



*Clair's*

**GUARDIAN**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**D.M. EARL**

CLAIRE'S GUARDIAN  
(POLICE AND FIRE:  
OPERATION ALPHA)

D.M. EARL



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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**COVER DESIGNER- Drue Hoffman @ Buoni Amici**

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**PROOFREADER- Joanne Thomspen**

Dear Readers,

*Welcome to the Police and Fire: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!*

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*When passion ignites, this fireman is here for it all...*

Ex-military man and dog lover Danny Moretti found his place in this world at the firehouse with his team of heroes. But when a local arsonist starts igniting houses and torturing stray dogs, Danny refuses to back down. He may be in the business of saving people, but he knows when someone deserves punishment.

Widow and single mother Claire George just wants to start over safely with her children—near those she loves the most. But when her world is threatened by a ruthless arsonist, there's only one man she can trust, Danny Moretti. Their attraction is palpable, and heat burns. Now, it's up to Danny to protect the one woman and the two children who stole his heart. Can he save them all or will everything he's ever wanted go up in flames?



*To the one person who has always believed in me and supported whatever I wanted to do in life even if he didn't understand it. He pushed me to write my first book and since then has been my biggest supporter not only in my career as an author but as a strong woman who is his wife and best friend. We go through our life one day at a time supporting and holding each other up through the good times and bad times. No matter what happens with my hubby and our fur babies by my side I can make it through anything. Chuck luv ya babe.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Can I tell y'all how thrilled and overwhelmed I am to be writing in Susan Stoker's Police & Fire Badge of Honor world. I fell in love with the first book of hers I read Protecting Caroline. I read the entire Seal of Protection series in like three days because I couldn't get enough. Then I kept going from one series to the next. Love how her series all seem to interconnect. Little did I know that one day I would have the privilege of writing in her world. And when that time came I thought about all of her characters I've met through her stories and one stood out that stole my heart even with his gruff ways... it had to be Tex.

Susan I'm forever grateful for this chance you've given me. I admire you as a businesswoman who has not only found success but also graciously opened the door for other authors to use your world to try and find theirs. You are so down to earth and approachable that when I first met you I actually said to my friends and I mean no disrespect "that's Susan Stoker." You looked like all the rest of us and not like my image of you. Then we spoke and I'll never forget how genuinely kind and open minded you were. When you threw out the "why haven't you reached out to write in my world" I think I almost passed out. I wasted no time to try and come up with a story that I thought was good enough to be a part of your world. From the bottom of my heart I thank you Susan. You are the epitome of how a true human being should walk through their life. Pushing it forward and man sistah do you ever.

My small team that without them I'd be lost. They do so much for me so that in my OCD world I can concentrate on what's important.

My publicists Debra Presley and Drue Hoffman from Buoni Amici who literally saved my career as an author. I now have the ability to do what I love which is write my stories. They handle all the other stuff that was dragging me down and

consuming my time. Also huge shout-out to Drue for designing Claire's Guardian cover which I love.

My editor Karen Hrdlicka and my proofreader Joanne Thompson who manage to take my words and make sure they are as perfect as possible. Without these two brilliant women I don't know what I'd do.

My Two Promotion Companies I use for each release. Enticing Journey Ena and Amanda and Itsy Bitsy Book Bits Promotions. Both of y'all I thank you for all of your support in making sure all my Tours of each book released run beyond smoothly. And to all Bloggers who help get my books to readers. I so appreciate and value each and every one of you.

My readers' group DM's Horde and my DM Earl's ARC team I love each and every one of you. Thanks for your continued support and more importantly your friendship.

Finally all the readers returning and new who each time I release a book either give an unknown author to them a chance or a returning reader who takes time to dive into another story of mine. Without each and every one of you my dream career as an author would have never gone anywhere. Thank you for your love of reading and giving new authors a chance. Means the world.

## ‘DANNY’

Feeling my gut shift, I struggle to control my reaction to what I’m seeing. Who in their right fucking mind would do this kind of shit not only to dogs, but more importantly to another human being?

When our fire station got the call for a structure fire, our company jumped in to both trucks, riding balls to the wall as we are the first station called to the scene. What greets our eyes tells each of us there’s no way anyone could have lived through this type of fire. Probably had a gasoline accelerant from the way the frame house is burning, fast and hot. Our trucks barely pull to a stop and Till, Paco, and Stash run for the hoses to advance an attack line, trying to get it under control. I see Lightning on the radio, probably calling in the status and checking on the arrival time for our second engine.

Not sure how long our backup is going to be, so Lil’ Man, Crow, Styx, and I run to Engine 23, planning on getting our backup line out and running. This is especially important as our line will protect our first engine and firefighters, just in case something happens and they have a major issue, like the fire turns on them or if for some unknown reason they run outta of water. Styx motions to go ahead so we advance behind Till at a distance, so as not to crowd him but still have his back.

Hearing Stash on the radio reporting in a probable DOA my heart starts pounding. I know from the intense smell of gasoline around the area, this is most likely going to turn out to be arson. To think it was used to hide a death or murder

makes it twice as bad. Lately we've been having more and more of these types of events. The law enforcement, county or state, cannot find any similarity in the deaths, other than the individuals are female. Apparently, they are held captive and badly beaten, left for dead to burn in the middle of an abandoned room on a bed—with their wrists and ankles chained to the bed frame—generally surrounded by what we are assuming are stolen or fighting dogs, maybe even bait dogs. As bad as I feel for the victims, my heart breaks for the dogs. Not only am I a paramedic/firefighter, but also, I'm a licensed animal abuse investigator for our state. I've not only seen the worst of the worst in how humans treat other humans, but also in the way they treat four-legged animals.

“Danny, leave the backup line for Crow and Lil' Man, need you to get in there and give Stash a hand. Check the situation out, make sure we are dealing with a DOA. I've alerted the coroner already, and a secondary EMT will be right behind you. Be careful, keep your eyes open. Don't forget the last scene we were at.”

Dropping my part of the hose, I know everyone heard the order, so Styx shifts to take up the slack as I walk farther into the building. Smoke is extremely heavy and whatever was burning left a horrific odor throughout the building. Making my way to the anterior part of the house, where Stash is waiting, my eyes adjust and, yeah, now I know why the smell is so bad. The floor is covered with animal crates and cages with what I'm assuming are dead canines. Fuck, not again.

Moving quickly, I slide next to Stash as he's pushing carcasses of dead dogs out of the way. From the way it looks, they surrounded the body trying to protect it. Keeping my heart closed, I go about doing my job of assessing what is in front of me. Second- and third-degree burns run up the back of the victim and when I reach to check for a pulse, I get nothing. Looking to Stash, I shake my head, then go to grab a shoulder to flip the victim over. With both of us, we manage to shift the body and what we find shocks the shit out of us. Beneath the body is what appears to be a bunch of puppies, young by the looks of them. Thinking they are gone either from smoke inhalation or the weight of the body, I literally fall on my ass

when we hear a slight whine. Stash grabs the first one, which is gone, then the second... same. By the third puppy I'm thinking we heard what we wanted but then puppies four, five, and six are trying to move, even if slow and sluggish.

Immediately we both take our oxygen masks off, turn them down to almost nothing, and put the masks on the pups' faces. Knowing time is of the essence, I grab the three little ones and put my mask on them for a quick minute, then cover them inside my coat. Stash is already on the radio as I make my way back the way I came. When I see the outside light, I let a sigh out and rush to the EMTs, who have a stretcher in front of them. Knowing that this is Cap's doing I'm beyond grateful.

Rome and Lightning immediately start to administer oxygen to their tiny bodies as they check out the pups' condition. When a hand hits my shoulder I jump, not expecting it. Turning, I spot Donovan 'Nova' Finnegan stretching over my shoulder to see what is going on. Not sure why the owner of Finnegan's Quest Sentries or—as we call it—FQS is here, but don't have the time to ask a million questions either.

“Danny, whatcha got? Stash said the DOA is a female, young, probably tortured liked the other ones we've found. How did these guys survive?”

“Not sure, the victim was surrounded by dogs and these lil' ones were stuffed under her, part of her shirt covering them. That probably saved their lives, keeping some if not most of the smoke out of their lungs.”

“All right, Danny, talked to your captain already. First, let's get this fire under control then you can 'do your thing'—his words. Get them to your vet and checked out. First though, this is our priority. Get back to the backup line as our second is delayed with another fire. Your captain is bitching to anyone who will listen about the lack of response.”

Realizing how lucky I am that everyone understands my passion, I make haste to relieve Styx and Crow, knowing until I can get them help, the pups are in good hands.

\* \* \*

THIS LAST SHIFT has been extremely brutal. Finding yet another victim in that house fire has hit our company hard. Then to top it off, Ash's wife had a bad reaction to her chemotherapy treatment, so he called off, which is totally understandable. She's fighting the cancer battle and from the looks of it she's winning, well, at the moment. But it's rough as hell and Ash won't leave her alone, especially after a bad reaction to her treatments. So, I stayed on for an additional eight hours until Cap could find someone to fill in for the rest of our brother's shift. One of the best things to come from tonight is the two new additions to my pack. Motherfucker, if I ever find the goddamn asshole who tried to burn down that house, left that woman to die, and let all those dogs die too, I'd consider killing that bastard with my own hands. Stash counted total dead animals to ten throughout the house. We lost two of the puppies, but the other three survived. In the basement, Stash found two more dogs that were alive, well barely. So when that little French bulldog started crying loudly and tried to jump up my leg, I knew I was a goner. Then it hit me why he was so loud; his buddy was hurt and he wanted someone's attention. Tied to the other end of the tether was an American hairless terrier, who looked to have a broken or damaged leg.

Once we got the fire under control, as usual, Cap let me gather all the canines up in his company SUV and run them all over to my vet, who always makes time for me and she checked them out. All of them are dehydrated and half starved. The three puppies have open sores and all five have fleas and mites, probably worms too. All five fur babies are spending the night for observation. Donna, my vet, thinks the pups have a great chance to be adopted once they heal but the two others, the bulldog and the hairless, not so much. They are spending the night together in a kennel 'cause no one could get them apart and believe me, we tried. Got a bunch of tiny teeth marks to prove it. Donna said they have to be adopted together, which is probably not going to happen. Her saying that tells

me I have gotten two more fur babies. And I'm okay with it since they already claimed me, so two more added to my pack is not a problem at all.

Adding the bulldog and hairless to my pack is going to stretch me, but being a animal abuse investigator, I have been taking the ones no one else wants. The old, sick, abused, and handicapped, in one way or another, end up with me. Thank God for my neighbor, Marjorie, and her husband, Herb. Called her earlier to tell her I had to take an extra shift and, as usual, she told me they would go over to my property and take care of my pack in the pole barn and my three babies in the house. I'd be lost without their help, especially with my erratic schedule. When I can, I return the help in their stables filled with horses and donkeys.

By the time I make it back to the firehouse from the vet's the crew is back, everyone's safe. Almost instantly my shoulders sag as the tension leaves them. Then I see my relief is here. Blaze is my replacement, so I thank her before gathering my shit and heading home. Knowing I probably have a ton of shit to do there before I can fall into my bed, it'll all depend on what Marjorie was able to do. She's able to handle every dog in my pack, so hopefully, everyone has been fed and let out. If their runs aren't cleaned, I can do that after I get some much-needed shut-eye.

The drive home is uneventful, and I almost call Marjorie and Herb to let them know I'm on my way, but it's pretty damn late, or early, depending on how you look at it. Don't want to bother them more than I already have today. They'll see my truck out front and I'll turn off all the extra lights I leave on when I'm not home. As I pull down my long-ass driveway, I'm trying to make a mental list in my head of what I'm gonna need for the two new dogs. The vet techs named them, so Marshmallow and Cueball it is. At least four new dog beds and some toys for them. And food dishes, they will probably drink from the communal drinking fountains I have around the house. Cueball, the hairless terrier, is gonna need some sweaters and hoodies 'cause, according to the vet, they don't hold their own body heat too well. I know my two pits will be fine with them, but my Jack Russell, Archie, is so



fucking protective—not only of me but the house itself—so he’s definitely gonna be my spoiled fur baby who throws a fit at the new additions, that’s a total given.

Getting out of the truck, I grab my shit and lock up. Walking to the pole barn, I unlock it, hit the security code, and turn the lights on. All the hounds are bedded down for the night. Their runs are cleaned, water filled, and they barely lifted their heads to check me out. Worn out, so guessing Marjorie put their asses through the paces and played with them for a long while. Even the cats are bedded down in the open pen used for play. Talking to them for a few minutes, I reset the alarm, shut the lights off, and lock up.

Walking back toward the house, I take a minute to just absorb the silence. Looking up, the sky is filled with a million stars, and I thank God I found this property when I was looking for some land to build my home on. The fifteen acres is probably too much, but I let the horses and donkeys next door use some of the pasture when my neighbors need to give their pastures a break. We help each other out which, fuck, I know is extremely rare nowadays. Most folks don’t even talk to their neighbors, for Christ’s sake.

When I get to my front door, I push in the code to unlock it, then immediately go to unarm the alarm when it hits me, it’s not armed. Dropping my bag, I turn toward the great room, looking to see if anything is off. Making my way farther into the room, I notice a throw on the couch, which I assume one of the dogs pulled down to lay on. Where the fuck are the dogs anyway? Never have I come home without being literally attacked by the two pits and lil’ Archie.

Walking to the sectional, assuming the dogs are deep asleep, I’m startled when I make it around the side and look down. Sleeping on my furniture is a strange woman and surrounding her are my three dogs. Neither pit bull, Bambi or Dumbo, looks my way or raise their heads while little Archie opens his eyes, lets out a sigh, and goes right back to sleep. When the woman shifts and the throw moves, damn, I get a full view of her. She is drop-dead gorgeous. She has long reddish hair with blond highlights and skin like fuckin’

peaches. From what I can see, she is curvy as shit, and again, after studying her, I know I don't know her from Jack. Who the fuck is she? And more importantly, why is she in my motherfucking house in the middle of the night?

“You done staring at me or do you want to take a picture, it'll last longer?”

Her voice is husky and lower than I would have expected. When I look up at her face, holy shit, she has the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Goddamn, she's beyond gorgeous, and I struggle to breathe. Hey, now wait a minute, she's in my damn house and she's giving me attitude. What the ever-lovin' fuck?

“Okay, lady, who the hell are you and what are ya doing in my house with my dogs? Need some answers now or else gonna have to put a call in to the police. You're trespassing on private property, which I'm sure you know.”

She gives me a look for like two point five seconds then busts out laughing. Deep belly laughs, which wake up the dogs, who when they finally see me all jump down to greet me with kisses and barks. I bend down to give them all some lovin' then glance up at the woman, who is watching with a small smile on her face. I raise my eyebrow.

“Damn, chill, dude, not like I'm stealing anything. My sister is Marjorie your next-door neighbor and they got tied up, couldn't come over for your doggie's night-time potty call, clean up, and water refresh, so I told her I'd come over and take care of the dogs for her. Didn't realize how many there were, and by the time I cleaned the pens, let them out, played with them, made sure they all had water, and got in the house and got these three babies out; I thought I'd sit on the couch for a minute or two 'til they calmed down. Must have fell asleep. Didn't mean to intrude. Let me grab my Chucks and I'll be out of your way. You have my apologies, grumpy.”

When she throws the blanket aside and stands, it takes everything in me not to drop my mouth open. She's even hotter than I thought in her leggings and a simple T-shirt. As she puts her shoes on and grabs her hoodie, I stand here watching her like a goddamn creep.

“Hey, sorry, you startled me, didn’t expect to find anyone in my house. I appreciate ya helping me out though, and I’m sure the pups all are thankful for the company. Let me give you something for your time.”

“Really? Do you pay Marjorie or Herb when they come over? I don’t want your money, was just trying to help my sister out like she’s helping me. I’m outta of here.”

As she goes to walk by me—not even sure why—but my hand reaches out, latching on to her arm. She stops immediately, looks down at my hand, then at me. Before I can even say a word, she does.

“Might want to take your hand off me, dude, before I break it. No one touches me unless I tell them they can, and since I don’t know you, I’d rather you keep your hands to yourself, thank you very much. I don’t care if my sister Marjorie knows you because I don’t.”

Removing my hand, I put both hands up in front of me. She rolls her eyes, then again heads for the front door.

“Hey, I’m Danny Moretti. Thanks again for what ya did, means a lot. Don’t mean to come off like a lunatic, swear. Can I get your name, darlin’?”

Shaking her head, a small grin on her face, she stops and looks at me.

“Well, first it’s not darlin’. I’m Claire George. And just saying, you got a beautiful home and a great bunch of fur babies. You’re a lucky man, Danny Moretti. Take care, night.”

Then she turns and walks out of my house. When she’s gone, I stand here looking at the closed door, and know this was one of those ‘something important just happened’ times, ’cause I could feel it down deep. I want to get to know Claire George better. Shit, I want to run after her and beg her not to leave. God, what’s wrong with me? Look, how pitiful am I?

With that thought, I set the alarm and call the dogs to bed. Dropping my clothes on the floor, I fall into bed, my last thought about a beautiful, snarky, red-haired, green-eyed woman named Claire.

## ‘CLAIRE’

Damn, Marjorie can be a total pain in my ass. Once again, she set me up and I fell for it like the sap I am. I feel like my life is on a roller-coaster ride and it just keeps going in circles without stopping, or at least taking a break so I can catch my breath. As I drive back to my tiny house, it dawns on me that my sister’s damn neighbor is gorgeous. When I volunteered to go over there to let his dogs out, little did I know he had a pole barn full of them along with some cats. By the time they were all settled and I got over my guilt of leaving them alone, I then headed into the house for round two.

The three goofy dogs in the house were so much fun. We ran around the main floor for I don’t know how long, until one by one they just flopped down, exhausted and panting. That gave me a chance to find and change their water, which by that time all I wanted was a drink myself. Next up was the last potty call so we went out in the backyard where sensor lights came on instantly, or as soon as the little one, Archie, ran out chasing what I think was a very stupid bunny. Dumbo and Bambi took their time sniffing and walking around until they found their perfect spot to pee.

When we got back in the house, of course they wanted their cookies which took me almost ten minutes to find. By then I was exhausted after the day I had so I thought sitting on the sectional for a few minutes was a good idea, which turned out to be a failure. But those dogs were adorable and maybe one day I’ll be able to find one or two to bring into my life and home. A fur baby to share that kind of love.

Pulling up to my house not sure what it is, but something seems off. The twins are at Marjorie and Herb's for a sleepover so I can have some me time or, as my sister calls it, some self-care time. I'm looking forward to it. The night is over and I'm just planning on going straight to bed. Looking around, everything seems okay. The outside light is on and I can see the soft light I left on in the kitchen too. Not seeing anything alarming, I take a second as now I'm living in the country and want to make sure no animals are wandering around.

Reaching for the whistle Herb insisted I carry and the mace Marjorie gave me, I shut the car off and get out. The hair on the back of my neck stands immediately up and, for some reason, going into my house is scaring the literal crap out of me. So without any thought, I jump back into my car and head to my sister's house, knowing she won't mind that I'm staying with them tonight. Won't be the first time the three of us camped out in their main room. The adjustment period has been a hard one for me especially, but it's getting better most of the time. As Herb keeps telling me, "with time this will get easier." I can only pray my brother-in-law is right.

As I drive down to Marjorie's, I don't have a clue as to what creeped me out.

Meanwhile, the trespasser watching and waiting in the shadows throws a huge branch they picked up from the ground into the brush before stalking away, fury radiating off of their entire body.

\* \* \*

HEARING THE SCREAMS, I wake up in a sweat, not sure where I am for a split second before it comes to me. I'm at Marjorie's. In the next minute or so I hear the sound of footsteps running from upstairs as first Lachlan, then Roan, open the sheet door to their makeshift tent in the far corner. Both of their eyes are heavy with sleep just as the main lights go on, blinding the hell out of me.

“Damn, Claire, are you okay? What’s the matter? Come here, baby sister, I got you. Don’t worry, you’re not alone.”

As Marjorie pulls me tight, I feel both boys crawl up next to me, hanging on for dear life. My baby boys need me because I just scared the hell out of them both with my nightmares, yet again. I feel my heart breaking in two looking down at how they turn to each other, and wish for the millionth time Shamus was standing right at my side, seeing our sons growing up together as brothers and best friends.

Looking up at my sister, I mouth, “I’m okay,” as I gently push away from her. My main concern right now is my boys.

“Aww, come to Momma, my sweet boys. I’m so sorry I woke you guys up again. Shush. Momma’s here and loves you. Let’s rock in Auntie Marjorie’s favorite rocker together. Come on, babies, Momma’s got you.”

First, I reach for Lachlan as he latches on, hanging on to my shoulder. Roan’s hands are already up, trying to reach for me also. These boys are getting too big for me to be attempting to grasp each of them at the same time, but for tonight I’ll swallow my moans of pain to settle them down. Because it’s my fault they are so frigging upset.

Making my way to Marjorie’s rocker, I feel the tears filling my own eyes. My husband personally commissioned two of these chairs be made when we found out we were having twins. One for our home and one for my sister and brother-in-law’s, so when Shamus was off on tour and the boys and I were here visiting, we had a bit of home with us. Not to mention my sister loved the chair probably because it was from my husband, who she loved to death.

The seat of the rocker is almost big enough for two adults to sit in it. And I know that from when both of us were sitting in it. Well, I was on his lap, my knees on either side of his, trying to break it in. That’s when Shamus, with his hands full of my ass cheeks, said while laughing that as the twins grew, they both would be able to sit on either my side or his as we read to them or I sang to them. And as always, he was right because already sometimes one or the other will roll off of me

and snuggle next to me, tiny hands on my tummy or trying to hug me tightly.

Once my butt hits the seat, both boys shift this way and that way, trying to get comfortable, not only on me but with each other so they are touching in some way. Since birth, the boys always have to be touching or at least close enough to touch. My OB/GYN explained that is the way some twins come out. And from the way she explained it, when she did the C-section, they were wrapped up in each other's arms in the sac, so it just goes to figure they'd continue with that same mindset. As they get in their favorite spots, I lean over and grab one of the books off the side table then reach under the shelf with the throws. Picking the one I love best... with all the baby animals, I spread it over all three of us and wait.

The longer I sit the more the anticipation builds. These two can only sit still for so long, so after not even a minute or two they start in.

“Mommy, read us the story. Pease, I want to see the wittle animals playing. Pease, Mommy.”

Clapping his hands, Roan starts to pat my tummy under the throw, trying to get my attention when at the same moment Lachlan lets out a grunt as he tries to lift up to grab my face. Leaning down to help him, he smooshes my cheeks together making fish lips, which he laughs at.

“Read, Mommy. Now.”

*Bossy little squirt*, I think to myself with a smile.

“Mommy will read when her two little monsters sit still and be good. Can you do that for me?”

They both nod like crazy and try with all their might not to move, which is a joke. These little boys, when grown someday, might be doing the exact same thing, but for me. Reading stories to their old momma. Who knows what life has planned for the three of us? We've already experienced hell on this earth so it can only get better, right? One thing I do know is moving out here and being so close to my family has been a lifesaver.

Right now, with Shamus's benefits continuing for the three of us, I thank God. We get a small government check every month, but I won't be able to live just on that and my sister knew that.

I bitched for a while about coming out here for another visit after she hounded me for weeks. But when the boys and I got here, to my utter surprise, Marjorie and Herb had a tiny home sitting off to the side of their beautiful log cabin. The little house has a deck and my brother-in-law had started a small, raised-container garden for me because I've always talked about wanting a garden. Also, there is a small swing set/jungle gym up for the boys, which they ran to immediately upon setting eyes to it. I broke down, overwhelmed by their love and support. My sister and brother-in-law totally shocked the hell out of me with their kindness. I was struggling working two menial jobs to try and keep things together back in the small condo Shamus and I purchased when we first got married.

Feeling the boys dozing off, I gently move and pick one then the other up and put them back into their little tent, making sure to cover and tuck them both in. Needing something, I walk into the kitchen and open the refrigerator, pulling out the gallon of milk. After filling a glass and grabbing some of Marjorie's awesome, kick-ass chocolate chip cookies, I sit at the table and let my mind wander to the one night that will not stay hidden where I keep trying to push it.

I don't think I'll ever be able to forget the sound of the loud knock on our front door that changed our lives forever. And not in a good way at all. When I opened the door, two officers were shifting from foot to foot. I already knew what they were there to tell me. My husband Shamus was dead. I remember losing it, falling to my knees and sobbing uncontrollably. Banging my hands on the floor, snot running down my face. Neither man had a clue what to do so when my neighbor, Theresa, rushed over, they helped get me in to the house and settled in a chair. As they went through the ritual, Theresa sat at my side, holding on to both of my hands, tears running down her face also. She was like my older sister/mother. Always around to lend a hand, which meant the



world, as with the twins I could use all the help I could get. Especially when Shamus was away on missions. Once I calmed down as much as I could, Theresa excused herself to 'go check on the boys' and then disappeared. I know she went in there because the baby monitor let me know there was movement. Shamus made sure we had the top-of-the-line monitors for the boys' room.

Theresa also, without my knowledge, reached out to my sister and brother-in-law, letting them know what had happened. To this day, I will never be able to thank her enough because the closest family I had, besides my boys, were Marjorie, her husband, Herb, and my parents. Shamus's family was in Ireland and did eventually come to the States, but it took them time. So, I never found out how, but my sister and brother-in-law managed to arrive there first. They were there every step of the way and held me up as I went through the process of making funeral arrangements for my husband. My parents showed up the next evening after working through flights and layovers with the airports.

Thinking back, without my family I would have never managed to get through the worst time of my life. Not to mention, I was now responsible for my twin boys all by myself. I fell into a deep depression right after those words came out of the soldier's mouth at my door, requesting to come in and have a word with me. My heart knew what they were going to say before the words actually came out of their mouths. Took my head a while though to process.

Being able to comprehend my best friend, high school sweetheart, husband, lover, and father of my twin boys was gone forever was unimaginable to me. To never feel his huge arms around me or his lips on mine, his body next to me or hear his deep velvety voice whispering dirty nothings in my ear. These thoughts literally tore my heart out on that day. Or to watch our boys grow into men, hopefully just like their daddy. And we had plans for more children too. Those feelings I'll never forget for as long as I live.

Little did I know how much my life changed that early morning, or how much more I would end up loving and

needing my sister, Marjorie, and her husband, Herb. Well, until right this minute as I look around their home, realizing that without them back then and even now, who knows where my boys and I would have ended up. I'm sure both my parents and Shamus's would have helped financially, but they all have their own lives. Putting my head into my hands, I let the silent tears fall as it hits me. I have no idea what is next.

Hearing her before I'm wrapped in her arms, my beautiful sister and best friend pulls me tightly to her, giving me time to just be.

"I got you, little sister. Never doubt that. You're never alone so let it out. Time to try and start to live again. No, you're right, I don't know how hard that is to do, but Shamus wouldn't want you to just get through each day to face another. Not for you, and definitely not for his boys. Come on, let's get you comfortable. You need sleep."

Once I'm settled on the sectional, she kisses my forehead and squeezes my shoulders before turning to head back upstairs to her own bed.

"Marjorie, there's no way I can ever repay you for everything. I hope you know how much both you and Herb mean to me. I'll always be indebted to you both for all you've done for the twins and me. Thanks, sis, for giving the boys and me a new beginning, as hard as it is. You make it easier for me to at least try because we're with both of you. I mean it, thank you."

She turns, giving me a beautiful smile then goes upstairs. I take a minute to pray I'll be able to give my boys what they deserve before I fade into a deep and thankfully nightmare-free sleep.

## ‘CLAIRE’

Not going to be a great morning, I can tell. Everything and anything is irritating me and I have no idea why. Could be I hate waking up with a major, throbbing, pain-in-the-ass headache, but I have no choice. Can't lounge around in bed or on the couch, need to rise and shine because the twins are wide awake and ready to start their day. By the time I get them out of their blanket tent, cleaned up, and dressed for the day, both Marjorie and Herb are in the kitchen and from the smells radiating out are cooking breakfast. Crap, need to get my stuff together, can't keep letting them wait on the boys and me. *They've done more than enough already*, I think to myself.

When the boys are corralled and watching their favorite cartoon, I plop down on the sectional after grabbing another cup of coffee and finally let my mind wander to last night.

Damn, when Marjorie asked me to please run over to her neighbor Danny's house, I didn't mind at all. She was trying to give me a little bit of a breather and some time to myself, which right now is rare. Yeah, had to 'take care of a bunch of dogs,' her words, but I was excited for the opportunity to have some time to just be quiet, which I never get with my twin boys. Man, what a setup he has going on over there for all his dogs and cats, or as Marjorie calls them his fur babies. And that firefighter is so beyond frigging cute. Then it dawns on me, he not only fights fires to protect and serve but also rescues the unwanted pets left behind, usually destined to die in said fires. And from what I saw, and all the stuff Marjorie is always going on about her neighbor, Danny, he seems to take a lot of rescues home with him.

Guess I didn't need to be such a snot, but the way he was watching me at first kind of pissed me off. Like I was either a crazy person or, worse, a psychopath. I must have been even more exhausted than I thought, didn't plan on falling asleep on his sectional. Still trying to get used to my new life all around, not to mention the insane and unplanned move here from another state, without giving it much thought. I would do it again if it means I get to keep Lachlan and Roan, my boys, happy and healthy. When I lost my husband, Shamus, to friendly fire, I was four months pregnant with our twins. My life quickly did a goddamn somersault. Instead of starting our family together, I brought the boys into this world alone, with Marjorie at my side. Yeah, Shamus's mom and dad wanted to help but they live in Ireland for God's sake, and my mom and dad are in Arizona. Both sets of parents wanted me to move in with them, but I said no.

Marjorie and Herb did their best but until recently, after much insistence on my sister's part, I was trying to figure out what to do, and even gave a lot of thought to relocating and moving in with them in their log cabin 'til I could find my own place somewhere close to them. I needed help, and my older sister always has my back and comes through in spades. When the boys and I finally arrived for our visit, to my utter surprise, I was totally shocked to see the sweet tiny home they had moved in for my boys and me? I broke down, overwhelmed by their love and support. My sister and brother-in-law totally rock.

That's why when Marjorie asked me to run over to Danny's house to take care of his animals because he was stuck out on a call, I didn't think twice. I've heard about the cute firefighter next door every time I would call and check in. My sister thought he would be perfect for me and has told me time and time again. Got to say though, she was way off on what he looked like. *Damn, he is hawt, to say the least*, I think to myself. And for me that's saying a lot, since I haven't been with a man since my husband died. Shamus was my first true love. We were high school sweethearts, and over the last couple of years I've had no inkling of desire or tingles when I've seen other men. Last night though, my body warmed up

pretty quickly just being in the same room as Danny. The man has it going on... and that voice. The deep husky timbre makes my body shiver just thinking about it. These feelings are so off, I'm actually surprised at my reaction. I don't think it's just his looks but his soft heart too.

When I was taking care of his pack in his pole barn, it shocked me the dogs he had in there. Some were elderly, then that little one had its own wheels to get around, and that other mutt only had three legs. My God, all those dogs were so frigging happy to be alive, I could tell just by looking at them and how good they looked. From what Marjorie has told me, Danny saved all the animals at fires or deserted houses. She said he does it because he knows if they were to go to a shelter, they'd probably end up in a kill shelter after their seven-day wait period. So, he takes the ones no one else wants. That says a lot about his character and his heart too. Guess before he became a firefighter, he used to volunteer at the shelters and was even an animal abuse investigator at one time. Not a job I could ever do, that's for damn sure. I'd probably end up in jail my first day on the job.

After breakfast and helping Marjorie clean up, I head back to my little house because I have a ton of stuff to do. First up is laundry then I want to straighten up the place. With the boys down for a nap, I decide between loads to lie down myself. My mind as usual, when I try to relax, starts to go in a million different directions. Something I've been wondering since I moved next to my sister has me thinking about it for a minute. Thought I saw a help wanted sign on that wall in the grocery store. It was the local humane society needing some help part time. That I could do, wouldn't need a college degree and I love animals. Getting excited at the thought, I hear the sounds of the twins waking up on the little monitor next to my bed. I stretch for a second or two, then go to get my boys up again. I give one last thought to the sexy firefighter, Danny, as I jump up, heading to the twins' room. I know no single man who looks like him is going to want anything to do with a widowed mom of twin boys. That's just how it is. So, after another minute or so of daydreaming, I put Danny out of my head as my boys jump out of bed charged up after their naps.

\* \* \*

HOW THE HECK do two little boys have some much frigging energy? I'm ready to collapse and they are like two Energizer Bunnies. Currently, they are in the pasture behind our home chasing the two donkeys, who couldn't give a rat's ass that two lil' boys are running around them like two crazy lil' buzzards. Just as I go to sit my ass down on the rock by the fence, I hear a vehicle heading our way. *Just great, who the hell is it now?* I wonder. Turning in my seat, I see the truck and it hits me just as Herb and Marjorie come out of the barn to see who it is.

I watch Danny step out of his truck as he greets my sister and brother-in-law. He seems to be telling them a story about something but since it doesn't involve me, I turn to keep an eye on my boys.

"Claire, come over, little sister, and bring the boys. We want to show them something. Move your butt, they're going to love it."

Hearing the laughter in my sister's voice is the only reason I don't turn and flip her ass off. Well, that and the two little buggers watching me from where they are playing. And she has been more than awesome with the boys and me, not to mention all they both keep doing for us as we settle in. Just giving us a new beginning close to our family, which is what I want for my boys, has humbled me.

"Hey, Lachlan, Roan, come on over by Mom, Aunt Marjorie wants to show you guys a surprise."

Before I even finish, they both come running toward me, hands in the air, screaming at the top of their lungs... *'Yay, a surprise.'* They plow into my legs, and it's by the grace of God I don't fall on my ass. Grabbing each of their little hands, we head over to the three folks watching us approach. Marjorie and Herb with smiles on their faces filled with love. Danny looks totally shocked. Well, guess he didn't know about my twin boys.

“Hey, what’s the big surprise? You know these guys get riled up for just about nothing. So, come on, don’t keep us waiting, they’re about to bust right in front of y’all.”

Everyone looks down to see both Lachlan and Roan pushing each other, making weird-ass noises, and repeating *Surprise! Surprise!* over and over in their little boy voices.

Danny kneels down while glancing between the twins. I watch him as first Roan, my adventurous one, then Lachlan, following his twin, both walk to Danny. When they are within reach, they lunge and hug him tightly, which shocks the shit out of him. Their combined weight and the unexpected hugs has Danny falling on his ass, with two little boys on top of him giggling like lunatics. Before I can grab the kids, Danny starts to tickle them, and shit, that’s it, it’s a mess of male camaraderie. Roan is trying to tickle Danny as Lachlan is yanking his ears and pulling on his cheeks. The man in question is laughing his ass off as he continues to tickle the shit outta my boys. My heart skips a beat because since Shamus passed before the boys were born, they haven’t been around a lot of men. Yeah, Herb, my dad, whenever my brothers come around, and the few times Shamus’s father was here, but that’s it.

“All right, you goofs, let Danny up, will ya? Come on, my little rugrats, give the man a break. He wants to show you guys something, but you have to let him up.”

Marjorie then reaches for Roan as Herb grabs Lachlan. I’m smiling like a nut but love that my boys get to have a short interaction like this. As I’m watching the boys, I feel eyes on me and turn to see Danny wiping his jeans off while his gaze is on me. The look in his eyes has my body immediately start to feel warm as my nipples harden. Holy shit, that hasn’t happened in crap, how old are my boys? So, it’s been over four years since I’ve had a reaction like that. Yeah, not gonna lie, I take care of my own needs with the BOB in my nightstand, but damn, never had a visceral reaction like that. Might need to update my battery-operated boyfriend for a newer, faster model.

“Hey, Claire, how are you doing today?”

Hearing that raspy, deep voice, a tingle runs up my back. What the hell is going on with me? Before I can answer his question, the boys kick in.

“Surprise. Mr. Danny, where’s the surprise? We want to see it NOW.”

Yeah, that’s my Roan, demanding and always wanting his way. Again, before I can pull him back, Danny walks to him, getting down to his level.

“Hey, lil’ man, if you ask nicely and not so demanding, I might show you the surprise. Otherwise, I’ll share it with this little guy who’s being very polite. What do you think?”

Roan immediately has his gonna-lose-it face and I’m waiting for the shouting and crying, but Danny leans over and whispers in his ear. I watch as, to my utter amazement, Roan touches Danny’s face then nods and claps his hands. No tears, no tantrum. How did he do that?

“Okay, since both of you are such good lil’ men, stay right here. I’ll be right back.”

I watch him grab a carrier, and shit, it’s gonna be some kind of animal and the boys are about to lose their minds. They’ve been begging me for a pet of their own, well, two pets, because they each want their own. Roan actually told me to get a set of twin dogs or cats for them. So, when Danny puts the pet carrier down, both boys’ mouths drop open and they run to the front of the box, both fall on their little boy butts and try to wait patiently, which isn’t gonna happen with two almost five-year-olds. They are pushing each other to get a peek first. When Danny pulls the carrier back, the kids’ faces are priceless, but then he opens it and reaches in with both hands.

He has two little dogs, one in each hand. One looks to be, no way, a French bulldog, my all-time favorite. The other one, wait, does it have on some type of hoodie? Yeah, a Station 23 firefighter hoodie and, no way, it’s one of those freaking hairless dogs. The boys are going nuts, jumping up and down wanting to hold the dogs. Danny somehow sits on his ass in the grass and tells the boys to each sit next to him. I watch as



he shows the boys how to pet the dogs gently and not to pull at either of them. Even when Lachlan pulls on the hoodie, Danny is very patient, trying to explain why he shouldn't do that.

When he puts the Frenchie in Lachlan's arms and the hairless terrier in Roan's arms, I feel the tears in my eyes. They look so goddamn happy. Then Danny glances my way, sees my face and the tears running down it, gives me a million-dollar smile, and then he winks.

*Fuck, I'm in trouble* is the first thought that comes to my mind. With Danny and those two cute as hell dogs in my kids' arms.

## ‘DANNY’

Fuck are these two lil’ boys cute as hell. They aren’t exactly identical twins, but very close. I had no idea Claire even had kids, since neither Marjorie nor Herb ever mentioned their nephews. Well, to be honest, usually they’re running over to take care of the dogs for me, so not much personal talking goes on. Shame on me. We’ve been neighbors and friends for a while, we’ve even gotten together and had a few barbecues.

As I’m watching the tears run down her face, it hits me straight in the chest. She looks so damn happy but sad at the same time. Don’t know her story, but hell, I’m dying to hear it from those full as fuck Cupid’s bow lips of hers. My mind is throwing picture after picture of what else I want her lips to do, but I shake my head. What the fuck is wrong with me? I’ve been around hot chicks before. Has it been that long since I got laid, for Christ’s sake? Well, yeah, it has been. Got sick of the one-night stands with no emotion involved so been taking care of myself.

“Hey, Claire, you okay, darlin’? If you don’t want the boys around the pups, let me know, I’ll put them back in the truck. Should have asked you first, sorry, my bad.”

At that, both boys’ heads shoot up and look directly at their mom with that little kid begging in their eyes. I watch as Claire’s eyes close briefly before she shoots her kids a drop-dead smile. They grin back, then again continue playing with the new additions to my pack.

“Danny, what did you go and do, son? Don’t you have enough rescues already? Tell us how these two oddballs came

to be part of your pack.”

Looking at the grin on Herb’s face, I know he’s goofing around, but yeah, this story luckily is a good one.

“Well, we got a call about a house fire in progress on the northwest side of town. Yeah, not the best neighborhood. When we got there and after we dropped a line and entered, what we saw was your worst nightmare. Zero had grabbed a lead hose and was watering down everything in front of him, I followed him in, and we found some real nasty as fuck bullshit.”

I look toward the kids to see if they heard me but they are both up and playing with the two dogs, so all good. I continue with recalling last night’s callout.

“Sorry about that. We found eight—no—maybe it was ten dogs tied or chained together, surrounding an unknown female already passed on. We think it was murder. These two, whose names are Marshmallow and Cueball, were tethered together in the sub-basement, which saved their lives, and as everyone can see, Cueball’s back leg was tangled in something, not sure what. He has a small fracture so the vet put that splint on so it can heal. He can’t be running around and going crazy for a while but should heal just fine. When we tried to split the two dogs up, they put up a fight.”

I raise both my arms to show them the scratches and tiny teeth marks before continuing.

“So, my Cap knows me too well, and even though their cute as hell, well, in Cueball’s defense so ugly he’s cute, knew if they went into a shelter there would be no guarantees they would, first, be adopted, and secondly, more important, together. So if they had no interest, then they go to a you-know-what shelter and I couldn’t let that happen, so I took them.”

By this time both boys are watching me and I should have thought about it before I opened my big mouth. Roan’s little face scrunched up as he never takes his eyes off of me.

“Whatcha mean, Mr. Danny, what kind of shelter?”

Not knowing what to say, I shift my eyes to Claire, who walks over, sitting in front of her boys.

“Guys, think back to when we go to the pet store with Auntie Marjorie, and we see all the animals in the cages, remember what that one mean man said about if they can’t dump them, they go to the bad shelter?”

Both boys’ heads jerk up and I have four eyes staring at me. Shit, now what.

“Hey, munchkins, Mr. Danny saved these two from that place. He’s going to give them a good home, and they’ll have lots of brothers and sisters because he already has a bunch of dogs and cats. Nothing to get upset or worry about, okay? Today is a good day for Marshmallow and Cueball, they’re going to their new forever home.”

The boys gently hug the dogs in their laps and start to mumble to each other in their own special language, I guess. I watch Claire get up and walk over to Marjorie, Herb, and me. Marjorie turns and grabs me close, hugging me while I feel someone putting something in my pocket. Turning, it’s Herb, his eyes on me.

“Don’t argue, Danny, take it and put it toward their care. Yeah, I know you got it, son, but don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Just let the kids play with them once in a while and we’re all good, right, Claire?”

Watching the interaction between the three adults, I feel the love between them. It dawns on me the tiny house my neighbors had put up behind their own home is for Claire and the boys. Where the fuck’s her man? Did he leave when the boys came or before? Was he a nutcase leaving a woman like Claire? With my mind coming up with all kinds of different scenarios, I miss what is said between the two sisters.

“Hey, Danny, Claire is new to the area, so maybe when you’re on your off-duty time you could show her around. We’d be glad to watch the two monsters over there, right, Herb?”

I grin, 'cause I know exactly what Marjorie is doing. And I have no problem giving Claire a tour or showing her around, as I planned to ask her out myself anyway. Well, eventually, was going to play it by ear after last night.

“Damn it, Marjorie, I’m not a kid. Don’t need you to try and fix me up with the first hot guy, I mean guy, who comes my way.”

“Mommy, you said a bad word. Have to put money in the jar in the kitchen.”

Between Claire and Roan my head is spinning. Wait, did she call me a hot guy? Well, hell to the yeah.

“Hey, Claire, it’s not a big deal, if you want to hang out, we could go for coffee or maybe a hot chocolate, if you like. And I don’t mind the boys, they can come along too. Oh, thanks though for the compliment, I’ll take it, darlin’.”

Her face turns a pretty shade of pink as the boys start screaming how they want hot chocolate now. Both Marjorie and Herb are shaking their heads smiling, but Claire looks lost. There’s a story there for sure. Not gonna let it go though, need to move this forward 'cause I want to get to know Claire. Once she goes out and about the other guys in town will see her, then that will be it, I just know it. Bees to honey for sure.

“Well, I’m off right now for the next couple of days. Cap gave me some Kelly time off 'cause I put in OT, helping a fellow firefighter brother out. Let me know if you have any free time, we can grab a bite to eat or just some coffee or, ya know, the HC?”

I wink at her when she realizes what HC is. Didn’t want to get the boys all riled up again.

“Well, yeah, I guess we can get together, Danny. Probably gonna have to bring the monsters with, if that’s okay?”

“Nope, they can stay with me and help with the horses and donkeys. Not to mention, Auntie Marjorie and I have more surprises for the boys. Tomorrow, we have two ponies coming here to live forever. Hey, Lachlan, Roan, how do you feel about each having your own pony? Yeah, that’s what we

thought. Go, Claire, they'll be busy getting to know their new friends. Seriously, we wanted to surprise the boys. And don't be upset, Claire, now that we finally got you here, we ain't gonna let you guys go. So, Marjorie and I decided we'd go as far as to use bribery if we have to. How could you move those two away when they have their own ponies? So yeah, Claire, your sister and I are wicked, but that's how much we love ya, kiddo."

"Well, Herb, you're bribing the boys but what about me? What am I getting to keep me here?"

Marjorie raises her eyebrows then tilts her head my way. What the hell? Not that I mind being pushed into Claire's path, but does her sister know something I don't? Last night she was not remotely fond of me and didn't have a problem showing me either. I hear both of them laughing so I look up and see it.

The love between their family is in my face and overwhelming. Claire walks over to Herb, a smile on her face, and gives him a huge hug, while Marjorie walks behind, her arms around the both of them. There's definitely a backstory between them and I'll be getting the scoop sooner rather than later.

## ‘DANNY’

I’m worried and now beyond pissed at whoever is abusing and murdering these poor women and dogs under the premise of setting these fires. Our house caught another two fires with the same circumstances. Abused dead animals surrounding the body of a young woman, who looked to be beaten, starved, and only God knows what else, chained to a bed. It seems like every time I go to pick up the phone to get Claire’s number—because dumbass I am didn’t get it that day with the dogs—so now going to have to get it from Marjorie, but of course something always comes up. Not to mention the overtime I’m putting in because of what’s been going on with this case.

Cap and I have a meeting over in town with the task force that has been put together to locate this particular serial jagoff, who is taking pleasure in torturing and killing all the victims we are coming across. Both two- and four-legged. To date we’ve only found four, but from what we’ve been told there have been over ten of these crimes that have been found in the last eight months. We’re just hearing about some of them now because no one had taken the time to compare the similarities by looking for cases that had familiar scenarios. Now, because of the circumstances of finding them like we have, it has stirred the pot and has new eyes on everything associated with this case. The powers above are now interested and want to be involved.

Walking into the police station, I’m glad I know some of the cops and officials who are going to be included in this meeting. Between serving with a few of them back in the day and the friendly competition between our softball and football

games, along with our combined summer family picnics, there are no strangers among us. For some reason our firehouse and the local and county cops seem not to have gotten the memo about cops and firefighters hating each other, which I for one am glad about.

Knowing my old squad leader, Donovan 'Nova' Finnegan, will probably be in charge of updating the crowd of men and women with the how, what, when, and why of this case, my apprehension lessens. After he was injured during a mission gone very wrong, he left the SEALs to go into the private sector. Now he owns FQS or as anyone from around these parts knows Finnegan's Quest Sentries. His company is mainly made up of former military. How he manages to get the best of the very best is his secret. He rehabilitates ex-soldiers to become fully functioning in some sort of a police, fire, or paramedic career that is satisfying and gives back to the community. So once someone is hired, they go through some intense training to decide what career will work best with the individual. Some are cops, local and county, while others are investigators for FQS. With my background as an Army Ranger Medic, I worked with Donovan, or as he goes by his call name Nova, when I returned stateside. We determined after many conversations that with my experience and dedication to wanting to serve, maybe becoming a paramedic/firefighter was a good fit. I'd been in situations during the military and after dealing with fires or people with burn injuries. Not to mention all the shit that went down in my life with my parents' ranch, some brush fires I was locally involved in, and as an animal abuse investigator. The sick fucks involved in the abuse make my stomach turn. I never panicked in any of those situations, always managing to maintain my calm and stay cool. Nova said it was like I could read the fire and its path. This led me into going through school to not only become a licensed paramedic, but eventually I went through the fire academy and became of full-fledged firefighter.

I've worked with some of Nova's bunch personally at the firehouse and know almost all the rest. They're all good at what they do together because—even though they are spread



out amongst different professions—one thing remains solid; they are a team.

This group of people knows how personal to me this is because of the crime itself. When I was overseas, I trained our service dogs, so when my parents' pole barn somehow started on fire and they lost a few horses, a mule, and the three family dogs, I was devastated when I heard. Tore my heart out thinking what they went through in their final moments. So even though most of these folks don't get my insane attachment to animals, they respect it. To be honest, without dedicating my time as an animal abuse investigator when I returned home, and the many conversations I had with Nova about my training to become part of the firehouse, not sure I would have made it back into society. Might have been another statistic of #22 A Day, like many other men and women who succumbed. Not to mention, without the Code Green, an awesome organization that focuses on first responders' mental health, which was made available to me, who knows what might have happened over these last few years as a firefighter.

As I tried to explain to Herb one night after one too many beers, who has a better understanding of what makes me tick than most who are not veterans or firefighters, I'm beyond fucking pissed that this son of a bitch is getting away with abducting, kidnapping, and playing with these young women. Probably some type of sadist who derives pleasure from first the emotional torture then the physical torment. And that part with the hands-on abuse is escalating. That's why my Cap brought me along because he knows my background. I've dived in a couple of times over the last what... five or so years on cases, but we've never had anything like this around these parts ever before that I know of.

Looking around, I'm surprised to see not only Nova but also Mayhem, Bones, Sardines, and holy shit, is that my man, Coma? Shit, didn't think he'd ever move out here. Also looking around I see some of my crew heading toward a table. Why the fuck didn't Till, Paco, or Styx tell me they'd be here, for holy sake. Could have drove together and talked about it on the way here.

Hearing a familiar sharp whistle, I turn to see Mayhem coming my way, a huge shit-eating grin on his face. Standing at just over six and a half feet tall, I think, he towers over everyone around him. Not to mention he's probably larger than any other person here in body girth too. When he's within arm's reach, I'm grabbed and manhandled in fun.

“Son of a bitch, didn't think we'd see you, Mo, but shouldn't be surprised. Know this is your home base and don't blame you, I wouldn't want anyone marking my zone, for Christ's sake. How much do you know or is it need-to-know still? Sometimes I wonder how many innocents have to be tortured and murdered before the powers that be get off their asses and move. Nova is about to call this shit to order, but find all of us after, 'kay? Good to see you, man, looking good.”

He gives me a couple of pounds on my shoulders and back that feel like he might have fractured a rib or two. My house knows my call name is 'Mo' and Cap is already sitting, grinning with the rest of our house while watching Mayhem walk away toward the table filled with some of the best people I know. While that thought is at the forefront of my mind, a throat clears right before I hear the raspy voice of Donovan 'Nova' Finnegan. I glance around as he waits impatiently for everyone to grab a seat and shut the fuck up.

“Afternoon. I'm not going to rehash the information we've all gone through individually already. If you feel you're not up to speed just look around and ask some questions, so we're not wasting time here tonight. The bottom line is we have someone who maybe appears to be a serial killer, who takes great pleasure in not only torturing but also, when done murdering his victims, then starts the building on fire with a heavy concentration of accelerant around the bed and body. Looks like this person might be a serial arsonist or practicing up to be.

“From what the coroner told me this morning, the latest victim might not have been dead before the fire was started. Doc said it appeared the five or so dogs were on top of the victim trying to protect her. So crossing off dog-fighting ring

'cause those dogs would rather tear our victim apart than lie on top of her during a fire. A suggestion was made to check the local humane society to see if there has been an influx of interest by a particular person or persons, looking to adopt a lot of canines. Just a thought.”

As he continues, it dawns on me that would be an easy way to obtain large numbers of dogs in no time at all. Racking my brain, I scan the surrounding areas. I come up with two humane societies and about four or so rescues. If this person is rotating into the facilities and also at some of the local adoption fairs, this would open up a vast opportunity. If this person is as slick as Nova is saying, they probably are using multiple false IDs. Tapping Cap on the shoulder I lean toward him.

“We need to get someone checking with the local shelters and the pop-up adoption fairs to see if we have someone using those venues to grab some dogs. Not sure for what reason but can't get in this psycho's mindset, it's way too dark for me.”

As we try to come up with a plan, the room is buzzing with the anticipation of the hunt. Fire, police, a few EMTs, and of course ex-military with Nova, and whoever else is involved, like those two tables in the far corner. I've no idea who they are. We do know that time is running out. This asshole might have already snatched their next victim and we won't know until another blaze is set purposely. That thought doesn't sit well with me at all, or from the looks of it, with my crewing either.

\* \* \*

THESE DUMBASSES ARE CRACKING me up. I look at my watch, knowing I need to get my ass on the move because my pack at home is probably going nuts being kept inside on such a nice day. I know Herb said he was on dog patrol with the boys today, as Marjorie and Claire were out and about. I know Herb will take excellent care of my pups and the twins will wear them all out, I'm sure. Just don't want to take advantage of my

neighbors' kindness. Herb probably has his hands full with those two boys. And the arrival of his herd of the two ponies.

Sitting and smiling to myself, surrounded by some of my firehouse family and Nova's misfits, I miss what Mayhem asked me. Looking up and around they are all in stages of laughing at me, so I join in. Can't let my guard down with them, I know better. With the smirk of a jokester, Mayhem raises his eyebrows and begins his inquisition.

"So, Mo, brother of ours, you going to fill your brothers and sister in on what has your mind drifting so you're not listening to a goddamn word anyone is saying? What's so fucking important that you can't spend a little quality time with your family here? We all know what that means, so come on, did you find yourself a little frog hog around town and you're taking advantage of the situation, having some fun? You can tell us; we can keep a secret if you want."

As everyone laughs even louder, I take the razing. He's right, my head is all over and has been since that first night I met Claire, but it's mainly this shit going on around here. I feel like no one is safe until we find this asshole.

"Sorry, brother, you're right. My head is up my ass but not for the reasons you're thinking. I'm frigging worried about this situation because, as you can see, the powers above don't want to alert the public because none of the women killed were important enough. Not some politician's wife or daughter or some banker's family member. Also, not a judge's sister or niece. The four we found were from middle to lower class families so they don't matter as much, I'm assuming from their actions here tonight."

Hearing movement all around me, I look up to see everyone either grabbing a phone, standing up, or looking around for who, I don't have a goddamn clue. Then Styx looks my way with those violet eyes of hers, giving it to me straight.

"Mo, you my friend, might have hit on one of the few clues this son of a bitch left behind, not intentionally. Maybe it is the plan to target people in the middle to lower classes as not to draw attention to what is going on. Let's see what Nova

has to say. I see Till and Paco making their way to him. Good job, brother, might be just what the task force needs to get ahead of this asshole.”

She gives me a shoulder squeeze, which for her says a lot. Our girl Styx isn't a touchy-feely type. I would say the majority of us men have more interaction between ourselves than she ever does. She keeps her walls up firmly, never letting them down. Not saying she's not one of us because she definitely is, just that she has her own demons. Feeling someone push in to me, I see Rome and Mayhem right beside me watching Nova quickly making his way to our table. Since Cap left, I've been hanging with this group, so when I see Nova come right up to me, I automatically tense up. I've seen him go from normal to downright scary in seconds. I'm trying to control my breath when he reaches me, pulling me in tight, whacking me on the back hard.

“Goddamn motherfucker. Mo, good thinking. You always were the one of us who could talk shit out and find the tiniest little clue that we all passed on. Already have the nerds going through everything we have on the bodies that have been identified. It's something, so let's keep racking our brains for some other little thing. Might lead us down the track and right to our person, never know.”

We all sit back down and start again. This is going to be a late night. I reach into my back pocket, pull my phone out, and text Herb, letting him know I'm tied up and if they don't mind, I'd greatly appreciate it. Didn't have to wait long for the buzz.

*Herb-No worries, Danny, we got you. Find this son of a bitch, that's all I ask. Our streets ain't safe right now and I got too much to lose, so do what you have to.”*

With a clear conscience, knowing my fur babies are safe and being well taken care of, I clear my mind of all outside shit and concentrate. We need to get this prick off the streets sooner rather than later.

## ‘CLAIRE’

What a day. Just like when we were kids, Marjorie remembered how to get me to relax. First, we made our way into town and stopped at the cute little coffee hut. Man, they have awesome coffee and goodies too. Then we hit the ‘mall’ if you want to call a couple of stores thrown together that. We had fun walking around window-shopping, looking for nothing but taking our time in case we found that special something we didn’t know we had to have.

As we went through our day, I kept my eyes open for any help wanted signs. There were a few but some of the stores looking for help weren’t my cup of tea, so to speak. The gaming store or the men’s shop. I did give my name to the lady at the gift shop because I’d love to work there, even though what my sister said is true, I’d probably give back my entire paycheck to her.

When we were done shopping, Marjorie asked if I minded going to the humane society as she had some stuff to drop off from their items-needed list. I didn’t care, Herb had the boys and it was nice to just get out and hang with my big sister. So she headed to the outskirts of town to a large, plain-brick building surrounded by a tall link fence. Not much to speak of, well, until you walk in. Whomever was in charge spent all their efforts in the inside. Smart, very smart.

Whereas the outside was boring, the inside was bursting with color when you first walk in. The waiting area was bustling and I could see the three people behind the counter were a bit flustered. Marjorie walked over to the corner, pulled

an envelope off the table, and put the two bags of towels, newspapers, and a few cleaning supplies in the mess of donations. Then she walked right behind the counter and started giving out orders.

Amazed, I just watched as, with Marjorie's help, everything seemed to start to run smoother. She had one volunteer speaking to two people interested in adopting, while the other volunteer was helping with necessary paperwork. As my sister and the last volunteer had a conversation, I looked around to see a few dogs must have piddled and no one cleaned it up. Turning, I walk down a hallway, seeing a closet open, so I head that way when a younger man scared the living bejesus out of me.

“Need something, Miss?”

Shaking my head, I look at him as he tries to avoid my eyes.

“Well, umm, yes, I need a mop if you have one and one of those signs that says Careful Wet Floor.”

“You new here? I've not seen you before.”

“Nope, visiting with my sister, Marjorie.”

“Holy shit, you're Marjorie's sister? Sure, yeah, grab any mop, just changed out the bucket water so all should be good. Thanks for helping out. Have a good day, Miss.”

Before I can say a word, he's gone. Weird. Need to talk to Marjorie about that because something was off with that dude, especially since he wouldn't look me in the eyes.

Finding the bucket of water and mop just inside, I wheel it down and clean up the two spots, then decide to just mop that entire area since it seemed they were experiencing a break in visitors. Looking up, I see Marjorie leaning on the counter, a huge smile on her face. *Now what is that goof up to?* I think to myself. I push the mop off to the beginning of the hallway before walking toward my sister.

“What's got that sinister smile on your face, big sister? It's usually never a good sign, especially for me.”

She throws her head back and laughs. I giggle a bit, holding my stomach as it is sore from all the cracking up we've been doing all day. When she's done, she leans over the counter, finger pointing downward. That's when I see it. The help wanted sign. Oh shit. Not a good idea for me to work in a place where they bring unwanted animals. I'll have a full house. I'd thought about it after seeing the sign in the grocery store, but I know the twins would love it and any animals that make their way to our home. Shaking my head, I look closely at my sister and it hits me.

“You set me up, you sneaky witch. What do you do, work here or volunteer? Need to drop some donations off, liar. Hey, some guy in the back almost crapped his pants when I said your name and that you were here. And by the way, he's a bit weird, might want to keep an eye on him. He gave me the creeps. Don't know his name but wouldn't even look me in the eyes, sis. Damn you, Marjorie, I don't know. What the hell are you thinking? I'm in a tiny house, can't put much more in it and you know me. Remember when we were kids, every injured or throw-away animal ended up in the garage.”

“We can build you a pole barn, just like our neighbor Danny has, and look how many fur babies he has in there, with plenty of room for more.”

Her eyes are twinkling and she's fighting a smile. Oh, paybacks are such a bitch, big sister. Looking around for someone to speak to about the job, Marjorie taps her fingers on the counter to get my attention. When I look up, she's pointing to an office off to the side. I nod then head that way, trying to straighten my clothes, though I doubt me being in jeans and a T-shirt is going to matter one bit if my sister is recommending me.

I knock and look in, but no one's in the office. Looking around, I walk in and try to see if there are applications on the desk, but again nothing. That's when I hear it again. My sister's laughter right behind me.

“Jean, this is my sister, Claire, who I told you about. Remember she's got the twins, so not sure how much time she's going to have available, but I'll leave that discussion up



to the two of you. Claire, this is one of my good friends, Jean. I'm going to take a walk through the adoption rooms, never know. Oh, any large animals looking to be adopted? Could use another farm animal to be a friend to our newest donkey, Jezebel."

Waiting for the two women to finish their conversation, I'm feeling a little better about my situation. Getting a job, besides a home, is a good way to start putting down roots. And I have to do that for my boys. They need a stable life and living here with Marjorie and Herb next door to us, my boys will get exactly that.

\* \* \*

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you set me up, Rie. Why don't I know you've been... what, working at that shelter? I mean, I'm glad you had an in because not only will the money help, but just to get out of the house and have a purpose will really be a nice change of pace. I just hope I don't need to add to the back of the house for all the additions I bring home. You're such a sneaky big sister."

Laughing, it hits me I've not called my sister Rie since before Shamus passed. I've been living in a vacuum, managing to get through one day at a time, and that's it. Before moving here, it was exhausting to work two jobs and try to raise my boys. Since being here, not sure why but everything just seems to flow better. The pressures are off my shoulders and for the first time in a long time I see a future for Roan, Lachlan, and myself.

Even last week when my in-laws called from Ireland to check in on the boys and me, my mother-in-law, Isla, said for the first time since we lost Shamus, I sounded happy. That made me cry, which in turn had her sobbing in the phone but it also gave us a moment to share something together. I never want to lose that connection, not only for the boys but also for myself. Sometime either later this year, or early next year, Isla and Oliver plan on visiting their grandsons and me. And I can't wait to see them again under better times.

The boys are watching television while I am putting away the few items I purchased in town. Knowing dinnertime is right around the corner, I think about what to make.

“Hey, guys, want some macaroni and cheese tonight? Or grilled cheese sandwiches?”

Lachlan jumps up first, running toward me, arms wide. Roan is not far behind. And as usual they ask for the same thing. Twin thing, I guess.

“Macrooni, Mommy, yeah.”

Lachlan screams at the top of his little lungs, while Roan waits then leans into my legs looking up at me.

“Mommy, I want the noodles with cheese, please.”

Damn, these two own my heart and I thank Shamus every day for them. I reach down and give each of them a hug, well, for Lachlan it's more of a pull-push type of thing while Roan could hug all day and night. One of the few differences between my twins.

While they turn and run back to the cartoons on television, I open cabinets, grabbing a pot to get some water boiling. Then to treat myself, I reach in and grab a wine glass, filling it with a quarter glass of the moscato I bought today. Thank God I was smart enough to put it in the refrigerator when we first walked in the door.

After dinner and baths, the boys start fading fast. Herb said they ran their little butts off every time he went over to Danny's to take care of the dogs. Damn, Danny, just the thought of him has me wanting to fan myself. Getting my mind away from his image, we settle down for a few bedtime stories before I get Roan and Lachlan settled again in the same bed. Arms wrapped around each other, they are talking their twin language as I leave after putting on their stars and moon nightlight and turn the overhead light off. I don't close the door all the way.

Grabbing my wine, I head to the sectional, turning the channel to one of my home shows. Can't wait to see how this house looks after the remodel. *I would love to do something,*

*maybe a fixer-upper, but for now I've got my hands full* I think to myself. So wrapped up in my favorite throw, wine glass on the end table, I slip into a nice sleep after a great day.

## ‘DANNY’

Waking up, I’m totally determined that today is the day I’m going to take Claire out, even if it’s just for a cup of damn coffee. The task force is now involved and everyone is on pins and needles waiting for the next fire, victim, or call. Every time the siren goes off, we jump. Thank God I got a couple of days off, even though I went to the meeting last night.

Trying to get out of bed quietly, as not to disturb my pack, is useless. First Bambi then Dumbo lift their heads and immediately know breakfast is coming soon. With all the ruckus they make the little ones start barking, letting me know all three of them have to go out. Shit, so much for a quick shower. By the time I get the indoor pack out and fed then go out to the pole barn to take care of them, a few hours have passed. I grab my phone, pushing Marjorie’s number as I head upstairs to take a shower. Looking around, my pit bulls are curled up on the sectional while Archie, Cueball, and Marshmallow are spread out on my bed.

“Hello, neighbor, good morning or what... afternoon, maybe?”

“Hey, back achta. What are ya up today? Can you and Herb, maybe, if you have time to, watch the twins for a bit so I can make good on my offer to show Claire around? Maybe grab a coffee too.”

As we shoot the shit, my mind is going in so many directions. I shake my head, take a breath, and decide right then and there that today is going to be about my first date with Claire. We both deserve for me to give her my full

attention, so that's what I'm going to do. After Marjorie gives me her sister's number, she tells me to just drop the boys off on our way out. Suddenly, for some reason, I get really nervous as I punch in her digits. When she answers in that sweet, soft, husky voice of hers I smile wide.

"Hello."

"Hey, hi, Claire, it's Danny from next door."

For a second it seems like the line dropped. I even look at my phone then I hear her say hey back. Going for the gusto, I just start talking to her and ask if she is busy today. After we make plans and she knows how I arranged for her family to watch the kids, we decide on a time. I tell her I'll see her shortly and we hang up.

I feel so good just from hearing her voice and talking to Claire. Why, I don't know, as it's not like I haven't had any recent dates, just not ones I'd want a second date with. And if the mood was right, I could always grab a 'bunker bunny' or a 'hose hoe' down at the local tavern, where they hang out waiting for any firefighter to give them the time of day. Or as Paco always says, a ride on his hose. Damn, not a good image. And I'm not proud that I've hooked up with one or two, but didn't like how I felt after. It's been a while since I've been with a woman and I'm good with that. When the need arises, I take care of myself. I want more than the one-night stands, maybe it's my age or seeing my brothers settling down and starting to have families. Don't know why but lately it's hitting me, as every day goes by, I'm alone and lonely. Even some of the guys and gals at the station have been recently hooking up and finding their *'one.'* As happy as I am for them, there is a small part of me that is maybe just a little bit jealous, or better yet, envious.

Going about my routine of showering, shaving, and getting dressed, I spend some quality time with the dogs since Cueball and Marshmallow are still getting acquainted with my three. I'm not worried about Dumbo or Bambi; my concerns are Archie. The little bastard thinks he's a mastiff when he's just a small Jack Russell. He got taught a lesson early on from Marshmallow when he tried to bully Cueball. He got a much-

deserved nip on his ass, so he tucked tail, ran, and hid for a while, then slowly made his way back out watching everything and everyone. Time. It'll take some time, but from what I'm seeing they will all be fine.

With that thought, I'm still gonna put the two newbies in the guest bedroom when I leave so there are no issues. Checking my phone, I see a text from Cap giving me an update, which is not much of anything. Thank God at the moment everything is calm.

When the time is close, I give all my dogs inside and outside in the pole barn a few cookies, then lock up and make sure my alarms are on. I head past Claire's house to go pick up the flowers I ordered for her. Need to make a good impression, and my mother would literally kick my ass if I showed up with nothing. Got something planned for the twins too. Just hope I'm not too late to get everything. *Nothing like waiting 'til the last minute*, I think to myself.

The drive into town is uneventful, thank God, though long as shit. Seems everyone is out and about today. First, I hit the florist, Becca's Buds and Blooms. Since I've known Becca from school, I prepare myself for some major razing, as I don't think I've ever ordered flowers before. Well, yeah, the firehouse did a few times for Ash's wife. I recommended Becca's and according to Ash, his wife loved the arrangements.

"Hey, fire boy, kinda strange to see all your hotness in a flower shop. Who's the lucky girl who got you to not only order flowers but pick them up?"

Smiling her crazy, goofy smile my way, I just laugh. Becca is one of the reason's I gave thought to becoming a firefighter. When we were in high school, her car started on fire in the parking lot of our school and she was trapped. Watching the firefighters and EMTs working their asses off to save her stayed with me. She didn't get away without injuries though. Both of her legs had second, and even some third-degree burns. I don't think I've ever seen Becca in shorts since.

"What's up, flower girl? Everything going good?"

She gives me a small nod. Then we catch up for about five minutes before she turns, reaching into the refrigerator behind her, pulling out—holy shit—a gorgeous bouquet of flowers.

“Damn, flower girl, you outdid yourself this time. Thanks for this. I know it was last minute, so I appreciate it.”

She just smiles and goes to check me out. I give her an eyebrow lift at how inexpensive the bouquet is, but she just shrugs.

Using my credit card, I see a spot for a tip so I leave a generous tip for my friend. Once completed we say our goodbyes. I go to my next stop to see if what I have in mind is available for the twins. Seeing they have a bunch on the shelf, I pick two and head to pay for them. Finally, I hit the local Walmart for some bags to put the boys’ stuff in.

Then I again head back to the road where Claire and I both live as my excitement starts to build. I know women think they are the only ones who get excited for a first date, but shit, my hands are slightly damp, my heart’s pounding, and right now I could do without my cock being at half-mast as I try to talk him down. Boy better behave himself tonight or else. Don’t want to scare Claire off before getting a chance, for Christ’s sake. Though thinking about it, it’s been a while since the boy was let out to play, well, besides with my hand that is.

So, yeah, I’m buzzing with excitement for tonight. I’m just hoping it goes well since we’re all neighbors and it could get uncomfortable otherwise. So looking down to my crotch, I give my dick a lecture. And when I realize what I’m doing I laugh out loud. Not one person in my life would ever believe I was talking to my dick about behaving on a date. So yeah, shit, it’s definitely been a while.

## ‘CLAIRE’

Shit, I’m a frigging mess. Have no clue what to wear, as my bedroom shows my indecision with all my clothes spewed all over it. Doesn’t help me the boys are trying to help. Every outfit I put on they both scream, “Pretty, Momma, dat one.” Right now they are running around the house because I just told them they are going to Auntie Marjorie and Uncle Herb’s house for a sleepover. And on that thought, as excited and nervous as I am to go out with Danny, I could kill Marjorie. I don’t need pity dates. I’m sure that hot as fuck firefighter doesn’t need help attracting women, especially having to settle on a single momma with two young boys.

Since we are going to grab something to eat, I finally decide that jeans would be cool. So I put on a movie for the boys and locked all the doors. It took me forever in the shower as I shaved, exfoliated, and then let’s not talk about the time needed for conditioning my hair and crap. Haven’t done any of this kind of stuff in forever. I went through two razors just to shave my legs. Shame on me.

I check on the boys, who are sleeping, wrapped up in their favorite blanket and each other. Smiling, I go to my room to grab my favorite jeans, ’cause they’re worn and have some holes in the knees, and I pull them on. To dress it up a bit, I reach for my silky green blouse. It makes my eyes look wickedly green. Finally, I settle on a pair of Chucks high-tops in black. Checking myself out, don’t look too bad. Next up is my hair, which is a handful. I take out the hot rollers and fluff it out. Holy fuck, it looks like the nineties came back. Giggling, I grab a headband, messing with my mop of hair



until it looks better. Then putting a tad of mascara on along with some blush, I finish off with some flavored lip balm. I hate lipstick and gloss, so the balm gives me a bit of a shine and smells and even tastes good.

Grabbing my purse, I throw the lip balm in my little wristlet with my money and ID. Making sure I have my keys, I go to wait nervously and impatiently in my little living room where the twins are asleep. When I saw this tiny home, I busted out and bawled like a baby. I've looked at these many times but couldn't figure out how to come up with the money to purchase or build one. Shocked as shit when Marjorie ordered that we come out to visit them, I took some time off and came up for a long weekend. And, surprise, this is what was waiting for me and the twins.

My sister and brother-in-law had this specially built for us. The boys share a bedroom with bunk beds, though more often than not sleep together on the bottom bunk and I have my bedroom across on the other side. No one has to go up into a loft. There are two lofts, one is a semi-office for me and the other is storage. The kitchen is a dream, and the living room is large for a tiny home, probably because of the high ceilings. There's a full bathroom off the living room by the boys' room, and off my room is a small master en suite. My dream house come true. And outside, off to the side, is a garage for my car and the kids' bikes, with some room for whatever else needs to be stored out there. Herb told me not to worry about getting my own tractor to cut grass, he'll do it when he works on his own with his huge tractor. What a relief that is, as I hate doing that being kind of allergic to grass.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost fall off the small sectional when both boys knock into my knees on the couch. Looking down, they have on their goofy, little boy grins so I smile down at my two precious angels. Roan reaches up and touches my hair.

“Pretty.”

Then Lachlan jumps in not wanting to be outdone, which they've been doing since they were able to talk. He puts his

hand on my blouse then looks up at me with those eyes that tear my heart out.

“Momma, reely pretty.”

When first there’s a knock then the doorbell, I let out a small surprised yelp, which scares both boys who start to cry. At the same time my phone is pinging to let me know the doorbell camera sees someone. Shaking my head, I shut off the phone alarm, move the boys back, stand up, and pick up each boy, and then walk to the door. Taking in a deep breath and letting it out, I open the door.

Danny is standing there in worn jeans and a Henley with a firehouse hoodie on top. But that isn’t why my mouth drops open. It’s because of the flowers in his hands. Holy shit, he brought me flowers. I feel them before I can stop them. Tears. ’Cause haven’t had anyone bring me flowers since Shamus did when we first started dating, when he was home, and I told him we were pregnant.

Seeing me so upset, three things happen at the same time. Danny gently pushes me back inside, into a chair, and closes the door. He looks around and walks to the small island in the kitchen, placing the flowers down. Roan pats my face with a wet hand and Lachlan puts his head on my shoulder his hand on my other shoulder. When Danny grabs my hand and leads me to the sofa, we all kind of sit. Until he reaches and grabs first one boy then the other, putting them between us.

“Hey, darlin’, what’s wrong? Don’t ya like flowers? If not, throw those bitches away, I mean witches away, no worries.”

Hearing him brings a small smile to my face. Damn, he knew that swearing was a definite no in front of the boys. How do I explain why I’m so emotional?

“Uh oh, Mr. Danny said a bad word, gotta put money in the jar,” both boys say at the same time while squirming off the couch to sit back in front of the television. I look up to see only concern in Danny’s eyes.

“Come on, Claire, it’s okay. Don’t know your story but believe me, it can’t be that bad. You got two great kids, an

awesome sister and brother-in-law, and this kick-ass house to live in. What more can you ask for in this life?”

The boys’ heads turn immediately and they point first at Danny then the jar, both shaking their noggins. Oh shit, he’s going to be in trouble with the boys.

“I know Mr. Danny said two bad words, but it’s his first time here so can he get a pass? It’s up to you two guys.”

They look at each other, talking in their twin talk, before they both turn and nod. Then of course Lachlan has to have the final word.

“Mr. Danny, you have a bweak. Don’t let it happen again.”

Then they turn and start to watch their program as I try not to laugh at the look on Danny’s face. Knowing he’s trying so hard; I wipe my eyes and look up at him. God, he’s gorgeous. His dark hair is on the longer side and his honey-brown eyes are sparkling with concern. High cheekbones and sculptured jaw finish off his model looks.

“Sorry, Danny, don’t get out much. Thank you for these stunning flowers, they are beautiful. Let me put them in some water and then we can go drop the rugrats off and head out, if you want.”

Before I can stand, he holds on to my hand.

“Nope, not that easy. Flowers can wait. Two things first. What’s going through your head, Claire? I don’t want to step on any triggers and upset ya. Come on, darlin’, two shoulders, no waiting. Second, got something for the boys before we drop them at Marjorie’s.”

Giggling at his words, I squeeze his hand and sit back. Taking a deep breath, I try to get the words together, but figure might as well just tell him like it is.

“Okay, Danny, you asked for it, remember that. I’m a widow as my husband, Shamus, was killed in friendly fire in Fallujah, Iraq. I was four months pregnant, so Lachlan and Roan never got the chance to meet their father and know how much he wanted and loved them. They’ll never know what a great man Shamus was, and now they don’t have a male role

model to help them as they get older. I worry all the time about them. I was working two jobs, just to make ends meet, when Marjorie called to ask us to come out to visit. They had cooked up the plan about the tiny home and just wanted me closer so they could help with my boys. But they also know me and knew I wouldn't just move in with them, so they made it impossible for me to be able to say no. So here we are, that's my life in a nutshell. Now looking for some kind of work. You can run if you want because, to be honest, if I were you, I'd probably run like hell to get outta of Dodge. Just saying, dude."

Danny never lets go of my hands so when I am done, he sits there for a second, then pulls me into his chest, his arms around me, and gives me one of the best hugs I've ever had. He just holds me close while his hands move up and down my back, no funny business. Takes a minute but when I relax into him, I feel it...cared for. Something I've been missing for years. My arms slowly creep up his back and I hold on for dear life. Don't know how long we stay like this but when I feel his lips on first my head, then my forehead, I pull back as he gently pushes me away. He looks at the twins first, then leans down to me, quietly speaking this time.

"Claire, goddamn, had no idea. If you don't want to go out with me that's cool, darlin'. No hard feelings. Whatever you want I'll do, but just so you know, it wasn't Marjorie pushing me that has me here. It's how gorgeous you are, and I watched how good you are with your boys. I want to get to know you. Can't fight your pull. Want to feel and taste those lips and see what's under those clothes. I want to hear the noises you make when you're close and feel your body surround mine. But first, I want to take you for that coffee, if you're still interested. So are ya in?"

It's hard to catch my breath with all he just said. My body is feeling warm and thank God I have a padded bra on, so Danny doesn't see how hard my nipples are. And let's not talk about between my legs. He turned me on with just his words. Giving myself a little shake, I take a chance for once in my life.

“Yeah, Danny, let’s start with that coffee. And maybe if you add some chocolate bakery, you might get a taste of these lips you want so bad.”

His head jerks and when his eyes meet mine, he sees the smile on my face. Pulling me up, he walks us to the kitchen.

“Put those in some water, darlin’, gonna use your restroom then going to get the gifts for your boys before we leave.”

Watching him walk to the bathroom, a huge smile hits my face when he tries to adjust himself without me seeing it. This is going to be a fun time tonight, I’m sure. Something I’ve not had in a very long time.

As I’m putting the flowers in a vase, thankfully Marjorie left one in the cabinet, I see Danny come back in with two bags in his hands. One is dark blue the other is like a dark gray. He sits on the couch and calls the boys’ names. So engrossed in their program, they totally ignore him. When he whistles next, they jump and look his way. When their eyes hit on the bags they jump to their feet, running the short distance to him. Their excitement is so contagious that Danny is laughing by the time they are in front of him. I slowly make my way to the island and lean on it to watch what happens next.

“Okay, calm down, you rugrats. I have these two bags for you both. One for each. First, I have to ask you a question and no matter how you answer, you get the bag. Do you both understand?”

They both nod but of course Lachlan, the impatient one, grabs for a bag, which Danny pulls back, shaking his head. My boy stomps his foot but before I can say a word Danny lets go of the bag, gently putting his hand on Lachlan’s shoulder.

“Son, calm down. You will see in a minute what’s in the bag. Question first. Got it?”

Lachlan nods and moves to stand next to his twin.

“All right then, lil’ men, my question is this. Is it okay if I take your momma for coffee tonight, while you get to play at your auntie and uncle’s house?”

I'm beyond shocked, and it seems both boys are because they've turned to look at me. Roan being my intense boy is watching me, while Lachlan has his eyes on his brother. When Roan sees whatever he sees, he turns and they have a twin conversation. I can tell the longer it takes the more nervous Danny is becoming. The boys finally turn back to him and Roan steps up this time.

"Mr. Danny, Momma can go widd you if she wants to. Wike she awways tells us, she can't make us be good or bad, so Lachlan and me can't make her go or not go, I guess. Can we have the bags now, pease?"

I'm holding my sides, tears running down my face from laughing when Danny raises his face, shock all over it.

"Yeah, here you go, guys. Enjoy."

They each grab a bag and run to their blankets. Ripping the bags wide open, they yell and scream when they see the fire trucks inside. And on top of each truck is a toy dog statue. The boys go nuts. Watching them, I jump when Danny's sexy voice is next to my ear.

"So, Claire, do you want to go out with me? Seems the boys don't care and now that I know they're easily bribed, I'm feeling better about things."

All I can do is nod and laugh. *What a monumental way to start a first date*, I think to myself.

## DANNY'

Holy fuck, didn't think I'd get outta Claire's house. My cock was harder than a two-by-four and I had to go to the bathroom to take a minute to try and get myself under control. Didn't need one of the twins asking what the bulge was in my pants. That would just be my luck with those two.

So after dropping Roan and Lachlan off, and saying my hellos to Claire's family, we make our way out of there and on the road, finally. Now we're sitting in the small bakery in town, both with coffee in front of us, and Claire has a huge double-frosted chocolate brownie and I have a cinnamon roll. There's a lull in our conversation which we are filling with eating and drinking.

"So, what made you want to be a firefighter, Danny?"

"I was in the military after 9/11. My brother, cousin, best friend, and I all joined up. We each went in different branches. I was an Army Ranger, my brother and cousin were Navy SEALs, and my best friend became a Night Stalker. I did my time and, after a messed-up mission, I was discharged, but knew in my soul I still wanted to help people. I worked with the Rangers as a medic, so thought maybe firefighter/paramedic would work. I got my EMT certification then went on to become a firefighter and finally a paramedic. I love my job but felt like something was missing. Started to volunteer at the animal shelter again, and it opened my eyes. How the process is so emotionless. How overcrowded those places are. Do you have any idea how many animals are put down in just a month's time? So I started to foster and then

tried to help find homes for them. Then it just took over. Lately, at every fire we go to, there are assholes who generally leave their animals or ‘pets’ in the burning home or chained up in the yard with no water or food. All the dogs and cats currently in my pack I’ve personally rescued from our calls. Figured this is also my calling. I’m a firefighter who also tries to rescue the unwanted fur babies in the world.”

Knowing I am rambling, I take a minute to let everything I’ve said sink in. If we are going to go anywhere, Claire has to know I’m not going to get rid of my pack. Feeling her hand, I look down to see she is holding both of my hands. Glancing her way, I’m struck by her as she slowly smiles my way.

“Danny, you’re such a good guy, with a heart of gold. Don’t ever change for anyone. And no worries, I won’t tell anyone your secret. I want to get to know your, what do you call them, your pack better. The three in your house are lovers, especially lil’ Archie. I know this sounds bad, but before the boys come over, can we try to see if the two pit bulls are okay with my little guys? I know I sound like everyone else, but they are so big and strong. Yeah, they were like teddy bears with me, but you’ve seen my boys, they’re batshit crazy. And just so you know, I would never try to change you. You be you always, like I’ll be me. Only way this, whatever it is, will work.”

Not believing her words and how she was able to see through what I was trying to say and do, without thinking, I lean over the table. I grab her face, giving her a second or two to pull away, which she doesn’t. Then I lightly kiss her lips once, twice, and on the third time I nibble on that full bottom lip. She sighs and I know this could get all kinds of crazy just by the pull I feel when I’m with her. But fuck, we’re in the town bakery and I don’t need the owner, Suzy, on my ass for putting on a show. So, after another quick kiss on her soft lips, I pull back and sit back down in my chair.

Looking at Claire, she has a shocked look on her face as her fingers are touching her lips. I grin her way and wait to see her reaction. Takes a minute or two, but she slowly smiles my



way before her eyes drop and her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink.

After that, we talk about everything and anything. Share our favorite colors, movies, and places we've visited. She asks me about prior relationships, and I want to be totally honest. Tell her that for a while it was stupid hookups, mostly locally. Tell her we would probably bump into a few and apologized ahead of time. Also explain that recently I've been looking for something more. When she tells me she's not dated since her husband passed away, I'm shocked and blown away. How the hell can a woman who's kind and beautiful like Claire not be going out or having men knocking her door down?

"Hey, Claire, look at me. No need to feel shy 'cause whatever you're thinking I've already thought about it. This right here is the best thing that's happened to me besides my job and the pack of misfits in a very long damn time. Those kisses are just the beginning, sweet thing. Now, you begged me for chocolate so ya better eat that monstrous brownie. I'm gonna hold you to that kiss you promised, darlin'. And just sayin', that kiss will not be in public so when I want to continue to taste you, I can, without eyes watching us."

Hearing her giggle is the best sound ever. I reach for my coffee as she lifts the brownie and takes a bite, her eyes on me. The moan that follows almost has me losing it in my jeans, for Christ's sake. Her eyes briefly close and I imagine that's how she'd look when she's coming or wrapping those full lips around my cock. Goddamn, if watching her eat a brownie has me this worked up, she'll probably kill me if and when we take this further.

Knowing what she's doing, I watch as Claire has fun teasing me. I sit back in my chair and enjoy the show 'cause I get the feeling, just by her innocent actions, this is new behavior for her. She's cute as a button, sexy as hell, and I'm taking it all in. *Putting it in my memory bank because, darlin', paybacks are a bitch.* When I have my mouth on her clit, I'll remind her of all this innocent teasing.

As we continue to chill and get to know each other, with a few innuendos being thrown back and forth, for the first time

in a long time I feel... shit, don't even know the word. Like whatever was missing is now right here, which is just asinine. I just met this woman, don't know her from Jack, but—shit—feels like we've been together for years. Reaching out, I grab her hand, just wanting the contact, and she immediately curls her fingers around mine. This feels good, really good.

\* \* \*

DRIVING BACK TO MY PLACE, I can feel Claire's anxiety the closer we get. Pulling her hand over, placing it on my thigh, I glance at her then back at the road.

“Darlin’, nothing’s going to happen that you don’t want. Relax, we’re getting to know each other, that’s all. Maybe we’ll make out on my couch like teenagers or possibly watch a movie or just keep talking. Don’t stress out, beautiful.”

“I know, Danny, but this right here is new to me. I don’t mean to bring him up, but Shamus was the only man I’ve ever been with, and we were together since early on in high school. He was the best, but like me, he was just a kid. I’ve never felt like this before, like a live wire full of electricity is running through my body. I’m confused as to why you and why now. Second-guessing everything. And if you’re looking for a quick one-night stand then, Danny, please just drop me off at my house. I’m not like that, not that there is anything wrong with it—I’m not judging—it’s just not me, that’s all. Crap, I’m babbling again, sorry.”

“Claire, it’s okay and never feel bad for talking about your man Shamus. He was your husband and the father of your two little guys. You need to talk about him, not only for yourself but for your kids. They need to hear about their father. Find some pictures and put them up around your house so the boys know what he looked like and can relate when he comes up in conversation. You can even find a place that will somehow, don’t know how the fuck they do it, but they can put a picture of the twins and one of Shamus and combine them. Might make it easier for the boys seeing themselves with their dad. You can tell them it was superimposed, but you wanted one

special picture of them with their daddy. We've seen people involved in fires who lose someone and act like it's no big deal, but goddamn, it is. The only way we keep those we've lost alive is by talking about them and keeping their memory alive."

She grabs my hand but doesn't say a word. Fuck, hope I didn't overstep and go too far with my preaching. It's just, when I was in the Army Rangers, we lost a couple of good guys and there's a tattoo on my ribs honoring them, so I never forget the ultimate sacrifice they gave. As I pull up the driveway to our homes, I have to ask her.

"My place or yours? No hard feelings either way, Claire. I've had a blast so far and if this is it, that's totally okay. No pressure at all. We are going to take this slow either way, and tomorrow's another day."

I wait for her to reply as she's hanging on to my hand with a death grip.

"Danny, I'd like to go to your house. Do you mind if I check in with Marjorie to see how my lil' monsters are doing? Won't take but a minute or so."

"For sure, go ahead, if you're still on the phone when we get to my house, I'll start letting the dogs out of their kennels and checking waters. Just take your time, darlin'."

When I pull up, I can hear her talking but want to give her some privacy, so I leave the car running and head off to the pole barn with a bounce in my step. I want this with Claire, this is what's been missing. A connection with a woman not solely based on sex. But because of what she's told me, my mind is confused on how to proceed. I enjoy her company and her boys are a riot. Don't want to do anything to upset her or make her feel uncomfortable. Guess I'll just take it as it comes, one step at a time.

No pun intended, and as I walk to my pole barn hearing all the dogs barking in excitement, I'm smiling wide for the first time in a long time.



## ‘CLAIRE’

“Rie, I’m scared shitless. Haven’t been in this predicament ever, what do I do? Yeah, before you say it, of course he’s hot and I do like him, but let’s face it, I’ve only known him—for what—a whole two days, for God’s sake. Let’s talk about this whole scenario being crazy, Marjorie. What? Of course he turns me on, he could turn on a dead woman’s corpse. Don’t you have eyes, dear sister, can’t you see all that is Danny or are you that old and feeble already? Ha ha. Does Herb know that’s how you feel about your neighbor? No worries, my lips are sealed. Well, as long as the boys are okay. I’ll be at Danny’s and, no, don’t check up on us, please. Try and remember I’m a grown-ass woman with two kids I’m raising on my own. Thank you, sissy, for that. I’ll see you tomorrow first thing when I come to get the lil’ monsters. You’re the best, Rie, love you.”

As I get out of the car, my nerves are all over the place. Not sure what’s gonna happen but my body is ready for sure. I can feel the wet between my legs from all the flirting going on over coffee, and every time Danny touches me my pulse goes through the roof. God, can’t imagine how I’ll feel if his hands are on my naked skin instead of just holding my hand. For a second, I feel all kinds of guilty and think of Shamus and what we briefly had together.

Heading toward the pole barn, I hear all kinds of barking and howling with some laughter in between. I quietly open the door and am totally shocked at what I see. Danny has all the dogs in the large open area and is spraying a hose for them to run through or drink from, I’m guessing. All of them are in

some form playing along, even the old lab, think his name is Duke, and the tiny one in her own wheelchair for dogs. I lean against the door and just watch as Danny's in his glory. After about five minutes, he turns the hose off and rolls it up. Then he grabs some towels and starts wiping the dogs down, while giving them kisses and talking to each one as he goes about lovin' on each and every one, especially the little girl on wheels and the old lab. When he has them dried off a bit, he turns, walking toward the small kitchenette off to the one side. All the water bowls are there, and he starts to wash them out, so I walk that way to give him a hand. Danny must have heard something because he turns around, and the smile he gives me has me misstep and I almost face-planted, but thank God, at the last minute I catch my balance.

Grabbing the bowls that are clean, I put them back in the pens and get the bottle of distilled water, filling them up. The dogs are still loose, walking around or lying on their beds, watching the two of us. We take our time, and I can tell this is something Danny does every night if he's not on duty. The dogs eat it up and even the cats come out of hiding to get some scratches. Once water is filled then it's goodie time. What a crazy time, even though they have some goofiness to the chaos. Once he secures them in their pens and tells them goodnight, he waits another five minutes or so before lights out, nightlights go on and he sets the alarm before we leave.

Holding hands, we walk to his house, which now has five dogs, so they all go out for their last pee call and then get their treats. Danny pulls me down onto his sectional, holding me close to his side. As we sit, his hands are running up and down my arm and side, which brings goosebumps to the surface. He lifts my chin and slowly brings his mouth to mine. When his lips touch mine it's like fireworks going off, and as stupid and crazy as it sounds, that's what I feel like. He nibbles, licks, and kisses my lips until I want, no, crave more. When his tongue touches my lower lip, I slowly open my mouth, and damn, the real kissing starts. Danny devours me with his lips, tongue, teeth, and even his breath. I feel overwhelmed in a very awesome way.

When he gently pushes me down onto the sectional so I'm lying on it, he covers me instantly with his hard body, his mouth never leaving mine. Feeling all kinds of out of sorts as this is very new to me, Danny takes his time, almost like he's trying to memorize what I like and don't like. My hands waste no time pulling his shirt out and going to his back, so I can feel all those sinewy muscles running up and down his back. God, this feels so good. I think I know exactly where this is going when Danny's hand softly brushes against my breast, when suddenly, instead of Danny I see my dead husband and I gasp in shock.

Danny slowly leans up, takes one look at my face, inhales a deep breath, and then another before he sits up, pulling me up with him. I'm so mortified and embarrassed. Seeing Shamus at this particular moment has me freaking out. I go to stand, thinking it's best I leave, but Danny won't let go of my hand.

"Sit down, Claire, it's okay, really. I get it, even though it's been awhile, this is the first time you've been physical with someone, and yeah, got to imagine it would be difficult. Come on, stay, let's watch something ridiculous on television. What wouldn't you ever watch?"

I know what he's doing and I like him even more for it. How it's possible someone like Danny is single, I thank all the dumbass women out here in the country. So I pick the one thing I kind of guess guys hate.

"Reality television."

"Oh shit, damn, felt that arrow right to the heart. What did I do to you, Claire, for you to sink so low?"

As we laugh, I thank my lucky stars he understands and is patient. I'm so totally into him and want what he's offering, but something is holding me back. That tells me I'm not ready, and I figure if he can't wait then he's not the one I need to be with.

"What's going on in that head of yours? Sit back and relax. Want something to drink? I got water, pop, beer, and wine—both red and white."

While Danny goes to get us some drinks and snacks, I lean back and take in a deep breath. I look out his back sliders into the dark outside, enjoying the complete nighttime serenity.

“Oh, Danny, forgot to tell you that I have a job if I want it. Rie was up to her old ways, so just have to figure what hours I can work. It’s pretty flexible.”

“Yeah, darlin’, what, something in town? Will it work with the boys’ daycare or will your sister and brother-in-law watch them? Are you looking to find a sitter? Could ask around the firehouse for you.”

“Well, I found out today that Marjorie has been working at the humane society for a while now. And she apparently has some pull because I have a job if I want one. What do you think?”

Hearing a crash behind me, I turn to see Danny staring at me with something dark radiating off him. Before I can ask him what’s wrong, he walks toward me with fire in his eyes.

“Claire, no, don’t take the job there. Fuck, didn’t know Marjorie was back at it, thought with you relocating here that she had given it up. Son of a bitch.”

Watching him have a mini meltdown for no apparent reason, I get up, ready to leave. I don’t need this kind of crap in my life, especially with my boys. When I go to walk around Danny, he pulls me close, his head resting on top of mine.

“Shit, I’m so sorry, Claire. I got no right to tell you what to do. We just found something out at the meeting last night and what you just told me kind of freaked me out, that’s all. You have to do what’s best for you and your family. Just promise me, no matter what, you’ll always be careful and don’t let your guard down. Promise.”

Being this close to him I can almost feel the desperation rolling off of him. What the hell is going on? Before I can even get the words out, Danny’s leaned down and his mouth is devouring me. And I let him. For right now, just going to enjoy it. Tomorrow may shed a different light on our situation, but I enjoy being in his arms, kissing him with all I have. So



that's what I do, even when we end back down on the sectional, and, man, do I enjoy the make-out session. Well, until suddenly we have five dogs surrounding us, which has both of us laughing out loud. Dumbo and Bambi jump on either side of us, licking our faces, as Archie, Cueball, and Marshmallow play down by our feet. Talk about settling in and being comfortable.



## ‘DANNY’

*Holy shit, that didn't just happen. I've never experienced such an intense connection with a woman without actually having full-blown sex. Well, as I think that, what we just did was pretty close to getting to some form of sex, but we were rudely interrupted by a bunch of dogs. I was loving the feel of Claire's hands running all over me. It's hard to believe she's not been with anyone since her husband. She's very responsive, and damn, she blows my mind. Then all hell broke loose when the dogs got involved.*

Now that everyone is settled back down on their beds with chew bones, when Claire's hand touches my waistband, I grab her hands, holding them off to the side.

“Darlin’, as much as I want to have my mouth on every part of you, while my tongue gets the ultimate pleasure of tasting you from your pretty pink lips, to those full as fuck tits, to your core where I can’t wait to bury my face, I’m thinking you might need a little bit more time before we go there.”

Watching Claire actually fan herself; I give up and laugh. She cracks me up and I mean that in a good way.

“Damn, Danny, if you didn’t want my hands all over that luscious body of yours then you could have chosen your words better. I’m burning up, and now you tell me you’re just gonna sit there and watch me burn?”

Knowing she’s playing me with her words, I just smirk her way. Damn, I want that hot body of hers, but I also want to get to know her and the twins. I don’t feel alone when I’m with

her and I look forward to when we'll be together again. In all that my job brings shit into my life, Claire brightens each day and helps to clear the rubble away. Feeling her glare, I give in a little bit.

“Come here, darlin’, let’s make out and get handsy like we’re horny teenagers again.”

I barely get the words out and Claire is literally jumping on me, not to make out but to try and tickle me. Of course she finds the spot that has me laughing like a hyena, for Christ’s sake. As we goof around on the sectional, the dogs take turns coming by to make sure we’re both still breathing. When I’ve had enough, I pin Claire down, looking into her eyes before I crush my lips on hers.

Immediately the burn starts and I know if this continues, I won’t be able to stop it before we combust. We have such chemistry together. Her warm hands are running up and down my back under my shirt and she drags her nails down every once in a while. *Damn, that feels so good*, I think as a moan escapes my lips.

“Damn, Claire, you temptress. One more kiss then it’s off with you before I lose my chivalry and turn into the scoundrel I am wanting to be, and bury myself deep into your tight wet warmth.”

Feeling her giggle against my lips has me wanting to make her keep doing that. Every new thing about her I like, and while it’s great, every once in a while I get freaked out. I always look for the bad in the good, just the man I am from what I’ve seen in this world of ours. Kind of prepares me before I crash and burn, so to speak. Feeling her hands squeezing my ass cheeks, it’s time to put a stop to this for now.

“Come on, darlin’, let’s get you home. I’ll drive you down and make sure everything is status quo. Claire, hey listen, sexy, and trust me if you keep pushing me, this is not going to go like you want it to. I’m doing my very best here, help me out, will you? Let me put Marshmallow and Cueball into the bathroom then we can go.”

I know at this point she might be upset with me trying to do what's right for once in my love life. I want to fuck her so bad it hurts, but don't want it to be a one and done. For too many reasons, but the main one is those two boys. They don't need me in one minute, out the next. Got no idea where this is going but after seeing the lengths Ash is going to for his wife, I want that kind of relationship.

Making my way back to the great room, Claire is giving love to Dumbo and Bambi while Archie is sitting next to her licking her face, making her laugh. When she looks up, she gives me a smile that lightens up the whole room. Thank God she gets it. By the time we leave, the dogs have settled down and the drive to her tiny home is not even four minutes.

“No, Danny, you don't have to get out, I'm good. Hardly anyone even knows this house exists, let alone that the boys and I live here. And my sister and you have never had any problems, so all should be good.”

“Don't matter, darlin', I'll walk you to the door and check it before you go in. That's who I am, Claire. I couldn't give a rat's ass if the area is safe, we have an arsonist out there and no one knows who it is. Gotta be careful. So come on, let's get you inside.”

Walking, she grabs my hand and I clasp on to hers. Not sure I've ever held a woman's hand outside of sex. Well, I'm thinking a lot of new things are coming my way with Claire, Roan, and Lachlan entering my life.

\* \* \*

MUCH LATER THAT NIGHT, after another heated make-out session with Claire, I finally make it home. Got all the animals taken care of, and now I'm lying in bed, my hand wrapped around my cock, my thoughts consumed with all that is her. Damn, it doesn't take but a few strokes and it's a minute or two minutes before my balls draw up and I let loose all over my stomach. The concept of trying to be a good guy is going to really wear me down.

I get up, clean myself off, then head down to grab a water. Everyone is quiet so I make my way back to my loft bed, lie down, and am just about ready to fall asleep, finally, when I hear the phone alert go off that is a direct feed from the firehouse. I'm reaching for it before it even rings.

“Lo.”

“Danny, it's Nova, get your ass to the firehouse now. We got another one, but whoever is escalating. We'll meet you there.”

Before I can even agree, he disconnects. Must be bad for Nova to be so short and not give any information. So again, I get my ass out of my bed and get dressed. Then I lock up the two new dogs with water, beds, and a few cookies in the spare room, and head back to town to find out what this sick fucker did now.



## 'DANNY'

What a goddamn motherfucking mess. The bastard took his time this round and, if I'm taking a guess, had some sick-ass fun baiting not only the dogs but the woman he tortured then killed. She was younger than the others and from the abuse, she must have tried everything to buy her freedom. And, of course, the asshole took and took but then tortured, killed, and chained her to a bed, burning her with the dogs.

I'm at the crime scene and something just doesn't feel right to me. Slowly I look around, not sure what the hell I'm feeling or even looking for, but my gut is screaming at me and I've learned to listen, so I do and continue to search for something to hit me in the goddamn face. Meanwhile, Nova, Till, and Paco are on the outside trying to see how the perp was able to not only bypass the fence and chains, but carry the dogs and woman in here without being seen. Again, something is right at the edge of my mind, but not for the love of God am I able to grasp whatever it is.

"Don't push it, Mo, it'll come. Keep moving and looking for it, something will eventually jump out at you, just have to have some patience, brother."

Taking in Styx's words I continue at it, walking through the area slowly and methodically. Fuck, it's right there in front of me, why can't I see it? Hearing the others around me going through the crime scene, I turn to go back and then I see it. Underneath the woman's body, peeking out from under her left shoulder is something I can't make out. Pulling some gloves out of my pocket, I move closer. Then I see the brutality this



poor soul had to endure. This fucker is a sick bastard but need to keep my attention on what caught my eye.

“Styx, Till, give me a hand. Think there’s something under her. Need some help to move her if Doc Truman says it’s okay. We need to be careful though, don’t want to mess up the evidence. Hey, Paco, can you get some shots of her before we shift her? Doc, we good to look under her?”

Doc Truman is in his late fifties. He served in the Marines so he’s no stranger to death. He looks at me with solemn eyes, nodding, not saying a word though.

With the help of everyone, we as gently as possible lift her body slightly up, so I can reach under and grab what appears to be a large fireproof document bag, filled with, I’m thinking, maybe papers. By this time Nova is standing directly behind me, as is my Cap. Once I have it out, I reach behind me, handing it off to Nova, who moves right to what’s left of a table off to the side.

As I slowly approach I hear the deep breaths and inhales. Fuck, now what? We need to catch this jagoff sooner rather than later. Spread across the table are pictures of women and dogs in different stages of abuse. Some look to be of the victims we’ve already found, while others look to still be alive. Fuck, this asshole is so gone in the head it’s not even funny. Looks like he’s perfecting being a psychopath too.

“All right, this shows at least three other victims with, shit, at least six or seven more dogs. Try to get some identification on these women in the photos. Check missing persons, runaways, or whatever. Someone has to be looking for them.”

Nova walks away after he’s given his orders. Cap stays with me and when the others are gone, he motions for me to follow him.

“Yeah, Cap, what’s up?”

“Danny, something isn’t right about this one. The abuse is three times that of the other victims and the dogs look to be someone’s pets, not fighters or shelter dogs. Either this asshole has escalated overnight, or we have a copycat. The photos left

behind is another shift from the others. And why would this psycho leave behind clues, unless the plan is to separate our forces so we become weaker in our efforts. Might want to share with Nova. I'm gonna head back to the firehouse for now. Be careful and stay on your toes, son. Eyes open at all times."

He turns and leaves. I walk over to Nova, and when he has a minute, I explain what my captain had to say. To my surprise, Nova agrees and thinks this isn't the same person. One thing is for certain, in this latest crime the person who did this has some serious mental issues for sure.

Till calls us over to the scene to share that the three dogs have chips and from what he can see they are from the local humane society. That has my heart just about jump out of my chest and drop on the goddamn floor, since Claire accepted a job at that shelter just this morning. Son of a bitch, how am I going to be able to keep her safe without seeming like a controlling asshole?

\* \* \*

IT TOOK hours for us to clear the crime scene before the coroner was able to pick up the body. We should have some answers by tomorrow when the autopsy has been completed. He told us he put it on the top of the list. I'm beyond tired and frustrated, as everyone else is.

Taking Styx's advice, I walk to the abandoned building and it hits me after the second time. That fucker didn't kill her here. No evidence of her being held or beaten at this location. So, either it is a copycat or this person is starting to morph into an even sicker killer than before.

By the time we get back and clean everything up, I'm starving and in a horrible mood. I want to spend more time with Claire, but these shifts are killing me. Between the firehouse, Nova up my ass, and all the crap I have going on at my house, I've barely got the energy to take care of what I have to at home. And for Claire, she's got the twins, still trying

to get everything settled since her move, and now starting a new job. We're going to have to really work at making some quality time so we can continue on getting to know each other, because I really like her. Not only because she's gorgeous, which she is, but also she's a genuine good human being with a heart of gold. She makes me laugh, and she sees the good in others and life in general. And she's not only a widow but a single mom of two little boys. Even after everything she's gone through, she still manages to find positive in her life.

There's so much more I want to know about her, like the little things: her favorite color, food, and season. Stupid shit like that, and that shocks me since usually when I'm with a woman I couldn't give a rat's ass about her favorite anything, except maybe position. And not tryin' to be an asshole, but my old man was right when he preached to me that as you get older your thoughts on life change, and you see what's truly important. I can't get Claire out of my head, which says a ton about her and the impression she's made so far. Not to mention I'm walking around with a semi-hard-on since I last saw her in person, and have been using my hand multiple times a day to pictures in my head of her beautiful face, firm tits, and tight round ass.

Damn, just that thought and I feel my cock starting to lengthen and get hard. Just what I need to happen, being in this firehouse with these goofs, having a hard cock. Taking a moment to breathe, I talk my dick down before anyone in the station notices.



## ‘CLAIRE’

Hanging up the phone, I lean back on the couch with a huge smile on my face. Dang it, not sure how it happened since we’ve not even seen a lot of each other, but I’m hooked on my hot firefighter neighbor. We’ve been texting since that first date and when we do see each other in passing, Danny does not spare the PDA. He’s always touching or kissing me. I wasn’t totally comfortable at first because I think there was some guilt and feelings of being unfaithful to my dead husband. Then there is Roan and Lachlan, my boys. First, they have no recollection of their daddy, and then, Mommy is bringing another man home. At the tender age they are, I don’t want to put them under any more emotional pressures.

Personally, I fight with myself each and every time. I try to imagine if I was the one who died. What would Shamus do? I already know what he’d do. No matter how much he loved me, my husband would eventually move on. And I pray he’d also want me to be happy. So when Danny’s hands are on me or he’s kissing me, I feel things I didn’t feel with Shamus and, according to Rie, that’s a good thing. My dear sister told me under no circumstances to compare the two men when it comes to ‘getting busy,’ her words, goof that she is.

Pulling my gym shoes on, I head out the door to the back of the house where Herb has the twins helping him muck out the donkeys’, ponies’, and horses’ stalls. I’m not sure how much my boys help, they probably make the job much harder, but my brother-in-law loves having them around. Best thing I’ve ever done is take Rie and Herb up on their generous offer and relocating my boys and myself here.

The hair on the back of my neck goes up as a shiver runs down my spine. Turning in a full circle, I look in all directions but don't see a thing. Why do I have this feeling again? It's happening more regularly, but each time I don't see anyone around. Maybe I just need to get used to living in the country. Hearing the boys laughing, I quickly make my way to the barn door, swinging it open. And what I see? Oh Dear God, are you kidding me? Roan and Lachlan are having a turd fight, flinging donkey and horse crap at each other and cracking up. Even Herb has some poop on his jeans and the bottom of his shirt. Christ Almighty, what is it with boys?

Trying to be quiet so they don't turn around and fling that shit at me, I lean against the beam, watching the two of them having fun. It's been a while since I've been able to see them having such a good time without my own stress and pressures holding them back. Not sure who sees me first, but Lachlan starts running toward me, his hands out wildly, going from side to side, hands coated in manure. Oh no, no way, my little man. And it's on, as I run and both Lachlan and Roan try to catch me. Herb stops to watch and is cracking up at our antics. Yeah, Rie was right. This right here is what life is truly about. I hope it continues to get better each and every day. And now I finally found a job, maybe our lives can get back to normal. Boys are with Rie and Herb three days a week since the daycare in town is able to fit the twins in twice a week. Gives them some kid interaction besides each other. And I'll get some quality time, being able to have adult conversation. *Damn, I can't wait*, I think to myself as I run out the barn doors, laughing hysterically with two little boys covered in shit chasing after me.

\* \* \*

WHAT A DAY. When the stalls had been mucked, the boys went under the outside shower to get the manure off of them. Then they chased the donkeys around for a while until they got bored, so Uncle Herb took turns giving them rides on his four-wheeler. Lachlan was a bit scared at first but all I could hear from Roan was "go faster, go faster." Marjorie came down

with some sandwiches she bought in town, so we had an impromptu picnic at our table in the yard. Then the boys went to play on the swings while us adults talked and caught up.

Marjorie said she talked to her friend, Jean, at the shelter about my thoughts on the guy in the back being weird. They both were going to keep an eye out and see if he does anything out of the ordinary. So far he's been an exemplary employee, per Jean. Time will tell. All I've done so far is clean kennels and mop floors. "Learning from the bottom up," Jean told me laughingly. I get it and appreciate being treated like all the other employees and not like Rie's kid sister. And the animals, oh my God, I've picked out at least six dogs and ten cats I want to adopt and bring to their forever home.

Herb laughed out loud when I brought up building a pole barn for extra space. He shook his head and said to talk to Danny first, because it's a ton of work and upkeep the more animals you have. This coming from someone who bought two boys, under the age of five, each a pony to kind of bribe them so I wouldn't decide to move away. *Like that would ever come*, drops into my thoughts. I'd have to be nuts to leave this gorgeous home and the setup with my family, who gives me all the help I need. Not to mention whatever Danny and I have going on.

Speaking of him, tonight we are finally planning on eating together and enjoying each other's company, his words not mine. Both boys are out of the tub, in their jammies, with the television on the cartoon channel, as they drive their fire trucks all over the house. Those trucks are their favorite toys at the moment. All they talk about is how they want to be like Mr. Danny when they grow up and fight fires. *A good male role model for them*, my heart thinks as my mind says, *don't get ahead of yourself*. My God, we've not even slept together yet. He seems to be going slow, well actually, I've seen snails move faster but maybe that's how he is. I know Shamus was patient, until he wasn't.

I talk to my big sister and as Rie tells me, each man is different. I'm finding that out the longer Danny and I spend time together and get to know each other. Especially since we

didn't grow up together or go to the same school. It's fun and exciting to share things together as the sexual tension continues to build. Sometimes I get angry at him because I'm ready to jump his bones. He's moving so slow, like the tortoise instead of like the hare. It has been a long time for me since a man has put his hands on me or I was intimate with one. Just guessing, but don't think Danny has had that same problem.

Checking the time, I've got about forty-five minutes before my sister shows up to babysit the boys. I'm going up to Danny's house since we didn't make plans due to his schedule. I'm going to try and surprise him by helping out a bit. Thought if I could get there when he was still at work, maybe I can start to give him a hand with his fur babies. I know lately his job has been emotionally draining, especially with all the fires and the unsolved murders. Everyone is on pins and needles. I pray they find the lunatic sooner rather than later, for all of our sakes. I make sure the twins are okay before I take a few minutes to put some light makeup on and finish dressing after my shower earlier. Figure since I'm going to be cleaning and playing with the fur babies in the pole barn, might as well be comfortable, so going with some leggings and an oversize sweater that tends to fall off one of my shoulders. Underneath I put on a purple camisole and look in the mirror. Not bad.

By the time Marjorie arrives I'm ready, so I grab the container of cookies I made earlier as the boys begged, pleaded, and cried for me not to give Mr. Danny all of 'their' special cookies. My sister stops them in their tracks when she pulls out a bag of her homemade brownies. When I leave both Lachlan and Roan are jumping up and down like crazies, screaming for brownies. *To be so young and innocent*, I think to myself. As I get in my car, I know I could walk to his house but this is quicker so I'll have more time to help him with his chores. Hopefully he won't mind.





## ‘DANNY’

Finally driving home, I’m beyond exhausted. It felt like this shift would never end. I’m trying to get some much-needed time off because I’m feeling burned out, no pun intended. I talked to Cap about it and he’s looking to see when a good time would be. We’ve been so busy lately with calls, then add the task force shit into it, and my head actually aches at times. And we’ve got nothing on our serial killer. That last victim was definitely brought to the scene already dead, but the animals—though beaten within an inch of their lives—were still breathing. That turns my stomach and makes me want to do to that asshole the same exact thing. Burn his ass alive.

This case is bringing back some not so good memories of my Army Ranger days. Especially when I became a medic and was thrown into the pit of what human beings can actually do to other people and animals. Those days, weeks, months, and years in the service, as much as I felt good about serving my country, altered the way I think about a lot of things. It opened my eyes to the dark side of the world, and at times scared the living shit out of me. Not to mention when our last mission pops into my head. That is one that continues to haunt me now and then.

Usually, after a really hard fire, car accident, or EMT call I’ll go home and that night or the next will have the same recurring nightmare about when I was in the service and the one mission that went way off course because of one selfish jagoff. I’ll never be able to forgive myself for not being able to save everyone. Nova always tells me I’m not God and, since I’m not, will never be able to rescue every single victim out

there. I hear his words and he's right, but that doesn't change the deep-down feelings in my heart.

I'm also on edge because though Claire and I are getting to know each other better and are able to spend snippets of time together, it isn't enough for me. Want more, even though I get that she needs time to get used to having a man in her life again. Fuck, all I can do is think about her and go over in my head how I want to kiss, touch, taste, and fuck her. That kind of wanting hurts so bad. My dick is almost raw from all of the hand jobs I've been giving myself to take the edge and pressure off. Hoping after getting my chores done, and getting some much-needed sleep, I'll be able to see her for more than a few minutes or an hour or two here and there. I'm happy though that she seems to be enjoying her new job. She's texted me a few of the animals she wants to adopt, but I told her as much as I get it, she needs to be more settled before bringing in a bunch of fur babies. Especially since she leans toward the older or disabled animals, which require so much more care.

Rolling down my road, I see Herb outside with the boys. Roan sees my truck and waves while Lachlan starts to jump up and down, screaming his little head off. I would love to stop and spend some time with the twins but, damn, I'm so tired and have probably about a couple of hours of shit to do before I can drop on my bed and pass out. The animals in the pole barn need to be turned out and their runs washed down, along with feeding them for today and fresh water. Also, they need playtime and fresh air since I've been pressed for time and can only ask Herb and Marjorie for so much of their help. When I head into the house the five in there will need some food, playtime before I start on the house. Haven't had a frigging moment to clean up or touch my laundry. Then there's the grocery shopping that needs to be done. By the time I'm done with all of this, I'll probably get a couple of hours of sleep and, before I know it, my forty-eight off will fly by. Damn, sometimes I wonder about the choices I've made in my life. Don't regret any of my fur babies but, fuck, it's time-consuming.

Finally, I see the last curve before my property in front of me. Never do I get tired of seeing its perfection. Especially

today as Claire's car is parked off to the side. I'm surprised as we didn't plan anything because I wasn't sure what time I'd be rolling in. Stopping and putting my truck in park, I open my door to the sounds of dogs barking. I glance around and my eyes stop on the outside playpens, where all the dogs are running around. Hmm, what's she been up to? When I open the door to the pole barn it smells fresh and clean. All the pens are spotless, food bowls down, and water troughs filled with clean water. The cats are all by the playpen eating goodies. No sign of Claire though.

Walking around the side, I greet each dog with a few long pets and a small crunchy before I head to the house. From the backyard I hear what I'm assuming is my inside pack barking and having fun. Before I can even open the door, it flies open and Claire is there disheveled and looking mighty pissed off.

"Hey, what are you doing home? Thought I'd have at least another thirty or so minutes. Didn't you stop by Marjorie and Herb's when the boys waved you down? Oh, Danny, did you just drive by? Dang it, give me a second."

Then she turns and walks away, so I follow her. Fuck, what the hell is going on? Though I'm not complaining she's here for me. My house is beyond clean, it looks to be scrubbed from top to bottom. The floors are shining and the back sliders are open, letting in some fresh air. My eyes find Claire, who has her phone out, waiting for someone to answer, I'm guessing.

"Hey, Herb, yeah, I figured. Put them on 'kay? Hey, guys, no, quit crying, you did good. No, Mr. Danny is not mad at either of you. I know he didn't stop but, and don't tell him I told you, but he had a belly ache and had to rush to get home and use the bathroom. What? Lachlan don't use that word. Where are you hearing that at? We don't say *'take a shit,'* got it, little man? Hey, watch your mouth. And, Roan, it's not funny. No, I don't know and I'm not asking him if his poops were runny or not. Come on, guys, just hang out with Uncle Herb and I'll see you both later. I love you too, my sweet boys. Put Uncle on the phone.

“Thanks again, Herb. I can still hear them laughing about Danny going to the potty. What else could I say, that he’s exhausted and just wanted to get home? No, he’d never hurt my boys intentionally. So are we good? I get it, just let me know if they take a turn and get upset again. I know, love you too, my favorite brother-in-law. Hey, it doesn’t matter that you’re my only one, smart-ass. Later.”

She drops the phone on the end table and walks slowly to me. Before she says a word, I grab and pull her close, my mouth on hers immediately. I taste her lip balm, think it’s blueberry this time, and I feel her hands moving up my chest to rest around my neck. Just what the doctor ordered, uninterrupted time with Claire, my mouth on hers. I grasp her hips, making sure she knows how happy I am to see her, as I swallow a small moan from her. Damn, this woman totally gets to me. Before I literally throw her over my shoulder and run up to my bedroom like a goddamn caveman, I slow down the kiss before nibbling her lips, then reluctantly pull away from that tempting mouth of hers.

“Claire, what’s up, darlin’? Did I fuck up with the twins? Shit, didn’t mean to, just have so many things to do. Well, I did, but it seems like I have a genie or fairy who’s taken care of the majority of them. Talk now, woman.”

She giggles, her hands dropping down to my chest as she leans her head back to look up at me.

“Sorry, Danny. Surprise. I had good intentions but that didn’t get me to far, huh? Okay, the plan was for me to help you out here, and for Herb and the boys to delay you for a bit. When I called the firehouse looking for you, not sure who, they told me you just left. So after talking to Marjorie, schemer of all schemers, she thought having the boys stall you would work. Unfortunately, none of us gave any thought of how exhausted you’d be. So, no, you didn’t screw up with the twins. Remember, Danny, they are little so their memory capacity is also tiny. They forget stuff as soon as it happens, normally. I think they cried because they like you so much and thought maybe you were mad at them, that’s all.”

Hearing the boys cried breaks my heart but as long as they are doing okay, that's all that matters. Now for the question of the day.

“Claire, what made you want to do all of this? I know you're working at the shelter and with all the stuff you do with the boys, you have to be just as tired. Come on, darlin', spill. What's actually goin' on?”

She lowers her head but I'm not letting her get away, so with my fingers I gently lift it up so I can look into those gorgeous eyes of hers. She stares right back.

“I feel like we are fighting a losing battle just trying to see each other. Between work, kids, and just normal responsibilities, we run out of time. So, I thought if I helped you out with what I know you have to do when you come home from your shift, maybe we would then have some time to spend together, that's all. Sorry, didn't mean to overstep or put any pressure on you, Danny.”

Before I know it, my lips are on hers and I'm putting pressure on them to open. When she does, that's it, all bets are off. I can't get enough of her taste. Damn, she's going to be the death of me. I've never had a woman in my life who's worried about me and wanted to spend time with me. Well, outside of the bedroom that is. Most women I've been with, all they wanted was what I wanted, some sexual release, nothing more. Thinking about it, there were a few who wanted more and that's when we had the uncomfortable conversation of me telling them I didn't want more. Claire's way different though.

Feeling her hands grabbing at my ass, I push my hips into hers so she can feel how hard I am right this minute. Her one hand reaches around and when she goes to put it on my dick, I immediately pull back, not thinking. I feel her go stiff in my arms. Damn, I'm an idiot.

“Claire, no, don't think that. I want you more than my next breath, but if you touch me, I'll blow like a teenage boy looking at his first *Playboy*.”

I feel her shaking. Not sure what to think until I hear her giggling then outright laughing. *Oh yeah, paybacks, my dear*

*Claire, are a bitch.* My last thought before the tickling fight is on.





## ‘CLAIRE’

Barely being able to catch my breath, I try to push away from Danny’s fingers that are driving me insane tickling me but, somehow, he’s able to hang on to me. Feeling like my bladder is ready to let loose, I scream for him to let me go. He just laughs so I tell him the God’s honest truth.

“Danny, you have to let me go. Please, I’m going to piss my pants in the next five seconds if you don’t.”

Immediately I’m released and I turn, running down the hall to the little bathroom under the stairs, slamming the door. I barely get my jeans down and my bladder must have had enough because I pee while trying to hit the toilet seat. Guess I shouldn’t have laughed at Danny, but he’s so easy to tease. One of the main things I like about him.

When I finish, I wash my hands and look at my face in the mirror. Damn, my cheeks are pink, eyes are sparkling, and I have a smile on my face. Yes, he does that to me. Opening the door, I scream. He’s right there, arms on the frame of the door, just waiting. I put my hands up as I take a step back.

“No, no more tickling, you jerk. I almost peed myself. You better keep an eye open at all times because I will get you back, promise. Now what are you doing?”

He gives me one of his sexy smiles but says nothing, just leans in a bit, hands above his head. Why are guys able to look even hotter when they do that. Me, I’d look ridiculous as my shirt would ride up and my soft belly would be on display for all to see. Now, Danny’s stomach is something I don’t mind

admiring at all. He's got what, a six- no, eight- no, whatever-pack going on, and those muscles between his hip bones that his low rider jeans are displaying are angling right to his 'moneymaker.' What the hell? *Where did that come from?* I think to myself. He raises an eyebrow at me.

"Okay, darlin', what is that look for? What went through your head just now, come on, tell me because I liked that look."

Smiling I give it to him, wanting to shock him a little.

"I was admiring your muscles and those, don't know what they are called, above your hips that point to your crotch. Not sure why, but instead of the word crotch I thought of moneymaker. Then I heard that song my sister Rie plays every once in a while. Something about shaking your moneymaker, and it had me thinking about you doing just that."

I watch as he looks at me strangely at first then it's like a light bulb goes off.

"You mean that Fleetwood Mac song?"

I nod because, honestly, not sure who sings it, but Danny catches my confusion.

"Shit, Claire, Marjorie loves Fleetwood Mac so I'm almost positive it's their version of the song. Now, what did you see me doing that put that glint in your eyes? Because, just so you know, I have rhythm and can dance if that's where you're going, sweet Claire."

His arms drop to his sides and he starts to sway, right there in the doorway, before my eyes. I feel my jaw drop when he starts to move his hips slowly before his hands move up and down his chest. Holy shit, just like a male stripper. My eyes are wide, my mouth is open, and my hands are at my mouth as he continues to entertain me.

"Holy shit, Danny, were you a stripper at one time? Damn, you got the moves, that's for sure, dude."

Can't believe that came out of my mouth. As usual, don't think before I talk. He stops moving, his hands now on his hips, watching me. Then he bursts out laughing, coming into

the bathroom, right up to me, and pulling me into his arms. Feeling the vibrations of his laughter causes me to start to giggle. *Damn, got out of that one too easy*, I think to myself.

Danny puts me in front of him, staring down at me.

“What do you know about male strippers, Claire? Have you ever gone to a show, maybe with some girlfriends?”

Shaking my head I just grin.

“Nope, my only experience was with *Magic Mike* and Channing Tatum. I will say that boy can move his body. Hot damn. What the hell...Umph.”

Danny picks me up and throws me over his shoulder so I'm beating on his lower back then his ass. Holy shit, his ass is hard as a rock, so I move my fists back to his back. Nothing seems to faze him, so I quit when he flips me off his shoulder, right over the back of his sectional. Before I can jump off, he's around the one end and on top of me, his hands holding my face while his body keeps the rest of me down.

“Not a good idea to talk about how another man can move in front of me, Claire. We've been doing this dance for a while and I'm good with taking it slow, just don't tease me too much. I'm holding on by a thread right now.”

Not shocked at how his words make me feel because I'm feeling the same, so I just nod. He starts to move his hand up and down my body slowly, reverently. I gasp when his hand brushes up against my breast, both nipples harden as my body sways into his hand, wanting more. He plumps it from the bottom up, then pulls and tweaks my hardened bud. Having a hard time taking in a breath, I try to touch him but he's so intent on me that all I can do is put my hands on his shoulders. When both hands get involved with touching my breasts, that's when something happens, and I lose it. My hands are in his hair and my tongue is battling with his. His hands are moving from my breasts to my waist then my thighs. Every place his hands touch I tingle and feel hot. I'm rubbing my thighs together for friction, I need him so bad.

When I try to push him off me, he gently lies me back down on the cushions, following me down, shifting off to my right side.

“Claire, are you sure? We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, I’m good with how we’re going, darlin’.”

While talking, his hands are getting a bit more personal as they drift down and go under my blouse. The rough calluses on his fingers are driving me crazy, then he shifts my bra and uses those fingers on my nipples. I let out a loud moan, my head pushing into the pillow. His one hand starts to head down and when he hits my waist, his fingers tease the top of my jeans. I know he is taking it slow, but damn, I need something now.

“Danny, please don’t stop. I feel, no, I need you to make both of us feel good.”

Reaching down, I open my button and pull my zipper down. Immediately, his hand goes straight in under my panties and finds my bundle of nerves with those callused fingers of his. He squeezes my clit and that alone literally sets me off. I feel it starting and he must too because he pushes first one finger then a second into my core, and my body grabs them and holds on tight. I hear a weird sound and it dawns on me the keening is coming from me. Danny continues to work my clit and finger fuck me. When after a particularly deep push he finds that rough, spongy spot inside, that’s it, I fly. My hands grab his hair as every muscle in my body tenses for not even a minute. When they relax, the flow of my release coats his fingers as he continues to push in and pull out. I’m gone, just along for one of the most erotic rides of my life.

Finally feeling like I’ve gotten a bit of control, I feel Danny kissing my face, cheeks, and neck while he continues to touch me. I start to feel embarrassed until he shifts, and I feel how hard he is. I did that to him. Yeah, little old me. Smiling to myself, I enjoy this moment, not even sure why, but making him as horny as I was gives me a little confidence in myself. Also, because it’s been too long for me and Danny makes me feel like a very desirable and wanted woman.

“What has you smiling there, darlin’? Not sure I’m feeling all too great with that smug little smile on your face. Something you need to tell me, Claire?”

Looking at his face, I can see he’s joking, which makes me smile even more. Not saying a word, I put my hand on his hardness and watch him close his eyes and push into my hand. As I start to move my hand up and down his length, his body jerks at first, then I hear his moan, which has me tingling in certain areas. I take a chance and unbutton his jeans then pull his zipper down. His cock is peeking out above his boxer briefs with a bit of precum on the end. I reach in and use the liquid to make my movements smooth. Not sure how he likes it, I start soft but when I tighten my grip, his hips start pumping into my hand. His head is in my neck, and I can feel his tongue tasting and licking my neck and nibbling on my earlobe. As I increase my speed, I can’t believe he gets even harder as his breathing is all over the place. Wanting to watch but I can’t with his head in my way, I concentrate on the hand job I’m giving him. I pay close attention to what he likes and before I know it, he’s squeezing me for dear life.

“Claire, baby, oh yeah, harder. Pull on it when you come up, oh God, just like that. Yeah. Damn, Claire, oh shit, yeah, oh fuck, gonna come.”

I never stop my motion, even when I feel the spurts coming out of him, I just move his shirt up. When I feel him start to soften just a little bit, I loosen my grip and slow down. Danny is trying to catch his breath, so I stop moving and just hold on to his cock on top of his body.

“Damn, darlin’. That’s better than some of the sex I’ve had. Holy shit, Claire. Baby, thank you for that and for what you gave me.”

I’m shocked at his thanks. Is that a thing, should I have thanked him? Like he can read my mind, he kind of laughs.

“No, Claire, you don’t have to thank me. I’m blown away and I know how hard this is for you, so it means a lot to me that we’ve done what we have. I don’t take it for granted, beautiful. Especially with you, Claire.”

Not sure what to say, I just lie here, my hand coated in his release. Danny must catch on 'cause he gently moves off the couch, pulls his jeans up, and heads toward the bathroom. In just a quick minute he comes back with a warm washcloth and washes my hands. He finishes zipping his jeans up but leaves the button undone and removes his shirt. Damn, my mouth waters just looking at all those muscles. When he sits down and pulls me next to him, my hand immediately goes to his eight-ish-pack. I'm so intent on feeling him up, I don't realize he's laughing until his body is shaking.

“What’s so funny, Danny?”

“Honey, you are. I’m honored, but you’re looking at me like I’m your favorite ice cream cone and you can’t wait to lick me up and down. Now, not complaining, but might need a few minutes before we continue.”

Liking how he is so relaxed and comfortable in his own skin; I giggle a bit and lay my head on his shoulder. *Well shit, talk about it being like riding a bike*, I think to myself, which has me snorting and then busting out laughing.

Danny just looks at my face and shakes his head. He’s so secure in himself, for sure, and I’m thinking comfortable with me too. Seems like my plan to help him to relax has worked, just not the way I thought it would.



## ‘CLAIRE’

Danny sounded so emotionally drained. I knew something was up when he was late for our date tonight. The twins, Rie, and Herb were on their way to dinner and then to see the newest Disney movie that released this week. We were planning on going out to dinner and then meeting his friends from his firehouse and the other folks he's been working with in the task force. They all needed to let some steam off so Styx decided that a night of drinking, pool, and darts would help relieve some stress.

Unfortunately, the psychopath struck again. Only difference is the victim was alive when Engine 23 arrived on the scene. Without Danny going into much detail, this one will stay with him and everyone from Station 23 for a long time. He was upset because he wasn't going to make it tonight, which I totally understand. His job is very important and I knew that going into this. Yes, I have a job but that's what it is, a job. Danny has a life mission and profession. Not saying I don't love what I'm doing because I totally do, but the humane society, as much as it saves canine and feline lives, most of the time it's generally not a life-or-death type of profession like his is for him.

Realizing that there's no need to stay in my pretty blouse and boyfriend jeans, I take a few minutes to change back into my oversized sweatshirt with my leggings. Might as well be comfortable as it seems like I'm spending the evening by myself. Not complaining though, I was so looking forward to spending the evening in Danny's company. I also had an ulterior motive. I finally feel able to take the next step. We've



been slowly advancing with the intimate side of our relationship. How Danny can go so slow is driving me insane. My body is throbbing all the time, and my girly bits want to play with his boy parts more and more each day.

The only thing weighing on my mind more and more as each day goes by is this feeling I'm having of being watched and followed. I've told no one because I think maybe it's just my paranoia. But there is this little voice in the back of my head telling me I'm not crazy. Like today at work, I went to throw out a few bags of garbage after cleaning all the kennels and when I had the last one in the huge commercial can, I turned and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I looked all around and didn't see anything but, damn, it sure felt like someone or something was watching my every move. I actually jogged back to the building, which says a lot because I don't jog. Ever.

\* \* \*

I DON'T WANT to bother Danny with my paranoia, not to mention he has a ton of other shit going on with his normal job, and the task force, to bring down the person responsible for all the recent arsons and deaths. I walk by Jean's office to see if she is busy, I see her on the phone, head in her other hand. She sees me and waves her hand for me to come in, so I do. If anyone can give me some peace of mind, it's Jean. She reminds me so much of my sister it sometimes scary.

I wait for her to get off the phone by looking at the photos she has around her office. And what I see not only confuses but also shocks me. There are pictures of Jean with, I'm guessing, her husband maybe and a few young kids. Looks like two boys and a girl surrounded by a bunch of dogs out in the country. As time goes by, I don't see the girl but do see the two boys as teenagers and young men. One of those men is the weirdo in the back who freaks me out all the time. My God, is that Jean's kid? How did I not know this and more the question is, how doesn't my sister know this? We've talked

about him and she assumed Jean hired him maybe because she felt sorry for him. Now I find out it's one of her kids.

“What's got your interest, kiddo?”

I didn't hear Jean approach so when she spoke directly behind me I jumped off my feet and screamed at the same time. I almost wet my pants on top of it. What the hell?

“Um, nothing, Jean, just waiting for you to get off the phone. Sorry, didn't mean to pry. Is this your family?”

As she gives me details, I notice she speaks of her two sons and husband but never mentions the little girl. Knowing I should just keep my trap shut, of course, I don't listen to my common sense and jump in with both feet.

“Jean, do you not talk to your daughter? I saw some of the earlier pictures but she's not in the current ones. Sorry, don't mean to pry, but as you know Rie always says I'm too nosy for my own good.”

She gets a really weird look on her face but doesn't say anything for a minute or two. Then she fake smiles my way while walking back to her desk.

“No worries, Claire. It's a family thing, everyone has something right? So what can I do for you?”

“Well, I was wondering if it would be okay to take off next week? Got to go and get the rest of my stuff and sell my condo. Hoping, it'll only take the week, if that's okay?”

She tilts her head then lets out a breath. My skin starts to tingle but it's just us in the office.

“Sure, Claire, I'll change the schedule. Congratulations on selling the condo. I thought Marjorie told me you were going to keep it as a rental.”

“Yes, I thought on it, but with being here and the distance between the two, thought it best to let it go and sell. Could use the money for the boys, you know how fast they grow. Well, thanks so much, Jean, I'll see you tomorrow then. Rie should be here any minute, we're going shopping.”

I turn and walk as fast as I can to the front still having that weird feeling about Jean. Quietly, I say goodbye to the girls at the reception area after grabbing my backpack. Once through the doors, I literally walk run to my car get in and lock the doors. Seeing that picture of Jean's family has freaked me out and I don't know why. Grabbing my phone immediately, I'm calling Marjorie.

"Hey, little sister, what's up?"

"How well do you know Jean, Rie? I was in her office and she has pictures of her family, which includes that guy in the back. You know, the weird one I told you about, who seems to always be in the background wherever I'm at. I think that's her kid or maybe a family member. Not sure if she figured out why I was staring at the pictures, but she was acting really strange. Oh shit, that guy is coming toward my car, I got to get out of here. Yeah, I'll leave the phone on, Rie, I'm scared. Are the twins with you?"

I put the car in reverse and hit the gas, never looking to see where he is at. Once I'm out enough, I jam the gear into drive and take off like the devil's chasing me. Marjorie is screaming in the phone, but I want to make sure I'm far enough away before trying to grab my phone to talk to her. When I turn on the main road past town that leads to our off road, not sure if there's a car following me. I reach over, picking up the phone my nerves all over. Freaking out as I do, I go overboard, my emotions taking over.

"Rie, I'm on the way home. Please lock the doors, put the boys in your walk-in closet, tell them it's a game you're playing. Grab your gun, no don't argue, Marjorie, don't have a good feeling. Is Herb home? Tell him to come to the house, but make sure he locks the barn up. I'm so sorry."

I take the turn way too fast and have to fight the wheel to keep control. I skid to a stop in front of my sister's log home and grab my stuff before opening the door and getting out. Looking all around, I shut and lock the door then make my way to her house. When I get close to the door, it opens and Herb grabs and pulls me in.

“Goddamn it, Herb, you scared the shit out of me.”

“Like you didn’t do that to both your sister and me. Thank Christ the boys are young enough we can pull the shit we just did. Marjorie has her computer up there and they are playing a game under a blanket tent. What’s going on, Claire? My wife is losing it and that’s saying a whole hell of a lot.”

“I’m not sure, Herb, but was at the shelter and felt this intense feeling I’ve been getting for a week or two, like someone is watching me. When I went to talk to Jean about it, she was on the phone, so I was looking at her pictures and saw that guy in the back Rie and I have talked about. He’s part of her family, Herb, so it made me wonder how my sister wouldn’t know that if they are such close friends. Rie knows everything about someone she cares about, that’s just her, as you well know.”

Hearing footsteps, I turn to see Rie coming toward me, her face pale and she looks like she was going to be sick. She comes right up to me, grabbing and hugging me tightly. I feel the vibration before she starts to cry.

“What’s going on, Rie? Please, you know I’d do anything for you. Who the hell is Jean, and is that guy her kid or not?”

When my sister lets me go and I step back, the look on her face scares the shit out of me. Not as much as her next sentence.

“Jean’s family, Claire. That guy is also part of our family and from what Jean’s told me, he has some mental issues. Herb and I are afraid he might be the one Danny and his task force are looking for. I think he killed his sister and their dogs when they were little.”



## ‘DANNY’

Hearing my phone ring, I shift on my bed at the firehouse and smile when I see Claire’s face.

“Hey, beautiful.”

“Danny, we, um...”

Hearing the fear in her voice, I sit up in bed swinging my legs over, reaching down to grab my boots.

“Claire, what’s wrong?”

I hear noise and voices in the background but weirdly enough, I don’t hear the boys.

“Claire, darlin’, what’s going on? Where are you?”

I’m almost running toward the kitchen when I hear her sniffing.

“Danny, we need you. Rie just shared something with me that might help you and the task force out with that serial arson case. I don’t want to talk about it on the phone. Is there any way you can come over to Herb and Rie’s house?”

I’m in the kitchen, everyone is watching me as I put my phone on speaker.

“Claire, can’t you at least tell me what this is about? As you know I’m on shift, I’m not able to up and leave without a good reason. Give me something, beautiful.”

“I just found out, not sure how, that two people I didn’t even know ’til I moved here might be a part of our family. Rie

hasn't gone into great detail, but if it's true, one of them might be your person committing those horrible crimes."

Cap grabs his phone, not sure who the fuck he's calling, but thankful he's got smarts to reach out for help. I look at him and he gives me a chin lift, which tells me to go. As I'm heading to my truck, I hear footsteps. Turning, I see Till, Paco, and Styx each moving toward their own vehicles.

"You can't come. If we get a call, who's gonna go?"

"Cap called in the standby crew, they should be here within ten or so minutes. There are enough people in there and our captain said worst case, he'll get his ass on a truck. Let's go, Danny."

Phone is still on speaker so Claire must have heard everything. I start my truck and try my damnest not to drive like a maniac.

"Claire, I'm on the way. Break it down for me, please. I'm going crazy here. Are the boys safe? Are all of you safe at the moment?"

"Yeah, I think so. My sister just told me we are related to that lady Jean at the humane society. Not sure how, but that's not all she has.... Oh shit, Danny, someone is coming up to the house. I see the lights. Is that you?"

"No, I just got on the main road, Claire. Can you see who it is?"

Before she can say a word, I hear a loud noise then her phone goes dead. Holy fuck, I push down the gas pedal and without thought to my friends following me, all of my attention is on getting to their house as fast as I can.

\* \* \*

I PULL down my driveway and make it to Herb and Marjorie's house in less than a minute. A strange car is parked in front, but I don't see anything else that's weird. Slamming the truck into park, I throw open my door as everyone else is right behind me. I take the stairs, two at a time, and before I know it

I'm pounding on the door. It takes a minute or so before Herb throws the door open.

"Danny, come on in. You three, also come on. Claire and Marjorie are in the kitchen."

We walk into Marjorie hugging a woman I think is Jean, who's crying, while Claire is standing off to the side observing. Not sure what the fuck is going on, I walk toward Claire, who when seeing me runs into my arms, losing her shit.

"Darlin', calm down. Come on, it's okay. Take a breath and try to tell me what's going on."

Herb tells everyone to go sit in the great room as he offers to make coffee. Styx offers to help him. When I ask where the boys are, Claire whispers they are in the main closet in a blanket tent playing games. I give Till a glance and he heads to find them and keep them company. I look down at the tearful face looking up to me when I hear Marjorie clear her throat.

"Damn, Claire, Danny, I'm so sorry. Didn't know how to explain this as I just found out myself. Oh, thanks, Herb. I could use a cup of coffee right about now. So I went to work for the shelter when it first opened, then we got busy here and I left. That's when Jean started working after moving from the city to out here. When I met her it felt like I've known her forever. I thought it was just, you know, how you sometimes find a friend that you feel you've probably known in a prior life. That's how I felt about Jean. Until one night we were having a girls' night, drinking wine, eating chocolate, and you know, just hanging out together. When she slipped her secret I almost passed out. I could tell she was shocked, like she thought I already knew. My reaction told her I didn't."

My eyes keep rolling across everyone in the room and then going to look out the whole wall of windows in the back, making sure no one is out there. After drinking some coffee Marjorie continues.

"Claire, I've been trying to find a way to tell you but just couldn't. After all you've been through, I didn't want to hurt you more. It seems that on one of the many times our cousin



John and his wife were on a break, he took up with a younger woman. Yeah, Jean is that woman. They had a hot and heavy affair. When he went back to his wife, he promised Jean he was going to leave her. Then Jean found out she was pregnant with Christopher, and I'm sure everyone can figure out what happened next. Eventually, she found her husband, they got married, had two more children, and all was good until he passed away."

Before she can finish her story, a knock on the door has everyone shifting and looking. I turn to see Nova. I make my way to the front door and let him in. Following behind him are Mayhem, Bones, Sardines, and Coma, who looks like total shit. *Damn, this just got real*, I think to myself. Nova steps right into the middle of everyone and lets it rip.

"So what the fuck is going on that we had to drop everything and get our asses over here immediately? That's what Cap told me when he called me, so here we are."

I look to both Marjorie and Claire. Marjorie nods and goes through the story again, trying to give as many details as possible. Even provided some background on the sister who died in some sort of fire. By the time she's to the end, I see a few of the guys on their phones, some making calls, while others are—I'm guessing—looking shit up on the internet. Just as I go to explain my thoughts on this situation, another knock comes at the front door. Herb goes to answer it just as Jean stands up looking at her phone.

"Oh no, please don't hurt him. He might not be all together, but I know my son and he'd never hurt a woman. And he'd never torture any animals ever. They are what keep him calm and in the right frame of mind. I even checked and he's taking all of his medications, so in my heart I know it's not him. Please give him a chance to explain."

At the pleading in her voice, I turn to look toward the front door just as a younger man steps into the kitchen in front of Herb. Jean runs to him, putting her arms around him as Nova and the guys, along with my crew from the firehouse, stand at alert. I move toward Claire letting this play out.

“Chris, honey, why are you here? I told you I’d talk to them first. Don’t want you to get stressed out, Son.”

“Mom, I’m not a strange little kid anymore, where you can fix everything. I can speak up for myself. I didn’t do anything wrong, so that’s why I’m here. Didn’t think the entire firehouse would be here with those guys over there. Who are they anyway?”

We wait to see what Nova’s next move is but before he can make it, I hear the kid clear his throat.

“Oh, hey, Marjorie. Hi, again, Claire, nice to see you. How are you liking working at the shelter? I love all the animals mainly ’cause they don’t judge me or think of me as stupid, like most people, especially when I get overwhelmed and lose my shit. Well, who do I need to talk to, Mom? Let’s get this over with.”

Nova and I walk directly to him, hands already out.

“Hi, Chris, I’m Nova, I own FQS in town. I’m sure you know Danny since he works at both the firehouse and used to work as an animal abuse investigator. Why don’t we sit in the dining room and talk for a bit, if that’s okay with Marjorie and Herb. The rest of you hang for a bit, will ya?”

With that, Nova and I lead Christopher into the dining room, with Herb and Jean following us. Mayhem and Sardines hang right in the entrance while the rest of Nova’s crew head outside to wait. Styx is cleaning up the kitchen with Marjorie and Till is still upstairs with the twins.

As much as I want to catch this sick son of a bitch, I’m not getting any vibes that this is our guy. So I tell Nova I’ll be right back and head out to the back screen porch for some privacy. I pull my phone outta of my back pocket, scroll until I see the name I’m looking for, then hit dial and wait.

“Danny, what’s up, brother?”

“Tex, I need your help badly, got a minute?”

Tex used to be a SEAL but due to an injury he now does ‘computer work’ back East. And I use the word computer lightly because he can do so much more than that. I explain to

him what's going on and he lets me know that Nova has been in touch. I ask him to run Christopher through his systems to see if he can find anything linking this kid to the brutal murders and arsons going on.

“Danny, just by what you've told me, I doubt this kid has the mental capacity to handle this type of capture, torture, murder, and then arson. But you never know. I'll get some intel and get back to you. If you find anything else out, give me a call. I'll be in touch.”

He hangs up without a goodbye, but I'm not offended because knowing Tex, he's already pounding at his keys, looking into Christopher. I turn and head back into the dining room to see where everyone is at with this situation.



## ‘CLAIRE’

Chris seems so much more different. Not so unsure of himself but still having a hard time looking everyone in their eyes. I doubt he’s the one all these people are looking for because, not trying to be mean, not sure he has the smarts to pull it off. Also, after seeing him at the shelter and how gentle he is with all the poor fur babies, I doubt he’d be able to hurt any animals in such a horrific way.

After Danny and Nova, along with Chris, move their discussion to the dining room, I make my way to the master bedroom’s closet to find my twins and Till dozing under the blanket tent. I stand in the doorway smiling, thinking how lucky I am to have such wonderful people in my life.

Suddenly, I get a shiver up my spine. Turning I let out a small shriek as Coma is standing a couple of feet behind me, staring my way. I don’t know this man like I do Danny’s firehouse crew, but he has nothing but great things to say about Coma. What I know is they served together and both of them were messed up because of their last mission going, as Danny calls it, sideways.

“Hey, Coma, need something? I’m just checking on my boys, even though I know they are good with Till.”

He doesn’t say a word just continues to stare at me, his eyes reflecting nothing at all. Then like something brings him back, he smiles then walks toward me, which immediately has me shying away. He looks behind me then laughs.

“Till can’t be around kids without getting them to do what he wants. Bet he needed a nap, so with his baby whispering ways somehow convinced your boys they were tired and needed a nap. Asshole. Oh, sorry, my bad, used to being around the guys.”

Letting out a breath, glad he got over what was messing with his head, I smile his way.

“Yeah, Danny said Till wants kids so bad but just doesn’t want to go through the crap most women bring with the kids. Hey, don’t get mad, those are his words, not mine. Anyway, you need something?”

“Nope, sorry, I was just walking around, getting a feel for the place, in case Danny or Nova want me to set up some security. This person seems to be a couple of steps ahead of us. Well, guess I’ll go back downstairs, see what’s going on. Later, Claire.”

Not sure what that was even about, though he’s one of Danny’s close friends, I really don’t know. The way he looked at the twins was almost painful, but I’m sure life as he knew it changed when they returned back to the States after they were released from the military hospitals. Well, here to check on the twins so that’s what I’m going to do.

Till must have heard Coma and I whispering because he’s stretching then shifts the boys so he can stand up. Walking my way, he’s looking around.

“Woman, who were you talking with, thought I heard two voices?”

“Sorry to wake you, Till. Was speaking with Coma. He said he was scouting out the place in case security was needed. Anyhow, the boys behaving? Seems like you’ve worn them out. Want me to keep an eye on them so you can go get something to drink or eat downstairs? Go ahead, we’re good. I’ve got the dogs for protection too. Till, it’s all right, scoot”

He smiles at me then heads downstairs. I’m sure he’d rather be in the mix of things than babysitting the twins. They’re a handful, no doubt. Feeling something rubbing at my

calf, I look down to see Marshmallow. Dang it, I'll probably have to get my own dog eventually, though the boys really love Danny's two new ones. He brought them over before his shift for the boys. Cueball is lying between the boys, out like a light. I bend down, picking up Marshmallow, scratching under his little chin. He pays me back with a few licks on my face.

I pull the corner chair closer to the closet and with the little dog curled up on my lap, I lay my head back and breathe. I know that all of Danny's friends have this under control. Problem is whoever is stalking, kidnapping, torturing, and murdering these young women is very smart. Almost like he knows what the police's next steps are. Holy shit, what if he or she is part of a police force and is hearing what the plans and next steps are. That might explain why Danny, the task force, and his friends are always falling short.

Knowing I can't leave the boys by themselves, I pull out my phone and text Danny my thoughts. If I can help in any way then I feel useful at least. Sometimes you need a new point of view from someone not so closely involved. God, I hope they solve this before another woman or bunch of dogs are tortured and murdered.

\* \* \*

NOT SURE WHAT'S going on but can feel a stitch in my back from this chair I fell asleep in. Slowly opening my eyes, I see the boys are still sleeping surprisingly. My mind is groggy but I'm wondering what woke me up. That is until I hear Marshmallow growling on my lap, looking toward the door. Lifting my head off the back of the chair, I look that way to see the back of someone moving quickly away from the door. What the hell?

Not having a good feeling, I reach for my phone dialing Danny.

"Yeah, darlin', boys and you doing okay? I'm in the middle of something, whatcha need?"

“Dude, I woke up because Marshmallow was growling and when I turned someone was hightailing it away from the door. Danny, someone was watching us. Who’s here besides your team? When you have a second, can you come up? I feel really weird knowing someone was just standing there. Second time today, the first was your buddy, Coma, and he scared me to death. Oh crap, the boys are waking up. I’ll talk to you in a little bit.”

First Lachlan starts moving, which in turn wakes up Roan. I always get a kick out of the way the twins wake up. They usually are looking at each other or spooning. When they are more alert they have to touch each other’s faces and talk in their own language to each other. Then and only then do they look around to see if anyone else is with them. Swear to Christ, sometimes I think as long as they have each other I could disappear and they wouldn’t even notice or care.

“Momma, my belly needs food. Lachlan, do you want something for your belly too? We need some nacks, Momma.”

Laughing softly, I watch the two of them stand and at the exact same time, stretch their little bodies. Then, holding hands, they make their way to me and attempt to crawl onto my lap. Unfortunately, they are getting too big for that anymore unless the chair is bigger.

“Hey, guys, want to go raid Auntie Marjorie’s refrigerator? Fingers crossed she’s got some good stuff in there.”

As I start to get up, the boys turn to the doorway and stop. My head jerks that way, and again, not sure who it was but I do see their back. Kind of shoving the boys out of the way, I quickly make my way to the doorway, but whoever it was is gone.

“Hey, guys, did you see anybody by the door just now? No one is in trouble just wondering, that’s all. Didn’t see anyone, okay, let’s get you some belly food then.”

I’m praying my sister has some leftovers the kids will eat or else we are about to have a tantrum over food, which I doubt Danny and his group of badasses want to hear about



now. Maybe we can order pizzas or something for everyone. That's actually a great idea, just need to run it by Danny.

Coming down the stairs, the boys head toward the kitchen and I walk through the great room into the back, who knows what it is called. I see all of the task force including Nova, Mayhem, Sardines and Bones. No Danny though. Nova sees me and comes toward me.

“Hey, Claire, you okay? Danny ran out for a quick minute, should be back shortly.”

“Yeah, Nova, boys are getting hungry, close to their dinnertime. Want me to order some pizzas or something? I don't mind, just wanted to make sure all you guys would eat that so I'm not ordering a ton of pizzas and then you leave. That would suck, pizza for a week or so straight.”

I smile up at him as he grins back. Even though Nova is engaged with me, I see his eyes never stop taking in everything around us. That's got to get old fast. Then he reaches for his wallet, flipping his credit card between his fingers. Here we go.

“I'll order a few of each. No, I can get it. Come on. Okay, yeah, I see it in your face, you're just as stubborn as Danny. So sure, Nova, I'd love to use your credit card to pay for the pizzas.”

Grabbing it, I turn to go when he softly grabs my upper arm.

“Claire, between us, Danny and I already talked about this. Trust no one. Not with your boys, not with yourself. That is unless it's your sister and brother-in-law, Danny, or me. That's it for now. No, don't ask any questions. Just be aware of your surroundings and keep that Mace your sister gave you close at all times. Remember, a key held between your fingers is a good weapon and so is a whistle. I don't mean to scare you, but this asshole is amping up and don't know how he or she is picking their victims.”

At the reference of a female my head snaps. He just looks at me with those eyes of his. Then he shocks me.

“Claire, just want you to know Danny is one of the best. I’ve served with him and I knew then as I know now, that no matter what, he has my back. The kind of man he is. Also, he takes his job in the firehouse to heart, as he does with all the animals he either saves by bringing them home or by helping them find new forever homes. I can honestly tell you he’s good at it if the three dogs and one cat that are probably lounging on my bed right now are any proof. He’s one of the few good guys out there.”

“I know, Nova, because if he wasn’t he wouldn’t be around not only me but mainly my rugrats. Though thanks for what you said. Sometimes it’s nice to hear how others see someone you really like.”

“Hey now, what the shit, Nova? I leave for a minute and you’re already hitting on my girl. Ain’t happening here. I even got Lachlan and Roan’s blessing so back off, boss.”

Leave it to Danny to lighten the mood. Another of his wonderful qualities.



## ‘DANNY’

Not sure why I’m having this feeling, but that weird sensation is on the back of my neck and it’s sending tingles up and down. Something’s wrong, I just need to figure it out. Glancing around the room trying to locate what is making me uneasy, I don’t see a fucking thing that’s out of the ordinary. The entire room is filled with people I’ve trusted with my life. And now with Claire’s and the twins’ lives. The thought one of these folks I consider my family could be who we are looking for literally is tearing me apart. As the feeling intensifies, I really think hard about each person as I look at them. Hating the thought has even entered my mind, but now that it’s there it’s spreading like an uncontrollable wildfire. For some unknown reason my gut is now queasy. My eyes shift to Nova and when he looks my way, I motion for him to follow me outside.

“What’s up, brother?”

“Nova, I know this is going to sound fucking outrageous, but do you think someone from our team could be the jagoff we’re looking for? Got this feeling a day or so ago and now it won’t leave. Why would anyone do these horrible things? Nova, please tell me I’m goddamn insane to even give a second thought to such an asinine hairbrained idea.”

Watching a man I’ve grown to trust and even think of as a brother, it hits me, he’s not disagreeing with me. Holy mother of God, what the fuck is going on? Someone who fought for this country so folks could have their freedom could then go

on a killing rampage. And not only on innocent and helpless women but also canines.

“Danny, remember I told you not to trust anyone. My man, I mean that. I’ve been slowly going through the team ’cause, like you, the feelings I’m getting when we are all together ain’t right. That’s all I got for now, but you need to keep a close eye on Claire, her boys, and all of the animals at your house. Don’t let anyone close, because at the moment I don’t have a flying fuck’s idea on who we can actually trust. I’ve reached out to Tex for some of his expertise. Know you have him checking out the kid, but also told him to do a background check on every single motherfucker on this team. I want to know where everyone has been and what they’ve been doing since we all got stateside.

“I find out it’s one of our own, I’ll lose my ever-lovin’ fucking mind, swear to Christ, Danny. And even though it hurts to think it, I got this weird sense so gonna follow up on it, brother.”

After he gives me a chin lift, Nova turns and heads back into where most of our team is. Feeling like someone is watching me, I glance around the room but don’t see anyone outwardly gawking at me. Could it be someone in here? God, I hope the hell not. Fingers crossed it’s a long shot, but I need to know why someone would have tortured another human being and dogs before setting them on fire. None of it makes a lick of sense.

Looking around I see Claire, Roan, and Lachlan sitting with her sister and brother-in-law in the screen room, trying to stay out of the way. I can see the twins are all wired up and I’m guessing they are waiting for something to eat. Damn, if I had a tenth of their energy and metabolism life would be grand. Walking over to where they are hanging out, I reach down and place my hands on Claire’s waist, which instantly has her pulling forward, hands up. Shit, didn’t mean to frighten my girl.

“Damn, Claire, sorry, darlin’, didn’t mean to sneak up on you. Are ya okay?”

She looks up at me and slowly nods. The boys see me and start jumping up and down talking their gibberish. At that moment the doorbell rings and both twins start to run toward it, hands in the air screaming, "Pizza, pizza, pizza pie." Guess pizza is gonna be dinner tonight.

Claire is screaming for them to wait when Nova steps in front of them, hand held out in their direction. Swear to shit, it looks like the brakes immediately engaged and both boys come to an instant and abrupt stop. Claire, whose breathing is off and her face is red, looks to the boys then to Nova and back to the boys.

"So, Nova, whenever you want to the boys are yours. Never have I seen them listen without even a single warning or punishment threat. Tell me your secret, please."

Nova lets out a laugh then lifts his hand to Claire. She raises an eyebrow for just a second then reaches into her back pocket and pulls out a credit card. So dinner is on Nova. That's sweet, hope Claire ordered a ton of stuff as my brother can truly afford at least a meal every once in a while.

\* \* \*

FOLLOWING Claire back to my house, I feel for both Marjorie and Herb. The twins wanted to spend the night so they can play with their ponies and the donkeys in the morning. I could see in Claire's eyes that she needed a break so I kind of pushed it, telling Herb if the boys stay the night, I'll help muck out the stalls in the morning. He just smiled and shook his head. And the boys stayed.

Pulling up to the pole barn, I shut the truck down and get out. Claire is already out of her car so we both head to the barn to handle the crew. I see it first, looks to be a white envelope. Like for a large card or a packaging envelope. Pulling Claire behind me, I whisper to her to call Nova and then text Herb to make sure the alarm is on and be alert. I'm barely a few feet away when I hear it. A low moaning coming from the inside of the barn.

Not giving it a single second, I'm at the alarm entering the code, while grabbing the envelope and pushing it into my back jeans pocket. That can wait, the animals can't. As soon as the door opens I smell it. Some chemical mixture which has my eyes, nose, and throat burning.

"Claire, stay back. Call my firehouse, tell them chemical poisoning and to get here stat."

Running in, the whole building has some kind of fog or smoke in it. Some dogs are moaning while others are just lying there. Cats are running past me to the open door. Reaching to the wall, I push the button to open the overhead door. Nothing. What the fuck? I manage to make it to the manual cord and pull on it until the door starts to go up very slowly. As I'm struggling, I feel hands land on top of mine and help me pull down on the release. Yeah, she listens for shit.

"Claire, grab the ones closest to the door. Put them in the pens outside. Try to remember which ones get along and which ones don't, if possible. Be safe, darlin', I'm going in. Make sure to take lots of breaths when you're outside. Help should already be dispatched and on their way."

Before she can say a word, I turn and run into the barn with every intention of saving as many of my fur babies as humanly possible. Little do I know someone else has other ideas. The smoke is thick so I don't see anything at first as my eyes have to adjust. But when the smoke thins a bit or my eyes focus, I can't believe what I'm seeing. Holy fuck.

By the time the engines and paramedics arrive I feel like my heart is going to jump out of my chest. Claire has been a saint, never giving up, but there is only so much we could do. Living this far out can be your best dream or your worst nightmare. Tonight it's turned into a horror beyond any I could have ever imagined. I'm sitting on the ground, hands to my knees, feeling the wetness run down my cheeks. Fuck, how did this even happen?

Looking up I see so many familiar faces. Nova, Marjorie, and Herb. I think everyone I've ever worked with at the firehouse is here. Styx, Till, Cap, Rome, Lightning, and Paco.

Then with Nova comes Sardines, Bones, and Mustang. Even some townfolk showed up. Seeing all the faces trying to help, something is missing but I don't know what. My body is beyond exhausted and probably will need to go to the hospital to get checked, but right now I'm barely hanging on.

Hearing their voices shocks me. Why the hell are they here? Then it dawns on me, if Claire, Marjorie, and Herb are here, so then are the twins. That thought explodes in my head as I'm hit on both sides by tornadoes. Roan and Lachlan hang on to me for dear life and I so need their little arms around me. For once they say nothing, just hang on to me tightly.

I feel her before she joins in our family hug. Well, that's what it is since I consider them all my family. Claire squeezes in right in front of me, her arms struggling to get around both of her sons with me in the middle.

"Danny, we need to get you to the hospital to get you checked out. I can see your arms probably have first to second degree burns. Boys, be careful don't squeeze or touch Danny too tight, okay?"

The boys look up to their mom then back at me before speaking to each other in their gibberish. Then Lachlan turns to me, serious as fuck, and blows my mind.

"Mr. Danny, are you going bye-bye like our first daddy did?"

Roan then puts the final cherry on the sundae, so to speak.

"Pease don't leave us, Mr. Danny. We don't want to lose another daddy."

With that, both Claire and I look at each other in utter surprise, right before her eyes fill up with tears and she sobs right there with four little arms patting her shoulders, while I try to hold her up. When I shift, that's when I feel it. The fucking thick envelope that was stuck to the door with duct tape. Shifting Claire against my body, I reach with one hand to grab it. I'm surprised by how bulky it is. Then it dawns on me, there's shit in the envelope. Claire looks up at me, tears still in her eyes, but she realizes something is happening. I pull the



envelope out, barely holding the edges. When her eyes drop to it, her mouth forms an 'O' right before she yells for her sister.

“Marjorie, please take the boys over to the front porch. Have them sit together on the swing for a bit, please. No, don't ask why. I'll explain later. Just need the rugrats away from here. Thanks!”

Watching Marjorie and the twins walking to my house, I glance at Styx who nods, letting me know without words the house has been checked and is safe. That brings to my mind the pack in the house. It's been really quiet with all of this ruckus going on.

“Nova, my dogs in the house, they all right? Oh fuck, please, brother, tell me they're all right.”

He walks toward me just as Paco and Rome fling open the front door. That's when I see them each trying to carry a big dog and a small dog each. Pushing Nova out of the way, I run full out toward them. That is until Paco sees me yelling at him.

“Danny, hey hold up, brother. They've been dosed. All are breathing, we just need to get them to the vet so they can either pump their stomachs or do whatever they have to. We got this, brother, ya got way too much shit going on right now. How's the pack in the barn?”

My head drops at his question. Unfortunately, we did lose two of my fur babies. Harold, my senior hound, who was as old as dirt or at least close to twenty, and one of the meanest fucking cats out there, Matilda. I never even knew they liked each other but from what I could see, the cat didn't want to leave the hound to die alone so they were wrapped together and I'm guessing, no praying, the smoke got them both.

Every other animal was rescued. Even my crippled little girl was carried out by one of the big hounds, I'm guessing. Some needed oxygen, which my firehouse brothers and sister provided. One of the kittens had some charred hair on their tail, and a few dogs closest to the fire had some hair missing from the embers flying about. All in all, we were very lucky. Thank God we came back here and didn't stop at Claire's little

house. I would have lost each and every one of them. Probably even my house and my pack in there.

This just turned very fucking personal and whoever is responsible just unleashed the madman I've kept locked down deep inside. My mind is going over all I plan to do to this son of a bitch when I get my hands on them. This is the last thought I have when I hear Claire calling my name. When I look for her, she's right next to Nova with that envelope in her hands. Something tells me the floor is about to fall out beneath us. Time to see what this asshole's game is.



## 'NOVA'

Watching how protective Danny is of Claire, I'm glad I grabbed the dirty envelope from her hands before she could rip it open. I seriously doubt we'll find fingerprints; this prick is way too smart. When I glance around it hits me, we are missing some of our team members. What the fuck?

I don't see Mayhem and Coma from my team, or a few of Danny's brothers from the firehouse. As this thought enters my head, I see a pickup truck racing down the road toward us. Immediately, I reach behind me for my automatic as many others do exactly the same. When the vehicle comes to a screeching halt, I see Stash, Crow, Ash and Lil' Man all jump out, emergency kits in their hands.

"Nova, man, where you need us? Heard the call, we came as quick as we could. Are Danny's dogs all right? Stash, you and Crow go over there, help that group out."

"Gotcha, Ash, come on, brother, these pups need some lovin'."

As they leave Ash comes closer to me, looking around first.

"Is this that motherfucker who's setting houses on fire with women and dogs trapped in it? Why Danny's place? Nova, is this some sort of vendetta or something?"

Hearing his words makes my brain start running amuck. Could this be something against Danny? But why? He's one of the most genuine men I've ever met. Never has he been a prick. A thought passes my mind. When we were overseas and

he needed to end it with any of the barracks bunnies, civilians, dorm sluts, or even some of the women serving—and if they were actively on duty, it was hard on him—even though it was just a physical sexual release thing. Danny was very up front and honest with each one at each base. For Christ’s sake, he was a man in his twenties, fighting overseas, he needed some kind of release. Anyway, my brother always felt horrible ending it with them but he wasn’t in the right place in his heart, and we definitely weren’t in the right place to start any kind of fucking relationship. Well, except a physical one.

There was that one chick, shit, what was her name? She fell hard for Danny but we were on the move. He tried to be gentle but she went nuts, threatening him and his team. The only ones she was kind to after the breakup, when we would go through that camp, were both Mayhem and Coma. Gigi, that was the bitch’s nickname. I don’t usually use that word for women but she was. Made Danny’s life a living hell. Tried to pit brother against brother. Especially when both Mayhem and Coma were fucking her every chance she gave them. Dumb young assholes thinking with the wrong head.

Shit, with these memories in my head I’m curious to see where in the hell Mayhem and Coma are. Grabbing my phone, I hit Mayhem first.

“Yeah, Nova, what’s up?”

“Where in the fuck are you, asshole? Danny’s place was sabotaged and you are nowhere to be found?”

“Fuck, no way. I thought it kind of odd when I saw Coma coming down the driveway from Danny’s or Claire’s houses. Jumped in my truck and have been following him for the past hour. How bad is the damage? Want me to turn around? Whatever you need, boss.”

Knowing Mayhem as I do, I trust him with my own life and those I care about. Now that he explained why he is MIA my instincts take over.

“Brother, keep your distance but stay on that motherfucker’s ass. Need to know where he goes or who he meets. Something ain’t right with that brother of ours, and I

need to know what it is. Be careful, Mayhem, I get the feeling there is more than one person involved in all this bullshit. Check in regular, will ya? Thanks, brother, later.”

Feeling something in the envelope, I walk a bit farther from the crowd, sit my ass down on a stump, and grab for my knife. Carefully I slice open the top of the envelope. Putting my knife to the side, I flip it over so the contents slips out. My mouth drops open when I see two Matchbox cars and two dogs’ tags, along with a piece of paper with handwriting on it. Finally, a lip balm hits the ground. Son of a bitch.

Screaming for Danny, I push the shit in front of me with my foot. The letter is folded in half and we are gonna need to touch it to open it. Well, unless someone has gloves in their kit. Yelling out loud I need gloves, I hear shifting and feet hitting the ground. A pair of blue gloves is shoved in my face from Styx. Pulling them on as I reach for the letter, Danny lets out a growl.

Seeing his face says it all without a single word. The cars must belong to the twins and the lip balm is Claire’s. The tags must be two of Danny’s dogs, just not sure which ones. As he grabs another pair of gloves from Styx, I flip the tags over revealing the names. Marshmallow and Cueball. Fuck, his most recent saves from one of the murder scenes they discovered. Danny reaches for the letter after looking at both the little cars and the lip balm. When he smells it and closes his eyes tightly, I know without a word it is his woman Claire’s. Fuck.

Waiting as he reads the letter; my heart feels like it’s going to jump out of my chest. Same way it did when we were in the Middle East during each of our missions. Not knowing who the enemy is makes everything so much harder.

“Son of a motherfucking bitch of a whore. I’ll tear your heart out first, you cocksucker.”

Danny’s outburst has drawn everyone’s attention. I shake my head to my team and his, but Claire rushes over, as do her sister and brother-in-law. Cap is right behind them. Flinging

the letter my way, I grab it before it falls into the dirt. My eyes scan it then I slow down and read it silently.

*“So how does it feel to have shit you care about taken away? Too damn smart for your own good but still haven’t figured it out. Danny, look closer at the victims. Both women and dogs. There’s a link, asshole.*

*Now, I’m going to give you a choice. As you see I’ve given you some clues to follow. Who’s next. Will it be Roan or Lachlan? Cueball or Marshmallow maybe, they’re small. And finally, of course, whatever is planned will include the beautiful widow, Claire. You got it bad for her. Not sure why. What does she have that other women you’ve been with didn’t have? Anyway, the decision is yours... for now. Let me know which one you want me to use in my next display. Aren’t the fires beautiful, Danny? I’ve gotten better over the years using different accelerants to achieve my goal.*

*Oh, make sure to check your mailbox, I’ve left another surprise. Can’t help but give it away. I filmed each fire for your pleasure, Danny. Watch as they burn. Until next time, brother.”*

When I finish, it makes sense why Danny’s face is ruby red with his hands clenched at his side. Cap is trying to calm him down but from his swearing outburst that aint’ gonna happen. Claire is at his side, arms around his waist. Her head is resting on his chest. She’s not saying a word but from the way she’s watching everyone, I figure she’s got an idea what the letter says. I prefer she doesn’t read it, but Danny grabs it from me, holding it in front of her so she can do just that.

I expected tons of tears and drama but when Claire is finished I watch silent tears run down her face, at first, she says not a single word. Then she tilts her head back so she can see Danny. Her words shock the fuck outta of me.

“So, dude, what’s the plan? I have no one or nowhere the twins and I can go to hide, and I feel safer here with Marjorie, Herb, and you, Danny. This asshole can pound sand. I’m beyond pissed, so watch out. Need to figure out who has it in for you first. Nova, I know you’re listening so let’s finish this

here, right now, top priority. Once this is good, leave a few people to guard the property. Bring as many of the animals as possible to Herb's barns, I'm sure he won't mind. Then we need to take a moment and restructure. This has been personal the whole time, so let's figure out who these women and dogs are to you, Danny. That might give us a clue to what is going on."

Hearing someone clear their throat, I turn to see the shelter guy, Chris.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Not sure if this helps, but Mom and I were talking it out. Two things. First, there's a dump site in the woods that folks drop off dogs they no longer want. And second, when we need to put some of the shelter dogs down, we send them out for that. We don't do that at our facility. They are picked up in a transport and taken to the pound two towns over. Thought I needed to tell you guys that, that's all."

"Chris, yeah, man, that helps. Thanks a lot. Appreciate it."

Watching the young man walk away, I call out his name.

"Stick around, buddy, might need your help, if that's okay. We gotta have men around we trust."

Watching his shoulders push back and his chest come out a bit tells me it worked. This poor guy went through the wringer with us when we thought he was the suspect. Looking behind him, I see his mom, Jean, watching me with wet eyes. When she catches my eyes, she mouths a silent "thank you" which I nod to. Then I turn and get to work. It's gonna be a long-ass night, that's for sure.





## ‘CLAIRE’

Grabbing a bath towel, I wrap it around my head as I reach for another to dry my body off. Scrubbing my skin, I try to get the nasty feeling off that took over as I read that letter. Not sure why someone has it in for Danny but now it involves my boys and, for God’s sake, no way is some maniac getting their hands on either Roan or Lachlan. I’ll either kill or die to save them both.

My heart is pounding as is my head. Nova, Cap, and Danny tried to tell me it would be okay, but it took Marjorie shaking me roughly before my mind snapped back. She pulled me away from everyone, holding on to me tightly, whispering everything would be all right. Listening to her words brought me back to being a kid when something went wrong, it was always Rie who was able to handle me with kid gloves. Guess she still is.

Speaking of kids, both boys are with Rie and Herb tonight. Not alone though, a sheriff’s squad is out front with two officers guarding. Inside Styx and Paco are staying over so the boys think it’s a sleepover. God bless Danny’s friends. I tend to follow his lead and since he seems to trust them, so do I now.

Grabbing my lotion and applying it over my body, it’s weird to be home without the boys. Danny is also here with Cueball, Marshmallow, and Archie. Dumbo and Bambi are also guarding Roan and Lachlan. After they finished at the vet’s some of Danny’s friends picked them up and brought the three to us while the two pits have twin duty. It took a few

hours but they are all back to normal after the vet gave them one shot to counteract the drug and some fluids to flush their systems. Guess Archie was pissed he was brought to the tiny home with the tiny dogs. I could hear him mouthing off to Danny when they first got here. Not sure what he did but finally Archie must have settled down.

After brushing my teeth, I run a comb through my hair before putting it in a loose braid. I grab the shorts and cami and put them on. Looking in the mirror I realize how scantily clothed I am so I throw a robe on top. Opening the bathroom door off my room, I don't see Danny so I venture out to the main area. There he is passed out on the couch, all three dogs somehow lying on him.

Poor Danny has been through so much today. The loss of his two fur babies has hit him hard. And the total destruction of the pole barn. That will need to be rebuilt. Thank God his house wasn't touched, well it was, since the dogs were dosed but the house wasn't set on fire. Well, come to think of it, that was weird. If someone had it in for him, why not torch the house also? Something to run by Danny when he's awake. Walking toward him, three little heads lift, looking my way. I give each one a pet on their head then reach for the throw on the couch and cover Danny up.

Not really ready for bed, I grab a water from the refrigerator then head out to the front porch. Before the door even closed I hear the tap of nails on my floors. Looking back, Archie is already at the door waiting impatiently, so I let him out. He immediately runs off the porch and starts peeing on everything in sight. Damn little bugger, he's marking his territory, smart-ass that he is.

When he finishes he leaps up on the porch then stands off to the side of the swing. I slow down and grab him, putting his little ass next to me on the blanket. He twists and turns until he's found his comfortable spot then lays down, head on my thigh. I absentmindedly stroke his little body, my head full of thoughts, but so overwhelmed I just keep the swing moving back and forth until the motion puts me to sleep.

\* \* \*

NOT SURE EXACTLY WHAT wakes me, but immediately I feel something evil nearby. My eyes snap open as my head takes in the area around the front porch. That's when I hear it. Lil' Archie is growling like crazy, and when I finally have him within my sights, he's got his front paws on the swing's arm and he's full-out growling, teeth showing and all. Knowing and trusting my little buddy, I do the only thing I can think of.

“DANNY! Danny, help! Please, Danny.”

The door flies open and Danny is there, gun in hand. He takes in both Archie and me then shifts toward me so he's directly in front of me. His eyes never stop moving or taking in the entire area.

“Claire, you see anyone?”

“No, I think Archie's growls woke me up. Stupidly, I fell asleep on the swing. Danny, when I woke up, I felt something really bad close by. It had my entire body trembling. For a quick minute I felt the foulness getting closer, then Archie started to really growl, showing all of his teeth. This little guy saved my life, Danny. I know that deep to my soul. What is going on? And more importantly why?”

Danny turns, pulling me up and into his arms. When I look up his eyes are burning into mine. Then I see the look I love in his honey-brown eyes. Before I can say a word, his mouth crushes mine, and even with all that is going on I instantly feel safe and loved. As his mouth devours mine, I move closer to him. When we are chest to chest, I feel his heart beating rapidly, right before his tongue touches my lips. I open and he plunges in. As our tongues caress and taste each other, I hear the sudden ringing of Danny's phone. Oh no, not now, though I know that's selfish with all that is going on. He gently pushes me away with a soft “Fuck, sorry, Claire.” Then he turns and rushes into the house.

“Yeah, Tex, what's up? No, not a bad time. In fact, need you to work your magic and see if you can see anything, or

more specifically someone, outside Claire's house. She was on the porch with my Archie when something spooked them both. Claire felt someone or something and screamed for me. Yeah, I was so exhausted I fell asleep on the couch. Fuck me, man, why is this shit happening, Tex? What? Yeah, I can shut up and listen."

I watch Danny pacing back and forth listening to whoever Tex is. Nothing shows on his face, but I can feel his emotions, anger, and frustration. Not knowing what to do, I pick up Archie and carry him inside to place him with Marshmallow and Cueball. Then I go and start up some water for tea. Need something to calm my nerves. I feel dirty, even though I just took a shower before going out on the porch. Something happened while I was asleep, damn it, and I missed it. It's all just a feeling but Archie kind of backed me up and, thank God, he was with me because not sure how this night would have ended otherwise. Then I hear what sounds like the ending of Danny's phone call, so I sit down and wait for him to finish.

"Yeah, Tex, if you don't mind, can you fill Nova in? Appreciate it, man. I'm trying to, swear to Christ. Give Melody, Akilah, and John my love. Keep me informed if you find anything from the cameras, Tex. Thanks, brother."

Watching him disconnect from Tex, he puts his phone in his back pocket then walks directly to me, which isn't hard in this tiny house. He plops down beside me as three dogs rearrange themselves.

"Any new information, Danny? Seems like your friend Tex had a lot to say."

"Claire, he's doing his best. But since we are all in the dark, he really doesn't have a fucking clue on what he's looking for. You know those cameras we put up around your house and property? He's going to review them and try to catch someone in the act. How you doing?"

"Not going to lie, I'm shaken up even more now. Don't understand how someone can do all of this, and murder women and dogs, without a single worry of being caught. It's almost like they are leading up to their finale and want to be

caught. Don't pay me any attention, Danny, I don't have a clue of what I'm saying." He leans back into the couch, pulling me into his side. Once there, he leans down and his lips find mine again. This time though I'm ready and push into him, needing to feel his hard body against mine. I need to feel alive and safe, even if it's for a little while.

As hard as it is, I pull away from him and stand looking down at him. The question in his eyes has me smiling. I'm not one who usually takes charge, but tonight I'm feeling different. Reaching down, I grab his hand, pulling him to follow me as I walk toward my bedroom. Hearing the tapping of nails on the floor, I shake my head when Danny goes to shut the door. The Three Musketeers will settle, but they also want to be close to us. I watch as they each pick a bed and get comfortable.

With my eyes on Danny, I let my robe fall off my shoulders, revealing my cami and pajama shorts. His eyes darken at what he sees. He reaches behind his neck, pulling his T-shirt over his head. I feel my mouth literally fall open, even though I've seen him without a shirt before. His smirk tells me he gets how he affects me. Feeling sassy, I first unbraid my hair then reach behind my own head and pull my cami off. Shaking my head, my hair cascades down my shoulders and over my breasts. When his mouth falls open I giggle a little bit.

Not wanting to be one-upped, Danny unbuttons his jeans then pushes the zipper down. Shoving his jeans down, I see he's commando as I look at the evidence of his excitement. And, man, is he feeling it.

"See something you like, darlin'?"

Instead of answering, I stick my tongue out and lick my lips slowly.

"Damn, Claire, keep doing that and we won't be going any farther, I'm that close to letting loose. Woman, control yourself."

He's smiling at me and for the first time in weeks I feel light. I put my hands on the top of my shorts and start to push

them down slowly. When they hit my ankles, I lift one and shake them off, then lift the other and kick them off. I couldn't do it again if I tried, but my shorts land right at Danny's feet. I laugh as I crawl into my bed until I'm in the middle, then I lie down, my head still tilted his way. He literally growls as he stalks toward the bed, his cock pointing almost straight out and leaking his excitement. I can feel myself getting even wetter in my girly bits as my nipples harden to the point of pain. I'm sure if Danny puts one finger on me I'm going to orgasm immediately.

When he reaches the side of the bed, one hand traces my body. First on my lips then down my chin to my breasts. He pinches each one then stretches my nipple. He continues on his way down my tummy to my most private parts. His fingers separate my labia and that's when I let out my first moan of many. Danny's fingers are followed by his mouth and tongue. By the time he lifts up, I've had multiple orgasms and I feel spent and weak. Well, until I feel his body weight on top of me. He fits between my legs after putting on a condom then, without any pause, he thrusts into me in one movement. Oh God, too full. He doesn't move, he's motionless above me, watching and waiting for my body to adjust.

After a bit, I feel my body relaxing and stretching to fit his length and girth. Looking up at him I give him a shy smile, which he returns with a wicked one. Then he lets loose and all I can do is hold on. He's thrusting in and out then circling with his hips before he's back to driving into me as he is chasing his own release. When he grinds down on my bundle of nerves on a push in, my body lights up like it's the Fourth of July. As we both chase what feels to be a once-in-a-lifetime release, the noises I hear are mainly coming from me. My legs are wrapped around Danny's waist, one heel digging into his firm as hell butt. When his fingers reach between us and he gives my clit a pinch and pull, my body tenses for a second or two then lets loose.

“Oh God. No, no, don't stop, Danny. Yeah, please, oh God, please, please. Yes, that's it, go faster. That's it, I'm coming.”

I lose track of time for a bit, but when I come back all I feel is Danny's hot, hard body on top of me and his hips pistoning faster and faster. I hold him tightly until he loses his rhythm and pushes his head into my neck. I feel the power of his release through the condom as his body shakes with it. He tries to keep his weight off of me, but when I pull him down he doesn't fight it because he's trying to catch his breath.

Right before I fall asleep, I think this is what I've waited for since Shamus. Someone I could spend my life with being just me. And that would be enough. If only the person who's terrorizing us can be caught, sooner rather than later, that's all I can pray for, and before anyone else is hurt or killed.





## ‘ANONYMOUS’

Fucking little rat. Should have grabbed it and broke its goddamn neck. All it took was that one second I hesitated for the night to go to hell. And for that bitch to call ‘*Danny*,’ like he’s some kind of hero, made me want to puke. Asshole is just another pretty fucking face. He’s never cared about anyone but himself. Well, and his dogs, that’s why when I started this, had to include dogs, even if they weren’t his. Though most of the dogs I used were dropped off in that part of the woods where people dump their pets when they were done with them. So in all reality, I put them out of their misery of living in the wild without their family. No struggling for food or water. Not sure the assholes investigating tested them, but I didn’t want the dogs to suffer. They were dosed, so most were already out when I started the fires. I could never truly hurt a dog, especially after working with them when I was in the service. Fuck, they saved our lives quite a few times.

Sitting with my ass on my calves, binoculars up to my eyes, I watch as the two selfish assholes fuck their brains out. Like nothing else matters. If I thought I could get away with it, I’d grab those two little rugrats of Claire’s, but I know that besides the patrol car with two cops there are some of Danny’s friends in there. What a joke. Danny’s friends, like he understands what that word even means. I mean, at one time, I thought he was one of my closest friends until he showed his true colors. Well, now I’m showing my colors and couldn’t give a flying fuck about what anyone thinks about it. Hell, been doing this kind of shit for years, well since I came back stateside. I’ve worked my way through almost all of the states

and left behind some souvenirs in the form of burned bodies to start, then added dogs recently. Sometimes I get the feeling Danny cares more about his canines than the people around him.

Not wanting to draw attention to myself, I clear my mind and try to get into a meditative mindset. Need to wait 'til it looks like everyone is down for the night. Can't take a chance like before, but it was so goddamn tempting. Claire alone and asleep on the porch in that swing. Only in a robe, not sure what was under it. Damn, I can feel my cock getting hard just remembering how she looked. Just the thought of forcing that innocent bitch has me almost blowing a nut. Though don't want to leave any DNA for someone to find.

It sucks Nova figured out Chris wasn't the one starting the fires and hurting those left behind. Should have thought that out better. He really is a piece of shit, useless as hell. Doesn't matter because they still have no clue it's me, and by the time they do figure it out it will be too late. I want to see the look on dear old Danny boy's face when I rape Claire, then grab his dogs, and pour gas on all of them before dropping that lit match on them. Oh yeah, he's going to burn too, but not before Claire and his dogs. I might even throw in those twins, not sure yet. Because of that asshole it was the day that started the loss of everyone I loved, so now it's his turn to feel the same overwhelming pain that never goes away. Soon it will all come to a head.

Feeling my phone vibrate, I look down to see the number that has been calling every few days. The barracks or bar bunny Danny was fucking around with right before he met Claire. Heidi seems nice enough but is clueless. The stupid whore was in my bed about a week after we met. She wanted to know all about my service, which I learned turned her the hell on. So I made shit up and, man, did it work. A horny little bunny Heidi is. Regrettably, I refuse the call. That's okay, I've already decided Heidi is my next victim. This time it's going to be a bit different though. Need to get Danny to really think about why this is happening.

Smiling to myself, I use the binoculars to look around while I wait for the world to all go to sleep. Something catches my eye and that's when I see someone walking around Claire's house. Who the fuck is that? I know it could be someone on patrol, but it feels like they are trying to be sneaky. Is it a copycat, I wonder? Wouldn't that be a bitch after all I've planned and worked on and Danny is taken out by a copycat. I'd laugh my ass off, for sure. Keeping my eyes on the figure until I lose them behind the tiny little house, I sit still and barely breathe. I figure in another thirty minutes or so I'll be able to take off and head to the deserted cabin about three miles to the north of here. I've stocked it up and there's a cold water stream on the property so I can use that water. If all goes to hell, I can stay at this cabin for quite a while and no one will know I'm right under their thumbs. That brings a huge smile to my face.



## ‘DANNY’

Feeling Claire’s weight against my side and her breath on my chest gives me comfort. My mind is a clusterfuck. After a second sexy romp with this incredible woman, she passed out. Me, I’ve been staring at the ceiling racking my brain. Going through everything that’s happened to me from when I started in the service to present. I can’t think of a goddamn thing that would make a person feel such hatred, for me in particular, they would use innocents to get back at me.

And that’s exactly what’s happening. Each woman I’ve had some contact be it a hookup or maybe just literally bumped into each other. This motherfucker somehow has eyes on me, or as Nova said, it could be someone on the teams. Being together as much as we are it’s just natural to talk, so we know everything of importance as we’ve shared.

In my heart I don’t think it could be anyone of my team at the firehouse. No one there seems sick enough in the head to start fires when they spend all day putting them out. Not one person there takes fires for granted or feel they can ‘read’ the path. We’ve learned over the years but each fire is unique unto itself. As I’m going through all on Nova’s and my team from our time in the service, I hear the faint ring of my phone. Fuck, it’s on the table in Claire’s front room.

Carefully but quickly, I shift Claire over and get up, feeling every ache and pain. Butt-ass naked, I sprint to grab my phone with my junk bouncing all over. As I grab it the ringing stops but instantly starts up again. Looking at the screen my gut clenches. It’s Tex.

“Hey, Tex, sorry, had to get up to grab my phone. What’s up, brother, find anything?”

“Danny, shit, man, I’m hoping what I found is somehow wrong, but I’m doubting it. So I checked everyone from the firehouse and from Finnegan’s Quest Sentries, or as y’all call it FQS. Do you remember an incident that involved ISIS in Ramadi? Don’t have all the details yet, but from what I’ve been told, it had something to do with a woman, not sure if she was a barrack bunny or not. All of assholes were interested but she only made time for you. And she worked for some foundation for abused animals. The two of you hooked up but then mutually decided to continue only as friends. The guys I spoke to said you were able to move on much more quickly than she did. She claimed she had deep feelings for you and you just dumped her. Think, Danny, which of your guys had the hots for her? I know it’s a long time ago, but I need you to get your head out of your ass and think, goddamn it.”

As I try to go back to that time, Tex keeps filling me in on what he’s discovered. Most I know but some of the information is new to me and something that needs to be discussed with Nova immediately.

“Tex, let me think on this, my head hurts from all the bullshit up there. Do me a favor, reach out to Nova and tell him what you shared with me about the team. I owe you, man, thanks for coming through.”

“Danny, I’m always available, just reach out and use me, that’s why I’m here. I’ve worked with just about all of the special teams, and now I’m getting more one-on-one work, which I’m good with. Take care of your lady and those twins, Danny. That’s what really matters, my friend. And hey, sorry about the barn, Harold, and Matilda. You gave them the best life ever, brother, never forget that. I’ll be in touch.”

Tex disconnects without a goodbye, like he always does. Putting my phone back on the table, I turn and see Claire in my T-shirt, leaning against the doorjamb, watching me intently. Even with everything going on, just the sight of her long as fuck legs, curvy body, and beautiful face... everything stands still. We just stand here staring at each other, neither of

us brave enough to say the three words I'm sure are on the tips of both of our tongues.

Claire gives me a shy smile then walks over to me. Reaching up, she gives me a gentle kiss then whispers, "Meet you back in the bedroom, Danny." Then she heads toward the bathroom. I grab two bottles of water and some cheese and cracker packs I'm positive are the twins', but fuck it, they won't miss two. I go to the bed, straighten the sheet and covers, then get into bed to wait for Claire to get her fine ass back in this bed with me.

Once Claire is back in bed, well lying directly on top of me, I'm telling her about what Tex said. She starts asking questions, trying to help me remember from back then. Something she says makes me think of that one time when, fuck, what was her name? I feel like an asshole I can't remember her name after I fucked her numerous times. Then it dawns on me, her name was Alice. Anyway, we'd been lying in her bed after a crazy night of sex just, I guess talking, trying to get to know one another. She asked me if I'd ever given any thought to a threesome. Then she specifically told me with another man because she's too jealous to have another woman in bed with us. I laughed at first because I didn't want to look like the question intimidated me, though it did. Up to that point I'd been involved with one threesome, and it was two chicks.

Anyway, when I told Alice no, I stupidly informed her a couple of my brothers on my team were into shit like that. Now that I'm reminiscing, that was the night I called it off. She went off on me, calling me a prude and I thought my shit didn't stink. That had me cracking up, which made her even madder. Since I'm not one to argue, it was easier to get out of her bed, get dressed, and get gone. On the way out, I told her Mayhem, Coma, Sardines, and Bones were more open-minded than I was. I left it like that when she picked up the vase of flowers I brought to her that night and flung them at my head.

Holy shit, could it be? Had one of my brothers in arms betrayed me? Grabbing Claire, I lift her off me and quickly fly off the bed, my intention to grab my phone. Not realizing in



my distracted mindset, I not only lift Claire, but fling her harder than I think, and she lands on her ass with a thud. Her huge eyes look at me for a brief moment, then to my utter surprise she starts giggling then laughing. When I offer her a hand up, she reaches up at the same time she snorts, then to my complete shock I hear a soft fart. Her face instantly turns red, then she's up and running to the bathroom, slamming and locking the door. I'm still in the same place, hand extended, when it hits me. Goddamn, Claire is perfect. The look on her face was priceless and we will be laughing about this for years to come.

Walking into her front room, I grab my phone, trying to think who to call first. I decide on Nova but it goes straight to voicemail. So next up is Tex. As usual he's gruff.

“Yeah, Danny, what do you need?”

As I explain to him what I remembered, I hear the door to the restroom open and see Claire trying to sneak back to the bedroom, head down. I whistle, shaking my head, then point to the couch. Hesitantly, she follows my hand to the couch and sits at the farthest edge. I listen to Tex and answer his questions. Then abruptly he disconnects, which means he's already working with the information I just gave him.

“Claire, darlin', look at me. Don't worry about it because I'm not. It just shows me you're comfortable with me. Do you get mad at the boys when they fart? I'm sure they are little clowns trying to outdo each other. Come on, darlin', we have so much bigger shit to deal with. You good?”

She nods but doesn't say a word, so I sit next to her pulling her close. One finger lifts her head and I drop my lips onto hers for a very intense kiss. Once I feel her relax, I then get us both off of the couch and head back to bed. Time to try and get some sleep. Not sure about Claire, but I'm fucking exhausted.

“Danny, I'm so sorry. Thanks for being so cool about it. Goodnight.”

I glance down into the face of the woman I'm in love with, who's embarrassed because she passed wind, as my mom would say. Cute as can be.

“Darlin’, learn this now, we never go to sleep without a goodnight kiss. So pucker up, Claire, here I come.”

Hearing her giggle right before our lips meet has me smiling too. I get a small taste of her then with her held tightly to my side, I drift off to sleep, not having a clue what’s coming next.



## ‘TEX’

With burning eyes and cramps in my hands, I reach down and rub my stump, as I took the prosthetic off hours ago. My entire body is in pain, but I’m finally getting somewhere. Nova and Danny are going to lose their shit when I share this information with the two of them.

All men named have secrets, some worse than others. I’ve narrowed it down to two of Danny and Nova’s brothers. I just can’t find a reason, no matter what I do. Might need the guys to interview these men with me in their ears. Hearing bare feet coming down the long hallway, I shut down the five computers in front of me and push the laptop cover closed. A brief knock comes before the love of my life enters the room.

“Mel, you need something? Everything okay? Kids good? Sorry I’ve been in here so long, just trying to figure some shit out for Danny and Nova. I could take a break though, if you’re up to a cup of coffee with your husband.”

She throws her head back laughing.

“John, that’s your go-to when you know I’m sporting a come-to-Jesus moment or when I have a bone to pick with you. Yeah, take a break. Let’s get some food in you and some water. Probably half dehydrated. Come on, husband of mine, oh, you took off your prosthesis. I could make you something and bring it back.”

“No, Mel, just give me a second. Can I ask you a question?”

“Honey, you can ask me anything, at any time, you know that.”

“What has a woman want to spend time in bed with two men? And don’t take it the wrong way, not looking for anything like that. I have enough trouble trying and making sure I take care of all of your needs, believe me, you’re a wildcat in our bedroom.”

She smiles but seems to give it some thought.

“Don’t know, John, never had that thought, but saying that doesn’t mean it’s wrong. We all have our desires and it’s no one’s business but yours and the person or people involved. I’m about you love who you love, and you know that. When you’re ready, come into the kitchen, going to make you an omelet, get some protein into you.”

Watching her, my heart fills with so much love. At that moment my computer goes static. Information on top of information is starting to come in. I know it is going to take me the entire night, and probably part of tomorrow, to get through all of this, so after putting my leg back on, I get up and go join my wife for a brief thirty minutes of unconditional love.

\* \* \*

DAMN, that took way more than thirty minutes. Though after my omelet, Mel convinced me I needed a shower, which I sure the hell did. Once under the warm water I took my time as my muscles had tightened from spending way too much time in my office without my leg on, so I didn’t get up and move like I’m supposed to. When I got out of the shower and was drying off, doing my hopping on one foot into our bedroom, almost fell on my ass because Mel was spread across the bed. So now an hour and forty-five minutes later, and me more relaxed than I’ve been in probably a week, I’m back at it.

Trying to start from the beginning of the onslaught of information, I see something that has me look twice. No fucking way, that can’t be right. Checking it, I’m shocked to

see it is. Shit, this is something Nova and especially Danny need to be made aware of. Continuing on, I go through all the checks Nova wanted for the team then start with this other issue that has come to my attention. Trying to pin down this woman, Alice, is becoming more of a problem than I thought. What I saw has my attention now. Nothing is showing up, it's like she vaporized into thin air, which is impossible. I've worked with Delta, SEAL, and other teams, and even they can't totally vaporize. Well, there might be one or two within the teams but she's a civilian with no specialized training.

Then it dawns on me. Why am I assuming she's not military? She met Danny and his team at a base in the middle of nowhere. I reach for my satellite phone, hitting one button and wait for his voice.

“Yeah, Tex, got anything yet?”

“Nova, this woman, Alice, was she military or civilian? I've been assuming but something isn't sitting right, and I got to follow up on it. I know the guys called her a bunker bunny, but what if she was a different branch than the men, and no one noticed since they were thinking with their small heads, the one without the brain cells. Any way to check that, or do we have a last name? I'll run it through my system, if she's in the military one, then I'll find her.”

“Tex, let me reach out to a few of the guys who ‘knew her,’ if you know what I mean, in the biblical sense. Not sure last names were even mentioned during those trysts, but from what I'm hearing Danny was with her for a bit over a month. If anyone should know, it would be him. Also, I'll share what you just told me so he can be prepared and have those around him in the loop also. Even though we don't know who's personally involved, we have to plan this safe, bottom line. Thanks, brother, for jumping right on this. Let me know if you find any other bullshit out. This crazy world we live in, Tex. Give my love to Mel and the kids.”

After disconnecting with Nova, I jump right back into all the information. Damn, what is wrong with people, whatever happened to just being a good human being in society? This kind of shit scares me to death now that I have a family.

Anyway, one page at a time. Looking at some team members of Nova and Danny's bank accounts. These men and women live on next to nothing just to serve our country, and then the people around them in service jobs risking their lives.

I almost missed it but, thank Christ, before moving on I always scan the page. It was at the end of the fourth paragraph. Rereading twice, I smirk to myself. Motherfucker, gotcha. Thought no one would catch this, didn't you? It's almost buried so deep but nothing is ever too deep for my eyes, you asshole Coma. Why not share with your team the struggles you've had. Each and every soldier deals with different forms of post-traumatic stress. Though according to his files, he harbors some negative feelings for some of his team because he feels as if they left him behind. He looks at Danny and gets angry because he seems like everything is going great in his life while Coma struggles to get out of bed just about every morning. This information tears at me 'cause I get it, been there myself. Gotta reach out to my brother Coma, get him on the right track, for sure.

I grab my phone and shoot a text to Nova. Want to keep digging, never know what else I might be able to find. Too bad this is going to affect the entire team, not just Danny and his new woman, Claire, and the adorable twins everyone is talking about. Something good comes in and something rotten must go out. Circle of life.





## ‘CLAIRE’

Remembering what Danny and Nova told me, I carefully pull into the employee side of the parking lot at the shelter. I’m a bit nervous as Jean mentioned we had a new volunteer starting today. A woman named Ali, who’s supposed to be close to my age, according to my boss. My sister Rie is stopping by so we can go to lunch, so I’m not stuck with this new person all day and having to take her with me to lunch. And that’s sounds shitty, but usually I don’t do well with people I don’t know. Not like Marjorie, who can befriend someone in one point two seconds.

When thinking of my sister, automatically Roan and Lachlan come to mind. They spent the night and from what Rie told me, Uncle Herb was going to have them help with outside chores today. Probably to try to get them to burn off some of their little boy energy. God, I wish I had a third of it. Grabbing my water, sweater, and phone, I make my way to the side entrance, not paying a lick of attention. Until I plow right into someone, who pushes me off of them and I bounce off the building before landing on my ass hard.

“Damn it.”

“Well, princess, watch where the hell you’re going and you won’t get knocked on your bubble ass.”

Before I even lift my head to get a glimpse of the witch who rode her broom to work, the door opens and slams shut. Oh for the love of all that is holy, please tell me that she-dog is not who I have to spend the next six and a half hours with,

except for lunch, training. We are going to get into a catfight, I can almost guarantee it.

Pulling the handle, the door doesn't even budge. What the hell? Wait a stinking minute, did someone purposely lock the door and me out? Well, screw that, Jean gave me a key, ha ha. Unlocking the door, I stomp in and almost run into poor Chris, Jean's son.

"Morning, Claire, need some help?"

Seeing how much the last day or so affected him, I smile brightly at him.

"Good morning, Chris. How's your day starting off? And, yes, can you grab this please before I drop it and the lid comes off and I spill water all over the floor. I'm having one of those days."

He reaches for my huge travel mug that contains my ice water and carefully holds it in his one hand.

"I'm okay, you know, lots going on. New employee, Mom said. Not to mention all the stuff, you know, we went through. Claire, I'm so sorry if you got the impression of..."

"No, Chris, stop right there, honey. We're good and you helped Nova and Danny out a ton. They both told me they feel good knowing you're here when I am, so let's leave it at that. Anything else going on?"

"Well, right before you came in, a woman slammed in and locked the door. When I told her we don't do that, she told me to mind my own damn business before she gets me fired. Guess she doesn't know my mom is her boss. She also told me I needed to take better care of my appearance or folks would stop coming to adopt the animals because I'd be scaring them away. She also called me a derogatory name, you know, for slow people. Nope, not going to say it. She is really having a bad day, I'm guessing. Think that's the new girl my mom hired through that internet service. We'll have to wait and see if she works out."

Just as Chris is ending, I hear footsteps and looking up, I see the woman he's speaking about. She's got the meanest

look on her face as she approaches.

“So now you’re a snitch too. Whatever, you loser. Like she even matters. I’m going to meet with Jean and make sure she knows both of you are not only time wasters, but liars. If I have my way, you both will be out on your asses before you know it. Oh, good morning.”

With that she strolls down the hallway to Jean’s office. I look at Chris, who is shaking his head, and we both follow her slowly. By the time we hit the office and walk in, big mouth is sitting down and Jean is looking at her with big eyes. I know that look, Marjorie told me about it when I started. She said if Jean ever directs her big-eye look at me, shut the hell up and run. Both Chris and I lean against the doorway. Jean’s eyes roll over us before she sits back, clearing her throat.

“Enough already. You’ve been here what...twenty minutes, and you think you have it all figured out. Listen here, missy, I’ve been doing this job for over ten plus years and there is no right or wrong answer. There is an ignorant one, and sorry to say what you just said fits the bill. No, let me finish. Not sure you have met some of my staff. That young man is Chris, he works in the janitorial department. Ooh, and yeah, he’s my son. And that right there is Claire, she works in the kennels and is in the process of learning some teaching and training techniques. And guess I should tell you she’s my best friend’s sister. Chris, Claire, meet Ali. This is her first day and she’s already full of ideas and sass. Hopefully, this too will pass.”

Ali turns fully our way and gives Chris maybe a second or two of her time then her eyes drop on me. The sheer look in her eyes has a shiver run up and then down my back. What the hell? I’ve never seen or met her before, what’s her problem? I just let it go and stare back. Guess you could say she’s attractive, if you like the phony kind. She’s wearing way too much makeup to work in a shelter, where no one normally sees you but shelter animals and other employees. Her clothes though right, jeans and a T-shirt, look brand spanking new. And her white gym shoes won’t last fifteen minutes in a pen. Again, her problem.

“Okay, so here’s what I have planned for today. Claire, give me like twenty minutes with Ali then you and Ginny will take her back and show her how the back end works. That includes cleaning and mucking the pens, walking the dogs, and working in the cat rooms. Nothing is off the list, show her everything. When Claire leaves for lunch, Chris, you and Mike will take over and show Ali the outside runs and pens. How’s that sound to everyone?”

Chris and I nod but Ali stares at Jean for a second or two before she erupts like a crazy woman.

“Wait a minute, you expect me to clean dog runs and scoop out cat litter boxes? Where was that stated on the application? I thought the most I’d have to do is sit at the front desk greeting people, and maybe bring an animal out for them to see, or worst-case scenario, walk a dog or two. Sorry to say, Jean, but I don’t have the stomach to be cleaning up animal waste. Is there anything I can do that won’t involve that? Please, you know my situation, I need a job.”

Jean shakes her head before looking at us.

“Go ahead, you two, give me a minute with Ali. I’ll call if I need you to come back in. Thanks for starting your day off in here. Oh, Claire, that one dog you and Danny were looking at for the boys is supposed to get fixed this week. Let me know if you guys are actually taking him or not. Thought Danny said he was taking a break after what happened to Harold and Matilda during that fire. Damn, do I feel for him.”

I wasn’t watching Jean but Ali and that small smirk on her face made me want to punch her, which shocks me as I’m not a violent person. She glances at me and raises her eyebrows. Then she just stares at me until she raises one hand and wipes an imaginary tear off her face. Yeah, need to let Jean know this one’s elevator isn’t stopping at all her floors. That’s for sure.

\* \* \*

ON MY HANDS AND KNEES, trying to get the vomit out of the corner of Tarzan’s cage, I don’t hear anyone walking behind

me until I hear a voice that has me letting out a blood-curdling scream.

“What the hell?”

“Damn, Claire, so sorry, hon. We need to talk, my office, right now. Follow me, please.”

This time I hear Jean’s footsteps as she walks away from me, assuming I’m going to follow her. Today is not turning out the way I thought it would. Everything that can go wrong has, and my gut is telling me more of this shit show is about to happen. Hurrying up, I get to my feet and almost run to catch up with her. She’s hauling ass, which is so unlike her.

Once we reach her office, she looks around and motions for me to enter first, then she follows, closing then locking the door. I look at her to see her entire body is tense and her eyes are shifting all around the room. From the short time I’ve worked with Jean, I know not to rush her so I impatiently wait. Well, until a loud knock on the door has me almost wet my jeans as I move around the desk, for what, I don’t have a clue.

“Give me a minute, Claire, it’s okay. Promise.”

She opens the door to Nova, Danny, and a red-faced Chris, who’s breathing like he just ran a marathon. Danny immediately comes to me, pulling me into his arms. That’s when I see Nova has a gun at his side.

“What’s going on? Please tell me. Chris, are you okay? Sorry, but it looks like you’re ready to have a heart attack. Sit down, take a minute. Nova, what’s with the gun? You’re all scaring me.”

Danny leads me to a chair then kneels beside it, while Chris and Nova sit on the small love seat, Jean hovering over her son. Nova looks to Danny, who I can feel nods.

“Claire, before I start, the twins are okay. Now, something put Jean off about Ali so she called us when she went to use the ladies’ room. That’s where Chris saw her trying to get back to the kennels which, thank God, you all keep locked. When she knew she wouldn’t get back there she went nuts. Chris tried to contain her but she grabbed a can of paint and hit him

over the head. He still managed to grab her by the legs and bring her down. Well, that is until a guy walked in with a hoodie covering his head. He kicked Chris a couple of times until he released Ali. She stood up, leaned down, and snarled at him before leaving her warning.”

Nova stands and kneels directly in front of me, grabbing a hand.

“Claire, her warning was for Danny. Remember how we were investigating our team and shit. Well, Ali isn’t her name.”

Before he can say it, the name comes out of my lips softly.

“Alice.”

“Yeah, that’s who that was, and her warning was ‘No one leaves Alice until she’s done with them.’ And she wasn’t done with Danny, back in the day, and for sure not now either. So watch out for what comes next.”



## ‘ALICE’

Well, fuck, that didn't go as planned. I never thought in a million years Danny's current piece of ass would not only be there but would be the one training me. No way I could even be in the same room with her for six plus hours, let alone her trying to tell me what to do. And that asshole knew this before he sent me in there. The more I think about it, the more I get the feeling he was setting me up to take the fall for all of his debauchery and recent crimes. Well, that is not going to happen because he tortured and killed those women and dogs, not me.

Trying his number again, it goes straight to his auto robotic voicemail.

“You dick, call me when you get this. Not sure what your plan is, but this is getting out of hand for me. We need to meet and agree to the next steps because I'm telling you now, I'm not going down for all of the shit you've been doing. Pick up the phone, asshole, and call me.”

Throwing the cell phone on the unmade bed, I walk to the bathroom, pulling my long hair up, and grabbing one of the scrunchies on the counter so I can put it up in a messy bun. Knowing I'm playing with the devil, I decide right here and now to have a backup plan to protect myself. Going back into the bedroom, I grab the phone off the bed, look for what I want, and sit down. Time to cover my own ass in case this psycho decides he doesn't need me anymore. Hitting play, I aim the phone directly at my face and start from the beginning. This is going to take a while, but need to go into great detail so



if I'm not around and this is found, the authorities will understand what, where, why, and how. Best I can do. It's starting to dawn on me that I'm being used and have been for quite a while. This has nothing to do with me, but all to do with his hatred for Danny. Not only have I been being used again but also, unknown to me, spied on through my own phone.

Across town in a small cabin no one knows about, or remembers, I'm being watched as I tape the plan and all the events up until now. If I had known and could have seen his face and worse, those dead as hell eyes of his, then for sure I would have run far, far away.

\* \* \*

TRYING to fall asleep after that video is nearly impossible. For God's sake, how the hell did I end up here like this? All because I let my imagination run wild when I met Danny. After the video, I took the time finally and went over everything in my head. Never once did Danny give me the impression we were more than, guess you could call it 'friends with benefits.' I made up the rest in my head. And he tried so hard to let me down gently, I was just such a bitch. Shit, I made a huge mess of things and now things are out of hand. Then to top it off, I fucked his brothers to try and make him jealous.

I need to speak to Danny and Nova immediately, before that maniac does something or hurts and kills another woman. As I reach for my phone, I hear a noise outside of my extended-stay hotel room. What the hell, someone getting in late or having company. Maybe one too many beers.

I look down and push Nova's number because I'm sure Danny won't pick up, though this isn't the number he knew, back in the day. The phone engages within a ring in a half.

"Ya got Nova, what's so goddamn important to have you call me in the middle of the fucking night when I'm sleeping?"

“Sorry, Donovan, but I think not only am I in trouble but need to make amends for my stupidity. If you don’t know, this is Alice.”

I hear him take a deep breath just as another noise comes from the outside of my room. Now this isn’t some cheap-ass place, I have a separate bedroom then a kitchen with dining and a living room, along with a huge bathroom. What the hell is going on? Getting up, I go to push the bedroom door open but it doesn’t move. Now what? I try again, giving it a bit of a push with my shoulder... nothing. Then I start to smell something.

“Alice, what are you doing calling and talking to me, for Christ’s sake, like nothing has happened? Woman, you are in so much trouble it ain’t funny.”

“Nova, you’re right. I’m in trouble right now. Someone barricaded my bedroom and I’m smelling something foul. Hang on for a second.”

“Don’t go, Alice, where are you at? Goddamn, woman, you’re going to be the death of me yet.”

That’s what I hear as I run to the bathroom, grabbing two bath towels and soaking them in the shower. Rushing back, I fold them lengthwise and put them up against the bottom of the door. I can still smell something but not as strong.

“Nova, you there? Before anything else, I made a video on my phone but I’m guessing this asshole somehow knows that now. It’s saved to my cloud under my grandma’s name, Gertrude Lowering. I’ve explained everything, how I got involved. No, this isn’t my mission, Donovan. I need a favor, yeah, that’s right, I’m asking, please tell Danny and Claire I’m so sorry. Now I’m at the extended-stay hotel just on the outskirts of town. Room three fifteen. I’m not going down without a fight, but get your fine ass here as soon as you can, please.”

With that, before he can say a word, I hang up. Why I didn’t fall for Donovan, I have no idea. He’s badass, hot as shit, and has that devil in his eyes. I look around after throwing my pajamas on the bed, grabbing my panties and bra,

putting them on. Then my jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. Going to the closet, I pull my gun safe out and put my hand to it. Hearing the click I pull out both of my weapons, Glock 19s. Knowing both are locked and loaded, I have thirty-two bullets before I need to drop the empty clips and reload.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I realize I'm totally fucked. There is no window in the bathroom, and the windows in the bedroom are rectangular and about seven or eight feet off the floor, in a room with ten-or twelve-foot walls. No way to climb to them, and even if I could, wouldn't be able to hang on and break them. Guess I could shoot them out, which is my plan if a gas is forced into this room. I've closed the bathroom off, so worst case, I can go into the walk-in shower and blow my brains out if I have no other choice. I do know this asshole is not going to let me survive if he can help it.

I feel the vibration before the actual explosion. Not sure what it is, but it's close enough to shake this building. I move quickly, grabbing my backpack on the way to the bathroom. Closing and locking the door, I squat in the walk-in shower, both guns aimed at the door. I have a huge Bowie knife on the shower floor and some other weapons in case I need them. Over the years I've watched and listen to every service guy I've been with.

The waiting is the worst part. Another vibration but not as intense. Maybe because I'm in the shower. I look up and see a small crack in the ceiling starting to spread. Son of a bitch, he's trying to have the building collapse onto itself. And if that happens there isn't a chance in hell I'll survive. Not sure why, but I grab my phone out of my back pocket and pull up my text message application.

I look for the names I want to include starting with Danny, Nova, Mayhem, Bones, Coma, Mustang, Sardines, and finally, Claire's. I type what I feel needs to be said and sit on my ass, looking at the text. I've said all I can in this text and more so on the video. Don't know what else I can do. Pressing my head against the cold tiled wall, I feel it before it happens. A single tear runs down my face, which with a gun in my hand I

wipe away angrily. I brought this shit on myself and will pay for it too.

When the third vibration hits, my finger presses send and I glance up to see a second and third crack appear in the ceiling. Yeah, this motherfucker is going to get his way, as usual. He might be able to kill me but it won't stop what I've put in motion, that's for sure. When I hear the sirens, one thought goes up, *none of my former friends are close by.*

Then it dawns on me that I can do something to try and save myself. I jump up and out of the shower and unlock the door, grabbing and struggling to bring it into the bathroom with me. Taking the Bowie knife, I slice it down the middle. I put one half on the shower floor. Then I lie down, pulling the other half on top of me. Once settled, I do the only thing left I can do.

Pray.



## ‘DANNY’

“Dude, ain’t no way in hell I’m going to stay away, so shut the fuck up. Yeah, I’m already in the truck and thank the powers above, Claire is at Marjorie and Herb’s house with the twins. Knock it off, brother, of course they have protection, you set it up. I have no idea who’s on guard duty at this moment, but I’m sure whoever it is will have her back. Wait, just got a message. Fuck, it can wait. So what else did that psycho bitch say to you, Nova?”

“Danny, fuck I got a message too. It’s from Alice, hang on, gonna put it on speaker and have my system read it out loud.”

Waiting on him to get it set up, I press the gas pedal even harder, knowing I’m going way over the speed limit. Thank God I have the blue flashing lights. They help out a bit as people tend to get the fuck out of my way.

“Dude, fuck, can’t get it to work. I’m gonna pull over for a quick second. Don’t hang up.”

This is one of the few times I wish my homestead wasn’t so far out of town in the wrong direction. I can hear Nova swearing and cursing but nothing yet.

“Danny, fuck, this is a total clusterfuck. Alice sent a text to every one of us who were deployed together, back in the day. She freely admits she lost her mind over you and couldn’t let go, though she fucked her way through most of your friends. You know the woman scorned saying, right? Anyway, after we all left, she hooked up with a guy who she thought was the one. Then she found out slowly he was the devil reincarnated.

“Do you remember that one mission when we were told to hit that small village outside of Panjshir Valley? I remember how we waited for orders and we watched the villagers come and go. God, how many hours did we just hold and wait? Couldn’t wait to get out of that area. Then the orders came in that this was a compound search and clear operation. After we asked for clarification three times, I remember that captain coming over the radio screaming that we were given an order.”

Listening to Nova, I’m getting a bad feeling in my gut. I hate to remember or even think about that mission. It was one of the main reasons I left the service for good. *Power makes men evil*, I think to myself.

“Danny, not going to go into details but according to Alice, one of the women who was shot in that operation was pregnant. I know, it’s killing me too. She also had two little children who were not there at the time, thank God. Anyway, she said the woman lived for a short time as a paraplegic. The baby was born but only lasted a few hours. Guess there was a house fire, and neither she nor the family pets got out. The husband came home and couldn’t save her. Not sure how she knows all of this, but that man lost his mind. He gave, yeah, you heard me right, he actually gave his young children to his brother and sister-in-law. Then he disappeared, never to be seen again. Alice’s words, you know she loves being dramatic.

“Long story short, he hooked up with Alice because in his research he found out she knew all of us. The men who, in his eyes, slaughtered his village and killed his wife, baby, and family dogs. And for some reason he was told you led that attack on the village, Danny. He wanted an in, but didn’t realize by the time he found and hooked up with her we had all moved on, either to continue our careers or finished our tours and left the service. Alice said at first, after she explained how no one was there, he seemed to be okay and wanted to build a life with her. Then something shifted in him and she said he became psychotic and manic. The first time he came to her smelling of chemicals and covered in soot, she freaked out. When she told him no to sex, he raped her repeatedly like a madman. And the story gets worse from there.”

“Nova, what the fuck? Not only was that a long time ago, but it was war. We followed orders, and when we realized by asking questions that led us to find out that prick of a captain had his own agenda, we all did what we did. None of us knew the powers above us had been in that village numerous times and had started a relationship with the woman, or he was such a dick that when he got her pregnant, he didn’t want anyone to find out. So, we became expendable and were used as weapons to hide his deception. Son of a bitch, thought we left that back in Afghanistan. Now what, Nova?”

“Alice was on the phone with me when something started to happen. I think whoever this fucker is, he’s going for her now. I’ll meet you there. Already put a call into nine-one-one so emergency vehicles should either be there or close to it.”

Before I can say a word, he hangs up. My head is spinning because I would have never thought the person committing all these horrific murders was someone from our military past. As I get closer to town, traffic is pretty heavy for this time of the evening. Something must be going on. Then right before my eyes, in the distance, I see a huge blackish plume of smoke rising up into the night. Holy fuck, what the hell is that?

\* \* \*

THE AREA IS A DISASTER. Not sure what was used but the building went down hard and sloppy, that’s for damn sure. Looks like whoever set this up to blow thought they knew what they were doing. First, the reinforced concrete supports were blown. Then, from what we can guess by the destruction, linear shaped charges were used to every steel support. Finally, the lower floor was supposed to be blown to control the collapse. It didn’t happen that way, which explains the mess up on top.

The building didn’t go all the way down though. So very carefully they are trying to see if this will be a rescue or a recovery situation. I can see one or two SAR (Search and Rescue) dogs already. My God, how far is this guy willing to go? Looking around, I see some of my firehouse team here



already. Paco is on a main line with Styx having his back. Till is just heading back into what is left of the building, and I see Cap giving orders to Rome, Lightning, and Lil' Man.

“Danny, over here, man.”

Hearing my name being screamed, I turn to see Nova standing with Mayhem, Bones, and Coma. The closer I get to them is when I get a clearer view of Mayhem and Coma. They both look like hell and either got in one hell of a bar fight, or something happened to them both.

“What the fuck happened to both of your faces? Jesus Christ, still can't get along in the sandbox?”

Coma's head drops but Mayhem, I can literally hear him growl before his eyes start shooting daggers my way. Not sure why I'm getting major stink eye from him but don't have time to worry about it. Got so much more on my mind. That is until Coma lifts his head and lets loose.

“You know, Danny, everything isn't always about you. For fuck's sake, Mayhem and I were kidnapped and doped. When we woke up, we were in a dank, dark basement. We both were tied up, and I think left to die. We were closing in on Sayyid Naim Latif. From what Nova told us just now, this is the man Alice somehow got hooked up with. We killed his wife and baby so he wants all of us to suffer. Anyway, as everyone knows I'm not good in the dark and Mayhem here hates small places, so let's just say it wasn't a fun trip. Mayhem managed to find a screwhead, and he used it to rip through the ropes.

“When we finally got out of that basement, what we saw almost sent me back down. We found two women almost dead and a bunch of dogs in crates also, starving to death. The weird thing is they all had fresh water, who knows, but it seemed like that person worried more about the dogs than the women. They were obviously beaten and I think raped too. Called for help, then we were making our way back when we heard the call on the radio, right before we both got that text from Alice.”

When he closes his eyes, I instantly know where he's at.

“Coma, you need to tell us something, brother? What’s been going on with you?”

Mayhem to my utter surprise pulls Coma close, holding on tightly.

“Yeah, Danny, guess I do. See I’ve been struggling for some time and even gave thought to putting a bullet in my head. Don’t remember, been leaning on booze and even drugs on and off for a while, but Alice showed back up and wanted to get our old party started again. I took her up on it until she wanted Mayhem to join in. That pissed me off, like I’m not enough, but when she started asking tons of questions about you, Danny, something felt off. Then this asshole suddenly started following me everywhere, getting into my business. Though if he hadn’t, I might not be here talking to all of you. Everyone has problems, Danny.”

I watch Coma take a breath as Mayhem reaches for a bottle of water, handing it to him to drink. Then he continues.

“So I ghosted her and began tailing her as much as I could. She’s in with some guy who doesn’t want to show his face. He’s hanging out in a run-down shack about fifteen to twenty minutes from you and Claire. I freaked him out the other night ’cause I knew he was watching you and Claire in her house, so I snuck up and around just to freak him out. Mayhem was following me and I caught his tail, so I pulled off in a rest area and he followed. We had it out but didn’t pay attention until that asshole was right there, an automatic aimed in our direction. He actually handed us the towels with whatever the fuck was on it, and told us to cover our mouths. Well, that is after he got us in a huge moving truck. Next thing, we woke up in that basement. Now we’re here. I’m sorry, Danny, never meant for this to turn into such a mess brother. I’m a loser and waste of space.”

I approach Coma then grab him from Mayhem, pulling him in tight. I feel the shaking first before he breaks the fuck down. Damn, my brother is gonna need some professional guidance and help when we get through this mess, that’s for damn sure. And I’ll be there as will our whole team to pull him through.

Before I can say a word, I hear Nova yelling our way.

“They found her. They found Alice, though she’s barely breathing. She’s coming out right now. Helicopter is landing up the street to airlift her to General. No sign of Sayyid Naim Latif, but fuck, not one of us has any idea what he even looks like, for Christ’s sake. He could be standing right next to us and we wouldn’t know. We don’t know if Alice is going to make it or will work with us, even if she does. We’re totally fucked.”



## ‘CLAIRE’

Sitting in my sister’s gazebo, watching the twins running around brings a smile to my face. My mind is going all over, especially since that frantic call I received from Danny after I got that text from Alice. I almost feel sorry for her, but no, she’s a grown-ass woman. Why is she letting someone make her do stuff she doesn’t want to do? Call a cop, a friend, or family—reach out. She’s been a terror for how long and now she wants to make amends. I smell something foul.

Maybe because of the way she treated all of us that day at the shelter. Like she was too good to pick up poop or scoop a litter pan. Whatever. Hearing the door slam shut, I jump up to hear Rie giggling like a loon.

“Real nice, give me a frigging heart attack, sissy. Oh, is that glass of wine for me?”

As she places it down, she pushes it in my direction.

“Sure is, thought you could use something a bit stronger than water with lemon today. Any news from anyone yet?”

As we talk about what we know of the case and the text I received, Herb comes in, turning on the Bose system he has hooked up.

“Hey, do you guys know that extended-stay hotel right outside of town? It just blew up according to the news, and before you ask, that’s all they’re saying. Let’s see if the television has any updates.”

Reaching for the remote, he turns it on and first thing we see is a big plume of dark smoke as a helicopter is trying to

land off in a field. *Damn*, I think to myself, *I hope not too many people were in that hotel*. Though it is after dinner, and if you are staying in an extended-stay property, you probably finished dinner and headed back inside for the evening. Then I hear Rie gasp and I look her way, she's pointing at the television. When I look, right there is Danny, Nova, Coma, and Mayhem. Holy shit! This must have something to do with that case they're all working on.

So the three of us continue to sit, drink, and watch the boys as our conversation drifts from the case to the boys starting school, to the shelter, and finally about the pole barn I want to start working on. Herb laughs at that, but my sister knows once I put my mind to something it's going to happen. As nice of a night as it is, my heart is still heavy knowing Danny is out there and they are no closer to catching that crazy asshole. And until they do I will continue to have guards, as will my entire family, which is not a way to live but the alternative is not acceptable.

\* \* \*

LATER THAT NIGHT, after I've put the boys down and then Herb and Rie went up to bed, I am lying on the sectional, trying to read a book but it isn't working. Getting up, I go into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, hoping it will relax me. Deputies are still outside and I haven't heard from Danny, or any of the other folks, so I'm figuring everything is status quo.

Hearing a knock on the door, I'm at first startled but then realize it's probably a deputy or whoever Danny and Nova have guarding the house. Still I grab the Mace and put the whistle around my neck under my top before walking to the door.

"Yes?"

"Hey, um, Claire, do you mind if I use the restroom? Got a bit of a stomachache. Sorry to bother you."

I hesitate for a minute, and that's all it takes for the door to come flying at me and knocking me down. I hear a thud land

next to me and when I look...holy mother of God, George is lying next to me, blood pouring out of his head, eyes closed.

“Say one word, you bitch, and I’ll slice those brats’ throats right in front of you, hear me? Now get your ass up and move. Don’t try anything. Let’s go now, don’t test me, Claire.”

Trembling, I struggle to get back up on my feet as I’m dizzy as hell. He grabs my arm, pulling me back toward the door, when I hear Herb yell for him to stop. The asshole doesn’t even hesitate for a second before he raises his gun, aiming toward Herb. *Not on my watch, buddy*, I think to myself as I jerk his arm down just as he pulls the trigger.

I hear Herb telling Rie to get the boys in the safe room now. The guy doesn’t stop pulling me to the open door. I start to pray that Herb lets this asshole take me because I need my brother-in-law to watch over my boys and sister. My feet start to move a bit faster and I hear a dark chuckle from the body next to me.

We make it to some kind of SUV, it’s huge, but I don’t know makes of cars so I have no idea. Before he pushes me in the back, he covers my face with a cloth that instantly starts to make me see double. Before I pass out, he puts duct tape on my mouth and around my wrists and ankles. Then he literally throws me into the vehicle, not caring how I land. Those are my last thoughts when darkness takes over.

Not sure how much later I’m awakened by a slap across the face. The shock has me open my eyes instantly to see the face of insanity staring back at me, with evil radiating out of his black-as-night eyes. In a split second, I know today I will die. The only solace I have is my boys, family, and Danny are safe from this man.

“Welcome back, Claire. Sorry the accommodations aren’t what you’re used to, but hey, you won’t be around for long, so no worries. My plan was to have a grand finale for Danny. I wanted to include Alice, his whore from his past—Heidi, his present whore—and you, of course, Claire, his future whore. Well, at least I got two out of three. From what is being reported Alice is not long for this earth, so maybe all of you

can meet in whatever is waiting for you in the afterlife and compare your notes on how wonderful Danny was.”

Trying not to go into full panic mode, I glance around and see a bed in the middle of the room, a woman on there chained to the bed frame. I can't tell if she—please tell me—is alive. I'm currently on some kind of old love seat, all my limbs tied with duct tape.

“Guess I should introduce myself and tell you a story as to why we are here. We have a bit of time. My name is Sayyid Naim Latif and I'm from Afghanistan. Years ago, I was away from our village when American soldiers came in and annihilated every person there. Well, my child died almost instantly once it was born, but my wife was paralyzed by an American bullet to her spine. She survived somehow as half a woman. Our entire life changed. She had two service animals to help her. One day the children and I went out to pick up some items from the store and a fire started. She was trapped on the bed and the dogs refused to leave her, probably because they were unable to pull her to safety. Someone had tied her to the bed.”

Watching his face, I see the dark, evil smirk on his face. Oh my God, he killed his wife.

“Yes, Claire, you are right. Though I had a very good reason. She was a whore, cheating on me with an American captain. The entire village knew about the affair, yet no one told me. So this was the best part of my plan, I let it slip that the village was a Potemkin village. That means it was all for show to hide the weapons I lied about being stored there. No one defies me, Claire, ever. That bitch thought I wouldn't know the child was American. The day she died; she couldn't do a damn thing as she was trapped in her body that did not work. Those stupid animals should have left her to die alone, but they sacrificed themselves and she was not worth their loyalty. Anyway, my mind wanders. Let's get this part of the plan started, shall we?”

I'm confused because at times he spoke so elegantly then others almost belligerently. Dragging me to the bed, I see the woman has been his captive for a while now. First thing I



notice are the welts on her wrists and ankles. Cigarette burns run up and down her body. I can see these because she is only in a dirty bra and panties. Bruises old and new are covering her. But the thing that makes me catch my breath is her eyes. They are dead eyes, no emotion, not a spark of life. She lies there like she is ready to die. Well, fuck that, I'm not ready at all.

“Claire, for ease, if you need to speak to me call me Mr. Sayyid. Though not sure how much talking you're going to be able to do. Now let's begin, shall we? This is going to hurt you way more than me. And please scream, as loud and as much as you want, I'll fully enjoy all of it.”

Then he rips off the tape covering my mouth and I'm sure some layers of skin with it. I don't say a word though it hurts like a bitch. As long as I can, I won't give him my cries and pain. When he places me off to one side of the bed, he cracks the other woman upside the head.

“Heidi, come on, wake up now. You've had enough sleep, you whore.”

I hear her moan then slowly and cautiously her eyes open, and she sees me immediately. I don't know who she is at all, never saw her before right this moment.

“Claire, meet Danny's present before you. Heidi, meet who Danny dumped you for. Not the nicest guy out there if he's dumping and trading up on his women, do you think?”

Neither Heidi nor I say a word. Sayyid's face gets a bit red, telling me he's getting pissed off that we aren't mad at Danny for what he did. I do say something when he reaches for my clothes. It's not much of a fight since I'm not able to use my arms or legs, but I don't make it easy. Well, until he punches me in my stomach. I feel pain immediately as I can't catch my breath.

“Now, Claire, only I can manage how much pain you will suffer before your death. Because, dear, that is what is going to happen. Heidi and you are going to die. Now it can go as I plan or it can be beyond your imagination in terms of pain.

Your choice. Now I'm going to remove your clothing but will leave your undergarments on."

"I don't have undergarments on, these are my pajamas."

He takes a second to look at my cami and shorts, confused. Then he shakes his head in disgust.

"That's right, American women have no sense of pride. Well, I'll leave the bottoms on but the top comes off. Give me a minute, I probably have some clothing from the woman before you."

My breath leaves me as it dawns on me he plans on putting some woman's clothes on me that he murdered.

"No, don't bother. Take these off, I don't care."

Again he stares at me, then an evil grin appears on his face.

"Claire, you can try but it won't work. You can't seduce me with your siren body. Many others have tried, but I'm too strong and I will resist."

He once again comes toward me and rips my clothes off, leaving me naked as his eyes rake up and down my body. Closing my eyes, I pray that either Danny finds me really quickly or not at all. Nothing happens until I hear a door slam. I open my eyes to see Heidi and I are alone. She is watching me, not sure for what until she opens her mouth.

"We're both going to die so don't make it worse than it has to be. He's fucking crazy, a goddamn lunatic. Remember the reason we are both here. It's because of Danny Moretti. I hope he burns in hell. Now prepare because in less than a minute the gas will start to pour in. Just take a deep breath and let it do its work. Don't fight it, Claire, won't work no matter what you do."

I hear it before anything. Looking around, I see it's gathering, then I hear Heidi take a few breaths before she takes a very deep one. By the time her body releases it she's out like a light. I'm feeling dizzy and my vision is off. Taking the woman's advice beside me, I take a deep breath and that's the last thing I remember.



## ‘DANNY’

I don't think I've ever been so exhausted. Each and every one of us has given our all at this disaster. And that's what this is, that son of a bitch took down an extended-stay hotel, knowing people would be in the rooms. The SAR dogs have been busy as fuck, and they've brought more of them from all over the area.

I'm finally sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree, drinking a much-needed bottle of water. Just as I put the bottle to my mouth, my phone starts to ring. Reaching for it I see it's Herb, so I throw the water down.

“Herb, everything okay?”

“Fuck no, it's not okay, Danny. He's got Claire. That motherfucker walked into our home and took her. One deputy is dead and George isn't looking too good. He's on the way to the hospital, his head split wide open. Get her back, Danny, don't care what you have to do. Call whoever you have to but get Claire back to those two little boys screaming and crying upstairs for their momma. Bring her home for Marjorie, who's trying to be strong for those boys but whose heart is breaking. Please bring her back.”

That's the last thing I hear before I'm up on my feet screaming for who or what, I don't know. Nova is the first to me, then everyone else just falls in.

“The motherfucker took Claire. He has her. Oh my God, what do we do? He's got her. Goddamn, Claire's gone and it's all my fault.”

Not seeing it coming, my head snaps back from Nova's punch to my jaw. When I just stare at him, he does it again.

"Danny, pull your ass together. Nothing is your fault; this man is missing a fucking screw. Now let me tell the guy in charge here we are done. Everyone get over to Marjorie and Herb's. I need two of you to watch over those boys. This is a live or die order. Sayyid is going to go after the boys and whoever is watching will need to be willing to die to save Roan and Lachlan."

"Nova, I'll do it."

I look at Coma, who gives me a small smile. Then I hear another familiar voice.

"I'm with my brother Coma. Count me in."

Mayhem. Both of them willing to die for two little boys they barely know. I have no idea why or how but one minute I'm looking at my brothers, the next I'm on my ass, head in my hands feeling wet dripping out of my eyes. No one says a thing, they move along quickly. When I feel a hand tap my shoulder, I look up and am shocked to hell who's offering me a hand up. Goddamn Tex.

"Get your ass up, Mo. Don't have time for you to have a breakdown. Let's get moving. Come on, brother, I got ya."

Seeing him gives me some strength. I stand and when I look behind Tex, then I totally lose it. My brother, cousin, and best friend are walking my way. Holy shit my trinity is here.

After hellos and man hugs, we all pile into Tex's huge SUV, a Yukon Denali I think, and we rush out to Claire's family home. All-hands-on-deck that's what this is. I can only pray we find something to locate Claire and bring her home.

We've been going at it for at least an hour and nothing. We've searched the area and Claire's tiny house. All the cameras too. It's like he's a ghost. I'm starting to really panic; my chest is feeling heavy and I'm struggling to breathe.

"Brother, take a deep breath, hold it for five, then slowly let it out. Come on, we'll do it together."

I turn to see my kid brother giving me a shoulder to hold on to. It takes a minute or so but gradually I'm able to breathe a little better. He pulls me close, telling me Claire will be fine, I just have to have some faith in my team. Goddamn, when did he get so smart?

“Jesus, Luca, when did you get so smart? Thanks, I needed that.”

“I gotcha, Brother. Now, let's find your woman.”

Hearing someone yelling my name, I walk with Luca to where Nova has sheet after sheet of paper spread across the dining room table in Herb and Marjorie's house. These are documents Tex brought with him.

“Think we have something, Danny. According to this, some shell company has purchased twelve homes within the last two years. All fixer-uppers. Tex has been researching it, found the name Sayyid Naim Latif associated with this company. Tex narrowed down the search to four houses. Might turn out to be nothing, but it's worth looking into, brother.”

“Nova, hang on, let's take it a step farther. Tex, mind checking to see if all the buildings are still paying taxes, are still standing, or any permits requested?”

Everyone waits as Tex works his magic on his laptop.

“Bingo, only one is paying taxes and had some permits pulled last year. Two out of the three were demolished, and the last has been donated to, get this—an animal shelter. They are currently working on getting it up to par.”

“All right, Coma and Mayhem are here on duty watching the boys. I need someone to volunteer to go to Danny's, keep an eye on whatever is left of his pack up there. Also, someone to watch Herb's barn, which has the majority of Danny's pack and Herb's horses and donkeys. Got no idea what this jagoff has planned. Trying to cover all our bases.”

I leave all the planning up to Nova as I go to walk out of the house. That's where Marjorie catches me. There's total fear in her face and her eyes stops me in my tracks. She grabs both of my hands, managing to pull me closer to her.

“Please, Danny, promise me you’ll do whatever you can to bring Claire home.”

I pull her close to me, holding on tightly, not sure if it is for her or myself.

“I’d give my life, Marjorie, if it means I can bring Claire home to those two boys upstairs and to you.”

She kisses my cheek then turns without another word and leaves. *Fuck, not sure if I can take much more.* That’s my last thought before I jump into my truck, praying like crazy I find Claire before he does something to her.





## ‘CLAIRE’

Hearing an animal in pain has me opening my eyes. Lost for just a moment, then it hits me where I’m at. When I try to sit up, I’m pulled back to the filthy bed by chains. Next to me I hear the chains rattling for Heidi, who’s starting to move around also.

Before I’m able to comprehend the situation I’m in, something lands on the bed. Looking down I almost lose myself. For a quick moment I thought it was lil’ Archie. But the fur color is off just a little bit.

“Got you for a quick second or two, didn’t I, Claire? Think how Danny will feel when he finds your corpse with that little dog dead right next to you. This will tear him to pieces, then I’ll have my chance to kill him finally. When his guard is down and he’s in pain. Since I now have you, the present whore next to you is not useful. Time to have some fun. Well, I will, not sure you will, Claire. All I ask is you don’t scream too loud, want to concentrate on Heidi’s screams.”

Then I watch Sayyid as he starts to take his clothes off. As his body becomes visible, I see his body is covered in scars all over. Next to me, I hear Heidi whispering.

“Claire, close your eyes and turn your head. He’s a sadist so he’ll keep hurting me until I scream. Don’t pay any attention. Use the little dog, hold it and try to remember a better place. He’s going to be watching you for your reaction, try not to give it to him. Don’t worry about me, this isn’t the first time he’s raped me in front of someone. The girl before

you, he did it to me and the whole time she begged him to stop, which just egged him on. And made it worse for me.”

Feeling the bed move, I shift as far away from that side of the bed and turn my head to face away. It doesn't stop the sounds and brutality, but like Heidi told me, I have the little dog next to me and I'm able to hold him—I checked, it's a boy—close to me as I try to shut my brain off and my ears. I have no idea how long the torture goes on until I feel a finger moving up and down my arm.

Hearing him chuckle I still ignore him, letting the memories of my twins fill my head. It helps me to forget the situation next to me but brings to the surface the fact I'll probably never see my two little sons again. That has tears fill my eyes and run down my cheeks. The thought kills me, but still, I know I need to stay strong. Then I hear it and instantly think I'm going totally insane, but it's there again. Shamus's voice.

“Beautiful, you've got this. I'm always with you and Danny is getting close. Hang on, Claire. No matter what he does, our boys need their momma. Without you, those boys will never know the wonderful woman you are and more importantly, how much you love each of them. Fight, Claire. Don't give up.”

With that, the voice immediately stops, which tells me Shamus is gone. All these years, since I lost him, I begged and prayed for him to come back to me, talk to me, and he never has. Until now. My God, how much more can I be expected to take? I feel something wet against my side and go to wipe at it. When I bring my hand back, I scream because it's covered in blood. Heidi's blood. I say a prayer that he hasn't killed her before I shift and look that way.

Sayyid is covered in blood though Heidi isn't dead. Yet. What's before my eyes is what horror movies are made of and the demonic look in his eyes should scare the shit out of me, but it doesn't. Little does he know that I've been given a heads-up. Danny and his team are on the way. Will they make it before Heidi and I are killed? Who knows? What I do know is Danny won't let him get away with all that he's done.

“Claire, what’s the matter? Blood make you woozy?”

He’s laughing as he gets off Heidi’s body. I reach and grab her hand. She turns her head, a small smile on her face. She mouths, “I’m okay,” which I highly doubt, but all I can do is be here with her giving her whatever support I can.

Smelling gas has my attention immediately. Lifting my head slightly, I see Sayyid splashing gas on piles of garbage around the room. This is it, he will get his revenge on Danny for what in his mind is the military’s fault. When in all reality he killed his wife for cheating but won’t take the responsibility for it. Maybe he had some kind of breakdown when he found out, who the hell knows. He’s a damn lunatic.

“All right, ladies, this is how this works. Under the bed I’m going to have this pot filled with gasoline, these ropes soaking in it. You can’t see but the ropes are wrapped all around the bed frame. When the room is set on fire, it will take a bit before it reaches the bed, but when it does the ropes will ignite and burn away. The mattress will light up and then, well, you know the rest. Heidi, by that time you might already be dead but your body will fuel the fire. Claire, unfortunately, unlike the furry friend you’re holding—who I’m about to dose—you will feel everything. That’s the only way this works. I have a hard-wired camera that will record your death. That will be given to Danny to watch before he too experiences the agony I’ve been put through because of him and his team. Now, any last words before I depart?”

I hear Heidi struggling to breathe so I squeeze her hand, which she returns softly. She’s fading fast. I look at Sayyid and know I probably shouldn’t push him, but what the fuck, I’m about to die. My boys will grow up without either of their parents.

“Yeah, I have something to say, Sayyid. You’re a worthless piece of shit. Instead of confronting your wife about her affair, you must have made the remainder of her time on earth a living hell. She probably was glad the house burned down because she was finally free of you. Instead of being thankful to whoever you worship that your children weren’t present at either the village or at the house fire that you set that killed

your wife, you gave them away. You've spent most of the last ten years letting hatred and vengeance rule your life. The people's lives you have torn apart and those women, who had nothing to do with either of those horrific events, you killed for no reason. I don't know your faith but you will not be met by whatever you think you will. You will burn in whatever it is called, but we call it hell. So go to HELL, Sayyid."

Heidi squeezes my hand hard as he storms to the bed. Before I can do anything, he punches me multiple times in the stomach and then the face. I don't care because the more time he spends taking out his frustrations on me, he's not setting fire to this dump. Right before I lose consciousness, I hear him screaming that he's the winner, no one else. Then I fade to the darkness calling me with my last thought of my twins and Danny.



## ‘DANNY’

Nova is driving like a maniac, which I appreciate. We are heading to the farthest location that was purchased by Sayyid. The other was cleared by Paco, Rome, and Till. With us in the truck are Bones, Styx, and Sardines in the back. Behind us are two trucks filled with members of both of our teams. Some firefighters, some paramedics, and the rest are part of Nova’s company.

My gut tells me we are heading to where Claire is being held. The vehicle is so silent you could probably hear a pin drop. I close my eyes, doing something I haven’t done since the military... pray. But before I can start a deep voice starts talking to me in my head.

*“Danny, you need to have Nova drive faster. You’re close but he’s not waiting. If he lights that match, the dreams you’re having which include Claire, Roan, and Lachlan, will never come true. Don’t question this, just listen. The thought of Claire moving on gives me pain and hope. If you can’t figure out who’s in your ear, brother, you’re not as smart as I gave you credit for. I told Claire to fight, that you were close. Don’t make a liar out of me.”*

My eyes pop open and I look around the truck.

“Which one of you assholes was it? Don’t play with me, ain’t the time, motherfuckers. Nova, come on, brother, move your ass, we’re running out of time.”

They all look at me like I’m nuts. Then something that was said penetrates and my mouth slams shut. No way in hell,

couldn't be. Then from a distance I hear that same voice.

*"Yeah, brother, it could and it is. Godspeed, Danny. Keep my—no—our family safe."*

Before another thought can run through my mind, the truck skids to an abrupt stop. I look to Nova, who points out the front window. I see a house in the not too far distance.

"Danny, can't just drive up, he could put a bullet in her head. We need to approach it like any other mission. Are you able to do that, brother, or do we need to lock your ass down?"

Before I answer, another two trucks flank us. Everyone is getting out, checking their equipment. I take a deep breath before exiting the truck. Nova gives orders and everyone, including me, follows them. We make our way to the abandoned house in three teams, coming from every direction except behind the house, as it butts up against a hill. Everyone is using their internal earpieces but keeping communications to a minimum.

When Nova raises his hand, fist tight, everyone stops. Not sure what he's fucking waiting for. Just as I go to stand, the front door opens and Sayyid steps out, a cigarette in his hand. He looks around the perimeter then takes a drag off his cancer stick. We maintain and watch one of the most manic, dangerous, hostile killers we've dealt with personally in our country since we were all in Afghanistan.

When he finishes, he flips the cigarette off onto the graveled front yard, turns, and goes back inside. Everyone looks to Nova, who gives the signal, and once again we proceed toward the house. I know now Claire's in there. As crazy as it sounds, her dead husband Shamus told me. And if I told any of my teammates, they would want me to go into a seventy-two hour psych lockdown for sure. But just from the little Claire has shared, their love was sacred. And if I was dead and saw what is going on I'd do everything in my power to save her also.

Quietly through the earpieces, Nova gives the orders on entry into the house. Front door and side entrance through windows and such. We sync our watches and now wait. These

will be the longest five minutes of my life, for goddamn sure. Right when we hit under two minutes we all hear it. A woman's voice screaming and then a man's voice growling and the sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Nova gives the order and all hell breaks loose.

\* \* \*

ON ENTRANCE all I can smell are chemicals and gasoline. One of the windows tripped a wire alarm. It instantly starts blaring throughout the house. At the other window, the team must have seen it, so thank God only one alarm is penetrating our ears before the team is able to disable it. As we go through the front of the house, we hear the 'Oh my Gods' over the earpieces. Pushing my way to the front, I make it through the small hallway, which opens to the large back end of the house. I see a dilapidated kitchen area and then sitting right in the middle of the room is a metal bed with two bodies on it. Both are unconscious and one is bloody as fuck. I also see the chains holding them to the bed. As we approach a small dog next to one of the bodies tries to lift its head then strangely enough doesn't bark or growl but snuggles deeper into the body it's next to.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here? The boys are back in town, huh? And the big man is present too. How are you doing, Donovan, or do you prefer Nova now? Guess it hurts too much when someone uses that name, knowing that's the last word she screamed before she died? Do you ever forget that moment? I've wondered about that."

It takes everything for three of us to hold Nova back. We've all heard bits and pieces of what happened to his family, back in the day. How this asshole knows has me confused. But right now it's all about Claire.

"Come on, Danny, move a bit closer. I want you to see everything so it sits in your mind, rotting everything else that comes into your life. My original plan was to rape and burn her alive in front of you, but now I've got a better plan. First,



I'll rape Heidi here. You remember her, right? She's not been very cooperative, to say the least. I've had to punish her many times because she's been a very bad girl. Anyway, I'll rape and burn Heidi first so you can see what all those other women went through. Then I'll let you burn Claire."

"Why are you doing this, motherfucker? I didn't kill your wife or baby, I just was following orders. We found out later about the captain and your wife. Dude, that has nothing to do with us. He gave the order to annihilate the village, so we did. Followed orders, that's it. He had the ulterior motive to get rid of your wife. Also, he was working with the other side, so that saying everyone has a price is true. He was killing two birds with one stone, so to speak. We're all sorry about your baby and then later your wife."

He's watching me with an eerie look in those black as hell eyes of his. When I mention his wife, he laughs like a fucking maniac.

"Danny, you don't know do you? Intelligent American soldiers haven't figured it out. The fire that killed my wife was no accident. I made sure she had no help. I dosed the dogs so they couldn't move her off the bed. I taped then watched the cheating bitch burn alive. She deserved all the pain she received for dishonoring me and my family name. Now, your captain was another story. He begged and pleaded for his life. Let's just say it was slow and very, very painful. Just like Claire's over there will be. So let the show begin."

He flings open the robe he's wearing to show us he's naked and there's already blood all over him. As he walks toward the bed, I hear Nova's voice in my head but don't hear the command. When he reaches the bed, he climbs on the unconscious woman and then reaches, pulling the other woman onto her back. He pushes her hair back and oh my God, it's Claire. The little dog is growling and trying to nip him. When he goes to grab Claire's hair, the dog leaps, clamping down on Sayyid's wrist, biting hard.

Everything happens so quickly. One shot rings out, which I know from the sound is a sniper shot. Sayyid's body flies off the bed to the floor. People rush to the bed as I see Sayyid

reach into his pocket for a lighter. Before I can say a word, he clicks the lighter and a flame appears. Without thought, I run and jump, landing directly on his body. I push the lighter away and then my hands are around his neck. Hearing the noises he's making just adds fuel to the fire. Then I hear one word shouted so loud that it penetrated deep into my soul.

*"CLAIRE. Danny, get to Claire."*

After one last punch into Sayyid's face, I jump off of him and push my way to the bed. My God she's been beaten within an inch of her life but she's breathing, which is a good thing. Heidi is in much worse shape as I watch the paramedics using a defibrillator on her. My emotions are all over. Well, until I hear a shout to the side of us.

"NO!!! I win. I always win."

Looking that way I see Sayyid with some kind of container in his hands, holding it like he's about to throw it. Again, a shot rings out and this time I see the bullet enter his left side. Falling backward, the bucket empties on him. The gas smell hits me immediately and I watch with horrified eyes as he reaches out to the lighter left on the floor, lights it, and brings it to his robe.

The intense heat and whoosh of air has all of us backing away, pulling the bed with us. Nova is screaming for a fire hose as he wipes off his shirt, trying to put the fire out. And through it all Sayyid never screams or swears, just lies there on fire burning. I've never seen anything like it in my life.

"Danny."

Looking down into the most beautiful hazel eyes surrounded by the black and blue bruising, I lean closer.

"Yeah, darlin', I'm here."

"Shamus was right then. Please, can we go home? I need to see my boys, Rie, Herb, and your pack. Dude, take me home."

Then she passes out. The pain she must be in I can't imagine. Her words though are what ring in my ears. She mentioned her deceased husband like she just talked to him.

My emotions are all over as I feel one then two tears drip down my cheek. Then I get busy doing what my woman wants. Taking her home.



## ‘CLAIRE’

Wrapped up in the same throw Danny found me in the first time I met him, Dumbo and Bambi both lying with me on the sectional, my mind is at peace... as stupid as that sounds. My heart feels like that crack is starting to heal. The last couple of days since I was released from the hospital have been crazy. Alice didn't make it but Heidi did. She will have a very long recovery, but we've spoken and I think in the future we could be friends, well maybe. When you almost die you see things differently.

Danny and the twins have been wrecks and, as usual, my sister Rie is the strong one, handling everything that comes our way. The biggest surprise when I got back here was Herb. He was beside himself because he was taking the blame for my kidnapping. I pulled him close and told him the only fault was Sayyid's. And it was over. Took a while, but I think I've gotten him to come around. Danny and the twins are walking the dogs. There is temporary housing out back for them while the pole barn is reconstructed. I needed some time to myself, knowing what I must do. It is time; I take a deep breath and in my mind's voice speak to my first love.

“Shamus, thank you for what you did. If you hadn't reached out to both Danny and me, I might be wherever you are right now. After all this time of me begging to just hear your voice one more time, you just had to wait so you could be my hero one more time. You saved me and I'm so thankful.

“You know I love you and always will. Miss you every single day. Think about you always and just have to look at

Roan and Lachlan 'cause they're your miniatures, Shamus. But I need this, please know it doesn't take away my love for you. If you were still here, we'd be following our dream. Living each day to the fullest. But that didn't happen, no fault of yours, and since I'm alive I must start living it. Not just for me, but for our two lil' boys. Danny made me see I've been dishonoring you by not keeping your memory alive with the boys. I will start doing a better job of that, I promise. He's a good man, Sham, really. Yeah, I don't even truly know everything about him, but then I do. He reminds me a lot of you. Same kind heart and always watching out for the people in his life. Just like you always did. I want this, so going to go after it. This whole experience showed me life is what we make it. I learned when I lost you that nothing is guaranteed. Just want you to know the part of my heart I gave to you will always be yours until the day I see you again. I miss your arms around me or when we'd snuggle in bed. I'll never forget our first time together in the back of your truck under the stars, junior year after our prom. All those memories are in my heart, Sham, just as you are. What's that poem your mom had us use at the wedding? The ending was something like *'And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand.'* That's so frigging true, my love. Until we meet again, I'll do my best to make you proud of how our boys turn out. I love you, Shamus. Please, love, find your own peace."

Putting my head down, the tears come again, but this time they feel like cleansing ones. Both dogs lay their huge heads on me and lick my hands. Not sure how long we lie like this together, but when I feel someone sit down next to me, even without my eyes opening, I know it's Danny.

"Hey."

"Hey, yourself, you doing okay? Need anything, Claire? Are you in pain? Do you want me to get Marjorie?"

Just those few words have my heart fluttering. How did I get so lucky to find not only one good man in Shamus but another in Danny? I'm truly a blessed woman.

"Nope, don't need anything but you. Are the boys okay? I'm guessing Herb has them? He's going to spoil the crap out

of them again. Can you lie with me for a bit?"

Danny doesn't say a word, but I feel him shifting both Dumbo and Bambi outta the way, then he's next to me, pulling me close as he lifts the throw to cover the both of us. I sigh as his arms wrap around me.

"Thanks, Danny, no... let me finish. Not only for coming to my rescue but for being you. I never thought I'd have this again after Shamus. In my heart of hearts I believe he is the reason we are together. He picked the best of the best to take his place. No, don't say a single word. After what happened and during my recovery I've had a lot of time to think. Well, you won't let me do anything else, but I digress. You will never know how much you mean to me, my boys, and my family. Thank you for understanding and not being an asshole about my feelings regarding Shamus. Especially after what happened that day when he reached out to both of us, and for keeping it between us. To me it's something special that bonds the three of us together and that means so much to me."

"Darlin', look at me. Claire, come on. I told you before that I understand Shamus will always be a part of you. Those boys are his and yours. And what he did, no matter if it actually happened or our minds split to help us deal with the situation, I'm forever grateful to his memory. Now that we're here together where it all began, I want more. Now that we've come full circle, I want it all. Don't want to scare you off by any means, but this, you and me, is what I've been looking for. Yeah, I have my pack, which I totally love, and—just so you know—can't get rid of and can't guarantee the pack won't grow, especially with you at the shelter now. That's just how the both of us are. But with you I feel complete, as fucking crazy as that sounds. But time is on our side, thank Christ. It's been pretty heavy with emotions the last couple of days, so now just want to hold you close and just take a breath or two and relax. That okay, darlin'?"

Before I can answer, I hear the tap-tap-tap of nails on the stairs and then three more dogs make their way to the sectional, two using the stairs off to the side. Archie takes a spot at Danny's head after turning around and around for who

knows, like ten times to find the right spot. Cueball and Marshmallow squeeze in between the pits and start to fall asleep. Seeing all of this, all we're missing is the boys. I think, *it'll never get boring*. Glancing up, I again thank Shamus, as I know deep in my heart he had something to do with all of this. He'd find some way to make sure the three of us were taken care of.

“Of course, Danny, I can definitely do this. Oh, and if you ever try to get rid of any in the pack, you'll answer to me, got it, dude?”

As we clown around back and forth, like Danny said, it just feels right, like we've known each other forever. After what we've been through, don't think anything can be uncomfortable or weird again.

“Claire, you ever gonna shut up so we can get a bit of sleep? You need your rest so you can recuperate. Not sure how long I can go with just holding your hot as fuck body and not tasting or making love with you.”

“Well, I have my doctor's appointment in two days. Hopefully, they will release me for all normal activity. I miss you too, Danny. I just needed some time.”

He pulls me close, snuggling against me. Laughing, I move even closer to him and close my eyes. Before I fall asleep, I feel Danny's lips on my forehead and barely hear his softly spoken words, which tear at my heart in both pain and joy.

“Thanks, Shamus, I owe you, brother. Will protect all three of 'em with my life, promise. I trust ya to have our backs up there too, brother.”

As Danny closes his eyes holding on to Claire tightly, neither are awake when a beautiful shooting star passes by the huge back sliding doors, stopping off in the distance, shining down brightly on the house. The glow around the house almost looks like two hands surrounding and protecting it, as off in the corner another star is twinkling and guarding those inside.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author, D. M. Earl creates authentic and genuine characters while spinning stories that feel so real and relatable that the readers plunge deep within the plot, begging for more. Complete with drama, angst, romance, and passion, the stories jump off the page.

When Earl, an avid reader since childhood, isn't at her keyboard pouring her heart into her work, you'll find her in Northwest Indiana snuggling up to her husband, the love of her life, with her seven fur babies nearby. Her other passions include gardening and shockingly cruising around town on the back of her 2004 Harley. She's a woman of many talents and interests. Earl appreciates each and every reader who has ever given her a chance—and hopes to connect on social media with all of her readers.

For the latest news and updates on books and upcoming releases, you can subscribe to my newsletter: <https://www.subscribepage.com/dmearlnewsletter>. You'll receive a free copy of a book for joining.

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Cara Carnes: [Protecting Mari](#)

Kendra Mei Chailyn: [Beast](#)

Melissa Kay Clarke: [Rescuing Annabeth](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Samantha A. Cole: [Handling Haven](#)

KaLyn Cooper: [Spring Unveiled](#)

Janie Crouch: [Storm](#)

Jordan Dane: [Redemption for Avery](#)

Tarina Deaton: [Found in the Lost](#)

D.M. Earl: [Claire's Guardian](#)

Riley Edwards: [Protecting Olivia](#)

Dorothy Ewels: [Knight's Queen](#)

Lila Ferrari: [Protecting Joy](#)

Nicole Flockton: [Protecting Maria](#)

Hope Ford: [Rescuing Karina](#)

Amy Gamet: [Guarded by the SEAL](#)

Desiree Holt: [Protecting Maddie](#)

Danielle Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Jesse Jacobson: Protecting Honor  
Rayne Lewis: Justice for Mary  
Ireland Lorelei: The Detective  
Kristin Lynn: Worth the Risk  
Callie Love & Ann Omasta: Hawaii Hottie  
JM Madden: Rescuing Olivia  
A.M. Mahler: Griffin  
Ellie Masters: Sybil's Protector  
Trish McCallan: Hero Under Fire  
Naomi McKay: Twist  
Rachel McNeely: The SEAL's Surprise Baby  
KD Michaels: Saving Laura  
Olivia Michaels: Protecting Harper  
Annie Miller: Securing Willow  
MJ Nightingale: Protecting Beauty  
Melinda Owens: Betraying Katie  
Victoria Paige: Reclaiming Izabel  
Danielle Pays: Defending Sarina  
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove  
Lainey Reese: Protecting New York  
KeKe Renée: Protecting Bria  
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove  
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: Extracting Mateo  
Ariana Rose: Chasing Paige  
Deanna L. Rowley: Saving Veronica  
Angela Rush: Charlotte  
Rose Smith: Saving Satin  
Tyler Anne Snell: Cowboy Heat

Lynne St. James: SEAL's Spitfire

E.M. Shue: Discovering Tyler

Bella Stone: Rexar

Jen Talty: Burning Desire

Reina Torres, Rescuing Hi'ilani

LJ Vickery: Circus Comes to Town

R. C. Wynne: Shadows Renewed

**Delta Team Three Series**

Lori Ryan: Nori's Delta

Becca Jameson: Destiny's Delta

Lynne St James, Gwen's Delta

Elle James: Ivy's Delta

Riley Edwards: Hope's Delta

**Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World**

Freya Barker: Burning for Autumn

B.P. Beth: Scott

Jane Blythe: Salvaging Marigold

Julia Bright, Justice for Amber

Gia Cobie: Saved from Revenge

Hadley Finn: Exton

Emily Gray: Shelter for Allegra

Danielle M. Haas: Crossroads of Betrayal

Deandra Hall: Shelter for Sharla

Jenna Harte: Dead But Not Forgotten

Amber Kuhlman: Protecting Paisley

Reina Torres: Justice for Sloane

Aubree Valentine, Justice for Danielle

Maddie Wade: Finding English

***Tarpley VFD Series***

Silver James, Fighting for Elena

Deandra Hall, Fighting for Carly.

Haven Rose, Fighting for Calliope

MJ Nightingale, Fighting for Jemma

TL Reeve, Fighting for Brittney.

Nicole Flockton, Fighting for Nadia

*As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.*

**SEAL Team Hawaii Series**

*Finding Elodie*

*Finding Lexie*

*Finding Kenna*

*Finding Monica*

*Finding Carly*

*Finding Ashlyn*

*Finding Jodelle*

**Eagle Point Search & Rescue**

*Searching for Lilly*

*Searching for Elsie*

*Searching for Bristol*

*Searching for Caryn*

*Searching for Finley (Oct 2023)*

*Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)*

*Searching for Khloe (May 2024)*

**The Refuge Series**

*Deserving Alaska*

*Deserving Henley*

*Deserving Reese*

*Deserving Cora (Nov 2023)*

*Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)*

*Deserving Maisy (TBA)*

*Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)*

**Delta Team Two Series**

*Shielding Gillian*

*Shielding Kinley*

*Shielding Aspen*

*Shielding Jayme* (novella)

*Shielding Riley*

*Shielding Devyn*

*Shielding Ember*

*Shielding Sierra*

### **SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series**

*Securing Caite* (FREE!)

*Securing Brenae* (novella)

*Securing Sidney*

*Securing Piper*

*Securing Zoey*

*Securing Avery*

*Securing Kalee*

*Securing Jane*

### **Delta Force Heroes Series**

*Rescuing Rayne* (FREE!)

*Rescuing Aimee* (novella)

*Rescuing Emily*

*Rescuing Harley*

*Marrying Emily* (novella)

*Rescuing Kassie*

*Rescuing Bryn*

*Rescuing Casey*

*Rescuing Sadie* (novella)

*Rescuing Wendy*

*Rescuing Mary*



*Rescuing Macie* (novella)

*Rescuing Annie*

**Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series**

*Justice for Mackenzie* (FREE!)

*Justice for Mickie*

*Justice for Corrie*

*Justice for Laine* (novella)

*Shelter for Elizabeth*

*Justice for Boone*

*Shelter for Adeline*

*Shelter for Sophie*

*Justice for Erin*

*Justice for Milena*

*Shelter for Blythe*

*Justice for Hope*

*Shelter for Quinn*

*Shelter for Koren*

*Shelter for Penelope*

**SEAL of Protection Series**

*Protecting Caroline* (FREE!)

*Protecting Alabama*

*Protecting Fiona*

*Marrying Caroline* (novella)

*Protecting Summer*

*Protecting Cheyenne*

*Protecting Jessyka*

*Protecting Julie* (novella)

*Protecting Melody*

*Protecting the Future*

*Protecting Kiera* (novella)

*Protecting Alabama's Kids* (novella)

*Protecting Dakota*

*New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal*  
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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