

Book 7 **Boswell Group**



June

Deanna L. Rowley

JUNE

BROTHERHOOD PROTECTORS WORLD

BOSWELL GROUP

BOOK SEVEN



DEANNA L. ROWLEY



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Also by Deanna L. Rowley.

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Brotherhood Protectors

About Elle James

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*I'd like to thank my editor, Ann Attwood, for the beautiful job
she does on my books.*

BROTHERHOOD PROTECTORS

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JUNE

BOSWELL GROUP BOOK 7

DEANNA L. ROWLEY

CHAPTER 1



ALFIE STUART PULLED his pickup truck into the entrance to the camping grounds at Sturgis, South Dakota, and had to slam on his brakes when he saw the metal gate across the entire entrance. He had been driving all day, and was tired, but excited about the adventure he was about to embark on. Alfie knew he was a few days early, but he had a plan. He climbed out of his truck, stretched, and began to walk around to see if anyone was around that he could talk to. He heard something in the distance, and with his hand over his eyes, he looked up and smiled when he saw a golf cart come barreling down a long road, kicking up dust in its wake.

“Help you?” the guy driving the cart called out while he was still some ways away. Alfie had to step back when it slid to a stop, and the man grinned at him. “What can I do for ya?”

“I’m Al Stuart, and I know I’m early.”

“For?”

“Camping for Sturgis Bike Week.”

“Damn, man, you are early, it’s Friday, and we don’t open our gates until Wednesday of next week. I’m sorry, but I can’t let you in until then. We’re still prepping the area.”

“I know that, and I don’t mean to be a bastard, or give you a hard time, but I have this,” Alfie said as he opened his truck door, brought out the folder he’d made sure had all his important paperwork in and pulled the top copy to hand to the man. While he’d been gathering that, the man had climbed out of the golf cart and opened the gate. Alfie watched as the man

read it, and his brows rose higher and higher. When he got to the end of the letter, he pulled his phone and looked at Alfie.

“You don’t mind if I verify this, do you?”

“Not at all, I would expect you to.” Alfie watched as the man dialed and wondered if this was a special case. Because he would be attending Bike Week as a vendor, but needed to be in Pierre for the weekend at a rodeo and try to get orders for his saddle, and sell some of his stock before he did the same here at Sturgis. He had contacted the person in charge of the event and explained how he had wanted to come in and set up his tent and camping gear early, go to the rodeo in Pierre, then come back, and set up his vendor spot at Sturgis Bike Week. Now, all he had to do was get the guy’s permission to let him in.

“Thank you, Mr. Overton,” the man said as he hung up the phone, and looked at Alfie.

“It all checks out, do you have your site all paid for?”

“I do,” Alfie pulled out the next item in his folder, and handed it over.

“Damn, you’re literally in the back forty.” The man laughed, and handed the papers back to Al. He climbed out of the golf cart he had sat back in to make his call, and went into the small shack Alfie had parked his truck next to. When he returned, the man handed a bright blue sticker to Alfie.

“What’s this?” Alfie asked as he took it.

“This gets you in and out of the camping grounds here. You going in and out with your truck?”

“Not right now, I’m going to go set up my tent, then I’m heading to Pierre for the rodeo. When I return here, I’ll be setting up my trailer at the vendor spot I’ve been assigned, and I’ll unload my bike and ride that back and forth from here to there.”

“Okay, then put this on your bike. My name’s Linc, if anyone gives you any trouble tell them to contact me.”

“I’ll do that, can you tell me where my campsite is?”

Linc laughed and pointed in every direction around them. “Okay, a quick rundown on this camping area. This is one of the spots that we call tenters.”

“Which means?”

“It means that only tents are allowed in this area. Each campsite is ten foot wide, by twenty foot long. See this here road.” Linc pointed to the ground at his feet, and when Alfie frowned, but nodded, he continued, “There are three of them that run east and west. This one is the middle one, or the main drag if you will. There is one on either end of this field.” He pointed, and Alfie couldn’t see them, but he had to trust the guy knew what he was talking about. When Linc told Alfie to follow him, he did.

“See here,” Linc again pointed to the ground, and Alfie saw a number one painted on the stones, then he looked up and saw other numbers as well.

“This side of the main drag is the north side, that is the south. You’re campsite is N-50-49 correct?”

“Correct, but what does that even mean?”

“I’m trying to tell you that,” Linc laughed. “N means the north side, 50 is what row you are in, and 49 is the number of the campsite.”

“Ah, so how do I get to row 50, and campsite 49?”

“It’s pretty easy, actually. Drive down this main road until you reach the three dumpsters, you can’t go any further than those, hang a right, and you’re the next to the last campsite on the left. There are fifty rows, and 50 campsites per row.”

“Are you telling me there are twenty-five hundred campsites on this plot?” Alfie asked in shock.

“On the north side, then there are that many on the south.” He pointed to the area on the other side of where they stood. “Have you ever been to Bike Week before?”

“Years ago, it might have been almost ten years ago, but yes, I’ve been here.”

“So, you know to expect at least fifty thousand bikes. As I mentioned earlier, this lot is for tents only. There are other sites for people who bring campers. Don’t get me started on all the hotels, motels, and private campgrounds around here. This is just in Sturgis, not including any of the surrounding areas, and towns.”

“Ah, okay, just one more question.”

“What’s that?”

“What are those other roads?” Alfie pointed to the other roads running through the campsite.

“Those connect to the roads at the end, and this one. You drive down them to get to your campsite.”

“So, if I didn’t want to take this main road, I can drive down this one, go to the end, hang a left, and take that to the end, and I’m the second one in on the last road?”

“Correct,” Linc grinned at him. “See, you’re a smart cookie. Let me finish opening up the gate for you. There are flags that indicate the campsite, but the numbers aren’t all up there yet. That’s what my crew is working on now, by the time you return, your number will be at the front of your site.”

It wasn’t until then that Alfie realized there were people working on the sites, and he nodded. They walked back to Alfie’s truck together, and Linc explained along the way. “Stay within your flags, and you should be fine. As I said, the site is ten feet wide, by twenty foot long. And yes, it’s grassy, and we’ve mowed the grass for the week. You shouldn’t have any problems.”

“My tent should be okay while I’m gone?”

“My men won’t touch it, but it’s up to you whether you want to leave it or not.”

“I’ll have to take my chances,” Alfie said and climbed back into his truck. When he got the go ahead from Linc to drive through, he opted to go straight down what Linc called the main drag, then hung a right at the dumpsters. By the time he reached his site, he looked back and couldn’t see the entrance.

“Damn,” he whispered to himself as he exited his truck. “I hope I come home to some friendly neighbors,” he sighed as he left his trailer in the road, and opened the back door to his truck, and began pulling out his camping equipment. Mentally, he had figured it would take him an hour to get everything set up, but he hadn’t anticipated the trouble he would encounter in trying to get the tent set up. He had brought the tent he, Alan, and Alex shared whenever they went camping, forgetting that it was only him putting up the three-man tent, instead of his two brothers helping him. By the time it was all up, and he was satisfied with the results, three hours had passed. Luckily he had given himself plenty of time at this stop in order to set up the campsite.

Once his tent was up, and he was happy with it, Alfie went into the back of his trailer and looked around for several minutes, having an internal war with himself. Because he was going on to Pierre to set up his trailer at the vendor circle, he didn’t know what to expect or how much merchandise to bring. He didn’t want to sell out there, and not have anything to sell at Bike Week, so he decided to take more than half of his inventory and set it in his tent while he was gone. He just had to trust in his fellow man, that his items would still be there when he returned. Thank goodness he had taken his brother Alex’s advice and store everything in plastic totes. Not that he anticipated any, but if it rained, then they shouldn’t get ruined.

For the last two years he had been making inventory, anticipating selling his leather work at Sturgis Bike Week one day. It wasn’t until Morgan had returned home after her ordeal, and he realized the belt he had made for her, the one with the hidden zipper in it that held her cash, was when he really buckled down and began to make more inventory. Before, it was a passing hobby, but with a plan in mind, he set out to make as much as he could. Since he’d moved to North Dakota, he’d been able to make more, and the fact that he’d hand stitched the saddle for Wyatt’s wedding made him feel that he would be a success at his chosen profession. No matter what he thought, in the end, it would all depend on the people

looking at, and possibly purchasing his wares. He could only keep an open mind at this point.

He grabbed the plastic totes with the key chains in them and took them to the tent. By the time he was done, he had fifty fifteen-quart-sized tubs stacked in the center of his tent. When he went back to his trailer, he looked around again, and was satisfied to see he still had another fifty of the same items to take to Pierre. It wasn't much, but he had several different varieties of leather key chains, and some of them offered a person's initial, and he had at least five totes with the spare initials. He could sell them outright, or take orders and have the people return the next day with the initial of their choice on it. He also had twenty-five hand-tooled leather motorcycle seats, but he decided to only take five of them to the horse show. His hope was to get saddle sales in Pierre, and seat sales in Sturgis. He also had several larger totes with hand-tooled leather belts with several designs, along with the hidden zippers in them, the same as he had made for his sister before she'd come out to Sturgis three years ago. He set the variety of buckles aside, only taking half of them with him, the same as with the keychains.

Satisfied with what he had in his trailer, he locked it up, double-checked his tent, walking around to make sure he'd picked everything up, and nodded when there was nothing on the ground, nor did he see his inventory, or blankets and pillow he'd left leaning against any sides of the tent. Not that he anticipated any rain, but he didn't want the sides of the tent to leak and get his bedding wet. He'd hate to have to sleep in his truck, not that it would be a problem, but he didn't want to if he could stretch out on an air mattress at the end of the day.

With a final nod, he zipped his tent shut, and strode to his truck, climbing behind the wheel, he started it up, and gave his tent one last look. With a nod, he dropped the truck in gear, and pulled out. With a laugh, he nodded to his tent and deepened his voice, as he said, "I'll be back." Then, he left to head to his next destination.

CHAPTER 2



JUNE VANDERBILT DOWNSHIFTED her Harley Davidson motorcycle as she slowed for the entrance to the camping site she would be at for the next six days or so. She was still undecided as to when she would actually leave. It was a Thursday, and she would definitely be leaving by Wednesday of the next week to head to her new job, but she didn't know whether she'd leave earlier or not. It all depended on if she'd seen everything she'd come to see, and was ready to move on. She had been processed out of the military after serving eleven years, and she'd made a promise to herself years ago, since the day she'd bought her Harley, that one day she would attend the Sturgis Bike Week Rally. It had been a dream of hers, but didn't attend while she was still in the military. Now after being processed out earlier than anticipated, she had two extra weeks to do as she wished. She would be spending it at the rally, as a way to wind down after serving her country for so long.

June had to wait out on the street as the other bikes ahead of her pulled in, but she had no problem doing that. She looked around and smiled at the different varieties of bikes, as well as people around her. As she sat there on her idling Harley, she let her mind wander to the possibilities of what lay ahead for the next few days. All she wanted to do was to relax, and enjoy herself. As the bikes ahead of her crept forward, she smiled when one of the bikes behind her, eased up beside her, and yelled at her over the sound of their engines.

“What year?” He pointed to the bike she was on, and she could only grin.

“Forty-five,” she yelled back, and the man grinned at her, giving her a thumbs up. She had purchased the bike years ago on one of her few and far between leaves from the military. She had fallen in love with it, and took it back to base with her. Though she was assigned to an elite woman’s military group referred to as the EWMs, she’d been stationed on military bases all over the world, and some very nice, knowledgeable, and friendly male soldiers had volunteered to help her get the bike up and running. She wasn’t stupid to turn down their offers. Don’t get her wrong, she knew her way around an engine, and had to for her job, but she wasn’t proficient in engines. She knew enough to operate the machine, and with the men’s help, she was able to learn how to troubleshoot what she thought was wrong with the bike whenever it acted up. Since learning when she’d process out, she’d gone to those men and asked them to help her fine tune the machine for her trip.

June drove a 1945 WWII Harley Davidson with a sidecar. Her entire life’s possessions were either strapped to the back, or packed in the sidecar. This included all her clothes, a tent, and camping supplies. Once she was done with the rally, which went on for fourteen days, but she figured she’d have had enough after six, so would be leaving, then going on to her job in North Dakota.

When she heard a loud whistle, she grinned as the bikes ahead of her had moved forward, and it was her turn to enter the campsite. She liked that there were four rows of people checking them in. Since everything was already paid for, she only had to get the pass to enter the area, and to find where she could pitch her tent.

“Hello, where’s your site?” The man beside her asked.

June had the paperwork ready, and withdrew it from the side pocket of her military-issued camo pants. She handed it over, he looked at it, then at her with a grin.

“Okay, that side of this road is the north side, which this N stands for. The first 50 means you are in row 50, and the second 50 means you’re in the last site from this main road.” He grinned again. “Literally in the back corner of the lot.”

“Okay, is this the only road to access the site?”

“No, you can take any of the roads running north and south to the end, and follow that around to your site. Or, you can stay on this road to the end, hang a right at the dumpsters, then go to the end.”

“Okay, thanks,” June took her papers back, then the blue sticker he handed her and told her that it had to be seen on the bike, giving her access to the camping area. If the people manning the entrance didn’t see the sticker, she would be stopped every time she tried to enter the camp ground. She took it, and for the time being, she put it in her pocket, then dropped the bike in gear and started forward. The entire way down the main drag, the man told her to take, people stopped and stared or pointed to her bike, she could only grin, because the bikes she saw were gleaming with chrome, and there wasn’t one piece of chrome on hers. She rode what a lot of people referred to as a rat bike. There were no bells or whistles, no fancy paint job, hell, because she had a WWII military bike, there was still a white star on the side of the sidecar in the olive-green paint. One of these days she would repaint it, but not today. She really liked that the bike showed its age, and had the right amount of patina without being rusted out. One of the men who’d helped her work on it said it had great patina on it. June wouldn’t admit it out loud to anyone, but she had to look the word up to see what it meant. She liked it. With a grin, she rounded the corner at the dumpsters and nodded to the people who stopped setting up their own tents and campsites to stare as she drove by.

When she arrived at her destination, she parked with the bike in the grass, and the sidecar still on the road. There was a tent already set up next to her, and she didn’t see anyone around, but she wasn’t worried about that, they could be anywhere. She shut her bike down, dismounted, and stretched. The first thing she did was walk every inch of the two hundred square feet of camping space, and even went into the field that bordered two sides of the site. She stood there with her hands on her hips and looked closely at the ground, then made a decision with a nod.

Back at her bike, the first thing she did was unstrap the duffel on the back of her bike, and extracted her military-issued foldable shovel. With that in her hand, she walked to the back of the area, and started deepening the trench that was already there. She had really wanted to put her tent in the very back corner of the lot, but after she looked and studied the ground, she realized there had been a narrow furrow in the ground that she assumed the rain ran through. Going with her gut, she'd dug the furrow deeper, and even dug it out about twenty feet into the field. When she was satisfied with her handiwork, she went back to the bike, and began unpacking the sidecar.

Three hours later, June stood back and admired the work she'd completed. Not only was her tent set up, but she'd also set up her firepit area, and the area beneath the canopy attached to her tent for her morning meditation area. To look around and see the other tents, she had to smirk at the size of hers. Compared to the gigantic one on the lot next door, hers looked like a postage stamp. It wasn't even as wide as the regular tents she saw being, or already erected, but it suited her needs. The last thing she had to do was set the poles for the awning, and she was done. In less than five minutes that task was complete, then she went to check her sidecar and grinned at the last item left there. She carried the medium-sized box into her tent and stored it in the corner.

At first she wasn't going to bring it, but had decided to pack it at the last minute. She never knew when she would need it. Again, she went out and looked around. Satisfied with her area, she zipped her tent shut, then went over and climbed onto her bike. She wanted to drive down to the main street, find someplace to park, and walk around to see what was being offered by the locals, as well as any vendors selling their stuff. She giggled as she fired up her bike and had the thought that maybe she should purchase a few tee shirts, so she would have something other than military olive green, or the dirt brown ones to wear.

She checked to make sure her leather jackets, chaps, a helmet, and a pair of gloves were stored in the sidecar, because you never knew when rain would hit. Seeing she was

prepared, she fired up her bike, and drove around the corner to head back to town. The entire way everyone stopped and stared, or pointed to her bike, and she could only nod and smile at them.



HOURS LATER, June was walking around the area the vendors were set up, and she was heading back toward one in particular that had caught her eye several times before on her pass of ‘window’ shopping before getting serious about maybe purchasing something, when she thought she’d heard someone call out her name. It wasn’t just her name either, she thought they’d called out her military rank before her last name. She paused, looked around, and just as she was about to shrug and walk it off, she heard it again. This time, she turned to where she thought the shout came from, stepped out away from the crowd before the vendors and looked around. When she spotted someone familiar, she stayed where she was, and allowed him to come to her. She wore a grin until she noticed the man limped.

“D-Dawg?” June asked when she thought the man approaching her was a man she’d gone through her own SEAL training with, and been on several missions as an EWM with. If she was right, then he should have retired from the military years earlier with a knee injury. She knew that wasn’t his real name, but it was what she’d called him during her training with him and his team. If memory served, Duke had been a D-Force military man.

“Gunny Sergeant Vanderbilt, as I live and breathe, I never thought I’d see you again,” the man said as he approached, and they stepped into each other’s personal space and gave one another a one-armed side hug. They stepped apart, and Duke threw his arm over the shoulders of a beautiful blonde woman beside him.

“How did you know my rank?” June scowled at him. “I got it just last year, and if memory serves, you would have been discharged before I got the promotion.”

“Oh, I’ve kept track of your career,” he grinned at her and turned to the woman with him. “Angel, this is the woman I’ve mentioned in the past, her name is June Vanderbilt, June, this is my fiancée, Angel Carson.” They shook hands, then with a wide grin on his face, Duke leaned in and whispered not quite so quietly, “She was an Army Ranger.”

“Oh, cool. I take it you’re both out now?”

“We are, and we’re living over in the Crazy Mountains of Montana. Not that I don’t know, but when did you get out? According to my sources, you should still be in.” Duke scowled at her.

June laughed and grinned. “Processed out two weeks ago. Finished up what I had to do, then decided to stop here on my way to my next gig.”

“Which is? Because if you’re looking for a job, I know with your military experience my boss at the Brotherhood Protection Agency would hire you in a heartbeat.”

“Sorry, I’m heading north next week to start working for a group called Boswell.”

“Shit,” Duke said and looked at Angel. “Another good one to slip through our fingers.”

Angel laughed and looked over at June. “We know your boss, she’s a great woman, and is putting together a great team of former EWMs. You’ll do good there.”

“Thank you, I don’t know any of them, but I’m looking forward to seeing what they have to offer me.”

“All I can say is to keep an open mind. I don’t know what they are doing, but it’s been said that they’re making progress.” Angel paused and looked around, then over both shoulders before she leaned in and whispered, “I don’t want to talk about it here.”

“I understand, and thanks for the advice.” June nodded then changed the subject. “Are you here for the entire Rally?”

“No, we’ll be leaving early Sunday morning, we have to work Monday. What about you?” Duke asked.

“I’ll be leaving on Wednesday, I’m going to be taking my time riding up to North Dakota. I know it’s only about three hundred miles or so, but I want to take my time. I don’t have to report to work until the following Monday, but if I get there early, my new boss, Morgan said I could start then.”

“I wish you luck,” Duke said as he gave her another side hug, and it shocked June when Angel reached in and hugged her.

“You’ll do good, I know all the women working at Boswell, from what Duke’s told me over the years, you’ll fit right in.”

“Thank you,” June said, not realizing she’d been concerned about her new job until Angel reassured her. Taking what she said for granted, she watched them leave, then made her way over to the vendor she’d tried to get to earlier.

CHAPTER 3



JUNE SAT in her fold-out camp chair when she heard a bike slowly approach. She frowned as she looked around and saw that most of her neighbors across the road from her had returned, and were lighting campfires, drinking beer, and having low conversations. She watched as the black and red Harley slowed down to almost a crawl and pulled into the spot next to her, the one that had the tent already up when she'd arrived. It was her first night here, and this was the first time she'd seen anyone there.

“Howdy, neighbor,” the man said as he turned off his bike and just sat there looking around. “Looks a hell of a lot different than when I set my tent up.” He laughed as he dismounted.

“When did you set up?” June asked, being neighborly and friendly. She liked the way the man looked and the first thing she noticed was that there wasn't a passenger seat on his bike, the second thing was that he did not wear a wedding ring. Not that it made any difference, but still, you never knew. Now that she was free of the military, she could hook up with someone. Not that she did it often, but while she'd been serving her country, she'd dedicated her all to her job. In the past she'd done random one-night stands, and that wasn't about to change anytime soon, she liked to keep her options open.

Before the man answered her, he looked at her campsite with raised brows, especially when he spotted her tent, which didn't look very big from the outside, but was spacious on the inside. Then, he looked over at her bike and she smiled when

she saw his eyes flare wide, even from a distance away. He pointed to her rat bike, and asked, “That yours?”

With a smirk, June thought she’d mess with him and threw her thumb over her shoulder, and said, “No, it belongs to the people behind me.” It took everything she had not to burst out laughing when he actually lifted his head and stared out into the empty field behind her. When he looked back at her, he wore a smirk.

“Good one, you got me there.” He strode forward, and June swallowed hard at the way he walked. Strong, decisive, like he was a man of action. It made her wonder what branch of the service he’d served in. When the man stopped before her with his hand outstretched, and said one simple but strong word, “Al,” June automatically took the offered hand, and they tightened their grip on one another when a volt of electricity shot up their arms at the contact.

“June.” She wanted to keep it short and sweet, she had to be this guy’s neighbor for six days, and if anything happened between them, not that anything would, but six days was a long time, when she didn’t want him to come looking for her. Any hookups she would be doing would be the understanding that it would never go any further than a weekend fling. She had a new job to get to next week and would be putting all her concentration on that, and not pining for some random hookup guy she’d met at Sturgis. She sighed in relief when he finally let go of her hand, and looked around.

“To answer your question, I got here last Friday before the campgrounds were even open.”

“Why?” June scowled at his answer.

“I’m not only here to take in the sights, but I also have my truck and trailer set up over in the vendor section. I set up my tent, then went over to Pierre for an event over there with my vendor stuff. Since I came back here, I’ve been working my trailer, and haven’t made it back here until now.”

“Wow, what are you selling?”

“Small leather items.”

“How small?”

“Key chains.” He smiled as he took one off his belt loop and handed it to her. She took it to examine it, and nodded.

As she handed it back, she asked, “Can you get any initial on it? I mean yours has a ‘A’, which I’m assuming is for your name, but what if I wanted a ‘J’?”

“I have them. I have every letter of the alphabet already made up, at least ten copies of them, but I have blank ones and the letters to add if I’m sold out. That’s what I was doing all last night, making up more to restock my inventory. I was able to get a few hours’ sleep in my truck.”

“Damn, but you’re caught up now?”

“I am, for tomorrow at least, but who knows how long that’ll last.” He nodded as she handed the key chain back to him, and he used the clip to attach it to his belt loop.

“I’d offer you a beer, but I don’t have any, I only have water, and sorry, but I don’t even have an extra chair for you to sit in.”

“That’s okay,” Al said as he started to back away from her, he nodded repeatedly. “I have to finish setting up my gear anyway. It was nice meeting you.” Then he turned on his heel and walked over to his tent, only to disappear in it as soon as he had it unzipped. June sipped her water, and sighed. It was just as well that they didn’t continue talking, because she might have done something stupid, like invite him inside her tent for some action. It had been a long time since she’d been with anyone, and Al was exactly the type of person she’d hook up with in the past, she could have some nights of lack of sleep if she did anything with him. She stared into the small fire and tried to ignore Al as he walked back and forth from his tent to his bike, and finally, after about an hour, she made sure the coals were banked, and she went into her own tent for the night.

The first thing she did was strip down and change into her shorts and top she always slept in, then set up her candles as she sat cross-legged in the middle of the tent, with her arms

outstretched and her hands resting on her knees. It took her a few extra minutes to get into her meditative state that night, but when she finally reached it, she did her nightly ritual of releasing her energy of the day, and relaxed both her mind and body for the coming sleep, to wake up rejuvenated the next day. An hour after going to bed, she was stretched out in her sleeping bag, sound asleep.



AL REPEATEDLY GLANCED over at June's tent as he finished setting up his camping gear. He wondered if she was always that quick-witted, or if it was just with him. Though he'd only met her for all of five minutes, he really liked her. He especially liked the fact that he felt the sparks between them when they shook hands. He rubbed his right hand on his thigh, trying to rekindle the spark he'd felt. With a heavy sigh, he rolled out his sleeping bag, and with a grin, grabbed the handheld air pump to pump up the air mattress he'd taken from Alan's camping tote in their camper back home. He figured his brother would never miss it, and though he was tenting it this trip, he wouldn't be in complete discomfort. An air mattress would help in the long run. Once it was pumped up, he tossed his open sleeping bag on it. He reached for his duffel to get a clean set of clothes out, then swore when he realized he'd forgotten it in his truck. He made a mental note to strap it to the back of his bike first thing tomorrow when he arrived at his trailer.

Since he had stopped to eat on his way to the campgrounds, there was nothing for him to do but to settle in for the night. With a heavy sigh, he glanced at his phone, and again made a mental note to charge his phone when he got back to his truck in the morning. It seemed like the only good thing going for him since locking up his trailer for the night was meeting his neighbor, June. He quickly stripped down to his underwear, leaving his clothes in a pile on the tent floor beside his bed. He'd have to wear them in the morning until he could get a clean set. Al quickly set his alarm on both his watch, and his phone to get up earlier than usual, so he could

go into town, grab a shower at one of the shower trailers, then change into some clean clothes. If yesterday was anything like today was, it would be a long time before he could get a break. If he ever did this again, he'd make sure he brought one of his brothers with him to help out. With a heavy sigh, he lay down and was out in seconds flat.

“Fuck!” Jane yelled just short of a scream when the clash of thunder hit overhead, and the sky lit up with streaks of lightning all around her. She quickly rose from her bed, and not bothering with any shoes, or to throw on anything to cover her boxers and tank, she unzipped her tent, and in a matter of seconds had the protective coverings down and tied into place. She had just placed the poles holding up the awning inside her tent when the skies opened up and poured torrential rain down on her. She looked around, and saw several of her neighbors scrambling to get some type of protection over their tents, and because she was who she was, she rushed across the road and helped several of them. On the way back over, she glanced over and saw Al had just emerged from his own tent, and she paused long enough to suck in her breath at the sight of his near-naked body. He only wore a pair of boxer briefs, and it didn't leave a lot to the imagination when she noticed they became wet and molded to his body in seconds. He looked around frantically, and that was when June noticed what he finally settled on. She rushed over and yelled at him, but he didn't seem to hear her over the sounds of the storm.

June ran up to Al and grabbed his arm. When he whipped around, she pulled so hard, he had to lean over, and she screamed into his ear, “Come to my tent! It's dry!” With her hand still gripping his forearm, she dragged him along with her. Once inside the tent, she immediately grabbed two towels and tossed one to him as she used the other and began drying herself off. Not shy about her own body, she quickly stripped off her tank, dried her body, and slipped a dry one on, all with her back to Al. She did the same with her shorts, and when she was dry and had on fresh clothes she turned back around and saw he had his back to her, drying his own body.

“You can turn around now,” she said, and smirked when he only looked over his shoulder at her, then turned fully around.

She also noted that he'd wrapped the towel around his waist, like you did when you first stepped out of the shower.

"I know I needed a shower, but this is ridiculous," Al said as he sighed and looked around.

"What's wrong? You look confused."

"From the outside, your tent doesn't look big enough for one person, let alone two, but from in here, it's very spacious."

"Thank you, and it'll keep you dry." She settled on her sleeping bag and pointed to the other end of it. "Might as well get comfortable, sounds like this storm is going to last a while."

Al sighed heavily as he settled down, and looked around. He heard the thunder and lightning, but couldn't see any of it. That was when he realized it was pretty warm inside the tent also.

"You have a heater in here?"

"No, it's the design of the material. It repels water, and I have a solar panel for all my needs that's set up during the day. Being heavy canvas, the day's heat warms the inside up."

Al scowled at her as he looked around, then turned it onto her. "How come you don't have a river gushing through the middle of your tent?"

June giggled, then rolled over laughing at him. It took several moments to get herself under control enough in order to answer him. "I checked out the area before I set up my tent. I wouldn't actually call it a ditch, but there was a small tunnel that ran through not only both of our campsites, but for seven sites on the other side of you."

"What's that mean?" Al frowned at her. He thought he knew, but wanted to have her verify it for him.

"It means that when it rains, that furrow in the ground is the run off for it. Where it ran through my site, is behind us." She pointed to the back of the tent, and he could barely make her out in the shadows. She stopped talking long enough to lean forward and light a candle, which brightened the entire

area. “I used my traveling shovel to dig the trench deeper, and made sure it carried out into the field further, rather than pooling there on the corner.”

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“My previous job,” June didn’t want to reveal a lot of personal information about herself especially nothing about her military career. “Now, it’s three in the morning, and by the sounds of it, this storm is going to rage on for hours, we can sit here and talk, or we can try to get some sleep, and check out the damage in the morning.”

“As much as I want to talk, I need sleep. I slept like shit in my truck last night, and I’m not in too big of a hurry to face a major problem I’m going to have once we wake back up.”

“And that is?” June thought she knew, but when she spoke, she only gawked at him, then burst out laughing. “I’m sorry,” she waved her hand in front of her face to try to get the laughter to stop, but it wasn’t working. She continued for a few more minutes, then was able to catch her breath. “Yeah, I can’t see you driving into town in nothing but your boxers and bare feet. Did your riding boots get wet?”

For the first time since they entered the tent, Al grinned, and June sucked in her breath at how even more handsome it made him. Even more so than usual. “I brought three pair of shoes with me, my sneakers, my work boots, and my riding boots. My sneakers are in my vendor trailer, my work boots are in my tent under several inches of water, and my riding boots are in my truck, at the vendor trailer.”

June studied him for several minutes, then smirked at him. “If you’re a good boy, and not kill me in my sleep, I can ride over and get your bag of clothes and boots for you in the morning, or whenever the rain lets up.”

“I promise,” Al smirked as he held up his right hand with three fingers up.

“You were a Boy Scout?”

“For a few years, I think I stopped going when I reached eleven or twelve.”

“Ah,” June said as she nodded and began to settle down on her bed roll. “Unfortunately, I don’t have a spare sleeping bag, we’ll have to share.”

Al grinned as he moved around so he was behind her, and though he didn’t touch her, he used his arm as a pillow and spooned with her, leaving several inches between them. Before he could say anything, June reared up and blew out the candle, leaving them in complete darkness to fall asleep to the sounds of Mother Nature as she unleashed her fury over them.

CHAPTER 4



JUNE ARCHED BACK into the most delicious heat she'd ever felt in her life. The fact that someone played with her breasts might have something to do with it also, but she wasn't looking a gift horse in the mouth. As soon as her sleep-muddled brain began to register all the sensations happening to her, she froze, then opened her senses to her surroundings. Outside she heard a storm raging, while directly behind her, she heard deep breathing coming from another person. The combination of the two brought what had happened earlier that morning to the forefront of her mind.

With a smirk, she slowly rolled over and looked at the man lying beside her, and sucked in her breath at his handsomeness. Never in her wildest dreams would she think she would ever get someone like him to take notice of her. Not that she wasn't anything bad to look at, but a lot of men in her past couldn't look past her tattoos, or her last name to realize she wasn't anything like what they thought her to be. She had met potential lovers in the past who heard her last name and thought she was an instant meal ticket for them. It hadn't taken them long to realize the truth in the matter that she wasn't as rich as her name led them to think. She thought it was just a name, like Smith, or something as common, but they heard it and immediately thought she came from money, and they could have a free ride. Little did they know that assumption was a first-class ticket to get kicked to the curb by June. She had a lot of issues with her last name, and maybe one day in the future, she'd work it out, but not now. She had other more important things to do with her life then to dwell on her

parents' past mistakes. Not that she classified herself as a mistake, but there were issues she needed to deal with about her past.

The other thing men of her past thought was that she was easy, because she had tattoos. Where they got their thinking from, she had no clue, but she let them know in a heartbeat that she had the ultimate decision as to who she would be taking to her bed, not them. The third issue previous men had with her was her job. It went two different ways, there had seemed to be no middle ground. On the one hand, they would be scared of her profession as a woman in the military, then on the other hand, some of the men would want her to quit. These were the ones who were already in the military and felt threatened by either her status, or the elite team she had been on. Personally, June thought they had been jealous of all she had accomplished as she moved up the ranks in the Marine Corps. Wanting to see if she could develop, not really a relationship, but maybe a week-long fling with Al, June made the decision not to tell him too much personal information. She would approach the subject by saying this was a fling only, something to pass the time between the rain drops, and that she had to leave next week. The rally would still be going on for at least three or four more days, and he would have to stay until the end. Besides, she never had to see him again, since she had no clue where he was from, and if she was going to do this, then she didn't have to know.

"Stop," came the voice from beside her, making June jump. She whipped her head to the side and saw Al was awake. "You're thinking so hard *my* head hurts."

June giggled, then rolled over onto her side to face him. She noticed he didn't remove his hand from beneath her shirt, now it rested on her narrow waist. "So, I've been thinking."

"I heard." Al grinned at her, then shocked them both as he leaned in and kissed her square on the mouth. That was all it took, and June had her arms wrapped around him, her hands buried in his hair, and she deepened the kiss. It was a long time before they broke apart, and when they did, she realized they were both naked.

“Shit, I don’t have any condoms with me, they’re in my tent.” Al growled.

June laughed, and broke away from him to crawl over to a small tote in the corner and extracted a box of them. Instead of tossing one to him, she gave him the entire box. In no time he had one out, and they both covered him up. When he rolled her over onto her back, he was poised at her entrance when he looked at her, and she laid her hand on his cheek, and whispered, “This doesn’t go further than this weekend. No personal information exchanged.”

“I agree,” Al nodded, then reared back and stared at her in horror.

“You’re not married are you?”

“No, you?”

“No.”

“Kids?” they asked each other, and once they confirmed they didn’t have any, he bent down and kissed her, while she reached between them and guided him home. Al took his time as he entered her, and when he was fully seated, they both sighed and stared into each other’s eyes.

June felt a pang in the region of her heart, and closed her eyes against it. In no time, he began to move, and when she felt him settle his weight down onto her, she wrapped both her arms and legs around him, and held on tight. If she thought she was going to receive a quick bang, she was in for the shock of her life. No matter how many times June encouraged Al to speed up, he would lift his head, look her deeply in the eyes, and smile at her. This caused June to melt and forget all about rushing to an orgasm. Her first one took her so much by surprise that she stared at him with wide eyes, and he only smiled at her as he kissed her gently, and resumed his movements.

Her second orgasm overcame her as fast as the first one, but it was more intense. Once she regained her breath, he continued to move at his own pace, and when she felt her third

one begin to peak, she looked at him, and whispered, “Come with me.”

That seemed to be all it took, because he moved faster, and faster, and she held on for dear life. By the time they both orgasmed, they were breathing hard, and the sweat on their bodies caused them to stick together.

Al rolled off her to the side, his chest heaving with his heavy breathing, and he looked over at her with a satisfied smile. “Thank you, that was amazing.”

“It was, I’ve never had three orgasms in one sitting before.”

Al rolled onto his side, propped his head on his hand, laid the other over her torso, and grinned. “Want to try for four the next time.”

“Jesus, you’d probably kill me,” she laughed, then they both jerked when a loud sound of thunder seemed to shake the ground around them. The two were silent as they cleaned up after themselves, and Al found the bag she used for trash to toss the used condom in. Because of his brothers and their girlfriends, he never questioned why she had an entire box of condoms with her. Once he was dressed in his boxers, he looked at her with a messed-up face.

“What is it?”

“I’m going to brave the elements and head over to my tent.”

“You’re leaving me?” June asked in shock, thinking he only wanted a bang out of her, but she was the one that encouraged it. Before she could say anything else, she stared at him in shock as he laid a hand over her lips.

“Only for a few seconds. I tossed my clothes on the air mattress before I ran out last night. They were wet, maybe they’ve dried out, and my phone is over there. I need to see if the vendors are opening today. I don’t expect all fifty thousand people here to stay at their campsites today.”

“Oh,” June said the only thing she could think of. By the time she thought of one, he had disappeared, and she took

advantage of his absence by tossing the covers back, and doing a quick wash up from the bucket of water she'd brought inside the night before. For some reason, it was lukewarm, so she didn't freeze to death as she washed. She quickly got dressed and cleaned up the sleeping area of the tent. By the time Al returned, she was ready to start the day. He entered and she laughed as he had his wet clothes over his head, and she quickly took charge of the situation.

She strung her clothesline from one side of the tent to the other, lit six of her meditation candles and placed them beneath the line, then turned to look at him with a frown. "How heavy is it raining?"

"I would say it was more steady than heavy," Al frowned at her, then watched as she began to work. He stood there with his mouth opened in shock as he saw her unzip the tent, but no rainwater entered, and she set up what he could only describe as a porch roof, with poles and everything. The only open side was at the far end, but that had a screen that could be brought down, the same as with the sides, and she brought the covering of the screens down. With the entrance to the main part of the tent open, they could set up the clothes line, and Al felt it warm up in there in no time.

Once it was all set up, they settled beneath the 'porch' roof, and he looked at her with a grin. "I have got to get me one of these. Did you have to spray anything on it to become waterproof?"

"No, it came that way. Are you hungry?"

"Starving, what do you have?"

June grinned as she opened a pouch and dumped out several silver packets. She lit the fire in the pit, using the dry wood she'd stored inside the tent, and had a pot with the extra water from her impromptu bath heating over the flames.

"What is this stuff?" Al asked as he picked up one of the silver packets and saw 'vegetable soup' written in bold black letters across the front. He felt it and scowled at what felt like dried beans.

“It’s an MRE, military for meals ready to eat. All you have to do is add water. I’m going to have scrambled eggs for breakfast.” She dug through the pile and found the packet she wanted, and held up two with a raised brow.

“Sure, better than nothing,” he sighed and watched her work. In no time he was eating hot scrambled eggs, and drinking a cup of hot coffee. He looked at her with a frown. “You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you?”

“In my previous job, you had to be prepared for anything. I lost track of how many times we almost lost our lives if my team and I weren’t prepared.”

Al didn’t want to ask any awkward questions, so he only nodded. “My phone is almost dead, do you know what time it is?”

June grabbed her own phone and noted she had over eighty percent battery, and saw it was only just past seven thirty. She told him, then dug through yet another small canvas bag, took his phone from him, and laid it on top of the item she’d removed. “Battery charger. What time do you have to be at your trailer?”

“Not until ten, so maybe your trick with the candles will dry out my clothes. I can’t say the same for my shoes.” He held one up and they both winced.

“Sorry, the only thing I can offer you for that is another pair of socks. My boots are waterproof, and I don’t think you can fit into a ladies size five.”

Al chuckled, “No, I don’t think so. If I give you gas money, do you think when the time comes, you could give me a ride over to my truck? I can leave the bike here, and drive my truck back tonight. I’ll have clean and dry clothes and shoes with me then.”

“I can do that, where are your leathers?”

“Locked in the inventory trailer.”

“At least they’re dry.” She smirked at him, and he only wrinkled his brows at her. As they worked together to clean up their breakfast area, they settled before the fire with another

cup of fresh coffee, and after several minutes of silence, Al looked at her.

“What?”

“Tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to tell, and I thought I told you this morning that we wouldn’t be exchanging personal information. I know I’ll never see you again after this week, and well...” She shrugged and left her statement hanging there.

“Wouldn’t that be the perfect time then? We won’t ever see each other again, and what would it hurt to know a little more about each other. I’m going to be honest, and you can kick me out, but I like you already, and I wouldn’t mind repeating what we did this morning.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that. I really enjoyed it too. I won’t give you my last name, and you tell me something about yourself first.”

“Okay, I won’t give you my last name either. I’m Al, and I’m thirty. Don’t hate me or judge me, but I live with my siblings.”

“No judgement here, do you have a lot?”

“I’m the oldest of three.” He looked at her from beneath his lashes and saw her nod. He hadn’t realized he’d held his breath until it became hard to breathe, then he let it out slowly.

“Parents?”

“Yes, but they live in a different state.” As much as he wanted to tell her everything, he kept most of what he said true. He was the oldest of the A’s, but he didn’t want to have to explain about being a triplet, and all that entailed, so he kept it short. “You? Parents? Siblings?”

“It’s complicated,” June sighed heavily, and watched as Al used her coffee pot to make another pot. Once it was brewing over the hot coals of the fire, he looked at her with only a quirked brow. She sighed again, snuggled into her camp chair, and looked at him with a wrinkled nose. “How much time to you have?”

Al smirked and looked at his watch, then directly into her eyes. “Two hours or more.” He didn’t say another word, until she settled further into her chair, and nodded once.

“Fine, but I’m not mentioning any names, and it’s complicated. Don’t complain to me if you can’t follow along.”

Al only shrugged, wearing a grin, as he settled back on his elbow, stretched his legs out, and studied the beautiful woman before him. “I’m ready.”

CHAPTER 5



JUNE STARED off into space for so long, Al thought she wasn't going to say anything, but then she turned to look at him, and he could see the anguish in her eyes. "We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I can see you're upset about it. I just thought we could pass the time to wait out this storm."

"No, it's okay, I just had to wrap my head around a few things. I have never told another living soul what I'm about to tell you." She stared at him hard, and when he nodded, she gave one decisive nod in return, and took the cup of steaming coffee from him. While she blew on the hot liquid, she stared directly into his beautiful blue eyes. "No names, and no locations."

"Deal," Al said and sat up, crossed his legs, and held his own cup of coffee. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Fine, but you asked for it. First I grew up in the services quarters of a very rich person's penthouse apartment." At his frown, she nodded. "Mom was the housekeeper for the family. So, I don't mention any names, I'm going to label the people involved as 'M', 'B', 'K', 'J', and 'C'."

"May I ask what they stand for?"

"M is the Mister of the house, the head of the household. B is for his bitch of a wife. K stands for their kid. The J is for the butler, and the C refers to the cook."

"Oh, wow, so they were *that* rich."

"Yeah, but none of that money ever rubbed off on to Mom or me. K had everything handed to her on a silver platter. She

is what you would consider as being born with a silver spoon in her mouth. B is just as I described. She was a first-class royal bitch that tried to get Mom fired at least once a week for as long as I could remember.”

“How long did you live there?”

“Until I turned eighteen, but Mom was there five years before I was born. Last I heard she was still there. At least she was when I left after high school.”

“Wow.” Al didn’t know how to react to that. “What happened? I feel like something major happened.”

“It did, before I get to that, I need to tell you that K and I never, ever hung around each other, even though we lived under the same roof. She treated me the same way her mother treated the help, with nothing but contempt and disdain. I need to tell you something before the story can move forward, and it’s all based on hearsay.”

“Whose?” Al demanded, then soften his question. “Whose hearsay, who told you the story?”

“Mom.”

“Oh, okay, do you think there’s any truth in what she told you?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Go ahead.”

“Okay, first K is four, almost five years older than I am. She was enrolled in the poshest private boarding school where we lived when I was born. She was in kindergarten. The B was having some lavish dinner party one Saturday, and Mom was told by her doctor to stop working because she was almost due to have me.”

“Let me guess,” Al said into the silence. “B wouldn’t allow that to happen.”

“Correct. Anyway, Mom did what she was ordered to do, but then her labor started. When she told the B, she was told to work, to get the house cleaned. According to Mom’s version, this pissed her off, Mom that is. Then I came so quick, no one

could do anything. If it wasn't for J we might not have survived. He's the one that called for help, and he's the one that actually delivered me." For the first time since she started talking, June looked at Al with a grin, and he sucked in his breath at her beauty.

"Oh god, what happened?" He chuckled at her.

"As soon as Mom said her labor started and the B told her to continue cleaning, that it wasn't an excuse not to do her job, her water broke. Right in the middle of the B's brand new solid-white Persian rug."

"Oh shit."

"Yeah," June laughed. "Mom told me that's when the B told her she would have to pay to have it replaced, and she was withholding her pay until it was paid in full. Mom was so pissed that when she finally arrived at the hospital, and they asked her about the names for the birth certificate, she put the father's name on it. During her entire pregnancy she would never tell anyone who the father was."

"Oh shit, don't tell me, it was M?"

"You guessed it. Anyway, I had nothing to do with him, ever. Not until I was around the age of fourteen. Prior to that, I lived my life, that of the offspring of the help. I went to public school, and I enrolled in the sports I was interested in, while taking all my required classes. Never, not once did I ever have a tutor like K did. She went to a private boarding school, several of them, because she kept flunking out of them. Or getting kicked out, it was a toss-up which happened first. When she was home, she spent time with her friends, or with her horse that was bought for her when she was five. If she really buckled down and concentrated on it, she was good at jumping. For a few years, that's all she did, then she discovered boys, and the horse was neglected, and M ended up paying the people where they boarded the horse to exercise it. I never found out, but when the shit hit the fan, I think he sold it. At least that's what I'm assuming happened from all the conversations I overheard at the time. If I had been in his shoes, I would have done it."

“Why did the shit hit the fan?” Al refilled their mugs with the coffee, and set the empty pot off to the side to cool.

“Remember I said that K was five years older than me?”

“Yes, what does that have to do with anything?”

“She was away at her first year of college when M and B got a call that she was sick. She was in the hospital. They were gone for almost two weeks, when they returned, the B went on a rampage.”

Al frowned then turned his head to scowl at her. “About?”

“Over the years, unbeknownst to Mom or me, she, meaning the B, snooped and found my birth certificate. She saw that M’s name was in the spot of the father. It turned out that K had partied a little too hard one weekend, and ended up in the hospital with alcohol poisoning. They also found illegal drugs in her system. According to the tests they ran, she’d been doing those drugs for years.”

“Did they do any damage to her body?”

“Yes, she needed a new kidney. The B refused to allow her precious angel to go on dialysis, so she literally grabbed me by my arm, tried to drag me out of the house, and told me I was giving her daughter a kidney, since we were sisters. First I had ever heard of it, and Mom stepped in and told her no. Mom then sent me to my best friend’s house, and my friend’s mother saw how upset I was, and actually saw the bruises on my arm from where the B had grabbed me.”

“Shit, what did she do? Call the police?”

“No, she did one better.” June sipped her coffee and grinned over at Al. “She asked if I had a dollar, and when I gave it to her, she said she’d represent me. The first thing she did was get a restraining order against the B, and it was issued within twenty-four hours. It helped that I had fingerprint bruises on my arm, and even the back of my neck. My lawyer then told me because I was underage, I couldn’t donate an organ. Then she went one step further, and that’s when the shit *really* hit the fan.”

“Tell me,” Al leaned in as he said this, fascinated about the story being told.

“She demanded that everyone, M, B, K, me, and even Mom get blood tests. Until the results came in, there was nothing anyone could do about trying to take my kidney from me. The B even called their lawyer to fight it, but he agreed with my lawyer. It took six weeks to get the results back, and I’m telling you now, it wasn’t pretty.”

“What?” Al asked in confusion, then he snorted. “Your mother lied, and you weren’t M’s daughter after all?”

“Nope, I was his biological daughter with a ninety-nine-point-nine-seven-percent chance of him being my father.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Yes, good for me, but bad for K.”

“Why?”

“Because the chances of him being her biological father were one point seven nine percent.”

“Holy shit, he wasn’t her father?”

“No, apparently the B had an affair with M’s best friend years ago when M was out of town a lot on business, trying to establish himself. When M found out, he kicked the B out of the house and started divorce proceedings. It was an ugly three years. His lawyer agreed with him, saying that because he’d been lied to all this time, he wasn’t responsible for K’s care.”

“Did the best friend step up and do the right thing?”

“Not until M sued him for all the bills K ran up. You know, the horse, the shopping sprees, the boarding school fees, the car they bought her for her sixteen and eighteenth birthday. He, M that is, even told the B to go find a real family member to donate their kidney, or to get K into rehab for the drugs, and on dialysis to try to save her life. He refused to foot the bill for any of it.”

“Wow, what happened after that?”

“Once I found out that I wasn’t a match to K, and the divorce started, I continued to keep my head down and lived my life as I had before. Mom continued to clean the penthouse, and on my part, nothing really changed except for the B and K were gone.”

“Something did change though, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” June sighed so heavily her bangs flew into the air. She sat forward, set her half-empty cup down, and wrapped her arms around her knees, drawing them up to her chest. “It wasn’t pretty, and I didn’t like it, but I didn’t say anything negative about it, not until the end.”

“What happened?” Al wanted to reach out and wrap his arms around her, but somehow knew she wouldn’t take too kindly to it, so he stayed there and just watched her.

“Mom and M hooked up. I don’t mean a random booty call, I mean she moved out of the servants’ quarters and downstairs into his bedroom. He had her redo it to suit her tastes before she moved. That happened one week after the final divorce papers came in. Three months after that, they were engaged. They tried to move me into K’s old room, even offered to re-decorate it to my tastes, but I refused. I could understand it if he hadn’t known he was my father, but he knew from day one. According to Mom, and she doesn’t have any reason to lie to me, she told him when she found out she was pregnant. They even continued their affair right there in the house.”

“Okay, but what really happened?”

“M tried to buy my love with material things. The same thing he used to do with K all those years she lived in the house. I tolerated it for as long as I could. It all came to a head three days after I graduated from high school.”

“How?”

“I came home from my best friend’s house—remember her mother was my lawyer—she had just left to go to the summer camp she went to since she was five. That was the first year she would be a counselor. I was leaving the next day for the

military. I walked in the back door, like I always did, because god forbid the help's bastard off spring be caught using the front door."

"Shit, that was so ingrained into you, that it was automatic, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I had my normal snack with C and J, like it was any other day. When I left the kitchen, Mom and M called me into M's study. That's where they confronted me."

"About?"

"M started it, Mom chimed in, and I finished it."

"Tell me." Al scooted forward and pulled her from her chair and cradled her in his lap. She resisted at first, but he wouldn't let her up, he just held her. When she finally relaxed, he didn't say a word when he saw the tears gather at her eyes, and leak out of the corners. He continued to hold her.

"M told me that no child of his used the back door, that I was to use the front door from that day forward. I snarked back at him. Now remember, this was the first real interaction we'd ever had. I mean, like ever, and he was putting demands on me." She looked off into space and sighed heavily. "I snarked that if he was so damn concerned about me being his daughter, then he should have stepped up to the plate years ago. Not when it was convenient for him to acknowledge me. That went over like a ton of bricks, because Mom jumped in and said I *had* to be grateful for the roof over my head for the last eighteen years.

"I lost it on both of them then. I won't get into what was said, because it is all water under the bridge. All I remember was the fighting and arguing, then when I first tried to storm away from them, Mom told me if I walked away, then never expect to return there ever again."

"Ah, shit. What did you do?"

"I stormed away, but I didn't go to the room they'd redone for me, you know, K's previous room. Instead, I went to my room in the servants' quarters that I'd used since coming home

from the hospital when I was three days old. The next day I left, but again, not without the final confrontation.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Because, I was scheduled to get on the bus at five in the morning and head out to boot camp for the military. When M demanded why I was leaving, I told him so. He turned to Mom, and they started having a fight about me joining the military, and I only shook my head, laid my key to the penthouse on the table beside the door, along with a note I had written the night before, and walked out. I haven’t been back since.”

“How long ago was that?”

“It was three days after I graduated from high school, and I was eighteen. So, it’s been twelve years, two months, and three days.”

“Damn, that’s a long time. Have you even contacted them in all that time?”

“No, well, that’s not entirely true. I called home after I graduated boot camp and the new housekeeper said that the owners were on their honeymoon.”

“Shit, you didn’t even get invited to the wedding? Wait, did they even know where you were?”

“Yes, that note I left explained everything, where I would be for the next few months, what I would be doing, and then the address they could write me at, as well as when to show up for my boot camp graduation. Nothing, crickets. Once I found out they were on their honeymoon, I verified they were Mom and M, and hung up. I turned my back on them, like they’d turned their back on me.”

Al didn’t say anything, he only held her tighter, then reached over and took the towel he’d worn after drying his body from collecting his clothes from his tent, and used a corner of it to gently wipe the tears from her face. Neither one of them said a word as he did that.

On a small laugh, she struggled to sit up and looked at him as she scrubbed her face with her hands. “I hadn’t realized it

still upset me so much, but as I said earlier, it's all water under the bridge now." She shook her head and rose to her feet. She didn't know how to react around him now that he knew her deepest secret, and was literally saved by the bell when the alarm on his wrist began to sound.

Sighing in relief, she went into the tent, and was back in seconds. "Your clothes are dry if you want to get dressed. It sounds like the rain let up, I can give you a ride over to the area where your things are."

"Perfect," Al said as he stood, and as he walked by her, he snaked an arm around her middle and pulled her to him. He only held her for a long time, then lifted her chin with two of his fingers, and planted a gentle kiss on her lips. "Thank you for telling me your story. I'm sure it took a lot out of you, but it'll get better, trust me." Then, he turned and walked into the tent, only to return ten minutes later, completely dressed except that his feet were bare.

"I am not wearing socks for the second day in a row. Wet jeans, skivvies, or shirts are fine, but not socks."

"Skivvies?" She smirked at him.

"Fine, if you must know, I'm going commando today." That was when June saw a wad of dark-blue material in his hand and she smirked as they stalked out of the tent and over to his, tossing the items inside. She didn't say a word as she went over to her bike and actually pulled a plug she'd had installed in the sidecar in case of heavy rains, so it would drain out. By the time she was ready to go, she grinned down at Al as he sat in her sidecar, and they slowly made their way around the mud puddles and down the road to get to where they needed to be.

CHAPTER 6



JUNE FOLLOWED the directions Al had given her back at the campsite and drove right to the vendor trailers, and she didn't know whether it surprised her or not when he directed her to drive behind the rows, and she was able to see several vehicles, as well as totes behind, and even beneath, the trailers. She went in the direction he had pointed and parked as close to a big-ass, dark blue pickup with double wheels on the back. She turned to him with a raised brow, and he only shrugged and smirked at her.

“Is this close enough?” She nodded at the truck and grinned when he stood in the car and pulled his keys from his front pocket. She had gotten him so close to the truck that he opened the door, and climbed into the passenger seat, without having to put his bare feet on the ground. Once he settled in the seat, he looked at her with a grin.

“Thanks, I wasn't looking forward to walking across those stones in my bare feet.” He climbed up onto the seat to face the back of the truck, and in no time he had a pair of clean socks in his hands, and a pair of black engineer boots on the floor beside him. In less than five minutes his feet were dressed, and June smirked at him when he whipped off his tee, tossed it on the floor, and grabbed his deodorant. After using it, he slipped on a clean shirt, and was ready for the day.

“Want to see what I sell?” he asked as he climbed out of the truck, after June had to back her bike up to give him room, then headed to the back of his trailer.

“Is that a come on, like asking me if I want candy?” June smirked at him, then when he laughed, she laughed right along with him.

“It could be—” he chuckled while raising his brows up and down. “—if you were into leather and all that.”

“I like leather.” She smirked and left it at that. She slowly climbed off her bike, and went to the back of the trailer, but only stepped back as he opened it, then jumped in to help as he lowered the back door to make it into a ramp. As soon as it was halfway down, she paused, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

“I love the smell of leather.” She grinned at him as soon as the door was completely open. He grinned as he walked up the ramp, then stopped so suddenly that June ran into the back of him. After she caught herself in her stumble, she looked at him with a frown.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have a fancy trailer, as you can see.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I set up tables and put everything outside.” He pointed and June started to see what his problem was.

“Do you have a tarp and some tie-downs?”

“I do, but what good is that going to do me?”

“You can hang the tarp off the side of your trailer, and you’re parked between two trees, use them to tie the tarp off, and people will have cover, but they won’t be tripping over any ropes tied to the ground, it would all be overhead.” She walked back down the ramp and looked around, and nodded once. When he was still standing there looking lost, she clapped her hands to get his attention.

“Chop, chop, times a wasting.”

Al only shook his head and dug out the items she required from a tote his brother, Alex, had told him he should pack. He hadn’t even looked into it, just shoved it beneath the last shelf.

Knowing Alex, he would have thought of everything. He was their go-to guy on any run, because he never forgot anything.

Al pulled the tote out, popped the lid and looked at June with a grin. “How big of a one do you need?”

“What do you have?”

Al picked up the plastic-wrapped tarp and grinned. “This says it’s twenty by twenty.”

“Perfect, you have any tie-downs?”

“Yes, and I even have what looks like a hunk of clothesline.” He lifted the items, and felt better when she grinned and laughed as she took them. In no time she had everything she said she needed, then looked at him with another grin. “What?”

“I need a boost up.”

“For?”

“You going to climb the tree to tie this off?”

“Oh,” he said in shock, then went out to investigate what she’d been talking about as she’d prepared the tarp. In no time he had her in the tree, and followed her instructions as she tied it off. They did the same to the other side, and when they were done, he looked at it and scowled.

“What’s wrong now?”

“What if it rains again? Won’t it dump on any customers I might have?”

“No, because I made the back lower than the front,” she said as she grabbed his hand and pulled him behind her. She pointed, and said, “See, if we get any rain that will collect, it’ll run off here, and there’s a ditch it can do into, so you or your customers won’t be standing in water.”

Al was so impressed, he grabbed her face and kissed her hard. “Thank you.”

“Thank me by buying me dinner.” She laughed at his expression.

“Deal.”

“Okay, now let’s get you unpacked, I see other vendors opening up. What do you need me to do to help you?”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t, but I want to. Besides, I’m going to leave my bike here and walk around once you’re set up. This way when I’m ready to go back to the site you’ll know I’ve left.”

“Deal,” he said, and walked up the ramp, which was not under the tarp’s canopy. It took thirty minutes, but the two of them had everything set up like Al wanted, and was ready for business.

“What’s that?” June asked as she saw some sort of contraption beside the trailer with a sign above it about seats.

“Not only do I make these key chains, bracelets, leather necklaces, and belts, but I also make saddles, and custom motorcycle seats. This contraption allows someone to sit on it, and I can get their exact measurements, so the seat is custom made for the individual.”

“Really?” June said, and decided to sit on it. “Holy hell, is this what the seat would feel like?” she asked as she settled in like she was going for a long ride.

“It is, but it’ll take a couple of weeks for me to make, since it’s custom and all. I’m only taking orders at this rally with all the information, so I can go home, make the seat, then mail it to the customer.”

“Do you have any orders yet?”

“A few, but I didn’t really have the time yesterday to spend on this side of the trailer. I was very busy with the keychains and stuff.”

“I can help with that. Why don’t you see if you can’t get more business for your seats?”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.”

“Al, I have nothing better to do. Just show me what to do, and I’ll help. I do have one last question though.”

“What’s that?”

“What’s with the saddle in the trailer?”

“Oh, that’s why I went to Pierre first. There was an event over there, and I set up the saddle like I did for the bike seats.”

“Are you telling me that you make custom saddles as well as everything else?”

“I do.”

“Did you get any orders?”

“Five.”

“Why aren’t you advertising the saddle here. Sure, we’re surrounded by bikers, but don’t some bikers ride horses also?”

Al instantly thought of his future brother-in-law, and nodded. “You’re right. I’ll set that up, but first, let me show you this side of things.” It took almost forty-five minutes for him to describe everything, and he even pulled his phone to show her how he took credit-card payments.

When Al was satisfied that June would be comfortable with her part of his business, he began bringing out the stand for the saddle, then the saddle itself. If she hadn’t put up the tarp, he never would have brought them out. He didn’t expect a lot of business that day, because there was still a misty rain every now and then, but at least he was prepared for whatever business he would do. He would be happy with one customer on this rainy, gray, miserable-weather day.

Hours later, Al looked up from getting the final details on the sale of a saddle, when he spotted a man staring at him from the distance. He had no clue who that man was, but he ripped off the copy of the receipt for the customer, and then put his book away. When he and June had opened his trailer that morning, he had been hopeful to get only one customer due to the bad weather, especially after the downpour the night before. With June’s help at the beginning of the setup, he had a tarp protecting, not only his inventory, but also his work space. He had turned the small items business over to June, while he’d talked to other people about his custom-made motorcycle seats and saddles. He had thought he would be helping her out

most of the day, but it turned out he had a lot of customers for the custom seats, spending most of his time on that end of the trailer, leaving the other stuff to June.

“Mr. Stuart?” came a voice from behind him, and he turned to see the man from earlier. “I’m Mr. Overton.”

“Oh, hey, please call me Al.” He looked over his shoulder and saw June was occupied with a customer, and hoped she hadn’t heard his last name. They hadn’t wanted to know a lot of personal information about each other. Though she had dumped on him about her past, he didn’t think it had been too personal. “What can I do for you?”

“I don’t normally do this, but I’ve liked your gumption since you contacted me almost a year ago about setting your tent up earlier than allowed. I like to visit all the vendors at least once or twice during the rally to see how they’re doing.” He laughed and looked up at the blue tarp above them. “This was a brilliant idea, I never would have thought of something like this. I assumed you had a regular vendor’s trailer, but I like this, it’s more hands on and more personal. You’re not looking down on anyone if you had one of those other type of trailers.”

“Okay.” Al frowned, and shook his head. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to say, Mr. Overton.”

The other man sighed, then looked directly at Al as he made his intentions clearer. “Like I mentioned earlier, I don’t normally do this, I wait about six weeks after the rally to start planning the next one. Would you like to come back as a vendor next year?”

“Can I have this exact same spot?” Al asked as he pointed to his space between the two trees. “In case I don’t get a new trailer by then, I can always set up the tarp again.” Al laughed with the other man. “It’ll work well in all types of weather. Shade for the sunny days, protection for the rainy ones.”

“You can,” Mr. Overton said as he grinned, and shook Al’s hand. They finished the details that Al was to call him directly on the number on the back of the business card he’d been

given, then after the other man left, Al tucked the card into his wallet and turned to look at June.

“What was that about?”

“That was Mr. Overton, he’s in charge of the entire rally. He just asked me if I wanted to return next year. Apparently you have to apply, but he offered me a spot.”

“In this same location?”

“Yes, I asked the same thing.” Al was so excited he picked June up and twirled her around, laughing with her. When he set her down, he took her head in his hands and kissed her soundly. It was several minutes before they broke apart. They were at a lull in their customers and finally had a chance to talk. “How are you holding up?”

“Good, but you’re running low on inventory.”

“Show me,” Al said as they went to the table, and she showed him what was selling out. Al took her by the hand, and took her into the trailer. Once there, he told her where he kept the inventory, and June liked that it was clearly labeled. She pulled one of the plastic totes with a label for what she needed, and sure enough, it was all there.

“You’re very efficient.”

“Thanks, but that was my brother’s doing. He was bored one day and asked me if he could help. I told him to label everything, thinking he’d get out of my hair.” Al laughed as he shook his head. “He did this instead.” He turned in a circle, and that was when June really paid attention to all the totes, and their labels.

“Holy crap, how long did this take him?”

“I don’t know, a couple of days, but nothing longer than a week. I tell you, when I was doing up my inventory the night before last, it came in handy. Are you running out of any key chains with initials on them?”

“Not really, it seemed like I sold ten of almost every letter in the alphabet. I did have several ladies ask for something special, I wrote it all down for you.”

“Special how?”

June reached beneath her shirt and pulled out a necklace on a silver chain with a cage at the end of it, the cage held a stone. “Something like this, but with a leather strap instead of a silver chain.”

“What is it?” Al asked as he cradled the cage with his fingertips.

“It’s a crystal that helps clear my head when I meditate. I keep it on a long chain, so it doesn’t get tangled in anything. The ladies asked if you do birthstones.”

“I never thought of that. I wouldn’t even know where to start to look for them.”

“I’ll give you a few websites you can look up when you get a chance. I know you can’t do anything now, but maybe for next year.”

“Something to think about. Could you write those sites down along with the special requests?”

“I can. Now, how did you do with your seats and saddles?” June asked, and sucked in her breath as his entire face transformed into something that a kid in a candy store with unlimited money would look like.

“First, thank you for encouraging me to bring the saddle out. You were right. I have ten orders for saddles, and that’s in addition to what I got before, but I have twenty-five orders for the motorcycle seats, and it’s not even noon yet.”

“See, I told you.”

“Thank you.” He settled his hands on her hips, then leaned in and kissed her first on the forehead, then the tip of her nose, then finally her lips. They didn’t break apart until someone called out, and they quickly stepped back from one another, then went outside. The rest of the afternoon was as busy as the morning had been, and they had both missed lunch. By the time they closed and locked the door on the trailer, he looked at her with a sheepish grin.

“I have no problem riding bitch if you want to drive us to a restaurant, then out to the campsite. I really don’t want to have both my bike and truck there. I can ride back here on my bike tomorrow.”

“Deal, you’re buying, right?”

“That was the deal.” He laughed as he had her climb on the bike first, then when she was ready, he climbed into the sidecar. They discussed where they were going for several moments, then she started the bike, dropped it in gear, and drove off.

CHAPTER 7



JUNE PULLED into a famous restaurant that she had heard about not only from the people who'd been customers at the trailer that day, but also on the internet, and in newspapers. It was famous for their colossal burgers. She studied the menu, but kept looking at Al to see if he would notice how nervous she was. It wasn't because she was on a date with him, which really wasn't a date, or that she had to eat in front of him, it was *what* she was going to eat that had her worried. She drew in a deep breath, and set her menu down.

"You ready to order?" Al asked as he laid his aside also.

"I am, what are you going to have?"

"I think I'll have the mushroom Swiss burger with the works, minus the onions."

"You don't like onions?"

"I love onions, but I'm not going to eat raw onions if I'm going to be kissing you half the night."

June stared at him in shock, then threw her head back and laughed, shaking her head at his comment. That was the way the waitress found them.

"You ready to order?"

"We are," Al said, then pointed to June. "You first."

"No, you first, because I have a few modifications to my meal."

Both Al and the waitress frowned at her, and didn't say anything until she sighed. "Fine, I'd like the mushroom Swiss burger with the works, but can I have my onions grilled?"

"You can. Anything else?"

"Yes, double the lettuce, double the tomato, heavy on the mushrooms and onions, and no bun, or burger."

Her request was met with silence, then the waitress quickly shook her head. "Would you like a gluten free bun?"

"No thank you, just put it all on a plate."

"Would you like fries with that?"

"Do you have sweet potatoes fries?"

"Not fries, but we have tots."

"What are they?" Al asked.

"Tater tots, but they're made with sweet potatoes."

"Yes, please, but only if they're baked, if they're fried, then I'll do without." June nodded and agreed to the honey butter dip with them. Al ordered the regular burger and June frowned when the waitress didn't say anything about her not ordering a burger, so she stopped her as she started to turn away.

"Did you get that I don't want any meat in my order?"

"You ordered the mushroom Swiss burger."

"Without the burger. Everything on a plate, no meat." She took a deep breath and nodded once. "I'm a vegetarian."

"Ah, got it," the waitress wrote something down, and walked away. June looked at Al from beneath her lashes and saw he had a confused expression on his face. "What?"

"No meat? How can you have a burger with no meat?"

"Easy, I eat everything else that was on the burger, but without the meat."

"Okay, but what was up with the no bun thing?"

“I don’t eat carbs, and there are less carbs in the sweet potatoes than the regular potatoes.”

“But you don’t look like you need to lose weight, I saw you naked, remember?”

June grinned. “Oh, I remember alright, but it’s not a weight issue with me, it’s a health issue. Remember that best friend I told you about? The one that her mother was my lawyer?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Her father had three heart attacks in a two-year span. The last one he almost didn’t survive. The doctors told him to stop eating red meat. It took some time and a lot of arguing, but he finally changed his diet to eliminate it, he went to chicken or turkey, and he not only lost weight, but he became healthier. I talked to my friend six months ago, and her father is still eating right and staying healthy.”

“Do you eat other things that come from animals?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you eat eggs? Drink milk?”

“I’m a vegetarian, not vegan. I eat vegetables, eggs, milk, cheese, just not the meat of the animal.”

“Ah, okay.” He thought about his family back home and the amount of meat they all ate. He didn’t stop to consider what any of them would do if they didn’t eat it. Hell, they had all pooled their money together and in a few short months they would be getting not one, but two butchered cows for their freezer for the winter. He made a mental note to make sure they could put a garden in next spring, then he realized that after June left the rally, he would never see her again so the point of a garden would be moot.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just thinking about my family. We’re big meat eaters.”

“Okay, but that has nothing to do with me. You eat what you want, and I’ll eat what I want. Nothing to it.”

“Oh,” Al said, then leaned back when their drinks arrived. He didn’t know what to say after that, so he asked how she had liked helping him that day.

“It was fun, and I don’t mean to come across as a bitch or anything, but don’t get your hopes up that I’ll be doing it again.” She held up her hand when it looked like he would protest. “I still have a lot of the rally to see and experience.. This is the first actual vacation I’ve taken for myself in twelve years. This is my time for me. Once I leave here, I’m heading to a new job that who knows how long it will be before I can get the time off for myself again.”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized that. I want to thank you for helping me today, it was a great time, though we didn’t really hang out together.”

“No, but the purpose of setting up a vendor spot was to sell your goods. I’m happy I was able to help you do that, and you were able to get sales for your seats and saddles. You were able to get more sales this afternoon, right?”

“Yes, I’ll be busy all winter. It’ll give me something to do when the snow hits.”

“You come from a snowy area?” June asked, then quickly held up her hand. “Forget I asked that, no personal information.”

“Correct, no personal information, but yes, I’ve heard it gets extremely snowy some winters.” They left it at that, though June had a million and one questions running through her mind, but she wouldn’t ask them. They sat back as their waitress approached and she set the plates down before her. She waited until June looked at hers and June gave her a grin when she saw there was no bun, nor any meat on the plate.

“Thank you, this looks perfect.” She pushed a tator tot around, and saw that it had been baked, and not fried like she’d requested.

She picked up her knife and fork and cut into the creation and smiled when the mushrooms cascaded down onto the bed of lettuce and tomatoes. She took her first bite, closed her

eyes, and moaned. “This is good,” she said as she opened her eyes and saw Al staring at her. “What? It’s the same as yours without the meat or the bun.” She turned her plate to show him, and when he saw for himself, he seemed to be more relaxed at what she was eating. As they continued with their meal, she offered him one of her sweet potato tots, and he took it and his eyes flared in surprise.

“Wow, I only eat sweet potatoes at Thanksgiving dinner, but these are great.”

“Yeah, and you can fry them, or you can bake them. Me, I prefer them to be baked, less fat, and healthier.”

“You’re all about the health stuff aren’t you?”

“I am. That man I mentioned earlier was like a father to me. Since I never knew my real father was M, not until I was fourteen at least, but that man treated me like one of his own.” She laughed and had to cover her mouth with her napkin to hold in her mirth. “It wasn’t like he already had enough, he used to say what was one more.”

“How many kids did he have?”

“Including my friend? Eight. I would make number nine.”

“Wow, so you grew up with them?”

“Yeah, when the B was being a B, I would go over there to hang out.” She looked at Al with a grin. “All nine of us were girls.”

“Holy shit, no boys?”

“Nope.” They shared a laugh, and finished their meals. Afterward, because it wasn’t too late, they walked up and down Main Street, taking in the sights, going in and out of the stores, and June ended up purchasing several shirts that had caught her eye. She looked at him with a grin. “At least I’ll have something to wear at my new job that isn’t a military uniform.” They both looked at her olive-green tee, and her camo pants. In one store Al encouraged her to try on a few pair of regular jeans, and she ended up purchasing five different pairs.

“I don’t know what to think now. I’m a normal civilian, at least in the clothes department. I’ve been wearing camo for the last twelve years.”

“Time to start a new chapter in your life then. Get back to your old ways.”

“Thank you,” she said as she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek, but he turned his head at the last minute so her lips landed on his, and they broke apart soon after, both wearing a smile.

They only stayed in town until ten that night, and then walked back to the vendor alley, where she had parked her bike after leaving the restaurant before walking the shops. June waited for Al to make sure everything was locked up tight, then they both climbed on her bike, and she drove them back to the campsite. The first thing she did was park, so that her headlight shone into his tent, and after he exited the sidecar, he went in and checked his limited belongings. Half his sleeping bag was still wet, but the water had receded from the tent. He made a mental note to move it the next day. Earlier that morning he’d seen the ditch June had mentioned the night before, and realized she had been right.

As he exited the tent, he walked over to her with the still-wet sleeping bag in his hands.

“Any chance you know where I can hang this to let it dry?”

“Sure,” she said, but instead of telling him, she took it and did it herself. It turned out she unzipped one of the screened sides of the ‘porch’ section of the tent, and set up a line to put up and hang the sleeping bag over it. It was all done in less than two minutes. In that time, Al finished putting the fire together, and with a raised brow to her, he lit it when she nodded.

Before he settled down, he went to her bike and withdrew one of his purchases from the sidecar. He had purchased a chair, so he could sit at his vendor trailer, or at his campsite, or at hers.

“Smart,” June said as she watched him open the chair and settle in. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Not really, not this late at night. I need to get up early and head over. I want to put together some of the key chains we ended up running low on. I can do that before I have to open at ten.”

“You have the equipment there to do it?”

“I do.”

“Oh.” They remained silent, each of them lost in their own thoughts as they stared into the small flames of the fire Al had built and lit. It seemed like hours, but was only one before a huge yawn overtook June, and she started banking the fire. As she rose to go into her tent, she looked at him with a quirked brow.

“Would you like to join me?”

“Yes.” He nodded, folded up his chair and stuck it beneath the canopy, out of the elements, and followed her into the tent. He zipped it shut behind them.

CHAPTER 8



JUNE TURNED to look at Al as he zipped the tent closed behind them, and studied him in the dim light. “You know why I asked you to join me, right?”

She saw his smirk in the dark and rolled her eyes at him. “I’m assuming it’s to have sex.”

“You assumed correctly. Again, the same as this morning, no strings attached.”

“Gotcha,” Al said as he toed off his engineer boots, and set them in the corner of the tent, away from the door, and when he turned back to her, he sucked in his breath at the sight before him. She had lit only two candles, but it brightened the entire area, and she had removed her own shoes, as well as her tee. He saw a tattoo that wound its way from the waistband of her camo pants, up her abdomen, and behind her back. Intrigued, he walked up to her, laid only one finger on the vine, and followed it around. From her back it went over her shoulder, down her arm, and stopped just past her elbow.

“This is beautiful. Who did it?”

“Tattoo artists all over the world. I had originally only wanted six inches of the vine, but it got away from me.” She grinned at him, and he smiled down at her.

“And the flowers?” he asked as he traced one on the back of her right shoulder blade.

“Each tattooist who added to the original vine added one flower to it. Whatever was the origin to their area of the

country, or the state flower when I was states side and had work done.”

“Wow,” Al said as he turned her to the light to get a better look at it, and in no time he had her bra unhooked, off, and trailed a line of kisses over the tattoo. When he was at her elbow, he looked up at her with a grin. “Where does it start?”

“My knee,” June whispered, and the only time she stopped him when his hands reached for the waist of her pants was to tell him that he needed to remove his shirt. He did in a flash, and tossed it in the direction of his boots.

“Careful of the candles,” she whispered, and reached out and laid her hand over his very-impressive six-pack. As she felt his muscles, she realized she wasn’t feeling a six pack, it was definitely an eight-pack. “Jesus, what do you do for your job?”

“No personal information, remember, but I work out with my brothers.”

“There are more of you like this at home?” She stared at him in shock.

Al smirked, and nodded as he undid the buttons on her pants, and quickly lowered them. In seconds, she stood before him in only her bikini underwear, and he sucked in his breath at her beauty. Down on one knee before her, he saw where the tattoo started on the left side, and again, he kissed his way up the vine, around her body, ending at her elbow, but he continued down to her hand, and took each finger individually into his mouth, and sucked gently. Halfway through his exploration, her knees had given out, and he’d caught her and laid her out on the sleeping bag, making sure to turn her, so he could followed the tattoo.

During his intense concentration of her artwork, he had removed the rest of his clothes, so he lay before her naked. He smiled down at her when she stared at him with a drowsy look in her eye, then he laughed as she suddenly reared up, pushed him over onto his back, and said against his chest, “My turn.” She used her hands and mouth to study every dip and plane on his entire body, leaving one part for last.

Al sucked in his breath, and shoved his head back into the pillow when she had taken his engorged cock into her mouth, and it took all his concentration to hold it together and not lose it.

“Damn,” he said as he had himself under control, and looked down his body at her. The sight before him, seeing his cock going in and out of her hot, wet mouth had him closing his eyes again. “You don’t have to do that,” he said between gritted teeth, and cried out when those teeth gave a little nip.

“I know,” she said as she kissed the spot she’d nipped, and smiled at his pained expression. “I wanted to, I wanted to see how you tasted.”

Al had no response to that, so he continued to lie there, then when her mouth suddenly disappeared, he didn’t know if he was grateful for the reprieve, or disappointed not to have her mouth on him. He whipped his eyes open, lifted his head, and stared down at her when he felt the condom being put on over his shaft, then before he could blink, she hovered above him.

“Guide me,” she said between clenched teeth, and that was all the direction he needed. With one hand on his cock, and the other on her hip, he rubbed the head of it through her juices and sucked in his breath.

“Damn, you’re so hot, and wet.” He then only put the head at her entrance, put the other hand on her hip, and slowly lowered her onto him. They both seemed to hold their breath until she was fully seated, and released it in a whoosh.

“Damn,” they both said at the same time as they looked into each other’s eyes. Unable to resist, Al reared up, wrapped one arm around her, while the other latched onto the back of her neck, and he brought her forward for a brutal kiss. Their lips smashed together, and he tasted a little bit of blood. He didn’t know whether it was his or hers, and he didn’t care. He continued to kiss her, then when she reached behind her and took his sac in her hands and gave it a light squeeze, he flipped them over, and he didn’t waste any time in pounding into her. It didn’t take long before she had wrapped herself around him,

and they were both frantic in trying to reach their release at the same time.

By the time June had her third orgasm, Al was ready to explode, and with his hand between them, he looked her directly in the eye, and said, "Again." As he pinched her clit, her eyes flared, and he again slammed his mouth over hers to soften her scream, and he arched into her, letting his own release go. He hadn't realized he'd collapsed on her, until she pushed him off, and they both breathed like they had been deprived of oxygen for too long.

"Damn," June said as she panted to catch her breath, and turned her head to look over at Al. It seemed like her head was the only thing in her body that seemed to work. "You okay?"

"Maybe, I don't know." He could turn only his head to grin at her. "I'll tell you once I get feeling back into my body."

June snorted a laugh, and continued to lie there panting for breath. Al was the first one to move, and he went over to the corner of the tent where he had seen a case of water, and grabbed two of the bottles. He crawled back to her and helped her sit up, then handed her a bottle.

"It's not cold, but it's wet," he said as he opened his bottle, and drank the entire thing down in almost one gulp. June did the same, but she only drank half of it.

"Damn," she said, once she could talk and had feeling coming back into her body. "That was very intense. I don't think I've ever had sex that explosive before."

"Me neither," he said, then reached out and gently touched the corner of her bottom lip. "I'm sorry."

June frowned at him, "For what?"

"After I was buried inside you and kissed you, I tasted blood. You now have a fat lower lip, with a little cut on it. I think one of my teeth might have hit you when I smashed my lips to yours."

June grinned at him, "You can smash me with any body part you want if that is the result." She giggled as she finished her water, and it wasn't long before they settled in her sleeping

bag for the night. It turned out they didn't get much sleep that night, nor for the next three nights. If Al wasn't at his vendor trailer, or June out seeing the sights, they were in bed together. June woke up alone on Tuesday morning, knowing Al had already left for the vendor trailer. He had said the night before that he had to get there early to make up some more initial key chains, and had set the alarm on his watch earlier than usual.

She enjoyed that he had his way with her, not that she was complaining or anything, but she had fallen back asleep, and he had left. Now she lay there in their cozy tent when a realization overcame her so suddenly, she sat up and stared into space in shock. "Shit!" she called out as she flopped the blankets back, and quickly dressed. She looked around frantically, then sat heavily in the center of the sleeping bag, taking deep breaths to try to calm herself.

"Shit, shit, shit," she kept repeating, then on a final deep inhale, which she held for several long seconds, then let it out in a rush, she looked around with tears in her eyes.

"Son of a bitch, I've fallen in love with him. I can't do this." She firmed her resolve, and very slowly, methodically, and efficiently, she packed up everything and once it was ready, she steadily put it all either in the sidecar, or strapped onto the back of her Harley. Once she was ready, she sat on her bike and pulled her phone. As much as she wanted to tell Al she was leaving, she didn't have his number, and she knew herself enough to know if she saw him again, she would throw herself at his feet and beg for them to have a relationship, to spill all their personal information at their feet. She wasn't that type of girl—never had been, and never would be—so she did the only thing her heart would allow, she sent a text to her new boss saying that she was available that day, and could she start work early. In less than ten minutes she had her response that she was welcome anytime, and if she wanted to come early, then they really could use her.

June looked at the campsite with a critical eye, and when she saw nothing of hers there, only the spot her tent had matted the grass down, she nodded once, started her bike, and slowly left the area. Not once did she look at Al's tent, nor

look back over her shoulder, or in her side mirrors. What she had thought was a random hookup, turned out to be a heartbreaker, because she had gone and fallen in love with the man she could never have.



AL PULLED INTO HIS CAMPSITE, excited to see June. He had terrific news he wanted to share with her. Because he'd had such a successful day at 'work' he had driven out to the restaurant they had eaten at before, and he'd bought them both dinner. It was the exact same meal they had eaten on their first date. He had been so excited to get to her that he hadn't paid attention to his surroundings, and stopped dead in his tracks when he realized that June's tent wasn't there. There was nothing there at all. He held the bag with their food in and turned in a complete circle at least three times before it dawned on him that he was in the right spot, but she had left.

"Shit." The knowledge that he would never see her again came over him so hard, he grabbed his chest, and sat down hard in the very spot her tent had been. "Fuck me," he said into the night several minutes later, and for the first time since being there he wished one of his brothers were there with him. His heart was so devastated that he'd never see his June again, that it actually felt hard to breathe. It took several minutes for him to get himself under control, and in his mind, he heard his sister asking his other brothers why they felt the way they had about the women who had joined Boswell. As he played out the conversations in his head like a movie, he realized he was like all his other brothers. He had fallen deeply in love with his vacation hookup, which was devastating in itself, because he knew from the beginning that it was only a hook-up and that nothing permanent would or could come from it. By the way he was currently feeling, he knew he's fallen hard for her, it would take a long time before he would get over her.

Shaking his head, he slowly made his way over to his tent, and went inside. This was his first time back in there since the rain had come through on Friday night. He looked around at

the spacious area, and shook his head. Unable to stay there, he went out, and the first thing he did was walk over to the nearest trash barrel to toss the food in when he saw his neighbors across the way, sitting around the fire. He walked over, and introduced himself, then told him what he had.

The woman at the fire looked at him in shock. “You can get vegetarian food around here?”

“Yes,” Al said, then gave her the bag, and told her the name of the restaurant. “Sorry, but there’s no bun, or meat on the one.”

“That’s okay, because I don’t eat gluten.” She took the bag and Al refused the money offered for the food, then he gave a small wave and climbed onto his bike to head back into town. As much as he wanted to go get drunk, he knew that wasn’t the answer, so he went back to his trailer, and spent the entire night making up more key chains, instead of leaving June’s bed early to make them. By the time he had to open, he was confident that he had enough made that he wouldn’t have to make any more for the next week of the rally. He felt like he had a heavy weight around his heart, and could barely function, but he put on a smile and got down to business in front of his customers, but once he closed up for the night, he sank into a deep depression. He continued to stay in his truck and trailer for the duration of the rally, and when it was time to leave, with everything loaded, he finally went back out to the campsite and packed up his belongings there. With a heavy heart, he climbed back into his truck to head home, but his phone rang, and thinking it was June, he answered quickly.

“Hello?”

“Al Stuart?”

“Yes,” Al frowned at the male voice coming over the phone. “Who’s this?”

“Mr. Overton, I have a question for you.”

“What’s that?”

“I know it’s presumptuous of me, but I had a vendor cancel for an event that starts in two days and was wondering if you

had enough stock left over to set up your trailer here?”

“First, where is here? What is the event? And how long will it be?”

“It’s here in Casper, Wyoming. The event starts in two days, and ends on next Sunday. It’s a rodeo.”

Al did some mental calculations, and looked over to where June’s tent had been, and nodded, then spoke out loud. “I can be there today, or early tomorrow. Can you send me the information?” They concluded the call, and once he had the address to where he was to go, he drew in a deep breath and sent a text to his brother Alex. He thought he would be the best person to tell the others. Besides, he knew Alex would never hound him about why he was avoiding going home. He received a text back from Alex saying he wished him luck, and that he hoped he sold out of everything. He also said he would tell the others, that the women were training the new recruit as they spoke.

Feeling better than he had all week, Al started his truck and headed to the next event, it took a couple of hours for the fog to lift from his brain, and he began to see the potential for his saddle business at this place in Casper. With a lighter heart, he put June behind him and got on with this next event. He realized that if he took one day at a time, then he could get through the heartache and regret of not getting to know more about June, and having the love of his life walk out on him. It turned out that it would be several weeks before he made it home, because after the event in Casper, there had been one in Cheyenne, and after that one up in Billings, Montana. Al finally had to tell Mr. Overton no to the next event, because he was out of stock. Everything he had packed to take to Sturgis was gone. He would have a lot of work cut out for him in the coming months, and all he knew was that now that June wasn’t a distraction to him, and he knew he wouldn’t fall into the same trap as his brothers had by falling for the recruits for Boswell, because even though he couldn’t have her, he only wanted his June, then he could buckle down, set up his area of the warehouse he had bought with his brothers, and fill the orders for his motorcycle seats, and the saddles. It turned out

that at the end of his trip, he had to make fifty saddles in the next year, along with over a hundred motorcycle seats.

As he drove home, he let his mind wander and wondered what his brothers would say if he set up a bedroom in one of the offices at the warehouse so he could concentrate on his work, and not have to travel back and forth to the compound every day. He didn't know how he could handle seeing all his brothers happy with their partners and him being so miserable. If he could get through his sister's wedding without punching someone, then he should be okay. At least he hoped he would be. After all, didn't time heal all wounds, and the wound to his heart at losing June was huge. It would take a long time for that one to heal.

CHAPTER 9



JUNE DROVE THROUGH A TOWN, saw a grocery store, and decided to stop and stock up on vegetables. She didn't know what the living situation would be like where she was going, and if she would even have a kitchen to cook in, so she wanted to make sure she had something she could eat raw or cooked over an open flame. If push came to shove, she could always find a campground and set up her tent to live in until she could find a permanent place for herself. She pulled in and parked, then strode into the store. To look at her, she looked like a strong, confident, woman, but if they really looked, they would see the sadness in her eyes. On a deep sigh, she grabbed a shopping cart and began with the produce section.

It seemed like everywhere she looked she saw slight variations of Al all around her. The man, that wasn't Al, either had his height, or his build, or the color of his hair, or the color of his eyes. She finally had to stop looking at others, as she quickly grabbed her items and fled the store. It seemed like everyone she met wanted to stop and chat, but she finally looked at her watch and shook her head. "Sorry, but I'm late for my interview. Don't want to get the new boss upset on the first day." After stuffing her purchases into the sidecar, she climbed on, fired it up, and looked at her phone for the directions. Almost an hour later, she slowed down and took a right into a driveway.

"Holy shit," she said as she looked at the massive house before her, then off to the right was another massive structure, and further out, was yet another one. She didn't know where to park, so she parked before the first one, and turned her bike

off. She looked up as someone came out of that building and stopped and stared at her.

“Can I help you?”

“Please, I’m looking for Morgan Stuart?”

“Ah, you must be the new recruit. She’s not here right now, by why don’t you come inside? I’m Chuck by the way.” He held out his hand, then escorted her to the front door. He walked in, and had her come in behind him. He let out a whistle and June stared in shock as what seemed like dozens of people turned to stare, but turned out to be only one or two over only one dozen.

“Chuck?” One of the women asked as she came forward and stuck out her hand. “Hi, I’m Astrid Montoya, what can we do for you?”

June took her hand and introduced herself. She noticed all the men stayed back, and the women came forward. “I’m June Vanderbilt, and I’m looking for Morgan Stuart.”

“She’s not here right now,” Astrid said, then laughed. “Sorry, you’re the new recruit for Boswell Group, aren’t you?”

“I am, and you are?”

“Oh, where to start, but first, do you have anything in your vehicle that needs to come inside right now? We’re getting ready to cook dinner.”

“I have some vegetables.”

“Great, let’s go get them, then I’ll do the introductions.” Astrid said, then turned to the men. “John, call your sister and tell her June is here.” Then she turned to June to led her outside. Nothing was said until Astrid saw the bike and laughed. She backed up a few steps, opened the door and cried out, “Joyce, get your butt out here.”

June frowned, but didn’t say anything because not only a woman she assumed was Joyce came out, but all the others did as well.

“Oh, my freaking god!” came a cry from the crowd, and June turned to see a raven-haired beauty stride forward, squat

down, and began studying the motorcycle before them.

“Forty-four?”

“Five.”

“Sweet Baby Jesus,” she laughed. “I’m in love.”

“Hey,” a man with his arm in some sort of foam contraption with a sling called out.

“I love you too, baby, but this is gorgeous.” She ran her hand over the tank and June smirked when everyone only shook their heads and rolled their eyes at her. They all looked up when a red pickup came barreling in the driveway and slammed on the brakes. A woman and man climbed out, and the woman strode forward, with her hand extended.

“Hi, I’m Morgan Stuart, and this is my fiancé, Wyatt Erwin. We live a couple miles down the road. I didn’t want you to be overwhelmed by the gang.” She laughed as the men stuck their tongues out at her, and she ignored them as she turned to June and waited until she withdrew the two bags of vegetables she’d just purchased.

“First, as I said, I’m Morgan, and this is Wyatt. Let me introduce you to everyone else. You have my older brothers, the J’s. Justin, John, and Josh.” The men stuck out their hands to shake as their names were called. “Then there is me, then the A’s, we have Alfie, Alan, and Alex.” Morgan stared in shock, then shook her head. “Sorry, I’m so used to saying it like that. Alfie isn’t with us right now.”

“Did he pass?”

“No!” everyone yelled at her, then it was the man with his arm in a sling who spoke. “He’s away on business, but he’s the oldest of us A’s. In case you haven’t noticed we’re triplets. I’m Alex, not only the last of the triplets, but the baby of the family.” He grinned when June coughed her surprise at his comment. “I’m dating Joyce.” He grinned when the woman who had come out to examine her bike walked up to him.

“Yes, now the women all work for me at Boswell. I’ll introduce them in the order they arrived. It’ll be up to them to

tell you what they did on their team. The boys know all about the EWMs.”

“Okay,” June nodded and paid attention.

“Ava,” Morgan began, and Ava answered with a wave of her fingers.

“Sniper.” And on it went.

“Joyce.”

“Mechanic.”

“Astrid.”

“Communications.”

“Janice.”

“Medic.”

“Alice.”

“Scout.”

“And now we have June Vanderbilt. What did you do on your team?”

“I was an analyst. I was given all the Intel we had before a mission and had to formulate a plan on how we were going to utilize it to complete our objective.”

“Damn, I was only given about three hours,” the woman named Alice said.

“Where will I be staying? Are there any apartments available in town?”

“You’ll be staying here,” Morgan said as she strode to the front door, then stopped in her tracks. “Sorry, I forgot, we have Chuck, he’s the J’s best friend since forever, like another brother to me, and he works with the J’s. Then we have Carl. He’s an agent with the local BCI agency and he works closely with us. Come on in, and I’ll show you around.”

They went inside, and the man with only one good arm took the vegetables to the kitchen, and called out, “How do you like your steak? We’re having steak, salad, and baked potatoes for dinner.”

June felt like a bug under a microscope when everyone turned to her with raised brows. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m a vegetarian, I don’t eat meat.”

“Okay, would you like us to cook up some of these vegetables for you? Do you want them grilled?” Her answer didn’t seem to faze anyone, so June breathed easier and went with it.

“Please, and there are sweet potatoes in there, could you do up one of those for my baked potato?”

“Do they cook the same way as the regular ones?”

“Yes.”

“Got it,” Chuck said as he joined Alex in the kitchen. She turned back to the others with a frown.

“The guys cook?”

“Yes, we all cook, but whoever doesn’t cook the meal does cleanup, so it’s equal. And no, we don’t have any schedule as to who cooks when, or what we cook, it’s whoever gets to the kitchen first, and what they’re craving,” Alice told her. “Is there anything else you don’t eat besides meat?”

“White.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t eat white bread, or any bread at all, no carbs, no white potatoes, no white rice, no pasta.”

“I know it’s none of my business, but are you allergic?” Carl asked as he began taking dishes from the cupboard.

“No, it’s more of a health thing. I saw my best friend’s family go through hell when her father had three heart attacks in a short span of time, for eating red meat, pasta, and lots of mashed potatoes. After seeing the devastation they went through of almost losing him, I made a vow to eat healthily.”

“How did you survive in the Marines then?” Morgan frowned. “Because I don’t recall any gluten or vegetarian meals in the mess tent.”

June grinned for the first time since leaving Sturgis earlier that day, and said one word. “MREs.”

The woman laughed, the men frowned, and Wyatt asked, “What are those?”

“Meals ready to eat,” Morgan told him. “Remember those silver packages we ate on that one camping trip.”

“That crap?”

“Yep, it’s the military’s way of feeding their soldiers without all the fuss and mess.”

“They tasted like shit.”

“Yeah, they do, but when you’re hungry and there’s nothing you can eat available, I know I’ll have something in my stomach.” June looked at the women and nodded only once, knowing they would understand what she was about to say. “I wasn’t a die-hard vegetarian until I was sent to Nigeria for several missions. It was my duty to stake out the local markets.”

“Oh god,” all the women said as one, and it was the woman named Ava who looked at the men.

“You don’t want to know. Let’s just say that I walked through that meat market one time. Only once in my twelve years as a Marine, and I swore off meat for six months.”

“We don’t want to ruin anyone’s appetite, so let’s table this for now,” Janice said. “I was turned off for about a year after going on a mission there.”

The others agreed, or frowned, but got down to work. It was Astrid who started showing June around, and she ended up taking the last bedroom on the right. “Can we use the upstairs?”

“Sure, did you have anything particular in mind?”

“I like to meditate in the mornings, or when my mind won’t settle. I thought the attic would be a perfect place for the peace.”

“It would be, and go ahead. I only ask if you lite candles not to leave them unattended.”

“That’s a given,” June said, and the women helped her carry her belongings inside and she unpacked as the others made dinner. By the time dinner was ready, she was already settled in her room, and had stored her camping gear in the attic. She would set up her meditation spot later.

The camaraderie around the table surprised June, but as she sat there and studied the others, she realized they weren’t only housemates, but they were love mates also. She tried not to wear her heart on her sleeve, but something must have slipped through because she started when Chuck asked her a question.

“You okay, June?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You looked so lost there for a minute.”

“Sorry,” she sighed, and saw everyone looking at her with varying degrees of concern. “Fine, I was in Sturgis since last Wednesday. I met someone and we hooked up, I told him from the beginning it was only a vacation fling, that I had to get to my new job. Which is here, and we didn’t exchange any personal information.” She wasn’t about to tell these people that she’d told Al about her past, but since no names had been mentioned, she was safe that he would never be able to find her.

“What happened?” Carl asked.

June drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. With her arms crossed on the table in front of her, she leaned in and sighed again. “I fell in love with him. We had one hell of a thunderstorm come through, and he had set up his tent over a runoff tunnel.”

“Shit,” the women said, and turned to the men to explain.

“You didn’t,” Carl asked, but it came as a statement of fact, not a question.

“No, because I had seen it and used my shovel to divert it toward the field behind me. I stayed high and dry, while he had everything soaked. I invited him into my tent to dry out, and well, one thing led to another, and we ended up spending almost every waking minute together if he wasn’t working. I woke this morning and realized I’d fallen in love with him, and had to get out of there. That’s why I’m here a day early. I was supposed to be in Sturgis until tomorrow, with reporting to Morgan by Monday.”

“Damn, and you didn’t tell this guy you were leaving?” Chuck asked.

“No strings attached,” Justin turned to look at his friend, then back at June. “Right?”

“Right, I didn’t want to see his expression when he found out I was leaving. I left while he was at work, but now I have Boswell, and I’ll sink my teeth into finding out what’s going on here and how you need me.”

“Girl,” Janice shook her head at her. “It’ll probably take you until next week to catch up. We won’t get into it tonight, but we start at the office at eight in the morning. Be prepared for a lot of reading, and a lot of information being thrown at you.”

“Be ready to take notes.” Alice grinned as she rose from the table and began gathering plates, since she hadn’t been in on the cooking part of the meal. When June rose, they told her that she didn’t have to help on her first day. She sat there and watched the others work, then Joyce told her to follow her, so they could put her bike away.

In the garage, June didn’t really look up until she’d parked her motorcycle where Joyce had told her to, and once she shut it off, dismounted, she looked around and turned to gawk at Joyce.

“I know right?” Joyce laughed. “I’m in charge of this baby too,” she laughed again, and joined June where the bikes were parked. As you can see, this is where we park all the bikes. Everyone rides, the only ones not here are Alfie’s, because he took his with him on his trip. Then, Morgan and Wyatt park

theirs over at the ranch. Wyatt and his brother Dillon own and operate something like fifteen thousand acres, they run horses and cattle.”

“A real live ranch, not a dude ranch?”

“Nope, not a dude ranch, a real live working ranch. It’s been in the Erwin family for generations. I think it’s four weeks from this coming Saturday that Wyatt and Morgan are getting married. It’s going to be a small wedding, but from what I’ve overheard, a gigantic BBQ for the reception. It seems like everyone from the surrounding area is invited.”

“But, the wedding is small?”

“Yeah, it’ll be just us here, and the ranch hands at the Flying E, that’s the name of their ranch, then Morgan and all the guys’ family will be coming from back east.” Joyce held up her hands and grinned. “I only know they’re from New York State, but not the city.”

“Oh.” June nodded and turned around to look at the other vehicles in the garage. “What are all these?”

“These,” Joyce pointed in the direction that was closer to the house, and said, “These are all our personal vehicles. Mine is the desert camo Hummer.”

“Bomb recovery?”

“Yep. Her name is Rosie. While this baby is Stella.” She patted the seat of a motorcycle and June nodded. “Ava only has the bike, no cager, and so does Alice. The small blue pickup belongs to Janice, and the Army Jeep belongs to Astrid.”

“Gotcha, and the other trucks?”

“Belong to the men, and Carl owns the big SUV. Now on this side,” Joyce said as she lightly gripped June by the shoulders and turned her to look in the opposite direction of the house. “This is what we refer to as the Boswell vehicles. We’re working with the local sheriff, who is Wyatt’s cousin, by the way, and an all-around good guy, and he provides us with them. He even registers them in the name of Boswell, but

the address on the registration comes back to the police station in town.”

“Smart.” June nodded. “So, if anyone wrote down the plate number, then it would go back to the sheriff’s office.”

“Exactly. I won’t get into all the details now, but there has been a rash of shit going down since just before the fourth of July, and the Boswell vehicles have taken a few hits. Again, we’ll explain it all tomorrow. We’ll let you relax for the night, but we will hit you hard and fast come the morning. We’re coming down to the wire on an upcoming mission, and now that you’re here, we’ll be cramming all the information down your throat to prepare you.”

“Got it, is there anything else I need to know about the vehicles?”

“They have a log book in the glove box, fill it out before you leave, and after you return. You’ll see from it that it’s written in the code we used on our team, so no layman can understand it.”

“Gotcha, anything else?”

“They all have tracking devices on them, as well as being equipped with cameras. You’ll understand tomorrow when we fill you in on what’s going on. Oh, and one last thing. If you go anyplace that is personal, like to town, to the post office, bank, grocery store, anything, use a Boswell vehicle. We’ve even told the men to do the same thing. They only use their personal vehicles to go to their jobs.”

“What do they do?”

“Construction,” Joyce said, and left it at that. “Except for my Alex, he helps where he’s needed, he’s even helped a great deal with Boswell, but he injured his hand earlier this summer, and he goes back to the doctor in two weeks to see if he can get out of the sling and foam crap. He works for Wyatt on the ranch.”

“So, who’s hooked up with whom?”

“Right now, the only single people in the house are you, Chuck, and Carl.”

“Well, after falling in love and leaving Sturgis, I won’t be hooking up with anyone soon.”

“Okay, let’s start at the top. Justin is with Ava. John and Astrid are together, and Alice and Josh. Alfie is single, he seems to be too busy working to be interested in anyone at this time, then there is Janice and Alan, then Alex and I are a couple. Oh, and you’ll be seeing Dillon and his fiancée, April, from time to time. He comes over with his son, Lucas, to work with us one on one. You can tell who April is, because she’s pregnant and due around Thanksgiving time. No, she has no military experience at all. Dillon was in the Marines for twenty, and only got out about three years ago. He has another son, DJ, but you won’t meet him until the wedding, because they just got back from taking him over to Missoula for college.”

“How old is Lucas?”

“Sixteen, he’ll be seventeen before the wedding.” Joyce looked at June, then looked over both of her shoulders, and leaned in to whisper. “He wants to join the Marines when he graduates and not go to college. It’s a sore subject between him and his dad right now, but on Wyatt and Morgan’s directive, we are to answer any questions he has about the military as truthfully as we can. Don’t sugarcoat anything, but don’t glamorize it either.” At June’s frown, Joyce giggled. “Like if he would have asked about what happened at that market place in Nigeria to turn you off meat, answer.”

“Oh god,” June did a little gag and waved her hand in front of her face. “I think it was the maggots that got to me, the people there slammed that goat’s head on the table, and the flies flew in all different directions, and the maggots started crawling all over.” She shuddered and Joyce also gagged a little.

“I understand perfectly. Mine was the mutton, they hadn’t even sheared the sheep, so you had all that wool mixed in with the rancid meat.” They again shared a shudder, and made their way to the door. “Astrid will hook you up with codes and keys to all the buildings. Then she’ll want to program a special something into your phone.”

“What?” June asked as they closed up the garage and made their way to the house. “She calls it the second and third string, but what it is, is she’ll program your phone to go off if someone enters the house and doesn’t program the security code in, or correctly. Each of us has our own code. Your phone will start playing a song like they did in the old westerns indicating the calvary is coming. Dillon will go to Wyatt and Morgan, who will come here, and there’s a tunnel from the office that connects to the basement of the house. They will be our backup, because we live in the house, we are the first string. The guys don’t carry, but they are weapons trained, but it’ll be up to us six women to protect the house until the others arrive.”

“Got it,” June said as they rounded the corner and saw everyone sitting around a fire in the pit. Morgan had left before they ate, and said she wouldn’t be back until eight in the morning. It was only going on nine at night, but June was exhausted. Not only had she left Sturgis this morning, but she’d driven over three hundred miles, and she was ready to call it a night. Besides, she wanted nothing but a hot shower and a soft bed. She told the others that, and they all waved and said they’d see her in the morning.

Almost two hours after climbing the stairs of her new home, June was sound asleep in the bed she’d been dreaming about. The water had been as hot and plentiful and the only thing missing was the arms of her lover wrapped around her. On a sigh, she settled in and hoped she could get some sleep, and not think about Al.

CHAPTER 10



JUNE STARED at the three women sitting at the desks across from her, then she whipped her head over to stare at Janice, and leaned forward to look at Joyce. She then looked over at Carl and Morgan in shocked awe.

“You’re not shitting me, are you?”

“Nope,” Morgan said as she picked up her cup of coffee and leaned back in her chair to study June. “It all happened as we told you, with Ava when she went out scouting and was pulled over by Tanner.”

“Okay, I got that, everything you’ve said, I’ve read, and reviewed, I got it. There’s only one part that I’m unsure of, for right now.”

“Which is?” all the other women and Carl asked as one.

“Atherton, the DA, do you know exactly what his involvement is in all this?”

“No, everything with him came to a head last week, a couple days before the big storm that came through and we were busy taking out the jokesters that were going after Wyatt’s ranch. We haven’t been able to find anything more on him, or the goons who work with him.” Morgan pointed to the screens where the faces of the men through the fence from the day they went riding were paused.

“Okay, and what about those punks who were fucking with Wyatt’s ranch? What happened to them? Did their story check out? What about the vehicle that was found?”

“That’s just it,” Morgan said as she looked over the top of her cup at June. “One hasn’t been found yet.”

“It’s a setup,” June said with such conviction, the others stared at her in shock.

“Come again?” Carl frowned at her from his own desk. He dropped his feet to the floor, picked up a pen, and pulled a pad of paper toward him, ready to take notes.

“Okay, hear me out,” June said as she jumped to her feet, then grabbed a handful of baby carrots from the bag at the front of her desk, then walked over to the walls that held most of the information they had gathered so far. She turned and looked at the others, each in the eye, before she began. “I like to talk things out to make sure I get them straight in my mind.” She saw their nods, then drew in a deep breath, and began, “Okay, if I’m wrong on any part, then stop and correct me.” Again, she looked at them and they nodded, but she saw they were all leaned forward now, paying close attention to her. “As I understand it, it started with Ava, correct?” June pointed to the copy of the ticket Ava had received back at the end of June. “Okay, here goes, Ava went out scouting to see if she could find any areas that might have pointed to what was going on in the area. The reason Boswell Two was formed, correct?”

Everyone nodded to her, and she nodded back. “However, she encounter a crooked cop named Tanner who gave her a ticket for the damage he caused. When she arrived at court, it was thrown out by what I’m to understand is a new judge?”

“Correct,” Morgan said, then frowned at her next question.

“What happened to the old judge?”

“What do you mean?” Carl asked as he stared at her in confusion.

“Ava said the DA was adamant that she be fined or whatever, for having an out of state driver’s license, but it was tossed out instead. Ava also said she went before a new judge. What happened to the old one? Did he die? Was he on

vacation? Was he behind the kidnappings prior to Ava's ticket? Do we have any information on him?"

"Holy shit," Alice said, and began scribbling on her pad to take notes along with everyone else in the room. "Continue," she said as she waved her hand in the air for June to hurry up.

June smirked, then nodded. "I'm sure there's more to it, but then we have Ava fighting with Tanner at Wyatt's ranch. Is that why he was put on administrative leave?" She looked around and saw understanding beginning to dawn on the faces of the others. "Was the ranch targeted because Tanner was taken out by Ava there? You know how some men are, they can't abide by women being better, smarter, or stronger than they are. Is that why Wyatt's ranch was targeted. Was there any incident besides what happened a couple of weeks ago where something happened to the animals there? To get back to Tanner, where was Tanner's boss during the time of his underling's abuse of power? Is he part of it? Did he know? Did he help? Was he totally clueless? What's his story? What's his background?" She saw the others staring at her, then she nodded once, and continued, "Next, we move onto Joyce. I'm only hitting the highlights here, because as you heard, I have questions. Anyway, Joyce had not one, but *two* encounters with this Rocco Monroe guy. Oh, to back up, Justin was seen in Ava's company when she went to court. I'm not saying this to scare anyone, but we might want to consider having them carry a concealed. With everything that's happened with you ladies so far, you never know." She munched on her carrot, and nodded once, confident in her line of questioning. "Again, Joyce had an encounter with the black truck on two different occasions." June paused as she looked at the information hanging around her, then back at the ladies. She did this several times before they asked what she was thinking. "Rosie," She pointed to the photos Alex had done from the tracking device on the bike.

"Stella," Joyce corrected her. "Rosie's my Hummer, Stella's my bike."

"Okay, Stella, it seems this all started with her, is this all the information from her tracking device? Are there any spots

not shown up here?”

“I don’t know, I’ll have to ask Alex.”

“Okay, and that brings me to the point that Alex was with you on one of your encounters with the black truck. You were in your personal vehicle, correct?”

“Correct, I was bringing Alex home from the hospital.”

“Ava, were you in the Boswell vehicle, or your own?”

“I only own my bike, no personal vehicle, but yes, I was in a Boswell vehicle.”

“Okay,” June said as she made two hash lines on the whiteboard beneath the initials BV. “Joyce, when you had that guy who stole Stella from the storage locker arrested, what vehicle were you driving?”

“My Hummer, my personal one.”

“Okay, now, I have questions about your encounter with the guys who chased and shot at you.”

“What?” Morgan demanded.

“Who owns the house you watched?” She walked over and pointed with her carrot to the photos Joyce had taken of not only the house with the men holding rifles in the open, but then she turned her attention to the photos of the motel. “Who owns the motel? What’s the connection between the two addresses, if any? Who owns Tanner’s house? Because, from where I’m standing, no county cop can afford a place this lavish.” Again, she walked down the line and pointed to the photos Joyce had taken of the outside of Tanner’s home. “What are they doing besides their regular county job to bring in the money to afford a place like that?”

“Next we have Astrid and her encounter with Neil Mason and the three Canadian cops. Do the cops check out? Was a background check done on Mason?”

“Yes, his name came back as Neil Carter. Mason is his middle name,” Carl spoke up then. “The BCI have a file on him, and he’s been a person of interest in several cases, but not all related to this current case.”

“Let me guess, he’s always lawyered up, and there’s not really enough to get anything to stick to him?”

“Correct.”

“Okay, go after his fiancée, this Mandi person. What do you have on her?”

“Nothing really,” Morgan sighed as she set her coffee cup down. “We’ve run background checks, and it appears she’s squeaky clean, nothing. No arrest records, nothing criminal.”

“Then in my book she’s hiding something. We’ll have to dig deeper. Just throwing this out there, but maybe Mandi isn’t really who she says she is, maybe she’s something or someone totally different than what we suspect.” June looked at the others and saw understanding dawn in their expressions. “What about these cops? Do you trust them?”

“Yes,” everyone said, and Carl pulled a file about an inch thick and put it on the edge of his desk. “This is the background checks BCI did on them. Feel free to read it.”

“I will.” June nodded, then looked back at the information hanging before her. “Next,” she said as she turned back to the group. “We have Janice, and her ordeal with the entire police force, with Henderson being the man in charge of her misfortune. Somehow I don’t think he had the smarts to pull something like that off. Who was telling him what to do? Who told the other cops on the same force, let alone the same shift, to harass her all damn day? She was driving a Boswell vehicle, correct?”

“Correct,” they all said, and watched as another mark went on the column of BV.

“Once Janice is admitted to the hospital and she’s under armed guard, somehow that asshole gets inside her room and tries to take her out. But then he takes the coward’s way out and swallows a suicide pill. Under whose direction? If you read some of his passages in the book Joyce found in his car, he wanted to be at the top dog of this secret organization, but had to follow the rules, and jump through someone else’s hoops. Whose? From what little I’ve read from the book so

far, he didn't like it that he had to curb his potential leadership roles in whatever they were doing. He wanted to be the one in charge." June didn't look at the others and see their expressions of shock and dismay at her rundown of what had been happening. She started again. "Next we have Alice, she had an encounter with a dead body," June tapped the pictures Alice had taken. "I forget the timeline, but you guys encountered those bikers and went on that run. That's where you gathered Intel on the roads being used by the corrupt cops. You went to investigate, ran into this," she said as she pointed to the photo of the fence across the road. "You've been able to catch their faces on film, any progress with that yet?"

"Not yet," Astrid sighed heavily. "I'm still running them through the system."

"Okay, you've also been able to ascertain that Ronan Atherton owns the property bordering the Templeton property. That's he's been claiming it as his own. Did he give the order to kill Templeton to take over the land, and put up these new buildings? Are there any permits from the town or county to erect those buildings? Hell," June sighed as she finally turned and looked at the others. "Are they even in the same damn county that he's the DA in? My last question for now, because I can tell you right now, once I do my meditation on all this shit, and read the files provided, you can bet your ass I'll have more questions, but for now, my final question is, who is Oro? What does he have to do with all this? Is he Mob? Cartel? A lowlife that thinks he's calling the shots? Someone like Henderson, a lackey taking direction from others, or is he the one who is really in charge? Hell, is he even a he, or is it a she?"

Joyce finally turned to look at the others and she didn't know what to make of their expressions. She made her way back over to her desk, but made sure she picked up the file from the corner of Carl's desk with the dossiers on the men from Canada. She settled down in her chair, and looked up at the others.

"What?" She asked in confusion when she saw they all stared at her.

“Damn, girl,” Alice grinned at her. “I would never have thought of asking those questions of the people not mentioned or whom we’ve had encounters with before. We concentrated on the people we interacted with.”

“That’s all fine and good, and I applaud you for doing what you’ve done so far, but you remember how we operated on the teams while we were in, at least on my team, my commander demanded that we made sure no rock was unturned, nor any question left unanswered before we started the mission. Not only was I the scout, but I was what they called the start-up man. Personally—” She grinned at them, “—I was the analyst for the team.”

“What’s that?” Carl frowned at her.

“I was given all the information ahead of the team and told to analyze it. When I had it all straight in my mind, I then went back to the commander and told her what I came up with, and all the questions. We then went to the team to present the mission, and to get their input. Not once did we ever not get our target. We were able to go in, and get the target, and anyone deemed working with them.”

The others didn’t say anything, they only continued to stare at her, and June only shrugged as she picked up the file from Carl and began to read. Two minutes later, she put that down and started at the beginning of the two-foot stack of paperwork she had been given that morning, and told of its contents. At one point she looked up with a scowl.

“Joyce?” June called out, and waited until the other women returned from the kitchen area with a fresh cup of coffee and several bottles of water, and one bottle of cola. She passed them around, then sat in her seat.

“What’s up?”

“The tracking device from Stella?”

“What about it?”

“It was Alan who did all those photos?” June pointed to the wall and frowned at the satellite photos from the stops made by Stella.

“No, it was Alex, he’s the one with his arm in a sling. Alan is the cabinet maker.”

“Ah, okay, sorry about that. It’ll take me a day or two to get the names straight. Anyway, is that all the information from Stella’s device?” She again pointed to the wall, and everyone looked at her with a frown.

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“Is there any way you can contact him to ask? Or is the device here, and I can run it and compare locations?”

June watched as Joyce picked up her phone, and stepped back into the kitchen, then Astrid handed her the device in question. June stopped reading and immediately began comparing what Alex had already put up, to what was there. She started a list of her own of things she wanted to purchase as soon as possible. She loved a challenge, and this job was right up her alley. She couldn’t wait to spread out and get her charts and information straight. It might take a few days, but once she was satisfied, she knew the others would appreciate all the effort she had put into trying to crack this case wide open. There were lives at stake, and if she had to work all night, she would.

CHAPTER 11



JUNE PUSHED her plate away from her dinner and looked around the table and saw everyone else were at different stages of their own eating. She leaned back with her glass of ice water and studied all the people at the table, minus Morgan, who had gone to her own home after they'd knocked off for the day.

“Question?”

“What’s that?” Joyce asked from across the table from her.

“Where can I go to an office supply store?”

“When do you need the stuff?” a man two seats down from Joyce asked, and June frowned, trying to remember which one it was. He must have read her mind, because he grinned at her, “Chuck.”

“Ah, sorry, as soon as possible.”

“Can you wait until Saturday?”

“I can, is there a significant reason why?”

“Yes, we purchase our groceries on Saturdays and it’s my turn.”

“I could always pick them up for you.”

The others at the table laughed, and it was Alex who stood, and as he took his plate to the kitchen, he took something off the refrigerator and brought it back to the table. He handed it to her, and June looked at it. It took several seconds for it to dawn on her that she was looking at a grocery list.

“Holy hell, do you buy out the store?”

“Pretty much,” they all laughed with her.

“I’ll go with you,” Chuck volunteered, and the others scowled at him. “What?”

“I’m sure June is a big girl and can get all of the groceries,” Justin shook his head at the other man.

“I’m sure she can, I have confidence she can, and what I’m about to ask, I mean no offense to anyone, but June, will you purchase all that meat on that list? Or bypass it?”

June flipped through the four-page list and stared at him in shock, but she answered honestly, “Oh, I’d bypass it in a heartbeat.” She wrinkled her nose at the others around her.

“Then, we’ll go together. We can stop at the office supply store first, then we can go shopping.” His cheeks turned pink, then he looked at the others and shook his head slowly. “I’ve been doing something, and I want to try it. Don’t expect us back before dinner, because it will take almost all day if we do it the way I want to.”

“What are you talking about?” John asked.

Chuck drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ve been binge watching a show on TV, and I’ve been online with a few people. This will be my first time trying it, but I think I can save us hundreds of dollars in groceries.”

“What?” Alice laughed, “Coupons?”

“Yes.”

“You can really save with coupons?” John asked in shock.

“If you plan it right, yes you can. I only have one question to ask you ladies.”

“Which is?” Astrid asked.

“How many printers do you have in the office? And how many computers?”

Astrid gave him the number and he grinned. “If I can have you all bring up a few things on your computers and print off

the coupons, we can save even more. One store in the area allows up to six coupons printed off of one printer. There's something in the bar code that gives the printer's IP address, or whatever that is, and I thought I'd try it. Oh, and there's no limit as to how many times you use the coupons. Meaning if I used six from the two printers in the house, that would be twelve items I can save on."

"Save how?" Ava asked.

Chuck turned his grin onto her and laughed. "Buy two get three free of six packs of your particular brand of cola."

"Let's go," Ava yelled and pushed her chair back. She led the way to the office, and because she had helped cook, as did Chuck, they left to go back to the office. June shook her head and laughed with the rest of them, and helped with the cleanup. It wasn't until four hours later they returned, and by then June was ready to call it for the night. When she went to bed that night, she again showered, and climbed into bed, only to dream of Al and wishing his arms were wrapped around her as she slept. She fell asleep with a heavy sigh, but only stayed asleep after a few hours. Instead of lying there wide awake, with her mind centering on regrets, she made her way silently up to the attic, to the area she'd set up for her meditation, lit a candle, sat cross-legged, and let her mind clear.

Thirty minutes later, her eyes popped open, and she swore, "Shit," she whispered as she blew out the candle, and rushed down to her room. She threw on her bedroom slippers and made her way down to the basement. She didn't want to go out the front door, then over to the office, so she used the tunnel that connected the two buildings. She didn't care that it was two in the morning. She'd had an epiphany and wanted to get to work on it right away.

June wearily stumbled into the house hours later and made a beeline for the coffee that was perking in its pot on the counter.

"Rough night?" Chuck asked as he looked at her with a smirk. She was still dressed in her pajamas, and she looked like she'd been up all night.

“Yeah, I woke at two, did meditation, and had an epiphany. I’ve been in the office working on it ever since, but I need some office supplies to complete it.”

“We’ll get them today. I’m not telling you what to do, but why don’t you help me with breakfast, then we won’t have to clean up afterward. You can run up and take a shower after you eat, then we can hit the road.”

“Sounds like a plan, what did you have in mind?”

“Omelets?”

“Sounds great,” June laughed as she sipped her coffee again, and opened the refrigerator to pull out the vegetables they had left. “Why don’t you do the meat, and I’ll cut up the veggies.”

“Sounds good,” Chuck laughed as he pulled the bacon and sausage. As they worked together, he cleared his throat, then looked over his shoulders, before turning back to her.

“June?”

“Yes?” She looked at him with a frown.

“I like you, but don’t think I’m trying to get with you or anything. I’m not very insightful normally, because *hello*, I’m a guy.” He grinned when she snorted a laugh.

“What are you trying to say, Chuck?”

“I’m trying to say that I can see you’re pining after that guy you met at Sturgis, and I get it. I’m also trying to say that if you need someone to talk to, or a shoulder to cry on, I’m your guy.”

June stared at him in shock, then walked over and gave him a hug. “Thank you, Chuck. I think that is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me without wanting to get into my pants.”

Chuck laughed. “No offense, but you seem like a little sister to me, rather than a lover, and that’s confusing as hell.”

“Why?”

“Because, I don’t have any siblings, only the Stuarts.”

“Oh, wow. So, you grew up with them?”

“Yep, I met the J’s the first day of kindergarten and I never looked back. It seemed like from that day on, I really began to live, and they included me in everything they did.”

“What do you mean you began to live?” June continued to chop up the veggies, and whip up the eggs as she and Chuck talked about his childhood.

“Let’s just say my home life wasn’t very homey, if you know what I mean. I had no clue who my father was for the longest time. It wasn’t until I was almost five that this man showed up and said he was my father. Apparently he’d been in jail the first few years of my life. My mother worked three jobs just to put a roof over our heads, and sometimes things had to give. Most of the time we went without food in order to pay the heat bill. It wasn’t until I met the J’s that I realized life didn’t have to be that hard.” He looked up from putting the meat he would cook in the pan and grinned. “I think I became a kid and enjoyed how to play, instead of cleaning the house, or worrying if I’d have a meal when Mom got home from work.”

“It was great having you hang out with us,” Justin said as he walked into the kitchen and made a beeline for the coffee pot. He turned at them and grinned. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to butt into your conversation.”

“It’s nothing.” Chuck waved it off, and June realized he was okay with his upbringing. “I was telling June that if she ever needed a shoulder to cry on, or someone to talk to, I’m here for her.”

“You two are hooking up?” Justin asked in shock.

“No,” they both said at the same time.

“We’re just friends,” June said, and saw what seemed like relief come over Justin’s face. “Why?”

“No offense, June, I like you, I really do, but you don’t seem like Chuck’s type.”

“She’s not,” Chuck laughed and grinned at June. “No offense.”

“None taken.” The conversation died out as the others joined them, and it wasn’t long before everyone sat down to eat. Once they finished, June left them to go upstairs to shower and change, and when she came back down, she saw the dishes weren’t quite done, but no one was around. She saw the front door open and decided to go investigate. After hearing several voices off to the right, she went to see what was happening, and that’s when she saw a pretty good-sized shack the others were walking in and out of.

“What’s this for?” June asked as she joined them.

“This was the old office before we built the new one,” Chuck explained to her, then waved her in so she could see inside. There were shelves on all the outside walls, but the space in between was empty. “Don’t say anything, but I’ve been wanting to try couponing for a while now, and like I’ve said, I’ve been watching that reality TV show about it. If I do this right, it might take us eight to ten hours of shopping. I’ve got everything all organized, but I’m going to need help, that’s where you come in.” He looked at her with a grin. “Do you have all of the others’ phone numbers programmed into your phone?” Chuck pointed to the other people present.

“I do, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Because, we’re going to be calling them when we have the first load done, and they’ll bring us another vehicle. I know it’s confusing, but it’ll work out in the end. Oh…” He looked shocked, then turned in a circle until he saw Josh and pointed at him. “Can you pick up this week’s egg order? I have coupons, I know you don’t think we’ll need them, but try it.”

Josh shrugged, then said, “Sure, I’ll try it, but if they give me a hassle, I won’t do it again.”

“Deal,” Chuck laughed as they made their way back to the house, and Chuck went to one of the offices down the hall and came back with a thick notebook. June swore it had to be at least six inches thick.

“What’s all that?” they asked in confusion.

“Coupons.” He grinned as he opened it, then flipped the pages, and withdrew several items from one of the many pockets. He handed them to Josh.

“What’s this?”

“The coupons for the eggs.” Chuck grinned as his friend looked at what was in his hand, then up at Chuck in shock. “Are you shitting me? Can they really do this?”

Chuck only smirked, and shrugged, “Try it.”

“What is it, babe?” Alice asked as she approached, took the items Josh handed her, then looked at Chuck. “Holy shit, if this is right, then we can get all twenty flats for the price of two?”

“Yep, just hand them what you have in your hands.” Then, he turned to June to ask if she was ready. Before they walked out the door, he called out, “Be ready to come with another truck to do the exchange. I think that’ll be better than doing everything at once.”

“Got it! Good luck!” they called out, and Chuck and June went to the garage. Chuck looked around, and decided to take the big crew cab red pickup that was parked on the Boswell side of the garage. June didn’t say anything, but filled out the log from the glove box, and they were shortly on their way. On the way to town, which was a different one from the one she’d driven through to get to the compound a few days ago, Chuck explained what grocery stores they would be going to, and why. The first stop they made was to an office supply store, and June was able to purchase everything she needed, and she didn’t know whether it shocked her or not to realize that Chuck had a coupon for almost everything she’d purchased, even the different state maps she’d required.

Twelve hours later, they pulled into the compound and Chuck backed the truck up, and the others rushed out of the house, and began unloading the items from the bed of the truck. Morgan and Wyatt were there, and she stood off to the side, then when Chuck exited the truck, she crossed her arms and glared at him.

“How much?”

“Excuse me?”

“How much did all this cost?” She waved her hand as the others unloaded the haul and took it into the house. They had decided to keep it inside there, before making the decision of taking it out to the shed, or down to the basement.

Chuck only grinned at her and patted his pocket, “Let’s talk after we unload and put the truck away.”

“Fine, but you know Boswell pays for all this, right?”

“Yes.” Chuck grinned again, and hopped up into the bed of the truck to bring the items to the end of the tailgate for the others to carry inside. Once everything was in, the ladies started unpacking the bags, and the men began stacking it. It looked like a warehouse had exploded in their dining room and kitchen.

Once it was all unloaded, and the perishables put away, they sat at the dining room table amongst the items, and Chuck pulled out the receipts and held onto them as he looked at Morgan and the others.

“First,” he grinned. “How much do you think is here? Moneywise?”

“At least five grand,” Morgan said. “I can understand the grand a week, because there are fourteen of you living here, but Chuck, this is too much. Why do you need one hundred servings of soup?”

“Are you going to take time out of your busy schedule and make soup for lunch during the winter, like Dolly does? Are you going to expect the ladies to do the same thing?”

“No, that would be stupid.”

“Exactly, and didn’t you say it gets cold here in the winter, and there’s nothing like a good cup of hot soup?”

“Yes, but Chuck, this had to have cost a fortune.”

Chuck and June exchanged looks, then turned with a grin plastered on their faces as they faced the others. “You want it

broken down by items, or do you want me to bottom line the entire bill?”

“Bottom line it,” Morgan said, and they all saw as she reached out and took Wyatt’s hand in hers.

“Bottom line, the entire haul today added up to six thousand seven hundred and forty-three dollars and thirty-nine cents.” Chuck held up his hand to stop her protests, and when June started tapping the table like a drumroll, he grinned. “That was the price before the coupons, and discounts.”

“And what was the bottom line?” Wyatt asked and winced at the grip Morgan had on his hand.

“The store paid us thirteen dollars and thirty-nine cents.” The room was dead silent until Wyatt cocked his head with a frown.

“They paid you? How is that even possible?”

“Because of the coupons,” June laughed. She took the receipts from Chuck and passed them to Josh, who Chuck had explained earlier was the man to do the house budget. He took them and looked them over, then he looked up with a grin.

“I’m voting that from now on, Chuck does all the grocery shopping. Yes, he bought a lot of stuff, but look at it, we have enough toilet paper to stock all the bathrooms instead of splitting up the packages between them. There is enough laundry soap that we won’t have to stop on the way home to pick up more if we want clean clothes. There’s enough soda that Justin won’t have to pick up more every day on the way home for Ava and the others.”

“Show me,” Wyatt demanded, then looked at the others. “For Lucas.”

That was when the others turned to June to explain, “Lucas drinks pop more than Ava does.”

“Ah.” She laughed, and watched as Chuck took the receipts back and explained how he had done what he’d done, and the last thing June heard before heading out to the original truck to retrieve her purchases from the office supply store. Instead of taking them to the office, she took them downstairs,

and set up a corner of what had been their offices there before the new building had been built. She then went up to her room, showered and fell into an exhausted sleep, only to wake after a few hours, and she went to meditate, then had another epiphany, and went down to the office in the basement, and over to the other one using the tunnel. That was how it went for the next couple of weeks.

CHAPTER 12



ALFIE PULLED his truck and trailer into the compound and sighed in relief. He was finally home. It had been a long drive since his last event. He probably should have made the drive in two days, but he wanted to get home to his own bed. When he'd left home almost six weeks ago, it had been with the intention that he would be home in two and a half weeks, but the man who had been in charge of the vendors at Sturgis Bike Rally, had called him and asked him to go to other places. Alfie had to finally put his foot down and say no to the last event Mr. Overton had talked to him about. They had been standing outside his trailer, and Alfie led the other man up the ramp and into the back of the trailer to show him that he had nothing more to sell. The only thing available to set up on display was one stand with a saddle on it, and one stand with the motorcycle seat. All the containers and totes were completely empty. That was when Mr. Overton finally understood, and though Alfie could tell he had been disappointed, he'd understood, but made Alfie promise him that he would be back the next year, after Mr. Overton promised he would send him the details of the events at the beginning of the year, instead of waiting for the last minute.

Alfie wanted to park and leave his rig there, but that wasn't the responsible thing to do, so he drove to the garage, and used his opener to open the door they stored their personal vehicles in, and drove inside. He hopped out and turned off the alarm before it sent out the silent signal that someone had broken in. He parked the truck, grabbed his bag of clothes, and closed the overhead door. Once that was down and secure, he

opened the smaller side door, and reset the alarm. The last thing he saw before leaving the garage was the time on the alarm, and scowled that it was one in the morning.

Alfie used his key to let himself into the house, and reset the alarm. Again, he didn't want the silent alarm to go to the others and they come running for no reason. Once the alarm was reset, he made sure the door was locked, then sat down on the bench his brother Alan had made months ago, and toed off his engineer boots, and removed his socks. He scowled when he realized that he had put them on clean the day before, so he removed them, then picked up his bag and walked barefoot down the hall to the laundry room and tossed all his clothes from his bag, and the offending socks in the washer, along with the shirt he wore, as well as his pants. He grinned as he saw a large bath towel folded on the counter. Not caring who it belonged to, he removed his underwear and tossed it all the machine along with the soap, and started it, making sure that his name tag hung on the outside door. As he turned to walk to the basement and hit his bed, he made a detour to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He grinned when he saw a container labeled 'lasagna' and took out a large piece, put it on a plate, then into the microwave.

In two minutes, he was eating it, and it never dawned on him that there was no meat in it, he had been too hungry to realize or care. After eating and cleaning up after himself, he switched the clothes to the dryer, then headed down to the basement where his bed was. All he wanted to do now was face plant into his pillow and not come up for a week, but knew he could have a few hours of sleep.

As soon as he opened the door to the basement, he frowned at the scent wafting up the stairs, and whispered, "You've got to be shitting me," he sighed heavily, then shook his head. The scent gave him an instant hard-on, because it reminded him so much of June. Ever since he'd returned to his campsite and found hers empty, he'd been working like a madman. It took him several days to realize why he'd been so upset to find her gone, even though he knew she'd have to leave soon, and what they had was only for the rally. He had fallen in love with her.

In the bedroom area he shared with the others he made it to his bed and only glanced over at the others. He took the time to grab a fresh pair of boxers, then decided to take a quick shower, rather than crawl into bed with two days' worth of travel coating his skin. It was only a quick shower, but enough to get him clean, and the water had barely gotten warm before he was out, half-assed dried off, and then he donned a pair of boxers, and made it back out to the bedroom. As soon as he face planted on the bed, he was sound asleep, not realizing he still held his phone in his hand, with the intention of putting it on the charger next to his bed.

"Alfie," came a voice above him, and he moaned, then turned over to see the Stuarts' family friend, Chuck, leaning over him. "Alfie, you need to wake up."

"Why? I just got to bed," Alfie mumbled and tried to roll over, but his blankets were snatched from him. That's when he realized the phone he still held was going off with the silent alarm that Astrid had installed on their individual phones. "Shit," he looked at Chuck with wide eyes. "What do we do?"

"Take this," Carl said as he joined them and handed him a pistol. "The safety is on, we need to check things out." They made their way to the bedroom, and then the gym, as they began to climb the stairs to go to the first floor, the door to the tunnel opened, and Morgan, Wyatt, and Dillon stood there, each holding a gun.

"Basement's clear," Carl said, and Alfie, Chuck, and Wyatt let Morgan, Dillon, and Carl take the lead.

"Just don't shoot us," Morgan said as she turned to look at them, then paused long enough to grab Alfie around the neck and give him a one-armed hug. "Welcome home."

"Thanks, I got in at one, and climbed into bed at two, what time it is?"

"Going on five," Carl said from the top of the stairs, and he and Dillon went through them with Morgan on their heels. Alfie had his gun ready, and then watched as his sister, co-worker and friends cleared the downstairs. They did the

kitchen, pantry, and dining room, when nothing was found, they returned, and Dillon scowled at Alfie.

“Did you reset the alarm?”

“Yes, that was at one this morning.”

Before they could say anything else, they froze when they heard a scream, a door slam, then several doors open at once, and the females of the house called out for whomever was in the house to stop. Morgan led the way up the stairs with the others following. They must have been in shock, because Morgan quickly lowered her gun, and asked in shocked awe. “Mom? What are you doing here?” Suddenly, all the other guns were lowered, when Morgan spoke, and the women disappeared. No one saw Wyatt when he turned, went down the stairs, turned the alarm off, then opened the door and motioned the others standing outside to come inside. He stepped back and his future father-in-law, aunt, and uncle entered.

Alfie saw the women had disappeared, and when they returned to the hall, they didn’t have any weapons on them. When he went to go to his mother and give her a hug, he stopped dead in his tracks when he felt something at the back of his neck, and a voice growled out.

“What are *you* doing here? Did you follow me here? Are you stalking me?” The others turned to watch as June held a gun to the back of Alfie’s head, and had a military issue K-bar at the ready around his neck. Alfie couldn’t do anything but close his eyes at the sound of the voice of the woman who held him hostage. When he opened them, he stared at his mother’s shocked expression.

“I can’t believe this!” Dottie practically screamed. “I come to see my children and get treated like a criminal! This is insane! I won’t be treated like this by my own children!” Dottie started to storm away, but Justin stopped her.

“Mom, technically, you broke in. We are just defending ourselves. I’m sure if this happened at home, Dad would have been right there with his own gun against the intruder.”

“I have a key!”

“Yes, but we’ve since put in a security system, and when it’s not reset, an alarm goes to all of our phones, and we come in with guns blazing, so to speak.”

“Why do you have guns?”

“It’s part of being a part of Boswell, Mom,” Morgan said. “I’ll deal with you later, right now, I have to make sure my newest recruit doesn’t harm my favorite brother.”

“I’m your favorite?” Alfie asked with a grin, knowing he was, based on a conversation they’d had years ago, and trying to defuse the tightly wound bomb at his back.

“June, you can let him go, he’s the good guy.” Morgan held out her hands to her, and studied her face and frowned at the anger she saw there. “Care to tell me why you’re so hell bent on taking this man down?”

“Because this is Al, the man I told you I hooked up with in Sturgis. Somehow he found me, and followed me.”

“No, he’s not,” Morgan said, then sighed heavily. “Okay, that’s not entirely true, he might have said his name was Al to you, but that’s really our brother that’s been out of town on business, this is Alfie.”

“What sort of business,” June asked and only let up on his throat a little bit.

“All I know is that he sold leather goods,”

“Son of a bitch,” June said, and ended up pushing Alfie away from her in her anger, and took a small amount of satisfaction when he stumbled on the stairs. She made sure the safety was on for her gun, put it into the small of her back, and stuck the K-bar in the sheath at her waist. When “Al” turned to look at her, she scowled at him. “I’m not going to apologize.”

“I know.” He grinned, then watched as his mother stormed past them, saying she was leaving.

“Stop!” June called out, and though the older woman did stop, she didn’t turn around. June felt everyone above, and below her staring.. “Don’t leave in anger, you’ll regret it. This

man and I have some issues from a few weeks ago, and we'll have to work them out, but don't leave now, not in anger." June took a large breath and let it out slowly in order to make a confession that only Al—she had better refer to him as Alfie now—knew about.

"I left my family home in anger three days after I graduated from high school. I haven't been back since." That must have pulled on the woman's heart strings, because she slowly turned and cocked her head in confusion at June.

"How long ago was that?"

"I was eighteen at the time, and I'll be thirty-one on my next birthday. It's been twelve years, two months, four weeks, and three days. Not that I'm counting or anything, but I called home once, and was told not to bother calling again unless I abided by their wishes. As you can see, I didn't. I won't get into the messy details, but my entire life was a lie, and I couldn't live it any longer. I was eighteen, and I had joined the military. That's why I left when I did, I was needed at Parris Island."

"You're a Marine?"

"Yes, Sir," she answered, and at the older woman's scowl, June was saved from answering when Morgan stepped up to her to give the explanation.

"Mom, while in the military, you address anyone of higher power than you as 'Sir'. It doesn't matter whether they are male or female. It's a sign of respect."

"Oh." Dottie looked confused, then they all turned to look down the stairs at their father who was filling a cup with steaming coffee and chuckling.

"Hey kids, I told your mother it was a bad idea to come barreling in the house without calling and letting you know we were on the way. She said it wouldn't cause a ruckus."

"Why did you do it, Mom?" Alex asked as he started down the stairs, and hugged Alfie as he passed. "Welcome home, brother." June noted the others did the same thing, as well as the women, and they all finally made their way down to the

others, and introductions were made, coffee poured, and Morgan frowned at her parents.

“You’re early, what are you doing here now? I thought you were coming for the wedding. If you are, then you’re about two weeks early.”

“I know, but I couldn’t wait any longer. According to my calculations, Alex has a doctor’s appointment this next week for his hand. Not that any of you call and talk to me anymore, or anything, but I want to be here for that.”

Alex looked at his mother in shock, then frowned at her. “Is that why you came into my bedroom? To see if I was okay? Mom, I’m not five anymore.”

“I know,” Dottie sighed, and took the cup of coffee her husband handed her. “I’m sorry, I guess in my head I thought you guys couldn’t survive without me.” She waved their concern away, then looked each of her children directly in the eye. “Introduce me to your girlfriends.”

The entire time his brothers introduced the women to his parents, Alfie couldn’t take his eyes off June. He couldn’t believe that she was actually here. Out of all the places she could have gone to when she’d left Sturgis, never in his wildest dreams had he suspected she would come to his home, let alone work for his sister. It must be fate.

“Alfie,” his mother said, and he jerked and looked at her.

“What?” He jerked, and looked at his mother. He saw his father’s smirk, and grinned at the older man.

“Introduce me to your girl.”

“I’m not his girl,” June said as she stepped forward, and because the younger people were grouped together, she made sure she threw her elbow into Alfie’s stomach as she walked past him. “I’m June Vanderbilt, Mrs. Stuart.”

“Please, call me Dottie.”

Once introductions were complete, Morgan sipped her coffee, and asked, “Mom, Dad, Uncle Chip, Aunt Peggy, why are you here two weeks earlier than we had planned on?”

“I’m here with your uncle.” Aunt Peggy grinned. “Just along for the ride.” She held up her hands and shrugged to indicate that she had no part in the plans for them being earlier than anticipated.

“I’m here to discuss some things about your case with you,” Uncle Chip said, “I took the opportunity to come out early, because I need to head on over to Idaho, and have a chat with the powers that be over there.” No one said a word about that, they only nodded.

“Mom? Dad? Why are you here early?” Alfie asked.

Dottie waved her hand in the air, and dismissed it. “We’ll get into that later.”

“No, Mom,” all of the Stuarts and Chuck said as one.

“Mrs. S,” Chuck began, and at her look he smiled sheepishly. “Mom S, the entire time I’ve known you, you have never, not once done anything on a whim. Arriving two weeks earlier than planned is a whim for you. What’s going on? Are you sick? Is Dad S sick.” He paused and then looked around with wild eyes. “Holy shit, is my Mom okay?”

June went over to him and laid a calming hand on his arm, and she threw a glare at Alfie when he growled low in his throat.

“No, everything’s fine,” Dottie rushed to reassure them.

“Then why are you here?” the siblings demanded.

“Better tell them, Dot.” Stan leaned back with his coffee, and stretched out his legs.

“First, let me ask you boys a question. Are you ever going to move back to New York?”

“No,” the six of them said as one. Even Chuck chimed in with his negative answer.

“I thought so. We’re here early, because if you aren’t coming home, then we’re moving here to North Dakota,” Dottie dropped her bombshell, then stared at her family. “There’s no discussing it, we’ve made up our minds, and will be looking at houses to purchase in the area. We’ll go home

after the wedding, like we originally planned, but only to pack up, sell our house, and finalize details with the club, and your father's business.”

The Stuart siblings stared at each other in shock, then they all made a mad dash for the coffee pot, took their seats at the table, and started asking questions. June and Carl ended up starting breakfast, and the woman named Peggy jumped in to help as the family discussed this pivotal move for their parents. From what June could tell, they had lived in the house in New York since before they were married over thirty-five years prior. It would be a significant change for all of them.

CHAPTER 13



JUNE LISTENED in to the conversation with the siblings and their parents, and felt a pang in the region of her heart. Growing up she had been close to her mother, but never had she been as close as these people were with their parents. She could tell there was nothing but love between them, and it seemed like Wyatt and Dillon was included. When a phone went off, Dillon rose to his feet and excused himself, telling Wyatt to stay where he was. He passed June on his way to the door.

“Chore time, I won’t be back for breakfast, I’ll eat at the ranch. Sorry you were woken so abruptly.”

“I was awake anyway, working on a project.”

“Oh,” Dillon said, then grabbed about four slices of bacon Aunt Peggy had just placed on a paper towel, and grinned when the older woman laughed. He left shortly after, and June continued to cook breakfast. Because it was a large crowd, she had mixed up both pancake batter and the egg mixture for French Toast. As Aunt Peggy cooked the meat, Carl poured the juice and set the table. It turned out he only had to put the dishes on the table, and the others automatically began spreading them out. He came back and took over cooking the heavy cakes, and June started cutting up all kinds of fruit to mix in a bowl.

“Breakfast,” Carl called as he took two platters of pancakes, then came back for two more of the French toast while, Aunt Peggy brought the heaping plates of bacon and sausage to the table.

It turned out that the empty chair beside June since she'd arrived was Alfie's and she was stuck sitting next to him. When the meat was passed her way, he automatically reached in front of her and took it, while she leaned back. She had a bowl of fruit, and the scrambled egg mixture from the French toast.

"Alfie," Stan said to his son sternly as he passed the meat tray to his father. "Give June some of that bacon and sausage."

"Sorry, Dad, but June doesn't eat meat, she's a vegetarian, and she doesn't eat carbs."

June didn't know whether it shocked her or not to realized that Alfie had remembered. It must have shown on her face, because he looked at her with a smirk. "I didn't forget." June didn't answer, just continued to eat her own breakfast. She had a hard time of it, because Alfie kept pressing his thigh against hers and she didn't know if she should press back, or slap him. She did neither, but she moved her leg away from his and glared at him. It infuriated her that he only smirked back at her with a wink.

"What's on the agenda for today?" Alfie asked during a lull in the conversation.

"I have to get back over to the ranch," Wyatt was the first to speak.

"We'll be in the office," Morgan said of her and the other women.

"If it's alright with you guys," Uncle Chip said. "I'd like to join you. I'm only here for a couple of days, then I have to get over to Idaho. Your Aunt Peggy is going with me. If we can, we'd like to stay here until we leave."

"Yes," the Stuart siblings agreed, and then looked at their women, to ask permission.

"Dad? Mom, what about you?" Alfie asked.

"We'd like to stay also, but while Chip and Peggy are gone, your father and I will be looking at houses in the area. We have ten of them lined up to look at already. Our first one is today at ten. I figured I could unpack our suitcases." She

paused and looked around the table. “We’ll be staying until the agreed upon time after the wedding.”

“Okay, Dad, what will you be doing?”

“Nothing much, probably following you boys around to see what you’re doing, and making a pest of myself.”

The women snickered as the men groaned, then Alfie spoke again, “Good, you can help me unload my bike from my trailer. I only arrived home around one this morning, I’ve been gone for almost six weeks.”

“Yeah,” June turned to him with a scowl. “I thought you said you were doing Sturgis, then going home?”

“I was, but the day after you left me, Mr. Overton called and asked if I would go to another event. I went to several more, then I had to refuse the last ones he asked me to attend.”

“Why?” June demanded.

“I’m empty.”

“What’s that mean?”

“My stock, remember the inventory you helped me sell those couple of days? It’s all gone. All I have left is the saddle and the motorcycle seat, and the stands they go on.

“Al, that’s terrific,” June said, and actually reached over and hugged him. The two of them didn’t see the others exchange grins.

“Then you can come to work with us, so we can show you the factory we bought,” Alan said as he began picking up the dishes.

“Factory? What factory? What inventory? What are you guys talking about.”

The men turned to Justin, and he grinned as he began to explain. Since he was the oldest of them all, they had always looked to him to talk to their parents about important issues. As he explained, the others began cleaning up the dishes, and waved their aunt to sit back down.

“Isn’t the stuff you do with leather only a hobby?” Dottie asked her son.

“Yes, it started out that way, but I decided to see if I could sell my hobby at Sturgis this year.” He reached to his side, and unhooked a key ring from his belt loop and passed it over. “I make things like this, with different initials. I also make the belts like I made for Morgan with the zipper in it years ago, and then some bracelets and necklaces.”

June held her arm out and moved the wrist back and forth. “I bought this from him before I even met him.”

“How did the two of you meet?”

June laughed, “It was during a bad thunderstorm, and he had pitched his tent over a water rut.”

“What’s that?” Peggy asked, and Dottie surprised everyone when she answered.

“It’s a spot on the ground that when it rains, the water will travel through it. Never, ever put your tent over it, or there could be dire consequences. How bad?” she asked Alfie as she turned back to him.

“Bad enough my clothes were soaked, the air mattress was floating, and my work boots took nineteen days to dry out.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, luckily June was camped next door, and she saved me by inviting me over to get dried out and warmed by her fire, and we ended up hanging out for the next few days, until she left me.”

“I didn’t leave *you*, I left for my job, which was here. If you recall, we said no personal information when we hooked up.” She glared at him, then looked at him with an expression like she’d smelled something bad. “Besides, you lied to me.”

“I know, but you left a day earlier than you had planned.” He cocked his head to the side, and demanded, “How did I lie? I never lied to you. Sure, we didn’t exchange a lot of personal information, but I never lied.”

“Really?” She glared at him scornfully. “You’re the oldest of three? What about the other four siblings you have? Are you saying they don’t count to you? The reason I left is my business, not yours.” June suddenly turned cold toward him, and pushed her chair back. “I’m sorry, but I’m going to take a shower before going to work. It was nice meeting you, Mr. and Mrs. Stuart.”

“Please, call us Dottie and Stan,” Stan said, and when she only nodded, then turned to his fifth oldest child with a grin. “You’ve got your hands full with that one.”

“I know,” Alfie grinned, “I’m up for the challenge, I can’t wait.”

“Be gentle with her,” Chuck said, and held up his hands when Alfie not only scowled at him, but he also growled. “I’m only saying that she’s hurting. I don’t know, nor do I want to know what happened between the two of you, but it’s almost like she’s raw.”

“I know.” Morgan grinned and looked at her brother. “If it’s true, then I’m going to tell you right now, do *not* fuck with my operative and jeopardize the mission.”

“What do you know?”

“June said she fell in love with the man she’d hooked up with at Sturgis. I’m assuming that means you. I don’t know if it’s love, love, like romantic love, but she’s been working a lot of hours, and when one of us ask, she says she can’t think. Don’t fuck with her emotions, Alfred, or you’ll have me to deal with.” Morgan made a circle with her thumb and middle finger and flicked it, causing Alfie to jump as he remember how she had knocked him out the last time she’d done that to him. He held up his hands in surrender.

“I promise.”

They all jerked when there was pounding on the front door, and before any of them could make a move, it opened, and a whirlwind of a person, which happened to be Lucas came flying in the door. He kicked off his boots, looked around wildly, then yelled as he rushed forward. “Grandma!”

He wrapped Dottie in a gigantic hug, causing the other women to laugh along with him. He settled at the table, but not before raiding their refrigerator, and grabbing a bottle of cola from it.

“Did you eat?” Dottie asked with an affectionate smile on her face.

“Yes, why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“It was last minute, sorry.”

“Mom?” Morgan frowned at the pair. “When did Lucas start calling you Grandma, and what’s going on?”

Lucas turned to Morgan with a grin. “I started calling her the day she left here the last time. I’ve been telling her all about the wedding plans, and everything.”

“Why?” Alice frowned at them. “Why would you know about Morgan’s wedding plans?”

Lucas puffed up his chest, sat up taller, and looked Alice directly in the eye, when he said, “I am the man of honor.”

“Oh,” Alice said quietly, and looked around the table, and realized that it was true when no one corrected him.

“Lucas,” Wyatt said with a warning in his voice. “Did you ask Dottie permission to call her Grandma? Or did you just assume it would be okay?”

“She told me to,” Lucas said, and wasn’t defensive about it at all.

“I did,” Dottie said as she reached over and took the younger man’s hand in hers. “How do you think I know what’s going on in my own children’s lives? You never call me, and the only time you do, your father has to call to remind you. Lucas tells me everything about what’s going on. I’ve known which of you women has hooked up with each of my sons before I even came here.” All the Stuart siblings looked guilty, and Dottie only glared at them. “I had to get information from someone, and having this young man call me Grandma is no hardship.”

“Okay,” Wyatt said as he nodded, and looked at the others with a smirk when he saw their guilty expressions. “Well, I

hate to eat and run, but I have work to get back to. Lucas, I'll give you an hour, then you need to come back to the ranch."

"I will, Uncle Wyatt. I just wanted to catch up with Grandma."

"Go," Dottie laughed as she kissed his cheek. "We can get together after supper tonight."

"Deal." He kissed her cheek, shook Stan's hand, then followed his uncle to the door to don his shoes and leave with Wyatt. Dottie turned to her husband with a sweet smile. "Now, if you'll go get our bags and take them up to the room we used before, I can get us settled, and you can do what you want with the boys."

That comment broke everyone up, and as they stood to finish getting ready for work, June had come down and called out that she was heading to the office, to which Chip had said he'd be there as soon as he had brought his and Peggy's luggage in.

CHAPTER 14



IT TOOK LONGER than usual for everyone to settle down behind their desks at the office, and no one said a word as Chip Boswell walked the perimeter of the room, looking at all the new information gathered there.

“What the hell?” he asked as he paused before a series of photos, and looked back at the women. “How do we have a dead body involved in all this?” He stared hard at everyone, and it was Alice who grinned as she stood and gave the report from beside her desk. The entire time she talked, Chip kept shaking his head, and June didn’t know if it was in disgust, awe, or wonder. When he told them to carry on, she figured they were in the clear. Morgan had given Uncle Chip the files that he hadn’t read yet, and that was when June realized he really was interested in what they did. They spent the rest of the morning going over any questions he had, and by lunch time, the older man said he was satisfied with what they were doing.

“When are you leaving for Idaho?” June asked as they cleaned up to go in for lunch, and saw the older man give a start.

“Tomorrow, better get it over and done with quickly.”

Carl smirked and laughed into his hand, “Better you than me,” he said, and looked at the last two Boswell recruits to explain what and why they had to go to Idaho.

“Are you telling me all this started in Idaho, and you haven’t clued them in on what we’re doing?” June asked in

shock. “Wait, how do you know it started over there?”

“We’re basing that on the stops that Stella made when she’d been missing for those ten months. We don’t have anything concrete yet, because we haven’t been over there to investigate like we have done here,” Joyce said as she grinned at Carl. “Personally, I think he’s afraid of this woman he calls Frankie.” Everyone noticed he was quick to deny the charge, and the women laughed at him, especially when his cheeks turned bright pink. They cleaned up enough to get the most incriminating information off the top of their desks, not that they thought anyone would break in and steal their information, but they erred on the side of caution when it came to their paperwork, they then made their way over to the house for lunch.

“Mom,” Morgan cried out as soon as they entered the house from the side, and stopped dead in her tracks as she saw her mother standing at the island with an apron on, and the table was laid out with dishes and silverware. “You didn’t have to cook.”

“Morgan Jane,” Dottie fisted her hands and slammed them on her hips as she glared at her daughter. Morgan smirked and held up her hands in a defensive move.

“Sorry, but still, you traveled all night to arrive here at five this morning, and I don’t want you to overdo it.”

“I’m fine. Your father got a call before he left with Alfie that the house we were supposed to see at ten was put off until tomorrow. I didn’t want to crash now and be up all night, so I’ll work where I feel the most wanted and needed and that’s right here in this kitchen. Don’t deny me the pleasure for waiting on my children, Morgan. It’s been months since I’ve been able to do this, and if you recall, it’s been years since I’ve been able to wait on you.”

Morgan smirked and looked at her Aunt Peggy. “I wouldn’t say months, I’d say weeks.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s the end of August, you only left here six weeks ago.”

“Fine, but you know what I mean.”

“I do, Mom,” Morgan said as she walked over and hugged the older woman, making sure she planted a loud kiss on her cheek. She scowled when she saw all the food laid out on the island. “Um, I don’t know if anyone told you, but since the boys bought the warehouse in town, they don’t make it home for lunch.”

“Oh, well, we can have the leftovers for dinner then.” Dottie dismissed her daughter’s concern, then turned her entire attention to June. “I’m not putting you on the spot, but besides meat, what don’t you eat?”

“White.” June didn’t hesitate in her answer as she reached in and grabbed one of the pieces of grilled asparagus.

“What does that mean?” Aunt Peggy asked as she began passing the bowls of food to the other ladies to put out on the table.

“No white potatoes, I prefer sweet potatoes, no white rice, I prefer wild grain, and no bread. I don’t eat bread at all.”

“Is it a medical issue?” Aunt Peggy asked.

“No, it’s a personal health issue. See, growing up, my best friend’s father had three heart attacks in a very short period of time, like in a six-month period, and they almost lost him. He was the father of eight, and my friend was the oldest, we were thirteen at the time.”

“Damn,” Chip said as he finished carrying the bowls to the table, and they all settled down to eat.

Joyce snickered, and laughed when she grinned at everyone around the table. “Tell them the real reason you don’t eat meat.” The other ladies laughed and turned to June who scowled at them

“That is not appropriate for dinner-table conversation. I don’t want to sour anyone else off the possibility of eating meat.”

“Sweetie,” Dottie said as she reached over and took June’s hand in hers. “I raised the heathens and Morgan. Nothing you

tell me would bother me.”

“Me either,” Aunt Peggy laughed. “Where Dottie had seven kids, Chip and I had five. Together, the two of us have gone through everything you could imagine with children, teenagers, and young adults.”

“Fine, but you asked for it,” June said as she drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I was on a mission for the Marines, and I was in Nigeria. It was my job to go into the market place to ferret out information that we were lacking.”

“See, Mom,” Morgan explained. “When we were on the inside, we were part of an elite team, only a select few were picked for these teams. All of us were part of that few, though we served on different teams, we were what the Marines called an EWM.”

“Which stands for?” Dottie asked, because this was the first time since Morgan had joined the Marines at age eighteen that she’d ever talked about her time there.

“Elite Woman Marine. We were the best of the best, and had to go through extra schooling that regular Marines didn’t go through. All of us speak, read, and understand ten different languages. We’ve trained with Navy Seals, and we had to pass their Hell Week in order to move on with our training.”

“What happened if you didn’t pass?” Aunt Peggy asked as she passed the dish of vegetables to the next person.

“We were a Marine, but not invited to continue with the elite status.”

“Isn’t that sexist?”

“Not really,” June said. “It means that you are the best of the best, and it’s a great honor to be selected for these teams.” She looked around the table and when she received a nod from both Morgan and Uncle Chip, she continued, “I never served with any of these women while I was in the Marines. I’m the last of Morgan’s recruits to join Boswell. I’ve been here for a short time. Each of us had a special position on the team. There were only five teams at any one time, and only five women served on these teams.”

“What were you?” Dottie asked in fascination.

“What you would consider the analyst. I was given the information and had to go over it, organize it, question anything that needed to be questioned, find the answers to those questions, then present it to the team with how we would be taking out our target.”

No one said a word, and they all saw Dottie swallow hard, then nodded to the others. “You?” Dottie pointed to the women in turn. “What did you do with your teams?”

“Sniper,” Ava said.

“Mechanic,” Joyce said.

“Communications expert,” Astrid said next.

“Medic.” Janice nodded to her.

“Scout,” Alice said, then elaborated. “Once we got our Intel from our analyst, I was sent out to scout the area to see what or where would be the best place to set up shop.”

“As I said, I was the analyst,” June concluded, and they all continued to eat. No one said a word, until Dottie turned to her brother-in-law.

“You knew all about this?”

“I did, and before you get all upset, it was the job with the United States military.”

“I’m not upset,” Dottie quickly reassured everyone at the table. “I’m damn proud that my daughter was part of something like that.” She paused long enough to look at Morgan in shock. “Holy shit, what would have happened if someone had gotten ahold of you when you didn’t have your memory for those six months?”

“Pardon my language, but the shit could have hit the fan. It was a godsend that Lucas and DJ found me. If I had fallen into the wrong hands, and they knew about the EWMs, then they could have gotten some very, very classified information from me. It would have been a nightmare.”

“Damn,” Dottie said as they continued to eat, then she frowned at everyone around the table. “Why are you telling me about this stuff now? When I was here earlier in the summer, you kept saying it was on a need-to-know basis.”

“It is, and we won’t be telling you a lot, but we have several conversations at the dinner table,” June said. “If you’re going to be here, then you’re going to be included in those conversations. I’ve only been here a short time, but from my understanding, the men know what’s going on.”

“They do,” Morgan said and looked directly at her mother. “I never told them differently.”

“They came to me,” Chip said as he pushed his plate away and settled back with a bottle of water, and stretched out his legs.

“They who?” Dottie asked as she pointed to the women.

“No, the boys. Morgan happened to be there and was telling me about the problems she was having with building this,” he said as he waved his hand, and brought the house into his circle.

“I don’t understand,” Dottie said as she too settled back.

“The town told me that I couldn’t build this, because it wasn’t up to code. I contacted the guy who had drawn up the blueprints, but he ghosted me. I went to Uncle Chip, because he’s the front money for this endeavor, but anyway, I told him I needed a construction engineer.”

“Justin is one.” Dottie frowned at her.

“I didn’t know that at the time. The boys wanted to know what I was doing out here in North Dakota, and Chip and I discussed it, and thought we would read them in.”

“You know,” Dottie said as she sat forward, and crossed her arms before her as she looked directly at her daughter. “The boys felt bad about not paying closer attention to when you had disappeared, and we never even suspected that you had been in an accident and lost your memory for those six months.” She turned and looked at the other women. “See, we lived three hours apart from each other. Morgan didn’t always

make it home every weekend, so not hearing from her for six months wasn't really any cause for panic. It wasn't until Morg's friend called to see how she was that Uncle Chip started investigating.

"Three months later, she knocked on our front door, and everyone was there. It happened to be Easter Sunday." She giggled and looked at her sister. "Stan will deny this to his dying day, but he passed out when he opened the door and saw Morgan standing there."

Morgan snickered and looked at the others. "He did."

"Is that how they got involved with building all this?" June asked as she waved her hand at the table they sat at.

"Yes, I gave them the specifications of what I wanted them to do, and since John and Josh own a construction business, then I knew they could do it. Chuck was the added bonus of being their foreman."

"That's why no one else worked on this compound, correct?" Joyce asked.

"Yes, once the work was done, they were free to pursue their own endeavors. It's my understanding that once Alex gets the okay from his surgeon, he's going back to ranching?"

"He is," Joyce said with conviction.

"The others?" Aunt Peggy asked.

"Justin's doing his construction engineering. Chuck, John, and Joshy are doing regular construction. Alan's doing his woodworking, and Alfie is doing his leatherwork," Morgan reassured them.

"Do they help you out at all?"

"Sometimes, and Mom, don't get upset, but they are trained in weapons, as well as hand-to-hand combat."

"Who's training them in that?" Dottie scowled at them, then turned her glare onto Ava.

"Not me," Ava laughed as she held up her hands. "The weapons is all on Tom Erwin."

“The sheriff?”

“Yes.”

“What about the hand-to-hand?”

“That too is Tom Erwin, but also Wyatt and Dillon are helping with that. As well as Carl.” The two older women turned to look at the man who had remained silent during the entire conversation, and he only held up his hands, shrugged, and aimed a smirk at them.

“What qualifications do they have?” Aunt Peggy asked.

“Dad did twenty years in the Marines,” came a voice from behind them, and they all turned to see Lucas standing there removing his shoes. He came forward, and the first thing he said was, “Uncle Wyatt and Dad gave me two hours to come over and see you guys.”

They laughed as Dottie jumped to her feet and made sure she had a plate for him to fill and she looked on proudly as it seemed that he put more vegetables on his plate than meat.

He didn't say a word as he ate one plateful, then as he began piling it on for seconds, he looked around the table, settled his gaze on June, then asked, “So, why don't you eat meat? You alluded to the fact you saw something, and I live on a working ranch, I've butchered my own animals, cattle, chickens, pigs, what could possibly turn you off meat?” He paused with a hot dog loaded with condiments to his mouth, and June wrinkled her nose at him. She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Maggots.”

“Huh?” Lucas scowled at her as he looked between June and the hot dog poised before his mouth.

“I was in the marketplace in Nigeria, and their refrigeration system is sadly lacking. Like non-existent. I was staking the area out, trying to get Intel from a few of the locals for my mission, and this man lifted a live goat on his table, hit it on the head with a hammer, the goat fell over, and he started butchering it right there in front of everyone, but...” She held up her hand and looked around the table at everyone. “He

never cleaned the area before he did that. The animal he had killed before that goat was still lying there, and where I thought there was dried blood, it was nothing but thousands upon thousands of blowflies. When he shoved that newly killed goat around, maggots started crawling out from beneath the area.”

“Oh,” Lucas said, and looked at his hot dog, then at the others. Morgan snickered when she saw he was green around the gills, but no one said a word after he laid it down, and continued to eat the vegetables and salads. It was a good fifteen minutes before anyone said anything.

“So,” Lucas asked with a smirk as he finally got his fill and moved his plate away, leaving the uneaten hot dog on the plate. He looked directly at June, when he asked, “Who are you hooked up with? Chuck or Alfie?”

CHAPTER 15



“WHAT?” June sputtered as she sipped her drink, and ended up spitting it out. “Why would you ask something like that?”

“Because, I’ve seen you pal around with Chuck, then Alfie’s finally home and he automatically knows that you’re a vegetarian, and is sitting next to you at the table.” He pointed to an empty seat beside her, then to another on further down the table. “Chuck sits there, Alfie sits next to you.”

“First,” June turned a scowl onto the younger man, “I was informed by everyone here that was Al’s seat when I first arrived.”

“Why do you call him Al?” Lucas asked.

“Because, that was how he introduced himself to me at Sturgis. We camped next to each other, and I invited him into my tent when the rain hit, and his was under water.”

“Did you have sex with him?”

“Lucas!” Morgan yelled at the younger man in shock. “What business is that of yours?”

“Because, I really like all the men, and I can’t see friends like Alfie and Chuck coming to blows over a woman.” He looked at June, and gave her a shit-eating grin. “No offense.”

June laughed, and shook her head at him. “None taken, and yes, if you must know, we had sex, and I left a day earlier than planned, because I fell in love with him. I know I told him no personal information, but he sort of lied to me. I don’t abide liars.”

“What did he lie about?”

“He told me he was the oldest of three.”

“Well, technically, he is the oldest of the A’s.” Lucas laughed, and began stacking the dishes from the women. When the others told him he didn’t have to do that, he waved them away. “Maybe...” He flashed his boyish grin again, “Maybe Grandma will bake me some cookies this afternoon.” Everyone laughed as they helped with the cleanup, and it was Janice who took Dottie down to the basement to show them all the food June and Chuck had bought with the coupons a few days prior.

“Holy crap,” Dottie said as she looked at all the supplies. “How the heck did you ever decide to buy all this stuff?”

“It was Chuck,” Janice grinned. “I’m the only one here that bakes, Alice doesn’t know how to cook, and I haven’t had the time to bake lately, but Chuck was able to get all this stuff, as well as the stuff outside in the old office with coupons. We know it’s a lot, but with all of us here, it might not take as long as we thought to go through it. See...” She looked at Dottie with a grin. “Before, we would purchase a large package of toilet paper, then divide it between all the bathrooms. With what Chuck was able to do, he was able to purchase five large packages per bathroom. We store the rest out in the old office.”

“The building to the left when you pull into the driveway?”

“Yes, and the same with the laundry soap. Someone is forever doing their laundry and we were always running out. We had to constantly ask one of the guys to stop and pick up something on their way home from work. It was like they would stop almost every day to get what we had run out of.”

Dottie laughed as she opened the cupboards and looked at all the supplies. “Maybe I should have him teach me how to do it.”

“You should,” Janice said, and left Dottie to her exploring, and made her way back up the stairs. The others were just

finishing up with the dishes and she went over to the office to begin working again.



HOURS LATER, June came inside the house and saw everyone gathered around the kitchen, and she drew in a deep breath as she approached, and looked around. She scowled when it was Alfie who asked what she wanted.

“Alan, may I have a word with you, please?”

“Sure,” Alan said as he broke away, and June sighed in relief when no one followed them. June led the way down to one of the original offices, and once he entered behind her, she asked that he close the door. He frowned, but he did.

“I have a question for you.”

“What’s that?”

“I had a thought, and I need your help.”

“Okay, I’ll try to help if I can. What do you need?”

“When do you deliver and install the cabinets at Mason’s place?”

“As of right now, Thursday.”

“Two days from now?”

“Yes, why?”

“Can I have Mandi’s phone number?”

“Why?”

“You know when I was on a team, I was an analyst, right?”

“Yes, not that I know what that means, but Janice said it was a good thing.”

June grinned and nodded. “It is, it means I analyze *all* the information. I’m going to be going with you when you install the cabinets, and I don’t want to go in blind.”

“What are you getting at?” Alan asked as he crossed his arms, leaned his hips against one of the desks, and studied the woman before him.

“First, who is going with you to install the cabinets?”

“Me, Chuck, John, Josh, Carl, and Astrid, but I introduced her as Jane when we first went there. Why?”

“Because I want to contact Mandi and see if your assistants, Jane, and Melissa, that would be me, could go in tomorrow and help her pack up her cupboards. You know, to get ready for when you arrive the next day.”

“Holy shit, and you can get the lie of the land to know where it would be best to plant the cameras? Give us a heads up on what we’ll be walking into?”

“Yes, but I’ll need Astrid’s approval to do it.”

Without saying a word, Alan went to the door, opened it, and yelled down the hall. Less than three minutes later, Astrid entered, and in seconds both June and Alan told her what June had planned.

“I’m in,” Astrid did a high five to the two of them, then frowned. “When are you planning to do this?”

“Tomorrow. If Alan will give me Mandi’s number, I’ll call her now, before dinner, and then I can set it up. We’ll be going there in pairs, that should appease Morgan’s rule, and no one will question that. I just need to know where we can get boxes to load her stuff in.”

“In the garage,” Alan said. “We didn’t want to fill up the attic, because we had never planned to hook up with you women, and we didn’t want to take your space away from you. There’s a loft above Joyce’s office in the garage. We can get them down for you tomorrow. Do you know what time you’ll be going there?”

“I’d like to see if we can’t be there around ten in the morning,” June said as she looked at the other two, and they nodded their agreement.

“Use a burner phone to call her,” Astrid said, then nodded only once. “If you get the go ahead for the two of us to arrive there tomorrow, I’ll call the cops from Canada and let them know we’re coming in.”

“That’ll work,” June said, and took the piece of paper Alan had written a number on. As the other two went to leave, Astrid frowned, and said, “Wait, what name will you use? I’m Jane.”

“Melissa, it’s my mother’s middle name.”

“Ah, okay. Let us know what you find out.” The two of them left, and June drew in a deep breath as she pulled the burner phone she always carried from the side pocket of her camos, and looked at the number Alan had written down. It surprised her how decisive his handwriting was.

“Hello?” came the hesitant response from June’s call.

“Is this Mandi?”

“It is, who is this?”

“You don’t know me, but my name is Melissa. I’m one of Alan’s assistants.” When her statement was met with dead air, June sighed heavily. “Alan, the guy putting in your new cabinets in two days?”

“Oh crap, I forgot all about that.”

“We thought so, but I’d like to propose something to you.”

“What’s that?”

“To make it easier and faster for Alan and his crew to remove your old cabinets and install the new ones, how would you feel if Jane, his other assistant, and I came to your home tomorrow and help you empty your current cupboards? It would cut down on time and energy.”

“You’d do that?”

“All part of the service.”

“What time were you thinking of coming?”

“Is ten too early?”

“That would be perfect. Then this way I can have the countertop man come in when Alan is halfway done with installing the new cupboards.”

“You can,” June said, and had no clue whether she could or not, she only wanted to get her and Astrid in there to scope out the situation, and see if they would be able to install the cameras. They finalized the details, and Mandi even went one step further and gave June the directions to the house, and what to say to the guards at the shack out at the road. With a grin, she went back to the kitchen, pocketing her phone as she went.

No one said a word as they got the food on the table and settled down to pass the dishes, and began eating. It was Alan who looked at June with raised brows.

“Well?”

“Ten o’clock tomorrow morning. She said that once the bottom cabinets are installed, she’d call her counter guy in and have him come in and take measurements.” She looked around the table and grinned. “Whatever that means.”

Alan laughed and explained it to her, and she nodded in understanding.

“What are you doing?” Alfie asked from her right side.

“Astrid and I are going over to Neil Mason’s to help Mandi remove her current dishes from the old cupboards, so when Alan and the others go in the next day, they only have to remove the old and install the new.”

“You’re not going alone are you?” Alfie demanded, and June turned to scowl at him.

“What part of ‘Astrid and I’ didn’t you understand?” She ignored the snickers from the others sitting around the table at her statement.

“Oh,” he said, then shook his head as if to clear it. “I guess I missed that part. Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m an analyst, and I’m not going in blind on Thursday when we arrive. I’ll help Mandi, then I’ll scope out

where it would be best places to put the cameras in. I don't want Carl to have to bumble around and find a location. Not that he would, but this way, it should be done smoothly."

"Great idea," Carl and Chip said at the same time, with a confirmation nod. "Make sure you see if there's a window that Carl could get a camera to aim out and see any activity toward any outbuildings on the property. The one that Paul said he had to go to."

At one point Joyce looked around and scowled at the oldest Stuart man. He must have seen her, because he sat back and scowled right back at him. "What?"

"I thought your name was Chad."

"It is, technically it's Chadwick Stanley Stuart. Back home around the club, and with work, I'm known as Chad, but when I'm with Chip, it's easier to go by Stan. Less confusing when you call out one of the names."

"Oh," Joyce said, then nodded. "I guess it makes sense."

"What do you do for a living?" June asked and she looked around when the entire Stuart clan seemed to freeze in place. "What? You don't know?"

"Actually," Alfie said as he reached over and took her hand in his. "No. At least, I don't know what he does. All I know is that he would leave the house a six in the morning and be home by six at night, but he never, not once failed to go to one of our sporting events." Alfie looked around the table at his siblings and saw they agreed with him. "I never knew what he actually did for work."

Stan looked at his wife, and she sighed heavily, "Might as well tell them, it's not like you'll be doing it any longer after we return from the wedding. You are going to sell the business, correct?"

"Yes, I'm selling."

"What type of business, Dad?" Alex asked as he settled back in his seat to study his parents intently.

"It's not bad, it's hard, honest work."

“Okay, so what was it?” They all asked.

“I am a vegetable distributor.” When he saw their confusion, he smiled as he held up his hand to stop the questions. “I would go to farmers and ask them to sell their vegetables to me, then I would go to the stores, and sell those to them.”

“So, you were like a go between with the farmers and the grocers?” June asked. “Didn’t that cut out some of their money?”

“Exactly, but no. See, some of the stores didn’t like dealing directly with the farmers, and that was where I came in. I dealt with the farmers, and the store owners. It took a couple of years to iron out all the problems, but in the end, everyone was happy. I’ve been doing this for over twenty-five years.” Stan nodded, then reared his head back and scowled at her when a slow grin came over her face. Her expression made him leery to ask what it was about, but he did anyway. “What?”

“Do you know anything about planting vegetables?”

“Actually, that’s more Dottie’s area than mine, I bought from the farmers, and sold to the grocers. When I get back, I’ll have to look into selling the business, and I have a fleet of sixteen trucks that go along with it.”

“Damn,” Justin said at one point. “So, it was profitable?”

“Let’s just say it put the six of you through college with no hardship on anyone,” Stan said and left it at that. “To answer your question, June, it’s too late in the year now, but come next spring, which Dottie and I have every intention of being back here by then and settled into a new house, you’d have to talk to her about planting a garden.”

“What are some of the things you’re looking to plant?” Dottie asked, and the women discussed what vegetables they wanted, and it was decided come next spring, Dottie would be there to help them plant, and then she looked at her boys and grinned.

“What’s that grin for?” Joyce asked with a laugh.

“My boys know how to weed a garden, and how to harvest one.”

“Do you know how to can, or freeze the product?”

“I do, how do you think I have seven strapping men sitting at this table. From the minute they went onto table food, they ate their vegetables. It took Chuck some time, because he didn't come into our lives until he was five, but as you can see,” she smirked as she pointed to Chuck who had just placed a heaping spoonful of fried zucchini onto his plate. The others laughed, and continued getting to know each other as the meal progressed.

CHAPTER 16



THE NEXT MORNING, the women as well as all the men piled into the office to see what was on the agenda for the day, and before Morgan could even begin, June stood from her seat at her desk and looked her boss directly in the eye.

“I did something last night.” Her statement was clear, concise, and brooked no argument. Morgan only raised a brow.

“Oh? What is that?”

“I called Mandi, no known last name, you know, Mason’s fiancée?”

“Okay, and what did you discuss?”

“I introduced myself as Melissa, another one of Alan’s assistants, and asked if Jane,” June grinned as she pointed to Astrid, who stood and took a bow, “could come over today and help her empty the contents of her current cupboards.”

Morgan stared at her in shock, then took several moments to get herself under control. “Damn, I never would have thought of doing something like that. Was there any particular reason why you decided to do this?”

“Because being an analyst I wanted to get the lie of the land before we go in tomorrow. You know, see what’s happening, and where Carl can place the cameras without having to bumble around. Also, I want to get a look at how many armed men are walking around the property. Are they in the house? Or do they only patrol the outside? What type of guns do they carry? Are there any stored along the walls or in

any corners as back-up if they have to use the weapons they carry, stuff like that.”

“Perfect, and what was Mandi’s reaction to your question?”

“Astrid and I have to be there at ten this morning.”

“Perfect. Astrid, will you have Griff, Paul, and Harry’s comms wired to you and June as backup?”

“Yes, I called them last night and told them to expect us.”

“One question.” Dottie held up her hand. “I know I have no say in what you ladies, do, but I’ve seen some of Alan’s work from back home. Do you have any boxes to take with you, as well as a tape gun? You’ll want to be prepared.”

“Yes,” Alfie said. “We saved the boxes we brought our things out with, and stored them in the loft above the garage.”

“Holy hell, how long will you girls be using them?”

“If all goes well, today, we’ll load them, then tomorrow or the next day, we’ll unload them,” June said. “If everyone agrees, I’d like to stay a little longer and put the things back into the cabinets, then we can bring the boxes home with us. Why?”

“Because I’d like to take them home with me to pack up my house. You can never have too many boxes, and I know the trailers and campers were loaded to the gills when the boys came out here last spring.”

“Take them,” Morgan said as she waved her hand at her mother. “But not before we’re done with them. Two days tops, maybe three.”

“Since we won’t be leaving for another month, that’ll be perfect. Continue.” She smiled as she waved her hand at them, and grinned when everyone laughed.

“Okay, so that leaves Astrid and June to go to Mason’s today to scope out the area.” She paused and looked at them sternly. “Try to see if you might be able to get an angle on the building Paul told us about that had the stopped-up sewage system.”

“What stopped it up?” Chip asked as he sipped his coffee.

“Paul, one of the cops from Canada said it was used tampons.”

“Shit, then they’re keeping women in those buildings.”

“We believe so, but without any proof, we can’t do anything about it. We’re hoping the cameras will pick up some activity that will warrant us to take them down.”

“What happens tomorrow?” Stan asked, and Morgan could see his fists were white-knuckled, but she ignored it for now.

“Tomorrow, Uncle Chip and Aunt Peggy will head on over to Idaho to inform them of what we’ve encountered so far. I trust Uncle Chip to use his discretion. Maybe see if they’ve come up with anything else from there. You, Mom, Joyce, and Alex will go to Alex’s doctor’s appointment to find out the results with his hand. The only people going to Mason’s will be Alan, Astrid, June, John, Josh, Carl, and Chuck.”

“Why not the others?” Stan scowled at his daughter.

“Because, we don’t know how many of the people we’ve been investigating have been in and out of Mason’s place. Both Ava and Justin were seen by the DA we’re after, so we want to keep them away in case someone recognizes them. Janice was harassed by an entire police force, and one of the cops even took a suicide pill instead of being taken into custody to be questioned. John, Joshy, Alan, and Chuck are the construction workers. I feel that between the four of them they can get the cabinets installed in no time, then Carl will be there to plant the cameras he has a warrant to install.”

“And Alfie?” Dottie said. “You didn’t mention him.”

“Alfie is our ace in the hole we have to have one person that hasn’t been noticed yet stay behind. If push comes to shove, we’ll have him go in some other time.”

“I’m okay with it, Mom.” Alfie nodded, but they all saw him take June’s hand in his, and kiss the back of it. “I trust June to do the right thing.” They all noticed that June didn’t drop his hand right away, and stared into his face with doe-like eyes, before she sighed and shook her head.

“I’ll be doing my job.”

“Exactly.” He grinned at her, and settled back in his chair. They finished with the rundown for the day, and Chip and Peggy soon left to head over to Idaho, Stan went out with his sons to go to their warehouse in town, and Dottie said she would head over to the ranch to talk to Dolly about the menu for the upcoming wedding reception. At the last minute, Morgan called out that if she needed any money for anything, Dolly had an account for the reception in the ranch office.

Dottie stopped dead in her tracks and turned a glare onto her daughter. “Morgan Jane Stuart, as your parents, we are responsible for paying for your wedding. We will not be using that money from Dolly, I will be using the money from the account we set up for you the day you were born.”

“Oh,” Morgan didn’t know what else to say, and when she looked at her siblings, they all wore shit-eating grins, and were no help there. “Fine.” Morgan gave in, and sighed in relief when her mother left.

Shortly after Dottie left, June and Astrid cleared off their desks, and made their way out to the garage. Since June had told Alan and Alfie the night before that she would be taking the red crew cab, the women looked in the back and grinned at one another when they saw at least fifty boxes there. June liked the fact that the spare tire was placed over them so they wouldn’t fly out when they drove down the road. They also noted that there was a small box which held a tape gun, an extra roll of tape, as well as several black markers, then in the back seat was a box that only had ‘paper’ written on the top of it. They assumed it was so they could wrap up the glassware from the cupboards.

“Want me to drive?” June looked at Astrid with raised brows.

“Please, this way, I can tell Griff and the others we’re on the way, and to expect us. You packing?”

“Two ankle pieces.”

“Me too, your K-bar?”

“Of course.” June grinned and left it at that. They had no idea what they would encounter, so they made sure they were prepared. Once they were ready, they looked up at the other women who stood in the doorway and as June came abreast of them, Astrid rolled down her window.

“I don’t expect a play-by-play—” Morgan began, “—but let us know if you run into any trouble.”

“Will do,” they agreed, and as the women stepped back, June pulled out of the garage, seeing Joyce shut the doors behind them. At the road, June looked over and sighed heavily.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” They nodded to one another, and June followed the directions on the GPS that Astrid had programmed while they were getting ready to leave. One hour later, they pulled into a very rough track, that didn’t look any bigger than a tractor path, and June saw all the fencing, and keep out signs.

“Holy shit,”

“Yeah,” Astrid said and pointed ahead of them. “The man on the left is Griff Lee, the one in the middle is Paul Girard, and the one on the right is Harry Walsh.”

“These are good guys?”

“Yes, all our intel came back, and we trust them.”

June nodded and eased the truck forward, and allowed Astrid to do all the talking. June saw Paul came to her window, while Giff came to Astrid’s. Astrid quickly handed him a small plastic bag, and once he palmed it, he nodded.

“Burner phones?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how long you’ll be?” Paul asked.

“Not sure, we’re going to be packing up the kitchen cupboards to get ready for the new ones to arrive tomorrow.”

“Okay. If you run into any trouble let us know.”

“Same directions as before?” Astrid asked.

“Yes, two miles down, take the right fork, and go another mile. Nothing else to report lately, been extremely quiet. Oh, Mason left two days ago, and won’t be back for another three.”

“Maybe we can get in and out both today and tomorrow,” June said, and crossed her fingers. When the men stepped back, she dropped the truck into gear and followed the directions. At the fork in the road, June looked over at Astrid with a heavy frown. “You ever go down that road?” She pointed to the left.

“No, I was with Alan the first time he came here, and he was scared shitless. As much as I wanted to go down there, and make the excuse that I was lost, I knew he didn’t have the heart to defy them. See, when we first arrived, the men we just saw greeted us with rifles in their hands.”

“Not the assault rifles?”

“No,” Astrid said, and looked up to where June had pointed. “Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“Last time I was here, there were only three men who greeted us with those rifles. Makes me wonder what’s going on to have twelve of them greet us.” She looked at June, then back at the men ahead of them. Before June could even park, a woman came out of the house and stormed up to the men yelling at them.

“I wonder what’s going on?” June asked as she rolled the windows down in order to hear what was being said.

“That’s Mandi,” Astrid whispered, and made sure her comms were recording.

They listened as the woman in question started yelling at the men with rifles, and June looked at Astrid with raised brows, but she followed the woman’s direction and parked. As soon as both June and Astrid exited the vehicle, she turned on them with her fisted hands on her hips.

“Sorry, but these goons think they have control of me. I know you’re Jane, and you must be Melissa?”

“I am,” June said as she strode forward, ignoring the men, but noting where they stood and how many there were, along with the rifles they held. She shook hands with Mandi, then stepped back. “We didn’t know if you had any boxes, so we brought some with us.”

“Great,” Mandi laughed, and June scowled at Astrid, because the other woman’s laugh sounded forced, almost like she was at a breaking point in her life, and any little thing could set her off.

“You...” Mandi pointed to the two men closest to the truck, “Gather the boxes these women brought, and carry them into the kitchen.” When they didn’t move, she stomped her foot, which impressed June, since Mandi was wearing shoes with at least a four-inch heel, and said through gritted teeth, “These women are here for me, not Neil, me. Do you want me to call him and tell him that you’re not doing as I asked?” She pulled her phone, and the two men couldn’t move fast enough to do her bidding. The three women followed the two men inside, and once they were left alone, Mandi heaved a gigantic sigh, and slumped into one of the stools at the island.

“Damn, I hate doing that, but it seems they do nothing but walk around with those damn guns. After you called me yesterday, Melissa, I told Neil you were coming, and he told me he would call them and tell them each to help me if I needed it.” She sighed again, then nodded. “I’m Mandi, by the way. Neil left on some business trip two days ago, and won’t be back for at least another three, maybe four.” She shook her head. “I have no idea what he does on these trips, but at least he’s out of my hair.”

“Hello, and I might be overstepping my bounds here, but are you safe?”

“No, but that’s an entirely different story. Neil gave me three hours to have you here in the house, then you have to leave, or you’ll be escorted out. At least that was what he told me after he talked with his men.”

“Damn,” Astrid said, and walked over to the cupboards. “Then, we better get started. Do you happen to have any

newspapers?”

“For?” Mandi scowled at them.

“In order to wrap your glasses, and cushion your plates. I don’t think the box we brought in with papers will be enough.”

“Oh, sorry, I’ll be right back. If you want to get started, then help yourself.” She waved her hand dismissively, like they were the help, and disappeared down the hall. Astrid held up her hand to June, then put her finger to her lips. She grabbed a stool from the corner and went up to grab the three fake flower pots on the top of the cupboard. When she brought them back down, June felt her eyebrows disappear into her hairline when she saw the cameras already there.

“Yeah, he doesn’t trust anyone,” Mandi said as she re-entered the kitchen, and slapped the newspapers down on the island.

“Are they wired for sound?”

“He said no. He only told me about them this morning when I reminded him that you two were coming. He thought he should warn me that they were there, so I didn’t freak out.”

“What about tomorrow, when all the cupboards come down, what then?”

“He wants them put back up where they were.” She sighed, and shook her head. June wanted to ask her more, but something made her wait. They got to work, and the only thing Mandi did was get them glasses of ice water before and the three of them were able to empty the cabinets, label the boxes, and they did it all in under the three-hour time limit. It impressed June that Mandi had done all that work in her heels, and hadn’t shied away from doing anything.

“Whew,” Mandi said as she wiped her brow, and settled into a chair. “What time will y’all be here in the morning?” That was the first time June heard a southern accent, and she made a mental note to look into it when she arrived back at the office.

“Is eight too early?”

“Not at all. When you get here, I can talk to the man in charge, and see when I can get the countertop guy in here to take his measurements. I’m hoping to have the kitchen complete before Saturday.”

“Well, from my understanding,” June said as she finished the last of her ice water, and took the glass to the sink, to rinse out and place in the side of it. “The old cabinets will be removed, and the new ones installed tomorrow, but I don’t know about the countertops or the back splash.”

“That’s what my tile guy is for. I already have him on speed dial.”

“Will Neil be here tomorrow?” Astrid asked. “I remember he was here when Alan talked to you about them.” She ignored the fact that Mandi had already said he was out of town.

“Unfortunately, he was called out of town on business. He won’t be back for a couple of days. I’m hoping this will all be done before he returns. I can’t thank you enough for offering to come in a day early to help doing this. I don’t know if I could have done it myself, because I know those goons outside would have been no help.” She shook her head, and then jumped to her feet. “Speaking of, why don’t you head on out, I don’t need them to come in and try to throw their weight around, because the three-hours mark is almost up.”

“Okay,” Astrid said, and did the same with her glass as June had, and just as they walked up to the door, the said goons were heading their way.

“See you tomorrow!” June called out, and went to the truck. They didn’t say a word until they were halfway between the house and the turnoff when Astrid had her pull over, and she went over the truck and only found one bug on it. She climbed back into the truck and placed it in the small iron box to deaden it’s tracking abilities.

“We can deal with this when we get home,” Astrid said, and June continued driving. They stopped by the guard shack, and one of the three men asked if everything went okay.

“Yeah, Mandi lit into the men with the assault rifles, there were twelve of them, but we were able to accomplish what we set out to do.” She grinned as she held up the small box. “Found the little gift they left on our truck, but we’ll deal with it when we get home.”

“Okay, and what about tomorrow?”

“We should be here around eight in the morning. It’s my understanding that there should be three trucks pulling three trailers, and maybe a spare vehicle. I’m not quite sure yet.”

“Okay, we’ll be ready for you. In the meantime, if you need anything let me know.”

“We will, thanks Griff.” Astrid nodded, and June pulled away from them. Neither woman said a word all the way home, not until they joined the others in the office, and Astrid walked right over to Carl’s desk and laid the iron box on his blotter.

“How many?” Carl asked.

“One.”

“Okay.” He picked up the box, and walked away.

“What’s he doing?” June asked.

“No clue, but he knows how to take care of the trackers, so they don’t show their location as being here. I only hope nothing comes back onto Mandi.”

“Me too,” June sighed as she went for a bottle of water, and settled in at her desk. She looked at the other women and explained how their morning went, and with the cameras they had already found.

“Damn, so this Mason guy doesn’t seem to trust anyone, not even his own fiancée,” Morgan said.

“It would seem so, but we’re all ready for the new cabinets to be installed in the morning. I told Mandi we would be there around eight.”

“That’s fine, get with Alan later tonight.” Morgan nodded, and everyone went back to work as usual.

CHAPTER 17



“READY?” June asked Alan from the back of the crew cab of the red truck she had driven the day before. The men had planned on taking their own personal vehicles, but after learning about the tracking device found on the truck the day before, they decided to hook the trailers up to the Boswell vehicles. This way, if anything really happened, then they would be traced back to the police station, and not the compound.

“Yeah, but I have to say that I’m scared shitless.”

“Nothing to worry about,” June tried to reassure him. “Think of it as any other job, and you should be fine. Let Astrid, Carl, and I worry about the goons. You, John, Josh, and Chuck concentrate on doing the job. That’s it.”

“Okay.” He drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and started the truck. The others must have taken his lead, because they started theirs, and followed him out of the garage. Almost an hour later, they arrived at their destination, and Alan looked in the mirror at June, then over at Astrid in the passenger seat. “Not as scary as the first time.” He nodded as Griff, Paul, and Harry came out of the guard shack carrying rifles. They nodded, and then waved them through, but not before telling them to send a text if they ran into any trouble.

No one said a word until they pulled in to where June directed them, the same place she’d parked the day before. This time there were only three men with the assault rifles, and Mandi was right there to meet them.

“Morning, I don’t know how you want to do this, but I’m assuming those trailers are my new cabinets?”

“You assume right,” Alan laughed as he exited the vehicle. “Is this the closest entrance to the kitchen?”

“It is, let me take you in, then you can decide if you want to back your trailers in or not.” She turned on her heel, still wearing the killer ones, but a different style from the day before, and walked away, and the men followed, leaving Carl, Astrid, and June to come in last. It was decided that the old cabinets would be removed first, to set them aside until they could bring in the new ones. Alan looked at his brothers and friend. “I want to save these. No demolition.”

“Okay,” they nodded, then went back out for their tools, then in less than an hour they had all the old cabinets outside sitting off to the side. Alan explained to Mandi. “We’ll load them up in the trailers after the new ones are installed.”

“Sounds good. Do you need me for anything?”

“Not really, no offense or anything.”

“None taken,” Mandi laughed, then edged her way toward the doorway. “I left a cooler of cold bottles of water, so help yourself. I’ll get out of your hair now.”

She left, and June and Astrid only exchanged raised brows before they got to work. Mandi gave the impression that she had something urgent to do and didn’t want anyone to know she was doing it, but no one said a word, each of them concentrating on the job at hand. It helped that John, Josh, and Chuck had construction experience, and June liked that they took direction from Alan, and didn’t try to overrule what he told them to do. It seemed Carl, Astrid, and herself were like the cleanup committee. When Mandi returned, she stayed off to the side for a few minutes, then gushed that she loved them. Carl had just set the original fake plants with their cameras in them back in place, but unbeknownst to anyone else, he had also set his own cameras based on the warrants he had in the safe back at the compound. But his weren’t a bulky or noticeable as Mason’s were. He had applied state of the art button cameras the same color as the pot the plants resided in,

and if you weren't looking, you wouldn't be able to find them, they blended in so nicely.

Alan stepped down off his ladder and stepped back to Mandi with a heavy sigh. "Sorry about not doing the countertops, but I'm not the guy for something like that."

"I understand, and he's on his way, I have to say, what you've done is absolutely beautiful. Let me go get the final check for you." She disappeared and the others quickly picked up their tool pouches, their tools, then went outside to load the old cabinets. June stayed inside with Alan as the others got to work. She had to admit that it went very smoothly, and it impressed her that it only took four hours. After hearing the others talk about it, it all seemed anticlimactic. They heard Mandi's heels tapping on the tile as she returned, and she held out an envelope to Alan. He took it and stuffed it into his pocket, but she told him to look at it, to make sure it was the right amount. Alan frowned, but did as told, then told her it was all correct. He left, and June looked at Mandi.

"Congratulations on your new cabinets. I'm new working for Alan, but they are beautiful. If you need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to contact us again." She pulled a business card that Astrid had made up with her and June's fake names, and a number to the burner phone they used, so that was what she gave her.

"I'm only a phone call away if you need anything." June didn't know what else to say so she left it at that, and quickly left. By the time she made it outside. The others had loaded up the old cabinetry and were climbing into their vehicles. June hurried over and climbed into the back of the red truck. As preplanned that morning before leaving the compound, Alan led the way away from Mason's home, and at a certain point he pulled over and Astrid jumped out to go over the truck to see if any trackers had been put on them while they'd been inside working. Between her and Carl they found six of them, and put them in the box she had used the day before. No one said a word as Carl took the box, and climbed back into the truck Chuck drove, and they got out of there. They only

stopped at the guard shack long enough to let the guys from Canada know they were done, and were leaving.

“Wow,” Alan said once he knew he was far enough away and shook his head. He held out one of his hands and the two women saw it shaking.

“Want me to drive?” June asked.

“No, I’m good.” He nodded and picked up speed. No one said a word until they returned home, and Carl and Astrid immediately went over the tracking devices they’d found.

“There weren’t any on the old cabinets, were there?” Chuck asked as he removed his tool belt and laid it down in the back of a trailer.

“No, I checked as we removed them, then as we loaded them into the trailers.” Carl admitted. “It was only the trailers and the trucks that had them on them. I’m assuming that was so they could track our every move once we left their place, you know, trying to find out where we came from.. The good thing is that they don’t know where our home is.”

“Terrific,” Alan said as he breathed out, and dropped to put his hands on his knees. “Remind me again never to do a job for someone like that.”

“You have to admit,” June grinned. “Mandi wasn’t that bad, and I never met him yet, but Mason wasn’t around.”

“True, but I swear every time I looked out the window I saw a goon carrying a rifle looking at me.” The others chuckled and started toward the house when another truck pulled in and they all paused when they saw it was Alex, Joyce, and their parents.

Alex was the first one out of the front passenger side of the vehicle, and with a gigantic grin on his face, he looked at his brothers and laughed, while holding his arms out to his sides, then moving them up over his head.

“It’s gone!” the men cried out when they didn’t see the sling, or foam apparatus attached to his arm.

“Wait,” Chuck called out. “No second cast either?”

“Nope.” Alex laughed. He wrapped his arm around Joyce in his joy, then looked at them with a grin. “Dr. Keener took x-rays with the cast still on, then she removed the cast, and took another set of them. She about stopped breathing because she kept warning me not to get my hopes up, but everything is completely healed.”

“Not completely,” Joyce said in warning. She looked at the others with a nod. “He still needs to go to physical therapy three times a week to strengthen his forearm and hand, get the muscles built up again, as well as his fingers. The doctor was optimistic that should only take about three weeks, three times each week, with the possibility of going for six weeks, three times a week..”

“Are there exercises you can do at home to help the process along?” John asked after he stepped back from giving his youngest brother a hug.

“Squeeze a tennis ball.” Stan laughed as he held up a bag and they all looked inside to see several containers holding the balls. There were several different colors too, pink, green, blue, and the traditional yellow ones.

Alex laughed, and grinned at the others. “Once I’m healed we’ll either have to take up tennis or get a dog to teach him to fetch.” They all shared a laugh as they left the garage and made their way to the house. Instead of going to the office, they went to the house and started getting lunch ready. They were there for ten minutes when the others joined them. It wasn’t long before everyone shared their good news with each other, making for a joyous day for everyone with the success of putting in the cabinets, and Alex’s continued good health.



THREE DAYS LATER, June, still unable to sleep past two in the morning, wishing Al’s arms were wrapped around her, was in the attic doing her meditation when she scowled at a ringing phone.

“What?” She barked into it, and frowned even harder when it continued to ring. That was when she realized it wasn’t her personal phone ringing, but the burner one, and the only person who had that number outside of the group was Mandi.

“Hello?” She asked quietly as she finally answered it.

“Melissa?” came the whispered reply.

“Yes, is this Mandi?”

“Yes, I can’t talk for long, but I have to tell you what I did.”

“First, are you safe?”

“For now, but once Neil finds out what I did, I won’t be. Forget I said that, I can handle him. I need to tell you what I did.”

“Okay, what did you do?” June expected this to be a heart-to-heart that normal women talked about, but the next words out of Mandi’s mouth had June sitting up and paying attention.

“If Neil finds out I did this, I’m a dead woman.”

“Talk to me, Mandi.”

“I copied files from his computer onto several flash drives. I know it was wrong, but he’s been acting suspicious lately, more suspicious than usual. I don’t like the people who’ve been hanging around or coming and going at all hours of the day and night lately. I did it for my own protection.”

“I understand, what did you do with those flash drives? Will the information on them incriminate Neil?”

“I think so, or at least I hope so. I don’t have them anymore though.”

It took everything June had not to swear, she’d just blown out her meditation candle and froze at her next words. “You do.”

“I do what?” June demanded, not softening the harshness of her words.

“I put those flash drives inside one of the men’s tool thingies they carry around their waist.”

“Which one?”

“I don’t know his name, but it was the guy with blond hair and green eyes.”

“Okay, I know who that is. You did the right thing, Mandi. If you’re in any danger and need me to come and get you, you call me back, understand? Call me at any time of the day or night. I want to make sure you’re safe.”

“Yes, but what if you don’t make it in time?”

June made a split decision and hoped it wouldn’t come back and bite her in the ass, but she said, “Go to the front guard shack and ask for Griff. He’ll keep you safe until Jane or I can come get you.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive. Mandi promise me you’ll go to him if you’re in any type of danger.”

“I promise. I’m sorry for bothering you, but I couldn’t sleep knowing what I did, and I needed you to find those flash drives.”

“How many are we talking about, Mandi? How many drives?”

“Three. They’re black, but I put different-colored nail polish on them. It means they’re to be read in that order.”

“What order?”

“Red, white, and blue.”

“Got it. So, when I find them I’m to read the red one first.”

“Yes, I have to go, I think Neil finally came home, and he doesn’t sound like he’s in a good mood.”

“Promise me you’ll call if you’re not safe!” June yelled, but it fell on deaf ears, because the line suddenly went dead.

June made sure her meditation area was picked up and no burning candles, and quickly made her way down to the

basement. As soon as she was downstairs, she only hesitated for a minute before going over to where the men slept. Mandi had described Chuck with the blond hair and green eyes, and June wanted to know where his tool belt was. She couldn't explain the sense of urgency she felt to get her hands on those drives.

Slowly, and quietly she opened the door to where the men slept, and crept inside, leaving the door open for what little light came in from the open area outside the room. She was grateful for a night light on the other side of the room, but she quickly realized she didn't know which of the three beds were occupied by Chuck. As she crept further into the room, she thought she knew who it was, but suddenly someone grabbed her from behind, lifted her off her feet, and covered her mouth with a hand. Before she could even think of struggling, she heard a whispered voice in her hear.

"It's Al." June relaxed and hadn't realized she was being carried away until they were in the office on the opposite side of where the men's bedroom was. She was unceremoniously dumped on her feet, and a very angry, very pissed-off Al stood with his fisted hands on his hips glaring at her.

"Were you coming into our room for a booty call with Chuck?"

"What? No," June said, and wrinkled her nose at him. "Though I *was* looking for Chuck."

"So, it *was* a booty call."

"No, you idiot, Mandi called and told me something, and I need to talk to Chuck right away."

"What could possibly be so important that you had to come to the men's bedroom at two in the morning, and who is Mandi?"

"Mandi is Neil Mason's fiancée, she called and said she copied some of Neil's files from his computer and put them on flash drives. She also said she put the flash drives into the tool belt of the blond-haired, green-eyed man from when the cabinets were installed."

“That would be Chuck.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” June said in frustration. “I was going to wake him to see where his tool belt is. The last time I saw it, he had taken it off and placed in a trailer. That was three days ago. Is it still there? Did he move it to his personal truck? Did he take it into town and leave it at your building there? I need that tool belt. I can’t explain it, but I feel like this might be some pivotal information we might need.”

“Come with me,” Alfie said as he reached down for her hand, and once he had a grip on it, he dragged her behind him as he climbed the stairs. Once they were there, he slipped his bare feet into a pair of boots, and reached up and grabbed all the keys from the hooks beside the door.

“What are you doing?”

“The guys’ trailer keys are on their truck keys. Might as well take them all, because I don’t know what happened to that tool belt. I didn’t go with you to install the cabinets. What vehicles did you take?”

“We took the Boswell trucks, and those keys are already in the garage.”

“Okay,” Alfie said as he turned off the alarm and they exited the house, and practically ran to the garage. He ended up using his own key to open the garage, and June dismantled the alarm. Once the lights came on, June stopped dead in her tracks at Alfie’s next question. “Which trailers did you take.”

“Shit, I can’t remember. All I know is they already had the finished cupboards loaded into them.”

“That would be Justin’s, John’s, and Alan’s. Did they have more than three trailers?”

“No.”

Alfie nodded as he went through the handful of keys he had and ended up dropping the ones they didn’t need, but he left them there in a pile to be picked up later. June said she’d go check out the Boswell vehicles while Alfie opened the trailers. An hour later, they still hadn’t found the tool belt,

when in frustration, June kicked out, and one of the old cabinet doors popped open, and there it was.

“Is that it?” June held her breath as Alfie frowned at her, then looked down to where she’d pointed. He walked forward, picked up the tool belt, and then back at June with a grin.

“Yes, see I burned his initials into the belt a long time ago. I did it with everyone’s to keep them apart.”

“How did you do that with the J’s, with them all having the same initial?”

“I used their middle initial.” He nodded as he passed the tool belt to June. “What are you looking for again?”

“Three flash drives, each one has a streak of different-colored nail polish on it.” June was hesitant to take the belt from Alfie, and waved her hand for him to do it. She didn’t want to be disappointed if they’d fallen out somewhere along the way and had gotten lost.

“These?” Alfie looked at her with a grin after setting the tool belt down and held up three black flash drives.

June was so excited they had been found that she rushed forward, threw herself into his arms, and kissed him for all she was worth.

CHAPTER 18



ALFIE WASN'T PREPARED for the kiss at first, but it didn't take him long to get with the program and kiss her back with everything he had. When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, he held her face in his hands, and looked directly into her eyes and breathed out.

“As much as I want this to continue, I don't want this to be a pity fuck. June, I want us to have what we had at Sturgis, but on a more personal level. I miss holding you in my arms at night.”

“And I miss having them around me,” June sighed as she admitted this. “That's why I get up at two in the morning and meditate. Let's get this mess cleaned up and get back to the house. I can't wait to see what Mandi gave us. It could be anything from gibberish to the Holy Grail.” They quickly locked the trailers back up. Picked up the dropped keys, and reset the alarm on their way out. They held hands as they made their way back to the house, and once inside, they reset the alarm, and Alfie looked at her.

“Where to? Don't think you can keep me out of this. No one is up, and I'm just as excited as you to find out what is on those drives. I won't be able to get back to sleep with wondering. Where do you want to do this?”

“How about the basement office? Can you make a pot of coffee while I get things set up?”

“Absolutely.” He grinned at her, and together they kicked off their shoes, hung the keys back up on the hooks, and made

their way to the basement. As June went to a computer, Alfie set out to make a pot of coffee, as it perked, he made sure there was plenty of paper in the copier, and once the coffee was done, he filled two mugs and brought them over. He set one down in front of June, settled in the chair beside her, and looked over her shoulder.

“What do you have there?”

“I don’t know, there are several files here, and I don’t know where to start.”

“Are you on the correct flash drive?” Alfie frowned at her as he sipped his coffee. “Didn’t she tell you which one to use first?”

“Yes, red, white, then blue.” June scowled at him, then sighed heavily when she realized she’d slipped the blue one into the computer first. “My bad,” she said as she powered it down, then inserted the red one. Once she ran the check of it not giving her own computer a virus, she opened it, and again saw several files. June looked at Alfie with a confused look.

“I only have one suggestion.” He said as he continued to sip his coffee.

“And that is?”

“Open the first one, print it, and move onto the next one. Let’s print them all, and see if we can make heads or tails of what’s there. It could be nothing, or it could blow this case wide open.”

When she still looked skeptical, he grinned. “I’ll even stand by the copier to gather the pages.”

“Fine, I’ll let you know how many pages in each folder.”

“Works for me,” Alfie laughed as he reached over, took her by the back of the neck, kissed her hard, then stood and walked over to the copier. He opened cupboards and pulled out a box of folders and dug through a drawer for a marker. “Let me know what to label them.”

“Okay,” she called out as she opened the first one and sent it to the printer. “Fifteen pages, introduction. That’s all it

says.”

“Got it,” Alan called back, and without reading anything, he gathered the pages, and they continued for the next couple of hours until the last file had been printed. Only then did they settle back in their seats with fresh coffee and begin to read. June liked that Alfie let her read the first file, then hand it over to him.

“Oh shit,” she said, halfway through the first file, and looked at Alfie in shock. “Houston, we may have a problem.”

Alfie jumped to his feet and went behind her to begin reading over her shoulder. “Who is that guy?” He pointed to the pages where a name kept coming up, and June could only shrug her shoulders. They both jerked when they heard someone clear their throat and asked if they were coming up for breakfast. They quickly put everything away, and joined them. No one said a word when the two of them arrived upstairs in their pajamas, while the others were dressed.

“Been working on something,” June said by way of explanation, then looked around the table and made a quick decision. “Carl, how much notice do you need to give your boss to have him come here?”

“Few hours, why?”

“And Stokes? Trent? What about those Canadian cops?”

“Those men can’t be here until the weekend,” Astrid said. “They don’t want their cover blown, so they work twelve-hour days, five days a week to have the weekends off.”

“Okay, I’m working on something, and should have all my ducks in a row by this next weekend.” She held up her hand when the others looked like they were going to bombard her with questions. “Please, it’s a lot of information, and I’d like to go over it at least once before I present it. Can we set it up for everyone, and I mean everyone, even the Erwins to be here next Saturday at nine in the morning?”

“I know it’s none of my business,” Dottie said from her seat at the table. “But Uncle Chip should be back by then.”

“Great, because he’s going to want to hear about this first hand.” June nodded and left it at that. She sighed in relief when the others left her alone, and only exchanged looks with Alfie. They finished eating, and because it was Sunday, the others had different plans, and June went back down to the basement office, along with Alfie. They spent the next few days compiling the information Mandi had given June. By the time Saturday rolled around, June didn’t know if she was brain dead, or ecstatic with all the information she’d been able to comb through.

“How you going to do this?” Alfie asked early that morning, and gave her yet another cup of strong coffee.

“I think I’ll lead with those letters from the red drive—the ones that explained who and what, as well as why. Remember? The ‘introduction’ file.”

“Yeah, I was going to suggest that would be a good lead in. It would get their attention. I’m not telling you how to do your job, but I think you ladies can deal with the white and blue drives on your own. Personally, I don’t think the others need to know what’s on them. At least not at this time. I’m sure you’ll explain everything when the time comes.”

June nodded, and when everyone started to arrive, she asked them to meet her downstairs in the war room, instead of over at the office. June stood at the front of the room with Al and watched as the people she knew arrived, and when Stan, Dottie, and Peggy came in, she nodded to Morgan, who had taken a seat with Wyatt, Dillon, and the rest of the Erwin clan. There were six people she did not know, and Chip came up to her with a smile on her face.

“When you said you had some groundbreaking news, I called in more powers that be. I’m not stalling, but I’ll get to the introductions in a minute. Because they are new, do you mind if I take control of your meeting for about five to ten minutes?”

“Not at all. While you do your thing, I’ll have the others sign an NDA.”

“Good idea.” He nodded and watched as she went to the side and opened a folder. She showed it to Morgan who gave her a thumbs up.

“I’d like to thank everyone for coming,” June said as she walked to the back of the room and began placing papers before certain people. “The papers I’m handing out are an NDA, meaning a non-disclosure agreement. In a nutshell, it means that whatever you learn here today, you cannot repeat to anyone, unless you plan on being prosecuted by the law.” They all nodded, and Morgan quickly jumped to her feet to look at her parents.

“Mom, Dad, Aunt Peggy, you’re included in this meeting, because you’re staying here at the compound for a few weeks, and well, we ladies just can’t keep work at work. All the guys know what we’re doing, and we oftentimes brainstorm at the dinner table. You’re going to be hearing, pardon my language, about a lot of fucked-up shit today, and if I know June and what she does, there will be a lot more. We’re not asking you for anything, but feel free to take notes as sometimes the most innocent question can lead us in an entirely new direction.”

They agreed and quickly signed the document and passed it forward. June noted that Chip had the three newest people that weren’t family sign them as well. He then stood at the front of the room and held up his hand. June and Al went over to the side to listen to what he had to say.

“First, thank you all for coming. As everyone is sure to notice, we have three new people joining us today. I’d like to introduce you to my friend, Fred Myar. He and I served in the military together, and we tried to open Boswell Group together, but he moved here to help his wife take care of her father. He has since joined the DEA up in Bismarck, and he is the one that told me what was happening back here. With his Intel, I was able to go to everyone for funding for Boswell Two.” Fred rose to his feet and nodded to everyone once Chip concluded his introduction.

“It’s nice meeting you all, and I’ve heard nothing but good things from Chip about Morgan and the team. I look forward to hearing what you have so far.”

“Okay, moving along, we also have Zack Reagan, he is the head of the ATF out of Bismarck, and next to him is David Helm, the man in charge of the local Homeland Security office. Gentlemen, I called you in today, because one of the operatives for Boswell Two has some information she needs to impart on us, and I thought you should hear it from the horse’s mouth. Are there any questions so far?”

“Yeah,” the man who had stood when he’d been introduced as David, said, “Who are all these people?”

Chip looked over at Morgan with a grin, and nodded to her. She stood and walked to the front of the group. “I’m Morgan Stuart, and I’m the commander of Boswell Two. Uncle Chip, do they know what we are about?”

“Yes, and they know that you only hire EWMs to be on your team. What they don’t know, is what information you’ve uncovered so far. They’ve been sitting back and waiting to come aboard. It’s not like they’ve been ignoring you, but they don’t have the manpower nor the man hours to do what you and your team have done in so little time.”

“Okay, then let’s get started.” Morgan turned to June and nodded. “Can we take thirty to roughly bring them up to date?”

“Sure.” June nodded and settled on the table to the side. It took exactly thirty minutes, and each woman stated their name, their position on their EWM team, and what they had done or discovered since coming to work for Boswell.

“Holy hell,” Fred said after Janice’s story. “So, it’s not doomsday preppers we’re looking for?”

“No,” everyone said, and June said from the back. “I’ll explain in a few.” The discussion continued, and once the brief rundown was given, they took a quick five-minute break and as everyone settled back down, June walked back to the front.

“Now that you’re all caught up, I called you here because a couple of days ago I received some mind-blowing information that will blow the top right off this investigation. My name is June Vanderbilt and I’m the newest recruit for Boswell Two.

I've only been here for a few weeks. While on the inside, I was the analyst for my team. Which means that I went over every piece of Intel with a fine-tooth comb and a magnifying glass. Once it was set in my mind, I went back to the powers that be and told them what the best method would be to execute our mission. Not once in eleven years as an EWM have I ever failed. Every mission I have ever done this for has been a success, whether it was our own, or with the other special teams we coordinated with." She saw the others nod and settled back in their chairs. Once she took a deep breath, she walked over to the board where she had written the people of interest's names on there a couple of days ago, and her teammates had used them to explain their own part in this endeavor.

"Today, we're going to be discussing information that I received from only one source. I have not been able to substantiate it completely, and that's why you people are here. You're all equipped with a laptop, so feel free to use them if need be."

"Who's the source?" Chip scowled at her.

"Mandi," June said as she walked over to the board and pointed to the name next to Neil's. "A little background, and I'll get right to it. Weeks ago, Alan..." She pointed to the man, and he only raised his hand to the others that didn't know him. "...was called in to go talk to a person about installing a shelf. The job turned into replacing all the kitchen cabinets and not just installing a shelf. Astrid had only just arrived, and decided to go with him. This is what they encountered." June nodded to Astrid, and on the big screen was the view from her body camera. No one said a word when the newcomers to the situation made comments.

"Anyway, last week, I contacted Mandi and asked if Jane, aka Astrid and I could come to her home and help her empty her cupboards. I know it doesn't sound like much, but I like to see if I can't get the lie of the land before going in. See, the new install was scheduled for the next day, and Carl had warrants to place cameras in the home for us to gather more Intel. If we hadn't gone in the day before, we never would

have found that Neil Mason, or someone, had their own cameras already in place. We had to scramble in order to get ours in there. Astrid and I have no clue who placed them there, I have my suspicions, but I won't voice them until I have more concrete evidence, though Mandi did state that Neil had placed them there. With that being said, three days after the cabinets were installed, I received a phone call from Mandi, but I have to tell you that before I left her on the day Astrid and I helped her pack up her cupboards, and the next day after the new cabinets were installed, I stressed that if she ever needed someone to talk to, she should call me." She paused and saw the other women nodding, even Dottie, Peggy, along with Dolly, and April.

"Give her an out if she needed it," Dottie said. "Did you give her your personal phone number?"

"No, Astrid set us all up with burner phones. I gave her that number."

"And she called it?" Elijah Trent asked.

"Yes, she told me some very shocking things. I won't leave you in suspense. She said that she had dropped three flash drives into one of the men's tool belts while they were installing the cabinets. When I asked her which one, she could only tell me that it was the blond guy with green eyes."

Everyone turned, and said, "Chuck."

"Yes, I immediately went to wake him. It was two in the morning, but Al waylaid me, and once I explained the situation to him, we went to the garage to look for your tool belt."

"Did you find it?" Chuck asked. "I can't."

"It was in one of the old cabinets in the back of Josh's trailer," Alfie grinned at his friend. "It was the last place we looked, but we found the tool belt and the drives."

"Right, and Mandi stressed that I look at them in order. She said she'd put a stripe of nail polish on each one. I was to read them in order of red, white, and blue." June held them up, and they all could see the colors.

“As soon as I read what was on the red one, that’s when I called this meeting. I’ll get right to the point. There were only two letters, and I guess you could say a list of explanations on the red flash drive. For me, being an analyst who loves organizing data, I realized that those three flash drives just opened an entire world of clusterfuckery for everyone involved in this case. Ladies, and gentlemen, if you’re ready, let me begin the shitstorm I am about to open.” June paused to sip her coffee, but sighed in relief when Al handed her a cold bottle of water. After downing half of it, she cleared her throat, and began.

CHAPTER 19



IF YOU ARE READING THIS, one, I hope like hell you are not Neil Mason, if you are, then I'm a dead woman. If you aren't, then I hope you will take what I'm about to say as the truth. Here goes: I am not the woman Mason refers to as Mandi. Mandi is a fake name, a name I made up almost two years ago when I came looking for Mason. I had every intention of hunting his ass down and killing him the minute I laid eyes on him. I actually had him in the crosshairs of my scope, but then I had a thought. Why kill him without getting answers? So, I backed off and reinvented myself into the woman I thought he wanted.

It took three months, but I was able to get rid of my accent, lose weight, learn to walk in high heels, have fake hair extensions, fake nails. I made myself fake for him. Why you ask? Because, I believe with every fiber in my entire body that he is responsible for the disappearance of not one, but three, and since getting to know him better, possibly dozens of women.

Let me start by saying my name is not Mandi. My real name is Betty Jean Beatty, and I came to North Dakota to look for my sister, Rebecca Sue, our cousin, Carrie Ann, and Rebecca Sue's college roommate, Daisy Mae. Yes, it sounds like we are from the south, and we are. I knew to come after Neil Mason, because the last phone conversation I had with Rebecca Sue was where she told me she had met a man, and he had invited the three of them to a party at his house. See, they were on their way from college up in Fargo to Yellowstone to do the touristy thing for Spring Break. Rebecca Sue called me and told me all about the handsome man she'd

met, and the party he'd invited them to. No one has seen nor heard from them since. I've included their pictures, the first one is my baby sister, Rebecca Sue Beatty. The second one, is our cousin, Carrie Ann Harrington, I have to say here, that when Aunt Mae was told that Carrie Ann had gone missing, her heart couldn't take it, and we buried her five days later. I blame Neil Mason for Aunt Mae's death, along with the three disappearances. The last photo is of their roommate, Daisy Mae. She's from two towns over down there in Alabama. Landry is her last name."

June paused and looked at Alfie, and on her nod, he brought the photos up on the screen.

"Son of a bitch!" Griff screamed, and jumped to his feet, so suddenly that his chair crashed to the floor behind him. His friends scowled at him, then did the same, swearing as he had. Before anyone could say a word, Griff looked around wildly. His gaze latched onto Morgan, and he said, "Remember we told you we had a woman in a safe house. She said she was American? Told us all about how she had gotten there, but couldn't tell us anything about her friends? We wouldn't give you her name, not until we investigated Mason further?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"That first picture, who Mandi, excuse me Betty Jean called her sister, Rebecca Sue, she's our Jane Doe in a safe house."

"The other two?" June demanded.

"No clue," Griff sighed as he set his chair back up, and sat back down. "Yeah, I'd say Mandi knows what she's talking about. No need to substantiate the information on her sister.

"Is she still alive?" David from Homeland demanded.

"Yes, as of three days ago she was." He opened a file he'd brought with him and laid it out on the table. "These are the newest victims found in the morgues back home."

June thought there had to be at least three dozen new photographs there. Everyone remained silent for a long time.

“I’m sorry, please continue.” Griff sighed heavily as everyone didn’t look at the others.

“That’s pretty much it for her background,” June said. “I’ll read the other stuff she’d written.”

“The next letter you will find is from a man, and I have no clue who this man is. I’ve never heard his name mentioned, and I have absolutely no clue whom he is talking about. I got this from Neil’s computer. I may look and act like a blonde bimbo around him, but in my real life I am a CPA in my day job, and a hacker in my spare time. It took nothing to hack into his system to get the information on the other drives I’ve provided. I included this letter, because once you read it, you’ll understand why I have concerns. If I’m reading it correctly, this guy is bad, I mean really, really bad and needs to be taken down like Mason does. However, I don’t know if the people he talks about are alive, or already dead, or who they even are. Whoever is reading this, then reads the next letter, I hope you catch the fucker and take him outback and shoot him, leave his body for the wild animals to find, he’s not decent enough for a burial. He’s not worth the trouble of a trial either, especially if everything he says in his letter is true.”

June looked up and saw everyone was staring at her with rapt attention. “I’m with Mandi on this, and for all intents and purposes, I believe we should continue to call her Mandi, because that is who we know her as. We don’t want to change her name this far into the investigation, and forget who we’re talking about.”

“I agree,” Morgan said, and all the others followed suit.

“Can I ask one question?” Peggy asked from the back.

“What’s that?”

“When you told Mandi to contact you, and she did, did you happen to give her another out?”

“I did, I told her if she was in immediate danger, then she was to go to the guard shack out front and ask for Griff.”

“Thank you,” Griff nodded. “If she comes, I’ll keep her safe. It’s taking everything I have right now not to go to her

and tell her that her sister is alive. I know it wouldn't help anyone at this point in the investigation. I don't want to jeopardize what we've done so far." They all agreed with him, stood, stretched, and grabbed something to drink.

As they settled back down, June looked over at Al, and sighed, "I'm going to have Al read this next letter."

"What? Why me?"

"Because, according to Mandi, a man wrote it, and I think the context will be better received if a male read it aloud."

"Oh," Alfie said as he stood and went over to take the stapled pages from her. Without even looking at her, he looked at the others, and said, "It might be my voice, but not my thoughts." They chuckled and told him they wouldn't hold it against him. As soon as everyone was settled he cleared his throat, walked to the front of the room, looked down, and started, "*People are such fucking stupid idiots,*" he began, then looked up with a chuckle. "So, tell us how you really feel, asshole." Alfie shook his head, and looked back down at the paper he held. "*Life is good, life is great, I laugh at the stupidity of how low-class human beings can be. They might think they are the pillars of this community, but they're nothing but the scum I scrape off the bottom of my shoe every night. I get what I want, when I want, whenever and however I want. I have done this my entire life. If I don't get what I want, or what has been promised to me, then I make the person who failed me pay. Everyone fears me, as they should. Well, everyone except for one fucking family that think they're gods in this area, but I'll show them, if they knew what I've already done to their precious family, and the plans I have for the rest of them, they'd run with their tails between their legs. They are too stupid and clueless to know that I control them, they don't control me.*

"*It all started eighteen years ago, as I mentioned above, I get what I want, when I want, and nothing stops me. It might take some time for my plans to come to fruition, but I will get what is owed me in the end. If not, there will be hell to pay. Mason, if you don't believe me, then listen closely. This is the first time I had ever been thwarted, and the results of being led*

on and lied to. It's still a work in progress, and I will get what is mine in the end. I believe revenge is best served cold, and this revenge will be stone cold when it's served, but it will be served. It's a long time coming.

I digress, this is what happened. I moved to town, and saw a piece of property I wanted. I put an offer in on it, but was turned down, because it wasn't for sale. Everything is for sale in this world, and the owners needed to know that I wasn't going away. They continuously turned down my offers, and even went so far as to get a restraining order against me. The fucking idiots. I showed them in the end, I studied them, I observed them, I found their weakness and I pounced. Like I said, revenge is best served cold, and after years of planning, I found the perfect opportunity to get the land I coveted. My first order of business was to get rid of the two who'd had the audacity of getting a restraining order against me for going after what I wanted. It was easy enough to pay off the local drunk to have him drive down the road at a certain time of the day. It worked perfectly. I couldn't believe that once William and Mary Erwin were killed, how easy my plan fell into place.

That was until I was lied to, yet again. I don't suffer liars. Once I got William and Mary out of the way, I targeted Debra. It was perfect, her loser of a husband was off on the other side of the world trying to be a hero, while his wife was home spreading her legs for anyone and anything that had a dick between theirs. With a little chemical persuasion, I was able to convince her to leave her snot-nosed little shits at home, and divorce her husband. She promised me that she would get everything of his in the divorce. She lied to me. That fucking pissant, mother fucking Wyatt got everything. I showed her that she couldn't get away with the lies. With an extra-large dose of her favorite drug in her system, I was able to transport her over the border into Canada and left her in the bathroom at a particular rest stop. It was all pre-arranged. I got my envelope of money left for me, left her drugged-up body in the toilet, where she belonged, and left. The only contact I received was the buyer called to say the merchandise had arrived safe and sound. That was the easiest one hundred grand I ever made.

When I realized that I couldn't get my hands on the Flying E anytime soon, I started investigating on how I could get more women to sell across the border. That's when I found a cop who wanted to get rid of his wife, but not in the messy, bloody way. After several weeks of discussion, I was able to get rid of her, put money in both of our pockets, and then I owned that pissant of a sheriff over in Grant county. He did my bidding, and that's when the plan of targeting single drivers came to pass. They only know me as Oro, and they do my bidding. I get a laugh every time I tell them to jump, and they ask how high? Not only do I have the entire police force under my thumb, but I also own the judge and DA for that county. Life is good. I put my dreams of owning the Flying E on hold all these years. That is, until a few years ago when I found the perfect woman for me. I had heard she had no memory, and it would have been perfect for me to train her into realizing she'd been mine all along. The only thing that stopped me was that snot-nosed pissant Wyatt, his brother, Dill-hole, and their cousin, who thinks he's a cop. I'll show them, they ran me out of that party like I was the shit they wore on their shoes all day long. The worst thing was when they sent my wife after me. Little did they know they did me a favor. My wife told me she was leaving me, because of my wandering eyes and hands, good, go, but not before I'm done with you, bitch.

For the next three weeks, she was locked in the basement of our home, and the minute she gave birth, I took that shit-faced son of a bitch, along with his mother and took them to the same place I dropped Debra Erwin off at years ago. See, I had grown so big in my dealings, that I didn't transport them any longer, I had others doing it for me, but I made an exception for Sally. It paid off too, because she had proved that she was capable of carrying and delivering a baby, she was sold to the man who used women like dog breeders use puppy mills. I had to know the details of what would happen to her, and he said once her body healed from giving birth, she would be gang raped until she conceived again, kept under lock and key until she gave birth, then the cycle would start all over again. When asked about the child—mine and the others Sally would produce—I was informed they were sold on the black market to people willing to pay millions of dollars for a

child without going the legal route. That's when I was told the same thing happened to the first woman I had given him. Life is great. I got three hundred grand for her, and an additional fifty grand for her brat. He still had his mother's blood on him when I handed him over. Don't know and don't care what happened to him.

I took some of that money, and went out and got fixed, no more mistakes for Franklin Oro Carlisle."

"What the fuck!" Wyatt screamed as he jumped to his feet. He looked at his brother wildly, then over at Morgan.

"Sit down," Morgan said. "Let's hear what else he has to say, then we can deal with it." Morgan looked over at Tom, and saw he was scribbling furiously and went to the men from the FBI, BCI, and Carl with his notes. They in turn grabbed the laptop and started pounding on the keys.

"Continue," Tom said as he looked up and waved over at Alfie. "We're good."

Alfie looked at the others, and drank half a bottle of water before he looked down at the pages he held, and nodded. *"Remember I said revenge is best served cold? Well, Mason, I don't ever tell anyone my plans, but for you, I'll tell you this. By the end of this year, the Flying E will be mine, all mine. How do you ask? Simple, I'm going to take out Dill-hole's entire family, starting with his son who left for college. Daddy's not around to protect him, so he'll be the first one eliminated. A little carbon monoxide poisoning in his dorm room, and it'll be ruled an accident. Then onto the other brat, I see him driving back and forth to school all the time, no brainer there to stage an accident. It wouldn't be my first, and won't be my last. Next would be to kidnap the whore he knocked up, and keep her until she had the bastard she's carrying, if it really is Erwin's, who knows, she's probably like his first wife and will spread those thighs for anyone.*

Once she gives birth, it's off to Canada she goes. I've got a sniper on retainer that can take Dill-hole and his greedy brother out. The only person left would be the bitch that was supposed to be mine years ago. I'd heard she'd gotten her

memory back, but I own a plethora of drugs that will wipe it out again, and I can reprogram her. It's not like she has any family to come to her rescue.

So, you see, Mason, this is why I do what I do. I need funds to obtain and maintain my dream piece of property. What better way than to sell unsuspecting women? No one's going to miss them, and look at all the money we can make."

Alfie shook his head and looked up at the others, then flipped over to the last page, and began reading again.

"I don't know why Mason kept this letter on his computer, and I have no idea who Franklin Oro Carlisle is, but whoever is reading this letter, please know that Mason is meticulous in his details. I suspect he kept this letter on his computer to try and frame the guy who wrote it. I wouldn't put it past him. That's all the information I have on the red flash drive. Please, be careful, and if you know anyone mentioned in that guy's letter, please let them know their lives are in danger."

Alfie looked up, and no one said a word or moved until they all jumped when a phone went off. Everyone looked at theirs and Dillon scowled as he answered, "DJ?" He paused, then slumped in his chair, and everyone saw the tears streaming down his face. It was Wyatt who took the phone from him, listened, then took off at a dead run. The others were shortly behind him, and they stared in shock as Wyatt flung open the front door, grabbed the man/boy standing there and wrapped him into a hug. The others noticed that he too had tears streaming down his face.

CHAPTER 20



“WHAT THE FUCK?” DJ said from where his face was jammed into his uncle’s neck. No matter how hard he tried to get loose, his uncle held on tighter. It wasn’t until Lucas and Morgan told Wyatt to stop, that he could catch his breath. As soon as he was released, he was grabbed again by his father, and held in the same position. This time it was April who called his dad off him.

“I wasn’t gone that long,” DJ said as he took a step away from the older men in his family when they let him go.

“Sorry,” Lucas grinned at him. “We just heard some disturbing news not two minutes before you called. Why are you here? You’re a week early to be home for the wedding.”

“Yeah, something happened, and we were sent home.”

“What?” Everyone yelled the question at him.

“Gas leak in one of the dorms, they have no clue where it’s coming from, then the original dorm I was in had carbon monoxide detected.”

“What do you mean the original dorm?” Morgan demanded. “Did you move to a different one? Why?” She saw she’d shocked him, but held up her hand. “Sorry, like Lucas said, we just heard some disturbing news, and you being here is both good and bad.”

“How is it good?”

“That you’re here and alive.”

“How was it bad?”

“We just learned that someone was going to try to kill you with carbon monoxide poisoning.”

“Holy shit, are you for real?”

“Yes,” Morgan said, and walked up to him and gave him a hug. “Sorry for barking at you. Come in.” She hugged him tighter and whispered for his ears only. “Don’t freak if your dad and uncle won’t let you return to college after the wedding.”

“I’ll try,” he said, then walked further into the room and saw everyone, along with some new people standing there. Introductions were made, and everyone stood around getting something to drink, went to the bathroom, and waited a good thirty minutes before going back down to the basement.

June heard Lucas fill DJ in on what they were all doing, and the other boy nodded, and walked to his father, and hugged him. “I’m fine, Dad, we can discuss it later, but I’m fine.” No one said a word when Dillon hugged his son again, and made sure he sat next to him when they resumed the meeting.

June stood at the front of the room again and looked out at the others. “Okay, then, I don’t mean to downplay anyone’s feelings at this time, as we can all see, that last letter was extremely emotional for some people, as well it should have been, *but...*” she said as she held up her hand. “We learned a lot of shit from that letter. I know I did. The first thing I’m going to address is the broad spectrum of the threat from that second letter.”

“What’s that?” Wilson called out from his position close to the Erwin family. June noted that he had his hand on the back of DJ’s chair, like he wasn’t letting him get away from him.

“I took the last part of that letter, where this Oro character is going after Dillon’s family as a direct threat.” June turned and saw everyone nod, then looked at Morgan. “Any chance the wedding will be called off?”

“No,” Wyatt said firmly. “I will not give that motherfucker the satisfaction of seeing me cower. According to him, we’re

clueless, but since hearing that letter, we can now be better prepared. I will not put my life on hold for that asshole.”

“Whoa, Uncle Wyatt, little strong there for you, isn’t it?” DJ asked, and frowned when everyone turned to glare at him. “Sorry,” he said as he held up his hands to ward them off.

“I think,” Stan said as he stood from his position from the back of the room. With everyone looking at him, he nodded once. “I think with all these alphabet soups here, they should have at least twenty undercover agents here at the reception as added security for the wedding. I’m talking apiece, like every bowl of soup have twenty agents here.”

“I agree,” Morgan said as she rose to her feet and went to stand next to June. “I trust you ladies, and my brothers with my life, and you’re not part of the wedding party, but you’re only thirteen or fourteen people. If this reception is anything like an Erwin BBQ in the past, we’re looking at close to six hundred people.” She looked over at the new people from the new agencies and nodded once. “We don’t censor who can come to one of these parties.”

“Do you think this Oro person will be here?” David from Homeland Security asked.

“I do,” Wyatt said. “He’s been to all of them in the past, and he’ll be at this one, thinking he’s pulled one over on us. He’ll get a shock and realize he’s not such a king shit once he sees DJ is home, and healthy. I agree with Stan, we need extra security here. I *will not* put my life on hold for that fucker.”

No one said a word when Lucas quietly left the room, and went upstairs. He ended up going out the side door, and over to the area of the lawn Alice used for her Tai Chi exercises. He pulled his phone and quickly dialed.

“Patterson,” came the barked reply into the phone.

“Yes, hello, is this Hank Patterson?”

“Yes, who’s this?”

“Are you in charge of the Brotherhood Protection Agency?”

“I am, again, who is this?”

“You don’t know me, but my name is Lucas Erwin, and I’d like to hire you personally, along with as many agents as you can get.”

“Whoa, hold on a minute, son,” Hank said, then frowned when it sounded like someone took the phone away from him. “Hello?”

“Just a minute,” a female voice came over the line, and Hank settled back in his chair, sipped his coffee, and waited. He was expecting several of his agents to arrive any minute, and put his phone on speaker as he waited for whatever the kid he’d been talking to dealt with. Probably a jealous girlfriend. Wouldn’t she have egg on her face when she found out this Lucas character hadn’t been talking to another woman. As he agents began to arrive, he grinned with his finger to his lips, pointed to the phone, and they all nodded and settled down, listening to the activity on the other end of the phone.

“Lucas! What did you do?”

“I’m hiring people to protect my family,” Lucas glared at Janice. “Give me my phone back.”

“Don’t you think we can handle this?”

“I’m sure you can, but this is my family we’re talking about. Give me the phone Janice.”

“Don’t make me hurt you, Lucas.” Janice glared back at him, and started to hang up the phone, but Lucas lunged and got it away from her. With it high above his head, he glared at her.

“You can help me, or you can get the hell out of my face.”

“Who did you call?”

“Some guy I’ve heard Aunt Morgan talk about all the time. I even went into her phone a few weeks ago to get his number from her. In case I needed it. I need it.”

“Who?”

“Hank Patterson with the Brotherhood Protection Agency.” Lucas ground out, then frowned when Janice seemed to deflate before his very eyes. Her next words shocked the hell out of him.

“Put it on speaker.” Lucas did, then spoke into the phone. “Sorry about that, Mr. Patterson. Now where were we?”

“You said you wanted to hire me to protect your family. What type of protection are we talking about?”

“You got earwigs? K-bars? Snipers?”

That got Hank’s attention, as well as the others in the room, and they all sat up to listen. “We do, but what do you need them for?”

“Sir, this is Janice Bartlett, I work for Morgan Stuart over here in North Dakota. The name of our agency is the Boswell Group. We just ran into a very—I’m talking ginormous—break in our investigation, and with Morgan and Wyatt’s wedding two weeks away from now, there is no way we can get all the bad guys by then. We’re looking to add additional security. As Lucas and I are talking with you, we have agents from the FBI, BCI, the State Attorney General, the DEA, ATF, and Homeland security also discussing getting at least twenty men from each branch in here as additional security for the reception.”

“Holy shit, is this about the Boswell Group investigation?”

“It is, and Sir, it’s big. We’re still combing through all the information to try to get to the bottom of it. First order of business is to keep Morgan, her fiancé, and his family safe. We’ve just learned that there is a threat against the entire family. I’m talking we learned this less than twenty minutes ago.”

“Since we’re planning to be there for the wedding anyway, we’ll be your security. Do you have a place for at least twenty extra men and some of their families to stay?”

“We do,” Lucas said, and only shook his head at Janice. “We have four campers that sleep eight, Uncle Wyatt has four extra bedrooms in their house, I have three extra rooms in

mine, and if need be, some of your men can camp out at the compound. There are eight spare beds there that I'm aware of now."

"He's right, Sir. Damn it, Lucas, why are you so freaking smart for a sixteen-year-old?"

"Must come by it naturally. So can we count on you, Mr. Patterson?"

"You can. We'll coordinate our plans and be there before Monday of next week."

"Thank you, and we'll discuss payment when you arrive." Lucas hung up the phone and looked at Janice. "Did I do good?"

"You did great kid, now you have to tell the others."

"Not a problem," Lucas laughed, then strode to the house. He held the door open for Janice, and together they made their way back to the basement. Lucas didn't waste any time with his announcement. "I did something," he called out as soon as Janice took her seat beside Alan. When everyone stopped talking and turned to look at him, he nodded, and strode forward. Morgan thought he looked six inches taller and ten years older as he strode toward her.

"What did you do?" Morgan asked.

"I just got off the phone with an agency I hired to protect you all." He looked at his father and said firmly, "I still have the reward money I can pay them with."

"Whom did you hire?" Wyatt scowled at him.

"Hank Patterson and his Brotherhood Protection Agency." When no one said a word against him, he scowled. "What? No hassles?"

"Nope, he's good, and I trust him. I don't know where you got his name and number from, but his agents are all former SEALs, so you did good, kid." Chip grinned as he walked up and shook Lucas' hand, then brought him in for a hug.

Lucas felt ten feet tall, but then let down at the same time, because people knew of the men he'd just hired, but then

again, as long as they knew Patterson, then he must be good. He'd find out for himself when they arrived the following week. He'd wait until later to let his uncle and father know that he'd given out rooms in their homes to these people until after the wedding. He quickly went back to his chair to listen in to what he'd missed, and when April reached over and squeezed his hand, he looked at her and felt ten feet tall again when she whispered her thanks for keeping them safe.



DUKE LOOKED at Hank with a scowl on his face. “What the hell was that about?” He pointed to the phone Hank had just hung up to stress his point.

Hank Patterson looked at the others with a grin, and they all braced themselves for the impact. They did not like the expression on his face. “That, gentlemen, was a job. We’re all going over to the wedding next week, right?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?” Kudo asked.

“It means that the kid I just talked to wants to hire us as bodyguards for Morgan and Wyatt. We’ll get all the details once we get there, but folks, I’d like to head out a couple of days early to get there and get the situation we’ll be facing.”

“Shit,” Duke sighed, and looked at the others when they all scowled at him. “This must be big.”

“Why do you say that?” Hank asked.

“I know, or have met almost all of those women working for Morgan. They’re good, they are the best at what they do. If they’re calling in our help, what the hell is going on over there that they can’t handle it?”

“No clue, that’s why we’re going to head over there a few days early. If seven EWMs can’t handle the situation, then we’re all doomed.”

“I think,” Angel spoke for the first time. “I think it’s not that they can’t handle the situation, I think they need or want

backup. If I know the girls, because I would do the same thing, they will be protecting the family that Lucas mentioned, and they'd want us there to back them up with more eyes on the situation. At least, that's what I would do. You know, we'd go in as second string, but because this Lucas person told us we could stay right there, then we'd know what is going on and be able to help at a moment's notice."

"There is that," Hank said. They remained silent for a long time, each lost in their own thoughts, trying to figure out what was happening over in North Dakota. "Anyway," Hank said at one point. "We're taking a chase truck, and cagers for the ones that aren't riding, correct?"

"Correct."

"Then, I want those cagers loaded for bear. We'll have the kids ride in my truck, and I won't be as loaded as you, but I will have protection in the car, just concealed." They all agreed and started planning the trip they'd have to leave for in three days' time.

CHAPTER 21



APRIL WALKED AROUND as the others talked around her, and when she arrived at one point in reading the information on the wall, she stopped, and ended up reading it several times, but several questions came to mind. She turned with one hand on her significant baby bump, and one on the small of her back. It didn't take long for the others to quiet down and look at her.

"You okay?" Dillon asked as he started toward her.

"Yeah," she said as she waved his concern away. It was sweet, but annoying at times. She was pregnant, not sick. "I have a question or ten," she chuckled as the others laughed.

"What's up?" June asked from her position about three feet away from her.

"I know it's stupid," she began.

"No question asked is stupid," June reassured her. "If you need to know something ask, that's how we've been able to obtain all this information so far. It's the unasked question that could lead us to not finding that critical piece of information we need, but don't know we need it, or realize it's missing until the question is asked."

"Wow, okay. Now, for my job I work at a lawyer's office, and it's my job to analyze the data, and make sure everything fits the time line set up for the case before it goes to court."

"Okay, I can see where that would be important. What would you like to know?"

“It’s the same question on different people. How did you know it was Gus Carter who stole the motorcycle in California?”

“From this,” Astrid said as she pointed to the screen, and everyone rose from their chairs, and went over to the screen that showed Gus and another man.

“Okay, and I’m assuming that when he was arrested, the police were able to get his name and fingerprints from their database?”

“Yes,” Tom said as he looked at her with raised brows.

“Bear with me,” April said as she turned to Joyce. “I know this is a stupid question, but how did you open your storage unit when you got home from the service?”

“Huh?”

“Did you use your own key? Did you have to cut the lock off? Was it the same lock? A different one?”

Joyce scowled at her, then slumped back on the desk behind her. “Marcus grabbed the key from his office, and we used that.”

“Oh, shit,” Alex said as he stared at Joyce, then turned back to April. “Do you think that someone in Marcus’ shop might have known about Stella, and had her stolen using the key kept in the office? No one would be the wiser with Joyce still in the service, right? How hard would it be to pocket the key, meet the thief there, then put the key back the next day.”

April shrugged, then looked directly at Joyce. “How else could it have been done? I’m not saying your friend and mentor had anything to do with it, but what if someone in his shop did. The key to your storage unit wasn’t kept under lock and key, was it?”

“Not that I’m aware of, it was tossed in the top drawer of his desk.” Joyce pulled her phone and strode away. She was back in less than ten minutes. “I’ve got a call into Marcus, he’s out running parts.” The others nodded, and continued with what they were doing, then April cleared her throat again.

“Another question,” she said into the room, and June again stopped and looked at her.

“What’s up?”

“How did you get information on Neil Mason?”

“That was harder,” Astrid admitted. “See, we did facial recognition, and nothing came up. It wasn’t until Alan came to us with the contract Neil and Mandi signed that we were able to get his prints. That’s when Carl said you can have surgery to alter your looks, but your fingerprints never change.”

“Where are you going with this?” Morgan asked at one point. “I can see the wheels in your head turning, but what do you want to know?”

“I can’t wrap my head around why this Neil Mason guy would have a letter from Frank Carlisle on his computer. I don’t know if you remember him from when you were here years ago with no memory, but well, Frank isn’t a really nice person. Sure, he’s good looking, but that’s all he has going for himself. He has the reputation of dating anything in a skirt, and not more than two or three times before he moves onto the next one. Why would someone like Neil have a letter like Alfie read on his computer? What connection do Neil and Frank have?” April looked at the others and they stared at her with wide eyes, and she sighed, “Sorry, just wondering is all.”

“No, don’t be sorry,” June said. “They are all legitimate questions. Astrid, do we have a picture of Neil Mason?” They all watched as Astrid’s fingers flew over the keyboard, then stared in shock as Dolly spoke into the silence.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” The older woman demanded, then looked around wildly.

“Dolly?” Wyatt asked. “What’s wrong?”

Dolly waved his concern away and looked at Astrid. “How sure are you that person is Neil Mason?”

“One hundred percent, why?”

Dolly pointed and everyone stared at her in shock, then slowly turned at her statement, and all hell broke loose then.

“Because that man you just put up on the screen is Frank Carlisle.”

“Son of a bitch,” Tom said from his side of the room. “Astrid, where did you get this photo of that man?”

“From the video I took when Alan and I went to discuss putting in the cabinets weeks ago.” She did something with her hands, and they all watched as the photograph changed, and they could see Alan in the photo, along with Mandi. She then brought it in closer to show the original picture.

“June, did you see him when you went to help empty the cupboards?”

“No, Mandi said he was out of town. It’s my understanding that only Alan and Astrid have laid eyes on Neil.”

“That’s Mason,” Griff said from his seat going over a bunch of papers. “When he’s there, which isn’t that often lately, he makes it a point to come out and let us know how to do our jobs.” The disgust in his voice told the others what he thought of Neil Mason.

“I don’t understand,” Dottie said from her seat in the back of the room. “How can this Neil Mason guy be Frank Carlisle.”

When no one said a word, April sighed heavily and turned to the others. “I think I might have an idea. It might be out there, but it’s the only thing I can think of.”

“What would that be?” David Helm from Homeland Security demanded, but when the other men scowled at him, he held up his hands and shook his head. “Sorry, I’m just not used to having civilians in on conversations like this.”

“Get used to it if you’re going to be working for us,” Morgan said, and didn’t pay any attention when he started sputtering. She puffed her chest and turned her glare on him. “In *my* organization, we are all civilians, and I pride myself on allowing my employees the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns.” Morgan continued to glare at him, and when he held up his hands, she went one step further. “Besides, if it wasn’t for these *civilians* as you not-so-subtly called them,

then we wouldn't have the information we have now. If it wasn't for them, you'd still be sitting in your ivory tower with your hands on your ass wondering what the hell was going on, then trying to throw your weight around when you were called late to the party. I'm only going to say this once, if you don't like the way *I* run *my* organization, then get the hell out now. Send someone in to replace you that we can work with."

David looked at her like she'd gone crazy and started to say something, but it was Chip that talked over him. "She's right, Helm. I invited you here as a courtesy, to come in and see where we are with this case. If you can't respect Morgan for what she's done with her operatives, then you can leave, and you can bet your ass that I'll be contacting your supervisor about this. Regardless of whether you stay or not. Your behavior isn't welcome here, so stow it unless you can be helpful to this investigation. If you can't, then leave." Everyone studied the other man, and when he looked around wildly, he must have known he'd screwed up, because he sighed heavily, then nodded only once. While looking directly at Morgan, he said, "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Thank you for your apology, and please, see that it doesn't." She then ignored him and turned back to April. "April, what did you want to say?"

April shook her head, turned her back and snickered, then turned back to the others. "I know this is going to sound crazy, but I'm basing this on the letter from Frank on Neil's computer. Physically they look alike, what if Frank has a split personality or something and actually believes that he's Neil Mason?"

"Shit," Zack Reagan from the ATF said as he jumped to his feet and spun around while pulling his hair. He looked around wildly, then nodded. "It tracks, that's the only way that letter could have gotten on the computer. What if he does have a split personality because of the things mentioned in the letter. You know the things he did to that Debra person, along with his own wife and child, what if he cracked and the only way to save face was to invent another personality. Is this Neil Mason guy rich?"

“He is,” Alan said, then went on to tell them how much he’d charged for the custom cabinets for the kitchen, and that Neil had even given him a bonus. “Both checks cleared the bank.”

“So, his persona of Mason holds true, that he’s rich and isn’t afraid to flaunt it. I just wish there was someone we could bring in to discuss multiple personalities with.”

“I might know of someone,” Morgan said. She looked around and her eyes landed on Tom. “He’s the guy you sent me to when I had lost my memory. Dr. Simms.”

“He would work out,” Tom agreed, and they discussed the ins and outs of calling him in to assist. It was decided that Morgan would go see him in the next couple of days to discuss the matter with him. If he agreed, or had the time, she would invite him into their circle.

Everyone spent the rest of the afternoon going over all the other information that Mandi had provided them. While they worked, Dolly, Dottie, and Peggy went up to the kitchen to make their meals and kept out of their way. It ended up that they spent three whole days on the information, and the Erwins only left long enough to do their chores and instruct the hands on what to do. By the time they had most of the information gone through, they were at a standstill as to how they would proceed from there.

CHAPTER 22



“YOU OKAY?” Alfie asked June when they came up from the basement for a break in their work. He had been right there beside her the entire time, putting his own work on hold. He figured he could work on his stuff during the winter, or at least once they’d caught the bad guys. He felt as though they were getting close to putting all their ducks in a row. It helped that all the others knew what was going on, and both he and June could rely on them when they became frustrated trying to sort through all the material.

“Yeah, just tired,” June said as she tried to roll her head on her shoulders in order to break up the tight knots. She hadn’t been able to do her meditation in a few days and she was feeling the tenseness not only in her body, but also in the work area surrounding her. When she went back after this short break, she was going to suggest that they all take the next day off. She sighed in satisfaction when Alfie went behind her and started massaging not only her shoulders, but also her neck. Neither one of them said a word for the next fifteen minutes, then when their break was over, she turned and laid her forehead on his chest, and sighed again in contentment when he wrapped his arms around her.

“I miss this,” she mumbled against his chest, and she’d never know what inspired her next move, but it might have been a combination of missing him, the stress she felt, or the fact that he was there, but she lifted her head, then stood on tiptoes and gently kissed him. Alfie wasted no time in taking control of the kiss the second their lips touched. With one hand on the back of her neck, he held her head steady, and his other

hand on her hip brought her into him. When she moaned against his lips, he smiled, and slipped his tongue inside. It was his turn to moan when June buried her hands in his hair and held on tight. Several minutes later, they broke apart, both breathing hard.

“We need to move this upstairs.”

“I know, but not now, we have work to get back to.”

Alfie sighed in frustration, but agreed with her. Before he stepped back from her, he made sure he gave her another deep kiss, then when she moaned once again, he smiled as he lifted his head and stepped back, dropping his hands from her. They both growled in frustration but shook their heads as they stepped away from one another.

“Later?” Alfie asked, wanting to pin her down to committing to seeing her alone, and not with the others around. It has been almost three weeks since he’d returned from his trip, and everyday around her was frustrating the hell out of him.

“After dinner,” June said quickly, then left to go back inside. She only paused long enough to use the bathroom at the end of the hall, then she made her way back down to the basement where everyone else was returning from their own break.

They all finally settled down at their desks, and it was June who stood in front of the group to ask, “Do you want to go over what we have learned from Neil slash Frank’s computer?”

“Before we do that,” Dolly spoke from the back of the room, where she’d just plugged in one of the large coffee pots to get it started. “I know I don’t have a right to ask, and it’s backtracking, but I’ve been wondering about something for the last couple of weeks.”

“What’s that?” June asked as she focused solely on Dolly. When the older woman remained silent, June looked at the others and held up her hand to stop them. “Talk to me, Dolly.”

As we've all said, the only bad question is the unasked question, so ask."

Everyone watched as Dolly drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly, then with her arms crossed around her middle, she began. "First, June, I mean no disrespect, but this happened shortly before you arrived here." She looked over at the women, and the Erwin family and nodded once. "I'm talking about the time during that hellish thunderstorm we had. The night you ladies were able to apprehend those, pardon my language, but those asshats of teenage boys that broke through the fence."

"What about it?" Wilson asked his wife.

"Again, I mean no disrespect, but I've been thinking about this for a long time. How did those kids know to go down that lane to gain access to the Flying E?"

"I don't know if I understand," Morgan said with a frown.

"That road is secluded from the main road. If you don't work here on the ranch, you don't know it's there, right?" She looked at the Erwins and her husband for confirmation. "Did you ever find the vehicle they arrived in?"

"No," Wyatt said, "And you're right about the road being secluded." He looked at Astrid and when she only pointed, he walked over to the aerial view of his ranch and grabbed the yardstick. He pointed out features for the others present, and then turned back to Dolly. "What are you trying to say?"

"Don't be mad at me, but because you have to work here to know about that access road, and no vehicle was found, it makes me wonder if the person behind trying to get you in trouble by letting the cattle out is working with one of the ranch hands." Her statement caused everyone to pause and stare at her in varying degrees of shock. Dolly sighed heavily, then walked to the back of the room. "Sorry, I can see it was a useless observation."

"NO!" June was the first one to respond and ended up holding her hand out to the other women. "I often wondered the same thing, but it seemed whenever I thought it, something

else would come up. So, you're saying that you think someone on Wyatt's payroll might be helping whoever is trying to take control of the Flying E?"

"Yes, I'm only saying this, because of the proximity of where those kids cut the fence on the access road, that's pretty far onto the property. Further than if someone walked in off the street as to say. There was no vehicle, so how did they get there, and if they hadn't been caught, how were they supposed to leave? Did anyone check the trail cameras you boys installed earlier that same day when you repaired the fence from the night before. Remember? The fence out on the main drag. And..." She held up her hand until they all looked at her. "Did we have trouble weeks before that, around the time when Janice was hurt by that cop? I recall that Morgan was out chasing cows all night with the rest of you. If you look at the pattern of the trouble the Flying E's been having, it goes back longer than just during that thunderstorm."

Wyatt looked at her in shock, "You really think so? Can you give us any idea as to who you think is doing this?"

"My first thought, before I even heard Alfie read that letter a few days earlier, was that Frank Carlisle finally got his wish. You know I don't drive, but I do go into town on occasion, and I've been in the feed store when he's been working. He gossips all the time, is lazy, slower than molasses in January, and asks the other patrons tons of questions about you Erwins, and the Flying E. It was like he was writing a book or something, trying to gather all the information he could about you." She still saw the shock on their faces and sighed heavily. "I'm sorry I didn't voice my opinion earlier, but you have to admit it does seem farfetched."

"Yes and no," this time it was Fred Myar from the DEA that spoke. "If this Carlisle character has a reputation for being lazy, and talkative, and everything you described, no one would think about imparting any information to him. From what I've seen, this is a small community, and the people have big hearts. Always looking out for one another, but on the other hand it's like they can't wait to impart gossip about their neighbors either. If Carlisle is behind this, then he has the

perfect setup to gather that information.” He turned to the three men from Canada, and asked, “When Neil Mason is in, does he leave often? Or is he in his house the entire time he’s there?”

“He leaves often,” Griff said, then leaned up on his hip and pulled out a small, battered notebook. He thumbed through it, then nodded several times before he looked up. “I never saw it before, but it’s like a pattern as to when he leaves and returns.” He rose and went over to Astrid, and together they went through the book while the times, dates, and coming and goings of Neil Mason started to appear on the screen.

“That’s the days and times Frank works at the feed store,” DJ spoke for the first time in hours. He looked over at his father and uncle with wide eyes. “Remember, you’d send me to pick up the feed order, but I’d say I didn’t want to go, because Frank was working.” He looked around the rooms at the others to explain. “When I go to town for the feed order, it takes an hour to get there, two hours loading up, then an hour home. Four hours for the entire trip. When Frank’s working, it still takes an hour there and home, but he takes four hours to load the truck up. He’s too busy trying to ask questions that he slows down even further than normal. When I can’t get out of going when he’s there, I make it a point to avoid him after I back the truck into the dock, then go over to the diner for something to eat. I have plenty of time while waiting for him.”

“Have any of the hands gone in for the feed order if you’ve refused?” Zack from the AFT asked. The others watched the Erwins as they looked at each other in shock, then it was Dillon and Wilson who spoke at the same time.

“Randy, we send Randy to the feed store if DJ wouldn’t go, and since he left for college.”

“How often do you go there?” David asked as he began scribbling, and when a phone rang, they all paused, but Owen Drake from BCI held up his, and excused himself as he left.

“We go twice a month,” Wyatt said. “But it’s not the same day, it’s been different days.”

“So, no pattern as to when you get your feed?”

“No. We probably should, but Old Fred isn’t really into remembering much these days, so we call ahead the day we’re sending someone to make sure they have what we need. If they do, we go, we have been known to put it off a couple of days until the feed store has what we need.”

“So, no pattern to you’re being there, but there is a pattern to Carlisle being there?”

“Yes, but we don’t know yet if Mason and Carlisle are the same person.”

They all looked up when Owen came back in, and he stood there and stared at them, and June could only think he was frustrated.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“We may have a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“The phone call I just received was from my contact in California. He in turn has contacts in the prison system. As you all know, we sent Gus Carter, the alleged cousin of Neil Mason back to California when he was arrested for stealing Joyce’s motorcycle. He went back there on pending charges of murder and wanted for questioning in several cases, in addition to the theft charges. He is or was a person of interest in several other cases down there.”

“What do you mean ‘was’”? Alfie asked and saw everyone looked at him in shock, before they turned back to Owen.

“It appears that Gus Carter was shanked while walking in line to the mess hall. A fight broke out and when the melee stopped, they found him on the ground with blood pouring out of several stab wounds in his gut area.”

“And?” June waved her hand to encourage him to continue when he paused to take a sip of his coffee.

“He succumbed to his injuries yesterday. They only notified me after they notified the next of kin.”

“Who?” Alfie asked at the same time as June asking, “When?”

“What do you mean, who or when?”

“When was the next of kin notified, and who was it?” June rolled her eyes and looked around at everyone. “Neil was out of town when Astrid and I went there to unload the cabinets. Then he was still out of town the next day when the new ones were installed. So, who was the next of kin that was notified? How were they notified? In person? Over the phone? If it was Neil, can you get ahold of any video from the prison to see if Gus had any visitors? I don’t know about the rest of you, but my gut is screaming that Neil Mason had something to do with Gus’s murder.”

Owen stared at her in shock, as did David Helm, and suddenly the guys representing the bowls of alphabet soup grabbed both their phones and laptops and began barking orders and pounding on the keys. It was mayhem for a long time. The women went over to the other side of the room and continued to try to analyze the data from Neil’s computer.

“I got it!” Owen yelled out as he jumped to his feet and look around wildly. “Astrid, can you put this up on the big screen?”

Astrid hurried over to him, and in seconds they all paused in what they were doing and watched the video from the prison. Plain as day, the man Astrid and Alan knew as Neil Mason walked into the prison, and he was seen sitting with the man who Joyce had pressed charges against for stealing her motorcycle.

“I’ll be damned,” David said and looked at June. “How did you know to look for something like that?”

“As I said earlier, my gut was screaming. I put eleven years in with the military and I learned to trust my gut, or get myself and my teammates shot. I’m not out in the field on this case, yet, but I still go with my gut.”

“Do you want to come work for me?”

“No offense, but that would be a hard no. Why? Because, as I just said, I worked for the government for eleven years, I did everything asked of me. I’ll stick with working with

Morgan, only because I can continue to do what I love and not have to jump through any bureaucratic hoops in order to do my job. Here, I won't have any restrictions on my job."

When it looked like David would fight her back on her statement, Chip spoke, "Give it a rest, David." The other man sighed heavily, and nodded as he settled back in his chair to watch the video Owen had been sent.

"Wait," David said as he sat up quickly and pointed to the screen. He had Astrid back it up, then walked up, and pointed. "Who is this guy that Mason is talking to?" The others frowned at him, but they watched it several times, and both Stokes and Astrid started the facial recognition programs on their computers.

"It might take a few minutes to get a response." Stokes nodded, and rubbed the back of his neck. While they waited for the results, they all decided to call it for the night, and went upstairs to wind down. They invited the others to stay, and it was Josh who went out and started a fire in the pit, while others started dinner. No one talked about the mountain of evidence they had uncovered and had yet to go over, they just relaxed and unwound for the night.

CHAPTER 23



LATER THAT NIGHT, after supper had been done, along with the clean-up, June didn't join them outside, and when someone questioned her, she turned to the group as a whole. "Please, don't take any offense in what I'm about to say, but with all this information swimming around in my head, I need to clear it, so I'll be up in the attic."

"What's in the attic?" Chip scowled at her.

"I meditate up there." She left it at that, and slowly made her way up the stairs. She first stopped at her bedroom to go in and change into some more comfortable clothes, when she came out, she stopped in shock as she literally ran into Al.

"What are you doing?" She frowned when he wouldn't move out of the way.

"Are you okay?"

June frowned, then sighed heavily. "Yes, and no." Then, she reached up, placed her hand in the center of his chest, and gave him a gentle push out of her way. She stepped around him and headed to the door that led up to the attic, not knowing whether it surprised her or not when he was hot on her heels. What she really liked about it, was that he didn't say a word. Once she was upstairs and settled into the area she'd set up for her meditation, she lit her candles, and placed her hands on her knees, closed her eyes, and regulated her breathing. It took several minutes for her to relax, but when she did, she felt the tension slowly leave her body, and her mind began to clear of all the information she'd read over the

last few days. If she hadn't been used to it, she would probably have run from the house screaming in terror. She was lucky that she was used to learning of others being depraved, and knew how to handle any situation. As long as she had her meditation, she was fine. It took over an hour for her to get to her happy place, and once she came back into herself, she slowly opened her eyes and smiled when she saw Al sitting across from her in the same position with his eyes closed. She didn't say a word, and just watched him. This was the first time she'd been able to study him since she'd arrived at Boswell, and he had returned from his trip. She released a heavy sigh, and when his eyes slowly opened, but seemed out of focus, she grinned.

“How do you feel?”

Al frowned, then cocked his head to the side while wearing a confused look on his face. He stared at her, then grinned, causing June to suck in her breath at his handsomeness. “Pretty good. I remember watching you do this down in Sturgis, but I thought it was a crock, no offense or anything, but that was the first time I've done it, and I feel good.”

“Good, how? And I didn't take any offense.”

“Good, like my mind is clear of all the crap we've been reading over the last week. I know you were trained to go over information, and what to do with it, but I'm new to this stuff, and I was getting to the point that I wanted to run away screaming.”

“I know,” June chuckled. “That's why I came up here. It helps me wind down, then I should be able to get a good night's sleep, ready to hit the ground running tomorrow.” June leaned forward and blew out her candles, then slowly stood, doing stretches as she did so.

Before she could go to the door that led down to the bedrooms, Al stopped her, and very gently put his hands on her waist, then while looking directly into her eyes, he whispered, “May I kiss you?”

“Yes,” June sighed, and then sank into him the second his lips touched hers. It felt like she'd just come home. They lost

themselves in the kiss, and the next thing June knew, she looked up at Al from her position on the floor. She didn't remember being lowered, and didn't care that she was in that position.

"If you want me to stop, I will," Al looked her directly in the eyes as he said this, holding his breath, because though he would stop, he didn't want to, but he would. He had never pushed himself on a woman in the past, and wasn't about to start now, especially with this woman that he had fallen in love with during those few short days they'd spent together down in Sturgis. It had almost broken him when he'd come home from his vendor spot one day and found her gone. That was why he'd gone to all those other locations. He couldn't stand to be home around his brothers and their loved ones. Since arriving home and finding his woman there, he'd jumped for joy on the inside and bade his time, until he could get her alone long enough to talk to her. Now was his time. As much as he wanted to talk, he wanted to make love to her more. He held his breath as he waited for her response.

June looked into Al's eyes, and sighed heavily. This was what she'd wanted since the day she'd left Sturgis early, knowing that she was in love with Al. With a smile on her face, she reached up and laid her hand on his cheeks, and nodded when he closed his eyes at the contact.

"Don't stop," she whispered, then brought his head down for a kiss. As their mouths kissed, their hands were busy stripping each other, and before she knew it, June was naked beneath Al. She tore her mouth from his, breathing deeply, then smiled up at him. "Please, tell me you have condoms."

"I do," he laughed, and lunged to the side, trying to find his wallet that was in his pants that had somehow ended up on the other side of the room. With one in his hand, he turned back to her with a triumphant smile, and sucked in his breath as she was on her knees before him, took the package, tore it open with her teeth, and had the condom rolled over him in seconds. His eyes widened when she pushed him onto the floor, and she straddled his legs. Not waiting for his help, she reached between them, took his engorged cock in her hand,

and held it as she guided it to her core. While looking him directly in the eyes, she slowly lowered herself down onto him, and they both let out a little cry of shock when she slid down his shaft. With her eyes closed, June felt Al rear up and wrap his arms around her. The next thing she knew, she was on her back with him poised over her.

“I want to go slow,” he whispered as he bent down and kissed her gently on her forehead. “With you on top, I don’t think that will happen.”

June melted at his words, because it brought back their first time in her tent when no matter how much she’d encouraged him to go faster, he took his time, and it had been the best sex she’d ever had.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Okay what?”

“Okay, we can go slow.”

He smiled down at her, but when he didn’t move or do anything, she tightened her inner muscles and grinned when his eyes flared, and he ended up glaring at her. “Fuck me.”

“I’m trying to, you just need to move.” She giggled, then sucked in her breath as he pulled almost all the way out, and eased back in slowly, so slowly that her eyes rolled back in her head. He kept that up for what seemed like hours, but June lost all track of time when her first orgasm began to build. With her arms and legs wrapped around him, all she could do was hold on for the ride. After her fourth orgasm, she began shaking her head. “No more, please, I don’t know if I can take anymore.”

“One more,” Al said between gritted teeth. He finally began to move faster, and because he was so close, and he wanted her to have one more, he reached between them and pinched her clit. As soon as he did that, he slammed his mouth over hers to smother her cries, and moved faster, pounding into her. It only took a few strokes for them both to explode. Breathing heavily, he fell on her, then moved his chest to the side so he didn’t crush her. He took a few minutes to regain his

senses before he removed the condom. He ended up wrapping it in his sock to take care of later, because there wasn't a waste basket in the attic.

"We probably should go downstairs," he said at one point, then grinned at June's response.

"Probably, but since I can't feel my body, I'm good right here." She opened only one eye, and he saw a huge question in it.

"What?"

"Will you lie with me and hold me?"

"Absolutely," Al said as he settled down beside her, and with his arm under her head for a pillow, he laid his next to hers, whispering, "If we're going to be up here often, maybe we should think about bringing a blanket and pillow to store up here."

"There's some on the other side of my meditation mat," she mumbled, then scowled at him when her head hit the floor as he hopped to his feet. He was back in seconds, and after he settled them back down, he wrapped his arms around her, pulled the blanket over them, and in minutes they were both asleep.

The rest of the night whenever either of them rolled over, they woke enough to make love again, and it wasn't until the early hours of the morning that they seemed satisfied with each other, and fell into a deep sleep. With only a few hours of sleep, they rose the next morning, and before June could say anything, as she returned the pillow and blanket to its original spot, Alfie let himself out of the attic without a word, and disappeared. Disappointed, June sighed heavily, and made her way down to her room. She hadn't even shut the bedroom door behind her when she heard a noise, and turned to see Al standing there.

"What?"

"Sorry, but I wanted to go down and grab some clothes before I joined you in the shower."

“Oh,” June said in shock as she noticed the small bag he held. Without saying a word, she finished entering her bedroom, and held the door open for him to enter. Once it closed behind them, neither said a word as they made their way into the bathroom. Still not saying anything, they turned on the shower and stepped in. June was lost in her own thoughts, and didn’t really talk, they just washed themselves, then climbed out of the shower. It wasn’t until they were in the bedroom, finishing drying off before either of them spoke.

Al started it. “How are you this morning? You seem awfully quiet.”

“Just thinking.”

“About?” He paused in the act of donning his underwear, and stood there in a towel studying her. At her expression he frowned. “Did I do anything to offend you?”

Dressed in only her bra and panties, June sat heavily on the side of her bed and looked over at him. “We need to talk.”

“Oh, shit,” Al said as he quickly donned his boxers, then grabbed a pair of jeans and slipped them on. Her tone sounded ominous, and he didn’t want his dick swinging in the breeze when she tried to rip it off him. Once he was satisfied that he was significantly covered, he walked over and sat down next to her on the bed, but not too close. “What’s on your mind?”

June drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. As she did, she turned and faced him, with one leg cocked on the bed, and the other had a foot on the floor. “I’m going to be brutally honest with you here, Al.”

“I would expect nothing less than that.”

“Okay, here goes.” She paused long enough to draw in another deep breath and let it out slowly. “The reason I left a day early from Sturgis was because I realized I had fallen in love with you.” She held up her hand when he went to say something. “No, let me get this out, then you can talk.” He only nodded, and she continued, “I told you a little about my past, and I don’t know if you caught on, or read between the lines, but I don’t really trust men. Hell, I lived under the same

roof with my biological father my entire life, and he never even acknowledged me, until they thought they could get a kidney from me. You know how that turned out. Anyway, once I left home and joined the military, any relationship I had was on my terms.”

“Which were?” Alfie asked after she remained silent for several moments.

“One-night stands, no sleepovers, and no second chances.”

As she talked, Alfie felt his eyebrows disappear into his hairline, then a slow smile came over his face, because they had both lived in her tent for those five days while she’d been in Sturgis, then they’d slept in each other’s arms the night before. He remained silent and let her continue to gather her thoughts, to continue, “I’m telling you this, because when I first arrived here, I was what you could say moping around. Sure, I did my job, but I was actually jealous of the women and the men in their lives. See, I knew you as Al, and everyone here called the missing family member Alfie. I never put two and two together until the night your parents arrived. That was why I befriended Chuck.” She held up her hand again to stop him. “See, he flat-out told me that it seemed like I was trying to get over someone, and offered me friendship, I took it. No matter what happens between us, I don’t want you to go after Chuck in any way. He was nice to me, and offered me friendship.” She stopped talking and looked at him dead in the eye.

“Okay, I can do that. Now, can I tell you what happened to me the day I came back to the campsite and realized you’d disappeared?”

“What?”

“I had brought home supper for us. I hadn’t seen you all day, and I wanted to spend more time with you, so I went to the restaurant where I took you out to dinner. I bought you the same thing you’d ordered when we were there. When I finally saw your entire setup was gone, I walked across the way and gave our meals to the people over there. I couldn’t stay in my tent, so I packed up some clothes and spent the rest of the rally

sleeping in the back of my truck, or in the trailer. I never went back out there until it was time to close up the campsite.” He drew in a deep breath, let it out in a rush, and ran his hand repeatedly through his still-wet hair. “I was dreading coming home.”

“Why?”

“Because, I knew all my brothers, except for Josh, had hooked up with one of you ladies from Boswell, and I couldn’t handle seeing how happy they were. See, I fell in love with you too, and I was miserable when you left. That’s why I kept accepting those offers to go to different events. It kept me away from here longer, and I wouldn’t have to see how happy my siblings were. Never in a million years did I suspect that you would be here, and if I had known, I would have closed up from Sturgis early and beat feet here.” He paused and looked to the side, then reached out and took her hands in his.

“I’m glad I didn’t though. It gave me time to think about what we had done for those five days, and it made me realize what I really wanted out of a relationship. On my way home, I made the decision to try and find you. No matter how long it took, I would find you and come to you.”

“How would you have done that?”

“I felt I had an in with Mr. Overton. See, he was in charge of the Rally, and it was he that sent me to those other ones. I thought I’d come home, stew for a couple of days, then contact him to see if he could give me the name of the woman who had been in the campsite beside me. I could have given him the location, then the first name, because we never exchanged last names.”

“Remember, you gave me the wrong first name too.”

“Yeah, that was a quick decision. I’d been Alfie all my life, and once I was away from my family, I felt that Al would sound like a stronger name than Alfie.”

“Which do you prefer?”

“Al, but I wouldn’t be upset if you called me Alfie.”

“I can continue to call you Al.” June smiled, then leaned in and gently kissed his chin. She sat back up, then sighed heavily again. “Aside from what we did last night, I’ve missed you. Last night it felt like I’d finally come home. Not only with our lovemaking, but also sleeping in your arms. You can tell me if I’m being too forward, but how would you like to move into this room with me, and we can see where this relationship takes us.”

“Yes,” Al laughed as he jumped to his feet and pulled her up into his arms. “Ever since I saw you on the stairs the night Mom broke in here, I’ve been wanting us to get back together, but I didn’t want to push myself onto you, and have you resent me more than it seemed like you already did. I love you June Vanderbilt, and I would be honored to move in here with you.”

June smiled, then took his face in her hands. “I love you, Alfie, Al Stuart.” They kissed, and because they had made love all night, they didn’t make love, but decided to save it for later that night. As they finished dressing and headed to the door, Al asked, “Do you think you’ll be able to get through all that information we uncovered from those flash drives that Mandi gave us?”

June liked that he included himself in his statement, but sighed heavily. “I doubt it, you saw it, it’s a lot. Between you and me, I trust everyone that was in that room yesterday, but I don’t know if we’ll have enough people to go through it all. I feel like we’re almost there to take the bad guys down, but I still have a few questions and need to connect the dots on a few things. Personally, I feel that until those are answered, we can’t go after them yet. My hope is that we can protect both Morgan and Wyatt for their wedding, but I fear until the wedding, we might have to put this investigation on the back burner.”

“Okay, I feel the same way. Right now, I think keeping Morg and Wyatt safe will be our number-one priority.” They kissed quickly, opened the bedroom door, and went downstairs. June didn’t know whether it shocked her or not, when no one said a word that they came into the kitchen area holding hands. She did receive a wink from Stan, and a sweet

smile from Dottie, but the others didn't bat an eye at them being a couple. June was going to love living here.

THE END

Thank you for taking the time to read this. If you enjoyed this book, please give it some love, and leave a review at your preferred site.

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Deanna has loved to read all her life. She was in the third grade when she fell in love with books while working in the school library. She turned that love of reading into writing. Now Deanna can be found in her writing cave, sharing her keyboard with her fur baby, reading, or making quilts.

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