but that didn’t stop Jackson from shaking his head.

“I’m staying with you at all times,” Jackson argued.

“No. I need you with Lucas. My plan is solid. Don’t question it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lucas said. “Is it a capture or kill situation?”

“It’s a kill and destroy situation.”

“My favorite kind. Polar bears and explosives. Thank you so much for bringing me.” Lucas had a big grin on his face as he hooked up his pressurized jumping equipment.

“I could carry Sebastian out. If he’s injured, you won’t be able to do it,” Jackson told her.

“I need you to have my back. If it changes on the ground, I’ll call you in. We have our plan *A*, plan *B*, and even plan *C*. We’ll know which direction we go when we get boots on the ground. We HALO jump in ten minutes,” she said of the high-altitude, low-opening jump.



The shaking that wracked Sebastian's body was so violent it felt as if his teeth would go through his jaw and into his brain. They'd dragged him outside and tossed cold water on him. He was currently lying in the snow, half dressed, and feeling every muscle in his body seize.

"Bring him inside," the leader snapped from the door.

Sebastian didn't know how long he was outside, probably only a minute, but he was sure he was hypothermic. He didn't fight them as they dragged him back inside the cold building. It was warmer in there than outside. He'd seen others walking by in regular clothes, so Sebastian knew there was heat someplace in this building. The better question was where he even was. Everything was so foreign to him, but right now all he could think about was being warm again.

"What's the code to the satellite program you developed?" the leader asked after they got Sebastian hanging on the hook again.

"You have to give me a cup of something hot before I tell you," Sebastian mumbled. It was getting hard to focus, but he had to keep his mind working.

"Tell us and I will. You'll get a nice warm room and clothes if you tell us."

Sebastian laughed. "I'll get a nice warm bullet to the head, you mean."

"Okay then," the leader said with a menacing smirk. "We'll leave you alive and just kill everyone you care about."

Sebastian laughed again as he bounced about on his toes. Anything to keep his body moving so it could warm up a little. There was no one in his life besides Birch who cared about him. Good luck with hurting him that way.

“He’s getting delusional,” one of the men doling out the torture said and for the first time Sebastian got a clue to who they were. He’d spoken in Chinese. One of the many languages Sebastian spoke to make sure he had a leg up when it came to business negotiations. He was always amazed how freely people talked as if Americans didn’t understand them. He’d learned German, French, Chinese, and Japanese and was fluent in all of them. Not a single soul in the world knew he spoke them for this exact reason. He could listen to their negotiations.

“Whee,” Sebastian said as if he were a kid swinging on a swing. Only this time he was swinging on the hook.

“Do a check with the crew and call me when he’s able to be questioned again. I’m going to check on the other hostages,” the leader said in Chinese before surprising Sebastian with a hard punch to the gut. “I’ll hit harder when I come back unless you’re ready to talk. Then I’ll start taking your fingers. Got it?”

“Aye, aye, captain.” Shoot, Sebastian really was getting delusional, but at least he found himself alone at last.

Sebastian jumped up and down and ran in place while no one was around. His vision began to get a little dark, but then he smiled faintly as Greer came to mind. She was on the dance floor with the lights glowing around her. He’d singled her out at the last wedding because he’d wanted to ask her about her cousin, Ryker Faulkner, or at least, that was the excuse he’d come up with. Sebastian was ready to sign a deal with Ryker but wouldn’t do it without Greer’s say-so. She was a good judge of character and if she trusted Ryker, he would too.

He’d waited for her to stop dancing and then approached her to ask about Ryker. It was as if he were still there. His

mind had disassociated from his frozen body to such a degree that he could smell her. The soft, fresh smell of her hair danced around him as if she were there.

“Greer,” he murmured on a sigh as his eyes slid shut.

The ramp to the cargo plane lowered and the frigid night air rushed onto the jumping platform. Their gear weighed them down, but it wasn't anything she wasn't used to carrying. First-aid emergency gear if they got stuck in the weather, protein drinks to keep up energy and hydration, and then weapons. Lots and lots of weapons.

Geer peered out through the plastic visor of the headgear she wore as she thumped her team on their heads to let them know to get ready. The three of them stepped forward and looked out into the dark night. They were thirty thousand feet up in the air. A storm was moving in below them so she saw nothing below but darkness and clouds. However, above them the Northern Lights lit up the sky. It was beautiful and heartbreaking at the same time. She took one last look at one of nature's wonders and jumped.

The air grabbed her and ripped her away from the plane as they went into freefall. HALO jumping was dangerous. If your pressurized gear failed, you would be unconscious in no time at all. Not only did they jump from high altitudes, they also didn't release their parachutes until they were close to the ground.

Greer kept an eye on her altitude and at 800 feet she pulled her chute. Her body jerked as the cords snapped taut and the chute filled with air. The perpetual night and the impending storm kept visibility low. It was a real advantage for them but it was also nerve-racking since they were jumping blind.

It didn't take long to float the 800 feet to the snow-covered ground. Greer softened her knees, hit the snow, and rolled to a stop. She unhooked her parachute and looked through the night-vision goggles.

Jackson and Lucas were unhooking their chutes as she walked toward them. She looked at her GPS and nodded. "We're three-quarters of a mile out. I'll take the west, you take the east."

Greer looked up and froze. "Oh my God."

"Come to papa!" Lucas called out to the giant polar bear sauntering toward them. It reared up onto two feet as if to challenge Lucas when he wrapped his arms around the bear's middle. Greer didn't know who was more surprised: she and Jackson or the polar bear.

The bear stood still, staring down at Lucas, and Greer was sure the creature was about to eat her team member. Then Lucas began to scratch the bear's chest and the bear groaned. Actually groaned and fell backward into the snow, belly up.

"Honest to God, I really thought Bertha was stuffed. I've been putting off Lucas's psych eval, thinking he was delusional and I didn't want him kicked out of the FBI. But he really is the polar bear whisperer," Jackson said in amazement as they stared at Lucas, now on his knees scratching the animal's tummy.

“Okay, Lucas. You can play with the bears after we rescue Sebastian,” Greer called out.

“Aw, okay. See you later, big guy.”

Greer shook her head to get her mind back on task. “Let’s move out.”

Walking in snow was not like strolling down your neighborhood street. Even with snow gear. Greer was breathing heavily by the time the lights from the research facility came into view.

“I have the target in sight. Two hundred yards out and approaching from seven o’clock,” she said into her comms.

“Target in sight. Fifty yards from the first antenna row. Approaching from four o’clock,” Jackson responded. “Setting explosives on the antennas as we move forward.”

“Take out any guards patrolling *silently*,” Greer ordered as she moved closer to the building. She screwed a silencer onto her pistol and moved forward stealthily, counting on her white gear to blend into the snow.

When she was close to the building, a patrol guard stepped out to smoke a cigarette. Greer dropped to the ground and waited. He lit up and then stepped from the light into the darkness to begin his patrol. Greer kept her breath slow and steady as he approached her and then walked right past her. She noticed the large rifle in his hand as he walked by, and that answered the question if this was an actual research facility. She aimed and fired. The man fell to the snow without a sound and Greer relieved him of both his weapon and access card before sprinting to the door.

“Entering the building now,” she whispered into her comms as she approached the door. She placed the card on the reader and the lock slid on the thick door.

Greer scanned the area and saw a hallway that went to the right and to the left. In front of her were two more large double doors. Greer went to the left first. There were no doors on the right, but a solid wall separated the hall from whatever was behind the double doors she’d first seen. Several lab rooms lined the hall. Most had the lights off and were used for storage, but at the end of the hall was a wall of windows and the inside was filled with people. Soldiers with guns lined the walls and protected the door.

Greer ducked into one of the darkened storage rooms and held her breath when two soldiers came out of the main room. Greer slid behind large boxes and prepared to fight her way out as silently as possible, if need be. The light flicked on and the men grabbed two large boxes and headed out again.

Greer waited until the sounds of their footfalls were gone before pulling out her scope that doubled as a camera with a live feed. “Alex,” Greer whispered as she turned the scope on and looked down the hall. “What am I seeing here?”

Greer saw Dr. Olsen working on something large with solar panels. “I think it’s part of a satellite. I’m running facial recognition on everyone I can see.”

“I don’t see Sebastian,” Greer whispered.

“I don’t either. But I see Olsen. Dude, the woman next to him just got a hit. She’s a French aerospace engineer who is also listed as missing. The man next to her is a British aerospace engineer, also missing,” Alex told her.

“Jackson,” Greer whispered into her comms. “Did you hear?”

“Copy. What’s the defense like?”

“At least thirty soldiers in that room. No exit that I can see except for the door I entered. No windows in the lab and only one door in and out,” Greer reported. “No sign of Sebastian in that room.”

“Do we blow it?” Lucas asked.

Greer paused as she heard raised voices coming from the other side of the building. She shrank back into the darkness and waited as two guards dragged a woman toward the lab. She was fighting and struggling against them. They reached the door of the room Greer was hiding behind and one soldier slammed the butt of the rifle into the young woman’s stomach. She yelled at the soldiers and Greer recognized some Russian curse words she’d learned. She definitely didn’t fit the older engineer look of the other hostages. This woman was maybe twenty-five, had punk rock hair, and several piercings hanging from her ears. She sucked in a breath and coughed as they dragged her toward the large lab.

“Alex, do you have an ID on her?” Greer asked.

“Dude,” he said in a way that told her he didn’t know who she was and was irritated that he didn’t.

“Lucas, hold on to the explosives for now. I’m planting some inside. Talon, fill in the president while I try to locate Sebastian,” Greer instructed.

Greer waited until the hall was clear, set her own explosives, and darted back toward the front door. She passed the double doors and headed to the other end of the facility

where she found bedrooms and a living area before running into a flight of metal stairs.

Greer crept up to them as some of the soldiers left their rooms to walk patrol or hang out in the common room. She cringed as the metal groaned as she stepped on one of the stairs. She saw the shadow of a man approach before stopping and knew she'd been heard. Greer looked out at the open mezzanine and took a chance. Silently, she sprinted the rest of the way up and pressed herself to the wall to the right side of the stairs. She heard the soldier approach and each of his footfalls seemed to echo with every stair he climbed.

Greer slid her tactical knife from its sheath, pressed herself against the wall and waited. The rifle came into view first, but Greer continued to hold still. Her eyes were locked on the rifle as the man's foot came into view as he climbed the last stair. When he stopped a few steps from the stairs, Greer made her move. From the shadows, she slid in behind him and slit his throat.

Her arms darted out to catch him, then dragged him out of sight and slowly lowered him to the ground. Now that the threat was past, she looked around over the mezzanine.

Her eyes scanned the open loft-like walkway to the mezzanine. Down the side she was in, around the back, and then the other side. No one was moving and there were no lights on.

Greer crept forward trying to stay in the shadows the best she could and looked over the metal railing. "Shit," she exhaled as fear shot through her body. The sight of Sebastian hanging bruised, bloody, and half frozen almost overrode all of her training. She wanted to get to him *now*, danger be damned, and destroy every person here for hurting him.

“What is it?” Jackson asked, worry clear in his voice.

“Package in sight,” she whispered back as she scanned the area for hostiles. Instead she saw the double doors and cursed internally. If she’d just gone through them, she’d have Sebastian already. Now she was stuck up here and the only way back down was through the soldiers’ living area.

“Condition?” Jackson asked.

“Damaged,” Greer answered as she looked for another way down.

“Dude,” Alex sounded as if he were holding back tears.

Greer looked down to where Sebastian hung, his arms shackled up above his head. The hook. She followed the cable up to the ceiling and saw that it was attached to a metal arm that reached out from the end of the hallway.

“We’ve got an issue,” Talon’s voice said, coming over the comms. “That arctic storm is moving in fast. We won’t be able to get the helicopter to you for eight hours.”

Greer would have cursed, but she was too worried about Sebastian. “Roger that. We’ll rally at extraction in eight hours. Set your watches.”

“Done,” Jackson and Lucas said.

“The president has ordered you to get Sebastian, do as much damage as possible without hurting the hostages, and escape. If you can get them, then do so. But Sebastian is the priority,” Talon said.

“I’m setting internal explosives to damage as much as possible. Lucas, Jackson, the main laboratory is on the west wall. Wait until external detonation to draw soldiers out back. Then blow the wall and see if you can rescue the hostages and

or destroy their work,” Greer ordered. “Meet at the extraction site afterward.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lucas answered with a scary level of eagerness.

“I’m going in for the package,” Greer whispered.

She kept to the shadows as much as possible as she walked to the end of the hallway. Greer scanned the area and saw it was clear. She climbed onto the railing, reached up and grabbed the metal beam and pulled herself up so she straddled the beam. The I-beam ran the length of the room, a metal cable ran on the underside that allowed the hook to move from one side to the other unless locked. Greer spotted the controls on the first floor and knew her only option was to cross the beam, slide down the cable, and cut the rope holding Sebastian to the hook.

Greer swung her feet up behind her so she was on her hands and knees and began to crawl forward as quickly as possible. It was at least twenty feet to the floor, but the height didn’t bother her. The fact that Sebastian didn’t move the entire time was what bothered her the most.

She kept her eyes on the hook and when she reached its location she paused on the beam. After another scan, she bent over the side of the I-beam and grabbed hold of the cable with her hands. She inched herself down using her booted foot to anchor her to the beam. When she was stretched out, she wrapped one leg around the cable and then the other to slowly slide down headfirst.

Sebastian was dreaming. He knew he was. He was dancing with Greer under soft lights on a beach. A shiver so violent it made him groan wracked his body. Sebastian was afraid he'd wake up back in hell since Greer and the beach faded from his mind.

He let his head hang back and when he opened his eyes, Sebastian saw Greer's face once again. The beach was gone. This time it was in this frozen torture room, but at least she hadn't left him. He could dream on and take himself away from the reality of his slow death.

“Greer,” he said with a soft smile.

“Package is alive,” he heard her say.

“Of course it is with the way you were grinding against me while we danced. Too bad we're here now, though,” Sebastian said. “But I can still get it up for you even after being tortured.”

Her silver-green eyes looked momentarily shocked and then she was reaching for him. Only it wasn't to kiss him again like he'd wished. It was to kill him.

Sebastian looked at the large, blood smeared knife that Greer pulled out and gave a little snort. “I always figured

you'd either love me or kill me. My money was always on killing me.”

Greer smiled and the knife sliced through the air. Sebastian closed his eyes and hoped to redirect his mind back to the beach. Instead of the beach, he found himself falling. Pain shot through his legs as they were suddenly asked to hold all of his weight instead of the partial weight from hanging on the hook. Sebastian's eyes shot open as his knees buckled. Holy hell, this wasn't a dream. Greer was really here.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Sebastian hissed as Greer put her knife back into its sheath, grabbed the cord with both hands, and then gracefully dropped her feet as if she were a gymnast dismounting from a handstand on the balance beam.

“I'm rescuing you, not killing you. Duh. As if you'd even see me coming if I wanted to kill you.” Greer was moving to the door before slowly pushing it open as Sebastian tried to make his hypothermic mind focus.

“Well, stop it. You're going to get yourself killed. Why didn't they send Dylan?”

Sebastian would have realized he stepped in it by the slow turn and glare Greer gave him, but he was too out of it to notice little things like that.

“Are you *seriously* questioning my abilities right now?” Greer asked, plastering herself to the wall as she pulled out a gun with a silencer on it.

“No. I never question your ability. I question the intelligence of whoever allowed you to come here alone and put yourself in danger.”

Greer rolled her eyes at him. Every fiber of him wanted to wrap her up and keep her safe, then spank her for being so stubborn. He couldn't believe she came here alone like this. She was in danger and he had to protect her.

“Oh shut up, Bash. Put your hands up in the air like you're still hanging on the hook. Do it now,” she snapped.

Sebastian struggled to stand up. His legs cramped and his muscles shook with cold. “Oh, the things I'm going to do to you when I get you out of here,” he hissed at her even as he went to grab the hook.

The door opened and one of his torturers came back in carrying a cattle prod. “Good, you're awake. We can resume. The code for the satellite. Now.” He pressed a button and the end of the cattle prod sparked with electricity.

Greer walked right up behind him and in one quick motion shoved the gun to the back of his head. “Hello. Would you be so kind as to drop your cattle prod?”

“Just shoot him,” Sebastian growled as he dropped the act of still being tied up.

“Questioning my ability again, Bash?” she asked sweetly.

No, he wasn't. He just saw the way the man was already looking for a weakness. Sebastian saw it but couldn't even open his mouth to warn Greer, it happened so fast. The man dropped and spun, kicking his leg out to knock her down. Only Greer didn't go down. She gracefully jumped, aimed, and shot him in the head before her feet landed back on the ground.

“I couldn't shoot him when you were in front of him or the bullet could have hit you. I could have slit his throat like I did to the man upstairs, but I didn't want his coat to get dirty. Now

you have something to wear in the freezing arctic storm we're about to go out in. Still questioning me, Bash?"

Sebastian bent down and rolled the man over. He undressed him as quickly as possible, grabbing the clothes even though they were way too small. They were better than nothing.

"I've never questioned your ability," he growled again. "I told you, it's the intelligence of everyone who keeps sending you into danger," Sebastian grumbled as he tugged on the layers of shirts, fleeces, and a jacket.

He tried to get the shoes on, but there was no way the boots were going to fit. He stood up and was looking around for his shoes when Greer snorted with concealed laughter. "What?"

"Nice crop tops. Very sexy."

Sebastian looked down. The shirts were stretched like they were painted on him and stopped a good six inches from his pants. "I'm so glad you're amused. The shoes are too small."

"There's another guy outside. We'll see what else we can find. I just need to get you out of here now." Greer pressed her ear and spoke. "I have the package. We're exiting the front. Get ready to blow the antennas on my mark."

Sebastian tried to rush forward only to have his legs give out. "Shit," he cursed as he hit the ground hard. The shirts felt good, but his body temperature was too far low for it to be immediately cured by a couple of layers of clothes.

Greer hurried over to him and bent down. "I got you. Put your arm around me."

"Give me the cattle prod," Sebastian told her as he worked to get his legs under him.

Greer didn't question him. Instead she turned back to the man on the ground, picked it up and ran back to him. "Here."

Sebastian used the prod like a cane in his left hand and with his right arm over Greer's shoulder, she pressed up to full height as he pushed off the prod. Together they worked to get him standing.

"Ready?" she asked him.

"Yeah, let's do this."

Sebastian was ashamed to admit how much weight he was putting on Greer, but she didn't collapse under it. Instead, she maneuvered him through the double doors and straight out the front door.

The cold sliced into him and immediately sent his body into almost debilitating tremors. His feet were already numb so the fact he was walking barefoot on the snow didn't even register.

He clenched his jaw to prevent his teeth from cracking as she basically hauled him off to the side of the facility. "Where the hell are we?"

"Nunavut. Bylot Island in northern Canada right across the bay from Greenland. Come on, there's the guy I took down."

Sebastian stumbled to a stop and dropped to the ground. He worked on getting the dead man's boots off while Greer grabbed the man's gloves and facemask. Sebastian shook so hard it took a while to get the boots and socks off and then it was a struggle to get them onto his feet while Greer took the man's jacket and insulated snow pants. As they worked, she told him how they ended up here.

"Erwin is dead?"

“Yeah, and I think they have the satellite you were working on. There are several scientists here who have been kidnapped from around the world. We’re going to try to destroy the satellite, but first you and I need to get out of here.”

“The satellite doesn’t matter. It’s okay, but without my code they’ll never get it to work. Erwin insisted on using his design and it’s subpar,” Sebastian grunted as he struggled to stand up to wiggle on the too-small pants that he had to leave unbuttoned and unzipped only halfway up his hips before he worked at shoving his feet into the boots. His toes were completely cramped up, but it was better than nothing. The thick socks at least felt good and the gloves and facemask were the best things he’d ever felt besides Greer’s lips.

“Alex, Sebastian can’t walk. Where are the snowmobiles?” Greer asked into her comms. Then she nodded and turned to Sebastian to tell him what Alex had said. “No good. They’re in the garage attached to the backside of the building with tons of people around, but there’s someone a mile southeast of us riding what looks like a snowmobile with supplies on a sled toward us.”

Greer bent down and Sebastian put his arm around her shoulder once again. “Blow it in three minutes.”

“Blow what?” Sebastian asked as he struggled to his feet with her help once again.

“The twenty-five antennas they have out back. Jackson and Lucas are here with me. They set the explosives outside and I got a couple inside. They’re also going to try to rescue some of the hostages,” Greer told him as she began to partially drag him as he worked to force his body to walk.

“Jackson and Lucas? Where’re Abby and Dylan? Are they okay?” Sebastian’s heart stopped beating until Greer answered.

“Abby’s pregnant and Birch wouldn’t let either of them come,” Greer told him as she pushed him to walk faster.

“That’s wonderful news.” Sebastian smiled and Greer looked at him questioningly.

“You didn’t strike me as someone who would care about babies.”

“I’m godfather to the Stratton kids and spoil them tremendously.”

Sebastian began to breathe heavily and his heart felt as if it were going to pound out of his chest. He started to slow his steps, but Greer kept pushing him forward. “We just need to get right there,” Greer told him, pointing to the mashed snow that formed a road the snowmobiles used.

“I can do that,” Sebastian said, panting heavily as they hurried forward.

“Ten seconds,” she told him and shoved him face first in the snow. “Stay here and don’t move.”

Sebastian wanted to argue, but it felt too good to be lying down. Suddenly the world seemed to rock as explosion after explosion went off. He reached for Greer to protect her, but she was running low to the ground toward the snow road. She dived down, tossed some snow over her, and seemed to completely disappear from sight.

The light from a snowmobile came around the corner at full speed. Greer didn’t move and Sebastian wondered what she was planning. Then, she rose up out of the snow like a Yeti. The man was surprised and let go of the throttle. One

shot was all it took. He fell backward off the snowmobile Greer was already running toward. It hadn't even stopped when she grabbed the handle and leapt on.

She turned it toward Sebastian, slowed it down, and drove it right up to where he was still in the snow. "Your ride's here."

Greer smiled down at Sebastian as she parked the snowmobile. "Get on while I look for something to keep you warm." Greer unhooked the tarp to find engineering materials. She tossed the tarp at Sebastian and then dug around in her backpack to find the shiny emergency solar blanket. "I'm going to wrap these around you as if you're the center of a burrito. Try to have only your face and one arm out and hold on to me."

She worked quickly and soon she had Sebastian's torso wrapped tightly. Greer then went back to the sled attached to the back of the snowmobile and kicked off all the metal, electric, and whatever else they were using to build this satellite and shot it to pieces. It would never work now. Greer took off her pack and tied it to the sled so it would be easier for Sebastian to hold on to her.

"Blowing the wall in three, two . . ." she heard Jackson say over her comms.

Greer was already moving back to the snowmobile as she listened to the exchange of gunfire, praying her brother and Lucas were safe. The gunfire was almost constant as she got back on the snowmobile. She felt Sebastian's large body press up against hers. His arm went around her and his hips and chest pressed against her back. Snow started to fall so heavily she could barely see as she got back on the trail. Soon it was a complete whiteout.

They had to get to the meeting point and then hide until the storm passed. At least the snow would hide her tracks.

“I’ve lost visual,” Alex said, but she could barely hear it on her comms as the wind howled around them. Sebastian buried himself further into her back. She felt his body shaking and knew he wouldn’t make the eight hours to extraction if she didn’t get him warm soon.

“I’m on a snowmobile heading toward extraction. Jackson, Lucas, give a status update,” Greer yelled.

The comms crackled, but through the static she heard Jackson answer. “Rescued hostages. Lucas has a flesh wound, but it’s not slowing him down. Several soldiers took off on snowmobiles. We got a couple of snowmobiles and will meet you at the extraction site. We’re going to go off the path a little and then hunker down until the storm passes.”

Greer looked down at her GPS to see where she was in relation to the extraction point and then pushed the snowmobile to its top speed.

Greer squinted through the blizzard and down at her fuel gauge. It was almost empty. She didn’t have enough to make it to the extraction point, but she did have enough to get within two miles of it. She was almost out of gas, which meant she was close to where she needed to turn off the main path. She’d been flying blind through the whiteout, but with others having access to snowmobiles she couldn’t risk slowing down.

Greer turned off the trail and stopped about twenty yards away. She went back and got on her hands and knees and brushed snow over the tracks until she made it back to the snowmobile. This would, hopefully, buy them time in case

others were right behind them. In this whiteout where she turned off-road, they would be near impossible to spot since it was hard to even see one foot in front of her face.

Sebastian wasn't talking, but he was still breathing as she got back on. He immediately leaned into her as she followed the GPS closer to the extraction point. She drove until the snowmobile died close to a snowdrift. "Stay here, this won't take long."

Sebastian didn't answer and Greer stopped herself from just getting to work. She checked his vitals and knew he needed to get warmed up and fast. "I'm going to get you warm, okay? I just need twenty minutes." Sebastian gave a small nod as she shoved his arm into the tarp burrito she'd made.

Greer looked at what she had and then got to work.

Greer unhooked the sled, grabbed her machete and snow shovel, and got to work digging into the snowdrift. She used the sled to outline the width and height of the snow cave she was going to build. She used the shovel and machete to make snow blocks from the area she'd dug out of the drift. This wasn't an igloo. It was a cave, using igloo-like blocks to form one solid wall on the outside.

When Greer had enough of the wall formed to block the wind, she rushed back to get Sebastian. "Come on, Bash," she yelled at him over the wind. His body was so cold and shaking she didn't know if he could walk. His eyes were unfocused, but he did everything she instructed him to do with a lot of help from her.

"Duck down. Welcome to SA Hotel's newest acquisition, SA Arctic Hotel and Spa." Greer heard a little grunt that was probably a laugh as she helped him into the snow cave, the interior lit with her flashlight. "The blocks are all made, I just have to close the door, okay? Then I'll get to work warming you up."

Sebastian collapsed on the floor she'd dug out and gave a little nod. Greer reached for the pile of snow blocks she made and stored inside the snow cave and piled them up.

The small snow cave seemed to fill with warmth as the last block shut out most of the howling wind. Now the real work started. Greer emptied her pack for her survival gear. The most important piece—a survival candle. This was no ordinary dining table candle. No, this was in a shatterproof container with a wick and resembled an old-fashioned oil lamp more than anything.

Greer set it on the little ledge she'd left for it and lit it. Instantly she felt the heat from the flicker of fire. It would bring the snow cave from minus eighteen up to double digits above zero when combined with their body heat.

“Okay, Bash, we need to get naked.”

“Took you long enough to throw yourself at me,” Sebastian said through heavy teeth chattering. “I can't move, Greer. I'm sorry.”

“Don't worry. I've got you, Bash.”

Greer got down to work. She rolled Sebastian over and took off the tarp she'd wrapped him in. That was going to separate them from the frozen ground. Greer doubled it up so it was eight feet long, which was the entire length of the snow cave, but only four feet wide. However, the double thickness would help a lot to keep the cold from seeping in. Next, she stripped down, using her thick jacket and snow gear to create a mattress on top of the tarp.

Greer shivered as the cold seemed to slice into her nakedness. She'd only be cold for a moment. Sebastian had been cold for much longer. Now that the bottom layer was ready, she rolled out her sleeping bag. It was going to be a tight fit with both of them in it, but that was the point.

“Okay, Bash. I need to start undressing you,” she told him. Maybe she’d thought about him naked a time or two . . . or way more than that before now. However, getting naked to save his life in the middle of the Arctic was not the fantasy she’d had in her dreams. She worried, though, when he didn’t respond. She needed to act and act fast.

She first took off the space blanket. It reflected heat and was windproof so the best way for her to use it was to shove it into the snow wall she’d quickly made. There were plenty of little cracks and spaces that let the cold air in. This would stop that and also radiate back the heat from the lamp and the heat from their bodies to warm them more quickly.

Once done, Greer began to strip Sebastian’s clothes from his body. If only this were that one hot dream she kept having where they were fighting and then he kissed her again. In her dream, he shoves her onto a bed and they strip each other before going straight for some hot, wild sex. However, Greer’s hands shook and not from pleasure as she pulled off his clothes. She was freezing by the time she got him almost completely undressed, but that didn’t mean she didn’t give a quick appreciation for the muscled body, wide shoulders, thighs that begged to have her hands rub them, and well, even the cold didn’t diminish all that he was packing.

“This isn’t right,” Sebastian muttered as she finished removing his wet pants.

“Bash, do you know where you are?”

“We’re on the beach and we’re naked. It’s my dream and I want to hear my name being screamed from your full lips. Why aren’t you screaming my name?”

“I will if you roll over toward me. Can you do that?” Greer asked as she lined up the sleeping bag.

She used her arms to help him roll and when she did, she screamed, “Good job, Bash!” because now she could get into the sleeping bag. Greer zipped the bag and then rolled onto her side so that she could press the front of her body against the front of Sebastian’s before pulling the hood of the bag up and over their heads.

“Eat some of this, Bash.” Greer put tiny pieces of an energy bar into his mouth. When he finished chewing, she gave him another until he’d eaten half of it.

His eyes closed and a small smile played out over his face as he snuggled closer to her. It was the first time she’d ever seen him without a scowl. He looked completely different. Soft, kind, sweet . . . but Sebastian Abel was none of those things. She had to remember that even though her body was screaming at her to rub against him, to take her fingers and rake them through his dark hair, to pull his lips to hers, to reach down and set them both afire, she couldn’t.

Instead, Greer set her watch, wrapped her arms around his chest, pulled his head to her shoulder, and held him with their legs entwined. She gave him everything she could—all the warmth and protection she had.

Greer reached above her and grabbed her comms kit. “Jackson, Lucas, check in.”

“We’re okay. I’ve stitched up Lucas’s wound and we found a small Inuit hunting cabin. Hostages are stable, but cold. We have enough gas to make it to our extradition site by going inland in a couple of hours. Hopefully, this storm will pass by then. Sending you our coordinates.”

Greer glanced down at her watch and saw that they were inland from the research facility. Instead of following the road, they had gone deeper inland to avoid detection. “Here is mine.

Sebastian is hypothermic. I built a snow cave and I'm working on warming him up."

The radio crackled and then a whispered "Dude" was heard.

"Working how exactly to warm him up?" Jackson asked in a voice as cold as the Arctic and Greer rolled her eyes at her brother.

"By the book."

"Dude," Alex whispered again as if in warning.

She could practically hear her brother's teeth grinding. "You're naked with him?" Jackson finally roared. "I'm going to kill him!"

Greer rolled her eyes. "Oh sure, after I go through all this to save his life, go ahead and do that. Stop being a dumbass. Sebastian is semiconscious. I'm working to get him stable. Check in every hour with your location and status. Love you."

"Love you too, but I don't love him. One wandering hand and he's a dead man. President's friend or not."

The comms went quiet and Greer looked at Sebastian's face in the soft glow of the firelight. Her brother had nothing to worry about. Sebastian didn't think of her that way. Most likely, when he woke up, he'd criticize her and tell her how she *should* have saved his life instead of what she did. Although, he had done everything she'd told him to do. Maybe his opinion of her was changing?

"Sebastian?"

Greer's voice came through the fog in Sebastian's brain like a bolt to the heart. Had he died? Was this his hell? To be subjected to her voice, her touch, yet never have her?

He would swear he felt her fingers running through his hair and it was the most erotic feeling he'd ever experienced. He'd been with lots of women, but none of them sent feelings of want and need coursing through him like Greer. However, she hated him even though he couldn't understand why. Sebastian had just offered her suggestions to keep her safe. Well, and he *might* have lost his temper at the idea of her being in danger a time or two. The idea of a world without Greer in it was too much to contemplate. Instead, he'd become a pathetic man slightly obsessed with her. He helped her friends and family out just in hopes of getting a smile from her.

And what a smile. Sebastian thought about it and how he'd kissed her that one time when his emotions got the better of him. He didn't like losing control like that and swore he never would again. But wow, that kiss had been something he couldn't stop thinking about. So much so he hadn't been with any other woman since. He'd tried, but they just never measured up to Greer. They weren't smart enough. They didn't have her athletic curves. They didn't have her smart mouth or the beautiful eyes she rolled at him. They didn't challenge him like Greer. So, the memory of that one kiss had been his only company recently.

"Oh, wow. Good morning, big boy. Sebastian, I take it you're ... *up*?" There was her voice again.

"Greer, I haven't been honest," Sebastian said. In his mind he was cupping her face and telling her he cared about her. He respected her. He only wanted to protect her and that was why he got upset when she put herself in danger.

“Ha! That’s a new one. You’re honest to a fault, Sebastian. Come on. Open your eyes. We need to get dressed and get moving.”

Oh no. Sebastian went rigid, apparently in more than one place. He wasn’t dreaming. It had been Greer running her fingers through his hair. Wait, dressed? Sebastian’s eyes shot open to find Greer’s face very, very, very close to his. That’s when he felt more than her fingers in his hair, too. He felt the heat of her body against his. He felt her breasts pressed against his chest. And he felt his erection standing up and begging to say hello.

“What the hell is going on?” Sebastian bellowed as he tried to back away, but literally couldn’t move more than a few inches.

Greer rolled her eyes at him. “Don’t worry. Your virtue is safe. You didn’t soil your playboy reputation by sleeping with a mere average woman. What’s going on is I saved your ass. You’re welcome.”

“You’re not average,” Sebastian replied instantly. It was the truth. There was literally nothing average about Greer Parker. She blinked in surprise and then blushed a little. If only she’d smile at him he’d take her right here, wherever the hell they were. “Um, where are we?”

“In the middle of Bylot Island, Canada. I rescued you from kidnappers who I think are Chinese. They’d used the cold to torture you and you were hypothermic. You held it together enough to help us escape, but I think you were passed out most of the way on the snowmobile. I built a snow cave and got you warm. But now we need to hike two miles to the extraction location. Do you think you can make it? How are you feeling?”

He was feeling turned on, that's what he was feeling, what with Greer's body pressed so tightly against his. Sebastian took a breath and tried to move his body here and there. "My back is killing me. My muscles are very sore. I think I have bruised ribs and the bottom of my feet hurt. I'll have to be able to move more to give you a full evaluation, but I can make it."

"Okay then. Let's get going. It might be easier for us to move if you reach behind me and pull the zipper down."

Sebastian wiggled his arms free and unzipped the sleeping bag as he looked around the snow cave. It wasn't warm, but it was above freezing. Not bad for being in the Arctic during winter.

"Yeah, so," Greer said before moving, "let's not mention this to my brother. It would be a shame for you to die right after I went through so much trouble to save you."

Sebastian was going to ask what she meant when she rolled out of the sleeping bag and stood up, completely naked. The sight made speech impossible. Hell, the sight of Greer naked made coherent thought impossible. She was all toned muscle, soft curves, and taut nipples. He'd never cared that much about breasts before. They were great, but they weren't the end-all, be-all for him. He'd been wrong.

"Yeah, I know. Not a supermodel."

"Thank goodness. I like a little more to my women. How's the wound?" Sebastian asked, still frozen in the bag staring like a teenage boy.

Greer looked down at the thin red line on the side of her stomach. "Good. It healed up well." Then she pulled her sports bra on and bent down to toss Sebastian a pile of clothes. "These are what I was able to get for you to wear that are dry.

You probably don't remember, but they're way too small. I figured I could cut some holes in the bottom of the sleeping bag and let you wear that to keep you warm as we walk."

Sebastian blinked as the clothes were tossed at him. There was something very sexy about a woman not covering herself from his gaze that made it hard to focus. But Greer Parker was not for him and the sooner he accepted that, the better. There was no way she'd be the no-strings, no-emotions, no-mess kind of woman he'd spent a night with. Greer and her family practically shouted *messy dating, wedding, and babies*. That was enough to splash cold water on any thoughts of having sex with her.

Sebastian cleared his head and pulled the shirt on and looked down. It barely covered his chest. There was no way he was going to stay warm. "So, about that sleeping bag."

Sebastian was hurting. Badly.

“How are you doing?” Greer asked from where she was walking up ahead of him. The astronomical twilight of the winter’s lack of sun was just enough to see her, but not enough to see too far in the distance.

“Fine,” he said between clenched teeth as they continued the trek through the snow.

Greer stopped and turned to look at him. She wasn’t even out of breath and Sebastian could barely take a step without hissing in pain. “I don’t believe you, but there’s nothing that can be done about it until we’re rescued. So, the best thing is to keep your mind off of it. Let’s play twenty questions.”

“Are you serious right now?” Sebastian asked with a frown as she smiled at him.

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun!”

“Do I look like someone who cares about having fun? I care about results. Acting like teenagers at a party won’t give us results. Head down, one foot in front of another will.”

Greer’s smile widened. “You played twenty questions in high school? Did you play spin the bottle and seven minutes in heaven too?”

“I don’t have time for these silly questions,” Sebastian grumbled as he trudged forward. Although he did realize he’d now caught up with her. Dammit. She’d been right.

“Ohhh, that means you never had the opportunity. Were you too cool for school, Bash?” Greer asked in a teasing tone.

“Quite the opposite. Why does everyone forget I started off in tech? Computer nerds weren’t invited to parties. I’m sure you were invited to everything.” He wanted to invite her to do all sorts of sexy things that might be illegal in some states. He’d have to check Canadian law.

“You know, I did forget about that,” Greer admitted. “How did you become involved in computers?”

Sebastian frowned at the memory. “My mother.”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

Sebastian shook his head. “No. Not bad. She was always supporting me. I excelled at math. I can see any mathematical problem and solve it in my head. I was that annoying kid in class. One summer, she had to work full-time and couldn’t afford a babysitter or to send me to camp so she dropped me at the base library with a book on coding. By the end of the summer I was the official IT help for the library. Engineering, coding—they all made sense to me when nothing else in the world seemed to.”

Why was he telling her this? Sebastian didn’t tell anyone anything that could be used to hurt him. The memory of his mother was at the very top of that list.

“Was?” Greer asked quietly as they walked through the open white expanse.

“Yes,” was all Sebastian could and would say.

“I’m sorry. How old were you?”

Greer was digging into his past and he didn’t like it. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her he figured she’d either love him or kill him. Right then she was killing him with the empathy in her voice and he couldn’t stand it.

“How about you?” he asked, not answering her question. “Did you play seven minutes in heaven and twenty questions in high school?” Sebastian clenched his hands into fists at the idea of someone blindly pawing at Greer. He shouldn’t have asked. He didn’t want to have to kill someone.

“Me? Have you met my brothers? Especially Jackson.”

Sebastian snorted. He wasn’t afraid of Jackson or anyone else if it meant he got Greer. “If they can’t put up with a little brotherly hazing, they’re not worthy of you.”

Even from behind the goggles they were both wearing he saw the raised eyebrow she gave him. “You’re saying that?” she asked with a little snort.

“What does that mean?”

“It means Abby told me you about peed your pants when you met Ahmed, and I’m pretty sure you’re now an investor in several of my cousins’ companies because you were so shell-shocked. If Big Bad Sebastian Abel can’t handle Keeneston, what makes you think some college boy could?”

Sebastian shivered at the mention of Abby’s father, Ahmed. “That’s because I didn’t care for Abby in that way. If I did, even Ahmed couldn’t stop me. As for your cousins, I really have no words to explain it. It was like I was mesmerized, tortured with kindness, smiles, stern talking to, hard numbers, and then I was just handing them a blank check. I’m pretty sure I funded Sydney’s charity for five years. And

Piper, well, all I know is every month I receive a check for the return on my investment in her nanotech company. I'm actually really interested in becoming more hands-on with it, but quite frankly, I'm afraid she'll take all my money. She's so nice you just hand everything over to her."

"Don't forget Sophie's company," Greer said with a chuckle.

"Wait, what? I own a part of her company, too? Which one is she?" Sebastian asked, trying to remember who they all were. He'd met them at a charity function when he was Abby's fake date.

"Weapons developer," Greer filled in.

"Is that why I keep getting weapons delivered to my office? I didn't know what one thing was and gave it to my secretary. We thought it was lipstick. She went to put it on, seized, and then farted as she slumped over her desk."

Greer laughed and Sebastian had never heard a prettier sound. His cold, hard heart continued beating until she asked her next question. "How serious was it between you and Abby? I know her side of the story, but I'd like to hear your side."

Sebastian immediately shut back down. Jealousy was a big no-no for him and usually ended his relationships. "It doesn't matter."

Greer stopped walking and turned to face him. Her smile was gone, in its place was a very serious tightness. "I'm afraid it matters quite a bit."

Greer's heart pounded. She'd been acting as if walking through the arctic glacier expanse of Bylot Island was just a normal everyday thing, but that was not the truth. The truth was something had shifted in her while she held Sebastian. It was something that hurt in her heart because she realized she had feelings for him and was beyond conflicted about it.

One, she knew someone as sexy and powerful as Sebastian would never be with someone like her. She knew from Abby that he didn't "do relationships" and that brought up the second conflict. He'd been with her friend, Abby. She knew Abby wouldn't care. Hell, Abby was using every opportunity to tell Greer how great Sebastian was and that she should get to know him. However, she didn't know how he felt about Abby and *that* mattered a great deal. The final conflict was that she couldn't get a clear read on him. Sometimes she swore he hated her, but then other times she saw desire. This morning was one of those times.

Yeah, she got up and got dressed in front of him. Yeah, she'd acted like it wasn't a big deal, but it was. She had been watching his reaction and the look in his eyes left her breathless. However, the desire had been shuttered and then it was back to all business. Not knowing where she stood was new for Greer.

So now she held her breath and stared at the man she'd reluctantly fallen for. It was as if her soul had reached for his and in that moment, he was vulnerable and had reached out to her. However, now there was a wall between them and it unsettled her.

"I feel as if no matter what I say it's going to be wrong." Sebastian tried to look tough, but it was hard with only his legs

sticking out of a sleeping bag. He looked like a walking burrito.

“Bash, there’re no wrong answers here. How you feel is never wrong. Did it hurt much to see Abby marry Dylan?”

Sebastian gave a little snort. “Did you know you’re the only one I let call me that?” Greer didn’t show how much that pleased her as she waited for him to answer the question. “It didn’t hurt at all. I’m sorry. I know she’s your friend, but Abby meant nothing to me romantically. I do count both her and Dylan as friends though.”

Greer started walking again as she turned her head to smile. “You don’t need to be sorry. I told you, how you feel is never wrong. It’s just how you feel. Who are you dating now?”

“No one,” came the quick reply. “I don’t really date.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve seen the revolving door of blondes on the gossip sites,” Greer teased.

“That’s not dating. That’s using. I use them to not be alone at functions and they use me to get their pictures in the news.”

See, conflicted. How could he be so great one moment and then a jerk the next? “That really makes you sound like an asshole.”

Sebastian looked over at her as they walked. “Did you ever think I wasn’t?”

“There are times when you’re not. Then there are times when you are.”

Sebastian gave a little snort of amusement. “And you call me out every time I am.”

“Someone has to keep you in line.”

“And you’re that someone?” Sebastian asked. Greer stopped smiling and glanced down at her GPS. They were now within a half mile of the extraction site. “As you pointed out, there’s no one else who will do it since you don’t date.” Greer needed to remember that. Sebastian wasn’t for her no matter how much she wanted it.

Sebastian sat in the snow as they waited for the helicopter. They hadn't talked since the end of Greer's discussion about his lack of relationships. He didn't like this feeling. He didn't feel as if he were on equal footing. Since his mother died, he'd maintained control at all costs. Greer threw that control out the window.

Greer put her finger to her ear. "Affirmative. We're at the extraction site. I'll provide cover."

"What's going on?" Sebastian asked even as Greer began checking the startling number of weapons she had on her body.

"Helo will be here in three minutes. Jackson and Lucas are coming in hot. I'm going to provide cover for them and the hostages. Now, lie down."

"Why?" Sebastian asked even as he did what she asked.

"Because I'm covering you with snow to protect you. Take this gun and use it if you have to. You point that end at the bad guys and pull this cute little curvy bit, it's called the trigger. As soon as the helo lands, you're going to get on it." Greer pulled a red smoke stick from her bag and ignited it before tossing it away from him.

“I know how to use a gun. Where are you going to be?” Sebastian asked even as she began to shove snow over him.

“Over there providing cover.”

“No,” Sebastian said, sitting up. “You’re not going out there alone.”

“I know you’re not used to hearing this so I’ll say it slowly,” Greer said, looking at him as she pushed him down and kicked more snow over the sleeping bag. “You. Are. Not. In. Charge.”

Then she ran off and left him. How she ran that fast over the snow after hiking and helping him along the way for a good part of it, Sebastian didn’t know. Suddenly she was gone. Greer dropped to the ground and he couldn’t see her. In the distance he heard the sound of a helicopter at the same time he heard the sound of snowmobiles. Sebastian turned his head and tried to see what was happening.

Four snowmobiles packed with people were racing toward him. A short distance behind the four were six more snowmobiles, each with single riders. Suddenly a shot rang out and one of the six single riders fell off the snowmobile. There was surprised shouting among the remaining five drivers before they began firing off wild shots at the four snowmobiles in front of them.

Sebastian had never hated a feeling like this so badly because he recognized it for what it was. He was powerless in this situation. Greer fired another shot and a second rider went down. As the four snowmobiles grew closer, Sebastian saw a man in a sweatshirt turn to sit backward and began to return fire. Between him and Greer, the threat was eliminated as the helicopter landed.

Sebastian rose from the ground and instantly had a gun pointed at him. “Hello, Jackson. I’ve so missed you. You can put the gun down now.”

Jackson Parker kept the gun aimed at his head. “I don’t know if I want to. You don’t look too hypothermic to me.”

“Your sister saved me from dying,” Sebastian said, refusing to back down.

“Too bad,” Jackson said, finally lowering the weapon. “But if you touch my sister again, I’ll kill you myself.”

“No, you won’t.” Sebastian said, looking Jackson in the eyes.

“The hell I won’t.” Jackson took a step closer and glared.

“I’m not some young kid to be scared off, Jackson.” Sebastian tried to sound bored, but what he was feeling was anger. Did he have a claim to Greer? No. Was he trying to make one? Eh, that was less clear to Sebastian.

“Ha. No one would accuse you of being young.”

“Ah, yes. Forty. My life is practically over. You’re in your thirties now, you’d better enjoy what little time you have left,” Sebastian said dryly.

“You’re not right for my sister, so back off.”

“You don’t have a say, Jackson.” Sebastian stepped up this time and stared down at him.

“What’s going on?” the man in the sweatshirt asked. Now that he was closer Sebastian saw a picture of him with his arm wrapped around a polar bear on the front of the shirt.

“Sebastian thinks he’s good enough to date my sister,” Jackson said, crossing his arms over his chest as a huge man

vaulted from the helicopter to help get the hostages on board.

“I never said that. I only said you don’t have a say in who she does or does not date.”

“Oh, now my sister isn’t good enough for you?” Jackson asked and Sebastian wanted to groan, but it was Greer who did it for him.

“Jackson, shut the hell up and get in the helicopter. Can’t you see Sebastian doesn’t want me and is seconds from falling down?”

“Here, I’ll help you. I’m Lucas Sharpe.”

Sebastian looked at the man with the large smile wearing nothing but snow pants and the sweatshirt. “Sebastian Abel. Aren’t you freezing?”

“Nah, I’m used to this weather. First time in forever I don’t feel hot.” Lucas drew Sebastian toward the helicopter and away from Jackson and Greer, who were still going at it like only siblings could. “You got balls of ice, man. No one, and I repeat no one, goes up against Jackson over Greer. He’s slightly overprotective.”

“Who is overprotective?” the huge man helping people into the helicopter asked.

“Sebastian, this is Talon Bainbridge. I was saying Jackson is overprotective of Greer.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to go there, mate. Come on up.”

Sebastian felt the need to argue but decided against it. Greer could handle herself. Sebastian took Talon’s hand, and when the man pulled, Sebastian cursed as pain shot through his ribs.

“Bash! Are you okay?” Greer rushed forward with Jackson hot on her heels.

“Bash? You’re calling him *Bash* now?” Jackson roared. “What happened in that shelter?”

Greer spun on Jackson as Lucas and Talon cringed. Greer jammed her finger into Jackson’s chest and poked him. “If you don’t knock this shit off *right now*, I will make you. Then Evie will be pissed at me for cutting off your boys. You think you and the uncles are the only ones who can threaten castration? Well, think again, brother. I’ll go full Willa on you and cut them off with a dull spoon if you don’t knock off this overprotective BS. Got it?”

Sebastian didn’t hide the smile he felt. She was glorious. It was also really nice to see her direct one of those lectures at someone besides him.

“Here, Bash. Let me help you up,” Greer said, taking one of his arms while Talon took the other. “Exhale on the count of three.”

Sebastian did what she said, but still cursed as they helped him up. He hated this feeling of weakness. He didn’t like to be vulnerable. After his mother had died, he swore he’d never be powerless again. Yet here he was, not even able to get into a helicopter without help.

“Here.” Greer took the seat next to him and handed him a thermos. “It’s hot chocolate mixed with protein powder to give you energy and help with the lingering hypothermia symptoms.”

Sebastian sipped the warm drink and sighed in pleasure. Talon and Lucas were handing out thermoses and energy bars

to the other rescued hostages as the helicopter took off, heading out over the frozen water.

“Where are we going?” Sebastian asked.

“Thule Air Base. Then we’ll catch a military ride home,” Greer told him.

“I need to get back to D.C. and talk to Birch,” Sebastian said, knowing their time together was coming to an end. Good. He needed distance from Greer to get his mind back on track. He couldn’t play the “what if” game of a future with Greer when there could never be one. Their lives would never line up. He traveled the world running more companies than he could count. There was no room for a girlfriend in his life. Not only that, but it would give him a weakness.

He’d talked to Ryker Faulkner about just that recently. Yet, Ryker hadn’t listened. He’d gotten himself married to a sweet nurse. What a dumbass. No competitors would know Sebastian’s weakness. All they had to do was target his wife and Ryker would fold. Well, maybe. Ryker was a lot like Sebastian. That’s why they could understand each other.

If Ryker found a way to make it work . . .

No. Sebastian didn’t have time to go down that path. And he certainly didn’t have the heart for it either. However, he could still be polite. “Thank you for risking your life to save me.”

“You’re welcome,” Greer said with a smile as she patted his thigh. Jackson glared and Sebastian gave him a wink just to mess with him. It was fun to see how far he could push Jackson. Even though Sebastian knew Jackson was a good guy just protecting his sister, Jackson still reminded him a bit of Brandon from his childhood when he tried to tell Sebastian he

couldn't do something—like be with his sister. So it was fun to push his buttons. “But you're not rid of me yet.”

“What?” Sebastian and Jackson said at the same time at Greer's words.

“My orders are to take you back to Keeneston.” Greer smiled up at him. Her eyes were full of mischief as if she knew this would annoy him. And it did. He needed space. He needed to stop thinking of Greer Parker, the one person he couldn't have in his life.

“No, no, no,” Jackson said, glaring at Sebastian who glared back at him.

“If you have a problem with that, you can call the president and tell him about it yourself,” Greer said to her brother with a shrug before looking up at Sebastian. Her eyes were alive and shining with unvoiced laughter. “I've been ordered by the president to guard your body and not leave your side.”

Greer was being a brat. She knew it. However, it didn't stop her from annoying the hell out of Jackson the entire trip from Thule Air Base in Greenland back to Keeneston. The added side effect was that Sebastian was equally annoyed. He rankled under her constant closeness as she "just followed orders."

She kept her body pressed against Sebastian's the entire trip, earning more glares and curses from both men in the process. It might hurt a little that Sebastian didn't like to be this close to her, but finally being able to get back at her brother for all the years of tormenting her was worth it.

The trouble was, it was honestly torturing her just as much, just in a different way. It was making her want things she shouldn't want. Namely, Sebastian.

Greer was used to strong, alpha men. Look at the brother she was tormenting right then by keeping her hand on Sebastian's leg. That didn't count Ryan, her eldest brother, or her father, Cole. Then there were her cousins and uncles. She'd grown up with her phone traced, her sleepovers bugged, and her dates spied on via drone. Yes, they were overprotective. Yes, they were big, strong, defend-their-

families-to-the-death kind of guys. And yes, she was used to them and loved them.

Sebastian was different, yet very much the same. Just like the men in her family, Sebastian radiated confidence, power, and control. The difference was his confidence, power, and control came in the boardroom and tech world and not from the military or law enforcement training her family had. However, even her family would respect Sebastian if they saw how he was handling his current situation.

He'd been given fluids and a full medical checkup at Thule. Jackson had insisted on staying with Greer and Sebastian during the exam. He'd seen the welts on Sebastian's back from the beatings. He saw the bruises on his body and face. Luckily, the frostbite on Sebastian's feet was minimal since he was kept in a building that had been above freezing in temperature. The short times he had been outside without shoes had hurt, but wouldn't result in a long-term injury. Greer had seen Jackson begrudgingly give respect. Unfortunately, Jackson had also seen her lack of surprise at seeing Sebastian mostly nude and that had started him harping on her about there being a zero chance of that happening.

So, she'd hatched this plan to torment her brother by constantly being near Sebastian. Except she was just as tormented as Jackson. Sebastian might be a computer guy, but he wasn't like Alex. Alex was tall and lanky and might not see the sunlight for a week at a time. Abby's computer hacker brother, Kale, had been the same until his father, Ahmed, forced him to spend the summer in Keeneston training as if he were going into Special Forces. Ahmed was a believer that mental and physical strength should be equally trained. Judging by the strong, toned thigh she was currently pressed

against, Sebastian had the same belief and it was a huge turn-on.

Greer had been with guys who had more brains than brawn and she'd been with men who had more brawn than brains, but never one who had both brains and brawn. And those gray eyes that seemed to hide a depth of mystery behind them . . . what girl could resist wanting to discover his every secret? Preferably while naked together.

The other rescued scientists were on planes to their home countries and now she, Sebastian, Jackson, Talon, and Lucas were all in the passenger section of a cargo plane that had been ordered to fly them the almost three thousand miles straight to Lexington. They'd been in the air for an hour, but with many more hours to go. Exhaustion began to set in.

Lucas was curled up on a stuffed polar bear from the Thule gift shop. Talon was asleep with the thickest blanket Greer had ever seen covering him. And Jackson was staring daggers to where she was sitting, pressed up against Sebastian, who was working on a tablet he'd gotten from the base commander.

Greer's eyes began to close and she must have let out a little sigh, because Sebastian moved. She thought he was trying to move away from her, but instead he lifted his arm and put it around her shoulder and pulled her against his side.

Greer glanced up at him from where her face was resting on the curve between his shoulder and chest. He looked down at her, the expression in his eyes soft for once. "Go to sleep, Greer."

"Always trying to order me around, huh?" she said with a tired smile at him.

“No. Always trying to look out for you. You’re exhausted, Greer. Let me take care of you for this short time.” Sebastian reached over and grabbed her thick jacket. He placed it over her like a blanket and went back to work.

The warmth from the jacket, the warmth from Sebastian’s body, and the warmth of his words comforted her as her eyes fell shut.

Sebastian was more aware of every breath Greer took than he was aware of anything else in the world. The attention he paid to her sleeping against him made the work he put into the satellite codes seem like child’s play.

Her head was on his chest, his hand rested on her shoulder, one of her arms was behind his lower back, and the other rested on his abs. She was holding him much like Lucas held that ridiculous stuffed polar bear.

“You don’t belong in Keeneston,” Jackson said in a hushed voice. Even the jerk didn’t want to wake his sister.

“No, I don’t,” Sebastian said, looking up from the tablet he was now using one hand to operate. He was talking to Alex, Kale, and Ryker via secure messaging. He wanted to get to the bottom of this before they landed in Keeneston.

“You’re such an asshole,” Jackson said with a shake of his head.

Sebastian felt like giving him one of Greer’s eye rolls. “Again, as if me being an asshole was ever in question.”

“Glad we agree on something.”

“I think if you got your head out of your ass you’d find we agree on quite a bit,” Sebastian said, turning back to the tablet.

“I doubt that,” Jackson said with a snort. “I’m not a silver-spoon spoiled brat.”

“Military brat,” Sebastian corrected, not looking up. “I worked my way through school with jobs and scholarships.”

“Oh. I did too,” Jackson said sadly as if finding something they had in common was a bad thing. “Well, I know one thing we don’t agree on. I want you away from Greer. You’re not good enough for her.”

“I know I’m not. I’m good at my job. I’m good at making money. I’m good at business negotiations. But I am not a good man, and she’s destined to be with a good, boring, small-town nice man,” Sebastian admitted. His mother would be upset to know he’d turned out this way. She’d loved him as the sweet, dorky boy who gave her hugs and ate ice cream with her. However, that boy couldn’t save her. The man he was today could have.

Jackson growled in frustration and Sebastian finally looked up at him. “Lexington Thoroughbreds is the best football team in the league.”

“Agreed,” Sebastian said with a shrug. “I was a big Trey Everett fan when he was with the Georgia Vultures. I followed him to Lexington and I like watching him coach now. His son, Knox, is one hell of a player too.”

Jackson clenched his jaw. “Bourbon over beer.”

“Agreed.”

“Classic cars over new flashy sports cars.”

“I have a garage full of classic cars and only three flashy sports cars, so yes, agreed.”

“You do?” Jackson asked, surprised.

“I do. Everything from an Aston Martin DB5 to a Shelby GT350.”

“Oh wow. I’d love to drive a Shelby,” Jackson said wistfully, slipping from his interrogation.

“Anytime. I have over one hundred classic cars. You’re welcome to drive any of them,” Sebastian said, surprised to find that he meant it. He automatically respected anyone who respected the beauty of the classics.

“Dammit, don’t do that,” Jackson said, frustrated for falling into a regular conversation with him instead of a contentious one. “Favorite vegetable?”

“Sweet potatoes,” Sebastian answered.

“Crap, you would be my friend if you weren’t after my sister.”

Sebastian sighed then. “Jackson, I’m not after your sister. Your sister infuriates me. I’m mad that you let her put herself in danger like this, but—”

“Greer doesn’t let anyone tell her what to do,” Jackson and Sebastian both said, finishing the sentence together.

Jackson made an angry grunting noise that might begrudgingly resemble respect. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared him down. “Abby and Dylan like you. Ari and Jameson like you. Ryker likes you. Kale likes you. Trent and Skye like you. I guess I can give you a chance and stop busting your balls.”

“Jackson, you’ve never bothered me enough to qualify as an annoying fly, let alone up to ball-busting level,” Sebastian said, turning back to his tablet.

“Have you always been an asshole?” Jackson asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why are they your friends? Why do they say you’re a good guy? A *nice* guy?” Jackson asked in a curious way that was much more dangerous than the anger he’d had just minutes ago. Sebastian was not going to open up and spill what few feelings he had to Jackson. Sebastian didn’t do bromances.

“I’m never nice without a self-serving purpose. Remember that.”

Jackson cocked his head and looked at Sebastian again. Really looked at him. Damn, that trait must run in the family because Greer had done the same thing on occasion. “You’re a big fat liar,” Jackson laughed. “You are a nice guy under it all. That’s your biggest secret.”

“Bullshit.”

“Uncle Cy trained us to be human lie detectors. I know when I hit the truth.” Jackson chuckled and looked like the cat with all the cream. Sebastian leaned down and kissed Greer’s sleepy lips. “Mother fu—”

“See, not a nice guy,” Sebastian said, giving Jackson an ice-cold glare. You couldn’t get to where Sebastian was by having a nice reputation.

You could be good for the right woman.

Sebastian shoved the voice in his head down even as he thought about waking Greer up to kiss her some more.

Jackson’s rage eased back down as he crossed his arms over his chest and looked at him again. If Sebastian weren’t careful, he’d turn into one of those love-struck, heart-on-his-sleeve, mushy men in love like Jackson was with his wife. Like Dylan was with Abby. Like his mother had been with his

father. No, Sebastian wasn't going to do that. One bad mission and Sebastian would be putting another woman in the ground. His heart couldn't stand to be broken one more time like that.

Sebastian tightened his grip on Greer. He'd protect her even if she didn't want him to. He had done it on every mission so far. She hadn't seen the drones that had taken down enemies. She hadn't noticed the best doctors in the world he'd brought in to take care of her when she'd been injured. She had thought they'd been regular military EMTs. It had been Sebastian the entire time. He'd made sure Greer had had every resource she ever needed because he could not stand the idea of losing one more person he loved.

"Shit," he cursed as he stood up so quickly Greer fell onto the seat and groaned as her eyes fluttered.

"What's going on?" she asked sleepily.

"Nothing, go back to sleep. I have work I need to do," Sebastian snapped.

When he turned around to leave the sitting area, that bastard Jackson just smiled at him. A disconcertingly knowing smile at that.

Sebastian stalked off with the tablet. He didn't have time for this. He needed to figure out exactly who had taken him, what they still needed, and how far along they were in the process of building their own spy satellite. More importantly, were they after something specific or just generally wanted to spy? Unfortunately his gut told him it was the former. There was something they specifically wanted from him and Sebastian was going to find out what that was. These *feelings* for Greer were simply because of his kidnapping and rescue. Nothing more.

Sebastian turned to glance back and saw that Jackson was laughing at him now. Bastard. Sebastian Abel didn't do love. He didn't do relationships. And he wouldn't do Greer Parker no matter how much his heart and body wanted him to.

“What the hell happened out there? Why the hell is Sebastian so pissed off about, and why is Jackson smirking?” Abby asked in a hushed whisper in the living room of Greer’s apartment.

After Jackson got married and Greer moved back to Keeneston for a bit, she had taken over the apartment above her mother’s boutique. They’d arrived home not ten minutes ago, but Sebastian was already locked in her bedroom having a talk with President Stratton.

“I don’t know,” Greer said with a shrug. She tried to glance to where her brother was sitting with Lucas and Talon but her phone went off, drawing her attention away from him. “Jackson!” she screamed as she saw his smile while he put away his cell phone.

“Finally,” Abby sighed as she looked at the phone.

“What?” Greer asked. She hadn’t heard her friend over the rage thundering in her ears at her brother’s smirk.

“Nothing,” Abby said with the same happy little smile on her face that Jackson had.

“Jackson, how dare you!” Greer yelled at her brother.

The door to her bedroom was flung open so hard it rattled the room. “What the hell is the meaning of this?” Sebastian demanded as he walked out with the president laughing in a small box on his tablet and the Blossom Café Betting App up on the main screen. “Did you do this?”

“Do what?” Jackson blinked innocently, but Greer knew her brother and there was nothing innocent about that look.

“Take it down,” Sebastian growled.

Greer was going to say the same thing, but ... “Wait a second. A bet that we’re going to date is so bad it has to be taken down? Ouch.”

“As if you’d ever date me. You’ve made it very clear what you think of me. I vividly remember you calling me an asshole.”

“You are,” Abby said with a shrug. “But just on the outside.”

Suddenly the sound of a stampede up her fire escape stairs in the back of the building had Greer groaning. She leapt from the living room chair and dashed to the back door, threw the deadbolt, and pulled the curtain over the window.

“Don’t say a word,” Greer whispered.

She held her breath as the doorknob slowly turned and then jiggled as someone tried to open it. Then silence, and Greer was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the deadbolt slowly turned. Before she could stop it, the door was flung open and in rushed, well, everyone.

“You’re dating!” her mother screamed as she rushed in to hug her.

“The hell you are!” her father yelled at the same time.

“Greer is way too young to date,” her brother Ryan said, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at Sebastian.

“It would be my privilege and honor to help kill the man,” Ahmed said to Cole with a bow of his head.

“I got this great farming stuff that we can sprinkle over the body and *poof*,” Uncle Pierce said with a snap of his fingers. “No more body.”

Dylan and Abby walked across the room and stood by Sebastian, who withstood the various threats of murder surprisingly well.

“We just feed people like that to Bertha,” Lucas said, getting in on it.

“Two words,” Mo said. “Diplomatic immunity.”

“Dad,” Ariana said with a roll of her eyes. “I’m Team Sebastian.”

She and her new husband, Jameson, moved to join Dylan and Abby next to Sebastian who was now listening to Wyatt’s very technical description of castration. He would know since he was a veterinarian.

“I thought you couldn’t talk about castration anymore,” Cousin Cassidy said.

“Nah,” Wyatt smirked. “That’s just the uncles. This has nothing to do with grandbabies. I’m in the clear, right, honey?”

His wife, Camila, didn’t look sure of how to answer. She looked back and forth and then just sat down next to Jace’s wife, Stella, to watch the show.

“Wait, that whole no-sex thing only applies to grandbabies like Wyatt said, right?” Uncle Miles asked the aunts.

“Murdering a not even yet boyfriend should not count.”

“Shouldn’t it only matter what Greer wants?” Willa asked as her husband, Porter, was talking to his twin, Parker, about places to hide the body on the farm.

The room went suddenly silent and all eyes turned to Greer. They didn’t bother her, but Sebastian’s single raised eyebrow made her stomach flip-flop and then nosedive. What did she want? She certainly had feelings for him. Feelings she shouldn’t have. But there was Abby saying she supported Sebastian dating her, so . . .

“It doesn’t matter what I want. We’re not dating. Sebastian is here for me to protect and that’s all,” Greer said as neutrally and professionally as she should.

Piper snorted into the quiet and Greer glared at her. So what if Piper had married her bodyguard? It didn’t mean Greer would too. Well, especially since *she* was the bodyguard while Aiden had been Piper’s guard.

“We are dealing with a national security crisis, not playing high school hookup,” Sebastian finally said, pointing to the president on the tablet. A president who was doing something on his own phone. A second later the betting app dinged with another bet placed in favor of Sebastian and her getting together.

“We probably don’t need to tell them,” President Stratton said. “I’m guessing Marcy already has.”

There was some huffing and puffing at the door and then Aniyah ran in carrying a pie that filled the whole room with a delicious aroma. Behind her, her husband, DeAndre, helped Greer’s grandmother, Marcy, into the room.

“I haven’t been filled in yet, dear,” she answered the president. “I was just stopping by to give this fresh-baked apple pie to—”

“Thanks, Ma,” Uncle Miles said, reaching for the pie Aniyah handed Grandma Marcy upon entering the living room. Grandma Marcy smacked Miles’s hand away.

Uncle Marshall laughed at his brother. “Not so fast, big bro.” Marshall reached for it and got smacked.

“Everyone knows I’m her favorite,” Uncle Cade said, reaching for it and promptly getting a swat.

“Everyone knows it’s the baby of the family who is the favorite,” Uncle Pierce said before receiving his own swat.

“Winner, winner, apple pie dinner,” Uncle Cy said, reaching for the pie only to be swatted away too.

“Amateurs. See I’m the one giving Grandma what she really wants—more great-grandchildren,” Dylan said, holding out his hands as Grandma Marcy walked toward him.

Only she didn’t hand him the pie. She handed it straight to Sebastian. “You’re such a good boy. I’m so glad you made it back alive. Of course, I knew my granddaughter would be able to *manage* you just fine.”

Could Greer just die on the spot from embarrassment? Because she was sure going to find out.

Sebastian instinctively reached for the pie Marcy Davies, the matriarch of the Davies family, held out. He was about to say thank you when she said, “My granddaughter would be able to *manage* you just fine.”

The word *manage* was the primary word and Sebastian didn't really know what to do because, well, Greer had rescued him. She had saved him from hypothermia. She had motivated him through the snow to get to the helicopter. She'd plucked off bad guys left and right. And she'd completely managed him without even blinking. Crap. Marcy was right, and he didn't know if he should thank her for that or not.

He looked at the pie and the idea of being bribed floated through his mind. Then he looked at the sweet old lady and knew he was being ridiculous. He was sure Marcy wouldn't mean it like that. She was just a nice grandma and that's what they did. They baked. "Thank you, ma'am."

"You call me Grandma Marcy."

"Aw, come on!" Cole groaned along with all of Greer's uncles and male cousins. Well, except for the one next to Sebastian. The females in the group were noticeably quieter. They hadn't said *yea* or *nay*. They just sat back with their arms crossed and watched. It was very unnerving. Sebastian had to remember that look for his next negotiation.

"You can definitely make those porn noises of yours with him," the beautiful, curvy woman Sebastian knew was in the state-elected legislature said to Greer, who then turned five shades of red. Aniyah. Sebastian remembered that was her name. Aniyah looked at him and winked. "He looks like he's packing a Big Foot of his own. He'll know what to do with your hoo-ha."

"I'm sorry. Did you say porn noises?" Sebastian's lips instantly tilted up into a smile at the thought of Greer, him, and porn being said together in the same sentence. He heard several feminine gasps when he smiled, but it was Greer's father he heard over everyone else.

“Oh, no! No! No! No!” Cole shouted into the room. “No porn. No hoo-has. No Big Foot.” Cole spun from Aniyah to Sebastian and pulled his gun and pointed it at Sebastian’s crotch. Sebastian casually moved the pie in front of his midsection. “And certainly not you, Big Foot, porn, and my daughter’s hoo-ha together! I will shoot it off first. And yes, I fully realize this will cost me a week of sex with my wife, but it’s worth it.”

“Before you shoot Sebastian, I need him,” Birch said over the video feed.

Greer covered her face with her hands and groaned in embarrassment. Sebastian should have been more worried about the gun pointed a foot from his manhood, but just then Aniyah leaned forward and whispered, “You know, I heard y’all came from the Arctic just now. I’ll send the Yeti porn over instead.”

Sebastian burst out laughing and it surprised him so much he almost dropped the pie. It also startled everyone else. Cole lowered the gun, confused by seeing Sebastian actually laugh and Greer smiled at him. Sebastian decided getting his package shot off was worth it. The way Greer smiled at him would make any torture worth it because she looked at him like he was, well, her hero, and Sebastian had never been anyone’s hero before.

“We’re totally upping our bet,” Sebastian heard Tate tell Birch.

Sebastian shook his head and saw Greer watching him. It unnerved him more than he wanted to admit. “Please excuse me. I need to finish this call.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Birch said. “They’ll all find out anyway. They always do. We ran everyone’s bodycam and

scope images through our program. We'd heard the Chinese government wanted to win the space arms race. It's no longer about being the first up there. There are few actual laws about who owns what and what you can do up there. The Chinese government wants to be the global superpower and the best way to eliminate all competition is by controlling our access to space."

"What exactly was this spy satellite they stole?" Parker asked the president.

"It wasn't just the satellite plans from DARPA, it was Sebastian who had the code, and the world's top astrophysicists to develop and launch my spy satellite into space. Good job, Jackson and Lucas, for rescuing the other hostages. Their countries are very appreciative and have offered their full cooperation should we need it," Birch told them all. "Sebastian, why don't you tell them about the satellite?"

Sebastian gave a nod and outlined the way the satellite worked and how his code would enable the satellite to trick the other country's satellite relays and the ground antennas into thinking the US satellite is theirs.

"A retractable arm?" Pierce Davies asked with a snort of amusement.

"Yeah, that wasn't my idea," Sebastian felt compelled to tell them. "I had much better ideas than something out of a bad sci-fi movie."

"I'm just wondering what the Chinese government thinks about all this. How far along are they in its development, and what are they looking for on our satellites to steal?" Parker wondered out loud.

“They’ve been testing several weapons along with North Korea, whose sole purpose is to take out or hack other countries’ satellites. I think they’re making a power play to force us to give control over to them to get our technology back. If they disable our satellites, not counting what we use for military purposes, we would no longer be able to run critical telecommunications, banking, finance, and transportation, just to name a few. I’m sure their government would kindly offer use of their satellites for us to use for a fee and also so they can data-mine everything they can about us. We’ve already shot down numerous attempts by them to do so commercially. However, to allow them control over space would be like opening the door to all citizens’ lives. We can’t allow that level of dependency,” Birch explained.

“Space weapons,” said a stunning woman with the look of a kid on Christmas morning. That must be Sophie, the weapons developer who had sent the farting taser. “I would love a government contract to develop that for you.”

“I guess the question comes down to ethics,” Pierce said, crossing his arms over his chest. “This satellite you’re developing would surely violate any space rules as much as the one China was trying to develop. So, what exactly is stopping you from using it to steal from others just like they were planning to do?”

“After the hostages were kidnapped, I talked to the leaders of several of those countries about just this. They don’t have the resources to develop something like this on their own, but they have knowledge they can add, provided we make it a multinational joint venture. I have been up many nights thinking about that same ethical dilemma,” Birch admitted.

Greer gave a shrug as she followed along. “I think the answer is simple.”

“You do?” Sebastian asked with a half-smile. He’s been watching her this whole time as she took in the information and could practically see her mind practically turning it over while Birch talked.

“I do. A multinational collaboration resulting in new international laws and regulations governing the rules of space,” she said with a smile.

“Ah, but we need a way to enforce said rules,” Birch replied.

“I know. So you build your satellite to protect us from that. The one you were going to build, but with some tweaks. However, no one nation has control over it. The allied nations run it together. You could do that from Diego Garcia’s base in the Indian Ocean. It’s already set up to monitor satellites, and while Diego Garcia is a mystery to most, meaning, they either don’t know about it or they think it could possibly be used as a CIA black site, it’s actually a UK territory with UK and US soldiers on it. It’s already multinational and has the infrastructure on it.”

Sebastian loved to see Greer’s mind work.

“The Ali Rahman royal family, Queen Suri, and I’m sure King Draven of Bermalia, and potentially Deming Nikan of Crusina would support working with the United States. All of you tackle this politically in the UN while the satellite is being built,” Greer concluded.

Sebastian gave Greer a slight nod of his head in agreement. Well, partial agreement. “I agree that you should move forward, setting out new laws on an international level, but

meanwhile, it's the wild west up there and you need a Wyatt Earp to handle things."

"I thought Wyatt Earp was a good guy?" Cassidy asked.

Sebastian shook his head. "You could argue he was both a hero and a villain. He walked that tightrope and fell off on both sides of it several times. However, he didn't mind getting dirty to do what needed to be done for the overall good."

"Sort of like you," Sienna, Ryan's wife, said, getting straight to the point.

"I never claimed to be good. In fact, I've clearly stated I wasn't," Sebastian answered back. Sienna, even when balancing a toddler on her hip, didn't seem intimidated. Damn these Keeneston women. His glares elicited eye rolls, his authoritative tone elicited snorts of amusement, and his regular acts of intimidation were met with laughter.

"Hmm," Sienna was thoughtful, looking at him closely but didn't say anything further.

Sebastian couldn't afford to be good. Good didn't get the job done. Being good and nice couldn't save his mother. Being good and nice didn't stop the bullies throughout his childhood. Being good and nice wouldn't protect Greer. He couldn't stop bullets or negotiate hostile takeovers with apple pies. With that in mind, he raised the apple pie from his lap and set it on the table. He had work to do and he couldn't worry about being a nice guy when he did it.

Greer watched Sienna cock her head and silently observe Sebastian, just as her aunts were doing. However, no matter how hard they looked, Sebastian would never reveal his heart to them. She'd known him for a year now and he hadn't revealed so much as his home address to her.

Greer's mind turned to the issue at hand. Something had been bothering her, but as she looked at the tablet Sebastian was holding with President Stratton on the screen, it hit her what it was. "How did they know where you were?"

"What?" Sebastian asked as everyone fell quiet.

"It's been bugging me. How did the Chinese spies know where you were? You're the most private person I know. Which is saying a lot considering Ryker is my cousin. But they not only knew what you were working on, they also knew that not only had you developed the code, but that it wasn't written down. And they knew exactly when and where you were to kidnap you. So, how did they know?" Greer asked

"Son of a bitch," Sebastian cursed. "I never thought about that. I use only my technology on my devices and only a handful of people know what that is."

“Do you trust that handful of people?” Greer asked pointedly.

“I do,” Sebastian answered immediately. That wasn’t the answer Greer expected to hear. In fact, it was strange to hear that Sebastian trusted anyone.

“Your satellites,” President Birch said suddenly. “The Chinese are further ahead than we know. They hacked SA Tech’s satellites.”

“Or they have spies on the ground,” Greer pointed out. “Probably both. As much as technology will advance, spies will always be around to infiltrate. You sure haven’t gotten rid of American spies overseas.”

“It’s safe to say what we’re on is no longer secure, Birch. Have your team scrub your systems now.”

“Be safe. Everyone, protect Sebastian at all costs. That’s an order,” Birch said before Sebastian turned off the tablet and removed its battery and internal card.

“Who knows about the code and what you were working on?” Greer’s father asked Sebastian as he finally holstered his gun.

“I can’t say,” Sebastian said grimly. “But I’ll notify them.”

“How? We don’t know what technology is secure,” her father pointed out. “Now isn’t the time to be mysterious. We need to get to the bottom of this.”

Sebastian shook his head. “I’m not being mysterious. For their safety, I swore I would never divulge their names. Even to you, to Greer, or to Birch. As far as how to contact them? I’ll think of something.”

“What about the satellite?” Pierce asked and Greer looked over to where he, his daughter Piper, Sophie, and Kale were talking.

“It was destroyed,” Jackson said. “We made sure of it.”

“So, we need to build another one and see who hacked Sebastian’s satellites and how,” Pierce said to the group.

“We?” Sebastian was confused. “Are you suggesting we build what Erwin worked years on right now?”

“Yeah,” Piper said with a shrug. “It can’t be that hard. Thanks to your investment in my company, I have some great ideas for nanotech on the satellite. I already sold new nanotech materials for the next rocket. It’s considerably stronger, smarter, and lighter than the metals used now.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Sebastian said, staring at Piper.

Piper shrugged. “I sent you a sample last month. You said you didn’t want to know the day-to-day. You just kind of threw money at me and ran.”

“Same here,” Sophie said. “I have loads of weapons ideas for space. This is going to be so much fun.”

“Piper, can we use your lab?” Pierce asked.

“I’ll need that code,” Kale said and Greer noticed he gave a small smirk. “I can work on the operating system with some friends.”

“He already knows some of it,” Abby whispered, coming up next to her. “Kale could never lie well.”

“Yeah, that’s interesting, isn’t it? Kale and Sebastian have already been working together.” Greer suddenly gave a little laugh. “And Alex. That’s the other person who knows. I should have figured it out sooner.”

“Why do you say that?” Abby asked.

“Dude,” Greer said as if that answered everything. And it did.

“Ugh. You’re right,” Abby said with a groan. “I got so used to hearing Alex say *dude*, I never noticed Kale began dropping it here and there recently. I thought it was just from when we helped Porter and Willa. But now thinking about it, the *dudanese* has really picked up.”

Greer nodded. “Dudanese is contagious.” Greer went back to the discussion around her and heard that they’d decided to work out of Sophie’s weapons lab because it was larger and closer.

Abby was quiet for a moment and then shifted so that her face was turned toward Greer and away from everyone else. “It’s okay. You know that, right?”

“I know. We’ll work this out and take down who’s behind it.”

“No, Greer. It’s okay to have feelings for him.”

Greer swallowed and thought about asking whom Abby meant, but she wouldn’t insult Abby by playing dumb. “That’s not what’s stopping me, us, whatever it is. Quite frankly, I don’t know if I hate him or love him. Also, it wouldn’t matter. Sebastian has made it clear he’s not interested in me either.”

Abby just smiled. “If you say so.” It was clear Abby disagreed with her, but then she turned to face the roomful of people. “Let’s pick this up tomorrow. Greer and her team have been up nonstop since this began. Let’s give them some time to rest and we’ll all face it fresh tomorrow. Lucas, Talon,” Abby said, getting their attention. “Poppy and Zinnia said they

have room at the bed-and-breakfast. Would you like Dylan and me to drop you off there?”

Lucas and Talon smiled and nodded.

“I’ll get to them soon enough,” Abby muttered before turning to hug Greer. “I’m glad you’re safe. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to back you up.”

Greer smiled at her best friend and gave her an extra squeeze. “Dylan did the right thing. I am very happy for you both and fully expect to be named godmother.”

Greer knew it would take a good ten minutes for everyone to say goodbye. Leaving in the South was a process. You didn’t just say “bye” and walk out the door. No, you said something to each person, shared a bit more gossip, walked outside together, stopped, and talked by the car for a little longer before getting into the car and rolling down the window so that you could continue talking, and then finally leaving after eliciting a promise to say hello to everyone’s mama. Luckily, everyone’s mama was here so that would trim five minutes off.

Greer and Abby slowly herded everyone toward the door. Greer tried to cut Sebastian out, but Grandma Marcy got to him first. “Be a dear and help an old woman down those stairs.”

Sebastian automatically put out his arm for Grandma Marcy to lean on as he escorted her from the living room. When Greer looked back at the herd, she saw Abby smile at her. Okay, so Sebastian wasn’t a total asshole. He was nice to her grandmother.

“I don’t like him one bit,” her father practically growled as he came up to walk beside her. He pulled her back a bit and

suddenly Greer was surrounded by three pissed-off FBI men who just happened to be family.

“He is not staying here with you tonight. You stay at the house with us,” her father demanded as her brothers nodded.

“I will do no such thing. I was given orders to protect Sebastian by the president.”

“Then you come stay with Evie and me and we’ll all watch him. Closely. Very, very closely,” Jackson said, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring down at her. Greer rolled her eyes at him.

“You will do no such thing,” Evie said, rushing up to grab Jackson’s arm. “The guest rooms are being renovated. I’m sorry, there’s no room.”

“They are not,” Jackson started to argue, but his wife was having none of it.

“They will be about three minutes after we get home. Now, trust your sister and congratulate her on leading a successful rescue mission,” Evie ordered even as Sienna and Greer’s mother joined them. “And thank you for bringing him home to me.”

“It was fun working with you.” Jackson hugged her and Greer smiled into his chest as she hugged him back. She had great brothers, well, apart from their overprotective streak. “Sebastian can stay with Ryan. Good night.”

Evie dragged Jackson away even as Sienna was shaking her head. “Sorry. Ash has a molar or something coming in and is crying up a fuss at night. Our house is no good.”

“We have plenty of room now we have an empty nest,” her father said with a big smile as he crossed his arms over his

chest. “My little girl’s room is waiting for her. Sebastian can stay in the basement. Safer that way.”

“Honey,” her mother said sweetly. “Our daughter is a grown woman and you are interfering with her work. She’s doing nothing different from what you did when we first met.”

“Exactly,” her father hissed. “And see what happened? Sex and three kids happened.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.” At least that’s what Greer thought her mother muttered before her mother turned and smiled at her. “We’ll just be going. If you need us, we’ll be at home.”

“We’re all going,” her father said stubbornly.

“The vacuum cleaner incident will look like a walk in the park if you don’t kiss your daughter goodnight and leave without saying another word,” Greer’s mother whispered quietly with a smile on her face. A smile that had Ryan running for the door. That was Mom’s *if you don’t do what I say I will lose it* face. Greer took a step back, just in case.

“Dad, I’ll be fine. Thank you for being worried about me. I know you have my back if I need you.” Greer rose up and kissed her father’s cheek. She meant every word of that. There had never been a time that she hadn’t known she had their love and support.

“I love you too, Greer. Call me in the morning and we’ll discuss a protection detail so you have some help,” her father finally relented.

Greer gave a little nod and her mother smiled sweetly at her before walking off with her dad. Greer followed behind them since her assignment was still walking her grandmother down the stairs.

Suddenly her mother turned, smiled brightly at Greer as if she'd just gotten her way, and Greer immediately got nervous. Her mother stepped to the side of the stairs. "Let Greer go first and help Sebastian."

Greer got a look at her grandmother in Sebastian's arms as he easily carried her down the remaining stairs. "What a strong young man. I sure feel safe in your arms. I'm so sorry I was clumsy and dropped my cane like that," she heard her Grandma Marcy say.

"Yes, that muscle spasm sending your cane flying like a missile was really something," Sebastian said dryly. However, he didn't put Grandma Marcy down until he met DeAndre at his car. "Thank you for the pie, ma'am."

"Grandma Marcy." Greer tried to hide the smile at her grandmother's insistence of being called Grandma Marcy. "Come on. Try it out," she ordered Sebastian.

Sebastian was ramrod straight. Greer also noticed his hands were clenched as if it were painful to say the words. "Have a good evening," Sebastian paused and took a breath. "Grandma Marcy."

Grandma Marcy smiled as if she'd won a million dollars. "Such a nice man you are. I'll be seeing you real soon."

Greer didn't know if that was a promise or a threat. She could tell by the slight tic in Sebastian's eyelid that he didn't know either.

"Come on, Bash," Greer said softly to him once everyone had left. "I'll protect you from my scary, kind, apple-pie baking grandmother."

"I never had a grandmother," Sebastian said quietly as he watched the car drive off with Grandma Marcy in it.

“Apparently you do now.” Greer knew better than to ask Sebastian more about it. It actually floored her that he’d admitted he didn’t have one in the first place. Greer literally knew nothing about Sebastian’s life. “I suggest making up for lost time.”

“What do you mean?” Sebastian asked as they headed back up the stairs.

“Well, Grandma Marcy’s pros are great hugs, fantastic chats about life, and desserts that will make you think you’ve tasted heaven. Just mention you like chocolate, or caramel, or peaches . . . whatever, and the next day *poof!* your dream dessert appears at your door. She’s like a dessert genie.”

“And the cons?” Sebastian asked as she closed and locked the door.

“Hmm?”

“You said pros, so that means there are cons.” Sebastian took a sniff of the pie and his face relaxed. Yup, dessert genie.

“Oh not much,” Greer said with a smile as she reached for two plates, a knife, and two forks.

“Then it won’t take you long to tell me what they are.”

“Just a slight obsession with her kids and grandkids marrying and having children. No biggie. Here, taste the pie.” Greer shoved the fork in his mouth to stop the line of questioning, especially since it was clear Grandma was Team Sebastian.

Sebastian moaned and all questioning stopped. “You weren’t lying. I understand Tate and Birch’s obsession with these.”

Greer cleaned her plate and eyed the remaining pie.

“Yeah, there’s no way this is surviving the night.” Sebastian read her mind and cut two more pieces before grabbing it all and heading into the living room. They sat on the couch making small moaning noises as they finished off the entire pie.

As they ate, they talked about the other desserts Grandma Marcy made and Greer found herself very focused on where their knees rubbed against each other and how their thighs brushed against each other. It seemed to sizzle from that point across and through her entire body. So, maybe she’d had a small crush on Sebastian. And maybe she was upset about that since she didn’t like feeling vulnerable. And well, crushes were called crushes for a reason. They left you crushed and vulnerable when they didn’t work out. But seeing Sebastian with her grandmother had her actually contemplating the reality of that crush.

They were both stubborn, yes. However, Sebastian was the first person she called when she needed help. Sebastian regularly asked her opinion too. They butted heads, argued, disagreed, but she never felt as if he was mad at her. Well, okay, that was a lie. He was definitely angry when she was injured or when she put herself in danger.

Greer bit her lip to center herself. No, she was just making stuff up to fit the bets being placed. Sebastian was a man of the world who was so private she didn’t even know who his parents were. He would never go for a small-town girl who was more comfortable in Kevlar than silk.

“Where is the spare room? I want to grab a shower and head to bed. I need to get to work early tomorrow on this new satellite.”

“Oh, um,” Greer said with a *sorry* smile. “No spare room.”

“I saw a door on either side of the bathroom,” Sebastian said questioningly.

“Yeah, it could be a small bedroom, I guess, but it’s always been used as an office. No worries, though. You’ll take the bedroom where you talked to President Stratton. I’ll sleep on the couch. There’s only one full bathroom in the hall. You can shower there. I’ll grab some towels.”

Greer stood to get the towels when Sebastian stopped her. “I’m not sleeping in your bedroom while you sleep out here on an old couch.”

Old? Yes. It had been Jackson’s when he’d lived here. Comfortable? Kinda. It would do. “It’s fine. This way I can keep an eye on each door.” Greer pointed to the back door everyone used and also another door on the opposite side of the living room from the kitchen. “That goes down to my mom’s shop.”

“I’ll take the couch,” Sebastian said as if it were a done deal.

“That doesn’t make sense. I need to guard you and therefore, I need to be here with the doors. I couldn’t guard you from the bedroom if you were out here and someone kicked in the door. Bang. You’re dead before I’m able to get out of bed,” Greer argued. “Now, I’m going to get your towels and some sheets for the couch.”

Greer spun and was surprised when Sebastian didn’t argue for once. Greer Parker, negotiator extraordinaire.

Sebastian shook his head at the maddening woman. Yeah, he could be an asshole, but he wasn't a complete dick too. He'd never make a woman sleep on the couch in her own home just like he wouldn't let a little old lady fall down an old staircase.

Well, Greer thought she'd won and man, was she wrong. Sometimes, though, he just couldn't talk sense into her stubborn streak so he was just going to do what a man had to do. It was a long running tradition that worked wonders and Greer was going to soon discover it.

He followed her down the small hall and into the bathroom where she was setting out towels. "I'm sorry I don't have your clothes. All I have are some of Jackson's old things in the back of the closet. I'll lay them out so you have something to sleep in."

"I sleep in the nude, so don't worry about that. I'll get a new wardrobe tomorrow. Why don't you take your shower first so you can get ready for bed while I take my shower?" Sebastian suggested. He tried to act casual, but his mind was three steps ahead. He had to hide the smile he was feeling at the anticipation.

"Oh, sure. Um, do me a favor, though." Greer handed him his towels. "Can you stay right outside the door so I can hear

you if there's trouble?"

"Sure," Sebastian didn't argue because in the end he was going to get what he wanted—her in his bed. Well, *her* bed, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that this time when they shared a bed, he wouldn't be hypothermic.

Sebastian walked out into the hall and took a seat against the wall opposite the door. Only Greer didn't close it all the way. She left it cracked so that she could hear him easily. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, Greer. There are no bad guys in the hallway. Can I ask you a personal question?" Sebastian called out as he heard the faucet turn on as she brushed her teeth. A garbled sound came out and he took that as a yes. "How do you have a sex life with your family threatening any male in a five-mile radius?"

She didn't answer right away. When the faucet turned off, he scooted a little to the left to look through the crack in the door. He caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror as she pulled off her shirt. Sebastian swallowed hard. He shouldn't watch, but he couldn't take his eyes off the reflection.

He'd seen women in thousand-dollar bras who were paid to show off their tits that didn't look half as sexy as Greer standing there in a black sports bra, a sloppy ponytail, and black military cargo pants. Even with the sports bra containing her breasts, he admired the swell of them that flared out and then curved down into a flat stomach. Not the kind of flat from eating no more than two peas a day either. The kind that was made from working hard, lifting weights, and running. Sometimes she was caught, though. The scar from the knife was evident and made Sebastian clench his jaw in anger. He

hated when she was in danger. He should have done more to protect her.

Then she wiggled out of the cargo pants and he was left with her in black panties that showed the bottom of the tempting round globes of her bottom when she turned around. “Yeah, why do you think I took assignments away from Keeneston,” she answered with a laugh.

Sebastian forgot what she was talking about as he watched her bend over and then he heard the sound of the shower being turned on. Speaking of being turned on. Voyeurism had never been Sebastian’s thing, but he was rethinking that with Greer. This was one of the most erotic sights because of how unpracticed it was. He’d had women strip for him before. They’d danced, they’d bumped and grinded, they’d done a hell of a lot more than undress for a shower, but this wasn’t practiced. This was just Greer. He’d seen her naked in the snow cave, but this was different. This let him look without being watched himself. He could drink his fill of her enough so his fantasies would be overflowing.

Sebastian was about to turn away when she pushed her panties down and he got a full view of her behind. “Wait, I thought you went with Dylan and Abby to protect the princess, not to get laid.”

He didn’t like the idea of a man touching her and suddenly he grimaced because he realized he was sounding a lot like Jackson.

“That was just a perk of the job,” Greer called out as she pulled her bra off.

Sebastian had never prayed as hard as he was now praying for her to turn around. Instead, she stepped into the shower and his view was lost as the curtain closed behind her.

“You sound as if you disapprove when I know for a fact you have been with way more woman than I could probably even count,” Greer called out.

She was probably right, but that didn’t change a rush of jealousy he got at the idea of her with other men. “None recently,” he called out. Which was true. When he’d started thinking of Greer instead of the women he was using, he’d just stopped bothering with them. He wasn’t that much of an asshole.

“Yeah, because you were kidnapped.” Greer chuckled and Sebastian smiled.

“I’m not the kind of guy who has to have sex to survive. I can and do go without it,” Sebastian called out. “You do know I work around a hundred and twenty hours a week, right? That doesn’t leave as much time for sex.”

“That doesn’t leave much time for anything,” Greer called out. “What do you do for fun?”

“Take over companies,” Sebastian called back. “Sometimes I hack a little with Alex.”

The water shut off and Sebastian’s eyes went back to the sliver of the mirror he could see through the cracked door. The curtain opened and there Greer was. He traced a drop of water that rolled down her clavicle, over the soft swell of her breast, and to the tip of her nipple before dropping off.

“You need to have more fun,” Greer called out.

“I have an idea of something fun to do,” he muttered as Greer moved out of sight. He needed to calm down or it would be painfully clear when he stood what kind of fun he wanted to have.

The door opened a minute later and Greer smiled out at him. “Your turn.”

“Thanks,” Sebastian said, using the towel to cover himself. It was becoming a common problem around Greer. “Want me to leave the door open?”

The idea of her watching him the way he had just watched her had his heart racing.

“No, that’s okay. I’m going to be getting my bed ready. I’m pretty tired so I’m going to lock everything up and set up my alarms and then head off to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.” Greer looked up at him through her lashes as she held the change of clothes in her hands and the towel around her body.

Sebastian had to take a deep breath. She’d see his plan soon enough. Ripping off the towel and taking her hard against the hallway wall wasn’t the plan he had, but it was starting to sound better and better. Instead, Sebastian gave her a little nod and moved into the bathroom.

Sebastian hadn’t meant to take such a long shower. The hot water had just felt so good that he hadn’t been able to move. He just stood there with his hands pressed against the wall and his head bent as the water ran over his body.

By the time he got out, dried off, brushed his teeth with the toothbrush Greer had given him, and wrapped the towel around his waist, the apartment was dark except for a lamp in the bedroom.

Sebastian turned off the bathroom light and headed to the living room. The second he stepped foot around the couch he

saw Greer open her eyes. “Sebastian? Is everything okay?” she asked sleepily.

“It will be. Come on,” he said as he bent to pick her up.

“What the hell?” Greer yelled as she sat up and smacked his hand away.

“I told you, you are not sleeping on this couch,” Sebastian said, staring down at her.

“And you’re not sleeping on it either.” Sebastian reached for her when she smacked his hand again. “Just try to move me and—”

Sebastian grabbed her wrists, yanked her up as he bent a little, and threw her over his shoulder, caveman style. “This way has worked for men for tens of thousands of years to deal with stubborn women.”

“Sebastian! Put me down right now!” Greer yelled and smacked his ass. “I swear, I will rip off this towel—”

“Go ahead,” Sebastian said as he strode down the hallway, making sure she didn’t hit any of the walls. “If you want to see me naked, all you have to do is ask. I’m at your disposal.”

“Oh, sure. For that you’re at my disposal,” Greer grumbled and Sebastian smirked as he tossed her onto the bed.

Greer bounced and then was up and fighting in her oversized Keeneston High School Football T-shirt.

“Stop,” Sebastian ordered in his boardroom voice. “We are both sleeping in the bed. We shared a sleeping bag so we can share a bed. I’ll even let you have the side closest to the door so you have a clear shot at anyone coming in.”

“You want to sleep with me?” Greer asked as if it were the strangest thing she’d ever heard.

“Yes. Now, get in bed,” Sebastian ordered.

Greer sat down demurely on the bed and looked up at him. She bit her lip and said, “Yes, sir,” in a low sultry voice that had his towel close to being ripped off by his growing erection. That was the hottest thing he’d ever heard—Greer surrendering herself to him.

She reached for him and he sucked in a breath of anticipation. The punch to the stomach wasn’t the touch he had been expecting. Pain shot through his already sore ribs as he cursed and bent over to catch his breath.

“Get real, Bash. I’m not some dim damsel you can order around.” Sebastian looked up to find Greer staring down at him with her hands on her hips.

“Get in bed, Greer,” Sebastian said between his clenched jaws.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I’m the one in charge here. You do what I say.”

“Fine. I like a woman who takes charge in bed. Once we’re both in it, you’re in charge.”

Greer tossed her hands up in the air in frustration and Sebastian leapt forward. He caught her around the waist and together they fell back onto the bed. “I told you to get in bed! Ow! Did you just give me a nipple twister?”

Sebastian sat up from where he’d managed to pin her to the bed and covered his chest protectively. He looked down at Greer’s satisfied smile.

“You should see what else I can twist.”

Sebastian gave a shrug. “It might be worth it.”

Greer rolled her eyes.

Sebastian let out a sigh. “Okay, real talk here.” He waited for Greer to settle down and then he continued. “I have complete faith in your abilities. However, while I may not act like it all the time, I was raised with manners. I can’t let you sleep on the couch in your own home. By sleeping together, you can protect me and I can protect you. Can’t we just have each other’s backs?”

Greer was quiet for a moment. “You’re not doing this because you don’t respect me and want to take charge?”

“No, I’m not. I respect the hell out of you.”

“You’re not doing this just to sleep with me?” Greer asked.

“Well, of course I’m trying to sleep with you. I’ve been telling you that all night,” Sebastian said dryly, purposefully ignoring how she meant the question.

“Ugh!” Greer smacked his arm, but this time it was playfully done. “Okay. Fine. You win. I’ll sleep here tonight.”

Sebastian smiled in victory and Greer rolled her eyes. “And stop that thing from waving at me. While it is very impressive, it’s not going to happen. Sorry, big guy,” she said to his penis that was hitting her stomach.

“Yeah, talking to him and calling him an impressive big guy isn’t going to help your goal of calming him down,” Sebastian said as he rolled off her and onto his side of the bed.

“I guess fighting turns you on. I should have guessed that,” Greer said as she slid under the covers next to him.

No. You turn me on.

Sebastian didn’t say that though. Instead, he put his arms under the pillow and stared at the ceiling as he listened to Greer slowly go to sleep. It was strange having a woman sleep

next to him. He never had women spend the night. He didn't want to lead them into thinking there was more to their relationship than sex. He doubted he could be vulnerable enough and trust a woman enough to sleep with her all night. Or, at least for the few hours a night he slept.

Then Greer rolled over in her sleep and Sebastian was lost. Her arm came over his chest, her leg was thrown over his, and her face was in the crook of his shoulder. His arm came down to hold her to him and finally his body just relaxed. It felt so right. His eyes drifted closed and he fell into a deep sleep.

Greer came awake realizing two things. One, she was very warm and cozy and two, her nose was pressed against something that smelled really good. Masculine, woody, and . . . Sebastian!

“Morning,” Sebastian said in a rough voice that indicated he’d just woken up as well. He blinked in the sunlight as she took in the scruff that had grown on his normally clean-shaven face and the way her body felt pressed against his. And pressed it was.

This was not the same as the time in the sleeping bag. They were pressed together then for warmth and because the sleeping bag was so tight there was literally nowhere else for them to sleep. Now she was draped over his body with his arm around her shoulder and his fingers dancing along her back.

And it felt wonderful.

Greer shot up in bed and took a deep breath. “Wow, it’s nine o’clock. I can’t remember ever sleeping this late.”

“Me neither,” Sebastian said, sitting up in bed and stretching.

Greer saw the way his chest and abdominal muscles rippled in the sunlight and stared. She’d seen plenty of men

naked or at least half naked. Hello, a million and one cousins and FBI teammates. However, Sebastian was different. He wasn't family for one. For another, he seemed so unobtainable yet here he was in her bed. Naked.

I have complete faith in your abilities. I respect the hell out of you.

The man looking over at her had said that to her last night and that had been hands down the sexiest thing a man has ever told her.

“If you want me to push the sheet down so you can look more, all you have to do is ask.”

Oh shoot. She had been caught staring. Greer's eyes popped back up to his and his arrogant smirk. “In your dreams.” *And mine.*

Greer scrambled from the bed trying to play it cool. “I'm sorry, I'm not really a breakfast person so I don't know what I have, but we can always hit up the café.”

Sebastian shook his head. “I don't do breakfast either. My clothes should be delivered soon and I thought I could meet with Kale to see if he has any ideas on how to secure my system. Then I need to get to work on the satellite.”

“Sounds like a plan. I'll let everyone know.”

“How? Aren't the phones possibly bugged?” Sebastian pointed out.

Greer smiled slowly. “Follow me.” She turned around and began to head out of the bedroom.

“Anywhere.”

Greer spun around and there Sebastian stood with Big Foot winking at her. Her hoo-ha practically cheered. “You're not

hiding in my woods,” she muttered before shaking her head and forcing her eyes from Sebastian. “Get dressed and meet me in the living room.”

Greer unlocked the door leading to her mother’s shop. “It’s okay,” she said looking down at her hoo-ha. “I’ll find someone really nice and satisfying as soon as I’m done with this assignment. Maybe we’ll be sent to Italy again. That will perk you right back up.”

“Are you talking to your vagina?”

Greer refused to bang her head against the door. Instead she ignored Sebastian’s question and opened the door. “My mom has a landline and unless they knew to come to Keeneston and bug everyone’s phones, we’re good to set up meetings for the day.”

Greer walked down the sweeping staircase in the historic house-turned-shop and over to the cash register. She let Sebastian walk around the still-closed boutique while she made the calls to set up the plans for the rest of the day.

“Your mom is really talented,” Sebastian said, coming out of the hat room with a Panama hat on. “This is perfect for my beach resorts.”

Greer looked up in surprise. She’d never seen Sebastian in a hat and certainly could never imagine him strolling alongside the beach in a hat that made him look incredibly sexy.

“It looks good on you,” Greer said, thinking she’d have to have another talk with her hoo-ha again about calming down. The shadow that paused in front of the curtained front door brought all sexual fantasies she was having to a screeching halt. “Get back into the hat room and stay there.” Greer

whispered the order even as she pulled a gun from under the counter.

She should have come down with hers but hadn't thought she'd need it yet. Her mom wouldn't mind her borrowing hers for just a moment.

"Your mom has a gun under the counter?" Sebastian whispered, not doing what she told him and hiding.

"Everyone in Keeneston has a gun under their counter, desk, seat, or in their spare coat. Now do what I say and get back," Greer hissed and the doorknob turned.

She crouched down and moved silently forward. She reached the door and slowly unlocked it and then threw the door open and pointed the gun into the face of the person trying to break in.

"Damn, girl. Are you trying to scare me to death? I look too damn good to die today, thank you very much."

A young man stood there looking very damn good, indeed. He was slender, his blond hair was perfection, his smooth skin flawless, and his suit to die for.

"I'm Evan, I'm here to dress Mr. Abel. But look at you in that old T-shirt," he said with a frown.

"I could still shoot you, Evan," Greer said dryly as she lowered the gun and glanced down at the oversized T-shirt she'd slept in.

"You do you, girlfriend." Evan looked past her and a slow smile spread across his lips. "Hello, handsome. Please tell me you're Mr. Abel."

Greer opened the door to let Evan in and saw Sebastian smirking. "I think she'd look better in nothing at all, but—"

Sebastian shrugged and gave Evan a wink.

“Anything would be an improvement over that shirt,” Evan said with a roll of his eyes. “I mean, I have an eye shadow in here that you would slay in. Put yourself in my hands after I finish dressing Mr. Abel and I will have you looking like a fierce queen.”

“I already am a fierce queen. See my gun?”

The door kicked open, Evan screamed, Sebastian vaulted forward to grab Greer, and Greer thought she was going to die as Aniyah pointed her gun in Greer’s face.

“No, honey,” Evan said as he stood up from where he had ducked down. “That’s a fierce queen.”

“I know I am,” Aniyah said with a roll of her hips and a toss of her head. “But thank you for recognizing. Now do I shoot this little man who was snooping around or not?”

Greer chuckled and put her mom’s gun away. “Not. He’s here to dress Mr. Abel.”

“I hope it’s because you undressed him,” Aniyah said to Greer, shoving her pink leopard print gun back in her bag.

Evan fanned himself, Sebastian smirked, and Greer rolled her eyes. “Evan, there’s a dressing room in the back you two can use.”

“I am loving this boutique. Oh my lord, is this Paige Parker’s shop?” Evan asked as his eyes lit on a hat display. Greer’s mom was *the* premier Derby hat maker.

“Yes, and I’ll let my mom know her gun isn’t fierce enough.”

“Shut the front door. You’re her daughter? Lord, you do need help. But don’t worry about living up to your mother’s

delicious creations. Evan is here now.”

Evan ushered Sebastian into the back of the room before he hurried out again. “I want it all!” he said, pointing to all the hats as he rushed out the front door. A moment later he was back, pushing a clothing rack.

“Well, this is an interesting morning.”

“It always is in Keeneston,” Aniyah said with a wink. “Well, since I don’t need to shoot anyone, I’m off to work.”

Greer locked the door after her, ran up the stairs, washed and brushed, and got dressed in jeans and a moss green sweater. She threw her hair into her regular ponytail and scoffed at the idea of putting on makeup. She slid her gun into the back of her waistband, a knife into her boot, and the fart taser into her pocket before running back downstairs.

It took thirty minutes, but Evan and Sebastian finally came out of the dressing room and damned if Greer’s hoo-ha didn’t start singing.

“This is how you slay,” Evan said, pointing to Sebastian. “Maybe just a little blush.” Evan reached into his bag and came out with makeup. Greer leapt back as Evan tried to grab her. “Come on, just a little blush. Maybe some eye shadow.”

Greer hurried away from him and soon they were racing around the store. “Lip gloss! You have to at least put on lip gloss!” Evan cried as she hid behind Sebastian.

“No!” she called out and finally pulled her gun. “Put the lip gloss down and step away from the makeup bag.”

Evan rolled his eyes and gave her a look that withered her. Sebastian laughed and Greer pouted. “Fine. You have thirty seconds.”

To his credit, Evan didn't gloat. He just got to work and by the time she reached twenty-seven he had a smug look on his face and the makeup was put away.

"Ever thought about relocating to New York?" Sebastian asked Evan as he stared at Greer.

"What? Is it bad? Please tell me I don't look like some over made up Barbie."

"I'd love to, but my husband is here in Lexington and we just love the small-town charm," Evan said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. "Call me if you ever need anything. Oh, and girl, you're now a queen."

"I'd worship you," Sebastian whispered into her ear.

Shut up, hoo-ha.

Greer ignored Sebastian and went to the mirror and looked at herself. It was her, only elevated. Evan was right. She did slay in the eye shadow that made her ice-green eyes pop. The lip gloss was a nude color and gave her a quiet sophistication.

"Wow, it's perfect. Thank you, Evan." Greer turned back to the man now packing up. He laid the eye shadow and gloss on the countertop.

"My gift to you. Call me!" Evan waved and rolled his now mostly empty clothes rack out the door.

"Come on, let's go." Greer spun from the mirror and looked into Sebastian's heated eyes. He looked drop-dead sexy in the black suit with the palest green shirt she'd ever seen. It actually reminded her of her eyes. "You do know you don't need to wear a suit, right?"

"It's powerful."

“But does it stop a bullet?” Greer asked. “Mine does. Come on, I’ll have Piper give you a dress shirt of hers that’s bulletproof since I have a feeling you won’t wear a vest.”

Sebastian slammed his fist down on the table so hard the computer jumped. Kale didn’t flinch. “My entire system encryption was hacked?” Sebastian roared in the conference room he and Kale were in.

Sebastian had been in a good mood until Kale had pulled him aside. No one knew that Kale worked for Sebastian and Ryker. He was sure they could or would put it together but the contract stated complete privacy and Sebastian was sticking to that.

“You should have used Willa’s dad’s encryption,” Kale said with a shrug. “Your encryption is good, but it’s a couple of years outdated and that’s not great. Who did it?”

“I did,” Sebastian growled before slamming his hand on the desk again. “Two years ago.” Sebastian let out a long breath as his mind worked through the problem. “I don’t like bringing in outside sources because they can be compromised and here I screwed it all up. So, the Chinese hacked my system and tracked my phone?”

Sebastian saw Kale’s jaw tighten and his hand curve into a tight fist. “No. It wasn’t the Chinese. The Panther is back.”

Sebastian froze. The Panther was a hacker he’d hire in a heartbeat if he could find them. He, she, it, they, whoever was The Panther, gathered top-secret information and sold it via an online auction on the dark web. The information ranged from corporate secrets, intellectual property, to names of government spies and locations of weapons shipments.

“Are you sure?” Sebastian asked.

“I’m having Willa’s father investigate too. Alex’s own investigation agrees with mine. The Panther is back and that’s who sold the information on your system to the Chinese,” Kale told him. “But, now you have Alex and me on your payroll. Give me access to your system and I’ll have you secure in no time.”

“Even from The Panther?” Sebastian asked.

“Even from The Panther. I’ll even set a trap to see if I can catch them. I’ve been working on quantum computing the last couple of years. It opened the world up to me in terms of what I can do.”

It was hard for Sebastian to let go of control. It took him a moment, but he knew it needed to be done. He was so busy running his empire, he simply couldn’t do it all. “I’ll log you in, but I want you to show me every change you make before you upload it.”

“Of course, dude.”

“No. Stop that right now,” Sebastian snapped. “There are more than enough *dudes* in my life.” Kale snickered as Sebastian worked on Kale’s computer. “I’m trusting you with my company. You betray me and I don’t give a shit who your father is. I’ll kill you myself. Got it?”

“Hey, I’m Team Sebastian,” Kale said with a large smile.

“There’re seriously teams for and against me hooking up with Greer?”

“It’s a town divided, du—bro.”

“Bro isn’t any better,” Sebastian said with a roll of his eyes.

“Nora at the Fluff and Buff is selling T-shirts,” Kale informed him. “Team Sebastian or Team Anyone Else.”

Sebastian groaned. “I’m not dating Greer.”

“Then you’re not nearly as smart as you think you are. Now, let me get to work.”

Kale’s breezy dismissal was also something Sebastian wasn’t used to, but he let it go. The sooner Kale secured his systems, the better.

Sebastian left Kale to his work. He found Greer standing across the security building of the Rahmi royal family laughing with Nash, the second-in-command of their security and husband of weapons-happy Sophie. Greer tossed her head back and laughed out loud. She was breathtaking.

When her eyes caught his and she smiled, Sebastian’s heart did something it had never done before—it warmed. It felt as if it swelled and his whole body felt . . . happy. When was the last time he was happy? An image of him, his mother, Birch, and Birch’s mom laughing over ice cream cones flashed into his mind. Had it really been that long?

“Hey. You ready to talk satellite development? Nash says Sophie was up all night designing space weapons,” Greer said.

“She actually used the words *laser beams in space*,” Nash said with a smile that told everyone around how much he loved his wife. “She was like a kid at Christmas. Didn’t sleep a wink.”

“Then we won’t keep her waiting.” Sebastian reached for Greer only to catch himself and pull his hand back. What the hell was he doing? Reaching to hold her hand? He needed to fix this problem and fix it fast. Make no mistake about it. Greer Parker was a problem.

“Piper, this is amazing,” Sebastian said, handling the material she swore was stronger than the metal they used on the spaceships.

“Aluminum is light, but the bodies have to be reinforced with titanium and heat shields. This material will do it all,” Piper explained a second before her father, Pierce, kissed the side of her head.

“I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Piper said with a big smile that showed how much it meant to hear those words.

Sebastian understood. He’d felt like he was on top of the world when his mother told him how proud she was of his academic accomplishments.

“But can it hold a laser beam, a nuclear weapon, an EMP device, and missiles? So many missiles,” Sophie asked as she spread out a five-foot drawing of dimensions and specs for her space weapons.

“You said you had ideas that Erwin wouldn’t let you use,” Pierce said with an indulgent smile to his niece before turning to Sebastian. “What were they?”

Sebastian took one small corner of Sophie's paper and drew his idea for a spy satellite. "See, most spy satellites are large and can easily be seen on radar. Plus, they are a burden to move quickly. Drones have become so popular because of their size, speed, and maneuverability. They can get you the information you need on the ground faster than the satellite can. However, they can only stay up for a short time. Plus, how can you sneak up on something if everyone can see you do it?"

Pierce looked down and nodded. Greer glanced over his shoulder but generally kept out of the way. "I like your thinking. Are those solar?"

Sebastian nodded. "I thought to have a large solar satellite that would go up into orbit that everyone could see. Then this detachable centerpiece—a space drone, if you will—is fueled by a solar-rechargeable battery. It's so small that it shouldn't be easy to spot when it's on a mission. It needs to be fast and easily maneuverable. That's where we house the ability to do our spy damage. Once we establish a connection to their satellite we can easily download the data, wipe their satellite, or give it commands to do anything we want."

"Where's the fun in that?" Sophie asked. "We need to make it go *boom*. Space explosions. Come on, now that's cool."

Sebastian found himself smiling at Sophie's enthusiasm. "And yes, weapons. However, think in centimeters, *millimeters*, instead of meters."

Sophie turned serious and Sebastian could practically see the wheels turning in her mind. Pierce was already taking the paper away from Sebastian and marking up Sebastian's idea. Piper was looking at her fabric and then smiled.

“You want the smaller part to be invisible, right? I can do that with my nanotech. I’ve been working on an invisibility suit for Dylan and Abby. Don’t laugh,” Piper said, holding up her hands.

“I’m not. It’s fascinating. Go on,” Sebastian instructed. He saw Greer notice and her eyes softened. Not that he needed her approval, but he felt it nonetheless.

“Well, it’s not actually invisible. It’s all about light particles and the material being able to adjust to the light particles around it on the go. It’s not perfect yet, but it’s pretty close and it would be perfect in space where you’re really not dealing with as many light changes as you are in Times Square, for instance.”

“I can build this,” Pierce said, his eyes glued to the computer. “But we need an actual expert to make sure it’s right.”

“Let me see if there’s someone Birch wants me to use. Should we discuss this over lunch?” Sebastian asked.

“No, I want to work on this, but thanks for asking,” Piper said and Sophie nodded her agreement.

“Yeah, thanks, but I’m going to do some research,” Pierce said, his eyes already moving over whatever he was reading. “Hey, there’s this woman whose name keeps popping up. Kirana Koh. See if she’s on the president’s cleared list.”

“Will do.” He couldn’t get his phone secured fast enough.

“Ready?” Greer asked. When he nodded she went out the door first and he noticed she scanned the area before moving from the doorway. “Is the Blossom Café okay for lunch? If not there, we can go to my grandmother’s or drive into Lexington and eat at Landon’s restaurant.”

“The café is fine. I want to get to work on the coding for the satellite. Landon is one of your cousins, right?”

Greer got behind the wheel to the SUV and nodded. “He’s Annie and Cade’s youngest. He opened his own restaurant recently and it’s so good. He partnered with Cady Woodson who owns the bourbon distillery here and incorporates her bourbon into the menu quite a bit.”

“Hmm. I’ve been thinking of diversifying my alcohol investments,” Sebastian said. “Is it better than Drunk Dog?”

Greer snorted. “Drunk Dog? I couldn’t even drink that crap when I was a teenager and was willing to try anything. How do you, Mr. Rich and Snooty know about Drunk Dog?”

“I drink it every year on the anniversary of my mother’s death.” Sebastian couldn’t believe he told her. Only Birch knew that, but he felt compelled to dislodge the myth that he was nothing more than a billionaire. “I wasn’t always rich, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” Greer said, and he appreciated that she didn’t dig for more information about his mother’s death.

“I grew up with my father always on deployment. My mother worked while I was at school and then snuck out to work nights while I slept, all to give me the best gift.”

“What gift was that?” Greer asked as Sebastian fixed his gaze out the window of the SUV. His mind took him to the past as he watched the rolling hills of the countryside go by.

“The gift of education.”

Greer was quiet for a moment. “That’s the best gift she could have given you. Was she able to see what you did with that gift?”

“No,” Sebastian said.

“Well, I didn’t know your mother, but”—Sebastian looked over at her ready to shut down whatever she was going to say —“no mother would want her son drinking Drunk Dog. I would rather be waterboarded.”

Sebastian smiled at her as they came up over a hill. “Shit!” Greer yelled as she slammed on the brakes but it was too late. The car ran over the spike strips. The tires blew and Sebastian hung on as Greer tried to control the SUV.

Her vehicle fishtailed while two other SUVs blocked the road up ahead. “Stay here,” Greer ordered as she unhooked the seatbelt.

“What the hell are you doing? The car is still moving!” Sebastian went to grab for her, but she yanked the car hard to the left so that his door was facing the roadblock, and bolted out of her door.

Sebastian saw her hit the pavement and roll, but then she was out of sight as the SUV he was in became a sitting duck when it rolled to a stop after going off the road and into a ditch.

Five men came forward with automatic weapons pointed at him. Sebastian held up his hands. Dammit Greer. She’d put him in a completely vulnerable position and then counted on him to trust that she’d handle it. This was absolute torture for him.

He locked the SUV and flipped off the men. They needed him alive and that gave him a bit of an advantage. He was also giving Greer enough time to do whatever it was she had jumped out of a moving vehicle to do.

One of the men smashed the window with the butt of the gun he was carrying. The glass pebbled and shattered over him. Sebastian was all for putting his trust in Greer, but like hell he was going to just walk away with his kidnapers.

Sebastian saw the needle in the hand of one of the men. They grabbed at him like they did from his car before. Well, Sebastian had learned from them. He seized the arm of the man trying to reach for him and slammed it down on the shattered window. He heard the glass piercing the muscle and then he slammed the arm into the window frame, snapping the bone instantly.

“Gentlemen, I would very much appreciate you stepping away from my vehicle.”

“Just shoot them,” Sebastian yelled as he saw Greer standing between the two SUVs blocking the road. She held a gun in each hand and had the sweetest smile on her face.

“Manners, Bash,” Greer called out. “Gentlemen, welcome to Keeneston. Please be so kind as to drop your weapons and lie on the ground.”

The men looked confused and Sebastian couldn't blame them. He felt just as confused. Then they laughed. At Greer.

“You shouldn't have done that,” Sebastian said with a sigh when he saw her smile slip.

Another man with the needle lunged for Sebastian. He never made it. The first shot took him down. Then gunfire erupted all around. Greer shot, they shot, and everyone forgot about Sebastian. He eased from the car, tapped the closest man on the shoulder, and then punched him out the second he turned around.

Greer took one more down as Sebastian swung the rifle he'd picked up from the downed man like a baseball bat, taking out kidnapper number four. It was almost comical when the one lone kidnapper realized he no longer had backup. He dropped his gun and held up his hands in surrender.

"It's a little too late for that," Greer said, stalking toward him.

Sebastian rolled his eyes and slammed his fist into the man's chin. He dropped to the ground with a thud.

"Hey, that was my bad guy," Greer said, stepping in front of him and putting her hands on her hips.

Sebastian fixed the sleeves of his suit and put his tie back in place. "I believe I'm the one with a grudge. Call it payback."

"You got me there. Want to torture him for information? We could do that over lunch. Have a nice picnic. There's a fire pit at my Uncle Miles's and he's always up for a little interrogation. Maybe have some Rose Sisters' Tea to warm us up?"

Sebastian stared at her as she put zip ties on the live ones.

"I can't tell if you're serious or not and that's kind of scary."

"I've heard that being mysterious is attractive. Isn't that why you do it?" Greer asked, and Sebastian realized she'd set him up and he laughed as a sheriff's SUV pulled up.

"Dammit. I have a bet on a Keeneston invasion being in two days. They move fast. I'm Matt Walz. I'm the sheriff of Keeneston and this one's cousin by marriage."

“Which one are you married to?” Sebastian asked as he shook Matt’s hand. He remembered seeing him around some during his short times in Keeneston but he’d never bothered getting to know anyone.

“Riley. Her father is the scary bald one.”

“Ah,” Sebastian said with a nod. That summed her father up rather well.

“Good job, Greer. Five of them. I’ll put it up on your body tally at the café.”

“Hey, I got two and a half of them,” Sebastian said. “I want that on my body tally. What the hell is a body tally?”

Matt looked mildly surprised as he turned to Sebastian. “One, I didn’t take you as a man who could defend himself. Two, it’s a tally board at the café for the number of bad guys we’ve taken out during various operations. Three, how do you have half a guy?”

“One,” Sebastian said. “After meeting Ahmed, I had a black ops man teach me some moves.”

“Smart.” Matt grinned. “You might survive family dinner.”

“Two,” Sebastian said, moving on while wondering what family dinner had to do with anything. “That is really strange, but who is in the lead? Three, I broke the guy’s arm, she shot him.”

Matt hemmed and hawed. “Okay, I’ll give you the half.”

“No way!” Greer yelled. “I’m the one who killed him.”

“Yeah, but was it really fair after Sebastian broke his arm?”

“It was his shooting arm,” Sebastian pointed out, and Greer flung her hands up in the air.

“Oh, and Ahmed leads the board but refuses to tell us where the bodies are so we really pay attention to who is number two and that’s a fierce tie between Dylan and Abby. However, after the pregnancy announcement, Greer has a real shot to step into contention. She and Jackson are neck and neck at four and five.”

Sebastian shook his head. “I’m still in the Arctic and unconscious, dreaming all of this.”

“Nope, this is Keeneston for sure.” Greer grinned as a Hummer with a lighted Christmas wreath on the grill pulled up and the window rolled down. The epitome of a PTA mom—perfect hair and wearing a long-sleeved polo with a sweater vest over it—peered out.

“Terrorists! This will be the best New Year’s ever! I made a turkey and a wreath for my grill. Now I need New Year’s fireworks. Perfect for terrorists. Maybe I can have a missile exploding instead of fireworks.” The tires spun and then the Hummer peeled out.

“Get naked,” Sebastian ordered Greer. Greer just rolled her eyes at him. “Hmm, this is all real. I would have sworn it was some coma dream.”

“I’ll take the live ones in and send in the evidence team,” Matt said, hefting the men and shoving them into the back of his SUV before pulling out his phone. “Luke, can you and Cody come out and rope off the road until the coroner can get here? Yeah, Greer and Sebastian took some out. Yup, document it and do your thing. Thanks. Two and a half each. No, seriously. A half each. Yup.”

Sebastian was sure his mouth dropped open as he stared at the sheriff explaining the half body to his deputy.

“I love my town,” Greer said, coming over to join him. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Sebastian looked down at her. He suddenly felt ice cold as all the blood drained from his face. Sebastian gently took hold of Greer’s arm and leaned in close. “You’ve been hit!”

Greer looked at her upper arm where there was a hole in her sweater. “Huh. Damn, I really liked this sweater. I’ll have to see if Sydney can mend it.”

“Screw your sweater. I have to get you to the hospital!” Sebastian felt his body pulse with adrenaline. Fear hit him harder than it had when he’d been the target. Fear, helplessness, and panic seemed to take over.

“Just take her to Jace’s on Main Street,” Matt called out as if it weren’t a big deal.

Sebastian’s stomach was rolling. His heart was pounding. He couldn’t lose her.

Sebastian picked her up in his arms and ran for one of the kidnappers’ SUVs blocking the road. They were only hit with bullets while Greer’s tires were shredded.

“What are you doing?” Greer asked he shoved her into the front seat.

“Saving you!”

“Bash, I’m fine,” she called out, but he couldn’t hear her. His heart was beating so loudly he couldn’t hear anything. Main Street. He had to get to Main Street.

Greer hung on for dear life as Sebastian sped down the road toward Main Street. She'd tried to tell him she was fine, but he'd just grunted. His face was white and she was pretty sure sweat was appearing on his brow.

“Sebastian, I’m okay. I promise,” Greer said as reassuringly as possible. Her arm hurt, but the shot was a through-and-through and burned some, but it wasn’t a life or death situation.

Sebastian took the corner on two wheels as he came around the curve that began Main Street. He gunned it down the street as people stared.

“Where is it?” Sebastian finally spoke.

“Three up on the left.” Greer hung on as Sebastian threw his arm out to keep her in her seat as he slammed on the brakes. Since he was going sixty miles per hour, it took a few seconds to stop. When he did he was right in front of Jace’s practice.

Sebastian didn’t bother parking. He left the car in the middle of the street and leapt out. Greer shook her head as she opened the door. He raced around and she wasn’t even out of the SUV by the time he got to her.

Greer let out a little squeak when he grabbed her from the seat and began running with her in his arms. Greer automatically slid her good arm around his neck and hung on.

“Get out of my way!” Sebastian roared to the trio of old men ambling along.

“Calm down, boy. It’s just a through-and-through. She’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, Mr. Wolfe. I’ve tried to tell him . . .” Greer let the words trail off as Sebastian stormed into the office by kicking in the door. “Hey, Sarah,” Greer said to the surprised woman sitting behind the front desk.

Sarah blinked twice and then pulled out her phone. Yeah, that was another bet. Sarah raised a houseful of boys and had been in the National Guard, so Sebastian’s roar to see the doctor now didn’t even have her looking up.

“Take a seat and I’ll see if he’s available,” Sarah said, pointing to the chairs while she finished placing her bet.

“I will not wait! This is his cousin and she’s been shot!” Sebastian yelled as he stormed toward the back.

Greer sent Sarah a shrug over Sebastian’s rather strong shoulders. She couldn’t deny it was nice to be held by him. It wasn’t every day someone made her feel feminine, but Sebastian did. He carried her as if she weighed nothing and she felt safe, all nice and cozy, cocooned in his arms.

The first exam room door flung open and Jace stood there. Behind him, they could see a little boy sitting on the exam table.

“Dr. Jace, what’s that man doing with Miss Parker?” the boy asked.

“He’s overreacting because she has a boo-boo and he loves her,” Jace answered the little boy Greer recognized as Brayden from her youngest cousin, Cricket’s preschool class.

Brayden nodded his mop of dirty-blond hair. “I understand. My momma does that too.”

Greer chuckled, Sebastian growled. “I do not love her. She’s your cousin. I assumed you were the one who loved her and would not want her to die.”

Greer rolled her eyes. “I agree with Bash on this. I’m not the type of woman he’d love.”

“Stop it,” Sebastian snapped.

Greer turned to look at him. His face was fierce. His gaze seemed to bore into hers. For all of the hardness and barely restrained anger in his taut body, he held her as if she were a precious piece of crystal. “Stop what?”

“Stop saying you’re not good enough for me. You’re beautiful, you’re beyond smart, you’re worthy of love, and you sure as hell are the type to catch my interest. *If* I were the type of man who was looking for a relationship, but I’m not.”

“And this is what doubling down means,” Jace whispered to Brayden as he held out his phone. “See how I doubled my bet?”

“But why would you do that when the scary man says he doesn’t love Miss Parker?” Brayden asked.

“Have you ever had to try a food and thought that you’d hate it? Then you taste it and it becomes your favorite? That’s how Mr. Abel is with Miss Parker. He just needs to taste her.”

“Jace!” Greer gasped as her cousin chuckled while leading Brayden out of the exam room.

“Take Greer to exam room two,” Jace ordered as he took Brayden to get a lollipop.

“Should I set you on the exam table and taste you?” Sebastian whispered into her ear. “It’s doctor’s orders after all.”

Greer rolled her eyes at him to buy her some time to calm down because the mental image of Sebastian on his knees between her legs was doing a number on her insides.

“Okay, then,” Jace called out, saving Greer from answering. “Just set her on the table.”

Sebastian lowered her onto the edge of the padded exam room table. His lips skimmed along her cheek and stopped at her ear. A seductive sting sent shivers down her back as he bit her earlobe. “Guess I have to settle for just a nibble.”

Sebastian stepped back and Greer tried to remember why she didn’t like him. The beeping of the blood pressure machine broke the trance between them. When did Jace roll up her sleeve and hook her up for her vitals?

“Damn, Greer. You must be in a lot of pain. Your blood pressure is up and your heart rate looks as if you just ran three miles. I’ll get you some pain medication.”

Sebastian licked his bottom lip and her heart rate jumped on the machine again. Asshole. He knew exactly what he was doing and judging by that little smirk he was giving her, he was loving every minute of it. Well, two could play at that game.

Greer smiled sweetly at him as Jace hurried back in with a shot of medicine. “This is morphine.” Greer was about to tell him it wasn’t pain that was causing her heart to race, but he injected it into her arm before she could. “Sebastian, you can

wait in the lobby. I need to stitch her up and make sure there are no more injuries.”

“He can stay,” Greer said with her own mischievous little smirk.

“Um, Greer, I need you to remove your top,” Jace whispered to her.

Whoa. Greer wavered as the morphine rushed into her system. She felt all warm and fuzzy.

“I’m staying,” Sebastian said, crossing his arms and looking seriously at Jace. “It’s my fault she’s shot. I need to make sure she’s okay.”

“I’m better than okay,” Greer said, licking her own bottom lip and giving him a wink. She reached down and yanked off her sweater. “Sexy, right? I bet your bimbos don’t have half of what I do.”

“You’re right. I don’t think any of them have Kevlar vests,” Sebastian said.

Greer looked down to find her boobs not on display like she thought. They were smashed flat under the Kevlar. Greer snickered as she tried to get the Velcro tabs released, “It’s like a chastity belt for boobies.”

“Maybe I should call Jackson to sit with you,” Jace said, eying Sebastian.

“Don’t even think about it. Greer saved my life and nursed me back to health. The least I can do is take care of her gunshot wound while she’s high as a kite.”

“Greer,” Jace said, drawing her attention away from the battle with the Velcro.

“Yup?”

“Do you want Sebastian to—”

“Taste me? Hell yes, I do. I mean, *look at him*. He’s sex on a stick. You couldn’t make him any hotter if you smothered him in chocolate, but it sure would be fun licking it off. Yum.”

Sebastian shoved his hands in his pockets to try to give his erection some room as Jace coughed uncomfortably.

“So, is there a grocery store nearby?” Sebastian asked her cousin.

“I’m definitely calling Jackson.”

Sebastian chuckled. “Relax, Doc. I’m not going to do anything to her . . . while she’s not able to consent anyway.”

“Whoa!” Greer suddenly gasped. She was staring at him with comically wide eyes.

“What is it, Greer?” Sebastian asked.

“You’re Big Foot!”

“How much morphine did you give her?” Sebastian asked Jace while trying to control the laughter threatening to overwhelm him.

“Not that much. I guess she’s just sensitive to it. See if you can distract her while I stitch her up,” Jace answered as he moved forward to work on getting the Kevlar vest off.

“Get your needle ready, Doc. I’ll get her vest.” Sebastian didn’t know why he didn’t want her cousin to touch her, even though he was her doctor. When it came to Greer’s body, he was the only one who could touch her.

Sebastian stepped forward and Greer giggled. “You’re all hairy.” Greer plastered her hands on his chest and began to rub them all over him. Sebastian ripped the vest free and Greer sighed. “Pssst. Come here. I have a secret.”

“How much time do you need, Doc?” Sebastian asked Jace.

“About five minutes,” he said, looking over the bullet wound that Sebastian quite honestly thought was gross. There was blood, tissue, and . . . Sebastian turned his eyes away and focused back on Greer.

“What’s the secret, sweetheart?” Sebastian asked.

Greer giggled and tightened her hold on his shirt. She yanked him forward until her lips were next to her ear. “I watched the Big Foot porno and fantasized all about you. And here you are. All big and hairy, and ready to take me.”

Maybe he should call Jackson. It was going to be near impossible to behave if she kept telling him these things.

“What did Big Foot do to you?” Sebastian asked.

Greer sighed a very satisfied sigh and Sebastian smirked. So, he satisfied her in her fantasy. Damn right he did.

“You used your tongue,” Greer was now saying before she stuck her finger in her mouth and twirled her tongue around it. “And you stuck it . . .”

She was going to kill him. Sebastian had thought this little infatuation with Greer was nothing more than some strange phase, but what he wanted to do to her right then was nothing that could be accomplished in a single night. Nothing short of non-stop sex for a week on a private island to get her out of his system was looking pretty good right now. It would be worth whatever torture Jackson would put him through.

“Stick it . . . wet-willy!” Greer yelled a second after her wet finger was shoved in his ear.

Jace snorted as Sebastian groaned and jumped back.

“Rethinking your bet?” Sebastian asked Jace while using a gauze pad to dry out his ear.

“Nope. I have faith in you to win her over.” Jace shrugged as he placed a bandage on her arm. “I have less faith in you surviving the family and actually making it to the wedding, but my bet only covered your attempt at being her boyfriend. I bet against you for the family dinner.”

“That’s the second time family dinner was mentioned. What is so scary about a family dinner?”

“Bang! Bang! You’re dead,” Greer giggled as she holstered her finger shooters.

“Basically,” Jace said. “Okay, she’s all set. The morphine will wear off in about four hours. Let her sleep until then. Then give her over the counter pain meds, but if they don’t control the pain, just call me and I’ll give her something else.”

Sebastian shook his head. No one shoots people at family dinner. Greer was still high as a kite. “Come on, sweetheart. Let me get you home.”

Sebastian heard the words leave his mouth and almost paused in the process of picking her up into his arms. Sweetheart? Home? Those are two words he’d never said to a woman before.

Greer wrapped her arm around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder. “I’m sleepy.”

“Here are some bandages. I’ll check on her tonight before I go home,” Jace said, shoving some things into Sebastian’s coat

pockets.

“Thank you,” Sebastian said to Jace as Jace opened the door for him.

Sebastian carried Greer out of the clinic as she nuzzled his neck. The SUV was gone, but Sebastian assumed the sheriff’s department took it to process the evidence.

“Why are you being so nice?” Greer asked against his neck.

“You took care of me. Now it’s my turn to take care of you.”

Greer was quiet as he walked down the street. He saw her mother open the door to her boutique. “John Wolfe called and said she was going to be fine. Then DeAndre called me and told me it was just a through-and-through on the outside of her upper arm. She’ll be right as rain in no time. Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Yeah, morphine is fun!” Greer giggled, but it sounded sleepy as she kept her head against his shoulder.

“Let me open the door upstairs so you can get her into bed,” Paige said as she moved past him and jogged up the stairs to the apartment.

Sebastian followed, keeping Greer safe in his arms as he entered the apartment. “Thank you, Mrs. Parker.”

“No, thank you, Sebastian, for looking out for her. Call me if either you or she needs anything. And please, call me Paige.”

“I promise I’ll take good care of her, Paige,” Sebastian swore. He looked down at Greer still in his arms sound asleep and knew he’d do anything he could to protect her.

“I know you will.” Paige patted his shoulder and turned to leave only to pause. “Oh, we’re having a little family dinner at my parents’ house in a couple of days. I’d love it if you joined us.”

“I’d be honored. Thank you.”

The door closed and Sebastian carried Greer into the bedroom. He thought about lowering her onto the bed and then working in the living room, but he didn’t want to let her go. Instead, he crawled into bed with her still in his arms.

“I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Greer’s quiet words hit him like a bomb to the heart. Excitement, fear, and denial warred inside him as he held her while she slept. If only it were that simple. If only he had the capacity to love. If only he were brave enough to love.

Sebastian slept hard and deep until Greer groaned. His eyes shot open into the dark room, surprised that he'd been in such a deep sleep. "Greer? Are you okay?"

"Why the hell do I have a pounding headache when it was my arm that was shot?" Greer groaned.

"It was the morphine," Sebastian told her, looking at the glowing clock by the bed. "It's dinner time so it's probably worn off. I can get you some medicine and a cold compress. Do you want anything else?"

"Food. I'm freaking starving," Greer told him, but she still didn't move from where she was pressed against his chest. Instead, she just sighed and snuggled in closer. "Please tell me I didn't do anything stupid on the morphine."

"Nope, not at all. Do you want me to go to the café and get a to-go order?" Sebastian rubbed his hand gently against her back as she rattled off a long list of food for him to pick up.

"Oh, wait. You can't go. I'll have someone get it for us."

"It's two blocks away. I can get it. I promise," Sebastian said with amusement.

"I'm too hungry to fight you on this. Everyone at the café will be armed so you'll be safe there."

“I have to get up, Greer.” Sebastian smiled to himself when she didn’t move.

“You’re already up.”

“I wasn’t talking about *that*, Greer. Unless you want to talk about it. We could put in a movie and really go over all the details. I heard this movie about Big Foot is really good.”

Greer gasped and shot up from the bed. “What?”

Sebastian took pity on the horror on her face. “It’s a documentary on how the myth of Big Foot began,” Sebastian said easily.

Greer’s face relaxed and she swatted him. “I don’t want to talk about your dick. I was just teasing you. I would like to talk about food, though. I’m starving.”

Sebastian stood and didn’t bother hiding his hard-on. She already knew he had it. It had been pressing against her stomach as she snuggled against him.

“Okay, okay, I’m going. Just promise me a taste of what you’re craving when I get back.”

Greer gave a little choking noise at the mention of a taste and Sebastian strode from the room with a smile on his face. Being with Greer was unlike anything he’d experienced before. It was quite a shock for him to realize how much fun he had with her.

The café was packed when Sebastian opened the door. Three old ladies and the three old men from earlier were at a table near the door. The PTA mother was in the back of the room with one of the Davies wives.

Sebastian scanned the café for the waitress when his eyes were drawn to a woman in a skintight sweater dress slowly getting to her feet. Her heels were spiked. Her ass was . . . enhanced. Her curves were killer. Somehow, her massive breasts didn't move as she strode toward him. Mahogany hair sat in soft waves around her shoulders and over her breasts. Her lips were filled near bursting. Her tongue poked out from the lips like a turtle's head from its shell as she seductively ran it over her lips.

Sebastian's eyes traveled upward to her eyes. He bet they were beautiful, but he couldn't see them. It was actually quite disconcerting. He looked closer to see how she was seeing as she sauntered toward him—once she built momentum with her shoulders and hips, her ass and tits were swinging in some strange rhythmic motion as her lashes fluttered.

“Bless his heart, he's a goner,” one of the old women said, but it sounded distant, as if in a fog.

“Hello, handsome,” the woman purred as perfect, long, pointy red nails came out and trailed down his chest. However, Sebastian was still focused on trying to peer through her eyelashes as she tried to blink to notice her hand trailing down his stomach. “I'm Nikki and I'm going to rock your world. I'm going to bounce on your—”

“I wouldn't advise that,” Sebastian said, managing to drag his eyes from hers down to her breasts.

“You like to take control. I'm good with that. I like my men to be alpha. To grab hold of what they want and pound ___”

“Yeah, I wouldn't advise that either. I'm afraid you'd burst with all that silicone. That would ruin the moment. Now, excuse me. I need to place an order.”

Sebastian moved to walk around the woman when her talons grabbed onto him. And by *him*, that meant onto his Big Foot. “I bet I could make you burst.”

Sebastian reached for her hand, ready to remove it from his body, when suddenly Nikki went rigid. She gave a little squeak, her eyes rolled back, and then she fell to the ground with his dick still in hand.

“Huh, I thought she’d let go,” Abby said, putting away the same lipstick taser Sophie had sent him.

Buuurrrrrmmph.

Nikki let a fart rip as Sebastian stared down at the hand still clinging to him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a wooden spoon coming. *Thwack.* It landed hard on Nikki’s hand and Sebastian grimaced as it caused her hand to jerk.

“I thought that would do it,” one of the old ladies said to the others.

“Here, let’s try the crepe pan,” another said.

“No!” Sebastian yelled. They were not going to hit him in the dick with a crepe pan.

“Well, while we’ve got you here,” the third old lady said, “I have some questions.”

“Yeah, I do too. How can she see? Does she have eyes? All I can see are those wooly caterpillar eyelashes and it’s really freaking me out,” Sebastian said, pointing at Nikki.

“I have a crowbar in the car, hold on,” a redhead said with a sigh. “I’m Andy, one of the deputies here. Come to think of it, I have a pry bar kit in the car too. I’ll grab them both.”

“Hiya. I’m Poppy. Do you want me to get started on an order while you’re waiting?” A pretty girl with a notepad

asked as if a man standing in the café with a woman farting on the ground while holding his dick wasn't abnormal.

Sebastian reached into his pocket and pulled out the list Greer gave him. "Greer wants all this."

Poppy took the list and looked it over. "Her usual then. What do you want?"

Sebastian chuckled. "She's not going to eat all of that. I know enough about women to know they order a ton and then only eat half a salad."

"Bless your heart, you don't know Greer very well, do you? You'll lose more than your penis if you try to touch her food." Poppy looked at him sympathetically and Sebastian felt a little defensive. He knew Greer. He knew her better than anyone realized.

"I think—"

"Oh, sugar, that's your first problem," Aniyah said from behind him. Sebastian looked over his shoulder to where Aniyah was snapping a video of Nikki lying on the ground, farting, while holding his dick through his pants. "Here, sugar. I'll just slide this into your jacket pocket." Aniyah came closer and pulled something from her purse and slipped it into his jacket. "You can thank me later."

"I'll just double the order," Poppy said with a wink before rushing out. No doubt this would be a thousand-dollar tab.

"Ugh, not again," a pretty woman in a suit said with a groan as she walked in and saw Sebastian's predicament.

"Again? She's done this before?" Sebastian asked.

"Only once a week or so. She's slowing down now that more and more men are married. Hold on, I think I have

something in my bag to help.”

“Sebastian, this is our town prosecutor, Tandy Rawlings. Tandy, Sebastian Abel,” Aniyah introduced. “Want to borrow my oils like last time?”

“Maybe, let me just find . . . aha!” Tandy called out as she pulled the item from her purse.

Sebastian blinked. Surely he wasn’t seeing what he thought he was seeing. “Is that a gold dildo?”

Tandy nodded. “It was a gift from Draven. He’s the king of Bermalia.”

“Yes, I know him,” Sebastian said dryly. He was feeling very confused right now.

“So, while they work to get you free we have questions for you.” The three old ladies surrounded him. “I’m Lily and these are my sisters, Daisy and Violet.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Let’s start nice and easy,” Lily said with a smile that reminded Sebastian slightly of Ryker Faulkner. It was the cross between a hungry shark and a hungry wolf. “How old are you, Sebastian?”

“Forty. How old are you, Lily?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Suffice it to say, I’m a little older than you are. Now, tell us about your previous relationships? We know all about you and Abby’s little fling, but I’m worried you’re too much of a . . . a . . . what’s that word?”

“Player,” Violet said with a nod.

Daisy shook her head. “No, that makes it sound like a fun game. Man whore. That’s the one I’d go with.”

“Man whore, that’s it. We see you with a different woman on your arm at every event. You know our Greer isn’t like that,” Lily said with her broom pointed at him.

“I fail to see how this is any of your business,” Sebastian said in a tone that usually sent people running. Instead, it caused the broom to smash down on his head.

“I got the pry tools,” Andy said of a thing that looked like a long flathead screwdriver with a hooked end.

“Here, use the water-based lube instead of the oil so it’ll wash off better,” Aniyah said, squirting lube on the tool. “Got the dildo ready?”

“Ready,” Tandy said.

“I know we just met and all, but don’t worry. I’m a professional,” Andy said as if he’d said that many times before. Then suddenly he was working the pry tool between Sebastian’s tool and Nikki’s hand.

Tandy was on her hands and knees and slid the dildo into Nikki’s hand as Andy pried it from Sebastian’s dick. This was truly the strangest experience of his life so he just ignored the twenty million questions being flung at him from the old ladies. Finally he was free and Nikki was curled up on the ground, farting and happily clutching the golden dildo in her hand.

“One second, ladies. He’s had a bit of a shock.” Dylan grabbed Sebastian and yanked him over Nikki, dragged him through the café, through the kitchen, and out the back door. “What the hell are you doing? You’re going to ruin everything!”

“Ruin what? What are you talking about, Dylan?”

Dylan stopped pacing and put his hands on his hips to stare Sebastian down. “Do you or do you not love Greer?”

Sebastian froze. “I do not,” he snapped out.

Dylan rolled his eyes at Sebastian. “Just admit it already! It’s clear. You. Love. Greer.”

“How exactly is it clear?” Sebastian asked.

“You constantly worry over her. You ask Greer’s opinion on everything. You are way more involved in our missions with her on the team than you ever were before. Plus, you stare at her constantly when you think no one is looking.”

“I’m not some lovesick teenager.” Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Dylan.

“You don’t stare at her with love. You stare at her with anger.”

“Then why the hell do you think I love her?”

“It’s not anger at Greer. It’s anger at yourself. You don’t know how to process your feelings. I know all about it. I’ve felt that way before too. You love her. Just admit it and you’ll feel better.”

Dylan stared at him and Sebastian thought he might be having a heart attack by the way his body was reacting to the idea of loving Greer. He’d never admit a weakness and, in his book, love was a weakness. Look at the pain it had already caused him. He loved his mother and couldn’t save her. He loved Greer and she’d been shot.

“Aha! There it is. You just admitted it to yourself. I knew this setup would work!” Dylan’s smirk had Sebastian wanting to punch him.

“I like her, but nothing will ever come of it. I don’t do relationships. Wait, what setup?” Sebastian asked.

“Abby and I orchestrated it so Greer was the one to rescue you. Duh.”

Sebastian shook his head. “No. You didn’t come on the rescue because Abby is pregnant.”

Dylan chuckled. “Like that would stop her. No, we had been trying to figure out a way for you two to admit your feelings when you went and got kidnapped. Then it all just fell into place. I mean, come on. Do you really think I would voluntarily tell Ahmed I got his daughter pregnant?”

“I’m pretty sure you’d have to tell him eventually.”

“Not until I had the baby in my arms and I could keep it between him and me. He probably wouldn’t kill me in front of his grandchild. Now, you need to fix this or my sacrifice will be for nothing. Don’t screw this up, Abel!”

“Screw what up? Look, I may like and respect Greer, but I’m not about to go declare my love and ask her to marry me. It’ll never happen.”

“Yeah, well, I’m betting otherwise.” Dylan stopped pacing again and looked Sebastian in the eye. “You owe it to yourself and to Greer to find out exactly how you feel. The first step is to earn her respect.”

“I have her respect,” Sebastian said blandly. He did. He stood up to her brother when no one else would.

“Yeah, that’s a no. You folded under a couple of questions from the Rose sisters. If you can’t withstand that, then you’ll never make it through family dinner.”

Sebastian tossed his arms up in the air. “What is it about family dinner?”

“It makes my black ops training look like kindergarten carpet time. Get your head into the game, Abel, or you’ll never even get the opportunity to find out if you two belong together. She’ll never respect someone who can’t fit into our town and our family.”

“And step one of that is answering those nosy old biddies’ questions?”

“Exactly. Now get back in there and do something you’ve never done before,” Dylan ordered. “Be truthful.”

Dylan walked inside and left him out there by himself. He had shut down all emotions so long ago he didn’t know how to restart them. “Do I love her?” Sebastian asked himself. “Yes” was the answer that immediately popped into his head and into his heart.

Okay then. Just because he loved her didn’t mean he would marry her. She’d get one taste of his life and run for the hills. But, maybe he could enjoy some time with her before it was time for him to go back to Washington. As for what he would do while he was in Keeneston? Well, no one told Sebastian Abel what to do, certainly not Greer’s town or family.

Sebastian flung the door open, but then paused. He didn’t want to embarrass Greer and he certainly didn’t want to give Jackson any room to lord it over him. Fine. He’d answer some old ladies’ questions and be done with it.

Sebastian walked back into the café and instantly everyone was quiet. “I’m sorry, ladies. I needed a bit of fresh air. What were those questions again?”

“How do you feel about moving to Keeneston?”

“How many kids do you want?”

“What will you do to show Greer she’s important to you?”

The questions were rapid-fire and Sebastian could barely answer one before the next came. “I would ask if you’d require a prenup, but if you did my daughter wrong you wouldn’t need to worry about divorce. Not that you’re man enough to ever find out since you won’t date my daughter.”

Cole Parker stood with his arms crossed over his chest and a steely stare that told Sebastian exactly what would happen to him if he hurt Greer. He’d be dead. Maybe another reason why he should back away from these feelings he was having for her. He couldn’t imagine having a family like this to deal with. He did what he wanted, with whom he wanted, and when he wanted. Not to mention the way he danced along the laws of the country and, well, internationally too. Did he really want to marry into a family of FBI agents?

“Get your dinner. My baby girl is hungry and worried something has happened to you. I’m to escort you back to the safe house.”

“Here you go,” Poppy said, handing him two large bags of food and the bill.

Sebastian opened the bill to pay and almost laughed. “You’ve made an error.”

“Oh? Did I forget something on the order?”

“The price is a little low, isn’t it?”

Poppy looked at it and then shook her head. “No, that’s the right price.”

“I’m not in New York anymore,” he muttered as he handed her cash, including a large tip.

“It is a pity you aren’t, but I can get you there real quick,” Cole said. “Now, come on.”

They walked out of the café in silence, but then Cole spoke. “We’re having a family dinner in a couple of days. Join us.”

The smile was the first warning something was off. The second was the tone of command. It was not an invitation. It was an order to attend.

“Thank you. Your wife already invited me. I’m sure it’ll be interesting.”

“Do you have a big family?” Cole asked as they walked the quiet downtown sidewalk.

“No. I have no one but Birch.”

“What happened to your parents?”

Sebastian was quiet. He didn’t tell anyone about his parents. However, when he looked at Cole expecting to see that desire to gossip people always had when they asked about his personal life, he only saw concern. And not the pity kind either. Just genuine concern.

“My father was killed in action and my mother died from cancer,” Sebastian said with no emotion.

“How old were you?” Cole asked.

“Thirteen and then twenty-one.”

Cole nodded. There were none of those empty-sounding sympathy clichés and Sebastian appreciated that.

Cole stopped at the base of the fire escape stairs, preventing Sebastian from going up them. He ran his hand through his graying hair and looked generally frustrated. “My daughter was so worried about your safety that she called me. Then I hear you politely, if not a bit overwhelmed, answering the Rose sisters’ questions and now I feel conflicted. I was in that same position decades ago and I don’t like that I’m starting to sympathize with you. Dammit!”

Cole stormed off as the door to the apartment opened. “Thanks, Dad!” Greer called out. “I’m glad you made it back. Aniyah sent me a very interesting video.” Her lips tilted up into a smile and then she started laughing.

Sebastian looked up at Greer and damned if he didn’t feel the same frustration Cole did. Only this time it was because he was in love when that was the last thing he wanted.

Greer sat back with a contented sigh. Dinner had been so good. Sebastian hadn't believed her when she said she'd eat it all, but she'd shown him and all those starving models he'd dated before how a real woman ate.

"I forgot," Sebastian said, reaching into his jacket. "Aniyah gave me a movie for us to watch."

Greer saw the way he looked down at it and smirked. Oh no. Not *Big Foot*. She'd watched it before and she was not going to watch that with Sebastian. Admitting she'd watched the *Big Foot* porn, because, seriously, who wouldn't watch that, didn't embarrass her. It was hilarious. She'd laughed her way through it, but she'd also had some seriously hot dreams about Sebastian ever since and it wasn't because Sebastian was furry. He wasn't furry at all. He was just right as she'd learned over the past couple of days.

It had been the power, the dominance, the pleasure . . . it had made her think of Sebastian.

"This should be interesting." Sebastian handed her the DVD.

"*The Virgin Taken by the Abominable Snowcock.*" Greer refused to be cowed by Sebastian. He was doing this to get a

reaction from her. Well, it wouldn't work. She was comfortable with who she was, even if she didn't know what direction in life she was going. "Looks good. Want to watch it now or save it for later?"

The look on Sebastian's face was priceless. She'd called his bluff and had to stop herself from grinning victoriously.

"We, um, better save it for later." Sebastian opened his arm and patted his lap. "Come here. Let me take care of you for once."

What was this man doing to her? Greer's insides were all warm and fuzzy as she crawled into his lap. She was a woman in a male-dominated field and with two older brothers—she never showed weakness. However, the feeling of being in Sebastian's embrace was almost overwhelming in its rightness.

"What's going on here?" Greer asked as Sebastian rested his chin on the top of her head.

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you, Bash." She was calling him on his bullshit. Sitting in his lap and him caring for her was certainly *something*. Greer's heart certainly didn't think it was nothing and that's why she needed to know where she stood in his life. Her heart was racing straight for him. She needed to protect herself and only honesty could do that. If she knew pain was coming, she could put up some walls and enjoy whatever this was while it lasted. Then he'd leave and she'd go on with her life. But if she didn't protect herself, then Sebastian had the ability to emotionally crush her. She'd never let a man ruin her life. She'd go on. She'd recover. But it would hurt like hell for a little while. The question was, was the pain worth it?

“Nothing can go on here. I don’t have a life that is suited for a relationship. I’d only end up hurting you and I can’t do that.”

“Protecting me again, Bash?”

“Always,” he said softly before she felt the gentle kiss on top of her head. Greer’s heart was screwed.

“I don’t know if I’m the best woman for a relationship either. After all, look at my job. It’s never guaranteed that I’ll come back alive.”

She heard Sebastian growl as he tightened his grip on her. “Then why do it?”

“I love it. I like analyzing every entry point, every contingency plan, and every way to help someone who needs to be saved. There’s nothing better than putting a plan in action and seeing it perfectly executed. I guess it’s like when you start a company and see it flourish.”

Sebastian let out a long breath. “I understand that. Then why not become the director of the FBI? Isn’t that what they do?”

“I’m learning that’s the least of what they do. It’s why I’ve stepped away from it. I’ll probably end up going back to the Hostage Rescue Team. I can rejoin HRT and just continue in the field, but agency competition is messing it all up. However, I’m really enjoying my time working for the president. I like the freedom and the trust he places in me to run an op.”

“Can you start your own security company?” Sebastian asked, and she found herself liking the brainstorm they were having.

“Piper’s husband, Aiden, has a security company. It’s mostly bodyguard stuff, which is great, but I like the rescues, navigating multinational politics and history, protecting the innocent, taking down the baddies. It’s the complexities that excite me.”

“I understand that,” Sebastian said.

Greer leaned back so she could look up at him. “You do?”

“Sure. I feel the same way about my companies. Do you have any idea how hard it is to buy a hotel or operate a company in some of these countries? Or get supplies to and from them? You have to research everything about them. Who is in control, who do you have to go through to get the job done, what’s their history, what are their weakness, how can you navigate some of these political minefields to do what needs to be done? Sure, I don’t always follow the law, but neither do you. Think of my business interests as the hostage and I’m trying to free them.”

“That actually makes sense.” Greer was quiet for a moment as she enjoyed the feel of Sebastian’s hands on her back and her arm. “Did you always want world domination?”

Sebastian chuckled. “I don’t think I have world domination. Yet.” Then he grew quiet and she knew there was more to the story so she waited. “It was never my plan to expand out from tech.”

“I know. I’ve read articles about how you started SA Tech. You’ve accomplished amazing things with your life, Bash.”

“Not the one thing I needed to, though.”

“What was that?” Greer asked.

“Save my mother.” Sebastian’s voice was barely above a whisper, but Greer heard the pain in it. “She had cancer. There

was a treatment but it wasn't covered by insurance and I didn't have the money to save her."

So that's what drove him. All the pieces fell into place. "That's why you get angry when I put myself in danger. You think you need to save me?"

Sebastian didn't answer right away and Greer leaned back so she could look him in his eyes. His jaw was tight, his eyes were hard, but his touch was gentle. "I won't lose someone else who is important to me when I have the power to protect them. Even if she constantly runs head-first into danger like you did in Afghanistan last month."

"How did you know about . . . it *was* you! I knew I heard a drone, but I couldn't see it. You were there? Helping me?"

Sebastian gave a single dip of his chin. "I was protecting you."

"How many times have you done that?" Greer asked, her heart and mind slowly realizing the lengths Sebastian had gone to keep her safe.

"How many missions have you had?" Sebastian asked it like it wasn't a big deal, but it was. It was a very big deal.

Greer smiled then and saw the surprised look on Sebastian's face. "You like me."

"I want you safe."

"Because you like me. Just admit it. I like you too, Bash."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do," Greer told him as she cupped his cheek with her hand. "Believe it or not, I like arguing with you. Once I figured out you weren't doing it because you didn't respect me, it made it all fun. You've met my family. I can't have a

guy who just gives in to everything I say. I'd be bored in a week. You, Sebastian, at first glance might appear to be all wrong for me, but when you take a closer look, you'll see, in fact, we're perfect for each other.

"You challenge me, I call you out on your bullshit, we both enjoy the international component of our jobs, and we both want to protect the other. To me, it looks like we might need to give this a shot."

Sebastian was quiet as she cupped his cheek. "I'm ten years older than you."

"Yeah, so? Obviously the men my age can't keep up with me or are too scared of my family to stick around. I need a man in my life who doesn't back down from anyone, even me, when need be."

"There's no future here, Greer. No matter how much either of us wants one."

It hurt to hear, but Greer was starting to understand him more. She needed time to show him it could work. And if it couldn't, they'd go their separate ways at least having tried. "How about this? We just see what happens naturally. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't."

"You'd do that? Go into a relationship with no strings and absolutely no promises of a future?" Sebastian sounded dubious, yet hopeful.

"I've learned lots of things over the years about bravery," Greer told him. "Sometimes being brave is running into a burning building. Sometimes it's speaking up for those who have no voice. And sometimes it's putting your heart on the line, knowing there's a good chance it'll be broken. You know who I am. I'll still run into that burning building. I'll be that

voice. And I'll put my heart on the line with no strings, with no promises, because in the end the only way to fail is to not try. So the question is, are you brave enough to do the same?"

Sebastian didn't answer. Instead he wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. His kiss was strong and commanding as he took control. Greer let go of hers and let him take the lead as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, making her moan around it. One thing she could say for sure, Sebastian Abel was one hell of a kisser. But then again, so was she.

Greer shifted so she was straddling Sebastian. She pressed him back against the couch as she leaned over him and kissed him back. Their tongues battled for control over the kiss, much to the delight of both of them. She'd take control only to concede to his, back and forth in a passionate battle.

If kissing was this intense, she couldn't imagine what making love to him would be like. Only first she had to find out if he was worthy and only a family dinner could tell that. If she were really serious about a future with Sebastian, he had to prove to her he could do what no man had been able to do—survive an evening with her entire family.

Greer pulled back and looked down at him. Her heart was already falling fast, but she threw out a safety net. She would not be another woman chasing him. If it were meant to be, it would be. "I think it's time for bed. I'll sleep on the couch tonight."

Sebastian didn't argue and Greer was kind of disappointed that he didn't. Instead, he simply stood up with her still straddling him. Greer tried to wiggle down, and then groaned as she felt his erection hit just the right spot.

“Keep making those noises and we will be doing a lot more in this bed than sleeping,” Sebastian warned with heat in his eyes. Greer practically melted in his arms as he carried her back to the bedroom. “We’ve already settled this. Don’t be stubborn just to be stubborn.”

Greer was about to argue, but decided not to. He was right. He’d called her out on her bullshit just like she did to him. Some might think she was crazy, but it was the best compliment he could give her. He was treating her as an equal and that was seriously hot.

Sebastian had to admit that he was having fun. His brain was swirling as he looked over the plans for the satellite with Pierce, Piper, Kale, and Sophie. This was what he'd started in when he was a boy—technology.

He normally worked alone, but it was a rush to work with a team who wasn't out to be the smartest or in competition with each other. For the past two days they'd worked fourteen hours a day to develop their plans, gather the materials, and be ready to start building when the expert arrived.

Abby had gone to pick her up and was due back any moment. During the long hours they worked, Greer, Dylan, Jackson, Lucas, and Talon took shifts as Sebastian's bodyguard. In reality, they just sat in the lab and watched. Then every so often they got up and walked the grounds.

The Rose sisters dropped off food and somehow every time either Lucas or Talon was on shift, Poppy or Zinnia were the ones delivering the food or checking to see if they needed anything. One look at the smitten couples and it was clear they had something going on, or were at least hoping for it.

“Abby's pulling up,” Greer said from her spot by the door. She had a computer on a small table that showed various video feeds from around the outside of the lab that sat in the middle

of a farm. Knowing it was Abby didn't stop Greer from pulling her gun. "I'll be right back. Stay here."

"What's she doing?" Piper asked.

"Probably making sure this woman is really who she says she is and also making sure she doesn't have any weapons," Sophie said with a shrug.

Sebastian took a peek at the screen of her computer and sure enough, there was Greer waving a wand over the woman—a wand Sophie had created that picked up on much more than metal.

Satisfied the woman was who she was supposed to be, they came toward the door. Sebastian went back to work at the table and the others laughed at him. "Scared Greer would bust you?" Kale teased.

"Damn right I am. I've seen her in action."

"Smart man," Piper said, looking as the doorknob began to turn. "But then again, I knew you were smart when you invested in my company."

"Mine too," Sophie said with a grin.

Sebastian shook his head. "I still don't know when I did that, but after working with you I'm very glad I did."

The door opened and in walked Greer and the sweetest-looking woman he'd ever seen. Greer was sweet in the tomboy-girl-next-door way. Kirana Koh simply radiated kindness and joy. She stood barely five feet tall with thick dark hair pulled back in a braid and a smiling round face.

"Hello, hello. I'm Kirana Koh. I am so excited to be here. I've brought food from my home country of Indonesia." The smell of something delicious was already wafting through the

lab. “It’s *nasi goreng*. It’s like Asian fried rice but I make it with *kecap*. I hope you like it.” At their confused look she smiled and opened the heat-saving bag to pull out a giant Tupperware container. “It has a thick and very sweet soy sauce. I hope you like it.”

The door opened and the Rose sisters came in each carrying a plate of food. Kirana turned and smiled at them. “Hello. I’m Kirana Koh. Here, please have some food I made for you all to show my appreciation for inviting me to your beautiful town.”

“But, we made you food to welcome you to Keeneston,” Miss Lily said, looking confused at the plates they carried and then at the dish Kirana was holding.

“No, no, please, let me feed you,” Kirana said, holding out her container of food. Sebastian had to fight from laughing at the very confused expressions on the Rose sisters’ faces.

“But we feed you. You’re our guest.” Miss Daisy said, holding out her plate to Kirana.

“Yes, yes. I’m your guest and to say thank you, I feed you.”

“How about you feed each other. It’ll be a cultural tasting,” Pierce said, eyeing all the plates the women were holding. Sebastian’s stomach rumbled and thought everyone sharing would be a good idea.

“Great idea. I’ll just set this here and you can help yourself. I very much look forward to tasting your food. I must say thank you for making me these plates and insist on making you dinner tonight,” Kirana said with the biggest smile Sebastian had ever seen. And it wasn’t a fake one. It was a real smile of kindness.

“Oh good grief,” Miss Violet said in horror. “No. We insist on making you dinner tonight.”

Sebastian saw Greer biting her lower lip trying not to laugh.

“Let me introduce you to your new team, Dr. Koh,” Abby said diplomatically.

“None of that. Kirana is fine,” she said, turning her bright smile to them.

“This is Sebastian Abel, owner of SA Tech,” Abby made the introductions as Sebastian held out his hand to shake Kirana’s. “Then this is Pierce Davies and his daughter, Piper Creed, and his niece, Sophie Dagher. Lastly, this is my brother, Kale.”

“It is such a pleasure to meet you all. I can’t wait to get to work.”

“What is it that you do, Kirana?” Miss Lily asked after Abby introduced them.

“I’m from Indonesia, but went to university in Singapore. I have a dual doctorate in astrophysics and aerospace engineering. I’m currently a US consultant on satellites at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean after helping build one of the rovers for Mars. That’s why it took me so long to get here. It’s a bit of a flight.”

Sebastian blinked. Kirana Koh was a freaking genius. “Glad to have you as part of the team. Kale and I have been working on the computer side of the design. Pierce has been working on the engineering. Piper has been working on these new nanotech materials we thought we could use for the satellite. And Sophie has been working on how to equip the satellite with weapons.”

“Excellent. What a great team to be a part of. Chief of Staff Orville has briefed me and I worked on some designs of my own. How about I send you mine and you show me what you have so far and we’ll dive right in?” Kirana asked as she was already moving toward the gigantic workstations they had set up. She looked at the material Piper was working on and her head shot up to look at Piper. “Wait, you’re Dr. Piper Davies?”

“It’s Creed now, but yes, a lot of my scientific papers still have Davies on them.”

“I can’t believe it.” Kirana said obvious delight. “I’m a huge follower of your work. Oh my gosh, is this it? Is this the material you’ve designed and patented for not only space, but for firemen, bomb testers, well, anyone dealing with extreme heat?”

Piper nodded. “It is. I can’t believe you know about it.”

“Know about it? I fought the government to allow me to use it for the next Mars mission, but DARPA wouldn’t let me.”

“I think you’ll find you’ll have a bigger say in things now,” Sebastian told her. “Here, let me show you what I’ve gotten so far and the general idea we came up with.”

Greer turned to look at the Rose sisters still standing with plates of food in their hands and felt a little sorry for them. They looked completely lost. “They get talking technical stuff and there’s no getting their attention. Even with the best smelling food ever. Can you hear my stomach rumbling?” Greer asked with a kind smile.

“We’ll show her,” Miss Lily said, ignoring Greer and turning to her sisters.

“No one comes into Keeneston and cooks for us,” Miss Violet said with a huff.

“Bless her heart, she has no idea who she’s messing with,” Miss Daisy swore.

“What are you three planning to do?” Greer asked a little hesitantly. She wasn’t used to seeing them upset.

“We have a century of Southern hospitality in our blood,” Miss Lily said, never taking her eyes from where Kirana was looking over the project.

“She’s staying at the bed-and-breakfast, right?” Miss Daisy asked Greer, who nodded in the affirmative. “Good. We have to get going.”

“Wait, what are you all going to do?” Greer asked again.

“We’re going to smother her in more food than she can imagine. By the time she gets to her room, there won’t be space available without some delicious treat on it,” Miss Violet answered. “Let’s get to baking. Bless her heart, if she’s used to always feeding someone else, she desperately needs us to make food for her.”

Greer had to purse her lips to stop from laughing out loud as the Rose sisters stormed from the building.

Greer turned her attention back to the group now working together as a team. Kirana was such an excitable ball of energy, it was fun to watch. However, it didn’t take long for Greer’s eyes to land on Sebastian. It was as if he felt her gaze and looked up from what he was working on to give her a seriously seductive smile.

The past couple of nights had been . . . intense. Greer had been serious when she had put out her heart's safety net and kept the intimacy from getting out of hand until she saw how he handled himself at dinner. If it turned out to be a disaster, there was no way she could sleep with him. Sure, she'd slept with other men before, but they hadn't been important to her. They'd been quick fixes. The ones she'd been serious about usually didn't last a single phone call with her brothers, never mind a meeting with her parents. As much crap as her mom gave her brothers about stopping grandbabies, her mother was no pushover. Sure, she was sweet, but she was also a crack shot and had raised two boys. She didn't put up with any nonsense, including pitiful boyfriends.

A motion alert went off on her computer and Greer pulled up the video. Sophie's husband, Nash, was flying down the lane toward the lab. Greer looked at her phone and saw that suddenly there was no reception.

Instantly Greer was on high alert as she slipped out the door. Nash was already sliding to a stop. "Answer your fucking phones!" he yelled as he leapt out.

"No service. What's going on?"

"I captured movement in our air space. Since Desert Sun Farm has embassy status, there's a no-fly zone over it. A helicopter heading this way broke it." Nash was already looking around the sky. No need to see it, Greer heard it coming.

Greer turned and ran back inside with Nash right on her heels. Her heart was racing as the familiar feel of adrenaline hit her body. It no longer caused her fight-or-flight response to kick in and overtake her. Now she used the adrenaline to

quickly assess the situation and set out a plan of action. “Hostile helicopter incoming. Do you have a bomb shelter?”

“Greer, this whole building is a bomb shelter,” Sophie said, not looking the least bit concerned as she gestured toward the hallway. “Helicopter? You’ll find weapons for taking down helicopters in the third room on the left. There’s the acid gun of death, a couple of high powered rifles, and several shoulder-fired missiles.”

Kirana didn’t look comforted. Her smile actually slipped, but Greer didn’t have time to reassure her. She and Nash were already running to the room with the helicopter weapons stored in it. Only her cousin would have weapon rooms organized by target types.

“What can I do?” Sebastian’s voice said from right inside the door.

“Stay inside. You’re too valuable to lose,” Greer ordered as she reached out for the acid gun of death. “I’m just too intrigued not to use it.”

“If you miss, I got you covered with this shoulder launcher,” Nash said, tossing the launcher over his shoulder and grabbing a couple of large missiles on the way out the door.

Greer rushed by Sebastian, but he reached out to stop her. “You’re too valuable to lose too. Let Nash handle it.”

“I’m a better shot than Nash,” Greer bit off as she yanked her arm free. “Don’t start questioning my abilities now.”

“I never question your abilities, only your constant running into the line of fire. I swear I’ll need to make regular cardiologist appointments if we’re together.” Sebastian reached out and spun her around right before she got to the

door. He placed both hands on her shoulders and took a deep breath. “You’d better not die before I have a chance to get you under me.”

“I like the idea of you under me.”

“Come to think of it, so do I.” Sebastian kissed her hard and quick. “I trust you, Greer. I just don’t like sitting here doing nothing.”

“Grab a gun and guard the door.” Greer rose up and kissed him one more time before putting Sebastian out of her mind. She had a helicopter to take down. “Take cover behind your car and I’ll go behind mine. Let’s go.”

Nash opened the door and together they ran out into the open. “So, I’m guessing I need to up the date on my bet?” he called out, but then the sound of the helicopter grew louder as Greer sprinted toward her SUV. She skidded to a stop and dropped behind the front wheel.

“Let’s see how dinner goes. What do you see?” she called out to Nash as she loaded the grenade-like acid ammunition into the launcher.

Nash cursed and Greer knew it couldn’t be good. “Three men fast roping four hundred yards behind the building. I see at least three more still in the helicopter at one o’clock. Coming in hot!”

Greer knew what needed to be done: Take down the helicopter and then intercept the three soldiers she couldn’t see. Bullets ripped into the building, but there was no sound of glass breaking or metal giving way. The helicopter kept targeting the building, but she could tell the second they saw her.

The helicopter turned its guns toward them. The bullets sunk into the ground as they grew closer to where she was positioned. There was no time to waste. Greer placed the launcher on her shoulder and used the digital sight to target the helicopter. The sight's crosshairs went from red to green when the helicopter was in range. Greer pulled the trigger and the small, sticky acid grenade shot through the air. She watched it splat onto the windshield of the helicopter and then nothing happened.

“Wait for it,” Nash called out.

It wasn't a big explosion. It was nothing and then suddenly there was a hole in the windshield and the front part of the helicopter melted and dripped fifty feet down to the ground. It didn't take long for the helicopter to crash near her SUV, but by the time the last part hit the ground there was nothing but a pile of goo left.

“Okay, that was seriously cool. Nash, take the left and I'll take the right,” Greer ordered as she slung the acid gun of death over her shoulder so it rested across her back. She reached to the ground where she had placed her rifle and picked it up before sprinting toward the building.

She and Nash plastered themselves against the wall and, with a single nod of the head, they separated. Greer turned the corner with her rifle raised. No one. Then she heard the worst sound: gunfire coming from inside the building.

Ready to fight, Greer raced around the side of the building to find one man guarding the back door. Two simultaneous gunshots rang out and the man dropped. She and Nash had both taken him out at once from opposite sides.

Nash's face was set in stone as they ran toward each other and the back door located in the middle of the building. “Get

the door,” Greer whispered as they stopped in front of it with weapons raised.

Nash reached out and, with a nod from Greer, yanked it open. She was the first through the door with Nash right behind her. They took the hallway side by side, he took the right and she the left.

Feet stuck out in the hallway up ahead as they passed the helicopter weapons room. Wordlessly, they crouched down and silently headed toward the main lab where they had left everyone.

Voices grew as Greer closed in on the double doors leading to the lab. The body of one of the attackers lay face down lodged between the doors. Greer looked to Nash. “Now,” she whispered.

They both kicked their door open and stormed in with weapons raised. Greer paused to take in everyone working as usual around the table and the second dead guy three feet inside the room.

“Did you get to use the acid gun of death?” Sophie asked, looking up from whatever she was working on. “How was it?”

“I did. It was beyond cool. What happened here?” Greer asked.

“Sebastian killed that one and Sophie that one,” Piper said, pointing to the bodies even as she didn’t look up. Kirana’s head and hers were bent over the new nanotech material as if nothing had happened.

“Didn’t you hear the gunfire outside?” Greer asked.

“Nope,” Sophie said finally, looking up and smiling at her husband. “Hey, babe. Could you do me a favor so we can get to family dinner on time?”

“Of course, my sweet. What can I do besides save your life?” Nash asked as Sophie rolled her eyes at him.

“On your way home, can you take Sebastian to Mo and Dani’s. Something about business,” she said with a wave of her hand. “Greer can pick him up after she showers.”

Greer looked at Sophie, who was now kissing her husband and promising to thank him later for saving her. Although things around here certainly didn’t look like Sophie needed saving.

The motion sensors went off again and Greer saw the line of law enforcement vehicles. She was going to have to stay here and handle this. “Nash, you got this?”

“No problem. Come on, Sebastian. It’ll be good to have a little chat while we drive to the farm. You know, in case you don’t make it into the house tonight.” Nash smirked and rubbed his hands together. “The hazing was worth it to be on this side of things at dinner.”

Sebastian grimaced as he stopped working. “I had a feeling I was close to something.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it tomorrow and it’ll be just what we need,” Kirana said with her bright smile back in place.

“Come on, Kirana,” Kale said, standing up from his desk. “I’ll drive you to the bed-and-breakfast.”

“Oh dear. Why would you do such a thing to a nice woman like her?” Piper asked with horror. “Don’t worry, Kirana, I’ll drive you.”

The door opened and Matt came in with his deputies, Cody, Luke, and Andy.

“How do I report a helicopter turned to goo?” Cody asked Greer as he walked inside.

“What helicopter?” Greer asked innocently.

Sebastian stopped by her side and put his hand around her waist. His fingers rested on her hip and he gave her a little squeeze. “I won’t take long.”

He leaned down and placed a quick kiss on her lips and then Greer watched him leave with Nash. He’d said no strings, however, but there seemed to be so many strings she couldn’t see through them all. Maybe tonight would cut them away. Either she’d see the man she loved or she’d see what she was used to seeing—the backside of a man running as fast as he could away from her.

Sebastian slid into the passenger seat of Nash's car as Greer's brothers showed up. Sebastian internally sighed. He'd never give them the satisfaction of knowing they got to him. He wasn't scared of them. He was angry with them. They should have more trust in Greer. They trusted her to lead rescue missions but not to date? It was ridiculous.

"So, you're kissing in public now?" Nash asked with an amused chuckle. "You are so dead."

Sebastian didn't respond as Nash navigated the car around the helicopter goo that one of the deputies was now putting crime scene tape around.

"You know Jackson will probably beat the shit out of you tonight, right? Oh, they say it's all fun and games to bond us all together, but it's not. It's war designed to weed out the weak," Nash continued to tell him.

Sebastian slowly turned his head to look at Nash. "You think I'm weak?" He let his lips turn into a very slow and controlled snarl.

Nash shrugged. "Hell if I know. I don't know anything about you. And trust me, I've tried to find out. I couldn't find

anything personal on you besides which blonde you had on your arm for such and such event.”

“Hmm, I wonder what kind of power you have to have to be invisible on the Internet?” Sebastian turned back to look at the rolling hills. The trees had lost their leaves and the horses had grown their slightly longer winter coats but were loving the cool air as they ran through the pastures.

“I think you only take your work seriously, which makes me worry for Greer. However,” Nash said as he easily handled the narrow country road, “you also kissed Greer, and all those photos of you with your dates at hundreds of events, there wasn’t a single picture of you kissing one of them. Hell, there wasn’t even a picture of you holding a woman’s hand. That’s what I find very interesting.”

Sebastian didn’t talk about his feelings and he certainly didn’t with someone he didn’t really know so he kept quiet.

“There’s one thing I need to know before tonight though,” Nash said as he turned into Desert Sun Farm. The guard saluted him and opened the heavy iron gates.

“What’s that?” Sebastian asked after they drove through the gates.

“Do you love her?”

Nash stopped the car and Sebastian turned to him. People didn’t ask him these things and he sure as hell wasn’t going to answer. “Thanks for the ride.”

Sebastian got out of the car to find a prince standing at the door. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Abel.”

“Prince Mohtadi.”

“You know that in Keeneston I’m just Mo. Come. This won’t take long.” Mo strode into the house in an impeccably tailored silver suit. Sebastian wasn’t above admitting to himself he wanted to know where he got it. He’d never ask, of course. He’d just hack into Mo’s records and find out.

Sebastian followed Mo down a long hallway past the reception rooms where he usually met the Ali Rahman family. Mo slowed at a closed door and turned to him. “This isn’t my place but through our past dealings, I feel as if I have a good read on you. Can I offer a bit of advice?”

Sebastian gave a slight nod of his chin. Mo was different from others trying to tell him what he should do. He’d always liked the quiet yet confident royal. He’d been rumored to have helped Birch with foreign policy on more than one occasion. “Shakespeare wrote, *‘uneasy is the head that wears a crown.’* I’m not talking about a literal crown as in my case. I’m talking about the global leadership you carry. It’s not easy knowing you have tens of thousands of people depending on you. One thing that makes the duty we have as leaders easier? Having someone you trust to help share the weight of it. Good luck, Mr. Abel.”

Mo opened the door and stepped back. Sebastian was still processing what Mo had said when Sebastian walked into the room and froze. He’d been set up by experts and walked right into an ambush.

“Sebastian, thank you so much for joining us,” Paige Davies said from her seat on the large sectional couch filled with the women of Keeneston. “You know my sisters-in-law,” Paige continued as she gestured to the five women to her right. “Morgan, Katelyn, Annie, Gemma, and Tammy.”

“Ladies,” Sebastian said, locking all his emotions down.

“And my dear friends, Dani, Kenna, and Bridget,” Paige continued.

“Princess, ladies,” Sebastian said respectfully.

“Please, take a seat,” Paige said, pointing to the large ottoman that was placed front and center of all the women.

Sebastian walked to the ottoman and sat down. He crossed his leg as to put his ankle on his knee and then clasped his hands. “How can I be of service to you ladies?”

“See,” Paige said with an exaggerated sigh. “I’m not so sure what to think of you. As a result, you’ve put us in a bit of a pickle.”

“I know. I’m sorry I brought trouble with me to your quiet town,” Sebastian acknowledged.

Katelyn smiled sweetly. “Keeneston was only quiet for a short time between when Morgan left after high school and Kenna arrived from New York,” Katelyn said. Sebastian had to fight not to laugh when Morgan calmly gave her sister-in-law her middle finger.

Annie snorted with amusement at their antics before turning to Sebastian. “What you’re involved in isn’t trouble. It’s just a fun Friday night.”

Sebastian didn’t know how to respond so he kept quiet.

“Before we get started, we’d like you to sign this,” Kenna said. She stood and smoothed down the skirt of her suit before stepping forward and handing him a piece of paper.

Sebastian read the paper and looked back up. “You need me to sign a nondisclosure agreement?”

Kenna smiled sweetly and handed him a pen. “Dani’s a notary to make it all nice and legal.”

Okay, this was getting weirder and weirder, but now he was intrigued. Sebastian signed it and soon the paper was handed back to Kenna.

“See,” Paige started again. “We,” she said pointing to all the ladies, “have given our husbands an ultimatum. Quit threatening our daughters’ men or give up sex with us.”

Okay, so that wasn’t the direction Sebastian had thought the conversation was going.

“But then you came along,” Paige said, now leaning forward, looking serious. “I don’t know if you’re perfect for my daughter or not. And because I love my daughter, we need to have a little talk. Our husbands will never let us live it down if they find out we had some questions we needed answered, hence the NDA.”

“You mean you have some threats you need to issue,” Sebastian stated calmly, instantly finding the key language in the NDA.

“You won’t make us resort to that, will you?” Paige asked just as sweetly as Greer had once asked a man if he valued his balls.

“And you think you can threaten me?” Sebastian tried not to sound amused, but the glares he received told him he’d failed.

Well, except Annie. She smiled. “Bless his heart,” she said with a laugh. “He has no idea who we are.”

Annie reached into her back pocket and pulled out a leather case. She opened it and set it down so he could see the shiny metal instruments inside. Then Dani tossed a piece of paper next to him. He picked it up. It was her diplomatic immunity. Bridget whistled and off in the distance he heard a

bark. Then suddenly a dog leaped up on the French doors, opened them, and skidded to a halt beside him with its teeth bared. Lastly, Paige pulled a rifle out from under the couch and casually rested it over her lap.

“We could have some fun and see if my bullet, Annie’s knives, or Bridget’s dog would get you first if you run,” Paige said sweetly.

Sebastian smiled as a laugh bubbled up. “You’re sneaky. All this time I thought Greer had gotten her personality from her father, but it was you.”

Paige smiled back at him. “Thank you. Compliments like that will get you everywhere. Well, except out of the list of questions we have.”

Sebastian stopped laughing. He had survived the Rose sisters’ questions, he could certainly survive this. “I guess telling you to shoot would be confusing. Proceed.”

“What has me worried is you’re not man enough for my daughter.” Ouch. Paige went straight for the kill shot. “I always thought she’d end up with someone like Walker. You, on the other hand, hide behind your desk and your bank account. You hide behind the countless women and encourage your reputation as someone willing to break the law to get what you want. See, Sebastian, the first thing I need to know is if you are man enough to sit here, exposed, and tell us the complete truth?”

Annie didn’t need her knives because this was the worse torture he could imagine. “May I see the NDA?”

Paige blinked once, but with a nod Kenna handed it over.

Sebastian snapped a picture, sent a text on his newly encrypted phone, and then handed it back down. “While we

wait, I have a question for you all.” Sebastian saw them shift in their seats. They weren’t used to being put on the spot. “Why do you all do this? Both you and your husbands smothering your kids, torturing those they marry? Do you really think that’s the way to build a lasting bond?”

This time it was Tammy who smiled first. “Do you know you’re the first one to ask that?”

“I can answer for myself,” Paige said, leaning back on the couch. “I hated it when my brothers did this to me. Absolutely hated it. Until they told me why they did it. They tortured my dates because they loved me too much to see me marry someone I didn’t or couldn’t love and respect. They knew my personality. They knew if I married a man who was a pushover I’d be miserable. However, they also knew that men—”

“And women,” Bridget added.

“Yes, and women can hide their true nature. My brothers explained they wanted to strip away all pretenses and see who the real man was under it all. Was he the type of man I could respect, because if he wasn’t, we were all just wasting our time,” Paige concluded.

“For the record,” Morgan said into the silence, “once you pass, you’re family. A family the likes of which you’ve never known before. A family that will drop everything, no questions asked, to help you, to celebrate with you, to mourn with you, and who will love you on such a deep level I tear up just thinking about how lucky I am to have joined this family.”

Sebastian thought about what they said. His mother had always supported him, but since her death he’d been alone. He couldn’t remember what family was even like and didn’t know if he wanted to. He was used to living his life as he dictated

and not with group input. His phone buzzed and Sebastian read the text.

“Please read and then sign with your finger, then pass it down to the next person,” Sebastian said, handing the phone to Paige.

She looked down and then smiled. “An NDA?”

“I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“I do. This is turning out to be very amusing,” Kenna said with a smile.

It took a couple of minutes for everyone to sign. Sebastian could just get up and walk out. He knew they probably wouldn’t kill him. The dog growled and he rethought those odds. Did he want to do this? No. Did he need to do this? Unknown, and Sebastian didn’t like unknowns. He liked certainties and there was nothing about Greer Parker that was a certainty.

“Here you go,” Tammy said, handing the phone back with a kind smile on her face. “For the record, I hope you survive. I really appreciate all you’ve done for Piper’s company and Dylan really values your friendship, although he’d roll his eyes if he knew I said that. Good thing for the NDAs!”

“So, Sebastian. Are you ready?” Paige asked.

“Do your worst, Mrs. Parker.”

Thirty minutes later Sebastian kicked himself for challenging Paige to do her worst. They had skipped all the fluffy questions the Rose sisters had asked about money, security, and life goals. These women had gone straight for the heart.

Now the nine women sat passing a box of tissues as they cried. The last thing he wanted was their pity, but they'd started off by asking about his childhood, then about his father and his death. Then about what kind of teenager he'd been. They asked about his activities, his friends, and learned all about him being bullied. They'd held it together until Paige had asked what his mother thought of all he'd achieved.

Sebastian told them about the doctors, the lack of money, and as much as it hurt, he'd told them how he'd failed his mother.

“Sebastian Abel!” Paige yelled in a very motherly tone as she bolted up in frustration. “Don't you dare put that on yourself or on your poor mother. It was not your job to protect her. You were a *boy*. It was your job to love her and you did.”

“Sebastian,” Katelyn said softly, “is that really what you think? That your mother died because of you?”

Sebastian didn't understand why they were confused. “There was a treatment that might have saved her. I couldn't afford the treatment. I failed. Because I failed, my mother died. It's not hard to follow.”

Paige took a deep breath and sat back down. She leaned forward until her hands rested on Sebastian's knees and her face was inches from his. “Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said instantly in response to that mom tone.

Paige reached up and cupped his face in her hands. “You are not at fault, Sebastian, not at all. You did not fail your mother. As a mother, as nine mothers here, we can tell you with absolute certainty your mother never once felt you failed her. You fought for her and you loved her. That's all that

matters to us mothers. That, and for our children to be happy and loved. See what lengths we go through to make sure of that? Your mother did the same thing. She went to great lengths to give you an education that would carry you through life to show you her love.”

Then Paige was hugging him. She wrapped her arms around his head, pulling her to him, and just held him. Sebastian went stiff, but over time he relaxed. It had been so long since he'd had a motherly hug and grief seemed to wash over him.

“Well, darn. I don't get to try my new pliers,” Annie said with a sigh. “Turns out you and I have a lot in common, Sebastian. You have my approval. I think you're the perfect fit for Greer.”

“Me too,” Paige said as she continued to smother him. “But if you hurt her . . .”

“I hate to interrupt, but we have an issue,” Gemma said with a final sniffle. “We have one hour until dinner and while I think we might have kept our husbands from putting you through the wringer, our sons are a different story.”

“Wait. I have one more question,” Paige asked, pulling away from him. “Do you love my daughter?”

“Don't worry, we're covered by the NDA,” Dani reminded him.

Sebastian couldn't say it. He was too raw from the toughest interrogation of his life so he just nodded. Paige wiped her eyes. “That's all a mother wants—for her child to be loved. Watch out, Sebastian, you're dangerously close to becoming happy.”

“That’s good and all, but what do you know about *muay thai* fighting?” Bridget asked.

“Can you at least throw a punch?” Annie asked.

“Shoot a gun?” Paige asked hopefully.

“There’s no time to waste if we need him to pass family dinner,” Morgan said, leaping up. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

When Greer picked Sebastian up at the farm, she had found him sitting with Zain and Gabe in the front room. He had showered after his intense training session and luckily Greer didn't seem to notice that he was now wearing one of Zain's suits. His suit had been torn during a grappling match with a senior citizen who beat his ass. Annie Davies was a terror, but Sebastian smiled at the memory.

He still felt wrung out emotionally, but Paige's words about why her brothers did what they did echoed in his mind. He understood. In a way, he did the same with his inner circle of employees. Put them through a series of tests to see if they were loyal. It had been a weird feeling—being mothered by eight women when the ninth was beating you up. Then Annie would tap out and Bridget tapped in. Annie went from warrior to teacher. Sebastian hated to tell Dalton and Grant, but these women knew more about fighting than he did. Dalton and Grant had been part of the president's elite group. They'd been pararescue jumpers used to dropping into the worst of the worst locations to rescue Navy SEALs and Delta Force trapped behind enemy lines. They were tough men, but Sebastian would still put his money on these women to win a fight between them.

“What are you doing?” Greer asked as she pulled into her grandparents’ farm.

“Texting Dalton about your uncles’ training facility. I heard Annie and Bridget are instructors there.”

“Yeah, so? I thought Dalton was retired.”

“He likes to keep his skills up to date. I bet he and Elizabeth would love this as a romantic getaway. Elizabeth was FBI as you know and still trains. Speaking of that, I should tell Val and Grant for when they’re ready for a break from their baby. Val and Annie would get along well. They were both DEA.”

That small group had been the original secret group of the president. Elizabeth had been in charge and married Dalton. Then Grant had married badass Valeria after Tate and Birch married. In addition to the main team, Crew Dixon flew helicopters for the president and flew several missions for Elizabeth as well. Then there was the cute hacker couple of Alex and Roxie, who now worked for him and Ryker under their joint company. Sebastian hated to admit it, but they’d become friends over the past couple of years. He kind of missed the action of the group, which was why he jumped back into it when Greer joined.

Greer parked among the field of trucks, SUVs, and cars and gave him a weird look as if trying to determine if he had been up to something while he’d been away. However, Sebastian looked out to see Marcy and Jake Davies on the porch and was rescued from Greer’s questioning look. “I should have brought something. I’ve never dealt with grandparents before. What do I do?”

Greer shook her head at him. “There’s nothing better than grandparents. Don’t worry.”

Sebastian opened the car door, and even knowing Greer would be opening hers, he went to the door to close it for her.

He reached for her hand, but Greer pulled hers back. Sebastian looked down at her as she smiled at her grandparents. Something was up. She was acting distant. Had she changed her mind about them? Not that there was a *them*. All there was a notion of no-strings-attached sex. Sebastian faltered as he realized that since he admitted to himself he loved her, no-strings-attached sex didn't sound all that great because the idea of him being with someone else was downright distasteful. Then the idea of her with someone else was downright nauseating.

“Hello, dears,” Marcy said from the top of the stairs. “So glad you could make it. Everyone is already here. Come on inside.”

Sebastian had always been alone. He'd walked into every boardroom alone. He'd walked into his house every night alone. He was used to being alone and liked it. Except he didn't like it tonight. Even though Greer was by his side, he was completely alone as he entered the Davies's house. Was this even worth doing if he didn't have Greer's support?

Sebastian was met by a wall of male Davies cousins. Greer didn't even acknowledge them. Instead, she headed straight for her female cousins who had gathered on the other side of the room. She'd left him. Alone.

Sebastian was about to leave when he saw the group of mothers. They smiled at him from where they stood behind the couch and chairs their husbands were pouting in. They had their hands on their husbands' shoulders as if to keep them seated, but the moms all gave him an encouraging smile and a nod.

Sebastian glanced over to where Greer stood with her cousins. They looked worried, but she kept her back toward him as the wall closed in around him.

“So,” Jackson said, clasping his hand onto Sebastian’s shoulder.

“Let’s go outside and have a little chat.” Parker smiled in a way that Sebastian knew wasn’t good for him.

Greer or not, Sebastian wasn’t one to back down from a challenge. “Maybe we’ll get so close we’ll have a bromance.” Sebastian turned and strode outside, leaving them all racing to catch up. If they wanted a display of power, Sebastian could certainly give them that.

“What the hell are you doing?” Abby hissed at Greer. “He needs your support.”

“I’ve deployed my safety net. I have to see if he’s worth it. If he can survive family dinner,” Greer whispered back as she felt Sebastian’s eyes bore into her before she heard the sound of a mass exodus, “without my interference, I know it’s okay to really get involved with him.” She leveled her gaze at Layne who had stepped in and taken on the men when Walker had been injured.

Layne shrugged. “I already knew I loved Walker. I have no problem interfering to protect the man I love. It’s what a wife does and what a husband does—they support each other. All this says to me is that you don’t love him.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that vibe too. That’s harsh, Greer,” Cassidy said, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at

her. “I actually liked Sebastian for you, and you’re hanging him out to dry.”

“Worse, you’ve just leg-shackled him and handed him over to the firing squad,” Sophie said, glaring at her. “I’ve been working with him nonstop. He’s brilliant, he’s a good partner, and he adores you. What does he get in return? You abandon him on the battlefield.”

“But,” Greer began but Jace’s wife, Stella, shook her head.

“Greer, you were always the nice one. I’m very disappointed,” Stella said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t date you after you pulled a move like this,” Camilla, Wyatt’s wife, said.

“Me neither,” Willa, Porter’s wife, added.

“Oh no. You can’t change your mind now. You went through this interrogation,” Greer, said turning to Willa. “And now you’re saying no to it?”

Willa shook her head. “I’m not saying no to it. It made me closer to y’all in a way I could never imagine. I’m saying Porter supported me through it all. It was our first real challenge as a couple and we handled it together. What does it say about you and Sebastian that you just tossed him to the wolves and left him there?”

Oh no. Did she make a huge mistake? “But, I have to protect my heart. He’s never had a serious relationship and all he wants is a no-strings one. And lastly,” Greer said defensively, “I can’t be with him if my family doesn’t respect him.”

“Nash and I already respect him,” Sophie said.

Piper nodded too. “Me too. Plus Dad has a man-crush on him. It’s rather embarrassing. Aiden loves talking to him too.”

“You know Dylan and I consider him one of our best friends. This is the first time he’s ever fought for a woman, Greer. Ever. And you literally turned your back on him. I can’t believe you did this to him.” Abby was pissed as she turned away and headed for her in-laws.

“Oh, shit. I really messed up, didn’t I?” Greer asked her cousins.

“Look,” her sister-in-law Sienna said. “I understand why you did it. Ryan and Jackson have made it impossible to put your faith in a man because they scare them all away as quickly as possible. However, you’ve also never fought for any of them before. The simple question is: is Sebastian worth fighting for?”

“Jackson claimed the hand-to-hand portion of tonight if that helps you decide,” Jackson’s wife, Evie, told her.

Greer didn’t wait to hear more or to even answer. She was already running out the door.

Sebastian had handled the shooting satisfactorily. Not great, but he had been raised on a military base, after all. He could hit the target. The axes had been clumsy, but after the third throw he got the hang of it and finally got a good throw off.

Now he stared down at the weapon in his hand and back up at Porter. “What? Do you want me to murder soup? Really take down a lobster bisque?”

“No, I want you to kill the dummy with the spoon.”

Sebastian looked at the dull spoon and then at the straw dummy. He turned the spoon around in his hand so the narrow tip was the weapon and used all his strength to shove it through the dummy's softest part—the eye.

“Well, damn. That would probably work. On to the next station!” Porter called out.

“That’s mine,” Jackson smirked. Sebastian was ready to quit. If he didn’t have Greer’s support, all this was for nothing. However, he’d never backed down since he’d beaten up Brandon, and he wasn’t going to back down now just on principle. But then he was gone. He’d been ready to fight for Greer, but she hadn’t been ready to fight for him. Lesson learned. He’d been right to avoid relationships all along.

“So, what are we doing? I had guns with Ryan, axes with Colton, and spoons with Porter,” Sebastian asked as he followed the group toward a lighted area near yet another range.

“Hand-to-hand,” Jackson answered.

“Then you and I are doing knives,” another Davies said.

“You’re the chef, right?” Sebastian asked and the man nodded.

“Landon. I’d love for you to come to my restaurant.”

“Stop being nice to him,” Jackson snapped.

Dylan grabbed his arm and pulled him aside. Nash and Aiden joined them as Jackson yanked off his shirt and began to warm up.

“Look, I know how Jackson fights and it’s dirty,” Dylan whispered.

“To be fair, we all fight dirty,” Nash said with a shrug.

“Have you ever been in a fight before?” Aiden asked worriedly.

“Yes. And I know how it feels to be tortured so a punch won’t make me cry if that’s what you’re worried about,” Sebastian said dryly as he tugged off his tie.

“Jackson is partial to head shots. He goes right for the kill, so make sure you keep your arms up,” Dylan told him.

Sebastian undid the buttons of his shirt enough to pull it over his head. “Let’s get this over with.” He had a plane to catch. He didn’t even care if it was commercial. He was getting the hell out of there.

Sebastian hadn’t even put his hands up yet when the first punch was thrown. Sebastian leaned out of range, but Jackson’s hand still slid across Sebastian’s head. “Hmm, no hair product. I took you as a product kind of guy,” Jackson said, ready to go again even as Sebastian was taking a step back to steady himself.

The punches came quick and hard. Jackson didn’t hold back and Sebastian tried to go on the offense, but it was hard. He was constantly on defense, which just gave Jackson more room to run his mouth. “I thought you’d fight harder for my sister.”

Sebastian didn’t respond. Instead, he ducked a punch and came up with an uppercut. This wasn’t about Greer anymore. This was about his pride. He hadn’t been challenged like this since Brandon. What he realized shocked him. Sebastian was having fun. There were no threats made through lawyers. Money had no place here. Even his relationship with Greer didn’t matter. It was all about the physical challenge of going one on one against an opponent—an opponent who was right

there in front of you, not hiding behind the corporate wall or government rule.

Sebastian grinned as they went at it. He let his frustrations out and slammed his fist into Jackson's stomach. Only, it left him open for a shot. Even as Jackson absorbed the punch to the stomach, he landed a punch to Sebastian's that had them both doubling over before hurrying to stand and face off again.

"Don't you lay another hand on him, Jackson!"

"Greer?" Sebastian tried to say but was still trying to catch his breath. Jackson was already advancing on him.

Sebastian prepared for the punch to come, but it never did. Instead, there was a battle cry and Greer was flying through the air. She slammed into Jackson, taking them both down to the ground.

"Greer, this is no place for you!" Ryan yelled as he tried to pluck her off Jackson.

Greer donkey-kicked backward and slammed her foot into Ryan's thigh before going back to wrestling with Jackson. "No place for me? You overbearing jerks. This is exactly where I should be. Fighting for the man I want to be with. I admit the others weren't worth the effort and I let you scare them off, but I won't let you do that to Sebastian."

Sebastian watched Ryan hobbling around as Greer and Jackson rolled along the ground throwing punches and knees. He could swear he saw a noogie was involved.

"Greer, I can take care of myself," Sebastian said in his annoyed boardroom voice. He didn't need her to know how much it meant to him that she was there. He might finally admit he had feelings for her, but he sure as hell wouldn't be

sharing that bit of info with anyone not covered by an NDA. No one could know his vulnerabilities.

“I know you can,” Greer said before Jackson tossed her off of him.

Sebastian rushed forward and took her place. Jackson was pissed now and went after Sebastian with a flurry of punches that had him backing up. Well, until Greer came out of nowhere, leapt on his back, and put him in a stranglehold.

“But you shouldn’t have to. If we’re doing this, I’m not going to hold back,” Greer said as Jackson tried to throw her off.

“Then I won’t either,” Sebastian promised.

Jackson dropped to his knees and tapped Greer’s arm in defeat. Greer let go and rushed into Sebastian’s arms. He felt her press herself against him as she held on to him and at that moment, he felt like a hero. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have left you to handle this. I was afraid you were just going to run like the others and I was trying to protect myself from the pain of you leaving.”

Sebastian hugged Greer to him as the guys all came up and offered him their hands. Dylan thumped his back and grinned like a proud papa. “Welcome to the family, Seb.”

“You have some talent with the ax. You picked it up quickly. Good job, man,” Colton said, slapping him on the shoulder. Somehow Sebastian felt more pride from that compliment than from closing any deal.

“I have this great local bourbon you can try with this recipe I’ve been working on. I know you’ve eaten at all the

best restaurants around the world, so your honest opinion would mean a lot.” Sebastian shook Landon’s hand and promised he’d be by to try it as soon as he could.

“Please don’t pick up another spoon. My brother has become worse than Uncle Miles and cousin Layne,” Parker said, shaking his hand.

“Come on, let’s eat. I’m starving,” Matt called out. “Way to survive it, man. Welcome to the club.”

“What club?” Sebastian asked as they walked back toward the house off in the distance.

“The in-law club,” Deacon said.

“We’re brothers in arms,” Aiden told him.

“Survivors is more like it,” Walker joked.

“It’s like going through war,” Nash added.

“We always have your back when you need help with your father-in-law,” Carter told him.

“You do realize we’re not married, right?” Sebastian asked them as Greer shook her head at them.

“*Yet,*” they said in unison.

“Well, dinner should at least be easier, right?” Sebastian asked as they climbed the stairs behind the Davies cousins. No one answered since they were met with a wall of Davies dads.

“Did he pass?” Cole asked the group.

“Greer helped, but yeah, he passed,” Jackson said, rubbing his head where his sister had given him a noogie.

“Good,” Paige smiled. “See, guys? No interrogation was needed.”

Paige winked at him and the aunts all smiled before welcoming him to the family as if they hadn't just interrogated and threatened him two hours earlier. Okay, so he had to admit — the Davies family was fun.

“Then it's time for dinner!” Marcy Davies called out and everyone rushed to the multiple tables now running the length of the house. “Now, Sebastian. Come sit by me and tell me when I can finally die happy.”

“I'm sorry, son,” Jake said, thumping his shoulder. “The answer is never. There are never enough grandchildren or great-grandchildren.”

Sebastian took the seat next to Mrs. Davies and she asked about his desire for children and that if he wanted to follow in the Davies tradition of a quick wedding. She let him know that could be arranged very quickly. They had a priest on speed dial. But then the family discussions took over. Sebastian sat back and listened. They teased each other, they laughed at and with each other, but love filled the room. They were family and there was a clear, strong bond between them.

“What do you think, Sebastian?” Miles asked. “I'd love to know the business side of this.”

And then he was off. Sebastian was drawn into various discussions just as if he were part of the family. By the time they left, he felt included. His opinion mattered. It was also challenged, debated, and accepted. It had been exciting to be just Sebastian and not the man whom everyone said yes to. He'd learned a lot too. Greer's family was a wealth of information and was happy to help in any way.

“Welcome to the family,” Morgan whispered to him as she walked by. When he caught her eye, she gave him a wink.

“Sebastian,” Greer said, drawing his attention away. “I’m sorry for not supporting you earlier. I was scared I was going to be hurt and I was a coward.”

Sebastian reached for her and pulled her against him. “I know it’s scary. I’m scared to put myself out there, so I understand. I’m still scared, but I want to move forward together.”

“I can think of some other things we can do together.” Greer gave him a seductive smile and Sebastian wondered how fast they could get back to town.

Greer drove home quickly. They didn't speak, but it was clear the direction their thoughts were taking. Sebastian's hand had reached across the console to her knee. By the time they arrived home it was well above her knee and she was so turned on that her legs shook with anticipation.

"You really okay moving forward?" Greer asked after she closed and locked the door to the apartment.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Sebastian angled himself so that he trapped her between himself and the door. He stepped forward, placing his hands on each side of the door above her head.

Greer was forced to look up to keep eye contact. "Well, you've just been through the trauma of meeting my family, and I don't want to take advantage while you're processing it all."

"Oh no. I insist. Take advantage." Sebastian's low, deep voice rumbled through her body in a way that had her biting back a moan. "What would you do to me, Greer?"

There were two ways for Greer to play this. She could attempt to talk dirty. However, that had never worked for her in the past. She used the word *hoo-ha*, and that tended to kill

the mood. Or she could just show him what she'd been dreaming about. The way he'd be in control and then lose it. That way they would push each other further, deeper, harder, until there was no beginning and no end.

Now was the moment to decide. Did she go for it, knowing there were no promises, no safety net, and no words of love? Sebastian lowered his head toward her until their lips were almost touching. His breath was on her lips and his hips were pressing hers against the door as he waited for her answer. "Tell me, Greer. What do you want?"

"You." Greer didn't whisper it. She said it clearly so that Sebastian would not question her desire. "Right now."

She didn't even have a chance to take a breath before Sebastian's lips were on hers. He'd been slow and gentle the past couple of days when they'd kissed. More of a tease here and there, but this kiss was no tease. It was an outright claim and one Greer was more than eager to submit to.

There were no sweet words. There were no hesitant touches, unsure of how to go forward. Sebastian's tongue surged into her mouth and together with hers battled in a war of passion. He pushed her against the door, his hands tearing the shirt from her body with her bra quick to follow so that he could finally touch her skin to skin. His hands massaged her breasts as he deepened the kiss, making Greer arch off the door.

Greer took the cue and shoved his suit jacket to the ground. She didn't bother unbuttoning his dress shirt. Instead she grabbed hold of it with two hands and ripped the buttons free. She immediately had her hands on his chest, running them up to his shoulders where she grabbed on when he lifted her up.

Greer's legs wrapped around Sebastian's hips and her eyes rolled into the back of her head as she felt his erection pulsing against her. She groaned in frustration at the fabric separating them. She didn't need to wait long. Sebastian spun and set her on the kitchen island.

He placed his hand between her breasts and pushed her backward until she lay flat on the counter with her legs hanging over the side. She felt the tug and then finally she was naked. The cold stone of the countertop couldn't even cool her when Sebastian grinned at her before dropping to his knees.

Time stopped. The world around them ceased to be. Greer's whole world focused on the points where his body touched hers. Her fingers strained to grip the granite but to no avail as wave after wave of pleasure rushed through her.

"I've waited so long for this," she heard Sebastian's words whispered in her ear as he now leaned over her, his hands still working her body, sending her into another frenzied state.

Greer pushed up on her elbow so she could grab the back of Sebastian's neck. "So have I. I can't wait any longer."

Sebastian kissed her. Greer hung on and kissed him back. She felt his hand reach between them so he could slide on the condom. She had thought he'd be as fast and hardened as he'd been just moments ago, but Sebastian slowed and deepened the kiss. His tongue slid languidly against hers as his hands came up to gently cup her breasts and trace her nipples with his thumbs.

When Greer thought she couldn't stand the anticipation anymore, Sebastian finally thrust forward slowly and then froze. He looked into her eyes as she tried to move her hips against him to make him move. "This means something to me, Greer. You mean something to me."

Greer stopped moving and pulled back enough to see his face. The sincerity in his eyes sent her heart tipping over. “Then show me what I mean to you because you mean something to me too, Bash.”

And then he did. He moved slowly at first. So slowly she thought she’d lose her mind. Her body was seconds from losing control but then Greer felt the moment Sebastian lost the tight reins on his body. Together they spun wildly out of control, each pushing the other toward a peak they could only reach together.



Sebastian was whistling while he worked. Sophie stared at him as she shook her head. It had been a week of working all day and spending all night with Greer. They’d had sex slow, fast, in the shower, in bed, on the couch, on the floor in the hallway, or wherever they were when the mood struck. And the mood struck a lot. They’d even had to pull over that morning on the way to the lab. He’d never had sex up against a tree and, well, the whistling while he worked should explain all that needed to be explained.

“I guess it’s going well with Greer?” Sophie asked as she looked up and gave her husband a wink. If the Keeneston marriages were half as good as this past week had been, Sebastian then understood the goofy grins the men all wore.

“What’s going good is this satellite. It took DARPA two years to build theirs and we’re almost done. Birch should hire you all to run the space program,” Sebastian said, smoothly changing the subject.

“Aw! That’s so sweet,” Kirana said, handing him a jar of yellowish liquid.

“Is this orange juice?” Sebastian asked.

Kirana smiled and shook her head. “No, I made this for you. I would drink it after dinner. It’s just a little drink we call *jamu kuat*. It’ll have you singing opera tomorrow. I’m partial to Pavarotti.”

“Did you just give him an aphrodisiac?” Piper asked, eyeing the bottle. “By the way he’s whistling, he doesn’t need any help in that department.”

Kirana just smiled, but she didn’t answer, and that told him all he needed to know. She’d given him sexy juice. He had been having really great ideas recently. Code for the satellite was flowing out of him and apparently she’d realized that. He should feel embarrassed. His private life had always been extremely private. However, he took the juice and thanked her for it. In this work group, there was no such thing as a private life. Sebastian had learned a lot about each of these co-workers and basically every person in town.

Then Kirana’s smile slipped. “I’m afraid I insulted the Rose sisters. They have been feeding me every day, yet last night I snuck down to the kitchen to make them a special breakfast and they had a padlock on the door. I don’t think they like my cooking.”

“I don’t think that’s the problem,” Pierce told her as he worked at his station. “They are used to taking care of people. They aren’t used to having people take care of them.”

“But *I* take care of people,” Kirana said with her brow knit in confusion. “I mean, they were just homemade egg rolls. You can’t get mad at egg rolls.”

“I’d never get mad at egg rolls,” Sebastian said as his stomach already rumbled at the thought of homemade ones.

Kirana’s smile perked back up. “I’ll bring you egg rolls! But what do I bring the Rose sisters?”

“They show their love through cooking. I’m sure they’d love for you to ask for some food. It would be a very big compliment to give them,” Sophie told her.

The door opened and Jackson walked in looking pissed. “I keep thinking you’ll be gone. Well, since you’re still here, Mom told me to invite you to the Blossom Café for dinner tomorrow night.”

“You could have sent a text,” Sebastian told him.

“Yeah, well, I have a problem and you’re the only one who can help me.”

Sebastian grinned. Jackson flipped him off.

“What do you need my help with?” Sebastian asked after he left his work area and joined Jackson off to the side of the lab.

“I ordered some weapons for my team and I can’t get them out of a port. They’re on one of Ryker’s ships, but the government is giving the captain hell about it even though we have all the paperwork. Ryker has tried to pull all the strings he could but got nowhere.”

“Which country?” Sebastian asked.

“Millevia,” Jackson said with an exasperated sigh.

Sebastian nodded. “They’re a small country with a leader who doesn’t know her place in the world yet. She took power just a year ago and has been notoriously vengeful. What did you do to piss them off?”

“I don’t know. I ordered the weapons from Israel. They were shipped to Millevia, unloaded, and put on Ryker’s boat. That’s all I know,” Jackson said, frustrated.

“Okay, let me see your receipts.” Sebastian looked over the email chain and nodded. “The company you ordered from in Israel is rivals with one in Millevia. Let me see what I can do.”

Jackson nodded as Sebastian pulled out his phone and called the minister of commerce. “Philippe, I’ll halt development on my resort right now if you dick around with this shipment,” Sebastian threatened. “Oh, and that new satellite internet for all your citizens, gone. Don’t be an ass, Philippe. You know how this works. You help me and I help you.”

Sebastian waited. He knew what Philippe wanted. Sebastian was going to do it anyway, but Philippe didn’t know that. “Yes, fine. I’ll make sure fifty percent of my construction crew are locals and give you credit for making it happen.” Sebastian paused and then nodded. “Good. It’s been a pleasure. You must join me at the grand opening.” Sebastian hung up. “Fucking corrupt politicians. Call the boat. You’re good to go.”

“Seriously?” Jackson asked. “So, that’s what you do? How do you get things done?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I thought you killed people.”

Sebastian raised his eyebrow. “I do what it takes to get the job done.”

“Jameson came to visit me the other day. Told me you had a private doctor stitch him up after the UN bombing.”

Sebastian shrugged. “Yeah, so?”

“You helped my cousin Trent and his wife too.”

“Your point, Jackson?” Sebastian was running short on patience.

“And dammit, you make my sister happy. You’re not horrible.”

“You’re still an ass,” Sebastian told him with no emotion.

“Aw, I was a fucking ass. I’m growing on you, aren’t I?” Jackson called out as Sebastian walked back to his station. He made sure to hide his smile from Jackson, but Jackson was right. They were all growing on him.

Paige and her friends and family treated him as if he were their son. Grandma Marcy, as she insisted on being called, sent him a new baked treat almost daily. Miles and Pierce talked business with him. Kale and Cade talked computers. Marshall and Cy asked about foreign intelligence he’d gathered during his travels. Then there were the political discussions he had with Zain, Gabe, Ariana, and Aniyah. He’d talked horses, football, and bourbon with more people than he could count and they’d all been great discussions. He’d even been invited to a guys’ night with the cousins tonight. It wasn’t just Greer growing on him. It was Keeneston too.

“Sebastian,” Kirana said from where she was working with Piper. “I think we might be getting close to done. Can you run a systems check?”

And back to work Sebastian went. He’d have time to think about Greer and Keeneston later. Now he had a weaponized satellite to finish.

“Well, Sebastian has survived a week. I didn’t think he could do it.” Cassidy lifted up her bourbon in a salute to Greer. “And thank you, Cady, for bringing the refreshments.”

“Anytime,” Cady said with a smile. Cady Woodson was a master distiller with her own small bourbon distillery and was slowly becoming more active in the town. She’d spent a year doing nothing but working and was now excited to get out more. She made it to almost every girls’ night and always brought a bottle of her bourbon. “With Tilly’s investment, I’ve decided to build another rack house so I can ramp up production. Soon I’ll have enough to start branching out from just local area distribution.”

“Cheers to that,” Willa said of her best friend, Tilly, as she held up her tumbler of bourbon.

“How is Tilly?” Greer asked.

“Good. She’s in Florida with her dad at the moment but will be coming to visit me soon. I miss her,” Willa admitted. “I love y’all, but she’s been my best friend since we were kids so it feels strange not to see her all the time.”

“We understand,” Sloane, Gabe’s wife, told Willa.

“And now back to Sebastian,” Sophie said with a mischievous grin. “He was whistling this morning.”

Greer tried to pretend she didn’t know why he would be whistling, but it was no use as her friends and cousins teased her. Every morning this week they’d had sex before they even got out of bed.

“So, you love him and he loves you,” Ariana said, making kissy noises.

Greer’s smile slipped a little. “We haven’t said those words yet.”

“You will. It’s obvious you two love each other,” Stella, Jace’s wife, said kindly.

Greer knew it was meant to be supportive, but this past week more and more people were talking about marriage and love and, well, it freaked her out a little. Right now, she and Sebastian had a good thing going. She didn’t want to mess it up by assuming feelings of any kind.

“They’re totally in love,” Abby said with a wink as she walked into the group with a baby sling over her shoulder and the little red nose of her father’s Vizsla, Nemi, sticking out of it.

“Abby,” Greer asked as she saw the dog peek out of the baby sling, “why are you carrying Nemi in a baby sling?”

Abby rolled her eyes. “My father thought it would be good practice. You should see what he gave Dylan. Anyway, when’s the wedding?”

“I have this great oil set for your wedding night,” Aniyah said, jumping into the conversation as she dug around in her purse and held up a bottle. “It really heats things up.”

“No!” Evie, Jackson’s wife, screamed and knocked the bottle from Aniyah’s hand. “No oils. Ever.”

Aniyah shrugged and picked the bottle up. “Fine. I have these great fuzzy handcuffs you could use. I could see that being your thing.”

“Sebastian tied to the bed with pink fuzzy handcuffs could definitely be my thing,” Greer said as she pictured it.

“That man is a lion and you will hear him roar,” Aniyah said. “You don’t handcuff a lion.”

“You do if you’re a lioness,” Greer said with a smirk. She and Sebastian did battle for control, but in the bedroom it always led to a win-win situation.

“Yes, sugar!” Aniyah yelled, holding up her glass. “To us lionesses!”



Sebastian felt like an idiot that he couldn’t just drive himself out to Zain and Gabe’s farm. The girls were meeting at Porter and Willa’s house, but Greer hadn’t left until Aiden had arrived to pick him up.

“Sorry you had to chauffeur me,” Sebastian told Aiden as they drove toward the farm.

“It’s no problem,” Aiden said in his British accent. Sebastian had learned Aiden Creed had been in the British SAS before starting his own security company. “It’s on my way and I wanted to talk to you about something anyway.”

“What’s that?” Sebastian asked, slightly suspicious.

While most of the time talk had been about work, his opinions, or his knowledge on something, strangers on the street had recently begun asking him about wedding dates. It was just assumed he and Greer would be getting married. Sebastian didn't really know how he felt about it. At first he'd been shocked and immediately denied it. However, the idea was beginning to take hold in his heart. He knew he loved her. It scared the shit out of him, but he was in love with Greer. However, he didn't know how she felt and whether things would change when they left Keeneston. No matter how much the town was growing on him, he would leave. He had to. He had properties and companies all over the world to run, and doing so from Keeneston wasn't a possibility. He also didn't think Greer would choose him over her hometown. He had to admit, that hurt. So he didn't think about it and had decided to live every day as the last.

"I guess I just wanted to talk to you before the guys got started in on you. Don't let them fool you with their talk of horses and American football—they gossip more than anyone I've ever met. So, be prepared. I found it was good to redirect the conversation. Dylan becoming a dad will be an easy one."

"Thanks, Aiden. Why are you doing this?" Sebastian asked. In his world, people didn't do things just to be nice. They always expected something in return.

"I know what it feels like to come from the outside into Keeneston. It's different for Matt and Carter. They've lived here before they married into the Davies family, but you and me? We came here following danger and love. They seem to go hand in hand when you're with a woman from Keeneston."

Sebastian smiled at Aiden's analysis of dating a Keeneston woman. "I'm guessing you came from England?"

“I did. Fell in love with Piper when I was guarding her. I moved my headquarters to Keeneston and never looked back.”

“Did Piper ask you to do that?” Sebastian asked.

“No, it took her completely by surprise. She’d never ask me to do that. I did it because I fell in love not only with Piper, but all of Keeneston.” Aiden gave Sebastian a little smile as if he knew he was reading Sebastian’s mind. “I don’t need to tell you how global the world is now. It was easy to move my headquarters here. I still travel a lot, but I always come home to Piper and Keeneston.”

Aiden pulled to a stop at Zain’s house as Sebastian watched a drop-dead sexy woman walk in, a bottle of bourbon in her hand. “I thought it was guys’ night.”

“Veronica and her girlfriend, Blythe, alternate groups. The other week Blythe joined us. Tonight we get Veronica,” Aiden explained.

“Isn’t she Mo’s executive assistant?”

“The woman is a national treasure. No one is more organized or gets things done like Veronica.”

“She should meet my new lawyer,” Sebastian said, thinking of Olivia Townsend. He’d hired Olivia, who was Ryker’s lawyer, after watching her decimate Sebastian’s top attorney.

“Dear Lord. We’d have no chance. They’d take over the world if they worked together,” Aiden joked as they got out of the car and headed to the boisterous group sitting around a firepit out back.

“Aiden! Sebastian! About time you all got here. Here, take a seat,” Zain called out when he saw them.

Sebastian was halfway down when an alarm went off. It was so loud he leapt up and almost dove behind the firepit.

“Shh. It’s okay, baby,” Dylan cooed through gritted teeth to the sling he had around him.

“What the hell, Dylan?” Sebastian asked after he and Aiden noticed no one else had jumped in fear.

“Ahmed strapped a C-4 baby to my chest and if I don’t hold it at the optimum baby head angle, it sets off an alarm and then shocks me,” Dylan told them as he stood, gently swaying. “I’m pretty sure it’s not an active bomb, but I’m not risking it. Ahmed says he’s preparing us for the baby.”

Sebastian sat back and listened to the dads in the group talk and compare diapers to bombs. He’d been around his godchildren, but he’d never been around anyone who talked about their private lives so openly as these men did.

“My question,” Jace said with a smirk, “is: When is Sebastian going to marry Greer?”

“Never,” Jackson said with a grunt as he crossed his arms.

“We’ll see,” Ryan said with a similar crossed-arm pose.

“What do you say?” Parker asked Sebastian.

“I say,” Deacon said, interrupting the conversation, “that it’s Veronica who should be getting married next. I mean, how long have you and Blythe been together?”

The entire conversation shifted to Veronica, who dodged the questions without even blinking.

Deacon caught Sebastian’s eye and gave him a wink. Sebastian gave him a dip of his chin to say thank you. They really were looking out for him tonight. It felt strange to know

people had his back and not because he was paying them. It felt nice. It felt—like family.

The second the conversation came back to Greer and Sebastian, it was redirected. Walker leaned forward and stared down Parker. “So, tell us the truth. What happened with Tilly?”

Sebastian and Greer were suddenly forgotten again as Sebastian heard all about Tilly Bradford and how Parker had drooled over her and then ran from her.

“She hit on the priest to make Parker jealous,” Porter laughed. “She’s literally the sweetest girl in the world, yet my brother tucked tail and ran.”

Parker tossed back his bourbon and took the ribbing. “Some of us can’t get everything we want, brother.”

Porter didn’t look embarrassed. He looked proud. “I was brave enough to go after the woman I love, and I get to reap the rewards of it every day.”

Parker rolled his eyes as someone new walked around the corner.

“Hey, guys. What did I miss?” DeAndre asked, taking a seat next to Sebastian. The guys filled him in, and then the conversation was turned back to Sebastian and marriage to Greer. Funny. Each time it was brought up, the panic at the thought of marriage dimmed.

“Look,” Jackson said, standing up and grabbing the bottle of bourbon to top off his glass, “I’m not saying you’ll marry my sister because I’ll kill any man who tried, but I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy so here it goes. Never, I repeat, *never*, use the oils Aniyah offers you.”

Colton burst out laughing. “Nikki used them on one of my men and he made us use the fire hose on his dick to stop it from burning.”

“How are you still alive?” Jackson asked DeAndre.

“My woman makes me a very happy man. What can I say, some of us like life a little spicy?” DeAndre looked like a very happy man. Based on what Aniyah had already offered Sebastian, he bet DeAndre was in a perpetual state of happiness.

“You’re one of those men who eats hot peppers just to say they could withstand the heat, aren’t you?” Jackson asked as if it were a bad thing.

The men laughed and Sebastian was caught up in another round of ribbing among them. Sebastian relaxed and soon found himself laughing right along with them.

Kale Mueez was laughing with the guys when his phone pinged. He looked down at the screen and the smile froze on his face.

Did you miss me? – P

The Panther, hacker extraordinaire and black-market seller of secrets, was back. He’d known it when he discovered the similarities in the operation to describe how the Chinese had the information they did. But this confirmed it.

Having a bit of trouble getting into our systems, kitty?
Kale texted back.

I love a good challenge. I had thought to retire, but you just make the game too fun to step away from. Game on.

Kale turned off his phone and smiled. The Panther had taken the bait. Kale had purposely left his number accessible to someone like The Panther. It would have taken work to get it, but he hadn't hidden it like he had the rest of the systems his technology protected. Now he had a contact, and while The Panther could attempt to track him, Kale could attempt to track The Panther. The game wasn't on. The hunt was.

“It’s four in the morning,” Greer said as she watched Sebastian answer his phone.

“It’s Kirana. She needs my help at the lab.” Sebastian slid from the bed, bent down, and placed a kiss on her lips.

“Okay, I’m coming.”

Sebastian shook his head. “Go back to sleep. Nash is picking me up.”

“Are you sure?”

The soft knock on the door answered her question. Greer went to make sure it was Nash while Sebastian got dressed. Today he grabbed the bulletproof windbreaker and put it on over his shirt. He was starting to get too comfortable in Keeneston. When he realized that, he grabbed his suit coat just in case.

Sebastian saw Greer shuffle back into the bedroom and crawl into bed. He liked this side of her. The sleepy and slightly irritable Greer. It was real. Well, not that Greer wasn’t real. She was surprisingly real about everything. She bitched about her PMS that was starting, she told him when he was being arrogant or when he was wrong, and he even caught her eating cereal from a box and she didn’t even care. The women

he'd been with before would never have been caught dead talking about their periods, would never have said anything negative to him, and had hardly ever even eaten around him. It was refreshing in its realness and he found himself relaxing into everyday life with Greer.

“You look happy for four in the morning,” Nash muttered.

“Why are you up and driving us?”

“Sophie got drunk last night and had a revelation about the weaponry on the satellite. I picked Kirana up and dropped them off at the lab hours ago. I went home and didn't even have time to pick up our daughter from her grandparents when Sophie texted me things she needed from Piper's Lexington lab. So, here I am.” Nash drove out of downtown and Sebastian took the quiet time to send business emails.

It didn't take long for them to pull into the laboratory. Sebastian put away his phone and headed inside to find the whole team already there. “What's going on?”

Kirana rushed forward with a plate of toast made into sandwiches. “I made Kaya toast. It's this sweet coconut jam. And coffee. You'll need it. We have a long day.”

“The Rose sisters turned it down, didn't they?” Sebastian asked as he took the plate and especially the coffee.

“I listened to Pierce and have been baking and cooking with the Rose sisters each night,” Kirana said with a huge smile. “I'm pleased that we've had half Southern American and half South Asian meals every night. No, I made these for you all since it was easy enough to make here at the lab.”

“Thank you, Kirana. You're not only a brilliant scientist, but you're also a generous woman and a wonderful cook,” Sebastian told her.

Sebastian ate while Kirana, Piper, Pierce, Sophie, and Kale went over where they were in the building stage and what was left to do.

“So, you see. I know how to fix the weapon,” Sophie said, grabbing the things Nash had gotten for her.

“The rest of the building part should be fairly simple now that I know the electronic engineering part needed for Sophie’s weapon,” Pierce added.

Sebastian nodded. “Then all you need is Kale and me to work on the robotics while you finish that up.”

“Yes, and then you just need to enter your little magic code and it should be up and running,” Piper said.

Sebastian looked at the satellite. The lion’s share of the device was the solar panels that would be used to power the weaponized robot that would detach and fly to the offending satellite, spy on it or destroy it, and then return to the solar panel base to recharge and upload any information. It was small enough that it wouldn’t be picked up by radar when it traveled away from the larger piece and would be invisible to telescopes thanks to Piper’s nanotech material. Everyone would see the giant solar panels of the satellite and see that it hadn’t moved. That was exactly what Sebastian had wanted to build for DARPA but the idea had been shot down by their team. They said it would take too long and it couldn’t be done. Sebastian almost laughed as he drank the last of his coffee. Just turn it over to Keeneston and they’ll get it done, in the middle of nowhere, in a week.

“Pierce,” Sebastian said after he and Kale got stuck. “You’re Mr. Cropbot. What do you think of this?”

Pierce left Piper and Kirana to work and joined them. Sebastian lost himself in work and didn't even notice when the Rose sisters practically shoved lunch into their mouths. They were on a roll, the end was in sight, and Birch had an Air Force cargo plane landing tonight to be on standby at the Lexington airport.



Greer, Ariana, and Abby watched as the enormous, canvas covered flatbed truck backed up to the bay doors of Sophie's lab.

"It looks like a covered wagon from the pioneer days meets an apocalyptic movie," Abby said with a chuckle.

"I love how serious the men who are guarding it are when they probably have no idea who we are or what they're picking up," Ariana said with a hint of mischief.

"Oh, no, Ari. I know that tone. We are not pranking these soldiers like you prank your brothers," Greer told her. Ariana may have calmed down after assuming her role in the royal family and getting married, but she still had a wild streak in her.

"I can't believe they're almost done with the satellite," Greer said as the reality of the situation began to set in.

"Are you worried that Sebastian might leave?" Ari asked, sensing now was not the time for pranks.

"I know he's going to leave. His life is in D.C. and New York and, well, all over the world," Greer said as she reached deep inside her and picked her heart's safety net back up. She knew pain was imminent and inescapable, she had to make a

last-ditch effort to pretend she wasn't fully, madly, and deeply in love with Sebastian.

"Your job could be in those places," Abby said. "The team used to run out of D.C. Or you could go back to HRT in New York."

"Yeah, Greer. What are you going to do now? I mean, I know you and Sebastian are going to be together, but you've been having this work crisis. Trust me, I totally understand, having gone through it myself. Have you figured it out yet?" Ariana asked.

"I don't think what I want to do exists. I want to plan and run the black ops group. But, Birch isn't going to be president forever and when he's gone our group is gone. I'm FBI. Not Special Forces. So I can't run their ops groups. I could try for the CIA or the head of the HRT in D.C., however, those posts get bogged down in political ass-kissing and that's just not me." Plus, in her head she'd built this life with Sebastian and now she had to realize everything she thought she'd figured out was crumbling down because there was one thing she'd not taken into account. It was time for Sebastian to leave.

"What does Sebastian think?" Ariana asked. "When I'm stuck, I work it out with Jameson."

"I brainstorm with Dylan too," Abby added.

"We haven't really talked about it. Look, I know you all think there's some grand love affair going on, but there's not. We're just having a fling. It's over the second the satellite is complete," Greer said, showing no emotion in her voice. It was as flat as if she were saying it was going to rain today.

"Bullshit," Abby said with a snort.

“Abby’s right. You love him and he loves you. It’s clear as day,” Ari told her, crossing her arms as if she were ready to fight Greer over it. “I’m sure he’s told you he loves you already.”

“No, he hasn’t.” Greer didn’t want to think about it. It hurt her heart too much to think she was falling for him when all he cared about was the sex. He hadn’t said anything about his feelings since the first night when he told her sex meant something to him. Well, of course it did. She was the only one around giving it to him.

“You’ve told him you love him, though, right?” Abby said in a similarly stern voice to Ari’s.

“He told me it was no strings and he didn’t do relationships. Besides, I don’t love him,” Greer said, trying to make herself believe it even as she said it.

“You know lying is a sin, right?”

“Jesus Christ!” Greer yelled in surprise at the voice that suddenly came from behind her.

“No, just a son of Christ,” Father Ben said with a smirk.

Greer punched his shoulder. Father Ben had been a chaplain for Special Forces. He could take a little punch. “Don’t sneak up on me. Isn’t eavesdropping a sin too?”

“No, I don’t think so. If it were, I’d need to extend confession hours for the town. I just stopped over because I wanted to let you know there was a cancellation at the church. Next Saturday is open if you want to get married then.”

“Is giving a priest the middle finger a sin?” Greer asked sweetly.

“Better not push it. You have a lot of making up to do for the fibbing you’ve been telling yourself and us about not loving Sebastian,” Abby said piously.

Greer narrowed her eyes at her friends. She was not going to be the woman left sobbing when Sebastian left. It didn’t matter that she’d fallen in love with him. She knew the rules at the outset and she wasn’t going to change them mid-affair. She wasn’t going to be that woman left running after him begging him to stay. Greer might have lost her heart, but she’d keep her dignity. “I better check on the soldiers and appoint them to their stations.”

“And I have a satellite to bless,” Father Ben said before calling out to stop Greer. “Greer, opening your heart is always the answer. Remember that, and that Saturday is open.”

Ugh, freaking meddling friends who were priests. She couldn’t just tell him to shove it so she stalked off instead. The idea of marrying Sebastian filled her with such warmth she thought she’d be able to fly. Until she remembered Sebastian didn’t do relationships or marriage. Then she plummeted back to Earth as her heart went *splat* like some cartoon coyote.

Sebastian hadn’t seen Greer since he’d left that morning. He knew she was outside because his rotating bodyguards told him she was with the soldiers sent to escort the satellite upon completion.

Sebastian appreciated not being smothered, but he still missed seeing Greer while he worked. Especially at the moment when they were going to test the satellite again.

“Okay, I’m ready at command,” Kirana said with a nervous smile from behind a bank of computers Kale had

brought over to run the satellite.

Sebastian looked down the long indoor bomb range at the various fake satellites they had spread out. In front of them, their satellite was suspended by a wire so that it could maneuver.

Sophie was on Sebastian's right with Kale on her other side. On his left was Pierce with his daughter Piper on his other side. Together as a group they stood behind Kirana who was operating the satellite.

"Turning Keeneston One on," Kirana said as she typed it a command. Three computer screens in front of her turned on and began to fill with data. "Running self-diagnostic." Kirana had more and more excitement in her voice.

Sebastian stepped forward with Kale and together they looked over the data coming in on the software. "It's good," Sebastian said with satisfaction.

Kale thumped him on the back and together they high-fived.

Sophie was next. She checked the weapons system and with a relieved grin pronounced it ready.

"My turn," Piper said with a big smile as she stepped away from the group. She grabbed a welder's mask, huge gloves, and a full-body apron before her father handed her a giant flamethrower. Sebastian heard a cackle and then all he saw were flames. He stepped back from the heat and shielded his eyes.

"No malfunctions!" Kirana cheered. "You can stop now, Piper!"

Piper didn't stop. Sebastian thought he heard her laughing over the deafening sound of the flames being shot at the

satellite. “Maybe I should warn Aiden about his pyromaniac wife,” Sebastian shouted to Sophie.

“I developed the flamethrower so I’m probably the wrong person to tell. Look how pretty it is. Do you know that with my modifications that baby reaches close to three thousand degrees?”

“You’re scary. You know that, right?” Sebastian asked her.

Sophie shrugged. “I wouldn’t say scary. I’d say quirky. Or maybe eccentric.”

“I think badass boss would be more descriptive,” Sebastian said, making sure she knew he meant it as a compliment.

Sophie turned and smiled up at him. “I think you’re right. I wonder if I can get that on the nameplate for my office door? Sophie Dagher, Badass Boss.”

Piper turned off the flamethrower and lifted up her mask. She wore a huge smile on her face. “That was awesome!”

“Sophie, you’re up,” Kirana said, giving Piper two thumbs up.

Sophie and Sebastian stepped forward. Sophie gave the orders and Sebastian input the codes to make it happen. He held his breath as the satellite’s inner robot lowered a hinged arm with a foot-long laser attached to it and turned it on. Sophie gave him the coordinates to enter. The laser turned to the target and Sebastian stepped back. “You should fire it,” Sebastian told her.

Sophie jumped forward and hit the fire button. You couldn’t see the laser, but you could hear it working. A second later you saw some smoke on the target and then a round hole began to form on it—the small control box that converted

solar energy and would store the data to send back to Earth. Three minutes later the box was gone.

Sebastian grabbed Sophie as she jumped at him. “It works!” she yelled as she jumped up and down holding onto him.

“Let’s try the targeted EMP that Pierce helped develop,” Kirana called out.

Sophie settled down and Sebastian went to work pulling up the weapon. Pierce had developed a massive one, but Sophie had worked to bring it down to a one-foot square to fit on the other side of the robot.

“Okay,” Kale said from his tablet. “I have the fake satellite’s electrical up and running. Fire away.”

Sebastian aimed it and then stepped back to let Sophie and Pierce fire it together.

“Direct hit!” Kale cheered. “I lost all communication with it but still have communication with the satellite we’re using for control.

The group cheered. Sebastian found himself in the middle of a group hug. Never before had he been in such a position, and it didn’t feel as constraining as he thought. It felt fantastic to share this excitement with others. “I’ll call Birch and let him know it’s a go.”

Sebastian stepped away, and a minute later Birch was on the line. “It works!”

“Oh, thank goodness. The British PM just called. They believe the Chinese government hacked one of their commercial satellites to steal intellectual property. No one wants to call them out for fear of starting a war. But the more I’m talking to nations, the more I realize this is a much bigger

problem than I thought. We can't waste a moment. I want you and your whole team in Florida to launch Keeneston One. The cargo plane will arrive in three hours. They had to fly from Edwards in California. As far as anyone knows, this will be a weather monitoring satellite a private company is launching into space. Great job, Sebastian. I'll meet you in Florida. Your assignment is over and as soon as the satellite is in space, we'll take down the Chinese satellite and you'll be safe and sound. They'll have other things to worry about, including the Space Summit we're hosting next week. Your regular security should be able to take over now."

"It was a group effort," Sebastian said proudly. The happiness Sebastian had felt was suddenly gone. He had no excuse to be here with Greer. He didn't need an excuse, though. Sebastian smiled as he turned back to his group. He'd tell the group the good news, then he'd tell Greer tonight before he left that he wanted to come back to Keeneston and be with her. That he loved her. That she and this crazy small town had changed his life.

“To Sebastian, Kirana, Pierce, Piper, Sophie, and Kale!” her mother called out from her table at the Blossom Café.

Greer lifted her glass of water in salute as Sebastian and his team clicked glasses together. She’d gotten a call from Birch. The second she placed the satellite and the team on the plane set to arrive in thirty minutes, her assignment was done. Sebastian was going home. Alone.

The town was celebrating at the café while the soldiers guarded the satellite now loaded onto the transport truck and currently parked in front of the café facing toward Lipston. They were going to take the main roads and catch the interstate by Lipston to reach the airport to avoid any damage to the satellite from inexperienced drivers driving small winding roads.

The town had taken a group photo around Keeneston One before the celebration started but now it was time to say goodbye and Greer’s heart was breaking. The safety net she’d tried to deploy to catch the pieces had failed. However, Greer was never one to fold under pressure or pain. So she smiled, cheered, and pretended as if she weren’t completely crushed that she’d gone and fallen in love with Sebastian Abel. He challenged her, he supported her, and even when they pushed

each other it was clear he respected her. She loved their talks as much as she loved the sex. But, now it was over.

“Hey,” Pam called out as she entered the party late. She’d been in Lexington visiting one of her sons. “Are you all expecting a large group of soldiers to help convey the satellite?”

“No, the soldiers we have are outside right now. Why?” Greer asked as the café went quiet.

“Because there’s a long line of government-type SUVs behind me on their way to Keeneston.” Pam turned around to look out the door. “See.”

Greer rushed to the large window of the café and looked down Main Street. Sure enough there was a long line of headlights. “Shit,” she cursed as she flung the door open. “Weapons ready!” she yelled as the SUVs sped down the street only to stop and cut it off in all directions. They were surrounded.

Greer was already reaching behind her and grabbing her pistol. “Don’t let them get that satellite!” she yelled at the soldiers who aimed their weapons at the SUVs.

The sunroof of one opened and out came a machine gun.

Pam shoved by her and vaulted into her Hummer. Suddenly, it wasn’t just Greer out on the street along with a small unit of soldiers. Somebody shoved her rifle in her hand and Greer looked over to see Sebastian holding a gun Sophie had designed. All around her the people of Keeneston spread out and took cover.

The door to an SUV opened and out stepped a man who didn’t look worried at all. “Mr. Abel. We meet again.”

“Who’s that?” Greer whispered.

“One of the three men who tortured me for information,” Sebastian whispered back. Greer felt a shiver go through his body. She didn’t know if it was from fear or anger, but she knew the emotion she felt. Anger.

“I’ll make this easy, Mr. Abel. Hand over the satellite and come with me. We’ll let these people live. Otherwise,” he shrugged, “you know what my general is capable of.”

Greer fired and the man dropped to the ground dead. “Now you know what I’m capable of.”

The silence only lasted a split second. The machine gun went off and Greer shoved Sebastian to the ground as bullets ripped into the concrete. The soldiers fired back as did some of Keeneston, but Greer saw the driver go down. She glanced around at the situation, she saw the opponents, calculated the risk, and then made a plan in the span of a second.

“Kale!” she yelled, getting his attention. “Can you drive that?”

“Of course I can!”

“Do whatever it takes to protect the team and get them and the satellite to the airport on my order,” she ordered Kale.

“Jackson, take Sebastian and the team and get them into the back of the truck. Now!”

“Let’s go, guys!” Jackson yelled to Talon and Lucas.

“I’m staying and helping you,” Sebastian argued.

“We always knew you were leaving. It’s not like this was a real relationship, right? Just like you said — no strings, no promises, and no relationship, remember? Now let me do my job and see you safely away. Goodbye, Sebastian.” Greer

turned away from Sebastian, hardening her heart as she nodded to her brother.

“Stop!” Sebastian yelled as Jackson practically shoved him toward the truck. “Greer!”

“What are you waiting for?” Greer yelled at her brother. “Get him out of here!”

“We’ll help,” Greer heard her father say and soon her dad and uncles had Sebastian and the team in the back of the truck and were providing a wall of cover.

Pam gunned her Hummer and rammed right into the SUV with the machine gun. The crash seemed to echo down the street. Greer knew they were outgunned as Porter and Parker began running to their trucks to get more weapons.

Windows in the courthouse opened and soon Matt, Cody, Andy, and Luke were firing from the sheriff’s station.

“I’ll get reinforcements,” Cassidy yelled.

“What? Where?” Greer hollered back.

“The church! Ben started an armory after he heard about the one at the church in Shadows Landing. I’ll be right back,” she called out before slipping back into the café and out through the back door.

Greer looked around and saw Porter’s truck. They had to make a path for Kale to get the truck out of town. Pam was using the Hummer to try to push one SUV out of the way and Greer knew how she could help.

“I got this!” Aniyah yelled as she rushed forward. “I got the Rose sisters’ car. That thing is a tank!”

Greer provided cover for Aniyah to reach the massive seventies era sedan. It stretched almost two parking spots and

was remarkably tank-like. Down the street she saw Cassidy and Ben racing forward with guns strapped across their fronts and backs.

“I’m out!” her mother yelled from where she was shooting behind an old bourbon barrel full of mums.

“Me too!” Aunt Annie yelled.

This wasn’t good. Greer saw in one moment the tides had turned and not in their favor.

Sebastian struggled against Jackson’s hold on him. “Would you knock it off? You can’t do anything to help but sit here. Let me do my job,” Jackson yelled at him.

“I have to get to Greer.”

“My sister is capable of taking care of herself. Now hang on,” Jackson said, shoving Sebastian to the floor of the truck. The uncles were at the door firing and Sebastian was stuck looking between their legs at the woman he loved fighting to protect him.

Suddenly an immense classic car sped by and hit an SUV next to the Hummer at ramming speed. Together they revved their engines and an opening appeared. Greer stepped forward so he could see all of her. “Kale, go!” she yelled before turning back to the people hiding on the street. “Shoot out their tires so they can’t follow!”

The truck’s tires spun and Sebastian was thrown like a rag doll as Kale gunned the massive truck. The uncles grabbed on so they didn’t fall out, but didn’t seem the slightest bit concerned.

“The satellite!” Kirana yelled as she scrambled toward it. She sat on the floor of the truck, put her back against the satellite, and used her body to brace it. Pierce, Piper, and Sophie did the same. It was just in time, too, because Kale did a one-eighty, sending the truck onto two wheels. Sebastian lost his balance and rolled across the floor and into Jackson.

“Didn’t I tell you to hang on?” Jackson yelled over the engine.

Sebastian grimaced as he shifted the gun to his right hand and gripped the side of the canvas with his left. Kale slowed as he approached the gap between the SUVs. Bullets ripped through the canvas. Kirana screamed as Miles jumped to protect her. He wore a jacket Sebastian recognized as one of Piper’s.

Sebastian looked out the back of the canvas. A line of people hid behind large planters, cars, two came in from behind, and others were shooting from the courthouse. In the middle of it all was Greer orchestrating the battle. She was magnificent. A true Gloriana.

“Greer! Look out!” Paige yelled and Sebastian’s head spun to see a man aiming a rifle right at her from the open window in the back of an SUV.

“No!” Sebastian screamed. He knocked Jackson’s hand off of him and pushed to the door. He aimed and fired. He kept firing until he was out of bullets. When he looked, the gun had dropped from the window and Greer was now safely behind a truck. However, the amount of firing was decreasing. Paige wasn’t firing and neither was Annie. “Stop! They need our help!” Sebastian yelled, moving to leap from the truck. Strong arms wrapped around him and hauled him back.

“Let them do it,” came the steady voice of Talon Bainbridge.

Cole turned to Sebastian with a grim face. “I owe you my daughter’s life. Thank you. Now, go do what you’re good at and let us do what we’re good at.”

Cole jumped from the truck with his brothers-in-law as Kale slowed to get through the smaller gap between the rammed SUV. Metal hit metal as Kale shoved his way through and then they were off.

Sebastian was thrown around the back of the truck as Kale sped toward Lexington. Sebastian saw headlights appear behind them and worried as the team moved to brace one another and the satellite as Kale drove like a madman.

“We got trouble!” Sebastian yelled.

“Nah, that’s just Pam and Aniyah,” Jackson called back as the headlights grew farther and farther away as Kale sped faster and faster down the narrow road.

Kale didn’t slow down as he entered the airport at top speed. Sebastian heard the roar of a large plane landing and knew his time in Keeneston was over. Kale slid to a stop and Kirana threw up.

“I’m so sorry. I’ve trained with astronauts in the simulators before, but it was *nothing* like his driving.”

Sophie laughed and looked completely unaffected. “It’s okay. Everyone throws up at least once when Kale’s driving.”

Sebastian looked out the back to see the cargo plane taxi to a stop right as Aniyah and Pam arrived.

“Drive the truck right into the cargo hold,” a soldier called out to Kale.

“Wait!” Aniyah yelled out her window.

The doors to the large car opened and the Rose sisters hobbled out. Their hair was a mess, but Sebastian had never seen such delighted smiles. “You all need some food for the trip,” Miss Lily called out.

Sebastian jumped out of the back of the truck after Jackson, Talon, and Lucas. He turned and helped Kirana down as Pierce helped Piper and Talon easily lifted Sophie to the ground.

“This should hold you until you get back. You did good, Sebastian,” Miss Violet said, handing him a large basket.

“I wish I were coming back,” Sebastian said, realizing he meant every word. “Thank you so much for your hospitality.”

“Oh, you’ll be back,” Miss Lily grinned as she handed a basket to Kirana. “You let me know where you end up and I’ll be sure to send you some treats.”

“Thank you. As I will send you some, too. Food pals!” Kirana laughed as she hugged Miss Lily and then Miss Daisy and Miss Violet.

Kale drove the truck onto the plane as Piper, Pierce, Sophie, and Kirana followed. Sebastian turned looking back toward Keeneston.

“She’s fine. Cassidy and Ben got there with the weapons and the uncles helped clean up the mess. Ryan has the live ones in custody. It’s over, Sebastian,” Jackson said in a way that made Sebastian think he wasn’t just talking about the shootout.

Sebastian had been fanciful and had thought Greer would speed to town to accompany him or at least wave him off, but she’d already said her goodbyes. While Greer was alive and

well, the pain of his heart breaking was as strong as if she'd been taken from him. "So it is," Sebastian said to Jackson.

This would teach him to love. He never wanted to feel this pain again. Sebastian turned and walked up the cargo hold door and never looked back.

“There it is,” Kirana said from behind the bank of computers at NASA. The satellite launch had been textbook. “It’s the one in the middle of Sebastian’s satellites. Look how it sidles up to it to intercept the data being delivered,” Kirana said in wonder. “It’s ballsy. They aren’t hiding it at all. It’s a big middle finger to the world.”

“Well, I’m ready to give them one and head back home,” Sophie said.

They’d slept a little on the plane, but then they’d been teaching NASA engineers and a few select drone operators how to use the satellite while NASA prepared for the launch. It took only ninety minutes for the rocket to drop the satellite near the Chinese one they’d found on radar but not near enough to be obvious. And now Sebastian had solid proof of the Chinese stealing his intellectual property.

“Sebastian, do you want to give the order?” Birch asked.

“No, Kirana is the leader here. It’s her call.” Sebastian had never given up control of a project before, but it felt right. Kirana was their leader. She did it through true collaboration, brilliant smiles, fabulous cooking, and being the smartest person he’d ever known. She was humble, but the leading

authority on satellites. Sebastian was happy to step back and let her lead.

“Well, what kind of statement do you want to make, Mr. President?” Kirana asked.

“A big one,” Birch said, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m tired of tiptoeing around the obvious just to avoid a second cold war. We’re already in a cold war. Now it’s time to show China I’m done pretending otherwise.”

“Okay then,” Kirana said, turning to Kale. “Enter the target.”

“Done,” Kale told them. “Systems look good for detachment.”

“Pierce. You’re up,” Kirana said, turning to Pierce.

“Detaching Mini K,” he said before Pierce explained what he was doing as he showed the drone operator how to operate it. A camera turned on from the top of the robot they’d named Mini K. “Detached!” Pierce said with a grin.

They watched the drone-like robot navigate through space on its own, thanks to Kale’s programming. “Here is how you switch to manual if you ever need to,” Pierce explained.

It took time for Mini K to reach the Chinese satellite. Pierce walked the drone operator through a manual landing on the spy satellite to save battery power, but now it was Sebastian’s turn before turning it over to Sophie. “Data crew watch on the big screen,” Sebastian said. “I’m going to access the satellite’s data storage by tricking the satellite into thinking I’m their receiver,” he said, talking them through how his code worked. A small antenna rose up out of the drone and then he entered his code. A minute later data was streaming down to them. Not just the data stolen from his satellites either. There

was classified data from several military satellites from various countries and data from private companies as well.

“Excellent!” Kirana clapped. “Well, not excellent. It’s really bad and the Chinese government is going to be in so much trouble, but your program worked perfectly, Sebastian.”

“Thank you.” Sebastian stepped back and Sophie rubbed her hands together in anticipation.

“My turn?”

“Take it down, Soph,” Kirana said with a grin.

Sophie worked with the drone operator to move the drone to the correct angle and then she showed them how to use the laser. “There. It’s completely dead now. You know, Uncle Pierce, you should really think of a way to clean up all this space junk.”

“That’s a great idea,” Pierce said, and Sebastian saw that maybe Pierce was moving from farm equipment to space.

“Great job, everyone,” Birch said as he applauded. “Dr. Koh, it would mean a lot to me if you could stay on here to make sure everyone was settled with Keeneston One before moving to head up the satellite division at DARPA.”

“Really?” Kirana lit up brighter than the sun. “Oh, I’d love that! Now tell me, Mr. President, do you and your wife like egg rolls?”

Sebastian shook hands with the NASA crew who would take over the operation of Keeneston One and promised to be available should they ever have questions.

Before long, however, he was with his team. Funny how they had all gravitated together. “Sebastian,” Pierce said, holding out his hand. “I was wrong about you. I admit it.

You're a good guy and a damn smart one. It has been a pleasure working with you. If you ever want to partner again on a project, I hope you give me a call."

"Me too," Kale said with a wink. Ha-ha, they already worked together but that was classified.

"Well, Piper and I already work with you, but I know I'd love it if you stop by the lab more often," Sophie said with a wink.

"Oh. I think he'll be there all the time since he's going to be with Greer," Piper teased. "Ready to go back home?"

Sebastian cleared his throat. "I'd love to see you all again," he said, meaning it. "And please, anytime you're in D.C. or New York, please stop in and see me. I'd love to show you the inner workings of SA Tech. As you said, it's time to go home. I'm catching a ride with Birch on Air Force One. It's truly been the best experience of my life working with you all."

Sebastian gave them a nod and then left them staring after him in shock. They'd all thought he was coming back to Keeneston, but Greer had made it clear. There was no reason to return.



"I just heard from Sophie," Nash announced to the group waiting for information at the café as they ate dinner the next night. "It was a success. They're on their way home!"

Greer smiled sadly to herself. She'd known it was a success. Piper had been texting her. She also texted that Sebastian had boarded Air Force One to go home to D.C. What did she expect? Greer had told him to go. In fact, she'd

had her brother forcibly remove him. However, some small part of her held out a spark of hope that he'd come back for her. It was silly really. She'd been the one to send him away.

"Think Sebastian will come back and propose?" Ari asked as she took a seat at the table Greer sat at with Abby.

"No. He's not coming back," Greer said. She was horrified to find herself near tears.

Ari snorted as if it were funny. "Of course he's coming back."

Greer shook his head. "He's on his way to D.C., Piper told me."

"I'm going to kill him," Abby muttered. "You tell him you love him and he leaves. I would have sworn he loved you too."

"I didn't tell him I love him, Abby. You, more than anyone," Greer said, her voice dripping in anger, "should know what a no-strings relationship with Sebastian Abel means." Greer shoved up from her seat as everyone stared at her in surprise. "I'm tired. Goodnight, everyone."

She barely made it out the door before Dylan grabbed her arm to stop her. "Greer, that was badly done."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll apologize tomorrow. I need to go."

"You both are perfect for each other if you weren't both too stubborn to make the first move," Dylan called out as she ran down the street.

Greer was already moving with tears falling from her eyes and rolling down her cheek. She couldn't let them see her cry. They wouldn't ever know her heart was broken. She was Greer Parker, tough ass warrior. She didn't cry and she wasn't vulnerable. Ever.

Greer stormed around the corner of the boutique and ran headfirst into a muscled body. “Bash,” she gasped, but the second the taser pressed to her neck she realized the truth. That wasn’t Sebastian and this wasn’t good.



Sebastian was exhausted when he arrived at his riverfront mansion. He locked the doors and collapsed on the couch. His heart was broken. He was such a fool. He’d let himself feel again and this is what happened.

Sebastian reached for the bourbon and staggered up the stairs. He’d drink himself into oblivion and then maybe the pain would stop.

Sebastian reached his bedroom, and even though Greer had never been to his house, he saw her everywhere. The entire wall of windows overlooked the river and as the moonlight glowed, he could imagine Greer standing there, looking out.

He turned to his king-sized bed and could imagine Greer stretched out waiting for him. She’d make him work for it and that made the reward of hearing his name on her lips all that sweeter.

“Dammit,” Sebastian muttered before taking a long slug from the bottle.

Sebastian stripped as he chugged the bottle. He could feel her breath on his neck and hear the way she’d say his name on a gasp when he thrust into her and drank more.

Finally, he crawled into bed and let the darkness take him.

“Wake up!” a male voice shouted in his ear. It forced its way through the darkness Sebastian had been living in and yanked him to consciousness.

“Mr. Parker?” Sebastian blinked into the darkness only lit by a bedside lamp. What the hell was Greer’s dad doing in his bedroom in Virginia? What day was it? What time was it? Somebody doused him with ice water and the cold shot through Sebastian’s system as he bolted up.

“What the fuck, Jackson?” Sebastian grabbed his head to stop the spinning as he took in Cole, Jackson, and Ryan standing next to his bed. “What is going on? If you’re here to kill me, just do it already.”

Sebastian lay back down and pulled a pillow over his head.

“Greer’s been taken,” Cole said.

The darkness and the spinning instantly stopped as those three words did more than any bucket of ice water could do to pull him from his drunken stupor. “When?” Sebastian was already up and out of bed.

“The best we can tell is that when she went home from the café yesterday she was taken by this man,” Cole said, holding up his phone.

Ice filled Sebastian's veins. "That's General Shen. He's the one who led my torture."

Jackson's face had to reflect Sebastian's. He was pale, his jaw was so tight it looked ready to break, and his eyes were filled with terror. "They're in China. It was never outright said, but the gist was that he'd trade her for the code you developed. Birch tried to call you, but you weren't answering. He said he hasn't been able to get a hold of you in over twenty-four hours. He even sent Secret Service here, but they couldn't get past your security system to see if you were here."

"I see you didn't have that problem." Sebastian grabbed the nearest pants and stepped into them.

"I'm better trained than the Secret Service," Jackson answered.

"Anyway," Ryan said, stepping into the discussion, "the Chinese government has stonewalled Birch after denying they have Greer and swearing General Shen has never left the country. Ever."

"Get your ass in there and save her!" Sebastian roared.

"We've been trying," Cole said, suddenly looking very tired. "We've pulled every political thread we have. Mo, Miles, Birch—everyone has been trying to find a way into China to rescue her. We've only come up with one way. You."

"Fine, let's go." Sebastian pulled on a black sweater and shoved his feet into a pair of sneakers.

"You'd so easily trade your life to save Greer's?" Jackson asked quietly.

"Yes." Sebastian didn't even need to think about it. The answer was there all along. "Now, let's go."

“About that,” Cole said slowly. “We didn’t mean to simply trade you. We mean to get in there, rescue Greer, and kill Shen. You don’t have to go. However, the only way we can get there is with your connections.”

“President Nikan of Crusina, the bordering country, said we can use his border. However, we were hoping you had contacts inside China to help us the rest of the way,” Ryan told him.

“We’ll figure it out on the plane. Let’s go.”

Sebastian’s plane was already waiting for them at the airport by the time they arrived. He’d let Cole drive as he began to develop his plan. Who owed him what? What markers could he call in?

“Paige is working her ass off at home to get a team together to go into China if we fail. Dylan and Abby are leading that up with her. Here are the assets we have who said they’d help us,” Cole said, handing him a piece of paper as the jet took off. “They’ve offered secret assistance. The ones in red are the ones who would offer assistance if we failed and Paige’s Plan B was the last resort.”

“Secret?” Sebastian said, looking down at the list of contacts and assets that Keeneston could put together. “Why secret?”

“Crusina is too small to stand up to China. They’ve already seen China give money and weapons to Crusina’s rival. They can’t rock the boat for fear of war,” Cole answered.

“Is anyone brave enough to stand up against them?”

“Bermalia and Rahmi will. They have close ties to Keeneston but will only do so if the US government goes public first,” Jackson explained.

“Well, this is an international clusterfuck,” Sebastian said, looking at the list. “Don’t worry. I have my own list.” Sebastian pulled out his phone. “Kale, I need you, Alex, and Roxie to call me in ten minutes.” Then he hung up and called Ryker. “I know you helped with the development of the satellite, but I need you again. Ryker, a general in the Chinese army took Greer to get to me. I need our company to hack into the Chinese government and shut them down. And I need your ships and any others you can get to barricade the ports in China. You good with that?”

Sebastian saw the look the Parker men shared. Yeah, they didn’t know Sebastian was in business with Ryker or Kale, but they knew now.

“Get Olivia on it too. I want to know every international law they’ve broken, every offense they ever committed, and then I’m going after them on every front I can. Scorched Earth, Ryker. Scorched fucking Earth.”

“You have a company with my nephew and Kale?” Cole asked when Sebastian hung up.

“Yeah. I trusted Greer’s opinion of him and approached him about a business opportunity.” Sebastian didn’t explain more. He was already pulling up Tate’s phone number. Tate Stratton had once been a brilliant reporter and press secretary before marrying Birch. “Tate, I have a plan and I need your help.”

His phone rang right after he hung up with Tate and before the Parker men could ask more questions, but he could see them figuring out his game plan.

“Dude,” Alex said sadly.

“I know,” Sebastian answered shortly. “Ryker approved. I want you to hack into the Chinese government network and take it all. Send all human rights violations, stolen IP, everything to Tate and Olivia Townsend. They know what to do with it and will give you instructions. Whatever it is, do it. Birch is redirecting all our spy satellites and soon I’ll have several other countries on it too so we can find Greer and General Shen,” Sebastian told them.

“This is war. You know that, right?” Kale asked quietly.

“I know.” Sebastian didn’t care. He’d risk everything to save Greer. His life, his contacts, his fortune, his power . . . they were all meaningless without Greer.

Sebastian hung up and Cole grabbed his hand before he could make another call. “I see where you’re going with this, son, and I appreciate what you’re willing to do to save Greer. However, I have an idea. Will you listen to it?” Sebastian gave a nod and Cole let go of his hand. “We pickpocket them.”

“We what?” Sebastian asked slowly.

“Most pickpockets cause a distraction. They bump into you and say *sorry* and then your wallet is gone. Or they create a scene, a woman fainting, for example, and as you’re helping the woman you get pickpocketed. We pickpocket them. Create a distraction that is innocent in nature—a bump—and then pluck Greer from them.”

“Okay, I see where you’re going. Explain more,” Sebastian said, realizing he gave an order. “Please.”

“That fancy new satellite you just launched, what kind of havoc can it play on the Chinese satellites? What if there was an outage—Ryker’s ships lose power, accidentally blocking

their commerce, their satellites go out and they lose communication, their electricity goes out . . .”

“You put China in the dark and swoop in and get Greer,” Sebastian said, getting it. “I have an idea.”

“I thought you might.”

“I don’t have the idea, what’s going on?” Ryan asked.

Sebastian was already calling Kirana. “Hey, I need you to take down all the satellites, *temporarily*. Can you do that?”

“Like you want me to blow them all up?” Kirana asked.

“No, I just need them to be disconnected from sending any info to Earth for one hour.”

“Oh, sure. No problem,” Kirana said, and Sebastian could practically hear her roll her eyes.

“The Chinese army took Greer. I need to get her back and I need your help causing a distraction. I was thinking of a solar flare that might impact the region where she’s being held. You turn out the lights and we go in and get Greer,” Sebastian said.

“Hmm, I could make that work. How much time do I have?” she asked.

“About twenty-four hours,” Sebastian told her. “Call Kale if you need help.”

Sebastian hung up and ran his hand through his hair. There were so many moving parts he didn’t know if this could be pulled off.

“You’re going to shut down China, aren’t you?” Jackson asked.

“How are you with hunting in the dark?” Sebastian asked in return.

“Really damn good,” Jackson grinned.



One thing Greer knew was when to shut up and pretend to be docile. When she'd awoken to find herself on a plane and locked in a cage, she knew that this was one of those times. The strange thing was that they weren't in a military plane even though it was clear the six people on the plane were military.

“Ah, you're awake, Miss Parker. I'm General Shen. Welcome to China.”

“China? How long was I out?”

“About eighteen hours. I gave you a little something to keep you asleep.”

Greer looked at General Shen and recognized that a man who carried himself as he did was ruthless, powerful, and used to being obeyed. There was a coldness in his eyes that told her he didn't care if she lived, suffered, or died.

“I've never been to China before,” Greer said easily as she worked to sit up in the five-by-five-foot cage. “Will we do any sightseeing?”

“I see why Mr. Abel is taken with you. You're not intimidated by powerful men.”

Greer shrugged. “Men are men whether they're powerful or scared little boys. No sense of being intimidated either way. I will warn you, though, I'm not good with tears so if you start crying I won't be the one comforting you.”

“Don't worry your pretty little head over my tears. Only your own. You behave, Miss Parker, and maybe you'll live.”

“Well,” Greer said with a sigh, “that’s a relief. So, what am I doing here?” She felt the plane begin to descend.

“I’m going to trade you for Sebastian Abel and something he has that I want.”

“Oh dear,” Greer said with a frown.

“What?” General Shen asked with annoyance.

“It’s just that you chose the wrong bait. I don’t mean anything to Sebastian and he won’t come for me.” Greer thought that was a very strong possibility and maybe being honest with Shen would gain her freedom when Sebastian didn’t come.

“You’d better hope he does, Miss Parker.”

The plane came to a stop and no one looked on as she was pulled from the cage, taken from the plane, and shoved back into a different cage on the back of a truck. They covered the cage with a tarp and Greer tried to take in every noise and smell she could. It didn’t smell like a port town so that ruled out several cities.

Finally she heard what sounded like a military checkpoint. A few minutes later, the cage was unloaded and carried into a building. She lay flat on the cage floor to peer out under the tarp. She saw military boots and knew her assessment was correct. She was being held against her will at a military base somewhere eight thousand miles from home.

The cage was dropped and the tarp was ripped off. A bottle of water and a protein bar were wedged between the bars. She was in a large hangar with a kitchen at one end and several couches arranged in front of an enormous flatscreen TV mounted on the wall. At least twenty men were hanging around.

Greer took the water and protein bar. She leaned against the bars and watched. She had to bide her time, let them grow used to her, let them assume she wasn't going to run. Then when they eventually grew complacent, she'd make her move.

Until then she'd observe and develop a plan.



Sebastian's plane landed close to the Chinese border in Crusina. President Deming Nikan met them as they stepped from the plane. An old woman with a truck that looked to be held together with baling wire and duct tape stood behind Deming. It was full of wool and cloth.

"This is Luly Tam. She's my best smuggler. She'll get us into China," Sebastian said to the team as he bowed to Luly. "Thank you, Deming, for allowing her to come into Crusina to transport us," Sebastian added.

"I didn't do it for you, Sebastian. I did it for Greer. I met her several times when Ariana was here. When Ari called to ask for help, I promised I would do all I could. Do you know where she is?"

"We have a guess. A plane landed here," Sebastian said, pointing to a map. "Then satellites caught a truck traveling in this direction."

Luly Tam looked over at the map and nodded. "Um," she said, nodding again before speaking.

"She says there's a military base there. It's strategically placed to be near Crusina and Russia and then a short flight from Japan and the Koreas," Deming translated for them.

Sebastian nodded and spoke in Chinese to Luly. He nodded as she explained it was used as a location to torture dissidents to the communist rule and to spy on their neighbors. “Luly says they send spies into Crusina regularly to test the strength of the border,” Sebastian told Deming and the Parkers.

Deming frowned. “It’s been a constant struggle to keep them at bay. That’s why I can’t publicly come out and challenge them without having most of the world at my back. They have spies everywhere. Remember that.”

Luly motioned for them to come to the truck. She shoved off the wool and cloth. She then walked to the front of the truck and turned the radio dial. The bed of the truck moved. She came back around and lifted it up. There was a compartment under the bed of the truck just large enough for the four of them to lie shoulder to shoulder in two rows.

“What about weapons?” Sebastian asked.

Luly shook her head.

“Just what you can wear,” Deming said.

“That’s not a problem,” Cole answered. “Sophie sent us well stocked.”

Jackson pulled out black military clothes from a bag and tossed them to Sebastian. “And these are courtesy of Piper.”

In five minutes, Sebastian was clad in nanotech protective clothing and armed to the teeth with lightweight weapons ranging from knives to guns and three acid grenades. He was also shoved against the side of the truck with Jackson smashed against him to the right and Cole’s feet against his. They were packed in like sardines, but they were moving and every moment they were getting closer to Greer.

No one spoke as they traveled. Every man was lost in his own thoughts. It took an hour, but they slowed down and finally stopped. Sebastian heard shouting as the border patrol checked Luly's papers and examined the vehicle. Then they were on their way again.

Sebastian looked at his watch. It would take another hour to get to their destination. Luly would unload them and then wait for them there while they hiked the rest of the way to the base.

Finally, the truck came to a stop on a bumpy road. It was go time.

They didn't dare take any electronics with them into China so they hiked in following a map and a compass. Darkness had fallen, and while it provided cover, it also made travel slow going as they didn't dare risk a flashlight. Instead, they wore night vision goggles and that took a little time to get used to.

“It's right over that ridge,” Cole whispered.

All four of them dropped to their bellies and crawled. Sebastian saw them take off the night vision goggles and he did the same. When he looked over he saw a military base and several trucks that matched the one from the satellite photos.

Jackson pulled out a long thin scope and held it to his eye. “There's the barracks at three o'clock. She shouldn't be there. I see two possibilities. The large building at ten o'clock and the smaller building at four o'clock.”

Jackson was about to drop the scope when he sucked in a breath. “Wait. Is that Shen?” He handed the scope to Sebastian. “Ten o'clock. The large building.”

Sebastian looked through the scope and saw the man who had ordered his torture standing there talking to another man as he smoked a cigarette. “That's him.” Sebastian watched as he flicked the cigarette aside and opened the door. It was only

a split second, but it was all Sebastian needed. “I see her. She’s in a cage.” And then the door was closed.

Sebastian’s heart beat so loudly he was afraid Shen would hear it. It also took everything he had not to race down the ridge and storm into the building.

“Is she alive?” Cole asked, his voice taut with emotion.

“Yes,” Sebastian said with relief. “She is. Let me show you where she is.”

“We have thirty minutes until lights out. Let’s get into position. We need to take out the generators too,” Jackson ordered. Cole might be his father, but he knew when to defer to the expert.

Sebastian did the same. He pushed down his instinct to rush headfirst to rescue Greer and trusted Jackson.

Greer was docile when they led her to the bathroom. As best as she could tell, they took her out to use the bathroom once every eight hours. This was her third time of the day so it had to be near midnight.

Greer used the toilet in the small stall and looked around again for something to help her escape. The man who escorted her into the bathroom tonight didn’t watch her pee like the others had. This one turned his back and sent a text. It was all the time Greer needed. She grabbed the toilet paper, pulled it off the cheap industrial double-roll holder, and yanked the spring clip free. When the guard turned around, she was pulling up her pants.

The guard shoved her out the door and back toward the cage. Most of the guards were sleeping, but several were

watching television. Something was on the news about the sun and they were all pointing at it. Then they shrugged and turned the channel.

“What was that about?” she asked the guard as he shoved her back toward the cage.

“Ah, Miss Parker. I am glad I caught you before you went to bed.” General Shen said something to the guard who handed him the key and left her alone with the general. “Just some talk about a solar flare that might cause a moment’s disruption. Not to worry, we have generators. Guess what news I have? Sebastian is no longer in D.C. My spies tell me his private plane took off yesterday. Do you have any idea where it went?”

“Dude,” Greer said, sounding like Alex at his most enlightening. “I told you, we’re not a thing. He has businesses all over the world. He could have gone to any of them. He probably doesn’t even know I’m gone. Did you tell him you’d taken me?”

Greer enjoyed the pause that followed. “Our ambassador talked to the president. It was made clear that you would be exchanged for the code and Sebastian Abel.”

“If you say so. I think you might want to try again because they haven’t reached out, have they?”

“No, but they need time and maybe a little encouragement.” General Shen ran a finger down her cheek. “Too bad you don’t wear a ring. I would send that finger to Sebastian but now I’ll have to get creative.”

Greer stood still as Shen ran his hand down her neck until his hand wrapped around her throat and squeezed. Greer tried

to keep the panic at bay. Shen leaned forward as his other hand ran down her side.

“Tell me, Miss Parker, which part of you does Abel value the most? Is it your pretty face? I could send him one of your eyes. The color is very unique. Or is it these full breasts?” Greer refused to look away when Shen squeezed her breast. “I could send him your nipple. I bet he’s intimately acquainted with them. You might be even more fun to break than Sebastian,” Shen laughed before shoving her to her knees.

Greer knew she’d do what it took to survive, but it went against her nature to do nothing. However, in this case, that’s exactly what she had to do.

“I like you in this position. I’ll give Sebastian until the morning. If he hasn’t contacted the ambassador by then, then you and I will give him a little encouragement.”

Shen stepped back and with a kick to her sternum, sent her flying back into the cage. “I’ll see you in the morning, little doll.”

Greer refused to shrink back or show the pain she was in as he locked the cage and strode toward the soldiers watching television. He’d made it halfway across the room when the lights went out.

The men were yelling and issuing orders as flashlights were found and men rushed out the door. Greer yanked the spring from her hair and straightened it. While they were fumbling around, she worked to get the lock undone.

The lock tumbled, but then a light shone her way so she kept to the backside of the cage. “What’s going on?”

A radio crackled and someone spoke. General Shen cursed. “Solar flare knocked out power across the whole area.

China is dark. Don't worry, little doll, there's all kinds of fun to be had in the dark."

He laughed and strode from the room to his private quarters taking the flashlight with him. Yes, there were all kinds of fun to be had in the dark. Greer smirked and prepared to fight.

Sebastian was silent and deadly as he hid beside the generator in the back of the building. He heard two guards talking and saw the beams of light as they rounded the corner. Cole and Ryan were going around the other side to enter through the front door.

"I got the far one," Jackson whispered.

Sebastian felt no emotion as he sliced the throat of the guard who bent to turn on the generator. When he looked up, Jackson's guard was also dead.

"I don't know whether to be proud or scared of you," Jackson whispered. "But I'm glad you're on our side. Use the acid bomb."

Sebastian pulled the pin and stuck the grenade at head level on the back of the building. There was a little *click* and then the wall melted.

Suddenly there was yelling and Sebastian was ready. He and Jackson burst through the hole and into a kitchen. Jackson laid down cover as Sebastian's attention went right to Greer.

"What the hell are you doing?" Greer yelled at Sebastian as Shen rushed toward her cage.

"Saving you. What does it look like?" Sebastian called out as he shoved his knife into a soldier and yanked it out.

Greer grabbed onto the top bars of the cage. When Shen bent to open the cage, she pulled herself up and swung her feet into the door. A door that should have been locked but wasn't. The door slammed into Shen and sent him tumbling backward to the floor. The front door burst open as Cole and Ryan entered with guns blazing.

"You shouldn't put yourself in danger like this!" Greer yelled back at him as she leapt onto Shen's prone body before he could get up and broke his nose with one punch. "How's this for a little doll, asshole?"

"Hello pot, meet kettle!" Sebastian yelled back as he ducked a punch and slammed his fist into the face of a soldier. "Besides, are you questioning my ability to defend myself and save you?"

"I'm questioning the intelligence of whoever let you come!" Greer yelled back before holding out her hand. "Knife."

Sebastian was three feet away when he tossed the knife straight up in the air before grabbing hold of the soldier in front of him and throwing him toward Cole who shot him.

"Save me?" Greer asked into the silence as she grabbed the knife out of the air and stabbed it into Shen's heart. "Does it look like I need to be saved?"

"No, you look glorious. I've always found you extremely sexy when armed." The relief coursing through Sebastian had him smiling at Greer. A smile that wouldn't leave any doubt as to what he was thinking.

Jackson punched him in the arm. "Gross. That's my sister."

"Honey, are you hurt?" Cole asked her as he rushed forward.

“No, I’m good. Thanks for coming after me, Dad.”

“It’s Sebastian who got us here.”

“While I appreciate all that Sebastian has foolishly done when he placed himself in danger, I think it’s a solar flare that saved us,” Greer said with a roll of her eyes.

Sebastian glanced to Ryan, standing by the door. “We need to go,” Ryan whispered. “The gunfire woke everyone up.”

“This way,” Jackson ordered.

Sebastian stepped back and let the Parkers usher Greer out the door. He brought up the rear, making sure to place himself between the base and Greer at all times. They ran in silence as they made their way back to Luly.

“Ah, you found her,” she said in Chinese.

“We did. Thank you for your help,” Sebastian replied.

“You speak Chinese?” Greer asked suddenly.

“I’ve only shown you the surface of who I am. You’ve never indicated you’d like to see more,” Sebastian said with his heart hardening again. Why had he thought Greer would shout her love for him when he’d rescued her? And the thing was, he’d rescue her all over again—every time she needed it because he loved her that much.

“Get in, get in,” Luly ordered in rudimentary English as she shoved the men toward the back of the truck. “You,” Luly said as she shoved papers at Greer. “Daughter.”

Then Luly reached into the back of the truck and handed her a ratty dress covered with what had to be dirt and manure. Greer didn’t hesitate as she pulled it on over her clothes. Luly shoved a traditional hat down on her head and then smeared

her face with dirt from the ground. “There, you sleep. We go now.”

Sebastian crawled into the compartment and waited as the Parker men got in and then the door an inch above his face closed and they were off.

“Thank you, Sebastian,” Cole said over the sound of the engine. “Thank you for saving my daughter.”

“You’re welcome.” Sebastian closed his eyes and thought of Greer as they bounced their way down the rutted road back to Crusina.

Greer pretended to sleep as Luly talked her way out of China and back across the border. Then they were finally free. When Luly stopped the truck, they were back at Sebastian's plane and Deming was hugging her.

"Thank you for all you did to save me," Greer said to Deming as he shook hands with her father and Ryan. He'd been an obnoxious dick before, but after a government coup, he'd turned out to be a pretty good guy.

"It wasn't me. It was all Sebastian." Deming looked to where Sebastian was climbing the stairs of the plane with her dad and Ryan close behind. Jackson came up after hugging Luly to shake Deming's hand. "That man is possessed by love. He literally moved Heaven and Earth for you," Deming told Greer after shaking Jackson's hand.

"As powerful as the mighty Sebastian Abel is, I don't think he has more power than the sun. But I do appreciate all that he and you did for me. Thank you."

"Love can make a powerful man crumble to his knees or rise like the sun," Deming said with a smile before he placed a kiss on her cheek. "Invite me to the wedding."

“What is he talking about?” Greer asked as she turned to Jackson.

Jackson wrapped her up in a tight hug. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

Greer blinked hard to stop from tearing up. “You know I’m not a damsel in distress. I was about to save myself when you found me.”

“Look, Greer. I’m only going to say this once and then I’m going to deny I ever said it, so are you listening?” Jackson asked. She looked up at her brother’s serious face and grew nervous.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I was”—Jackson took a deep breath—“wrong about Sebastian. He is worthy of you. Any man who literally goes scorched earth to protect you loves you, and that’s all I wanted for you. A man who would go to the ends of the earth for you. Sebastian did that.”

Greer swallowed hard. “But you said—”

“I know what I said. I was wrong. He loves you, Greer. He single-handedly launched an international revolution against China because they took you. He had Ryker’s ships blocking the ports, costing China millions, billions, probably. He hacked their systems and has Tate distributing all their atrocities to the media across the world with Birch calling on the world leaders to sanction China in response. He has Olivia filing charges in the international court and in every country China operates to freeze their assets. Hell, the man created a fake solar flare and shut down the entire country for one hour to save you. So, I admit it. I was wrong about him, but you’ll never hear me say it again.”

Jackson turned and went up the stairs leaving her, breathless and confused, to follow.

Sebastian was already on the phone when she boarded the plane. He turned and didn't watch as she walked past him to take a seat next to her father.

“Did Sebastian really shut down the entire country to save me?” she whispered.

“He did. He's a man in love. A man in love will do anything to save the woman he loves.”

“So, Dad, that's what it takes for you to approve of a man?” Greer asked, growing annoyed as the plane took off. She could have loved him this whole time yet her family had put her dates through hell and scared them off so much that she thought she could only have a secret no-strings relationship with Sebastian to have anything at all.

“No, just a man brave enough to fight for you. He did that, darlin', but the question is, are you brave enough to fight for him?” Her father sniffed the air and cringed. “You might want to think about that in the shower.”

“Ugh!” Greer stormed back to the bedroom. She'd been in this plane enough to know about the large back bedroom with a nice bathroom attached to it. The shower had multiple jets and was stocked with the best-smelling shampoo ever because it always reminded Greer of Sebastian.

Greer looked around and spotted the telephone. She picked it up and placed the call.

“Hello?”

“Abby, it's me and I think I messed up.”

“Greer! It's Greer!”

The phone was yanked away and her mother was on the line. Greer was passed around the room so that everyone could make sure she was safe, to tell her about how Sebastian had told several heads of states exactly what they needed to do, how Kirana had used the EMP upon Sebastian's order from the satellite to fake a solar flare and shut down China, and how they were so happy they were coming back to Keeneston.

"Greer?" Abby asked as the noise level dropped. "I'm outside now so we have some privacy. What do you mean, you think you messed up?"

Then the tears Greer had fought finally came. She told Abby about their no-strings relationship, about how she had gone and fallen in love with Sebastian, how he'd rescued her, and now how he didn't even talk to her on the plane.

"Greer, you idiot. I love you like a sister, but you are one stubborn woman. Sebastian might not have said anything, but his actions have always said more than his words. What do his actions tell you?"

"That he's loyal, a good friend, and literally went to war for me. He loves me, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does. Why do you think Dylan and I went to these lengths to set you two up?"

Greer took a deep breath and let it out. "Thanks, Abby. You're a good friend."

"You can reward me with a wedding in two weeks. That's when I placed my bet."

Greer laughed and hung up. She stripped and entered the bathroom. She took a deep breath and turned on the water. She loved him and there was a good chance he loved her. Now, was she brave enough to go after it?

Sebastian hung up with the Swedish government. He'd thanked them for the fake report of the solar flare that got this whole thing started. He stood up and walked to the bar at the front of the plane.

"Got any bourbon in there?" Cole asked.

"Of course, Mr. Parker." Sebastian pulled out a bottle of the very best bourbon he owned and poured two glasses.

"Thank you, son. Do you have a moment? I want to tell you a story."

"A story?" Sebastian asked after taking a sip. "Sure, what kind of story?"

"A true one. See, there once was this stubborn FBI agent and an even more stubborn young hat designer. She was a witness to a shooting and the FBI agent was assigned to keep her safe. This woman infuriated him. She was stubborn and wouldn't listen and constantly did her own thing. However, as the agent kept the woman safe, the annoyance he felt to her changed, shifted, and turned to something else.

"Their feelings for each other grew until one day the agent couldn't stop thinking of the woman and bought her a special gift as a way to tell her he loved her. He had a big speech prepared and presented her with the gift." Cole told him.

"And she fell in love with the agent and they lived happily ever after?" Sebastian guessed.

Cole laughed and shook his head. "No. She was furious and ran from the agent. The assassin followed after her and almost killed her. When the agent arrived, her feet were

bloody and battered as she had sprinted through the woods and into the agent's arms."

"Really?" Sebastian asked.

Cole smiled. "No. She did run through the woods but it was to get her rifle and shoot the bastard."

"And then you lived happily ever after?" Sebastian asked.

"It wasn't until the agent realized how much she meant to him when he nearly lost her that he also realized it had been love all along. He loved their fights, he loved their debates, he loved their passion, and he loved her. Being a strong man doesn't mean dominating a woman, forcing her to fit into a neat domestic box. A strong man is brave enough to respect an equally strong woman and all her stubbornness because as a team there isn't anything in life you can't conquer with a woman like that by your side." Cole took a sip of his bourbon and Sebastian's mind was spinning. He felt it like a punch to the gut. He understood exactly what Cole was saying because he felt invincible with Greer by his side.

"What was the gift you got Mrs. Parker?" Sebastian asked.

Cole grimaced. "A vacuum cleaner. It had a special pet hair filter."

Sebastian smothered his smile and tried to hide it behind his glass. Then he took a deep breath and set his glass down. "Mr. Parker, I love your daughter very much. I know I'm not who you envisioned for her, but I'd like your permission to ask her to marry me."

Cole smiled at him and reached out to clasp Sebastian's shoulder. "You're exactly who I envisioned with her. In fact, you exceed what I had dreamed when I held my little girl in my arms for the first time. I wanted a man worthy of her, and

you, Sebastian, are. You love her, you'll fight for her, you'll support her, you'll be there for her, and she'll do the same for you. Marrying a Davies is quite an experience. Greer may have my last name, but she's a Davies through and through. Only special men can handle that. You have my permission, Sebastian. Welcome to the family, son."

Cole pulled him into a hug and Sebastian was somewhat frozen. He didn't know the last time he'd had a fatherly hug like this. Maybe when he was a little boy? Sebastian raised his arms and hugged Cole back.

"Any words of advice?" Sebastian asked.

"Yeah, don't ever get her a vacuum."

Sebastian laughed and when he looked back at the couch he saw Jackson and Ryan smiling at him. When Cole gave them a nod, they both jumped forward.

"So, a billionaire brother-in-law who literally brought the world to its knees to save our sister," Jackson said, holding up the bourbon Sebastian had just poured. "Dad, you might win the biggest badass in-law game yet."

"Damn straight I will," Cole said, clinking his glass to Jackson's and Ryan's.

Sebastian and the guys had a celebratory drink before he got to work. He sent a message to Olivia Townsend inquiring how hard it would be to move his headquarters to Keeneston or at least Lexington.

He sent a text to a jeweler he knew in Paris and had received several pictures of engagement rings from him already, but it was the seventh picture he sent that caused

Sebastian's heart to stop breathing for a split second. That one. That was the ring his wife would always wear as a symbol his love for her.

The jeweler promised to have the ring at the Paris-Le Bourget airport by the time they landed to refuel. Sebastian was in the midst of brainstorming ideas to propose when the bedroom door cracked open and Greer stepped out, looking all fresh and clean.

She stopped in front of him and looked at the seat next to him. "Is it okay to sit here?"

"Of course," Sebastian said. "Feeling better after the shower?"

"I am. I'm sorry, Sebastian. I was a jerk to you. I didn't realize all that you did to rescue me," Greer told him. She looked nervous and Sebastian knew it took a lot to admit she was wrong.

"It's okay, Greer. Why don't you look happy?" Sebastian asked as he reached around her and pulled her against his side.

"What are we doing, Sebastian?"

"What do you mean?" Sebastian asked.

"I mean, you don't do strings. You don't do relationships. Yet there is something between us, right?"

Sebastian was quiet for a moment as he brushed a piece of wet hair off her shoulder. "Greer, what do you want in life?" She took a deep breath and frowned. "It's not a question meant to trick you. It's just a question. Close your eyes and picture a life that would make you happy. What does it look like?"

Greer closed her eyes. It was easy. She saw it clearly.

She and Sebastian, hand in hand. A smile on his face. Children running around them. Then he'd get a call and kiss her, telling her he had to work. He'd bend down and kiss their children goodbye. A little girl with big hazel eyes and her father's dark hair was tugging on her hand. "When do you go to work, Mommy?"

"I'm going to catch a ride into work with Daddy. Have a great day at school." Greer would kiss her children and slide into the car with Sebastian.

"What's on your plate today?" he'd ask her.

"New recruits," she'd tell him.

Sebastian would grin as he ran his hand up her leg just to tease her. "I know how you love to torture your recruits. I have a deal I'd love your opinion on."

Greer opened her eyes. "Family. A partnership with the man I love. I'd like this certain job too, but it doesn't exist so I don't know about that part." She basically wanted all the stuff Sebastian wouldn't want.

Sebastian kissed the top of her head. "You should have everything you wish for, Greer. Now, we've had a long couple of days. Let me hold you while you sleep."

As much as Greer wanted to fight the overwhelming exhaustion and talk to him, her eyes fluttered closed and she dreamed of a life she'd never have with Sebastian.

Greer woke up when they landed in Paris. While they refueled, she walked around the airport with her brothers. She stood on the tarmac with them and watched Sebastian meet with some man.

“Did you tell Sebastian yet?” Ryan asked.

“Tell him what?” Greer asked back. Ryan stared at her. “Oh, that. No, I haven’t. I will, though.”

Greer bit her lip. Telling Sebastian she loved him was going to hurt. Opening herself up like that was hard, but then knowing he didn’t see the same future—well, it was going to crush her.

“Are you going back to HRT?” Jackson asked.

She was thankful for the change of subject as she shook her head. “I’m going to call Birch when we get back on the plane. I want to run something by him.”

“You gotta find your passion,” Jackson said to her as they walked back to the plane after their father whistled at them.

Greer made her way to the back of the plane and shut the door. She stared at the phone and took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.”



Greer's eyes popped back open as the tires hit the runway. She looked out and the entire town of Keeneston was waiting for them. "I should have known," she muttered. Sebastian shifted to look around her and paled. He'd been acting strangely since she'd come out of her shower.

"I didn't expect the whole town. I thought they'd wait for you in Keeneston," Sebastian said, sounding a little unsure.

"Well, you know Keeneston. We don't do anything in a small way." Greer smiled and then frowned when Sebastian swallowed hard. "Are you coming with us to celebrate?"

"Depends," Sebastian said slowly, drawing back from the window.

Um, okay. Nerves shot through Greer and she suddenly questioned everything everyone told her about telling Sebastian how she felt. *Be brave.* "I hope you do. I need to talk to you privately."

"About what?" Sebastian asked, but then the door opened and her family called her name to hurry up and exit the plane.

"Just don't leave without talking to me," Greer called back as her mother shouted her name from the crowd of people gathered a short distance away.

Greer followed her brothers down the stairs as her mother raced forward to wrap her in a tight hug. Around her, chaos ensued on the tarmac. The Rose sisters were feeding everyone, Aniyah and all Greer's friends and family were hugging her, her uncles were shouting at her brothers and father, and all

Greer wanted was Sebastian, but she was pushed toward her mother's car and away from the man she loved.

She turned and saw Sebastian watching from halfway down the plane stairs. His black suit and stark white shirt gave him the appearance of being untouchable. He stood with a frown on his face as she was swept up in the crowd. He raised his hand as if to wave goodbye and Greer had a legit panic attack that caused her heart to pound, her palms to sweat, and her eyes to go wild.

"Honey, are you okay? Come on, let's get you home," her mother said, grabbing her shoulders and turning her toward the car.

"Sweetheart," Cole said, prying her mother's hands from her shoulders. "Give Greer a little room to breathe."

Sebastian turned to head back up the stairs. "Sebastian! Stop!" Greer screamed from the depths of her soul. The entire town of Keeneston went quiet. "Sebastian, wait! I need to talk to you. You can't leave yet!"

Sebastian turned and looked at her. "What is it, Greer?" he called out.

"Don't go," she called out as she ran toward him.

"Why should I stay?" Sebastian asked as she stopped at the base of the stairs and looked up at the man she couldn't imagine ever leaving again.

"You asked me what I want. Well, I want the impossible, and I've been told you're the man who can make that happen."

Sebastian's lips tilted up as he took a slow step down the stairs. "I am pretty good at the impossible. What is this impossible desire of yours?"

“You, Sebastian. You and so many strings we’ll be tied together forever.” Greer didn’t notice the entire town at her back, listening in. All she saw was that Sebastian didn’t turn and run back onto his plane.

“I don’t do strings, Greer. You know that. They’re too messy, too easy to be tangled, too confusing, and too unclear for people looking at us from the outside to see who we are. I like things to be straightforward so there’s no question about where we stand,” Sebastian said, taking another step closer to her. “Why do you want strings, Greer?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you. There’s something between us.”

“What’s between us, Greer?” Sebastian asked, stopping in front of her. “Say it. What’s between us?”

“Love,” she whispered and Sebastian nodded. She felt gutted standing there telling him she loved him and knowing she wouldn’t hear it back. Her heart was exposed and she was holding it out for Sebastian to do with it what he would.

“About time you realized that, you stubborn woman,” Sebastian said with a look of exasperation on his face as the townsfolk sucked in a breath.

“Stubborn? Me?” Greer asked on her own gasp.

“Yes, you.” Sebastian stepped forward until he was looking directly down at her. “It took all this time for you to see that you love me. I’ve known I loved you for the past year. Why do you think I sent those drones to protect you? Why do you think I hated you putting yourself in danger? I love you, Greer Parker. I love your stubborn, badass, sweet, funny self, and your loyal heart. Besides, only someone as stubborn as

you wouldn't give up on someone as stubborn as me. You're my perfect match, Greer."

Greer felt the tears filling her eyes as he brushed his thumb over her lower lip. "But then why a no-strings relationship? I'm not sharing you, Sebastian!"

"I'm thinking of an unending circle instead of strings. Strings can be cut. A circle is true, always bringing us back to each other." Sebastian dropped to his knee and Greer blinked at the diamond ring that appeared between his fingers. "Greer Parker, will you be my constant love, my constant light, and my constant partner in life? Will you marry me?"

"Are you sure?" Greer blurted out.

Sebastian grinned and her heart was his. "Yes. I've never been so sure of anything in my life. I love you with all my heart, all my soul, and all my being. Marry me, Greer, and make me the happiest man to have ever lived."

"Yes! Yes, I'll marry you," Greer said, bending to kiss him. He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her feet off the ground as he spun her around.

"I love you," he whispered against her lips before claiming them in a kiss that had her brothers groaning and her friends cheering.



Sebastian couldn't stop smiling at the surprise engagement party the next evening. Grandma Marcy had insisted on throwing it at the farm. As a surprise, Birch, Tate, Alex, Roxie, Crew, Dalton, Elizabeth, Grant, and Valeria were all there when he and Greer walked in, thinking it was a small dinner

party. They'd all been a team, but since then they'd all moved on to new things—namely love, marriage, and family. And here Sebastian was, getting ready to move on as well.

“Congratulations,” Dalton Cage said, shaking Sebastian’s hand after things calmed down. “Lizzy and I are thrilled for you. It’s strange to see the group all together, but no longer active. I’ve been waiting to receive orders from Birch, but diaper duty is the only order on my plate right now.”

“What about the president’s group? Is it over then?”

Dalton grinned. “You haven’t heard?” Then he laughed and called the old crew over and told him the great Sebastian didn’t know what was happening to the group.

“I have to say,” Valeria said with a smile, “I liked Greer when I met her in New York City. I’m happy for you, but after seeing their setup back there, I am rethinking my marriage to Grant. That chef is sexy. I could throw axes, and he could feed me gourmet food.”

Her husband, Grant, shook his head at his wife. “Then you’d lose . . .” Grant whispered into her ear and Valeria grinned. “So, food or sex?” her husband asked.

“I think I’ll stick with your pop tarts and amazing sex. Now, if our child were to marry into the Davies family, I’d be up for that. Are arranged marriages still a thing?”

“Totally calling dibs on that. Good thing it looks like there’ll be lots of little ones to pick from,” Lizzy said with a laugh. “Miles Davies showed us his training facility and I don’t care if I’m a PTA mom of four, I’m coming here every year to play.”

“I already booked a romantic weekend in the spring,” Dalton said, kissing his wife’s head. “I even upgraded to the

weapons testing package.”

“I love you so much,” Lizzy said before turning and kissing her husband on the lips.

“Alex and I love coming here to work with Kale. We get our computers and sit out in a field and work with horses all around us. We’ve come up with so many new ideas that way,” Roxie said as she smiled at her shaggy-haired husband.

“Dude,” Alex replied sweetly to his wife.

“I guess I’m the only one left out, but I did check out the training facility and would love to come. Even as just a pilot. Whoa,” Crew said, grabbing Sebastian’s shoulder. “Who is that woman undressing me with her eyes?”

Sebastian followed Crew’s gaze and shook his head. “You can see her eyes? I’m impressed. I wasn’t sure she had any. That’s Nikki, and she’s known locally as quite a temptress.”

“I love this town. Later,” Crew called out as he strutted over to the woman who immediately plastered herself to the tall airman.

“Excuse me,” Humphrey Orville called out as he tapped a glass with a spoon. He shoved his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose as he waited for the crowd to quiet down. “Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.”

“What’s he doing?” Sebastian asked his group who were surrounding him.

His group snickered at him.

“Dude,” Alex muttered as if Sebastian were dense.

Birch stepped up on the raised platform at the front of the tent they were all under. Large metal warmers cast a fire-lit glow but also kept them all warm as they partied outside.

“Keeneston is a special place to me. When our country has needed help the most, you’ve answered. Tonight I have exciting news to announce. Not only are we here celebrating the union of my best friend, Sebastian, and Keeneston’s own Greer Parker, but we’re celebrating a union between Keeneston and the United States. Effective immediately, after the wedding next week, Greer Parker—” Birch said.

“It’ll be Greer Abel,” Greer called out from the front row.

Birch smiled and nodded. “Greer Abel will become my senior intelligence advisor.”

Sebastian pushed through the clapping and cheering crowd. “D.C.? I thought we were moving here?” he whispered to his fiancée.

“It’s called a cover,” Greer said, smiling up at him. “I’ll be in D.C. recruiting the best of the best for the next black ops team we’re calling The President’s Guard. After I’ve recruited them, we’ll come to Keeneston where they will train at the Keeneston Training Center. We’ll fly back and forth, splitting our time in each city. Good thing I know a man with a plane,” Greer said with a wink. “The Keeneston Training Center and the town of Keeneston will be their covers. Some are going to be instructors at the center and others may choose to work at the fire department, sheriff’s station, or start their own businesses here. My family will train them and get them ready for the field. Then when missions hit, I can run those missions from either Keeneston or D.C.”

“And when Birch’s term is over?” Sebastian asked of The President’s Guards.

“Well, hopefully he wins re-election for his last term. Either way, if the next president meets with our approval after Birch vets them, we’ll continue. If not, I’ll focus on raising our

children and starting a private security group specializing in hostage rescue. There're a lot of kidnapped people in the world who need saving."

"You did it. You found your passion. I'm so happy for you, Greer. You know I'll do everything I can to help. I even have some ideas on a tech company that might be able to help you out," Sebastian said with a wink.

"You spoil me with your willingness to break the law for me," Greer teased.

"There's no one I'd rather put everything on the line for," Sebastian whispered into her ear as Birch wrapped up the toast. "I can also think of several ways you can thank me."

Sebastian was whispering a few of those ideas in his fiancée's ear when Birch raised his glass. "To Sebastian and Greer!"

EPILOGUE

Washington, D.C. . . . one week later

Sebastian looked into the mirror of his closet as he tried to tie his bow tie. Evan had wanted to do it since he'd been in charge of Sebastian's formal wedding attire, but Sebastian had needed a moment to himself.

"Do you need help?" Cole asked from where he stood in Sebastian's closet doorway.

"I never have before," Sebastian muttered in frustration.

"Well, your wedding day is different from all other days." Cole walked into the massive closet with its own sitting area and stopped in front of Sebastian. "Let me."

Sebastian lifted his chin as Cole went to work on the bow tie. "How is everything looking downstairs?"

"It's all ready. Greer and her bridesmaids are getting ready in the salon you have in the basement. We need to talk about that, by the way," Cole said. "Why on earth do you have a salon?"

Sebastian smiled at his soon-to-be father-in-law. "It came with the house. Glad it's getting some use."

“You’re marrying the wrong woman if you think it’ll get any use beyond tonight. There you go,” Cole said, stepping back and eying the bow tie. “You’re all set.”

Sebastian cleared his throat. “Thank you for letting me have the wedding here and not in Keeneston.”

“I understand. This place represents what you’d have given your mother and you feel as if she’s here today. Just know this, today you don’t just gain a wife. You gain a father, a mother, two brothers who will torture you for the rest of your life, a pretty adorable nephew, grandparents, and way too many aunts, uncles, and cousins to count. You’re part of a very large family who will feed you, interfere in everything you do, love you fiercely, and who will always have your back. You’re not alone now, Sebastian. And you will never be alone again,” Cole surprised him by wrapping Sebastian in a hug. “I’d better go check on the women. My wife may hyperventilate from happiness.”

“I don’t see Paige as the type to hyperventilate.”

Cole winked at him. “See, you know us so well already.”

Sebastian turned around and gave himself one last look in the mirror. He wanted to see if the gardens outside looked exactly as he and Greer planned it before people started to arrive. The next time he came to this room he’d be a married man with his wife in his arms.

“There you are,” Grandma Marcy called out when Sebastian reached the bottom of the stairs. “I want to make sure everything is perfect before I go finish getting ready.”

Sebastian got a brief look at the house decorations before Marcy ushered him outside. A gigantic tent stretched from the back door, across the patio, and covered most of his yard. The

tent had walls on two sides to block the chilly winter air, but when he walked into the tent it felt as if he were still inside the mansion. Huge, sparkling chandeliers hung from the two-story roof of the tent, wispy silk covered the walls, and elegant tables were set with mammoth centerpieces full of flowers.

“Daisies,” Sebastian said as Marcy held on to his arm while they toured the tent on the patio.

“They’re not just your mother’s favorite, but Greer’s too. When we found that out, we put two in each bouquet. And then there’s this.” Marcy showed him the man setting up across from the bar.

“What is that?”

“It’s an ice cream bar,” Marcy said gently.

Sebastian swallowed hard. “How did you know?”

“Greer told us to do it. She wanted it to be a surprise. She was worried you’d tell her no because it and the daisies didn’t fit the glam type wedding expected of Sebastian Abel.”

“I don’t give a shit about what’s expected of me.” Sebastian froze. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“It’s *Grandma* now,” Marcy said, patting his hand. “And that’s why you two work. You’re both considerate of each other. Morgan has promised to send several photos to the press so you don’t have to worry about that either. Birch has declared a no-fly zone over the neighborhood so we should have a nice peaceful wedding. Now, I do believe I’ll take advantage of the salon downstairs and have them do my hair.”

Marcy smiled at him, then grabbed the usher’s arm when he approached. “See you at the wedding, Sebastian.”

“Sebastian?” Father Ben called out from the far side of the tent. “Can we do a quick run-through?”

Sebastian turned from Marcy and walked down the center aisle of the tent, between the tables on each side, down the stairs of his patio to the next area of the enormous tent covering the dance floor, and out the backside of the tent. There, a path of lanterns lined the grass leading to chairs surrounded by beautiful fire sculptures that were really there to provide heat on the cold night but would look stunning at sunset when they married overlooking the river.

“What’s this?” Sebastian asked suddenly as he saw the two paintings leaning on silk-covered easel stands off to the side of the groom’s seating.

“Greer thought your parents should be with us tonight. She had those portraits made. Is that okay?” Father Ben asked.

“My bride is amazing. Is there anything she didn’t think of?”

“Well, she tackled the wedding planning as if it were a black ops mission, so no. Greer’s very thorough. But, she didn’t tell you?”

“We talked about what I wanted and what she wanted. Then Paige said it would be done and that was the last I had heard. I worked all this past week getting everything running smoothly so I can step away from the businesses for a month while we’re on our honeymoon. I had thought Greer was doing the same. She set up her office at the White House. I have no idea how she had time to do all this alone.”

Father Ben smiled. “She didn’t do it alone. She had her family to help. Your family now.”

“That’s been a common theme this afternoon,” Sebastian said. “To be honest, it might take some getting used to. I’ve been on my own for so long.”

“You’ve never been alone, Sebastian. Your mother and father might not be here, but they’ve never left you. And while he’s not blood, Birch is very much your brother. This wedding will change your life. Greer will change your life. I’m always here to talk if you need to. I’m the one person in Keeneston who won’t tell anyone else what you say. Well, except if it’s baby news. Then I’m betting on it. The church could really use a freshening up. Plus, I’m going to start teaching free self-defense lessons so I need to buy some weapons and build an armory. How cool is that, right? There’s this church in Shadows Landing that does it. I’m going to visit to check it out.”

Sebastian made a mental note to send a very generous check to the priest and then maybe he’d keep any baby news secret. “You’re not like any priest I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you,” Ben said. “But, if you hurt Greer, God himself won’t be able to protect you. Got it?”

Sebastian froze as Ben threatened him and then burst out laughing. “You know, your threat was even scarier than Jackson’s.”

Ben grinned and stood up straighter. The man kept himself in fighting trim and certainly not at all like priests Sebastian had met. “Well, he’s FBI and I was Special Forces.”

“Of course you were,” Sebastian said dryly.

“Ready to join the ranks of married men?” Birch called out as he walked toward them. “Father.”

“Mr. President,” Father Ben replied respectfully.

“Has Greer talked to you yet?” Birch asked Ben.

“She has, but I had to decline the offer of joining The President’s Guard. My calling is to the people of Keeneston and to watch over your guards,” Ben told Birch before launching into where they needed to stand and cues for the rest of the wedding.

“Shouldn’t Jackson and Ryan be here as the other groomsmen?” Sebastian asked.

Ben shook his head. “They’ve done this so many times they could do it in their sleep. Besides, I heard you had some very good bourbon.”

“A pre-wedding toast?” Birch asked with a grin.

“I don’t know about that,” Sebastian said, looking at his watch.

“As president, I insist,” Birch said, slapping his back.

“The bourbon should probably be blessed,” Father Ben was perfectly serious, joining them as they headed to the bar.

Greer took a deep breath as her mother secured the veil into her hair. Her dress was simple. Sydney had designed it perfectly to hug every curve and be sexy but not revealing. It was classic, it was sweet, and it was stunning. The long-sleeved, boat-necked dress was Greer to a *T*.

“You’re beautiful,” her mother said with tears in her eyes.

Greer wore her hair pulled back in a low bun. Some of it was still loose, since she flatly refused to use a gallon of hairspray. A swoop of her hair rested against the side of her forehead and was pinned behind her ear.

“Your veil is perfect for my something borrowed,” Greer said, squeezing her mother’s hand.

“Don’t you look lovely,” Grandpa Jake said from the door. “I brought you something, my dear.”

Greer turned to smile at her grandfather. She had wondered if he’d had any left and feared she would have missed out on the tradition. “I saved these for you. I knew they were yours from the second you were born. These were my mother’s. My father gave them to her for their first wedding anniversary.”

Greer took the box and opened it to reveal a pair of green amethyst earrings that matched her eyes. “My something old. Thank you so much, Grandpa. They’re beautiful.”

“Here’s your something blue,” Abby said as she approached with Ariana and Cassidy. The three of them were Greer’s bridal attendants.

Greer opened the small box and laughed. They were blue silk panties with *Bride* written across the bottom.

“We had to narrow down who the panty droppers are. We figured if these were found we’d have caught you,” Ari grinned.

“Me? I’m not the panty dropper. You have to have sex for that and before Sebastian, you know . . .” Greer caught herself and stopped as her eyes shot to her mom and grandfather.

“Yes, well, I ‘d better check on my soon-to-be son. Shall we, Dad?” Paige asked her father.

Greer rolled her eyes as her bridal party laughed the second the door closed. “So, about that sex with Sebastian? Panty-dropper worthy?” Cassidy asked.

“Most definitely,” Greer grinned as she added the final touches to her outfit.

“Knock, knock,” Sophie called out before she entered the room holding a large box wrapped in the prettiest white wrapping paper she’d ever seen. “I have a gift from the groom.”

“I don’t think it’s sexy underwear,” Ari said as Sophie set the box on the table.

Greer tore into the paper and opened the box. She pulled out the elaborate tissue paper and then stared in surprise. “What is this?” Greer took out the card and read it.

To my badass bride on our wedding day. I know I worry, fret, and interfere with drones when you go on missions and I’ll never ask you to stop what you love. However, I can send you on your missions well-armed. I can’t wait to make you my wife and promise you’ll never find reason to use this on me. Love, Bash. P.S. I got one too. You’re right, it’s just too fun not to use.

“I made the acid gun of death an actual gun. Those are little acid bullets. They’re quiet, they’re deadly, and they leave no evidence behind,” Sophie said with a proud smile.

“Best bridal gift ever!” Abby said with envy.

That was Greer’s Sebastian. He knew she didn’t want a diamond necklace or a fancy sports car. She wanted her very own acid gun of death and he’d gotten it for her.

As the sky filled with the bright colors of the setting sun, Greer kissed her husband. Sebastian cupped her face with his hand and kissed her in a manner completely inappropriate for

a formal wedding with international dignitaries in attendance, and absolutely perfect for her.

“Yes, man!” King Draven yelled. Well, maybe not so inappropriate for this crowd after all.

Sebastian raised his face from hers and smiled down at her. “I noticed that whole ‘obey section’ of the vows was missing.”

Greer smiled at her husband. “I wouldn’t want to commit a sin on my wedding day by lying.”

“I can think of plenty of ways we could sin together,” Sebastian winked before stepping back and taking her hand in his right as the sun set.

“I present to you Sebastian and Greer Abel!” Father Ben shouted to the cheering crowd.



Parker Davies took a sip of the bourbon and sighed.

“Sebastian might be my new favorite cousin if he serves this bourbon all the time,” Porter, Parker’s twin brother, said as he joined Parker watching the happy couple dance.

“I had thought he was a cold fish, but they’re practically igniting the dance floor,” Parker said with a shake of his head. His phone buzzed and the Blossom Café betting app was equally hot with baby bets being placed for nine months from now.

Parker lifted the bourbon to his lips and enjoyed the oaky smell before taking a sip. He almost choked on the amber liquid when he saw who else was on the dance floor. “What is Tilly Bradford doing here?”

Porter shook his head. “Bro, what is up with you and Tilly? You were all about trying to get into her pants and then you shut it down faster than Father Ben shuts down those women hitting on him. Anyway, her father knows Sebastian.”

“Of course he does,” Parker said, tossing back his drink and shoving the glass toward the bartender for a refill.

“So, Tilly? What’s going on?”

“I can’t tell you,” Parker said, grabbing the new glass and taking a deep drink.

“Can’t or won’t?” Porter asked him.

“Can’t.”

“Shit,” Porter cursed.

“Exactly.”

“Is she guilty?” Porter asked.

“I don’t know. The case came across my desk in the middle of your short CIA stint. The investigators are doing their thing, but I’m in the loop. Therefore, she’s off limits.”

Porter patted Parker’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, bro. I know you were into her. Let me know if I can help. Happy to jump back into the spy business. Hey, you also have a new cousin-in-law with connections to the family.”

Parker nodded and turned back to the bartender. “Just give me the bottle.”

“Ladies, I am out! I am done. I have cleared the board and am now ready for lots and lots of grandbabies,” Paige said,

holding up the best champagne she'd ever drunk for a toast with her friends.

"Yeah, yeah," Tammy complained but did so with a smile. Her youngest, Cricket, was just a toddler.

"So, who is next?" Kenna asked, pulling out the matchmaking notebooks the Rose sisters had passed down to them.

"I got two," Annie said about Colton and Landon.

"Cassidy is getting closer," Tammy said with a smile.

"Parker needs a woman bad. He's been moping for months now," Gemma said.

"Kale might never be ready," Bridget groaned.

"I'll take your never and raise you Colton. That boy is having way too much fun right now," Annie said with a roll of her eyes.

"Okay," Dani said with a smile as she handed a pen to Kenna. "That means Landon and Parker are the top two."

"But which one?" Katelyn asked.

"Landon," Annie said at the same time Gemma said, "Parker."

"Why don't we just put them both on the list?" Kenna asked. "We can't go wrong then!"

"Good idea," Morgan said with a smile.

"To Landon and/or Parker," Paige said, holding up the champagne.

"And to you having a grandbaby in nine months," Kenna whispered to Paige. "Those two remind me of you and Cole."

“Us? Nah,” Paige said, shaking her head.

Dani looked to Kenna and rolled her eyes. Everyone around the table laughed, but it didn’t matter. Her children were all happily married and Paige had visions of grandbabies on her mind.

“Bless their hearts, they’re the worst matchmakers ever,” Miss Lily said with a sigh as she turned back to her table.

“What were we thinking, turning the notebooks over to them?” Miss Daisy asked.

“That we’d be in no danger of our jobs being taken,” Marcy Davies said, holding up her champagne.

“Well, maybe that crossed our minds,” Miss Violet said, trying to hide her smile. “To Greer and Sebastian and another job well done.”

“Parker, honey, can you come say hi to your grandmother?” Marcy called out. Her grandson tossed back his fourth bourbon and dutifully joined the table. “You look so handsome tonight. You should be dancing. I think I saw a princess looking for a date.”

Parker grimaced. “I don’t want a princess, Grandma. You know me better than that. I’m just a US marshal with a horse farm. What would I do with a princess?”

“So right, dear,” Miss Lily said, hiding her grin behind her glass.

“Tilly!” Marcy called out even as her grandson groaned. “How are you, dear?”

Tilly kissed her cheek and stood with a sweet smile on her face until she saw Parker trying to hide behind Miss Lily. Then her smile fell. “It’s so nice to see you, Mrs. Davies.”

“You too. You look beautiful. Doesn’t she, Parker?”

“Hmm,” Parker muttered.

“Oh, to be young and to dance at such a grand wedding,” Miss Violet said wistfully.

“Parker, you and Tilly show us how it’s done,” Miss Daisy said with a wink to Marcy.

“Oh yes, then I could die happy to see two such wonderful people dancing together,” Marcy said, patting Tilly’s hand.

“Tilly, would you care to dance?” Parker asked with no enthusiasm.

“Hmm,” Tilly replied, and Marcy had to purse her lips to stop from laughing.

“Laying it on a little thick there, Grandma,” Parker whispered into her ear..

“I don’t know what you mean,” Marcy said with innocence that Parker wasn’t buying. It didn’t matter. His fate was sealed and he’d get on board with it sooner or later.

“They’re going to be tricky,” Miss Lily said.

“The good ones always are.” Marcy raised her glass of champagne. “To another successful campaign and to a battle worth winning.”

“I got that information you wanted, Mrs. D,” DeAndre said in a whisper as he passed a folder across the table to her.

“Well,” John Wolfe said with a huff. “I bet it’s not as good as what I found out, you young whippersnapper.”

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Marcy said with a grin to the Rose sisters. “I’ll drop an apple pie by as soon as we get home.”

“Mrs. Davies,” Humphrey Orville said as DeAndre and John walked away, debating who had the best intel. “Here’s the information you asked for. It’s all I could find.”

“Thank you, Humphrey dear. I have an apple pie in my hotel room with your name on it. Stop by tomorrow and pick it up.”

Humphrey grinned and hurried away. Birch and Tate casually strode by and Tate handed her a gift bag. “All the information you wanted is inside.”

“Thank you, dear. Send one of the men over to my hotel and I’ll give you an apple pie for your trouble.”

Tate and Birch high-fived before heading to the dance floor.

“Dude!” Alex said, kissing Mrs. Davies’s cheek.

“Here you go,” Roxie said, handing Marcy another gift bag. “I made him print it off because I didn’t know if you used a computer much. I hid it in the gift bag.”

“Such dears! Stop by tomorrow and pick up a pie.” Marcy grinned up at them and patted Roxie’s hand and Alex’s cheek.

“Dude!”

“You’re really pulling out all the stops on this one, aren’t you?” Miss Daisy asked.

“Well, you know the hurdle Parker and Tilly have to overcome. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

“Grandma Marcy, may I have this dance?” Sebastian asked as he stopped in front of her and held out his arm.

“What a wonderful grandson I have,” Marcy said, taking his arm and letting him escort her onto the dance floor. “The wedding is beautiful. Don’t let Draven give you a golden dildo. No matter how much he thinks women like it, they don’t. Oh, and look at Deming dancing with Cassidy!”

Sebastian looked around and shook his head. “I also see a pro football player, a famous country singer, and the son of a billionaire looking very displeased about it.”

“Yes, they do, don’t they?” Marcy’s brain started turning. No, not yet. Cassidy still had some time. She had to focus on Parker.

“Thank you for the apple pie you left in my bedroom. I ate it while I got dressed. I have something for you too,” Sebastian said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope.

Marcy took it and slid it into her purse.

“I have one question,” Sebastian said with a new kindness to his eyes.

“Yes?” Marcy asked with a twinkle in hers.

“I don’t know how, but you did this, didn’t you? The apple pies are bribes to get your way and you somehow decided Greer and I should be together. You sent her to rescue me to get us together to see how far we’d go to save the other, didn’t you?”

“Me?” Marcy was all innocent as she batted her eyelashes at him. “That sounds more like something the powerful Sebastian Abel would do, not a little old lady from Keeneston, Kentucky.”

“Don’t worry, Grandma. Your secret is safe with me. For the price of an apple pie.”

Marcy patted her purse and smiled up at him. “I have a feeling you might earn an apple pie or two from me yet.”

“Cole, really? Out here?” Paige asked with a giggle.

Cole had his wife alone in the dark, pressed against the side of Sebastian’s house. “We’ve married off all three of our children to great spouses. I can think of no better way to celebrate.”

Paige shivered as her husband shoved up her long silk dress and it wasn’t from the cold night air. His lips came down onto hers, hard. Well, if he thought he was going to lead this exhibitionist quickie, he was wrong. Paige kissed him back with just as much passion.

Paige reached down and unzipped her husband’s tuxedo pants that he’d looked so sexy in a moment before Cole dragged her panties down her legs.

Cole grabbed her leg and hooked it over his hip as he thrust forward and then stopped. “Wait, we just married them all off. We can’t pull a Tammy.”

“Get off! Get off! I am not having a menopause baby.” Cole smirked and she wanted to punch him. “You got me all hot and bothered and then throw out a Tammy?”

Cole reached into his pocket and pulled out a condom. “I came prepared.”

Paige giggled as if she were still twenty. “Where did you get that?”

“Stole it from Sebastian’s bedroom. I actually stole them all and placed a bet for nine months from now.”

“Cole Parker, I have never loved you more!”

“Well, then wait until I finish getting you all hot and bothered and then tell me if you love me even more,” Cole said, pinning his wife to the wall and showing her that their love only got better with each year.

Parker had to get away. Tilly Bradford was about to kill him. Of course, the song his grandmother had made them dance to was a slow one that lasted forever. He felt her lush body pressed against his and the way her hands moved over his shoulders and thought he’d lose all self-control. And one thing Parker never did was lose control.

Parker went through the house and out the front door. He just needed a moment to himself and then he could go back and finish his bottle of bourbon. He heard a noise up ahead of him and paused. “Hello?”

He knew there were Secret Service agents at the road and also in boats down at the river, but the noise was coming from where several cars were parked. “Who’s there?”

The noise stopped as Parker crept forward. He reached where he thought he heard the noise—the fountain in the center of the circular drive. There was no water running in the fountain during the winter, but the centerpiece metal figure of a woman stood lit by spotlights in the fountain pool. He scanned the area, and when he looked back at the house he saw a shadow disappearing around the side. He looked back to the fountain and shook his head.

A pair of black panties hung from the hand of the statue. “The panty dropper strikes again.”

“Really? The panty dropper?” Tilly asked from the doorway of the house. “Someone thinks highly of himself.”

“Not me!” Parker shouted as Tilly rolled her eyes and stormed back into the house. Well, great. His brother and cousins all had their happily-ever-afters and now he had the woman he was interested in, that he might have to arrest, thinking he was a panty dropper. He didn’t know whether to finish the bottle of bourbon or go bang his head against a wall.

Sebastian put his arm around Greer as she talked to a group of friends. He looked around the house his mother had once dreamed would be theirs. She’d told him a house like this shouldn’t be empty. It should be filled with love, children, and family. Now it was.

His little nephew, godchildren, and new cousins were toddling around laughing and dancing in the middle of presidents, royalty, and corporate tycoons.

“What are you thinking about?” Greer asked, and he realized they were now alone.

“Filling this house up with children.”

“Aniyah did give me our wedding present early. I had someone take it to our room.”

“And that would help us with children?” Sebastian asked.

“Have you met Aniyah? It’s filled with fuzzy handcuffs, oils, and sexy jungle-inspired lingerie.”

“Well, it would be rude not to open a wedding gift. Come on, Mrs. Abel. I’ll tie you to the bed and give you your real wedding gift.”

“Um, no. I’m tying you to the bed and giving you your wedding gift,” Greer said back to him before lifting her dress and running for the house.

“Don’t you take my happily-ever-after from me,” Sebastian called out laughing.

“Darlin’ what I have planned will *definitely* be our happily-ever-after,” Greer said with a wink before darting inside.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Brooks is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author. Kathleen's stories are romantic suspense featuring strong female heroines, humor, and happily-ever-afters. Her Bluegrass Series and follow-up Bluegrass Brothers Series feature small town charm with quirky characters that have captured the hearts of readers around the world.

Kathleen is an animal lover who supports rescue organizations and other non-profit organizations such as Friends and Vets Helping Pets whose goals are to protect and save our four-legged family members.

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