

PIPER STONE



BOOK FOUR  
MISSOULA SMOKEJUMPERS

# FIRESTORM

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# FIRESTORM

MISSOULA SMOKEJUMPERS BOOK FOUR

# PIPER STONE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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Piper Stone

Firestorm

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## WHAT'S INSIDE

She cupped both sides of his face, leaning into him as she pressed her lips against his then his chin, her hot breath skipping along his skin.

Her simple touch, the way she was open and so gentle was breathtaking. His heart continued to race as she licked across the seam of his mouth. He was so used to being in control, taking what he wanted without reservation or any question. This was amazing, scintillating in such an unexpected manner.

As she licked down the side of his neck, she began to unbutton his shirt, peeling back the edges until she placed the flats of her hands on his chest. She continued to kiss and lick, her lips moving back and forth until she reached his nipple.

Riker tilted his head back, savoring the way she bit down, creating a hint of pain until his cock was pinching in his zipper. Fisting her hair, he kept her head in place as she dragged her mouth to his other nipple, licking in lazy circles. His breathing ragged, he rubbed his other hand down her arm and back until he could take no more. Pulling her head away, he growled then yanked at her shirt, tugging the edges from her jeans.

“Oh...” The sound almost inaudible, she slid her hands down to his waist then moved them to her shirt, pulling the material up and over her head.

Cupping both breasts, he rubbed his fingers back and forth across her already hardened nipples, enjoying the way they felt through her lace bra. Grunting, he lowered his head as he slid

his arm around her waist, dipping her into a deep arch. He mouthed her neck, sucking on her skin as he dipped his fingers past the thin edge, fingering her nipple. He could tell she was wet, the scent of her feminine wiles wafting between them.

She clung to him, her fingers tight as she gripped his arms, her body swaying forward and backward. “God.”

He moved his mouth down to the cleft of her breasts, licking up and down before using his teeth to pull away the unwanted material and exposing her nipple. He dragged his tongue around several times before taking the tender flesh into his mouth, sucking, nipping.

“Oh... my...” Easing her hand down the length of his chest, she rubbed her fingers across his groin, moving back and forth in slow and even motions.

Yanking the material, he heard a ripping sound and issued another low-slung growl then pulled her up as he reached for the clasp on her bra. As he eased the straps down, he shook his head, admiring every inch of her exquisite beauty. She was perfect.

Biting her lower lip, she fumbled to unbuckle his belt, fingering the leather as she gave him a heated look. “Mmm... A thick strap.”

“You enjoy discipline?”

“Yes.”

The single word sent another rush of raw desire, a different and very commanding longing. When she unzipped his jeans, freeing his dick, he sucked in his breath. “Be careful what you ask for.”

She slid her hand underneath his cock, rubbing his already swollen balls between her fingers. Then she wrapped her hand around his shaft, pumping the base as she pushed his shirt off one shoulder. “I’m asking.”

He hissed as he yanked at his shirt, dragging it off and tossing it. There was no turning back, no way he could stop what was about to happen. As she squeezed the tip of his cock, using just enough pressure he moaned, he pushed her away,



the dark and demanding side taking over. “I want to see all of you. Every inch.” After removing his boots, he stood with his arms crossed, the expression commanding.

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## CHAPTER 1

*Extended Attack: Work done after the initial effort has failed to stop a fire*

*Firestorm: A mass configuration of fire, a blow up*

*Spot Fire: Fire started outside the main fire area by flying sparks or embers*

*Zulies: Missoula Smokejumpers*

“*A*nd the award goes to...”

“You’re a shoo-in,” he whispered as he nuzzled against Trinity’s neck, blowing hot air from his pursed lips.

Trinity Hargrove shifted in her seat, glowering at the stunning actor grandstanding on the stage. Christopher Walker was a mainstay in Hollywood, a man considered the best in the business. He was also a womanizing pig. She wasn’t entirely certain she cared whether she won the Film Actor’s award, but her entire management team certainly did. They were banking on a best win to booster the upcoming movie contracts, pushing her into the ‘upper echelon of actors’ as her agent had mentioned at least five times.

“Trinity Hargrove for Dark Accusations!”

The audience roared, clapping as they rose to their feet.

Trinity was well aware that every camera was panned in her direction, capturing her reaction at the glorious win. She plastered on her practiced smile and rose to her feet.

“I knew you could finally do it, babe.”

As her pseudo boyfriend wrapped his hand around her wrist, squeezing in a not so gentle reminder that she belonged to him, she had to resist issuing a nasty retort. Chance Reynolds was a catch, according to every tabloid magazine in the entire world. For her? She wanted nothing to do with his nasty attitude and dominating demeanor. Still, she played her part well, cooing as she blew him a kiss.

As the various well-wishers, other actors who would just as soon rip out her eyes as issue any happy congratulations, hovered in the aisles, she hiked up her long dress. Waving, she headed for the stage, cognizant to hold her breath, keep her stomach in and resist fidgeting with her hair. The entire night was fake, yet perfunctory for the majority of them. They were here to swoon, wave to the enlarged crowds and pretend as if they cared about their fans.

Almost none of them did.

She kept the smile, the look of adoration as she walked onto the stage.

“Here you are, my dear. Congratulations.” After handing her the statue, Christopher leaned over, whispering in her ear, “How about we grab some champagne later? Very much alone?”

Her look wasn't caught by anyone but the masterful playboy, but he knew the ‘don't fuck with me’ expression well enough and took two steps back. The night was young. He'd try again. She stepped in front of the microphone, holding the gilded award close to her breasts. She'd been trained well and caught the various moguls in their seats, locking eyes and nodding.

At least a few of them would call her agent by the end of the week. When the clapping died down, she changed to a serious look, one befitting the movie, a brutal look at a serial rapist.

“Thank you so much for this prestigious award. I can't tell you how thrilled I am to receive such amazing recognition for

work amongst some brilliant actors. I applaud all of you for your achievements.” She began to clap, finding the other women in the audience. Three of the four were none too happy to be idolized, their faces captured at that moment. What did she care? Play the part. The mantra of the last few years.

“In this business, there are only a few movies that manage to capture your very soul, dragging you into the part until you become one with the person portrayed. *Dark Accusations* is that movie, a terrifying look into the mind of a monster.”

Trinity continued the speech for another minute before she caught Chance’s yawn. The acceptance speech had gone on too long. How the fuck dare he? Still, the signal was all she needed. “Again, thank you to everyone involved and my heartfelt gratitude toward my agent, Marvin Huddles. Without his love and support, I would never have come this far.”

She was led off the stage and into the wings. Once free of the cameras, she exhaled and shook her head. There would be some commentary tomorrow on the national news regarding her lack of happy words for poor, old, Chance. What a shame. She rolled her eyes and grabbed a cup of water before walking down the second set of stairs and back to her seat. Thank God, there was only one award left.

Then the parties would begin.

To say she loathed the festivities was an understatement and a reflection she kept to herself. She’d come a long way in the film industry and enjoyed the perks of money and fame, but she’d grown weary of the bullshit. She slid back into her seat, mindful of several sets of eyes watching her every move. A slight chill trickled down her spine. She would bet he was watching her, the freak who’d been following her around for over a year.

“You looked okay up there. Next time, you’ll follow my advice. Green is not your color,” Chance said, the tone harsh.

The words dragged her back into reality. She’d had enough of his condescending attitude, his demands and his constant needs. The man took prima donna to an entirely new level. This was a perfect night to end the relationship. Seething, she

said nothing as the next award was given out, acting appropriately for the win and waiting until the cameras stopped rolling before launching out of her seat.

Chance grabbed her arm, pulling her back. “We have a party to go to. Remember?”

“I remember. I’m just not going,” she retorted, clawing her way toward the aisle.

He yanked her until her back hit his chest. “You’re going because I say you are. Don’t make a scene or you know what will happen.”

Trinity controlled her breathing and waved at the recently named glamor couple of the year. They certainly seemed happy. Then again, looks were entirely deceiving.

“I have a limo waiting for us,” he whispered and wrapped his arms around her.

“Fine. I’ll go but I don’t want to stay long.”

“We’ll leave when I decide.”

How in the hell had she managed to find a man she considered ‘asshole’ of the year? Oh yeah, the initial date set up by her agent. She shuddered as she thought about how green she’d been even three years before. An ingénue with a hot body and a sharp mind. The statement had haunted her from every director to producer. She’d all but decided that this life, this ridiculous world of make believe, wasn’t what she wanted any longer.

Now, she just had to tell the powers that be. Walking away wouldn’t be easy, especially with the fact she’d been exploited in every manner possible.

As Chance led her out of the auditorium, she searched the screaming crowd for any sign of the jerk. A single reporter, paparazzi had made her life miserable. The man was hell bent on making her life an open book by inventing secrets. Unfortunately, he hadn’t crossed any lines. None. There was nothing she could do but endure his wrath.

“Here we go. Wave so you don’t look like such a bitch,” Chance directed, as he led her down the sidewalk and toward a gleaming black limo.

“You’re hurting me,” she hissed through clenched teeth, yet she resisted jerking away from him. Any additional bad press and she’d find a brand spanking new label slapped on her resume. *Difficult to worth with*. The crowd followed her, taking photographs as they breeched the barriers, coming closer. Heat rose from her chest, creeping up both cheeks as claustrophobia set in, driving her heart rate to an uncomfortable level. She could see the various news stations were well represented as microphones were stuck in her face. “Get me out of here.”

“Wait,” Chance grinned then waved to the fans. “You have to do this. Jesus.”

Trinity stood still, her knees locked. She couldn’t panic. Not now.

“Ms. Hargrove. Just one picture.”

“Ms. Hargrove, what can you tell us about your next film?”

“Trinity, what are your plans for the future?”

The questions came fast and furious. Yes, she was trained to answer. Yes, she could give them everything they wanted, but tonight she was full of anger. The recent photographs had kept her on edge.

She managed to hold up her hand and took a step away from Chance’s controlling hold. “I have several pictures in the works. You’ll be the first to know about them after the contracts are signed.” She gave her signature laugh.

“What about your next leading man?”

The question was sweet and came from a fan. Trinity winked as she inched even closer. “Now that, you’re just going to have to wait and find out. I can tell you that he’s hot, and not just on the big screen.” The answer garnered her enough laughs and smiles that she started to move back toward the limo and out of the limelight.



“Ms. Hargrove. What can you tell me about the young woman you destroyed four years ago?”

The question seemed to echo, the words elongated and lingering in the now hushed crowd. She knew the voice, the scratchy baritone coming from the single man that was trying to derail her career, her life. Without thinking, she turned in his direction and took two purposeful steps toward him, her mind reeling as she noticed his wry grin. She’d had enough.

“I have one thing to say to you. Get. Out. Of. My. Life.”

*Wham!*



“WHAT IN THE hell is wrong with you?” Chance railed, his face beet red.

“Just let me alone. Okay?” Trinity grabbed the glass of wine, walking away from him and into her living room. The floor to ceiling window gave her an incredible view of the ocean, a view she’d paid through the ass to secure. She could hear his heavy footsteps behind her. Another confrontation she wasn’t in the mood for.

Chance stopped a few feet behind her. “You got your wish. We’re home. You can relax. You can crawl under the sheets, your normal response.”

She wanted to rip out his throat. “Relax? That’s not going to happen.” A chill remained, sliding into every muscle. What in the hell was the bastard after?

Using a single finger, he rubbed from her shoulder all the way down her arm. “At least we can get cozy. I’ve missed you.” He wrapped his arm around her, sliding his hand past the bodice of her dress. Cupping and squeezing her breast, he rubbed her nipple between his fingers. “A great deal.”

Swallowing back bile, she allowed the touch, even thinking she could do this, could perform another night. When he pinched and twisted her hardened bud, she took a step away, breaking the connection. “Not tonight.”

“Oh, come on. We haven’t been intimate in months.”

She wanted to tell him all the reasons why, but she bit her tongue. He'd already had too much to drink.

Exhaling, he took a swig of his drink before tipping his head. "You have no idea what you just did."

"And you have no idea how that monster is trying to destroy my life!" She glared into the glass, eyeing his terse reflection.

"Comes with the territory, sweetheart. You're on public display at all times."

"Not like that." Anger swelled from deep within, dragging her back to so many years before, a past she'd rather leave buried like the dead. Snorting, she took a gulp of merlot, savoring the flavor, the slight burn given her parched throat. Chance could care less that she was being harassed. He was more worried about his career, his brand than anything else.

"Don't be a child. You should have just blown him off." Chance mumbled something else under his breath.

"What did you say?"

Laughing, he moved back toward her couch, plopping down. "I said, you need to learn your place."

Swinging around, she took several long strides toward him. "I don't know who you think you are, but I won't tolerate that kind of insolence from anyone. Do you hear me?" You bet this was the perfect night to get rid of excess and unwanted baggage.

Chance took a long gulp of his drink, allowing the ice cubes to clink against the glass. His eyes never left her as he slapped the crystal down on the side table. "I think you need to mind your manners. In fact, I think you need a hard lesson tonight."

Trinity watched as if in slow motion as he patted his lap. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"You need to be whipped."

The words were ridiculous, hysterical. "You are such an asshole."

He jerked up, unbuckling his belt. "I'm in charge here. Get your fuckin' slutty ass over here or the whipping will be worse."

There weren't enough words to issue the statement that had been brewing in her mind for the last several months. To think she'd actually allowed this man, this freak to take certain levels of control, even issuing spankings when he considered her a bad little girl was disgusting. "Get out."

"What did you say?" He folded over the strap and narrowed his eyes.

"You heard me. We're done. We are *so* done. Get out of my house and my life."

He shook his head, his eyes flashing amusement. "I know you're joking. We are together, even though you really are a bitch."

Trinity wanted nothing more than to physically throw him out, but at this point, she needed a clear head and anything other than a direct and bitter end would give him a reason to try and weasel. She'd allowed him to suck up to her, showering her with roses, diamonds and even a car. What a damn fool she'd been. He meant nothing to her. The objects meant nothing to her. Nothing. She'd lost her self-esteem and her vibe by allowing him to drag her down a road of discipline. No more.

"Did you hear me?" he demanded.

Smiling, she walked out of the room and toward the hallway. Of course, he followed. He had to have the upper hand, a belief that he was top dog. The moment she heard his footsteps, she opened the door, damn glad she'd never given him a key. "Get out. I'll have your things sent to you when I get a chance." When Hell froze over.

Chance swaggered toward her, his smile equal to one of her own. Crowding her space, he kept his tone of voice bland, the volume little more than a whisper. "I know things about you, secrets from your tawdry past. I will ruin you. Trust me, babe. You're done in Hollywood."

She pushed the door back against the hinges until the door thumped. “Get. The. Fuck. Out.”

Sniffing, he brushed both hands through his hair then stormed out, stopping just outside. “This isn’t over by a long shot.”

“Take a number.”

*Bam!*

The door reverberated after the hard slam and she shivered as the adrenaline rush created an instant headache. She quickly locked and bolted the door, her hands shaking. What a horrible night. Ugly thoughts and visions swam through her mind, images of a happier time at least until...

“No!” Slapping her hands against the door, suddenly her legs gave out and she slowly slid down to the floor as the tears began to fall.

Every contrived picture, every ugly representation of her previous life was such a lie.

But the real truth was eating her alive.



RIKER SHEFFIELD ROUNDED THE CORNER, pushing the Harley to its limits. He loved the crisp spring air, the way the wind whipped around his body as he accelerated. Leaning into another curve, he could see a line of cars ahead, moving at a snail’s pace. When he was on a straight section, he jugged out and bolted ahead, passing all four vehicles. He had a couple days off and the free time would allow him to play.

The end of the bitter cold winter meant a new fire season. As if the past season had allowed the smokejumping team any concept of rest. Too many dangerous fires had destroyed thousands of acres of land in three states. He was exhausted and antsy, longing to spend a few weeks by himself. He hissed as he rolled into town, shooting by Ziggy’s. While he’d developed real friendships with the Jackals, the majority of the smokejumping team would never understand the man inside.

Neither did he any longer.

He remained bitter, full of anger to the point he'd succumbed to drinking alone, something he swore he'd never do. At least the pain was dulled enough he could sleep, freefalling into a drunken state and away from the constant nightmares. He wanted to say enough was enough, but there was nothing that could drag him away from the anguish. Nothing.

After stopping at a red light, he contemplated where he was going to land for the night. A single thought came to his mind. The biker bar was on the other side of town and far removed from a location his buddies would consider, perhaps with the exception of Landen. However, his best friend and a man after his own heart had a woman. A damn woman. Yeah, he couldn't help but smile. Someone deserved a level of happiness.

He took off, roaring past the sightseers and tourists, heading in the direction of the dilapidated bar. He'd been to the place a few times, his presence never questioned. Tonight, he needed some kind of relief, or he was going to crawl out of his skin.

Rolling into the parking lot, he darted a glance at the other vehicles. Mostly bikes of various sizes and types, he knew he'd feel comfortable, even fitting right in. He parked in the back and climbed off, securing his helmet. He could hear the loud music pumping through the thin walls. The time wasn't even nine-thirty and already things were getting wild.

Exactly what he needed. A damn good time.

Riker headed inside, taking only a moment before walking straight for the bar. There were no odd looks, other than perhaps given his massive size. Yeah, he towered over almost every man, but his look was basically the same. Jeans, shit kicker boots, a T-shirt and jacket, only his being leather instead of tattered denim. The place was crowded, wall to wall with mostly men. He could see more than one game of pool, a few throwing darts and all were drinking.

Easing onto a bar stool, he tapped his fingers on top of the bar. Almost instantly the bartender acknowledged him, giving

him a respectful nod. Not a single one knew of his status, a supposed hero to so many in town, nor would they give a shit. This was just the way he liked it. He was nothing to no one, which meant there wasn't a thing expected from him.

“What'll ya have?”

“Budweiser. Bourbon chaser.” Riker thought of Stoker, the man's usual drink and snickered. Wouldn't the jumper be proud?

The place was hot. Too many bodies in one damn place. After removing his jacket, he settled into the worn wooden stool and gave a quick glance at the ancient television, the grainy picture highlighting some game that he sure as shit didn't care about. The thought made him sigh. He'd been forced to face some ugly truths as of late. He didn't give a shit about anything but his job. Not a single blessed thing.

“Here ya go. You got a credit card?” The bartender asked as he slid the drinks across the bar.

Riker grabbed a twenty, tossing it past the drinks. “Cash still good?”

“Works for me. Let me know when you need another one.”

He raised the bottle, taking a swig. At least the beer was ice cold. Polishing off half the bottle, he noticed a group of females sitting together at a table in the back. An unusual site in a place like this. Biker women were well attached and not a single man would let them come out in a pack. So, why were they here? He snickered and shook his head. Listen to his barbarian thoughts. Things had certainly changed in a few years.

The bourbon was just smooth enough, settling his aching head and he could feel a portion of the tension easing away. Even the headaches had occurred more often, keeping him grumpy, or so he'd been told more than once. This would be a good respite, albeit brief, to find his soul. This time, he resisted laughing. His soul had been ripped away one fateful night.

When one of the girls eased out of her chair, he couldn't help but notice. She was striking. Long, reddish-blond hair and a killer body. As she walked through the crowd, swishing her hips in a way every red-blooded male would notice, he watched. He didn't mind enjoying the view.

"Hey ya, hot mama. Wanna play?"

She stopped, gave the man a hard look and pointed her finger. "Sorry, dude. You don't have what it takes."

"Ooh!" Several men yelled then whistled their approval.

The damn bars were all the same. At least this one had some entertainment value. He fingered the glass before polishing off the bourbon, lifting the finished product so the bartender could see.

"Gotcha," the man said, immediately grabbing a glass.

The girl slid her hand against almost every shoulder as she passed, her walk becoming more exaggerated. And she was headed right for him.

Riker looked away, concentrating on the second drink as it appeared, the man behind the bar no longer asking for an instant payment. He swirled the drink, listening to the various conversations, none of which were interesting in any manner.

"Hi ya. Haven't seen you here before." Her voice was sultry, laced with a hint of huskiness, either practiced or from too many nights of cigarettes and booze.

He gave her a once over and shrugged. "Just stopping in."

"Mmm... Our luck. Would you like to join the girls? We're out for a night of fun and you're the kind of man we're looking for."

He shot the table a glance. "All of you?"

Giggling, she inched closer, resting her arm on the bar. "Could you handle all five of us?"

The question was asked as if he'd honestly consider. "Not interested. Thanks for the offer."

“Oh, you’re a one-woman kind of guy. I like that.” She bit her lower lip and reached down, taking the drink from his hand. Her eyes never leaving his, she took a sip then licked the rim. “Tasty. No doubt just like you.”

He inhaled, gathering the scent of what she no doubt considered French perfume and twisted in his seat. “Would you like a drink?”

“I believe I would. What you’re having is just fine with me.”

Riker simply lifted his glass and nodded in her direction. He knew the bartender would follow along.

“So, do you have a name?”

“Don’t we all?” He could tell she was surprised at his answer.

“An anonymous kind of guy. I like that. Mysterious. Very kinky.” Using the tip of her nail, she trailed down the length of his arm, swirling around his various tattoos. “Nice ink.”

“Thanks.” The flirting was interesting.

“So, what do you do, big boy?”

Riker fingered his drink and tipped his head. “I’m a smokejumper.”

“A what?” Her eyes opened wide.

Chuckling, he took a sip of his drink. Even stationed out of Missoula, a big little town as he liked to call the place, very few residents knew the term or the horrific concept of danger. “Like firefighters without the use of water.”

“How in the hell can that happen? I mean...” Wrinkling her nose, she shifted, obviously uncomfortable.

Lifting a single eyebrow, he lowered his voice so only she could hear. “We get into the belly of the beast, the raging fires that consume thousands of acres. Sometimes we go in by truck, sometimes by airplane, parachuting in. It’s always very dangerous work. We dig trenches, cut down trees that would fuel the ongoing fire in an effort to stop the monster from



growing. All this to prevent, protect and preserve property and life.” He took another gulp and waited to see her response.

“That makes you a true hero.”

Riker was taken aback not only by her statement but by the look of respect in her eyes. “Appreciate it, but I’m just doing my job.” An awkward silence settled in.

She leaned closer, the move pushing her breasts further out of the skimpy and very tight top. “You know, you seem like a man who knows exactly what he wants. I could help you with that.”

“I’m sure you could, given how beautiful you are. Just looking for a night alone, a couple of drinks.” In truth, his cock was already swelling, a need he hadn’t satisfied in a hell of a long time bridging the surface.

“Oh, poo. I want to have some fun. The girls are great, but I prefer a man, his touch and lips, his big, thick cock.” She offered another giggle and grabbed the drink the moment it was placed on the bar. “To new friends, Mr. Sexy.”

Riker allowed the toast and enjoyed the sexual bantering. She wasn’t as young as she appeared from a distance, but she was very pretty, even though her makeup didn’t suit her face. Still, she had a nice set of tits and long legs, her ass sculpted in the tight, leather skirt. The bustier was flaming red, the single leather string a dangling teaser. Yeah, he wanted to see her swollen nipples, her rosy buds. Then again, he wasn’t looking for a relationship, or even the concept of dating. He was ready for a single night, maybe two and nothing more.

She slipped her hand to the back of his neck, her fingers flipping through his short-cropped hair. “All rugged and male. I can only imagine the rest of you.”

Now, his cock was aching, pushing hard against the tight jeans. He took another sip, contemplating accepting the bait. No, this wasn’t what he wanted. “Like I said. Just here for a couple of drinks. Nothing more.”

She wrinkled her nose and took a step back, her expression turning hard. “Well, fine. You have no idea what you’re

missing. Thanks for the drink.”

“Anytime. Enjoy the evening.” He didn’t need to know she’d left. He could tell by the hungry words spouted off as she walked by several drunk men.

The bartender walked closer, a grin on his face. “Careful with that one. Hear she’s a bit of a gold digger.”

“Well, then she came to the wrong guy.” Riker broke into a smile as he thought about his meager belongings. The girl would be mighty disappointed.

“I hear that, brother.”

Barely thirty minutes later and he’d grown bored, the tension returning with a vengeance. Dropping another set of bills, he grabbed his jacket and walked out the door, acknowledging no one. The moon was bright, illuminating the shadowed sky. Exhaling, he glanced at the billowing clouds, the twinkling stars, wishing for another time.

“I thought I’d try one last time. I really do think you’re one hot man.”

Riker wasn’t surprised she’d followed him outside. There wasn’t much of a choice with the dudes hanging out in the bar, the majority far too drunk to be of any benefit. “I play hard.”

“I like that. The kinkier the better.” She rubbed her hand through her hair and adjusted the trench coat covering her outfit.

He debated as he reached for his helmet. There was an erotic vibe, a sensual appeal about the woman. She certainly knew what she wanted.

“I live close by. We could go there.” Her words were little more than a purr.

“What’s your name?”

She cocked her hip, her smile seductive. “What do you want it to be?”

Exhaling, he climbed onto the bike, starting the engine. “I’m not into games. Period.”

Taking a few quick steps, she rubbed her hand down his arm. “Kiki. It’s Kiki. Okay?”

The offer was too good to pass up and maybe even what he needed to get him out of his funk. Without saying another word, he grabbed the second helmet from his satchel, tossing it to her. “Get on.”

“Purr, baby. I’d love to. You’re going to have a damn good time.”

Yeah, he’d have to see about that. After all, he was in a predatory mood.



THE AIR WAS INVIGORATING, the moonless night allowing him to maneuver through the darkened streets with ease. He knew exactly where he was going. Rolling down the street, he turned the lights off before he reached his destination. The neighborhood was large, the houses positioned on several acres. He wouldn’t have to worry about sound. Not that the asshole would have any time to react, let alone scream for help.

Easing out of the car, he grabbed the pistol, placing it inside his jacket then looked down the street. There was no one coming, no lights even in sight. As he headed for the house, he crouched down and moved around the side. There were a few lights on inside, but there was only one person home. Timing was everything.

He crept through the well-manicured grass toward the back gate. He knew the area very well, the house and the exits like the back of his hand. The house was secure but there were no annoying systems to hamper his entrance. As he unlatched the gate, he was careful to make certain there had been no recent purchases at the houses surrounding, dogs to keep a watchful eye. Snickering, he closed the gate behind him before advancing.

The door was locked, just as he knew it would be. His favorite pick would be enough for the single cylinder lock.

Within seconds he heard the clicking sound and smiled. Everything was going according to plan.

Walking inside, he gathered a scent of rosemary and baked chicken, one of his favorites. The homeowner was, after all, a consummate cook. The prestigious man also kept a schedule that almost never varied. The concept alone had allowed for an easy event. Surprise. Surprise. He fought the laughter creeping up his throat.

He crept down the darkened hallway, finally able to hear the television blaring from the den. The man always retired to the wood paneled location for a brandy, a cigar and a snooze. As he eased into the room, he surveyed the cluttered space. He had no visitors, no women over for an entertaining night. As a matter of fact, the man was boring as fuck and deserved to die.

The thought giving him a smile, he stood to his full height and inched inside. The light snoring sound was coming from the comfy, overstuffed leather chair. He could see the remnants of the man's drink, the expensive brandy a glorious amber color. He'd have to purchase a bottle at some point.

He pulled the gun into the light of the television and sauntered in front of the chair. This was far too easy. "Hey. Wake up, fuckhead."

The man snorted then wiped his mouth but didn't open his eyes.

What the fuck? In a drunken stupor? No, the asshole had to know what was coming. He kicked the chair hard. "Wake the fuck up."

Stirring, the man lifted his head, blinking as he tried to focus. Then his eyes opened wide, a look of utter terror displayed as the television scene reflected in his eyes. "What the hell do you want? Get out of here!"

"What do I want? To give you what you fucking deserve."

*Bam!*

The single shot was all that was needed. Right between the eyes. He couldn't help himself and blew on the end of the gun before sliding it back into his jacket. Leaning down, he was

prepared to hoist the lug of a man over his shoulder. “Hmmm.” Grabbing the glass instead, he threw back the entire contents, relishing in the smoothness, the way the liquid seemed to just slide down his throat. The taste was damn good.

When he was finished, he yanked the man by the arm and managed to pull him over his shoulders. The fucker was heavy as shit. Laboring out of the house, he had the asshole in the trunk in no time.

He removed his gloves and tugged out his phone, humming as he dialed. When the party answered, he was almost gleeful, giddy in fact. “Yes, I’d like to report a bomb threat.”

## CHAPTER 2

“Come here, baby. Let me make you feel like a man,” Kiki cooed as she walked backwards, her stilettos clicking on the wooden floor. Unfastening the belt on her coat, she swung her hips as she beckoned for him then slid the material from her shoulders, dancing in a complete circle before pitching it over the back of the loveseat.

Riker dropped his jacket and surveyed the small space. Pillows were everywhere, vibrant colors of violet and crimson. The apartment was little more than a hole in the wall, but he certainly gathered a hint of her very feminine personality.

“Come on. I don’t bite. Well, unless requested.”

The single light did little to guide the way, but he knew where she was going. He trailed behind her down the hallway, passing only a galley kitchen and a tiny bathroom. Even before he entered her bedroom, he gathered a whiff of various scents. Vanilla and gardenia, cinnamon and another exotic spice. While he’d normally be turned off, tonight, he was ravenous.

She clicked on a lamp next to her bed and threw out her arms. “My boudoir.”

At this point, he didn’t care where they were going to fuck. He’d just stepped into the room when he grabbed her by the wrist, yanking her against his chest.

“Oh! You are a rough and tumble kind of guy.” Kiki draped her arms over his shoulders and wiggled her hips, creating friction.

Sliding his hands under her leather skirt, he cupped her buttocks, squeezing her naked skin between his fingers. He lowered his head, breathing across her face. "Condom?"

"I got plenty, but I want to play first." She nuzzled into his neck, dragging the tip of her tongue back and forth across his earlobe then down the side of his neck. "So sexy."

Riker closed his eyes and tipped his head back, enjoying the attention, the way her ass cheeks felt in his hands. When he realized she wasn't wearing any panties, he chuckled, allowing the hoarse sound to linger.

Kiki licked around to the front then nipped his chin as she pressed the palm of her hand against his chest. "Mmm..." Taking a step back, she gave him a sultry look then jerked at his T-shirt, pulling the hem from his jeans. "I want to see all of you."

He allowed her to pull the material up and over his shoulders, watching with amusement the way she twirled it around her finger before dropping it with flair.

Growling, she palmed his chest, her fingers digging in and began to kiss his skin, moving down in small increments.

Placing his hands on either side of her head, he fisted her hair as she dropped to her knees. The feel of her wet mouth on his hot skin was exhilarating, forcing his balls to swell, ache. His breathing labored, he kept his eyes locked on her actions as she fumbled to unbuckle his belt. Every scent in the room, including her perfume, became intoxicating, filling his nostrils.

She issued a series of wet kisses across his groin before unzipping, all the while making guttural sounds. When she peeled away both sides, a slow breath escaped. "My, oh, my. You are one big man."

There was something so enticing about the way she removed his boots and socks then rubbed his feet, his calves before yanking down his jeans.

"Commando. I see we're quite a bit alike," she purred as she crawled between his legs. Raking the tips of her nails

down the underside of his cock, she rubbed his balls, rolling them between her fingers. “Well hung ain’t the right word, honey.”

Riker sucked in his breath and pushed down on her head. “Suck me.”

She didn’t need another command. Opening her mouth, she licked around his cockhead as she squeezed his testicles then engulfed several inches into her mouth.

“Yes...” Her mouth was hot, her tongue raspy and the combination drove a series of electric jolts rushing through every cell. His muscles tensed as she wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft, pumping, twisting her hand.

Kiki opened her mouth wide and seemed to relax her throat, taking him down an inch at a time. Holding the stance, she struggled to dart her eyes in his direction, as if seeking approval.

“Yeah. Good.” The words were whispered and as she began moving up and down on his dick, the sounds of slurping floated between them. He tipped his head back and rose onto the balls of his feet, jutting his hips forward.

Moaning around the thick invasion, she sucked in earnest, harder and faster, one hand squeezing his balls, the other pumping in fevered actions.

While he continued to hold her head, he didn’t demand or force her in any manner. He was enjoying the salacious act, her expert mouth.

She eased back, pulling his cock out of her mouth and licking down the underside. “I love the taste.” Placing one ball into her mouth, she rolled her tongue over and around.

“God!” His legs were shaking, the need peaking.

“Mmm... Hmmm...” Every sound a ragged moan, she moved her mouth to his other swollen testicle and sucked, using her jaw muscles to add pressure.

Beads of sweat formed along his hairline, sliding down from his forehead. “Don’t tease.”



“I like teasing,” she whispered then dragged her tongue in zigzag patterns up the length of his shaft. Grunting, she took half his cock into her mouth and rubbed her hands on the insides of his legs as she began to suck, moving up and down, every move practiced.

As her rhythm increased, he began to fuck her mouth, rocking forward and backward. The move shoved his cock further into her mouth until the tip hit the back of her throat. There were no gagging sounds, no sense of struggle. Just pure acceptance of his control.

She continued, her head bobbing up and down, her tongue moving wildly.

He could come easily, erupting into her wet mouth, but he wanted more, was desperate for more. Pushing her back, he released a ragged growl and eased Kiki to her feet.

Pursing her lips, she winked and twirled her finger around the leather string of her bustier, pulling ever so slowly. “You hungry for more, baby?”

The dark chuckle came easily, and he rubbed the base of his cock before advancing, yanking the rest of the leather tie. As the bustier fell away, revealing her full breasts, he snickered. Cupping both, he squeezed and let out an exaggerated sigh as he pressed them together, his thumbs flicking back and forth across her nipples. Bending down, he dragged the tip of his tongue around her hardened bud.

Kiki breathed out and brushed her hands up and down his arms. “Do you want to spank me, baby?”

He wasn’t startled by her question but by his body’s reaction. Every cell, every muscle was jazzed as the dark need to dominate, take full control swept into his system. A flash of memories hit the back of his mind hard, clawing at the padlocked box. Hissing, he shut down the visions and slid his lips to her other nipple, sucking then biting.

“Oh. You’re on fire, baby.” She eased her hands around to the button and zipper on her skirt, unfastening then wiggling the supple material past her hips, kicking the skirt away.

Grunting, he crawled his fingers down her chest as he used his knee to widen her stance. He cupped her mound, moving his hand back and forth before sliding his fingers into her pussy.

“Fuck! Oh, baby!” Gripping his shoulders, her legs began to shake as he swirled his thumb around her clit. She panted, a nervous laugh escaping. “That feels... so... good.”

She was wet, her pussy muscles clenching around his fingers. He flexed them open and simply pulsed in and out, his thumb never shifting from position, constantly moving. Biting down on her nipple, he pulled the tender flesh between his teeth, savoring the taste of her skin.

“Oh... my.” Her body tensing, her legs shaking, she began riding his hand, her hips gyrating as his fingers drove in and out.

Riker closed his eyes and slid his other arm around her waist to her ass. Oh, yeah. He was going to spank her rounded ass. Closing his eyes, he slid his mouth across her chest, sucking on her second nipple. Wiggling his fingers, he found her asshole and slipped first one then a second finger inside.

“Jesus!” She rose onto her tiptoes and tossed back her head, her mouth remaining open.

He drove his fingers deep into her ass as he pumped into her pussy, moving in practiced orchestration, her body responding. As he sucked on her nipple, his rough tongue moving back and forth, he knew she was close to coming.

“I can’t... Oh, God.” Running both hands through her hair, she held her forehead and as her entire body began to shake, she issued a keening cry. “Ooohhh!”

Harder and faster he plunged into her ass as he began to pump into her cunt, keeping his fingers wide open.

Kiki’s body swayed back and forth as the climax rolled into an intense wave. “God...”

When she sagged forward, only then did he pull away.

She licked her lips as her eyelids fluttered open. “That was... amazing.” Reaching behind her, she fumbled to open the nightstand drawer, searching blindly for some needed item.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and cocked his head, expecting a condom in her hand. When she handed him a paddle first, he couldn’t help but laugh. “You do appreciate a hard spanking.”

“Oh, fuck, yes. I’d take one every day, twice a day if I could,” she half whispered and produced a condom. Giving him a mischievous look, she ripped the corner of the gold, foil package, cooing as she eased the condom into the light. “One big rubber for one outstanding man.”

As she rolled the condom down the length of his shaft, he rubbed his fingers across the cheap wood, his heart racing. Yeah, he wanted this kind of relationship again. Yes, he believed in discipline.

“Spank me, oh, please, sir.” Kiki leaned over the side of the bed, planting her hands on the silky comforter, her ass in the air. “I’ve been such a bad girl.”

Riker realized his hands were sweating, his mind reeling. Sucking in his breath, he refused to allow the past to interfere tonight. Not now. He needed this and so did she. Pulses of light flashed in his peripheral vision as he tapped two fingers against her ass. Twisting the paddle, he fell into a zone, the one allowing him to let go, to become the man he’d always been.

“A very bad, little girl,” she mumbled, as if trying to encourage him. “Spank me, Daddy.”

He took a step back and tapped the paddle against his hand. He’d long ago accepted who he was, his dark cravings. Only one woman had been able to understand the man inside.

*Smack! Crack!*

“Oh!” Jerking up, she darted her head over her shoulder. “That felt good.”

*Pop! Slap!*

He smacked each ass cheek, moving back and forth.

*Crack! Pop! Slap! Smack!*

“Fuck. You’re good at this,” she managed, her arm flailing behind her.

Riker grabbed her arm by the wrist, pushing it against the small of her back. “Don’t get out of position or we start again.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

*Pop! Crack!*

Panting, he wiped away sweat and continued, thrilled at the solid thudding sound, the way her ass cheeks reddened.

*Whap! Crack! Smack!*

“Oh!” Kiki dropped her head, gulping air. “I am bad.”

“Yes, you are.”

*Pop! Crack!*

*Smack! Slap!*

He rubbed her ass cheeks with the tips of his fingers, the move gentle, a simple caress. My God, he was so hard, so fucking horny.

*Smack! Crack! Pop!*

The punishment continued until his hunger was off the chain, creating a heavy wave of pain behind his temples. Dropping the paddle, he exhaled as he grabbed her hips. “I’m going to fuck you hard.”

Kiki moaned and arched her back, pushing back her hips.

Riker thrust the entire length of his cock inside, hissing as he dug his fingers into her skin. “Yes!”

“You’re so big, baby.”

Adrenaline coursing through every cell, he struggled to keep from shaking as he pulled out until just the tip was inside. He slammed into her again. And again. Moving harder and

faster, he pummeled until the sound of skin slapping against skin overpowered their combine grunts and groans.

She met every hard thrust with one of her own as she tossed her head back and forth. “Fuck me, baby. Fuck me hard.”

*Smack! Pop!*

He slapped his hand against the side of her buttocks as he continued, every thrust harder than the one before.

*Slap! Crack!*

The force pushed her hard against the comforter, but she struggled to shove back, to meet every demand. “Yes!”

*Smack! Whap!*

He knew there was no way to hold back any longer. Stars floated in front of his eyes as his balls filled with cum. Issuing a strangled yell, he rolled up onto the balls of his feet, using his powerful thigh muscles to control him, to allow him the control over her. When he could no longer focus or feel his legs, he let go, releasing. “Yes!”



RIKER WAS aware he'd been sleeping, could tell he was lying somewhere comfortable and warm. As he shifted, he heard someone else breathing and forced his eyes to open. The room was dark, not a stream of light coming from anywhere. He had to think about where he was and what had happened. Exhaling, he rolled his eyes as the memory flooded in. A damn bar. He'd been to a bar and picked up a girl.

Turning his head, he could feel her breath dancing across his skin. Kiki. How could he forget? He had to admit, the time shared had been damn good, but he was disgusted with himself. This wasn't what he wanted. The realization was sickening. The girl didn't deserve anything but respect and he was no man to give it. Not now. Not since...

A lump formed in his throat and he swallowed several times, trying to alleviate the pressure. His head still ached but his heart was worse. His eyes adjusting to the darkness, he

could make out her sleeping form. Her hair was splayed out over the pillows and she'd kicked the sheet almost all the way off. Reaching out, he rubbed her shoulder then pulled back, his mind reeling. Kiki. He had to wonder whether it was her real name. Then again, he hadn't told her his name at all. There'd been no need.

He sat up and swung his legs onto the floor. She was a nice girl, or so it seemed. What the hell had he been thinking? When he stood, he made a promise to himself that he was going to concentrate on work from now on. That was the single aspect of his life that was important.

Riker managed to find his jeans and shirt, and as he finished dressing, she mumbled in her sleep. The sound was sweet, a gentle reminder that they'd been very close. After tucking in his shirt, he walked around the other side of the bed and watched her sleep for a few minutes. It was just after four thirty and while he debated waiting until later, he needed to get home, to be by himself.

A cold chill slithered down his spine and he started to turn away, instead, grabbing the sheet and sliding the slick material up and over her shoulders. He tugged hair out of her face and shook his head. Yeah, this had been a mistake. Grabbing his jacket, he headed for the door, turning to listen for any sounds she'd awakened. Hearing nothing, he closed the door with a soft click.

As he climbed onto his bike, he yanked his phone from his jacket pocket, studying the screen. Someone from the hangar had tried to call three times. Shit. What in the hell was going on? He lifted his head toward the mountains, sniffing for any sign of smoke. He could see or smell nothing.

He pressed redial and waited before revving the engine. "Katie. What the hell is so urgent?" For Katie Myers, the captain's assistant and one hell of an office manager, to be at the hangar this early meant there was an extreme emergency.

"Riker. Thank God. We've been trying to get ahold of you for almost two hours. You need to get here fast."

"What is going on?"

“A massive fire. We need every jumper on this one. This is a special call,” Katie barked. “And I mean now.”

He turned again, studying the sky. “Where? Idaho?” The mountains just across the border from Montana had experienced an entire dry year, the pines subject to caustic fires.

“Nope. West Virginia.”

“What the fuck?” They’d gone West, working on fires in California, Oregon and Washington State as well as Idaho, but West Virginia?

“Don’t ask any questions. Get here. The plane is leaving in thirty minutes and you know how the captain is. Don’t want to piss him off.”

The concern in Katie’s voice was mixed with her usual banter, but the edge was different. “I’m on my way.” Grabbing his helmet, he finagled the clasp and started the engine, jerking out of the driveway and accelerating down the street. This is what life was all about.

Hell, this was all he knew and all he cared to deal with.

After all, he was dead inside.



ON. Off. On. Off. Trinity flicked the switch over and over again, catching her reflection in the window every time the garish light was flipped on, if only for a brief second. Sighing, she glanced over at the clock. Almost five in the morning. She hadn’t even bothered to try and sleep. What was the point? Her life was a disaster, no doubt her career on hold after her escapade with the reporter.

Huffing, she decided to keep the light off and wait, watching for the morning sun. As if the glorious California day would soothe her nerves. She’d spent too many years on a wide-open stage, allowing everyone else to make decisions for her. Well, no more. At least she’d made the decision to be her own woman sometime around two a.m. She snorted and reached for her wine. Drinking wasn’t going to solve anything,

but at least she could dial back the demons floating inside of her head for a little while.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back in the chair, contemplating what, if anything, she could do. Jack Spartan. The name was synonymous with asshole of the highest degree. She tried to remember the first time the reporter had taken a 'liking' to her, following her around like a lost puppy dog. Ah, yes. After the success she'd found with her second film. She hadn't been able to go anywhere without his prying eyes and lens being right there, following her every move. The damn vulture.

Sure, at first his pictures had seemed benign, almost a token of appreciation and she'd allowed him to photograph her. Once he thought he had an in with her, all hell had broken loose. Why the vicious turn? Terse words spouted off at a fundraising event. If only she'd kept her mouth shut.

Trinity curled her legs under her as she sipped on her wine. The taste was somehow bitter, no longer relaxing at this point. She was honestly surprised Marvin hadn't been beating at her door, demanding to know what the hell was going on. Everything was quiet. Too quiet. What if she left town for a few days? Would that help? No doubt, the asshole would just follow her. Jack had a method of hunting her down like a dog in heat.

After a few seconds, her curiosity got the better of her. She grabbed her laptop from the table and flipped open the top. Hesitating, she maneuvered to the internet and waited, typing in her name. Then she cringed. There it was, the glorious story already on the morning news. Her finger hovered over the site before she could find the courage to click.

The picture was telling. She looked haggard, older than she was and bitter. That was the term. Bitter. The headline was perfect, albeit blasphemous.

*Trinity Hargrove After a Night of Celebration*

And the subtitle was even more creative.



*A vile attempt at stomping on the news, the award-winning actress takes out her anger on a local reporter.*

“Wonderful.” She closed the lid and resisted tossing her beloved Mac. Anger didn’t look good on her. No doubt, her phone would start ringing off the hook soon enough. For a few seconds, she thought about doing some writing, her first love. How many books had she started but had to shelve after life interfered? Too many. Words written on paper, typed into the computer were relaxing, a tethering to her past. If only she’d chosen another profession to run to.

What? And lose all the glamor infused into her life? She burst into laughter and was forced to double over. Then the laugh turned into deep breaths and finally another round of tears. She was pathetic. Sucking in her breath, she jerked to her feet, slapping the wine glass on the table. No one was going to best her, especially not some two-bit reporter.

A shower. She’d feel a hell of a lot better. As she walked toward the bathroom, she heard her doorbell. No, not already. She wasn’t prepared to handle the onslaught of crap that would be tossed her way. She folded her arms and paced her bedroom floor.

The bell was pushed again.

She just knew the asshole, Jack, was standing outside her front door, waiting for her rebuttal, her comment on what he considered the truth. If she was a smart and sensible girl, she’d leave well enough alone. But she wasn’t.

The bitchy side grabbed what was left of her mind, and she headed down the hallway, taking long strides. If the jerk wanted a piece of her, he was going to have to reach in and grab it. By the time she stormed into the foyer, the bell had been rung a third time. She turned on every outside light, hoping the fucker would be blinded. Hissing, she looked through the peephole, ready to strike. “What?”

Trinity smiled as she opened the door. “Ana? What are you doing here?” Ana Phillips was her cousin, her best friend and the very reason she was in Hollywood in the first place. Granted, at this moment, she could kick the girl’s ass. The

beautiful brunette continued to model, the place where Trinity started. After a bit part in a movie, Trinity was discovered, now much to her chagrin.

Ana squinted and glanced toward the roof line as she held out two steaming cups of coffee. “I thought you might need a friend, but if I’m going to be interrogated, forget about it.” Grinning, she winked. “Are you going to let me in?”

“Of course. I haven’t seen you in months. Let me guess, you read the paper.” Trinity closed the door behind her, making certain the locks were in place, as if that would keep out the rest of the world. Flipping off the outside lights, she shivered. He was out there. She’d bet all she owned that he was biding his time.

“Mmm... Well, actually, I had a phone call last night right after the prize-winning fight. Drove up from San Diego because I knew you’d be in a tizzy.”

“Very funny. I don’t do tizzy. I do pissed off.” She took a cup and wrapped her other arm around Ana. “Thank you for giving a shit about me.”

“Wow, girl. You sound like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

Trinity eased back and shrugged. “I guess I do. Just...”

“Come on. Let’s go sit down. Tell me what happened. Not that I don’t think the jerk deserved it, but the way the various newspapers are depicting the story, you’re the big, bad wolf.”

“I wish I were at this point.” She led Ana into the kitchen and turned on the light over the stove.

Ana leaned against the counter and dropped her purse. “So, what are you going to do about the reporter?”

“Nothing I can do. He hasn’t threatened me in any way or said anything that was totally dishonest.”

Ana tilted her head. “This whole crap about your past is absolutely wrong. The man needs to be stopped, no matter how.”

“But what has he said really? Nothing.”

“Insinuations of inappropriate behavior. And that’s for a start.”

Trinity exhaled. “He has no idea what the truth is.”

“Then get an injunction against him.”

“At this point, that would only fuel the already nasty fire. I need another course of action.” She took a sip of coffee, relishing in the burn. “Like leaving town. The state altogether.”

“You’re going to let Mr. Jerkoff win? That’s not like you. You *are* pushed to the wall.” Ana touched Trinity’s arm. “I’m worried about you.”

“At least somebody is.”

“Why didn’t that boyfriend of yours do the punch?”

Trinity laughed. “Chance is a wimp. Do you honestly think he’d allow himself to break into a sweat to help anyone?”

“Maybe not.”

“He won’t be coming around.”

Ana lifted her eyebrows, a grin spreading on her face. “Why is that?”

“I threw him out last night. I think it was just after he called me a bitch.”

Coughing, Ana slapped her hand against her chest. “That fucking asshole. Why are men such meatheads?”

“If you find the answer to that question, we’ll be golden.” Trinity chuckled, feeling more relaxed than before. “What did I interrupt with my outburst?”

“Just a modeling gig for Cartier. Nothing special.” Ana purposely fluttered her eyelashes.

“You are the bitch. My guess is you’re happier than I am.”

“Happiness is highly overrated. That’s what my agent keeps telling me anyway. That and the fact I’m almost over the hill.”

Trinity grimaced. “At twenty-nine?”

“At twenty-nine. Don’t worry about me. I have some irons in the fire. Now, as to the reason I’m here.”

She could tell her cousin had something up her sleeve. “What have you done?”

“Not what I’ve done, yet. But I have an idea for you. If I know my beautiful and ultra-talented cousin, I’d say you’re ready to take a long vacation to somewhere that not a single person can find you. Am I correct?”

“You know me well. I just don’t know where that is or how I can get away.”

“You know I’m sneaky, right?” Ana rolled her eyes.

“Just another thing I love about you. Now, you’re killing me. If you have a way for me to get out of here, just disappear, you can have anything you want.”

She tapped her finger across her mouth. “Deal. Do you like cowboys? Mountains? Fresh water? Outdoor activities? A place with blue skies, amazing spring flowers and some of the nicest people who will have no idea who you are?”

“Sounds like heaven. Is there such a place?” Trinity had to admit, she was intrigued.

“You bet there is. One catch.”

“There always is.”

Ana leaned forward. “You let me stay here, in your house so I can do some snooping and try and find out what Jack boy is up to. And no, you can’t refuse me. Period. You know how I can be when I don’t get my way.”

“I don’t know if this guy is dangerous.”

She studied her cousin for a full minute before reaching into her leather bag.

Trinity opened her eyes wide when the cold steel flashed in the dim light. “What are you doing with a gun?”

“A girl can’t be too safe or too rich, especially with assholes out there like this Jack person. Don’t worry. I’m licensed, and you bet I know how to use this.”

She studied the firepower and couldn't help but smile.

“Don't you dare chastise me!” Ana huffed and slid the gun across the counter.

“That is not even close to what I was going to say.”

“Then what were you going to say?”

Reaching out, she wrapped her hand around the grip. “That I need to get one of these.”

“Hmmm... Honey, where you're going, you can get a sexy man to take care of your business. Maybe in more than one way.”

“You're so bad.” Trinity could feel the heat rising on her face.

“Do we have a deal? I'm the super sleuth and you can have two or three cowboys at your beck and call.” Ana held out her hand.

She thought about the arrangement and had to admit, she liked the idea on several levels. All she had to do was pack a few things and leave town. Perfect. “Deal. Just don't get yourself killed.” The handshake felt good, as if she was taking her life back.

“Don't you worry about me. I think Jack Spartan is the one who has to worry.”

They both laughed, giggling like old times until they heard a distinct thud against the door.

“What the fuck?” Ana asked between clenched teeth and grabbed the gun.

“And so, it begins.” Shivers raced down the back of Trinity's legs.

“Stay here.” Ana walked out of the room, every step with purpose.

“Ana!” Racing after her, she had no idea what to expect, even though her gut was screaming with new fears. Pandora's Box had to stay locked.

Ana flung open the door, holding the gun out in front of her. “All right, you bastard. You aren’t going to mess with us!”

Looking down at the stoop, Trinity sighed and reached for Ana’s arm. “A present.” The white envelope said so many things. Shaking, she reached down, tentatively grabbing the edge. While the envelope wasn’t heavy, she had a feeling she knew what was inside.

“No return address,” Ana remarked.

“Something new in his game. Jack is always the same, never varies.” Trinity held the envelope and walked back into the kitchen with heavy feet.

Ana slammed the door, the force reverberating into the hall. “Last night rattled him, but you don’t know this is from him. Maybe that sad sack of a boyfriend of yours is trying to say he’s sorry. If you take him back, I will disown you. No pressure.”

Trinity tried to smile as she opened the flap and reached inside. “Here goes.” The moment she tugged out the contents, she sagged against the counter. “Get me out of here as fast as you can.”

“Oh, shit, honey. I’m so sorry. He’s a dead man.”

## CHAPTER 3

“*J*esus F. Christ.”

Riker looked over at Landen Weaver and grimaced. Yeah, the plane ride was for shit, the turbulence the worst he'd ever experienced. “How much longer in this thin steel box?” He directed his question to their captain. The fact that Captain Scully Phillips was on the trip with them said a hell of a lot about the fire they were facing.

“Almost an hour,” Captain Phillips answered without looking at his watch.

Landen exhaled and glanced out the window. “How did this thing kick up again?”

“The authorities don't know for certain,” Antonio Giovanni stated as he edged forward in his seat.

The head of the crew and one ferocious Italian seemed completely out of sorts. Riker knew the entire team was off kilter, the order dragging half of them away from a few days off. “But they suspect arson?”

“Or kids playing with matches,” Stoker Hansen added.

Riker noticed the jumper's right leg was thumping against the metal floor. To say the father to be was anxious was an understatement. What little he'd learned about the fire was that they were the closest smokejumping team available and given the spring conditions, leaves on the trees, there was fresh fuel for the already devastating blaze. The Appalachian mountain area was considered park territory, the pristine landscaping and various resorts already busy.

“Not likely. The cold nights certainly aren’t a draw for kids. It’s even early for hikers,” Garcia Puevos said and gave Riker a look.

Everyone was questioning why they were involved. From the reports issued by their spotter before they’d left the hangar, there were dozens of firefighters on the scene. To have a fire get out of hand to the point of needing jumpers was disconcerting to say the least. He glanced at the unusually quiet rest of the team. They’d incorporated members from another more prominent group months before. The three had learned to fit in, even becoming friends to most of the guys. Not to him. He didn’t need any new friends, nor did he care what they had to offer.

Matt Washington struggled to climb out of his seat. The man known as ‘Moose’ had continued to vie for leadership, sparring against Antonio and even the captain more than once.

“Sit down. We don’t need any injuries before we get there,” Riker commanded.

“Shut the fuck up,” Moose hissed.

“Sit down,” Steel Frost’s voice was surly.

Moose glared down at the man and shook his head. “We have no reason to be here.”

“Gentlemen. That’s enough!” the captain snarled. “We’re doing this. We were asked by the Governor of West Virginia specifically to come in and help. Over ten thousand acres have burned, and I don’t have to tell you, that’s a hell of a lot for the area. We need to get in, do our job and make certain the firefighters can do theirs. Be ready to jump as soon as we get there. I suggest you make certain your gear is in order.”

Tyler walked toward the men, his voice booming over the noise. “I’ll be spotting. Just remember to take some time and look over the maps you all have. This is vital if we’re going to be successful.”

“Did you hear me?” the captain added.

The words hung in the air.



Sawyer Lincoln, the oldest and the senior jumper on board cleared his throat. “You heard the man. Get ready. We will do this. We are the Jackals!”

“Jackals,” Stoker repeated.

“I don’t hear any enthusiasm!” Sawyer barked.

“Jackals.” Moose smiled as he raised his eyebrows, his stare meant for Riker.

Riker ignored the moment of revelry and faced front, clenching his fists. The plane jerked, tossing them down a solid thousand feet.

“Shit!” Moose exclaimed as he was thrown against Garcia. “Glad when we get off this thing.”

“Sit down!” Antonio directed.

“I’m getting in position. Maps, gentlemen. Maps!” Tyler directed

Smiling, Riker resisted chuckling. Yeah, the three new members, including Zane Grey, the only man on vacation for this soiree, had proven their worth. There was no reason for him to remain caustic, even nasty, but he’d realized over the last few months that the emptiness was creeping into a desperate level. No matter.

“What’s up with you?” Landen asked as he leaned in. He fumbled to grab the handheld computer, pulling up the required map. When Riker didn’t answer right away, he raised a single eyebrow. “You’re not still pissed at the last gig, are you?”

“The last gig?” Riker asked, knowing exactly what he was referring to. The last major fire, late in February had created more tension between the men, the reason was something they’d all ignored.

“You know what I mean. Jesus. Let it go, man. This is a new season.”

“It’s only spring.”

Landen snorted. “You are such a hard case lately. I thought I was bad.”

“Come to think of it, you have been in a surly mood.”

“Just arguing with Shannon. Been a rough couple of months.” Landen eyed the screen. “There are only a few ways to try and cut this fire off, Antonio. Do you have it mapped out?”

“Best I can. We go in from the southern point and head west.” Antonio called to everyone.

Riker nodded as he rose to his feet, ready to grab his bag. He’d learned to keep a spare at the hangar for these reasons alone. He’d had no time to go back home and grab his things.

“Where were you last night? Even I tried to call.” Landen pushed by him, reaching up to the overhead bin. As the plane dipped again, this time bumping up, he groaned. “The wind shears are ridiculous.”

“I wasn’t available.”

“I thought you were going riding. Must have been a nice, long, hard ride,” Landen teased.

Riker huffed as he dragged the bag to the floor.

“Thirty minutes out. Get ready,” Captain Phillips called.

“I was busy. Okay?” Riker pulled out what he needed.

“Geez, dude. You need to lighten up. I hope the ride was nice. I’m not judging you. You’ve been out of sorts and way too quiet lately.”

He knew Landen was only trying to be a friend. “Sorry. You’re right. Just been a rough few weeks, but getting over it. Let’s get the gear ready.”

“Shit! Would you look at that fire,” Stoker huffed only minutes later. “That’s amazing.”

“Wow. The entire side of the mountain is on fire,” Garcia added.

Riker crouched over, staring out the window. He could see they would be dealing with at least two separate fires. They were going to have their hands full. “No other smokejumping team as back up?”

Antonio looked at the captain. “The Rattlesnakes might be called out if necessary.”

“Why do I have a shit bad feeling about this?” Garcia asked through clenched teeth.

*Whoosh! Boom!*

“Fuck!” Moose yelled as he rubbed his head. “Can this pilot fly a damn plane?”

“The wind is really bad. No wonder that fire is rolling. God. Damn. Would you look at that?” Sawyer’s voice was stilted.

*Crink!*

“I don’t like these noises,” Boone said, a nervous laugh pushing past his lips.

“Yeah. I don’t either.”

“Gentlemen. The fire is spreading west. We need to get out ahead of this,” Tyler quipped. “In position in seven minutes.”

“Seven minutes. I’m not sure the forest has seven minutes,” Steel said, the coldness in his voice catching everyone off guard.

*Wham!*

The plane dropped in altitude, careening down nose first.

“Goddamnit!” Captain Phillips yelled as he struggled to get out of his seat. “What in the bloody hell is going on?”

“Sir, we’re...” Tyler started as he placed his hand over the earphone.

From where Riker sat, he could see a look of terror in the man’s eyes. Inhaling, he took another glance out the window. At the rate they were losing altitude and the direction they

were heading, they stood a chance of smacking into the mountain.

*Whoosh! Bam!*

“Fuck. Me,” Landen hissed, white knuckling the seat in front of him. “I don’t like this.”

“Gentlemen. We may have a mayday on our hands.” Tyler turned to face them, his face ashen.

“If the pilot doesn’t get the damn plane up in the air, we’re going to be a decoration in that fire,” Sawyer snarled.

“Come on, baby. You can do it.” Antonio’s voice boomed.

“Come on,” Boone added.

“Sit down!” the captain yelled.

“Brace for impact. I’m sorry, guys. We aren’t going to—”

*Bam!*



“I’M GOING AWAY. That’s all the information you need to hear, Marvin.” Trinity paced back and forth as she looked up at the departure boards. The plane was on time. Leaving from the Las Vegas airport had been another brilliant idea of Ana’s. She’d even taken a rental car, leaving hers in the garage. No one was going to find her, not until she was ready. If she was ever going to be ready.

“You can’t just disappear, Trinity. The newspaper articles alone are scathing. Do you have any idea how many phone calls I’ve received this morning alone?” Marvin barked, his voice getting louder.

She held out the phone and resisted telling him off. “You can handle them. I don’t need to be there.”

“Just tell me where you’re going so I know how to get in touch with you if an emergency arises.”

“An emergency? You mean if another reporter makes a useless threat?” She remained on edge, angry and wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with a good book. “No,

I'm not going to tell you where. I have some time and I'm going to enjoy myself. I deserve this, Marvin. You know I do." The man should be jumping for joy that she was in the news.

He exhaled, the sound exaggerated. "I'm not trying to suggest that you don't deserve time off, but now? Right now? We have so much going on and that reporter is getting a lot of attention for what he wrote about you."

She could hear the angst as well as the anger in her agent's voice. She laughed when she heard the statement. "As if I give a rat's ass what that jerk printed. I'm not going to fall prey to his ridiculous comments. Neither should you." Rubbing her eyes, she couldn't wait to get on the plane, bound for a destination she'd never been to. A glass of wine, a good book and nothing but time.

"Trinity. Honey. You're a star and you have to act like one at all times."

"I won that award for you, didn't I? I *am* willing to talk contracts later." Much later.

"That's not good enough."

"Well, it damn well better be!" Cringing, she moved closer to the wall as almost everyone around her heard her nasty exclamation.

Marvin snorted. "Just answer me this. Is what Jack Spartan is saying true? If it is, we need some serious damage control, which takes planning, which means you need to be here. Not gallivanting off on some tropical island."

"No! The motherfucker is a lying sack of shit!"

"Shh!" A woman smacked her index finger over her mouth, her expression admonishing.

"He's just trying to garner attention," she whispered.

"Well, he's doing just fine. At some point, we're going to need a statement from you. There is no other way around this." Marvin half laughed.

"Marvin. Handle it! I pay you a hell of a lot of money to handle my business. A hell of a lot. This is the least you could

do for me. Get it? I'll call you in a few days." She could tell the plane was boarding. Grabbing her carry on, she headed for the gate.

"There are the contract negotiations as well."

"No. Damn it! The contract can wait. I will talk to you later." Ending the call, she hissed and tossed her phone into her purse. My God, she couldn't even get away from the vultures for a few days. She thought about calling Ana, but her cousin knew how to handle herself. Maybe she should have given the girl some instructions on what not to do. She had a terrible feeling Ana was going to dig into Jack's life, thereby creating another nightmare. Well, how the hell could the situation get any worse?

Heading closer to the departure area, she pushed aside her anger. This was going to be a damn good trip, one way or the other.

As she waited in line, she was cognizant that at least three people were staring at her. She hadn't bothered to throw on a disguise. Lowering her head, she yanked out her phone, fiddling with it as she scooted the luggage with her foot.

"Is that who I think it is?"

The man's voice was gruff, the whisper loud enough several people started to look around.

"Did you hear what they said about her? Disgraceful!"

Trinity yanked the collar of her jacket up over her ears and refused to make eye contact with anyone.

"Next." The attendant scanned her ticket and smiled. "Have a good flight, Ms. Hargrove. I hope you enjoy your stay in Missoula."

"Thank you. I hope so too." Missoula, Montana of all places. She had no idea what to expect when she arrived. She'd been given an address and a set of keys to a cabin. She could only pray to God that the place wasn't in some campground. Absolute alone time was needed, no, required for her very sanity.

Maybe for her soul.

The moment she eased into her seat, she felt better. When they were in the air, she finally breathed a sigh of relief. The jerk wasn't going to get to her any longer.

“Would you like a beverage?”

Trinity smiled at the flight attendant. She'd allowed herself to fly first class, one perk before heading to cowboy town. “A gin and tonic with two limes.”

“Absolutely, and may I say, I love all your movies.”

“Thank you.” As she noticed the closest passenger doing his best to figure out what movie she'd been in, she slunk further into the seat. You bet she was going to have to come up with some kind of disguise.

The drink firmly planted in her hand, she sat enjoying the view, the beautiful sun and white puffy clouds. Her thoughts drifted to her past, time spent with what she'd considered to be the best friends of her life. She'd lost touch with everyone since making it big in Hollywood. She laughed and took another sip. Some big-time actress. In her eyes, she was nothing but as fake as the rest of the actors, all portraying something they weren't.

She eased her phone from her purse and shook her head. Marvin had sent her four texts, all begging her to return. The man wasn't going to stop until he owned her. The word made her shiver. She'd wanted a relationship for so long that she'd allowed Chance to slither into too many facets of her life.

She could just envision his face the day he came swaggering back to her house, no doubt with flowers in his hand, trying to win her back. Ana would kick him in the balls. Too bad she wasn't going to be there to see the festivities.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a flash on her phone. An incoming email. Swallowing hard, her hand began to shake. If the freak had gotten her personal email, she was going to hunt him down. Very tentatively, she eased her glass down into the holder and held her finger over the screen. She couldn't be terrified all the time. Besides, what Jack thought

he knew was all wrong. But coming clean wasn't necessarily any better.

Hissing, she shored up her courage and flicked her finger across the screen, pulling up her email. She smiled seeing that the majority were garbage, except for the one from Ana. The bobble headed figure at the beginning made her laugh. The pictures were merely aspects of Montana, mountains and rivers, the city from above and what looked like a ranch complete with horses.

*I found someone to stock up, but you'll need to go to the store.*

*Find yourself a cowboy...*

Yeah, as if she was looking to find a man. There wasn't a man alive she would ever be able to trust. Not again. Not after... Sliding her phone back into her purse, she finished her drink. After a few seconds, she closed her eyes, exhaustion settling in. There hadn't been two consecutive days that she hadn't been on call, filming a movie or negotiating contracts in the last year and a half. No wonder she couldn't keep her eyes open.

*"There you are. I've been looking all over for you. I need to talk to you. It's important."*

*She glanced into his face, his horrified eyes. There was no way to help him, not any longer. She closed the door behind him and walked toward the couch, sitting on the edge and wringing her hands. "I don't know how to help you."*

*"I think you do." Inching closer, he eased onto the couch beside her, yet keeping his distance. "You're the only one who can help me. I don't know what to do."*

*"You should have thought about that before." She heard the edge in her voice and closed her eyes. How had everything gotten so off track? How had she allowed this to happen? There was no recourse, no way she could right the wrong.*

*Exhaling, he remained quiet for a solid minute. "I know I've put you in a difficult position. That wasn't my intention."*



*“But you did. You’ve placed both of us in a dark place and I’m not entirely certain we can crawl out of it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”*

*He reached over, taking her hand.*

*She yanked it away. “Don’t touch me. Don’t you ever touch me again!” She didn’t have to look at his face to know she’d hurt him, but at this point, there had to be some distance between them.*

*“Carrie, I care about you more than you know.”*

*“And I care about you, but that doesn’t change anything. What happened is wrong, very wrong. What you did was... horrifying.”*

*“But I did it for you...”*

Jerking awake, she slapped her hand over her mouth, unsure whether she’d issued a cry out loud or not. She glanced at the passenger across the aisle. He was dozing, his eyelids closed. Thank God. Beads of sweat remained above her lip and she wiped them, rubbing her hand back and forth. The nightmare was never the same, but the last few words always ended the dream. He did it for her. The guilt and worry had burrowed its way into her heart and soul, leaving ripples of desperation for the first few months. Now, the ache was dull, but a constant reminder. There was no way to run from the past. Jack would eventually figure out everything and when he did, she’d be ruined.

A single tear slipped past her lashes and she allowed the salty bead to trickle down the side of her face. Maybe she should simply come clean then move on with her life in obscurity. Yeah, as if that would erase the damage done, the wretched moments and the anger and hurt.

Nothing ever would. Nothing.



“JESUS CHRIST, the wind is strong as fuck!” Stoker yelled over the roar of the fire.

Riker took a step back, lifting his mask and rubbing away the soot and grime. After glancing up at the tree line, he yanked the cord on the chainsaw, moving his arms in swinging motions. They were just damn lucky the plane had been able to land. Hell, they were lucky to be alive. At least the pilot was damn good.

Landen moved by his side, cutting in the opposite direction. He wielded the saw like no other jumper, using his powerful muscles to maneuver his way through the dense underbrush.

“Hold on!” Antonio called through the microphone.

Riker just made out the call and eased back, touching Landen on the shoulder.

“Timber!” Boone called out.

Both men looked up as they heard a cracking sound and backed away. The crown fire had taken out a significant portion of trees and this one came crashing down, embers flew, raining down on the barren land.

“Come around to the right. We’re making headway.” Antonio’s voice cut through the whirl of the powerful motors.

Landen shook his head and trudged over the underbrush.

He could see Stoker and Garcia digging trenches just ahead, the rough work exacerbated given the parched earth. The area was usually lush and green, but the massive water shortage given the lack of rain had taken a significant toll on the landscaping. Everything was dry as a bone.

Swirls of smoke billowed into the air, making breathing difficult. The late afternoon sky created shadows throughout the forest, but the orange glow of the almost uncontrollable blaze lit up the horizon.

“We need to create a burnout,” Sawyer suggested, his voice garbled by a decreasing connection.

“He’s right,” Moose called. “If we can burn the timber to the right just past the control line, we should be able to deny the main fire any additional fuel.”

“The wind is changing direction. We have to be careful,” Frost added.

“Grab the fuses,” Antonio commanded. “We need to use the railroad flares for maximum thrust.”

Riker shook his head. He’d been in enough of these kinds of fires to know the wind could alter everything in a split second. He continued cutting, the dulling blade now having difficulty cutting through the dense wood.

“Every man in position!” Boone called out.

He followed Landen toward the others, finally switching to his ax. Using the power of his upper body strength to slice through the briars and smaller trees, but he knew he was falling behind.

*Whoosh! Hiss!*

Two flares were tossed into the sky, rocketing over his head. Riker glanced at the angle. No doubt Boone had tossed, his accuracy almost dead on the money. He continued cutting, creating a pathway, working his way in the direction of the rest of the team. Methodical in every cut, he could hear the jumpers moving off to the right.

“Riker. Call in. Where in the hell are you?” Antonio’s voice boomed through the microphone.

“On my way,” Riker answered.

*Wham!*

The thunderous noise was off to his left, creating rumbles in the earth.

*Bam!*

The second seemed closer. Too close for comfort.

Turning, he managed to see what appeared to be a flash fire rolling past the control line. “Fuck. We have an issue. The line has been breached. I repeat, the line has been breached.”

“Stay where you are. We’re on the way.”

He heard the concern in Antonio's voice, knew the correct protocol. Then he heard something else.

"I found... a... sur... vor." Moose's call was cut off.

"Repeat," Sawyer was the first on the call.

Riker hesitated, listening for any signs or sounds coming from within the forest.

"Survivor and..." Squaaa!

The hiss on the other end of the line was followed by a series of squawking blips then dead silence. "Is anyone there?" Riker called out. The same hissing followed. "Fuckin' fantastic." For some reason, their communication lines were gone. He thought about where he'd last seen Moose and took long strides in that direction. He could hear the crackling sounds of the fire coming from behind him. The team might have one chance to extinguish the flanking flame before it spread uncontrollably.

Taking long strides, he moved over the fallen limbs and other debris. If the jumper had really found a survivor, there was little time to try and get the victim to safety.

*Wham!*

Huffing, he ducked as another limb pummeled to the ground, spearing the earth just to his right.

"Goddamnit! Anyone there?" Riker realized any additional communications at this point was useless. Shitty fucking equipment. The smoke was acrid, thickening to the point he had difficulty seeing more than a few feet in front of him. Still, he pressed on, moving deeper into the trees. The wind whipped, forcing a shower of embers cascading from all sides. The only saving grace was the fact the sparks had yet to start any additional fires that he could see.

Riker swung the ax, taking out anything in front of him as he trudged over and around, sweat beading into his eyes.

"Stay there!"

He heard Moose's voice, the call directed to someone else. "Washington!" Standing still, he sucked in shallow breaths as

he listened for an answer. Any answer.

“Over here!”

When the call finally came, he shifted his position, moving faster. His gut told him Moose was running out of time. “Shout out!”

“Here.”

Riker was closer. Almost there. The air around him was sweltering, the crackling and popping sounds echoing. When he could see a flash of color, he raced in the direction.

Moose was hunkered down, leaning over a fallen limb, the oversized log massive in size.

“What do you have?” Riker closed the distance, panting as he surveyed the situation. “Fuck!” The small boy was obviously unconscious, his tiny hands clenched into fists. By the boy’s side was a dog, his fur matted and covered in soot, his eyes wide with fear.

“His leg is stuck. I can’t get him out,” Moose huffed as he placed his hand on the dead wood.

The dog whimpered then let out a mournful howl.

“Damn it.”

*Whoosh! Slam!*

As the earth rumbled again, he could see a line of fire, an intense blaze coming their way. “We have to get him out of here. Let’s do this.” Riker jumped over the log, crouching down and digging at the dirt. The boy’s foot and lower ankle were crushed into the dirt.

“I tried digging him out. Damn shit is like rock,” Moose wiped his mouth.

“We need to get leverage. Where’s your ax?”

*Bam!*

Another limb fell, hitting the earth with a hard thump.

“I have it. We don’t have much time.” Moose yanked the ax handle in front of him.

Pitching the chainsaw, Riker looked up and down the log. “Put the head right there and don’t do anything until I tell you.”

“Got it.”

*Woof! Woof! Woof!*

The dog began to bark, jumping backward and forward, his mouth frothing from saliva.

“It’s okay, boy. Hold on.” There was a snowball’s chance in hell at getting the kid out of here in time. The heat was suffocating, indicating the fire was engulfing everything in its path. He shoved the ax under the base of the tree, praying to God the steel was strong enough. “On the count of three, up and over.”

Moose nodded and both men crouched down, preparing to use leg muscle.

*Woof! Woof!*

“One. Two. Three!” Grunting, he leaned into the ax handle, pushing. After a few seconds, he could hear the creaking sound as the log rolled just a few inches. “Come on, baby. Come on.”

Both men strained, groaning as they continued to push, their feet now planted wide apart in the ground.

“Aaahhh!” Moose hissed. “Move, damn it.”

*Woof!*

*Wham! Whoosh!*

Another group of embers flashed down over them, this time several sparking flames. “Move. Move. Move!” Riker struggled, using every ounce of energy.

*Crack!*

The second Moose’s handle snapped at the metal tip, all the weight was put on Riker.

“Fuck!” Moose screeched. “We can’t do this.”

“We... will,” Riker continued pushing, his strength waning. “Dig. Dig!”

Moose dropped to the ground, snagging the metal portion of the ax. He began to dig around the little boy’s leg, huffing as he struggled to free him.

His entire body was shaking, and he could hear cracking sounds coming from below. If he lost the grip or if the ax snapped, the boy could be crushed. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on his breathing. He could do this. He would save the little boy.

“Almost. Hold on!”

The sound of Moose’s voice seemed to echo, mixing with the hissing noises coming from the encroaching fire. *Hold on. Please God, let me hold on.* As the seconds seemed to slow down, all sound muffled, he opened his eyes and in those few precious seconds, he could see his little girl, his baby, Grace and her dancing eyes.

“Clear!” Moose yelled as he took two giant strides backwards.

Riker continued to keep his grip around the ax, his body now shaking violently.

“Riker! All clear. Let go!”

*Grace. Baby!* As he let go and eased backwards, tears slipped from his eyes.

“You did it. Fuckin’ Jesus Christ. I don’t know how, but you did.”

*Woof! Woof!*

Leaning over, he panted as he tried to collect his breath. Reaching out his arm, he managed to give a slight smile as the dog nuzzled against his hand.

“We need to get the hell out of here.”

Riker looked over his shoulder before struggling to stand upright. The fire was only feet away.

“Come on, Riker. We have to fuckin’ get the hell out. Run.” Cradling the boy in his arms, Moose took off running.

Riker turned all the way around, studying the fire, looking the beast in the eye. He took a step forward, reaching out as visions of Rose and Grace flashed in front of him.

“Run!”

The call was haggard, the sound muffled.

*Woof!*

As the dog jumped up on Riker’s legs, the vision disappeared. Blinking several times, he shook off the intensity and homed in on the sound of Moose’s call.

“Now!”

He took off running, the dog closely at his heels, the fire spreading to trees beside them. As he jumped over a log and twisted, he could see the line of fire racing down a tree.

*Wham!*



## CHAPTER 4

“Welcome to Missoula, Montana.”

Trinity heard the words, but her mind continued to reel from the vision. She was furious with herself that she'd fallen into the trap, allowing guilt and sadness to interfere with her life. After grabbing her bags, she headed for the row of rental car kiosks. As she stood waiting, she was drawn to the beautiful view outside the massive set of windows. The mountains were incredible, highlighted by the beautiful sunny day, not a cloud in the sky. Snow remained on the peaks and the dichotomy of colors from the pristine snow to the deep forest green of the trees was majestic.

She certainly hadn't known what to expect, but this was amazing. “Wow.”

“They don't call it God's country for nothing.”

Glancing toward the jovial voice, she found herself nodding as she slid her driver's license onto the counter. “I can see why.”

“First time?” the clerk asked.

“Yes. I had no idea.” Trinity glanced out the window again, marveling at the landscape. This was completely unlike Los Angeles.

“Then I'm happy to give you some ideas of where to go.”

Trinity grinned at the perky blonde. “I'd like that.” You bet she planned on curling up by a roaring fire, drinking a bottle of

wine, reading and cocooning, but eventually she'd have to venture out into civilization.

"I have your rental and a list of fabulous places," the clerk said as she handed Trinity a set of keys and a folder.

"You are fabulous."

She stood staring at the massive, sleek, black truck for a solid minute, until the chilly breeze forced her to react. "What the hell?" She checked and rechecked her paperwork. This must be Ana's idea of shoving her out of her comfort zone. How in the hell was she supposed to even get inside the huge monster mobile? Groaning, she unlocked and opened the door, tossing her things onto the passenger seat and floor. After slamming the door, she walked around to the driver's side. Opening the door, she huffed.

Thank God, she'd worn jeans. Shaking her head, she glared up at the seat then down to her legs. She was tall, but Jesus Christ. Hearing a dark laugh behind her, she bristled.

"Little lady, need some help?"

She gathered a whiff of his cologne, rugged and exotic. No doubt she'd turn around and the man would be short and balding. "I'm fine."

"You sure about that?"

The deep baritone was far too sexy, a slight twang, or what she'd call cowboy twang. Exhaling, she gritted her teeth to keep from lashing out. Then again, she must look ridiculous staring at the driver's seat as if needing a set of stairs.

"Don't worry, I'm not a mass murderer or a Jehovah's Witness either. See that wide silver border right there?" When she didn't respond instantly, he chuckled again. "Called a running board. Thick and strong enough that drivers use it as a step."

Glancing down, she groaned. "I'm really not this stupid." As she turned around, she was taken aback. The man standing in front of her fit the sound of his delicious accent. Tall, dark and handsome was just the beginning. She knew she must have acknowledged the fact in some manner that she was

panting since he remained grinning. Wearing faded blue jeans, a T-shirt and leather jacket, his scuffed boots and large canvas bag slung over his shoulder could have garnered him a modeling gig.

“Just not used to trucks. Really big trucks. I can see that.”

“Very true,” she said then laughed. “Thank you. I appreciate the information.”

“Sure thing, ma’am.”

The cowboy was even wearing a black Stetson. At least she knew her cowboy gear given the modern western flick she’d been coerced into being a part of. His chiseled face and steel blue eyes were mesmerizing. A long, tall drink of water. Wow. If this was the kind of men in Missoula, she just might... A shiver trickled down her spine. No men. Still, a girl could admire.

He tipped his hat and smiled after giving her a once over, his expression full of appreciation. “Forgive the forwardness. New in town? Visiting our fair city?”

“That obvious, huh?”

Lifting a single eyebrow, he nodded. “Let’s just say that I think the locals forget how incredible the mountains are. I can always tell a look of utter appreciation. That usually means the person isn’t from around here. Forgive my rudeness. Zane Grey.”

“Trinity Hargrove.” She realized she’d used her stage name without thinking and cringed. When there was zero sign of recognition, she breathed a sigh of relief. “The locals don’t know what they’re missing. I’m used to seeing traffic, lots and lots of traffic and glass buildings as far as the eye can see. This is... perfection.”

“Hmmm... Yes, I think you’re right.” His eyes never left her face.

A flush of heat crept up from the swell of her breasts, rising to her cheeks. She squinted at the sun in an effort to hide her embarrassment. “I’m looking forward to staying here. Any recommendations?” Why was she trying to keep the

conversation going? The man could turn out to be an ax murderer after all.

“Let me think. You have to go hiking. There are dozens of trails leading up through some of the most incredible scenery. Beautiful with the various colors. The rivers are wild this time of year, but the water is crisp, refreshing, but if you’re into white water rafting, this is the best place in the world. I don’t go out to eat much, but Ziggy’s is a local bar and restaurant and Maggie’s serves up the best breakfast in town.”

“Sounds amazing. Thank you.”

“No problem. Sorry, I have to run. Sure, you don’t need help getting into that truck of yours?” Zane winked.

“I’m fine.”

“Enjoy your stay.” He turned then stopped, shifting so he could look into her eyes. “If you get bored, stop by Ziggy’s tonight. I plan on having a beer or two.”

“Ziggy’s. I’ll keep that in mind.”

She watched him walk away and for the first time in several days, she was able to smile almost like she used to. That was before life seemed to go to Hell.

Grabbing the handle over the door, she planted her foot on the running board and hoisted herself up, successful after three attempts. Then she burst into laughter. A cowgirl she’d never be.



TRINITY CHECKED and rechecked the address, comparing the email to her GPS. “This has to be it.” The small mailbox appeared new but the area surrounding the gravel road was all woods. As a matter of fact, there didn’t seem to be a neighbor within miles. Then again, the winding two lane road didn’t allow her much opportunity for sight-seeing.

She read the numbers one last time before turning onto the driveway. Tall trees flanked both sides, various pines leaning toward the center. As the gravel crunched under the tires, dust flew up from underneath, creating a haze. She could just make

out a small clearing up ahead. The moment she rolled into the space and directly in front of the small brown and beige cabin, she groaned. The small structure seemed more like a cape cod house from Anywhere USA than a vacation cabin in such a pristine location.

Beggars were certainly not allowed to be choosers. After parking, she threw open the door and grimaced when she jumped down. She must look ridiculous driving such an oversized truck. Well, this was a new place and she was a different girl, at least for the time being.

The moment she unlocked the door and walked inside, she grinned. The place was small, but someone had taken the time to update just about everything from the light maple wood flooring to the small but luxurious looking fireplace. Ana's purchase had been a damn good one.

Her eyes swept up to the second floor. From where she stood, she could see an alcove, complete with a bed and several book cases. Dropping her things, she explored. The kitchen was adequate, the bar top table positioned in front of a gorgeous bay window overlooking the back yard. The appliances were new and the floor a rich two-tone ceramic.

The living room had an overstuffed couch and chair and a single table, all positioned directly in front of the fire. There was a bathroom, an impressive wooden deck and one additional room that served as an office and guest room. The alcove comfy and inviting, the master bath was adorned with a claw foot bathtub. She rubbed her hand on the side and closed her eyes. This might be the first stop, one long, hot soak. A few candles. Nice music. A slice of heaven.

Fifteen minutes later she'd unpacked, placed her items in the bathroom and found the two bottles of wine in the small pantry. She'd even selected a paperback novel from the bookcase. Now, she could relax. What she'd also noticed was no sign of music, no television and after firing up her computer, zero internet connection. Even the bars on her cell phone faded in and out. She was effectively cut off from the world. Was that such a bad thing? Peace and quiet for the first time in months?

Maybe...

A glass of wine in one hand, the book in the other, she headed outside, just in time to catch the sun disappearing behind one of the mountains, shimmers sparkling on the snow-capped peaks. Inhaling, the scent of fresh air filled her nostrils, a light chill creating goose bumps. She slid into the weathered Adirondack chair and kept her gaze on the incredible view. This was home for at least a couple of weeks, maybe longer. At least there was no formal timetable, no real need to get back to her former life, other than the contracts.

She thought about the next movie and in truth, couldn't remember the plot or the cast. She seemed to go from one to the next without taking the time to plan out her next venture. Then again, she wasn't the master of her universe. Maybe it was time to leave. The thought wasn't new and certainly not because of some reporter. Acting wasn't her life and never had been. What she wanted to do was far more representative of the girl inside.

The book in her hand was new. There were no turned down corners or hidden bookmark. There were no crinkles in the cover or any sign that the book had even been read. She thought about the realization as she read the back. The love story centered around a Colorado ranch, a former model and a mere ranch hand. A laugh bubbled to the surface. A simple life. How quaint and wonderful.

Trinity took a sip of wine and settled into reading. Only a few pages in, she realized that she could write this kind of drivel in her sleep. And she had no doubt the author had made tons of money. She'd brought the laptop with her for a sole reason. To write. How many stories started over the last few years? How many ideas popping into her head at any given time? Hundreds. *You can do this. You can write the next great American novel.* She snickered at the thought. No, she wasn't good enough, but perhaps one day she could be. Dropping the book on the deck, she sighed and crossed her legs. Two weeks or more of 'me time'. Two weeks of quiet. Two weeks of... loneliness. Great.

The bath never manifested but the pacing did. Back and forth. From one end of the tiny house to the other. Boredom had settled in and it was only seven thirty. The food in the refrigerator she considered rabbit food, no doubt hand selected by Ana, who hadn't eaten a cheeseburger in most of her life.

She stood at the front window, glaring out at the truck. No music. No entertainment. She was going to go mad. Her thoughts drifted to the sexy cowboy. Ziggy's. An interesting name for a bar. A sexy man. An invitation. But had he actually invited her or just made a comment to be nice? Either way, the place had to offer up a better evening than the one facing her. If there was anything she loathed, it was being bored to freaking death. After one more look into the cabinets, she decided. This evening, she'd celebrate vacationing on her own. Tomorrow, she'd purchase some groceries that she could actually eat and resign herself to holing away alone. Very much alone.

But, tonight? One juicy cheeseburger. And maybe a little flirting. She grinned as she walked up the stairs toward the bedroom.

After throwing on a different blouse, she headed out. This was an adventure after all and she was a big girl. She could find her way. The truck remained daunting as she drove down the winding road, going back the way she came. Only when she reached the main road did the bars on her phone become prominent. She pulled into a gas station and flipped to the internet. To her surprise, Ziggy's was only a couple of miles away.

The parking lot was full, the vehicles an interesting combination of pick-up trucks and well, more pick-up trucks. Maybe Ana had known what she was doing. She found a spot in back and had to convince herself to walk inside. What if she was recognized? What if she was hassled? The what ifs were going to fry her brain. Counting to five, she opened the door and fell out onto the pavement. The drop was just enough to skin the heels of her hands. Groaning, she darted a look in both directions. Yep, a tourist in action.

She grabbed her purse and slammed the door, wiping her hands on her jeans, laughing the entire way to the entrance. Walking inside wasn't just surprising, the experience was delightful. Seeing the flashing neon signs, the expansive dining room and elongated bar was inviting, even comforting. The crowd was lively, their voices booming over the multiple television sets and jukebox style country music. Her usual hangout was a corner jazz bar, the sometimes pianist and sultry singer. The only electricity coming from a few claps at the end of a set.

"Would you like a table?" the hostess asked as she swung her hips back and forth to the music.

"I don't know," Trinity had to admit. "Maybe just the bar?"

"You'll be lucky if you find a spot. Game night," she said then narrowed her eyes. "You've never been here before so let me see what I can do."

Seemed everyone realized she was a newcomer. She waited as she studied the crowd of men and women, various ages and sizes and while her rather keen observation skills allowed her to pick out those with money, she could tell no one cared. Missoula wasn't about who had the fancier and more expensive car or conversations revolving around the latest conquest, whether in real estate or women. Everyone just wanted to have a good time.

"Follow me," the hostess beckoned.

She trailed behind, landing a spot smack in the center of the bar. "Thank you. This is perfect."

"No problem." The hostess patted her arm. "If you're bothered by any of the local yocals, ask for Shannon. She'll kick their butts just as soon as asking them to leave you alone."

"I'll keep that in mind." Trinity shook her head as she slid onto the barstool. She was beginning to like the city. Within seconds, the bartender approached, his grin matching his twinkling eyes.



“What will the pretty lady have?”

“A glass of merlot. I mean, if you have that.” She wanted to ask for tequila but knew better given the drive and darkened roads. She’d leave that for another day, maybe celebration of finishing her first book.

He tapped the bar and pushed a coaster in her direction. “We might not be the big city, but we do know our wines. How about a selection from Oregon? I have a bottle from 1992 that I think will be perfect for a spring evening.”

Blushing, she rolled her eyes. “Ugh. I’m sorry. As long as it goes with a cheeseburger.”

Rubbing his jaw, he offered a pensive look. “Let me think. Cheeseburger dripping with cheese. A side of the best French fries this side of the Mississippi? I think this will do perfectly.”

“Then your choice sounds divine.”

“Excellent. Comin’ right up.”

Glancing up and down the length of the bar, she enjoyed people watching, catching snippets of conversations. While she’d received several admiring looks, not a soul seemed to recognize her, let alone beg for an autograph. Maybe Hollywood didn’t extend to cowboy country.

Trinity noticed a vibrant redhead move behind the bar, the woman’s eyes sweeping the entire room. After talking with the bartender, she waved to a girl sitting alone a few seats down. Even with the rowdy noise, she caught the majority of their conversation.

“Laney. Haven’t seen you in a couple weeks. How are things?” the redhead asked.

“Hey, Shannon. They’re great, although the kids are a handful with the warm days. I can’t keep their minds on school work,” Laney answered as she swirled a wine glass.

“Uh-huh. I can tell you’re worried. Have you heard from Garcia?”

Laney shook her head. “Not since they left.”

“I wouldn’t worry. Flying to West Virginia was a surprise. You know they’re just busy. I used to worry about Landen constantly, but I learned to box up my fears.”

*Wham!*

A loud noise drew Trinity’s attention. Two men were pointing fingers, yelling over the music. She held back a smile as Shannon promptly walked from behind the bar and toward them, her expression changed to the look of one pissed off vixen.

“Hey! You two. This is a nice establishment. Take it outside or you’re banned for life. Got it?” Shannon demanded, her finger shoved into one of the dude’s faces.

She couldn’t help but admire the feisty woman. If only she could be just as forceful in her career, hell, in her life.

“Sorry, Shannon,” the second man said, his face sheepish. “Just a disagreement.”

“Outside. One warning.” Shannon gave both a hard look before taking long strides back toward the bar. She leaned over, grinning at Laney. “Now, where were we?”

“I heard a plane went down and...” Laney stated, her voice fading off.

“You came,” he half whispered.

The deep and very masculine voice was right behind her. Trinity inhaled before tipping her head. The cowboy had changed, the simple blue Henley the color of his eyes.

“Zane. Remember? The airport and one big he-man truck?” Zane laughed as he crowded into the bar.

“How could I forget?”

“Glad to see you.”

“Zane! You’re here. What happened. Where are the guys? Are they on the way?” Shannon piped in, storming in their direction.

Zane opened his eyes wide. “What are you talking about?”

“The trip to West Virginia? Some plane crash?” Shannon demanded, giving Trinity a single nod.

“Wait. West Virginia?” Zane shook his head. “I was on vacation. Just got back a couple hours ago. Haven’t even called in. What are you talking about?”

“Vacation? I didn’t think smokejumpers were allowed any vacation time. Landen hasn’t gotten any,” Shannon huffed as she reached the other side of the bar.

Zane smiled at Trinity. “They didn’t have a choice. A wedding I couldn’t get out of. Now, freaking tell me what you’re talking about.”

“Hold your horses. Let me see what I can find on the news.” Shannon pointed a remote at the closest television, flipping channels.

“Smokejumper?” Trinity asked as Laney approached, her eyes misting over.

“Yeah. Laney, right?” Zane asked, his eyes darting up to the television.

“Yes. You remember. Have you talked with Garcia?” Laney asked, her voice almost inaudible.

“As I was telling Shannon, I have no idea what the team is up to. Just rolled in. Plane crash?” Zane hissed.

Laney nodded. “I caught one of the morning shows today, just the tail end, but a plane fell out of the sky and it was full of firefighters.”

“Okay. This isn’t making any sense.” Zane looked down then motioned to Laney. “I’m sorry. Laney... Cavanaugh? This is Trinity... Hell, I’m sorry.”

“Hargrove. Trinity Hargrove and don’t worry. Looks like everyone is worried. Nice to meet you, Laney.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt your date,” Laney gave a half smile as she shook Trinity’s hand. “You look familiar.”

“We’re not dating,” both Zane and Trinity said at the same time.

Trinity laughed. “I just met Zane at the airport and I get that about my face all the time.” She looked away, grabbing for her wine and hiding behind the glass.

“Damn it! I can’t find anything.” Shannon growled and continued flipping.

“I’ll call the hangar and see what I can find out. Hold on. I’ll be right back.” Zane seemed awkward saying the words.

“Okay.” Trinity looked back and forth between the women. “Do you mind if I ask, what’s a smokejumper?”

Laney smiled. “Don’t feel bad. I had no idea before I met Garcia. He’s my fiancé and a member of the team. They fight fires, the worst kind only they don’t use water. They cut down timber and cut trenches to try and push the fire in another direction. Dangerous work. Very dangerous.” She looked down, her lower lip quivering.

“I’m sure he’s all right.” What else could Trinity say to the poor girl?

“He loves the work. He was going to quit, and I talked him out of it. Now, I’m beginning to wonder why. I don’t know how I’m going to be able to get through the season.”

“Season?”

Laney nodded. “Summer is the worst time for fires going into the fall. When there’s a huge drought then the foliage and ground is dry. Fires start any time. Like California last winter. Brutal.”

She remembered the terrible season, had been lucky enough to live in an area that hadn’t been affected.

“Wait. I might have something,” Shannon said loudly.

Laney crowded into the bar, leaning over. “Oh, please be all right.”

“In breaking news, the fire on the Appalachian’s is now almost fifty percent contained. Given the improving weather

conditions, local and national firefighters believe they have the blaze under control. While there have been no casualties, a plane carrying smokejumpers from Missoula, Montana went down.”

“What?” Laney screeched.

Shannon stumbled back toward the other side of the bar, grabbing Laney’s hand. “Hold on, honey.”

Trinity watched as the cameras panned to an overhead view of the fire. “Shit.” The blaze seemed to be covering dozens of miles if not more. “Contained?” She looked over her shoulder. At least fifty people had crowded up to the bar, all eyes on the television.

“No!” Laney yelled.

“Fortunately, the plane was able to land and from what we’ve learned, all the crew members are safe and accounted for,” the reporter continued.

“Yes!” Shannon slapped her other hand on top of the bar. “That’s our boys!”

The crowd cheered.

“We’ve also learned that two of the members of the Missoula team were responsible for the rescue of one lucky little boy and his dog.” The reporter was smiling.

Everyone leaned in further, watching in awe as the picture shifted to a parking lot of a hospital. Several people were gathered around, including three different television stations. The camera panned in on a sobbing woman, her hand clutching the fingers of a little boy. A man was crouched down, hugging on a dog, tears in his eyes.

“Oh my God.” Laney shook her head.

Trinity was sucked in, watching every moment as the scene continued to remain chaotic, reporters clamoring to get closer to what had to be the family.

The report was switched back to the blonde. “From what we’ve learned, both men risked their lives to save him as the fire threatened to consume the area. They were able to pull

him to safety just seconds before the entire area went up in flames. I'm trying to confirm their names."

"Amazing," a man said behind Trinity.

"They do this kind of thing all the time," another said.

"Hey Shannon, how about a round on our heroes?" a third asked, getting the entire crowd jazzed.

Shannon lifted her arm, shooting off her middle finger. "Not a chance, boys. You pay to play."

Trinity chuckled and glanced back at the door. Zane seemed troubled as he walked back inside, his brow furrowed. He glanced up at the television, watching the report for several seconds before heading back in their direction.

"What did you find out?" Shannon asked.

"I should have been there. Damn it. They needed me," Zane said under his breath.

"Everyone okay?" Trinity asked.

Shrugging, he rubbed his mouth. "I need a bourbon."

"I think we all do," Shannon stated then grabbed a glass.

"You have a team?" Trinity was more than curious given the reactions from the customers.

He nodded and leaned against the bar. "Yeah. Ten of us. If I'd known, I wouldn't have gone. We count on each other."

"You deserve to live your life," Laney suggested.

"Not when it risks the others," Zane countered.

Trinity was taken aback. She'd never been a part of a life-saving team and the realization of how much they cared for each other was heart-warming.

"Wait. There's more. Look at those faces." Shannon laughed as she pointed at the screen.

"From what we've just learned, Mathew Washington and Riker Sheffield were the two smokejumpers responsible for saving Eric Baker. Eric is only six years old and walked away from his family during an outing. I'd say Eric and his dog,

Rusty are very lucky to be alive. While I don't have all the details about the event, I can tell you that both Mathew and Riker are two seasoned smokejumpers with the Missoula, Montana department. They were called here to help with the fire and from what I can see, their new title will be heroes."

"Yes!"

The entire room seemed to be clapping, whistling as the man they called Mathew's picture was flashed on the screen. Trinity studied the man's face, his tired eyes and sighed. What a life.

"Good guys. All of them," Zane said as he wrapped his hand around the rocks glass.

Trinity exhaled and realized she was shaking, her pulse skipping. Why? Because she fell into the camaraderie of the entire room? The thought was riveting.

"There's that sexy man!" Shannon called then placed her fingers into her mouth, letting out a shrill whistle.

As the second picture flashed on the wide screen, Trinity sucked in her breath. Riker Sheffield. She could honestly say that she'd never seen a sexier and more attractive man in her entire life. Electric jolts shot through her system, every cell and every muscle until she was panting. And she knew at that very moment that she came to Missoula for a reason.

"Wow." As the single word left her mouth, she caught Zane's expression.

The man was crushed.

## CHAPTER 5

“*J*esus Christ. Aren’t you exhausted?” Landen asked as he sat back in the seat, using his fork to push around his food.

“Slept on the plane ride back.” Riker gave him a look then took another bite of his sandwich. The three days had been grueling, the flight back at least better than the one going in. There had been zero sleep and he was exhausted. The vision of his wife and little girl had left him restless, the bitter sadness and anger keeping him on edge.

*“Mama!”*

*“Oh, my little baby. You’re okay,” she sobbed as she leaned over, covering his body with hers. Seconds later, she looked up, reaching out for Riker and Moose. “You’re the men who saved my little boy?”*

*Riker swallowed hard, nodding as he blinked several times, pushing away the tears.*

*“Just doing our job, ma’am,” Moose muttered.*

*“You’re wonderful, my heroes. If there’s anything I can do for you, anything at all.”*

Riker clenched his fist, the memory of the woman’s tear stained face and haunted eyes would remain in his mind forever. A buzzing sound floated in his ears, creating a series of jitters. He gripped the table in an effort to keep from falling over.

“Riker. Yo, buddy. You okay?”



“What?” Riker finally managed. The buzzing faded but he was left with a throbbing ache just behind his eyes.

“You look like shit,” Landen huffed. “Go home. Put your feet up. Drink a beer.”

“I’m fine. Good. Just fine.”

“Bullshit!”

Shrugging, he exhaled and shook his head. “I’m fine, Landen. Leave it alone.”

“That’s what you’ve been telling me for weeks. You’re anything but fine.” Landen folded his arms, his brow furrowing. “Heroes are allowed to sleep, you know,” he teased.

“Stop with the hero shit. Moose and I were in the right place at the right time.” His thoughts shifted to the little boy, the angelic face and the way he wailed when he saw his mother. He’d also never forget how the little boy hugged his dog, clinging to the matted fur on the pup’s neck the entire flight in the helicopter.

Landen shook his head. “The kid was lucky and one day you’re going to have to explain to me how you kept that tree in mid-air all by yourself. You’re strong, dude, but holy crap, that was insane.”

He didn’t want to remember the incident or the visions he’d experienced, but he had the distinct feeling they weren’t going away. A single shiver shifted down his spine, settling into his legs. He hadn’t experienced anything like that in years. Not since... Swallowing, he looked away, studying the various people shopping, laughing and going about their day to day business. Happy. They all seemed happy. For him, nothing would ever be so simple. Casual. “Adrenaline. You know the story.”

“No, I don’t know. I’ve never been put in that kind of position. Even Moose is silent about the shit.” Landen leaned over, as if waiting for an answer. “You guys bury the hatchet once and for all?”

“There was no hatchet. We just don’t get along.”

“Right. Tell me another lie.” Sniffing, he took another bite of his food then reached for his beer. “Well, anyway. I heard some shit through the grapevine.”

“How do you always hear shit? We just got back a few hours ago.”

“Shannon knows all.” Laughing, he shoved his plate back and kept his voice low. “She said the entire government center was evacuated the day we left.”

“Evacuated? Why?”

“Bomb threat.”

“What?” Riker hadn’t heard any news since their return, not that he’d bothered to turn on the television or open a paper. He’d heard enough about the life saving maneuvers to make him sick to his stomach. Tossing his sandwich, he wanted nothing more than to crawl in bed, sleep for a full day. Lunch had been more than a diversion, an attempt to stay awake. He had no doubt the nightmares would come, filling every night with memories, horrors from the past. He couldn’t go through it again. Not ever.

“Yep. They found a device, but the damn thing was unarmed.”

“Any idea of the perpetrator?”

“Not from what Shannon heard,” Landen said. “One of the city council members has disappeared too.”

Riker snorted. “I’m beginning to wonder if any of the powers that be are on the up and up.”

“I hear that. Then again, the mayor is doing an okay job.” Landen polished off his beer. After a few seconds of quiet, he pushed back his chair. “Okay, Mr. Talkative, do you want to see a game or something this weekend? Just you and I?”

Narrowing his eyes, he’d known something was wrong with Landen for almost two weeks. His buddy had stayed late at work and hadn’t bothered to come to Ziggy’s more than once. “What’s up with you and Shannon?”

“Eh, nothing.”

“My turn to say bullshit.” Riker offered a slight grin.

“I don’t know. Growing pains. I think she’s been spending too much time around Jessica and Stoker. You know, the baby coming and all.”

“That’s interesting. Does she want a kid now?”

Landen looked away. “I’m beginning to think she does. She won’t tell me in so many words, but she’s hinting.”

“At what? Marriage? Babies? Shannon is the kind of woman who comes right out and tells you exactly what she wants. That’s what you love about her.” The old angst settled into his system. There had been a time, albeit short lived, that he’d wanted nothing more than to spend quality time with Shannon. Then she’d become more like a little sister. While he was happy for the two of them, he could tell there was trouble in paradise.

“That’s the issue. She’s not telling me anything, but she’s barking lately, reminding me of all my sins. You know how I am.”

“Pigheaded?” Riker grinned. When his friend remained quiet, he exhaled. “Look, just talk to her. You know. Talk?”

“I’m trying. Just hard right now. I don’t know why.”

“Love, dude. That’ll do it to you.”

“Yeah, you oughta know. I should take tips from you and your marriage.” Landen laughed then shut down. “I’m sorry. That was shitty of me.”

A sadness crept into his heart that was more difficult than seeing Grace’s sweet face. He closed his eyes and winced, hearing her little cries and giggles. “Just let it go. Okay?”

“Yeah. Sure. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me.”

“Let. It. Go!” Riker hated the nasty tone in his voice but the last thing he needed was to be reminded of the past in any manner.

Before Landen had a chance to reply, both of their cell phones rang. “What the hell?”

“Not another damn fire. Jesus.” Riker jerked out his phone. Seeing the emergency system, the one for the entire city go off, he looked up at Landen. “I’ll make the call.” The platform had been recently established, allowing every emergency team to know about various emergencies. However, the system had only been used once.

“Yeah. This isn’t normal.”

He dialed the number. “Riker Sheffield from the Missoula Auxiliary Smokejumping team. What is the emergency?”

“We have a report of a bomb threat at the corner of Second and Main Street in the Best Buy box store. What is your location?” the dispatcher asked, urgency in her voice.

“We are located across the street. Is there any additional information?” Riker glanced out the window, eyeing the stand-alone store. From what he could tell, there were several people inside.

“None. The call was made ten minutes ago. You are the closest EMT in proximity. Proceed with caution. Get everyone out. The bomb squad is on the way. ETA is five minutes.”

“Will do.” Bomb squad? Since when did they have an actual bomb squad? Riker jerked out his wallet, yanking and dropping two twenties. “We have to go, brother.”

“What’s going on?” Landen immediately jumped to his feet.

“Outside.” Riker darted his eyes in the direction of the full restaurant.

Nodding, he followed Riker outside, his face pensive. “What’s going on?”

“Bomb threat.”

“What? Are you kidding me? Just like the other one. A call was made then nothing. Might be a hoax.”

“We can’t take that chance. We’re the closest team.”

Landen groaned as they jogged across the street. “Team? Shit, we’re not equipped for this.”

“Yeah? Well, we have to get the people out. Now.” Riker hit the entrance first, moving inside and taking long strides toward the cash register by the door. “Where’s your manager?”

“In the back,” the kid answered, giving Riker a contemptuous look.

“Get him or her out here, now.” While Riker kept his voice down, he made certain the young man could see the commanding look on his face as he pointed to the smokejumping badge on his jacket. At least the damn thing was official looking. “Now.”

“Yes, sir. Ms. Maverick. Will you come up to the front immediately?” the kid mouthed into the microphone.

“How many employees are in the back?” Landen asked as he surveyed the store.

“Five, maybe six.”

“Get them up here as well but do it quietly,” Landen instructed.

Nodding, the young man locked and moved away from his register, scampering toward the back.

“Go ahead and start asking everyone to leave. Mention that there is an electrical issue.” Riker could tell they were already being watched by at least two customers.

“Yep. Got it.” Landen headed toward the aisles.

Riker waited until the manager approached, her eyes darting back and forth.

“Can I help you?” She glanced up and down, her expression exasperated.

“Mrs. Maverick, we have a situation.” Riker took her arm, leading her outside. “My name is Riker Sheffield and I’m with the Missoula smokejumpers. We need to get everyone out of your store immediately. There’s been a bomb threat. Make an

announcement that there's been an electrical issue and the store must be shut down. Nothing more. Understand?"

"Are you kidding me?" she blinked and looked up and down the street. "Smokejumpers? You have no authority here."

"I'm a public servant with the city emergency team. My authority is to make certain that you, as well as your customers and employees are safe. While I apologize for the interruption, there is no time to wait. Just go inside and make the announcement," Riker encouraged, yet he heard the distinct edge in his voice as he towered over the diminutive woman. "Time is of the essence. Am I making myself clear?" If he had to handle the announcement himself, he sure as shit would. "Now!" He could see the first group of customers coming outside, watching every move he was making. "Please, just get away from the building. Go across or down the street." Now, he was barking orders. Hoax or no hoax, they couldn't take any chances.

Frowning, she gave his badge a second look. "If that's absolutely necessary."

"It is!"

"Fine." As she headed back inside, he scanned the area for any sign of an unwanted visitor, including any suspicious vehicles. Nothing drew his attention. He noticed the calm but questioning face of a young woman, her eyes never leaving his actions, her strawberry blonde hair fluttering in the wind. She stood with her arms crossed, a wry smile on her face. A single siren sounded in the distance. Damn, they were taking their sweet time.

"What's going on?" A wide-eyed woman asked, her tone bordering hysteria.

"Why don't you come with me," the strawberry blonde tugged at the older woman's arm then beckoned to several of the other customers as they raced out of the building.

Riker nodded in her direction, giving her a respectful look then heard several terrified yelps, forcing several of the

bystanders to become not only curious but terrified. Hissing, he walked back inside just as the manager finished her statement.

“Thank you and we apologize. Please come back later,” Mrs. Maverick said, her voice now shaking.

“Ladies and gentlemen, right this way. Please go outside and move away from the perimeter.” Riker directed, keeping a smile on his face. He could tell the hysteria was mounting.

“What’s going on, officer?” A young man fidgeted as he approached. “Come on, Mama. We need to go.”

“Just some electrical issues. Nothing to worry about,” he answered, ushering them to the door.

“That’s bullshit. I’m an electrician,” the young man said.

“Sir, go outside. Now. Do you understand me?” Riker was in no mood to play games of any sort.

“Is there a bomb threat?” the man demanded, getting in Riker’s face.

“Hold on here. Please just follow directions,” Mrs. Maverick half-whispered.

“What?” the older woman yelped as she dropped her bags.

Riker shook his head. “Outside. Please. Come on.” He moved past the line of people and could feel the vibe of fear increasing. When it appeared everyone was out, he motioned toward the manager. “All the employees out?”

“Yes, I think so,” she stated, wringing her hands.

“Go outside. I’ll do a last sweep. Keep everyone back at least two blocks. Do you understand?”

“I do. Thank you. I…”

“Come on, I’ll take you outside.” Landen took her by the arm.

“I’ll go down the aisles and check the back again.” Riker scanned the store.

“Don’t be a hero on this one,” Landen said gruffly.

Riker waved him on and took long strides, moving up and down the aisles before heading into the back. He slammed his hand against the bathroom door, going inside and checking under the stalls. Passing through the two offices, he studied the area, looking for any concept of a bomb. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

The stock room in the back was filled with boxes as well as pallets of merchandise. A damn bomb could be hidden anywhere. He made certain there was no one hiding inside and could hear the sirens all around him. Just as he was about to walk out of the room, he noticed a group of boxes on the exterior wall. They were empty but instead of being broken down, as a nearby pile would indicate the practice, the boxes were piled on top of each other.

Sucking in his breath, he took careful steps in the direction, gently pulling first one then a second off the pile. When he reached the bottom, he blew out the heated air. A black box stood on the concrete floor, a single red-light blinking. "Fuck me." This had to be the bomb. Against his better judgment, he crouched down, studying the object. He'd been around a few bombs in his career, mostly after they'd detonated. This appeared to be the real thing.

The sirens drew closer and he inched back away from the object. *Don't be a hero.* The words reverberated in the back of his mind, only they didn't belong to his partner, but the woman who had been his entire world. What the hell did it matter? He studied the bomb, listening for any sounds, ticking or otherwise. Part of him wanted to dismantle it, see what they were really dealing with.

No. This was crap. There was no sense in getting himself killed over some asshole who wanted nothing more than to showcase his testosterone levels. He jogged toward the entrance, racing outside just as a group of fire engines and other emergency vehicles pulled up.

"Shit. There you are. What the fuck were you doing?" Landen chastised as he stormed in Riker's direction. "We have hysterical people out here."



“Trying to figure out what we were dealing with.” Riker moved to the curb, heading in the direction of the sheriff’s car.

“You were pretty rough on the manager.”

The words caught Riker off guard. Stopping short, he glared at the blonde, a nasty retort on the tip of his tongue. They locked eyes as he walked closer until he was able to inhale her perfume, the exotic scent filling his nostrils. She was attractive, he’d give her that, but no doubt a handful, arrogant and opinionated. “Necessary when bystanders interfere with an emergency situation.”

“Emergency? I thought this was an electrical issue.” Her face held a look of amusement.

There was no reason for him to care what she thought, but at this moment, he did. “Even a malfunctioning power supply can mean potential danger.”

“Danger. Of course.” She looked at the crowd. “Sometimes people just want to know everything in their meager world is going to be all right,” she stated so that only he could hear.

Before he had an opportunity to comment, he noticed the sheriff heading in his direction.

“Riker Sheffield. Right? Sheriff Brennan James. Is everyone out?” He surveyed the scene, turning his head back and forth.

“Yeah. There’s a bomb located in the back room,” Riker answered in a hushed tone as the young woman backed away.

“Yeah. That’s what the asshole caller said. Same damn voice as the other night. Get out of here and let the bomb squad do their jobs. You did good, buddy. Thanks for the help,” Sheriff James said then immediately moved away.

“Come on, Riker. Nothing else we can do,” Landen said under his breath and tugged at Riker’s arm.

Riker shook his head. The last thing they needed was another threat in the city. Whatever Shannon had heard was true. This was getting out of hand. “Yeah. Whatever.” He stood for a few seconds then walked toward the street.

“I can tell that look in your eye. What’s bugging you?” Landen yanked out his sunglasses.

“There’s something about that bomb that doesn’t seem right.” He thought about the mechanism, the almost cheap plastic.

“And you’re the bomb expert?”

“I’ve seen a few in my day.” Riker made mental note of the design of the supposed bomb. Perhaps Antonio would have a few ideas. Considered the bomb expert on the team, he’d been able to utilize his skills on several occasions. “I bet the asshole is watching us right now, enjoying the calamity he created.”

Landen snorted. “I would agree with you. Longing for those fifteen minutes of fame.”

“Gentlemen, do you mind telling me what’s really going on?” The same blonde approached both men, her arms crossed.

The girl’s voice was softer, less inflammatory and the sound sent an odd series of sensations into his belly. Riker turned in her direction. “As we mentioned, simply electrical issues.”

“With all this firepower?” She nodded toward the various EMT vehicles. “I think you have a bomb on your hands.” A wry smile crossed her face.

He resisted the snarky words that came to his mind. “While I appreciated your help earlier, let the firemen and other emergency personnel do their jobs. You can go ahead and leave.”

Landen glanced back and forth. “Are you aware of any details we should know about, Miss? Did you see anyone fleeing the scene?”

Narrowing her eyes, she darted a look toward the edge of the building. “A black van drove off just as I arrived. Does that help?”

“Maybe. Did you notice any distinguishable marks, a logo or happen to see the driver,” Riker asked, as if it was his job to play detective. He could see such fire in her eyes as well as amusement. She seemed to be looking right through him or perhaps into his very soul. Damn, if he wasn’t uncomfortable as shit.

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t paying that close of attention. Just came here to buy a television.”

“That’s a shame, but you should tell the sheriff what you saw. Might come in handy,” Landen said as he smiled. When she didn’t look in his direction, he stepped in between them. “Come on. I’ll guide you across the street.”

“You’re that smokejumper. Right?” She took a step away from Landen and directed her question to Riker.

“I’m a member of a smokejumping team. Why? Are you some reporter looking for fame and fortune? Trust me. I don’t need another damn story written about me.”

She laughed. “Hell, no. I freaking loathe the vultures who think they’re investigating the news. I’m merely a curious tourist, new to your town. Even Los Angeles isn’t this exciting.”

Riker shook his head and took her by the arm, curious about her vehemence. “Need to get you out of the way, Ms...”

“Hargrove, Trinity Hargrove and I can handle myself. Thank you, Mr. Sheffield.” Yanking her arm away from his grip, she stood defiantly, her eyes never leaving him.

Landen inched closer, a grin crossing his face. “Having issues there, buddy?”

“Nothing I can’t handle. The lady was just leaving,” Riker insisted. “You can go see that nice deputy over there and give your statement about the van.”

“Uh-huh. I can see that. You’re doing a great job with the ladies.” Landen held out his hand. “Landen Weaver.”

“As I said, Ms. Hargrove was just leaving,” Riker snapped. Los Angeles. The city of the rich and famous. Perfect. No

wonder she had a haughty attitude.

“Lover’s quarrel,” Landen said under his breath then popped Riker on the shoulder.

Trinity lifted a single eyebrow, her look of amusement fading.

An air of tension remained.

“Okay, well we need to get back to the hangar, don’t we?” Landen asked, taking a couple of steps back.

“The way you saved that little boy and his dog was courageous. The whole bar was talking about you the other night, cheering you on as if you were indeed some kind of hero. Sad to see that you have a chip on your shoulder the size of a boulder. Kind of dampens the knight in shining armor aspect. Don’t you think?” Trinity shook her head and turned away, walking into the crowd.

“Wow. I see you haven’t lost your touch with the ladies. Impressive,” Landen snickered.

Riker snagged his sunglasses from his shirt pocket and jammed them on his face, watching as she faded into the distance. What in the hell was that about? “Tourists. Pain in the ass.”

“Synonymous with women in your book.”

Grimacing, he took a deep breath then a last glance at the building. He had a feeling the game of cat and mouse was just beginning.

*Whoosh! Boom!*

“What the hell?” Landen and Riker crouched down.

Screams peppered through the crowd, the explosion creating near panic as everyone ran into the street.

“No. No!” Landen raced toward them. “Everything is okay.”

Riker stood to his full height and studied the building. There were no flames or debris flying in the air.

As several members of the fire department rushed toward the building, the two officers from the bomb squad rushed out. They were covered in what appeared to be soot.

“What the fuck?” He headed toward the sheriff, who was barking orders into his radio.

“Just get the evidence team down here, now! I mean, now. Do you understand?” the sheriff snapped then tossed his radio in through the window of his cruiser. “I don’t believe this shit.”

“A dud,” Riker said quietly.

Sheriff James shot him a look and raised a single eyebrow. “Looks like it. This asshole is grating my last damn nerve.” He shook his head as he took long strides toward the bomb squad. “What’s the situation?”

Landen flanked Riker’s side. “Do you have a feeling this guy is sending a message?”

“Yep. And I have a bad feeling the next one is going to be much worse.”



TRINITY GROANED as she walked away. When the explosion hit, she’d ducked down, terror racing through her. There were no flames, no indication of an actual bomb? She controlled her breathing and kept her head down as she walked quickly toward the truck and perhaps some level of safety.

Why had she confronted Riker, interfered with the emergency? She honestly had no idea other than the fact she’d been surprised seeing him walk through the door. Had there really been a bomb threat? Her thoughts drifted to the black van. There’d been nothing suspicious about the vehicle, but she’d noticed the darkened windows and the fact the driver had slowed in front of the store, before jerking around the corner. What if Jack Spartan had found her, sent his crew after her?

A chuckle pushed past her lips. *Right.* As if she was that important, even to his story. A bomb, even fake? No, this was

way beyond anything the reporter had ever considered. Still, she remained shivering, troubled by the entire ordeal. Riker had seemed disturbed by the event as well. As she unlocked the cab and climbed in, she glanced over at her groceries. The shopping trip had almost been completed. She'd hunt for a Target or even a Walmart to finish with her purchases. The two days alone had been more grueling than she'd originally thought.

She'd even politely declined Zane's invitation for dinner or drinks. She sat quietly, contemplating what to do next. My God, she was actually bored. Dropping her head against the steering wheel, her mind wandered, delicious images floating back and forth, the vivid colors accentuating the fantasy. She'd even struggled with creating a new story, her mind full of the crap in her life instead of a tall, dark and very handsome hero.

Maybe she'd found the perfect muse. And damn, the man was much better looking in person. Tall, muscular, a carved face and a chiseled body, the close-cropped hair and intense eyes giving him a dangerous persona. Mmm... Riker was all male, that was for certain. She inhaled and could still gather a slight hint of his cologne, the earthy and very masculine kind of smell that made her mouth water and her pussy clench.

Trinity leaned back against the seat and groaned. "Well, if I can't have the perfect man in real life, why not in the pages of a scathing, sinful book?" She had no doubt her fantasies were going to have to do. The man seemed to have an instant dislike of her. After starting the engine, she glanced one last time at the chaotic scene in front of the store before pulling out. She did love a good mystery.

She was just outside of the city limits when her cell phone rang. Ana was supposed to call. Fumbling, she had to reach over to grab her purse, tossing half the items out of her bag before she was able to secure her phone and answered without looking. "Glad you called now, before I lose reception."

"Trinity?"

Hissing, she debated ending the call. "Marvin. I asked you to leave me alone. What didn't you understand?"

“I wouldn’t bother you if this wasn’t for a damn good reason. Have you looked at your email lately?”

“No, I’m trying to take a few days off. Remember?”

“Well, you need to and you’re going to have to issue a rebuttal of some kind.”

“You mean because of the asshole?” she snarked, her mood shifting to abysmal.

Marvin exhaled before answering. “We’re not playing games with this any longer, Trinity. The man has made some rather horrific accusations that are about to go public.”

“Marvin, I’m not going to—”

“You are, Trinity or the studio is pulling every picture in the works, including the one in the can. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?” Marvin exclaimed. “I’ve had every executive either in my office or on my phone grilling me about what the fuck is going on with you. What the hell am I supposed to tell them? Stop being a child here. I need your help, or you’re finished. Finished!”

“Jesus Christ, Marvin. Okay. Okay.” She heard the serious tone in his voice and glanced into the rearview mirror. “Let me pull over so I can see what you’re talking about.” As she headed into the parking lot of a small convenience store, she could hear voices in the background. By the time she shoved the gear into park, her hands were shaking.

While the connection was a hell of a lot better than at the cabin, it was almost three minutes before she was able to connect and navigate to what had to be the flaming email. Hesitating, she had a terrible feeling this was going to change the course of her life.

The email was direct, the words with seemingly no emotion.

*Ms. Hargrove. I’m certain that you don’t want this out in the public, but you’ve given me no choice. The world deserves to know the truth about you.*

The next words were only a teaser, a hint of what Jack was going to have printed. As she read the inflammatory bullshit, the damning headline posted next to two photographs, she sunk further into the seat, stars floating in front of her eyes. She would be ruined. She heard Marvin huffing, cursing in a manner she wasn't used to. Then again, he had every right. As she brought the phone to her ear, she had no idea what to say or how to dispel the accusations. The truth was coming out.

“Trinity. I don't give a shit what you think about Jack Spartan, you are going to have a statement in my inbox by tomorrow morning or I'm cutting ties, ending your contract. And don't you dare think about siccing your attorney on me, sweetheart. Remember the morals clause you signed? I think you managed to piss on that concept. In the morning!”

Wincing, she could tell the call had ended. She stared at the screen for a few seconds, her heart racing. What if she contacted Jack, tried to explain? No, time for explanations was over. The statement would have to be the best speech of her life, words formulated that could never come back to hurt her or... Protect. She was going to protect, no matter if her livelihood was stripped away from her.

She was only half cognizant that she'd dropped the phone and pushed the gear into drive. There was nothing left inside of her, no concept of right or wrong, good versus evil. She was simply lost.

Her hands clenched the steering wheel and she blinked away burning tears as they slipped past her lashes. She was having difficulty breathing, her pulse skyrocketing. If only she'd dealt with this before. If only she hadn't shoved everything in a box. If only she could go back in time.

If only she could—

A flash of silver forced her to blink, but she was slow to react. Slamming on the brake, the truck began to skid, the back tires screeching as she tried to correct, jerking the steering wheel until she—

*Bam!*



## CHAPTER 6

*“Carrie, I care about you more than you know.”*

*“And I care about you, but that doesn’t change anything. What happened is wrong, very wrong. What you did was... horrifying.”*

*“But I did it for you...” His eyes were imploring, his face pinched. “I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted this to go so far.”*

*Carrie folded her arms, chills racing down her spine. “David, you are dead to me. Do you understand me? Dead. To. Me.”*

*“Don’t say that. Please.”*

*“Get out!”*

Moaning, Trinity blinked several times as she breathed in and out. The moment she tried to move, pain tore through her head, creating a wave of nausea in the pit of her stomach. What in the hell had happened? She held her breath as she lifted her head, squinting as she tried to understand what she was seeing. The phone call. The road. A blur.

“Shit.” She strained to see over the front of the truck and was able to make out a motorcycle lying on its side. “Oh, no.”

She struggled with the seatbelt, just releasing it when a dark flash popped into her peripheral vision. The second the driver’s door was flung open, she yelped.

“It’s you.” The voice was gruff, accusatory.

Trinity lashed out, catching the man in the chest with the palm of her hand. “No!”

“That’s what I said. Goddamn, woman. Ah, shit. Are you all right?”

“Riker?”

“Ms. Hargrove?”

Sagging, she bit her lower lip as she noticed the gash on his forehead. “Oh my God. Did I hurt you? I didn’t see you at all. Shit. Shit!” His expression was full of anger. Could she blame him? A quick glance back to his bike allowed reality to set in. She’d almost killed the man. A flood of emotions rolled into her mind. The email. The threats. Her life. Killing the most gorgeous man on the face of the earth.

“Evidently not. What the hell were you doing? Not paying any attention? Jesus Christ, lady. You could have gotten us both killed. You shouldn’t be driving,” Riker hissed, the words laced with a hard edge.

“You’re right. I wasn’t paying any attention. I was just... stupid. I was stupid.” Unable to clamp down on her thoughts, the ugliness racing through her mind, she burst into tears, her entire body shaking. “I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry.”

“Whoa. Hold on here. Accidents happen. Come on. Let’s get you out of the truck. Can you move? I can’t see any cuts but that doesn’t mean you’re not hurt. I’m going to lift you down. Hold onto me. Okay? Just hold on.” Riker gathered her into his arms, easing her down onto the pavement.

Crumpling, she clung to him as her thoughts shifted back and forth from so many years ago to her life, the movies, her beautiful house in California. Everything was a lie. “I’m just...”

“Okay, Trinity. Right? I think you might have a concussion. Let’s get you away from the truck just in case. I’ll call for an ambulance.”

“No! I’m fine. I’m just...” She held her breath as the visions and thoughts faded. Blinking again, she was finally able to focus. “What have I done?”

“Well, the truck doesn’t seem to be in too bad of shape, but I think my Harley is totaled.”

“Riker. I’m just so sorry.” Reaching up, she brushed her fingers across his forehead. “We need to put something on that.”

Riker wrapped his hand around hers, his eyes darting back and forth.

The moment seemed stuck in time, a quiet realization that there was more to life than tragedies and horrors. His touch was gentle, almost unlike the rugged man standing in front of her. Every cell in her body tingled, creating another and more profound wave of heat. She could feel his thumb rubbing her hand, the caress loving and from a complete stranger. “You’re bleeding.”

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he eased her to the guardrail, helping her down onto the hard steel. “Let me call this in. Okay?”

She nodded and as he tugged his phone from the pocket of his jeans, she surveyed the damage to both vehicles. While the rental company wasn’t going to be thrilled with her aggressive driving skills, the front grill seemed to have received the full brunt of the crash. The motorcycle was in pieces scattered across the road. How had everything gotten so damn out of hand?

Riker walked toward her, the phone still in his hand. “No, we’ll definitely be here. Thanks, Randy. I appreciate your help.” Sighing, he glanced back at the Harley before closing the distance. “I called it in. The ambulance and a deputy should be here in just a few minutes. The majority of the sheriff’s office is still on the scene of the electrical issue.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need an ambulance.” The moment she tried to stand, her body swayed back and forth. “And you mean the bomb scare.”

“Don’t do that.” Riker gripped her arm and rolled his eyes. “You’re one pigheaded lady.”

“I know a bomb scare when I see one.” She took another step forward, pulling her arm out of his grasp. “What really happened? I heard the explosion.”

He looked toward the sky and exhaled. “I don’t know. A bomb threat was called in but that was no active bomb, or my guess is the entire block would have been in flames. Some asshole sending a message.”

“I understand those kinds of assholes.”

His gaze settled on her face. “Do you want to call your boyfriend or husband?”

“I’m here alone. Very much alone.” Why had she told a complete stranger anything about her life? Maybe because she had no one to trust, no sense of friendship at this point.

Nodding, he rubbed his temple before walking toward his bike, shaking his head.

She followed him, watching the way he crouched down, lovingly rubbing his fingers across the twisted metal bars, the once pristine engine. “Your baby?”

“Yeah. I’ve had her for years. Brought her with me when I moved out here. She’s been my peace, my salvation during some difficult times. I know, it’s just a thing but in my eyes, she was beauty.”

“Riker, I don’t know what to say. I’ll buy you a new one. We can do that today if you want.” She realized as soon as she’d said the words that she’d pissed him off. “I didn’t mean that... I just was trying to...” Sure, she could whip out her checkbook and solve this. She sensed Riker wasn’t that kind of man. He was simple, honest and she could already tell hard working. Who was she to try and buy her way out of this mess? She’d lived in fake town far too long. That had never been her. She’d never cared about things or money. She was absolutely disgusted with herself. “That was shitty of me. Shitty.” When he didn’t say a thing, she clenched her eyes shut.

“You can’t buy happiness or fix everything with money. There is no amount of expensive toys able to soothe the

concept of loss, no matter in what circumstance.” Riker stood. “You may be able to repair the damage or provide a moment of solace, but sometimes there’s no real peace. That has to come from within and sometimes that never occurs.”

His words were full of such pain, such intense heartache that she was left unable to find any words of comfort. She’d destroyed what seemed most precious to him. She remained silent as he circled the bike, his breath sounds ragged. She’d been so centered around her life, her woes that she’d interfered with someone else.

Riker planted his hands on his hips and sauntered away from her as the sound of crunching gravel was heard coming from down the road.

She grabbed her license and the truck’s registration, leaning against the truck when the deputy’s car pulled up, the ambulance only seconds later.

The deputy exited the vehicle and lifted his sunglasses. “Riker. You know how to get into some shit. What happened?”

“An accident. Just an accident.” Riker tipped his head. “I think Miss Hargrove might need some medical attention.”

“I’m okay. I don’t need anything.” *Except a new life.*

“Miss Hargrove, I’m Deputy O’Brien. Let’s go through what happened.”

Trinity listened as Riker told his side of the story then gave her perfunctory version, accepting the ticket as a matter of course. She’d ceremoniously taken away what happiness Riker seemed to have. She certainly wasn’t going to fight a ticket. When the wrecker came, the attendant picking up most of the pieces by hand, she winced every time a broken and mangled part was positioned on the flatbed.

“Are you certain you don’t want to be checked out at the hospital, either of you?” the deputy asked as he shook Riker’s hand.

“I’m fine. Really.” Riker placed his hand on the bandage covering the cut. “Nothing a tall bourbon won’t fix.”

“Miss?” Deputy O’Brien asked.

“No. Thank you.” Shivering, she moved closer to the truck.

“Okay. Hey, buddy. You’re going to have to get Landen or another jumper to give you a ride. I need to get over to the Best Buy. I hear the crowd of people is getting unruly.” The deputy grinned. “Crazy week.”

“Was this really called in?” Riker asked in a hushed tone, darting a glance in her direction.

The deputy lifted his eyebrows. “Second one. No idea who is doing this or why. You know how the sheriff gets. He’s driving all of us nuts to gather evidence.”

“Well, guess we’re lucky at this point. I’ll catch a ride. Go do what you have to do. Thanks for coming down.”

“I’ll have the report for your insurance company by tomorrow.” Deputy O’Brien turned in her direction. “Take care of yourself, Miss and please watch where you’re going. We have a lot of winding roads out here and some lead to drop offs of several hundred feet.”

“I’ll pay more attention,” Trinity said and gave him a smile. “Thank you.”

When the officer pulled away, Riker started to make a call.

“I’ll take you home.” She could tell the words surprised him.

“You don’t have to do that. I have plenty of friends who owe me a favor or five.”

She walked closer. “Please. Allow me to do something to make up for this. Just a ride.”

He gazed at her, his eyes never blinking. “Sure. Just a ride.”



RIKER REMAINED stiff as she drove, directing her and saying little else. She wasn’t chatty like normal women nor did she try and apologize again. He was thankful for the silence as

well as the ride. The Harley. Damn it. The one thing he cared about in his life gone. Yeah, he knew the bike was just a thing, nothing that he should lose any sleep over, but he felt as if another portion of his sanity had been ripped away. “The next right turn.”

“Okay,” Trinity whispered, concentrating on her driving.

He turned his head, gazing down the length of her. She was one damn beautiful woman and the sobbing had tempered his fury, but for how long? He wasn't into comforting women or getting into their psyche like Stoker or half the other guys. He didn't give a shit about her past or her ex-boyfriend. He didn't care about anything or anyone.

What a crock of bull. He studied the way her hand gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white as if terrified she'd cause another wreck. Whatever had distracted her had altered her personality for just long enough. Her actions had been stilted, even horrified but he didn't think the accident had anything to do with her losing her cool.

Someone had frightened her.

He inhaled, fighting the attraction given her fragrance and the lilt of her voice, yet his cock was aching, stiff enough the jeans were pinching his swollen balls. Perfect. As if he needed this crap.

She slowed down and put on her blinker, moving at a snail's pace before turning onto the gravel driveway. “The area is beautiful.”

“Works for me.”

“Yeah. I can tell.” A single look in his direction was followed by a hard frown.

“Just keep going. I live at the top of a hill.”

Nodding, Trinity continued to crawl, her eyes sweeping the road. “Do you have a lot of wild animals here?”

The question made him chuckle. “Tigers and bears?”

This time, she shot him a nasty look. “Coyotes and wolves maybe?”

“Some.” He shook his head as she pulled up to the house, parking next to his beaten-up truck. The truck was like the rest of his life, disheveled. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone was here. Even Landen had only been around a couple of times. He preferred his privacy and just about everyone knew that.

She eased the truck to a stop and shifted the gear into park, allowing the engine to idle. “Nice place.”

“It’s a shit hole. I haven’t taken the time to fix it up.”

It was her turn to laugh, the sound much lighter than before. “This is your home. You should take the time.”

He placed his hand on the door handle. “No real reason. Just me. I work a lot of hours and we’re gone several weeks out of the year fighting fires. When I come home I tend to sleep then shower. Nothing more.”

“Oh.”

For some reason, he hesitated, his index finger tapping on the handle. “Look. Don’t blame yourself for the accident. Shit happens. I’ll get another bike and the insurance will pay for it.”

She huffed then nodded. “Okay. Things can be replaced. Right?”

“Yeah.” Riker continued to stall. What the hell was wrong with him? “Thanks for the ride. I appreciate it.”

“Sure. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Maybe.” He opened the door then sighed. “Look, I don’t like to drink alone, and I plan on having a few. Would you like to join me? I mean just for one or two.” He could hear a catch in her breath as she debated. He allowed himself to turn his head, offering a single smile. “If you’d like.”

“Yeah. That sounds nice.”

“Okay.” He climbed out and shut the door, yanking his keys from his pocket. The way she jumped out of the cab gave him a smile, one he refused to allow her to see. She was certainly out of her element. When she walked around the



truck, he moved toward the front door. “Nothing special inside. I haven’t cleaned up in a while either.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

The words were so stilted between them, difficult, as if they had no idea what to say to each other. Riker opened the door, allowing her to walk inside. For the first time since his arrival in Missoula, he was embarrassed at the state of his house, the emptiness and lack of care. He’d purchased only a few things, preferring to live in sparse conditions.

She exhaled as she glanced around the living room. “Good bones.”

Riker grinned, the comment unexpected. “Yeah. When I bought the house, I just wanted a place to land but the mountains and the area drew me in. The place is almost fifty years old. Needs a new roof, but I’ll get to it. Make yourself at home. I have bourbon and well, bourbon.”

Lifting her head, she gave him a bright smile. “Bourbon sounds great.”

Why his footsteps were heavy was beyond him. He was nervous, as if he’d never been around a woman before. She was different, unlike the few women he’d spent time with. More eloquent, polished but he had a sense that she was also fractured, pained from some experience. No, he couldn’t care or get involved. That wasn’t what this was about. He simply wanted some company.

No. That was a lie. He wanted more. Gripping the edge of the counter, he had to face the fact he craved this woman. Why? What was so different, so enthralling that all he could think about was commanding her every move, requiring her to submit to his every need. This was ridiculous, but there was no denying the insatiable desire, a deep and intense burn cascading through his system. Fisting his mouth, he counted to five then ten, merely trying to get control. The women he’d been with had breached a barrier, allowing him moments of pleasure. This was more. He resisted laughing and shook away the thoughts. There was no way she could care for him. None.

*Leave it alone. Breathe. She will never want you.*

Hissing, he managed to find two matching glasses that were clean and filled them with ice. After grabbing the bottle of bourbon, he hung back, able to catch a view of her as she walked from one end of the room to the other, her eyes settling on the single picture he had over the mantle. He realized his hand was shaking as she studied the framed photograph.

“They’re from my old fire department in Maryland. A good bunch of guys.”

“A fireman. So, a smokejumper doesn’t use water?” she asked, her face still concentrated on the picture.

“That’s right. We use dirt and cut down trees. We also start fires in order to burn others out. Hard work.”

“I can imagine. Very dangerous.” She tipped her head in his direction, her smile genuine.

Riker set the glasses down and poured, leaving the bottle on the coffee table. As he walked closer, he remembered so many good times with the guys, memories he never let himself fall into. “Yeah, it’s dangerous, but when you know what you’re doing, and you follow your training, working as a team, everyone gets out alive. We work hard.”

“You also live hard.” She accepted the glass and took a step away. “And you play hard.”

He snorted. “Some of us do.” The fact she was studying him, trying to look into his soul would normally be disturbing, but he could sense she was intrigued, her mind wandering. “Some of us want nothing more than to get away from the daily grind, if only for a little while.”

“You’re a tough man, refusing to let anyone inside. I understand that concept more than you know. Like you’re playing a part, until you get into your work. Then you come alive. But you miss, hunger in a way few could ever tolerate.” She rolled her eyes and glanced back at the picture. “But you’re lying to yourself every day, pretending to be something you’re not.”

“Maybe you do understand.”

“More than you know, Riker. I just wish I hadn’t fallen prey to my job, a career that has left me hollow. What I want, I’ll never be able to have.” She had a faraway look.

“Wanting means letting go.”

“Yes. Wanting also means fear.”

Fear. An emotion he knew far too well. “What do you do?” As soon as he asked the question, he could tell she wanted to run away from it, as if telling him was the last thing she wanted to do. “I don’t mean to pry. I don’t care what you do. That’s not important.”

“You’re the only person I’ve ever met who says that. You see, I’m an actress on the big screen. I don’t save lives or race into danger. I don’t develop cures for terrible diseases or even care for those who can no longer care of themselves. I’m fluffed and cajoled, handled and pampered because I make films. I’m a commodity.” Her laugh was bitter. She took a sip of her drink and closed her eyes.

Riker inched closer, eyeing the picture one last time. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. “We’re all hiding from something in our lives. I’m no exception, but every job, every career has meaning and a purpose. You entertain people, allowing them to get away from their dull or difficult lives. That has special meaning for so many. Then again, what you do with that life is up to you. You always have a choice even if making a change means opening yourself up to pain and anger.”

“What if I don’t? What if I’m forced into a way of life that I can’t escape from?”

The words hit him in a manner he didn’t expect. “Then you find something else you love. There’s always an out. Always. You have to find the way and sometimes, only you can do that. You can’t rely on those around you or find yourself on the advice of others. Only you know what’s best for you.”

She sighed and opened her eyes, nodding several times. “You’re right. You know what’s funny? I have supposed

friends, those who honestly want something from me, and they've never spoken to me that way. They don't care. So many rely on my acting abilities to fund their concept of entertainment. Isn't that sad?"

He hadn't realized he'd reached out, sliding a stray strand of hair from her face until the tips of his fingers touched her skin. Electrified, he sucked in his breath but instead of pulling away, what he would normally do, he eased the hair behind her shoulder then allowed his fingers to trail down the length of her arm.

Visibly shuddering, she took a sip of her drink, the ice clinking in the glass.

She was nervous, an emotion that would normally not matter. On this evening, at this very moment, he had a sense of protection, a need to draw her in. He swallowed and forced himself to take a step away. "Why are you in Missoula?"

"Do you want to know the truth? It's pretty ugly."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not into games." Riker grimaced hearing his words, even though they were the truth.

"I appreciate that more than you know. I'm here because a nasty reporter has it in for me. He's selling pictures on the internet that are false, but blasphemous and could damage my career. My cousin suggested I come here. Heal myself. That's what she told me. I'm just not certain I have it in me any longer. I'm tired, drained from the day to day bullshit. I hate the life, the people I work with and the concept of everyone thinking I live happily ever after when there's no such thing in Hollywood. There are only liars and cheats, people who will stab you in the back for the next available part, all in the hopes that they make it to the top." After taking another sip, she laughed. "Aren't you happy you asked?"

Riker contemplated his answer. She wasn't a fragile woman, even though she'd broken down in front of him. He could tell she had the strength of a lion, forced to fight for her dreams in a sea of misery. "You've come to the right place. That much I can tell you."

“Yeah? How so?” A smile lit up her face, pushing away the darkness.

He took a step back, giving them both space. “I came here a broken man. I had no place and no heart, but I knew that I loved what I did. I wanted the job of becoming a smokejumper and I fought for it. When I came, nothing mattered but landing the job. What I found was a level of friendship I hadn’t anticipated, men who were willing to die for me with no questions asked. What I don’t honestly think I realized is how much I’ve come to depend on their friendship. I just...” He shook his head. “My soul is too battered to make much sense.”

She inched toward him, her hand resting on his shoulder. “You’re doing just fine. I don’t know why, but I really like being around you. You’re not like any other man I know. You’re real. That’s important to me.” As if sensing his discord, she pulled away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to suggest anything.”

“You didn’t. I... I like your touch.” Hearing the angst in his voice, he had to fight to stand in the same spot. Did he honestly think he could open up to this woman, a girl who’d given him nothing but shit since they met? The truth was something he hadn’t expected and hated to admit. He was drawn to her, much more so than any other woman with the exception of his wife. There were no reasons why, no telling event. Just an understanding, a connection that he wasn’t certain he could or wanted to fight.

Trinity studied him and took another sip of her drink before reaching up, brushing her fingers across his bandage then continuing to caress, moving down the side of his face. “Thank you for letting me in, if only on the surface. I know how difficult that is for you.”

When her touch lingered, he could feel the beads of sweat trickling down the back of his neck. His cock was throbbing, aching to the point he was in real pain. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to give a shit about anyone. “I’m no good for anyone. I don’t know if I can be ever again.”

“You have your reasons. If you want to tell me, I’ll listen. If you don’t, that’s fine too. Besides, I’m nothing special.”

He allowed a slow breath to escape as he listened to the sound of his heart beating, thumping in his chest. “That’s where you’re wrong.” Sliding his arm around her waist, he yanked her forward, crushing her mouth with his. The taste of her was unlike any other woman, sweet and sultry. The kiss became a passionate roar as he held her against his chest, their tongues entwining.

She wrapped her hand around his neck, clinging to him, her body undulating against his.

The friction, the heated electricity was intense, creating an urgent need, a desire that sent a rush of longing through every muscle, every cell. He was mad with hunger, the sensations off the charts.

Moaning into the kiss, Trinity dug her nails into his skin, her breasts crushed against him as she stood on her toes.

As the kiss continued, he became lost in the dazzling moment, no longer afraid of sharing or allowing this woman, this vibrant woman into his life. He wanted this desperately. When he broke the kiss, he rubbed his thumb back and forth across her mouth, panting as the adrenaline kicked in. He could feel the old angst, hovering, threatening to bite him, take back the raging need.

Her eyes never leaving his, she took his drink, setting both down on the hearth. “Riker.”

“Don’t talk. Don’t say anything. I just want you. I want this. Just for tonight.” He heard what he was saying, knew the meaning and expected her to push away.

But she didn’t.

She cupped both sides of his face, leaning into him as she pressed her lips against his then his chin, her hot breath skipping along his skin.

Her simple touch, the way she was open and so gentle was breathtaking. His heart continued to race as she licked across the seam of his mouth. He was so used to being in control,

taking what he wanted without reservation or any question. This was amazing, scintillating in such an unexpected manner.

As she licked down the side of his neck, she began to unbutton his shirt, peeling back the edges until she placed the flats of her hands on his chest. She continued to kiss and lick, her lips moving back and forth until she reached his nipple.

Riker tilted his head back, savoring the way she bit down, creating a hint of pain until his cock was pinching in his zipper. Fisting her hair, he kept her head in place as she dragged her mouth to his other nipple, licking in lazy circles. His breathing ragged, he rubbed his other hand down her arm and back until he could take no more. Pulling her head away, he growled then yanked at her shirt, tugging the edges from her jeans.

“Oh...” The sound almost inaudible, she slid her hands down to his waist then moved them to her shirt, pulling the material up and over her head.

Cupping both breasts, he rubbed his fingers back and forth across her already hardened nipples, enjoying the way they felt through her lace bra. Grunting, he lowered his head as he slid his arm around her waist, dipping her into a deep arch. He mouthed her neck, sucking on her skin as he dipped his fingers past the thin edge, fingering her nipple. He could tell she was wet, the scent of her feminine wiles wafting between them.

She clung to him, her fingers tight as she gripped his arms, her body swaying forward and backward. “God.”

He moved his mouth down to the cleft of her breasts, licking up and down before using his teeth to pull away the unwanted material and exposing her nipple. He dragged his tongue around several times before taking the tender flesh into his mouth, sucking, nipping.

“Oh... my...” Easing her hand down the length of his chest, she rubbed her fingers across his groin, moving back and forth in slow and even motions.

Yanking the material, he heard a ripping sound and issued another low-slung growl then pulled her up as he reached for

the clasp on her bra. As he eased the straps down, he shook his head, admiring every inch of her exquisite beauty. She was perfect.

Biting her lower lip, she fumbled to unbuckle his belt, fingering the leather as she gave him a heated look. “Mmm... A thick strap.”

“You enjoy discipline?”

“Yes.”

The single word sent another rush of raw desire, a different and very commanding longing. When she unzipped his jeans, freeing his dick, he sucked in his breath. “Be careful what you ask for.”

She slid her hand underneath his cock, rubbing his already swollen balls between her fingers. Then she wrapped her hand around his shaft, pumping the base as she pushed his shirt off one shoulder. “I’m asking.”

He hissed as he yanked at his shirt, dragging it off and tossing it. There was no turning back, no way he could stop what was about to happen. As she squeezed the tip of his cock, using just enough pressure he moaned, he pushed her away, the dark and demanding side taking over. “I want to see all of you. Every inch.” After removing his boots, he stood with his arms crossed, the expression commanding.

Her eyelids fluttering, she shuddered then unfastened her jeans before reaching down, tugging at her boots. She took her time, darting glances, her face glistening in the shadowed light. Shimmying, she pushed the jeans down her hips, struggling to pull them off. When she stood in only a thong, she covered her breasts, a flush creeping up from her neck to her cheeks.

“Don’t ever cover yourself. You’re beautiful. So very beautiful, but you will do as I say.” He could hear the raggedness in his voice, the strangled sound because of his tightened throat. This was different. This was... A flash of the past washed across his mind, creating a terrible pain in his gut. Swallowing hard, he refused to deny what he’d needed, a



different kind of tethering, a powerful connection. My God, he wanted all of her. He wanted her body and soul, her submission in a way he'd ignored before. He was so alive, blood bumping to the point he had trouble focusing.

“Yes, I will.” Her lower lip quivering, she eased her hands down to her side, clenching her fists. “Through all the years, every photographer, every movie, I’ve never felt beautiful, merely an object.” A nervous laugh escaped her mouth. Hissing, she closed her eyes.

Riker exhaled as he moved closer. She was covered in goosebumps, her arms and legs quivering. Cupping both sides of her face, he rubbed his thumbs in gentle strokes, relishing in the way her skin felt against his fingertips. Lowering his head, he pressed his lips against first one then her other eyelid. “Hear me. I will take what I want.”

“Yes. You can have everything. Anything.”

Reaching down, he slid his fingers under the string of her thong. With a single twist of his wrist, he jerked away the thin covering, pitching her panties onto the floor.

A single moan escaped her lips, yet her expression remained full of determination. Curling her fingers, she used the tips of her nails, scratching down the front of his chest. As she began to tug on his belt, pulling an inch at a time, she panted, her fingers gripping the strap.

“With pleasure comes pain.”

“Yes. What I need.” Her words were mere whispers, a soft admittance of the woman inside.

The thought of disciplining her, using his belt to create welts on her flawless skin was a powerful aphrodisiac. He was lost to the beast inside, the one that would mark her body, require her to belong to him.

When the belt was free, she brought the strap to her face, drinking in the smell, the essence. Darting out her tongue, she licked across the grain before pressing the tip against her neck, sliding it down to her breasts.

The moment was cathartic, the beginning of a story of their creation. His body remained tense, his mind full of rapture.

Trinity allowed the end of the strap to dangle between her legs, swinging the belt back and forth as she opened her legs wide.

Riker eased his hand between her legs, pressing the leather against her pussy, sliding both up and down. He studied her face, the way her moans became whimpers, her mouth pursed with raging desire. “One day I will spank every inch of you, whipping your ass, your breasts and your pussy.”

“Oh, yes. Yes!” As he continued, her body undulated, shifting back and forth.

He dug the strap into her cunt, rubbing harder and faster, his breath skipping as she fell into the moment of pleasure. “Pinch your nipples for me.”

Obeying instantly, she cupped and squeezed her breasts before taking both hardened nipples between her fingers, plucking and twisting, her mouth going slack. “Oh...”

The belt moved easily, slickened from her pussy juice, and he continued to rub, his hand moving faster, harder. He had difficulty focusing as she pinched, her own moves forceful.

Her body began to sway forward and backward and she opened her mouth in a perfect ‘O’ as her chest heaved.

Harder. Faster. He loved the feel of the leather sliding along her tender tissue. He could tell she was close to coming, her legs trembling to the point she was having difficulty standing. As she writhed, her eyes fluttering open and closed, he issued a single command and one he knew she would follow. “Come. Now!”

Her eyes shot open, her mouth going slack, the sound coming from her throat more of a growl. “Aaahhh!”

Riker continued, pushing her into a blissful zone until her body went slack, falling toward him. He held her against him as he folded the strap then he wrapped his arm around the front of her, pulling her over at the waist.

She moaned but didn't resist, merely lolled down her head, her long hair draping over her shoulders.

He rubbed the belt down the length of her spine then tapped on her buttocks, remaining breathless.

*Crack!*

“Oh!” Jerking up, she flashed him a look.

“Pain and pleasure.”

“Yes. Yes, sir.”

*Smack! Crack!*

He remained holding his breath as he issued a series of hard strikes, one after the other.

*Pop! Crack!*

Holding her tightly, he had never felt in more control in his life.

*Smack! Crack!*

Riker rubbed the belt down to her upper thighs, smacking both with quick, hard snaps.

*Slap! Pop!*

With every strike, every controlled spank, she seemed to fall into a state of peace, her moans becoming whimpers, her body relaxing.

*Crack! Slap!*

Stars floated in front of his eyes, a tingling feeling rushing into every muscle.

*Whap! Smack!*

The sensations were incredible, creating an almost desperate need for more.

*Crack! Pop!*

Seconds later, he dropped the belt and eased her into a standing position, capturing her mouth and thrusting his tongue past her lips.

She remained shivering, but her kiss was a passionate roar and she flung her arms around his neck, clinging to him as the kiss became more intense, heated until they were both grunting.

When he broke the hold, he exhaled and pushed her down onto her knees then took a step back, removing his jeans and underwear.

Seeing him naked, she licked her lips and reached out, dropping her arms seconds later. She knew how to obey, how to follow directions and wanted nothing more than for him to control her every move.

Inching closer and using a single finger, he trailed a line from her arm to her shoulder as he moved behind her. Crouching down, he rolled down onto his back and tugged her with him until she was straddling his face. He held her hips and kept her aloft as he inhaled her luscious scent. Darting out his tongue, he dragged the tip around her clit until she moaned.

“Oh, my...” Her arms at her sides, she wiggled as he licked her, her body rocking ever so slowly.

Sliding his tongue inside her cunt, he pulled her down until she was sitting on his face. As he began to feast, licking her with wild motions, she leaned forward.

He could feel her hands on his cock, her fingers stroking the underside. His cock was hard, throbbing, his balls already full of cum. When she slid her hot, wet mouth around his cockhead, he grunted and began to lick her in fevered moves.

Trinity grunted as she sucked, one hand pumping and twisting the base, the other rolling his testicles between her fingers.

Riker slid one hand around her hip, his finger finding her dark hole. He wiggled the tip between her ass cheeks, dipping his finger just inside.

Bristling, she moaned as she took him down an inch at a time, her hand creating friction, her fingers squeezing his balls.

Every cell on fire, he pushed further into her asshole as he continued to lick, the taste of her damn sweet. She was so wet, her juice oozed onto his face, his chin.

She used her strong jaw muscles to suck as she raked her fingers up and down the underside of his shaft. Moving up and down, she allowed the sound to become exaggerated as she sucked, her throat now relaxed.

This was a feast, a moment of release for his soul and he wanted her to swallow every drop, but he wanted more. So damn much more.

Bobbing her head up and down, she developed a rhythm, her mouth and tongue working in unison.

He was almost lost to the passion, to the way her mouth was driving him into raw ecstasy but on this night, he would own her. Pushing her up, he grabbed and wrapped his hand around her hair, pulling her away from his cock. "Get on all fours."

She crawled off him and moved into position, her head held high, her legs spread wide open. She was offering him every inch, every hole to take and use, to fuck and fondle.

His legs tense and quivering from excitement, he rose to his knees, inching closer. Sliding two fingers into her pussy, he pumped, the move hard and fast. He added a third then fourth, flexing them open as he thrust, the move almost savage.

Her body rocked yet she maintained position.

The look of her welts was so sublime, such a magnanimous draw that he grunted, the sound guttural. Unable to hold back any longer, he lifted his cock and shoved the entire length into her cunt as he fisted her long strands, tugging back. Beads of sweat rolled down his face, his neck, the drops cascading off and hitting her on the small of the back. He watched as they fell, sliding down the crack of her ass.

"Oh! Yes!" She panted, meeting every hard thrust, arching her back as he tugged on her hair.

Riker loved the sound of flesh hitting flesh as he plunged into her, the force almost pushing her face down, hitting the rug. And still he continued, harder. Faster. His breath was caught in his throat, his breathing ragged. Sweat rolled into his eyes, clouding his vision but nothing had ever felt so damn good. Pressing his hand on the small of her back, he allowed his thumb to wiggle between the crack of her ass, finding her asshole. One day he would claim her dark hole.

“Riker...”

“I can’t hold it.” Harder. The thrusts becoming deeper.

She squeezed her cunt muscles and pushed back.

The climax raced up his legs, curling his toes and creating severe pain in his balls from the pressure. When he could hold back no longer, he exploded, throwing his head back and howling. “Yes!” When he stopped shaking he curled his arms around her and pressed his chest against her back, savoring the warmth. As he closed his eyes, more content than he had been in months, he heard something that stripped him of the joy.

She was crying.

## CHAPTER 7

The night was quiet, only a few dogs barking in the background. He'd been patient, spending time at his favorite bar until closing time. He was far enough away from the city that he could appreciate the view of the mountains, their peaks somehow glowing under the almost full moon. He stood with his arms crossed, enjoying the brisk breeze, the slight chill in the air. God, he loved this time of year.

So far, his plan was going according to every detail, the organized chart he'd put together over three months ago. His design was damn good. Snickering, he studied the house and knew that he was taking a chance tonight. Sadly, he wasn't a patient man and she was only going to be home for two days. At least his contacts had been able to keep him informed. He paid the fuckers well enough they damn well better supply him with information.

He stood in the shadows for another few minutes, watching for any sign of life. Life. Now, he had to keep from bursting into laughter. The stupid bitch had no idea that she was merely a pawn. What a shame. But he had to do this right. Patting his pockets, he was satisfied he had everything he needed. He slipped into his gloves and headed in the direction of her house, or as he liked to call her, 'the wicked witch of the west'. He smiled, resisted whistling, and realized he was in a damn happy mood.

As usual, he crept around the back, being very careful not to draw any attention. Her neighbors were too close given the

type of neighborhood. There was no fence, no gate to contend with, merely a small walkway leading to a set of French doors. He stood on the deck, listening and surveying the area. There was no one awake. They no longer partied, no longer cared about the nightclubs and after-hours bars. They were, according to the powers that be, respectable citizens.

The lock was easy and there was no alarm, no security measures of any kind, which was surprising given her status. Then again, this was Missoula. He closed the door with a soft click and waited for a few seconds until his eyes became used to the darkness. He knew exactly where he was going. He also knew every square inch of the house, the location of furniture, pictures. He also knew her habits, even if the plane had been delayed.

He walked into the study and turned on a single light. The wooden beams giving the entire room a cozy feeling was perfect, especially given the roofline sloped in the direction of her desk. He ran his hand along the smooth wood, marveling at the fact she was neat and tidy. There wasn't a speck of dust, even though she'd been gone for three days. Her housekeeper should be given a raise and would certainly move the situation right along in the direction he desired.

He positioned the rope, twisting and tying until it was perfect. Tugging, he could tell the thick rope would be secure enough, and that had taken some calculations. A grin crossed his face. Everything was ready.

He kept close to the wall as he stalked down the hallway. Her bedroom door was open, and she was snoring, her body smack in the middle of the bed. While he loathed the concept of using chloroform, he doubted anyone would demand an autopsy. Her connection to the fat fucker from before would be difficult to find out and the sheriff was a befuddled idiot.

The small bottle held just enough for his use and he was cautious not to spill a drop. She didn't resist until he had her in a sitting position. Then she flailed her arms, scratching at him, her nails catching his cheek.



Hissing, he raised his arm, ready to beat her into a bloody pulp, but pulled back, clenching his fist. That wouldn't bode well for the plan. Not at all. He squeezed her mouth and nose until she accepted the inevitable.

She was easy to lift, toss over his shoulder. Now, he could whistle, enjoy his work. Thank God, she was light enough he didn't even break into a sweat when he placed the noose around her neck.

He watched the way her body swung back and forth, the rope creaking against the beams. Damn, if he didn't do good work. There was no reason to tidy up her bedroom or even worry about her night time attire. He placed the note on her desk and backed out. Everyone at her office knew she was having difficulty with her divorce. There would be no real question about the fact she took her own life. She had no real friends and even those she worked with knew very little about her. She was a nothing to no one in a political arena of useless assholes.

One more and the prize. He wouldn't wait.



*“YOU’RE GOING TO BE RUINED!”*

Jerking awake, Trinity blinked several times as her body quivered. She was panting, even sweating from the damn dream. She rolled on her side and fisted her mouth to keep from gasping. How had she forgotten where she was? A single strand of moonlight peeking in through the blinds allowed her to see the shadowed outline of his face. Even in sleep, Riker seemed to have a pensive look on his face, as if worry and exhaustion had created permanent lines.

She brushed the back of her hand across his cheek, pulling back when he grunted and rolled onto his back. They'd talked some, but the few hours had been spent drinking and doing little more than holding each other. She had a feeling his life was full of pain, a refusal to allow her to get any closer. Then again, she hadn't told him about the wretched details of why she'd run to Missoula.

Crowding closer, she tugged the sheet around her arm and cuddled next to him, keeping her head on his chest. From her position, she was able to see the single picture she'd noticed in his house. The silver frame seemed to glisten in the shimmering light, accentuating the photograph. Lifting her head, she studied the happy threesome and shrunk back as the understanding settled in. Riker, a woman and child were standing together. They were a family. There were very much in love.

She felt like an intruder, someone who he'd never bargained for and no doubt didn't plan on inviting into his home. Sadness crept into her heart, forcing her to look away. This was invading his privacy. A sudden chill slithered down her spine to the back of her legs. She didn't belong here. Not with him.

Easing out of bed, she tried to remember where she'd dropped her clothes. The living room. She'd been allowed to borrow a shirt from his closet. Reaching down, she snagged the material and slid her arms into the sleeves, buttoning a few of the buttons. He'd made a fire and the embers were still glowing, allowing her to see the outline of the furniture as she walked out of the bedroom.

While she didn't just want to leave, she also didn't want to see the light of morning, perhaps knowing they'd both regret what they'd done. Walking around the couch, she couldn't help but smile as she noticed the belt. Unable to resist, she hunkered down, fingering the strap. Even from where she crouched down, she could detect the slight scent of her climax. A giggle bubbled to the surface. Would he ever be able to remove the smell?

She continued to finger the belt as she stood, holding the strap against her chest. The memory would be sweet, a wonderful reminder that there were other reasons to live. She allowed her thoughts to drift to her books, her imagination weaving a sinful story, until she heard a noise at the front door. The clinking was followed by a rattle of the doorknob. Then she noticed the handle turning. Riker hadn't locked the door. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the group of fireplace

implements. Dropping the belt, she yanked the poker off the stand, holding the metal in both hands.

Before she had time to react, the door was swung open and a man stormed inside.

Trinity took two long strides and swung the poker, catching the intruder against the arm, the force knocking him onto his knees.

“What the fuck?” the intruder yelped.

“Get out!” she snarled and was prepared to swing again.

“What in God’s name is going on?”

An overhead light was switched on, flooding the entire room.

Blinking, she opened her mouth to explain when the intruder stood, swaying back and forth. Once she recognized him, the man who’d been with Riker at the store, she cringed. “I thought he was breaking in.”

“And da-you tried to kill me.”

She heard the slur in his words and caught the scent of alcohol, copious amounts of alcohol.

“Landen. What in the hell are you doing here?” Riker shook his head as he walked closer. “You reek, buddy. What in the fuck? I haven’t seen you drunk since we’ve been friends. What are you doing?”

At that moment, she realized that Riker was naked, and she was wearing only the man’s shirt. Fucking fantastic. Lowering her head, she groaned as she headed back toward the fireplace, dropping the poker into its slot. She stood with her back toward both men, trying to calm her breathing. This was the last thing she needed.

“Whoa. Talkin’ about me. Look at chu, bubba.” Landen laughed. “Naked as the day you were born. Interrupt somethin’?”

Riker exhaled. “How the hell did you drive here?”

“Know de place like back of my hand.”

Wincing, she breathed out as she shot a look in Riker's direction. The man was pissed. "I should be going."

"You were invited. This hunk of flesh on the other hand," Riker growled.

"You can't let him leave. He's drunk. He'll kill himself or others."

"I'm right here!" Landen pounded his chest then coughed.

"Let me get dressed. You, stay right here. And I mean right here. You move, I'll hunt you down."

"Yeah. Sure," Landen slumped and staggered toward the couch. "I know you. Right?" Grinning, he gave her a once over.

"We met." She grabbed her things and sidestepped him, following Riker into the bedroom and closing the door. "I'll leave. He's your friend and I think he needs you right now."

He paced the floor, his hands on his hips. "He hasn't done this shit before. Means he's off the wagon. At least with liquor. He promised himself he wouldn't do that shit after what happened in New York. Long story. What the hell has gotten into him?"

"Sometimes life gives you painful reminders of your past, a place you can't go to without help." She heard the angst in her voice and swallowed back tears.

Riker tilted his head and groaned. "Shannon is the best thing that's happened in his life. He's fucking up the relationship. The man is scarred. Hurting."

She closed the distance, placing her hand on his arm. "Be his friend, Riker."

"I don't know how to be anyone's friend, not like this."

"Yes, you do. When you allow that huge chip I was talking about to fall away, even for a short period, you're an amazing man. He needs you and if you want to know the truth, I think you need him."

He glanced into her eyes before taking her hand, pressing his lips against her palm. “You think you know me, lady?”

“For a short period of time, you allowed me in. You showed me an incredible man, so the answer is yes. I need to leave.”

“It’s dark. I’m worried about you getting back.”

“I’m a big girl. Time, I started taking care of myself instead of allowing a staff or people I pay to do so.”

Riker chuckled. “I hope that tonight was...”

She darted her eyes toward the picture, exhaling when she noticed he’d pushed it down onto his nightstand, away from prying eyes.

He seemed to catch her look and darted his eyes, his face pinching.

Reaching up, she brushed her fingers across his cheek. “I enjoyed tonight.”

“Yeah.”

She could tell he was pulling away. “I’ll get dressed.” Hurt filtered into her heart, the back of her mind. This had been a fabulous one-night stand and nothing more. What could she say? She certainly wasn’t going to beg him to see her again. Maybe this was for the best. Her life was a muddled mess of shit and she had to work on a ridiculous statement for the Press. Whatever she was going to say needed to keep the vultures away.

Unable to look at him, she slid into her jeans but for some reason, removing his shirt, the one that smelled just like him, was more painful than saying goodbye. She held the thick cotton to her nose, breathing in. His rugged scent filled her nostrils and she found herself tearing up again. No. The man wasn’t going to see her break down twice in two days. She was stronger than this. He was just a man. They’d shared a good time. Nothing more.

She was surprised he’d remained in the room, as if waiting or wanting to find the right words. He stood with his hands

leaning on the dresser, glaring at his reflection. She studied him, his tense shoulders and angry expression and wanted so very much to hold him, to wrap her arms around his chest and never let go. Instead, she placed the folded shirt on the bed, patting the material before clearing her throat. “I left this here for you. Thank you for letting me borrow it.”

Riker didn’t move, merely blinked as if she could see his reaction.

Walking around him, she hesitated before looking back in his direction. “I’m so glad I met you, Riker. Thank you for allowing the girl inside to be free. If only for a single night.”

He remained silent then when he spoke, his words were cracked, full of sadness. “Be careful.”

“Yeah. I will.” *Why won’t you talk to me? Why won’t you confide in me?* Her little voice was screaming, throwing a tantrum. This man didn’t have the capabilities of opening up. Not to her. Perhaps not to anyone. As she walked past Landen, she could tell he’d fallen into a drunken stupor, his head thrown back, his mouth open. Hopefully, the man would remember nothing in the morning.

When she walked out the door, her boots hitting the landing, she knew in her heart that she’d never see him again. As she headed to her truck, she allowed the tears to fall.



“WHAT DO you think is going on?” Stoker asked as he nodded toward the captain’s office. “Whoever that dude is, seems arrogant.”

“He’s been in there talking with the suit for almost an hour. Heated conversation from what I could tell,” Garcia answered as he folded his arms. “I hope this isn’t about another budget cut. I caught the mayor on the news. The whole city council is working on some veteran referendum. Pissing off a bunch of people. That much I can tell you.”

“What the hell does that have to do with us?” Boone asked, a lilt in his voice.

“Think about it. We’re the last expense that was voted on. Maybe they need the money.” Garcia rubbed his jaw.

“I don’t buy that. Mayor Falk is a woman of her word.” Riker wasn’t into politics, but the mayor had come through on more than one occasion, keeping them in uniform and in a job.

Zane snorted and walked away. “Maybe she didn’t do such a good thing.”

“What’s eating his ass?” Sawyer chuckled.

Moose gave Riker a look. “Something about a girl that has a crush on our boy here.”

Riker huffed. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ll have to ask Zane.” Moose slapped him on the arm.

“Look at them go at it. Shit!” Garcia exclaimed.

“The guy in the cheap ass suit isn’t from the county. That much I know,” Antonio said as he joined them. “The guy’s too polished. Slick.”

“An attorney,” Riker said under his breath.

The men looked at him as if he knew something.

“Maybe so. Are we involved in some legal issues?” Boone joined them, his face pensive.

“We’re always in some legal issues,” Sawyer said then laughed. “I overheard Captain Phillips on the phone yesterday. Something about the land the hangar is on.”

“The land?” Landen piped in. “The hangar has been here for years. Hell, the thing’s so dilapidated, I’m surprised we don’t freeze to death in the winter.”

As if knowing he was being watched, the captain glared at his men then stormed over to the blinds on the windows looking out into the hangar space, closing them with a jerk.

“Well. Guess we’re not supposed to know.” Sawyer shook his head. “I wish we could have a quiet few months.”

“We did. Time’s over. The season is ready to begin,” Moose stated as he looked from man to man. “Hey, heard you

were in an accident. Care to share?” His question directed at Riker, he remained stoic, his eyes never blinking.

“An accident. What the hell, dude? You didn’t tell anyone?” Landen slapped Riker on the arm.

“Seems like you were too damn busy sucking face with a bottle to give a shit.” Riker knew the words were harsh but given the fact Landen hadn’t remembered driving to his place, let alone why he was on Riker’s couch, the man deserved a hell of a lot of shit thrown his way.

“Whoa. I think that’s our key to leave these two love birds alone.” Boone held up his hands and backed away, heading toward the lockers.

Landen bristled and rubbed his eyes before glaring at Riker. “I had my reasons.” Storming off, his heavy feet created an echo on the cold, tile floor.

“Is he okay?” Stoker asked quietly as he flanked Riker’s side.

Riker shrugged. “I have no fucking idea. Showed up at my place drunk off his ass.”

Garcia looked at Stoker, both men wincing. “That’s not like him. He’s a beer drinker at best.”

“That’s what I told him.” Riker hadn’t gotten more than five words out of his friend, let alone the reason for the setback. He had an idea, but what good would it do to confront him with questions at this point? Exhaling, he knew he needed to offer some sort of comfort, but what the hell was he supposed to say? He knew where he’d find Landen, lifting weights. As if the exercise would rid him of his demons.

“What’s with the bomb threats? Anybody know?” Zane walked closer.

“Haven’t heard shit except the one at the Best Buy was a dud.” Antonio sighed, his eyes never leaving the captain’s office.

“Least you guys were there in case.” Stoker gave Riker a high five. “Right place. Right time.”



The crew laughed, forcing Riker to shake his head. “Yeah. Scared the shit out of the customers.” He left the group, heading in the direction of the weight room. He might be the only one who could talk some sense into Landen. When he crossed the threshold, he nodded to Steel as the man grabbed a towel, tossing it around his neck. He waited until the jumper left before approaching Landen, who was dead lifting way too many pounds. “You need a spotter.”

“I’m fine.” Landen hissed as he struggled to lift the set of weights.

Riker straddled the back, peering down over him. “You ready to talk about last night?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“You show up fuckin’ drunk at my place at four in the morning so yeah, we have shit to talk about.”

“Like you’re perfect.” Grunting, he puffed out a long exhale as his arms began to shake.

“You’re going to hurt yourself. Jesus Christ. You can’t lift this kind of weight.” Grabbing the bar, he held it in mid-air, glaring down at his friend.

“Would you leave me the hell alone? Mind your shit!” Landen attempted to jerk the bar from Riker’s hands.

Riker’s hands slipped at the same time Landen tried to grab the bar. “Shit!”

Boom!

The thud of the weight slamming against the floor echoed, causing the entire team to race into the room.

“Are you guys okay?” Antonio huffed.

“We’re dandy. Just daddy-o trying to interfere as he always does.” Landen popped off the bench, shaking his head.

“Looks like he was trying to help,” Boone said, a wry look on his face.

“I don’t need anybody’s help!” Landen’s exclamation brought a series of surprised expressions. “I’m fine. Okay?”

“If you say so.” Garcia was the only one to answer.

The others shook their heads as they backed out of the room.

Riker held his tongue until they left, then he let loose. “Whatever you’re going through, I get it, but you could have gotten yourself killed last night or worse. You’ve never been so irresponsible. Get your shit together.”

“As if you should talk. Fuckin’ around with a girl you don’t even know. Guess that’s better than the whores you’ve picked up lately.”

*Wham!*

The punch hit Landen square in the jaw, knocking him across the room. “You asshole.”

“You’re the asshole!” Landen pushed off the wall, racing in Riker’s direction.

*Bam! Whoosh!*

Riker grabbed him around the neck as Landen swung, catching him in the gut. Anger boiled within him, an overwhelming feeling of despair.

*Wham!*

“What the fuck are you two doing? Get the hell off each other.” Antonio jumped into the fight, yanking at Landen while Stoker grabbed Riker’s arms.

“You’re friends, remember?” Stoker hissed between clenched teeth.

“He’s no friend of mine!” Landen yelled, able to jerk away. He threw another punch, hitting Riker on the side of the neck.

A growl pushing past his lips, Riker crouched down, pummeling Landen.

“That’s it. Both of you.” Moose managed to yank Landen out of the way and stood in the middle, his arms outstretched.

“No more!” Stoker added, getting in Riker’s face. “Stop. Okay?”

Riker took a step back, his chest heaving.

“What the hell is going on here?” Captain Phillips swept into the room, his face beet red. “We’re a team. Or did you forget?”

“No, Cap’n,” Boone offered after the others remained quiet.

“Then act like a team. We don’t need this. Not now. Not ever!” Captain Phillips walked toward Riker, tilting his head so he could stare at the larger man in the eyes. “You’re a leader.” He shot Landen a harsh look. “So are you. Act like it or at least act like adults.”

Landen yanked away from Antonio, rubbing his arms. “We’re fine. Just an argument. Nothing more.”

The captain rubbed his brow. “I need you all cohesive right now. Okay?”

“Yes, sir,” several of the men said at the same time.

“I didn’t hear you!”

“Yes. Sir.”

Captain Phillips grumbled under his breath. “Better. Now, while you’re all here. I need to tell you the latest saga in the Jackal world.”

“Uh-oh.” Sawyer whistled.

“What’s up, Cap’n?” Boone folded his arms and leaned against the wall.

“I had a very terse meeting with an attorney. He’s representing the folks who own the land and leased the use almost twenty years ago. Seems there are some mineral rights that no one knew about. A recent test indicates that there is enough iron as well as other valuable metals that the land holder is evoking their rights.” The captain looked around the room.

“What the hell does that mean?” Garcia asked.

“It means, gentlemen, that the attorney was here to tell me that we have to move. They are in the process of scheduling demolition to this building in thirty days.”

“What. The. Fuck?” Stoker breathed.

Captain Phillips sagged. “The paper work seems on the up and up and before you ask, this isn’t something the city council is going to lift a finger to help us with. Not their land. The owners are planning to dig.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Garcia asked.

“Well, we can try and hire an attorney, but the cost to fight this could be astronomical and I certainly don’t have the extra cash lying around.” Captain Phillips groaned. “I will talk with the mayor, but be prepared.”

“I know an attorney who might help us. He’s a corporate attorney but owes me a big favor,” Garcia stated as he nodded toward Stoker.

Stoker shook his head. “Do you think Troy would help us?”

“Can’t hurt to ask. He owes the fact he still has a license to practice law to Laney. My bet is he’s ready to pay off the debt.” Garcia’s eyes were twinkling.

“That’s not a bad idea, Cap’n. I’ve heard about the guy’s reputation. Troy Bruester is a shark both in and out of the courtroom.” Antonio gave Garcia a high five. “Damn good idea.”

“Well, it couldn’t hurt. Will you set up a meeting with him?” Captain Phillips asked.

“You bet your sweet ass,” Garcia said then laughed. “Might give the man something to sink his teeth into.”

Riker sighed. The damn team could never seem to catch a break.

“All right. Let’s see what we can do.” The captain grinned.

“I thought I heard you guys in here. I hope I’m not interrupting.” As the sheriff walked in, he gave the group a

collective smile.

“Not at all. What can we do for you?” Captain Phillips asked then shook the sheriff’s hand.

“Well, you guys obviously know about the bomb threats. Two phone calls from what we think is the same guy. The bombs were real, but they weren’t finished. The first one never went off. The second contained a soot like compound, the lab is still analyzing. I have a feeling the perpetrator is sending a message.” Sheriff James moved his hat from hand to hand. “I just worry that these threats are going to escalate.”

“How can we help?” the captain asked.

“Keep your eye out. If you hear anything or come across any weird fires, let me know. Never can be too careful.” The sheriff’s voice was gruff, his face flushed. “Hate this kind of coward. We just don’t need anyone to get hurt.”

Captain Phillips glanced at his men. “We’ll do what we can. What does the fire department say?”

“They’ve had a few suspicious fires, but nothing that included a bomb of any kind. I hate to say this but just the usual. Kids playing, a pipe bomb but that was drug related.”

Riker thought about the bomb. “The casing around that last bomb was of military origin.”

“How the hell would you know that?” Antonio scoffed.

“Seen enough in my time. Worked with the FBI when I was with the Fire Department in Baltimore. They had a serial arsonist that ended up being a military man on leave. His bombs were of similar design.”

The men all seemed to take a deep breath.

“Well then, son. I think you might need to talk to the bomb squad about what you know. Anything might be able to help.” Sheriff James gave Riker a nod of respect. “Well, they’re actually heading a special task force.”

“Task force?” Stoker questioned.

The sheriff nodded. “Anything having to with the military and they send in personnel.”

“How do they know it’s actually military in design?” Stoker challenged.

Captain Phillips gave Stoker a harsh glare. “I doubt the sheriff has all the details.”

“Yeah, I wish I did.” Sheriff James didn’t look Stoker in the eyes. “Why I think the help is needed.”

Riker had the distinct feeling the sheriff knew more than he was telling.

“He’ll be glad to help,” Captain Phillips answered, raising his eyebrow. “Stoker, you go with them. Your innate military knowledge might come in handy.”

“Yeah. Fine.” Riker thought about the case from the past. He was certain the bomb was similar. He also knew the asshole who’d torn apart the city had an ulterior motive, killing off men from his previous unit and the Marine had been almost completely successful. The perpetrator always had a distinct reason for their method of kill and reasons why.

“Sure. I wasn’t involved with the detail handling them, but I know the basic actions, how the operation is put together. If this guy is military, he’ll follow standard procedures,” Stoker offered yet he had a curious look on his face.

“That’s excellent, especially since we have no idea what we’re dealing with. The caller no doubt disguised his voice,” Sheriff James huffed. “That shit we don’t need. The mayor is breathing down my neck.”

“I might be able to offer some thoughts too,” Antonio said as he stepped up.

“Task force. Sounds pretty damn serious. Whatever helps. We’re happy to do our part, Sheriff.” The Captain gave him a waning smile. “I know how Mayor Falk can be.” A strangled laugh bubbled up from his throat.

Riker glanced at Landen. The captain also knew something was up.

“I appreciate it. The woman is tenacious. I don’t blame her given what her office has been dealing with this past year, but Jesus. I’m understaffed as it is, and the task force has too much on their plate. Two people thinking they can handle the entire state,” Sheriff James snarled. “Sorry. Just exhaustion talking. I’ll leave you guys. Scully. You have a second?”

Captain Phillips nodded. “Sure, Brennan. Come into my office.”

The team remained silent until they left.

“Whew. A military bomb. That’s some shit,” Stoker said under his breath. “Military guy. This whole thing seems quick on the switch. Possible but why call in a fake threat?”

“Maybe a cover up for another crime?” Boone offered.

“Can’t you tell that something else is going on?” Zane laughed. “I can read that sheriff easily.”

“He’s a good guy working too many cases,” Steel stated quietly.

“Yeah, but Zane is right. They ain’t telling us something.” Moose shook his head. “I don’t like being in the middle of something when we’re not told the truth. Gets people killed.”

“From what I can tell, we’re not in the middle of anything. Well, maybe Riker and Landen are.” Garcia grinned.

“Landen and I were having lunch and answered the call. We’re *not* getting involved,” Riker said far more forcefully than the conversation warranted. Yeah, his sixth sense was in high gear.

Garcia opened his eyes wide. “Testy today, boys?”

“Cut it out. Riker is correct. We have a job to do and if the sheriff asks for our help, then we give it to him,” Sawyer stated, his tone authoritative. “Been around this block more than once. Whatever is going on, we’re here as back-up. Just like always.”

“Yeah, he’s right,” Garcia mumbled.

“Riker, when you’re done with Landen, let’s talk. I might know something about this bomb you saw.” Antonio kept his voice low as he shook his head. “No more hot-headed shit. Got it?”

Landen chuckled and rubbed his jaw. “I think we’re finished.”

“Sure.” Riker hung back as the others left. The tension between he and Landen was palpable.

“What do you think is going on?” Landen asked after a few seconds.

“I honestly don’t know and I’m not certain I want to know.”

He nodded, a sigh pushing past his lips.

Riker huffed and clenched his fists. “All right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken a swing at you.”

“Yeah, you should have. You had every right. I’m sorry I’m so damn out of sorts.” He hesitated before continuing. “Shannon and I had a fight and I left her house, went to a bar by myself. You know the rest. Fell into a bottle.” Landen walked over to the set of weights, chuckling as he bent down. “I haven’t done that since I got here. Not once.”

“So, what happened?”

He issued a long breath and struggled to pick up the weights, placing the bar back on the rack. “She doesn’t want to see me any longer. She said we’re growing apart.”

Riker exhaled. “Women have a funny way of telling you they just need some space. Give her that then buy her flowers.”

Landen rolled his eyes. “Says the matchmaker.” He huffed. “I don’t mean anything by that. I really don’t. I just have no idea what to do or what to say to her. You know how stubborn she can be. By the way, was I hallucinating or were you with the sexy blonde we met at the store?”

“You weren’t hallucinating but I don’t want to hear any shit. I can’t take it.”



“She’s sexy. Whew baby. I was drunk but not so much, I didn’t catch her in the shirt.”

“She’s interesting.” A second of jealousy popped into his mind.

“You do know she’s an actress, right?”

Riker nodded. “She told me.”

“I mean as in an academy award winning actress?” Landen jabbed.

He wasn’t certain he cared. The realization that she’d seen the picture, the look of sadness, even pity on her face was too much for him to deal with. So, he’d turned into an asshole, allowing her to walk out the door without even finding out her phone number.’

“You like this girl.”

“She’s okay.”

“Wait. Riker, you really like her. Don’t you?” Landen walked closer. “Come on, buddy. It’s me you’re talking to. We can’t seem to be able to lie to each other.”

Riker half smiled. “I like her. She’s different, somehow understanding me even when I don’t talk.”

Landen nodded and glanced toward the door. “I heard the guys talking. Seems like Zane has a crush on Trinity.”

“How the hell does he know her?”

“Something about flying in at the same time she did. He was at Ziggy’s the other night too. Shannon said he was hovering around the new girl and she only had eyes for you, Mr. Hero.”

“Very funny!” Riker growled.

“Look, I didn’t mean to interfere. If I’d had any concept that you were with someone, I would have gone somewhere else.”

“Yeah? Where?”

Landen grinned and dropped his head. “I have no idea. Maybe Stoker’s place.”

“Right. You, sleeping on the couch when Jessica is pregnant. I think Jess would have thrown you out herself.”

“I think you’re right.” He hesitated before winking. “You going to see Trinity again?”

“I...”

“You, what?” When Riker didn’t answer, he groaned. “You didn’t get her number. Did you?”

“She knows about my wife.”

“What do you mean she knows?” Landen frowned.

“She saw the picture on my nightstand. I just can’t deal with telling her the story.”

Landen closed the distance, placing his hand on Riker’s shoulder. “You’ve been full of guilt and regret for far too long. I don’t know much about Rose other than the little bit you’ve told me, but I have to believe she’d want you to live again. To love again.”

Riker bristled.

“Don’t do that. You deserve to find someone.”

“You’re giving me that line of shit?”

He dropped and shook his head. “I guess we are just two losers. I heard she was at the bar the other night. Why don’t you ask Shannon if she can find the lovely actress? She knows everybody.”

“Why don’t *you* ask her? Your girlfriend?”

“I’m... Not yet. Time. Remember?”

Riker snorted. “You guys are going to have to talk.”

“Yeah, I know.” Landen took a few steps toward the door. “Any chance I can stay at your place tonight?”

“What, your place not big enough for you?”

“I rented it out for a couple of weeks. I didn’t think I’d have to worry. You know?”

Lifting a single eyebrow, he gave Landen a harsh look. “One night. Then you’re going to talk to her or I’ll kick your ass.”

He rubbed his jaw. “You already did. Hey, what about this accident you had?”

“Let’s just say that Trinity and I had a run in. Totaled the bike. The deputy assigned sure had a good laugh.”

“Ouch. Well, think of it this way, the deputy who took your statement will have the address of where she’s staying.” When Riker gave him a look, he held up his hands. “I’m just saying. Karma is a funny beast.”

Karma. Fuck karma. An unsettling feeling fell into the pit of Riker’s stomach. He wanted nothing more than to see her again, the woman who could set him free. His thoughts had remained on Rose since the morning, visions of her face, her sweet smile filling his mind with memories. He’d never let go, never asked her if she would mind if he learned to live again. Maybe it was time. Maybe he could find a way to leave the past behind him.

There was too much to think about. As he headed toward the showers, he decided that he would at least find Trinity and apologize. If nothing else, the woman deserved to understand why he was such an ass. He headed to his locker, yanking out his phone. After rubbing the screen for a full ten seconds, he dialed the number of the sheriff’s office.

Time to stop being a fucking coward.

## CHAPTER 8

“*T*here you go, Marvin. Send it to the asshole.” Trinity read the email message three times, then four, her fingers shaking as she crouched in front of the computer. She was going to have to leave the house just to be able to hit send. Right now, all she wanted to do was crawl under the covers. The words were the best she could come up with, even though they said almost nothing about the incident in the past or address the full level of accusations thrown at her.

Still, the statement could be enough to get Jack and her agent and the entire movie world off her back. However, she had a feeling she was going to have to have a conversation with David. The realization left a bad taste in her mouth. She knew nothing about David’s new life, one he’d forged only recently. She’d severed all ties, telling the man in no uncertain terms that he was never to contact her again. But she knew where he was, where he’d landed.

Groaning, she grabbed her keys and headed out the door. She could use this as an excuse to grab a bottle, no three bottles of wine. A pity party she was allowed tonight. All. By. Herself. She started the engine and roared down the driveway, the tires skidding on the gravel just before she hit the main road.

As soon as she was a half mile down the winding path, her cell phone rang. She was utterly terrified to look at the screen. Seeing Ana’s phone number, she breathed a sigh of relief. “Ana. At least a happy voice.”

“Happy. I’m not happy at all right now. Just had a lovely and caustic visit from that man you dated.”

“Chance?”

“Oh, you bet. He’s looking for you. Says you are the love of his life and he will find you,” Ana said then chuckled. “He didn’t take kindly to me throwing him out at gunpoint.”

“You did not!”

“I did too. I told you no man was going to give me shit ever again.”

“That’s why I adore you,” Trinity purred. “Do you really think he’s going to try and find me?”

“Honestly, I do. I hope you haven’t been recognized.”

“Not so far. Seems Missoula is far removed from the glamorous life of Hollywood. The truck is interesting.”

“Ah, come on. You fit right in.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.”

“Jack’s been sniffing around too. I don’t think he knows you’re out of town yet. The guy isn’t so bad. Just has a fixation on you.”

Trinity made several grunting sounds. “Jack is a pinheaded peon.”

Ana laughed. “I understand. Hey, would you like some company?”

“If the person doesn’t have a cock between his legs. You bet.”

“Do I want to know?” Ana asked, her voice holding a lilt.

“That’s for a bottle of wine or maybe tequila.”

“You’re on. I thought I’d come spend a couple of days. I know what you’re dealing with. I know what you’re going through. Nothing is a secret in this town.”

Trinity cringed. “I think I could use a friend.”

“Good. I can’t make it for a couple of days, but I’ll let you know when I book the flight. Have that tequila handy. I think we’re both going to need it.”

“Oh, I will. Call me.” She wanted to toss the phone out the window. If Chance found her on top of everything, she would absolutely leave the country.

She pulled into the parking lot and sat for several minutes before she managed to look at the email one last time. There was no doubt Marvin would be on the phone in a matter of minutes, but by that point, she’d be nursing her first glass of wine. “Here goes nothing.” Her finger hovering, she said a silent prayer then hit enter.

Then she became chilled to the core.



“THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING IN.” The male voice was clipped, even bored, as if their presence wasn’t necessary. “I’m Lieutenant Yancy and this is Lieutenant Sloan. We’re working on the task force investigating the recent bomb threats.”

“Riker Sheffield,” After shaking hands, Riker looked at the two investigators sitting behind the table and nodded. Goddamn, they were smug. This particular task force was small, but he had no doubt they’d been made aware of the situation in lowly Montana the second the first bomb threat was made. Interesting how they were only minutes away after the second call had been made. He knew little about their operation except they went by the book. At least the threats were being taken seriously. “Sure.”

“Antonio Giovanni. My expertise is, or I should say was working with bombs out of New York. Small fire department, but we had our share of follow-up calls.”

Antonio had concurred that his concept of the bomb being one used by the military was spot on, but that in itself didn’t mean shit. Anyone could build a bomb based solely on information found on the internet. For all they knew, a kid could be flexing his wings. Up to this point, no real harm had

been done. “I’m not certain what any of us might be able to add. We’re smokejumpers,” Riker said.

“I understand you’ve had experience with this type of bomb during your stint in Baltimore,” Lieutenant Sloan commented as she glanced at Riker.

The woman wasn’t going to address his statement. “Yeah. We had a particularly nasty case involving the same type of mechanism, the only difference being the bombs were detonated, killing almost a dozen people.” Riker had recalled as many of the details as possible, even though his entire working past he’d pushed behind him. “Remote detonation through a phone, a radio signal, etc. However, the difference being, the person sending the signal isn’t required to be in close proximity.”

“Exactly what was and is currently being used in military applications. However, from what I’ve heard, the bomb that went off at Best Buy was older in design, no longer used. I was able to confirm that from my old sergeant.”

Riker looked at Stoker. They’d come directly from the Hangar to the makeshift office in the government administration building. There would have been no time for Stoker to call anyone. Why was the man bluffing?

“We are aware of how it works, Mr. Sheffield and Mr. Hansen, we suspect the perpetrator isn’t on active duty.” Lieutenant Sloane looked at her partner, a knowing expression on her face.

“Then why are we here?” Antonio challenged.

When the two investigators remained quiet, Stoker leaned across the table. “This isn’t about the bombs. Is it?”

“The bombs are a cover up.” Antonio sat back in his seat, his dark eyes penetrating.

Both investigators looked uncomfortable.

“This is an active investigation and as such, we can’t divulge any details.” Lieutenant Yancy kept his eyes locked on Riker.

“I repeat, why are we here?” Antonio jerked up from the seat.

“I think we should go, gentlemen.” Stoker did the same.

“Hold on. Unfortunately, the bomb was detonated, the pieces destroyed prior to our arrival on the scene. Mr. Sheffield. You were the only person to see the actual device. At minimum, we will need a detailed sketch.” Lieutenant Sloan’s tone was suddenly softer, encouraging.

Riker rose to his feet, a smirk on his face. “I’m certain we can do better than that. With Stoker’s help, we’ll get you an actual color photograph of the device used for your records. Will that help?”

“A great deal. Thank you. I think that’s all we need.” Lieutenant Yancy smiled as he stood. “Here’s my card. You can email that photograph. As soon as possible.”

“Of course.” Grabbing the card, Riker stuffed it into his back pocket without taking a glance.

“Thank you so much for coming in.” Lieutenant Sloan had already shut down, closing her notebook.

Antonio chuckled. “We’re happy to help.”

Riker was the last to leave the office and he stood just outside the door, trying to catch any additional conversation. Their voices were hushed. When he was outside, he glanced back at the building.

“What in the hell was that about?” Stoker asked.

“A waste of time,” Antonio huffed, cursing under his breath.

“They were fishing, but why?”

“Because you and Landen arrived first?” Stoker paced the sidewalk. “Nah, they have more information than they’re letting on.”

“You were bluffing in there,” Riker stated.

Stoker gave him a once over. “No task force arrives on the scene for a simple bomb threat, especially given their



credentials, and I know they're not simple investigators. I can tell."

"I don't like this shit at all. Reminds me of the asshole from last year. A smokejumper with a beef." Antonio looked from one to the other.

Riker thought about what little the investigators had offered. "What if the perpetrator is ex-military? What if he or she is using the bombs as a smokescreen?"

"But why? What is he or she after?" Stoker raised his eyebrows.

"A particular target. Look at this a different way. With a task force set up in town, that would mean the target *is* significant. Maybe they have a suspect in mind already. Some bad dude." Antonio had a grin on his face.

"That makes more sense." Stoker held up his finger. "Perhaps the real reason behind whatever grudge this asshole has. That's what we have to figure out."

Antonio chuckled. "I think you just need to change careers, buddy. You like investigating crimes much more than you do fighting fires."

Blushing, Stoker groaned. "I do love a good mystery."

Riker kept his eyes pinned on the administrator building. "Stoker. Can that sergeant of yours find any information?"

"Well..." Stoker laughed.

"You *were* bluffing, you old dog, you." Antonio slapped him on the back.

"Could be any branch of the military, Riker." Stoker lifted his gaze. "But Cooper knows anybody who's anybody in the upper echelon of the military. Worth asking him a question. That is, if we were actually investigating."

Riker had to laugh. "A question couldn't hurt, especially given I have a terrible feeling this thing is going to escalate."

The other two men nodded. "Eyes and ears open, gentlemen. Now, why don't we have a drink at Ziggy's

tonight? Been a long time since we've been together."

"You guys go ahead. I have something I need to do." Riker gave a half smile.



TRINITY SAT with her legs curled under her, the laptop sitting on her lap and a drink on the coffee table. She'd been surprised that two hours had gone by and the amount of words she'd written. They were easy, flowing and her fingers couldn't keep up with her mind. Thoughts were spiraling, wild and wooly and in the two hours, she'd written over four thousand words. As she sat back, she eyed the computer screen and smiled.

The story had taken a dramatic turn, becoming a passionate romance of domination and submission and all because of one single reason. Riker. She rolled her eyes and leaned over, reaching for her wine. The rough and tumble man had a way about him, from his brash attitude to his almost surly demeanor, the character was easy to write. She only wished the man was just as easy to get to know. At least she could live her adventure vicariously through the pages of her amazing book.

Giggling, she held up the glass of wine, a silent toast to her inspiration. She could give up acting and become a famous and very illusive writer. And pigs would learn to fly. She had talent, she knew that, but giving up the illustrious career? Maybe. She glanced at her phone. Why she was bothering to keep it on the couch was beyond her. When she was on the deck, she had a single bar. Inside? Nothing. At least she could shut out the world for the remainder of the day.

After another sip, she eased the glass back on the table and took a deep breath. The words began to flow again, her mind reeling from intense desires, thought about utter submission, a powerful man and the kind of relationship so many women seemed to dream about.

*The moment he looked into her eyes, she dropped to the ground at his feet, the sign of respect a requirement. But in her*

*eyes, the action was everything she'd ever wanted, dark and almost painful cravings keeping her awake at night.*

*Crack!*

*When the end of his belt hit her back, she moaned, her pussy clenching.*

Trinity inhaled and realized she was hot and bothered. How the hell did authors write smut all day long and not remain wet? Maybe none of them wore panties. Ever. She closed her eyes, envisioning Riker and the night before.

A strange sound drew her out of her revelry. What the hell had she heard? Easing the laptop onto the cushion, she got up slowly, walking toward the front of the house. A red car. A sports car. Fuck. Who the hell had found her? Chance? This was exactly the kind of car he would rent in his effort to reclaim her. Ana wouldn't have said anything? Oh, she'd kill her cousin with her bare hands.

Bam! Bam!

She remained silent, hoping the asshole would go away. Maybe a traveling salesman? She bit back a laugh. She stood in a short cotton dress and bare feet and she had no way of protecting herself. My God. What was she thinking?

"Trinity. I know you're in there."

The male voice, husky and full of the sound of remorse sent a series of chills down the back of her legs. "Riker?" How in the hell had he found her? She fumbled with the lock, cursing then opened the door a mere crack. "You're here."

Riker had a stoic look on his face, a quiet yet humbled expression. "I wanted to apologize."

Trinity could tell the words were difficult for him to admit. Opening the door wider, she inhaled, and her nipples became hard, sensitive against the thin material of her blouse. "You don't have any reason to apologize."

"I think I do. May I come in?"

"I..." She took a quick glance at her computer then bit her lower lip. "Yes. Of course." She held her back against the door

after closing it behind him and for those few seconds, she drank in the gorgeous man. The black, skin tight jeans and the cobalt blue Henley, stretched out over his carved frame took her breath away. He was so unassuming, no idea that he was mouth-watering. Even his scuffed cowboy boots were sexy. She brushed her hands through her hair, smoothing the drooping curls.

Turning to face her, he gave her a heated look. “I didn’t mean for you to leave like that. I was an ass.” He exhaled. “A huge ass. I’m not used to...”

“Having a woman stay over?” She walked closer.

He nodded, his entire body remaining tense. “I’m not that kind of guy.”

“Being an asshole or having a woman stay?”

“Both.” Chuckling, he shoved his hands into his pockets and glanced around the living room. “Nice place.”

“Adequate,” she whispered and moved toward him, knowing better than to crowd the man.

“I guess it would be for an award-winning actress.” He lifted a single eyebrow when she sighed. “I don’t care who Trinity Hargrove the actress is. I care about the woman.”

“You care about me?” She dared whisper the question.

“Yeah, I do, which is why last night was so tough. I know it doesn’t make any sense.”

“The picture.” As soon as she said the words, she could tell he was shutting down. She reached out, touching his arm and he flinched. “Please don’t pull away. I wasn’t trying to pry. I did notice the beautiful photograph, but I wasn’t going to ask you any questions.”

“You didn’t have to. I could see the look on your face. I knew what you were thinking.”

“What was that? What could I be thinking other than I knew the picture was special, is special to you?” When he didn’t say anything, she allowed her grip to become tighter. “We all have a past. I told you that last night. You don’t know

me, and I have no idea what you've had to endure. What I do know is that we have chemistry. Something few people ever find." She couldn't believe she was saying or suggesting anything. There was no future for them, especially when he learned what a horrible person she was.

Riker moved his arm, pushing away her hold but grasped her hand, rubbing his thumb across her skin. He watched what he was doing, as if trying to figure out what to say. "The only thing I have left."

"I'm so sorry. What happened?"

"I lost them. A terrible tragedy. They were my life."

Trinity knew better than to push him. A few seconds passed. "How did you find me?"

Another grin crossed his face and he continued rubbing. "The deputy had your address for the report. I thought I'd come by and at least tell you how sorry I am for acting like such a jerk. You didn't deserve that."

"Well, okay. I'll accept your apology." A wave of tension fell between them. "How did you find out I'm an actress?"

"Landen. You know, the drunk guy asleep on my couch?" he teased, a clipped laugh followed by a snort. "He's a good guy. Just having troubles with his girlfriend. She knew who you were from the other night. You were in Ziggy's?"

"Yeah. I wanted to get away from the quiet here. Don't get me wrong, the place is beautiful, but I'm used to noise, people, parties. All crap, I know." She bit her lower lip and wanted to wrap her arms around him. "That's when I saw you."

"Saw me?"

"The report on the news? The little boy you saved?"

"Okay. I get it," he whispered, his eyes misting, forcing him to look away. "A little boy and his dog. Lucky Moose and I came along when we did."

"Moose?"

"Another smokejumper."

“Oh. How many of you are there?” Trinity heard the lilt in her voice. Why couldn’t they move past a basic conversation? They’d been so intimate, so close for several hours.

“Ten, plus others on the team that help us do our jobs. Do you really care?” Riker pulled her closer.

She palmed his chest, her fingers kneading his shirt. “I do. I’d love to know everything about you.”

“Why? What does it matter? You’re going to be leaving in a couple of weeks and I’ll still be here, doing my job.”

“Being a hero.” When he bristled, she shook her head. “Don’t do that. Don’t pull away. It does matter. I’m not happy with my life.”

“So, chuck it all and move here?” The question sounded accusatory.

“Maybe. Is that so crazy? What’s wrong with wanting to do something different?”

“You can’t leave everything you’ve ever known and move because of me.”

“You mean you won’t let me in.” Jerking away from his hold, she walked around him and toward the back door, folding her arms as she glared out at the deck. Everything about this man was difficult. Damn it! She could see a hint of his reflection in the glass and she had no doubt he was going to storm out the front door, cursing at her in the process. “What are you so afraid of? Why can’t you let anyone in? Why? What’s so wrong with allowing a single person to get to know you?”

Riker remained quiet, stoic.

Huffing, she threw open the back door, storming outside. Gripping the railing, she clung to the worn wood like a lifeline. Nasty words remained on the tip of her tongue, but she refused to spout off, to break the only connection they seemed to have.

Then she heard his heavy footsteps before she felt his hand wrapping around her arm, turning and jerking her against his

chest. “Oh!”

“Listen to me. I’m no one special. I’m nothing to anyone and you can’t give up your life for me. Not for me, but, lady, I can tell you this, I do want you. I can’t offer you a thing other than heartache, but what you do to me is driving me insane.” Crushing her lips with his, he thrust his arm around her as he plunged his tongue inside her mouth. Lifting her onto her toes, he squeezed until she moaned as the moment of passion continued.

Breathless, she tingled all over as he French kissed her, his tongue entwining with hers, his groin pushing against hers. She was electrified, her heart racing as he cupped the side of her face, his fingers digging into her cheek. She could no longer focus and closed her eyes as she wrapped a leg around his thigh. Friction created another set of sensations until her pussy was so wet, her nipples hungering for his tongue, his teeth.

When he broke the kiss, his eyes were narrowed, blackened pools of extreme lust. Using one hand, he yanked the dress up and off, growling when he saw her naked breasts. Cupping both, he lowered his head, taking her nipple into his mouth.

As the light breeze wafted across her naked skin, she eased back her head and gripped his arms, jutting her hips forward as he sucked and nipped, his actions savage, primal. He wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Panting, she winced as he bit down on her tender bud, sucking, the sounds exaggerated.

Riker moved his mouth to her other breast, taking more of her skin into his mouth. Reaching down, he tugged at her thong.

She struggled to lower her panties, kicking out of them. The realization she was standing naked outside was a delicious tease, letting go and feeling free. She yanked at his shirt, managing to tug the material from his jeans and slide her hand underneath, caressing his skin. He was hot, and she could feel his rapid heartbeat against her fingers.

Kicking her legs apart, he crawled one hand down her stomach to her crotch. Cupping her cunt, his fingers kneaded, the force of his hand pushing her onto her toes.

“Oh, God!” The moment his index finger swirled around her clit, she almost came. When he shoved two fingers inside her pussy, wiggling, flexing them open, she opened her mouth, issuing a silent scream. Everything about this man was all powerful, consuming and he would demand then take what he wanted.

And she would give it to him.

Riker eased back, licking his lips as he cocked his head, watching her reaction as two fingers became three, thrusting harder and faster.

She rocked back and forth, unable to keep her eyes open as her cunt muscles clenched around the invasion, drawing him in deeper.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

“God, yes.”

“Do you want me to whip you?”

Her mouth sagged, and she blinked several times. “Yes, sir.”

He grunted, as if the words were nothing more than sheer fuel, opening up a padlocked box and allowing the savage beast out to play. A wry smile crept onto his face as he pumped deep inside. Pulling his hand free, he held his glistening fingers into the waning sunlight then licked across the tips. “Open your mouth.”

Obeying, she knew what he was going to do. When he shoved his fingers inside her mouth, she gripped his wrist, holding him tightly as she sucked, tasting her juice as her pussy continued to clench.

Riker issued a low and husky growl, his eyes sparkling as he watched her clean and lick every finger, one after the other. Taking a step back, he tweaked her nipple, pinching until she yelped then yanked off his shirt.



Sucking in her breath, she reached out, her fingers touching his belt.

“Fascinating,” he muttered and allowed her to unbuckle it.

“What?” she managed as she unzipped his jeans.

“Your love of my belt. A method of issuing needed punishment. Have you always craved a firm hand, a man who could help you with obedience?”

Trinity nodded, a nervous laugh slipping from her mouth. “Yes, sir.”

“Do you hunger to be kept in line, rules to follow?”

“Oh, yes, sir.” Her eyes never leaving his, she peeled back his jeans then pushed them down past his hipbones, allowing herself to fall slowly to her knees.

“Trinity, do you need a hard spanking?”

“I do. I need it so much.” The words seemed to slip out of her mouth, the admittance surprising yet she felt as if this was the right man, the right time to let go. When his jeans were just above his knees, she pressed her mouth against his thigh, kissing his skin then proceeded to remove his boots and socks, taking her time to rub his feet as she kissed along his inner thigh.

Riker exhaled, the sound strangled. “Then ask for what you want, what you need.”

She continued kissing, moving down his leg until she licked across the top of one foot then the other. As she licked back up from his calf to his knee, she breathed out, unsure if she’d actually asked the question. “Please spank me. Whip me so I understand my need to obey.”

Issuing a single, powerful roar, he fisted her hair, pulling her to her feet. His hand still wrapped around her long strands, he shook his head. “Don’t ask if you don’t understand what you’re asking for.”

Arching her back, she pushed her breasts against his chest, dug her fingers into his skin. “I want nothing more than to learn to obey, punished for my infractions.” The words so

similar to the passage she'd just written, she was shaking all over, uncertain if he understood how important this was for her.

His breathing remained scattered, the sounds laced with a series of savage grunts, his eyes seemed to glaze over. "One day, beautiful lady, I will own you." After giving her an intense stare, he pushed her over the deck railing, using his feet to push apart her legs.

She held onto the dense wood, her pulse skyrocketing, her desire so different than she'd ever experienced. He could see right through her, to the terrified and broken woman inside. He knew what she needed, every concept of making her whole again. Own. The idea was scintillating.

*Crack! Pop!*

His hand peppered against one ass cheek then the other. "You will learn to follow my directions."

"Yes, sir."

*Whap! Crack!*

"To obey me without hesitation."

"Yes, sir. Oh, yes, sir."

*Smack! Whap! Crack!*

"Never to question my decisions," he whispered as he twisted her hair around his fingers and leaned in, blowing across the back of her neck.

"Never question them, sir." She could no longer feel her legs.

*Pop! Smack!*

With every hard spank, every crack of his hand, she was more alive, adrenaline flowing. She never closed her eyes, accepting the punishment, knowing this was exactly what she needed.

*Smack! Crack!*

“Then so be it. This is just the beginning,” he huffed and rubbed her ass, moving his fingers up and down the crack of her ass.

*Pop! Slap!*

“Perfect, sir.” The spanking was euphoric, pain mixing with pleasure in a manner that melded together, creating spikes in her heartrate, her pulse. She leaned further over the railing, the offer one she’d longed to give for so long. Years of turmoil in relationships, wanting to be taken in hand, loved in a manner that she didn’t know existed.

*Smack! Crack!*

He hissed and peppered several additional strikes before yanking her back against his naked chest, his hands covering her breasts, squeezing. “I’m going to fuck you.”

“Yes. Yes!”

Riker turned her around and slid his hands down her back and under her ass. Hissing, he lifted her into the air, holding her aloft, his muscles tensing.

Panting, she wrapped her legs around his thighs and moaned as his thick and throbbing cock was slapped back and forth.

He yanked her down, driving the entire length of his shaft inside. “Yes!” The sound of his booming voice reverberated in the air, floating through the wind as he growled and tossed back his head.

She clung to him as he lifted her again, repeating the move. Stunned by his power, his strength, her entire body began to shake. She could feel his cock throbbing inside, filling her completely.

A smile crossing his face, he rubbed his hands up her back, one hand clutched around her neck. Then he walked, taking long strides into the house.

She hung her head, their lips just touching as he carried her through the house. There was no more need to talk, no

questions that needed answers. They were simply consummating the beginning of a life changing moment.

Riker stormed into the bedroom and tilted his head, kissing her lips. "All mine."

"Yes. Yours."

He sat down on the bed, his hands never leaving her.

She began to ride him, moving forward and backward as her arms remained draped around his neck. Purring, she kissed the side of his face, dragging her tongue down his neck as she undulated, clenching her pussy muscles.

"Ride me. Take what you want."

There was no need to tell her what to do. She moved in a perfect rhythm, going up and down, forward and backward, rocking as the electricity shot into overdrive. Every cell in her body was on fire, sweat beading across her upper lip. How she hungered for this man, this incredible man who was so intense.

Issuing a single chuckle, he rolled her over, planting his hands on either side of her and rose up, straightening out his arms. As he hovered over her, dropping his head to dart his tongue around her mouth, he blew out a swath of hot air. He pushed one arm over her head then the other, holding her wrists together with one hand.

Her legs remained wrapped around his waist and she wiggled as he pumped, lifting his hips so only the tip was inside. She watched his eyes, the change in his demeanor as he pumped into her, driving his cock as deep into her cunt as he could. She lifted her legs, shifting the angle and both moaned.

"Tight. Jesus." Hanging his head, beads of sweat dripped off his face, cascading onto her face and neck.

She moaned as his actions became more manic, thrusting harder, faster and still he seemed to crave more. As he stared down into her eyes, a grin on his face, she could tell the orgasm was close. So close. "I'm going to..."

"Not until I tell you," he commanded and picked up the pace, the force pushing her hard into the bed.

Struggling, she tossed her head back and forth as every muscle in her body tensed. There was no way to hold back the climax, the wave that was shooting up her legs. “Please.”

“Mmm...” Riker kissed her lips, darting his tongue just inside, pumping even more savagely. “Come!”

Opening her mouth, the scream was no longer silent, and she jerked up from the bed as her entire body began to shake. “Oh!”

Growling, the sound guttural, he exploded, his entire body jerking and shaking then tensing until he stopped moving altogether.

Covered in goose bumps, she exhaled and the moment he freed her wrists, she wrapped them around him, pulling him down until his body covered hers. This was perfect. This was amazing.

This was love.



RIKER STOOD on Trinity’s back deck, a glass of wine in his hand. As he swirled the dark liquid, realizing he hadn’t had a glass of wine in years, he thought about the time he’d already spent with her. She was special, there was no doubt in his mind and the thought of her leaving was already pulling at his heart. Shit. This couldn’t be happening. He wasn’t equipped to feel the lump in his throat, the tug at his groin. Huffing, he took a sip and held the wine in his mouth before swallowing. She didn’t seem to care that he’d been married before. Then again, what did she actually know about him? Nothing.

He heard the sound of the door and was surprised he didn’t tense. The sex had been intense, the spanking amazing and she seemed to be the kind of woman he’d been looking for. Wait a minute. Looking for? He wasn’t searching for anything or anyone. But there she was, a beautiful flower ready to open up, expose herself to the elements.

Trinity eased next to him, her body just touching his, her face peering out at the twilight. “Am I interrupting?”

“No. I’m glad you’re here.” He allowed his body to sag, the move easing closer to her. Even the heat of her body against his felt right. “You’re a special lady, Trinity Hargrove.”

“Carrie.”

“What?”

“My real name is Carrie Simmons.” Her words were stilted.

He glanced in her direction, studying the way her face was pinched. “A beautiful name.”

“Not good enough for Hollywood. It took four people to decide what my name was going to be. I had no choice.” She laughed and swirled her wine. “I allowed a group of fat men to determine the new name I’m supposed to live with for the rest of my life. Can you believe that?”

“We all have to fake aspects of our life. Why did you allow it to happen?”

Exhaling, she took her time answering. “I don’t honestly know. I was happy doing some modeling. My cousin helped me get into the business but I’m not really high fashion model material. Still, I had fun and made good money for a few months. I did a bit part and was noticed. Then, an agent saw me at a fashion show and gave me his card. Marvin is a good guy. A pain in the ass at times but he does know his shit about Hollywood.”

“So, you were lured.”

“I was. I thought about the fact I could make some money, maybe buy a house and become something.” She brushed her hand through her hair and shivered.

“Are you cold?”

“It isn’t the Missoula weather. I’m disgusted with myself for falling into the trap. A fake boyfriend, a large house I’ll never be able to pay for and part after part in movies that mean nothing. I know. Entertainment.” She pushed her shoulder against his side. “Still, not fulfilling any longer.”

“What would you do if you didn’t act? Go back to modeling?” He could tell she was on the edge of opening up, perhaps something he needed to hear in order to... Trust. God. The word hung there, as if he wasn’t certain about the woman behind the mask.

She darted a cautious look in his direction. “Don’t laugh. I’d like to write books. I do write them, just not very well.”

“That’s amazing.”

“You really think so?”

Her voice was so small, as if asking if she was doing anything right in her life. “I honestly do.” Turning toward her, he leaned against the railing and gave her a comforting smile. “I don’t have the ability to do anything but fight fires. Never wanted to do anything else. You have so many talents.” The moment he pressed his fingers against her skin, the same desire crept in, pushing his cock against his jeans.

“Well, then you can help me push a book or two to a publisher.” Her laugh was light, easy. She gazed into his eyes and exhaled. “You are quite the man.”

“I’m just me.”

“A wonderful you.”

He looked down, still touching her, still needing the connection, but his heart remained heavy. The burden of his guilt and the past was too much to bear alone. “I was married for several years. Rose was an amazing woman. She was sweet and filled my world with laughter, something I didn’t experience much of as a kid. We fell in love hard and fast. When we married, we had nothing. I mean nothing to our names.”

Trinity rubbed her hand up and down his arm.

“She was very special, could make anything seem amazing and made certain we had what we needed. I started to make money with the fire department and while she wasn’t thrilled with my choice of profession, she knew what I wanted so she never pushed hard. When she became pregnant...” He swallowed hard as his chest tightened.

“Take your time. I’m right here.”

“I know you are.” Riker took another sip of wine, surprised how easily it was going down. “I was thrilled, although scared to death. Me, as a father. Me, of all people. I didn’t think I could do what was needed, but then Grace came. A little ball of wonder and joy. She was so happy from the minute she was born. She laughed, giggled all the time.”

“The light of her daddy’s eyes.”

“Yes,” he whispered, tears welling in his eyes. “She was so perfect. Rosy cheeks and ten little toes and fingers. I was the happiest man alive. So was Rose. She doted on me and Grace every minute of the day. I was given a promotion, which meant we could get a bigger place. Everything was going so well. We were so happy.”

Trinity rose onto her toes, kissing his cheek. “It’s okay, Riker.”

Sniffing, a single tear slipped down his cheek. “I’m sorry. Landen is the only person I’ve talked to about this. He’s the only one I knew I could—”

“Trust?” she interrupted.

“Yeah. I guess that’s it.” He could feel himself pulling away and refused to fall into the same trap he’d fallen into since leaving Baltimore.

“What happened?”

“Rose died. My baby died.” He heard her anguished sounds, the way her breath was ragged, just like the damn beating of his own heart.

Trinity eased against him, resting her head on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I’m so very sorry.”

Riker gripped the back of her head, keeping her in place, desperate to cling to the present instead of the horrors of the past. “They were my world.” As his voice broke, tears sliding down his face, he looked up at the sky and could see Grace’s face the last time he’d been home. The evening before she... “My fault.”



“What?” She lifted her head, her eyes never blinking.  
“What do you mean your fault?”

He held his breath for what seemed like an eternity before he could speak. “They died because of me. I killed them.”

## CHAPTER 9

There was no way to understand why Trinity hadn't pulled away, shoving him out the door, but she hadn't. Instead, she'd held him while he wept, the first time he'd done so in over three years. When he finally pushed the damning memory into the ugly black box, stifling the tears and facing reality, she'd held his hands, refusing to let him go. Still, he hadn't been able to tell her the final details. Perhaps he never would. Maybe they didn't matter.

Numb inside, his instinct was to go away, take his Harley to parts unknown. Perhaps the crash had been about karma after all, refusing to allow him to run.

"Will this do?" Trinity asked as she walked out of her bedroom. When she saw the look on his face, she laughed. "I wanted to look nice."

"Nice? You've been to Ziggy's. The place is honky-tonk," he said as he walked closer. Convincing her to go with him to the bar had been unexpected, but his desire felt right, as if she was supposed to be by his side.

Groaning, she smoothed down her dress. "I currently have one pair of jeans to my name. This is what I normally wear, and don't you dare say a word." Laughing, she sauntered closer, allowing her hips to swing back and forth.

"You look wonderful." And she did. With her hair swept up, pinned in the back, her fiery red dress clinging to her curves in a provocative manner, he was horny all over again.

Closing the distance, he reached around, tapping her ass. “Just remember you belong to me.” He could hear a distinct echo, as if saying the words from a distance. She didn’t seem to notice.

“How could I forget?” Whispering, she kissed his cheek. “This is unexpected. I’m glad you invited me.”

“Just remember, the gang is well, the gang.” Riker wasn’t certain what to expect, other than ribbing from the team, but even for a single night, he wanted to feel like Stoker, or even Landen, happy to have someone on his arm.

She remained silent during the first few miles and while he couldn’t see her face, he could almost hear her mind reeling, churning with what he’d told her. He gripped the steering wheel until his hands ached, and still there was no relief. Maybe he could forget, even for a few hours.

Blip!

The sound came from her purse. He looked over and noticed her body had tensed and the fact she was ignoring the call or text. “Important?”

“Crap. No doubt just utter crap.”

What she hadn’t told him was intriguing, but he wasn’t going to grill her on anything. She seemed to relax after a couple of minutes, until her phone rang in earnest.

“I don’t have any reception at the cabin. I’m sure this is just my agent, trying to figure out where I am.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

Snorting, she darted a glance in his direction. “Not on your life.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened to make you leave?”

“No.”

The word was simple. Succinct. He nodded, even though he knew she wasn’t paying any attention.

Seconds later, she dragged her phone out of her purse, sliding her finger across and twisting her body.

Whatever she was harboring, she certainly didn't want him to see. He kept his eyes on the road as she stared down at the screen.

"No." The whisper was hoarse, filled with terror.

"What's wrong?"

Trinity coughed, the sound choked and slapped her hand on the dashboard. "It's just something I'm dealing with."

"The reason you left."

"Leave it alone. Alone!"

Riker exhaled but remained quiet. The entire rest of the trip, she wasn't able to take her eyes off of what had to be an email. What asshole was bugging her? He realized the defensive protection mechanism was clear and present. When he pulled into the parking lot, easing into a spot, he remained idling as he unclipped his seatbelt. "Are you certain you want to do this? My friends can be very pushy."

"I need this. Let's go have some fun. Okay?" Without saying another word, she unfastened her seatbelt and slid out of the car, walking several feet ahead of him.

After scrambling to follow, he took her arm, pulling her back. "Hold on here. Wait for me." Wrapping his arm around her waist, he tipped her chin with his finger. "Just like you told me. I'm right here." Lowering his head, he captured her mouth, allowing the kiss to be a gentle reminder, a softness that they both seemed to need.

She melted into his arms, her fingers digging into his shirt, moaning past the kiss.

In an uncharacteristic mannerism, he kept his arm around her as they walked inside and within seconds, they were noticed.

"Holy. Fuck." The exclamation was loud, drawing attention in their direction.

Riker cringed as he walked them further inside, unsure of who'd issued the two words. He noticed Stoker's face first, the man grinning from ear to ear. "Here we go."

Trinity nestled into his hold, her hand on his chest as they continued further in, passing by a solid two dozen people, several turning in their direction.

“Riker Sheffield. Have you been keeping secrets?”

Riker laughed, seeing Shannon’s bright eyes and happy smile. He walked closer to the bar, waiting for the onslaught. “Trinity Hargrove, Shannon Miller. Be careful with this girl. She’s one mean bartender.”

“We’ve sort of met already and I heard about her reputation,” Trinity said then laughed. “I love your place.”

Shannon narrowed her eyes and walked from around the bar, heading in their direction. “Thought I recognized you the other night. I’ve seen two of your films. I know. Not many.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not into chick flicks either,” Trinity teased. “But can we keep this quiet?”

“A beauty like you? Going to be tough to do, but I’ll be happy to try. The boys are already in the back. Why don’t I bring you guys some drinks back there?” Shannon winked as she touched Riker’s arm.

“Landen?” Riker asked.

Her face clouded over. “I haven’t seen him in a couple days.”

He lifted an eyebrow and gave her a stern look. “You and I need to talk. No, you need to talk with Landen.”

“Don’t start with me.” Shannon turned her attention to Trinity. “What would you like?”

“Tonight? Bourbon,” Trinity answered.

“A girl after your own heart. Two comin’ up.” Shannon frowned then inched closer, leaning in so that only Riker could hear. “That attorney, Troy something is here. You guys okay with that?”

“From what I’ve heard, the man has paid his dues. He might be able to help the Jackals with yet another issue.” Riker

looked over the crowd, eyeing the Burnout room. He could see the captain pacing, his hands doing part of the talking.

“Okay. Then I’ll keep that in mind. Go have fun.” Shannon patted his arm.

Riker grabbed hers. “I’m serious. If you won’t talk with that brooding boyfriend of yours, you and I *are* going to talk. Okay?”

Huffing, she narrowed her eyes before nodding. “Fine. We can talk but that won’t change my mind.”

“Uh-huh.” Riker watched her walk away and could see past her fake bravado. Shannon was one unhappy woman. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

“Jackals?” Trinity asked.

“That’s what we call the smokejumping team. Makes us feel closer, I guess.” He hadn’t thought about the term since arriving. Yeah, they were close. Maybe too close, sometimes. As he neared the room, he could tell Stoker had alerted the group to their arrival. He growled under his breath before walking in.

“Well, well. What do we have here?” Moose snarked first, giving Trinity a once over.

“Riker with a girl? Hell must have frozen over,” Cooper added, inching closer. “And a beautiful woman to boot. I’m Cooper McKenzie. Folks call me Coop. That big guy is Mathew Washington and his nickname suits him. Moose. Oh, don’t let this lug of a man fool you. He’s a softie.”

“Awww!” Several of the team said at the same time.

“No, he’s perfectly hard, chiseled in all the right places,” Trinity stated, winking at the smokejumper.

“Whoa! I like this girl. Laney, Jessica. You’ve met your match.”

Riker could see recognition in Trinity’s eyes as Jessica moved closer.

“Jessica Dunn.” Jessica grinned. “I mean Hansen.”

Riker laughed when Stoker smacked her on the ass. “Stoker and Jessica are together. Laney and Garcia over there and Shannon and...” His words died off.

“Jessica Dunn. Fringe. My favorite band in the world. I know you’re country now, but damn, I miss your rock albums.” Trinity held out her hand.

“And I’ve seen your movies. You’re amazing,” Jessica said then laughed. “Now, I’m just an old married, pregnant woman.”

“You’re my honey bunny,” Stoker said with a husky voice as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Let me make all the other introductions. That’s Captain Scully Phillips, the only man who can keep us in line. Tyler Franklin, our spotter. He keeps us going in the right direction. Boone Martin, a much better bull rider. Sawyer Lincoln, old as dirt.” Riker couldn’t help but grin.

“You are so going to get it for that!” Sawyer huffed. “I can outrun you any day.”

“Try me,” Riker teased. “Antonio Giovanni. Don’t fuck with him. Steel Frost, a man without a voice. Zane Gray, but I think you already know him.” He could tell Trinity was taken aback.

Zane shook his head, anger furrowing his face. “By all rights I should beat the shit out of you for stealing my girl.”

Several of the team took a long stride backwards, as if there was going to be a fight.

“Don’t do that,” Steel hissed, moving in front of Zane.

Trinity walked around Steel, holding out her hand. “My welcoming party. How are you, cowboy?”

Keeping the same look on his face for a few seconds, he finally rolled his eyes. “If it were any other man here but Riker, I would beat his ass.”

“Whew!” Boone and Sawyer said together.

Riker gave Zane a nod of respect before tipping his head toward Garcia. “And this happy fellow is Garcia Puevos, the latest jumper to take the plunge.”

“Plunge?” Trinity wrinkled her brow.

“Marriage. An ugly word.” Riker shivered. He eyed Troy and could tell how uncomfortable the man was. At least Garcia didn’t seem to mind the guy’s presence. After everything Laney had gone through, realizing the single father was working for the man she’d been running from for years, the attorney was lucky he hadn’t spent any time in jail.

“Marriage can be okay,” Trinity said absently.

“Good to see someone has grabbed at this guy’s heart. He’s ruthless, dangerous and a troublemaker.” Captain Phillips held out his hand. “Pleasure, Trinity. Now, do you mind if I talk to Riker for a few minutes?”

“I’ll take care of her, boys.” Jessica winked.

“That’s what we’re all afraid of,” Stoker huffed.

“Bad!” Jessica pointed her finger.

Trinity squeezed Riker’s arm, giving the men a nod. “I’ll be fine. I can handle myself. Besides, a lot of good looking cowboys in this bar.”

Riker realized he was tingling. He gave her a possessive expression before she walked away. “What’s up?”

“First of all, Troy Bruester has agreed to help us with our problem.” Captain Phillips beckoned for Troy to join them.

Riker nodded as did the others.

“Thank you all for not kicking me in the teeth.” Troy smiled, giving Laney a nod as she squeezed his arm.

“He’s a good guy with a fabulous little boy,” Laney said, giving every man a hard look. “We’re friends now, so be good to him.”

Troy sighed. “I appreciate everything. Captain Phillips told me about the mineral rights. There are some very specific laws regarding this. This might not be my expertise, but I have a



friend from Miami who specialized in this during his early career. He's going to help me make certain that what is going on is legal."

"What if it is? What then?" Sawyer asked, his face pinched.

"If the landowner, which I understand to be Parson's Group, does have the rights, they can evoke them at any time. Which means, you'll have to abate the land and building." Troy kept his tone even.

"Fuck!" Stoker snapped.

"But," Troy held up his finger. "If there is any indication that an additional sale was made, or the rights were transferred, we're talking a different story. I need to do some digging."

"Sounds good to me," the captain said then sighed. "We don't need any more shit. Sadly, we can't pay you much."

Troy held up his hand. "You don't understand. I was given back my life. I owe Garcia and Laney everything, including the life of my little boy. I'll do anything I can to help and I do mean anything."

The words hung in the air.

Boone cleared his throat. "We appreciate it."

"Yeah, we really do." Antonio held out his hand. "I know you went through some shit. Glad to see you're back on your feet."

"He's been good to Laney," Garcia said quietly then tipped his beer. "To good friends."

"To good friends." Troy raised his glass. "Now, I'll get out of your hair."

"Stay. We're going to drink and enjoy." Garcia gave him a smile.

"I'd like that. I'll just say hello to Laney, if that's okay." Troy half laughed. "How things change."

Riker realized that life changed in a split second. He darted a look at Trinity and had no idea what he was going to do.

“I have some other news and we have to keep this on the down-low. Seems Sheriff James hasn’t been telling us the entire truth.” The captain kept his voice low.

“That’s no surprise.” Riker sighed as the others crowded around. “What else?”

Captain Phillips shook his head before speaking. “You guys all heard that Chris Camden disappeared a few days ago?”

“Wasn’t he working with the city council?” Cooper asked.

“Yeah, he was. New to the position. Started in January for the budget year. He didn’t take a thing in his house and just left.” Captain Phillips allowed the news to sink in.

“And?” Riker knew there was more.

“And, Molly Jenkins was found dead in her home. Killed herself by hanging.”

“Who is Molly Jenkins?” Garcia asked.

Stoker narrowed his eyes. “I know that name. I swear I know her.”

“Well, she worked on the city council with the mayor. She was also a member of some special committee. I don’t know much about it, but from what I heard, they were working on getting additional funding for veterans. Money for housing, food, that kind of thing. A new start.” The captain took a sip of his beer.

“They were working on the Veteran’s Coalition Act.” Garcia shrugged. “That’s what the mayor called it on the news the other day.”

“Why is it important that we know she killed herself?” Boone asked as he folded his arms.

Captain Phillips shrugged. “Her son was stationed in Afghanistan alongside Chris’ son. Unfortunately, both boys disappeared in action on the same day. Now, if that isn’t

enough of a coincidence, both Chris and Molly have ties to the military as well. In Chris' previous job, he worked directly for the Marines in Washington. Some reports say he had the say so for those who were sent overseas and what missions they were assigned to."

"Whoa. Then this guy was high up in the Marines. What the hell is he doing taking a position on the city council in Montana of all places?" Stoker huffed. "That's odd."

"What are you thinking?" Riker asked, keeping his voice low.

"I don't know yet. Something is just off, but now, it makes a hell of a lot of sense why those two investigators were in town. Maybe Antonio's earlier suggestion has merit. Chris' disappearance would be on the military's radar." Stoker rubbed his jaw. "Yep. Makes a hell of a lot of sense."

"What does this have to do with the bomb threats?" Sawyer shook his head.

"They both worked directly for the mayor for one thing. And, there's something you don't know about the mayor." Captain Phillips looked directly from Stoker to Cooper.

"Her son was killed in action," Stoker answered. "That's one reason this cause is important to her."

Captain Phillips nodded.

Cooper inhaled. "Oh, shit. I can tell you have something stuck in that craw of yours."

Stoker laughed. "I don't understand why this Chris Camden fellow left a powerful and influential position to work here."

"You know, Stoker. He loves a good mystery," Garcia teased.

"I still don't understand why this matters to us." Antonio said.

"What unit?" Riker asked.

Captain Phillips exhaled before pulling a file off the table. “You’re not going to like this. This one.”

As the men crowded around, Riker didn’t have to look to understand. Stoker and Cooper had been a part of the same unit, the one that had been crippled, causing Cooper to lose his leg. The very one in which Stoker had been captured. The mission had been dangerous, clandestine and involved a hell of a lot of Marines. Too many lives had been lost.

“Ah, fuck!” Stoker said quietly.



TRINITY FELT MORE comfortable talking with Jessica than she had any other woman, besides Ana, in years. “And you just fell in love with Missoula?”

“Not right away. I wasn’t happy being here, but as soon as I met Stoker and the rest of the guys, life just seemed to fall into place,” Jessica said then patted her stomach. “Besides, Stoker is a tough man to push aside.”

“Everyone is so nice. Not like what I’m used to.”

“Oh, trust me. I do know what you mean. Even going to visit my record producer makes me cringe every time,” Jessica huffed. “You can find everything you never knew you needed right here in this magical place. You just have to allow your eyes to open.”

“Rather profound.” She looked for Riker, her heart still racing given what he’d told her. She knew there was more to the story. Of course, there was.

“Riker is a good man. He won’t let anyone in except for Landen, but I know what he’s made of. He’s tough and caring, but has no idea how to free his mind.” Jessica followed her gaze. “I don’t know everything that happened to him in Baltimore, but the little I do know, his entire world was turned upside down. If you care about him, remember that his psyche is fragile. Well, we could say that about every man.” She laughed, as if trying to lighten up the conversation.

She heard the words and knew what the woman was telling her. If she wasn't serious about the man, don't start a relationship. She groaned and hid behind her glass. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Running. I've been running my entire life. I can't do it anymore."

"Then don't. Sounds simple, but I know what I'm talking about. I spent so much time running from my past that I lost a good portion of my life. Don't let that happen. Lean on Riker if you need to. He's a strong man in his own way."

"He's an amazing man." When Jessica squeezed her hand, she thought about the damn series of messages. Jack wasn't going to let this go.

"Ah, you do like him."

Blushing, she pressed the back of her hand across her heated cheek. "I do. Crazy as it sounds, he's perfect for me."

"Then go for what you want. Never let anyone, anything or any past deed stop you. There's always a way and you'll have friends here."

Trinity smiled and knew Jessica was being serious. "I have a lot to think about. I know."

"You'll figure it all out. I can tell how much you care about Riker. Just remember that when times go to shit." She rolled her eyes. "Pot calling the kettle black here."

"But you have a great life."

"We all do," Laney said as she slipped into the seat. "I'm lucky to be alive. These guys saved my life. Literally."

"They've saved almost everyone in town," Jessica added.

"Aren't you worried they'll be killed?" Trinity asked then noticed the look the two women shared.

"What they do is very dangerous, and I worry every time Stoker goes out, but this is what he loves. Taking that away from him would kill a part of him. I can't do that. I know that what he's doing is needed and some deity will keep him safe. The beast won't get him." Jessica sighed.

“The beast?”

Laney nodded. “They believe fire is a beast, eating and growing. The ones who have looked the beast in the eye are forever changed.”

“Riker has seen the beast. That much I know. Sadly, the moment ruptured his life.”

Trinity looked at Jessica and could see such love in her eyes. She fiddled with her drink, realizing that somehow love had indeed crept in, sweeping through her when she wasn't thinking about anything but the man who had managed to change her life. “I don't know if I could do that. Wait and worry.”

“You can. If you can believe in love, you can. Speaking of which, Garcia and I are thinking about a September wedding. You will be a part, won't you?” Laney grinned at Jessica.

“That's fantastic. I'm so happy for your guys. Of course, I will. This baby wants to come out now, so I might look good in a dress.” Jessica squealed. “Pretty soon, we'll have them all married off.” Winking, she nodded to Trinity.

“Oh, no. Marriage isn't my thing!” Trinity held up her hands. “I'm not the marrying kind.”

“Said the spider to the fly,” Laney said in a sing-song voice.

Trinity sensed Riker was paying attention to her, watching the way she was talking with the other women. This seemed so normal, so every day and she loved every minute of it. As the girls continued to talk, she excused herself from the table. She had a nauseous feeling in the pit of her stomach, a sickening notion that her world was going to come crashing down. Would Riker understand her truth?

She stood in the bathroom, glaring at her reflection. Exhaustion and worry had given her new creases around her eyes. Wouldn't the studio executives be thrilled? Why was she even going back? Why did she care to follow up on a career she hated? Could she stay here, in such a beautiful location? Could she learn to live a simple life?

If she sold everything, she could break even and have enough to start a new life. That would be incredible. She sagged against the sink and jerked out her lipstick. So what if a few people knew who she was? They certainly didn't seem like the kind of people who gave a shit. She applied the lipstick and rushed into the stall, vomiting what little she had in her stomach. Chance. The message he'd left had been sweet and loving, almost begging her to come back.

The man was nothing like Riker. He was a taker while Riker had no idea how to give, but he managed to provide everything she needed. Dropping the lipstick into her purse, she stood tall, striking a pose similar to so many she'd done over the last few years. No, this wasn't her. She was a jeans kind of girl. Wasn't that a hoot?

She walked outside, noticing Riker was talking with Shannon. She moved closer, but kept her distance. They were obviously close, perhaps having dated before.

Riker nodded as she neared, as if beckoning her to come closer.

The dominating words he'd issued, the way he'd stated in no uncertain terms that he would own her was exhilarating. She walked closer and smiled given the way the dress swished back and forth across her bruised ass. The man knew how to give a spanking.

"Just talk to him. He cares about you." Riker kept his voice low.

"I know he does and I love him. I adore Landen, but he's pigheaded, much like you I might add," Shannon stated as she shook her head.

Riker huffed. "He's staying at my place for one night only. Go see him or call him. What's that going to hurt? I know the two of you and you're nothing without each other."

"Well, thank you very much," Shannon chastised, her smile fading. "I will talk to him. The truth is, I can't live without him. He's managed to become a part of me."

“My work here is done.” Riker grinned and took Trinity’s hand.

Trinity nuzzled next to him, determined to relax for the rest of the evening, when a news bulletin caught her eye. Her name was plastered on a huge red banner smack in the middle of the screen. She knew this was coming. She knew there was no place to run and no method of hiding that would keep her safe, but this. “No. Please, dear God. No.”

Shannon caught her look then glanced up at the television, unable to stop the bartender before he turned up the sound.

“In breaking news, there are serious accusations placed against Trinity Hargrove, the award-winning actress of such films as *Dark Accusations* and *Contemporary Passage*. According to reports, Ms. Hargrove was involved with a vicious crime eight years ago involving a professor, David Miller. From what we’ve been able to learn, the professor was accused and served time for the senseless killing of his wife in a love triangle involving the actress. While Ms. Hargrove was never charged, there are some that believe she is the cause of Susie Miller’s death. We’ll keep you informed as additional information occurs.”

All time seemed to stand still, the entire world around her in a vacuum. Unable to focus, to see or hear anything, Trinity backed away, certain everyone in the room was staring at her, accusing her, pointing fingers. Her heart racing, she could no longer breathe, her throat closing. Everything she knew, everything she loved was destroyed. Gone. She clawed at her face, her throat as the memories rushed into the forefront, taking what was left of her sanity.

Blinking, she could see the look of horror on Riker’s face, could swear he was screaming at her, calling her names, wretched but truthful names. There was nothing she could do. Nothing.

And so, she ran, pushing past everyone standing in her way. Screaming. They were screaming at her, chasing her. She had to leave. Tears rushed down her face as she struggled to get away, tripping, stumbling, every muscle aching. She



continued fighting, shoving against everyone standing in her way.

“Help me!” Had she issued the words?

“Trinity!”

The single word, the call. His voice. He was following her, trying to get to her. No! She wouldn't allow this to happen. She couldn't take from the man who she adored, who she loved. Love. God!

Bolting out the door, she blinked away the burning tears as they stung her eyes. She was unable to see anything in front of her, but she kept running, racing to find solace in anything. Alone. Very much alone.

“Trinity! Stop!”

She refused to stop. No. No! “Get away from me. You can't help me.” No one could help her. There was no one she could trust.

“No. No! Trinity. Stop! Look out!”

## CHAPTER 10

Riker stood in the doorway, his legs crossed, his heart racing. The adrenaline hadn't stopped flowing since yanking Trinity out of the middle of the street a split second before being hit by a trucker. The poor driver had skidded in an effort to avoid her, crashing into the light in front of Ziggy's. The entire scene had been chaotic, Trinity remaining hysterical for thirty minutes. Somehow, Shannon had been able to calm her down. Unfortunately, Trinity had been nearly catatonic ever since.

He rubbed his tired eyes and tried to figure out what to say to her. The one thing he'd captured during her race to get out of the bar was that she was certain no one would believe her. In truth, he had no idea what to believe. The story was all over the news, told in different and jaded methods, but the information the same. The dark secret she'd been hiding involved murder.

Exhaling, he walked outside with the drink in his hand. Finding the bottle of bourbon in the cabinet was perhaps the only thing keeping him from losing his shit. He was so out of his element. Easing down onto the deck, he wrapped his arms around his knees and stared at the moon, studying the way clouds were floating across the bright orb.

She sat huddled in a blanket, a glass of wine in her hand. Her breathing remained scattered, as if her inner demons had control over her heart, perhaps her very soul.

Riker knew what horrific guilt felt like, understood the mind-numbing aspect of fighting to even have the right to

breathe or live. Whatever had occurred all those years ago continued to eat her alive. Reaching over, he took her hand into his. She was so damn cold. He squeezed her hand, praying she wouldn't pull away. When she issued a single moan, he pulled her fingers to his lips, blowing across them in hopes of giving her a hint of comfort.

Trinity brought her glass to her lips, gulping then swallowing, both sounds scattered, strangled.

Now, he was angry. Why the hell had someone brought up her past now? What fucking monster was hell bent on destroying her life? "Do you trust me?" The words slipped out without planning, without any thought.

She hesitated, but answered, the single word almost inaudible. "Yes."

"Then hear me when I say this. I'm not going anywhere and I'm not the kind of man to jump to conclusions, believing shit. Okay?"

"But it's not shit. Not exactly."

Her could hear the sobbing sounds racking her body, could feel her utter blinding despair. "Talk to me. What does that mean?"

"You don't..." Trinity choked. "You don't want to know."

"Did you kill Susie Miller?"

This time, she chuckled. "No. I had nothing to do with her death."

Riker hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until she answered. "Then what happened and who is this fucker trying to destroy you?"

She took several deep breaths before tipping her head, giving him a slight smile. "A reporter from Los Angeles that has been following me for almost three years. He's not a bad guy, but—"

"Not a bad guy?" he interrupted. "I could kill the motherfucker." The moment she placed her hand on his arm,

her fingers squeezing, he almost lost it, the adrenaline forcing his body to shake. “I could kill him.”

“He’s just trying to make a living like everybody else.”

“No excuses!” Hearing the ugliness in his voice, he groaned. “I’m sorry.”

“You care about me.”

He shifted, moving closer. “More than you know, lady. More than you know. Let me know the details. Talk to me so we can try and figure this out.”

She swirled her wine glass and leaned her head against the railing. “I knew Jack was going to do this. He’s been threatening for a couple of months.”

“Jack?”

“Jack Spartan, reporter for TMZ. He’s basic paparazzi and has a reputation for being hard-nosed. I’m afraid getting this national piece has put him on the map. That’s what he really wanted in the first place and didn’t mind destroying my life to get it.”

“You couldn’t stop him?”

Sighing, she took a sip of wine before answering. “I pushed him off. My mistake was not to confront him or the story right away. I guess I thought it would go away, but he kept digging. Now, the various agencies, movie houses and directors won’t want to have anything to do with me.”

“Because they think it’s the truth?” Riker growled under his breath.

“They don’t care about the truth. It’s all about sensationalism. Morality clauses. You might not know much about Hollywood, but times are changing. If there’s even a hint of a scandal they race away, their tails between their legs. They can’t afford any hidden stories. Clout in movie town has dropped. So, I’m finished.”

He breathed out and looked up at the sky. “What about the truth?”

“The truth is still ugly, damning no matter what slant is placed on the sordid story.” Trinity laughed. “I don’t know what I was thinking when I allowed Ana, my cousin, to talk me into getting involved in the modeling scene. I ran away from home and thought the ugliness wouldn’t follow. When my agent wanted me to change my name, I thought, hey, that’s great. No one will dig into my past. I was wrong.”

The wind had picked up and Riker knew a storm was coming. Or maybe the storm had already arrived. He eased his legs around hers, scooting even closer. “Can you tell me the real story?”

“Riker, you’re a wonderful man and I adore your friends, but I’m not going to drag you into the middle of this. There’s no doubt that somebody from the bar has already called the press, let them know I’m here. My guess is that this beautiful town will be filled with reporters bright and early tomorrow.”

“You don’t give this town or its people enough credit. My friends already consider you one of their own and will protect you. So, will Shannon and her friends and trust me. You don’t want to cross Shannon.” He allowed himself to laugh.

“Why? Why would they care about someone they don’t know and a woman who lied to them?” Trinity’s voice held angst, her words stilted.

“You aren’t just someone. You’re special and important to me. They know that. And what did you lie about?”

She seemed to think about his words. “My entire life.”

He intertwined their fingers and inched even closer until their lips were nearly touching. “We all have a lie we live, every one of us. Yours just happens to be more...”

“Horrific?” she whispered.

Kissing her lips, he refused to back away, making certain she could feel his heat, even his love. The word and concept were no longer startling.

She pressed her hand against his chest. “You deserve the truth but let me get through this. Okay? It’s harder to think about than you know.”

Nodding, he remained quiet, merely rubbing her fingers between his.

“When I lived my life as Carrie Simmons, I was just a girl in college. I had no idea what I wanted to be, so I took business and writing courses at the local university. My parents lived paycheck to paycheck, so I had to pay my way. I did some local modeling and waited tables. I also had an amazing and encouraging professor. He was brilliant and an author. I admired and respected him. He knew I wanted to write books, so he took the extra time to give me ideas, thoughts about stories. We became close, spending time in local coffee shops. I wrote stories and he’d critique them.” She groaned and looked down.

Riker leaned further in.

“I knew he was married and he never tried anything. Not once. He was a perfect gentleman, so we continued meeting, coffee turning into wine and even a few dinners. I was so happy and even had a few stories that he and I thought good enough to send off to some publishers. I had no idea that he was falling in love with me. I cared for him deeply, but he was my mentor. I also had no idea that he was disturbed, his marriage on the rocks. There was no indication. None.”

When the tears slipped down her cheeks, he used his thumb, wiping them away.

“Anyway, one night after dinner, he took me home. I had car trouble and he simply offered me a lift. That’s when he professed his love for me. He said he was going to leave his wife and that he wanted me to consider being with him. I was floored, or I guess naïve enough not to see it coming. When I look back, of course, all the signs were there, but I guess I chose to look the other way.”

“What did you do?”

“I told him how much I cared about him but that we couldn’t see each other any longer. I didn’t want to be in the middle of the break-up of his marriage. I’m not that kind of girl, no matter what the tabloids say. He tried to kiss me and for maybe five seconds I let him. Then I pushed him away and

couldn't get out of his car fast enough." She laughed and shook her head. "I was so stupid. I didn't see him for a couple of days. He was supposedly sick, so I thought he was working on his marriage. Then..." Her entire body began to shake.

Riker cupped her face. "He's not here. You can do this. I'm right here to help you through it."

"I know you are. I know." She took another gulp of wine, almost draining the glass. "When he returned, he was different. Quiet. I wanted to talk to him, but I was terrified he would think I wanted to be with him. He called a couple of times, but I never took his calls. About..." She sucked in her breath. "Maybe a week later, I heard the news that his wife was found dead. A friend of Susie's went and found her at their house. He hadn't called the police. He left her there to die. The bastard!" A choking sob pushed up from her throat.

"Jesus Christ."

Nodding, she wiped the tears roughly and began to rock. "I don't know all the details and I never learned them except that they'd had a fight and he pushed her down the stairs. The police thought I was involved because they found something that had dropped from my purse, a damn lipstick. In his car with my fingerprints. People at the restaurant put me there on the night they determined she'd died. I was questioned and released, but there were several weeks that the entire town thought I was a black widow."

"That's why you left."

"One reason. Yes. When Ana offered me to stay at her place in California, I jumped at the chance. I just left my life behind."

Riker breathed out and had no idea how to comfort her. "What happened to David?"

"He was convicted of second degree manslaughter and served time. He's out now, or so I heard. He actually came to my house just before they arrested him and confessed what he'd done. I'd already heard, and I didn't know what to do. It

was ugly. He kept saying he did it for me. For me!” Dropping her head, she allowed the tears to flow.

He held her, wrapping his arms around her as she broke down and every part of him wanted nothing more than to kill both the assholes. This was insane. “It’s okay, honey. You didn’t do anything wrong. He was a sick man who was infatuated with you.”

“I know. I know. I do. Ana helped me realize that, but the nightmares never stopped. Never. I can see David’s face the day he came to see me. He was smiling, so happy as if he and I could be together. I think I was numb for years. When I started acting, I changed the way I looked and with the name being different, I just thought my past was the past.”

“What if you told the truth? Seriously? What is anyone going to think?”

“I’m not certain it will matter. The story has been twisted. There’s no turning back. I am the black widow stories are created from.” She laughed then cried, her sound guttural.

So many thoughts and ideas shifted through his head, but right now, what she needed was comfort, his love. He pulled her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. “Then you can stay here in Missoula.”

She sniffed and kneaded his shirt. “I think I’d like that. I don’t know. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Take some time. That’s what you’re going to do. You’re in a good place where people care about you. Try and remember that.”

“I do, and I will.”

He rocked her, his chin on top of her head until he could sense she’d fallen asleep. As he pulled the blanket around her, making certain she was warm, he could see the first sign of lightning. For some reason, the blue hued light felt like a sign. Perhaps this was the beginning of a new life.

For both of them.





HE WATCHED her through the window, the way she played with her hair as she talked on the phone. She was completely unaware that he was watching, standing just outside her realm, her almost perfect world. Well, there was nothing perfect about what she'd done or was contemplating doing. She was a monster in his eyes and always would be.

*Crack!*

The sky lit up, creating a sizzle of electricity. He tipped his head, watching the way the clouds rushed across the waning moon. The storm would certainly cover up any sound, especially given she would no doubt be a hellion. Unlike the others, she was strong, a fighter. This was perhaps the best moment of his career, even his life. She had no idea what she was about to face and this time, he would allow himself to play.

He waited, peering in through the windows every so often as she continued to pace, drinking her no doubt expensive wine, planning some frivolous party or catered event. That's all she ever did, never thinking about anyone but herself.

The fucking bitch.

*Boom!*

The roll of thunder gave him a series of shudders, the sensational feelings dragging throughout his body. He loved a good storm, the way the electricity kicked into high gear, a wonderful reminder of the best time in his life. Before everything had been taken away. He snorted and wiped sweat from his brow.

As the first few drops of rain began to fall, he crouched over and moved quietly around to the back of her house. The door leading to the garage she never locked. The one leading to the house went into her laundry room, a perfect place to wait until he was ready. He crept along the side, double checking there was no one. The house next door had a dog and he heard a few yelps, but fortunately, no one turned on a light. If they did, they would be slaughtered.

He turned the handle then hissed. The damn thing was locked. She fucking never locked it. What in the hell was she doing? His rage increased, boiling until he had trouble focusing. *Think. You have to think.* Did she know he was here? No, there was no way. He was too careful. Too cautious.

This was just a minor setback. He dragged out his pick, sliding the metal end into the lock. For some reason, the damn flange wouldn't move. Now, he was sweating. He sucked in his breath and tried again. What the fuck? Anger rushed into every cell until he was shaking. He jammed the pic further into the lock and heard a click, a snapping noise. Damn it!

No matter. They would have no way of knowing who he was. He eased into the garage and panted, trying to catch his breath. *You ain't gonna lose it. Not here. Not now.* He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, snorting until he was able to breathe normally. Pressing his ear to the door, he heard nothing. She wasn't close by.

Very slowly he turned the knob then patted his jacket. He had everything he needed for a wonderful night. The moment he stepped foot inside, he became another man. Just as he was about to close the door, the earth began to rumble, only this time, the sound had nothing to do with the storm.

*Boom!*

No!



BEEP! Beep! Beep!

Riker jerked awake, hearing his cell phone. The damn emergency system. "What the hell?" He peered down at Trinity, who was curled up over his legs. They'd both fallen asleep on the couch.

Stirring, she opened her eyes, reaching up as if by instinct to rub his face. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. A call. Stay right here." Easing around her, he grabbed his phone, dialing the number. "Smokejumper Riker Sheffield. What's going on?"

“We have an explosion and a fire at the Martin Industrial Plant. There are reports that the fire has spread to the surrounding forest.”

“Shit. Firefighters?” He looked over at her, the way her face glistened in the single light.

“Several engines are en route but have requested back up from the auxiliary smokejumping team.” The dispatcher was perfunctory, stating the facts.

“I’m on it.” Riker shoved the phone into his back pocket and grabbed his jacket. “I don’t want to leave you, but I have to. I have a fire. I’ll come back. Okay?”

Sliding off the couch, she moved toward him, standing on her tiptoes and kissing his cheek. “Yes, come back to me, cowboy. Thank you for caring about me.”

“You’ll be all right?”

Nodding, Trinity rubbed his cheek. “I’ll be fine.”

Yanking her against his chest, he captured her mouth, allowing a moment of intense passion. When he eased back, he smiled. “I don’t know how long this will take. Okay? Don’t worry about me.”

“I’ll try not to.”

Riker grabbed his keys and headed out the door, jumping in the car and immediately dialing the captain. “Captain Phillips. What are we dealing with?”

“Sheffield. Good. Too early to tell given the explosion, but there are suspicions of a bomb. Only this time, it wasn’t called in,” Captain Phillips huffed. “Asshole had no idea what he was hitting.”

“Maybe he did.” The Martin Industrial plant made and housed ammunition. No wonder the fire had spread. “Are the others on the way?”

“Yep. Get your ass in here. Bus is leaving in ten.”

“I’m too far away. I’ll meet you there.”

“All right. Just get there. I’ll have one of the guys grab your gear.”

“On my way.” Riker tossed the phone and pressed down on the accelerator, flooring the engine.

The place was on the outskirts of town, located in an up and coming industrial area. If the bomber knew what he was hitting, this might have been the original target, but why wasn’t there a call? What in the hell was really going on?

He roared through the city, toward the Blackfoot mountains. As soon as he turned on the main road, he could see the fire bomb, orange lighting up the sky. The damn thing already looked like a firestorm. The rain was falling, thunder rolling, the worst of the storm fast approaching. This was going to be a shit storm for all of them.

There were only a few cars on the road given the time, but he was stopped several times by red lights. He gunned through the last one, hearing the scream of a horn as he barely missed getting into an accident. He had a gut feeling this was going to be bad. He was still a solid eight minutes out. Damn it.

Riker pulled onto the road leading to the park and could see flashing lights. He glared out of the windshield at the blaze. The fire had already engulfed dozens if not hundreds of acres. “Shit.” Flashes of lightning coupled with the flames lit up the sky as the thunder rolled.

*Boom! Pop!*

The explosion jerked his car to the side, almost forcing him to lose control. “Fuck!” A rush of smoke rolled up from the roof of the building, creating firebrands. The large embers were not only pieces of the warehouse, but also shrapnel, no doubt from the boxes of ammunition. The entire thing was going to blow.

He jerked the Camaro to a stop and killed the engine, rushing out of the car and toward the group of firefighters standing on the sidelines. “Where’s the smokejumping team?”

“Already engaged. Hey, you Riker Sheffield?” the firefighter called, beckoning to him.

“Yeah.” Riker hadn’t worked with this particular engine company. He trotted toward the man in full gear.

“Some of your guys left your gear. Over there. They’re already headed up the mountain. We have our hands full here. The damn shit has already gotten away from us. We can’t get close to the building. The ammunition has been going off like bottle rockets.”

*Whoosh! Boom!*

“Goddamnit!” the firefighter ducked, holding onto his helmet as the embers cascaded down, mixing with the torrid of rain.

Riker remained standing, ignoring the floating sparks as he studied the mountain. He would consider this a blowup, the catastrophic fire spreading rapidly. Grabbing the bag of gear, he struggled to grab his things, the various implements. He had no chainsaw, only an ax. Yanking on the outer gear, he took off running before engaging the communications unit. “Sheffield here. Where are you?”

“Up on the first ridge line,” Antonio called. “Be careful. We’re worried the fire is going to cut us off.”

“I’ll be there.” He headed up the slope, cutting away brush and debris as he moved. The smoke was rancid, already swirling around him, the blackened substance thick. He took long strides, moving up the side of the mountain. Within seconds, flames were all around him. “Where are you?”

*Boom!*

There was only crackling noise on the other end of the communications line. A third explosion hit the building, the force sending another series of tremors. Flashes of lightning tore through the sky, the brief light accentuating the area. He could tell the fire was headed in the direction of the town. They had to cut it off before it reached the next ridge, or they might lose control.

Taking long strides, he swung his ax back and forth then noticed the control line. The team had been busy. Within seconds, he heard voices and headed in the direction.

“Thank God. Need all the help we can get!” Landen called as he waved.

“Work with Weaver, Lincoln and Frost. The rest of us are moving to the West, past the control line,” Antonio called then motioned for the rest of the team.

Riker jumped in, cutting away debris as the other men continued to dig, working tirelessly side by side as the flames continued to lap close by. The sound of trees cracking, breaking and toppling over was all around them.

*Wham!*

“Damn. The entire building is going to be torched,” Sawyer hissed as he took a moment, looking in the direction of the plant.

“They’re at least four units down there, with more on the way,” Riker commented as he rubbed his eyes.

“Keep moving!” Landen called. “We’re making headway.”

“Shit. I don’t see it,” Steel huffed as he continued digging.

They continued to work, time slipping away as popping noises could be heard all around them. The light of morning filtered into the sky and as the storm began to die down, strings of colors washed into the sky.

Riker grabbed a nearby chain saw, pulling the starter rope. When the tool roared to life, he used the power of his upper muscles, swinging the blade back and forth. He moved ahead of the team, now able to see the fire collapsing on one side.

Landen flanked his side, panting as he looked in the direction of the fire. “How the hell long have we been out here?”

“Hours. I don’t know.”

“You didn’t come home last night,” Landen teased as he hunkered over.

“I was busy.”

“Well, Shannon and I talked.”

Riker gave him a look and grunted. “Chit chat is over. Let’s get this thing done.”

“I hear you, brother. I hear you.”



TRINITY PACED THE LIVING ROOM, wringing her hands. When Riker hadn’t come back to the cabin by almost four in the afternoon, she was almost in a panic. She knew what he’d said, that he could be a while, but how long did it take to put out a fire? Her thoughts were all over the place, thinking about their conversation, the way he’d been so tender. She’d garnered strength from his sweet words, the way he’d held her.

Did he believe her? She could only hope so. The cup of tea had given her a nauseous feeling and right now, she needed to talk to him, to be with him. What in the hell could she do? After a few minutes, she grabbed her keys and purse and headed out the door. The moment she touched the door handle, she heard the sound of crunching gravel. A smile crossed her face. Riker.

She dropped her bag and took several steps, her entire body on fire, excited to see him. The car that cleared the trees didn’t belong to Riker. The black Mercedes was sleek, freshly washed and very out of place in a city like Missoula. Who the hell had come to visit her? An attorney? A member of law enforcement. Not driving a Mercedes. Her curiosity piqued, she stood her ground as the door was opened.

“Oh, no way.” Bristling, the man stepping out of the car fueled her already increasing anger. Not now. This shit she didn’t need.

Chance yanked off his sunglasses and grinned before throwing out his arms. “Baby! Are you happy to see me? I thought with your little issue, you’d want some support.”

“How in the fuck did you find me?”

“How?” He swaggered toward her. “Your cousin thinks she’s a smart cookie, but I figured it out. All I had to do was find out that she owned some property and voilà. Here I am.”

He took another long stride toward her. “Models are pretty fucking stupid.”

“Just go. I don’t want you here.”

Chance laughed. “You don’t have any choice. You belong to me. Remember?”

“Bullshit! You and I are through. Just get the hell out of here. Now!” She folded her arms and took several steps back.

“No can do, sweet cheeks. When I told Marvin where you were, he was thrilled I was coming to take you back where you belong. We’ll deal with those nasty allegations together. Of course, you’ll have to repent your sins.” He came closer, his eyes sweeping up and down. “Looking rough there, baby. By the way, I never knew you had it in you. Killing a man’s wife. Tsk. Tsk.”

“Get the fuck away from me!” What in the hell was she supposed to do? She inched backward toward the cabin.

“Don’t you dare talk to me that way again or I’ll wash your mouth out with soap.” Chance’s face was red.

Trinity had to get out of here. She bit back another retort and tried to think. Damn. She didn’t know the area well enough.

“Now, let’s go inside and you can fix me something cold to drink. I flew all the way out here and you are going to service my needs.”

“Over my dead body.”

Chance sniffed and looked at the sky as he shoved his sunglasses into his pocket. Then he advanced, grabbing her by the arm, digging his nails into her skin.

“Listen to me, you little cunt. I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but you’re not going to treat me that way. You get it?” As he started to drag her toward the cabin, he laughed.

“Get off me, you bastard!” Yanking away, she ran toward the truck, snatching her purse and opening the door.



Grabbing her by the hair, he jerked her back then lowered his head, whispering in her ear. “I think you need a lesson in humility as well as respect. We’ll take care of that inside. You need a hard whipping, the only thing that keeps you in line. You and I have a date with my belt.”

“I’ll fucking kill you!”

He wrenched her neck, his face full of venom. “I wouldn’t try it if I were you, sweetheart.”

“No! You get the fuck off me, Chance or I’ll call the sheriff.”

Chance laughed and dragged her back several feet.

Struggling and lashing out, she managed to free herself once again, stumbling forward.

Growling, he took several steps then his eyes opened wide.

Trinity heard what had to be the sound of a gun, the safety being popped off, the creaking and slapping sound indicating the gun was ready to fire. She peered over her shoulder and grinned. Shannon.

“I don’t think the lady wants anything to do with you. If I were you, I’d get in your fancy car and get the hell out of here before I blow your fucking head off.”



RIKER STOOD UNDER THE SHOWER, panting from exhaustion. At almost eight in the evening, they’d spent over sixteen hours battling the fire. Thank God, they’d been able to contain the blaze. From the rain to the lack of significant wind, the team had managed to keep the loss of acreage down, at least in his eyes. The building, on the other hand, was completely torched, several others in close proximity with significant damage.

“That was some shit,” Boone laughed as he turned on the water.

“Yeah. We’re lucky there were no lives lost.” Riker tilted back his head, allowing the almost frigid water to slide down his throat. He preferred a cold shower, the way the cold pinged against his skin.

“How’s that sweet thing of yours?” Moose teased as he grabbed a towel.

Riker gave him a nasty look.

“I’d leave him alone if I were you,” Landen huffed, pointing his finger then grinning. “He’s one protective man.”

Protective. The thought was far too much on the money. He wanted nothing more than to get back to Trinity.

“You okay?” Landen leaned over.

“Fine. Dandy.” What was Riker supposed to say?

“Did you talk to her, find out if the news broadcast was the truth?” Landen leaned against the tile.

“We talked. The shit ain’t what it seems.”

“It never is.” Landen glanced at the other men. “You really like this girl.”

“Yep.”

“Enough to try and convince her to stay?”

Riker shook his head. “I don’t know at this point.”

Landen snorted. “I think you do, which is why you’re in an even worse piss poor mood.”

“And you should talk. Shannon? Kissed and made up?”

“I’m going to see her tonight. Asked her to come to your place. Hope you don’t care. Just neutral ground.”

If Riker had been a better friend, he would have offered suggestions. He had nothing left to offer. “Sure. Whatever.”

“Heads up, gentlemen. The sheriff has arrived with an entourage,” Antonio said as he stuck his head in the shower area.

“At this time?” Boone asked, laughing after the question.

“Says it’s important. Just get out here.” Antonio directed then left.

“What the hell is that about?” Riker watched the jumper as he left.

Landen lifted his eyebrows. “Stoker and Cooper found out some details. That’s all I know. Whatever is going on, must be pretty damn big. See you in the big room.”

Riker turned off the water and grabbed a towel. This should be interesting.

He was the last one out of the locker room and was surprised the mayor was standing beside the sheriff. Instead of her usual suit and perfect hair, she was wearing jeans, her face pale. The fire investigator was also hovering in the background. Frederick Nelson had a curious look on his face. From working with the intense man, he knew Frederick hated pomp and circumstance. When the mayor was involved, you never knew what to expect.

Holding his breath, Riker eased against the wall, remaining quiet. Stoker and Cooper stood at the front, their hands behind their backs, standing at full attention.

“Looks like we’re all here.” Captain Phillips glanced around the room.

“What’s up, Cap’n?” Sawyer nodded toward the mayor.

“First of all, some good news,” Captain Phillips said as he grinned. “One of the reasons that Mayor Falk has graced us with her presence is to announce some commendations that she’s going to bestow on two of you. And I don’t want this going to your heads.”

“Woo hoo!” Garcia whistled as the others began to clap, looking in Riker and Moose’s directions.

“Settle down. We’ll let the lovely mayor explain.” The captain moved aside.

Mayor Falk smiled. “We rarely seem to have any good reason to celebrate. Between our budget constraints, a death of one of our own and the fires we’ve all had to endure the last year or so, life for every emergency team has been difficult. To that end, our fair city and the fabulous smokejumping teams have gotten some good press lately.” She laughed as the men continued whistling.

Riker cringed, knowing what was coming next.

“Well, we’re so very proud of both Riker and Mathew. Not only did you provide national recognition for your team and for our city, but the calls have been coming in, flooding our offices for interviews, even donations to your team. Utterly fantastic.” Mayor Falk held out her hands, clapping. “You should all be proud of yourselves.”

“Ah, shucks,” Boone laughed as he strutted forward, bowing several times.

“Get out of here!” Sawyer grabbed his arm.

“To that end, the city council would like to give both of you men commendations for your bravery and no, I won’t take no for an answer. This is planned for the end of the week, Friday morning, in front of the administration building at nine a.m. sharp. And Riker, Moose, there is no getting out of this.” She nodded in their direction.

“Oh, the boys think they are all that!” Zane exclaimed.

“Going to get those big heads,” Garcia added.

“Won’t be able to get in through the doors.” Stoker nudged Riker.

Riker shook his head. He hated this kind of shit. Looking down, he kicked his boot against the tile floor.

“The man is blushing!” Sawyer teased.

“I’m proud of you guys. I would say grace under pressure but...” Captain Phillips grinned. “We’ll all be there. You can count on it, Mayor.”

“Good. That will be a needed break,” she muttered.

After a few seconds, the captain held up his hands. “Now, for something more serious. Just listen and don’t talk. Sheriff, Mayor. They’re all ears.” The captain stepped aside.

Sheriff James cleared his throat before stepping forward. “Gentlemen, first of all, congratulations on your commendations. Well deserved. Secondly, the mayor and I would like to thank you for helping in the situation at the warehouse. Your expertise as well as quick reaction helped

contain the fire, preventing any loss of life. Fred, you want to say a few words?"

Frederick cleared his throat and walked closer to the team. "Keep in mind, I've just started figuring out what went on, but I can tell you that the bomb was expertly built. Very much a military class, set to detonate from a great distance."

Stoker shook his head, his face pensive.

"The guy was good, but I don't think the bomb was supposed to go off when it did," Frederick continued.

"What?" Moose huffed, taking a step closer.

Frederick held up his hand. "I have a hell of a lot of investigating to do, but let's just say from a portion of the mechanism I found, I'll stand by my beliefs. If that is true, either something could have occurred escalating the arsonist's plans or he or she fucked up. I'm worried there might be additional bombs in town, but this is only my opinion."

Riker could tell by the smug look on Stoker's face that he was itching to tell the entire story.

"Thanks, Fred. Appreciate your information, but we believe that we have much more on our hands than bomb threats. We also need your help, gentlemen. There was an attempted break in at the mayor's house." The sheriff looked uncomfortable.

"Ah, shit," Garcia said under his breath as he nudged Stoker.

"Mayor, why don't you pipe in on this?" The sheriff stepped away.

The volley back and forth meant there was indeed more to this game.

"Absolutely. It's come to our attention that the bombs are likely a cover for what we believe to be a more heinous crime. We can't be entirely certain that the break in attempt has anything to do with the bombing, but it's very coincidental. I understand that Fred believes there are more bombs and there could be, but our main focus is something else entirely.

Thanks to Mr. Hansen and Mr. McKenzie, we believe we have a better understanding of why.” Mayor Falk’s face held exhaustion as well as apprehension.

“Cut to the chase,” Antonio said gruffly.

Captain Phillips glared at him until he took a step back.

“It’s all right, Captain. We’re all antsy over this.” She gave a half smile. “As you know, two of the city employees, two council members, have been involved in incidents the past few days. Chris Camden was a good friend of mine. We’ve been close for years. He disappeared from his home without a trace. Molly Jenkins had a tremendous following and was a very active member of city council. She was our fundraiser. They were both primary members of a special committee working on what we titled Veterans Coalition Act. Because of this, we believe foul play is involved in both counts. There have been several threats made against the committee members.”

“By whom?” Riker asked. At least the information the captain had received was correct.

She shook her head. “Well, at first we all thought just overzealous folks who fight anything having to do with the military. Then we suspected that various veteran’s groups might be involved.”

“Whew,” Garcia whistled.

“But?” Riker piped in.

“But,” she said as she shot him a look. “We think the two members were directly targeted and that there’s more.”

“What makes you believe that?” Zane asked.

Mayor Falk glanced at the sheriff who nodded. “Well, in truth, we believe there is at least one additional target and that the bomb threats were used as a smokescreen, sending a message as well. The timing for the bomb threat and the two other incidents is close. During the time of the bomb at the warehouse, we believe the perpetrator was planning on exacting his revenge at the same time.”

“Revenge?” Steel huffed.

Stoker cleared his throat. “As Investigator Nelson noted, the bombs were of military design. The two council members were primarily working on a program for veterans, funding. Too coincidental. Given the fact Mr. Camden was high ranking, his clearance considered Yankee White, one of the top clearances in the country, there’s a possibility there is more going on here.”

Mayor Falk exhaled. “There are many on the Congress floor who believe what the committee is trying to do is actually provide a bill to cut funding instead of provide aid, which is completely wrong. However, the press has tainted our viewpoint. These two individuals were the most vocal and well known, spending time before Congress. Chris was the man who brought the idea to me, given we were friends and he knew I’d understand.”

“If we’re right and based on the information that Stoker and Cooper were able to find, this is indeed nothing more than revenge for an operation that was derailed in Afghanistan years ago.” The sheriff looked from man to man.

Riker allowed a slow breath to escape as he looked at Stoker and Cooper. The operation from years before had certainly been derailed, causing several deaths and an end to certain Black Ops. Stoker’s instinct had been dead on the money.

“May we ask, who is the intended target?” Antonio asked as he crossed his arms.

“Gentlemen, that would be me,” Mayor Falk stated as she glanced around the room. She faltered, her head dropping. “And there’s something else.” She looked toward the sheriff as if asking for support. “I believe, given the information presented to me, that the perpetrator is...” She lowered her head, closing her eyes. When she looked up, her eyes were full of tears. “Is my son.”

## CHAPTER 11

Trinity continued to laugh, her sides hurting. “I can’t believe you did that! You actually scared him off. That is a feat all in itself.”

“The fuckhead deserved worse. That much I can tell you,” Shannon stated, a snarl on her lip. Then she smiled and rolled her eyes. “Who was that guy again?”

“My ex, fake boyfriend. Set up by the studios and yes, they still do that kind of thing.”

“Whoa. I don’t think I’d make a very good actress. I’d probably kill every man who tried to give me shit.”

“Oh, trust me. It has crossed my mind more than once. If I had a gun, I would guess I’d be in some kind of trouble.” Trinity held up the bottle. “Another glass?”

“Why the hell not? I’m not working tonight and Landen, well...”

“He’s a good guy. I like him. Riker says he’s special.” She poured them both another glass.

Shannon inhaled. “He is. I love him with all my heart. We just need to stop being pigheaded. Both of us.”

Trinity held up her glass. “To pigheaded men and a thank you. I don’t know what Chance would have done if you hadn’t come along.”

“Well, you’re welcome. Glad I happened to come along. Was he always like that?”



“Truth is, yes, but I guess I allowed him to become an asshole to me. I don’t know why. He seemed so sweet at first, then he became dominating, which is okay, and I appreciate a strong man, but not his way. I tossed him out my door the night before I left town.” Trinity groaned.

“Good for you.”

“Yeah, but I might have to get one of those guns of my own to keep him out of the state.”

“Does that mean you’re staying?” Shannon asked, a glint in her eye.

“I…” How could she answer honestly? Shrinking back, she closed her eyes, a shiver creating goose bumps.

“Honey, let’s cut to the chase here. I came here to talk to you and yes, Riker told me where you were staying, last night. The whole thing was—”

“I know. I’m so sorry. I know what you must think of me,” Trinity interrupted.

“Let me finish. Okay?”

She shrugged and wanted to crawl under a rock.

“I don’t know the story, but I gathered from our talk that you’re a damn nice girl. I’m a pretty good judge of character. Whatever is being said about you is crap and certainly not an ordeal you should have to go through, especially alone. I just wanted you to know that you have friends and we’ll back you. We’ll stand right behind you if you have to deal with the asshole reporters.”

“That’s what Riker said. He loves this town and his friends.”

Shannon wrinkled her nose. “The man has been through a hell of a lot in his life. He’s one of the best. Just a few rough edges. Anyway, you are welcome in my bar, my house, whatever. Okay?”

“I appreciate that. I really do. More than you know.” She chuckled. “A woman who wouldn’t care about shooting a man between the eyes with a smart mouth. I like you.”

“You mean between the legs?” Winking, she patted Trinity’s arm. “I was talking with Jessica. You know that she has connections.”

“Yeah. Wonderful singer.”

“And a great lady and friend. She has an idea or two that you might want to listen to. I know you have a lot to deal with, but if you want this shit to go away, you’re going to have to deal with it head on.”

“Are you and Riker brother and sister?” Trinity laughed again. The woman had a way that put her at ease.

“Very funny. We’re all truthful people who deserve living a good life. I just know what I’m talking about. I can see such courage in you but only you can find the strength to fight this thing head on. You’ll live with guilt and shame for the rest of your life no matter what you do if you don’t. I know a thing or two about guilt.” Shannon took a sip of wine.

“So does Riker. He won’t tell me why. At least not the entire story.”

Shannon groaned. “That’s his story to tell. Even Landen won’t tell me all the details. What I do know about that man is that trust is tough for him. He has the capacity for caring, even loving but he’s afraid. Seems like you suit him well.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do. He’s never brought another woman into the bar. I know he’s been with women. He is a man after all, but bringing you to Ziggy’s means you’re something phenomenal. You should keep that in the back of your mind.”

Trinity thought about her words, those of courage as well as the kind of man Riker was. She knew she wanted to get to know him, every part, but at what cost. “I will.”

“You know this Chance dude isn’t going to give up.”

“Yeah, I know. I might need to stay somewhere else.”

“I have an idea.” Shannon grinned.

“Chance is the least of my worries. What about this fire? Why hasn’t Riker come back?”

She shook her head. “Don’t do that to yourself. We’ve had some bomb threats and this time, the bomb went off. Ammunition plant so you can imagine. From what little is on the news, the fire has been contained to the point the smokejumping team is just cleaning up the debris. The firefighters have more work to do and the investigation will begin.”

“Terrifying.”

“Yeah, we’ve had our share of shit. That’s for certain. Now, did you kill this woman?”

Trinity choked, and the way Shannon asked, the look on her face was calming. “I did not.”

“Then we’re all good here. How about some dinner? I’ll show you around this illustrious city of ours.”

“You know what? I’d love that.”

“Good. That way I can try and convince you to stay. Yes, I have ulterior motives.”

“You know what? I think I like that you do.” Trinity laughed easily. Maybe a move to a new city would do her a hell of a lot of good.



RIKER GLARED out at the morning light. He’d gone by Trinity’s cabin after leaving the hangar and she wasn’t there, even though her truck was in the driveway. His sixth sense was telling him she was about to run, to flee again, as if running was going to do her any good. He’d wanted to open up to her, to allow her to understand why caring was so difficult for him, but in doing so, she’d learn his ugly secrets. Perhaps, there was no other way.

The fire had left him exhausted and on edge. The chatter regarding the bomb was varied, certain firefighters certain the warehouse was the intended target. The smokejumping team had another theory, a cover up for something else entirely. As

if their opinion mattered. Then the visit from the mayor. He was having difficulty wrapping his head around the information presented, even though he was well aware there was much more to the story. Whatever Stoker and Cooper had found was no doubt damning.

The mop-up had been grueling, hours of cutting back brush and certain trees, digging up roots and burning anything considered fuel. Even covering up the remaining embers in an effort to reduce the possibility of a flare up had left every jumper agitated. They were all on edge as concerns increased regarding the arsonist. Whatever the asshole's prerogative, there was increased fear the bomb threats would escalate, no matter what had been suggested. What if these were two separate crimes?

He pulled the Camaro to a complete stop and leaned back against the headrest. His mind was reeling, a combination of worry and frustration furrowed into his psyche. What the hell was he supposed to do in order to help Trinity? Was there anything that would matter? She was a movie star, a woman who had no idea what she wanted to do. As the car idled at the stop light, he decided that he'd drop by her place one last time. If she asked him to leave, he'd have his answer. Hearing a single beep from the car behind him, he resisted giving the driver the finger. Yeah, the dark and ugly man had breached the surface. Fuck this. Backing away from Trinity was the last thing he wanted to do.

The drive was cathartic, giving him the courage to be the man she needed and when he drove up the long driveway, he held his breath. What in the hell was he going to find? The truck was still parked in the same position as before, lights on in the house. She'd been with someone. Who the hell did she know in town? He cut the engine and waited, as if she was going to rush outside, jump into his arms. When she didn't, he sighed and slowly climbed out, waiting by the car for a solid two minutes.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he walked toward the front door, tapping lightly. He heard nothing, no music or other

noise, just a dead silence as if she'd already disappeared from his life.

Tap! Tap!

He knocked more vehemently, exhaling as he realized he was already sweating.

Trinity opened the door, her face filled with relief. "I wasn't certain who was at the door."

"Reporters?"

Shaking her head, she looked around him, her eyes pensive. "Worse. Oh, Riker. I couldn't sleep. I know you have your job and it's important to you, but I have no idea how Laney and Shannon, any of the other women deal with this." Grabbing his arm, she kissed him on the cheek, the closeness lingering.

He breathed in her perfume, closing his eyes as a series of electric jolts rushed into his system. "I told you I'd be fine."

"Shannon told me not to worry, but I'm not her. She's much stronger than I am."

"You're much stronger than you realize." The moment was awkward then he was flooded with relief as well as an unusual emotion, unbridled desire as well as love. Wrapping his arms around her, he lifted her off her feet, pressing his face into her neck. "I'm glad you're still here."

"I'm not running from this. I'm tired of fighting the past. I just..." Her voice was strangled. Well, I'm just glad you're here."

"What did you mean by you weren't certain who was at the door?" Easing her down, he brushed hair from her eyes.

Trinity blushed and looked away. "Nothing."

Riker cupped her jaw, forcing her to face him. "Not nothing. Who was here?"

Swallowing hard, she gave him a waning smile. "My ex. He's a real prize. That much I can tell you."

“What did he do?” The ragged feeling of anger boosted deep inside, a primal need to protect her.

“He just...” Pulling away, she took backwards steps, her actions full of nerves. “He has some notion that I’m going to go back to Hollywood with him.”

“The man has another thing coming.” When she smiled, the knowing almost surprised expression crossing her face, he could feel the heat cresting along his jawline. “You don’t want him here.”

“Hell no, but I know, Chance. He won’t take no for an answer. He’ll use this situation with Jack Spartan against me, trying to force me to leave.” Trinity huffed.

“What’s the asshole’s name?”

She exhaled before answering. “Chance Reynolds. He’s nothing and means nothing to me.”

“If that asshole bothers you again, so help me God.”

“I’ve changed, and I don’t think he likes that very much.” She blinked several times, a dark shadow crossing her face. “I never understood how violent he was. I guess I had an idea of what men should be like and at the time, he fulfilled certain desires. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Chance Reynolds. He made mental note of the man’s name. Violent. If the man tried anything again, he would have no problem beating the asshole to death. “Where is this fucker?”

She held out her hand. “Don’t. Shannon made it very clear that the man wasn’t welcome.”

“Shannon?”

“Rugged woman with big gun.” She laughed after saying the words. “Don’t look so surprised. You were right about your friends, about this town. You’re very lucky that you have a real family.”

“They are important to me. I guess I never really understood how much.” A single shiver slithered down from the back of his neck. Trinity was right. He was very lucky.

“We all take what we have for granted. Shannon dropped by to make certain I knew she would have my back. The rather formidable woman happened to arrive at the perfect time. She helped me throw the asshole off the property.”

Riker shook his head, anxiety eating at his stomach. “She’s a great gal. When she makes friends, they’re for life.”

Trinity gave him a heated look. “Are you here to chastise or provide comfort?”

He closed the distance, rubbing his hands up and down her arms. Even the simple touch was enigmatic. “Neither. Actually, I have something I want you to help me with. Are you game?”

“Hmmm... Depends on what you have in mind.” Her expression was coy.

“You can’t say no. Against the rules. Remember, I’m in charge.” While he was teasing, the few words prodded his inner being. He wanted nothing more than to take control. Why now? Why this woman?

“Mmm... Even after my rather disgusting experience with Chance, I still like the sound of that. Do I need to change?” She took a step back, turning in a circle.

The tight blue jeans and simple red shirt made his cock stiffen. “Nope. Grab a jacket. A little breezy where we’re going.”

“Now, you have me intrigued.”

“We have a stop to make first.” He refused to tell her anything as he drove, yet the way she kept her hand on his leg continued to leave him aching with longing, his testosterone on overdrive. This woman, this beautiful and almost delicate flower, had her grip around his heart.

“You’re not going to tell me at all, are you?” Trinity pushed as she leaned over, licking his earlobe.

“If you keep that up, we’re heading straight back to your place. Seems mine is being used.”

“Shannon and Landen?” Her question was full of eagerness.

“Yeah. I told them to get out, but they ignored me.” Riker snickered. “Not that I mind. Not really.”

“Well, I think the dinner she and I had last night was eye opening, even for a woman who certainly has more control over her life. I told her she was a fool. She told me to suck it up, face my fears. We had a hell of a lot of fun and drank way too much.” Trinity laughed. “Long story.”

“Balls to the walls kind of woman and if she convinced you to stay in town for a while, I’ll give her the place.” Grinning, he gripped her hand, moving her fingers to his crotch.

“You are one bad boy.”

Riker laughed, surprised he was able to let go so easily and could tell she was feeling much better. Still, there were so many unanswered questions, so many things to interfere with their happiness, but perhaps neither could hide any longer. He thought about the reason her ex had popped into town. No doubt to take her back, as she said. Chance was the last reminder of her past or Tinsel Town that she needed to deal with right now.

As he rolled into the parking lot, he gave her a look. “Time to purchase a new bike.”

“Really? Now? What about the insurance? I haven’t heard a word from the deputy.”

“I don’t need the insurance money, and I can’t do without my Harley.”

She rubbed her fingers across the top of his hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault. Just freedom. I think you can understand.”

“Yeah, I can.”

He breathed out and gazed at the plate glass window, the gleaming motorcycles front and center. He was allowing her



into his private world. “This is where you come in. You’re going to help me pick out a new ride.”

“Big he man needs a woman’s touch. I think I like it.” Her feminine laughed filled the space, if not a darkened void.

He waited as she climbed out of the car. A sickening feeling remained in the pit of his stomach, and he wasn’t entirely certain if the reason was about Trinity and what she was going through or because of his past. Either way, this was a special moment, one she might not fully understand.

“Hey, come on. Let’s do this,” she exclaimed and tapped on the window, grabbing his attention.

Chuckling, he allowed the tension to ease. Today, was going to be a damn good day.

Riker was impressed that she was not only attentive but more than interested in the purchase. The choice had been easy, the Switchback the only model he would choose but he enjoyed the process. Watching as she asked questions, as if trying to learn more of what he was about, was alluring. She was surprising in so many ways, a quiet joy in his pigeonholed life.

“I’m so excited.” Kissing his cheek, she laughed and headed out of the store.

When he walked out, the keys in hand, she squeezed his arm.

“Now, we go for a ride.” Grinning, he yanked his sunglasses from his pocket before walking toward the Camaro and opening the trunk.

“On the bike?” Trinity paled as she looked at the steel beast then studied the blanket in his hand. “I’m not a motorcycle girl.”

“You could have fooled me. All about pushing that comfort zone.”

“I might pass out.”

“You’ll be fine,” he stated, his tone of voice commanding. “Besides, I want to take you to someplace peaceful. The only

way to experience the ride is on two wheels. Open road. Wind. A slight chill. We'll stop and get a few things on the way."

"What about the car?" she backed toward the Camaro, her face flushing.

"I know the owner. He'll take good care of her and we'll drop back by. Trust me." Grinning, he took her hand and held out a helmet.

Groaning, she dragged her feet as he pulled her toward the bike. Taking the helmet, she gave him another fearful look. "If I fall off..."

"Just hold on tight." Swinging his leg over the bike, he donned the helmet and started the beast, enjoying the vibrating motor, the power between his legs. "Put your arms around me and don't let go."

When she was in position, he kicked up the stand and took off, maneuvering the bike down and out of the parking lot. He kept the speed low as they drove out of the city, stopping for a bottle of wine and other refreshments. Now, he was ready to hit the mountain road, heading for the most serene spot in Missoula. "See? Nothing to worry about."

"Oh! That's for you to say." Her arms clenching around his waist, she squealed as he changed the gear to second then third, hitting the accelerator. "God!"

Laughing, he roared around the bend, hugging the curves. The engine was powerful, but the ride was smooth, the Harley performing, moving with every slight turn of the wheel. As the wind whipped against his face, the feel of her face pressed against his back gave him chills. Even the sensation of her thighs crunching against his legs was damn seductive and he remained hard, his cock throbbing.

He rounded corner after corner, his entire body so alive, so free. After several minutes, her tense body seemed to relax, her hands falling into his lap. There was nothing but the open road, a cloudless day and a beautiful woman. He concentrated on the drive, falling into the same zone he enjoyed during every long drive. But only on the Harley. After almost forty-

five minutes, the river made its appearance, paralleling to the two-lane road and he could sense she was mesmerized by the majestic beauty. The three crossing rivers were his sanctuary, the lapping water hitting the shore a reminder of life. How many times had he allowed himself to stand at the river's edge, dreams filtrating his mind, his heart?

Today, would be different. A new beginning.

He noticed the sign for the turn off and powered down, turning onto the mostly gravel road and passing several small parking lots, notices of campsites and picnic areas. Where they were going had no road, no easy access. Few tourists knew of the large patch of grass, backed by overhanging trees and wild flowers. The rolling hill banked down gently toward the water, allowing for a perfect landing spot for kayakers and canoes, swimmers and those enjoying the massive body of water.

Slowing down, he breathed in the crisp air as he headed into the line of trees, the path narrowing.

“Where are we going?” she called over the roaring engine.

“Somewhere special.”

Squeezing his waist, she nuzzled her face into his neck.

Riker pulled the bike under a bank of trees, surveying the lush surroundings. There was no one in sight.

“Oh my God. This is incredible.”

Cutting the engine, he kicked down the stand and yanked off his helmet, remaining still. “The Blackfoot River. Seventy-six miles of sheer beauty.” They'd traveled for over an hour, heading into Lincoln, Montana and well worth the ride.

Easing off the bike, she removed her helmet and folded her arms as she walked close to the river's edge, standing still as she gazed around at the mountains, the pine trees and vegetation.

He remained on the Harley, watching the way she inhaled the clean air, the way she laughed seeing jumping fish and pointed toward a Bald Eagle. Simply being able to see her joy, the moment when every aspect of life before seemed belittled

in comparison to Mother Nature gave him a rush, a distinct chill sliding down his spine. So many people took this for granted, but for him, this was his slice of heaven.

Trinity turned around, scampering in his direction. “How did you find this place?”

“You ask around. Locals know where to go to get away from the rat race.” He climbed off the bike and took her hand before grabbing the saddlebag. “I come here when I can’t think any longer, when my mind is muddled with worry, fear. This is my joy.”

“I can see why. There’s nothing like this in California. Well, I’m certain there is but I never ventured away from the city, other than on a plane. I guess I just didn’t care enough to find something else.”

“I can understand. You lock yourself away in a tight cocoon, refusing to believe there’s anything outside of your world.” He guided her down toward the river then walked away from the main path to a special embankment hidden by a group of trees and bushes. He knew the way, every step counted, every tree denoted in his mind. The moment he stepped into the clearing, his stomach churned, a cold chill furrowing into every muscle. The area was a close resemblance to times shared with Rose.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. There’s a blanket inside.”

Her eyes darting back and forth across his, she gave him a sweet smile. “Allow me to fix us a spot.”

Nodding, he eased the satchel onto the grass and walked to the edge, crouching down, allowing his fingers to dangle in the water. He dropped his head, hissing.

She seemed to hesitate before she moved behind him, remaining standing. “This place is special to you.”

“It is. Reminds me of a very important location from my past.” The words were jarring.

Placing her hand on his shoulder, she remained quiet.

“This is also where I came to die.”



SUCKING IN HER BREATH, Trinity dropped to her knees, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. “There’s nothing worth dying for, no amount of guilt or worry, fear or frustration. I’m learning that more every day. Losing your family must have been the most difficult moment of your life, but you remain alive. You’re allowed to enjoy, share good times and bad and even fall in love. Rose wouldn’t want you to suffer, not for a minute. You have to know that.”

“Placing his hand on top of hers, he rubbed her fingers. “You’re right.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Riker exhaled. “There’s no need. Today isn’t about the past, but changing and the future.”

The words were interesting, especially coming from a man like Riker. She wasn’t certain either one of them could climb out of their self-imposed torture. Maybe there could never be more than they were sharing today. “The future.”

“Yup. Besides, Rose would kick my ass for being dull and sullen.”

“Sullen? Yes. Dull, never in any lifetime.” She squealed when he yanked her around, pulling her over his lap. “Don’t you dare!”

“I think you know who’s in charge here.”

*Smack! Slap!*

His hand peppered against her ass. “Ow!”

*Pop! Slap!*

“Spankings are supposed to hurt,” he growled.

*Whap! Crack!*

“What if someone comes by?”

“Then they’ll get a show.”

*Smack! Pop! Crack!*

Kicking out, she flung her hand back, trying to block his hand until he grabbed her wrist, pulling her arm to the small of her back.

“Fighting me only makes the punishment worse.”

“You’re incorrigible!”

*Whap! Smack!*

“Thank you,” he said then laughed.

*Pop! Whap!*

As the spanking continued, heat rising between her breasts, she panted and moaned as a moment of raw ecstasy replaced any concept of pain.

*Smack! Crack!*

His breathing labored, Riker slowed down, now only rubbing her ass. He let go of her wrist then gently pushed her off, jerking to a standing position.

She scrambled to her feet and shook her head. “Don’t you do that. Don’t you dare pull away from me. What we have together, what we’re sharing isn’t something that comes along more than once. People can go their entire lives without ever meeting someone that they can love unconditionally, sharing every aspect of pain, pleasure, terror and joy. When you find something like what we have, you fight to keep it. You fight the demons inside, no matter how horrible, no matter how disgusting. You fight. Do you hear me? Do you understand what I’m saying, Riker Sheffield?” Panting, she brushed both hands through her hair, her chest heaving. When he remained quiet, the rugged and damning man acting as if what she said didn’t matter, she did the only thing she could think of doing.

*Smack!*

Her hand hit him directly in the face, across his cheek. Slapping both hands over her mouth, she could barely see straight, mortified at her behavior. “Oh, God.”

While the force of the slap had seemed hard, Riker remained in the same position, his eyes open wide.

“Riker.” Had she just destroyed everything they’d shared together?

Grabbing her by the wrists, he yanked her against his chest, his breath sounds ragged. “Hear me, woman. Hear these words. I love you. I have no clue about the future or what might happen, but I know I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Tears slipped past her lashes as she struggled to find anything to say. Suddenly, a rush of emotion replaced her fears, her guilt and every aspect of her previous life. “I’m so in love with you.”

Grunting, he crushed her mouth, thrusting his tongue inside, the heated passion savage. Raw. He slid his hips back and forth, his groin pushing against her stomach.

Moaning into the kiss, she remained shaking, every cell exploding with current, her skin tingling from desire. She yanked at his jacket and shirt, tugging the hem from his jeans, her hands moving up and down his back, kneading his carved muscles.

Their tongues wrestled together, the French kiss wild and manic. Pulling back, he issued a low and husky growl against her neck before licking down from her ear to the edge of her shirt. Nipping her skin, he allowed his hot breath to cascade across her jawline. “I want you. I will have you. Period.”

There would be no denying their need, their hungers. As she struggled to breathe, she yanked off her jacket and shirt, tossing both then tore at his, her fingers fumbling to get the unwanted material off. Away. She had to have him. She had to taste him.

Riker kicked off his boots and unbuttoned his jeans, jerking them down his hips.

A streak of flickering lights floated across her field of vision, forcing her to blink as she struggled to get out of her skin-tight jeans. She was nervous. Excited. This was different. This was about their love.

When she was naked, he advanced, his expression and actions predatory. As soon as he was only an inch away, he cupped both sides of her face, nose to nose. “My beautiful woman.” He peppered kisses along her forehead and eyebrows, moving ever so slowly down the bridge of her nose to her lips. Then he slid his hands down to her waist.

Palming his chest, she wanted nothing more than the simple touch, the tips of her fingers against his skin.

Riker picked her up into his arms, cradling her and he lowered his head. “Forever.”

“Forever.”

As he laid her down on the blanket, using the power of his upper body strength to move slowly, easing her onto the hard ground, he smiled. Lowering down, he placed his hands on either side of her head, allowing the kiss to be soft, loving.

The feel of his shoulder, the touch of his neck and skin, the scent of the man she’d fallen in love with was dazzling. As he eased his legs between hers, she rubbed her hands and fingers down the length of his back, shivering from anticipation.

Riker held his body aloft as he shifted his hips back and forth, sliding his stiff cock into her wet pussy.

Trinity lifted her legs, wrapping them around his hips. “Make love to me.” She could sense a change, a moment of absolutely letting go as he held his lips to hers. As he thrust his cock inside, she jerked up, every nerve standing on end. “Oh!”

His body was shaking as he ground his hips then pulled out, keeping just the tip inside. A slight smile crossed his face as he drove into her again. “Tight. Wet.”

“Yes.” She dug her fingers into his skin as he hung his head and plunged in and out.

He continued driving deep and hard, the force making him grunt. “Baby.”

Closing her eyes, she clung to him, blissful and happy, her nipples tingling. When he flipped over, pulling her on top of him, she yelped and pushed against his chest.



A chuckle slipped past his lips as he cupped her breasts, his thumbs moving back and forth across her hardened nipples. "Ride me, baby. Hard."

She lowered her head, allowing her long hair to dangle across his chest as she locked her knees, her legs pushing against his hips. As she began to rock, moving forward and backward in a slow and easy rhythm, he pinched her nipples between his fingers. Pain soared through her and she panted, beads of sweat dripping down across his neck.

His eyes were glassy, unblinking as she moved up and down, but his smile remained, as if knowing she belonged to him and no other.

Her heart racing, she knew neither of them could hold on for long and she clenched her pussy muscles, squeezing until he growled.

"So... bad," he managed, beads of sweat trickling down both sides of his face.

As she rocked harder, her muscles straining, she pressed hard against his chest and threw back her head, her entire body shaking. "Oh... I..."

"Come for, baby. Come with me." His arms were shaking, his mouth pursing and he lifted his hips, shoving his cock deeper inside of her.

Trinity lost it, tipping her head back and allowing a harsh cry as the climax rushed up her legs, crashing down, one wave turning into another. She could feel his hot cum spewing inside, the throbbing remaining, and she closed her eyes. They were as one.

"Yes!"

Her body crumpling, she rested her head against his neck, unable to think or see clearly.

"All mine."

She wasn't certain how long he held her, rubbing her back, but as she moved, lifting her head, he gripped her hips, lifting and pulling her pussy over his face. "Riker!"

Riker licked up and down the length of her pussy, darting his tongue inside as his grip tightened.

Moaning, she wiggled as he licked and sucked, swirling the tip of his tongue around her clit. When he moved her up and down, she threw her arms and head back, staring up at the sky. The feast, his feast was amazing.

Licking and sucking, he pulled her down until he could bury his face into her cunt.

“Yes, oh...” Laughter bubbled up from her throat, slipping out of her mouth and she knew this was absolute and pure ecstasy. Her toes and lower legs tingling, she let go, another orgasm pushing air out of her lungs. “Ah!”

Refusing to let her go, he licked savagely, his tongue and mouth working together, sucking up every drop.

Easing Trinity onto her side, he held her, his fingers rubbing and caressing, his chest heaving.

She brushed the tips of her fingers across his chest, more peaceful than she'd been in so long. As she closed her eyes, she heard an agonizing sound.

“I need to tell you the rest.” Riker's voice was stilted, quiet. He never moved, his arm keeping her by his side.

“Okay.”

His chest was heaving, scattered pants slipping from his mouth.

Nuzzling closer, she allowed her fingers to brush against his skin.

“Rose and Grace were home. I was on a training mission for the new job, one that I wanted so badly for her, for us. She didn't want me to go. She said she had a terrible feeling and begged me to stay. I refused, pushing her aside as if her fears didn't matter. I wanted this job and the money, but I didn't realize how terrified she was. We were out of the city, too far. Way too far.”

Trinity heard the catch in his voice, the utter terror and guilt.

“There was... There was a fire. I got the call when we were getting ready to leave. I was coming back to her! To my baby! I was on my way. If it had just waited for a lousy hour. One fucking hour then my family would have survived. I was there at the end. I tried. I swear to God, I tried to save them.”

His fingers dug into her and she held her breath as she slipped her arm over him, her leg over his. “What happened?”

“A fire. A huge fire. She couldn’t get out. My Rose and my baby were both trapped. They were pounding at the window, begging for help. The fireman didn’t get there in time. The fire was so massive, so hot. I was there. I tried. They pulled me off. They didn’t save my family, but the truth is. I killed them. I’m the one. I’m the horrible person. I killed my wife and child.”

## CHAPTER 12

Weight. Guilt. Despair. The words continued to flow in the back of Riker's mind, but he had to admit that sharing the full story had eased a burden that had been locked deep inside. He hadn't realized how intense the emotions would be until he'd muttered the words. The timing had been right, sharing a part of his life that had left him a broken man. There would be no vindication, no way of erasing the past, but words Trinity offered had been the key to unlocking the rusted padlock.

Rose would want him to live, even to love again. He wasn't ready to give up on life, no matter his earlier thoughts, nightmares and the fact he'd stood by the river on more than occasion doubting his ability to go on. But he was a fighter. That much he knew. Both Trinity and Rose had seen that in him from the beginning. They were similar, both caring and nurturing, but also so very different.

The time spent at the river on this glorious May morning had meant more to him than he could possibly admit. After making love, after holding each other for what seemed like forever, sharing wine and nothing more than gentle touches, he felt almost whole again.

Shivering, Trinity huddled next to him, half wrapped in the blanket as she sipped on her wine.

"Cold?" he asked, pulling her tightly against him. His throat remained scratchy, the single word almost inaudible.

"Invigorated."

Sighing, he kissed the top of her head. “We should go soon. An hour to get back.”

“Then what?” Tilting her head, she glanced into his eyes, hers searching as if terrified he’d try and crawl back into his hole.

“Dinner?”

“I’d like that. I admit, I’m starving.”

He pulled her to her feet and glanced back at the river one last time. From now on, this beautiful place would belong to them. That is, if she was going to stay. Another hurdle. Another conversation. “Good sex will do that to you.”

“Very funny.” She grabbed her shirt and noticed her phone laying on the ground. The moment she had it in her hands, she groaned. “Two missed calls from Ana. She told me she’d call when she was flying into town.”

Nodding, Riker grabbed his jeans, jerking them on as she listened to her voice mails. He could tell by her pinched face that something was wrong. After sliding into his shirt, he grabbed his jacket, checking his phone. Seemed everyone was trying to get a hold of them. “Shannon.” He hit redial without bothering to listen to the message. “Hey. Sorry. Trinity and I drove up to Blackfoot. What’s up?”

“Is she still with you?” Shannon asked, a hint of anger in her voice.

“Yeah. We’re just getting ready to leave. Why?”

“Because there are dozens of reporters in town and I mean dozens. Their trucks are parked all over the damn place. A couple of them came in to grab lunch and I overheard them talking. Asshole ex-boyfriend must have told them where Trinity was and given the bastard was at the cabin she’s using, I wouldn’t suggest you go there.”

“Fuck. This is the last things she needs,” he muttered under his breath.

“I know. I wanted you to hear it from me. I don’t think she’s going to be able to hide but so much longer,” Shannon

huffed. “I hope she’s ready to face the music.”

“She shouldn’t have to.”

“Preaching to the choir. Let me know if you need anything. Just a phone call away.”

Riker turned to find Trinity staring at him, the look on her face one of utter disgust. “Thank you. I owe you one.”

“There’s more news. They caught the motherfucker setting the bombs.”

“What? You’re kidding me.” There was no way it could be that easy. He’d seen the bomb and the mechanism was the real thing, not one created from some blueprints off the internet. What about the asshole threatening the mayor? Something was off.

“Yeah, some kid, believe it or not. The little creep had several of the same model in the basement of his parents’ house. The internet.” Shannon laughed. “Gotta run. I feel a bar fight happening. Oh, don’t forget to remind Trinity that Jessica has some pretty snazzy ideas on how to help her out of this media crisis. You know, Jess. She’ll bug me to freaking death.”

“Yeah, I do, and I will. Thanks for everything.” A kid? There was no way given the information he’d learned about the bomb itself. What the hell was going on?

“You got it, my friend.”

Riker ended the call and held the phone to his head. There had to be a ruse involved, playing a game in order to catch the real perpetrator.

“What’s wrong?” Trinity shoved her shirt into her jeans. “Maybe I should say, let me guess. Reporters?”

“Yeah. All over the damn place.”

“That motherfucker told everyone where I was. I should kill him!” Pacing, she mumbled under her breath. “My cousin called. Ana rented a car and found a good dozen photographers camped out at the cabin. What the hell am I supposed to do? Go to a hotel? My guess is they will just find

me there. I'm going to have to go back, face this thing. Shit! I will kill Chance. I will. He called me. The fucker called me telling me in no uncertain terms that I belonged to him and he'd be waiting at the hotel for me to arrive. The nerve of the asshole."

"Waiting at the hotel? Which hotel?"

"Don't you do anything stupid."

"I don't plan on it."

She paced the ground, hissing. "This is getting out of hand."

"Yeah, it is." Riker walked in her direction, taking her arms. "I agree that you need to face this situation but on your own terms and when you want to do it."

"Better be soon, since my agent called and issued an ultimatum. Come back and deal with this in the next twenty-four hours or he's firing me as a client. Can you believe that? I've been with that man since I started. Made him a hell of a lot of money too and he's willing to chuck everything. I'm done." Nervous laughter trickled past her pursed lips. "Done. I can't do this anymore. The lying. The pretending. That's not the girl inside."

"You're right. You're a different woman and my guess is that you always were. You were caught up in the glamor, as well as the money. Maybe it's time for a new start, but my opinion is that you need to go out swinging, no matter what you decide."

"I'd love to. Trust me. I'd love to stick this in their faces, call their bluff. Just how am I supposed to do that?"

Riker gave her an authoritative look. "I understand that Jessica has some ideas to help you? Connections?"

"That's right. Shannon mentioned that she and Jessica cooked up some ideas. I have to do this right." She groaned and rubbed her eyes. "I don't know anymore. At some point, I'll listen to her. I just need some time to think."

“Uh-huh. I can tell you’re just as stubborn as I am, but I don’t know how to help you. The thought of movies and stars, Hollywood and the dirt, not my bag. First things first. You’re going to stay with me.”

“They’ll make the connection at some point. I can’t do that to you.” Trinity shook her head.

“And I have the ability and the means to get them the hell off my property. In the meantime, we can try and figure out a plan. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“I don’t have any clothes.”

Grinning, he kissed the top of her head. “And that’s a problem, why?”



FLIPPING OFF THE TELEVISION, he stood rubbing his jaw, ready to burst into laughter. What fools. Then again, the fact a local teenager had been arrested, charged with the two bombing attempts and the destruction of the warehouse might just work in his favor. There was no more heat, at least for now. All eyes would be on the poor, dumb kid, who’d stumbled his way into an operation.

He grabbed his beer, taking a swig. Perhaps he’d lay low for a couple of days, give the media and the sheriff’s office time to process. Then he could get back to work, finishing what he’d started. He’d leave her off the list for the time being, switching his method of operation. Even the disappearance of a prominent city council member had taken a back seat to the bombing news. Well, perhaps it should.

Still, he had to be careful. He eased his beer down and walked to his favorite room. Time to change his method of operation. As he turned on the light, he inhaled, savoring the rich scent of ammunition, gun powder and metal. The collection was beautiful, the most important things he’d ever owned.

Chuckling, he walked to the cabinet, unlocking then swinging open the doors. He couldn’t help but admire the firepower he’d amassed. He rubbed his fingers over the



M16A2 and the M4 carbine, but his selection for this particular mission? The HK416. Wrapping his hand around the tactical rifle, he eased the thing of beauty out into the light. His favorite method to kill.

He rubbed the end of the barrel, savoring the way it felt, the cool metal against his skin. Now, he wished he'd used the piece for the first kill. Snickering, he remembered the look in the man's eyes, the way he stared in horror, if only for a few seconds, a mere understanding. The next kill would taste even better.

After closing the doors, he grabbed a few handguns, shoving them into a duffle bag. Adding various ammunition clips, he zipped the bag and patted the top. Very soon it would be time to set the remaining act into motion.

As he walked out of the room, he began to whistle. Everything was working out perfectly.



“WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE AGAIN?”

Riker heard the amusement in Landen's voice. “Doing me a favor. Just a conversation. Nothing more.” The cars had pulled up, remaining in the back. This was the right thing to do. At least the opportunity to get one asshole off Trinity's back.

“I kind of like this.” Boone held the baseball bat in his hands, slapping the wood against his palm.

“Violence. Sounds like fun.” Antonio moved ahead of the group, a grin on his face. “I like to deal with bullies.”

“What about you?” Sawyer laughed.

“You said, this guy is violent?” Steel asked between clenched teeth.

“He threatened Trinity more than once. If Shannon hadn't arrived with a gun, who knows what would have happened.” Riker studied the area, the parking lot filled with vans from various news agencies. A Quality Inn. The man certainly wasn't living high on the hog at this point.

“Then his ass belongs to us,” Moose said quietly as he looked up at the hotel.

Zane bounded out of the entrance, whistling as he sauntered forward. “The girl behind the desk is very nice. Pretty too. I managed to snag her number and get the room number. Room 472.”

“You go, you dog!” Garcia woofed.

“Let’s just make certain he understands why we’re here. Follow me.” The four-story motel had an outside set of stairs, the inn certainly not meant for a Hollywood star. As he took them two at a time, his blood pressure increased. The asshole would know exactly what the town was made of.

“This should be good,” Landen said behind him.

Riker remained quiet as he set foot on the landing and opened the outside door. After a quick look at the sign on the hallway wall, he took long strides all the way down until he reached the door. “Just stay out of the way.”

The men flanked the hallway.

After knocking on the door, Riker took a step back, placing his hands behind his back. He could hear someone inside, no doubt believing that Trinity would actually succumb to his demands. When the door was opened, he wrapped his hand around the man’s neck, pushing him inside. “You think you can bully people?”

“Who the fuck are you?” Chance hissed as he dug his fingers into Riker’s hands, trying to get away.

“Your worst nightmare.” Riker whistled and grinned as the others, all nine of the smokejumpers entered the room, Antonio slamming the door. “This is just a friendly gesture.”

Boone slapped the bat on his hand as he moved closer, eyeing Chance’s knees. “One hard hit. He’ll have trouble getting a movie part for a long time.”

“No! Don’t you fucking dare. Get off me.” Chance struggled, flailing as Riker slammed him against the wall.

“You are an asshole.” Riker smiled. “Now, my boys are going to try and explain it to you. You are going to leave Missoula tonight. Period.”

*Whap!*

Boone slapped the bat and moved closer as the others crowded around in a semi-circle.

Chance sputtered, his eyes darting back and forth. “You’re crazy.”

“You’re right. We enjoy beating the shit out of assholes,” Moose said as he puffed up, inching closer.

“You wouldn’t dare.” Chance pushed hard against Riker’s chest.

“Did you hear the pansy ass creep?” Landen laughed.

“I say we beat his face first, then break both of his knees.” Steel snarled as he inched closer.

“No!” Chance blinked, his mouth going slack.

“No? Then you’re going to do exactly as we say. Leave town and never, not once, try and contact Trinity again. Not once. Because we will know when and if you do. And if we find out that you have tried, even breathing into the phone, sending her an email or text, we will hunt. You. Down. Am I clear?” Riker dug his nails into the man’s skin before backing away. “Not once.”

“Okay! Fine.” When Riker let him go, he coughed but remained backed against the wall. “Sure.”

“We have your word?” Moose insisted, frothing at the mouth.

“Yeah. You do. Swear to God.” Chance managed, his face flushed.

*Smack!*

Boone slapped the bat against the dresser.

Riker grinned as he looked down at the man’s very wet crotch and sniffed. “Clean yourself up and get the hell out of

here.” As they stormed out of the room, he smiled.

“That was a blast.” Moose slapped Riker on the back.



“I’M MISSING SOMETHING HERE.”

Riker looked over at Landen. The entire team remained on high alert, the concept of helping the sheriff as well as the mayor daunting. However, they all needed to hear the various details. An impromptu meeting had been called at his house, for the simple reason of the onslaught of reporters hanging around Ziggy’s as well as every other bar and restaurant in town. He glanced out the back door, studying the way Trinity was sitting on the edge of her seat, her eyes never leaving Jessica. Whatever help Jess could provide would be a Godsend. “What’s this shit about the kid being the bomber?”

“My guess is that the sheriff is playing a game of cat and mouse. And here I didn’t think the guy was that intelligent,” Boone chortled.

“Not a bad idea, if you ask me. The mayor’s son. Why does she think he’s the one ceremoniously killing those involved with funding veterans?” Landen sipped on his beer.

Stoker grabbed a beer out of Riker’s refrigerator and walked back into the room. “Neither Cooper or I can give you all the details, but what we found about the unit Kevin Falk was in was interesting.”

“Your unit?” Sawyer asked.

“No. When Stoker and I were stationed in Afghanistan, we had a sister unit that was involved in the mission that you’ve all heard about before,” Cooper answered.

“Some of us haven’t,” Steel said under his breath.

Exhaling, Stoker leaned against the fireplace. “Short version. Cooper and I served together. We were buddies and our entire unit was involved in some dangerous missions. We were caught on a mission, a nighttime flight in order to rescue several prisoners of war. Things went wrong and when we jumped, well...”

Riker could tell his hand was shaking.

Cooper cleared his throat. “Stoker was captured, and I was injured. That’s how I lost my leg. We were the lead going in but there were several ground units. When everything was shot to shit, all hell broke loose. Given what Stoker and I went through, we had no idea what happened after Stoker was deemed a prisoner of war and I was sent stateside. The mission is still deemed classified, but several men were lost, their bodies never found.”

“Is one of them the mayor’s son?” Garcia asked, swirling his beer.

Cooper looked at Stoker before answering. “Yes. Kevin Falk was believed to be missing in action for almost three years, but there have been reports that he surfaced, pictures of him working with the Taliban.”

“Wow. This is getting serious.” Boone shook his head.

“Very much so. Then the pictures stopped for no apparent reason. There have no additional sightings of him and no known whereabouts. All of this shit stays here.” Stoker looked around the room. “Got it?”

“Yeah, sure,” Landen said.

“Of course,” Boone added.

Riker lifted his beer bottle as did the others.

“All right. Cooper and I asked a hell of a lot of questions. Our old sergeant refused to say anything else except the man was considered armed and dangerous.” Stoker shrugged. “Just asking the questions has made this National Security. My guess is we’ll see the top brass coming in on this one, especially since we’re talking about Chris Camden, a four-star General.”

“In Missoula?” Garcia asked.

“Retired, or so we’ve been told,” Cooper said then rolled his eyes.

“But you don’t believe any of this shit. Do you?” Riker already knew the answer.

“I don’t believe in coincidences. His son is also missing in action, not killed as we originally were told. I will say this. Our asses might be court marshalled given the digging we’ve done. Who the hell knows?” A long breath escaped Stoker’s mouth.

“Then why bother asking for the information?” Moose’s question sounded accusatory.

Stoker walked closer to the man, his eyes full of venom. “Because that’s what we do as a team. The entire town we consider a team, in case you haven’t noticed. We care about people.”

“Okay. Let’s not allow this to get out of hand,” Antonio moved closer. “That word. Team. Remember it, all of you. We’re smack in the middle of shit that we shouldn’t be. Listen up and shut up.”

Stoker gave him a sideways glance before nodding. “I think the investigators, whatever their real titles are, knew that Cooper and I were connected to the mission. That’s why they homed in on us, not for some bullshit about the bombs.”

“Stoker and I believe that the mayor knows a lot more than she’s telling anyone,” Cooper added. “There’s more to this story.”

“The mayor was petrified. That was obvious,” Zane said.

“Unbelievable,” Antonio muttered under his breath.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do right now,” Landen added.

Riker leaned his head against the wall. “I assume the mayor is being protected?”

“She’s at a safe house at this point. The sheriff wouldn’t say anything else.” Stoker shrugged.

The room grew quiet.

“What about this Friday awards ceremony?” Moose broke the silence.

“She’s insistent that the event goes on as planned. You know the mayor.” Stoker shrugged.

Riker sniffed. “Good time to pick her off.”

Stoker nodded. “Yeah, the sheriff will no doubt have a full detail there. I’m certain FBI and CIA will be there as well.”

“And you two are going to be more involved?” Garcia asked.

Cooper and Stoker shared another look, Stoker hesitating before answering. “In a manner of speaking. We’ll be debriefed tomorrow. That’s all we know.”

“If they really tell us the truth,” Cooper added.

“So, we wait. Investigator Nelson still thinks the bombing isn’t over. I believe that man over the military any day.” Antonio allowed the words to sink in. “Eyes and ears open, I guess.”

“All we can do.” Riker grabbed another beer then headed for the back door. “You guys can analyze this to death. I have other things to do.”

“Lover boy,” Landen teased.

Riker gave him the finger before walking outside.

Jessica leaned back, a smile on her face. “I think we have a good plan in motion.”

“A plan, huh?” Riker studied Trinity’s face. She was much more relaxed than before.

Trinity eased out of the chair. “Jessica is good. I’ll give her that.”

“I’ve had too many years of experience dealing with the damn press,” Jessica answered as she laughed and struggled to her feet. “Ugh. If this baby doesn’t come soon, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“You are as big as a house.” He couldn’t resist. “And that better not be wine you’re drinking, or I’ll make certain Stoker knows.”

“Uh-huh. I can still take you down so don’t you dare tell Stoker a thing. One glass isn’t going to hurt this baby. A fighter like his mama.” Jessica stuck out her fist. “Just ask Stoker. I beat him up all the time.”

Riker rolled his eyes. “Right. I happen to know the real story, sugar plum”

“Sugar plum. See what I have to deal with? If you stay here, just make certain you know what you’re getting involved with or should I say who. Tough bunch of men, but...” Jessica inched closer, whispering in Trinity’s ear.

Trinity laughed, her eyes flashing as she squeezed Jessica’s hand. “Totally agree.”

“I’ll leave you two alone. You have a lot to talk about.” Jessica huffed, the smile remaining on her face. “You have the courage. You can do this.”

“I know. Thank you for talking with me. I feel a hell of a lot better.” Giving Jessica a hug, Trinity softened her gaze as she looked at Riker.

Dear God, he could see such love in Trinity’s eyes. He held his breath as Jessica walked by, allowing her fingers to trail across his arm. When the door was closed, he closed the distance, leaning over the railing. “Are you considering staying?”

“I am. I have a lot to think about, but I want something different. This entire experience has taught me that I can’t live a lie any longer. I have you to thank for that first. Jessica and Shannon also nudged me. Well, pushed like the strong women they are.” She laughed and moved her wine glass back and forth between her hands.

“What about acting?”

“Well, I have a movie that I just finished and I’m under contract for one more. Well, that is if anyone will consider hiring me after this fiasco.”

Riker brushed his fingers across her cheek. “They’d be fools not to. I’d like you to stay.”



“Yeah?”

“Very much so.”

“Why?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

“Because you allowed light back into my life. You allowed me to feel again. I had no idea how dead I was inside until you smashed into my life.”

Biting her lower lip, she shook her head. “You’re never going to forgive me for the accident. Are you?”

“Probably not.” Using his thumb and index finger, he pulled her jaw closer. “I’ll let you make it up to me over and over again.” Capturing her mouth, he wanted the kiss to be soft, a slight touch, a whisper of what he felt for her.

Shivering, she slid her arm around his neck, holding the back of his head, her eyes shimmering.

Slipping his tongue just inside, he groaned as the kiss continued, every part of his body tingling. When he eased back, he kissed the tip of her nose.

“I heard you were getting an award,” Trinity purred.

“News travels fast. Yeah, for saving the little boy.”

“I fell in love with you because of that newscast, remember.”

He cocked his head. “And here I thought you fell in love with Zane, you know the welcoming party?”

“You’re terrible. Zane is a great guy, but the moment I saw those steely eyes, that gorgeous and very dirty face on television, I was hooked. You should consider acting.” She rubbed the tip of her finger across his nose.

“Over my dead ass body,” Riker huffed and smacked her on the ass.

“Oh!”

“Careful or I’ll have to give you more spankings. Yes, I think I will.”

She shook her finger. “No, you don’t. Jessica told me how to handle you guys and your Burnout club. Domestic discipline, huh?”

“The only way to treat a lady.” Grinning, he pulled her in for a tight hug. “Does that bother you?”

“You’re serious about that, aren’t you?”

He’d thought about the question, remembering what he’d shared with Rose. “It’s in my blood. I’ve always wanted control.”

“Could have fooled me.” Laughing, she rubbed her hand up and down his back before pulling away. “I’m not sure I can live that way, not entirely. Don’t get me wrong, I like the spankings, but I don’t know if I’m that kind of woman.”

He caressed the side of her face. “Not a deal breaker, lady. I’d just like to have you in my life.”

Trinity smiled and rose onto her tiptoes, kissing his lips. “You’re amazing.”

“What about the reporters? Are you going back to California to deal with this?”

“No.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

She bit her lip and gave him a mischievous look. “I’m going to handle this my way. With the help of Jessica and Shannon.”

“You know what? I think I’m petrified.”



TRINITY PACED BACK and forth as she wrung her hands. This was more nerve wracking than she wanted to admit. “Why am I doing this? Why? I’m crazy. No one is going to believe me.”

“Relax. Everything is going to be all right. Besides, they’re going to believe your attorney.”

She glanced at Troy and smiled. “No offense, but you handle corporate law.”

Troy laughed. “Not today. Besides, I know my way around a courtroom and how to finagle the bad guys.”

“I understand that you do. You’re a good friend and I don’t even know you.”

“I owe these folks my life. You heard me say that before.”

“Someday, I need to hear the entire story,” she said as she gave him a look.

“That’s for a bottle of liquor and a long night. Let’s just say that I was a dumbass, getting involved with the wrong people. Almost destroyed my life with my little boy.” Troy exhaled. “I’m a lucky man to have a second chance.”

“Involved with the wrong people. Sounds like what I’ve done my entire life.” Marvin had been calling her non-stop. At least she’d been able to give him something to chew on the last time he’d harassed her. The chance of him being here? Then again, did she want him to be here? Yes. The truth was, yes.

“Well, then you can change that. Right now. Tonight. Just follow my lead. Okay?” Troy winked. “I do know what I’m doing. I’m actually a damn good attorney.”

“I’ve heard.”

Hearing a knock on the door, she groaned. “Come in.” When Ana walked inside, she breathed a sigh of relief. “Is everyone here?”

Ana glanced at Troy then gave him a once over. “Oh, there are dozens of people here. And who is this sexy man?”

Trinity smiled. “Ana Phillips, meet Troy Bruester. This is my attorney.”

“And you’ve been keeping him a secret, why? Is every male in this town good looking?” Ana sauntered closer, slapping her hand on her hip. “Wowie is all I can say. Hollywood, you’re missing out.”

Troy blushed. “I haven’t had a woman look at me like that in a long time.”

“Stupid. Women are stupid.” Ana fanned her face.

“Well, if the two of you can stop flirting,” Trinity teased. “Any sign of Chance?”

“Not yet, but I’m certain we can find a couple cowboys or smokejumpers to kick his ass,” Ana purred.

“No violence. Not right now.” Troy winked.

Shannon opened the door, popping her head inside. “We’re ready. The place is packed balls to the walls.”

“Shit. I don’t know if I can do this.” Trinity started pacing again, her anxiety as high as it had ever been.

“You can, and you will. This is about your freedom. Do you understand?” Troy kept the tone of his voice soft yet direct.

“I do. Riker has continued to tell me exactly the same thing.” Trinity wanted nothing more than to have the man by her side, but everyone was right. This, she had to do on her own. Her terms. Her life.

“Good. Then I’m ready if you are.” Troy grabbed a file off the desk and nodded toward the door. “One step at a time. That’s what I’ve had to do.”

“I can do this. I can do this.” Sucking in her breath, she smoothed down her dress and brushed her hands through her hair. Plastering on an award-winning smile, she walked to the door, following Troy outside into the hallway.

“Here we go,” he whispered and moved into the restaurant.

As soon as she walked into the light, she was swarmed, dozens of reporters, cameras and microphones shoved in her face. She managed to keep the smile as she trailed behind Troy to the designated spot. Shannon had insisted that Ziggy’s be used for the press conference, closing down the restaurant except to those on the invitation list. She could barely see anything, or anyone given the lights, the flashing bulbs from cameras. Where was Riker? Where was everyone else?

Troy took her arm, leading her to a marked off area. He stood behind the podium, nodding to her as she settled back

behind him. He faced the cameras and held out his arms. “Ladies and gentlemen.”

Her teeth were chattering, her knees knocking, and she tried desperately to locate Riker. Just when she thought she was going to have a panic attack, she noticed his face, his smile and his penetrating eyes. Breathing a sigh of relief, she felt the courage that she so desperately needed fuel every cell.

“I’m going to make a statement and there will be time for a few questions. I’m Troy Bruester, attorney for Trinity Hargrove. Eight years ago, Ms. Hargrove was enrolled in college in her hometown of Des Moines, Iowa. While in college, one of her professors, David Miller, committed a heinous act resulting in the death of his wife. While there was speculation at the time regarding Ms. Hargrove and her involvement, she was ruled out immediately as a suspect. There was no romantic involvement between Ms. Hargrove and Mr. Miller. I repeat, there was no romantic involvement. While what occurred is horrific and has left Ms. Hargrove with ugly memories, there is no scandal. There is no open case. There is no new evidence as suggested by Mr. Spartan’s erroneous claims. In fact, we will be seeking action against Mr. Spartan for libel.” Troy looked around the room, his gaze stopping on Jack Spartan, who stood with a slack jaw.

Trinity allowed a slow breath to escape as she noticed Marvin standing smack in the middle of the room. From Troy’s deep and authoritative voice to the way he commanded the room, especially Jack Spartan, he had the reporters eating out of his hand. She resisted squealing as Marvin gave her an admiring nod of respect.

“Now, as I said, Ms. Hargrove is prepared to take a few questions after she makes a statement of her own.” Troy ushered her forward.

Trinity felt more confident than she had in years. She gripped the podium, smiling directly at Jack, who was backing out of the room. Asshole. “Jack. Do you have any questions for me? Would you like for me to give you a story?”

The entire room laughed, several photographers turning to snap Jack's picture.

He bristled, his face turning red.

"I could tell you about two heroes, men who risked their lives saving a little boy and his dog. Two men, along with an amazing team that work together to actually save property and the lives of every man and woman in Missoula and states beyond. They race into danger, caring about the people around me. Caring about the women they love. They welcome strangers with open arms, unlike what I was forced to endure for years. I'll be happy to make the arrangements, so you can meet these heroes. That is, if you're man enough." Trinity kept her head held high, a smile on her face and knew that she'd captivated the room.

She heard a whistle from the back, everyone beginning to clap. After a few seconds, she held up her hands, quieting the room. "Please meet the Jackals, heroes to all of us." She could tell they were stunned, Riker's face as red as a beet.

Troy flanked her side, a grin on his face. "True heroes."

"Come on. Let's give them a round of deserved applause." Trinity held her hands over her head, clapping.

As the men streamed out, one after the other, Trinity realized she'd never been so proud in her life. Tears were in her eyes as they waved to the crowd, after a few seconds enjoying having their pictures taken.

"You did good," Troy whispered.

"So, did you." She caught Riker's admonishing look, one that clearly stated she was so going to get it, then noticed Jack's departure out of the corner of her eye. Good. Fucking. Riddance.

When the roar died down, she eased back behind the podium. Riker moved closer, his arms crossed, his face beaming.

"My name is Carrie Simmons. I've been lucky enough to provide hours of entertainment, working with some of the finest actors in the business. I've learned many things,

including the fact that there is little trust in Hollywood, the kind of trust as well as love that I've found in this amazing town. To that end, I'm here to announce my retirement from acting."

"No!"

"You can't!"

The exclamations were loud and varied.

"Ms. Hargrove. What will you be doing?"

Trinity took a deep breath and locked eyes with Riker. "I'm going to be staying in Missoula and writing my first book."

## CHAPTER 13

“**E**xactly what did you think you were doing parading us around in front of the press?” Riker moved behind Trinity, allowing his voice to remain husky, a hint of anger. However, there was no way he could pretend. He was ecstatic with the outcome.

Leaning back, she exhaled as he wrapped his arms around her waist, keeping her nestled against his chest. “I thought my man should garner at least some attention. After all, he is going to be presented with a prestigious award.”

Breathing in the scent of her exotic fragrance was enough to intensify his already raging libido. “Ah, yes, but you kept this from me. Grounds for a spanking.”

“Mmm... Should we go ahead and leave?”

“And miss Jack Spartan being run out of town? Not a chance in hell.” Turning her around, he shook his head. “You did good. You had those reporters eating out of your hand.”

“I did what I should have done a long time ago. I found the courage. Didn’t hurt that Troy has a way with words.” She nodded in Troy’s direction, laughing as she kneaded Riker’s shirt. “I think my cousin has found something she likes in little ol’ Missoula.”

Riker followed her gaze. “The guy deserves a break. Maybe he can find happiness.”

“We all deserve a break.” Trinity snagged a kiss before chuckling. “Don’t worry. I don’t think the press will rake you over the coals.”



He studied the photographers, the way they were catching every move they made, and let out a long, slow breath. “I don’t like notoriety.”

“I don’t think you have a choice, sexy man. Uh-oh. Here comes my agent.”

“I’ll get rid of him if you’d like.” Riker winked.

“Marvin, I can handle,” she purred.

“Trinity. Do you think we could talk for a few minutes?” The man gave Riker a curious look before concentrating on Trinity.

“Marvin Huddles, Riker Sheffield.” Trinity took a step away, her hand never leaving Riker’s chest.

Marvin held out his hand, a grin on his face. “A true hero I understand. On more than one level.”

“I’m not certain I like the sounds of that.” Trinity lifted a single eyebrow. “Have you two been conspiring against me?”

“Just met the man,” Riker commented. He didn’t like Marvin, could tell her agent was a pompous jerk. Why Trinity had allowed such idiots to remain in her life all these years might never be answered.

“Let’s just say he has a powerful group of friends.” Marvin laughed. “I have a table in the back. I know this is an important night for you, so I’ll just take about fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be right there,” Trinity said, her lips thin and tight.

“Good enough. I’ll order you a drink.” Marvin gave Riker a look of respect. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Riker tilted his head, eyeing the man as he walked through the crowd. “Weasel.”

Trinity chuckled. “He is. I can’t lie. Now, exactly what did you and the rest of the team do?”

“Just righted a wrong. Nothing more.”

“Right. Is that why Chance Reynolds decided to skip out on the press conference?”

He held up his hands. “I’m not saying a thing.”

She cupped his chin, her fingers brushing back and forth. “However you managed to get him to leave, I’ll forever be grateful. He was a true monster. You know why I adore you?”

“I have no idea.”

“Because you’re unlike any man I’ve ever met. Honest. Kind. Straightforward. You protect me. You care, and you stop at nothing to make certain I’m safe.” Pressing her lips to his, she shivered as he wrapped his arms around her.

Pop!

Tensing, he could hear cameras clicking and knew they were being photographed. She would remain a celebrity for as long as she maintained involvement with any aspect of Hollywood. He wasn’t entirely certain she wanted to leave the glitz and glamor, no matter. But dear God, he wanted her to and he’d stop at nothing to convince her. His cock stiffened, creating beads of sweat along the back of his neck. He wanted nothing more than to take her away, to their secluded spot. As she fell into his arms, her body shivering, he pressed his tongue inside, tasting her sweet mouth.

“Get a room!”

Riker reached out, shooting Landen his middle finger.

Trinity pressed against his chest, breaking the kiss. “I should talk to Marvin anyway. I promise. I won’t take long.” Rubbing her hand on his shoulder, she eased the tips of her fingers down the length of his arm, allowing their fingers to intertwine as she gave him a lust filled look.

“Wow. That was...” Landen said under his breath.

“Yeah.” Riker looked around the bar, studying the huge crowd. Shannon had opened up Ziggy’s to the regular customers and everyone was in a good mood, celebrating, their voices raised, their glasses filled.

“What’s wrong? I know that look on your face.”

He exhaled, unsure of how to answer. “She won’t stay.”

“She told you that?” Landen huffed.

“She doesn’t have to. I know. There isn’t enough to keep her here in town.”

“I think you might be wrong, brother. You didn’t have a bird’s eye view of that kiss.”

Riker snorted. “I’m going to talk to Troy.”

“The guy did a damn good job.”

“Yeah, let’s just hope he can save the hangar.”

“Well, Troy is tenacious. I’ll give him that. By the way, Stoker mentioned he has some news. Maybe the real asshole has been found.”

“You know what? I doubt it. He hasn’t played out his final hand and I’m not entirely certain it has to do with the mayor.”

Landen shoved his hands into his pockets. “Maybe not, but there haven’t been any additional bomb threats the last couple of days. Not that I’ve heard anyway.”

“There will be.” Riker weaved through the crowd, nodding and doing his best to smile as he was congratulated by several men and women he didn’t know. He didn’t like the limelight, hated the concept of being considered a hero. When he reached Troy, he waited in the background.

“I’m so glad you were able to help Trinity,” Laney said as she squeezed his hand.

“I didn’t do anything but look the part,” Troy said as he laughed, giving Riker a waning smile.

“You’re the best-looking attorney I’ve seen. All the ones in my business are over anxious toads.” Ana grinned, her hand remaining on Troy’s shoulder.

Blushing, Troy shifted from one foot to the other. “Ah, shucks. Guess you model types don’t know what a real man looks like.”

“She’s right, my friend. And you did more than you know. I can never repay you.” Laney glanced at Riker. “I’ll leave you two boys alone, but come over when you’re done.”

Troy nodded. “I will, and I still owe you.”

“No, you don’t,” Laney said, giving him a wink before walking away.

Riker watched as she walked toward the Burnout room. “What do I owe you?”

“Payment? Not a damn thing. I was serious when I said I’m paying off a debt and will be for some time.”

“Should I ask?” Ana glanced from one man to the other.

“Long story,” Troy said then issued a long exhale. “I may have some good news on the land situation. I have some feelers out and from what I can tell, the information the captain was provided wasn’t entirely the truth. Talk about a toad. The attorney for Parson’s Group is a real winner.”

“We could use some good news,” Riker commented. Even from where he stood, he could tell Trinity was riding on every word Marvin was saying.

“How about we grab some dinner?” Ana pressed, sidling closer to Troy.

“Go on. We don’t need to talk about business tonight.” Riker took a step away.

“Hey. Before you go. One thing I didn’t tell Trinity. I honestly didn’t think it was the right time.” Troy lowered his voice.

Riker wasn’t certain he wanted to hear any more. “Go on.”

“This David Miller? Evidently, he’s been leaving her messages. He wants to set up a meeting to apologize.”

Gritting his teeth, he pushed back his anger. “Yeah, I think he called her. Is he trying to get you to set up this meeting?”

Troy nodded. “Not something I want to do. If they want to talk, fine but I don’t want to be involved. I have a really bad vibe about this guy.”

“I hear you. Thanks for letting me know.”

“You’re welcome, buddy. We’ll talk soon.”

Riker realized Trinity wanted to get her life in order, but the last thing she needed was the burden of another round of guilt. He held his breath as he walked toward the back, determined not to interfere. As he passed by their table, he noticed a set of papers, Marvin’s stern face as he pointed to the documents.

Trinity was shaking her head, her face full of anger. When she started to stand, Marvin grabbed her wrist, whispering as his entire expression became animated.

Discouraged, he walked into the room. While only Stoker, Garcia, Landen and Boone remained, he could tell they were embroiled in a conversation.

“Hey, dude. Stoker and Cooper have some information.” Garcia beckoned him over.

“What’s going on?” Riker joined the group. “Where’s Cooper?”

“Cooper has a meeting with an old buddy of his, trying to get some additional information. Especially since we were totally stonewalled by our old sergeant.” Stoker ran his hand through his hair. “I get that certain missions and the details surrounding them are classified, but I know the sarge. He wanted to tell us something.”

“That means you were right. The military has been keeping secrets.” Boone huffed. “Where does that leave the mayor? She can’t live in hiding her entire life.”

“I gathered they have the man responsible surrounded.” Garcia took a gulp of his beer.

Stoker smirked. “Yeah. I think so.”

“But you don’t think the mayor’s son is alive. Do you?” Riker tilted his head.

“Cooper and I know what happened on that mission. We might not have seen the end, but I don’t buy that any soldier who went through what we did, experienced the horrors that

we did would suddenly turncoat. I don't buy it. If Kevin Falk is alive and working with the enemy, then the man has lost his mind." Stoker's eyes opened wide. "Interesting thought."

"What are you talking about?" Landen asked, his eyes dancing.

"I need to check something out before I say anything. You guys want another beer? On me." Stoker grinned.

"You bet!" Boone chuckled. "Somehow, it's been a long ass week."

"And it's not over. Awards ceremony tomorrow morning. Nine sharp." Garcia teased.

Riker growled.

"What about this kid that was arrested?" Landen asked. "I haven't heard much on the news."

"Last report I heard said the kid is out on bail." Boone shrugged. "Shit he had was the real deal."

"Kid was a scapegoat. A smokescreen and so far, it hasn't worked. I'd bet anything," Stoker said as he looked to see if anyone was paying attention.

"Then where'd they find this kid?"

"That's what the investigators are here for. You don't think Lieutenants Yancy and Sloan were here for the scenery, do you?" Landen snarked.

"Guess the real perpetrator isn't taking the bait." Riker rubbed his jaw.

"Uh-oh. Don't look now, buddy." Landen pushed him on the arm.

"Riker. Can we talk?" Trinity's voice came from the doorway.

As soon as he saw her face, the way she couldn't look him in the eyes, he knew. She was leaving.



THEY WERE both silent on the ride home. The last place Trinity wanted to tell him was in the car. The moment they walked inside his house, he walked into the bedroom. She'd never felt like such a shit in her entire life, but she had no choice. None. Her back was against the wall. She tossed her coat onto the chair and thought about her words for the tenth time. This wasn't the end. This was just a break. A break. Knowing Riker, this would mean a break-up. She walked toward the fireplace, studying the picture. Then she noticed he'd placed the picture of Rose and Grace on the other side of the mantel.

Her entire system wanted to shut down. He'd never forgive her, not for leaving him now. Tears rushed into her eyes and she reached for the photograph, studying Rose's beautiful face, Grace's happy smile. Then there was Riker's expression. She'd never seen that look on his face, not during the time they'd made love or even during the special time spent at the river. He remained a broken man.

She fingered the glass, a single tear slipping past her lashes. Her heart was heavy, aching as if she would never see him again. And in truth, she wasn't certain she would. They lived in two different worlds. How in the hell could she bridge them? Closing her eyes, she held the picture against her chest.

“Rose used to tell me that finding love was like opening up a book. Sometimes you're uncertain of the first few pages, even deciding that you're not the kind of reader who would enjoy the story. But something about the book, the characters and the setting, always draw you back in. When you take the time to read past the lines, into the imagination of the author, then you can't put the book down, devouring every word, every sentence. The story leaves you breathless, hungering for more. That's when you know that a story has taken a part of your heart, never to be returned.”

Hearing the angst in his voice, the utter sadness, she kept her face turned away as the tears fell. The ache would never leave. “That's beautiful. Love is precious.”

“True love can go through anything.”

“Yes. I agree.” She wiped her eyes and eased the picture back in its place, allowing one last gaze of what had to have been the happiest time in his life. She heard his approach, could sense just how tense he was.

Riker slipped his arms around her. “You’re leaving.”

The frankness of his words startled her. “Oh, Riker. I don’t want to.”

“But you have to.”

“I do. I don’t have any choice. I’m under contract for a movie. There were some issues. They have to reshoot, plus I can’t get out of the other contract. Suddenly, they don’t want to lose me.”

Inhaling, he kissed the top of her head before pulling away. “Will you be back?”

“I don’t know if I can. I mean, not right away.” Turning to face him, she blinked, unable to stop the tears. He seemed as if he’d aged, as if loving her and then forced to give her up had taken years off his life.

Swallowing hard, he studied her for a few seconds before nodding. “I understand. This life isn’t what you’re used to. I only want you to be happy.”

“You make that sound like I’m not happy here. I am. I love being with you.”

“Let’s face it. This place, this life will never be enough.” Riker looked down, a deep sigh escaping past his lips.

A quiet tension settled in.

“Maybe you can come with me.” As she took rapid steps closer, her stomach wrenched in knots. There was no way he’d ever come to Hollywood. Not for any reason.

“My life is here.”

“But we could find a way.” She closed the distance, refusing to give up. She couldn’t lose him. Not like this.

He gave her a half smile and touched the side of her face, his thumb rubbing in aimless circles. “I love you, Carrie, more



than I can tell you, but this isn't going to work out."

"Riker. I love you. We have to try."

His face remained stoic, as if he was going to shut down.

"Please." She knew he was going to break the connection, pushing her out the door. Every part of her was trembling, her heart skipping beats, leaving her light headed. "Please."

His body shaking, he grabbed her, pulling her tightly against his chest. "Oh, baby. I would do anything in my power, but this can't happen. You have to do this for you."

Sobbing, she clung to his shirt, pressing her face into the softness, inhaling the sweet smell of him. There was no life without him. None. "I love you." She could hear him, choking, the restrained tears of a haunted man.

Seconds later, he pulled her off her feet, cradling her as he walked toward the bedroom. Easing her down onto the bed, he curled up behind her, his chin resting on her shoulder. "You are my light, my joy. Never forget that."



RIKER STOOD AT THE WINDOW, the coffee cup in his hand, his heart empty. Letting her go had been the only thing he could do, but he knew she wouldn't be back. He was merely a moment in time, a break from the normalcy she'd become used to. He wanted to be angry, to feel anything at all but he couldn't. She hadn't planned on falling in love and he hadn't wanted to become involved. She'd left sometime in the middle of the night, refusing to wake him. There was no teary-eyed goodbye, no hours spent making love. They'd simply held each other.

She'd cried herself to sleep, doing her best to stifle the agonizing sounds. If only she'd known that he'd remained awake for hours, the tears burning his eyes. Some kind of hero he was.

Twisting his head, he cringed as a stream of sunlight cascaded across the photograph, memories fresh and brutal.

His decision to move it into the living room had been one of hope, of letting go. Maybe he'd never be able to let go, not completely. Checking his watch, he sighed and walked toward the kitchen. There was no way to avoid the ceremony. As he walked past the kitchen island, he sucked in his breath. He'd read the note before, his anger forcing him to ball it up, tossing it into the trash, but this was one small piece of her, the woman he'd fallen so desperately in love with.

His hand shaking, he fingered the writing, the cursive words.

*I love you. There is nothing else to say but that you are the only man for me.*

*Never forget...*

*Carrie*

Riker rubbed away the tears, closing his eyes as he thought about what they'd shared.

*Whoosh!*

Knocking everything off the island, he tossed his coffee cup into the sink, snarling when the damn thing broke into several pieces. Storming toward the door, he grabbed his jacket. Dress blues for the ceremony. As if he gave a shit.

Riker wasn't entirely certain which route he'd taken to the administration building. When he turned down the street, he was cut off immediately, the entire block roped off, police vehicles everywhere. "Shit."

He found a parking space on a side street and walked down the sidewalk. The sheriff must have called in members of other police departments from out of the county. He could see the police were checking everyone trying to get close to the front of the building. While he hadn't been told that the ceremony had even been announced as a celebration, given the number of people in the crowd, the mayor had made good on her promise.

This was a damn celebration.

Sucking in his breath, he kept his head low as he walked through the crowd, heading in the direction of the others.

“Wait. You need to be checked.”

The officer’s voice was gruff. He motioned toward Riker, patting him down twice before letting him through.

Riker had no desire to be here. Looking around, he noticed there were strategically positioned officers on the various corners, even several on the roof tops. Several of the officers were with service animals, no doubt bomb sniffing dogs. He closed the distance as he glanced around the decorated square, the podium standing smack in the middle of the oversized concrete common area. “Some believe the bomber is going to up his game today?”

Cooper nodded. “Sharpshooters, even a few FBI. The investigators we talked to aren’t taking any chances with this. Must be a credible threat.”

“He won’t try and take her here. He wants time.” Stoker flanked Riker’s side.

“He? You’re now convinced this is all about her son?” Riker asked quietly.

“Nope. In fact, I don’t think this has anything to do with her son.” Stoker’s answer was stiff, his voice clipped.

Riker turned to look at him. “Then what do you think?”

“Doesn’t matter. We were told in no uncertain terms to stay the hell out of it.” Cooper hissed his answer.

Noticing Moose’s advance, Riker kept his mouth shut, but the way the two former Marines were studying the crowd was telling.

“You were almost late.” Moose tipped his head and pointed to his watch.

“I had shit to do!” Riker didn’t give a crap he was snapping at everyone.

Landen and Garcia rounded the corner just in time to hear the exclamation.

“Whoa. Okay. We have about five minutes.” Moose backed away.

Landen pulled Riker aside, keeping a smile on his face and his voice low. “Try to stay positive, buddy. There are cameras everywhere. This is supposed to be a good thing. Remember?”

“Yeah, whatever.” Riker flexed his arms. He hated the basic monkey suit.

“What happened? Your attitude went to shit in less than twelve hours.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Now, you’re sounding like me.” Landen kept his grip firm. “Confess.”

“Trinity had to leave.”

“Why?”

“Contracts. The movie she’s in. I don’t know all the details. I didn’t ask.” Riker heard the sadness in his voice.

Landen exhaled. “Then she really did have to leave. You know she wouldn’t go without a good reason. You can always visit.”

“Right. Hell will freeze over.”

“I’ll give you some of the same advice you gave me not so long ago. Get the damn chip off your shoulder. You were dealt some bad karma a long time ago. Time to live again. That might mean mixing up that routine.”

“Yeah? As if you know.”

Landen huffed and let go. “You’re right. I don’t know shit. Let’s get you in place so you can sulk the rest of the day. That’s all you really want to do.”

When his friend walked away, Riker closed his eyes. Landen was right as usual.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for coming. If you’ll settle down, we can get the festivities started.”

Hearing the mayor's voice, Riker clenched his fists. He pulled back his shoulders and walked toward the small staging area. He walked forward and noticed the little boy he and Moose had saved, standing with his tiny hands in his parents'. As he approached, he could see how eager the little boy was to see him. Eric Baker. He remembered the kid's name and nodded to his parents as they waved to him.

"Mister!" Eric broke away from his parents, running toward him.

Bending down, Riker allowed the little boy to wrap his arms around Riker's neck, holding him tightly. "It's okay, son. You're safe. What are you doing here?" He heard the crowd, clapping and cheering, knew his picture was being taken at least a hundred times. But at this moment, there was no one else around but a sweet little boy, whose life had been saved.

"Mommy and Daddy said we were to honor you proper." Eric eased back, his eyes wide. "We got to ride in a plane and everything. I couldn't bring Rusty. I wanted to."

"Your pup? How's he doing?" Riker's voice cracked.

"Good," Eric said as gave a dimpled grin.

"We were honored to be asked to be here. I'm Becky Baker and this is my husband, Rob." She held out her hand, waiting for Riker to stand.

Moose eased beside them, shaking the father's hand.

"I'm glad you're here." Riker patted Eric's head before shaking her hand, surprised when she reached out, pulling him into a hug.

"You saved my world," she whispered before pulling away, wiping her eyes. "Both of you did. We can't thank you enough."

"We were happy to be there," Moose said as he smiled at Riker.

"Mr. Sheffield. Mr. Washington. If you don't mind coming this way." Mayor Falk laughed. "I promise you, this will be painless."

“Mama. Can I go with them?” Eric asked, peering up at his parents.

“I don’t see why not.” Riker scooped Eric into his arms and the gentle hold cut him to the core. His feet were heavy as he walked toward the mayor and he tried to block out the cheers, the happy sounds as he moved forward. When they were in position, the mayor held up her arms.

“Residents of Missoula. We’ve seen our share of difficulties over the last few years. You’ve lived through horrific fires as well as other emergencies and we owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women serving our beautiful city with their dedication and training. Without their service, their willingness to walk headlong into danger, many of us wouldn’t have our homes, our businesses or our lives. This, is a special thank you to two brave smokejumpers, two men who risked their lives to save a little boy and his dog.”

Riker was vaguely aware of the kind words, the support from his entire team. He was thankful for his job and for the men he considered his friends. But there was so much missing from his life.

“To that end, we’d like to present a medal of commendation and bravery to Mathew, Moose, Washington and Riker Sheffield, with a special thanks to the Jackal smokejumping team. You are our true heroes.” Mayor Falk allowed the audience to clap before opening a box, easing a medal into her hands.

“You’re the hero,” Riker whispered before easing Eric to his feet. As Moose lowered his head, receiving the medal, Riker noticed the salute from the little boy, his hand prone, his little fingers resting on his forehead. For a few seconds, he could see into the future, could envision his son being proud of his father.

“And Riker Sheffield.”

Riker closed his eyes and lowered his head, his heart racing. When the medal was placed around his neck, he breathed out. “Thank you.”

“Thank you. You’re both amazing men,” Mayor Falk said as she shook their hands.

When Riker stood, a fleeting glimpse caught his eye. Standing just off to the right, her face beaming, her eyes directed at him was Trinity. There were no words to say, no method to alter the future. But at this moment, these few precious seconds, there was nothing else that mattered.

She was the love of his life.

## CHAPTER 14

“*N*o!” Turning over the desk, he smashed his hands on top of the wooden chair, splintering the top. “Fuck!” Pacing, he ran his hands through his hair. Then again. And again, ripping several shreds from his scalp. Holding out his hands, he hissed, snarling as he kicked the chair then picked up the lamp, smashing it against the wall.

The fuckers thought they could play him. They thought they could hide the bitch. The woman wasn't going to get away with this! No. He was finished playing games. Finished!

Storming into the garage, he grabbed the two cans of gasoline, stalked back into the house and slammed the door. Lifting the can, he began to pour, dousing the couch and chair, the drapes and everything else in his path. Tossing the first can, he grabbed the second, heading into the kitchen then the hallway and finally the first bedroom.

He took a deep whiff before pitching the empty can against the wall. He grabbed the two duffle bags from his bed and headed for the front door. Tonight, was the end. Yeah. They'd learn what he was about, and he'd be famous.

Snorting, he flung open the door, standing just inside as he looked around the damn house one last time. This had never been his home, just a landing spot, a place purchased by his father to keep him close. To keep an eye on him. His father, the cold-blooded killer, the man responsible for the loss of so many lives. Then he thought he could live out his life, retiring. Playing with his girlfriend.



Well, the bitch was going to have it coming to her. She'd never been his mother. She'd never been his friend. She'd stolen his father, taken him away, filled his mind with bullshit. Bullshit!

He dragged a lighter out of his pocket and flicked, studying the flames, the way the orange hue flickered in the light breeze. He'd get her one way or the other. As he tossed the lighter, he grinned. This was going to be a damn good night.

*Whoosh!*



“I THINK the attorney is getting hot under the collar,” Zane teased as he folded his arms and eased against the wall.

“And look at Troy! That man is cool as a cucumber,” Antonio said as he snorted.

“I think the captain is actually enjoying himself,” Sawyer added. “Even caught him smiling. Once.”

“What are y’all talkin’ about?” Garcia pulled a T-shirt over his head.

Riker remained in the shadows, only mildly interested in the ongoing meeting. Almost a damn week had passed. He’d called Trinity once, then decided to leave it alone. Her voice mail, the way she sounded, so happy and enthused, had been enough to keep him from trying a second time.

“That same attorney about the mineral rights was called to a special meeting,” Boone cracked, a smile on his face.

“I’m damn glad I suggested Troy. He’s been a godsend.” Garcia shook his head. “He’s been seeing a lot of Trinity’s cousin too.” Cringing, he darted a glance at Riker. “I’m sorry, dude. I didn’t mean to bring up her name.”

“I’m fine,” Riker managed.

“He’s not fine. Trust me,” Landen huffed.

Riker gave him a harsh look.

The captain's door was thrown open and the attorney walked outside, taking long strides as he shot past the group, not bothering to look in their direction.

Troy remained standing in the captain's doorway, shaking his head.

Riker wasn't able to hear a word of the conversation, but he could tell the hangar ordeal must be over.

The captain's phone rang, and he shook Troy's hand before walking back to his desk.

Troy sauntered forward, a shit eating grin on his face. He blew on his knuckles before swiping them across the lapel of his suit jacket. "Gentlemen."

"What the hell did you do?" Garcia challenged.

"Let's just say that the land was sold to another party then sold back to the Parson's Group years later. What they failed to notice was that the contract had been changed," Troy said slyly.

"Meaning?" Boone asked.

"Meaning that the mineral rights had been obliterated from the contract, thereby cancelling any rights Parsons' believed they had. What's sad is that this information was buried. I had to sift through the land records three times before I found the information. My belief is that Parson's Group hid the real estate deeds on purpose. Now, if this is the case, there could be some significant and nasty allegations raised. I pointed this out to their attorney, just in case they tried to drag this through court. I don't think you'll be bothered by him any longer."

"You. Are. De. Man!" Boone whistled.

"You can work with us anytime!" Sawyer shook Troy's hand.

Troy cocked his head. "Let's hope you guys don't need an attorney any time soon."

The captain's voice boomed into the expansive space. "Get in here. We have a situation."

“Thanks for all you did,” Garcia said as he headed for the captain’s office.

“Sure thing.” Troy nodded to Riker before heading for the main door.

“What’s going on, Captain?” Antonio asked as he moved into the office.

“Where the hell is Cooper and Stoker?” Captain Phillips asked as he paced the floor.

Landen shot Riker a look.

“They had a required meeting. That’s all I know, Cap’n,” Boone answered as he rested his hands on the back of the chair.

“Fucking fantastic. I don’t know what we’re dealing with but it ain’t good.” Captain Phillips shook his head. “Had a call from the sheriff. We have three fires at the moment and all burning out of control. One, is at the home of the city council member, Chris Camden, the missing member. Two, at the home of a Michael Moore, aka Michael Camden.” He looked around the room.

“What? Who the hell is that?” Steel asked as he inched closer.

“All the sheriff would tell me is the man’s son.” The captain snorted.

“The one supposedly missing in action.” Antonio shrunk back.

“And the third fire?” Boone questioned.

Captain Phillips paused, exhaling before he spoke. “At the mayor’s house.”

“Wait a minute. Isn’t she in a safe house?” Landen asked.

The captain shook his head. “Been almost a week. She refused any police protection. Right now, the sheriff has no idea of her location.”

“Ah, shit,” Garcia said as he paled.

“What’s wrong, Puevos?” the captain asked.

“I know where she should be.” Garcia swallowed before finishing. “She and Laney are friends. Jasmine, Mayor Falk, was supposed to pick her up about an hour ago. I think they were going shopping then having dinner.”

“Fuck. Me,” Antonio hissed.

“Get her on the phone. Right now!” Captain Phillips directed.

Garcia blinked several times, not reacting.

“Now!” the captain barked.

“Come on. Let’s grab your phone,” Boone pulled at Garcia’s arm, yanking him out of the room.

“I’m calling the sheriff.” Before the captain had a chance to pick up the phone, it rang. “Yes?”

The men remained silent.

“What? Arrested. Good.” Captain Phillips paced back and forth. “What do you mean there’s a problem?”

“This is shit,” Zane said under his breath.

“Fires burning? He must have set off several bombs,” Antonio snarled. “Bastard.”

“No. Okay. Yeah, our guys are here to help. Look, the mayor is with Laney Cavanaugh.” The captain shook his head. “Yeah, they are driving the mayor’s vehicle. You need to put out an APB.”

“Where the hell is Garcia?” Landen walked toward the captain’s door.

“No, I have no idea what she drives. That’s your job.” Captain Phillips shook his head several times. “Okay. We’re on standby.” He slammed down the phone. “This is ridiculous, but they found Michael and picked him up. Now, they can’t reach the deputy who arrested him.”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me!” Antonio huffed.

“Here’s Garcia.” Landen moved out of the doorway.

“And?” Riker asked.

“She’s not answering. This is crazy. I’m going after her.” Garcia backed out the door.

Landen grabbed his arm. “Where did the mayor pick her up, your place or Laney’s?”

Garcia struggled, his eyes blinking several times.

“Garcia. Come on. Think!” Boone shouted.

“My place. She’s been staying with me. I have to find her. I have to save her.” Garcia huffed.

“Let the sheriff’s office do their jobs,” Moose walked closer.

“Back away. Back the fuck away!” Garcia insisted.

“No! Son, what do you think you’re going to do?” Captain Phillips called.

“She’s my fiancée. I’m going to protect her.” Garcia called before taking off running.

“Jesus. Fucking. Christ! Go after him!” the captain instructed.

Riker yanked out his phone, calling Stoker. When he got voice mail, he tried Cooper. The call was picked up on the second ring. “Cooper. We have several fires. What’s this shit with Michael Camden?”

“Michael Camden? Oh, fuck me!” Cooper hissed. “Hold on.”

He could hear Cooper talking with Stoker.

“Riker. This is Stoker. Listen to me carefully. Coop asked a buddy of his who has real credentials about the mayor’s son. The sightings were false. That kid they arrested isn’t responsible for the bomb threats. If Michael Camden has been arrested, then you need to warn the sheriff’s office. This man is considered armed, dangerous and lethal. He was the top demolitions expert when he shared a tour of duty at the same time Coop and I did. The guy lost it after the mission we were on. That was swept under the rug by the powers that be. His

father was responsible for sending the units into an area that they knew had been compromised. We were all sent in there to die. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. The guy is out for revenge." Anger furrowed in Riker's gut.

"Exactly. Molly Jenkins worked for him at the time. Michael was sent to a mental institution, only released earlier this year. His father somehow managed to convince the hospital staff that his son could be released to his care." Stoker's tone of voice was terse.

"Why the damn mayor?"

"That I don't know, other than she's a part of this Veteran's Act."

"I'll let the sheriff know. There seems to be an issue with the deputy who arrested him. Garcia is going after Laney."

Stoker hissed. "He'll get himself killed. If Michael gets loose, he'll stop at nothing to get to the mayor. What the investigators found on the guy, what they knew all along could have prevented this. Damn this system."

"I'm heading to Garcia's house, just in case they return."

"Got it."

He ended the call as Captain Phillips stormed out of the office. "What?"

"Michael Camden escaped, nearly beating the deputy to death. And there's something else. A bomb threat was just called in for the government building. Things just got dicey."

Riker raced into the locker room, grabbing his things.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Antonio tried to stop him.

"Laney and the mayor are sitting ducks."

"We need you here! You're not a damn cop!"

Ignoring the demand, he raced outside and jumped onto his Harley, kicking up the stand and starting the engine. Within

seconds, he was on the road, moving in excess of sixty, then seventy miles per hour. Whatever vendetta this asshole had, the bastard wasn't going to hurt anyone else. He headed for his house, racing around every turn, passing slower vehicles.

Within minutes, he roared up his driveway, slamming on the brakes, the Harley skidding on the loose gravel. Jamming his boot onto the ground, he swiveled before managing to stop. Leaving the bike idling, he bolted into his house, yanking out the dresser drawer and sifting through his things. Pulling the Glock into the light, he exhaled before grabbing ammunition. It had been years since he'd been forced to use a gun. No, he wasn't a cop, but he would protect those he gave a damn about.

Shoving the gun into his waistband, he headed out the door. Garcia lived several miles down the same road. He floored the accelerator and leaned over the bike, praying to God that Garcia hadn't run into them. In the distance, he could see smoke billowing up from the trees.

Missing the turn, he cursed and swung the Harley down a side street, nearly colliding with an oncoming car.

Holding his breath, he managed to turn just before he ran off the side of the road. "Fuck!" He yanked off his helmet and wiped his eyes, able to hear sirens coming from all directions.

*Boom!*

The explosion was powerful enough, he could feel the rumble on the ground. He threw on his helmet and eased out. Finding the driveway, he sped up the embankment. Seeing Garcia's truck, he hissed.

Garcia ran out of the house, his face twisted. "She's not here!"

Killing the engine, he climbed off the motorcycle, dropping the helmet. "Did you call her again?"

"I tried twice."

"Try again."

Garcia nodded, his hand shaking as he pulled out his phone.

Pacing, he hissed when he heard the emergency buzz on his phone and he certainly had no need of calling in. He knew exactly where the bomb had gone off.

“Laney. Where are you?” Garcia’s voice was exasperated. “No. No! You can’t go to the fire. You need to get to safety. Go to the sheriff’s office.” He looked at Riker. “I said, go to the sheriff’s office. You’re in danger. Laney. Laney!”

“What’s wrong?”

“She’s with the mayor. The connection is shit but I think they’re going to the government office. A fire. I don’t know.”

Riker exhaled. “We have to go. We’ve been called in.”

“What?”

“Get in your truck. I’m coming with you. Drive.” Pushing on Garcia’s shoulder, he managed to break the man’s trance. He slid onto the passenger seat, slamming the door.

“I’m going to kill the son of a bitch.”

“You’re going to let the sheriff and his deputies do their jobs. We have to do ours. Get moving.” They remained silent as Garcia drove and Riker had no idea what they were going to face.

“I can’t lose her,” Garcia whispered.

“You’re not going to lose her.” How the hell did he know?

Garcia rounded the corners, zigzagging his way through traffic. When they neared the city limits, they were able to see what appeared to be three separate fires. “Shit!”

“Go to the government office. The bomb threat was there,” Riker directed, already removing his seat belt by the time they were only two blocks away. “Jesus.”

The entire area was blanketed with fire engines, deputy cars and other emergency vehicles blocking the area. Garcia found a parking spot and was out of the truck before Riker could catch him.



Riker raced behind, running past the crowds of screaming people, workers and customers of the various shops trying desperately to get out of harm's way. He lost sight of Garcia as they neared the building and he stopped as he studied the flames shooting out of the roof. The bomb had been centralized, taking out only a portion, but the flames were moving fast.

He searched the area for any sign of the other smokejumpers. He noticed several from the main smokejumping team and headed in their direction. "Where are the Jackals?"

"I don't know. We haven't seen them. There's a report that the fire on Briar Road crawled up the mountain. Maybe they went there."

Nodding, Riker moved closer to the building, passing the various fire engines, scanning the area. If the fucker wanted to make a statement, now would be the time to do it. Black smoke poured out of the building, the wind forcing the smoke to roll toward the streets. People were everywhere, trying to get out of the area. Grabbing his phone, he tried the captain.

"Riker. Where the hell are you?"

"At the government building. Where is the team?"

"They've been called to the Briar Road fire. Get your ass up there. We need all the manpower we can get," Captain Phillips yelled.

"Yeah. I'm going." Shoving the phone into his pocket, Riker turned in a full circle, noticing Garcia. He followed the man's gaze and could just make out a large, black SUV. There was someone sitting in the passenger seat. Heading in the direction, he pushed past several disoriented people, no doubt those who'd been inside the building.

*Boom!*

The rattle rumbled the earth, cascading burning embers out several hundred feet. Ducking, he tried to focus as the smoke stung his eyes. He continued in the same direction and just as

he swerved past a group of firefighters, he could see Laney, her terrified face as she opened the passenger door. “No!”

Garcia was almost to her. Almost.

Then the mayor stepped out, moving in front, her arms crossed, her eyes on the building.

Riker zigged and zagged, jumping over one of the water hoses. “Mayor!”

Mayor Falk looked in his direction, recognition on her face. She took several steps forward, her face pensive.

“Wait.” As he pushed through another group, racing out of the building, he noticed a glint, a single flash. And he knew in his gut what he was seeing. Yanking the gun from his back, he popped the safety and planted both hands together, his arms out straight.

A look of horror washed onto the mayor’s face as she followed his gaze.

Riker sprinted in her direction and could see the shooter, could just make out the man’s face a split second before... Lunging forward, he pressed his finger on the trigger.

*Bam!*



“YOU, are a nutcase. An asshole. An idiot!” Landen threw out, his face ashen. “Why?”

Riker shifted, groaning as he swung his legs onto the floor. “Just doing my job.”

“You’re not a damn cop!” Captain Phillips inched closer. “Get back in that bed.”

“Just a damn scratch.” Wincing, Riker struggled to get up. The damn sling was the problem. He ripped at the Velcro, yanking the covering off his arm.

“Hardheaded asshole,” Stoker said as he came into the room. “You could have gotten yourself killed.”

“He wanted more hero time,” Landen insisted. “When you get out of here, I’m kicking your ass.”

“You’re going to have to take a number on that one, Hansen,” the captain huffed. “You could have internal bleeding issues. The doctor is running more tests.”

“Over my dead ass body,” Riker hissed.

“I’ll tie him down,” Moose teased.

“You and what army? How’s the mayor?” Riker was hesitant to ask. He wasn’t certain how long he’d been out, but the bright sun indicated at least several hours.

“She’s fine. Your damn heroic act saved her life.” Stoker looked from one to the other.

“And Laney?”

“Not a scratch. Garcia is with her. Said he owes you one.” Captain Phillips mumbled under his breath. “This thing got out of hand.”

Riker walked toward the window. “What about the perp?”

Stoker exhaled. “Don’t know how you did it, buddy, but you shot him right between the eyes.”

“The press is going to insist a damn street is named after you,” Landen snarked. “We ain’t gonna let that happen. Your head will never get through the door.”

Chuckling, Riker was glad the wretched experience was over. He looked down at the parking lot, his thoughts drifting to Trinity. “Any phone calls? Anyone checking up on me?”

There was a collective silence.

“Sorry, buddy. Only been a day,” Landen said quietly.

“Now, the boy here needs his rest. The sheriff and a whole lot of FBI agents have been bucking to talk to you. The doctor won’t allow them to bother you so stay here. Can you comprehend direct orders?” Captain Phillips moved closer.

Riker looked in his direction. “I got it. I’m not going anywhere.” In truth, he didn’t give a shit where he went.

“We’ll leave you alone.” Moose patted him on the back. “Everything will be okay, buddy. It will.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Riker remained standing in front of the window, enjoying the rays of sunshine. He wanted nothing more than to talk to Trinity, to at least hear her voice. Then again, why worry her? Sighing, he closed his eyes until he heard a set of footsteps. “I’m fine. Really. Okay?”

“That’s not what the guys are telling me. They said you’re a pain in the ass.”

His eyes shooting open, he glanced at the reflection. Her reflection. “Trinity?” Turning around slowly, he blinked as he tried to focus. The sunlight showered her face, her beautiful and dazzling face.

Nodding, she took two short steps then closed the distance. “Riker. I thought I’d lost you. Landen called me last night and I was on the first flight out. My God, you’re shot!” Throwing her arms around him, she pressed her lips against his.

He didn’t care about the pain or about anything that had happened. As he pulled her into a tight embrace, tears slid down both sides of his face. The kiss was sweet but more powerful than any before.

When she eased back, she gulped for air. “Riker. Oh my God. I heard what happened. I heard what you did. You saved that woman. You...” Choking, she rubbed his face, brushing the tips of her fingers against his skin.

“You didn’t have to come all this way.”

“You are stubborn, pigheaded, a fool running into danger and that’s why I love you.” Trinity kissed his cheek. “And if you ever do anything like that again, I will kick your ass.”

Tap. Tap.

Hearing a knock on the door, he exhaled. “Yes?”

Mayor Falk walked in, a waning smile on her face. “Do you have a few minutes? I’m not trying to interrupt. I know you need time to recover.”

“That’s okay. I need to leave anyway,” Trinity said as she gripped Riker’s hand.

“You’re leaving? I mean, so soon?”

Rising onto her tiptoes, she whispered in his ear. “I’m never leaving your side again, big he-man hero. Seems like you need someone to take care of you. I’ll be back. Just need to make a couple phone calls.”

Relief rushed into his system and he gripped her hand, squeezing her fingers. “If you do leave, I’ll hunt you down.”

“Promise?” Trinity laughed.

“You can count on it.” There were so many things he wanted to say to her, so many thoughts.

Mayor Falk moved closer. “I owe you an explanation and a huge thank you for saving my life.” She inched forward, her hand running across the end of the hospital bed. “I also owe you an apology.”

“For?”

“Risking your life, your team. I should have told you the truth from the start, but I couldn’t.”

“Okay.”

She rubbed her mouth and sighed. “Chris Camden and I were lovers, a long time ago. We thought we were in love. I met him almost two years ago, when he was still working with the military. He was set to retire and wanted to move out here to be closer to me.”

Riker could see how much the story was troubling her.

“Anyway, I realized that Chris was involved with some aspects that were... Let’s just say unscrupulous after I was contacted by certain parties in the government. Unfortunately, I can’t give you details as they are classified, but I can say that after I was convinced of Chris’ betrayal of our country, I agreed to work with the CIA to try and bring justice. I knew his son was in a critical state and never believed that Chris would somehow manage to get him out of the psychiatric

hospital. He kept that a secret from me and from the entire world really.”

“Interesting story. How does that equate to what happened? The bombs?”

“I had no idea that Michael was involved until the investigators came into town. They are actually CIA agents. When I learned what had happened, they tried to convince me that my son was involved. I knew better. A mother knows when her child is gone. At that point, with Chris missing, I had no idea what to believe.”

“So, you allowed our team and everyone else believe that your son could be involved.” Riker shook his head. Unbelievable.

“I did. I had no choice. I can tell you that the information I found on Chris Camden and those who worked with him is a matter of national security. There’s nothing more I can tell you except that I’m sorry and so grateful for what you did, your entire team. You are heroes.”

A series of nasty comments remained on the tip of Riker’s tongue, but the Mayor was as much of a pawn as they all had been. “I’m sorry about the loss of your son. If your help with the investigation into a mission, and no doubt several others, gives my friends, the real heroes, any peace, then I’ll offer you my gratitude. Their lives and their friendship was almost destroyed.”

“I know, and I understand. Stoker Hansen and Cooper McKenzie are going to be given the Silver Star for their bravery during the mission in Afghanistan. That, of course, is out of my hands. I hope that in time you’ll forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Mayor Falk. You did what you thought was right.”

She nodded and turned away then stopped and tipped her head. “When I saw that little boy in yours arms, I was lost in the past. You will make a great father as you do a role model. I hope you take that to heart.”

Riker looked away and could only give her a single nod. When she walked out of the room, he stumbled back against the window, his breathing shallow. And he could hear Grace's little voice, the few words she'd learned before she died.

“I love you, Daddy.”

## CHAPTER 15

TWO WEEKS LATER

“*R*elax. You look amazing,” Trinity said then laughed as she watched Riker’s pinched face, the way he growled every time he moved.

“I look ridiculous and you know it. How the hell did you talk me into this?”

“I did and could because you love me.”

Riker rolled his eyes and adjusted his tie. “I’m choking to death.”

Leaning over, she fiddled with the ends before pressing her hand against his shirt. “You’re going to be the most handsome man there.” She realized tears had formed in her eyes and she looked away, fearful he’d notice her emotional state. The rugged hero wasn’t one who could tolerate female hormones on a regular basis. No, he was rough and tumble, the kind of man erotic novels were made of. Little did he know she’d penned his likeness in her latest hero. If he found out? There would no doubt be a spanking on her horizon. “Did you know Ana is bringing Troy tonight?”

“The poor man got suckered into this as well?”

Trinity rolled her eyes. “Very funny. They are quite the item, I understand. I think wedding bells might be in order.”

Riker shook his head. “Well, good for him. A good guy.”



“Yeah, so I’ve heard. Laney told me the entire story. Seems Missoula is a hot basin for criminal activity.”

Bursting into laughter, he nodded several times. “Yeah. We’re hoping for a quiet summer.”

She knew better. She’d heard the odds, read various articles on the two teams stationed in Missoula. Would fear for his safety ever allow her to feel peace?

“How long do we have to be here?”

The question had been asked and answered at least five times. This time she answered differently. “Too long.” Giving him a mischievous grin, she ran the edge of her manicured nail down the side of his face as she crowded closer, using her other hand to stroke his crotch. The fact he was hard, throbbing gave her shivers. “How about we skip this shindig and find a kinky bar, do a little dancing?”

Riker inhaled and closed his eyes, his body tense. “How about I pull you over my lap and give you that spanking you so desperately need?”

“Party pooper.”

Unclasping the seatbelt, he shifted his body, taking her hands into his and kissing several of her fingers. “We have all the time in the world to go to a bar, but tonight is your night. Besides, I don’t dance.”

A laugh bubbling past her lips, she cupped his face. “Do you know how important you are to me?”

“You keep telling me that. I’ll let you show me later.” His eyes twinkled as they rolled past a series of neon lights, the marquis signs lighting up the crowded road.

Trinity settled back against her seat, thinking about the past four whirlwind weeks. The decisions she’d made affected several lives, but for her, this was the beginning of an important phase. There would be no glitz and glamour, no large sums of money funding her bank account. She would go back to her roots, living simply. A life with love. Nuzzling against him, she realized she was living the fairy tale.

And it had nothing to do with Hollywood.

“Whatever happens tonight, you are the most special and beautiful woman that I’ve ever seen. Never forget that. I’m right by your side.”

Hearing his words, the kind he infrequently said, were more incredible than praise from the biggest producers, directors or agents. She squeezed his arm and sighed as they rounded the last corner. “I know that. Thank you for being my Knight in Shining Armor.”

Nuzzling against her neck, he nipped her earlobe before whispering, “Does that mean I need to buy a white steed?”

“Actually?” she mumbled, her nipples hardening, “Yes.”

“Then I will.”

She sat up on the edge of her seat, peering out the side window. “Jesus.”

Riker groaned and shook his head. “I’m not cut out for this shit. I’m not polished enough for these people.”

“Keep something in mind, my sexy smokejumper. These people are fakes. You should see what they look like without their clothes.” Grinning, she pressed her lips against his, drinking in the scent of his all male cologne. When the photographers got a load of Riker, they would go nuts. This was her secret weapon for the night.

When the car stopped, she held her breath then took a quick look down at her dress. “Do you think scarlet red is too much?”

As he eased his hand down her leg, crawling the dress up to the point he could touch her inner thigh, he issued a single husky growl. “Red is your color but I do plan on ripping this dress off later. Keep that in mind.”

Her pussy wet, she tingled all over. “And I’ll happily succumb.” She gripped his hand, squeezing. “Here we go. Try and remember to smile. At least this isn’t the Academy Awards. The scene is much more chaotic.”

“And this isn’t? Shit.” Riker glared out the window.

“If you can rush into a dangerous fire, you can handle this.”

The moment the door was opened, flash bulbs began to pop from every side, every angle, the light almost blinding.

Riker mumbled under his breath before he exited the limo first, holding out his hand.

She said a quiet thank you for the gift of her new life before taking his hand. As he helped her to her feet, immediately wrapping his arm around her waist, she felt more like a princess than she had her entire life. While her smile was normally plastic, her posture perfect, gestures she'd learned while modeling, this time, her happiness was genuine.

“Ms. Hargrove, what do you think your chances are of winning the award?”

“Ms. Hargrove, are the rumors true? Are you really leaving Hollywood?”

“Ms. Hargrove, how do you feel about your co-star's allegations?”

The last question drove Trinity to a flash of anger, the kind of emotion she'd promised herself she wouldn't tolerate. Not tonight. Not because of Chance Reynolds and his ridiculous and overbearing lies.

Riker gripped her arm and she could tell he was ready to lash out, grab the male reporter by the throat. She pressed her hand against Riker's chest then tilted her head, kissing him seductively on the lips. Exhaling, she offered a dreamy look and knew that every reporter, photographer and magazine editor had captured her expression. “Honestly, Wally. I feel sorry for Chance. From what I've heard, his offers are drying up in the industry. No one likes to work with a prima donna.” She winked as they took a couple of additional steps, fueled by the laughter and chatter floating around them.

“You're so bad,” Riker whispered.

“Just wait.” Trinity stopped short and turned, the angle providing an extended look at Riker's physique. “Oh, and Wally?”

“Ms. Hargrove.”

“Now, I know what it’s like to be with a real man, someone who treats a woman like a lady by day and by night, well...” She offered another elongated sigh. “The night? All I can say is that once you’re with a man like Riker Sheffield, you want nothing more than to forget about the little dicks of this world.”

Her smile bright, her attitude bold, she sashayed further down the velvet flooring. This would be on the late-night news.

“What am I going to do with you?” Riker whispered.

“I have many thoughts.”

“Oh, no you don’t. Get the fuck out of here!” Riker pointed toward Jack Spartan, who walked closer.

“Don’t. It’s okay now. Jack and I are now buddies.” Trinity had kept another secret from Riker. Two spankings were definitely in order. “Jack. I’m glad you came.”

“Thank you for allowing me to be your guest,” Jack said, a flush creeping up his face.

“Guest?” Riker asked between clenched teeth.

“I’ll give you the details later. Promise.” Trinity moved toward the reporter, allowing their picture to be taken.

“And this is the hero I’ve heard so much about?” Jack held out his hand.

Trinity rose onto her tiptoes. “You can trust him. If he does anything else, he knows he’ll face your wrath.”

Riker lifted a single eyebrow before shaking Jack’s hand. “I’m just an ordinary man with an amazing team behind me.”

Jack smiled, his eyes darting in Trinity’s direction. “He’s exactly as described, and this will be the perfect story, the one to send me to the national news.”

“What story?” Riker hissed.

Trinity patted his arm as they were led inside the auditorium. "I'll tell you all about it later."

Lowering his head, he spoke so only she could hear. "Add this to the growing list of infractions."

As they were directed to their seats, Trinity held her head high. This was the perfect ending and a night for new beginnings and all because of a man who'd been like a firestorm coming into her life, and the very man of her dreams.



THREE HOURS, fourteen minutes and thirty seconds later and Trinity could hear the ragged beating of her heart, could feel her pulse beating rapidly, the way her breath sounds skipped. There was no reason for her to be nervous. This was simply an award for work she'd completed when she was wearing a mask of steel. The consummate actress. Perhaps she wanted Riker to be proud of her. Perhaps she wanted to be remembered as someone who took the business seriously.

Ana reached over, taking her hand. "Thank you."

"Why are you thanking me?"

"If you hadn't punched that asshole reporter, I wouldn't have met Troy."

Trinity had to fight to keep from laughing as Chance continued to drone on, thanking everyone he'd ever been involved with. Except for his leading actress. How convenient for him to forget that she'd been in the film with him, enduring his tantrums and attitude, his negative comments and cheating. The constant cheating. She held her tongue on several levels. The sound bite wouldn't show well on the evening news and she was a much classier person. "You two are adorable together."

"I think we are too." Ana lifted her arm, flexing her fingers. The diamond ring sparkled in the dim lighting.

"Oh, God!" This time, her voice lifted above the silent crowd, causing a nasty look from Chance thrown in her direction. She resisted giving him the finger. "Beautiful."

“Troy popped the question on the way over. Whirlwind romance. Just like two people I know.” Ana chuckled and leaned forward, winking at Riker.

Trinity exhaled, a smile remaining on her face. Who said there wasn't true love at first sight? She intertwined her fingers with Riker's, savoring every moment of the evening.

“Also, for being a strong woman,” Ana continued. “I mean that. I'm thrilled you're so happy.”

She brushed away a single tear and glanced up at Riker. When he lowered his head, she expected a blank face, or perhaps disgust for being forced into this situation. Instead, she noticed admiration, pride and love. “I am happy.”

“And now ladies and gentlemen, the award we've all been waiting for.” The announcer took a step back, allowing the audience to see the screen. As he read out the names, the cameras were positioned on the actresses sitting in the audience. “And our last nominee, Trinity Hargrove for Dark Accusations.”

The audience clapped, whistles coming from the back.

“Just remember, you are my shining star,” Riker whispered.

Blinking away tears, Trinity realized she no longer cared if she won. She was the lucky girl of the night.

“And the winner is... Trinity Hargrove!”

“Yes! Woof! Woof! Woof!” Ana jumped to her feet, Troy by her side, her fist pumping in the air.

Trinity was shaking, finding it difficult to get to her feet. With Riker's help, she stood and while the entire audience gave a standing ovation, she wrapped her hands around his neck.

Riker tilted her back, crushing her mouth with his, holding her as he pushed his tongue inside.

“Wow. That's a kiss,” Ana purred.

When he let her go, the crowd roared. She cupped his face before stepping out into the aisle, carefully making her way on stage. The statue in her hand, she stood behind the microphone, the glaring lights in her face, and smiled, waiting until the audience quieted down.

“Thank you to everyone who helped me with this movie and of course to all of my fans out there. None of us as actors could do this without you. While I could spend a full hour thanking everyone involved with the film, you know who you are and bless you for being here to help, guide, push, nurture and work together as a team.

I learned about team work in a different manner just a few weeks ago from a man who refuses to be in the limelight, loathes the word hero and gives thanks to the caring and amazing men he works with every day. In those precious weeks, I not only found friendship and loyalty, I found love. This very special man said something to me that I will never forget, and I wanted to share this with you today.

A very special woman that will forever be in his heart told this amazing man that finding love was like opening up a book. Sometimes you're uncertain of the first few pages, even deciding that you're not the kind of reader who would enjoy the story. But something about the book, the characters and the setting, always draws you back in. When you take the time to read past the lines, into the imagination of the author, then you can't put the book down, devouring every word, every sentence. The story leaves you breathless, hungering for more. That's when you know that a story has taken a part of your heart, never to be returned.

Thank you, Riker Sheffield for your bravery in allowing this sometimes spastic and often unruly woman into your life. Thank you for your life and courage. You have my heart.”



RIKER REMAINED STUNNED at her beautiful words, the sentiment given. He knew pictures were being taken, one after the other. He tried to smile, even though he had difficulty for no other reason than he wasn't used to smiling. But somehow,

he knew things were changing, that his life would never be the same.

For Trinity to give up her career, sell the house and most of her belongings and move to Missoula to start fresh remained unbelievable. To have her by his side was a gift from God. She'd talked with David Miller, for ten solid minutes, then he knew the incident could be pushed from her mind.

He watched her as she worked the red carpet, laughing and touching arms, shaking hands. She was so easy with the reporters, talking with them, allowing them to take photograph after photograph, but she never went far, never allowed him out of her sight.

Her looks toward him were lust filled, sweet, romantic and always full of her natural verve. Exhaling, he couldn't be happier for her. But he would be damn glad when the night was over. Shoving his finger past the tight collar, he was literally going to rip off the bow tie the second they were in the limo. And the after parties? Bullshit.

Chuckling, he walked closer, yet kept his distance. She deserved all the glory in the world. Even her attitude toward Jack seemed to have given the man an entirely different demeanor. Things were... interesting.

"Well, my first and hopefully only time in Tinsel town." Troy flanked his side, groaning as he smoothed down his tuxedo shirt.

"A married man, eh?" Riker grinned.

"Yeah. I know it's quick, but the woman is a firecracker. Gun wielding, gum chewing spitfire that knows how to ride a horse and cook a mean steak, extra rare or as she requires, 'just show it the fire'. She adores Jaime and I've never seen the little boy so happy. Now, he has the most incredible teacher in the world and the best stepmom."

"And, she's beautiful."

"That she is, brother, but you have nothing to complain about." Troy laughed as he patted Riker on the back then took



a step forward. “Don’t look now, but asshole is heading in her direction.”

“Hmmm... I think he’s bucking for trouble,” Riker snarled as he noticed the nasty look on Chance’s face.

“What do you say we intervene?”

“Sounds like a plan.” They walked forward, their steps purposeful just as Chance managed to snag Trinity by the arm.

“My, my, if it isn’t the whore. Winning an award. Now, are you going to suck off that boyfriend of yours in the limo? That’s all you were good for, sucking cock,” Chance’s voice was loud, drawing attention immediately.

Riker puffed up as Trinity turned, the same sweet smile remaining on her face.

“Hold on,” Troy whispered. “Let’s see what our girl can do.”

Holding his tongue wasn’t an attribute Riker gave one shit about, but he could tell she had something to say. Every single camera within close proximity had swarmed around them, lights popping, bulbs flashing. He could picture the headlines now.

Her hand on her hip, she sauntered closer, licking her lips. “Why, Chance. I don’t mind one bit you saying that I like to suck cock, but then again, how would you know? Your cock isn’t big enough to suck.”

“Oooohhh!” The crowd roared.

Chance reeled back, his face reddening, spittle popping from his mouth. And he lifted his arm, clenching his fist. “You. Fucking. Bitch.”

Riker only had to take a single, long stride and give a long overdue punch to the asshole’s face. “Goodnight, asshole.”



ROLLING TRINITY OVER, Riker brushed his hand down the side of her face, peppering kisses along her nose and jaw.

Moaning, she closed her eyes as he eased his hand under the sheet, fingering her pussy, the tip of his finger swirling around her clit. Grinding her hips against his hand, she arched her back and clenched the sheets, dragging them down past her naked breasts.

The look on her face kept his cock hard, his blood pumping. Yanking the sheet, he pulled the entire piece of expensive linen off the bed, exposing them both. There was no need to be covered, especially given his intense hunger. "Spread those legs for me."

"Yes, sir." Opening them wide, she curled both legs at the knees, pulling them back.

Crawling over her, he lowered his head, licking around each nipple, dragging his tongue back and forth until they were rock hard. Beads of perspiration from their intense sessions of heated sex had left her skin shimmering, glistening in the early morning light. Growling, he blew a swath of hot air across her belly then licked down the length of her stomach to her belly button. "Are you wet for me?"

"Always," she purred, her eyelids fluttering open.

"Are you hungry for me?"

"For that big, fat, juicy cock?" The lilting sound remained, a continued reference to the night before.

"Bad girl." Tweaking her nipples, he adored the way her mouth opened wide. He lifted his arms, pinching and twisting both between his fingers as he dropped his head, resting his mouth on her cunt.

"Don't tease me! Eat me!" she breathed out then groaned. "I mean, sir."

Chuckling, he was more than surprised she not only wanted to try a domestic discipline lifestyle, but had spent several hours talking about the concept. Not for today. Well, except for one much needed spanking. Burying his tongue into her pussy, he lapped at her cream, his cock throbbing, aching to have her mouth wrapped around the tip.

She wiggled, arching her back and pushing her groin into his face. “Please!”

He eased his hands down, toying with her belly button before brushing his fingers across the insides of her thighs. Opening her even wider, he licked up and down, savoring the flavor, the sweet scent. He swirled the tip of his index finger around and around her clit as he licked, sucking on her pussy lips.

“Oh!” Slapping her hand down on the bedding, her entire body began to shake.

Thrusting three, then four fingers inside her cunt, he flexed them open as he nipped her tender flesh, pulling the tissue into his mouth. He loved licking her, driving her into a heated frenzy.

Trinity tossed her head back and forth, panting, her body starting to buck.

Riker held her, keeping her wide open as he licked and sucked. He could tell she wouldn't be able to hold back the climax for long. Pumping his fingers, he picked up the pace, his eyes watching her every move, the way she was panting. The sound of her moans was a powerful aphrodisiac. A growl slipped past his lips as he buried his face, wiggling his head back and forth.

“I can't hold... Oh, God!”

Refusing to stop, he sucked and licked, his fingers driving harder. Faster.

“Riker! I... I...” Her body jerking up, a loud scream erupted past her lips. She bit down, clamping the sound and smacked her hands on the bed repeatedly.

When she was done shaking, he licked his lips and eased onto the floor, holding out his hand.

“What?”

“Come, my sweet and sassy woman.” He grinned and beckoned for her. When she grasped his hand, he yanked her to her feet, the force pulling her hard against his chest. Lifting

her off her feet, he pulled her toward the floor to ceiling windows. The view of Los Angeles was indeed beautiful, the early morning clouds crisscrossing over the various hues of color.

“What are you doing?”

“I wanted to make certain that you knew what you would be missing.” Riker moved closer to the window, easing her down to her feet then positioning her directly in front of the window. “Can you see the amazing architecture?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Can you see the gleaming buildings?”

“Yes, sir.”

He rubbed his hands down her arms then lifted one, placing her palm on the glass. “Can you see the freeways, the lines of vehicles, waiting?” He placed her other hand on the glass.

Darting a glance over her shoulder, she smiled. “Yes, sir.”

Riker slid his hands down to her back, over to her hips and tugged until her back was arched. “What else can you see?” He could tell she’d closed her eyes, her expression almost dreamy.

“I can see mountains, so beautiful as they tower above everything else, their peaks moving into the heavens. I can see water, crisp and clear as it rolls and trickles over rocks, fish jumping, birds flying.”

His heart thumping, he moved directly behind her, brushing the tip of his cock back and forth across her buttocks.

“I can see horses and dogs, pastures and ranches, smiling people and amazing cabins,” Trinity continued, her voice almost inaudible.

Riker breathed out, the sound so damn ragged. “What else?” Sliding the tip of his cock just inside her pussy, he waited to hear her answer.

“I can see home, our home.”

Driving the entire length of his shaft into her cunt, he threw back his head, roaring. “Yes!”

“Oh, Riker.”

Holding the stance, he pulled out, leaning over and nipping her shoulder. He thrust in and out, trying to remain in control. God, how he wanted this to last.

She pushed out, purring as if offering, goading him into fucking her.

“Bad. So damn bad.”

“I am, sir.”

He began to fuck her in hard and fast plunges, his balls swinging, aching with almost desperate need. The force of his almost savage thrusts pushed against her and as she slapped against the glass, her body undulating, he became lost in a private moment of raw ecstasy, his body on fire.

Meeting every hard plunge, she made soft cooing sounds as he continued.

His nails digging into her hips, he yanked her back, changing the angle, the plunges becoming brutal. The sound of skin slapping against skin was alluring, the scent of their combined desire intoxicating. There was no way he could hold back, not for long.

She undulated her hips, clamping down her pussy muscles, her eyes remaining closed.

“You are...” The moment his balls filled with cum, shooting up his aching shaft, his entire body began to shake. As he erupted, he placed his hands over hers, pulling her back against him. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

Riker nuzzled against her as they remained where they were for several minutes, enjoying the view, a look that perhaps they wouldn't see again for a long time. There was no new movie to film, no reason for Trinity to return, unless she wanted. She'd severed all her existing ties, determined to complete her first book.

“We should get a shower,” she whispered.

“In a minute.” Riker backed away, plopping down onto the side of the bed. He could see her pensive face in the reflection. “Time for that spanking.”

“What? Me?”

“You thought I wouldn’t remember. A hero story being written on me. Right.” Patting his lap, he waited, a laugh trying to surface.

Turning, she gave him a pouty look. “I’m a good girl.”

“And you’ll be a better one. Come here, now.”

Her feet dragging, Trinity finally closed the distance. “Yes, sir.”

Rolling his eyes, he tugged her over his lap. “This is the first of many. Daily spankings. That’s what you need.”

*Crack! Smack!*

“Daily?” Jerking up, she twisted her head until she could see him.

Riker pushed her down.

*Pop! Crack!*

“Yes, daily. You need to learn obedience,” he whispered, the sound authoritative.

*Whap! Crack! Pop!*

“Oh! That hurts.” Whining, she kicked out her legs.

*Smack! Pop!*

“I told you before, spankings are supposed to hurt.”

*Whap! Crack!*

“Now, hold still or we start again.”

“Yes, sir.”

*Smack! Pop! Crack!*



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Riker walked out of the bathroom. Trinity stood in front of the television, laughing almost uncontrollably. “Should I ask?”

“The Today Show. You, my dear, are an instant celebrity.”

“What?” He stormed toward the television and groaned.

“Hollywood is all abuzz this morning about one single man. He’s not an actor. He’s not a musician. In fact, he’s not a celebrity of any kind. That is until today. Being heralded as a hero, this man, correction, this gorgeous man had every woman talking, including the staff here at the Today show.” The female co-host beamed, fanning her face.

“And I hear from a reliable source that *People Magazine* has received an amazing story about true heroism. I think we’re going to be seeing a lot about Riker Sheffield in the days ahead,” the second co-host said, her eyes twinkling.

“Here to give us the amazing story of a team of smokejumpers from Missoula, Montana is Jack Spartan. Welcome, Jack.”

“Thank you so much for having me, Marsha. This is an amazing story...” Jack began.

“You are so going to get it for this!” Riker pulled Trinity against his chest, pressing their foreheads together. “If the guys hear about this, I’m dead.”

As the two distinct rings began on their cell phones, one after the other, Trinity began to laugh. “Too late and for the record, you’re my hero, only mine.”

The End

# PIPER STONE

Piper Stone writes in several genres including thrillers, erotic romance, dark erotic, Domestic Discipline, spanking, Domination and submission and traditional romance. She has a love of the non-traditional, preferring to create worlds that defy the imagination. Wine and sous vide cooking are only second to her love of golden retrievers and you might find all three nestled in the pages of a book or two.

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