

**COWBOY**  
BREAKING  
POINT

WEST PROTECTION SENTRY

*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**EM PETROVA**

eBooks are not transferable.

They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved

Cowboy Breaking Point

WEST Protection Sentry

Book 2

Copyright Em Petrova 2023

Ebook Edition

Electronic book publication 2023

Cover Art by Bookin' It Designs

All rights reserved. Any violation of this will be prosecuted by the law.

[SUBSCRIBE](#) to Em Petrova's Newsletter to keep up to date and for special reader features.

## **WEST Protection Sentry**

[LONG ARM OF THE COWBOY](#) Lexis's Story

[COWBOY BREAKING POINT](#) Quaide's Story

[SHOTGUN WEDDING COWBOY](#) Julius's Story

JUSTICE FOR THE COWBOY Jennings's Story

## **West Protection**

[HIGH-STAKES COWBOY](#) Prequel Noah's Story

[RESCUED BY THE COWBOY](#) Ross's Story.

[GUARDED BY THE COWBOY](#) Boone's Story.

[COWBOY CONSPIRACY THEORY](#) Mathias's Story.

[COWBOY IN THE CROSSHAIRS](#) Silas's Story.

PROTECTED BY THE COWBOY Josiah's  
Story.

BRAVO TANGO COWBOY Corrine and  
Panic's Story

BREAKING IN THE COWBOY Casey's  
Story

SHIELDED BY THE COWBOY McCoy's  
Story

CLOSE RANGE COWBOY Landon's  
Story

ZERO DARK COWBOY Judd's Story

TOP SECRET COWBOY Jace's Story

COWBOY UNDER SIEGE Jaren's Story

**She can run, but she can't hide. Not from him...**

Quaide Livingston doesn't regret leaving the FBI for his new undercover job with Sentry. He does, however, miss his former assistant. She ran away, taking her sexy curves and secretary glasses with her. But he will find her. And when he does, he'll show her exactly who's boss...

Dove Priester loved her former job. But staying wasn't an option. Not when she was harboring a criminal. And especially not when she kept falling into bed with the hot boss who noticed far too much. Now all she has to do is figure out how to forget him — and all the steamy nights they spent together.

She's in over her head and too stubborn to admit it, not even to the overprotective cowboy who seems so determined to uncover all her secrets. When all is said and done, is happily ever after in the cards for these opposites, or is their forbidden relationship headed for a devastating breaking point?

***Steamy action and adventure romance with a hot hero who knows exactly what—and who—he wants, and a heroine with more skeletons in her closet than shoes. 1-click to preorder the next book in the WEST Protection Sentry series now and binge the WEST Protection series!***

**COWBOY  
BREAKING  
POINT**

**by**

Em Petrova

# Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

## Prologue

---

Quaide Livingston's gut tightened as he walked into the FBI office and his gaze landed on his personal assistant's desk. Every day for three years he walked in and called out good morning to Dove...even though he'd just left whatever hotel bed they'd shared.

The anticipation of setting eyes on the stunning blonde wearing those sexy glasses perched on her cute, upturned nose never got old. Neither did watching her struggle to remain aloof as he passed her desk to his office.

He saw the way her fingers tensed over the computer keyboard because she was recalling how she gripped the sheets, his shoulders and even his ass the previous night.

When Quaide saw the empty desk, he checked the coffee station for her. No sign of Dove in her sexy fitted blouse.

He slowed his steps and swung his gaze to the copier machine. She wasn't there either.

She was three minutes behind schedule. In the grand scheme of things, three minutes was nothing.

Maybe she'd hit a snag getting home from the hotel. It was in a different part of town than the usual hotel they frequented to keep their forbidden affair under wraps.

Dove might have gotten stuck in traffic. Or she couldn't tame that cute cowlick on her forehead that drove him crazy for different reasons than it drove her crazy.

His fingers seemed to tingle around the phone in his hand, the urge to text her strong.



They'd agreed to keep communication to a minimum at the office. Early on, they both realized their attraction made them want to spend every waking moment connecting to each other. When just stepping out of the office and speaking to Dove wasn't enough, he started finding reasons to text his work requests to her.

That led to a flirtation that neither could let slip to the rest of the office. The FBI frowned upon intraoffice relations, and they'd definitely disapprove of Quaide fucking his secretary.

As he stepped into his office a few feet away, he threw one last look at Dove's desk. Where was she? She *always* got here before he did.

What if something happened to her on her drive to work? A flat tire or, god forbid, an accident?

He changed directions and forced himself to nonchalantly stroll to the office next door. Rapping twice on the open door, he poked his head in.

"Hey, Harv. Did you happen to hear about any accidents or construction on the interstate this morning?"

Harv had been working for the FBI since the eighties and was tired to the point of looking haggard every single morning. Just seeing his coworker trudge into the office every day had spurred Quaide to take the big leap.

The one that would also open up his entire world to having Dove permanently in his life.

If she accepted him, that was.

Tugging his bloodshot eyes away from his computer screen, Harv raised a brow. "No, I didn't hear of anything. Why?"

"Just wondering. Dove isn't here yet."

As usual when Quaide spoke of his assistant, he forced a neutral expression onto his face. He couldn't let on that last night he'd thrown her legs over his shoulders and pounded them both to a screaming orgasm. Or that he'd taken her into

his arms and kissed her long and deep with all the emotion burning in his heart. Emotion he had yet to confess.

“I’m sure she’ll roll in any minute,” he quickly added. “While I’m here, do you still need those reports on the Doyle case?”

“Yeah, send them over when you get a chance.”

“Will do.” Quaide ducked back out and returned to his office. Again, his gaze landed on Dove’s desk situated outside his door.

No Dove.

She was *officially* late for work.

He fiddled with the phone in his pocket. He could text her and ask if everything was all right, but that would sound controlling and clingy. Quaide was a top FBI agent in the prime of his career. He might be a man in love, but he couldn’t *act* like it. And least of all reveal it to the entire office and get Dove, himself—or both of them—fired.

He could text her for the Jazairi files, but he didn’t do that either.

He went into his office and shut the door. Through the glass, he had a perfect view of Dove when she was actually seated there. Looking at her empty chair gave him a sense of longing he only felt when they skipped their nights together.

When he lay in his own bed, alone and wanting her soft body in his arms, he ached.

Pulling up his personal email on his phone, he scrolled through them and paused on one from his old buddy from the Marines, Clay Lexis. Quaide knew what that email contained—the step forward he needed to keep himself from being another Harv, working forty years for the FBI. The email contained his official paperwork to join the Sentry team.

It was ironic that Quaide spearheaded the task force in Colorado and recruited Lexis in the first place. As soon as he signed that contract, he would be taking orders from his friend.

The career shift also got him out of the FBI office and into the field, where he could set his own schedule...*and* he would no longer be Dove's boss.

He shot another look at her desk. No long blonde hair swishing over her back. No glasses stem in the grip of her sharp, little white teeth...

Holding back a growl, he tried to keep his mind off the sting in his shoulders that bore her bite marks from the previous night.

A noisy sigh ground past his lips. He'd hoped to tell her about Sentry before now, but he wanted to work out all the details before laying out a different plan for her.

She wouldn't like that word—plan. He'd call it an opportunity. Dove might take orders in the office *and* in the bedroom, but she disliked it when he tried inserting himself in her personal life. *That* right there was his reason for wanting to make the switch to Sentry.

He wanted to insert himself in her days, her nights and everything in between. Once he was situated on the new task force, he would take her with him and make her his in all ways.

If she ever got to work, he could tell her all this.

He turned to his computer and the morning work emails inevitably waiting for him.

His gaze hit one, and he froze.

*Subject: Dove Priester—Resignation*

His heart rocketed into his throat, but his stomach bottomed out. His gaze ran over the subject line five more times, and even on the sixth try, his mind refused to accept the words.

Then he skimmed the body of an email sent to the HR department and that he was copied on.

Like he was an afterthought.

*She resigned. She fucking quit.*

And she didn't even have enough respect to send him a direct email, let alone explain in person. What the hell? They'd literally parted ways two hours earlier.

"Goddammit!" He peered closer at the timestamp on the email. She'd sent it *before* their night together.

He shoved both hands into his hair. *Something is wrong.*

He knew Dove. She would never do this. Even though she claimed that he was so regimented that he drove her crazy at work, she could always talk to him. She had no problem telling him when she thought his actions or choices needed reassessing.

Looking back now, he had to question if those trailing touches across his skin were the very last.

If some of her kisses were kisses goodbye.

# Chapter One

---

Quaide removed his coffee mug from the circa 1980s microwave and took a sip of the lukewarm brew. The appliance was on its last legs and one of the major items on his list of things to replace in the house.

Inheriting the big old two-story home from his grandparents was great, but it would take a lot of work—and capital—to make updates.

Leaning against the chipped countertop, he sipped his coffee and tried not to dream of the heavenly pots of rich brew that Dove had made them back in the office. Pots they made any excuse to meet at, just to steal a few lingering stares or whispers. And they especially needed all the caffeine they could get after their late nights together.

Now he was standing in his kitchen alone drinking leftover coffee reheated in the microwave, and Dove was gone.

Since their final night together six weeks before, he hadn't heard a peep from the woman. Her resignation email was the final correspondence. He couldn't even get a text through to her phone.

He was certain she blocked him. And yeah, he could pull strings and find out her home address, but she obviously was avoiding him for her own reasons, reasons that he needed to respect.

What those were, he had no idea. One minute she was in his life and the next, gone.

He heaved a sigh and dumped the bitter coffee down the drain. In the small town of East Canon, there were only two convenience stores, and one made a half-decent cup of joe.

With any luck, the place would be robbed while he was there and give him some real purpose in life again.

He was past the point of admitting he wasn't all right.

With a glare at the wallpaper border sporting roosters parading around the perimeter of the kitchen and dining room, he gnashed his molars.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be *at all*. His plans were wasted energy flushed down life's toilet.

He and Dove were supposed to be in this house together, ripping down that ugly goddamn wallpaper. They were supposed to be working together on the Sentry task force that he had spearheaded and she had provided all the support to bring to realization.

When things got tough, Dove always brought her look-on-the-bright-side outlook and made him see that the world wasn't just shadows and trouble. Her sunnier disposition always gave him the morale boost he needed.

Sentry was their *baby*. This house was meant to be their *home*.

What happened? Not having closure was gutting him on a daily basis.

When his phone rang, he brought it to his ear automatically without glancing at the caller.

"Livingston."

"It's Lexis. We've got a body."

He stared at the opposite wall of the kitchen where a giant-sized fork and spoon hung but he didn't really see the décor. "A body," he repeated.

"A fisherman's body was found."

"Why are you calling me about it? I thought Jennings was the new body guy." Jennings Abel was also a new recruit to

the Sentry team and he made it clear from the start that he didn't mind taking the worst jobs. Looking into dead bodies discovered around the rundown town was up there on the list of crap that Quaide didn't want to deal with.

“Because I knew you'd be awake.”

“Because I'm an early riser?” Quaide walked over to the giant fork and reached up to remove it. Then he thought better of it and dropped his hand. Starting any of these projects would swell into a huge commitment, one he didn't have time for until he was completely settled into his new role here.

Or his mind was less cluttered by thoughts of Dove.

“Because you're not sleeping,” Clay broke into his thoughts.

“Ah. Right.” He'd gotten maybe three hours of sleep the previous night, but even that was broken. “Give me the location of the body.”

Clay told him the spot and that a medical examiner would be meeting him there. When they ended the call, Quaide walked through the silent, outdated house to his bedroom to grab his sidearm.

So far, his room was the only space that he finished renovating. The old, cheap wood paneling got ripped out and new drywall fixed in place. It was painted a pale blue-gray shade. It took him three weeks of sleeping in this room to realize it matched the exact shade of Dove's eyes.

Taking a minute to check his weapon, he accepted how bad he had it for the woman who'd left him. Six weeks hadn't done a thing to erase her from his mind either.

After a short drive, he arrived at the local prime spot for Colorado fly fishermen. Several cops were already on the scene. They spotted Quaide and one came forward, picking his way down the grassy bank.

Quaide was careful to keep his footprints off the soft, muddy spots so he didn't mess up the crime scene. Working with Sentry had forced a switch in his thinking. In the

Marines, he barreled into the thick of battle. After that, most of his work for the FBI didn't involve close fieldwork like this.

The cops could handle the bloated body of a guy who had a heart attack on shore. But if they believed the death to be from natural causes, Quaide wouldn't be called in.

The officer cocked a brow at him. "You Lexis's man?"

Quaide's feathers ruffled for two reasons. First, *he* hired Lexis to head Sentry. It burned a little that he no longer held any position of authority and was viewed as an underling. Second, this officer must be half his age.

His smooth baby face suggested that he might be too young to grow a beard. It was far too early and Quaide wasn't nearly caffeinated enough to be dealing with this brand of bullshit.

Quaide extended a hand. "Quaide Livingston."

The guy shook it. "Officer Faller. What were you told about the find here?"

"Not a lot," he admitted. "But I'm guessing you believe the cause of death to be suspicious if we were called in."

Sentry slipped into the dark corners of the underworld and picked apart crimes from the inside. In the past six weeks Quaide had been with the team, he spent a lot of time sitting at bars pretending to fit in with a group of local outlaws believed to be working a drug trade spanning the Colorado-Montana border.

Most of those nights he spent trying to keep the taste of rust out of his mouth for all that he'd lost. His position of authority was a small thing to let go of compared to Dove.

Officer Faller looked past Quaide. His expression transformed to one of surprise.

Quaide twisted to see a young woman coming toward them. In jeans, hiking boots and a leather bomber jacket, she could be any other resident of East Canon. But as she drew closer, he made out the words printed on her coat: Medical Examiner.



“Hi, guys,” she breezed out with a toss of her loose brown curls. “What do we got?”

Her amber eyes shifted from the cop to Quaide. “I don’t think we’ve met. You’re Lexis’s man?”

His inner alpha beast let out a challenge but he contained it. “Livingston.”

“Ah yes. Former FBI.”

He lifted a brow. “I don’t like being known before I know the knower.”

“Are you Dr. Seuss?”

Okay, the woman immediately grated on his nerves.

Straightening his shoulders, he stared down at her. “Who are you?”

She gave him a cool look. “Dr. Raven Barker-Moore.”

That explained her lofty view of herself.

“The medical examiner.” She tipped her head back to hold his gaze in a challenge that most people wouldn’t be comfortable with. Quaide was made of tougher stuff.

Without another word to him, the woman set off down the bank to where the other officer was crouched, snapping photos.

Quaide met Faller’s eyes and he managed to keep from rolling his. The former medical examiner in the area had about four decades’ worth of experience on this girl. She didn’t look old enough to have a bachelor’s degree, let alone a doctorate. And she sure as hell didn’t appear to have what it took to perform such a demanding job.

He waved at Faller. “Lead the way.”

When they approached the body, he drew every minute detail into his mind even as he formed a bigger scenario about what happened.

The sweet reek of damp grass drying out in the sun was the only smell he detected, which meant the body was still

fresh.

Instantly, he started recording audio notes on his phone. “Victim appears to be late twenties, early thirties. Male. Dressed in green cargo pants and a green plaid shirt. No fishing rod in sight.”

As if trying to outdo him, the medical examiner brought her phone to her lips and began dictating as well. Their voices overlapped for a few sentences until Quaide stopped to let her get her need to show off out of her system.

The man lay half out of the water. His phone was on the bank near his chest as though it had fallen out of his breast pocket.

The medical examiner hooked a bunch of curls behind one ear to reveal a silver spike piercing her earlobe, stretching it in a fat gauge. She was definitely living up to his first assumption about her age.

He switched his focus from Barker-Moore to the officer snapping photos.

When he finished, Quaide snapped on a latex glove, bent over and picked up the victim’s phone. He swiped the screen, and it came alive. After a night in the rain, it shouldn’t work, yet it did.

Another clue that the body had been dumped.

“Well, Livingston?” Barker-Moore set a hand on her hip.

“The phone’s in operating order. It wasn’t out in the elements.”

She nodded as if she didn’t need to even look at the phone to know what he said was true.

Irritation took his already poor mood and made it worse. He didn’t want to work with this know-it-all kid.

“Whoever killed him was lazy. Probably tossed him in the river.” He twisted to look at the bank a short distance from the road. Sure enough, the earth and grass were sunken under the weight of a truck.

“They probably backed a vehicle in, bed down. He rolled out, which accounts for the reason the body’s not submerged,” he continued.

Barker-Moore nodded and swiped a thermometer over the man’s ear. Once she had a reading, she cleared her throat. “Based off body temp, overnight temp and lividity, I’m going to agree with you, Livingston.”

He paused, shocked that she didn’t just propose a different plan—any other plan—to outshine him. Looking at her in a new light, he waited for more.

She continued, “I’m going to guess our killers didn’t want to get wet. They dumped the body in the easiest manner possible and avoided getting close enough to the mud to leave tire tracks.” She looked up. “Faller. Measure the width of those depressions on the bank where the tires were.”

If Faller had any reservation about taking orders from a kid, he didn’t show it. He set off to do her bidding.

The victim’s phone in Quaide’s hand vibrated. With a start, he glanced down at the screen to see a text popped up. He bent and pressed the phone to the dead man’s thumb, bypassing the lockscreen.

“Smart, Livingston.” Barker-Moore bobbed her head. “What do you got?”

The instant the phone totally unlocked to him, he set about changing the security measures that would lock him out again. He deleted the facial recognition and the need for a thumbprint. Only then did he check out the text.

“The contact’s name is MJ. Any idea who that could be?” He shot Barker-Moore a look.

“Nope. I don’t know who this guy is any more than you do. I’m just here for the investigation.”

“The text doesn’t have any message, only a photo.” He held up the phone to show her a map of the area that included the river they were standing beside right now.

“So somebody wants to meet our friend in this location,” she speculated while he scrolled through the camera roll.

He only made it through a dozen or so photos before he stopped dead, his finger frozen over the screen and his heart throbbing.

The photo was a headshot of a young woman. Honey-blond hair with paler streaks, blue-gray eyes and an oval face that ended in a delicate chin.

His brain shot to the image burned into his brain. Only *that* woman wore sexy eyeglasses that slid down her nose and she often took off to nibble the stem in thought.

His voice sounded as rough as a gravel road. “We need to find out who this girl is.”

Christ. It looked like Dove. *So much like Dove.* But he knew his lover’s face like he knew his own reflection in the mirror, and while this woman closely resembled Dove, it wasn’t.

He looked a second time just to be sure.

“I’m going to take the phone back to my office. Run these photos through the facial recognition program. You got this, kid?” He glanced at the medical examiner.

Still crouched beside the body, Barker-Moore leveled him in a serious stare. “That’s Dr. Kid to you.”

Ordinarily, he would jump into that conversation just to irritate her, but he needed to get out of here before he lost control of his emotions.

The woman in that picture looked like Dove. And Dove hadn’t been in contact with him or anybody from the FBI office in six weeks.

As he strode back to his vehicle, his mind argued with itself.

*It isn’t her.*

*But it looks so much like her.*

*There is no way Dove had a connection to the dead man.*

His heart gave a lurch. *But what if there is?*

\* \* \* \* \*

A messy house was not something Dove could live with, and since her sister Rain started living with her, the place had been *anything* but tidy.

She shot a glance from the dirty dishes piled in the sink to the stack of Rain's laundry taking over the small kitchen table. A cereal box sat open on the counter, along with a splash of puddled milk beside it.

Dove ran a palm over her face to dispel the annoyance building inside her.

A cluttered home meant a cluttered mind. How could she *ever* think straight and formulate a plan with all this junk sitting around and chores undone?

She was neat and orderly—it was a trait she took pride in and one that helped her climb to her position with the FBI.

Her former position, that was. Now she was the out-of-work sister of a slob.

As she set about filling the dishwasher, she silently seethed that her sister wasn't out here doing a chore she despised just as much as Dove did. Of course her irritation was valid. First of all, she'd wrongly enabled her sister for her entire life. Now she expected Rain to clean up after herself?

The second big issue was missing a certain man in her life with a painful ache. Even though she wasn't ever quite sure where she stood with him, that didn't stop her from wanting him then or now.

“Rain!”

Her sister didn't immediately answer nor did she appear in the kitchen. Dove called her a second time.

When her sister bounced into the room, Dove groaned.

Now she hated her even more.

Why did she look fresh and pretty, without a care in the world, while Dove had aged at least a decade over the past six weeks they'd been living together? Her lover wouldn't want her even if being together were still a possibility.

"What's up?" Rain asked. "I was listening to a podcast on beauty standards for women." Rain directed a shoulder-length layer of hair behind her ear, which showed off the delicate diamond studs she wore in her lobes.

Dove pushed out a heavy sigh. "Can you remember to pick up your laundry? Or fold it?"

Rain lifted two perfect brows that sloped in twin arches seen only on magazine covers. "And do what with it?"

"Put it away."

She widened her eyes, which only enhanced the look of her long lashes. "Where do you suggest I put my clothes?"

Dove held on to her patience. She really tried anyway. But she'd been cooped up in her apartment for weeks with nobody but her baby sister for company.

*I signed up for this. I. Signed. Up. For. This.*

She reminded herself to pull enough air into her lungs to answer. "In the closet," she told Rain.

"You mean the closet I've been sleeping in for a month and a half?"

"Yes."

"Your walk-in closet that's already filled with your clothes and a *massive* shoe collection?"

"Rain." Her tone came with an edge. She tried to keep her cool, but she wasn't sleeping well. Or sleeping at all.

"If you let me sleep on your couch, then my clothes would fit in the closet and my stuff wouldn't be all over the apartment. Which offends your sensitive soul."

She folded her arms. "That sounds like a stab, Rain. I do not have a sensitive soul. I am a hard, cold woman...who happens to require more order around her. And you know why

you can't sleep on my couch. The house will look disrupted. Someone could walk in and see you."

"Who is walking in, Dove? All your friends who don't pop in or ever call you? Your landlord? Or a boyfriend you don't have?"

*Stab.*

Dove shook that one off.

"In the event that someone does, you can't be seen."

Rain's shoulders slumped. "I made one bad decision."

"I counted at least three."

"Is this how you spend your time? Keeping score?"

"No. I'm problem-solving to keep you alive, Rain. Current problem is that we're out of food. Again. I'm going to have to go out." Into the real world. A terrifying prospect when she was trying to remain hidden away along with her sister until she could figure out the next move.

Rain's face brightened. "I can order a pizza."

Dove leveled her with a look. "Didn't you get the memo last time you ordered a pizza without me knowing? You're not supposed to use your phone. You're definitely not supposed to order delivery. No one is supposed to come here, remember? And you sure as *fuck* weren't supposed to use your card! Which is tied to the account that started this whole mess to begin with!"

Rain threw her shoulders back and faced her. "Why are you treating me like I'm the problem here? You're supposed to be helping me. Besides, I'm not so naïve. I remember what you told me. I was just trying to help you. You really look stressed out, Dove."

"Gee, thanks."

"And I thought ordering that pizza meant one less meal you needed to fix for us."

This really was Dove's fault. If she hadn't taken over when their parents died, right down to fixing meals for her

sister, Rain wouldn't be so helpless now. She'd enabled her. She was an enabler.

"Next time, Rain, I don't need you to order pizza. I just need you to not date a drug dealer."

"How was I supposed to know he was a drug dealer?"

Dove scrubbed both hands over her face. "He only went out at night?"

"Lots of people work nights," Rain argued.

"He has gold teeth?"

"Has style."

"Oh my god. Do you hear yourself?"

Rain threw her hands up in the air. "Okay, it could have happened to anyone!"

They stared at each other across the kitchen.

"If I can't order a pizza, could you pick one up, Dovey?"

She inwardly winced at the pet name her sister called her.

"You know how my blood sugar can be. Your favorite salads and all this clean eating doesn't work for me."

Of course her sister always packed away junk food and managed to stay thin while Dove barely glanced at a bag of movie theater butter popcorn and her hips expanded.

But her lover *liked* her hips. Just the way they were.

She really needed to quit thinking about him. It was over. But oh, how good would it be to step into his arms and lay her head on his chest one more time?

She walked to the kitchen door to slide on her boots. "Fine, I'll grab a pizza while I'm out getting groceries. Just don't open the door." She straightened from zipping her boots, eyes narrowed on Rain. "For anyone."



## Chapter Two

---

The drive through East Canon, Colorado was a bleak one. While the mountains and surrounding forest provided a striking backdrop, the town itself could use some rehab.

In his grandparents' day, the town was thriving. But after a couple factories closed their doors, the place went downhill on a fast track. Poverty replaced posterity. Homes went to hell and violence took over the streets. The crime rates climbed so high so fast that the town came under the scrutiny of the FBI, which was when Quaide set the idea of Sentry in motion.

Of course, he credited Dove with so much of that work. The long evenings they spent in the office poring over police reports and even investigating the police to make sure they weren't being bought off by the crime lords were—oddly—some of the best of his life.

Yes, even work was enjoyable with Dove at his side. Which was why he knew that when he came on board with Sentry that he was damn well taking her with him.

Except she wasn't here now.

And he had a dead man's phone to go through.

That photo of a beautiful blonde was imprinted on his brain. She was almost the spitting image of Dove. Who was she?

He came to a traffic light and waited for the light to change. When it did, he took an immediate left to a side street leading to the temporary Sentry headquarters.

The building was old. The brick wasn't in great shape and the mortar was crumbling in parts. At least inside Lexis had the place properly set up with all the tech they needed to run a top-level operation.

When Quaide parked and climbed out of his SUV, he pushed through the front door and stopped in his tracks, struggling to process what he was looking at. A desk with a couple chairs positioned at angles in front of it hadn't been there the previous day.

Clay strolled out of a back office. "Thought I heard someone come in."

He waved a hand. "What's with the desk?"

Clay tugged the brim of his cowboy hat. The accessory had become a persona to Clay over the years. For a while, Quaide had been thinking about digging his old Stetson out and putting it to use again too. Wearing one meant he fit in around these parts, and blending was the grand plan.

"It's a decoy," Clay said.

"A decoy?" Quaide repeated.

Clay nodded. "This building used to be an old insurance company. People keep coming in randomly, looking for cheap insurance."

"So now you're selling insurance on the side?" Amusement threaded through his voice.

"No, jackass. I just need it to look less like a bunch of undercovers work out of the place."

"Why don't you just lock the front door?"

"We need to blend in. Hiding and looking suspicious won't do that. If someone comes in for insurance, I tell them our agent quit and we're trying to hire one. It keeps the front up but means the customers go away."

"Smart idea. I'm surprised you had it."

Clay's lips twitched, but he switched gears with a question. "What happened with the body?"

Reaching into the inside pocket of his rancher jacket, he withdrew the dead man's phone. "Need to upload the contents of this to the system."

With a twitch of his head, Clay said, "This way."

The back room that Clay had walked out of was appointed with several long tables and desks with computers and other equipment set up on every surface. Two giant flatscreens were hung on the wall if they needed to look at a bigger map or something similar.

What Quaide wanted to do was put the picture of the blonde up on that screen and compare her to the memory of Dove he had stamped in his mind.

He got straight to work on the guy's phone by hooking it up to one of the main computers.

Clay stood watching over his shoulder. "So, the body?"

"Looks like it was dumped there."

"What did the medical examiner have to say?"

He threw a glance at his buddy. "Have you seen the kid?"

"Who?"

"The medical examiner."

"That's Raven Barker-Moore. Not yet. She hasn't been around these parts long, but everyone says she's smart as a whip."

"She's a kid."

Clay leaned in to see the screen better. "Do we need Lark to come hack this phone? She's great with technology."

"I got it."

"Do you actually know how to use this system?"

"You're the luddite, not me." He referred to Clay's lack of skill when it came to anything related to technology.

"I *am* your boss. I demand some measure of respect."

He chuckled. “Of course you’re going to lord that over me. Remember, it was me dragging your puking ass up the trail in bootcamp when you couldn’t complete that run in the heat. Quit trying to micromanage me, Lexis. I said I got it.” Photos popped up on the screen.

The small thumbnail images showcased everything from mountain scenery to muscle cars and a few of the dead man holding up various fish he’d caught, most likely in the very river where he’d been dumped. But one photo had Quaide’s full attention.

The blonde, face angled from the camera, a wide smile on full lips that were all too damn familiar to him. Her hair was the same shade as Dove’s. Her skin, the same creamy pale perfection.

Dove’s marked easily when he got too rough with his kisses and his beard scraped her skin.

His gut tightened.

Clay jabbed a finger at the image. “Who’s this?”

“No idea.” His voice sounded rough.

“You know who she looks like?”

“No. Who?” His heart picked up an extra beat.

“That chick... One you were dating? You had so many women.”

He grunted.

“Wasn’t there a hooker down in Colorado Springs?”

A cough sounded from behind them, and Quaide and Clay swung around at the same time to see Lark entering the room.

Quaide shot his friend a cut-the-shit look before turning back to the screen.

“I’m joking. No, this girl looks like the lovely woman who worked for you. What’s her name?”

The last thing he needed was someone poking around in his business. Even if he considered Clay a friend, he didn’t

want to confide in him.

“I don’t know who you mean.” Quaide kept his voice even.

“Robin. Wren.”

He tensed. “Never heard either name. Maybe you’re the guy with hookers in his past.”

Lark came to lean over the desk. Her red curls tumbled over her forehead as she stared at the screen. “Hookers, huh? Well, you did have a lot of life before I came along.” She threw him a teasing look. “We’ll have to talk about that later, Mr. Silver Fox.”

Every time Quaide heard Clay’s girlfriend call him that, he laughed. He’d laugh now, except all sound was cut off by the fact he could barely breathe at the thought of this woman in the photo having some connection to Dove.

*His Dove.*

“There seem to be a lot of girls with bird names flying around here,” he muttered to himself. First Lark and now Raven, the new medical examiner.

And Dove. He’d never forget her.

“What *was* your assistant’s name, anyway, Livingston?”

“I really don’t know who you’re talking about, Lexis.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Oh.” He feigned surprise while giving up the ruse. “Do you mean Dove?”

Clay gave him a silent nod.

Turning his focus back to the screen, Quaide muttered, “I don’t see the resemblance.”

Lark had nudged him aside and drawn the keyboard toward herself. Her fingers flew over the keys.

He was about to ask what she was doing when her spine snapped straight.

“Guys?” Her tone grated out with an edge of worry. “You’d better find out exactly who she is.”

“Why is that? Is she next of kin to the dead guy?” Clay asked.

Lark twisted her head and looked at Quaide. “No. There’s a hit out on her.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dove tiptoed past her closet door so she didn’t disturb Rain’s sleep. Just like the old days, she thought. The time after the big family tragedy that landed her in charge of her little sister.

She padded across the thick pale gray carpet to her bed and crawled onto the big, comfy mattress. As soon as the memory foam hugged her body, she stifled a whimper of bliss. Her head hit her feather pillow, and she instantly closed her eyes.

She was exhausted in a way she hadn’t been in years and years. No wonder she was thinking about *that* time of her life again. She was once more responsible for Rain.

Only when her sister slept could she take a few minutes for herself to let down her guard. Sometimes she watched a few minutes of video reels before passing out into a disturbed sleep. Nights like this, though...*he* invaded her mind.

Quaide.

Her lover and boss.

When she drew in a deep breath, she picked up the calming eucalyptus she’d sprayed her sheets with but she was smelling Quaide’s aftershave, the one with notes of sandalwood and bergamot.

God, she loved the way he smelled. As soon as he’d enter the office and their gazes locked, he’d start seducing her with his eyes. Then all he had to do was walk past her desk for her body to wake up and start tingling in all the right places.

She hated how she’d left things. Sending him an email with her resignation letter must have gutted him. But what was

she supposed to do? She needed to hide Rain, and that involved locking herself up as well. Her reason for this was twofold—Rain was too naïve about the real world to realize how dangerous this game really was. Second, she and Dove were mistaken for each other all the time. That could potentially put both of them in danger.

Though neither of them had any idea how to progress their relationship forward, they'd been discussing it. Now that would never happen.

He invaded her mind far too much for her to be anywhere near being over him.

Quaide Livingston was the real deal. The guy every woman dreamed about having a chance with. His amazing sense of humor hooked her attention from day one, but his rugged good looks lured her into his bed, against her better judgement.

The whole affair had been a terrible idea from the start. He was her boss. It was bad enough that he held a position of authority in the office, but in bed, she actually *liked* it. One thing she didn't enjoy was Quaide's strictly by-the-book approach to life.

Still, she missed their arguments.

A tear trickled from the corner of her eye to dampen her pillow. Her life had changed so much.

Automatically, she strained to hear any noises coming from the closet. Those nights when Rain would break down in tears and Dove had to set aside her own needs to comfort her were far too embedded in her DNA, to change the habit.

When she heard nothing, she rolled onto one side to stare at the window. The curtains were drawn shut, but they were sheer enough to provide a glimmer of moonlight streaming through. Another tear wet her pillow, followed by a third.

It was hard to imagine that if circumstances were different—if she and Rain weren't fighting the world alone—then this never would have happened.

Everything flooded back. Things she stuffed down deep and never talked about. Her mom cheating on her father, and that terrible night when he went crazy and wiped them both off the face of the earth.

Her bottom lip quivered with a cry she held inside. *They* were supposed to raise Rain. Instead, Dove had finished doing the job. She never resented working two jobs to put herself through community college while Rain finished high school.

But she'd obviously done a poor job if her sister had been so naïve as to let herself get entangled with a guy who asked her to launder his drug money.

Maybe she'd sheltered Rain too much. She should have been teaching her life skills, but after all the horrific crap in their past, she didn't want to scare Rain further by warning her about such things.

Then the minute she started living her own life—and spending so much time with Quaide—Rain ran out and got herself a thug boyfriend.

More tears flowed out. This wasn't her. She didn't look like herself and wasn't acting like herself. She was the woman who picked up the pieces and found a way to put them back together without sweating it.

Because after what she and Rain had lived through, *everything* was small. Even getting involved in money laundering with a bad boyfriend.

This was a whole new level of experience, though. For a small time, she was only in charge of herself, not Rain too. She had a life, pleasure in her work...pleasure with Quaide.

Since her guard was already down, she just let them flow. She was tired and more than a little depressed. Stressed didn't begin to explain it, and it was taking a toll on her health and appearance.

Between her lank hair and the dark hollows under each eye, she looked haggard. Rain complained about not having had a manicure in six weeks. Meanwhile, Dove looked like she'd been in the grave for six years.



Add in a new forehead crease and she had to ask herself if Quaide would still want her.

Of course he'd tell her she was being silly, that she was gorgeous no matter what, even when she was nothing but wrinkles.

Oh, she'd ruined everything.

Unable to think about him anymore, she swiped her phone to bring it to life. It wasn't exactly fodder for sweet dreams to scroll through the local news site, but knowing that nothing had popped up about Rain's involvement in a local money laundering case was a small comfort to sleep by.

A news video showed a few local break-ins and a car accident that shut down the interstate for two hours while it was cleared up.

Next was a body found by a fisherman. The man was too young to have died from natural causes. They believed foul play was involved.

The camera panned over the riverbank and some weeds that had been crushed down. The camera then zoomed in close to the back of the coroner's van. Dove stared at the guy's legs and a pair of worn cowboy boots.

In large letters on the bottom of one was a word that jerked her head right off the pillow.

*RAIN*

She rewound the footage and paused the screen on that boot.

An odd thing to write on the bottom of a boot.

Unless there was a matching name on another boot that was right now residing in her closet half a foot from where her sister slept.

Rain's cowboy boot had a similar marking, only a different name.

*DOM*

No...

Way...

That dead guy found on the bank of a river could *not* be Rain's boyfriend Dom.

Could it?

She let the footage roll forward to the end, but the victim's name wasn't shared.

Dove bolted up in bed, fingers digging into her temples. Oh god. If he was dead, packed away in the back of a van...

It *had* to be the drug dealer. Nobody else would have that name on their boot.

*He's dead.*

Her breaths were coming sharp and fast. Did that mean it was all over? Were they safe?

Could she return to her old life...to Quaide?

## Chapter Three

---

The facial recognition program pulled a name. Rain.

The same name found on the bottom of the dead guy's cowboy boot.

And a last name too—Priester. The same as Dove's.

“Why would anybody write their girlfriend's name on their boot?” Quaide scrubbed a hand over his tired face. He hadn't been sleeping—Clay was right about that. It had been weeks since he easily drifted off with little weighing on his conscience.

Lark turned her head to answer his question. “I'd write Clay's name on the bottom of my boot.”

Clay's stare landed on her. When the pair looked at each other, electricity snapped and made everyone who was in the room with them feel like voyeurs peeking through a keyhole at something very private.

Had he and Dove behaved the same way?

He didn't think so—they purposely avoided talking about their personal lives for that very reason.

After a moment, Clay said, “I'd do the same.”

Lark plucked a black permanent marker from the pen holder on the desk and brandished it at Clay, sticking out her yellow high-top sneaker.

“Don't you guys start getting sappy. We have work to do. A case to solve. Now it appears that we don't just have a local

outdoorsman killed and dumped on the riverbank. He's got ties to a woman who has a hit out on her."

Just then, the phone rang. Quaide saw the caller, inwardly groaned and put her on speaker.

"Hey, Barker-Moore." He pictured the very young medical examiner. He couldn't believe he was working with people young enough to be his own kids, if he'd ever had any and if he'd started young enough.

"The autopsy's about to begin. I'm sending you the link to stream it."

His brows shot up. He and Clay exchanged looks. "Did you say we were watching the autopsy?" he asked Clay.

"I'm not watching the autopsy." Clay darted a look at his significant other. "Lark?"

"I'm good!" She popped out of her seat and was halfway across the office before anyone could stop her.

A deep voice came from the doorway. "Did somebody say autopsy?" Julius Abel, also new to Sentry, rubbed his tattooed knuckle across his jaw. One hand sported tattoos on each knuckle that spelled *wild*, and the other said *free*. The guy looked rough, from his leather shit-kicker boots to the tattoos up and down his arms that probably extended to all parts of his body. Julius was perfect for this team—he could easily infiltrate extremist groups and outlaw biker gangs and fit in without raising eyebrows.

"Join the video now. I'm about to begin," came Raven Barker-Moore's response.

"I'll make popcorn." Julius started to turn away.

"What the fuck, Abel?" Quaide asked.

"You did not just say you're making popcorn," Clay added.

Being around these young pups, Quaide was feeling older and older by the day.

“What’s the problem? It’s not any different from watching the ID channel,” Julius said.

Quaide wagged his head in awe. “Uhh, yes, it is. Because it’s real.”

Julius twitched his jaw toward the phone on the desk. “I’ll be right there, kid. Don’t start without me. I love a good *Y* cut.”

“Oh my god,” Quaide grumbled.

“Well, I do have a steady hand. Okay,” came Raven’s voice again. “I’m prepping the body. I need a minute.”

“Three minutes in the microwave and I’ll be here.” Julius swung out the door, leaving a stunned silence hanging between Quaide and Clay.

“Can you believe that guy?” Clay jerked his thumb toward the door Julius exited through.

Quaide stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles. “Well, you *are* the boss. You hired him.”

Clay sighed. “Not gonna let me live that down, are ya?”

“Not a chance.” He clicked the video link and the autopsy room filled the big-screen TV on the wall.

Raven was busy at work with the body. They watched her for a short time before Julius strode in, bringing the scent of buttery popcorn with him.

“I’m back! What’d I miss?” He reached into the bag and then popped a piece in his mouth.

Raven looked up at the camera. “Nothing. I’m still checking out the victim’s clothing.”

Julius studied the screen for a moment while munching. “Can you zoom in?”

With an exasperated tilt of her head, Raven stared straight at the camera. “No. This isn’t a cam show.”

Quaide didn’t need to see this, so he swiveled his seat to the computer and started doing research on the biggest

question in his mind—who the hell was Rain?

Okay, that wasn't the biggest question. The first was who she was and the biggest was how she was related to his former assistant.

Lark poked her head through the door. "Uh...Clay? Somebody's here asking about insurance?"

Clay scrubbed a finger between his brows. "Fucks' sake. We've gotta get out of this building. We either need to be hiding in plain sight or just plain hiding."

"What is it with you guys speaking in rhymes?" Barker-Moore asked the room at large.

Quaide straightened, his mind latching on to the obvious answer.

His house was large enough for the Sentry team. It even had spare bedrooms if the guys needed places to crash. It would be easy to stock with food and toiletries, even clothes if they got into a tight spot and were in need of a clean set.

In the background, he faintly heard Julius asking questions about the autopsy happening in live time on the screen while other voices from the front told him that Clay was having a difficult time answering the unwanted customer's questions about insurance.

Onscreen, Quaide sifted through information about Rain. Every time her photo popped up it was another blow to his gut that left him aching for the woman who resembled her so damn much. Rain could be Dove's sister or cousin.

He didn't know a lot about Dove's personal life. Banging his assistant was bad enough, and there was no room for stepping over more boundaries. They had agreed—no personal life details. They wouldn't exchange addresses, just meet at hotels. There was that one time at the cabin too...

As he moved through some of the darker corners of the web, he snapped back to attention. Sentry monitored calls for execution with hitmen involved. Seeing Rain's picture on that site wasn't unexpected...but it was *very* shocking.

Who would want her dead? What connection did she have to their guy at the river?

Julius asked Raven a detailed question about the autopsy that made Quaide grimace. Their generation seemed to be desensitized to things that he'd seen many Marines puke over.

Clay returned, plopping into the leather desk chair with a sigh. "I don't think this space is working out for Sentry."

"That's okay. I've got a place for us. When I'm finished here—and Abel's done checking out the liver of that dead guy—we'll make the move."

Clay sat forward, elbows on his knees. "All right—where?"

"My place."

His brows shot up. "Your *house*? The one with the shag carpeting?"

"Yeah. You guys can help me rip it out. With all those bedrooms, there's enough room for everyone and a good-sized office too."

"Are we running a task force or a construction crew?"

Quaide's mind faded as he stared harder at the screen.

Clay took a step closer to the screen. "What the hell, Livingston?" His outburst overlapped with a loud "Fuck!" from Quaide.

They both stared at a photo of two blonde women who looked so much alike they could be cousins or...

"Sisters." Quaide felt the blood drain from his face. Goose bumps rippled across his shoulders and down his spine. "Rain is Dove's sister." He rocked back in his seat, gripping his skull. He felt like it had been loaded with explosives.

"This can't be happening." It came out as a groan.

"That's your assistant. Jesus, did you know?" Clay asked.

"Hell no. If I had..." He would have helped her. Rescued her. From whatever shit was going down involving a murder

and a hitman.

He jolted to his feet, forcing Clay to step away. Hands fisted, he faced his friend and boss. “I’ve gotta go. Now. They’re not safe.”

“Do you have any idea where to look?”

“No. But I’m good at digging.”

He had no memory of reaching his SUV but suddenly he was sitting behind the wheel, gripping the leather so hard that his fingertips numbed. His breaths were coming hard and fast.

Fuck. Dove. What was she involved in? Was this her reason behind that resignation letter...for avoiding his phone calls?

He didn’t have all the pieces of the puzzle yet, but he’d been in the business long enough to make some educated guesses.

Dove’s sister got herself in trouble with a boyfriend who was doing some bad things. They were close. He loved her enough—fuck, did Quaide ever understand falling for a Priester woman—that he got sappy and wrote her name on his boot like some silly animated movie character.

Whatever dark shit he was involved in got him killed and painted a target on Rain’s back.

And Dove...

God, if something happened to her, Quaide couldn’t live with himself. How could he go on, knowing that he’d dropped the ball and failed to keep the only woman he’d ever loved in his entire life alive?

He stomped on the gas, his mind already halfway down the road to Boulder. He was so zoned out, thinking of what he was walking into, that his phone rang four times before he realized he should answer it.

“Livingston.”

Lark’s voice projected into his ear. “I figured you’d need this address I found for Dove Priester.”



“Give it to me.” His lips felt stiff, wooden. His jaw ached from clamping it so tight.

She recited the address, and an image of the high-rise apartments popped into his head. Now that he knew where Dove lived during that time they were together, he couldn’t quit picturing her there, maybe hanging out on the balcony that each one of the rental units had.

His heart gave a hard squeeze. “Got it. I’ll be in touch.”

Clay’s voice projected into his ear too. “Livingston? I’ve never seen you act this way. What the hell did you *really* have going on with Dove?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” If he admitted to having an affair with her—of being in love with her—he’d break. He would break down and cry like a damn baby.

“Jesus, man, you have bigger ties to that woman than you’re saying.”

He tried to keep the tremor of fear from his voice but probably failed miserably.

“I’ll find them. I will find them and bring them back.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Hot water blasted from the shower massage head, striking the back of Dove’s neck. Soon she would run out the hot water tank, but the stiff kinks in her neck were still in the tightest of knots.

She twisted into the spray, letting it run over her bowed head. Fatigue had her shoulders slumping and her mouth opening on yawn after yawn. No amount of coffee would invigorate her. After the bad sleep, tormenting dreams and lying awake half the night, she was tired and even more depressed.

She tried for a little dance to a pop song that she forced into her head. Dancing in the shower to start the day was supposed to be a mood booster, but in the week and a half she’d been doing it, she didn’t feel improved at all. She just felt stupid for dancing in the shower.

Leaning heavily on the tile wall, she closed her eyes and let more water swirl down the drain.

At least the house was stocked with food. Making that weekly trip down the block to the local market had gone from something she enjoyed before this all began to something she dreaded. If she were seen, she didn't have a backup plan.

And she *always* had a backup plan and a smile to go along with it. Until now.

Quaide would have one, though. He was such a planner that he had contingency plans for every plan B he created. It was one of the many things she admired—and disliked—about him.

The only plan she could think about right now involved scalding hot coffee and blueberry waffles. She switched off the shower and toweled off.

Tucking the end of the terry cloth above one breast, she drifted across her room to her walk-in closet to find some clothes for the day. Something comfortable but not sweatpants. It was bad enough she felt terrible about her situation and her appearance—sweats would only make her feel worse.

Maybe she'd throw on that bright blue sweater that Quaide liked so much on her as a mood booster.

She peeked in the closet.

When her gaze landed on the rumpled covers thrown over the inflatable air mattress, her heart skipped.

Rain wasn't here. She *always* slept late.

Where was she?

She ran out of the closet, clutching the towel to keep it in place. "Rain? Rain!"

Her crazy sister couldn't be trusted. She was too naïve—she didn't see the big picture that laundering money for a known drug dealer wasn't going to end well for her and she really needed to lie low until Dove figured out that backup plan.

“Rain?” Panic felt like cold fingers scrabbling at her skin.

She skidded into the kitchen and nearly wiped out when her damp feet hit tile. Grappling to keep her towel in place, she grabbed the edge of the island and glared at her sister.

Then she realized a second set of eyes was drilling into her.

Slowly, Dove turned her head to look at the man sitting on a stool at her kitchen counter.

“Dove.” Quaide’s deep, yummy voice stroked through her senses.

Spine snapping straight, she stared at him. He couldn’t be real. He was a figment of her imagination, conjured from lack of sleep and torturous dreams of his mouth on her body.

“Look, Dove! I made coffee.” Rain jumped off her stool and in her light, graceful way with her angelic blonde waves swirling around her shoulders, she moved to the coffee bar set up in the corner.

Dove blinked at Quaide. He blinked back.

She threw up a hand. “Hold on. You let a stranger in!”

Quaide arched one dark brow at her claim.

Rain stopped. “He said he’s FBI.”

Dove couldn’t look away from the man she’d spent countless nights ruining clean hotel sheets with. The man she’d left with no explanation.

“Does he have a warrant?” she asked him to his face.

His stare dipped from her wet hair to her bare shoulders and landed on the tops of her breasts pushing against the white towel that was the only barrier between her and the man she ached to have touch her.

“You’re dripping, Dove.” His warm voice set her on fire. Like always.

She had no response to that and simply gaped at him as he got off the stool, walked to the range and grabbed a kitchen

towel draped over the handle. He returned to her side and began pressing the wet ends of her hair between the cloth.

A shudder tore through her. At his closeness. At his touch. Oh god, she wanted him to touch her so bad.

But he shouldn't be here.

“What are you do-ing?” Her demand had a small waver.

“Drying your hair.”

“Are you using this as an excuse to touch me?”

“Can't I be doing both?”

Silence fluttered between them. Was he recalling that night they spent in the honeymoon suite and how he'd dried her off after their bubble bath and carried her to bed with her legs wrapped around his waist?

She didn't dare turn her head. One look at his face would tell her if he was.

“Uhh...” Rain tipped her head to study them. “Am I interrupting something here?”

Jerking back to the present, Dove stepped out of Quaide's reach. “This is Quaide. We used to work together.”

“Quaide.” Rain's eyes cut over him. “Isn't that your boss?”

“*Was* my boss.”

Rain's eyes widened, which only accentuated the blue more. “Oh my god! You were sleeping with the boss? How many bad decisions have you made, Dove?”

Irritation hit with the reverberation of a gong inside her. “Are you kidding me now? You've been living in my closet for six weeks.”

“That doesn't answer my question about you sleeping with your boss.”

“Rain! Enough! Go to your room.”

She threw her a sweet smile. “I don't have a room.”

“Go to your closet!”

Her sister only paused long enough to toss them both a huge, dazzling, Barbie-doll grin before flouncing out of the kitchen. Dove waited several seconds to hear the closet door slam before she settled her gaze on Quaide’s.

His chest inflated. God, he looked amazing. Though now that she looked harder, she saw hollows under his eyes too. Small lines etched around each hazel eye and a bit of his usual glow seemed to have extinguished.

Oh hell. He looked as bad as she did.

“What are you doing here?”

“You and Rain are going to pack your bags and come with me.”

When she hoisted her shoulders back in defiance, her towel slipped. She made a grab for it, crushing the cloth in her balled fist. “Are we under arrest?”

“No, Dove. But it’s not safe here. You’re coming with me. Now.”

She opened her mouth to protest. He took a hasty step toward her and pressed one longer finger over her lips.

Staring deep into her eyes, he murmured, “Don’t argue with me. Just do as I say.”

Her heart slammed into her ribs and kept on pounding hard and fast in reaction to his nearness. His scent. The way his finger felt against her mouth. Even that glare in his eyes mingling with a spark of concern had her body tingling—everywhere—for him.

Slowly, he peeled his finger away from her lips and let himself fall back a step. His stare never left hers. “Okay, Dove?”

Maybe it was the shock of finding him in her kitchen. Maybe it was that look in his eyes that said he wanted to peel that towel off her, lift her onto the counter and spend the morning defiling her kitchen...

But she felt herself nod in agreement.

## Chapter Four

---

As Quaide looked around Dove's living room, he raked his fingers through his hair. The space was pale gray like the color of the bird she was named after, with cozy carpet and plump pillows. Tall windows made the space airy and light, in contrast to the scathing remarks the Priester sisters were exchanging behind the closed bedroom door.

"Do you ever stop to think how irresponsible your actions are, Rain? I told you—many, many times—not to open the door. To anyone!"

"He said he was FBI. Jeesh, Dove. You need to calm down. Your face is getting red and your eyes are starting to bug out a little."

"You haven't seen the worst of it yet!" Dove's voice raised a notch higher as she lost more control.

Quaide's lips twitched up at one corner. He'd never seen her this mad—or in this case, heard her. But he was more than a little relieved that the anger wasn't directed at him.

He walked to the bookshelf and skimmed the titles as the sisters continued their argument.

"I know you told me not to let anybody in the apartment, but you have to agree that it was the right move. He's going to get us out of here. He's here to help us, Dove."

"He doesn't know what he's getting into with you. Now stop talking before I shove you in my suitcase and zip you up!"

A chuckle bubbled up his throat. He was dying to see Dove's face when she muttered *that* threat, but he had a good

imagination when it came to this woman.

“Now what are you doing, Rain? You are *not* taking my suede boots.”

“Really? They match this outfit so well.”

“Oh my god. Who cares about your outfit when you’re hiding from the law?”

His stare settled on the closed door, every inch of his brain connecting to what she said.

So his guess was right—Rain was wrapped up in some sort of crime.

“I don’t have any shoes that match this shade of honey brown, Dove.”

“Fine! Take the damn boots! This isn’t even me—I don’t get upset. Ever! Just lemme out of this closet before I do something I regret.”

A few bumping noises followed. Then the bedroom door flew open and Dove appeared, her face red, her eyes slightly bloodshot and bulging just as Rain had said.

Quaide’s heart spasmed. She was the most stunning woman he’d ever seen in his life.

Using all her strength, she heaved a suitcase through the door behind her. He stepped forward to take it from her.

When his fingers wrapped around the handle, and around her fingers too, their gazes locked.

She blew out a breath. “Please don’t ask me any questions yet, Quaide. I need to get myself together first.”

“Of course, honey.” He caressed her fingers. They felt thinner. *She* was thinner.

But so was he. His jeans were hanging on his hips, and he’d added another hole in his belt the previous week. It shouldn’t feel so damn good to know that she was doing just as horrible as he was. All these weeks, he’d struggled with the idea of her happy and thriving while he was so miserable without her.



“Let me take the bag,” he said.

She released the handle, but he caught her hand before she could pull it away. When he strummed his thumb over her knuckles, a shiver ran through her.

So he still affected her.

That deep ache that had been knotting his chest since the morning he received her resignation letter transformed from a sharp stab to something bittersweet.

Rain stepped up behind her in the doorway, looking cool and collected where her poor sister was frazzled and frantic.

“Oh, can you take my bag too, Quaide? It’s so heavy.”

“If you hadn’t packed half of your wardrobe—and mine too—your bag wouldn’t be so heavy,” Dove shot out.

He captured her gaze and tried to transmit a message to her. *It’s all right, Dove. Just breathe, my baby.*

As if she understood, her chest inflated. She issued a low sigh and brushed past him.

He offered Rain a smile as he took her bag too.

“Make sure you have everything including ID,” he told them.

Dove shoved her feet into a pair of black boots and bent over to zip them. Her long, thick blonde hair trailed to the floor, and for a minute, he couldn’t move for the heat in his balls and a swirl of memories of her in that very same position, taking a pounding from behind. From him.

This wasn’t going to be an easy trip back to East Canon when he was half erect and ready to make up for lost time.

She violently zipped each boot and flipped her hair when she straightened. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave at all.”

“Oh? Do you have another plan?”

“No, she does not,” Rain cut across her. “She’s paranoid about going out too. She waits forever to go down the street to the market to buy us food.”

The revelation had Quaide's protector instincts raging and the alpha male inside him pummeling everything in range with his fists. Dove was afraid to leave the apartment. That should never, ever happen. And it wouldn't again—not on his watch.

"Rain." Dove's throat mottled with a red flush of anger.

"I know, I know. Shut up. You never used to be so mean, Dove."

"Oh my god. Spare me." She grabbed her purse off a hook near the door and threw the strap over her shoulder so the leather hung across her body.

He shouldered his way past the women snarking at each other to position himself in front of the door. When both sets of nearly identical blue eyes turned on him, he was stunned by the resemblance.

"We're leaving the apartment on my terms, so listen to me."

Dove narrowed her eyes at his command.

"You're going to stay behind me. We'll take the elevator —"

"Oh my god!" Rain burst out. "I almost forgot my toiletry bag!" She rushed back into the bedroom.

"There is no excuse for her," Dove said in a flat tone that would make him laugh under any other conditions. But seeing the stress on her face was breaking his damn heart.

"By the way, I'm driving myself." Dove's declaration had him arching a brow.

"No, you're not."

"I want my car."

"So you can make an escape?"

"Because I want my car." She did something he'd rarely seen from her and jutted her jaw in a stubborn—and adorable—fashion.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight, Dove."

At that moment Rain returned carrying a heavy black bag, cutting their disagreement short.

He restated the plan, and only after gaining the agreement of both women did he slowly open the door.

The corridor was empty, so he stepped out first. “Rain, close the door behind you.”

“Okay!”

“And be quiet!” Dove added in a violent whisper. “Quaide, I’m driving.”

“You’re not driving. You don’t even know where we’re going.”

“I would if you told me anything.”

Their gazes met. He knew what she meant. They didn’t need to drag out that old disagreement and air it in front of her sister. Dove always harbored frustrations that he wasn’t upfront about how he saw their future.

It was all crystal clear in *his* mind. He just wasn’t willing to share it with her until he had a plan in place, dammit.

Swiftly and on high alert, he moved the three of them to the elevator and then out of the building. A quick glance at the parking lot showed nobody around, but he couldn’t get them to his vehicle fast enough.

“Stick close. Keep your heads down.” Before they walked out, he wasn’t thinking about their shining blonde hair being a beacon to anybody looking for Rain, and now he regretted not instructing them to put on hats or wear something with a hood.

He might have spent too many years sitting behind a desk and his skills could use some sharpening. He was rusty—and that *couldn’t* happen.

Dove set off walking at a fast clip for her small SUV. Before he could stop her, she whipped open the back door. Rain tossed her toiletry bag inside.

“What are you doing? You’re not the only person here.” Dove’s whisper dripped with murder.

“This is all my important stuff. It cost me a fortune too.”

“You mean it cost your drug dealer boyfriend a fortune,” she muttered.

Quaide barely heard the soft, low clicking sound over the sisters arguing, but he acted on instinct, whipping his arms to yank them away from the SUV just as it exploded.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Guess you’re driving after all.”

Dove stuck a finger in her ear and wiggled it to stop the ringing from the explosion. She might be cracking jokes, but it was only to combat the paralyzing fear thundering through her right now.

Her baby sister was sprawled out on the pavement, crying. Dove needed to get to her.

She flipped over and crawled the few feet to where Rain lay.

Rain pushed into a sitting position and reached for Dove. “Oh my god, Dove! Are you okay?”

She wrapped her sister up in her arms and pulled her close. Over her shoulder, she met Quaide’s gaze. One glance and she knew how this moment would go down. She already saw him gearing up to crack open that rulebook he lived by, but there were no rules for moments like this.

“We’ll take your vehicle,” she told him.

He grabbed both her and Rain by an arm and hauled them to their feet. Before she knew what was happening, he propelled her back toward the building.

“Why aren’t we making a run for it?” she asked through the ringing in her ears. Behind them, the SUV billowed with black smoke.

“My vehicle might not be safe either. We need to grab another vehicle and wait for backup. Get forensics in.”

“We don’t have time for that!”

“We’re not in danger at the moment. C’mon.” He towed her the last few feet to the door.

“Quaide, it’s insane to stand around waiting for someone to come. Who is coming anyway? Harv from the office?”

He shot her a strange look she couldn’t decipher but pulled out his phone.

Suddenly, an engine revved. Quaide whirled, giving her a clear view of a truck with the driver’s window down.

It took her several seconds to realize that Rain was sitting behind the wheel.

“What the fuck?” Quaide asked the question Dove hadn’t formed into words yet.

“Get in!” Rain waved frantically at them.

Dove shook her head. *How? What about keys?*

“She hotwired a truck.”

“Jesus Christ!” Quaide barked.

Again, her sister waved for them to hurry. For once, Rain was the only person thinking straight.

Dove took a step toward the truck.

Quaide’s grip bit into her forearm. “Let her go. You’re staying with me.”

She gaped at him. “You’re trying to boss me around now? That isn’t how this works, Quaide.”

“We’ll track her down as soon as—”

She cut him off. “Are you listening to yourself? I can’t let her do this alone. She’ll wind up dead!”

A stabbing pain in her chest made it harder to breathe than the oily smoke filling the air did. Rain was the last person in her life. Her *only* person.

Hazel eyes burned into hers. “You’re staying with me, and that’s final!”

She wrenched her arm out of his grip. “If you’ll leave an innocent, helpless woman, where does that leave me?”

“Get in!” Rain yelled again.

Quaide swung his gaze to the truck and back to Dove. “Fine,” he gritted out, and hauled her across the pavement to the truck.

“Scoot over—I’m driving,” he told Rain. With his forearm across his nose and mouth against the smoke, he grabbed the bags they’d dropped far enough away from the SUV that they weren’t yet on fire.

Dove jumped in the driver’s side of the truck and scooted down the bench seat, placing herself in the center. It wasn’t until Quaide joined them that she realized her mistake. Her body would be pressed up against her former lover’s.

As soon as he leaped behind the wheel and took off, Dove could let out the breath she’d been holding.

“How do you know how to hotwire a truck?” He scanned the rearview mirror and both side mirrors for more danger as he picked up speed.

She was still shaken up after the explosion, but she fixed her attention on the tendons rippling in Quaide’s forearms.

He took the speed bumps to the street fast enough that all three of them were tossed around on the seat with springs that had seen better days.

Rain didn’t answer.

“Let me guess—the ex-boyfriend taught you how to hotwire a car too. My god, Rain. Will the surprises end?” Dove wanted to shake her baby sister, but at least she’d gotten them out of trouble. If she hadn’t hotwired the truck when she did, they’d be standing around in the parking lot waiting for backup.

She opened her mouth to ask Quaide again who he expected to back them up when Rain let out a sharp gasp. “Oh no!”

Dove grabbed her. “What’s the matter?”

“My toiletries! They’re on the back seat...burning up!”

“Pretty sure they’re already ash.” Quaide hit high speed while casting more looks in the rearview mirror.

“You’re making me nervous. Are we being followed?” Dove’s stomach pitched.

“No sign of a tail right now.” He took out his phone and gave a voice command to call Lexis.

She and Rain traded a look as the call connected.

“I got them. Yeah. Notify the authorities that they need to send fire units to that address. Why? Because her SUV just fucking exploded.” He paused, listening to the speaker. “Exactly like Trinny. Rigged the same way. No, I don’t think it’s related at all. It’s commonplace now—the FBI sees a lot of that type of explosive. On our way now. Okay, meet us there.”

He ended the call and looked around for a spot to set his phone. Automatically, Dove held out her hand to take it.

When he handed it to her, their eyes met, and his softened a bit.

“You two okay?” His tone was gritty with what she knew to be controlled fury.

She’d heard it plenty of times on the job. But when the reason had to do with her...it was so much hotter.

“I’m fine. Rain?”

“My ears are ringing.”

“That’ll subside in a little bit. It was only a little flash-bang. We’re lucky—there wasn’t much explosive material used or it would have blown our eardrums.”

Dove clasped his phone, absorbing the warmth from his body heat that the metal still held.

“What exactly is happening? Who is Lexis and what backup were you talking about?” She made an attempt to smooth her hair. She already looked overly tired and didn’t have a trace of makeup on. Not that it mattered when someone just tried to blow them clear to Seattle.

“I left the FBI.”

“You what?”

He sliced a glance her way. “I’m with Sentry now.”

She processed this. So he’d left too.

“And who is Trinny?” she asked him.

He swung his head to look at her. “I guess I said her name to Lexis. Trinny is a woman who was under the protection of the WEST Protection team. Her vehicle exploded the same way yours just did—with a trigger in the back seat that’s activated by weight.”

Rain made a choking noise. “You mean...if one of us had slid onto the seat...”

“It wouldn’t have been pretty. But yeah. Explosives like that are becoming increasingly common in these parts.”

Hearing that, her anxiety spiked even higher. Dove had to find a way to get Rain to a safe place, and to make sure Quaide didn’t get hurt because of them.

“You can take us to the next town. We’ll get a rental car and go somewhere else.”

He tore his stare away from the road again. When it burned into hers, she started to squirm and not in a good way.

What she saw on Quaide’s face was white-hot rage. “I’m not letting you out of my sight, Dove. You left me once. You were nowhere to be found.”

Her stomach plummeted, and her head spun with the force of his words. “I know what’s best for me and my sister.”

“Like hell. I’m not going to even let you go to the bathroom without me.”

Rain issued a low whistle, and when Dove threw her a glare, she saw her sister’s lips pursed in a you’re-so-in-trouble expression.

She resisted the urge to jab Rain with her elbow. “You think I don’t know the laws? You can’t keep us against our



will.”

His jaw clamped so hard she swore she heard his teeth gnash. “Do you have any damn idea how much you made me suffer when you left, Dove? I *am* going to get my way on this.”

## Chapter Five

---

Who was this woman? Quaide and Dove agreed not to dive into each other's personal lives, but her personality seemed very different from what it was when they worked together. And slept together.

Was she even the same? Maybe he didn't know her as well as he believed and had spent the past six weeks fantasizing about being with her again, only to have it all come crashing down.

What Quaide said to her was an understatement. For the past six weeks, he'd been going crazy wondering what the hell went wrong between him and Dove. Now it looked as if she'd taken off to harbor a suspect in a criminal case.

For their sake, he downplayed the danger they'd just escaped. The bomb in her SUV wasn't that small. Most of the hit was on the opposite side of the vehicle, which made it easier for him to tell the lie and spare the ladies more fear. If it had been planted a few inches to the left, they'd all be dead.

At least the truck Rain so cleverly hotwired had a big engine that would get them to Boulder a few minutes faster if he held this speed.

He ground his teeth. The faster, the better. How much longer could he survive in this cramped cab with Dove bouncing up and down on the seat, rubbing against him?

He didn't dare glance over at her breasts. Too many times he'd seen them bouncing in the throes of lust while he pounded into her wet, tight pussy.

Great—now his jeans were strangling his cock.

He tried to focus on anything but stopping the truck, dragging her out and pinning her to the door. Or lowering his mouth to her sexy throat and kissing his way down to the plump crests of her breasts.

The sisters were arguing again. It took him two tries to zero in on what they were saying.

“You have no clue how much that makeup cost. My foundation alone was a hundred dollars, Dove.”

“Then you’re stupid for spending that.” She stopped and sucked in a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I *have to* find a minute to calm down. I shouldn’t have called you stupid. I’m the answer girl. I have an answer for everything. So we just need a plan.”

“I’m going to have to buy more as soon as we get to the city,” Rain said.

Dove groaned. “Quaide, you’re going to have to freeze her bank accounts.”

“I’ll take her credit card as well,” Quaide offered.

“No use. She’s got them saved in her phone.”

“I’ll take that too.”

On the other side of Dove, Rain issued an indignant sigh and twisted her face to look out the window. At least the road was relatively smooth. Any more bumps and Dove would bounce into his lap. Their arms brushed with every sway of the truck.

“It’s too bad this thing doesn’t have a back seat. We’re so cramped in here.” Dove held her body stiffly as though trying not to bounce up against him. Which made him want to purposely hit a few more potholes than necessary.

“You’re fine right here. *Beside me.*” His tone brooked no argument.

“Actually—” she began.

He cut her off. “You don’t question the FBI. The FBI questions you.”

“Wait a minute. You said you’re not with the FBI now.”

“Sentry is a division.”

She sighed. “Okay, fine. I’ll answer your questions. I might need to lawyer up, though. Do I need a lawyer, Quaide?”

They stared into each other’s eyes. Damn, the woman was making him hard as hell. Seeing her again, touching her—as brief as that had been—was driving him crazy. Even with so much left unsaid between them, and some anger at how things had played out between them, he only wanted *her*.

If Rain weren’t sitting right there listening to every word they exchanged, he’d inform Dove that challenging him was having the opposite effect of what she wanted.

“So,” Rain drawled out, “you really were sleeping with the boss.”

“Oh my god,” Dove blurted. “She’s not really my sister, I’m certain of it. I question her paternity every day.”

He laughed.

She made him laugh.

And goddamn did it feel good, like coming home after a long, arduous and lonely journey.

He forced his stare back to the road. “We’ve got about an hour’s drive ahead of us, even at this speed. Sit back and relax while you can, ladies. When we get to my place,” he put emphasis on the words and threw a look at Dove, “we’re going to talk.”

She wrapped her arms around herself and scooted a millimeter away from him.

She could try to keep from touching him or feeling anything for him, but he’d seen that look in her eyes. It was the same one that she gave him right before he lowered his mouth to hers, plunged his fingers under her sexy pencil skirt and made her moan.

When he got her alone, he was going to ask about her glasses he’d missed seeing them so damn much. Then he planned on making her *beg* him for release. After she left him

without warning, he had no remorse whatsoever in driving her mad with need and then withholding it until she'd been punished enough.

He spent a dizzying heartbeat watching her breasts jiggle in that blue sweater that he always loved seeing her in. Oh yes, his little lover was in big trouble once he got her alone.

Rain cleared her throat. "Could we maybe listen to the radio? The tension between you guys is too loud."

Dove sent her what Quaide could only guess was a glare. "No, we can't."

"Don't leave the closet, Rain. Don't order a pizza, Rain. You can't listen to the radio, Rain," she muttered under her breath in a mocking tone.

Dove dropped her head back against the seat and refused to speak for the rest of the drive. Silence fell over them. For a solid half hour, he questioned how well he knew the woman beside him.

Knowing how she sounded when he made her come didn't count. She was under a lot of pressure, and some cracks in her cool façade were starting to spring leaks. He understood that. But he didn't like how distanced he felt from her either.

Right now, all that mattered was prioritizing their safety while getting to the bottom of Rain's case.

Raindrops struck the windshield in heavy plops. Dove jolted at the noise. He automatically reached over and settled a hand on her thigh. "It's just rain, honey. We're all a little punchy after what happened."

She didn't try to nudge his hand away. "I suppose there's a rulebook that tells you what to do after your SUV explodes."

"There are always steps to follow."

"We needed to leave fast."

"And we did, thanks to Rain." He met her eyes and pitched his voice low. "There's a lot we need to discuss."

When they drove up to his house, several vehicles he recognized as belonging to the Sentry team were parked out front, including Clay's truck, a souped-up show truck on steroids and a flashy street bike.

After pulling into the driveway, he hit an app on his phone to open the garage door.

Dove let out a little gasp. "I remember when you installed that!"

His chest constricted. *This* was the woman he knew. She was suddenly *his* Dove again. Even the excitement in her voice was a soothing balm of familiarity that he hadn't totally been deluding himself all these years that their relationship, though restricted, was real.

He pulled into the garage and shut the door. Then he cut the engine.

"Uh, Quaide? What do we do about the stolen vehicle?" Rain asked.

"Not stolen. Commandeered for official business."

"That's a thing?"

"Yup. We'll make sure it gets back to the owner and he's compensated. Let's go inside." He cut off more questions by climbing out.

The ladies followed, and he led the way through the door that opened into the kitchen. He was half embarrassed for Dove to see the outdated house. He hadn't made nearly enough progress on those remodeling projects in the six weeks since they'd last spoken.

When they walked in, he stopped at the sight of boxes and plastic totes overflowing with equipment crowding the kitchen.

"Guess the guys got everything moved in while I was out."

Dove, curious as always, looked to him for an explanation.

He opened his mouth to start to explain, but shut it and shook his head. “There’s too much to share right now. I promise I’ll fill you in—”

The thump of boots on the old hardwood floors confirmed for him that his team had officially occupied his home.

When he made the offer, he didn’t realize he’d have Dove back in his life and want some privacy. Plus, he’d shared quarters in the Marines. The stench of dirty feet wasn’t something he wanted to experience again.

At the sound of the kitchen door slamming, Clay entered. He swept his stare over the sisters, then he looked at Quaide.

“Clay, this is Dove and Rain.”

He felt Dove’s surprise. She knew Clay’s name from helping put together the task force, but this was the first time they’d met.

“Clay Lexis is my...”

“Boss,” Clay supplied with a flash of white teeth.

“My counterpart,” Quaide corrected. “He runs the Sentry team,” he said for Rain’s benefit.

“Hello, Clay.” Dove didn’t sound totally like herself yet. As soon as possible, he needed to get her alone and set her mind at ease.

Quaide caught the bounce of fiery red curls from the corner of his eye and turned toward Lark.

“This is Lark. She’s pretty much running the ship from behind the curtain.”

She threw a wave and smile at the sisters. “Gosh, you two look so much alike. Which one of you has the hi—”

Clay snagged Lark around the waist, yanking her up against him and cutting off what she was about to share concerning the hit. Quaide met Clay’s eyes and gave him a nod of thanks. He wasn’t certain if the sisters knew about the potential cause of the attack as of yet, but now wasn’t the time.

Before he could suggest a conference in the dining room, Julius and Jennings Abel walked in. Two more people in the kitchen made the place feel like a dive bar on a Friday night.

“Wow,” he heard Rain say softly to her sister. “That’s a lot of testosterone.”

Dove elbowed her.

“Dove, Rain, these are the Abel brothers, Julius and Jennings. Guys, would one of you grab the suitcases from the back of the truck in the garage? Then we’re all going to sit down and talk through the next move.”

Julius strode forward. “Too bad your SUV didn’t blow up. You could use something more fun to drive.”

Quaide snorted. That SUV had a lot of memories for him and Dove. But maybe she didn’t want to remember them.

He waved a hand for the sisters to follow him. “Do either of you want a drink or something to eat before we talk?”

“Uhh, you wouldn’t happen to have soda water, would you? With lime?” Rain asked.

He turned to her. “Just plain water. But we’ll get whatever you like for later. Lark?”

“On it.”

“Dove?” Just setting eyes on her was a fist to the stomach.

She really was here with him.

Now he just had to figure out how to keep her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dove reached for the chair to pull it away from the big, old dining room table, but Quaide got there first.

Holding her gaze, he slowly slid it across the scratched hardwood that had seen better days.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

Next to her, Rain made a noise that told her that she’d seen the exchange between them and was going to ask



questions later.

As Dove took her seat, she made sure her elbow jabbed Rain.

“You don’t have to be so mean!” Rain whispered loud enough for everyone to hear.

Was Quaide smiling? Oh god, he was. When the man smiled, he lit up entire rooms. She’d witnessed it for herself every time they shared a conference room, which she supposed they were doing now. If the old dining room could be called that.

To avoid looking at her former lover directly, she scanned the space. Faded wallpaper sported a teapot pattern with tiny sprigs of flowers on the front of each rounded belly. The wood tone of the table was outdated. The chairs were as comfortable as sitting on a slab of concrete, and only half the bulbs were lit on the tarnished brass chandelier hanging over the table.

The rest of the Sentry team filed in and took up seats.

“Uh...Quaide?” she asked before the meeting commenced.

“Yes?”

“I thought headquarters was downtown. Since when did you start meeting in your grandparents’ house?”

“You mean the Playboy mansion?” The tattooed man introduced as Julius Abel glanced around.

“Abel.” Quaide’s voice came with a warning growl that sent shivers of desire up and down Dove’s spine.

She’d missed his voice *so* much. Heard it in her dreams.

When Quaide gave her his undivided attention, he looked at her as if she were the only person in the universe.

“The building wasn’t meeting our needs, so this morning I suggested we move here. The guys moved everything while I was picking up you two. I realize the house needs updating. Lark? Maybe you wouldn’t mind finding us a better conference table and comfortable chairs.”

“Top of my to-do list.” The bubbly redhead seated near the head of the table with her laptop at the ready seemed really out of place among the hard-ass men surrounding her. Like a bright butterfly flitting around grumpy storm clouds.

The Abels looked to have stepped out of an action flick. Clay Lexis’s black Stetson only accentuated the scowl he wore—unless he was looking at Lark. And Quaide...

Dove’s stomach heated.

“Let’s get started.” He shifted his stare from her to Rain and back again. “Will you tell me what happened?”

She tangled her fingers in her lap. “Which part?”

“Start at the beginning.”

Rain spoke up. “Oh! You wanna hear about the meet cute?”

*Oh my god. We can’t be related.*

Dove made an attempt to keep her expression neutral, but that meant avoiding Quaide’s eyes.

*Stay positive through every situation. I’ve already lived through the worst.*

“Meet cute?” Clay asked.

“Yes, we need to hear how you met Dom, whether it was cute or not,” Dove injected.

With a little wiggle as though getting more comfy, Rain looked around the table. “We met at a club in Boulder. I was with my friends, and Dom was with his. I was trying to flag down a server to get another drink, and Dom just walked right up and put one in my hand. And...” she paused for dramatic effect, “it was the right drink! Rosé punch.”

Julius cocked a brow. “What in the hell is a rosé punch?”

“It’s really good. But it might not be your thing.”

“I drink bourbon.”

One glance at the man’s dark, perpetual scowl was enough of a clue for Dove. Maybe her sister wasn’t so out of touch

with reality after all if she picked up on it as well.

Quaide grunted. “We don’t care what anyone was drinking. Please go on, Rain.”

“Anyway, Dom and I started talking. Then he was rizzing me up.”

“Excuse me—what is rizzing?” Clay looked to Lark for interpretation.

Rain smiled. “It means flirting.”

“Why not just say flirting?” Julius seemed to dislike everything about this meeting. Or maybe he just disliked Rain.

Feeling the protective need to take over, Dove jumped in. “The point is that Rain was dating a drug dealer.”

Her announcement didn’t shock anybody the way she expected it to.

“He’s a really good guy, Dove.” Rain paused. “Other than the drug thing. But I didn’t know that when we were dating. He paid for everything and bought me lots of presents.” She pushed back a lock of blonde hair to show off the diamond stud in her earlobe. “See?”

Lark nodded in appreciation, but the guys were as unimpressed as Dove.

She pushed out a sigh. “Bottom line—he was raking in the cash and he needed a way to clean it. That’s where Rain comes in.”

“Can you tell us more about how you did that?” Quaide’s eyes were bracketed by lines of fatigue. So were his lips. He still looked hot as hell and Dove’s entire body quivered for his touch. But he looked tired and withdrawn.

Her mirror had told her the very same thing every day for the past six weeks.

“Well, it started out really cute too,” Rain continued.

Dove dropped her head into her hands. “I don’t know how we’re related.”

Julius shifted in his seat. “Thought Clay said you’re sisters.”

She jerked her head up and pierced him in a dull stare. “They don’t have sarcasm in the South, honey?”

Quaide folded his lips inward but his stern look reflected his disapproval.

Unfazed as always, Rain went on, “Dom had me run errands for him. He always ordered the same takeout, which made it easy. He only ordered pad Thai, General Tso’s from the Chinese restaurant or pizza with extra mushrooms.”

“Rain,” Dove urged her faster.

“Whose story is this anyway? Last I heard, it was mine. Anyway”—she sat up straighter in her seat with all the poise of a movie star—“he asked me to do some shopping for him. He’d spent time bulking up with muscle, and his shirts were too tight.”

“Jesus,” Julius muttered.

Rain purposely ignored him. “I love shopping, so it was a really good arrangement. He gave me cash and I went out and got what he wanted that day. Sometimes it was a suit, sometimes golf clothes. He always told me to pick up something nice for myself while I was out. He spoiled me so much.”

“You mean he was dropping money on you as a way to hide the fact that he was dealing meth, Rain.” Dove wanted to stuff her sister under the table and pretend she’d never spoken a word.

Rain ignored her too, going on in a strong voice that spoke of how much she thrived on the attention. “He had me making deposits for him at three different banks.”

“And you didn’t think anything of that?” Quaide questioned.

Rain shrugged. “Dom said he was putting money into his mom’s account. You know, to help out.”

“And the other two accounts?” Quaide asked.

“They were both Dom’s—a savings account and a checking account.”

“You never questioned—” Clay broke off. “Never mind. Go on, please.”

“After a couple months, I realized it was silly to go to three different banks in three different towns. It cut into my spa time. I realized if I combined accounts that I could fit in a pedi too.”

Dove stared at the ceiling, petitioning whatever ghosts of Quaide’s ancestors that haunted this house for patience.

“It was a solid plan. I was saving bank fees, and Dom could just wire money into his mother’s account,” Rain continued.

Every time her sister opened her mouth, Dove silently prayed for a swift death. At this point, she’d prefer being burned at the stake to hearing her sister say another word.

“Out of the blue, Dom got really, really mad at me. He was unhappy that I’d combined bank accounts and that’s when our relationship started to break down.” Rain lowered her gaze to the table.

Dove had to stop her from saying more—now.

“Rain called me crying. Her boyfriend hit her,” she put in.

Every man at the table stiffened, their already thunderous expressions darkening.

She barreled on, “I went and picked her up. Dom wasn’t there. But as soon as I looked around his house, I knew what was going on. You don’t work in the FBI for three years without knowing what to look for.”

She couldn’t look at Quaide. She already knew that her resignation letter hurt him.

“I got Rain back to her old apartment that she still kept—”

“Great closet space,” Rain added with a knowing nod.

Dove set a hand on her sister’s arm to silence her. “From there, I did a little digging. It didn’t take much to find that

Dom's accounts had government locks on them because of large sums of money being moved around. That made Rain an accomplice. And I couldn't exactly work for the FBI while my sister was wanted for money laundering."

Quaide bowed his head.

Dove drew in a deep, shaky breath. "Rain's been with me for six weeks."

Clay took over. "Thank you, ladies. We're going to set up all the equipment and get to work on the case."

Dove's chest tightened to the point where no air would move in or out of her lungs.

Oh no. Not the panic again. She'd experienced a sense of doom a few times since locking her sister up in her apartment with her, and it always ended in a freakout. She couldn't do that here, not in front of everyone.

She shoved away from the table.

## Chapter Six

---

Dove found the back door and slipped outside into the cool air. The garden resembled an overgrown forest in a fairytale, and it was raining, but it was the perfect place to hide for a minute to compose herself.

She was exhausted. Years of being there for her sister had only taught Rain to rely on her rather than figuring things out for herself. Dove had screwed up. Now she was sitting at the bottom of a well with no idea how to pull herself out. She was so tired of being the responsible one, the only one who worried about anything serious or important.

Those small escapes with Quaide were one of the only things she ever did for herself. Now that was all screwed up too. If she didn't know where she stood with him before, she definitely didn't now.

She sucked in deep breath after deep breath. With each step she paced, the spongy turf pushed up water around her boots.

Getting away for a minute wasn't helping. That panic in her chest wasn't subsiding.

Now she was breathing too fast.

She didn't have time for hyperventilating fits. She needed...

*A paper bag to breathe into.*

She needed to get her crap together.

Pulling out her phone, she located her note app. If she didn't get some of this weight off her chest, she'd burst into

awful tears.

Bringing the phone back to her lips, she began to stammer out words. “I need coffee. I didn’t even get my coffee this morning. And my SUV blew up. I loved that thing. It was my very first new vehicle, and I bought it when I got my very first raise.”

Water dripped off the eaves of the big old house, creating puddles on the ground that she paced through.

She hit the record button again. “Contact insurance company explaining that my vehicle blew up. File a police report, too. Or does the FBI handle this? Ask Quaide. He’s such a fixer and he goes by the book on everything. And Rain! She hasn’t grasped or cared about anything serious in the past six weeks! I’m never going to have my own life, am I?” Her voice gave a horrible wobble.

She could *not* break down.

She strode to the other end of the garden where a wooden bench was almost completely obliterated by vines. Her mind bounced between her family problems and back to her forbidden lover. Just being in his presence made her senses go haywire and amped up her libido. With everything that was going on, would they even have a chance to talk things through let alone connect?

“Can I even *handle* being this close to Quaide?”

Whipping around to pace in the other direction, she stopped dead, suddenly face-to-face with the guy she was talking about.

The one she never got over.

Quaide’s fists were clenched at his sides, rain darkening his hair further.

Heat burned in her stomach. How many times had she ached for this very moment when she’d see him again?

Now she was seven shades of humiliated to even face him.



He dragged his eyes over her hair and face, working slowly down her body. Having him look at her this way made her wish the ground would open up and swallow her. She looked horrible. Not even the blue sweater he favored could save her sallow expression or help him overlook the bags beneath her eyes.

Quaide took a step toward her. “Dove. What are you doing?”

A thick lump clogged her throat. “I’m journaling. I worked with the FBI, remember? I have to document this stuff.”

“In a voice recording? On your phone? Honey, you know better. Anyone could get a hold of that.” He closed the gap between them.

Of course he was lecturing her on sticking to the rules, but didn’t he see that she really, really needed this as an outlet before she blew up?

On the flip side, she just wanted to step into his embrace and take strength from his arms.

“Exactly how long is the journal, Dove?”

“A hundred...eighty...pages.”

“Fuck.”

“I needed to record *everything*, Quaide. God forbid my sister got arrested. I needed proof that she was taken advantage of!”

When he reached out and hooked his finger under her jaw, tilting her head up so she met his stare, her insides quivered.

A sharp cry threatened at the back of her throat. Somehow, she managed to bottle it up.

“Honey... Christ, I can’t stand to see that fear in your eyes.”

She couldn’t think straight near him. “I’m sorry you’ve been sucked into this.”

His gaze softened like she'd seen it once when he looked at a stray kitten on the street. "Don't be sorry. Besides, you're brave as hell. Not many women would do what you did to keep your sister safe."

"She's family. There's nothing else in the world as important. Only...I know I hurt you when I turned in that resignation and never warned you it was coming."

His jaw locked. "You should have brought this to me, Dove. I'm trained to deal with cases like Rain's."

She stopped mid-rant, a silent gasp on her lips. She slowly shut her mouth. "Even with your training, you don't know what's best for my sister."

They stared at each other for a long heartbeat, at a standoff.

When she moved away from him, he dropped his finger from her jaw, but she still felt the warm ghost of heat from his skin. She wanted that touch all over her body.

"Come inside. You need to know the plan," he said.

She eyed him. "Do I get to speak in this meeting? Or do I have to be silent and take notes like I always did when we worked for the FBI?"

He sighed. "We're going to discuss the moves, Dove. So probably more like option two."

Her brows shot up. "Really? I don't get a say?"

"Not when it comes to you and Rain's safety, no. But you need to be there for the discussion."

He turned and walked inside, leaving her standing in the rain, jaw dropped, with no choice but to follow. When they reached the dining room, she felt that same panic trying to take hold of her again.

This time she steeled her spine instead of running. She was tough. She would get through this, just like everything else in her life so far.

When she glanced at Quaide, her mind warred with her heart. She didn't want to lose him again. She didn't want to leave her sister to deal with this mess either.

Clay brought the meeting back to order. "Do you guys need to towel off?"

Quaide's already dark hair was even blacker from rain. His gaze found her. "I'm fine. Dove?"

"I'm okay."

Clay continued. "Now that we're all here, there's no more pulling punches. We need to talk about the fact that Rain has a hit out on her."

Dove's eyes widened in shock. At her side, Rain froze.

A...hit? As in an order of execution?

All that rain that felt so soothing on her face outside now turned to drops of ice. Oh god, this was *far* bigger than she ever imagined. This entire time, she thought she was just hiding her sister from the law until she could find a way to prove she was innocent in a money laundering scheme.

The men started talking at once, formulating a plan and discarding it immediately. A second plan was hatched. Dove reached over and gripped Rain's hand hard while they both listened in a state of shock.

Quaide set his palm on the table over a water ring from a drink set there long ago. "I suggest we move her to the Wynton Ranch."

The Abel brothers stopped arguing to listen. Clay sat up straighter.

Quaide went on, "They'll protect her there. We're a small team. We don't have the manpower to investigate this crime and stop it from moving forward, but we need to keep Rain safe."

Clay hardly gave it a moment's consideration. "It's a solid move." He turned his head. "Julius, you get in touch with WEST. Make the arrangements."

Dove's heart thundered hard in her chest, leaving her feeling sick and dizzy. "What is the Wynton Ranch? *Where* is the Wynton Ranch?"

Rain squeezed her hand harder.

Quaide looked about to leap up and come to her side. "WEST Protection is a security agency. The team is founded and operated partly by the Wynton family. They're trained to keep Rain safe."

"I'm going too, right?" She had to look after Rain.

Quaide stared at her. "They know what they're doing. You won't be needed there."

She opened her mouth, but he cut across her.

"I need you here, Dove."

Her mind spun. Electricity zapped through her body, and she wanted to jump out of her chair and into his lap. The room faded away until it was only them, looking at each other as if for the first time.

After what felt like an eternity, Clay cleared his throat. "Any chance you two wanna take this somewhere else?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Quaide led the way out of the dining room, his boots echoing in loud, ominous thumps on the old hardwood. He entered the study, and Dove sailed in right behind him.

She came to a stop and looked around. "Oh *god*."

As she scanned the space his grandfather used as his office and personal library, Quaide saw what he'd grown blind to—a remodeler's wet dream. Or to him, a nightmare. Cheap fifties paneling ran across the bottom of the walls, and the wallpaper above it was peeling off in spots.

He slashed a hand through the air. "I inherited a mess."

"You mean the house or me?" Dove directed a lock of hair behind her ear, drawing his attention to her tiny little earlobes,

he loved nibbling every chance he got. And to the sapphire earrings he'd surprised her with one evening.

His chest felt too tight to pull any air into his lungs.

"I meant the house, Dove. I told you there's a lot that needs fixed. I'm not sure I can do this. I don't have that type of skill."

She dropped her stare to the floor and the worn area rug in gawdy colors under his feet. "I'll fix myself. I'll fix Rain."

He wasn't sure how to fix what happened between them. If it even *could* be.

All he knew was that he hadn't quit thinking about her for more than a few minutes for the past six weeks. And she didn't know that part of his reason for leaving the FBI was for her.

"You don't have to go it alone now, Dove. I'm here. Sentry is here."

She put on a bright face. "I never got my coffee."

She was doing it again — dodging anything remotely close to emotional. How many times had he done the same, switching topics to avoid admitting to his own feelings until he had a plan in place?

"I'll make you some."

"I can find the kitchen, Quaide."

"There are boxes everywhere. Let me get the coffee. Have a seat on..." He pivoted toward the brown patterned couch. They both stared at it for a long minute. Was she also wondering why his grandparents chose a tiny, covered bridge pattern for a sofa fabric?

Dove chewed on her bottom lip. "You know, that thing can probably fetch a good price. It's vintage."

"Only thing that could make it better is some gasoline and a match."

The corners of her lips twitched in a small smile, but that was all he'd get from her right now. "I'll fix your coffee."

He left her still standing in the middle of the study, looking lost and alone. It broke his damn heart that she'd let things go this far without reaching out to him when she knew damn well he could help her. That he *would* help her.

In the kitchen, he shoved some boxes stuffed with cords and external hard drives out of his way so he could reach the coffee machine. He didn't bother fixing a whole pot, just put in a pod and set a mug at the ready.

As the scent of the rich brew hit his senses, he grabbed some powdered creamer and dumped it in. He only ever fixed Dove coffee in hotel rooms when they were alone. In the office, she fixed it for him.

He carried the mug back to the study and found her perched on the edge of the ugly couch, her head in her hands. For a heart-shattering moment, he thought she was crying.

Then she lifted her head and he saw her thin cheeks were dry. Her eyes were tired but not red.

She started to stand, reaching for the mug, but he crossed the space to her before she could get up and placed the mug in her hands.

The urge to pull her against him was so damn strong that his throat closed off for a moment. If he started touching her, he couldn't stop. He'd have her legs wrapped around him and his cock buried in her tight heat before she ever got a chance to take a sip.

As she brought the mug to her lips, he stepped back, watching her. There was never a void to fill between them. They conversed with ease. They enjoyed silent companionship in the same way.

“Why didn't you come to me?” he asked at last.

She swiped her tongue over her bottom lip. “I told you—I didn't want to drag you into my mess. What were you going to do? Helping us would have jeopardized your position with the FBI.”

“I was leaving anyway. But it wouldn't have mattered—I still would have done anything for you.”

Issuing a small exhalation, she shook her head. “Do we have to talk about the whys of it all, Quaide? Fact is, everything is a mess now. A hit is out on my sister!”

“Sentry’s got a tight rein on the situation. We’re going to get her into hiding and no harm will come to her. I promise.”

“I can’t let her go to this ranch alone. Do you have any clue what kind of trouble she’ll get into if I don’t watch over her?”

He gave a slight nod. “I can guess based off what I’ve seen so far.”

When she drew the mug to her mouth again, it wobbled ever so slightly in her trembling grip. “So...tell me your plans for this study.”

The change in topic was one they both needed and *so much* like the upbeat Dove he knew. He looked around. “First thing I do is rip down the wallpaper and tear off the paneling.”

“Brighten it up with fresh drywall. Any ideas for a paint color?”

“That’s always been your wheelhouse, hasn’t it?”

Countless times over the months they’d spent together, they’d lie in bed and talk about this house. Now she was actually in it—and he never thought she would be.

“After this is all over, I guess I can give you some ideas,” she said.

“Good. It’s settled. When you’re done with your coffee, I’d like to show you and Rain where you’ll sleep.”

“All right.” She took one last sip of coffee and set the mug on the ugly table in front of her.

“I’ll get Rain and meet you in a minute.” He found the team still sequestered in the dining room, talking over the plan, but Rain wasn’t with them. He located her in the kitchen with Lark, munching on an apple.

Every time he saw the woman, Quaide was hooked in the gut. She looked *so much* like Dove. Even the way she chewed

reminded him of her.

The major difference, though, was their personalities. Dove was smart and reserved. He didn't know Rain, but what he'd seen was impulsive and somewhat immature.

He couldn't help but wonder how Dove got saddled with the responsibility for her sister. Wasn't there any other family member to help?

Their bags were still in the spot where Julius had set them, so Quaide picked them up. "Rain, I'm going to show you to your room."

"Okay." She took one last bite from the apple and tossed the core in the trash.

As he led her to the study to get Dove, Rain wrinkled her nose. "This house is kind of atrocious."

"It's got great bones."

"My sister thinks *you've* got great bones."

Dove stepped out of the study. "I heard that, Rain. Stop talking about us."

He could see that even if he didn't want Dove all to himself, he needed to separate the sisters to keep them from fighting. They'd been living in close quarters for weeks and were probably on each other's nerves in a big way.

He twitched his head toward the staircase. To his shock, the sisters grew quiet as they ascended the stairs. When he looked back, he caught Dove running her hand along the smooth wood railing as though she appreciated the carvings as much as he always did.

The first room they came to, he opened the door and set Rain's bag inside. "This is you."

Rain poked her head in first. "It's small."

"The smallest bedroom usually served as a nursery to the new baby in a big family. My father and all my aunts and uncles slept here, then when they all grew up and left home, my grandmother used it as her sewing room."



Rain sniffed as her gaze landed on the old sewing machine and table in a corner. “I see that. This is worse than the closet.”

“Rain—” Dove broke off as if questioning whether or not it was worth her time to give her sister hell for her comment.

“Can we discuss my toiletries?” she asked.

“Sure. Just keep them in the bathroom,” he said.

“No. I no longer have any, remember?”

He scrubbed a finger over his upper lip. “We’ll get you some.”

“There’s only one bed. Where is Dove supposed to sleep?”

He stood inches away from his lover. When he faced her, her big, gray-blue eyes were fixed on his face.

“Across the hall.” He tilted his head toward the hall and then took a step toward his own room. The sisters trailed after him.

When he pushed open the door, Rain let out a gasp. “Dove gets the updated master suite with a king-sized bed?”

“I don’t need this,” Dove argued, backing away from the door. “Rain can have it. I’ll take the sewing room.”

He fixed her in his stare. “You’re staying in here...with me.”

Rain’s lips rounded into an *O*.

Dove drew back her shoulders. “Mighty bold of you to assume I’ll share a bed with you.”

The world faded, and he only had eyes for Dove. “Look what happens to you when we’re apart.” He let his gaze skim her hair before reaching out to brush the pad of his thumb over the dark circles under her eye. “Look what happened to me,” he continued, turning the attention on himself.

She made a small noise in the back of her throat. He was distantly aware that Rain hurried into the sewing room and

quietly closed the door. It might be the first time ever that such a thing happened, but he was glad that she chose now.

He cradled Dove's beautiful face in one palm. "We never should be away from each other."

"Now you're on Rain's side? Saying I make bad decisions." She searched his eyes.

His chest burned. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

With deliberate slowness, he leaned in and captured her lips. Giving her time to end it and hoping like hell she didn't.

## Chapter Seven

---

As Quaide's mouth brushed hers, Dove's senses went haywire. She moaned, shivered and clutched at the front of his shirt, all at the same time.

She heard the bag he held in his free hand hit the floor a split second before he hooked one arm around her back and hauled her up against him.

"Open your mouth for me."

She moaned. Oh god, she had a love/hate relationship with this man's bossiness. But when they were behind closed doors, she stopped thinking and only took every order he gave.

When she parted her lips, he angled his head, deepening the caress, pressing her lips harder under his until she moaned out.

He reached around her and shut the door. Then twisted the lock.

She was trapped. With her lover. All alone.

And god, he felt *so* good.

"Wider," he ground out.

On another gasp, she opened her mouth more and found his tongue at the ready to stroke over hers. The dark need of desire curled in the pit of her belly. Hunger stole over her.

She shoved her hands under his shirt and raked her nails across his back. A growl burned on his lips even as he cupped her ass and dragged her against him. She rocked into his growing bulge as their tongues danced out of control.

Picking her up, he carried her the few steps to the big bed. They fell together in a tumble of kisses and grappling hands. She ripped off his shirt, more than eager to feel those muscles covered by velvety skin.

When he cupped her breast, a cry scorched her throat. He took her mouth over and over, slanting hot kisses over it and feeding her roughened moans as they stripped each other.

She tore at his jeans. He went for her sweater and bra. After she was bare, he sucked her nipple between his hard lips while working off her pants.

Getting Quaide inside her after these painful, aching weeks made all her worries over the past few weeks disappear.

As soon as he yanked off the rest of her clothes, they tore their lips apart. Chests heaving, their gazes locked.

Purposefully, she let her thighs fall apart.

“I’ve missed the hell outta you, baby.” His gritty voice scorched her senses, but his fingers burrowing deep in her wet pussy had her twisting and bucking for more.

“I need you inside me. Don’t make me wait—it’s been too long.” She couldn’t quite keep the plea out of her voice.

Not when he was inches from filling her with what she wanted.

“Still on birth control?” His dark eyes blazed into hers as he settled his weight over top of her.

“Yes. Luckily I get a six-month supply. Makes it easy to hide out for months with your kid sister who’s involved in criminal activi— Ahhh!” The word ended on a scream when he filled her to the hilt in one hard, claiming shove.

Her pussy walls flexed around him, and he went still.

Buried deep, weight supported on his elbows, he caressed the hair off her forehead and gazed into her eyes. Passion flooded in, and so did a big fat lump that lodged in her throat.

She’d missed him with a bone-deep need she’d never allowed herself to stop and admit to. Now it overflowed like a

geyser in the national park.

“Move!” She managed to get out the demand.

Huffing out a laugh, Quaide churned his hips, arrowing his cock toward her deepest point before slowly withdrawing.

They shared a strangled noise that spoke of how often they’d done this in the past, and would again if she stayed here with him for any length of time.

She never thought she’d end up in his bed again, let alone be under his protection.

The way he cradled her so tenderly spoke of emotions, love. The way he pounded deep into her core said he’d been aching to fuck her just as much as she wanted it.

When he clamped his fingers on her nipple and lightly pinched, her walls contracted around his stiff length.

He froze. “Oh yeah. That’s it, honey. Draw on it with your pussy. Milk me.”

Her body flexed on its own several times before he seemed unable to take it anymore and plowed deep again.

They rolled, and he situated her on top of him, her thighs hugging his torso and his hands on her breasts as she worked his erection in and out of her.

“Oh...my god!” Her breathy plea for more mingled with his groan. When she wiggled her pussy down over his length, she rejoiced in his eyes rolling back.

“Don’t stop, Dove. Take what you need.”

God, he was always a selfless lover, holding off until she came and sometimes longer so she could have even more bliss before his release.

Leaning in, she bracketed his face with her hands and kissed him long and deep while their bodies slapped in a hard rhythm. The pain in her heart faded, leaving behind a balm of love that probably reflected in her eyes.

As it did his.

The man had never held back with her one time. Here, in this world, they were equals. It was only when they stepped beyond those walls that things got messy.

Jerking his hips upward in time to her downward thrusts, he plucked at her nipples. She couldn't believe she'd lived without that tight, pinching pleasure for this long. Every day without his touch had been torture.

And yeah, he was right. They both looked worse for wear. The stress lines etched on his face filled her with guilt. But they always knew their fling couldn't last forever...right?

He slipped his hand between their bodies and ground the pad of his thumb over her clit. "Ohhh!" That spot...was so good.

Her core clenched. Her pussy flooded.

He worked her bundle of nerves with the perfect mind-spinning pressure until she writhed.

His eyes darkened. "Come on my cock, honey!"

Mouth opening on a silent scream, she focused on him striking that point that would send her over the edge while he teased her nubbin and her nipples with his other hand.

More dirty promises hit her ears. "You're going to come like this before I flip you onto your back, hook your legs over my shoulders and pound you. I'm going to fill you up with my cum until you remember you belong in my bed."

Her insides shuddered. Her orgasm hit like a violent wave of water drowning her. She bit down on her lip to cut off a scream that would surely echo through the entire house no matter how big it was.

Quaide slowed his hips, drawing out her pleasure. His hard pinches on her nipples turned into tender, loving strokes meant to bring her down from her high—or drive her even crazier for him.

Long moments passed while she shivered through the final waves of her orgasm.

“Christ, you’re soaked. You were really pent up, weren’t you?” His voice carried an edge that she knew all too well. Whenever they were forced to skip a rendezvous, he suffered.

They both suffered.

She opened her eyes and met his. The fire sparking in those dark depths told her everything she needed to know about this connection—it hadn’t died. The five-alarm fire that always fueled them hadn’t gone out. It only flared hotter.

With her cradled in his arms, he flipped her. The mattress was better than any hotel bed they’d ever shared. She looped one calf over his shoulder.

Usually, this move made him grin. Now he only grimaced.

When he began thrusting, she knew why his forehead creased that way—it had been a long time since he had a release too. During their time apart, she couldn’t even bring herself to touch herself. Was it the same for him?

In hard, quick plunges, he sank his cock into her again and again. Their bodies slapped. A bead of perspiration broke out on his brow, his jaw locked and she felt the ripple of release run through his body.

A heated spurt of cum struck her inner walls. It was a strange sensation to miss. So was the blissed-out look on his face. But damn, she had dreamed about this countless times over the course of their separation.

“Fuuuck!” His primal roar sounded as he filled her with more thrusts and he collapsed on top of her.

She curled her fingers on the muscled planes of his back and held on tight. Because this really might be their final stolen moment.

Before she could curl up next to him, he rolled off the bed and reached for his jeans. She protested when she saw the phone in his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Clay was going out, and I forgot to check in.”

“Check in?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s past time.”

Dove sighed. Of course, even in the post-haze of sex, Quaide was always by the book.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grandma wouldn’t recognize her dining room now. Well, if she looked beyond the computer equipment filling the entire old-fashioned table and the computer monitors mounted over the yellowed paint on two of the walls, she might. But in the hour or so since Quaide slipped upstairs with Dove, the team had rapidly transformed the place into Sentry headquarters.

Clay sat at one computer, his entire focus on his task. Lark hovered over his shoulder as an advisor. Or maybe the pair just couldn’t stand to be away from each other.

Quaide’s mind swung to countless stolen moments in the FBI office when Dove would come in with some matter for him to address and the longing would be plain in her beautiful eyes.

He snapped out of the reverie and walked the perimeter of the table to get a feel for the setup.

“This looks great.”

Clay nodded. “Julius is as good at tech as his brother, Jaren.”

Quaide didn’t personally know all the members of the WEST Protection team yet, but the things they protected their clients from often came under the notice of the FBI as well.

Jaren was the Abel brother in the cybersecurity division and was known for being a technology whisperer. All he had to do was sit down with a keyboard and the world was at his fingertips.

Julius entered the room with a sandwich in one hand and a bottled water in the other. Spotting Quaide, he said, “You’re out of lunch meat.”



He snorted. "I can see why." The sandwich was stacked thick with ham and turkey. "No matter. I'll have to get the place stocked up now that we're all working here, and we have guests to feed too."

From over Clay's shoulder, Lark looked up. "I'll do a food run this afternoon."

Clay lifted a hand to touch the back of hers where it rested on his shoulder. "Actually, now would be a good time to go, Lark. When I got back from the old office, Ross got in touch. I expect a call from him any minute. We won't be needing you for a while."

"Okay, sounds good." She leaned in and kissed Clay on the cheek.

Not being the person in charge made Quaide uncomfortable. Coming into Sentry as anything less than the leader gave him more of a complex than he ever thought it would when he agreed to Clay's offer. Without that title of leader, he wouldn't have the respect he received in the FBI. He held no clout with the Abels or even that young medical examiner.

Despite his misgivings on his position in Sentry, he was beginning to see the perks of not being at the top. Such as him going upstairs to pleasure Dove while decisions were made and meeting times were set without him. He only had to show up when he was told to, and that was freeing on some level, though now he felt marginally out of the loop.

"A meeting with WEST was set up?" he asked.

Julius swallowed the huge bite in one go and nodded. "I got Ross himself lined up, and that's difficult these days. The security agency has exploded on a national level. They're getting so many calls that they are turning people away."

"That's good and bad." After years of handling a heavy load of FBI cases, Quaide knew that feeling of being overwhelmed. He'd been on the verge of burnout several times.

He took a seat at the table and realized the flaw in the setup. “We can’t hold meetings here. There’s too much crap on the table.”

Clay nodded in a distracted way, still glued to his screen. “Lark’s looking into desks and tables to put around the room, but I think we’ll need to move the conference room elsewhere.”

“The downstairs bedroom,” he said at once. “The powder blue one.”

Clay looked up. “Powder blue?”

He shrugged. “That’s what Grandma always called it. My cousins always got that room when we came to stay. My brother and I got the pink one upstairs.”

Clay and Julius let out simultaneous snorts.

“Still fits your image, Livingston,” Clay harassed him.

He chuckled.

The sound made Clay stare at him harder.

“What?” Quaide asked.

“Been a while since I’ve heard you laugh or seen you smile. The change wouldn’t be due to the fact there’s a beautiful blonde staying in your room, would it?”

He cocked a brow. How the hell did his buddy know what room he’d put Dove in?

Who was he kidding? The reason he’d wanted Clay to run Sentry was because the man had a keen mind and all the skills for the job. That made him *very* observant. And when he didn’t have time to look into what was happening, he employed people who did.

Still munching on his sandwich, Julius also stared at Quaide.

He turned the attention from Dove. His personal life was just that. “We’re going to need to do some reorganization of the house, reallocating spaces and the like. But at least here you’re not getting walk-ins looking for insurance policies.”

Fixated on his screen, Clay let out a grunt. Okay, maybe not running the show was getting on Quaide's nerves. He got up and circled to Clay. When he scanned the police rap sheet that his friend was busy analyzing, Quaide's gaze shot straight to the name at the top.

Dom Tretorn. The dead guy.

He had a few misdemeanors in his youth and a DWI the previous year. While Quaide didn't consider Rain to be as intelligent as her sister, the fact that she didn't see this guy as bad for her was damn shocking.

Of course, Dom most likely hid his past from her and he obviously targeted her naivete as well as preyed upon it. Now he was dead and she was in the line of fire.

Thank god that Quaide got to them before anything terrible happened. Just knowing that someone was watching them—and planted that bomb in Dove's vehicle—had his fists clenching.

No harm would come to either sister—not as long as he was still drawing air on this earth.

The phone buzzed, and Clay answered it. "Yeah, Ross. Let me put you on speaker." He looked to Julius. "Get your brother."

Julius had polished off his sandwich and immediately walked out of the room to find Jennings. A minute later, both Abels returned to the space and they all took seats near Clay so they could hear and be heard on speakerphone.

When someone appeared in the doorway, Quaide glanced up to see curves filling the space. Dove stood there, a hesitant expression on her face.

He quickly waved for her to join them, and she settled into the seat beside him.

Clay offered her a nod before giving his attention to the meeting. "Everyone, I've got Ross Wynton from the WEST Protection team on the line to discuss the move with Rain."

Dove sat back in her seat, fingers twisting in her lap.

Back when they worked together for the government, he couldn't reach out and stop her nervous gesture. Now, nothing was stopping him. He settled his hand on her knee, close to her hand. She stopped twisting her fingers and let them rest in her lap.

"The plan is to move Rain to the ranch. We don't have the resources right now, and I need everyone on my team working on the case," Clay told Ross.

"My office is bombarded with work, Lexis, but I understand your problem. I have two solutions on the table, but one might fall through."

"Hit us with them."

"One is that we meet you halfway at a predetermined destination and my guys bring her in."

Dove's full lips tightened. Quaide could already see her disregarding the move because unless Dove was with her sister, she wasn't going to be happy.

Ross went on, "The other is I have Modeen coming back from North Dakota with the chopper. He's expected by nightfall, but circumstances could delay him."

Clay nudged the brim of his hat up. "That means we only really have one option. We don't have time to lose—we need to get her to the ranch and under your protection. Let's make it happen."

"All right, consider it done. I'll have Corrine text you with a time and location."

"How long will Rain be at the ranch?" Dove's voice projected with an edge of coolness, but Quaide saw right through it.

She was stiff with tension and her brow creased with worry.

"Ross, you're speaking to Dove Priester, Rain's sister," Quaide introduced.

"Hello, Dove. I can't give you a timeframe for Rain's stay. I can only assure you that she will be safe here."

“Do you have room for me too?” she asked Ross.

Quaide applied pressure to her knee.

“It’s a big ranch. Accommodations can be made.”

“Good. Then I’ll be accompanying Rain.”

Quaide gave Clay a serious look and saw that they understood each other. Dove was not going to Montana with her sister.

“This case is a top priority for us, but we can’t come today. We need a day to prep. There are too many people around. My sister has people here looking at horses. A lot of people coming and going, and I can’t take the risk. But I’ll get it all ironed out to make sure that while Rain is here, she will blend in with the ranch workers.”

“Doing what? Working with horses?” Dove’s voice raised a notch. “My sister is terrible with animals. She can’t even stay in the same room as a fly because she will run for the hills.” She twisted in her seat to Quaide, an imploring look on her face. “She can’t go to a ranch. Send us somewhere else—anywhere else. The mountains or a big city where we can get lost and blend in—”

He stood, pulling her to her feet with him. “We’re going to step out for a minute. Thank you, Ross.”

Leaving the rest of the team to the call, and taking her by the arm, he led her out of the room. He started toward the study, but Dove pulled free and hurried to the stairs instead. Her legs were much shorter than his but she still managed to rush to the top faster than he imagined.

She gave a single, cursory knock on Rain’s door before bursting in.

## Chapter Eight

---

“You’re going to the ranch,” Dove announced to Rain when she barged into the room.

Her little sister reclined on the bed, flipping through an old book of sewing patterns. The page was open to some eighties lounge pants.

She bounced into an upright position with the same energy and grace that a gymnast performed a flip. “Yay! An excuse to wear my boots!”

Dove gaped at her. Was her sister joking right now? She studied Rain’s face and saw that unshakable, hopeful smile.

No, she was *not* joking.

The same exasperation that Dove had been battling for weeks while her sister lived out her days in her closet gripped her by the throat. She shook her head hard enough to make her hair whip across her face. “No boots, Rain. Not happening. Your stupid personal joke with Dom is exposed. Remember? You marked each other’s boots. Now they’re *evidence*. That stupid link is how they tracked you down and put a target on your back!”

“Evidence?” she echoed. Rain’s big blue eyes were so wide and childlike that Dove’s protective big sister instinct hit hard enough to trample her frustration.

“As part of the investigation he’s under for selling drugs and laundering money, Rain.”

Her sister looked between her and Quaide. “The authorities actually know he’s doing those things? All this time

I thought Dove was just being overprotective in the event that something was actually discovered.”

Quaide’s deep voice filled every corner of the cramped room. “Dove’s instincts were spot on, Rain. Your boyfriend was in trouble.”

“But he isn’t now? You said ‘was.’”

Quaide shifted into that all-business mode—and Dove braced for the trainwreck that she couldn’t stop.

“He’s not just in trouble, Rain—he’s dead. When he was found, he was wearing cowboy boots with the word—or name—‘Rain’ written on the bottom. The media splashed that image all over the news when the reporters took a shot of his body being loaded into the van. Someone killed him, and now they have a positive ID on you too.”

Rain’s jaw dropped. Her face crumpled. Huge tears splashed over the rims of her eyes and trickled down her face just like those weeks and months following their parents’ deaths.

Dove leaped forward, arms outstretched. Her sister threw herself at her, head buried on Dove’s shoulder as she wept. “He’s...dead?” she hiccuped.

Over Rain’s shoulder, she shot a glare at Quaide.

He spread his hands in the universal what-did-I-do man gesture.

She cradled Rain’s head against her shoulder, both caring and annoyed at the same time. “Listen to me, Rain. We don’t know what power Dom had over you, but the man was manipulative and he probably profiled you for your naivete and innocence. I don’t really understand why you’re crying over a guy like that.”

She sniffled loudly. “He didn’t really want me dead. If he did, I wouldn’t be alive. He told me he couldn’t ever give me up!”

Patting her back like a baby, she tried not to think about shaking her hard enough to knock some sense into her. “It’s all

right. He's at peace now? Yes, that's it. He's at peace." She didn't know if she convinced her sister of anything when she was lying through her teeth.

Quaide blinked at her in disbelief.

Dove snapped her fingers. "Get her some tissues—now!"

"Christ! Okay, fine." He spun and walked out. The sound of his boots was muffled by the thick, ugly carpet.

She smoothed Rain's hair.

Her sister squelched a sob. "He's not all bad. He *wasn't* all bad, I mean," she corrected herself in a broken voice. "He was trying to turn his life around. He would go to church every Sunday."

Church? That wasn't the normal drug dealer behavior, was it? He possibly felt penitence for the sin of hooking people on his street drugs, but still...weird.

Rain's shoulders shook. "Dom loved me. Of course I'm broken up over the fact that he's...dead!"

At that moment, Quaide returned with a box of tissues. He held it out to Dove, and she glared at him again as she yanked three from the box. She handed them to Rain, who crushed the wad to her nose.

Quaide plastered himself against the wall at the far side of the tiny room as though tears were cooties, and her sister—probably Dove too—would infect him.

"Did you bring the boots with you or do I need to send somebody to Boulder for them?" he asked.

Rain lifted her head. "Why do you need my boots? Are you going to destroy them? Do you have any idea how much those cost? They're authentic cowgirl boots, not some cheap knockoffs!"

More tears rolled down her sister's face.

Dove controlled her sigh. "You're going to give Sentry the boots, Rain. We'll get you a new pair on the way there."

Quaide was shaking his head. "No stops on the route."



Rain issued a broken snuffle. Dove glared again.

He glared right back. Okay, maybe she deserved his frustration. After all, she was the reason why Rain was such a flighty woman to begin with. But he wasn't invested in the same way that she was.

With a shake of her head, Dove closed her eyes as if searching the inner lids for patience. How could he know how naïve—how sensitive—Rain was? If only he knew how many nights Rain spent crying her eyes out over what happened to their parents.

But he didn't know, and that was because of their stupid rule about not sharing their personal lives. She *felt* close to Quaide and yet, what did she *really* know about him? What did he know about her? Very little.

Rain lustily blew her nose, and Dove smoothed a hand over her back. "It's all right now, Rain. You're safe. We're leaving for the ranch as soon as the team gives the word."

Quaide had opened his eyes and was shaking his head, once more contradicting what she said.

Narrowing her eyes at him again, she attempted to convey just how much she disagreed with his highhanded abuse of authority. No stops along the way even with a bodyguard, and telling her that she was not going to the Wynton Ranch with her sister? Not happening.

"Here, Rain. Come sit down. Try to calm yourself." Dove led her the few steps to the bed and her sister sank onto the mattress.

When she passed her a few more tissues, she thought of ways to prove to Quaide that her sister wasn't going to make it without her. Rain had been on her own and look what happened—she got herself tied to a string of crimes and a target on her back.

But they needed to cut her some slack. She'd just learned of her boyfriend's death. A man she loved in her own innocent way.

From the corner of her eye, Dove shot Quaide a look. Of course he didn't understand her sister. How could anyone unless they knew what they'd been through? All those horrible broken birthdays and holidays they spent in the years following... Well, they clung tight to each other, and that was all he needed to know for now.

Soon, she would share the truth with him.

Or maybe not. Once she and Rain were off to the Wynton Ranch, it was possible that she wouldn't be seeing Quaide again.

The idea cut like a stinging slash across her heart. She couldn't look at him without feeling his touch on her skin or tasting his kisses. God, she ached for him to carry her off to his bed again.

A shock rippled down her spine. All those other stolen moments were spent in hotel beds. While they were crazy about each other, it made the act feel less personal.

This time they were in Quaide's bed. She'd smelled him on the pillowcases. He'd claimed her in his own bed.

And that made all the difference, didn't it?

He'd brought her into his world.

Heart pattering fast, she peeked at him from underneath her lashes. He stood like a guard, like a sentry the team was named for, waiting for... Well, she wasn't sure what he was waiting for.

He caught her eye, and a dark glimmer came into his.

When he sliced a glance at the bed, her insides clutched with knowing. Any time there was a bed inches away, that look burned in his eyes.

And her body responded.

What was the matter with her? Her sister was in danger. They were about to run further away from the lives they worked so hard to build for themselves. Yet, she was standing here thinking about tearing off her clothes and offering herself up to her forbidden lover.

“Okay, when you guys look at each other like that, it makes everyone uncomfortable. Why don’t you leave me alone and take care of”—Rain waved her hand at them—“whatever you need to take care of.”

Quaide cocked a brow as if that was the first smart thing he’d ever heard Rain say.

Honestly, it might be.

No, no. What was she thinking?

“You need me to stay with you, Rain. I’m here for you. We’ll sit and look at...sewing patterns from the eighties.”

Rain stretched out on the bed again like a cat. “I’m going to lie here and process what you told me about Dom. You go on, Dovey. I’ll be fine.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Quaide added fresh grounds to the coffeemaker and then poured bottled water into the machine. When he pressed the button to start it, he took a moment to breathe.

There was a lot of controversy taking place in his mind. Rain had a hit on her, but Dove’s vehicle had been targeted. How could he really say Dove shouldn’t be under protection too?

Lines were blurred between them since the moment he first grabbed her in the parking garage near the FBI office and kissed her. Now they were even more skewed.

Turning from the coffeemaker, he leaned against the old Formica counter and faced Dove.

She leaned against the counter opposite him, her arms folded and her face expressionless.

Emotionless.

The way they had to keep it to hide their office affair from their coworkers. But that didn’t apply anymore, and he didn’t know how to make the leap from forbidden to in the open.

A long heartbeat of silence stretched between them. He curled his hands into fists to keep from walking over and lifting her onto the counter, spreading her legs and sliding between them.

“I see you still grind your own coffee beans and use spring water.” Her gaze traveled over his face and downward to linger on his chest.

“Yeah.”

“Who made coffee for you after I left?”

“My new assistant.”

Dove tucked in the corner of her mouth. “So I was easily replaced.”

“You know HR. They always have someone ready to move up.”

She jutted her jaw forward. “Please tell me it wasn’t that brunette in Stansky’s office. She was always vying for my job.”

“Jordan? Yeah, she got the position. She wasn’t half bad. Learned how to make coffee the way I like it in only two days.”

Dove folded her arms tighter. “Do you have any idea how that makes me feel, Quaide?”

“Do you have a damn clue how I felt getting a fucking email that you resigned?” he shot back.

She nudged him aside to get at the coffeemaker. “It’s not like I had any choice.” Her eyes flashed with sparks of anger.

His lungs seared with it. “There’s always a choice, Dove,” he said in a low, even tone. He watched her take out several mugs and empty the pot of coffee into them. “What are you doing?”

“I’m making coffee to prove that I can do it better than Jordan. Also, do you even hear yourself? Whenever you go into FBI agent mode, you are so cold. So *soulless*.”

“Well, maybe you ripped it out of me when you left without fucking warning me what was coming, Dove.”

“Did it matter if you had hours or a week’s notice? I had to leave—fast. As soon as I learned what Rain was up to—You know what? Why am I trying to explain any of this to you? I’m not even going to see you again. Tomorrow we’ll go to the ranch, and you’ll—”

He let out a humorless laugh. “That’s right. I’ll just be here, cold and soulless. Doing my job while the woman I fucking *love* is doing anything she can to escape me.”

Her jaw dropped.

“That’s right, Dove. Love. I love you. I have since the day you walked through my damn office door in that skirt that hugged your ass and wearing those studious, sexy glasses. Where are your glasses, by the way? I haven’t seen you wear them here,” he sidetracked before veering back on course. “Then I found out you were funny and smart. And damn good in bed.”

Her jaw fell lower. “You...”

“Dare to bring up your glasses? Yeah, I demanded that you wore them to bed. It’s my kink, all right? I don’t fucking care who knows it either.”

“We can hear you!” came one of the Abels’ voices.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered. This was a terrible idea, bringing the Sentry team into his personal space.

Dove stared at him for a long moment. Neither of them spoke. What was there to say? He’d tossed the *L* word at her—and she had no response whatsoever. Probably because no matter what their feelings were, their relationship was far from being settled. None of their issues were resolved.

She sliced her fingers through her hair. He saw her as she was now—with limp hair and hollows under her eyes. The blue sweater he loved on her hung off her thin shoulders. But what his heart saw was *much* different.

Without a word, she pushed off the counter, abandoning her coffee grounds, and turned toward the door.

“I didn’t even know where you lived. I had to do some digging.” His words stopped her in her tracks.

She swung her head but didn’t meet his eyes. Her voice was quiet. “I didn’t know where your place was either. We don’t know anything about each other, Quaide.”

“Let’s remedy that.”

Her eyes ticked up to his. “You’re a rule follower. If I’d come to you with this mess, you would have been forced to make arrests.”

“You don’t know that for sure. You never gave me the chance to figure it out.”

“Because even if our odd relationship is a mess, I still know the man you are.”

“Maybe I’ve changed. I’m no longer with the FBI and my rulebook has changed too.”

She eyed him. “Am I supposed to believe what you said? That you love me? It was an office affair, Quaide. A—”

He never let her get the words out of her mouth. In two steps, he had his arms around her and yanked her body flush against his.

When she tipped her head up to meet his stare, he saw more than anger in those bright blue eyes. There was a leap of hope too.

She opened her mouth. The perfect opportunity to fill it with his tongue.

He slammed his lips over hers and thrust his tongue in her mouth. She moaned. The flavor of her, the goddamn sweetness, stole his last speck of control.

Backing her up, he pressed her against the counter and did what he wanted from the moment she walked into the kitchen. He lifted her. She wrapped her arms around his neck. Her thighs wrapped around his hips.

He dug his fingers into her hair, knowing just how to pull those sexy little sounds from her and just how hard to tug.

Angling his head, he sank his tongue deeper. Invading. Owning.

“You think I’m cold, honey?” He ground his cock between her legs. “I’m not cold for you.”

She gasped.

He grabbed her hand and placed it over his thundering heart. “Does that feel soulless to you?”

She curled her fingers into his shirt. “Quaide...”

He took her mouth again, kissing her until she was gasping and he was throbbing hard enough to pound nails. “Please tell me you brought the glasses.”

A short laugh burst from her, and she leaned into him, face buried against his neck. “There’s more to me than my glasses and this sweater and secret meetings in hotel rooms.”

Cupping her face, he drew her head up to meet his stare. “There is so much more to *us*, Dove. Let’s explore. Let’s share.”

Her smile faded, replaced by a serious expression. “There’s a lot that you don’t know yet, Quaide. Reasons why... Well, just reasons why I feel the need to take care of Rain.”

He smoothed his thumb over the crest of her cheek. “I want to hear all of it. You’ve trusted me with your body. Now let me protect the rest of you.”

## Chapter Nine

---

For the first time ever, Quaide and Dove occupied a bed without sharing screaming orgasms. While he ached to take her when he woke at dawn, he lay there staring at her beautiful, sleeping face and fell even more in love with her.

By the time he emerged from his shower the previous night, she was fast asleep—and taking over his side of the bed too. The tenderness welling in his chest took over any discomfort of sleeping on the wrong side. He simply slid in next to her and drew her into his arms.

Having her body against his and feeling her touching him at all times during the night made him sleep better than he had in weeks.

He'd also made a decision. There was no way he was letting her go to the ranch with Rain. When he said he needed her here with him, he was dead serious. Yes, he was fucking greedy as hell. But no one could protect her as well as he could.

He slammed back two cups of coffee and was reaching for a third when Clay entered through the garage.

Quaide gave him a chin lift in greeting. “Who gave you a key?”

“Took one that was hanging on the hook.” He pointed toward the wooden holder that one of Quaide’s uncles had made in high school shop class back in the sixties.

“I plan to install keypad entries on all the doors and security cams around the perimeter of the house.”



“Good idea. If you let Lark know what you want, she’ll order it all.”

He poured the rich black coffee into his favorite mug. “Is she okay with handling all these small tasks? I don’t want her to feel like she’s being misused.”

Clay grabbed a mug too and nudged him out of the way to get at the pot. “She doesn’t feel that way, believe me. After running errands for people on the Quick Bunny app, she realizes how much we appreciate her help. Besides, she’s got two feature articles pending at the *Washington Post*.”

He almost spit out his coffee. He lowered the mug. “The magazine?”

“Yup.” Pride infused his buddy’s tone.

“Damn, that’s great. I knew she was a journalist, but I didn’t know the scope of her talent.”

They sipped in silence for a moment.

“So…” Clay arched a brow.

“Don’t even say it—” Quaide began.

“You and Dove were a thing,” he finished.

He groaned. “You just can’t let it go, can you?”

“How did you get away with it? Weren’t you her boss?”

“Aren’t you old enough to be Lark’s father?”

Clay grinned. “Hardly her father.” He didn’t seem in the least bit concerned about the gap in their ages.

Love didn’t know walls, and both of them were proof of that.

“When the brothers get here, we need to hold a meeting.” The caffeine seemed to be hitting Clay’s system.

Quaide sipped. “Is that what we’re calling Julius and Jennings now? It makes them sound like they’re mafia.”

“They might as well be. You know I’m sending them into that recovering addicts support group at the church.”

He stopped. “The church...”

Clay caught on fast. After all, Lark had gone undercover to dig deep into the case involving a bomb.

“Shit—you think there’s a connection to Tretorn?”

“We already suspect that something shady is going on at the church. Plus, he’s a drug dealer and they run a group for substance abusers.”

“We’ll need to fill the brothers in after our meeting today. We’re going to nail down the plan to get Rain out of Colorado.”

“Dove and Rain should be involved in the meeting.”

“I thought you said Dove’s not going to Montana.”

Quaide set the mug down on the countertop. “She isn’t.” Actually, over his dead body was he letting her out of his sight. “But she will want to contribute to the discussion.”

“You mean give you hell.” Clay’s eyes creased with amusement.

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ll make sure the ladies are up and around before the ‘brothers’ show their faces.”

After dumping the last swallow of coffee dregs down the drain, he climbed the stairs to the bedrooms. With each step he ascended, he got a vision for how to refinish the old, dinged-up wooden stairs and polishing the carved railing. When he reached the top, his shoe dragged on the old carpet that was bubbled there after years of use.

He really needed to start on some of these projects. In this case, before somebody tripped on that loose patch of carpet and pitched down the stairs to their death.

He started toward his own bedroom and then stopped. As soon as he walked in and saw Dove, he wouldn’t be able to leave her until he’d at least kissed her good morning, which could take a while because he wanted to kiss more than her lips.

He backtracked to knock on Rain's door.

Her voice projected through the wood on the second knock. "Uh? What is it?"

"It's Quaide. We're holding a meeting about your trip. Can you meet us downstairs in..." He started to say ten minutes and realized he was speaking to a woman who spent a small fortune on makeup. Ten minutes wouldn't be enough time to wash her face.

Of course, she didn't buy the makeup. The money was from her boyfriend's drug trade.

For about the seventh time, he wondered where the hell their parents were in all this. What made a fully grown woman so protective of her fully grown sister?

He had some guesses, and with a few clicks of a button, he could dig into their background. But he wanted to hear it from Dove.

"Rain? Did you hear me?" he prompted her.

"Yeah. Yes! I'm up. I'm really up. Oh god, who wakes up at this time?"

He left her muttering to herself and moved to his bedroom door. He gently knocked.

"Dove?"

"Come in."

Dove stood at the foot of the bed, rummaging through her open bag. When his stare fell on her, his heart gave a flip.

"God, I missed your beautiful face."

Her expression softened, and she smiled in that tender way he probably read way too much into.

He closed the door, walked right up to her, leaned in and kissed her. The gentle stamp of his mouth over hers wasn't nearly enough for him, but he drew back to give her space.

"You look rested," he said.

“I don’t know if I should take that as a compliment that I look nice or a statement that I didn’t before.”

He trailed his knuckle over her cheek. “You needed sleep, and so did I.”

Her stare traveled over him. “Your collar’s sticking up. Let me fix it.”

Her hands on him made his gut clench with need. That quickie the previous day and a few stolen kisses in between hadn’t done much to slake six weeks’ worth of lust for her. Somehow, he managed not to grab her hips and yank her into his stiffening cock.

She fidgeted with his shirt collar, smoothing it with her fingers while he stared down at her.

Her hands stilled. Then she spread them across his shoulders. As she tilted her head back to look at him, she ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip.

“Last night we didn’t...”

So she also thought it was strange that they hadn’t thoroughly enjoyed their time with a mattress more.

He shook his head. “No. Believe me, I wanted to. But you were asleep when I got out of the shower, and I wanted to let you rest.”

She trailed her fingertips down his chest before letting her hands drop to her sides. His chest heaved with the inferno building inside it. He needed to touch her.

If he did, he wouldn’t stop.

He used up a good portion of his willpower for the day walking away from her, but he forced himself to do just that. At the door, he said, “Meet us downstairs. I already woke up Rain.”

“You’d better wake her again. She won’t be up.”

“I’ll do that.” His gaze latched on to hers for a heartbeat that stretched on and on between them.

When he entered the dining room, his mind was still back in his room—in that bed—with Dove. Julius was already there, a breakfast biscuit with egg and cheese in one hand.

“Is there ever a time when you’re not eating a sandwich?”

“Sure. When I eat my momma’s home cookin’,” he drawled without shifting his gaze from the computer monitor. With his free hand, he tapped at the keys.

“What are you looking at?”

“Just doing a little digging on the church’s recovering addicts group that Clay is taking an interest in.”

“And?”

“Their social media is clean. They’re peaceful. Nothing out of place at all, just invitations to join them at the meetings and enjoy their refreshments.”

Quaide pulled out a chair and sank to it. “We know something’s going down.”

“I know what happened to Lark with that kidnapping. I’m not saying they’re not dirty, but on the surface, they don’t appear to be crooked. I’ll look into it.”

“It’s what Sentry does.”

Julius glanced up, a smile quirking his lips. “Some members of Sentry seem to get a little more fun than most.”

Quaide cocked a brow. “Why don’t you come right out and say it?”

“Okay. You and Dove? Are about as disgusting together as my brothers and their women. I’m not sure how you two got separated from each other, but you shouldn’t let her get away.”

Julius’s statement increased the deep ache inside him, the one he’d been carrying with him for the past six weeks of hell.

It bugged him that he didn’t know where he stood with her. Declarations of love didn’t come easy to him, and she must know that even if they didn’t know every single small detail about each other.

But she hadn't said a thing about her feelings in return.

He sat there brooding over it all while Julius continued his research into the church group.

A feminine but slightly grouchy voice projected from the kitchen. "Is there coffee? Please tell me it's good coffee."

Dove responded. "Quaide made it. I know it's good."

"Oooh, Quaide made it," Rain mocked.

"Do you ever stop being sassy?"

"No. You never used to be this serious either, Dovey. Not even after—"

Silence rang out. He and Julius exchanged a questioning look. There was definitely some secret between the sisters that Quaide wanted to know about. If it had to do with the drug dealer and money laundering, he *needed* to know.

A minute later, both ladies entered the dining room, cradling mugs of coffee.

He skipped straight over Rain to meet Dove's eyes.

"We took the last of the coffee, but don't worry," she said to him. "I started a fresh pot. I figured you'd want another cup."

When Julius and Rain shared a wide-eyed look, Quaide snapped, "Cut that out. It's just coffee."

"Sure, bro. What else would it be about?"

Dove avoided his gaze as she sat across the table from him. Too far away. He would only be happy with her round ass snug against his groin.

Seconds later, Jennings and Clay joined them, which was good because their presence distracted Julius from more teasing comments.

When they were all seated, Clay removed his black Stetson and settled it on the table in front of him. He stared at the hat for a moment and then snorted.

“Sorry—removing my hat at the table that way is a move left over from my days with WEST Protection. At the meetings, everyone takes off their hat and sets it on the table.”

At the same time he spoke, Julius and Jennings reached up tugged their hat brims, offering heads bowed. Clay placed his hat back on his head, tugged the brim and gave a nod back to the team.

Dove’s gaze shot to Quaide. In her eyes, he read what everyone here was feeling—that the moment was a turning point for the Sentry team. A new bond forged.

One he was missing out on. As soon as he got the chance, he intended to stop by the local outdoors store and pick up a new one.

Lark entered the room late. She buried her nose in her own mug of coffee. “Who made this pot? It’s so good.”

“I did.” Dove offered her a smile.

Lark’s attention landed on the table. “Oooh! Are we doing the hats too now? Like the WEST team?”

Clay’s mouth twitched. “Guess we are.”

“Then Quaide needs one. I’ll get your hat measurement and make sure I get one for you today.”

“I’d appreciate that, Lark.”

Rain slumped in her chair. “I don’t get this whole hat thing. I thought we were here to discuss me going to the ranch. Does that mean I need a hat too?”

“You don’t need anything,” Quaide said. “We’ll take care of everything. We are here to discuss how to move you. As soon as WEST gives the green light, we’ll go.”

“How worried are we about interception?” Julius finished his biscuit and brushed a few crumbs off his shirt.

“Interception sounds bad,” Rain uttered.

Clay sent a look around the table. “It’s definitely something we need to take precautions against. We can’t be too safe in this case.”

“I can shoot,” Dove interjected. “I can help protect my sister.”

Quaide was already shaking his head. “You’re not going with her, Dove.”

She lifted her jaw only a fraction but he knew her body language like he knew the cold steel of the weapon tucked against his spine. She didn’t like him giving her orders.

Except in the bedroom.

At that moment, Jennings jumped in. “We can run separate vehicles. If someone gets wind of the exchange, then they’ll see several vehicles making stops at different exits on the interstate.”

Quaide was watching Dove close enough to note how her lips rounded in a slight *O* and her breasts moved with an intake of air. He knew her well—damn well. And she had an idea.

As long as it didn’t involve her going to the Wynton Ranch, he welcomed anything she had to add.

“You have something to share, Dove?”

She nodded. “Rain and I can dress alike. I’ll act as a decoy.”

“No.” Quaide’s hard tone came out a little too loud.

“It’s a good idea,” Jennings drawled.

“Hell no,” Quaide said even louder.

“I’ll dress like them both,” Lark added.

Julius swept his gaze over the three ladies speculatively. “Dove, Rain and Lark are all about the same size.”

“I’m a size four,” Rain put in.

Dove sent her sister a conciliatory look. “The point is that we’re close enough in size to fool anybody watching.”

Quaide leaned forward, arms taking up a good portion of the table. “No.”

“It does seem risky.” Clay was looking at Lark.



“I’m game,” Lark said. “Our body types are close enough, and Dove and Rain already could pass for twins.”

Quaide stifled a growl. “I don’t see it working.”

She smoothed her hair over one shoulder. “It worked before. How do you think I helped her disappear?”

He did not like this. At all.

“After Rain called me for help, I grabbed two identical shirts that I had and made her put one on. We both put our hair up in ponytails and had on jeans and black boots. I made her walk out of the apartment she was staying at first while I watched to make sure she was safe. Then I waited a minute or two and went out behind her.”

“How do you know nobody noticed two identically dressed women walking out of the building? Someone noticed—they planted a bomb in your vehicle.”

“That’s true, but it threw off most people. One resident was standing there and he called me Rain.” That defiant little tilt of Dove’s jaw left him throbbing to bend her over the table that his grandma served Sunday supper on.

“So we dress all three of the girls alike, do their hair the same—give Lark a blonde wig—and leave in three vehicles,” Clay said slowly.

Quaide scraped his chair back and shoved to his feet. “We’re not going with that plan. Dove’s not getting involved.”

She jolted to her feet and they glared at each other across the table. “I will do anything in my power to make sure Rain is safe. If that means putting on the same outfit and risking my life for her, I will.”

Their gazes clashed for several heartbeats. “Clay? You’re willing to let Lark take the same risk?”

“It’s going to be low risk with me watching out for her. So, yeah.”

Issuing a low snarl, he thought of all the things that could go wrong. “We could be ambushed. We can put all three in jeopardy.”

“It’s a low risk,” Julius repeated.

Quaide slashed his hand through the air. “No one is seeing this for what it is! A terrible idea. Have any of you ever heard of the Davis-McQuaid case?”

They all shook their heads.

“A similar approach to concealing a target was taken on the case back in the nineties. And the results were not favorable. The FBI trained us on this very thing. New rules were made because of what happened.”

“Again with the rules.” Dove’s comment was quiet but struck him hard. It didn’t matter that he knew what he was talking about. Or that he was scared enough for the both of them. She still wasn’t on the same page as him.

“I think it’s good. A solid plan.” Clay looked between Lark, Rain and Dove. “If you’re all willing to try this route, we’ll pull it together.”

Dove gave her nod of approval.

“I won’t let you go,” he grated out.

Her jaw opened and closed again. A red flush hit her cheeks. “You won’t *let* me?”

Too many things that couldn’t be unsaid hovered on his lips. They glared at each other.

Then Dove stormed out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dove’s level of frustration rose like floodwater inside her, pushing at her throat and cutting off her air.

Running upstairs like a teenaged girl was ticking her off as much as the whole situation. But she had to find a place to be alone without Quaide’s glares and commands.

When she reached the top step, the toe of her shoe caught on something and she pitched forward.

“Oof!” Hands out, she hit the floor, then lay there questioning her life choices for a heartbeat before she

scrambled up again.

In a few stumbling steps she reached the bedroom door and threw it shut behind her. Breathing hard, she scraped back the hair that had fallen across her face.

What happened to her life? Just a few years ago, she was thrilled to land a job with the FBI. If she were honest, that was the only *normal* thing she'd experienced. What came before was pure madness. Then just months into her new job, she got involved with Quaide.

Nothing had been the same since.

Nothing ever *would* be.

In the hallway outside the room, heavy, thumping footfalls approached the door. She only made it two steps before the door blew open and hit the wall.

Whirling, she aimed a dirty look at the man responsible.

Quaide's dark eyes blazed with a warning she did not heed. She darted toward the bathroom, but one long arm hooked her around the middle and yanked her back.

She struggled against him. He crushed his lips to hers and cut her fight-or-flight response with the taste of coffee and man.

Her body went boneless in his grasp. A soft rasp escaped her, and he thrust his tongue into her mouth, claiming her quiet cries and killing off any protest.

She hated him for trying to strip away her control in a world where she had precious little of it.

But oh god, the man could kiss.

He ran his hands down her spine to cup her ass. When he slipped his grip low between her thighs, she rocked against him.

"Forgive me," he ground out between deep passes of his tongue.

He ripped her top over her head, lifted her around the hips and hauled her a few steps to the bed.

They hit the mattress, clawing at each other's buttons and zippers. He practically shredded her panties getting them off her body.

When they were totally bare, he ducked his head and latched on to the side of her neck, right over her hammering pulse.

"I'm still mad at you."

"I still love you." He lowered his hips between her splayed legs and sank his hard cock balls-deep in one smooth thrust.

Her inner walls clutched at him, milking him on the first withdrawal. Need cut through her, but suddenly so did his words.

She stared up at him. "You really love me?"

He froze. "Pretty sure I've said it before."

"I thought it was just lust talking."

He gave a hard shake of his head. "You know better, baby. Now give me your mouth and I'll show you how much."

## Chapter Ten

---

Quaide's libido didn't just hum—it *revved* for this woman. He wanted to grab Dove by the hips and plow into her until neither knew where the separation between them existed.

But he always did right by his lover and made sure she got pleasure first.

He ground his hips, dragging his cock in and out of her tight, heated walls. Ecstasy rippled over her beautiful face, and he etched every moment into his mind.

Her personal scent and the silky smooth feel of her skin couldn't be forgotten if they spent a century apart.

Never again would he let her walk away, not even for a short spell on the Wynton Ranch with people he trusted. Didn't she see how good they were for each other?

Her soft moan spread a dark heat through his gut and his mind. Making her come just to watch her was the only goal in his brain.

Swinging his hips back, he pulled free until the head nestled against her swollen, needy pussy lips.

“Quaide!” Her whimper of disappointment held a note of anticipation too.

“You're going to get what you want, baby.” He gave her a dark look. “Thighs back.”

She shivered and did his bidding.

“Spread them.”

She did.

“Farther.” His tone grated.

She let them drop apart.

His balls throbbed with the need to blow, but goddamn, her soaked folds cried out for his fingers and tongue.

He threw himself between her legs and slowly eased one finger into her sheath, sinking it to the first knuckle and then the second. When he thrust it all the way to the base of his hand, she muffled a scream.

Watching his long finger disappear into her pussy had become a kink he'd never shake. It was a highlight in his every fantasy since that very first time.

Pumping his finger faster, he focused on her face, her reaction to what he was doing to her.

Her mouth opened on a gasp as he lowered his tongue to her folds and gave her pussy a long, slow swipe from bottom to top.

Inner thighs shaking, she widened her legs, giving him full access. He worked the point of his tongue into her folds and circled her hard nub.

In soft flicks he lapped at her clit. Her sweet taste left his cock stiffer and leaking precum. Good; he'd make her come so much that she ruined the sheets—and he ruined her for any other man.

Working his finger inside her, he licked her pussy, pausing only to remove his finger and suck it clean of her juices before diving in again.

She dug her fingers into his scalp and pulled at the strands of his hair, urging him on. He'd ached for Dove—just like this. She consumed so much of his thoughts that it got to the point where he could barely focus on anything.

Now she was here, and he wasn't going to get enough of her. Ever.

With small flicks of his tongue, he worked her clit until she bucked. Grabbing her hips, he held her in place. Her nipples stood in stiff peaks, and he never wanted to clone

himself as much as he did now so he could have his tongue on every inch of her body.

Dipping his finger into her entrance again, he curled it and instantly found the spot that drove her crazy with need.

A sharp cry burst past her lips. He twisted his finger, working it in and out. Juices flooded, and he pulled his finger free to lick it off before sinking in again.

“Oh god! Quaide! Don’t stop!”

Not a damn chance. They weren’t finished until her pussy was filled with his cum. Using his lips, he drew on her bud, working her G-spot faster and faster. Her insides clutched at his digit. He ground his cock into the bed.

She writhed and then went still. When she tipped over the edge, he watched for the moment she surrendered to him.

Her face shivered in pleasure. Her lips parted on a wide *O*. And her hips rocked into his finger and tongue, dragging out her release until she collapsed.

He swished his tongue in a circle around her clit and ended by pressing a soft kiss to her pussy.

Lifting his head, he met her stare. Her eyes were hazy with bliss.

When he drew his finger out of her soaked pussy, his cock surged, at the ready to take its place.

Every second she wasn’t with him was a second they wasted. Never again. From this moment forward, she would remain by his side, and if he was persuasive enough, he’d be asking for her hand very, very soon.

As soon as he ensured her sister was safe and whoever had a hit out on her ended up behind bars or six feet under. Then he planned on having *all* the conversations that he and Dove never did in the past when they were trying to keep things on a professional level while fucking each other senseless several times a week.

“Quaide!” Her plea pulled all the tenderness from deep inside him. When it came to Dove, that well never went dry.

And it never would.

He did a pushup and moved up her body, swiping the back of his hand over his lips and jaw before hovering over her.

Her gray-blue eyes glittered with a need only he would be satisfying for the rest of her days.

Leaning down, he brushed his lips over hers in a gentle caress that lingered on and on. She angled her head to deepen the kiss, and they shared a moan.

Passion flared as hot as the sun between them. She stole his breath.

Dove's fingers pattered over his shoulders and trailed down his spine. "I need you!"

"You have me." In one shove he filled her. When he tunneled deep, a dark sound thrummed in his chest. She dragged him close and wrapped him in her arms. But the softness only lasted a few heartbeats before desire took hold.

He jerked his hips. She twitched upward to take him. She raked at his ass with her short nails and he latched on to her neck to ravish her.

With every plunge of his cock, his balls brushed that soft spot on her ass that stole his damn mind. He was always crazy for her, but this second chance was even hotter than the first.

All the days separating them popped like soap bubbles. He had her in his arms. In his bed. Wrapped around him.

Her pussy milking his cock.

"I know you're close." Her murmur was urgent. "I'm almost there. We have to come together. We have to..." She broke off, shaking as if hanging on to something that wasn't even close to being in her control.

On a harsh cry of surrender, she came.

Her tight, constricting walls threw him off the cliff too. He pounded into her three times, then four, hooking her ankle over one of his shoulders to get even deeper.



Streams of cum filled her up, but it wasn't enough. Only when she couldn't walk straight and a bead of his cum was running down her inner thigh would he be satisfied.

He took her mouth in a rough kiss meant to claim. If the pink spots on her throat told him anything, he'd already been a little too eager with her. She wouldn't appreciate it once she looked in a mirror.

Then again, he was no longer her boss. If he wanted to ravish his former secretary, so be it. They'd all heard it anyway.

Let her sister and the guys of Sentry see. Let the world see.

Nuzzling her neck, he swallowed down all the sappy love words that could make her run. She knew his feelings, and he'd bounced the ball into her court. She had to decide what to do with it.

Breathing hard and fast, he rolled off her. He looped an arm around her middle, dragging her along with him so she lay half on top of him with her bare thigh slung across his.

“You keep getting better,” she rasped.

His heart welled with love. He wanted to keep this woman safe for the rest of his life. If only she'd let him, and open up and share.

He stroked his hand down her spine to her hip. “We need to talk, Dove.”

Tensing, she twisted her face into his shoulder.

He cupped her head. “You can't hide from me, honey. It's time that you open up and tell me why you're doing this all alone. Where is your family?”

Her voice came muffled against his skin, but it echoed with lancinating pain instead of pleasure.

“They're...dead.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dove disentangled herself from Quaide's arms and started to roll off the bed, but he hooked an arm around her middle to stop her.

"Don't run away, Dove. You know we need to have this talk if we're going to move forward in our relationship."

She held on to her calm façade, but inside, she was out of control, throwing mental chairs through windows and then setting fire to pretty much everything.

Which was *not* her. At least it didn't used to be her. The past six weeks had changed her greatly. It was as if she hit a threshold of how much stress she could handle before she lost it.

Turning her head, she threw a side-eye at her lover. "I don't really want to talk about any of it. Can't we just call this what it was—a stress reliever?"

He yanked her down so fast that she didn't have time to open her mouth to protest. Her back hit the bed and he pounced, bracing his weight over her. His eyes burned.

"It definitely relieved some stress, that's true. But it's more than that, and you know it. Save us some time and admit it."

She returned his look with one of challenge. "When are you going to stop telling me what to do? Why do you think our fling was even more sordid when you had all the power over me?"

He jerked. His shocked expression mixed with the hurt in his eyes had her stomach sinking. She'd gone too far, but she'd spoken her mind, and that wasn't something she could regret.

"Our relationship was off-balance. And whatever this is"—she waved between them—"still is. The past two meetings, you've bossed me around and told me where I'm going and what I'm doing. You've even told me that it's time to have this talk!"

He went still. His tense muscles put off a vibration that her own body picked up and tripled until she was jittery.

All of a sudden, he rolled off her and sat on the bedside, hands braced on his knees.

She scooted into a sitting position and gathered her scattered thoughts.

“You think I pushed you into sleeping with me?” His voice was low and gritty.

She stared at his stiff spine, her throat growing thick. “No, I wanted it too.”

“Because I couldn’t live with myself if you thought I coerced you in any way. I hate that you believe I am trying to control you, Dove.”

He didn’t turn to look at her, which was almost worse than seeing his haunted pain.

“Look, Quaide. Things aren’t so easy between you and me.”

He launched off the bed and whirled to face her. His nude body seemed to swell with harnessed power. “It can be easy! Have I ever given you a reason to think you can’t trust me?”

She didn’t need to think about it. “No. But you have so many rules. I don’t want to hear why I shouldn’t think or feel or act a certain way because it goes against some code or section of a manual.”

“You have some false belief that you’re still working under me and I’m on a power trip? We both know that’s bullshit, Dove.” His jaw flexed as he clenched it hard.

“I don’t need help is all. I can handle Rain.”

“Maybe, but can you handle the hitman after her? And whoever else might be tied to her criminal ex-boyfriend?” His eyes sparked with something she’d rarely seen in her time working with him—true anger.

She dropped her gaze from his and something else caught her eye—his very hard, impressive erection.

“Are you...getting hard...because we’re arguing?”

He sliced a hand through the air. “It happens.” His stare landed on her bare breasts. “Are your nipples hard for me?”

Oh god, they were. Now that she tuned in to her body, she recognized the light pinch of need between her thighs too.

He threw himself at her. She met him halfway. Their naked bodies collided and he bore her back on the bed, plunging inside her in one hard thrust.

Oh god, she’d missed this so much. The burning ache deep in her core that only Quaide could stroke to completion. He flattened her hands to the bed and stared into her eyes as he churned his hips fast and furious. The dark tightening inside her core raised a growl to his lips.

His dark eyes blazed. “You’re mine. We belong together.”

He never said these things before. Though this sex was just as wild, it came with a new titillating level of emotion that she could never have guessed he felt. Her stoic boss lived, ate and breathed the rules. But between their stolen nights and burning looks in the office...he’d fallen in love with her.

Her heart gave a warm patter, a tiny throb that went faster and faster. When he released his hold on her hands, she moved them to his body. Ohhh, his muscles flexed like velvet steel.

She missed his body so damn much. Not only his impressive length pounding into her pussy but the feel of his hard chest against hers when it ended and those strong arms encircling her.

His rhythm changed, and she felt his need coiling in his muscles. The cords on his neck stood out as he thrust deep inside her. Sinking her fingers into his ass, she rocked her hips to meet every thrust, taking everything she needed. Taking—

“I’m coming!” Her throaty cry met with his primal groan.

He grabbed her by the hips and lifted her into him, arrowing his cock at that perfect spot that fractured her mind into a million pieces of pleasure. She floated on ecstasy, aware only of Quaide’s cum splashing inside her and the masculine shudder of his body as he came down from his own high.

Long seconds pulsed by. He brushed his lips over her brow. “We’ve never had fight sex before.”

“I thought that was makeup sex.”

“Nope, that comes after the fight. Pretty sure we were in the middle of it.”

Her mind whirled over what they’d even argued about. The fight went out of her. “I know you have my best interests in mind.”

He rolled off her, dragging her closer. “Dove...I don’t only have your safety in mind. I am here for more than that.”

Tears burned in her throat. “I don’t think you really want to hear about my past, Quaide.”

His gentle touch on her cheek and the tender look in his eyes brought a fat lump to her throat. “I want to hear anything you want to tell me. But I’m trying to understand where you’re at right now. I can’t see the big picture because you haven’t shared it with me.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn’t bear to share what happened while looking at him. It was bad enough the horror lived inside her mind—seeing it on his face would break her.

“You want me to tell you...” She broke off.

“I’m listening, baby,” he said in the softest tone.

She burst out, “That my dad caught my mom cheating and he killed her before offing himself?”

He sucked in a sharp gasp.

She barreled on. “That I was barely eighteen and Rain was sixteen and we were broken and alone and terrified? We clung to each other and made it work, but now I’m scared I’ll lose...her...too?” Her voice splintered on each word.

His warm arms squeezed her closer, and he tucked her head under his angular jaw. “Jesus, Dove. I had no idea. I should have looked into it all so you didn’t have to tell me.”

“I’m glad you never dug into my p-past.”

He tightened his arms around her. “This all makes so much more sense.”

“What does?” Her voice was muffled.

“Why you don’t want to get close to me. Maybe you’re afraid to get close to *anyone*. After losing people close to you, that makes a hell of a lot of sense. You might be using this whole office love affair as a bullshit reason to hold me at arms’ length, but I see through it now, Dove. With that said...I have no excuse for being bossy, and I’m sorry. It’s the protector in me. The Marine, and hell, even the FBI agent too. I take charge.”

She drew in a deep breath, filling her head with Quaide’s spicy aftershave that always lingered on his skin even when he let his beard grow. Several minutes passed while he just held her exactly the way she needed him to.

“Are you okay, honey?” His chest rumbled under her body pressed to it.

“I hate talking about...that time of our lives. And I hate feeling like I have no control over any of this.”

“That’s on me too. I need to trust that you know what’s best for Rain, and that means helping you get to the ranch with your sister instead of hindering you.”

An uncontrollable shiver rolled through her. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

“Thank you for giving me another chance at...” He broke off for several heartbeats. Then his voice came in a tender murmur. “Loving you.”

This wasn’t the first time he’d confessed his feelings, but this time, when he was holding her skin to skin, and after she’d cracked open her heart enough to share part of her past...it felt different.

It felt real.

Though they weren’t on uneven ground now, this new page felt even scarier. Now she wasn’t only giving her body

and a little bit of time to Quaide—she was allowing him into her heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

“God, this really is *so* ugly. How did anyone in the eighties wear this crap?” Dove held up the mauve garment that she and Rain had spent hours wasting time at the sewing machine making.

Her sister mumbled around a mouthful of pins she was busy sticking into the fabric to make a pair of matching mauve pants.

Dove pushed away from the sewing table and stretched. Her back muscles screamed from the time spent hunched over a needle and working the electric pedal of the old Singer. If not for Rain’s devotion to the project, she would have given up long ago.

Tissue paper sewing patterns were strewn all over the bed and the top of a dresser. The waistband of the pants dangled off the side of the table, ready to be stitched to the legs that Rain was busy pinning to each other.

Dove eyed her sister. “I’m surprised you’d take on a sewing project. You were pretty young when Mom used to sew.”

She looked up at Dove. The pins sticking out of her mouth and her wide eyes made her giggle.

“You look like a quizzical porcupine, Rainy.”

Her eyes widened more and she spit out the pins into her palm. “It’s been a while since you called me that nickname.”

She sank to the edge of the bed a few feet away. “I’ve been stressed.”

“I realize.”

“You seem...calm here, Rain.”

“More like bored. But yeah, something about this house makes me calm. Don’t you feel it?”

She nodded. "I do. I'm sure Quaide feels the same."

"So...Quaaaide." She drawled out his name

Dove was just getting ready to say she wasn't talking about their protector when Lark appeared in the open doorway. Dressed in a yellow top with frills at the wrists, jeans and a pair of yellow Converse sneakers, she brought the sunshine that the rest of the home's interior lacked.

"Knock knock. I'm not interrupting, am I?"

Dove issued a low laugh. "Oh yes, we're sewing a mauve matching set straight off a 1982 runway. Extremely classified operation."

Lark's eyes twinkled and she rushed over to the top they'd just created. "Wow! I saw all the sewing patterns and stacks of cloth, but I never pegged you two as seamstresses."

"We aren't," Dove said dryly.

Lark held up the garment to her top. She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not sure this is ever coming back in style."

"Not a flaming chance in hell." Dove grinned.

"We *are* finishing these pants, Dove. I don't care what you say!"

Lark cocked a brow. "And who will be modeling the glam outfit?"

"Not me," Dove said at once. "Lark?"

"Those pants are a mile long. Not going to fit me." She stuck out one petite leg.

Dove and Rain laughed.

"Actually, I came to see if you could give me a hand, Dove." Lark's expression grew serious.

"Oh?"

"I couldn't help but overhear... Well, you know how every word in the house carries..."

She did. She and Quaide had been struggling to find a private corner and still someone overheard every murmur they



exchanged.

“I heard you and Quaide discussing how you made his coffee to perfection. He seems to be a very particular man—”

“That’s an understatement, but go on.”

“I figured if you can make him happy with a pot of coffee that Clay could be just as happy with mine. He says the coffee I make is like brown water. Would you be willing to teach me your secrets to a great pot?”

“Of course!” She started toward the door.

“Wait! You’re not just leaving me to sew this thing, are you?” Rain called out.

She turned. “Uh. Why don’t you take a break for now? Join us in the kitchen and I’ll teach you how to make coffee too.”

Her sister was hopeless in the kitchen despite Dove’s instruction.

Lark gave a small bounce. “Oh! Why don’t we make this a little friendly competition? The person who makes the worst pot of coffee wears that monstrosity.” She waved at the mauve outfit.

“Deal!” Dove and Rain said at once.

Lark’s smile led the way downstairs to the kitchen. All the guys were gathered there. Sandwich fixings were spread out on the countertop and Julius was toasting bread in the toaster.

Dove sought out Quaide’s gaze. As soon as the warmth struck her, tingles rippled up and down her arms. She always felt as if she was basking in a tropical sun when he looked at her that way. It kept her going back into his office over and over again, asking questions she didn’t need answers to just to see him one more time.

“What are you ladies up to?” Quaide’s stare followed her to the coffeemaker.

“We’re having a competition.”

“What sort of competition?”

“Coffee. There’s a wager too—loser wears a really ugly outfit.”

Quaide pushed off the counter he was leaning against. “How ugly we talkin’?”

“*Very* ugly.”

His hazel eyes burned down at her. “You’d be sexy in a feed sack.”

“We’re all here.” The masculine voice brought Dove back to reality. Clay’s teeth flashed white in a sideways grin.

“Okay, let’s get this competition underway.” Dove took control. “We each make a pot. The guys are our taste testers. Whoever comes out on top wins...” She cast a look around the ugly, outdated kitchen for some prize.

Quaide plucked a mug off a top shelf. “How about they win this dusty old gold mug with a bank logo on the front? It was Grandpa’s favorite.”

Laughter sounded around the room.

“Yes! Winner gets the gold bank mug! And the loser wears the ugly outfit that Rain and I finish sewing. Lark, would you like to go first?”

“Sure thing.” She moved to the coffeemaker and located the bag of coffee. “I’m going to start with this delicious variety of Columbian dark roast in a big red can.”

Dove leaned toward Quaide. “Rookie mistake,” she whispered from the corner of her lips.

His eyes smoldered with the old amusement that they always shared in the office. The rest of the team and even Rain seemed to be getting into the game as they watched Lark scoop the grounds and add them to a paper filter. Then she filled the pot with tap water.

“Is that going to taste like the lead pipes in this place?” Clay drawled.

Lark made a show of dumping the water into the machine. “That only adds to the flavor. It will make the best cup, I

assure you.” Since she already claimed to need help improving her skills, her claim had Dove and Rain laughing harder. It seemed like she really wanted to sport that mauve outfit.

Once the pot finished brewing, Lark passed out small cups for them all to sample. When Dove took a sip, she stopped before wrinkling her nose.

The guys weren’t as forgiving. “Ack! That’s disgusting,” Quaide said.

Dove elbowed him in the ribs, and Clay leveled him in a glare as he drew the cup to his lips and sipped the brew his significant other had made. “I don’t see a problem here.”

Lark spun on her man. “You’re the one who told me to find a new technique!”

His eyes danced. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said in a show of loyalty.

“Okay, let’s dump the pot. Next, I hand the baton to Rain.” Lark made a show of emptying the coffee down the sink drain and then passing the pot to Rain.

She selected a better bag of grounds but the first sip made them all gasp and wince.

Dove thumped a fist against her ribs. “That’ll put some hair on your chest.”

Laughter exploded around the room. Something that momentarily blew away the dark storm coming.

## Chapter Eleven

---

Quaide stared at the computer monitor, a sick feeling spreading through his chest and sinking into his stomach. The article in the newspaper explained the crime and made mention of Dove and Rain.

The secret that Dove had kept from him all this time left him shellshocked, and he'd seen a lot of horrific things.

Of course the FBI would have known this when she was hired, but her information was never disclosed to him for privacy reasons. That the woman had survived such a thing and come out as well as she did stunned him.

It also left him with a bad taste in his mouth when it came to Rain. He'd misjudged her—very wrongly. Now her childish behavior made so much sense. He didn't have a psychology degree, but if he did, he was pretty sure she had frozen in time at the age of sixteen after that trauma in her life.

It also explained Dove's reasons for being so protective of Rain. When her parents were gone, she stepped into the role of parent and caregiver, and Rain leaned heavily on her.

He sat back in his chair and rubbed a hand down his face. To think all this was going on without him knowing it hurt. He could have helped her so much more. Could have been there for Rain too.

Maybe then she wouldn't have gotten involved with Dom.

"Wow, that's some bad news for some poor family." The voice over his shoulder made Quaide turn to find Julius standing behind him, staring at the story splashed across the monitor.

Quickly, he closed the tab and spun his desk chair to face him. “Keep your voice down. It’s Dove and Rain’s family.”

Julius’s face blanked. “Goddamn. I’m sorry to hear that happened to them.” He scuffed his knuckles over his jaw. “It explains some things, though.”

“Yeah.”

“Like Rain’s behavior.”

“Yup.”

“And why Dove doesn’t want to let her sister go to the ranch alone.”

He nodded.

“Did you uncover that info on your own?”

“No, she told me.”

“Well, I do tend to run on the gory side of things, but I have no interest in reading more about what happened in their family.”

He gave him a stiff nod. “You and me both.” But he was fully prepared to let Dove take refuge in his arms while he handled things until she was strong enough to do it herself.

He’d go to any lengths to keep her safe. Each time he thought of what could have happened to Dove if she’d gotten in her SUV that was wired to blow, his hands shook.

He would hunt down that hitman and kill him with his bare hands. Then he’d find every person connected with Dom Tretorn and end them too, so the sisters could walk without fear.

Julius sank into a seat, his boot hooked over his knee. “Any new developments with our dead guy?”

“I haven’t heard anything.”

“It’s pretty hard to hear anything over you and Dove’s moans and the headboard banging the wall.”

Quaide leveled a look at him. “You won’t bring that up again if you like being on this team.”

Julius flashed his pearly whites in a wide grin that showed Quaide that he gave no fucks about threats of termination. “It’s not really your decision, since you’re not the boss.”

He grunted. That statement would have sent him into a rage a few days ago. Now he saw the pros of not being in charge. This was starting to look like a better fit for his life.

“Don’t get so cocky or comfortable, Abel. Clay could decide that one of your brothers is a better fit for Sentry.”

“You won’t find a better fit for Sentry, but go ahead and try.”

Quaide had enough of this punk kid running his mouth, but he was right—Sentry needed every man they had. Six weeks earlier, Sentry was a team of one. Now as it was, four men plus Lark running the back operations weren’t enough to clean up this part of the state.

Julius stretched his legs and crossed his ankles. “Any word from the medical examiner today? She mentioned getting the report for us soon.”

“Haven’t heard anything, but it’s still early.”

“You really going to stop Dove from going with her sister?”

Quaide sat back, his mind in a knot. The turmoil in his chest wasn’t letting up when it came to what he felt was right in this case and what he felt Dove needed.

Two beautiful blondes on the ranch would raise eyebrows. Since it was a working ranch with cattle and horses being sold on a regular basis, people came and went. Sure, the WEST team had a tight rein on all the business taking place on the property. But that didn’t mean things *couldn’t* slip by.

He’d given his word to Dove to stop trying to control the situation, but now that he was faced with the choice, he wanted to take the other path and keep her with him.

He fisted his hand and brought it to his lips in contemplation. His precious moment of silence was broken when Clay entered the new office space.

He took one look at Quaide and arched a brow. “Quaide still seems to be in his funk,” he said to Julius.

“You got that right.”

Quaide gave them both a lazy eye roll. “Real professional, guys.”

Clay leaned against the edge of the table now serving as a workspace. “You sure you’re good to work on this case, Livingston?”

He straightened. “Hell yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Clay tugged his hat brim lower. “When you started work on the case, it wasn’t a conflict of interest. It is now. You’re really close to it, buddy.”

“I’m not too close. Dove is a friend.” He wasn’t lying.

He cocked his head. “C’mon. I’ve known you since the days when neither of us had more than a sprinkling of hair on our balls. What’s really going on with Dove? And don’t bother lying—I have ears.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Julius didn’t bother to keep his laughter inside where it belonged.

“Your new bed creaks, Livingston,” Clay said.

Quaide sent him a long look. “Payback. I heard you and Lark back when I was here helping with the bomb case.”

Clay studied him for a moment. “So that’s what was eating at you even then. You were hung up on her...and she disappeared to hide her sister.”

He’d had enough talk for one day. He shoved away from the table and stalked out of the room. His boots thumped harder with every step that carried him to the garage.

When he threw open the door, he headed straight for the wall of his grandpa’s tools. They were old, some ancient enough to belong in a museum, but they still served their purpose. He grabbed a crowbar and a sledgehammer and headed back inside.

When he reached the study, he dropped the sledgehammer and walked right up to the far wall. Without a second's hesitation, he stuck the claw end of the crowbar into the molding on one window and pried it off. The cheap, old wood gave a satisfying crack. He did it again and again until he had one window cleared. Then he moved to the next.

Damn, his teammates were nosy bastards. But they did have Dove and Rain's safety at heart.

This frustration level inside him wasn't easing up. Actually, his chest grew tighter. Maybe he'd been running in panic mode for so long that he missed the adrenaline high.

Jamming the tool into a crack where two sheets of the ugly wood paneling met, he gave it a yank at the same time he issued a roar. The sheet cracked at an angle, and Quaide gave it a hard yank to rip it entirely off the wall.

It hit the floor with a loud crash, and he lunged forward to attack again.

He *wouldn't* go back on his word to Dove.

Losing control of the when and how left him feeling weak. But he would give up his own life ten times over to keep her safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

The crashes echoing through the house drew Dove down the stairs. The noise of demolition tugged her past the dining room, and she paused to poke her head in.

Three members of Sentry were standing in the middle of the room, looking up at the flatscreen that had been mounted on the wall since she was last in here.

They all swung their attention to her.

"He's in a funk?" she asked them.

"I'd call it taking out some aggression," Julius drawled.

"He's in the study," Clay added.



She glanced up at the screen and bile rocketed up her throat.

The image was a closeup of Dom's boot. On the sole Rain's handwriting spelled her name. The letters were scuffed in places but Dove would know the little up-flick on the *R* anywhere. Her sister had a way of exaggerating it.

Clay saw what she was staring at and pressed the remote in his hand, blacking out the screen.

"I'll just...go see what Quaide's doing." She rushed away from the room, her stomach heaving with the image she now couldn't unsee.

A muffled grunt coming from the study made her walk faster. The study door was partially closed and particles of dust hung in the air. The floor was covered in chunks of wood paneling and molding Quaide had ripped off the walls.

Putting out a hand, she pressed the door open and stepped inside. Quaide was standing by the bookcase, examining his hand. Blood ran down to his wrist.

"Quaide!"

He jerked his head up, and her heart flexed at the emotion she saw on his handsome face.

She rushed to him. "You're cut. What happened?"

"I should be wearing gloves."

"There's a lot of things you should have done before ripping the place apart. Like clearing out the room first. Let me see your hand." She wrapped her fingers lightly around his wrist and drew his hand closer to examine it.

His warm skin and the hardness of bone in her grasp pulsed with life. Blood trickled from a cut below his pinky.

"A piece of paneling caught my hand as I tore it down." He hovered over her, staring down at her with so much intensity that her skin rippled with it.

"I assume there's a first-aid kit around here?"

"Grandma always kept bandages in the medicine cabinet."

She issued a soft laugh. “That dates them to the Kennedy administration.”

“Adhesive was stickier back then. I’m sure they’ll still be fine.” His tender smile caught her off guard with the peace and contentment in it.

“I’ll be right back.” She hurried to the bathroom and located some bandages that didn’t look that old. She carried a few back with a bottle of peroxide and a clean washcloth.

“The peroxide’s out of date, but does that really matter?”

“Not to me,” he responded.

“At least you have a project to work out some frustrations.”

“There’s the sunny, look-on-the-bright-side woman I know.”

Her lips tugged into a smile. “I hated feeling so out of sorts the past six weeks.”

She cradled his hand in the cloth and dumped peroxide over the wound. The blood was slowing and the wound wasn’t very deep. As she tended to his cut, she felt his gaze on her. Moving over her. Burning *into* her.

She layered two bandages over the gash and looked up into his eyes.

His stare traveled across her face with that same emotion he’d shown her before.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” she whispered.

“I’m in awe of you. You’re such a survivor.”

Goose bumps skittered down her arms. “I didn’t tell you about my family to gain your sympathy or make you think differently about me.”

“I don’t. I mean, I do. But it’s not a bad thing. Not many people would end up stronger after something like that.”

She thought about Rain. While she never considered her baby sister broken, there had been plenty of times when Dove

had to pick up the pieces. After so many years, they were in a much better place. At least they would be right after the Sentry team stopped whoever wanted them dead.

Lifting his other hand, he cupped her cheek. Warm, rough fingertips eased into the hair at her temple. “Let me take it from here, Dove. I’m asking you to let me do my job, to use the knowledge I’ve gained over years of training, and make sure you’re both safe.”

Her mind shot to that image of Dom’s boot on the screen and fear gripped her stomach again. That could have been her sister. Dove didn’t know how to protect her. Someone had gotten to her vehicle and planted a bomb, which proved they’d go to any lengths.

She dropped her gaze to his muscled chest. “You’re right. I’m just the assistant. I don’t know these things.”

He applied pressure to her face, drawing her stare back to his. “You’re not *just* the anything, baby, unless you count that you’re just *mine*.”

His words sent liquid heat through her body to pool in her core.

“I want to take care of you and your sister. Will you let me?”

She searched his eyes and saw that he was meeting her halfway, compromising. Wasn’t this what relationships were all about?

“You don’t need to do this alone anymore. Let me help you. Let me love you, Dove.” He lowered his lips to hers.

All tenderness fled in a spiral of need. She grabbed at him, hands scrabbling on his spine as he backed her up against the only section of wall he hadn’t destroyed yet. When he pinned her to it with his body, he growled, “Raise your hands over your head.”

The command sent darts of desire through her system. Her panties flooded, and her nipples peaked.

Slowly, she lifted her arms over her head. His hand came down over them, locking them to the wall as he plundered her mouth and tongue-fucked it in a mimicry of the way she needed his cock between her legs.

His other hand skated down her ribs, around to the flat of her stomach. He popped the button of her jeans and slid down the zipper.

She shook in anticipation of his touch on her throbbing clit. Small noises burst out of her, which he kissed away.

When he slipped his hand inside her panties, she let out a cry, and he issued a deep groan. “You’re fucking soaking wet for me, baby.”

“Kiss me!”

He plunged his tongue in her mouth and circled her clit with a fingertip. Electricity shot through her, causing her mind to blank to anything but the pleasure he was giving her up against this wall in his grandparents’ study.

She rocked into his hand. He sank a finger lower, probing her entrance before thrusting it inside. He applied just the right pressure. Worked her with just the right speed.

Call her seven shades of blushing right now, because she felt the desire climbing her neck and face. Her breath slipped raggedly past her lips.

His taste on her tongue sent her into a frenzy of passion that couldn’t be stopped even if the entire Sentry team walked in right now.

“Quaide!” she rasped. “Please. I need...”

He latched his lips on her throat and teased her clit. “Need this, baby?”

“Yes!”

He released her hands pinned to the wall, and she threw them around his neck, kissing him with all the need coursing through her veins.

With one hand still buried in her folds and tormenting her clit, he cupped her breast and flicked at her straining nipple.

Her knees threatened to buckle. She might need him to hold her up when she came.

And she knew he would. That was what he was saying to her—*asking* of her.

Pleasure waves hit, and she let go, giving Quaide more than *just* the release he demanded of her.

## Chapter Twelve

---

Chair legs scraped on the floor, and all four of the Sentry team took a seat at the table. Without pause, Clay tugged on the brim of his Stetson and gave a nod of respect to those he shared the table with. Julius and Jennings followed.

Quaide scraped his fingers through his hair. He didn't need a hat to fit in, but ever since he returned to his grandparents' home nestled not ten minutes from the Colorado countryside, he felt like he was missing something.

He cocked a brow at Clay. "We have more damn meetings than the FBI ever did. Shouldn't we actually be taking *action* on this task force?"

"I called a meeting to form a plan, Livingston. Take it easy." Clay swiped a finger over the screen of a computer tablet.

"Did that report from the medical examiner come through yet?" Jennings leaned forward to eye the screen.

"Yeah, it did. It looks like the time of death was within ten to twelve hours of the body being dumped on that riverbank," Clay read. "There's a lot of information on how the medical examiner made that determination. If anyone's interested, you can read it later."

Everyone looked to Jennings.

Julius gave him the side-eye. "Or maybe you can ask her to read it *to* you. Seems your kind of pillow talk."

Jennings scratched at the corner of his eye using his middle finger.

Clay continued to inform them of details. When he got to the official cause of death, he blew out a breath first and looked around the table. “Blunt force trauma to the back of the head.”

Quaide sat back in his seat. “Goddamn, that’s brutal.”

“Now we can try to deduce who our hitman might be and hunt him down before he makes any more moves on Rain.” Clay pulled up another screen. It popped up on the wall TV so they could all read through the list.

Quaide counted them, and then blew out a whistle. “Thirteen executioners on our radar just in this area. Weren’t there only twelve yesterday?”

Clay nodded. “I spent a few hours overnight on the dark web doing a little research.”

“A few hours? You were awake half the night, Clay. The blue light from your tablet was keeping me up.” A voice from the doorway drew their attention away from the list as Lark breezed into the room.

She stopped, took one look at Quaide and did an about-face. She strode from the room as fast as her petite legs could go, but the action left them all trading questioning looks.

“What was that about?” Jennings asked.

Clay shrugged. “Beats me, but she was looking at Quaide. Whatever she’s mad about, it’s his fault.”

Chuckles followed, but Quaide had to wonder if Lark and Dove had gotten together and had a talk about Dove’s prior issue with him. He thought they’d cleared that all up when he fingered her to a gasping, panting, boneless orgasm against the wall of the study earlier. But maybe he was wrong.

“Third guy on the list.” Quaide pointed. “He’s out. He’s a sharpshooter and likes to show off his skill by taking the shot. He wouldn’t use blunt force trauma to kill a man.”

“Ewww! You guys are always talking about death and destruction,” Lark interrupted on her return.

Clay grunted. “That’s kind of the point of Sentry, doll.”

“I know, silly. But there are fun things about Sentry too. Like this!” She whipped a bag out from behind her back. She flounced up to Quaide and held it out for him.

He took it from her, and without even peeking inside, he knew what the bag contained.

The familiar weight in his hand gave him a little thrill, and he felt a grin spread across his face. All the years he came to visit his grandparents, he always sported one.

Everyone watched as he pulled out a black Stetson. When he turned it around in his hands, Clay gave a single nod, stamping his approval on this purchase, and Julius let out a low whistle. “That’s a sweet one. Good quality.”

Lark did a little bounce on her toes. “Try it on. I think it will fit, but...” She bit down on her lower lip.

He set the hat on his head and adjusted it. Not so loose that it fell off when he bent over and it didn’t squeeze.

“What do you guys think?”

Lark bobbed her head, a wide smile on her face. The other guys gave their stamp of approval too—but only one opinion mattered.

And that was Dove’s.

She stood in the doorway, watching him. A hand fluttered to her chest.

Was he the only person who saw the pink flush on her cheeks? She was aroused.

For him.

Their gazes connected and held. Several heartbeats throbbed between them.

“Here we go with the uncomfortable staring again,” Julius drawled out.

Jennings and Clay laughed. Shaken from the moment, Dove threw her shoulders back and stepped into the room.

“I’d like to be part of whatever’s going on.”



Lark bounced up to her. “Good! Because I had a *big* shopping trip. Wait until you see what I got for us.”

Dove looked at Quaide again. “Us?”

Lark answered. “Yes, for Operation Clone. We needed three outfits, makeup, I had to get a wig... It’s going to be *great*.”

Quaide swallowed hard. They were really going through with this risky plan.

That just meant he needed to be at the very top of his game so he kept all of them safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

A rhythmic banging noise from the study rattled the entire house. Luckily, Quaide’s bedroom suite offered refuge from the demolition taking place below.

If Dove, Rain and Lark were in any of the untouched older parts of the house, dust would be falling from the ceilings and blanketing every surface.

Quaide had offered her refuge in more than his arms. This house and his love sheltered her from the world when she needed it most.

That was a very unexpected part of him being in her life again. She’d told herself she’d walked away so his job wasn’t jeopardized. She didn’t want to drag an FBI agent into Rain’s mess.

But fact was, she didn’t know this side of Quaide.

He was always the leader at work. Now she saw the protector.

She knew him as a lover...but was seeing the nurturer in him.

He was taking care of her—of Rain too. And she loved him even more for that.

*Loved*. She’d been stuffing that emotion down for far too long.

Staring off into space, she toyed with the satin belt of her robe and let the images of a life with Quaide slam into her.

She pictured them together in this house. Sharing this bed every night. Waking up and knowing she was lying next to a man who would love her until the end of time—because that was Quaide.

As long as he wasn't trying to order her around, they were good together.

Really, *really* good.

They worked well together, and played even better.

She loved the Sentry team too. The guys were like big brothers. And Lark was a gem.

Dove swung her stare to the beautiful redhead sitting on a chair having her makeup applied by an artist. The woman was transforming Lark's pale, freckled skin to the creamier tone of Rain's. As soon as Lark was finished in the chair, Dove would be getting the same treatment.

Rain was propped on pillows against the headboard, watching their new friend being transformed—and wearing the mauve eighties outfit. She'd lost the competition, but had donned the garments with a pride that surprised Dove.

Three identical sets of clothes were laid out at the foot of the king-sized bed. Three pairs of simple black boots were lined up on the floor.

This plan needed to work. It had before—but then she just believed she was keeping her sister out of jail. Now the stakes were much higher with a hitman to worry about.

The makeup artist used a blender sponge to sweep foundation across Lark's forehead. Dove watched the woman's freckles disappear, leaving behind a warm tone that was closer to Rain's.

Maybe close to Dove's own skin tone before all those sleepless nights and stress took their toll on her.

Lark caught her staring in the reflection of the mirror and flashed her a smile. "What do you think so far?"

Dove moved from the chair to drift over to Lark. She gave the artist enough room to work her magic and instead leaned against the pale wood dresser that the smaller makeup mirror was propped on.

“I think this is going to work,” Dove said.

Lark eyed her. “Are you saying that because you believe it or because you want to make it into a reality?”

“Both?” Dove gave a rueful laugh.

“No, I *know* it’s going to work.” She sliced a look at the artist. What did the woman know about their reason for hiring her? Lark hadn’t shared that bit when she admitted her to the house along with a giant trunk filled with makeup.

Lark picked up on her reservations without her needing to speak in front of the stranger.

“Oh, don’t worry. Brighton is an old friend of mine. She actually dated my brother for a while, didn’t you, Brighton?”

The pretty brunette unfolded her lips that had been sealed in concentration and nodded with a smile. “Back in the day.”

“She will keep all the secrets we have to give her,” Lark assured Dove.

Rain took an interest in what was happening and joined them, dragging over the chair that Dove had abandoned and draping herself on it. “How much do we need to worry about? Are we going to get out of the driveway and be attacked? Or do you think someone will chase us out of East Canon all the way to the interstate?”

Dove watched Brighton closely, but the woman’s brows didn’t shoot upward and her expression remained the same. Of course, she might have plenty of Botox to keep her face from moving, but Dove didn’t think so.

Seeing that she really didn’t seem to care about this conversation, Dove answered Rain’s questions.

“I’m not a hundred percent certain of the plan right now, but Quaide mentioned us slipping out at night.”

“What good is it to match each other’s appearance, then?”  
Rain wound a thick lock of hair around her index finger.

“We don’t want to be seen, but if we are, hopefully this will confuse people.”

“I understand. And the chance of being chased?”

“Not high,” she told Rain.

Her sister looked to Lark. “What do you think, Lark?”

“Have you *seen* those men downstairs? No one is messing with them.” Lark’s response made Brighton nod and Dove smile.

Part of that team belonged to her. Quaide was *her* man. He was smart, hot *and* skilled. All three left Dove wishing he would come in and sweep her off her feet and carry her away to a private spot. The study might be in a state of total wreckage, but that didn’t mean they hadn’t stolen some pleasure for themselves.

Little by little, Brighton changed Lark’s appearance by using tricks of the brush. By creating shadows and highlights, she made her eyes the same shape as Rain and Dove’s. She sculpted her nose using bronzer to give the illusion it was a bit thinner at the bridge. Then she outlined her lips to a fuller pout that resembled Rain’s.

“Wow, that’s amazing.” Rain came closer to examine her work.

“Thanks,” Brighton responded.

Rain stroked her fingers over the blonde wig that was laid out in a box lined with velvet. “Wow, this color is really close to my shade.”

“Brighton’s amazing at color-matching. One time in high school, she even matched my shade to use on her own hair.”

Brighton chuckled. “Everyone at school called me Single White Female for the longest time after that.”

“I knew better. You just always wanted to be a redhead. I mean, who wouldn’t?” She touched a finger to a springy curl

that hung by her ear. It bounced.

Dove felt her lips stretch into a smile. This moment might be a pivot point for what would happen next, but she had new friends to share it with. New friends who actually cared about how this plan turned out.

“Will the hair on the wig be too long?” Rain slipped the silky strands over her splayed fingers.

“We’ll cut it to match your length,” Brighton told her absently as she filled in Lark’s already full lips into a bigger pout.

Rain swung her head to look at Dove. “I assume you’re cutting Dove’s too.”

She whipped a hand up to her sensible ponytail. “I actually like my hair.”

Rain, Lark and Brighton all gave her a rueful look.

“Crap,” she muttered, realizing there was no use in fighting. After all, she’d made the plan in the first place.

“Don’t worry, Dovey. It will grow long again,” Rain said.

“I’m not the only one who likes it.” She pushed out a sigh and plowed on. “It’s the first thing Quaide ever complimented me on.”

Rain opened her eyes wide. “Oh. He actually likes the ponytail?”

“Cut it out, Rain. I didn’t only wear a ponytail to the office. One day, he walked in, stopped by my desk and just stared at me for so long that I thought I’d made some error in the report I sent. Then he said, ‘Your hair looks nice today,’ in a really gruff voice.”

A shiver rolled through her, and she wrapped her arms around her middle.

Lark smiled softly. “Aww. So it really was an office fling. Clay pegged it before Quaide ever joined Sentry.”

Dove gaped at her. “What do you mean?”

“Quaide joined us on an op, so he was staying here with us.”

Brighton spun Lark’s chair to face her. Then she applied a tight cap to her red curls before reaching for the wig.

Lark continued, “He was pretty broody. Stuck to himself. He wouldn’t joke around with Clay the way he normally did. Not that I’d know, but Clay’s known him for years. He thought Quaide had something going on at work. He wouldn’t talk about it, and they’d always been able to talk about work. That had Clay questioning whether or not he really had love trouble.”

Dove linked her fingers in her lap just to keep them from performing some nervous action that would surely tip the ladies off. But what was the point in denying it anymore? She loved the man. He loved her. Who knew how that would end?

Right now, the only clear path she could see was one to the Wynton Ranch to get Rain safe.

“She’s in love.” Rain’s whisper had Lark mouthing, *Oh yeah.*

“Stop it, you two. One Rain is enough to deal with!” Dove’s exclamation had them both laughing, and then Brighton joined in.

Dove stopped to watch her work the wig into place. As soon as it was positioned securely, she and Rain let out simultaneous gasps.

Lark stared at her reflection. “Wow. You’ve outdone yourself this time, Brighton.”

The artist grinned. “Wait until I cut your hair the same as Rain’s!”

Dove and Rain watched the entire process and when she was finished showing off her mad skills, Lark—on first, second and third glance—could easily pass for Rain.

Rain faced her doppelganger. “I can’t believe how well you pulled this off. It’s amazing.” She turned to Brighton.

“Maybe when this is all over, you’ll let me watch you do more makeovers.”

“I’d love that.” The two women smiled at each other. Then she waved for Dove to take the seat. “You’re up next.”

She really didn’t want her hair cut. A trim was the most she allowed her own stylist to do every quarter. She kept her makeup to mascara and lipstick, but she had to admit that the full face of makeup really made her eyes pop and a swish of blush across her cheeks had her bone structure highlighted just like Rain’s.

When they got to the hair part, she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for it all to be over.

“Oh my god! She looks amazing!”

She started to open her eyes, and Brighton whipped the chair around, away from the mirror. “We’ll do a reveal when you’re finished. Just a few more minutes...”

Dove wasn’t a flighty person in any sense of the word, but she was about to bounce out of her seat. “It’s taking *so* long.”

“Stop complaining, Dovey. You’re gonna be sooo surprised!” Rain responded.

Countless minutes passed where the hairbrush whizzed over the ends of her hair. It felt so short. She was going to hate this haircut, she just knew it.

But for Rain, she’d do anything.

“Okay, ready? Three, two...” Brighton spun the chair.

Dove gaped at her reflection in the mirror. Slowly, she lifted a hand to touch the much shorter ends of her hair. It hung in layers around her face and past her shoulders in soft waves.

“If I didn’t know this is me, I’d think I’m staring at Rain!”

Lark, Rain and Brighton all nodded and beamed.

“Let’s get together and take a selfie!” Rain burst out.

Lark and Dove gave her are-you-kidding stares.

She held up both hands. “Kidding. Jeesh. I’m not stupid.”

Dove walked over to her sister and put her arms around her. “I’m sorry I’ve been snapping at you so much, Rain. I’ve been so stressed out... And I really want my closet back.”

Rain laughed and hugged her back. “I don’t want to live in there or in that tiny sewing room anymore either!”

Lark checked her phone. “I just got a text from Clay asking if we’re ready. Okay, girls, time to get dressed in our matching outfits and get this girl group on the road.”

They scrambled into their clothes while Brighton packed away all her tools and makeup. Dove barely had the jacket on over her fitted T-shirt when a knock sounded at the door.

“Can I come in?” Quaide’s voice sent vibrations through Dove and arrowed toward her core.

With a glance around to check that they were all dressed, she called out for him to enter.

As soon as he did, his gaze fell on her. She watched him closely for any negative reaction but his chest heaved and his eyes hooded. “You look really sexy.”

She touched her hair. “Yeah?”

“Ohhh, yeah. I’d like to—”

Rain broke in, clearing her throat. “We’re here! All here. We can hear you.”

Dove shook herself out of the moment, forcing herself to break eye contact with the hot man undressing her with his eyes. “What do you think? Do we pass for the same woman?”

He looked at the other women. “If I didn’t know what I was looking at, I’d believe you’re one and the same.” His stare locked on her once more. The depths burned with a barely banked fire that told her he would pick *her* out of a football stadium full of lookalikes.

A shiver of emotion passed through her—passion, tenderness and desire. She loved this man, and as soon as she got him alone, she would tell him. If Rain’s situation had



taught her anything, it was that life was short and could change in a blink.

He stepped up to her. Heedless of who was watching, he pressed his palm into her lower back and tugged her against him. “I don’t know how I’m going to live through more days of separation from you, baby.”

Her lips hovered close to his. She wanted to kiss him but couldn’t mess up her lipstick. Searching his dark eyes, she whispered, “Don’t give up on me, Quaide. If it’s six more weeks or six months, we *are* going to make this work.”

## Chapter Thirteen

---

Quaide skimmed the list of hitmen and then started at the top again. “Jennings, you paid our friend Monk a visit last night?”

Monk had a long reach as a paid killer and was known from Colorado to California. One source claimed that he declined to do any jobs on the East Coast because he wasn’t as familiar with the territory.

Jennings rubbed a finger between his brows as if his head ached. “Yeah, that was a trip and a half. I found him in a whore house.”

“That explains the claw marks I saw on your back.” Julius’s comment had Clay chuckling.

Quaide grunted. “Tell me you got what you needed, and I don’t mean your sex life.”

“Let’s just say that Monk has an alibi. He was not in the area when Dom was killed or when Dove’s vehicle blew up.”

He nodded. “Enough said.”

Clay turned his attention to Julius. “Do you have a status on the guy you’ve been tracking down?”

“Still trying to run him to earth. But you know these guys know where to hide. I’ll keep flipping over rocks until I find him. And the hit-woman on that list? She’s been spotted in Vegas. I guess she’s got a problem with booze and drugs. As soon as she gets paid for a job, she takes off on a bender until the money runs out.”

“Classy broad,” Quaide drawled.

Clay took over the meeting. “WEST Protection has a guy on the road right now. He’ll be meeting us in...” He glanced at his watch. “Five hours. Are the women running on time?”

Quaide straightened in his seat, mostly to combat how tight his jeans got at the thought of Dove like he’d last seen her. It had taken all his self-control not to grab her and toss her on the bed. Before the ladies even exited the room, he could have been buried between her thighs, pulling moans out of her.

“They’re wrapping up,” he told the team.

Jennings who was sitting closest to the door let out a low whistle. “Speaking of...damn.”

All three ladies passed in front of the open doorway. Quaide’s stare locked with Dove’s.

“Fuck!” Clay jolted to his feet. Quaide could only imagine the things going through his friend’s head at seeing Lark looking completely different from her usual beautiful self.

“You guys are spooky.” Julius’s statement brought all three women’s attention on him. “Okay, *that’s* even spookier. You’re even giving me the same dirty look. Did y’all practice that before you came downstairs?”

“Yes,” they said in synchronization.

Quaide looked them over carefully. It felt kind of wrong to be hard as steel for Dove when she looked so much like her sister.

“We leave in thirty minutes,” Clay announced. “We don’t want to get there early.” He looked to Quaide and then Julius. “You two be ready to ride.”

“I’ve got Dove. You’ve got Lark.” He nodded at Clay. “Julius is with Rain. Jennings is bringing up the rear as lookout.”

“We have twenty-nine minutes. Dove?” Quaide tipped his head toward the door, indicating she should follow him through it.

The things she’d said to him upstairs still felt like a warm caress that never left his skin. He wasn’t sure when she began

to think of *them* as a team, but he was grateful as hell for it. He loved this woman and he would fight for her the rest of his days. Every minute he would spend devoted to her happiness.

He led the way to the study. It was still messy as hell, with paneling and molding all over the floor, but now that he'd strummed her body and kissed her and dragged an orgasm from her, he felt as if the place had a special energy for the two of them. It was their place.

She looked around the space. When she moved her head, a lock of shorter hair framing her face swung against her cheek. He itched to brush it away, to cup her beautiful face and kiss her until she was soaking wet for him. Then he'd take her panties off her and slip them in his pocket as a reminder that they'd soon be together again.

Their separation would *not* last six weeks this time.

She looked at him. Her eyes were outlined by makeup that brought out the blue hue. "Do you remember when we talked about doing this? The renovation? It was a dream. We both thought it would never actually happen."

He stepped closer to her but refrained from touching her. He didn't want to muss her appearance, but on the flip side, that was the *only* thing he wanted to do.

"There was a lot we didn't know about each other then."

She issued a low laugh. "You didn't even know where I lived, but still you conned my baby sister into letting you into my apartment."

He leveled a pointed look at her.

Her lips tipped at the corners. "Okay, you're right. She would have let in the bad guys. I always knew it."

He reached out and caught hold of her hand. It was the only thing he couldn't mar the appearance of. Her soft fingers tangled with his, tugging at his heart.

She tilted her face up. "What are the next steps for this room?"

“I’d like to make it my personal office, and it’s yours too if you want to use it.”

Her smile made her face light up with an angelic glow. “You actually want to work with me again?”

With a yank on her hand, he pulled her to him. Despite her looking so much like Rain, she still smelled like the Dove he knew. “I want everything with you. I want to hear your voice first thing when I wake up in the morning, all day long and the last thing before I go to sleep.”

Her eyes glimmered with emotion.

“I never made my intentions clear before. But I’ve learned my lesson—and goddamn, was it a hard one. I can’t wait for everything to be planned out or in place. I’m not going to let you leave my side today without knowing how in love with you I am.”

She slid her fingers up to his jaw. “Oh, Quaide. Let’s find this person who’s after my sister so we can get on with our lives together.”

Nodding, he leaned in to kiss her. The initial brush of their mouths turned into so much more. He stroked his tongue over hers, pulling a quiet moan of need from her.

He hoped she knew how damn serious he was. His job—his life—meant nothing without her by his side.

“They’re at it again.” Rain’s voice broke through their passion, but Quaide swirled his tongue around Dove’s several more times before breaking the kiss.

He and Dove pivoted toward the doorway. Rain stood there with her arms folded and an exasperated expression on her face. “If you’re finished eating off each other’s faces—”

“Rain!” Dove yelped.

She flashed a smile. “You two *are* pretty disgusting. I only came in here to tell you that Clay needs to speak with Quaide for a minute.”

Reluctantly, he released Dove. Walking away was even worse. It didn’t matter that she’d be in the car with him, and

he'd give up his own life to keep her safe. He still didn't like what they were about to do.

When he stepped into the dining room, Clay waved him over to the far corner where a laptop was running a facial recognition program. It paused several times on the rough visage of a guy dressed in a black leather vest with silver spikes around the collar and on each shoulder. Otherwise, he was shirtless.

The photo was taken in the dark by a security cam, but Quaide could make out the outline of a loading dock and some wooden crates in the background.

Clay saw him staring at the screen and whirled his chair to face him. "That guy's of no concern right now. I'm just getting it through the system while it's still a fresh lead. Look, something came up and I had to send Jennings to Colorado Springs."

His muscles stiffened. "You sent him *now*? When we're minutes away from transporting Rain?"

"I know it's last-minute and it sucks. But you're going to have to take Rain with you and Dove."

He slashed a hand through the air. "That's a terrible idea! What's the point in having them look alike and ride together? If we're followed, they're going to know we made a decoy to throw them off."

"I know, but there aren't many choices left."

"Julius."

"He's going with Jennings."

Quaide felt the fury rising in his system, building into a fire that he felt blazing in his face. "You're seriously cutting our team in half? Now?"

"I don't have a choice. We're still down several people. I don't like it, but this is the only way. Look, it's relatively low risk. We can get the girls to the rendezvous point and we'll make damn sure they're safe in the hands of the WEST team before we return."

The growl rumbling in his throat couldn't be silenced or stifled. He let it go, filling the room with a noise that would have made his grandmother jump out of her housedress if she were still alive.

“This is ridiculous, Clay. Is this any way to run Sentry?”

Clay's eyes narrowed. “Are you calling me incompetent, Livingston? Because I know you'd never say that to me.”

He and Clay rarely went head-to-head on anything, least of all work issues.

He drew a deep breath. He couldn't let his pride step in and ruin a nearly lifelong friendship.

He wasn't about to back down on such a vital issue, either.

“There has to be another way, Lexis. Another day when WEST can come.”

He was already shaking his head. “You heard Ross—they're stretched thin. I'm sorry. We ride now or not at all.”

The words “not at all” looped through his brain, but he knew that notion was madness. They had to end the reign of fear.

“Fuck!” He tore off his hat and knifed his fingers through his hair.

“Look, the woman I love isn't as at risk as yours is, but she's still *at risk*. Remember that we're both in uncharted territory and neither of us feels comfortable with the way we have to operate Sentry right now. As soon as possible, we need to find more recruits. Especially since the brothers will be going dark while they're undercover investigating the church.”

“I fucking hate this. I don't feel comfortable at all, Lexis.” His jaw ached from how tight he clenched it.

“I know, man. I wish we had any other option, but this is it for now. We'll make it work.”

Clay had Lark. Quaide had Dove and Rain.

No one had their six.

Hell. This wasn't good.

He walked over to a metal gun cabinet that the guys had moved in from the former office. With a flick of his wrist, he spun the combination lock to open it. Then he reached in and plucked a second sidearm off the shelf. He checked it over before tucking it in the waist of his jeans. After pulling out several clips of ammo, he turned to Clay.

"I just got her back. I can't take any chances." Great—his throat clogged with emotion.

"I understand. She's going to be safe. We got this handled, Livingston."

He muttered an answer but didn't respond further. "I'll get the sisters into the vehicle and wait for the greenlight from you."

Clay offered him a stiff nod. Quaide yanked his hat low over his eyes and walked out.

He almost plowed into Dove standing outside the door.

One look at her face told him that she'd been listening.

"How much did you hear?"

"All of it." She lifted her jaw a small increment. "We have to keep my sister safe, Quaide."

"I'm trying here."

"I can figure out another way to get Rain out of town. We'll leave you out of it," she argued.

"Not possible."

"Are you saying I'm incompetent?"

He gave his head a hard shake, reeling from her question. "You're the most capable woman I've ever met, Dove. Hell, for that matter, you're more capable than many of the Marines I served with, and FBI agents too. Don't you see that you're the one separating us by applying roles that no longer exist?"

Her lips parted but no sound came out.



He cupped her cheek and stared deep into her eyes. “I’m going to keep you both safe. Trust me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay stepped out of the room and stopped when he saw Quaide and Dove standing there, but caught up in a moment that went far deeper than what their discussion revealed.

Quaide dropped his hand from her cheek and they both turned to look at the man.

“A text just came through from Josiah Wynton. He can’t come today.”

The announcement punched the air out of Dove’s lungs. She felt her body deflate, and all the fear and nervous energy trickled out like helium through a pinhole on a balloon.

Quaide fisted his hand and dug a knuckle into his forehead over the crease lines. “You’re kidding me. They’re just now informing us of the change? We could have been on the road already.”

“Josiah’s wife is in labor.”

Quaide pushed out a sigh. “I can’t blame the guy for sticking by his wife. If it were Dove...”

Her stomach dipped.

“We’re just going to hold off another day. Possibly two,” Clay said.

A feminine cry came from behind them. All three of them turned to see Rain bouncing on her toes. “That means I’m not stuck on a smelly old ranch yet.”

“Rain—” she began tersely, but Quaide touched her elbow. The tender touch brought her down to earth and made her see that this delay could be a good thing. It was like getting stuck behind a slow driver and then down the road finding a car accident had just taken place. Sometimes the universe had other plans for people.

On the other hand...it might be good for Rain to find herself and grow. The ranch would be a safe place to do that,

away from street thugs who laundered money. She could finally be her own woman.

However, the delay brought another level of thinking.

“It’s probably for the better,” Dove said quietly. “There’s a reason we’re not supposed to go today. There are too many issues cropping up. Remember that one case you and Harv handled back in the FBI?” She raised both eyebrows at Quaide.

He searched her face for a moment before nodding. “I remember it well. And you’re right.”

“Okay, your private communication isn’t helping the rest of us out,” Rain popped off. “But I’ll take that tiny sewing room and eighties clothes patterns over smelling manure any day. I’ll be upstairs if anyone’s looking for me.”

With that, Rain flounced off, leaving Dove to handle the next steps of plan B.

Was there a plan B?

“Oh god. We’ll have to do this all over again. The makeovers. Lark’s wig.” She moaned. She was not up for that a second time, even if it had been relatively painless.

“Since I’m not driving to Colorado today, I’m going to bash some stuff in the study.”

She inched closer to him, linking their hands and raising her fingers to his jaw. “That sounds like a good way for you to relieve stress.”

“Will you join me?”

“Actually, it’s getting close to dinnertime. We all need to eat. Did I see chicken in the refrigerator?”

He nodded. “I’ve never eaten your cooking before.”

She shrugged. “I had to learn fast. When you’re suddenly in charge of your little sister, you figure things out.” She released his hand and backed up a step. “Go fight some demons in that study, Quaide.”

He chuckled. “If by demons you mean that sofa with the covered bridges pattern...”

She wrinkled her nose. “Exactly.”

He turned away from her as if reluctant to do so, and Dove drifted into the kitchen. Cooking was far from her favorite pastime, but she could use the mindless task right now. After the blow that they weren’t going to the ranch, and all the preparation it took to go in the first place, she was mentally exhausted.

But she had cute hair.

And Quaide called it sexy.

She opened the refrigerator door first and rummaged through the stocked fridge. When she located a package of fresh chicken breasts, she started planning the non-protein portion of their meal.

After digging through the cupboards, she located long grain rice and set to work putting together a meal for... She counted. Five people.

The kitchen had a lot of old pots and pans, which made it easy to cook in. As she worked, butterflying the chicken and seasoning both sides, it was easy to imagine Quaide’s grandmother standing at this very counter, preparing food for people she cared about.

A loud crash carried across the house from the study. Wow. Clearly Quaide was being *very* enthusiastic about relieving his stress.

She smiled to herself and even began to hum. The sound startled her until she realized it was coming from her. How long had it been since she felt so much like herself?

On the electric stove, she preheated some oil in the bottom of a well-loved skillet. She was just placing the breasts into the pan when the lights flickered off.

Immediately, they came back on. Then they dimmed for a moment and then went off entirely again.

“Goddammit!” Quaide’s bellow resonated through the house just as feet thudded down the stairs.

Lark walked into the kitchen. The room had a lot of natural light, but Dove couldn’t exactly cook on an electric top without electricity.

“What happened?” Lark asked her.

She shrugged. “Lost power.”

“Maybe somebody hit a telephone pole.”

Rain walked into the kitchen. “Why isn’t there power?”

“I think when I tore out that last piece of paneling that I knocked some wiring loose.” Quaide’s grumbled revelation shed light on the mystery.

She swung toward her lover and her brows shot up at the dark scowl on his handsome face. “Are you sure it was you? Might have been a coincidence.”

“I don’t think so.” He raked his fingers through his hair. At some point, he’d shed his Stetson. She loved seeing him in the hat that suited him so well, but those long, capable fingers gliding through his hair left her body tingling with the electricity the house didn’t have at the moment.

Lark pulled out her phone. “I’ll place a call to the electric company.”

“Thanks, Lark,” Quaide mumbled. He scowled at the cooktop. “Now there’s no dinner either, thanks to that mistake I made.”

She shot him a look. “Again, you don’t know if it was your fault.”

Dove wanted nothing more than to soothe her angry bear of a lover, but she held back. What would probably do him more good was a good meal.

“I’m a problem solver. I got this. There’s a grill in the garden. I saw it the other day,” she said to Quaide. “Does it work?”

“Yeah, we used it a couple weeks ago to grill steaks.”

She reached for a clean plate and began placing the chicken from the pan onto it. "I'll be outside with this. I saw a container of potato salad in the fridge. We can have that as a side. Best to eat it now so it doesn't go bad."

With the plate in one hand, she leaned on tiptoe to kiss the corner of Quaide's firm mouth. She heard his low sigh right before she turned for the back door leading to the garden.

Bees hummed around the overgrown path and the scent of flowers flooded her senses. She wished she didn't need to tend the chicken or she might putter around pulling weeds or raking just to take her mind off...well, everything.

One more day without reaching the Wynton Ranch and safety. Not that she was eager in any way to leave Quaide, but she did want to cut out the fear hovering over her. And Rain too. She must feel the heat, even if she never did anything but joke around and flit from subject to subject like a carefree butterfly.

That was just Rain. Dove loved that side of her so much, but after this was all over, they were going to have a serious talk about who she dated. If she had to survive one more enormous, stressful event in her life, she'd surely age from her thirties to her nineties in no time.

The chicken smelled rich and fragrant. She watched it carefully, flipping it several times so it wouldn't burn while making sure that it was thoroughly cooked inside.

When the back door opened and Rain emerged carrying a stack of plates, she couldn't stop her lips from dropping open in surprise.

Rain raised her full arms. "It was Lark's idea for me to set the table out here."

"The power's still not on?"

"No." She moved down the path to a weathered picnic table and set everything down. "It could be pretty out here if someone cleaned it up a bit and bought new furniture."

"The table looks sturdy enough. It will last a lot more years."

Rain gave it a skeptical eyeball. “It’s not nearly as pretty as some of the little bed and breakfasts that Dom took me to over the past year.” She stopped and went silent for a long minute.

Dove watched her sister carefully but gave her some breathing room. She could do a lot for Rain, but handling her grief over her boyfriend wasn’t one of them. Her sister would need to walk that path alone. Dove couldn’t even empathize with the situation when the guy had not only used Rain as a mule to launder money from his drug trade but had struck her too.

Her sister really needed some therapy after this. She made a mental note to bring it up as soon as they were safe and everyone who needed to be locked up were.

The door opened again, and Clay and Lark walked out carrying various other components they’d need for the meal. Finally, Quaide joined them last. His stare sought hers.

Her insides softened at the very sight of the man she loved. They’d get through this. The universe hadn’t thrown them back together just to tear them apart.

His lips relaxed into a tender smile before he walked over to her and removed the metal tongs she was using from her hand. He set them aside and pulled her into his arms.

“They’re doing it again,” Rain griped loud enough for them to hear.

Quaide issued a rough noise and deepened the kiss. Following his lead, Dove looped her arms around his neck and clung to him, pressing every inch of her body against his.

“Look away. Nobody needs to see that much PDA. Yuck.”

Dove and Quaide broke apart, laughing. She picked up the tongs again and placed the grilled food on a clean plate.

When everyone was seated, she looked around at the relaxed faces of her loved ones and new friends.

“Dig in, everyone,” she urged, sliding onto the picnic bench next to Quaide.

“I don’t have much time to scarf down food. I’ve got to look at that electrical panel and see if I caused the power outage.” He bristled with annoyance at the complication.

“It’s not that big of a deal. Power will be restored soon.” She passed him the plate of chicken.

“You’re not taking this seriously enough, Dove. I know it’s a problem with the electrical system. It’s probably not safe. I need to come up with a plan to fix this.” He started to get up, but she grabbed his arm.

“Quaide, please just sit down and eat. You can call someone to take a look at it after you’ve had a meal.”

His gaze met hers. Struggle played in the lines around his lips.

She pitched her voice low in a soothing tone she always used when Rain got upset. “It’s going to be all right.”

When he placed his hand on her thigh, a shiver ran through her. Why did she suddenly feel as if they were sitting in the eye of the storm?

## Chapter Fourteen

---

Who was Quaide kidding? He was probably over his head with this old house. His bedroom update had been mostly cosmetic. That probably wasn't the case for the rest of the place. He could open up a wall and find bad wiring or something structurally unsound.

Of course, none of that was as important as his work with Sentry...or securing Dove in his life. Still, that didn't take the weight of the house issues off his shoulders.

He started across the garden to the kitchen door. He could handle this, he just needed a plan of action. First, he'd call a legitimate electrician to check the place out. Then he'd find that old generator that his grandpa kept in the garage for power outages and at least keep the refrigerator and freezer running until power was restored.

“Quaide!”

He stopped and swung toward Dove. She walked faster to reach him.

His heart caught in his throat. The fading light of evening cast pale gray and blue shadows over her face and hair. The hues made her into an ice queen.

*His queen, who reigned over his heart.*

When she stopped in front of him, a quizzical expression in her eyes, she reached up and brushed her fingers over his jaw.

“Everything okay, honey?” She pitched her voice low enough that the others wouldn't overhear. Not that it mattered



—they were all making fun of him and Dove’s behavior, and it wouldn’t stop him from ravishing her right now in the open.

Placing his hand over hers on his jaw, he nodded. “I made the decision to move Sentry base to this house and now I’m questioning if it’s going to work out. We require electricity to run our computer systems. How could I have offered without planning for everything we’d need?”

“I know it’s stressful, but we’ll figure it out. No plan required. If you want me to make some calls, I don’t have much else to do but sit around waiting to be moved to the ranch.”

He searched her eyes. “For what it’s worth, you did a much better job than Jordan.”

Her lips twisted into a smile. “Good thing you said that, buddy.”

He chuckled. Meshing their fingers, he drew their hands to their sides and led her to the door.

As soon as he opened it, a golden glow of electric lights swallowed them. “Oh! The power’s back on! See? It *was* the electric company’s issue. It wasn’t you at all, Quaide. Only a coincidence in timing.”

Feeling instant relief, he dragged her through the space.

“What’s the rush? Where are we going?” At the base of the stairs, she pulled him to a stop.

“I’m taking you to bed.”

She sucked in a breath. “Bed?”

“Damn right, baby. You can either walk up these stairs, or I’ll carry you. But either way, you are going to be underneath me.”

He half expected someone to call out that they could hear them. But silence had its own ring in the air.

When she hesitated, he smoothed his knuckles over her jaw. “My beautiful lover. I’m going to wreck your lipstick and

that pretty hairdo and make sure everyone knows that you're mine."

She gave him those eyes—the get-between-my-thighs expression he'd seen *so* many times during their trysts.

The staircase was twelve steps too long for him—he wanted her naked. Now.

As he pulled her up the last step, her foot snagged the carpet and she pitched forward.

A soft grunt escaped him as she hit his chest, knocking him backward.

He scrambled to stay upright, one hand braced on the wall. "I have got to rip up that carpet before it murders one of us."

"Later!" She crushed her lips to his.

With an urgent growl, he wrapped his arms around her hips and lifted her.

They never made it to the bed. The door barely closed and they were dropping to the floor and tearing at each other's clothes.

He sent the lookalike outfit flying.

He flattened her on her back, and she hooked her ankles behind him, yanking him in hard and fast.

With a rock of his hips, he sank balls-deep, stealing his very last thought.

All he had left was the sensation of moving inside her... wanting to pour everything into her. Taking her to the next level of loving him.

His biceps bulged as he jerked his hips and stretched her deepest point. God, he hoped this wanting between them never ended. Passion blended with need.

A cry tore from her throat. He rolled with her, flipping her on top of him. Surprise yanked a laugh from her.

With a wicked grin, he urged her into motion. She sank down over his cock, taking him to the hilt.

“Christ, baby.” He shoved his fingers into her hair, tugging just enough to heighten her arousal. The other hand cupped her breast and he pinched her nipple into a tight peak.

“Quaide!” She moved to a beat that only they could hear. Her knees hugged his hips. Her pussy *strangled* his cock.

“I love you,” he rumbled. “I want to marry you.”

She didn’t even stumble. “Yes!”

As he captured her lips in a deep kiss, his grin spread over her mouth.

The tight knot of need at the base of his spine began to throb. He drove in deeper and faster. Perspiration broke out on her throat. He drew her on top of him to trail his lips down to her collarbones, nipping and nibbling her into a frenzy. When he sucked one nipple between his lips, his callused fingertip located her clit and pressed down with just the right technique to send her body sailing.

She clamped down on his length. He pumped inside her two more times with an unstoppable force and let go just as her orgasm struck.

Suddenly, she stilled. She lifted her head and looked him in the eyes. “Do you smell smoke?”

## Chapter Fifteen

---

Dove wore nothing but his shirt as she raced down the steps in front of him. He was shirtless and barefoot in jeans, but he had a weapon in one hand and the other tucked along his spine.

*Jesus Christ.*

That smoke better be because Julius left the toaster on a high setting for too long while fixing one of his snacks.

The thick black smog said otherwise.

Dove hacked an explosive cough. He had to get her out faster before she inhaled more smoke. He swept her up in his arms and made a break for the back door, skidding to a dead stop when they faced a wall of flames.

“Jesus!” He whipped around, rushing for the front door.

The entire front wall of the living room was smoldering, rippling with heat.

They burst through the door and he bolted into the yard.

“Dove!” came a sharp cry from their right.

“Rain! Thank god!”

The sisters huddled together with Lark, their eyes wide with shock.

Clay took Dove from him, and he spun toward the big old house.

His ancestral home, a link to his past and one to a future for Sentry...a future with Dove.

His throat burned, probably from the noxious fumes ... but from emotion too.

Faulty wiring had to be the cause of the fire, and it was his fault.

“Quaide!” Dove took a step toward him.

Something whizzed past his head—an all too familiar sound.

He whipped around, his only thought to shove Dove to the ground, but Clay beat him to it.

“Shooter!” Quaide pulled up, looking frantically for the source of that bullet.

“Get down! Take cover!” Clay yelled at the ladies. He had his weapon in hand, scanning the perimeter.

Behind Quaide, the house was well on its way to ash, but if one of those bullets clipped even a hair on anyone’s head, he was going to unleash some *hellfire*.

Fury barely banked in his chest as he realized maybe he was wrong about the electric being faulty. What if someone set that fire to lure them—

Another bullet winged by his shoulder this time. “Find cover!” he bellowed to the three ladies who were now crawling across the grass.

The street outside of town luckily didn’t have many neighbors, and none within immediate range. Old trees with long branches concealed places where a person could hide.

“Fan out!” Clay’s order registered in the haze of his brain, but he was already on the move.

The sudden peal of tires from the end of the street made Clay jerk around at the sound.

“Go! I’ll cover!” Quaide’s voice sent Clay bolting to his truck to give chase. With a glance at the ladies to ensure their safety, Quaide stormed across the property, sweeping the shrubs that flowered in the spring, searching for the perpetrator.

A scream of fire engines wailed in the distance. One of the front windows of the house exploded in the heat, shattered glass spraying across the ground. From the corner of his eye, he saw flames flicking out like an orange tongue.

No more bullets flew—he was pretty sure the shooter made their getaway—but he never let down his guard and continued to search the perimeter.

Quaide glanced at the two cars grouped in front of the house where the ladies were huddled together.

But they weren't there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Terror ripped through Dove's body. The cold metal of the vehicle at her back was a small comfort when she was staring at the man she loved standing in the middle of that yard, silhouetted by the burning house.

Rain's fingers bit into hers in a tight grip. When this was over, she'd bear fingernail marks in the back of her hand, but if that was her only problem, she was getting off easy.

"Where is the shooter? Did he get away?" Rain's rough whisper rocked Dove.

She bit her lips to keep from screaming for Quaide to get down, find cover, the same way that the guys ordered her, Rain and Lark.

On her other side, Lark hunched into a tight ball, making herself the smallest target possible.

Some heavy metallic noises struck the car feet away from them.

"Shots! Let's get out of here!" Lark pushed off the ground and made a run for the next vehicle parked in front of the house.

Dove barely registered the soles of Lark's sneakers kicking up. Gripping Rain's arm, she shoved away from the vehicle too. But Rain's arm slid from her grasp. When Dove

glanced over her shoulder, a hand came down on her mouth, cutting off sound and air.

She felt her chest well with the need to exhale. Then her feet left the ground and she was being carried off.

Away from Quaide.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Quaide!*

Her mind floated down a dark tunnel. Then the black ring at the end expanded until she realized her eyes were open and she was still staring into the dark.

In a rush, her senses all came back at once. Her ears filled with a hum of a fan from somewhere nearby, though she didn't detect any air blowing across her.

Ignoring the deep throb in her skull, she let her head fall to the side. A few shafts of light allowed her to see the bed beside her.

Was she on a bed too? It was hard enough to be a table.

Her gaze slid over the shape on the bed.

When she tried to move her tongue, it was glued to the roof of her mouth. She worked her lips apart enough to cry out, "Rain!"

Her sister rolled her head toward Dove. Oh god, she was bleeding from a cut on her temple. Her blonde hair was glued to it, stained dark.

"Rain, are you all right? Talk to me." Panic incinerated any shred of calm she'd gained over the past days in Sentry's care.

She tried to reach out a hand to Rain, but she couldn't move it more than half an inch. "Oh my god! My hands—"

"We're tied up, Dove."

Dove gaped at her sister. "How can you sound so calm?"

"Because you've been knocked out for a lot longer than I have been. I've had time to figure out all the things you are

right now.”

“So fill me in!”

Rain turned her head to look at the rectangle where some light trickled from. Then she looked at Dove once more. “We’re strapped to some beds.”

“Where?”

“I’m not sure, but it looks like some kind of hospital or something. See that cart in the corner? It’s covered in medical supplies.”

“What!”

“Keep your voice down, Dovey. We don’t want them to come back in!”

“Who is *them*?” Her voice quavered on a note of terror.

She pulled at her bonds and tried to kick her feet. No use. They were strapped down too.

“Do you remember what happened to you? How we got here?” she whispered to Rain.

“Nothing. My brain’s blank. In fact, it’s still really foggy...”

“We were drugged!”

Now that her eyes were adjusting, she made out the fixed manner that her sister was staring at her in. Rain was still drugged. How was she so coherent?

The low voice of a man came in snippets. She directed all her energy to making out what the guy was saying.

“We didn’t know who was who! We had to take both.”

She stared at Rain, who stared back. “They’re talking about us,” she hissed at Rain.

Her sister didn’t respond, only lay there as if whatever drug was pumping through her system came in spurts that left her coherent for only short spells before she sank into a drugged haze again.

“Rain! Look at me, Rain.”



Her sister's head lolled toward her once more.

"Don't go to sleep. We don't know what they gave you. Keep talking to me, please!"

"Okay, Dove." Her sister's words came a little thicker.

She battled against her bonds but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't free her hands enough to reach out to Rain.

For so little struggle, it left her exhausted. Her heart hammered from the constant drip of adrenaline in it.

"Rain! Look at me."

Her sister did as she ordered.

"Dovey... What do you think is happening with Quaide and..."

"I think they're having a meeting is what! I'm sure they're making a plan right now."

"A meeting? A plan? We'll be dead by then."

Anger stabbed her in angry spikes. "I don't know what to tell you—it's the rules."

"Whose rules? Sentry's?"

"No, Quaide's."

"So he won't come and rescue us without making a plan first?" Her eyes slipped shut.

"Rain! Wake up!"

"I'm up. God, you're so bossy, Dovey. You never used to be so bossy... Are you sure that Sentry won't come for us now?"

"I'm sure. Quaide won't make any moves without that plan."

"It won't matter. It's Quaide. Going by the rule book was beaten into him in the Marine Corps and then the FBI."

"Shh!" Rain lifted her head off the bed and turned it toward the open door.

Footsteps echoed across the room. In her drug-fogged brain, Dove found it difficult to make her eyes adjust to the movement.

It was too dark to see the man standing next to her bed. “You’re only alive because you’re not a problem. Be a problem...you’re dead.”

Bile choked her throat, and she couldn’t even manage a nod to show she understood.

The guy didn’t linger—he turned and walked right back out, leaving her and Rain alone again.

Rain started to speak.

“Shh! Stay quiet. If you don’t talk, then you don’t draw attention to yourself. We can’t give these guys any ammo against us!”

“You know, I could coach you too, Dove.”

“And what would you coach me about?” She darted looks between her sister and the door, expecting their kidnapper to return any second.

“Don’t be afraid of love.”

She stared at her sister. “Are you even coherent? What are you saying?”

“You know I metabolize things different. Remember my blood sugar issues? What I ate for dinner burned off already.”

Heavy footsteps returned. Dove stared in horror as the man walked into the room again and went up to Rain’s bed.

“We’re taking you for questions, so you’d better cooperate.”

A scream lodged in Dove’s throat. Take her sister? Take her where?

Rain made no move as the guy moved to the head of her bed and began pushing it toward the big door.

*No!*

Rain twisted her head toward Dove, and that was when she caught it. Rain's wink.

Oh god. She was faking that she was drugged. That *had to* be why Dove thought she was behaving so unpredictably!

Her sister was either nuts or she was a genius. Maybe Dom's death had really affected her—caused her to finally grow up.

And maybe she wasn't so out of touch with reality as they all thought she was.

Hope bubbled in Dove's chest. She couldn't take all the credit for raising her sister... After all, she'd only taken over after the tragedy...but maybe, just maybe, she'd done a good job in the time she had.

## Chapter Sixteen

---

He *had* to find Dove.

His jaw ached from holding back a bellow and tension had him strung like barbed wire, gripping the steering wheel to the point of pain. When he found her...

When he found whoever *took* her...

The matching tension running through Clay wasn't helping matters.

"Whoever took her is going to die. In fact, every damn person on that list of hitmen is going to die." He bit the words off in sharp chunks.

Clay pierced him in his stare. "We're going to find her, and we're going to do it all on this side of the law."

He barked a harsh laugh. "You think, bud? There were plenty of places to hide bodies in the mountains, and I know how to make it look like an accident too."

Silence plummeted into the vehicle, quieting even Lark, who had been speaking to Clay in quick, fragmented sentences.

She sat in the back seat, a tablet in hand, navigating ... Where? He didn't have a goddamn clue. His brain was a fog of smoke and pain, and he was running on autopilot while Lark had the metaphorical wheel.

"Take the exit, Quaide," she said, pointing to the side of the road.

*Get to Dove. Find her.*

He didn't even slow when he veered off, hitting the ramp at a high enough speed to rock his passengers in their seats. Clay gripped the armrest but said nothing. If anyone knew how he might be feeling right now, it was Clay.

“Right or left, Lark? Which way we going?”

“Left!”

He gave the intersection a cursory glance before skidding through it at seventy.

“You're going to kill somebody,” Clay roughed out.

Quaide's jaw popped from clenching it so hard. “Yeah, I am—whoever took my woman and her sister. When I find them...” He broke off, struggling for long moments while images of inflicting all the torture techniques he'd learned in the military and read about in FBI reports from sick bastards they captured careened through his head.

A small scream escaped Lark. “Oh my god, it's up! I got them!”

Her revelation almost had him stomping the brakes. “What? How? Where?” His head swirled.

For a moment, his vision blacked, and he was driving blind. Then he realized he needed to connect, to ground himself. No matter how fucking afraid he was that he could lose the woman he loved, he couldn't help her if he drove off the mountain.

“The toiletries,” Lark said, confusing him more. “Didn't Clay tell you? He slipped a tracker in Rain's lipstick that I picked up.”

Her words couldn't hit him harder if he smashed into a brick wall going eighty.

Another rough bark of laughter burst past his lips. Yeah, it sounded as crazy as he felt.

“Rain must have the lipstick in her pocket. Take the next turn, Quaide. I've got a faster route,” Lark spouted.

“Where is she?” Did he want to know? He couldn’t even breathe. What if Dove and Rain had been split up? They didn’t have a trace on Dove.

His guts rolled. Fisting the wheel with both hands, he gnashed his teeth again.

“Just take the turns when I tell you to, Quaide,” Lark said in a depth of tone he’d never heard from the easygoing, bubbly woman before. “Don’t think about anything but getting us to the destination.”

“Yeah, in one piece,” Clay ground out.

His head cleared enough to get a question out. “What kind of tracker did you plant?”

“It’s tech that the WEST team uses. Ari Bloomberg— Well, now she’s Ari Bloomberg-Abel—developed the device. She started with the SeeQ. You may have heard of it.”

He gave a single nod. He had. A miniscule camera made to look like a sequin on a woman’s dress or one she’d accessorize with.

“I’ve heard of it. I just didn’t realize that the brains behind it was married to one of the Abels.” Sentry clearly had more connections than he’d ever imagined when he asked Clay to head it.

Thank god Clay thought ahead and planted that tracker. If he hadn’t, they’d take a wide detour to find the Priester sisters, and that would take far too long.

His mind swirled around the issue at hand while another realization hit on top of it all. Quaide didn’t need to do everything in order for the right things to get done. The members of Sentry were just as capable as he was.

Lark’s instructions broke through again. “A right, then an immediate left.”

His throat closed. “Won’t that take us back to East Canon?”

“Yeah. On the outskirts on the far side.”

He racked his brain for the lay of the land. The city wasn't large by any means, though it was sprawling. He didn't have the entirety mapped out in his head yet, but he had a few key landmarks pinned in his mind.

"The only thing I know on that side of town is the—"

"Rehab center," Clay supplied.

They traded a look.

Quaide locked the pedal to the floor.

When they came up on the stretch of flat land leading to the center, he hit speeds that would kill them instantly if they got into an accident. He only had one thought in his head—get Dove.

Night had fallen. The headlights cut through the blackness. Up ahead, he made out the long single-story building that housed a rehab facility.

"Point me to a door, Lark." His face felt numb, his lips rigid.

She leaned forward between the front seats. "Uhhh. I don't know! Just get to the parking lot and I'll guide you through the comms."

He touched the earpiece she'd thrust into his hand even before his ass hit the driver's seat. The parking lot was fairly empty at this time of night. Visitors who came to see loved ones were gone, leaving only vehicles that belonged to the staff.

Immediately, he rejected an entrance on the far end of the building. "Unless the women were dropped off, it wouldn't be at that entrance. They've got to be in the center of the building."

Quaide hit the brakes. The SUV's tires squealed and he yanked the door handle before he even put the vehicle in park.

He took off at a dead run for the door.

Clay's orders filled Quaide's ear, but he was already at the entrance, weapon cocked. "Lark, stay here! Climb into the

driver's seat and get ready to drive. Lock the doors and don't open them for anybody."

He wasn't fucking around with the call button on the side of the building—he fired a bullet at the lock. An alarm trilled. Men in orderly uniforms came running in his direction.

Quaide assumed a defensive pose, prepared to deliver a kill shot to anybody who got between him and the woman he loved.

"FBI! I'm looking for two blonde women! Any idea where they are?" he barked.

The orderlies eyed him like he was a lunatic and required far more than this rehab facility could provide.

Violence built inside him.

Suddenly, Lark's voice flooded into his ear. "Go right! On the right!"

He took off running, the orderlies giving chase too. He didn't know if they believed he really worked for the government or if they were chasing *him*.

Right this minute, he didn't give a damn. His heart raced. Hot breath seared his lungs.

"You're close! I see you on my screen, Quaide, and Rain's tracker is a millimeter away from you!" Lark cried.

How far was a millimeter in real distance? He skidded to a stop. Tossing a wild look at his surroundings, he tried to determine which door she might be behind. Using his shoulder, he threw himself at one. It flew inward to reveal an empty room, but he didn't turn before hot, sharp pain sliced across his shoulder.

He'd been knifed in combat, and that wasn't a sensation a man ever forgot. He whirled and squeezed the trigger in the same move. When his bullet struck a man square in the chest, Quaide didn't stop to watch him fall.

The knife the man held clattered to the tile floor. The knife he'd cut Quaide with.



The scent of his own blood hit his nostrils, and within seconds, he knew his shirt was soaked. Dammit, Dove wouldn't be happy *at all* with this turn of events.

With a low groan, he ran on without slowing at the pain.

“Quaide! What just happened? Did you fire a shot?” Clay demanded.

“Fucker slashed me with his knife. I'm fine—but when you find the scum lying dead in the hallway, you'll know you're close to me.”

“Let me catch up, Livingston!”

Not a damn chance was he slowing. If anything, he was going to pick up speed. Dove had to be around here somewhere.

“Stop!” Lark directed through the comms. “She's right in front of you.”

Weapon up, he blasted through another locked door. When it swung open, his gaze locked on a man standing over Dove.

His future wife.

In one flick of the trigger, he dropped the man in his tracks. Dove screamed.

Quaide rushed to the bed that she was strapped to.

“Oh my god! Quaide!” Her unhinged tone blinded him to anything but getting revenge for her. “Where's Rain?”

“I don't know!” He whipped out his knife and cut her bonds with a few quick slices, aware of the hot, sticky blood rolling down his spine.

“What do you mean you don't know? How did you find me?”

“She has a tracker on her.”

“But you're *here*, and Rain's not. They took her, so where's the tracker?” As soon as he cut her free, she leaped off

the hospital bed and stumbled two steps to the other bed. He covered her back while she rifled through bedding.

A sharp gasp broke from her. She held up a small black tube. “All that’s here is lipstick!”

“That’s it. Her tracker. There’s no time—come on!” There was no time to figure out why Rain would leave that lipstick hidden in the bedding either. All that mattered was the woman had led him straight to Dove.

He grabbed her by the arm but she resisted.

“Dove, you can’t stay here. Let me get you safe and we’ll find your sister!”

When he tugged on her arm again, she still wouldn’t come. With a growl, he hoisted her over his shoulder, ignoring her yell.

What was this place? They’d confined her in what appeared to be a detox room where they took patients to keep them from harming themselves. The hitmen he profiled wouldn’t take things to this extreme—they’d just kill her in the car and toss her in a ditch.

So who the hell was after her and Rain?

Dangling over his shoulder, Dove continued to scream.

He whirled to the exit. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“No, but you are! Quaide, you’re covered in blood.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dove’s hands were streaked with her lover’s blood. The tang of iron and rust filled her nose, making her head swirl. She wasn’t one of those people who fainted, but for a moment, her brain wouldn’t quit spinning and that meant her stomach spun too.

Her instinct was to struggle out of his grip and find Rain herself, but wiggling might cause him more pain.

His arm was a steel band around her thighs, pinning her firmly against his body. He never slowed. Lights and walls

flashed past her vision, and she had no sense of time and space.

Suddenly, they were barreling through a door and cool Colorado air struck her face.

Panic seized up her chest. “We need Rain! Where are we going?”

“Lark, unlock the doors!”

Her body jostled as he pounded the pavement. She was tossed into a vehicle. The door slammed and the locks clicked.

Hair straggled in front of her eyes, and she pushed off the leather seat where he’d left her.

“You okay, hon?”

She straightened to see Lark twisted in the driver’s seat. Even in the dim light coming from the outside lights of the building they’d just exited at warp speed, she saw the concern etched on Lark’s face.

Terror stole through her, and she gripped the seat in front of her. “I need out of here! I have to find Rain!”

“The guys will find your sister, Dove. You can’t go back in there.”

The air whistled in and out of her lungs far too fast. Her face tingled.

“You’re hyperventilating. Shit! Dove, look at me!”

She shifted her gaze at the command, locking them on Lark’s big, beautiful eyes.

Her friend reached around the seat and grasped her by the hand. “Just breathe with me. In...two, three, four...out...two, three, four. Good; again.” They did that over and over again until her body cooperated and she breathed normally.

Exhausted by the episode, she slumped forward, tears bottled in her throat. “My sister... And Quaide. He’s hurt. Bleeding!”

“I heard, but he’s strong and he knows his limits.”

Dove lifted her head. “Do you really believe that?”

Lark folded her lips into a tight line but refused to answer.

“What happened? Can you tell me?” she asked her own question.

Dove closed her eyes, trying to make sense of the order of events. “The house was on fire.”

Lark nodded.

“You ran from our hiding spot to another.”

“But you and Rain didn’t follow,” she supplied.

“That’s right. Someone grabbed me. I can’t remember anything until I woke up in that room.” She shuddered from the top of her head clear to her pinky toes. “Rain said I was out a long time. Then they came in and took her!”

“She’s in there. They’re going to find her, Dove.”

“Do you really believe that!” she half-shrieked, hating the terror in her voice and the fact that she was screaming at her friend.

“Honey, we’re going to get you and Rain out of this mess. You’re going to—”

“What? Live in fear and hide?”

“Quaide won’t let that happen. *Sentry* won’t let that happen.”

Her hands shook. So did her insides. She was going to hyperventilate again.

Seeing this, Lark grasped her by the hand again. She clung to the lifeline.

“I can’t do this alone anymore. It’s too much, Lark. I’ve been responsible too long, and I’m so tired of juggling all these balls.”

She squeezed her hand hard. “Then pass them to me, Dove. I’ll help you. You did all you need to do—just admitting that you can’t be in control of every situation and every little thing in life is the most important step.”

Gulping, she nodded.

“The guys will do everything they can to make sure you and Rain are safe and live normal lives.”

“Is Rain ever going to live a normal life? She—” Dove stopped mid-rant.

Rain had winked at her right before that man took her away.

And she had left that lipstick tube in the bed. Thinking more clearly now, she had to wonder ... was it possible her sister knew what the tube contained and that she was being tracked?

Rain’s wink suggested to Dove that she’d left the tube behind on purpose — so Quaide would find Dove.

A pained breath seared up her throat. She dropped her forehead against the cool leather seat in front of her and let everything roll through her mind. Did *Rain* save *her*? It seemed she had.

That was not the act of a selfish, immature woman. All these weeks, Dove didn’t think for a minute that her sister had grown up or changed. She never took her situation with Dom seriously.

Now, she saw the truth of the situation. Sometime when she wasn’t paying attention, Rain *had* grown up, and while she might not be perfect in the future to come, she really had moved forward from the life she’d been stuck in for so many years following their family tragedy.

“Rain’s all I have,” she whimpered.

Lark squeezed her fingers again. “That’s not true, but I know how important she is to you.”

“I can’t sit here waiting for the two people I love to come out of there safe!”

“Quaide is coming out with Rain very, very soon. *I promise you.*”

The force behind her words made Dove sit up straighter. All of a sudden, she realized why Quaide yelled at Lark to open the door.

“You have an earpiece!”

Lark nodded, but her expression wavered with worry.

This time Dove gripped her friend’s forearm hard. “What aren’t you telling me? They’re in trouble, aren’t they?” Her voice elevated with each word.

“They’re gonna be all right, Dove. Trust the team.”

“How do you know? Sentry is two months old! They’re babies!”

She shook her head. “Not babies. Those men have four decades of experience between them—they will get your sister and get out safe.”

She slung her forearm across her eyes and took deep breaths that she tried to keep even. Her clothing still smelled like smoke from the fire.

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. “The house...”

“Don’t worry about the house, Dovey.”

She jerked at the pet name her sister used. Hearing it spread a soothing balm over her bruised and battered soul.

Rain wasn’t the only person she had in this world. She had Lark, Quaide, Clay and the Abels. Without a doubt, she knew that if she ever needed someone to come to her rescue, aid, or she just needed a shoulder to cry on, she had them.

In her mind’s eye, she saw the guys tipping their cowboy hats. The act was a brotherhood that filled her with awe and a passion that bordered on pride to be affiliated with the team at all, let alone sit in their presence and be a part of it all.

She dropped her arm and stared at Lark. The woman sat behind the wheel, twisted so that she could see her profile. It was silhouetted by the greenish glow of the building’s lights. But that eerie cast wasn’t what caused Dove’s stomach to plunge.

She was listening to whatever was happening between the men inside.

As she looked on, Lark dived across the seats, popped the glove compartment and whipped out a handgun.

Dove's scream was cut off by shock when her friend leaped out of the vehicle and ran around the front. She yanked open the passenger door and the other back door. When her gaze hit Dove's across the seat, a cold shiver rippled down her spine.

"Don't move, Dove. They're coming out and—" She broke off, struggling. "Well, just don't move."

Heart hammering in her throat, she nodded. All she could do now was wait for what was to come.

Seconds later, Lark jumped behind the wheel again, poised to drive the getaway. At that very second, the door burst open and three figures emerged.

Dove cried out, surging to the edge of the seat and peering through the windshield at the people making slower progress than they should.

"Why aren't they hurrying?" Then she realized why.

Rain was on one side with Clay on the other. In the middle was a third person, a tall, strong man crumpled over, his weight being supported by his comrades.

She made a grab for the door handle, but Lark's hard voice rang out. "Don't move, Dove. Your man is injured and he's going to need you to be your best for him."

## Chapter Seventeen

---

Quaide's shoulders and spine felt as though they were on fire. And his chest felt tight and hot with rage aimed at himself.

He couldn't believe he'd been weakened by a quick slash of a knife blade. Of all things that he'd faced in the Marines and FBI, he didn't expect such a small thing to drain him of his strength.

He lay face down on a hard bed, aware of his surroundings even if he didn't feel completely connected to his body. The sterile smell of hospital stung his nostrils, but he'd been warned several times already not to get up while the doctor was stitching his wound.

"Dove. Where is Dove?" he asked.

Clay's voice came from nearby. "I already told you three times before this that Dove is safe. She's just outside the door."

"Is she safe? Does she have a guard?" He'd lost too much blood. It made the room spin.

"Julius is with her. He rushed back to help. No one is going to harm her."

"Or take her." He ground out his oath. He'd personally killed the three men responsible for taking Dove and Rain. And off *his* property, no less.

He inwardly groaned. That was all he had now—a piece of land. When he last saw the house, it was a desiccated shell of some burned out walls and ash within. He hadn't only lost a place to live and a lot of memories—Sentry lost all their equipment.



It wouldn't be an easy feat to get the funding for more, either. It could be weeks or even months, and that would be time wasted. Time where criminals doubled their ranks, swelled in power and more people got hurt.

Noises projected from beyond the privacy curtain. A female voice grew in strength and blazed with anger. "You can't keep me away from him anymore, Julius! I'm going in!"

The slight tugging of thread in his back paused as the doctor took a break. Quaide lifted his head to look at Clay. "Let her in. Please. She's upset, and we can't be separated anymore." The gritty tone of his own voice sounded rough-edged in his own ears.

Tugging on his hat brim in answer, Clay got up. Quaide couldn't see what was happening, but seconds later, a soft gasp reached his ears. A sound he knew all too well as coming from the woman he loved.

Dove's hips came into view, and then she clutched his hand. "Oh my god! Are you okay?" She bent over him, her lips landing on his cheek in the sweetest, most beautiful moment of his damn life.

He grasped her fingers. "I'm fine. Just getting a Band-Aid on my booboo."

A watery laugh exploded from her, and that sound carved out a deeper hole in his heart where she fit in like a key to a lock.

Her lips brushed up his cheek toward his ear. "That's an awful big booboo you've got there."

"I'm big everywhere."

She expelled a surprised giggle.

The doctor cleared his throat, breaking into their insinuating banter. "The blood you lost will naturally be replaced over the span of a few days. Be sure to drink lots of water and get good nutrients through food in the meantime. Someone will be in to dress your wound."

He started to speak, but Dove straightened and swung toward the doctor. “Thank you.”

The sincerity written on her beautiful face had Quaide’s heart flexing with an outpouring of love. Though the wound wasn’t life-threatening, the fact that Dove was here for him gave him a new tightness in his chest. They’d moved forward in this relationship—together.

Everything else should be easy.

Loving her was easy.

As soon as the doctor walked out, Quaide arched a brow at his lover. “I guess we’re going to be having a lot of sex with me on top.”

Her eyes widened and she slanted a look toward the foot of the bed. “I think the doctor heard that!” she whispered.

He chuckled. “Of course he did—everyone else did too.”

She curled around him again, her lips moving lightly over his temple. When he reached out an arm to wrap around her, he felt the stitches pull in the long gash that spanned both shoulders, but that wasn’t going to stop him from offering his woman comfort.

“Baby...you’re shaking.”

“You scared the hell out of me when they dragged you out of that building,” she rasped with a note of hot pain.

“I walked out under my own steam. They were just guiding me a little.”

“What even happened in there?”

He went still. Was it even prudent to tell her such things? When they worked together before, she wasn’t in a position for him to disclose information on the cases he worked on. When he left on an op, he returned to their hotel bed and her arms, but they didn’t discuss a thing.

Now since nothing hindered them, it made sense to share...yet her sister was involved. Dove had been through too

much trauma in her life already—the last thing he'd do would be to add to it.

He pressed the tips of his fingers into her lower spine where he held her. “We’ll need to debrief as soon as I’m back at Sentry—” He stopped dead and shook himself mentally. “There is no headquarters left.”

“Oh, Quaide, I’m so sorry. Your house...”

“It’s a blow, but it’s just a house. We’ll get a new place. New equipment. And I’ll rebuild bigger and better—for us, Dove.”

She drew back to search his eyes, her own warm and soft with emotion. His heart throbbed only for this woman.

“Thank god, baby. Thank god I got you back, and now that you’re safe and sound in my arms, I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

“I love you, Quaide. So, so much. I’m going to find that person to bandage your wound so we can get out of here and I can start taking care of you.”

“We’re going to take care of each other, baby. For the rest of our days.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Quaide sat at the folding table that served as a conference table in the former Sentry office. He never thought he'd be sitting in this space again, let alone wanting to laugh.

Or cry the way that Dove, Rain and Lark were.

There was also the option of getting up and running out of the room, which the rest of the team wanted to do, if he had to guess. Julius, Jennings and Clay all looked as if they wanted to bolt for the nearest exit and find themselves a beer.

They kept eyeing the women as if their tears were a plague hanging in the air, and a few days ago, Quaide would be doing the same. After all that they'd been through together, he was a changed man.

A new perspective on life had him leaning back in his seat, as relaxed as he could be when his lover was so upset.

Lark stopped typing notes into the computer in order to pluck another tissue from the box set in the middle of the table. She swiped at her eyes and dabbed her nose.

“Go on,” Quaide said with as much gentleness in his tone as he could. If he could retell the story of events that Dove and Rain had suffered through in the rehab center, he would do so and gladly. He’d take away her pain and bear it for eternity if that helped her walk through the fires unscathed.

Her watery blue-gray eyes met his, and he gave her a small nod of encouragement.

Drawing a shaky breath, she continued with her tale. “After they took Rain away, I was freaking out.” Her voice trembled, and she reached for the mug of coffee Quaide had made her, wrapping her fingers around it.

Rain touched Dove’s arm, as if the small brush of her hand over her sister’s elbow would grant her the strength she needed to go on.

Thrusting back her shoulders, Dove continued, “I could hear Rain crying out.” Her voice broke. “Not cooperating.”

The wobble in her voice had them all bowing their heads. He and Clay had seen similar when they served overseas. They’d heard similar screams. He could still hear them at night when he closed his eyes.

Sleeping with Dove in his arms had silenced those voices and blurred the faces until he was able to move on with his life.

“Dove,” he said gently, “you don’t have to go on. We’ve got enough information on—”

“You know that’s not true, Livingston,” Julius drawled. Palms on the table on either side of his Stetson, he looked to Dove. “I’m sorry, but we need to hear it all.”

She swallowed hard, received a nod of encouragement from Rain, and repeated her earlier statement. “I heard my

sister crying out. She wasn't cooperating."

Rain rubbed Dove's arm in a soothing gesture. "I wasn't."

"What did the guy want from you?" Quaide asked.

Rain stared at the cheap, laminated faux wood of the tabletop. "They questioned me about Dom. They wanted to know if I ever heard any names mentioned. If he ever told me about his 'friends,' which I assume were his contacts for dealing." She pushed out a low sigh. "I didn't speak to any of his friends...but I saw them. I can pick them out of a lineup if need be."

Clay gave a hard nod. "Lark? Let's make that happen."

"Making a note to call the chief of police after the meeting." Her fingers flew over the keys.

Rain continued. "They also had questions about the money I carried."

"What sort of questions?" Quaide kept shooting glances at Dove, checking her mood and gauging whether or not she was okay. If he needed to stop this meeting and take her to bed to give her the rest she needed, he would.

"They wanted to know amounts. What banks Dom used."

"Did you tell them?"

She bit down on her full bottom lip and sliced a look at Dove. Quaide leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. He got the feeling that Rain wasn't saying everything in order to protect Dove from the truth. Talk about a reversal of roles.

"I told them that the government closed the accounts and seized the funds." She raised a hand and gingerly rubbed at the side of her head.

Quaide and Julius both saw the movement and traded a look. If he checked Rain over, he'd bet anything that she was hiding a goose egg from a blow to the head under her thick blonde hair. As soon as they finished here, he'd pull Lark aside and get her to examine Rain just to make sure she didn't have a more serious injury than a bruise.

Rain drew a deep breath. “Then I heard the pops and explosions—”

“Flashbangs,” Quaide corrected. Dove shot him a quizzical glance. “I tossed some stun grenades outside the room they had Rain in—then under the cover of smoke, Lexis and I were able to rescue her.”

Dove gave a small shake of her head, her lips formed into a tiny *O*. He was trying to keep everything said here as neutral and as easy for her to hear as possible. But she’d been covered in his blood, for god’s sake. She couldn’t escape that event unscathed.

The minute he got her alone, he planned to make her shut out the entire world and just focus on him and the pleasure he was going to give her.

“Is there anything else you want to add, Rain?” Clay’s question brought Quaide’s attention from Dove’s stunning face to her sister.

She shook her head. “If I think of anything else, I’ll tell you.

Clay spread his hands on the table. “Jennings? Any progress on our friend off that list?”

He scuffed a fingertip over his stubbled jaw. “Julius and I paid a visit to the church. Had a thorough look during and after the meeting. But we didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. It wasn’t until we got out of town that one of our informants gave us a tip on that guy Sykes.”

Clay and Quaide both straightened in their seats.

Quaide eyed Jennings. “Sykes? You saw the man? He’s practically a ghost.”

“Not if you know where to look, and I do. Anyway, he isn’t a problem anymore.”

Silence throbbed in the room. “What does that mean exactly?” Clay asked.

Julius’s mouth set in a firm line.

Quaide issued a rough laugh. “Abel, tell me you didn’t shoot him so you can see another autopsy.”

He twitched his head toward the door. “I’m making the popcorn now. Don’t you hear the microwave running?”

The exchange made them all chuckle, breaking some of the tension from Rain and Dove’s recounting.

Julius’s lips quirked in a sideways smile. “I just wanna see that medical examiner again.”

“Pffshh. She’s a child,” Jennings scoffed.

“She’s a doctor. Definitely within the rules of engagement, brother.” Julius grinned.

Rain rubbed a hand through her hair. “I think I’d like to lie down for a while.”

Julius slid back his chair and gained his feet. “I’ll take her to the hotel and stand guard outside her room.”

At the mention of a hotel, Dove’s gaze clashed with Quaide’s. He felt the stirrings of desire low in his gut. If he could even get her to the room before stripping her and wrapping her legs around his waist, he’d be doing something right.

She swept her tongue over her plump lips. “I could use some sleep too.”

“Let’s go.” He shoved away from the table and popped out of his seat.

Dove did the same.

He stared at her for an eternal heartbeat.

“Quaide? You don’t have to look at me like that,” she whispered.

The room faded, and a spotlight zeroed in on the love of his life. “Like what?”

“Like you’re going to lose me. I’m not going anywhere.”

“When I saw you strapped to that bed, Dove... Christ.” He ripped off his hat and jammed his fingers through his hair.

Then he slowly set the hat back in place. “I know this is inappropriate, but...”

Using her expressive eyes she urged him to continue.

“When I saw your wrists tied up... Well, *that* never occurred to me.”

“Oh my god! We’re here! All here!” Rain exclaimed.

The laughter that filled the nearly empty space brought Quaide back to the present.

He threw a look at Clay. “You know where to find me.” He circled the table and held out a hand to Dove. “Let’s go, beautiful.”

He couldn’t wait to get her alone.



## Chapter Eighteen

---

Julius walked next to Rain, his body moving in tune with hers. Dove could see that he really was good at guarding people, and they'd taken all of ten steps to get out the door of the old Sentry office.

Julius stopped with a hand on the knob. "We're headed to the same hotel outside town as you. Want to ride together?" he asked Quaide.

Chafing his thumb lightly across the base of Dove's, Quaide looked to his teammate. "Nope."

Julius eyed him, a grin in place. "That's not just as a precaution, right? In case we need two vehicles?"

"Hell no, it's not a precaution. I want to be alone with my woman."

Dove's heart flipped over at what he'd just called her, and she threaded her fingers through his, clutching his hand tighter.

Rain stopped, reaching out for Dove. They embraced. "I'll be fine, Dovey. Especially if Julius isn't stingy and books me a nice big suite."

Dove fished in her front pocket and pulled out the lipstick. "I found this on that bed. Maybe you should take it with you."

Rain's face lit up with amusement. "Are you kidding me? I know what that is."

She felt Quaide twitch the whole way through their linked hands. "What are you talking about, Rain?" she asked.

"I know things. I know lipstick...and I know *things*. I knew that wasn't a real lipstick. I just played along because I

know you all had my best interest at heart. I do that a lot, Dove.”

She sucked in a breath and expelled it slow enough to give her a minute to think on what her sister just told her. A revelation and a reality. Did Rain just *act* helpless and clueless? It was possible...but Rain had also grown up a lot in the past few days.

Dove was so glad for it too.

They parted ways, with the pairs splitting into two vehicles. Quaide was extra-protective of her when they entered the hotel. She couldn't help but note how his hand rode along his spine, hovering near the weapon she couldn't see but knew was there.

Desire pooled low in her belly. God, she wanted him with every cell of her being. They bypassed check-in and headed straight for the elevator.

“How did you just get away with that?”

“Connections. Lark's good at her job.” He shot her a grin that stirred her want even more.

By the time they reached a door and he tapped in a keycode to enter, Dove was so knotted up that her pussy throbbed.

Once he had her inside, he moved to flip on the light. Her breath caught. He slayed her heart. How had she ever gone weeks without him? She never wanted to be parted from him again.

Inch by slow inch he leaned over her.

And she surged onto her toes to meet him.

When their mouths connected, she pulled in a deep breath of his scent, which swirled in her head for dizzying seconds. She curled her fingers into his shirt, eyes pinched shut, trembling.

Was the last of her fear from today leaving her body? Or was it excitement?

A hoarse breath left him, and he scooped her against his body. Letting her feel every inch of his hardness while he gently probed her lips with his tongue. The instant she opened to him, he plunged inside.

She gripped his shirt front harder and hooked a hand around his nape. He swayed her against his erection, and a shudder racked her.

Tentatively, she made a swipe of the inside his mouth, gathering his masculine flavor.

“Maybe we should slow things down,” he rumbled between hot passes of his tongue.

He tried to break the kiss, but she held him tighter.

He cupped her jaw, threaded his fingers into her hair. “Baby, you’ve had a difficult day. I don’t want to add any pressure to it. I’ll take you to bed and hold you while you sleep.”

She moaned. With a sensual grind against him, she met his gaze. Their lips were a breath away. “Please, Quaide. I need you to make me forget what happened. To put me back together.”

His chest heaved. “You don’t know what you’re saying, Dove. You need cared for, not wild, hot, possibly angry sex.”

“Angry?” She tilted a brow.

He skimmed a fingertip between her breasts, raising goose bumps in his wake. “Anger directed at myself. I should have protected you better. I failed you.”

“I’m not asking you to make love to me—I’m demanding it.” She stood on tiptoe and bit his lip. A snarl left him, and without a hint of control, he gripped her ass. Kneading it, he hitched her flush against him.

She was so hot and ready. She ached for him to drill into her. Hard. Fast. Just claim her like an animal and make her forget the blood he shed for her and all the things that tore them apart before.

With her clutched tight against his body, he turned for the bed. Tongues tangled, groans were shared. She wrapped her arms and legs around him as they fell to the pristine bed.

Passion flowed. She angled her head to deepen the kiss, and he took the invitation, sucking her tongue until small squeaks erupted from her. Then he dragged his teeth across her lower lip.

“More,” she demanded.

He swooped in for another nip. The points of her nails dug into his back and she came at him with a bite on his earlobe.

“Little vixen,” he growled.

Hovering, he did a slow pushup, drawing his length over her pussy. She gasped and tore at his shirt. As soon as she had all that steely hard flesh of his muscled chest exposed, her stomach blossomed with more want.

“God, you’re beautiful,” she murmured. Her gaze licked over his chest and arms.

“You’re the one who’s beautiful.” He struggled with the buttons on her top but her bra was no match for his skilled fingers. Finally, he was able to kiss her throat and bathe her nipples with slow, mind-bending swirls of his tongue.

Licking a path to her other breast, Quaide held her gaze. Seeing his eyes darken as he sucked her straining bud into his mouth had her crying out.

“Your hands are shaking,” she said, then arched as he drew harder on her nipple.

“Because I fucking want you.” He placed a chain of kisses down her cleavage to her ribs. She writhed, and he raised his head with a grin. “I always loved that you’re ticklish.”

“It’s so good when you kiss me there,” she panted.

Lowering his mouth again, he sucked a spot on her side. Her hips lifted off the bed, and he slipped his hand between them to cup her pussy. When she cried out and pushed into his hand, she felt how hard he was against her. God, had he ever been this hard?

Lapping down to her navel, he caught her hands and pinned them to the bed. For long moments it was as though he relearned every contour of her torso from collarbones to her waist. Her grip on her tightened, and she rocked her hips.

“What do you want, baby? This?” He released her hand and cradled her pussy again.

“God, yes.”

“Are you wet for me?”

“Yes.” Her voice was so breathy. The world vanished.

Nuzzling her waist, he one-handedly unbuttoned her jeans. Slid down the zipper.

Pushing back, he removed her boots and socks. Then tugged off her jeans and panties. “I want to take this slow. You deserve slow.”

“I deserve you.” The force in her tone made his eyes burn.

Using one fingertip, he stroked down the seam of her pussy. She panted and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Look at me while I touch your pussy. Show me what you need.”

Her eyes flew open and she met his stare. A dark shiver ran through her, making her pussy clench. As he painted her wetness up and down her seam, he watched her, and she stared back, trying to show all her love.

When he reached her clit, she sank her teeth into her lip.

“Don’t hold back that cry, baby. I want to hear it.”

She released her lip and moaned. He swirled his fingertip around her clit, barely brushing the center where it would be most sensitive. She writhed. Then he moved on, gliding through slick folds, zigzagging back and forth on a road to ecstasy. She tilted her hips, let her legs fall apart.

Not far enough apart for Quaide. He clutched her by the inner thighs and opened her wide.

She lay spread-eagle, open to his hungry gaze. He sat back on his heels to examine her, but everything about the touch of his eyes turned her to molten lava. Only one man had *ever* looked at her this way—Quaide.

He ran his fingers down her pussy lips to her soaking entrance. But he didn't sink his fingers into her like she needed.

More juices wet her.

“Fuck yeah, baby. You're so wet for me. So fucking beautiful. Spread your legs wider for me. I want to just look at you.”

Trembling with excitement, she widened her thighs.

“More.” His gaze was almost black. She throbbed for his touch, but he continued to stare at her. The lines cut between his brows made him look stern. His unsmiling mouth set in the granite of his square jaw gave her a new kind of ache—to see him happy.

Without him instructing her the way he normally did on secret rendezvous, she eased a finger into her pussy.

He clapped his fingers around her wrist. Sucking in a gasp of surprise, she looked into his eyes. “That's my job.”

“Yessss.”

He lowered himself between her thighs. Hot breath rushed over her needy skin, but he didn't kiss or lick her. His eyes were darker than Hades. As black as coal, but gleaming with an inner fire that ignited her too.

“Be my wife.” His command was grittier, pitched lower as he ran his nose along her inner thigh, dangerously close to her pussy.

Oh god. Was he really asking her again? Without a ring? Seriously, Quaide Livingston was doing something that *wasn't* by the rules?

Could she ever deny how much she wanted this?

“I will!” she whispered.

Very gently he covered her whole pussy with his mouth. Top to bottom. Her clit beneath his upper lip and his tongue probing her entrance.

With each slow, maddening lap of his tongue, she rocketed higher. He'd barely started and in seconds, she was on the verge of falling off a steep cliff of bliss.

A primal noise tore from him, and he sucked her clit hard. She bucked against his face, digging her hands into his hair. The top was longer with trim sides and back, but she had more than enough to hang on to.

He mouthed her more softly, torturing her. Using gentle flicks of his tongue on her clit, he sent her spinning out of control. She rocked into his mouth. A vein of fire started deep in her core. She quivered, her nipples bunching and her pussy beginning to pulsate as her orgasm rushed up.

“Quaide—”

He growled in answer and sucked her hard. She burst like a Roman candle on the Fourth of July. Waves of pleasure struck, and she fucked his tongue for long, mind-blowing seconds. Her whole body hummed as the moment stretched.

What felt like an eternity later, she started to come down. He mouthed her more gently, and she eased her hold on his hair. She opened her eyes and their gazes locked.

Electricity zipped between them, and she didn't have time to make sense of her roiling emotions before he plunged two fingers deep into her aching pussy. Her sensitive walls clutched at him, but too soon he dragged his fingers free. Cream coated his long digits, and she watched as he stuck them in his mouth.

Sucking noisily, creases formed around his blazing eyes. “Sweet. So fucking sweet.” He dived between her legs again and thrust his tongue into her pussy, in and out until she hovered in a haze again. So close, right on the edge—

He got to his knees. He was so big, hovering over her. But she knew he'd never hurt her. In his bed she felt totally cherished and protected.

“I want to touch you.” She sat up, wrapped her arms around him, and pulled him down with her. He let her roll atop him, his eyes hooded and his lips still wet with her release.

She skimmed her fingers over his muscled biceps and around to his pecs. The ridges of his abs were speed bumps worthy of exploring for a whole week. But she didn't have time. She was still burning for him.

When Quaide committed to a person, he did it with his whole heart and soul. And so did she.

Her throat tightened as she opened his belt and moved to his fly. His cock bulged, making it difficult to slide down the zipper with ease.

As each tooth vibrated through her soul, she wet her lips.

His ragged groan made her glance up. God, he was so ruggedly handsome. She wanted to touch, kiss, and lick him all over. When she reached into his boxer briefs and pulled out his thick length, it was impossible to hold his gaze a minute longer. She had to see him—all of him.

A moan of desire left her, and she dropped a kiss to the plump tip. He answered with a rumble and drew her hair aside to watch her. She teased a circle around the head and down the veined underside of his shaft.

“Fuck, Dove.”

Spurred on by his hot groans, she licked down to his balls.

He gripped her by the upper arms and dragged her up his body. “It's going to be over before it starts if you keep that up. Now give me your hot fucking mouth.” He didn't wait for her response—he leaned in and claimed it.

A wild kiss, almost bruising in its hunger, lit her up. She kissed him back with everything inside her. When he flipped her beneath him again, she barely registered he'd moved her. Still kissing her, he twisted to pull off his boots. Then he kicked off his jeans and boxers.

A throaty moan left her as he returned to sucking her nipples, drawing her up the steep incline in five seconds flat.



In one smooth glide, he filled her. She cried out, writhing closer. He pinned her with his kiss and didn't waste time. He started to move, jerking into her hard, splitting her with a rhythm that stole her last defenses against Quaide, if she'd ever had any.

He stared into her eyes while he fucked her. He leaned in for long, bone-melting kisses. Then he bit her lip and sent her spinning before starting all over again. The intimacy between them shot her higher yet. A burn spread through her lower belly, and her pussy contracted around his cock. The build-up was bigger than anything she'd known before.

He captured her gaze once again. Looking at the pleasure contorting his rugged features opened a chasm inside her. Suddenly, she was helpless against him, but it didn't leave her feeling vulnerable.

She hooked her leg around him. Understanding, he let her roll on top. With her hair floating around them, she pressed her palms against his chiseled chest and began to move.

As he cupped her ass, his fingertip grazed her seam. She sucked in a breath, which only made him do it again.

“You like that, baby? I'll fuck you there in time. There won't be a single part of you that I haven't explored.” He pulled her into another scorching, tongue-dueling kiss while resting a finger against her pucker.

The added sensation sent her flying. White-hot flames engulfed her as she came with a cry. She sought his gaze, and he stiffened. Heat flooded her insides, and her orgasm hit full force.

She threw her head back and screamed. His roar echoed hers. For several minutes she couldn't think or even move. When she came back to herself, she found she was tangled with Quaide and her head pillowed on his broad chest.

She listened to his heart throb and her own racing heart beginning to calm. Quaide ran his fingers over her spine. Everything about this moment left her feeling as if she'd just

begun her real journey. Maybe she had been stuck too, same as Rain.

And now...now she was rising from the ashes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blueprints were spread across every available surface in the cramped house they were renting. Dove braced her hands on a table and leaned over one drawing. She scrubbed her hand over her face. “I don’t know what I’m even looking at anymore.”

Quaide chuckled and peeked around the computer monitor to see her. As soon as he clapped eyes on his lover, his heart surged against his ribs. She was wearing blue today.

And she had her sexy glasses on.

As he looked on, she removed them and stuck the stem in between her teeth, giving them a pensive nibble.

He pushed away from the computer, the information on the screen forgotten for the time being. He approached her slowly, gaze locked on the way her round ass thrust backward. All he’d have to do was pull down those jeans, latch on to those hips and sink inside her from behind.

He definitely was happy not to have the entire team surrounding them. He was also accepting his role with Sentry more and more by the day. He wasn’t in charge, and that was okay. Good, even.

“What seems to be the problem, baby?”

She placed her glasses back on and trailed a finger over some lines on the paper. “The office plan is fantastic. Plenty of space and light too, while still offering all the privacy Sentry needs. What I’m unclear about is this.” She pointed to a square on the paper. “Is it a storage closet? It looks a lot bigger than the others in the office rebuild.”

He stepped up next to her, enveloped by her sweet perfume. When he was near her, he couldn’t keep his hands off her. Now that she was no longer off-limits, he touched her. A lot.

Though he had to watch himself today—Lark was in the kitchen doing some footwork for the plans to rebuild.

Sliding his hand low on her spine and down to the crest of her fabulous buttocks, he leaned in to look at the plan. “You’re looking at the main office, yes. Our private quarters will be off the back, here.” He pointed to the wall that would be shared between their home and the Sentry office. Then he pointed to the separate plan showing their space.

She froze. “Quaide.”

“Yes, Dove?”

“Your hand.”

He realized he’d slipped it low over her cheeks and was stroking the space between them. “What about it?”

“I can’t focus on giving my approval on the plans when you’re—oh!” She let her head drop between her arms when he pressed the seam of her jeans into her pussy.

With a swallowed hiss, he closed the gap between them, tucking her against him while he continued to apply pressure to her pussy through her jeans. “I think you’re going to approve, baby. Of everything.”

She shivered. “This big space... What is it?” Her question ended on another gasp.

A knock at the front door separated them. “That’s gotta be Clay,” he ground out. “The man has the worst timing ever.”

“Not worse than Rain. Remember she walked in on us yesterday.” She straightened, shook herself as if she was still half undressed like she had been when Rain discovered them.

“I’ll get the door,” he said, but she was already striding toward it.

He drifted to the computer again. With a click of a button, he brought up the doorbell camera he’d temporarily installed while they stayed here. While the big threat was over and the sisters were safe, he would never, ever take another chance.

By the time he saw who was calling on them, it was too late. Dove cracked open the door.

“Hi there,” she said.

He moved swiftly to join her and pushed the door open wider. When he smiled down on the shorter man who served as a pastor in the church they’d been investigating, Quaide felt his teeth meet with a gnash.

“Can I help you?” he asked in his most pleasant voice.

The man beamed. “Good afternoon. I’m Pastor Miles Orion. I’m from the local parish.”

Dove took over. “What can we help you with today?”

He looked between Dove and Quaide. “I live right up the street. Just there.” He pointed at a huge white house at the end of the cul-de-sac. “And I wanted to personally welcome you to the neighborhood. I hope you don’t mind that I did some asking about you before paying this visit.”

Quaide tensed. Dove grasped his fingers and squeezed.

The pastor went on. “I know about the fire that took your home.” His forehead creased all the way up to his receding hairline.

Quaide’s alarms had already tripped, but now they were blaring. It could be said that people knew everyone else’s business in a small town, but he didn’t like it. At all.

“Thank you for your attention to detail.” Quaide widened his smile.

The man continued to beam at him, but Quaide saw through the farce. His own grandmother had been a woman who emanated genuine love for mankind, so he knew the difference between real and a fake.

“Well, I won’t keep you. As I said, I want to welcome you to the neighborhood and invite you to services Sunday at ten.”

“We appreciate it. Thank you for stopping by.” Dove gave him a smile of her own. While not as wolfish as Quaide’s, the expression definitely had a tension that it never did normally.

Pastor Orion stepped away with a small wave, and Quaide closed the door.

As soon as it was shut, a hot whisper came from behind them. “What was that!”

He’d forgotten that Lark was even in the house. She’d been in the kitchen all morning long, working diligently with the city of East Canon to get the building permits in place so they could break ground as soon as possible.

The redhead rushed across the room and whipped the curtain back to look outside. “What is that man doing here?” she demanded.

Dove’s eyes rounded as she met his stare. “Lark, what is going on? Why are you so upset about the pastor—”

She released the curtain, letting it swish back into place, and whirled to face them. “He’s crooked. He’s involved with a lot of crimes around here. I heard his voice and...” She raised her shoulders to her ears as if giving a shiver. “I know his voice. I heard it when they drugged me and put me in that coffin.”

“Coffin!” Dove clapped a hand over her mouth.

“I’ll tell you all about that another time. The issue right now is—that man? Is trouble. He is involved in some seedy things that we have yet to prove. But did you see his clothes? Why is a pastor wearing—”

“Designer clothes? I wondered that too. But he pointed out that white house at the end of the street was his,” Dove broke in. She lifted her hand in a nervous gesture he knew too well since he got her back in his life.

Lark’s eyes bugged. “The huge mansion? I see how the church donations are allocated now. Knowing we’re right down the street from him lights a fire under me to get these permits so we can break ground this week.”

“I believe if anyone can get it done, it’s you, Lark.” Quaide gave her a pointed look and then shifted his eyes toward Dove. He saw the nerves popping out on Dove like

hives. If he didn't know her so well, he wouldn't pick up on her small tells that revealed her feelings.

Lark gave him a small nod. "I'll just be in the kitchen."

As soon as she bounced away, he caught Dove's arm and swung her to him.

Her eyes darted everywhere but to his. "I'm going back to my life, Quaide."

"Back to your life," he repeated.

She nodded. "Now that Rain is feeling more in charge of herself, she can make her own decisions. She wants to go to cosmetology school. But I will ask if she wants to come with me or take the risk and stay."

"And you want to leave why?"

She burst out, "If that man is capable of putting that look of fear on Lark's face, I have to get as far away from here as possible!"

He brushed his fingers over her skin. "You can't go anywhere, Dove. You don't have a ride. But...there might be a company car."

His words made her mouth snap shut. "What are you talking about?"

He waved a hand at the blueprints. "That space you asked about is your personal office. I was gonna offer you a job before you resigned. I still want that."

She folded her arms and shook her head. "It won't work, Quaide. If it means sleeping with you or working with you, I'm sleeping with you."

A possessive growl vibrated in his throat. "Yes, you will be sleeping with me, baby. Why do you think you can't do both? Because for me...it's *you*. It's always *been* you. I thought you knew that when I asked you to marry me. And you accepted."

"But you're by the book. I don't follow every rule. Life is too messy for rules."

He cut his fingers through his hair. “I’m writing a new book.”

She started twisting away from him, but he grabbed her hand and held her. Reaching into his pocket, he located the slender band supporting a fat diamond. When he withdrew it, his heart thundered.

Gazing deep into her eyes, he said in a low voice, “Dove Priester, love of my life. Heart of my heart. I asked you before to be my wife, and I meant every word of that question. This just makes it official.” He held the ring up in front of her eyes.

They widened. Her lips popped open on a soft cry.

“Oh, Quaide! Yes!” She threw her arms around him, scrambling up his body and wrapping her thighs around his waist. Their lips crashed together in a stamp of unbridled passion that sealed the deal on their love.

When they broke apart, she dropped her forehead to his and stared into his eyes. “I love you so much.”

“I love you with my whole heart. I’m going to keep you safe from harm. You and Rain both.”

“You already have proved that.”

“I’m going to worship you until the day I die. Not to mention worshipping this body... And make sure you come to bed with those glasses on.” He squeezed her ass.

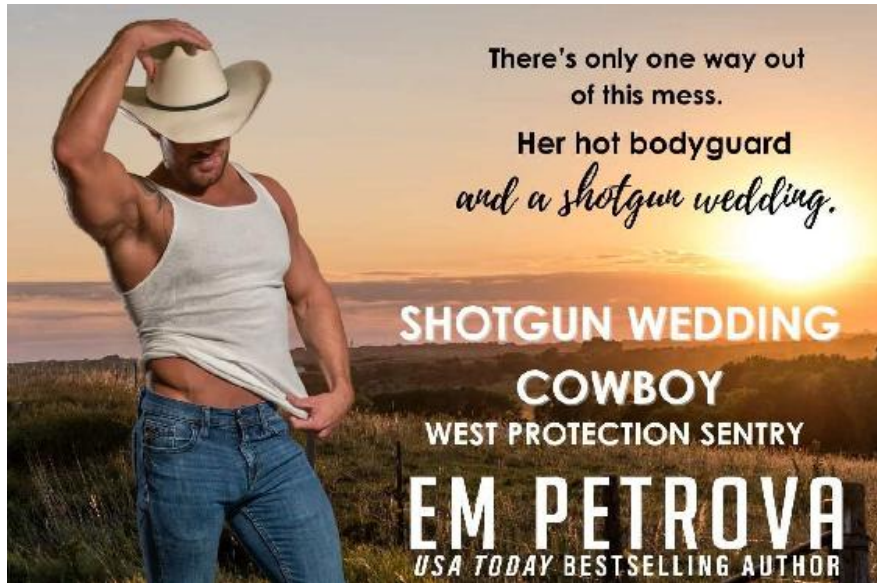
Her eyes glowed with love and joy. “Keep your voice down. We don’t want anyone overhearing us!”

He rumbled a laugh and leaned in to capture her luscious lips. “I don’t care who knows how I feel about you. You’re my world, Dove.”

Their mouths fused in a lingering kiss to seal the deal.

READ THE NEXT BOOK IN THE WEST PROTECTION  
SENTRY SERIES

## [SHOTGUN WEDDING COWBOY](#)



[SUBSCRIBE](#) to Em Petrova's Newsletter to keep up to date and for special reader features.



# Em Petrova

Em Petrova is a USA Today Bestselling Author who was raised by hippies in the wilds of Pennsylvania but told her parents at the age of four she wanted to be a gypsy when she grew up. She has a soft spot for babies, puppies and 90s Grunge music and believes in Bigfoot and aliens. She started writing at the age of twelve and prides herself on making her characters larger than life and her sex scenes hotter than hot.

She burst into the world of publishing in 2010 after having five beautiful bambinos and figuring they were old enough to get their own snacks while she pounds away at the keys. In her not-so-spare time, she is fur-mommy to a Labradoodle named Daisy Hasselhoff.

Find More Books by Em Petrova on her [Website](#)

And Follow On:

[Goodreads](#)

[Amazon Author Page](#)

[FB Fan Page](#)

[Instagram](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

[Bookbub](#)

## **Other Titles by Em Petrova**

### **SEAL Team Blackout**

[SHATTERED TIES Bishop's Story](#)

[RUTHLESS PROTECTION Sparrow's Story](#)

[MERCILESS SURVIVAL Ramsey's Story](#)

[SAVAGE PAWN Gunnison's Story](#)

[REBEL MISSION Frost's Story](#)

[WICKED INSTINCT Lachlan's Story](#)

[FINAL TARGET Mustang's Story](#)

[DIRTY JUSTICE Apollo's Story](#)

[SWEET REFUGE Lena and Overstreet's Story](#)

### **MT Ops**

[MOUNTAIN PROTECTOR](#)

MOUNTAIN DEFENDER

MOUNTAIN SAVIOR

**Xtreme Ops**

HITTING XTREMES

TO THE XTREME

XTREME BEHAVIOR

XTREME AFFAIRS

XTREME MEASURES

XTREME PRESSURE

XTREME LIMITS

NORTH OF LOVE **Xtreme Ops Alaska**

**Search and Rescue**

XTREME RULES

**Ranger Ops**

AT CLOSE RANGE

WITHIN RANGE

POINT BLANK RANGE

RANGE OF MOTION

TARGET IN RANGE

OUT OF RANGE

## **Knight Ops Series**

[ALL KNIGHTER](#)

[HEAT OF THE KNIGHT](#)

[HOT LOUISIANA KNIGHT](#)

[AFTER MIDNIGHT](#)

[KNIGHT SHIFT](#)

[O' CHRISTMAS KNIGHT](#)

[ANGEL OF THE KNIGHT](#)

## **WEST Protection**

[HIGH-STAKES COWBOY](#) Prequel Noah's  
Story

[RESCUED BY THE COWBOY](#) Ross's  
Story.

[GUARDED BY THE COWBOY](#) Boone's  
Story.

[COWBOY CONSPIRACY THEORY](#)  
Mathias's Story.

[COWBOY IN THE CROSSHAIRS](#) Silas's  
Story.

PROTECTED BY THE COWBOY Josiah's  
Story.

BRAVO TANGO COWBOY Corrine and  
Panic's Story

BREAKING IN THE COWBOY Casey's  
Story

SHIELDED BY THE COWBOY McCoy's  
Story

CLOSE RANGE COWBOY Landon's  
Story

ZERO DARK COWBOY Judd's Story

TOP SECRET COWBOY Jace's Story

COWBOY UNDER SEIGE Jaren's Story

**WEST Protection Sentry**

LONG ARM OF THE COWBOY Lexis's  
Story

COWBOY BREAKING POINT Quaide's  
Story

SHOTGUN WEDDING COWBOY Julius's  
Story

JUSTICE FOR THE COWBOY Jennings's  
Story

## **The Guard**

HIS TO SHELTER

HIS TO DEFEND

HIS TO PROTECT

## **Crossroads**

BAD IN BOOTS

CONFIDENT IN CHAPS

COCKY IN A COWBOY HAT

SAVAGE IN A STETSON

SHOW-OFF IN SPURS

## **Dark Falcons MC**

DIXON

TANK

PATRIOT

DIESEL

BLADE

## **Moon Ranch**

[TOUGH AND TAMED](#)

[SCREWED AND SATISFIED](#)

[CHISELED AND CHERISHED](#)

## **6-Pack Cowboys Series**

[SIX-PACK RANCHER](#)

[SIX-PACK WRANGLER](#)

## **Wild West Series**

[SOMETHING ABOUT A LAWMAN](#)

[SOMETHING ABOUT A SHERIFF](#)

[SOMETHING ABOUT A BOUNTY  
HUNTER](#)

[SOMETHING ABOUT A MOUNTAIN  
MAN](#)

## **Operation Cowboy Series**

[KICKIN' UP DUST](#)

[SPURS 'n SURRENDER](#)

## **The Boot Knockers Ranch Series**

[PUSHIN' BUTTONS](#)

[BODY LANGUAGE](#)

[REINING MEN](#)

[ROPIN' HEARTS](#)

[ROPE BURN](#)

[COWBOY NOT INCLUDED](#)

[CUPID COWBOYS](#)

[COWBOY BY CANDLELIGHT](#)

[THE BOOT KNOCKER'S BABY](#)

[ROPIN' A ROMEO](#)

[WINNING WYOMING](#)

## **Ménage à Trouble Series**

[UP FOR GRABS](#)

[WRANGLLED UP](#)

[HOOKING UP](#)

[ALL WOUND UP](#)

[DOUBLED UP novella duet](#)

[STIRRED UP](#)

[GETTING WARMED UP](#)



## **Another Shot at Love Series**

[GRIFFIN](#)

[BRANT](#)

[AXEL](#)

## **Rope 'n Ride Series**

[BUCK](#)

[RYDER](#)

[RIDGE](#)

[WEST](#)

[LANE](#)

[WYNONNA](#)

## **The Dalton Boys**

[COWBOY CRAZY](#) Hank's story

[COWBOY BARGAIN](#) Cash's story

[COWBOY CRUSHIN'](#) Witt's story

[COWBOY SECRET](#) Beck's story

[COWBOY RUSH](#) Kade's Story

[COWBOY MISTLETOE](#) a Christmas  
novella

[COWBOY FLIRTATION](#) Ford's Story.

[COWBOY TEMPTATION](#) Easton's Story.

[COWBOY SURPRISE](#) Justus's Story

[COWGIRL DREAMER](#) Gracie's Story

[COWGIRL MIRACLE](#) Jessamine's Story

[COWGIRL HEART](#) Kezziah's Story

### **Dalton Boys Collection**

[Collection Books 1-3](#)

[Collection Books 4-6](#)

[Collection Books 7-9](#)

[Collection Books 10-12](#)

### **Single Titles and Boxes**

[BOOT KNOCKERS RANCH SERIES  
BOOKS 1-6 PLUS BONUS](#)

[SINFUL HEARTS](#)

JINGLE BOOTS

A COWBOY FOR CHRISTMAS

**Firehouse 5 Series**

ONE FIERY NIGHT

CONTROLLED BURN

SMOLDERING HEARTS

Hardworking Heroes Box Set

**EM PETROVA**  
*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR