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K. L. RAMSEY HIS NERDY ASSISTANT

BILLIONAIRE BOYS CLUB BOOK THREE

HIS NERDY ASSISTANT

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Billionaire Boys Club Book 3

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His Nerdy Assistant (Billionaire Boys Club Book 3)

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Welcome to the Billionaire Boys Club where the men are hot, rich, and very bossy. They make being in charge look easy and their custom-made suits look sexy as sin. Confidence is not a problem for these guys—well, not until they find the women that they want and are turned down flat. Sparks will fly, tempers will flare, and there's sure to be a whole lot of steam when these alphas meet their match.

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LUKE

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Prologue

Five Years Earlier:

Luke Tracy ducked into the alley, not sure if the two men who were following him were still behind him. If he was taking a guess, they were, but he wasn't sure why they were still on his ass. He had picked up the tail after he left the bar, on his way back to base, and he knew better than to take trouble back to the Naval base he was stationed at. His commanding officer had already warned him to stop borrowing trouble and he had a feeling that the two guys chasing him down were major trouble.

He couldn't just hide away in an alley. If he wasn't back to base in the next two hours, he'd be written up for missing curfew and that was also a black mark against him that he didn't need. For now, he just needed to ditch his tail and get back before anyone missed him—as if it was that easy.

“Jesus, Luke,” he chided himself, “get yourself together and think.” There had to be a way out of this that didn't involve him calling his best friend, Ranger. The last thing he needed was to get his buddy involved in whatever shit he currently was tangled up in, but he was beginning to see that he had no choice.

“Fuck,” he whispered to himself, pulling his cell from his uniform. “Shit, shit, shit,” he grumbled as he dialed Ranger's number and held the phone up to his ear.

“Lo,” Ranger answered on the second ring. “What's up, man?”

“I’m in trouble,” Luke whispered into the phone. “I’m being tailed and I’m not exactly sure why.”

“Shit, Luke,” Ranger mumbled. “Where are you?”

“I just left the Taproom,” he said. It was a place that every guy from base knew well. The Taproom was practically their second home, and he knew that Ranger would know where to find him. “I’m about two blocks south of there in an alley, trying not to do something stupid like get myself killed.”

“How many guys are following you?” Ranger asked.

“I’m guessing about two, but don’t know for sure. And unless I’m willing to let them catch up with me, I’m betting that you’re going to have to settle for my guess here, man,” Luke said. He knew what his friend’s question would be before he even asked it. Ranger like to deal with the known—how many and what he was dealing with would be his next questions, and Luke didn’t want to find out those answers on his own. It was why he called Ranger in the first place.

“Fine,” Ranger said. “I’ll be there in five minutes, just lay low and try not to get yourself killed in the meantime,” he grumbled.

“No promises, man,” Luke teased. “Just hurry. And Ranger, don’t tell anyone about this. I need to figure out what’s going on before going to command with this.” Hell, he didn’t even know what “This” even was. Why would anyone be tailing him? The question was, were they watching him the whole time that he was sitting in the Taproom, or had they just picked up his trail and decided to track him down? But he was getting ahead of himself here. First, he’d have to figure out who was following him, and then, he’d let his mind wander as to what they wanted from him. Why was it that every time something like this happened, his brain immediately went to him being chased down by spies or some crazy scenario like that?

“I think he went down here,” a man loudly whispered at the street corner that led back to the alley. He was hidden in one of the back corners, but he knew that if they wanted to find him, all they had to do was put a bit of effort into it. There

wasn't anywhere for him to truly hide and all he seemed capable of doing was closing his eyes and saying a little prayer that Ranger would hurry the hell up.

"It's a dead-end," the other guy whispered back. "What kind of moron would block himself off down a dead-end alley?" If he wasn't being hunted down for no reason, Luke would find their whole dialogue about him being a moron funny—but nothing about this was funny.

"I don't know much about the guy, but from what the boss has told us, he's not a rocket scientist," the first guy said. At least he wasn't calling Luke a moron like the second guy had. Still, the rocket scientist statement stung a bit.

"What does the boss want with him, anyway?" the second guy asked. "I mean, do we have any idea why we've been trailing this guy for days now?" Days? They had been tracking him for fucking days and he hadn't even noticed it. Well, that made him definitely feel like a moron. How had he not noticed them following him around?

"No clue," the first guy admitted. "All I know is that the boss called me tonight and said it was time to bring him in. Apparently, this guy has connections that can get the boss back his family, and he wants answers now."

Who the hell was this "Boss" person that they were talking about and what did Luke know about his family? He racked his brain trying to figure it out when a government issued vehicle, which looked more like a damn tank, showed up in the alley. He heard the two guys cursing and Luke was pretty sure that they had taken off when Ranger showed up to collect him.

He ran down the alley, trying to stay in the shadows, and jumped into the front seat of the vehicle. "You couldn't have brought something a little less inconspicuous?" Luke grumbled.

"It was either this or my bike, and that thing makes a shit ton of noise," Ranger defended.

"Yeah, and this tank is so quiet," Luke joked.

“By the way, you’re welcome that I came to save your ass. I saw the two guys standing in the corner. I’m assuming that they were the ones on your tail,” Ranger said.

“Yeah,” Luke said. “I overheard them talking about me. They said that their boss wanted them to bring me in because I apparently know something about where his family is and how he can get them back.”

“His family?” Ranger asked. “You have any idea what they were talking about?”

“Not a clue,” Luke admitted. “But I plan on finding out. I think that we need to take this to command. I’m being followed. This wasn’t just a chance thing. They want to bring me in to talk to their boss, and I can’t let that happen.”

“Agreed,” Ranger said. “I’ll go with you to talk to the Commander. He actually likes me, and I’ll smooth things over for you to pave the way. You’ll need his help and going in there alone doesn’t always end well for you,” Ranger taunted.

“Fine,” Luke said. “I’ll take all the help that I can get at this point. Thanks, Ranger—for everything.”

Present Day:

Luke wasn’t sure how the hell he was going to tell his new boss and his best friend that he was going to have to take a leave of absence, but he had no choice. As the law firm’s new head of security, he couldn’t bring his troubles to their doorstep, but that was exactly what he was doing by just showing up to work. He wasn’t sure that Alex or Rod would understand, but he had no choice but to be straight with them and let the chips fall where they may.

He decided to just bite the bullet and head upstairs to Alex’s office and hope like hell that Rod was there, and that Alex’s cute new assistant would let him in to see both of them. He rode the elevator up to the top floor of the building and

stepped off of the elevator almost running into the exact sexy assistant that he was just thinking about.

Ruby Grace was the exact opposite of his type. She was the kind of woman that he'd usually look right past if he was out scoping women, but he wasn't. For some reason, Ruby turned him completely inside out and that wasn't going to change any time soon. Her red hair and blue eyes were a complete turn-on for him and honestly, Luke never saw himself with someone like her, not that it mattered now. He was going to have to leave town, his job, and even sexy, little Ruby behind.

"Hey, Ruby," Luke breathed, "you heading out?"

"No, just running to the restroom," she said. "Can I help you?"

"Um, sure," he said, thinking about all of the ways he'd like to ask her to help him out—most of them completely inappropriate. "I need to talk to Alex, is he in?" he asked.

"Yep," she said. "If you give me just a minute to run to the bathroom, I'll let him know that you're here," she said.

"All right," he agreed.

Alex stuck his head out of his office and smiled over at Luke. "Hey, man," he said, "come on back."

"Sorry, Mr. McTavish," Ruby apologized.

"Not a problem," Alex assured. "You take all the time you need, in fact, feel free to head home early. I have an appointment at the doctors with Nova, so I'm going to skip out early too."

"Thank you, Mr. McTavish," Ruby said.

"Alex, Ruby," he insisted. "I told you to call me Alex." She nodded and disappeared down the hallway to the restrooms, turning back to smile at Luke as he watched her walk away.

Luke crossed the hallway and walked past Alex into his office. "Thanks for seeing me on short notice," Luke said. "I didn't mean to come up here and barge in on you."

“It’s not a problem,” Alex promised. “Honestly, it’s a slow day. I knew that I was going to have to leave early today for my wife’s OB appointment.”

“Oh, yeah—I heard that Nova’s pregnant, congratulations,” Luke said. “Rod told me about him becoming an uncle when we went out for a beer last week. Is he around today, by chance?”

“Sorry, no,” Alex said. “He’s been in meetings all day.”

“I guess I can fill him in later. Listen, I need to take a leave of absence,” Luke said.

“Everything all right?” Alex asked. This was the tricky part. Did he tell his new boss that he had a feeling that someone was watching him and that he was in danger, or did he come up with something that sounded a little more believable? Luke hadn’t felt this way since he was being followed while stationed in South Korea, and nothing had ever come of that investigation.

“I’m not sure,” Luke admitted. “Last night, I found this note on my truck’s windshield on my way home.” He pulled the wrinkled piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Alex.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave town now, and no one else has to die,” Alex read aloud.

“Who has already died?” he asked Luke.

He shrugged, “The only person that I can think of is my older brother, but he’s been dead for almost five years now. He died in a hiking accident.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but this note makes it sound as though someone was murdered. Do you know of anyone who was murdered?” Alex asked.

“No,” Luke admitted. “No one that I’ve known personally. I’ve also had a feeling like someone’s been watching me for weeks now. I can’t pinpoint one instance, it’s just a feeling. But now, with this note, I’m starting to feel that maybe my instincts were right.” He was being honest with Alex—he didn’t know anyone who had been killed personally, but he

had seen many men and women killed during his time in the Navy. He just didn't think that their deaths were pertinent to their conversation. The only person from his personal life that had ever died on him was his brother, Jack, and he wasn't murdered.

"Anything else?" Alex asked.

"Nothing tangible. I just think that it would be best for me to take some time away from the office to try to figure this all out," Luke said.

"Did you go to the authorities about this note, yet?" Alex asked.

"No," Luke admitted. "I mean, I thought that I'd be able to handle this since I am in security. I just don't want my trouble tracking me down at work. Whoever left this note had to come on company property to do so. I hate that my problems are touching your firm, Alex," he said.

"First, you need to check the security cameras to see if we got any footage of the person leaving this on your truck. Second, you're not taking a leave of absence. That's bullshit and I won't let you walk away from the firm to try to save us. If someone's coming for you, we'll figure this out together. Hell, I'll increase your security staff to help out with this issue, Luke."

"I can't ask you to do that, Alex," he insisted.

"You didn't ask, I've offered. Consider it a done deal, Luke. You're my brother's best friend. I've known you for years now, and I won't let you handle this problem alone. I say we call in the cops and give them this note as evidence," Alex said.

"Be sure about this, Alex. You have a lot of employees and I'd hate to put any of them in danger," Luke said.

"I'm sure," Alex said. "I'll help you put together a larger security team in the morning. Until then, call the cops and tell them about this note. I can't stick around. If I miss this appointment, my wife will kill me."

“No, you should go. I’ll turn the note over to the authorities in the morning. I’d like some time to comb through our security footage before involving them. Maybe we’ll be able to take care of this issue in-house and not have to involve them at all,” Luke said.

“All right,” Alex said. “Fill Rod in when you see him next, but don’t spread this around the company. I don’t want mass hysteria about having to come to work every day from the employees. Keep this quiet.”

“Right, boss,” Luke agreed. “Thanks for listening,” he said.

“Any time, Luke,” Alex said. “Keep me in the loop.”

Luke nodded and left his office only to run into Ruby again. She had her bags and was ready to leave for the night. “Heading home?” he asked.

“I am,” she agreed. He wanted to ask her who she’d be going home to, but he knew better than to ask employees personal questions.

“You?” she asked.

“I think that I will,” he said. “It’s been a long day. You mind sharing an elevator?” he asked.

Ruby giggled, “Well, it does have a twelve-person capacity, so sure,” she teased. What was it about Ruby that had him so tongue-tied and saying all the wrong things?

“Right, thanks,” he breathed. When the doors opened, he waited for Ruby to step in first, and then followed her on. The doors closed and she cleared her throat, watching the numbers light up over the top of the door as the elevator descended. He took the opportunity to look at Ruby, really look at her, and God, she was adorable. She wore Converse with her skirt and dressy blouse. Her red hair was pulled back in a messy bun and her thick, black glasses were falling down the bridge of her nose.

“Can you please stop looking at me like that?” she whispered, turning back to look at him.

“Looking at you like what?” he asked. Sure, he had been caught, but playing dumb was his only option.

“I can see you out of the corner of my eyes, Luke. You were looking at my outfit.” She turned to face him, almost standing toe to toe with him. “Listen, I know that I’m odd. Heck, I’ve been called a nerd more times than I care to admit, but I won’t let you make fun of me too.”

“I wasn’t going to make fun of you, Ruby,” he assured.

“Then, why were you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Because I think you’re hot as hell and I was trying to memorize you right now, at this moment, until I get to see you again.” Her little gasp made him rock hard. The elevator doors opened to the lobby, and he loved the way she watched him as he stepped off.

“Have a good night, Ruby,” he said. She watched him until the elevator doors closed on her again and he smiled to himself. He’d finally gotten up the nerve to talk to the new girl, and as far as he was concerned, it had gone well.

RUBY

Ruby stood on the empty elevator blinking at the closed doors, trying to figure out if she had just heard Luke say what she thought that she had. He was the head of security at the firm that she worked for and every day, he checked her bags and said good morning to her, but she was sure that he did that for everyone who passed through the front doors into the building. She had no idea that he thought that she was—what did he call her? Oh yeah, hot as hell. No one had ever called her that and she was still in shock hearing the hunky hulk say those words to her.

“Wow,” she breathed. “He thinks I’m hot as hell,” she repeated. The words didn’t even feel right on her own tongue. It was as if she was repeating a lie to herself, and she almost wanted to laugh at how ridiculous it sounded.

She was jolted backward when the elevator started to ascend to the seventh floor. Shit, she had forgotten to get off of the damn elevator after what Luke had said to her, and now, she was going to have to work her way back down to the lobby. A part of her thought about just heading back up to her desk and hiding out there for a bit until she could sneak out of the building without running into Luke again. But that would be ridiculous. She needed to get herself together and leave the building, just as she had planned. Then, she’d go home, make herself some dinner, and open a big bottle of wine.

When the elevator stopped on the seventh floor to pick up passengers, she stepped to the back of the car and asked for someone to push the button for the lobby. If she was lucky,

she'd be able to hide in the crowd of passengers who had just gotten onto the elevator and leave the building without having to see Luke again. She needed time to process everything that he had said and that was going to require copious amounts of wine.

She didn't feel as though she had taken a breath the entire time she made a run for it to her car. Ruby felt as though she was acting like a child, and if anyone knew what she was doing—running and hiding from a grown man, they'd believe she was a complete fool. How many women would run away from a man who looked like Luke Tracy? She was betting that the answer was not many.

As soon as she made it home to her tiny apartment that she had rented purely because it was close to the office, she pulled off her jacket and Converse and practically flung herself onto the sofa. What a day and all she could hear in her head was Luke's voice telling her that he thought that she was hot as hell. It was playing on a loop up there and nothing she did would shake it loose.

The knock at her front door startled her from her daydreams and she sighed, standing to answer it. She pulled the door open and found her neighbor, Millie standing on the other side.

“Hey,” Millie said.

“Hi, Millie,” Ruby breathed. “Listen I just got home and I'm exhausted.”

“Oh,” Millie whispered. “So, you're not up for dinner then. It's fine, really. We can just reschedule.”

“Reschedule?” Ruby asked. “Crap, I forgot about our dinner plans,” she said. “I'm so sorry. Come on in.” she stood aside to let her friend in, and Millie looked hesitant.

“It's fine if you want to reschedule,” Millie said again.

“Not at all,” Ruby insisted. “I was about to open a bottle of wine to help me unwind. I'm sure I'll get my second wind as soon as I down my first glass. We can order some takeout if that works for you.”

“Well, I could go for some Asian takeout,” Millie agreed.

“Deal,” Ruby said. “I’ll call in our order and you grab the wine from the fridge and open it. You know where everything is.”

“Yep,” Millie said, seeming to pep up a bit. Millie had been her only friend in town since she moved into the apartment two months ago. Honestly, besides a few people at work, she didn’t know anyone in her new hometown. Being alone usually worked for her since she was kind of a homebody and very much a loner. Ruby didn’t go out to clubs or parties like other girls her age. At only twenty-four, she should have been living it up, going on dates with men her age, but she was always a bit shy and tried to hide away. It was easy to do since guys weren’t beating down her door, begging her to go out with them. No one wanted to date a nerd.

Millie poured her a glass of wine and handed it to her. “So, how’s the new job?” She asked Ruby that every time they got together. She had been working for Alex McTavish for almost two months now, and Ruby always gave her the same answer.

“It’s great,” she said. “Although something interesting happened today.”

“Share,” Millie insisted. Ruby instantly regretted bringing up the incident with Luke. She and Millie weren’t friends like that yet, but Ruby had no one else to spill the beans to.

“The hot guy in charge of security at my building told me that I was hot. Well, he said, ‘hot as hell,’ but you get the gist.”

“Oh—that is something,” Millie agreed. “Do you like this guy?”

“I mean, I never really thought about him that way. Sure, I’ve noticed him and all, but I never thought that he even knew who I was,” Ruby admitted.

“But he does, so you like him?” Millie pushed.

“We’ve only said a handful of words to each other, but yeah, I think he’s nice,” Ruby admitted.

“And hot,” Millie said. “Don’t forget that you said that he’s hot.”

“Yes,” Ruby agreed. “He’s nice and hot.” God, she sounded like an idiot and now, she fully regretted bringing up the subject with Millie. “Let me call in the order. You want your normal meal?”

“Yep,” Millie agreed. “P7—the orange chicken and fried rice combo.”

Ruby nodded and told the woman who answered the call their order. She was promised that the food would get to them in about twenty minutes, and she wondered how she’d be able to change the subject because talking about hot, nice Luke until their food got there wasn’t going to happen.

She ended the call and Millie sat down on the sofa next to her, wearing a huge smile. “So, what are you going to do about Luke?” she asked.

“Um, nothing,” Ruby admitted. “I work with him, and I’d be mortified if I asked him out and he said no.”

“I get that,” Millie said. “I’ve been turned down before and it hurts. It doesn’t hurt to play things safe,” she said. “Let him come to you.” As if that would ever happen. Guys like Luke didn’t come for her—ever.

Ruby did her best to make small talk while Millie kept trying to drive the topic back to Luke. Ruby said a little prayer of thanks when the delivery guy knocked on her front door.

“That must be the food,” she said. “Give me just a minute.” She pulled the front door open and gasped when she found Luke standing there. “You’re not the delivery guy,” she said.

“Who is it?” Millie asked. She joined Ruby in the doorway and gasped a bit as she looked Luke over. “Wow, the delivery guy’s hot.”

“Millie, this is Luke,” she said.

“You weren’t kidding, he is hot,” Millie said.

“You told her about me?” Luke asked, smiling at her like a loon. Ruby suddenly wondered how the hell she had gotten herself into this mess. The better question was how the hell was she going to get out of it?

“No,” she lied.

“Oh, she told me all about how you told her she’s hot while you both were on the elevator,” Millie shared.

Ruby shot Millie a look, trying to silently tell her to shut up, and Luke laughed. “What can I do for you, Luke?” she asked.

“I’m in a bit of trouble and I need your help,” he admitted.

“How can I help you?” Ruby asked.

“By giving me a place to lay low,” he said. “I’ll explain everything, if you’ll just let me in, Ruby, please.”

“How about you send my order over to me and I’ll leave you two alone,” Millie asked.

“You don’t have to leave, Millie,” Ruby insisted.

“I don’t mind,” she said. “What are friends for?” She winked at Ruby and all she could muster was rolling her eyes.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll have the delivery guy bring your half over when he gets here,” Ruby agreed.

“Nice meeting you, Luke,” Millie said as she brushed a little too closely by the big guy. He nodded and gave her his best smile, but Ruby could see that it didn’t reach his eyes.

Ruby let Luke into her place and shut her front door. She didn’t even offer the poor guy something to drink before she crossed her arms over her chest and told him to, “Spill it.”

“I think I’m being watched,” he admitted, “and, I need a place to stay for a while. I had no one else to turn to,” he said.

“You have no other friends or family in the area?” she asked. Sure, she was prying, but she couldn’t help it.

“No,” he admitted. “Well, no friends that I want to be involved in this mess. Alex and Rod both have families and

I'm worried that whoever is watching me is really trying to get to them."

"To the McTavish's?" she asked. "Why would someone want to hurt them?"

"I'm not sure, but I need time and space to figure that all out. That's where you come in, Ruby."

"Fine," she said. "You can hang out here for as long as you'd like. But for the record, you don't need to lie to me and tell me that I'm hot next time you want something from me."

He dropped his duffel bag in the corner of her small family room and turned back to smile at her. "For the record, honey," he said, giving her back her words, "it wasn't a lie."

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LUKE

Luke wasn't sure that he'd say that Ruby looked happy to see him—hell, she looked downright pissed that he was standing in her apartment. The only time she looked pleased to see him was when he told her that he wasn't lying about her being hot. He was still trying to figure out why in the hell he had shown up at her place, to begin with. Sure, she was the last person he saw at the office before running home, packing a bag full of his shit, and taking off for her condo. Maybe it was the fact that he had snooped into her personal file at work just before he left the office for the day or the fact that he had memorized her address, telling himself that he'd never look her up. Yeah, he was a big, fat liar and here he stood in her family room, trying to figure out what to say to her next.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, "I shouldn't have come here." Luke walked to the corner of her family room and grabbed his duffel bag off of the floor. "This was a mistake."

"Luke," Ruby breathed, reaching out to put her hand on his arm. Just that one simple touch sent what felt like an electrical jolt up his body. "Don't go. Let me help you figure this out before you just take off. If someone is following you, then you can't just keep running. Stay here, where it's safe."

"That's just it," he murmured. "I don't know if it's safe or not. I might have put you in danger by just knocking on your door, Ruby." She leaned into his body when he said her name and for just a second, he thought about kissing her. Instead, he cleared his throat, and she took a step back from him.

“Has this ever happened to you before?” she asked. “I mean, do you usually have someone chasing after you?” she asked.

“It’s happened before,” he admitted. God, she was going to kick him out of her place so fast, it was going to make her head spin, and he wouldn’t blame her one bit for it. “When I was in the Navy. I was stationed in South Korea for almost a year.”

“You were stationed in South Korea?” she asked. “I think that we should sit down for this conversation.” Ruby pulled him to the small sofa that sat in the middle of her apartment, and he sat down next to her. Luke liked the way that he took up most of the sofa, forcing her to have to touch him. It actually gave him some strange comfort having her so close.

“I was in the Navy and well, I was stationed on a base over in South Korea for eleven months,” he said.

“And this happened to you while you were there?” she asked.

“Yes, well, kind of,” he said. “I was out enjoying some downtime at a local bar, and when I was on my way back to base, I realized that I was being followed. It felt a lot like this does. I can’t explain it. Jesus, I know this must all make me sound completely crazy, and maybe I am. Maybe I lost my damn mind and now, I’m paying the price.”

“Nonsense,” Ruby countered. “How about you tell me the rest of the story and let me judge whether or not you’re crazy,” she offered.

“Good luck with that,” he teased, causing her to giggle. “I overheard two men talking, saying that they were supposed to bring me in to talk to their ‘Boss,’ but then, my friend Ranger found me, and that never happened. They said that he wanted to talk to me because I’d be able to get their family back for him.”

“Were you able to get the guy’s family back to him?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted. “I never even met the guy. He sent the two guys after me, to bring me back to him, and that was about all that came of it. My buddy Ranger showed up and took me back to base. He went in with me to talk to our commander and well, I was sent back to the states shortly after reporting that I was being followed.”

“That’s kind of suspicious,” Ruby challenged. “I mean, you reported to your commanding officer that you were being followed, and then, they sent you home before you could figure out who had been following you?”

“That about sums it up,” he said. “I never found out who was following me or who their boss was. I really didn’t give it too much thought—until now.”

“Because you feel like someone is following you again,” Ruby said, following along.

“Yes,” he said.

“Do you have any proof that someone is watching or following you?” she asked.

“Um, not really,” he admitted. “It’s more of a gut feeling.” She looked him over and he held up his hands in defense. “I’m not crazy,” he insisted.

“I never said that you were crazy, Luke,” she said. “But you have to admit, this whole thing sounds a little bit off.”

“Well, that’s a lot nicer than saying that it sounds crazy,” Luke mumbled. “I know how bad this sounds, but I just need someplace to lay low while I try to figure out what’s going on,” he said. “Can you give me that?”

“I think that I can,” she agreed.

“I promise not to put you in any more danger than I already have,” Luke assured.

“I appreciate that, but I’m tougher than I look,” she promised. There was a knock at her door and Ruby started to stand. Luke pushed her back to the sofa and she looked at him like he’d lost his damn mind.

“I’ll get it,” he said. “Were you expecting anyone?”

“Um, yeah,” she said. “The Chinese takeout. Remember, I thought that you were our delivery guy when you showed up here?”

“Right,” he breathed. “Well, let’s not take any chances.” Luke pulled his gun from his shoulder holster and held it by his side, trying to keep it out of eyesight when he opened the door just a crack.

“Food delivery,” the guy said from the crack in the door.

“Thanks,” Luke said, taking the bag of food from him.

“I’ve already paid,” Ruby said. “And left a tip. Thank you,” she shouted to the delivery guy as Luke shut the door in his face. He walked back into the family room and handed her the bag of food and another soft knock sounded at her door.

“What now?” she grumbled. “I’m assuming you’ll want to get that too,” she said.

“Yep,” Luke agreed. He walked back over to the door, gun still in hand, and opened Ruby’s front door to find the same woman from earlier standing in her doorway.

“Hi,” the woman squeaked. “I’m Millie,” she reminded.

“Hi, Millie,” Luke said.

“I’ve come to grab my food,” Millie said.

“Sorry, Millie,” Ruby shouted. “Come on in.” Millie brazenly walked past Luke and smiled up at him as he holstered his weapon.

“Were you expecting someone else?” she asked, eyeing the gun.

“Don’t mind him,” Ruby said. “He’s having a bad day. Did I mention that Luke works in the security department at McTavish Industries?” Ruby asked.

Millie shrugged, “Probably, but I might not have been paying attention.” She waited for Ruby to unload her food from the bag and handed her the rest.

“Sorry about dinner again,” Ruby said. “I’ll make it up to you next week. You can choose the place.”

“Sounds good,” Millie agreed. “And no problem. I mean, if I had a better offer, I’d ditch me too.” Millie giggled at her own statement and waved over her shoulder at them both. “Talk soon, Ruby,” she said. “See you later, Luke.” He nodded to Ruby’s very odd friend and waited for her to leave the apartment before crossing the room to the front door and locking them back in.

“You need better security,” he mumbled, more to himself than to Ruby.

“Well, I’ve never had a need for more security,” Ruby admitted.

“I’ll make do with what you have in place,” he assured. “But I’d like to at least put a deadbolt on your front door. Is there another way out of here?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Not unless you’re planning on going out the second-floor windows.”

“No, but we really can’t be too careful,” he insisted.

“Well, you should come sit down and eat while it’s still hot,” Ruby said.

“But that’s your food,” he said.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” she said. “I always order way too much food. I can’t possibly eat all of this myself, so come sit down next to me and eat.” He was starving, and honestly, the smell of the food was making his stomach growl. Ruby waved her egg roll in front of him and he laughed—God, it felt good to laugh again.

“You know you want to,” she taunted.

“I do,” he admitted, “thanks, Ruby—for everything.”

RUBY

Here, Ruby was thinking that her weekend was going to be boring as hell. Her only real plans were to go grocery shopping and binge watch a few of her favorite shows, but instead, she was sitting next to the hunkiest guy from work, trying to figure out why Luke made her feel like a schoolgirl every time he so much as looked at her.

After the insane story he had just told her, she should run as far, and as fast, as she possibly could from him. But there she sat, giddy that their legs were touching as they sat next to each other on her very small sofa, eating Chinese food. Yeah, she was completely nerding out about this guy and she was sure that sooner or later, she was going to make a complete fool of herself.

“This is really good,” he said, holding up the container of sweet and sour chicken. It was her go-to order when she and Millie got Chinese food and he was right, it didn’t disappoint. She wasn’t lying when she told him that she wouldn’t be able to finish all the food that she had ordered. She never could, but tonight, she was a bundle of nerves and sure that she wouldn’t be able to choke down even a few bites of her dinner while sitting next to the hulk.

“Yeah, it’s my favorite place to order Asian takeout from,” she said. Small talk was never really her forte. In fact, she sucked at it. She usually ended up rambling and saying all the wrong things. Like at work, for example, with her new boss, she was a total blabbermouth who couldn’t even get his name right.

“So, how long have you been with McTavish?” she asked, trying for casual or at the very least, calm.

“Just about a year now,” Luke said. “After I got out of the Navy, I wasn’t really sure what was next for me, but then Rod asked me to come work for him and Alex. I told him no, at first, feeling that he was throwing me a pity hire, but then, I thought—why not? I took the job and haven’t looked back since. I love working over there, but I hate that my trouble might become theirs.”

“How would that happen?” Ruby asked.

“It’s why I showed up at Alex’s office today. I got a threatening note at work, and I was up there to tell him that I was going to take off some time. Whoever left it for me, did so while I was at work. I found it on my windshield in the parking garage, and I hate that this happened at work.”

“I’m betting that Alex told you that it wasn’t your fault that someone left you a nasty note on your windshield at work,” Ruby said.

“Good guess,” Luke said. “That’s exactly what he said to me.”

“Alex is right,” she assured. “You can’t be responsible for what other people do and don’t do on company property.”

“I get that,” Luke said, “I still feel like shit though.”

“What did the note say?” she asked.

“It said that I should leave town now and no one else will have to die,” he paraphrased.

“Who’s died?” she asked.

“You sure that you weren’t eavesdropping in on Alex and my conversation earlier?” he asked.

“Of course, I wouldn’t do that,” she insisted. She felt so flustered and when he laughed, she was sure that she must have turned bright purple from embarrassment.

“I was kidding, honey,” he said. “I know you wouldn’t do something like that. You’re a nice person, Ruby.”

“Thanks,” she said. He had gone from calling her, “Hot” to calling her, “Nice” and she didn’t like it one bit. She wanted to be hot all day, every day. Nice girls finished last. Hell, nice girls didn’t land guys like Luke Tracy. That was just straight facts and even though they sucked, she knew that it was true.

“To answer your question,” he said, “no one’s died. Not recently, anyway.”

“Why would someone want you to leave town?” she asked.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have the answer to that question either. I mean, I don’t know many people in town, so I can’t imagine who’d want for me to leave,” he admitted.

“So, we have two questions to answer to help figure out this mystery—who died and who wants you out of town. I think that if we can answer those questions, we’ll be one step closer to figuring out this mystery,” she said, sounding every bit the nerd.

He took her container of food from her and put it on the coffee table. “You know,” he said, practically pulling her onto his lap. “I always had a thing for Velma in the Scooby-Doo cartoon.”

“Velma?” she whispered. He was so close, all she had to do was lean in just a bit, and their lips would be touching.

“Yeah, when you said all of that about solving the mystery, it made me think of sexy Velma. It made me think about you, Ruby,” he said.

“You think I’m sexy?” she whispered.

“Very sexy,” he breathed. This time, Luke didn’t give her time to consider her next move. This time, he leaned in and took what he seemed to want from her. He sealed his mouth over hers and when he finally let her up for air, she was panting, and even more confused than she was before they began their conversation. In the course of the day, Luke had called her hot, compared her to Velma from Scooby-Doo, and then called her sexy. All in all, she’d consider today a win—

especially if the hunk sitting next to her decided to kiss her again.

“You kissed me,” she whispered. Ruby was still practically sitting on Luke’s lap, and she wasn’t about to make a move to get up.

“I did,” he said, “twice.” He was right. Luke had kissed her twice and God, she was hoping for a third one. “Is it okay that I did that, Ruby?” he asked. She could tell that he already knew the answer. Hell, she was probably bright red with embarrassment, and with the way that her chest was heaving as if she had just run a marathon, he could guess that she was completely turned on by what he was doing to her.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I like it when you kiss me, Luke.”

“Have you been kissed before?” he asked. She had but it was nothing like the way Luke kissed her.

“I have,” she admitted. “I mean, not a lot. I had a boy that I liked in high school, but he didn’t pay much attention to the class nerd. When I got to college, I had a friend, well, I thought that he was my friend, but he turned out to be more than that. Geeze, I’m rambling.” Ruby took a breath and tried to slow her roll, but apparently, that was impossible for her to do when she was faced with a hot man and an embarrassing situation. What the hell was wrong with her.

Luke pulled her hand into his own, resting it on his massive thigh, and she damn near swallowed her tongue. There would be no stopping her verbal diarrhea now. Poor guy didn’t have a clue as to what he had just unleashed. “His name was Mark and he kissed me,” she admitted. “I mean, not like you just kissed me. He wasn’t as good at the whole kissing thing as you seem to be. Not that you’ve kissed me enough to figure out just how good you are at it.”

“Ruby,” he cut in.

“Hmm,” she hummed, leaning into his body. Every time he even whispered her name, she found herself shamelessly leaning into him as if she wanted to crawl directly inside of him. Heck, shameless didn’t even begin to describe her.

“You’re talking a lot. Do you do that when you’re nervous?” he asked.

“Yes,” she admitted, “I do. It’s one of the reasons why guys seem to run the other direction from me when they see me coming. I guess that will include you now, too. I mean, when you see me at the office, you’re going to probably try to duck into a cubby or hallway to avoid me now,” she was about to go on with her verbal tirade when Luke pulled her completely onto his lap and sealed his mouth over hers again, and this time, he didn’t show any signs of letting up. He kissed her like a starving man, licking his way into her mouth and sucking her bottom lip into his very skilled mouth. He made her feel things that no other man had ever made her feel—including very wet and needy in her girl parts. Ruby was sure that it was all perfectly normal, judging from the numerous romance novels that she liked to read in her spare time, but she couldn’t be completely sure.

“Wow,” she whispered when he finally broke their kiss. “You’re really good at that.”

“Thanks,” Luke breathed. He was breathing just as hard as she was, and his hands were everywhere. Every place that he touched set her skin on fire and all she wanted was more.

“I want to touch you everywhere, Ruby,” Luke whispered. “You need to tell me to stop.”

“Why would I want you to stop?” she asked. “I want you to touch me too, Luke.”

He rested his forehead against hers and she could feel his warm breath on her face. Luke closed his eyes and she worried that this was all too much too fast, even for a guy like Luke. He just seemed so sure of himself; she went with what he was asking of her.

“Because I’m pretty sure that you’ve never done what I’m thinking about doing to you,” Luke admitted.

“What are you thinking about doing to me, Luke?” she brazenly asked. God, she hoped that his answer was going to be, “Everything”.

“I want you, Ruby,” he whispered. “I have since I first saw you around the office. I can’t explain it, but for some reason, I feel drawn to you.”

She smiled at him, and a scowl formed on his handsome face. “Drawn to me?” she questioned.

“You’re laughing at me,” he grumbled.

“No,” she quickly said, “not at all. I’m just not the type of woman that men are usually drawn to, Luke. And to answer your question, I have never done what you want to do with me, with any man. I’ve already told you—I’m a nerd and not many guys want to have sex with the little nerdy girl who has her nose stuck in a book or laptop.”

“They’re all idiots,” Luke said. “You’re all that I can think about, Ruby. I find everything that you do sexy as hell. And that’s why you need to tell me to stop.”

She looked him over, trying to decide what her next move should be. There was no way that she was going to give up her chance with Luke—not after he admitted that he wanted her.

“Well, that’s not going to happen,” Ruby breathed.

LUKE

Luke couldn't keep his hands off of Ruby and that wasn't going to end well for either of them—but especially her. She was so sweet and innocent, but all he could think about was taking her, making her his, and never letting her go again. That was crazy though because he really didn't know Ruby. Hell, today was the first time that he had actually spoken to her, and now, he couldn't stop kissing and touching her.

“Ruby,” he said as if in warning.

“Luke,” she countered. “I'd really like to see what you have planned to do with me. I mean, this might just be my only chance, and I'm going to take it.”

“It's not that simple,” Luke insisted. “If I do what I want to with you, there will be no going back from it, and honestly, that should scare the crap out of you—it does me. We've only just met,” he said.

“I know that,” she said. “I was there today when you finally spoke to me for the first time. You said that I was hot,” she reminded.

“I remember,” he assured. “I was there when I called you hot,” he teased. “Maybe we should just let this thing between us slow down.” That was the very last thing he wanted, but he was also a gentleman—well, mostly. If he wanted to slow down, it was most likely because he was being a coward. It had been so damn long since he'd been involved with a woman, and it had ended badly.

Honestly, the last woman he saw on a regular basis ended up telling him that he was the worst boyfriend that she'd ever had. The part that hurt the most was that he knew that it was the truth. He was an awful boyfriend and that's why he avoided having any woman call him that title for some time now. It had been years since he had been with any woman for more than one night and he planned on keeping it that way—until he saw Ruby around the office.

At first, he didn't pay too much attention to his attraction to the sexy redhead. Hell, he did everything that he could just to avoid talking to her or having to run into her on a daily basis. But then, she went to work for Alex, his boss, and he knew that he'd be hard-pressed to avoid her. Today was the first day that he actually took a chance and spoke to her and all in all, he'd have to say that it went well. Ruby was sitting on his lap right now, her arms wrapped around his neck, her lips swollen from his kisses, looking at him as if she wanted more from him. The question was, would he be able to give her more?

"I don't want things to slow down," she said, shaking her head at him. "In fact, I think that we should speed things up a bit." Ruby snaked her hands under his shirt, rubbing them over his pecks and stomach and he gently grabbed them and pulled them back out from under his shirt.

"That's really fast, honey," he said. She smiled and reached for her own shirt, slowly tugging it up over her body. Luke felt like he was going to swallow his damn tongue, but there was no way that he'd stop her.

"I like the way that you're looking at me," she whispered to him. "No one has ever looked at me the way that you are."

"I don't understand why anyone wouldn't look at you like this," Luke said. "You're so fucking beautiful."

"A girl could get used to hearing things like that," she whispered. She tugged her shirt up over her head and tossed it to the floor. He couldn't stop looking at her as she sat on his lap wearing just her bra and skirt. Luke ran his hands up her body and cupped her breasts through her bra, loving the

breathy little sighs that he elicited from her as he stroked her taut nipples through her bra.

“You like that?” he asked.

“Yes,” she stuttered. “So much.” Luke reached around her back and unsnapped her bra with just one hand, letting it fall to the floor with her shirt.

“You’ve had practice at that,” she teased. “I can’t even unhook my bra with one hand.”

“I’ve been around a bra or two in my day,” he admitted. “Look at you,” he whispered. Ruby looked down her own body and then back up at him. He hated that she looked unsure of herself. All he saw when he looked at her was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He just wished that she could see herself the way that he saw her.

Luke cupped her breasts and she hissed out her breath. “Luke,” she shouted. He could tell that she liked what he was doing to her, but would she allow him to take things even further? Would she let him push her?

A sharp knock sounded at her front door and they both groaned in unison. “If that’s Millie again, I’m going to kill her,” Ruby said.

“You’ll have to get in line behind me,” Luke said. “I take it that you weren’t expecting anyone else tonight then?” he asked.

“No,” she said. Ruby stood up from his lap and grabbed her shirt from the floor. He waited for her to put it back on before he stood to answer the door. “Whoever it is, just get rid of them.”

“That’s the plan,” he agreed. He readjusted his erection and she giggled as he walked over to her door, pulling his gun from his shoulder holster again. He carefully opened the door and peeked out to find his old pal, Ranger standing on Ruby’s front step.

“What the hell?” Luke asked.

“Hey, man,” Ranger said. “Long time.” Luke pulled the door open and looked his old friend over. It had been almost five years since he saw the guy—long time didn’t even begin to cover it.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Luke asked. “How the fuck did you even find me?”

“I found you the same way that the guys tailing you found you, asshole. Now, move and let me in before they join us,” Ranger ordered. Luke didn’t bother to look outside to see if Ranger had guessed correctly. His friend was good at tracking, and he was right, if he could find Luke, others would be able to. He stepped out of the way, letting Ranger into Ruby’s apartment, and then he quickly shut and locked the front door.

“You’re still smart enough to know that won’t do you any good, right?” Ranger asked.

“Yeah, but I thought that I’d be safe enough here since no one would pin Ruby and me together.”

“Well, you did a shitty job of covering your tracks. You have no idea what you’re dealing with still, do you?” Ranger asked.

“No,” Luke admitted. “I honestly have no idea why this is all happening again. Does it have anything to do with South Korea?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Ranger said. “And I think that I might have some of the answers that you’re looking for, but there are still some blanks. I think that together, we’ll be able to fill them in this time.”

“Why now?” Luke asked. “What’s different from last time? We didn’t get the answers that we were looking for and I’m betting that we’ll hit a few walls still now.”

“Probably,” Ranger admitted. “But we won’t have the roadblock of the Navy in our way. You started asking questions that must have set them off. They sent you home and you never got your answers and that was partly my fault. I shouldn’t have told you to go to command,” Ranger said.

“You did what you thought was right, Ranger,” Luke said.

“I appreciate that man,” Ranger gushed, pulling him in for a quick side hug.

Ruby cleared her throat, interrupting their bro moment. “Um, I’m Ruby,” she said. “Luke and I work together.” She looked at Luke as if to confirm that she had said the right thing and he nodded and smiled at her.

“It’s a little bit more complicated than that,” Luke admitted. “But we’re still negotiating everything.”

“So, you two are together and you came here thinking that no one else would add that up?” Ranger asked.

“Well, that part isn’t really his fault,” Ruby defended. “I mean, today was the first day that Luke really talked to me. He said that I was hot when we were in the elevator together, and well, I didn’t believe him until he showed up here. He interrupted my dinner with Millie, but I was fine with that. I shared my Chinese food with him, and he kissed me. Well, he more than kissed me, but that’s mostly private stuff that you really don’t need to know.” God, Luke found everything about Ruby to be completely adorable—even the way that she rambled and overshared when she was nervous. “Is she for real?” Ranger asked.

“Yeah, Ruby overshares when she’s a little frazzled,” Luke said. “Pretty cute, huh?”

“Um, sure,” Ranger said. “But that was a whole lot of oversharing.”

“Sorry about that,” Ruby whispered. “I don’t really have a filter, especially when I’m nervous, and being around two hot guys tends to make me more nervous than usual.”

“Two hot guys?” Luke asked. He didn’t like that Ruby thought about Ranger that way.

“Yeah—you and Ranger are both hot,” she said. “I picked up your name from when Luke and you were having your special reunion. I hope you don’t mind me calling you by your name.”

“No,” Ranger breathed. “I mean, everyone calls me Ranger, so have at it.”

“Is that your real name?” she asked.

“No,” Ranger admitted. “But if I told you my real name, I’d have to kill you.” Ruby looked nervously between him and Ranger and giggled. She didn’t stop until she realized that his buddy wasn’t laughing, and poor Ruby stopped giggling and cleared her throat.

“I see,” she whispered.

“Listen,” Ranger said, “you two aren’t safe here anymore. As I said earlier, if I found you, the guys trailing you will be able to find you too. You’ve put her in danger by coming here.”

“I know,” Luke admitted. “And I feel like shit that I did it, but now, I have to figure out my next step. It’s what we were doing when you showed up—figuring out what comes next.”

Ruby giggled and cleared her throat again when he shot her a look. “I bet that’s what the two of you were doing. But I’m here now, and I think I can help with the next steps. I’ve got a place where you both can lie low for a bit until we can fill in the blanks. You two up for a little road trip?” Ranger asked.

“What about Millie?” Ruby asked. “She saw him here. Will they hurt her trying to find out where we went?”

“Who’s Millie again?” Ranger asked, rubbing his head, trying to keep up with Ruby.

“My neighbor—the one that I was supposed to have dinner with tonight until Luke showed up here,” Ruby said.

“Right, I’ll keep an eye on her to make sure that no one shows up here asking questions. You’ll need to introduce her to me on your way out,” Ranger ordered.

“I’m sure that she’s going to love meeting you,” Ruby teased.

“Great,” Ranger grumbled. “You two have ten minutes before you have to hit the road. Get packing.”

“I’m already packed,” Luke said, nodding to his duffel bag. “I still travel light.”

“I see,” Ranger said. “You now have nine minutes, Ruby,” he said, looking her over.

“On it,” Ruby said, running back to her bedroom.

Luke watched her go to the back of the apartment and turned to Ranger. “I hope that I didn’t just get her killed, because I really fucking like her,” Luke admitted.

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RUBY

Ruby wasted no time packing up some of her things. She should have been worried about how she had gotten mixed up in this whole mess, but she wasn't. In fact, Ruby felt downright giddy that she was about to go on an adventure with one of the hottest men that she had ever met. What the hell was wrong with her?

All she could do was chalk it up to the fact that she really never had anything exciting happen in her life up to this point. Her life was utterly boring and predictable and there was nothing that she could do about it. Sure, she tried to put herself out there—honestly, she did. But she never found acceptance and because of that, she was never really invited to join in anything fun or exciting.

When Ruby was in college, she decided that being a part of the in crowd was overrated, so she'd go it alone. She had a few friends that she'd hang out with or go to dinner with, but nothing ever happened to her. At least, not until now, and maybe that was what had her packing her stuff like she couldn't get out of her apartment or her life fast enough.

"Ready," she said, standing in the corner of her family room, holding her two bags in each of her hands.

"That was fast," Luke said, crossing the room to take them from her.

"You don't have to carry my bags, Luke," she said. "I don't mind."

“It’s the least that I can do,” he offered. “I mean, I did pull you into this mess. If I just left you alone and didn’t show up on your doorstep this evening, you wouldn’t have to leave your cozy life here.” She wasn’t about to tell him that she hated her life or that it wasn’t very cozy. Ruby would keep all of that information to herself. Luke probably already thought that she was pathetic, and she didn’t need to give him any more reason to believe that about her.

“He’s not wrong,” Ranger grumbled. “But we’ll find a way to get you out of this, Ruby,” he offered. She nodded at Luke’s friend and pasted on her best smile, trying not to seem too eager or giddy about the prospect of heading out on the run with Luke.

“I trust that you will,” she said. “Thank you for agreeing to keep an eye on Millie for me, Ranger.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said. “I’ll need to stay here to do that,” Ranger said.

“Here?” Ruby squeaked. “Why do you need to stay here?”

“Well, Ranger and I were talking while you were packing and we think it might be best for him to hang out here—you know, let the guys who are trailing me think that we’re still here. It will give us a head start and he’ll be able to keep an eye on Millie. It’s really a good thing.” Ruby couldn’t argue with any of what Luke had just said, but she wanted to protest. She had personal things in her apartment that she really didn’t want Ranger or any other man to see.

“Don’t worry,” Ranger said, “I won’t go through your nightstand drawers,” he teased as if reading her mind. She could feel her cheeks heat that he had guessed correctly as to where she kept her girly things.

Both guys chuckled and Luke wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “He was only kidding, honey,” Luke assured.

“Didn’t sound like he was kidding,” Ruby grumbled.

“You two need to head out. I’ll create a distraction out in the parking lot. You two need to slip into my pick-up truck and

head out. Try not to let the two guys sitting in the white sedan, in the back of the lot, see either of you. Got it?” Ranger asked.

“Easier said than done,” Luke mumbled.

“What about Millie—can I say goodbye?” Ruby asked.

“No,” Luke said. “I’m sorry, but we can’t take the chance that she’ll either cause a scene or get us noticed somehow. Besides, it’s best that she knows as little as possible about where we’re going or that we’re leaving in the first place. If they catch on that we’ve taken off, they might try to question Millie and that won’t end well for her.” Ruby hated that her friend was in danger. She hadn’t known Millie for very long, but she liked her. Ruby considered her a friend and she wouldn’t ever want anything to happen to her.

“I’ll come up with an excuse to tell her and when that fails, I’ll figure something out. But I won’t let them get to her,” Ranger assured.

“Whoever they are,” Luke added.

“I’ll be in touch soon,” Ranger promised. “We’ll figure this out.”

Luke took the keys out of his jeans pocket and tossed them to Ranger, and he did the same, giving Luke his keys. “Oh—you’ll need a key to my apartment,” Ruby said. She walked into her kitchen and found the spare keys to her front door that she kept in her junk drawer. She handed them over to Ranger and he smiled down at her.

“Love the keychain,” he said, turning it over in his big hand. It said, “Worlds Best Dad,” and was a Father’s Day gift that she never got around to giving to her father. Instead, she stuck her extra keys on it and tossed them into her junk drawer.

“Thanks,” she said.

“I’m sure that there’s an amusing story behind it, but we don’t have time for that,” Ranger insisted, “Dad,” he quickly added. She rolled her eyes at him and grabbed her purse.

“We’ll let you know when we get to the safehouse,” Luke said.

“Great,” Ranger agreed. “Let’s move.” They all headed out of her apartment and for some reason, she took a last look back as if she’d miss the place which was crazy because she had only lived there a short time. Maybe it was the fact that it was the first place she’d felt at home since moving out of her parent’s place. It might not be much, but it was hers and that felt like it counted for something.

Ruby was tired of being in the truck. It felt as though they had been driving for days, not just hours. She knew that every time she asked Luke if they were almost there yet, she was slowly driving him crazy.

“Are we—” she began, and Luke sighed.

“If you’re going to ask me if we’re almost there again, honey, I’m going to lose my damn mind. We still have another two hours until we reach the safe house that Ranger arranged for us.”

“I’m trying to be patient,” she mumbled. “But it’s already been four hours. I had to pee about an hour ago and well, I’m hungry,” she said.

“We ate dinner back at your place,” he said.

“Right, but I shared my dinner with you and now, I’m hungry again,” Ruby insisted.

“But you told me that you ordered too much food and you wouldn’t eat all of it. I thought that I was just eating what you didn’t want,” he said. God, he looked butthurt that she had lied about not wanting to eat all of the food that she had purchased. She ordered her usual and she usually ate all of it, but she didn’t want to admit that to Luke.

“Fine,” she almost shouted. “I lied. I could have eaten all of it, but I thought that it was a nice thing to do to share with

you. I mean, I couldn't sit and eat my dinner in front of you without offering you some, Luke," she said.

"Sure, you could have," he said. "I intruded on your dinner and while sharing half of it with me was kind, I hate that I ate your meal, Ruby," Luke said.

"It's not a big deal, Luke," Ruby insisted. It really wasn't. There was no way that she would have sat and eaten in front of him, sharing was the only way she would have eaten any of her dinner. "I wanted to share with you, so I did," she said.

"How about I grab us some take-out on the way to the house, and we can eat when we get there? I don't want to expose our location, but I can do a drive-thru," he offered. "Can you wait two hours?"

"To eat, yes," she agreed. "To pee, no."

Luke chuckled and nodded. "I'll find a rest stop here soon and pull off," he offered.

"Thank you," she said. "My bladder and I both appreciate that."

"How about you tell me about yourself while we drive?" he asked. "It might help pass the time some."

"Sure," she agreed. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"I'm originally from New York City," she admitted. "My parents still live there."

"Oh," he said. "I had you pegged as a country girl," she said. "But New York City is a pretty big deal."

"Yeah, I guess. When you're from there, it's really not. It's just where I'm from. I never thought about it as a big deal," she said.

"Why did you move away?" he asked.

"Honestly, because of college," she said. "I moved to town to go to college and when I finished, I just kind of stuck around. I got my little apartment just after Alex offered me the job as his assistant and I'm happy there."

“Yeah, it’s a nice little town,” he said. They were just outside of Chicago, and he had to admit, it felt like home.

“How about you?” she asked. “Where are you from?”

“Originally, I’m from Wisconsin, so not too far from here,” he said. “Do you get back home to New York often to see your parents?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “I mean, for holidays and stuff, but I don’t go home very often. I do talk to my mom at least once a week.”

“Any brothers or sisters?” he asked.

“Nope, I’m an only child,” she admitted. “How about you?”

“I am too,” he said. “My parents divorced when I was just a little kid, and well, neither of them remarried. My father passed a few years ago, but my mother still lives in Wisconsin. I go up to see her every chance I get. I’ve tried to get her to move down here with me, but she refuses,” he said.

“I take it that you and your mom are close then,” she said. She always wondered how that would work. She and her mother had a pleasant relationship. Yeah, that’s how she’d describe it, but she wouldn’t call them close. Her mom was great, really, but she never seemed to understand Ruby. She wanted someone more like her—popular. Her mother was voted biggest flirt in high school, and Ruby had no clue how to even begin to flirt with a guy. Her mom was also prom queen her senior year of high school and Ruby didn’t even bother to go to prom. They were like night and day, and that always made Ruby a little sad, even if her mother never said anything about their differences.

“We are,” he admitted.

“I always wondered what that would be like. My mom and I get along great, but we really have nothing in common. I mean, I don’t think that she really understands me, but I know that she loves me and that’s enough.”

“What wouldn’t she understand?” Luke asked.

“Well, she was popular in high school. Heck, my father was the captain of the football team, and my mother was the head cheerleader. They were the kind and queen of their prom court, and then I came along. I guess she just never saw herself having a kid who was a giant nerd, you know?”

“You keep calling yourself a nerd, but I don’t quite see it, Ruby,” Luke said. “I mean, you’re quirky, I’ll give you that.”

“Gee, thanks,” she grumbled. “I’m not sure which is worse—you thinking I’m quirky or being a nerd. I don’t mind it, really. I just never seemed to fit in with any group of kids, and I was fine with that. I liked being alone, for the most part. I had a few friends that I knew that I could count on, but I was always a loner.”

“Ruby,” Luke whispered, pulling her hand into his lap.

“Don’t feel bad for me, Luke,” she said. “I wasn’t unhappy. And now, I’m making new friends here.” She smiled over at him, and he chuckled.

“I hope that you don’t mean me, honey,” he said. “Because I want to be so much more than your friend, Ruby.”

“You do?” she squeaked.

“I thought that I made that pretty clear when we were making out on the sofa back at your apartment,” he said.

“Well, yeah,” she breathed, “but, you still feel that way?” she asked.

He laughed again and Ruby wondered what she had said that was funny. “It’s only been a few hours, honey. I haven’t changed my mind if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I guess I just don’t have a whole lot of experience with—well, all of this,” she admitted. “But that’s good to know.” She yawned and leaned back in her seat. “I’m really tired. Do you mind if I take a little nap?”

“Not at all,” he said. “I’ll wake you when we get to the safe house,” he offered.

“Thanks,” she said around a yawn. “At least I’ll stop asking you if we’re there yet,” she teased.

“Thank God,” he whispered.

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LUKE

Luke had to admit that he found the little snoring sounds that Ruby made to be absolutely adorable. “What the hell is wrong with me?” he whispered to himself. He found just about everything she did to be either sexy, hot, or adorable and that wasn’t his style. Hell, he’d only just met Ruby today, even if he had been following her around like a damn puppy since she started at McTavish Enterprises. He just needed to remember to leave out the part about practically stalking her around the office. He didn’t want to scare her off before he even got his chance with Ruby.

It had been a bit of a drive but heading out of town to the safe house that Ranger found for them was a good idea. He had to admit that he was looking forward to spending some one-on-one time with Ruby, even if that’s not what their little trip was about. Keeping her safe was his top priority and if that led to her falling into his bed, so be it.

He pulled onto the unmarked road that led back to the house that Ranger had secured for them. His friend had texted him repeatedly over the past few hours, even asking the dreaded question, “Are you there yet?” a few times. Ranger was almost as bad as Ruby about asking him that, but he wouldn’t tell his friend that. He knew that Ranger was trying to help them, but this was his mess to figure out. The problem was, Luke knew for sure that if Ranger hadn’t involved himself, he wouldn’t be able to figure out who was following him all these years later—or even if it was the same people.

He parked in front of the house and looked around, making sure that they hadn't been followed back to the property. Ruby stirred next to him, stretching and yawning. He shamelessly let his gaze run over her body and she smiled up at him.

"Were you just checking me out?" she asked.

"I was," he admitted. "You good with that?"

"I'm not sure how I feel about that, honestly," Ruby said. "I think that I'm going to need time to get used to it."

"That's fair," Luke agreed. "And before you ask again, we're here," he said, nodding to the house. She turned and looked out the window and nodded.

"It's cute," she said. "Where are we, exactly?" she asked.

"We're in the middle of nowhere, just where we need to be. I think that we're off the beaten path enough that no one will come out here looking for us." Luke assured.

"And if they do?" Ruby asked.

"If they do, then we'll know it. This place has a state-of-the-art security system already in place. Plus, I still have this," he said, patting the gun in his shoulder holster. He'd leave off the part about having two more guns in his trunk, along with a few knives. That was his world—not hers and he was sure that Ruby wouldn't understand his need to travel with so many weapons.

"I'd love a bath," she breathed. "I feel like we've been in this car for days, not just hours."

"Well, let's get in and you can have your bath while I call Ranger to let him know that we got here." He got out of the car and grabbed their bags out of the trunk as Ruby climbed out of the passenger side. She still looked groggy, and cuddly from sleep and all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and carry her into the closest bed.

"You just did it again," she said.

"Did what?" he asked.

“Checked me out.” She giggled as he rolled his eyes and followed him up to the porch that spanned the front of the cabin.

“I’d love to tell you that it won’t happen again, but I’d totally be lying, honey,” he admitted. There would be no way that he’d stop checking her out. He couldn’t seem to help himself and honestly, she didn’t really seem to mind it.

“At least your honest,” she teased. “I appreciate that attribute in a person.” His mother liked to tell him that he was honest to a fault as if that was a bad thing, but he never could hold back the truth. It was what made him good at his job. Most big companies wanted a security team that would come in and feed them some bullshit about how safe and secure they already were. He didn’t bullshit people like that. If Luke saw a problem, he let the company’s owners know about it.

They explored the house and when they found the master bedroom with an adjoining bath, she tossed her bag onto the bed and smiled over her shoulder at him. “I’m going to soak in that tub until my fingers and toes shrivel. Is that okay with you?” she asked.

“Yep,” he agreed. “I’ll call Ranger.” What he really wanted to do was ask her if he could join her, but he was sure that she’d tell him to get lost.

He finished bringing in their bags and toured the house, checking to see what security measures that he was working with. It seemed to have adequate security, but he didn’t want to take any chances, so he set up a few rudimentary ones of his own. He even set up one of his favorites from when he was a kid—putting some cans he had found in the pantry under the windows. It would at least alert him if someone tried to get into the house, the rest would be up to him, and since he had practically brought an armory, he was pretty sure they could handle just about anything thrown his way.

After he finished his task of securing the house, he decided to call Ranger. His friend picked up after a few rings and he sounded grumpy enough that Luke was betting that he had just woken him. “Yeah,” Ranger grumbled.

“Hey, sorry to call so late,” Luke said.

“It’s not late, I’m just exhausted,” Ranger insisted. It was nearly midnight and he had to admit that he was tired too.

“I just wanted to let you know that we made it to the safehouse. It’s a great place, thanks Ranger,” he said.

“Not a problem. Listen, have Ruby call Millie tomorrow morning to let her know that she took off with you,” Ranger said.

“Did you let her know what was going on?” Luke asked.

“I did, and I don’t think she believed me,” Ranger said. Luke couldn’t help his laugh. Millie didn’t seem like the trusting type, and he could just imagine her giving Ranger some shit.

“It’s not funny,” Ranger insisted. “I told her that Ruby would call and explain everything in the morning.”

“I’ll have her call Millie,” Luke agreed.

“Great,” Ranger said. “I’m going to stick around here and keep an eye on her. Plus, it will give me time to do some research to figure out who might be trailing you.”

“Thanks, Ranger,” Luke said. “Stay in touch.”

“Always, man,” Ranger assured and ended the call. Luke tossed his cell onto the kitchen counter and started for the master bedroom, sure that Ruby would be done with her bath by now. He walked into the bedroom and Ruby screamed, pulling the towel over her curves, but the damage was done—he’d already seen most of her.

“I’m sorry,” Luke lied. “I thought that you might be finished your bath.”

“I was,” she mumbled, trying to finesse the towel to stay in place around her body. “But I didn’t have my pajamas in the bathroom and well, these towels are way too small for me.” She was right, the towel was blissfully too small, and he was loving every minute of watching her try to cover her curvy, sexy body.

“I’m sorry that I walked in on you, but I won’t complain about the size of that towel,” he teased. “In fact, it’s kind of cute watching you squirm around trying to cover yourself. You’re not doing a great job of it, by the way.”

“Did you see me?” she asked.

“Would you like for me to lie and tell you that I didn’t?”

“No,” she whispered. She turned the cutest shade of pink, and he couldn’t hide his chuckle. “Don’t laugh at me, Luke.”

He hated that she thought that he was laughing at her. He’d never do that. Finding her naked in the room made him hot as hell, but he wasn’t sure what he should and shouldn’t say to her. Did she even feel the same way as she had back at her apartment? When they were together there, she seemed to be into him. The way that she kissed him made him think that she might want more, and he was certain that he did.

Luke crossed the room and pulled her into his arms, happy that she willingly let him. “I’m not laughing at you, honey,” he promised. “I’d never do that. I’ve already told you that you’re hot as hell. I haven’t changed my mind about that, Ruby.”

“You still think I’m hot?” she asked.

He smiled and dipped his head to gently kiss her lips, grabbing handfuls of her bare ass. “It’s only been a few hours since we left your apartment, and I haven’t changed my mind about you, Ruby. I’m sorry that I walked in on you and made you feel uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t make me feel uncomfortable,” she fibbed. He kissed her again and she let her towel slip a bit more.

“Does this make you feel uncomfortable?” he asked, kissing her once more. She let out a little breathy sigh and shook her head. “How about this?” he asked, sliding her towel down her body, and running his hands over her taut nipples. God, she was beautiful, and Luke was sure that he was pushing her, but he didn’t care. He needed more from her.

“No,” she stuttered, “that doesn’t make me feel uncomfortable.” Luke walked her back to the bed, and when her knees hit the mattress, he pushed her down onto it. He

loved the way that she watched his every move, not taking her eyes off of him. It was sexy the way that she licked her lips as she looked him over as if she might eat him alive—something he'd be totally for.

Ruby had seemed to forget all about her lack of a towel to cover her body. In fact, it lay next to her on the bed, revealing every sexy inch of her body.

“I'm not really sure what to do now,” she said. He was standing over her, looking over her every curve when he realized that he must have been just standing there for a few minutes now. Of course, she was worried about what the next move should be since he hadn't made one yet.

“You don't have to worry about what to do, Ruby. I'll tell you. And if you don't like something that I do to you, you'll need to tell me. Are you good with that?” he asked.

She shyly smiled up at him and nodded. “I'm good with that,” she agreed. He kissed his way down her body and settled between her legs, not bothering to ask her if she was okay with him eating her pussy. There was no way that he'd be able to hold back from tasting her. It had been all he could think about since their little make-out session at her apartment.

“Luke,” she whispered, trying to close her legs to him. He held her thighs and looked up her body to find her watching him.

“Ruby, if this isn't all right, tell me,” he said. “But I want to taste you.”

She laid her head back and groaned, causing him to laugh. “Fine,” she mumbled.

“I promise, you're going to like it, honey,” he assured. He gently bit the fleshy inside of her thighs that led to her sweet pussy, and she moaned. He was going to make this good for her, no matter how much she wanted to protest.

RUBY

Ruby wasn't sure if she wanted to hide from Luke or let him make good on every sinful promise that he was making to her. Her decision was made as soon as he put his mouth on her girl parts—God, it felt so good, she never wanted him to stop. And when he sucked her clit into his warm mouth, she nearly bucked off the bed. She would have too if Luke hadn't been holding her down. He was as sexy in bed as he was out and that had her feeling like she had hit the jackpot. The question was, would he take things all the way? Would Luke want to take her virginity from her, or would he insist on taking things slowly? She didn't want to think about slowing things down with him. In fact, she wanted to rocket to the next step at warp speed.

“You like that, don't you, honey?” he asked.

“Y-yes,” she stuttered. “I like that a lot.” Luke had her feeling like a wonton sex goddess, and she had no idea how that was even possible. She'd never felt this way in her entire life and just one day with Luke had her wanting to try things that she never had. Hell, she wanted to try everything with him.

“Hold on,” he ordered. “I'm going to make you come and then, you and I are going to talk about me making you mine.”

“Talk about it?” she squeaked. “Can we just bypass the talking part?” He chuckled and dipped his head between her legs and shamelessly smiled up at her. If she wasn't mistaken, he even winked at her. And when he ran his tongue back over her wet folds, she couldn't help but shout out his name. When

she came, she practically wrapped her legs around his head, holding him in place as she rode out her orgasm. It was raw, sexy, and totally unexpected, but she loved it. Ruby loved the way Luke made her feel and she wanted so much more from him.

She watched as he stood over the bed, staring her down, as if silently daring her to change her mind, but she wouldn't she wasn't ready for him to stop what he was doing to her. Ruby watched him strip out of his clothes, her breath hitching with every inch that he revealed. He was just as gorgeous out of his clothes as he was in them.

“Are you sure that you want to do this, Ruby?” he asked.

“I am,” she said, reaching for him. “I’m sure.” She was more than sure that she wanted Luke and she wasn't about to miss her chance with him. He covered her body with his own and she could feel the head of his erection nudge her slick opening. She wanted to tell him to just do it; get it over with, but he didn't seem to be in a hurry.

“Is something wrong?” she asked. For a second, Ruby worried that he might have changed his mind about what they were about to do.

“No,” he breathed. “Yes,” he corrected. “This is going to hurt you, and that's not my intent.”

“I know that it will, but it's what I want. You're what I want,” she insisted. “Do it fast,” she insisted. He nodded and nudged the head of his cock into her, and she closed her eyes, not wanting him to see her in pain.

“Open your eyes and look at me, honey,” he ordered. “I need to make sure that you're okay.”

“I will be,” she promised, “just do it, please.” Luke took his time kissing her and she felt herself relax some. He was good at that—making her relax around him. In fact, she didn't feel the need to continuously talk around him as much. Before she realized it, he slid into her body, and she gasped at the sharp little pain she felt deep in her core.

“You okay, Ruby?” he whispered into her ear. He was peppering her face with kisses as if trying to help her to relax and when she realized that she was good, she nodded up at him.

“I’m good,” she assured. “You can move now, Luke.” He moaned and kissed her again, starting to pump in and out of her body once more. She wasn’t sure where he ended and she began, and she loved that. It was the first time that she had ever felt so connected to another human being and she was sure that she’d never find that again. There was something about Luke that made her want to beg him to stay, but that was ridiculous since they had only just met. It was probably the sex talking, but someone needed to tell her heart that, so she didn’t do something foolish like fall for the guy from work. Luke’s gaze was intense and when he came, shouting out her name, she lost another little piece of her heart to him—a dangerous game for her to play, but what choice did she have?

Ruby had been avoiding making a call to her mother to tell her about Luke. She was fine with calling Millie to fill her in but calling her mother scared the crap out of her. Honestly, she wasn’t sure how her mother would feel about her practically shacking up with a guy from work. She was sure that would be how her mother would see her relationship with Luke, but Ruby knew that it was so much more than that to the both of them. Sure, she might be kidding herself by thinking that she’d be able to get her mother to see that, but she wanted to try. Ruby wanted to tell her mother about the special guy in her life and let the chips fall where they may. It wouldn’t change things between her and Luke, but she still wanted to try.

Ruby pulled the new cell phone that Luke had given her, with the promise that she wouldn’t tell anyone where they were or give out her new number to anyone and dialed her mother’s number. She was surprised that her mom answered on the second ring. “Hey, Mom,” Ruby said.

“Ruby, I’ve been trying to call you for days now. Your cell number doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Um, no,” Ruby said. Shit, how did she not think to call her mother to tell her that she had to get a new cell phone? “I lost my phone,” she lied, “and I had to get a new one. It took me a few days to get everything set up. Sorry, Mom,” Ruby said.

“Well, next time, find a way to reach out so that I don’t worry so much,” her mother said.

“I’ll try to do better next time,” Ruby said. This phone call wasn’t going the way that she planned. She hoped to start things off lite and cheery, but that wasn’t the way things are going. Now, she was going to have to blurt out that she was on the run with some guy that her parents had never met.

“I’m glad you called me. I’ve been wanting to talk to you about your father. I’m so sick of the way that he talks to me. He yells at me like I’m a child and then when he’s really pissed, he throws a tantrum as if he’s one. I just can’t take any more of it. I’m so done. I’ve thought about leaving him, but I worry that if I do, my life won’t be the same and I like my life. I like having everything that I have, and I like stability. What should I do?” her mother admitted.

“Wow,” Ruby breathed. “That’s a lot, Mom. I really didn’t know that things were that bad with Dad. I know that he has a temper and can yell, but I never thought that you were that upset. You just seemed to roll with everything.”

“Well, when you were little, I really didn’t know how unhappy I was. I mean, I had you and you kept me pretty busy, even as an only child. But then, you went away to college and moved out, and it was just the two of us. I guess I stopped looking past his bad behavior and stopped just accepting it. His yelling has gotten worse and if I ever confronted him, well, I just don’t know what he’d do.”

Ruby’s gasp filled the phone, “Do you think that he’d hurt you?”

“No,” her mother sighed. “He’d never physically hurt me, but his verbal abuse is getting to be too much.”

“What about counseling?” Ruby asked. “Couples counseling might help him to see how angry he’s become.”

“Maybe,” her mother said.

“You know, Mom, any good therapist will point out both your and Dad’s flaws,” Ruby challenged.

“My flaws?” her mother asked. “What flaw would a therapist point out about me?” Ruby thought better about simply listing her mother’s shortcomings. That never ended well for her. Of course, a good therapist would point out that her mother was a bit overbearing and pushy. She was also demanding and a downright busy body if given the chance. Maybe her father had a reason to be so grumpy, not that it would make that okay for him to yell at her mom or anyone else.

“Never mind,” Ruby said. “Listen, I called to let you know that I’m going to be away from home for a bit. I’ve taken some time off work and I’m doing some traveling.”

“But you just started your job,” her mother countered. “How did you have time off already?” she asked. She couldn’t tell her mother that her boss is friends with the new man in her life and insisted that she take off until they could figure out who was after Luke.

“Yes, I had some time already,” Ruby lied. “Alex is a wonderful boss and is good to give me some time off.”

“Are you all right, Ruby?” her mother asked. “Should I be worried about you?”

“Not at all, Mom,” Ruby said. “I’m fine. Listen, I just wanted to let you know not to worry about me. I’m fine. I’ll call again soon,” she said, ending the call with her mom before she could protest. Ruby had given up on the idea of telling her mom about Luke. It wasn’t the time—maybe it never would be, but she could hope that someday, she’d be able to share her news—maybe.

LUKE

Months were passing far more quickly than Luke would have liked. He was grateful to Ranger for holding down the fort, but they were still no closer to finding out who was following him. His friend took a job at McTavish as the acting head of security until he could get back, and Luke knew that he'd never be able to pay his friend back for doing that. Ranger was more than qualified to handle the job, but he didn't hesitate to agree to take the position. Luke just hoped that once he was back at the office, Ranger would agree to stay on. He liked the idea of working with his friend again full-time.

Ranger had also stuck around Ruby's apartment, to help keep an eye on things there. Luke knew that he was also keeping an eye on Millie, but every time he brought the subject up, Ranger had a mini tantrum. He wondered what that was all about, but honestly, Luke was too tired to push him for answers.

He was worried about Ruby and that worry had kept him up most nights. She was sick with some kind of stomach bug and wouldn't let him take her to town to see the doctor. She said that she'd be fine in time and that there was no need for him to worry, but he just couldn't help it. He'd fallen for her in the four months that they had been stuck together in the middle of nowhere. Luke loved that he got to spend every minute with her, but he worried that Ruby would come to resent him for keeping her from her life. He worried that sooner or later, she'd get sick of spending every second of her day with him and tell him that she'd had enough, but she hadn't done that yet. Still, she was grumpier than usual and

taking it out on him, which seemed about right since he was her only option.

She walked into the kitchen; her hair pulled back in a messy bun like she wore it every morning after puking her guts out in the bathroom. “You were sick again, weren’t you?” Luke asked, already knowing the answer. Poor Ruby still looked a bit green, and he couldn’t help but worry about her.

“No,” she lied. Ruby had a tell when she wasn’t being completely truthful with him—she’d raise her chin and press her lips together as if daring him to call her a liar.

“Liar,” he said, accepting her challenge.

“Fine, I got sick, but I’m feeling better,” she said. “In fact, I’d love some tea and toast.” That was her go-to breakfast after getting sick every morning and he made it for her every morning while she sat at the kitchen table, trying to recover.

“Ruby,” he breathed. “This has been going on for far too long now. You need to see a doctor.” She had been getting sick every day now for close to a month.

“I think that you might be right, Luke,” she agreed. His jaw almost hit the floor. She’d never agreed with him before. He had all but begged her for weeks now to see a doctor and each time, she assured him that she was going to be just fine.

“Wait—what?” he asked. “Did you just agree with me about seeing a doctor?”

“I did,” she said. “I think that it’s time that I saw someone.”

“Great—I’ll make you some tea and toast and then, we can get dressed and head into town to the clinic. We’ll have to use fake names, but I think that if we pay in cash, they really won’t care what our names are.”

Ruby nodded and sunk into one of the chairs around the kitchen table. “Do you think that they will have OBGYNs on staff at the clinic?” she asked.

“A what?” he asked.

“You know, a girly doctor,” she said. He knew exactly what an OBGYN was, but his question was—why was she asking if they’d have one on staff?

“Is everything all right—you know, down there?” he asked.

Ruby giggled and shook her head at him. “You’ve said pussy a million times to me over the past four months, but you’re going with calling it, ‘Down there’ now?”

“Can you just answer the question, Ruby?” he grumbled.

“Everything is fine, down there,” she said. “But I’m pretty sure that I’m getting sick every morning because I’m pregnant.” She whispered that last part and Luke nearly dropped her cup of tea on the floor. How had that happened? Sure, he hadn’t used protection, mainly because he didn’t bring condoms with him. But he was sure that Ruby was on the pill—wasn’t she?

“Pregnant? But you were on the pill, right?” he asked.

“No,” she breathed. “I’ve never had any need to be on the pill. I just never really thought that I’d be able to get pregnant, so I didn’t push the subject of protection.”

“Why wouldn’t you be able to get pregnant?” he asked.

“When I was a teenager, my mother took me to her girly doctor for my first official checkup. Honestly, I think she was just making sure that I was still a virgin, and I was, but I had some other issues that needed to be checked.”

“Other issues?” he asked. He was feeling a little lightheaded and needed to sit down. Luke handed her the tea and toast that he had made for her, and she thanked him as he slid into the chair next to her.

“Yeah, I was having really bad periods, and a lot of pain associated with them every month. After they ran a few tests, they found out that I had a bunch of things wrong with me—cysts on my ovaries, and endometriosis, which is the main reason why the doctor told me that it would be nearly impossible to get pregnant. I guess he was wrong.” She took a bite of her toast and sipped her tea, watching him as if he was

supposed to say something to her. Maybe he was, but he wasn't sure what the hell he could say about any of this.

“Why do you think you're pregnant now?” he asked. “Maybe you just caught a stomach bug.”

“From where?” she asked. “You hardly let me out of this house and you're fine, so I didn't catch it from you. Plus, I haven't had a period in just over three months now, so I'm assuming that I'm pregnant.”

“How can you be so casual about this, Ruby?” he almost shouted. “A baby?”

She shrugged, “For so many years, I had resigned myself to the fact that I'd never have a baby. I thought that I'd never be a mother and well, I have a chance to be that now and I guess, I'm okay with it. I want to be a mom, and if I'm pregnant, then, so be it.”

“So be it?” he asked. “How can you say that? If you're going to be a mom, then I'm going to be a dad and I'm not sure that I'm ready for that, Ruby.” He had never pictured himself with kids. Hell, he'd never picture himself with one woman, yet here he was, sitting next to the woman who had captured his heart, even if she didn't know it yet, and he was fucking everything up.

“Then, I'll raise the baby on my own. I'm not looking for you to make me any promises here, Luke. I'm just looking for a ride into town to the clinic.” She stood and grabbed her plate and mug, tossing them into the kitchen sink with a clatter as she made her way upstairs to the bedroom that they shared. When the door slammed shut, he almost jumped out of his seat. It was the first time that he'd ever seen Ruby that angry, and he was the cause of it. He hated that he had given her the impression that if she was pregnant, he wouldn't be a part of their child's life. Of course, he'd want that because he wanted Ruby—he just hadn't gotten around to telling her that part yet. He was a chicken, and now, he'd gone and fucked everything up with the one woman he could see himself spending the rest of his life with. Luke had ruined everything, and he wasn't sure that he'd be able to fix it now.

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RUBY

Ruby locked herself in the bathroom and cried until she was sure that she had no more tears left. She had to focus on the fact that she was going to finally get answers to the many questions that had popped into her head over the past couple of weeks.

When she first started throwing up every morning, she never imagined that she could possibly be pregnant. She thought for sure that she had come down with a stomach bug, but then, she started doing some math, realizing that she hadn't had a period in months, and came up with the possibility of being pregnant.

At first, it terrified her to realize that she might be carrying Luke's baby. She thought for so long that it was simply impossible, but the more that she allowed herself to dream about it as a possibility, the more she liked the idea. Ruby thought that Luke would make a wonderful father, but now, she worried that she had pegged him all wrong.

At least he had agreed to run her to town to the local clinic. She needed confirmation that she wasn't losing her mind. She needed to hear from a doctor that she was pregnant, and then, she'd find a way to go home. It was time for her to take back her life. Mr. McTavish had been kind enough to hold her job for her, but sooner or later, he'd have to fill her position. She wanted to go home. Knowing that Luke wasn't ready to be a father had her fantasy of the two of them raising this baby together vanish, just as quickly as it had formed. She was a fool for thinking that Luke might be happy about the baby.

Why would he be? They had only been together for four months and now, she was telling him that he was going to be a father. Of course, he wasn't happy about her supposed news.

After she showered and got dressed, she found Luke in the spare bathroom. He had showered and dressed in clean clothes and when he saw her looking at him in the hallway, she wanted to run and hide, but changing her mind now wasn't an option. The damage was already done and if she was pregnant, she'd have to find out sooner or later.

"Ready," she said. "Thank you for agreeing to drive me to town." She walked downstairs to wait for him at the front door.

Luke caught up with her about halfway down the stairs and grabbed her arm. "Wait," he insisted. "I don't want things to be this way, Ruby."

"I know that I've sprung a lot on you, Luke. I'm sure that my puking my brains out never registered with you that I could be pregnant. I know it was a shock, but if I'm pregnant, I want to know for sure. After this visit, we can sit down and come up with a way that I can go back to my apartment and my job. I'll need to have a way to pay for my and my baby's medical care, and my job won't hold forever."

"It's not safe," he said.

"I'll figure that out as I go," she said, "but, I can't wait to stay here with someone who doesn't want me."

"I never said that I don't want you, Ruby," he argued.

"Right, but you don't want to be a father and if I'm going to have this baby, and you won't want him or her, then you won't want me."

"It's not like that," Luke insisted. "I didn't mean what I said earlier. I'm not sure how I'll handle the news if you're pregnant, Ruby. I just need to figure it out," he said.

"Well, don't take too long, Luke," Ruby spat. "If I'm pregnant, you'll only have about seven months to figure it out." She pulled her arm free from his grasp and finished down the stairs. She was done discussing this. It was time for

her to figure out her next move because, in her heart, she knew that she was going to have to come to grips with being a mother, and she was pretty sure that she was going to have to do it alone.

The doctor who saw her seemed to be nice; sympathetic even when Ruby basically told her the whole story behind her possible pregnancy. Of course, she left out the parts about the two of them being on the run and possibly having someone coming for them. That wasn't something that she'd be able to share.

They had her pee on a pregnancy test and took some blood, just for good measure—the doctor's words, not hers. She'd be fine just peeing on the stick, but apparently, they weren't always conclusive. Luke stood in the corner of the room the entire time as if she had the damn plague, and she almost found the whole scene funny—but then again, none of this was funny.

When the nurse came in holding her pregnancy test with a paper towel and wearing a smile, she knew that she was going to get her answer without the help of the blood test. "I'm guessing that you're about to tell me that I'm pregnant," Ruby said.

"I am and you are," the nurse said. Ruby felt the hot tears spilling down her face as she choked back her sob.

"Really?" she asked.

"Well, I hope that I'm not giving you unwanted news, honey," the nurse said, "but, yes, you're pregnant. The doctor would like to do a quick sonogram to check on the baby since you've been having so much morning sickness with the pregnancy."

"Is something wrong with the baby?" Luke asked. It was the first thing he had said since they left the house.

“Not at all,” the nurse assured. “Doc just wants to check in on the little guy or girl. Give us a minute and I’ll be right back in with the machine.” Ruby nodded and swiped at her tears. She hated that she couldn’t seem to stop crying, but the waterworks didn’t seem to have an off switch.

“I’m sorry that this didn’t turn out the way you were hoping, Luke,” she sobbed. “But I’m not going to be sorry that I’m pregnant. It’s a miracle that it even happened, really. I won’t ever be sorry about any of it.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Luke said. He crossed the room to stand next to her and when he sat down in the chair next to her and pulled her hand into his own, that damn hope bubbled up to the surface again.

“I wish I could take back what I said earlier, Ruby. I was surprised by the idea of us having a baby, and I fucked it all up and said all of the wrong things. I’m sorry.”

“You did say all of the wrong things,” she agreed. “You said that you weren’t ready to be a father,” she reminded.

“That wasn’t the truth. I couldn’t see myself being a father—ever,” he admitted.

“Yeah—that’s so much better,” she mumbled.

“Let me finish,” he insisted. Ruby nodded and waited him out to go on. “I never saw myself with a wife and family—not until I met you, Ruby. I never had a true steady girlfriend. Hell, you’re the only woman that I’ve been with for longer than a few dates.”

“What we’ve been doing isn’t necessarily dating,” she said.

“I know, but it counts,” he argued.

The nurse and the doctor reappeared in the tiny room and went over things like prenatal vitamins and follow-up visits. She found herself only half listening and nodding to the doctor’s instructions. When they finally did the sonogram, she held her breath waiting to hear the baby’s heartbeat and when the loud whooshing sound filled the room, she looked up to

find Luke wiping away tears of his own as he watched the monitor and held her hand.

“You’re about three months along,” the doctor said. “Does that sound about right?”

“Yes,” Ruby agreed. “I was told that I couldn’t have children. Is the baby okay in there?” she asked.

The doctor smiled and nodded, “He or she looks to be just fine.”

“Can you tell the sex yet?” Luke asked.

“Not yet,” the doctors said, pointing to the image on the screen.

“Our baby,” Ruby whispered. Luke squeezed her hand into his own and smiled down at her, and for just a second, her whole world felt right.

“We plan on going back home soon,” Luke said to the doctor. “Can she have her follow-up appointments back there?”

“Of course,” the doctor said.

“We’re going back home?” she asked Luke.

“Yeah, but there are conditions. We can talk about all that later,” he promised.

“It’s okay for me to travel, right?” Ruby asked.

“Yep,” the doctor said. “But if you have a long trip ahead of you, make sure that you stay hydrated and get out of the car every two hours to head off the possibility of blood clots. Other than that, I think you are safe to travel.”

Ruby sat up and pulled her shirt down. “Thank you,” she said. “For everything.” The doctor nodded and turned on the lights. “When you both are ready, come out and we can give you your prescription for prenatal vitamins and you can be on your way.”

As soon as they left the room, she turned to Luke. “What are the conditions?” she asked.

He chuckled, “I knew that wouldn’t sit long with you, honey. First, I want you to move into my house once we get back home. Your apartment isn’t safe, and I’ve got great security at my place.”

She didn’t even have to think about agreeing to that part of his conditions—her answer was an easy, yes. “Sure,” she said, going for casual. “Anything else?”

“I’d like for us to go into the office and leave together after work,” he said. “I won’t take any chances with either of you, Ruby.” Luke put his hand protectively over her tummy and God, she lost another little piece of her heart to him.

“Deal,” she agreed.

“I’m sorry that I fucked things up earlier. I feel like I’ve been doing that to you since we met—fucking up your life. If I hadn’t shown up on your doorstep, you wouldn’t have been in so much danger that you had to go on the run with me,” he said.

She didn’t let him finish, covering her hand over his mouth and cutting him off. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she assured. “I’m happy with the way things turned out. I honestly, wouldn’t change a thing,” Ruby admitted. “Not even this,” she covered his hand with her own and smiled.

“Really?” he asked.

“Yeah, really,” she said. “My life before you was boring and you opened up a whole new world for me. You gave me something that I never thought that I’d have—a baby. I’m so thankful that you showed up on my doorstep, Luke,” she admitted.

“I’m pretty okay with the way everything turned out too,” Luke agreed. “And Ruby, I do mean everything.” He rubbed his hand over her tummy again and she knew that she had finally found a guy worth giving her forever to. She just hoped that Luke felt the same way about her.

LUKE

They had spent a blissful month in his house, and he had to admit, having Ruby there with him, dreaming about their future together, felt right. They had discussed baby names and tonight, he was finally going to admit that he had fallen in love with her. He just hoped that it was well received because there was no way that Ruby would be able to run away from him if he fucked this all up.

He found her in the kitchen, making some dinner, and he like the way that she looked in his space. He could see her there with him long-term, he just needed to convince her that was a good idea. “Hey,” he said, wrapping his arms around her from behind.

“Hey yourself,” she breathed. “I’m making dinner,” she said.

“So I see,” he said. “You’re becoming very domesticated,” he teased.

“Well, I have to do something to fill the time. I can’t wait to go back to work.” He didn’t feel the same way about her going back to McTavish. All he wanted to do was keep her locked away at his place and keep her safe. At least at work, he’d be able to still keep an eye on her since it’s his job to keep all of the employees safe.

“You’ll be very happy to hear that I’ve spoken to Ranger today,” he said, “and you’ve been cleared to go back to work.”

“They were able to put in extra security measures then?” she asked. Her concern wasn’t for herself, but her boss and

everyone on the top floor. That was just like his girl—always worrying about everyone but herself. That was something that he both loved and hated about her. If push came to shove, she'd protect everyone else around her—even sacrificing herself, and he couldn't let that happen.

“Yep,” he said. “Everything is safe, and we can both head back into the office on Monday if you're still up for it.”

“I'm more than up for it,” she said. “This is going to be stellar.”

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. “I'm glad that this makes you happy,” he said.

“It does,” she agreed. “Now, all we have to do is eat my delicious dinner.” She looked at it and grimaced, making him laugh again.

“Okay, but before we sit down, I have something that I need to say,” he breathed. She turned in his arms and wrapped hers around his neck.

“Shoot,” she said.

“Well, I wasn't sure when the time to say this would be, but there's no time like the present,” he said.

“That sounds pretty serious,” she said.

He shrugged, “It kind of is,” he admitted, “I'm in love with you, Ruby.”

“You are?” she asked.

“I am,” he whispered, gently kissing her lips.

“Well, I guess that's a good thing since I'm in love with you,” she said. “I wasn't sure when the right time to tell you that was either.”

“I think that before dinner was the best time for both of us to spill our guts,” he teased.

“Speaking of spilling my guts, I haven't done that in almost a week now. The doctor here was right—it just kind of stopped,” she said. They had been to the new doctor that was recommended to them, and he had to admit, he liked her. She

seemed pretty easy going and Ruby liked her too, which was all that mattered.

“Well, that’s great news, right?” he asked.

“Yes—very good news. Plus, I’m hungry all the time now,” she said. “And I don’t think that whatever it is that I’ve made here is going to cut it for me.” She held up the pan and looked at the food inside of it as if it had offended her in some way.

“I guess that’s my cue to order us some dinner. How about if I call in an order to your favorite place in town, and get them to deliver while you go in and pick a movie for us to veg out in front of?”

“Deal,” she said. “Get me something spicy. I think this baby likes a little bit of a kick when it comes to his or her food.”

Luke chuckled and nodded, “Will do,” he agreed. “I just hope that he or she doesn’t have a spicy attitude to match your craving.”



They had started their movie while they waited for their food to be delivered and he had to admit that it was nice to be able to just relax and not worry about anything. It almost felt as though they were already an old married couple—but he was sure that she wasn’t ready for that step, even if she was pregnant with his baby. They had only just admitted to being in love with each other, but he was sure that sooner or later, they’d get to that point—commitment, marriage, the whole nine yards.

The knock at the door had him pausing the movie. “Don’t move,” he ordered. “I’ll grab our dinners and we can eat in here.”

“That sounds like heaven. I don’t know that I’d be able to move from this spot, even for food. I’m exhausted,” she admitted.

Luke grabbed his wallet and opened the front door to find two men standing on his porch, holding the bag of food that he had ordered, and alarms started sounding in his head like crazy.

“Give me just one minute,” he said to them. He casually pulled his cell phone out and sent off an SOS text to Ranger. His friend would know exactly what to do once he read it.

“Sorry, guys,” he said, “had a work thing. How much do I owe you for the takeout?”

The taller of the two guys shoved the bag at him, revealing that he was holding a gun behind it, pointing right at Luke’s chest. Fuck—they had found him. They had slipped right past his security and gotten to him and Ruby.

“I take it that you’re not looking for a tip, then?” he asked.

“Is something wrong?” Ruby called from the living room.

“Not at all, honey,” he said. Luke leaned into whisper to the two guys. “You don’t need to involve her in this. Take me—I won’t put up a fight.”

“I think that it might be a lot easier to get you to talk if we keep her with us,” the shorter guy said. He wasn’t wrong, but he couldn’t let them lay one finger on Ruby. Luke would end up getting them both killed if they did.

“Back up, big shot,” the tall guy ordered, pushing his gun into Luke’s chest. He had no choice but to comply.

“Please leave her out of this,” Luke begged as Ruby stood from the sofa to investigate what was going on.

“That’s not going to happen,” the tall guy said.

“What’s going on here?” Ruby asked. “Oh, God,” she breathed when she saw the guns pointed at her and Luke.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” he breathed.

“It’s going to be okay,” Ruby insisted.

The tall guy laughed, “Into the kitchen,” he ordered. They walked back into the kitchen, and he barked out an order for

them both to sit, which they obeyed. Luke wasn't about to do anything that might jeopardize Ruby.

He watched the two men pacing in front of them and Luke worried that they were not going to just let them go. He didn't care about himself, really, but he worried that they'd hurt Ruby, or worse. Luke couldn't let that happen. He promised to keep her safe and now, he had their baby to worry about too. He couldn't let anything happen to either of them.

"Let her go," Luke begged again.

The tall guy standing in the corner laughed and pointed his gun into Ruby's side, causing her to sob. "You're not the one calling the shots here, tough guy."

"Understood," Luke said, "please, just don't hurt her." His panic was tangible, and he worried that Ranger getting his cryptic text and showing up was his only hope of both of them surviving. It was a long shot and one that he wasn't willing to sit around and wait to happen.

"Well, that will be up to you," the other guy said. "You have some information that we need."

"I don't know what information that you think that I have, but I'll tell you anything you want to know, as long as you don't hurt her," he said, nodding to Ruby. The fear in her eyes was almost too much for him to bear. Luke would do best not to look at her if he planned on keeping his cool in all of this.

"Where are Joo Won's wife and two sons?" the tall guy asked. He kept his son trained in Ruby's side as if Luke's answer would determine his next move.

"Joo Won," Luke breathed. That wasn't a name that he had heard for over five years now. Won was one of the names on their watch list while he was stationed in South Korea. At one point, Won had been a contractor who worked with the American government, but then, he went rogue. He was suspected of espionage against his own country and had ties to the North Korean government. The last thing Luke had heard was that the North Korean government had Won's family. They were holding them until he agreed to give them the

information that they wanted. Won had gone underground just before Luke was shipped back home.

“Was Won the reason why I was sent back stateside?” Luke asked. “Was he the one following me back in South Korea?”

“Now you’re catching on,” the tall guy said. “We almost had you, but then, your government sent you home and for years, you were out of reach. But Won never stopped looking for his family and he’s under the impression that you know where they are.”

“I think Won might believe that my clearance was higher than it actually was. I have no idea where his family is. Even if I did know where they were being held back then, who’s to say that they’re still in that same place and haven’t been moved?” He left out the part about them possibly being killed after so much time because he was sure that would only piss off the two men with guns. That was the last thing that they needed.

“I think our boss is onto something,” the other guy said. “He told us that you knew where to find his family, and I think that still holds true.” He had no clue where Won’s family was. Hell, he’d only heard rumors that they were being held in North Korea back when he was in the military, but he didn’t even know that for certain. If he couldn’t give them a believable answer, he’d end up getting them both killed.

“Fine,” he spat. “I have information, but I won’t hand it over until she’s safe. You want me to tell you where Won’s family is being held, you let her go,” Luke insisted. “It’s the only way that I’ll talk.” He worried that he was pushing them and that they’d hurt Ruby in retaliation. He felt as though he was holding his breath waiting for what their next move would be.

“We let her go and you’ll give us the information that you have about Won’s family?” the tall guy asked.

“Yes,” he breathed. “You have my word.”

“We have more than your word,” the other guy said. “We’ll kill you and then find and kill her if you’re lying to us.”

Luke was sure that they were telling him the truth. They would kill them both if he fucked this up, but this way, Ruby and their unborn child would have a fighting chance. “Understood,” Luke said. “Do we have a deal?”

The second guy shrugged, “Sure,” he agreed. “Let her go.” The tall guy looked at him as if he’d lost his mind, but he followed orders and let Ruby up from the kitchen chair.

“Luke,” she sobbed. The tall guy pushed her past where Luke sat across the room, and he shook his head at her.

“Just go, Ruby,” he insisted. “Please,” he begged. She wiped the tears that were now spilling down her face and nodded.

“I love you,” she whispered as the tall guy practically pushed her out the back kitchen door. He didn’t say it back, he couldn’t speak past the lump that had formed in his throat. If he had, he’d beg her not to go, beg them to let both of them go so that their baby would have two parents, but that would be a mistake. This way, Ruby and his baby would have a fighting chance—even if it would be without him.

RUBY

Ruby grabbed her purse and keys from the ground where the guy had thrown them. He told her to get lost and not to even think about going for help or coming back to rescue Luke. She nodded and promised that she wouldn't. The tall guy promised to find and kill her and Luke if she did anything so foolish, and all she could seem to do was agree with him. But that was total bullshit because the very first thing she planned on doing was finding Ranger and begging him to help Luke. She couldn't lose him—she'd only just found him. They were going to be parents and she was sure that she couldn't go through that alone. Her baby deserved to have both parents to grow up with, and she had to make that happen no matter what the consequences.

She backed out of the driveway as the guy stood on the porch and watched her. She didn't bother to look back in the rearview mirror, knowing that watching him walk back into that house to confront the man that she loved, was something she might not be able to do. Ruby couldn't help Luke if she didn't find Ranger first. She needed his help and going back to the house without him would only end up getting both her and Luke killed.

Ruby pulled her cell phone from her purse and dialed Ranger's number that Luke had programmed into her phone in case of emergency. Ever since finding out that she was pregnant, he started doing things like that, just in case. Ranger answered the call after the first ring.

“Ruby,” he growled into the phone. “Tell me that you both are safe.”

“I am, but they have Luke,” she said. “Please, Ranger, you have to help him.”

“I’m on my way,” Ranger assured. “I got a cryptic text from Luke and knew that something was up. Where are you now?”

“I just left Luke’s house. He bargained with them to release me for the information that they want,” she sobbed.

“Okay, listen to me,” Ranger ordered. “I need for you to go back to your old apartment. Can you do that for me? Go to Millie’s place. She’ll know what to do. I’ve gone over this with her a million times.”

“I can do that,” Ruby promised. “Just get to Luke and keep him safe. I can’t lose him. I’m pregnant.”

“Oh,” Ranger breathed. “I’ll do my best, Ruby. I love Luke like he’s a brother. I need for you to tell me who the men were and what they wanted.”

“They seemed to know someone from Luke’s past—when he was stationed in South Korea. They sounded as though they were speaking Korean, but I can’t be sure—that’s just an assumption. They were talking about some guy named Joo Won and they asked Luke where his family was. He agreed to tell them only if they let me go.”

“Shit,” Ranger grumbled. “He doesn’t know anything about Won. He didn’t have clearance to know that kind of stuff, but I did. All this fucking time, they were coming for Luke, and they should have been coming for me. I was the one that had the information that they wanted—I still do.”

“You know where Won’s family is being held?” she asked.

“I still have buddies in the Navy and yeah, I know where they are. Unfortunately, the guys holding Luke aren’t going to like the answer. They are being held in North Korea. They have been there for years if they’re even still alive.”

“They might be dead?” she whispered.

“It’s been over five years, so yeah, they might be. North Korea doesn’t share much about what they are doing. I do know that as of two years ago, they were all still alive, but that’s all the intel I have.”

“What will you do now?” she asked.

“I’m going to Luke’s house and trading myself for him. I’m the one that they want and can probably help them. I’ll make them the same kind of deal that Luke just did—his freedom for answers. I’m betting that my contacts in the Navy can get them the answers that they’re looking for.”

“What can I do?” she asked. “I want to help, Ranger.”

“You can go meet up with Millie at her place and do what she tells you to do, got it?” he asked. She wanted to protest; to tell him that she was going to turn the car around and go back to Luke’s place. Ruby was sure that she could be of more help than going to sit at Millie’s and wait for her life to be decided for her.

“Don’t put your baby at risk, Ruby,” Ranger said.

“Playing the baby card is low, Ranger,” she whispered. He was right and she hated that. She wanted to be stronger for Luke. She wanted to walk back into his house and tell those assholes holding him that they had the wrong man, but Ranger was right, she’d be putting her baby in harm’s way, and she couldn’t do that.

“Fine,” she mumbled. “I’ll go to Millie’s. Just bring Luke back to me,” she said. “I can’t lose him.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to make that happen,” Ranger promised.

“I’m going to hold you to that, Ranger,” she breathed, ending the call. She took the exit to her place and swiped the hot tears that rolled down her cheeks. This was the first time that she had been without Luke in over four months and Ruby felt like a piece of her heart was missing. She just hoped that Ranger could keep his promise to her and bring that missing piece back because, without Luke, she wouldn’t ever be the same.

Millie pulled her apartment door open as if she was expecting Ruby. “Ranger called you, didn’t he?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Millie said. “Come in,” she insisted, pulling her into her apartment. “We have to talk.”

“Talk?” Ruby had only spoken to Millie a handful of times since taking off with Luke. “I know that we haven’t seen each other in months, but can we catch up some other time?”

“No,” Millie said. “I need to tell you something before Ranger tells Luke and you find out that way. It’s important,” Millie insisted.

“Can it wait? I’m a bit worried about the father of my unborn child,” she said, cupping her nonexistent belly.

“You’re pregnant?” Millie asked. Ruby sunk into the couch and nodded. “Wow, Ruby, that’s fantastic. Are you happy?”

“No, I’m not happy. Luke’s being held at gunpoint by two crazy South Koreans while I’m sitting here catching up with you. I’m not happy at all. I should have never left him.”

“Yes, you should have,” Millie insisted. “They would have killed you if Luke hadn’t negotiated your release.”

“I see that Ranger also filled you in on—well, everything,” Ruby grumbled.

“He did because I’m helping him with all of this. I’ve been hired by McTavish Industries, Ruby.”

“Doing what exactly?” Ruby asked.

“I’m a computer hacker by trade,” Millie said. “I’m ex-military and I was trained to hack into enemy computers and stop them from hacking our systems.”

“How did I not know any of this about you?” Ruby asked. She thought that Millie was a run-of-the-mill nerd, just like her, but she was so wrong. “You were in the military?”

“Army,” Millie said. “When Ranger found out what I can do, he talked to your boss, Alex, and got him to make me an offer that he knew I couldn’t pass up. I don’t regret telling him about my past, but I’m not sure that Ranger and me working together is such a good idea.”

“Why shouldn’t the two of you work together?” Ruby asked. She sat back and closed her eyes. “You like him, don’t you?” she asked.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Millie said.

“More complicated how?” Ruby asked.

“We slept together and now; he’s giving me the cold shoulder. I’m not sure what I did wrong, but he won’t talk to me about anything but work and this thing with Luke,” Millie admitted.

“That sucks, Millie,” Ruby said. “Was it just one night?”

“Yeah—one wonderful night,” Millie gushed. “And then, he left out of here so fast the next morning, it was as if his ass was on fire. I had already agreed to work at McTavish at that point. I would have never taken the job had I known that he was going to treat me this way. I don’t know that I can keep the job because seeing him every day, and having him ignore me, is painful, you know?”

“I don’t,” Ruby said. “I’ve never had something like that happen. Honestly, I have very little experience with men. Luke was my first,” she said, letting a small sob escape at the thought of wanting him to be her last too. “God, if something happens to him, I’ll die.” Millie sat down next to her on the sofa and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“He’s going to be all right,” Millie assured.

“How do you know that?” Ruby asked.

“Because Ranger is good at what he does. Hell, he’s a trained killer and probably overqualified to handle what’s going on with Luke. He’ll bring your guy home and then, you can help me find a new job.”

“Or I can help you figure out how to get Ranger to talk to you again. There has to be a reason why he’s giving you the cold shoulder. Maybe he’s worried about getting you tied up in all of this. Maybe it’s his way to keep you safe, Millie,” Ruby offered. It was a long shot. Ranger was most likely being an asshole, but she liked the idea of having Millie hanging out around McTavish Industries. The thought of having a friend around the office was a nice one, and she wasn’t ready to give that up just yet.

“It’s a nice thought,” Millie said. “But I’m not convinced that’s what is going on. You don’t have to sugarcoat things for me, Ruby. I’m a big girl and can handle being disappointed.” Ruby smiled and nodded.

“How long do you think it will take before we hear from them?” Ruby asked.

“Soon,” Millie assured. “I’m sure that we’ll hear from them soon.” Ruby wanted to call her out for sugar-coating things for her now, but she was too tired to argue. If Millie said that the guys would be in touch soon, then that was what she’d believe because thinking otherwise was just too painful for her.

LUKE

Luke sat in the hard kitchen chair and stared down the tall guy in front of him. They had taken turns punching him in the face and he was pretty sure that not only was his nose broken, but his jaw was dislocated. The only thought that kept him going was the fact that Ruby had probably made it to Ranger and Luke knew that his friend would keep her safe.

“This can all be over if you just tell us where Won’s family is,” the tall guy promised. Luke was sure that it would all be over for him if he actually knew where the guy’s family was. They’d have no problem killing him once they got the information they were after.

“I’ve told you; I don’t know where they are now,” Luke said. “I heard a rumor that they were being held in North Korea when I was stationed over there, but that was five years ago. I have no clue where they are now. You’re wasting your time.”

“We don’t believe that you don’t still have connections,” the other guy said. “You could find them if you really wanted to. Maybe we should get your little girlfriend back and then, you’ll cooperate.”

“No,” Luke shouted. “We made a deal.”

“Which you aren’t upholding. Did you really think we’d just let her go? We put one of our guys on her. He followed her back to an apartment complex nearby. One phone call and we can have her back here to help encourage you to give us the information that we’re looking for.”

Shit—Luke was worried about something like this happening. Why did he believe that they would just let Ruby go? He knew better but he was blinded by hope that the woman he loved, and his unborn child might make it out of this mess—the mess that he created by dragging Ruby into his life.

“Make the call,” the tall guy insisted.

“No,” Luke said. “I’ll find them for you. Just give me some time to make a few calls.” He wasn’t sure who he could call, but stalling was his only option. One thing was clear, they weren’t going to leave him or Ruby alone until he found the answers that they were looking for.

Luke watched the two idiots holding him at gunpoint, hoping that they’d believe his lies when the kitchen door opened. He looked back to find Ranger standing in the doorway, wearing his easy smile. What the fuck was he doing? He just walked into the house and was basically handing himself over to the bad guys.

“It’s about fucking time,” Luke grumbled. “Although handing yourself over to them isn’t a plan that I would have gone with.”

“I’m doing what I need to do to save your fucking life, Luke,” Ranger growled. “I know where Won’s family is. I’m the one you two idiots should have been tailing all these years, not Luke. I’ll tell you what you want to know once you let my friend go.”

The tall guy chuckled, “We’ve already made a deal with this one,” he said, nodding to Luke. “Now, you want for us to let him go so that you can sit in his place and tell us the same lies?”

“It’s not a lie,” Ranger said. “I have the clearance necessary to know where Won’s family is. Luke doesn’t. You want your answers, you let him go. I’ll tell you where to find his family—today, right now. Luke might be able to give you information from five years ago, but we all know that won’t help you today.” The two guys looked at each other as if trying to silently decide what to do, and Ranger rolled his eyes. “The

offer expires in sixty-seconds. How about you two come up with a plan—and fast?” Ranger asked. If Luke’s fucking jaw didn’t hurt as much as it did, he’d bust out laughing at his friend. Ranger was an asshole to the two guys holding guns at him, and wasn’t that just his way? He didn’t give a shit about the way things should be—Ranger made and lived by his own rules.

“We have a counteroffer for you,” the tall guy said to Ranger. “We won’t kill him just yet, and you give us the information that we’re after.”

“How is that a counteroffer?” Ranger asked. “I mean, usually you give something and get something back in return. But you two seem to only want to take from this situation. I don’t find that to be very fair.”

“We’re also the one holding these,” the tall guy said, waving his gun around as if proving his point.

“Well, I’ve got one of those too,” Ranger admitted, patting his shoulder holster.

Luke groaned, “Jesus, man,” he said. “You had to go and tell them that? You don’t want to get out of this alive, do you?” he asked. The other guy walked over to Ranger and held out his hand, silently ordering him to hand over his weapon.

“I’m just trying to help them out. I mean, they can kill both of us and go back to their boss empty-handed, or they can take me up on my offer, let you go, and I’ll give them the information that they need.” Ranger stared down both of the guys still pointing guns at them.

“You’re insane,” Luke breathed. “I think you might just be the craziest fucker on the planet.” Ranger laughed, actually laughed, and Luke shook his head at him. It was almost as if Ranger was enjoying the whole crazy scene.

“Listen,” Ranger said. “All I have to do is make one phone call and you’ll have the answer that you want. I just need some reassurances that you’ll let my friend go once I get you your answer.”

“Make the call,” the tall guy said. “We’ll let your friend go once we have our information.” Luke could tell that Ranger didn’t believe him any more than Luke did, but there was no other way around the fact that no matter how they handled this, they would probably end up dead.

Ranger reached into his pocket and both guys shouted at him to stop. He smiled and slowly pulled out his cell phone. “I’ve already given up my gun,” Ranger assured. “I’m just making that call like you wanted.” The two guys stood by Ranger, taking their attention off of Luke. He wasn’t bound to the chair, and he decided that this might be his only chance to grab the gun that they had laid on the kitchen table earlier. He gently slid it under his thigh and sat back in the chair before either guy noticed that he had moved.

Ranger took his time looking through his contacts to find the number he was looking for. By the time he had the phone up to his ear, Luke was sitting back in his chair as if he hadn’t just swiped the gun from the table.

“Hey,” Ranger said. “I need you to put those hacker skills to good use for me,” he said. “Can you do that?” Luke wondered who he was calling. He tried to think over Ranger’s contacts and who might be the hacker that he was referring to.

“I need to find out who had Joo Won’s family right now,” Ranger said. “I’m looking for his wife and two sons. Okay, thank you,” he said and ended the call. “Now, we wait.”

“Wait,” the tall guy repeated. The tall guy took Ranger’s phone from him and stuck it into his jacket pocket.

“Yes,” Ranger said, “we wait for my contact to get back to me. I’m assuming that you’ll be the one to take the call then.”

“Have a seat,” the other guy said. He shoved Ranger into the chair closest to Luke and the two guys started speaking in Korean again. Luke knew that Ranger was fluent in Korean. He seemed to pick up the language no matter where they were stationed.

They seemed to finish up their conversation and looked back at Luke and Ranger before leaving the room. “What the

hell, man?" Luke asked.

"Don't worry, man," Ranger said. "It's all part of the plan. You just need to trust me; can you do that?"

"You know that I trust you, Ranger," Luke said. "Tell me that you know where Ruby is and that she's safe."

"I do," Ranger agreed. "Your girl called me as soon as she got out of here. Congratulations, by the way. She told me about the baby."

"Thanks," Luke said. "But I can't think about any of that right now. Is she safe?"

"Yeah," Ranger said. "I sent her to be with Millie."

"Why Millie?" Luke asked. "I hardly think she's qualified to keep Ruby safe."

"Oh, she's qualified, all right," Ranger said. "Millie was keeping a little secret from your girl. She's ex-military and probably the best hacker that I've ever met. It's why I hired her to work at McTavish for us."

"You hired Millie without even asking me?" Luke asked.

"Yep," Ranger said. "Like I just said, she's a damn good hacker and well, she'd just as good making sure that hackers don't attack our systems at McTavish. Plus, you were a little bit busy running from the bad guys and knocking up Ruby. I didn't want to bother you with work things," Ranger said.

"Well, bother me now," Luke said. "So, Millie is like a super computer spy? Is she the one you called just now?"

"Yes," he said. "If anyone can find Won, Millie can."

"But she doesn't have clearance," Luke said.

Ranger chuckled, "That woman doesn't need clearance to find them. She's like a super ninja with a computer. She'll get the information that we need and be out of the North Korean's system before they even know what hit them."

"So, you think that the North Koreans still have them?" Luke asked.

“Well, they were the ones holding them, to begin with. I’m guessing that they either still have them, or that they’re dead,” Ranger said.

“Which means that we’re as good as dead too,” Luke mumbled.

“Naw,” Ranger said. “You don’t think I walked in here and actually told them about the only weapon that I was carrying, do you?” Luke did, actually, but he wasn’t about to tell his friend that. “Plus, I saw you swipe the gun on the table when I was calling Millie. I think we have a fighting chance here.”

“What did they say before they left the room?” Luke asked.

“Oh—that they were going to give us ten minutes and then kill both of us. They also said something about finding the woman that they let leave earlier—I’m assuming that was Ruby.”

“Shit,” Luke growled. “How are you so calm about all of this?”

“Because they took my phone,” he said.

“I’m not following,” Luke said. “You’re happy that they took your cell phone?”

“I am,” he said. “Especially since I’ve rigged it to explode when it rings. Well, it will be less of a ring and more of a vibration and then—bang.”

“Your phone is going to explode in that guy’s pocket?” Luke asked.

“Yep,” Ranger said. “I’m betting that it will take out both guys since they seem to be joined at the hip.”

“And what happens if they’re in here when it detonates?” Luke questioned.

“I’m betting that won’t happen,” Ranger said. “They went out to smoke and said they’d be coming back in ten minutes.”

“So, we have about eight minutes left until we blow up with the Korean guys. Do I have that right?” Luke asked.

“Kind of,” Ranger said. “Except I forgot to tell you the part about Millie saying that she’d call me back in five. So, actually, we have about three minutes until they blow up out in the driveway. At least, that’s where I’m assuming where they’re having a smoke.”

“Jesus, man,” Luke grumbled. “You’re a bit more ruthless than I remember. Still, it’s cutting things close, isn’t it?”

“Nope,” Ranger said. “You see, Millie is an overachiever and she’ll actually call back in three minutes, not five. That means that my phone should go off any second now.”

Luke felt as though he was holding his breath, waiting for the sound of an explosion when he realized that Ranger knew a bit too much about Millie. “You slept with her, didn’t you?” Luke accused.

“What?” Ranger asked.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Luke said. “You slept with Millie, didn’t you? Shit—working together is going to fucking suck.”

“Fine,” Ranger said. “I slept with her, and yeah, working with her now isn’t a picnic, but we’ll find a way to make it work.”

“You’re an idiot,” Luke insisted. The front door opened and before he knew it, Ranger was flying across the kitchen at him, knocking him off his chair and onto the floor under the kitchen table. Their world seemed to explode around them and when he looked out from under the table, at the dust and debris that were still flying around the kitchen, he realized that he couldn’t hear. Ranger looked like he was shouting at him, but he couldn’t hear anything but his muffled voice. Luke pointed at his ears as if signaling that he couldn’t hear him, and Ranger pointed to the back door. He practically pulled Luke from under the table and out to the backyard. Ranger gave him the thumbs-up sign and Luke nodded, even though he felt anything but okay about what had happened to him today.

“Did it get both of them?” Luke asked. He was sure that he was shouting, but he couldn’t help it. Ranger gave him the

“stay here” signal and he nodded as he watched his friend take off around the corner of the house. Luke collapsed onto the grass, suddenly feeling very tired, and moaned. He closed his eyes and knew that he was damn lucky to be alive, given the way everything seemed to hurt. When he opened his eyes, he saw one of the Korean guys stumbling into the backyard. He was still holding his gun in his right hand, but his left arm was gone. It must have been blown off in the explosion. He was shouting at Luke and when he pointed his gun at him, he knew that nothing was stopping the guy. This was it—his final seconds, and all he could do was close his eyes and pray that it would be quick. Ruby’s face flashed through his head, and he smiled, knowing that she got out—she and his baby would be safe and that was enough for him now. He could die knowing that they were safe.

A shot rang out and for just a second, he thought that he could feel the pain of the bullet searing his skin. Luke opened his eyes and looked up to find Ranger standing over him, the Korean guy lying face down next to him on the ground, a pool of blood around his chest.

“You okay?” Ranger shouted into his ear.

“No,” Luke breathed. “I’m not.” He knew that he was going to pass out, but that was fine with him. Luke welcomed the darkness. He’d love to feel numb, if only for a few minutes. He closed his eyes again and this time, he allowed the darkness to consume him as Ruby’s beautiful face played through his mind again.

RUBY

Ruby rushed into the hospital and shouted Luke's name as though he'd call back to her. Instead, she found a very worried-looking Ranger standing in the hallway, pacing in front of one of the ER rooms. "Is he in there?" she asked.

Millie rushed in behind her and nodded to Ranger. "How is he?" she asked.

"He's in there and I'm not sure how he's doing. They won't give me any answers."

"Are you all right?" Millie asked Ranger.

"I'll live," he looked down at himself and grimaced. Ranger looked like hell, and she knew that if Luke was in the ER, he had to look worse than his friend.

"What happened after I left?" Ruby asked.

"They roughed him up a bit if you want me to be honest," Ranger said.

"I'd appreciate that," Ruby said. She needed to know the truth about what Luke had been through. She needed to know what she was going to be up against if he came out of this.

"He was pretty banged up when I got there. I'm pretty sure that his nose and jaw were both broken, but he was conscious and talking. In fact, when I told him about my phone bomb, he was pretty pissed off that I was acting so casual about a bomb."

"Gee, you think?" Millie asked.

“Hey, it was a good plan,” Ranger insisted. “I knew that you would call me back with information in about five minutes and I also knew that one of those assholes would take my phone with them, so I wouldn’t be able to call for help. There was no way that they’d let me hold onto it. The risk was minimal.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t account for them walking back in the house, did you?” Millie asked.

“How did you know that?” he questioned.

“I have sources too, Ranger. I called a friend on the force, and he gave me a quick rundown while we were driving over here.” Ruby wasn’t sure if Ranger looked pissed off that Millie had checked up on him, or if he looked proud that she had connections. Either way, he looked Millie over like he wanted her. She knew that look because it was the same one that Luke had given her so many times over the past four months.

A nurse pushed her way out of Luke’s room and Ranger grabbed her arm. “How is he?” Ranger asked.

“I really can’t answer that. Do you by chance have numbers so that we can reach his family?” the nurse asked.

Ranger practically shoved Ruby in the nurse’s face. “This is Luke’s fiancée,” he lied. “She’s pregnant with their baby. You can talk to her, right?”

“Fiancée?” the nurse asked, looking Ruby over as if sizing her up. “And you’re pregnant?”

“Yes,” Ruby lied. Well, partially lied. She was pregnant with Luke’s baby, at least. “How is he?”

“He’s pretty banged up. I’ve called for the plastic surgeon to come take a look at his nose and his jaw since they both look to be broken. He’s also in shock,” she said.

“Has he woken up yet?” Ranger asked. The nurse looked him over and pressed her lips together.

“Has he woken up yet?” Ruby repeated.

“No,” the nurse admitted. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to find out what’s holding up the doctor.” She

disappeared down the hallway and all Ruby seemed capable of doing was watching her walk away.

“Now what?” she asked. Ranger looked about as unsure as she felt. There was no way that she was going to leave Luke laying in the ER room by himself. She pulled the door open and slipped into the room, glad that the nurse had been the only person in there with him.

“Luke,” she whispered, rushing to his bedside. “Can you hear me?” she asked. He moaned and stirred, and she looked him over, wincing when she noticed the bruises and blood on his face. The nurse was right—his nose and jaw looked broken. She just hoped that he wasn’t in too much pain.

“Hurts,” he breathed.

“I know,” she said. “You’re in the hospital and they’re finding a doctor who can help you.” He nodded and moaned, and she ducked her head out of the room. “He’s awake,” she said to Ranger. “Get him some help—he’s in pain.”

“On it,” Ranger promised. He was about to turn to walk back to the nurse’s station and walked right into the same nurse from moments earlier. “He’s awake,” Ranger said.

“Tell me that you weren’t in there,” she grumbled.

“I wasn’t,” he assured. “But his fiancée here was, and she said that he’s waking up and is in pain.”

“Which room is he in?” a man asked from behind Nurse Ratchet.

“This one,” she said, pointing to Luke’s room. “Possible broken nose and jaw. He’s waking up now.” The doctor nodded and walked past the nurse, Ranger, and Millie to go into Luke’s room. Ruby didn’t wait to be invited back in—simply following behind the doctor. If he was there to give Luke answers, she wanted to be in on that conversation.

She looked Luke over and noted that he had fallen back to sleep again since she had stepped out of the room. “Jesus,” the doctor said. “What in the hell happened to him?”

Ranger stood in the doorway to the room. “It’s classified,” he lied. “We are both ex-military and I can’t share what happened until it’s cleared.”

“Give me the gist,” the doctor ordered.

“Two guys beat him up,” Ranger offered. “That about sums it up.” Luke was in and out of consciousness which wasn’t that bad given that he was in so much pain. Every time the doctor touched his nose, he shouted in anguish and Ruby hated that he had to go through all of that. If she had stayed, would things have been different? She felt incredibly guilty that she left him so easily, and now, all she seemed capable of was standing in the corner, sobbing uselessly to herself.

“His nose is broken. I’m thinking that his jaw is just dislocated, but I’ll need to order some x-rays to be sure. We’ll have to set his jaw and nose, but I don’t think he’ll need any surgeries right now. Let’s get the x-rays back first so that I know exactly what I’m working with and then, we can come up with a game plan.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Ranger said.

“We’ll have him back from x-ray in no time,” the nurse assured. She put the rails up on Luke’s hospital bed and started wheeling him to the door. Ranger held it open for her and she gave him a look that made Ruby almost want to giggle. Ranger seemed to really rub the woman the wrong way—just like he had Millie. Poor guy wasn’t having any luck with women and Ruby was sure that he only had himself to blame.

“Thank you,” Ruby said from the corner of the room.

“Ruby,” Millie said, crossing the room to put an arm around her shoulder. “You should sit down and relax some. All of this crying and stress can’t be good for the baby. You’ve been through a lot today.”

“Millie’s right,” Ranger said. “You should get checked out too. You need to make sure that you and the baby are all right after what happened.”

“What happened?” the doctor said. He had been typing something on his computer and Ruby wasn’t sure if he was

listening or not. Apparently, the doctor didn't miss very much, even if he didn't look like he was paying attention.

"The same men that beat up my friend held Ruby against her will," Ranger said.

"Yeah, but they didn't hurt me," Ruby assured.

"Well, if that's the case, you and your baby should both be checked out. Your friend is right. How far along are you?" the doctor asked.

"Um, I just started my second trimester," she admitted. She looked between Ranger and Millie and smiled. "I got pregnant right away," she admitted, "but, I didn't know that I could even get pregnant. I didn't plan it at all."

"Well, how about we get you admitted, and I'll send you up to the maternity ward to get checked up?" the doctor asked.

"Please, Ruby," Millie said. "Just do as the doctor says and get checked out."

Ruby rolled her eyes and nodded. "Fine," she agreed. "I'll get checked up, but only because I want to make sure that the baby is all right. Plus, it will give me something to do besides worry about Luke."

"Leave worrying about Luke to me," Ranger said. "Millie, would you mind sticking by Ruby's side while she gets checked out?"

"Not at all," Millie agreed. "Is that okay with you, Ruby?" she asked.

"I'd like that," Ruby agreed. "Thank you—both of you," she said, squeezing Millie's hand into her own.

"Great," the doctor said. "Come with me." She followed him into the hallway and down to the nurse's station, Millie by her side the whole time. The doctor pulled a wheelchair out and pointed to it. "Have a seat," he ordered.

"Is that really necessary?" she asked.

"Yep," the doctor said. "Sit," he repeated.

"Fine," Ruby grumbled, sitting in the wheelchair.

“Will you take Ms.—um, I didn’t get your name,” the doctor said.

“It’s Ruby Grace,” she said.

He nodded, “Take Ms. Grace up to maternity to have her and her baby checked out, please.” A perky little blond nurse appeared from behind the desk and smiled up at the doctor, causing Ruby to giggle.

“Thanks, Doctor,” Ruby said. “Will someone come to find me to fill me in when you have news about Luke?”

“Absolutely,” the doctor assured. “Just try to relax and I’ll see you back here in no time.” She nodded as the super eager to please nurse rolled her into the elevator, and Millie followed behind them.

“He’s awful cute,” Millie whispered to the nurse as if she hadn’t noticed.

“Yeah,” the nurse gushed, “he’s the hospital’s most eligible bachelor, but he doesn’t pay attention to any of us.”

“Maybe he has a girlfriend already,” Ruby offered.

“No,” the nurse said. “He just claims that he won’t date anyone who he has to work with.”

“Well, that’s no fun at all,” Millie said.

“Yeah?” Ruby asked. “So, working with Ranger is going to be a picnic for you now?” she asked her friend. Sure, she wasn’t playing fairly, but she didn’t care. It was going to be fun watching both Millie and Ranger dance around each other for the next little bit.

“Not cool, Ruby,” Millie grumbled. “But it will be fine—as long as Ranger either continues to ignore me or comes around and realizes that I’m not the devil for luring him into my bed.”

“Wait—you were the one who lured him into bed?” Ruby asked.

“Yeah,” Millie said. “Listen, I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

“Well, we can talk about it later, then,” Ruby assured. “But ignoring Ranger or the fact that you two slept together and now work in the same office, won’t be easy to do.”

“I know,” Millie agreed. “But ignoring it has worked for me so far. I think that might be the right game plan to get through all of this, even if you think I should push the envelope and force Ranger to talk about my feelings. I think I know what’s best for me—avoidance and pretending that it never happened is the way to go.”

“Whatever you say, Millie,” Ruby agreed. Yeah—it was going to be a whole lot of fun watching Millie and Ranger figure this all out together.

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LUKE

Luke woke up in horrible pain as he tried to sit up. “I wouldn’t do that if I was you,” Ranger said. “Just lay back and take it easy.”

“Where am I?” he mumbled. His jaw was wrapped in some sort of gauze and what felt like an ace bandage as he ran his fingers over it.

“You’re in the hospital and you have a dislocated jaw—but they popped that back into place and the face sling is a nice touch that the doc gave you to keep your jaw immobile. He said not to talk much.” That wasn’t going to be a problem for Luke because every time he tried to open his mouth, his entire face hurt like a son of a bitch. He had no problem keeping his mouth shut if it meant not causing himself any extra pain.

“You also had a broken nose, but the doc fixed that while you were passed out from the pain of him resetting your jaw. He said that it will take you a few weeks of downtime, but you’ll live. How’s the hearing?” Ranger asked.

“Better,” Luke mumbled.

“Yeah, mine is coming back too, so I figured yours would be about the same,” Ranger said. “Sorry about almost getting you blown up.”

“Ruby,” he grumbled. Luke was sure that he had seen her standing over her bedside earlier before they took him up to get x-rays done.

“She’s upstairs, getting checked out,” Ranger said.

“Upstairs,” Luke slurred. He had so many questions that he wanted to ask—why his girl needed to be checked out was first and foremost in his mind. Luke tried to sit up and Ranger practically pushed him back down.

“She’s good,” Ranger said. “When the doctor found out that she was pregnant and held against her will today, he told her that it would be a good idea to get checked out. She and the baby are both doing well,” Ranger said. “They’re just taking precautions and are doing a sonogram while they have her, but she should be released about the same time as you will be, and I’ll make sure that you both get home. Well, I’ll get you back to Ruby’s place. Yours is off-limits until the police clear it and then, I’m assuming you’ll want to add a few walls and all that.”

Luke closed his eyes and groaned at the thought of his house being blown to bits. “Again, sorry about all of that, but it could have been worse. If Millie had been a few minutes later, we would have been blown to bits, not just your house.”

“Hey,” Millie said, rolling Ruby into the small ER room. Luke tried to sit up and Ruby shook her head at him.

“No,” she insisted, “don’t do that, Luke. You need to lay back and relax.”

“The baby?” he mumbled.

“Is fine,” she said. “He’s a trooper, just like his daddy.”

“It’s a boy?” Ranger asked.

She smiled up at Luke and nodded, tears spilling down her beautiful face. “It’s a boy,” she said.

“I’m betting he’ll have a lot more to say when his jaw heals and the pain meds aren’t making him drool,” Ranger assured. His friend was right—he’d have a whole lot more to say when he was feeling better. For now, he’d be happily content with knowing that his woman and his baby were both going to be all right and most importantly, were safe.

The nurse from earlier walked into his room and mean mugged everyone standing around his bed. “I thought that we

discussed you getting some rest. Are you sure that you don't want to stay the night so that can happen?" she asked Luke.

He shook his head, and the nurse rolled her eyes at him. "I promise to let him rest," Ruby said. "I've been ordered to spend the next three days on bed rest too, so I think I'll be able to handle that part of Luke's recovery."

"And I can check in on you guys and bring you food since you'll be right next door," Millie offered.

"I'll be by to check on you guys too," Ranger cut in.

"This is beginning to all sound very unrelaxing again," the nurse said.

"We'll take care of our friends," Ranger said. "When can they be released?"

"I have the papers for both of them now," the nurse said, waving the papers in the air. "I just need to go over a few things with you both and then, we can get you two out of here."

"That sounds like heaven," Ruby agreed. "Thank you."

Luke half-listened to the nurse's instructions, knowing that he'd be spaced out for the next few days felt like a good plan. She gave Ruby his meds, went over what he could and couldn't eat, and told her to call or bring Luke back to the ER if he had any trouble. He didn't plan on there being any trouble for either of them though because he wanted Ruby to rest too.

"Let's get you two home," Ranger said. "We'll have you both right as rain in no time." Luke almost wanted to laugh at his friend's optimism, but he was in too much pain to even crack a smile.

The next four weeks were kind of a blur for him. He'd spent most of that time sleeping and trying to get past the pain in his face. Luke had broken his nose one other time when he was

just a kid and got into a fight with Gary Jones. His mother told him to stay away from that boy, that he was bad news, but he just couldn't listen. And when he came home with a bloody, broken nose, his mother had a field day with the "I told you so's."

They had been cooped up in Ruby's little apartment, and if everything worked out tonight, that wouldn't be for too much longer. He had Ranger and Millie help him out, finding a house for him and Ruby. He wanted to bring home their baby to a home that they loved, not Ruby's little one-bedroom apartment. So, he found what he hoped would be Ruby's dream home and he was going to take her there tonight after his final doctor's appointment that would hopefully clear him for going back to work, and more importantly, going back to his life.

But there was so much more to tonight than showing her the house. If all went well, she'd love the house and also agree to be his wife. It was a big step for both of them, but he felt that they were both ready—he just hoped to hell that Ruby agreed.

"You ready for your big doctor's appointment?" Ruby asked, walking into the kitchen from the bedroom. She had worked a full day and had come home to change and was ready to take him to his appointment.

"Yes," he said. "I'm dying to get back to my life and if everything goes well this evening, I'll be cleared to do just that."

"I'm excited about that too. It means, you'll finally be taking the trash out, right?" she teased.

"Ha, ha," he drawled. "Yeah, I'll be able to take the trash out and drive again—the whole nine yards. I think it's time for me to start holding up my end of things before this little guy gets here," he said, rubbing her belly.

"Well, that sounds like heaven," she agreed, resting her hand over his.

“How about after my appointment, you let me take you for something to eat, and then, I have a little surprise for you,” he said.

“What kind of surprise?” she asked, looking him over skeptically.

“You don’t like surprises, do you?” he asked.

“No,” she said. She rubbed her hand over her belly and smiled up at him. “But some surprises are okay.”

“Yeah—he’s the best surprise ever,” Luke agreed.

“I guess I could go for dinner,” she mumbled as if it was going to be a chore. “And I’ll stick around for the surprise.”

“Good,” Luke said, giving her a quick kiss. “Let’s get this doctor appointment over then, I can’t wait to give you your surprise.”

RUBY

They had spent about an hour at the doctor's office, going over everything that Luke could and couldn't do now, and she was happy that he was officially medically cleared. That would mean that they'd be able to go to work together. She missed having him around the building, but now, he'd be able to come back.

On their way to dinner, Ranger called to tell Luke the news that Won had been given evidence that his family was killed in North Korea while being held captive there. She had a feeling that Millie had worked her magic and found the information that they were looking for. It was the only way that Won would stay off of Luke's back and stop sending guys to find him. For the first time in a long time, Luke was going to be completely free, and she was so happy to hear that. They wouldn't have to worry about anyone coming for their baby or them ever again.

They had dinner and she couldn't get over Luke seeming so nervous. She worried that he was planning something, but then again, when was he not planning something? Luke seemed to get more excited with every mile that they drove toward her surprise.

"You're really excited about this, aren't you?" she asked.

"I am," he said. "I've had a little help with this surprise," he admitted. "Ranger and Millie did the leg work while I was down and out."

“That was nice of them,” she said. “But it makes me wonder how big this surprise is if you needed both of them to help.”

“It’s a doozy,” he agreed. “I just hope it was worth all of the running around they both needed to do for me.”

“I’m sure that I’ll love whatever it is,” she assured as he pulled into a gated development. He stopped at the guard’s station and explained that they had an appointment and gave an address. They were buzzed through, and he looked over at her, giving Ruby his nervous smile.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Um, sure,” she murmured. He pulled through the open gate after it raised and turned left, going towards the back of the development. “It’s lovely back here,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorite housing developments in the area,” he said.

“Are we meeting someone back here?” she asked.

“Kind of,” he admitted, not giving away much of the details surrounding her surprise. He pulled into a driveway and nodded to the woman who was standing on the big front porch, waving to them like a loon.

“Who is she?” Ruby asked.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you,” he offered. Luke got out of the car and made his way around to her side, opening the door for her. He held out her hand and she hesitantly took it.

“Ruby, this is Stephanie, our relator. She’s going to be showing us this house,” he said.

“Showing us a house?” Ruby asked as if trying to keep up. “We’re getting a house?”

“Hopefully,” he said. “If you agree, this might be the house. I want to bring our baby to a home and not to an apartment. Besides, we don’t have the room for a baby in your one-bedroom apartment.”

Ruby looked over the massive house and back at him. “How will we be able to afford this place?” she asked.

“Well, I make good money at McTavish, plus I got the insurance money from my house being blown up. We can afford it, Ruby.”

“You can, but I don’t make very much at McTavish. I can’t afford this place,” she insisted.

“Can you give us a minute?” Luke asked Stephanie.

“Sure, I’ll be in the house. Just come on in when you’re ready,” she said.

Luke waited for the realtor to go into the house and shut the door before he pulled her into his body. “Marry me,” he whispered. Ruby must have looked at him as if he had lost his mind, judging by his chuckle.

“Marry you?” she asked.

“Yep,” Luke breathed. “I’m in love with you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to build a family with you, Ruby. This past month, I’ve had a lot of time to think about everything that’s happened since our elevator run-in where I blurted out that you are hot.”

“And I told you that I’m a total nerd,” she reminded.

“You’re the sexiest nerd that I’ve ever met,” he whispered.

She giggled, “Thank you.”

“So, how about it? Will you marry me?” he asked. Telling him yes felt right. It felt as though he was the person that she had been waiting for her whole life.

“I’ll marry you, Luke,” she said. “I love you and want to marry you too.”

“Then, I think that we need to take a look at this house,” he said. “If you hate it, please tell me. But we need to find a place soon. I want to bring this little guy to our new home.”

“Me too,” she agreed. They took a tour of the house and when they finished, she knew that Luke was right—he’d found the perfect house for their little family. “I love it,” she gushed.

“Thank fuck,” he groaned. “Because I’ve already put in an offer on it.”

“You put in an offer?” she asked.

“Well, Stephanie told Ranger that houses in this area go fast and I didn’t want to lose it. If you ended up hating it, I would have simply lost my deposit and we could have kept looking.”

“I want to be mad at you, but I can’t be,” she said. “I think that this house is the one and I’m glad that you didn’t let it slip through your fingers.”

“Our fingers,” he corrected, linking their hands together. “Our house and our future,” he whispered.

“How about I give you both a few minutes?” Stephanie asked. “Just come outside when you’re ready and I’ll lock up.”

“When will we know if we got the house?” Ruby asked.

Stephanie smiled, “Well, I heard about an hour ago that they’ll accept your offer, but I wanted to make sure that you still wanted it.”

“We want it,” Ruby said.

Luke laughed and nodded, “We’ll take it.”

“Great, I’ll let the seller’s agent know while you two finish up in here.”

They walked through the house again and Ruby couldn’t believe that it was going to be hers. Luke had made all of her dreams come true and now, he was giving her a home and a family. She didn’t know how she had gotten so lucky, but that was exactly how she felt—like the luckiest nerd on the planet, and it was all because of Luke.

The End

I hope you enjoyed Luke and Ruby’s story! Now, buckle up for a sneak peek at His Curvy Assistant (Billionaire Boys Club Book 4)—coming in September from K.L. Ramsey!

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RANGER

Ranger walked into McTavish Industries and turned the corner right into his office. It was his daily routine and this morning, he hadn't planned to deviate from it, but he had. Instead of walking into his office and booting up his computer, he ran into sexy Millie—the only person at the company who he actually tried to avoid.

“Sorry,” she breathed, placing her hands on his chest to steady herself. “I didn't know that you were here.” That was obvious since she was in his office. Millie never went into his office and that thought left him curious and a bit worried.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked.

“Um, I didn't want to bother you, so I just left you a letter,” she said. “It's over on your desk.” Millie pointed over to where she had put the envelope and he smiled down at her.

“So formal,” he said. “An envelope and everything.”

“Well, I thought that I should make my resignation look as professional as possible.”

“Resignation?” he asked. They had been working together for almost three months now and he had to admit, it seemed to be working out, even if they spent most of their time avoiding each other. He and Millie were able to work together, and she was damn good at her job. She had taken over their computer security network and she was the most talented hacker he'd ever met, and being in the military, he knew a lot of them. But now, she was thinking about leaving and it was all his damn fault. Ranger thought for sure that he'd be able to keep their

work and private lives separate, but he was so wrong. Sleeping with her felt right at the time—hell, hiring her to work at McTavish felt right, but everything had fallen apart so quickly, he wasn't sure how to fix any of it.

“You can't leave,” he insisted. She sighed and pulled her hands from his chest as if just realizing that she was touching him still. He hadn't forgotten since her every touch felt as though she had scorched his skin. He still had it bad for Millie Jenkins, not that he'd ever admit that to her.

“Listen, Ranger,” she said. “I want to say that I'm fine with the way things are between us, but I'm not.” Ranger's finger's itched to reach out and pull her curvy body against his, but he also knew that wouldn't end well for either of them.

“What's wrong with the way things are between us?” he asked.

“For one, I don't like being ignored.” After they slept together, and he went crazy and offered her a job, he just about ghosted her, and for that, he still felt like shit. Millie was right, she deserved better than the way that he was treating her, but he couldn't go back and redo the past.

“I'm sorry,” he breathed. “I should have done better, but I wasn't sure what the protocol was. I mean, we jumped into bed together, I hired you, and then, I guess I freaked out.” There, that was as honest as he'd ever been with her and from the look on her beautiful face, she wasn't buying his apology or his excuse for his bad behavior.

“Thank you for saying that,” Millie said. “But it's just too late. I don't think that we should work together, and well, I've already taken another job. In fact, I start next week, if you wouldn't mind not holding me to the two weeks that I promised. I have to move since it's out of state and well, I'd like to get settled in before starting my new position.”

“You're quitting and moving to another state?” He felt as though he had been kicked in the nuts and honestly, he didn't like any of this one bit. He wanted to protest, to tell her that he wanted a redo with her—with everything.

“I am,” Millie said. “Thank you for this opportunity, but it’s time for me to move on, Ranger.” She held out her hand to him and he looked down at it as if it offended him. He took hers into his own and shook it, trying to remain as professional as possible.

“Well, I’m going to head back down to my office. I’ll finish out this week,” she offered. Ranger couldn’t do anything but nod and smile, even if he felt like he was dying inside watching her walk out of his office.

Ranger walked into Luke’s office and slumped down into one of the corner chairs that he kept in there. “What’s up your ass?” Luke asked. “You’ve been in a funk since Millie left.”

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Ranger grumbled. He wasn’t in the mood to fight with his friend. The fact that Luke was right really rubbed him the wrong way. He’d been in a shitty mood for over a month now, ever since Millie moved two hours away to take a new job. He wasn’t sure how he’d take her leaving, but now that he knew, all he wanted to do was get into his pick-up truck and drive to her new place.

“Well, I’m just stating the facts here, man. Millie left town and you slipped into a full-blown drama queen. Why not just call her?” Luke asked.

“Because she won’t take my calls,” Ranger mumbled. He had tried to call her repeatedly after she left. The first week she was gone, he had called her cell phone every day. The second week, he backed off some and called her every other day, leaving messages every time to, “Call him back,” but she never did. Hell, maybe that was for the best since he wasn’t sure what he’d say to her anyway. Now, he was randomly calling her, practically begging her for a callback, but he knew that she wasn’t going to give him that courtesy.

“I take it you tried to call her then?” Luke asked.

“Yep, and she’s not returning any of my calls,” Ranger grumbled.

“I’m sorry,” Luke said. “What about if I get Ruby to give her a call. She can pretend to just be checking in and you’ll have peace of mind knowing that Millie’s okay.”

“That’s something, at least,” Ranger agreed. “I’ll swing by your place tonight on the way home if that works.” Ruby was almost seven months pregnant now and she had started working a three-day week.

“That should be fine,” Luke agreed. “Ruby will probably even insist that you stay for dinner. I swear, she’s decorated the house and the nursery, and every day she has off, she cleans the place and has dinner waiting for me when I get home.”

“That sounds very domesticated, man. You ever imagine that you’d be settled down with a wife and a kid on the way?” Ranger asked.

“Nope, but I wouldn’t change a thing. I like the way things turned out—all of it,” Luke admitted.

“I’m happy for you, man,” Ranger said. He was more than happy for his friend, but once in a while, he felt that little green-eyed monster show his face. A part of Ranger wondered if he’d find what Luke had with Ruby, but he wasn’t sure that he ever would. First, he’d have to figure out his obsession with Millie and then, he’d try to find a way to move on—hopefully.

MILLIE

Millie slumped into her very uncomfortable bed and rubbed her growing belly. She had gotten out of town just in time to avoid anyone else noticing that she was starting to show, but there was no avoiding it now. She was six months pregnant, and she had outgrown most of her clothing.

She hated her new apartment, but most of all, she hated being away from family and friends, but what else could she do. If she had stayed back home, she would have had to explain to everyone, including Ranger, that she was an idiot who forgot to take her birth control pills and got herself pregnant. Telling Ranger that he was going to be a father would be nearly impossible since he wasn't really even talking to her. She couldn't take the silent treatment that he was giving her anymore, and she knew that if she told him about the baby, he'd do the right thing and help her. That was the last thing that Millie wanted from Ranger. If he wanted her, he would have made a move by now. It was very clear that he only wanted her for a one-night stand and that hurt like hell.

Since their only night together, she spent so many sleepless nights trying to figure out what she had done wrong. It had to have been something that she did. Things seemed to have gone great until the next morning when he felt like he was trying to put a little distance between them. The night before, he had taken her to dinner, offered her a dream job, and then, she pushed him for more. Maybe that was her mistake—pushing Ranger to jump into bed with her. Maybe she was too pushy, and he liked his woman a bit more laid back, but that was who she was. When Millie wanted something, or in this case,

someone, she went for it. She just had no idea that it would end with Ranger not even speaking to her within the first few days of them working together.

It was so embarrassing, and she only seemed to make things worse. He had avoided her at work, and she couldn't seem to take the hint. God, she even asked him out to dinner, after her second week on the job, and he turned her down flat. That was the last time that he really talked to her besides when she handed in her resignation. Millie wasn't sure what she was hoping for when she turned in her letter of resignation to him. He acted like he didn't want her to leave—even asking her to stay, but she just couldn't do it. She had a little secret with an expiration date that she just couldn't tell Ranger about.

Millie decided to stop sulking in her bed and got up to go into her little living room. She plopped down on her sofa and grabbed the remote control, turning on the television. It was her routine—dinner, on the couch, watching television. Millie needed to get used to the fact that she was going to be trapped at home with her baby every night, soon enough. Not that she'd change that fact in any way. Being a mom was something that she'd always dreamed of for herself. She just never imagined that she'd be doing all of this alone—completely alone. She didn't even have a birthing coach to go to classes with her. And when it came time for her baby to come, she had no one to take her to the hospital or make sure she had her bags in the trunk for the big day. She had no one who'd be there with her to cheer her on or tell her that it was going to be okay. Millie would be all alone until her little one arrived and then, it would be just the two of them. She'd figure the rest out from there.

She was just getting into one of those crazy reality television shows when her phone rang in her pocket. She pulled it free and saw that Ruby was calling her again. Her friend had called her just about every day since she had moved, and it was getting harder and harder not telling her that she was pregnant. Millie wondered if she could do that and trust that her friend wouldn't tell Ranger. It was a big ask, and one that she wasn't sure was fair to make of Ruby.

She couldn't avoid Ruby's call. Millie knew that she'd end up just trying her back later and she planned on heading to bed early tonight. "Hello," Millie answered.

"Hey," Ruby said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good," Millie lied. "How are you doing?" She was tired, as big as a house, and ready to break down in tears at any moment. Ruby was about a month ahead of her, pregnancy-wise, and she had to be feeling about the same. Millie decided to concentrate on her friend and then, hopefully, she'd be able to avoid Ruby's questions that would have her spilling her guts over the phone.

"How are you doing?" Millie asked, trying to put the focus back on Ruby.

"Um, you've asked me that question twice now," Ruby teased. "Are you sure that you're good?"

"I am," Millie lied again. "How's Luke doing?"

"He's good," Ruby said. "He's driving me crazy with getting things ready for the baby. I think that some of the girls around the office are going to throw me a shower and I don't want to go out and buy stuff first. It'll ruin the surprise." Millie knew all about the shower that was being thrown for her at the office. She was invited but had to come up with some stupid excuse about being too busy at her new job to travel back for it. Her new job allowed her to work from home, so she really could have taken a few days off, but then, she'd have to explain her baby bump and that wasn't something that she was ready to do. Millie had always been a little bit curvy, but there would be no hiding her belly behind her curves now.

"You're awfully quiet," Ruby said, breaking Millie's inner thoughts. She had forgotten to interject little hums and signals that she was listening to Ruby. God, she was just becoming a bad friend. "Why not tell me what's really going on, Millie. You haven't been yourself since you moved away. I'm worried about you, and you shouldn't make a pregnant woman worry."

"No kidding," Millie mumbled under her breath.

"What was that?" Ruby asked.

“Nothing,” Millie said.

“Millie don’t make me drive out to see you. I’m seven months pregnant but won’t hesitate to get in a car and drive down to see that you’re all right with my own two eyes.”

That was the very last thing that Millie needed. “You don’t need to do that,” she insisted.

“Give me one good reason not to,” Ruby insisted. “Tell me why you’ve been acting this way. Are you unhappy?”

“No,” Millie lied.

“Are you homesick?”

“No,” she lied again.

“Do you hate your new job?” Ruby questioned.

“No, Ruby,” Millie shouted, “I’m pregnant and alone. How do you think I should act?” Millie gasped and covered her mouth with her trembling hand as if trying to stop anything more that might come out of her pie hole. It was too late though. The damage had been done and there would be no taking her words back now.

“You’re pregnant?” Ruby asked.

“I am,” Millie whispered. “Please don’t tell Ranger. He hates me and I just don’t think I can raise this baby with him. He won’t even talk to me, you know?” The silence at the other end of the call worried her. “Ruby.”

“Um, I’m so sorry, Millie. The guys put me up to it. They wanted to know if you were really happy at your new job,” Ruby said. A sense of doom filled Millie’s gut and she knew that she wasn’t going to like what was about to come.

“What did you do?” she asked. “Tell me that he’s not there listening to what I just told you.”

“I wish I could,” Ruby said. “I’m so sorry.”

“So, he’s there, listening to everything that I just said, and he still won’t talk to me?” Millie asked. She couldn’t deal with his silence anymore. It was why she decided to leave town after finding out about the baby. She had grown up in a home

where her parents fought constantly. They hated each other and Millie didn't want her son or daughter growing up in a home like that. If Ranger didn't want to talk to her, that was on him, but she wouldn't be made to feel guilty about any of this. He was the one giving her the cold shoulder and not the other way around.

"Listen, I have to go," Millie said. "I have a busy day tomorrow and I need to get some sleep. I think it would be best if you don't call me anymore, Ruby," she said.

"Millie," Ruby shouted into the phone just before she hung up on her. She didn't care if she sounded like a bitch or that she had just told the father of her baby that she was pregnant over the phone. None of that mattered. In fact, the only thing that did matter was her baby right now. Millie rubbed her hand over her belly and longed for the day that she'd be able to feel her baby kick her, but for now, she'd settle for the little flutters that told her that her baby was just fine inside of her growing belly. Yeah—he or she was the only thing that mattered, and she'd make sure that her baby had the best she could give. Even if that meant being a single parent.

His Curvy Assistant Universal Link->

What's coming up next from K.L. Ramsey? Grizz (Grumpy Mountain Men Series Book 1) is coming in June 2022. You won't want to miss this one!

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GRIZZ

The snow was coming down harder now, causing Grizz to have to stop chopping wood. He figured that he had enough for the week at least an hour ago, but he still had a bit of aggression to work out and now, he wouldn't be able to do that.

“Shit,” he grumbled to himself. He wouldn't be in such a foul mood, needing to chop down an entire fucking forest, if he hadn't gone into town. He knew better, but he had to see her. Maybe that made him a masochist or maybe he was just an idiot. It was probably a bit of both in his case. But Brooklyn was worth it. Just seeing her face was worth the trek down from his mountain in the Catskills to the city. Seeing her smile was worth riding the fucking train into New York City and dealing with the fast-talking, fast walking jerks. God, he hated that place but seeing Brooklyn made it all worth it.

Two fucking hours—that was how long it took him to get to the city on that train. He hated riding the train, but it was the quickest way for him to get from his mountain top down to see Brooklyn. He'd been a part of the rat race who took the train into the city every day to sell his soul to his nine to five job. He was a fool believing that he'd make something of himself that way, but he wanted to prove his father wrong. His old man said that he'd never make anything out of his life and maybe he was right. Grizz got sick of taking orders from his asshole boss and when he told the guy that he didn't need the job or the money, he laughed in Grizz's face. Once he explained to his boss that he could buy and sell his little company about ten

times over, with the money that his grandfather had left him, he seemed to sober rather quickly.

Grizz had been raised surrounded by wealth and privilege and he didn't want anything to do with that life now, even if he never did prove his old man right. At thirty, he just didn't give a fuck anymore, plus it helped that his father died a few years back from lung cancer. He always hated the guy and there was no way that he'd show up at his abusive father's funeral to cry over his grave. He'd leave that job to his brother, Walter. He was always such a kiss ass and Grizz knew that he'd have no problem showing up to the funeral to play the loving son. It was all a fucking lie though because nothing about the house they grew up in or their family was loving. Once their mother died, when Grizz was only ten, all the love disappeared from their home and in its wake, abuse was all that was left for them. He and Walt had found a way to muddle through, it's what they were taught to do, but it wasn't easy. Nothing in life was ever easy and that was all he needed to remember.

Grizz grabbed his ax and the jacket he had discarded when he overheated from chopping wood. "You really have some shitty timing, Mother Nature," he grumbled. He looked back at the pile of wood that littered the ground and shook his head. He was hoping to get it all stacked and covered before the storm blew in, but the unpredictable Catskill weather won again. He should have gotten used to it after two years of living by himself up on the mountain, but he hadn't. The only thing he had truly gotten used to was living alone—and that was something that wouldn't change any time soon. Not unless Brooklyn agreed to his proposal, but he knew that his wishful dreaming would only end with him being disappointed once again. She wasn't ready to leave her job in the city. Brooklyn wasn't about to leave the job that she had worked so hard to land. She was a damn good lawyer and there was no way that she'd give that up any time soon, even if it was him being the one to do the asking.

Grizz stowed his ax on the porch and stomped the snow off his boots. It had only been snowing for about an hour and he was sure that there was already a few inches on the ground. He had a feeling that the storm was going to be a rough one and

he'd end up trapped in his cabin for the next few days to a week—alone. That was fine by him, he had a few books to catch up on and when they were finished, he could catch up on his sleep.

His only saving grace was that he picked up the supplies in town on his drive back from the train station. He was set for months, if necessary, and with how colossally bad things went today with Brooklyn, he might just hideaway for that long.

His cell phone rang in his pocket, and he pulled it from his jeans, surprised that he still had service with the storm picking up around his cabin. He knew that he'd lose power sooner rather than later and have to get the generator going if the fire couldn't keep his place warm enough.

Grizz answered his cell before it went to voicemail. "Lo," he growled.

"Grizz, it's me." He'd know her voice anywhere; it didn't matter that he had just spoken to her earlier that day.

"Brooklyn," he breathed.

"Listen, I know we didn't end on a good note today, but I'm in trouble and need your help." The panic in her voice had him pulling on his jacket and boots.

"Where are you?" he asked. "I'll come find you."

"You haven't even asked me what's wrong," she said.

"Doesn't matter," he insisted. "Whatever it is, I'll find you and help fix it."

"Does that offer to stay with you still stand?" she asked. He wanted to tell her that he didn't offer to let her stay with him when they met today. What he asked her to do was move in with him and be his woman. She must have just forgotten that part. Turning her away now might mean that he'd lose his chance with her forever, and he wasn't willing to let that happen. Not now that she was willingly turning to him for help.

"Sure," he said. "It still stands, Brooklyn."

“Good,” she almost whispered. “Then, open your door, Grizz,” she ordered.

He turned around and pulled his front door open to find her standing on his porch, shivering against the cold wind that had picked up with the storm. Brooklyn was shaking as she shoved her phone back into her parka.

“Thanks,” she said. “I was starting to think that I might freeze to death out here.”

“Why didn’t you just knock?” he asked. Grizz pulled her into his cabin and shut the door, trying to keep out the blustery cold.

“I was afraid that you wouldn’t answer, and I had to know where we stood, Grizz. When you left me in the city today, you seemed so angry. I couldn’t just show up here and knock on your front door hoping for the best.”

She was right—he did leave her in a foul mood. She had told him no again and that plain pissed him off. Brooklyn was the only woman to hold that kind of power over him. She was the only woman that he’d ever loved and now, she was on his doorstep asking for his help. Grizz would have to put his pettiness away for the time being if he was going to be of any good to her.

“How can I help?” he asked. It was a start and judging by the smile on Brooklyn’s beautiful face, it was a good one.

BROOKLYN

Brooklyn Summers wasn't sure how it had happened, but she found herself in quite a mess. Her day had all started so normal—coffee, shower, makeup, and messy bun, in that order. But then, Grizz showed up at her office demanding that she make time to talk to him and that's where her day started to spiral downhill.

He'd shown up again, begging her to move up to his cabin with him, but they had already been down that road and both knew how it ended—with heartbreak.

They had been college sweethearts. Grizz was trying to figure out his next step on how to piss off his old man and she was just trying to work her way through law school and pay her tuition. Hooking up with Grizz was a fun distraction at first, but then he went and convinced her to move in with him. They lived in complete bliss for the first year. Grizz seemed happy about the added bonus that his father hated that he was “Slumming it” with her and she loved having a partner. At least, she thought that's who she had found in Grizz, but she was so wrong.

They rang in the New Year together and they had so many plans. They were both supposed to graduate that year—him from business school with his masters, and her from law school. But best-laid plans usually went wrong and theirs certainly had. Brooklyn found out that she was a few months pregnant by February and when she told Grizz about the baby, he flipped out on her. He accused her of getting pregnant on purpose and then walked out on her. He was gone for over a

week before he returned, begging her to take him back, telling her that he was a fool, but it was already too late. She had lost the baby the day after he left.

It was crazy, really. She never thought that she'd want to have a kid. At least, not before finishing law school and building her career. Hell, she wasn't sure she'd ever want kids at all, but losing her and Grizz's baby had shown her differently. She not only wanted that baby, but she was devastated when she lost it. Brooklyn blamed Grizz for her loss and when she told him about the baby, and he seemed almost relieved, she told him to get his stuff and get out of her apartment. As far as she was concerned, they were over.

But life was crazy sometimes and she learned quickly that just because she said something was over, didn't make it so. Grizz graduated from school, just as she had, and they went their separate ways. She was sure that would be the last that she'd hear from him until he started showing up at court when she had a case. He'd sit in the back of the courtroom for open cases and watch her. It was almost like he was catching her performance in a play or something, the way he'd watch her every move and seem to hang on her every word. It was kind of creepy and when she confronted him to tell him that, he begged her for another chance.

Grizz told her that he had quit his job and bought a cabin up in the Catskills. He told her all about how beautiful it was up there and then he asked her to move in with him. It sounded nice, but that wasn't the kind of life she wanted for herself. Besides, Brooklyn finally was working toward the career that she always wanted and walking away from it now wasn't an option for her, so she turned him down and sent him on his way back up to the mountains. But that didn't matter to Grizz. He kept on coming back to the city every few weeks, asking her the same question each time. He wanted her to move up to his mountain and be his woman. She turned him down every time he asked and sent him home, wondering if that would be the last time she'd hear from him. Sooner or later, Grizz would get sick of her telling him, no, and he'd stop trying. At least, that was what she thought would happen, but it never did. He

was the most stubborn man she'd ever known, and that was saying something in her line of work.

He should never want to speak to her again, with the way that she dismissed him earlier that morning, yet here he was, asking how he could help her. He was either a masochist or a fool, but she didn't have time to figure any of that out right now.

"I'm in trouble," she said.

"What kind of trouble?" he asked.

"You know the kind of people that I represent," she said. "I'm in that kind of trouble, and I'm not allowed to tell you anything more. I'd be breaking lawyer, client confidentiality."

"Shit, Brooklyn," he grumbled. "How can I help you if I don't know what we're up against?" Hearing Grizz call them a "We" did strange things to her battered heart. How would she ever come out of this with it still intact? She wouldn't—it was that simple.

"I just need a place to stay for a bit. You know, ride out the storm," she teased.

"This isn't a joking matter," Grizz grumbled.

"I know," she agreed. "But I have nothing else left, Grizz. I have to keep my sense of humor intact because otherwise, I'd go crazy."

"It's that bad?" he asked.

"Worse, actually," she breathed. "Listen, at some point, maybe I'll be able to tell you the whole story, but for now, can you please just trust me?"

He nodded without hesitation. "Already done," he agreed. "I trust you more than anyone else on the planet, Brooklyn." She wanted to "Aww" his statement, but she also knew from experience that he hated that.

"Thank you," she whispered. Brooklyn unzipped her coat and pulled it off. "Your place is great," she said. He'd talked so much about his cabin and the mountains, she thought she had it all pegged, but she was wrong. The cabin was better

than she ever imagined. “I haven’t been out this way since I was a kid,” she said. “My parents used to bring me and my brother and sister up here for vacations every summer. I loved coming up to the Catskills.”

“I had never been here before I found this place. I bought it sight unseen and my realtor thought that I was a lunatic. But from the pictures online, I knew that it was the right place for me.”

“I can see why,” she said, spinning around. “It suits you. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’d love to change out of my wet clothes. I had to park my car about a half-mile down the mountain and hike the rest of the way up here with this storm. Can you point me to your spare room?” she asked.

“Can’t,” he said.

“I don’t want to play games, Grizz,” Brooklyn insisted.

“I’m not playing games, honey. I can’t point you in the direction of my spare room because I don’t have one. This cabin is a one-bedroom. The master is through that hallway and to the right,” he said, pointing back to his room.

“We can’t share a room, Grizz,” she insisted.

“I don’t see why not, Brooklyn. We used to live together and slept in the same bed together for over a year. I think that we can handle that now that we’re friends, right?”

He was issuing her a challenge. Every time she turned him away, she claimed that they were better off as friends, and she didn’t want to lose their friendship because it was too important to her. Now, he was throwing all of that back in her face and by telling him that they couldn’t sleep in the same bed together, she’d just be proving him right. That was the last thing she needed because Grizz gloating would get on her nerves in no time flat.

“Sure,” she reluctantly agreed. “We can handle sharing the same bed—as friends.”

He smiled down at her and took her two bags. “Great,” he said. “Follow me then.” He nodded back down the hallway to his bedroom and every step she took felt as though the walls

were closing in around her. How the hell was she going to get through the next few days having to share a bed with Grizz, and keep her hands to herself? The question was simple—she wouldn't.

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ABOUT K.L. RAMSEY & BE KELLY

Romance Rebel fighting for

Happily Ever After!

K. L. Ramsey currently resides in West Virginia (Go Mountaineers!). In her spare time, she likes to read romance novels, go to WVU football games and attend book club (aka-drink wine) with girlfriends. K. L. enjoys writing Contemporary Romance, Erotic Romance, and Sexy Ménage! She loves to write strong, capable women and bossy, hot as hell alphas, who fall ass over tea kettle for them. And of course, her stories always have a happy ending. But wait—there's more!

Somewhere along the writing path, K.L. developed a love of ALL things paranormal (but has a special affinity for shifters <YUM!!>!! She decided to take a chance and create another persona- BE Kelly- to bring you all of her yummy shifters, seers, and everything paranormal (plus a hefty dash of MC!).

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