



A MILITARY MAN
ROMANCE NOVEL

GUARD
MY *Heart*

WESTON PARKER

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A MILITARY MAN ROMANCE NOVEL BOOK 6

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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FIND WESTON PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



She's off limits and I follow the rules—normally.

In my line of work, rules keep you alive.

They are not to be broken.

For anything.

Or anyone.

But I'm barely keeping my head above water with my sexy new rookie.

She's out of bounds.

My mentor's daughter.

Everything I shouldn't want.

But I need her.

I'll teach her how to follow the rules on the job.

In bed?

I'll show her how good it feels to break them.

Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

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SANTIAGO

Sunlight reflected off the clear blue water of the Gulf of Mexico in the distance, making the surface sparkle like it was covered in a blanket of diamonds. I peered at it from the staircase leading into the hotel before pushing my sunglasses to the top of my head before I turned to go inside.

The bay was calm, there was barely a cloud in the sky, and there wasn't so much as a lick of wind. Not that the weather was always to blame for a catastrophe at sea, but it boded well for a peaceful party this afternoon.

After cutting one last glance over my shoulder at the water, I headed inside, smiling when I saw the bright, multicolored *Happy Retirement* banner hanging in the lobby. Underneath it was a picture of Captain David Jones—his real name—our guest of honor for the day.

Everyone who was anyone in the Coast Guard had come out to Pensacola for the occasion, and there were people milling around everywhere. Some were sipping drinks while others simply stood around the cocktail tables, chatting but keeping an eye on the bay. It was instinct, even for those who had long since retired.

As much as we knew there were others on duty today and as unlikely as it was to see something happening with the naked eye from this far away, we still looked. Watched. Guarded.

As I walked in, I saw plenty of familiar faces between the unfamiliar ones, and I grinned when the first of the familiar faces approached me. Lulu Jones, David's wife, had been part of the administrative staff on the Station prior to her own retirement a couple years ago, and she'd also been the Station's self-appointed mother hen.

“Santiago Cortez! I was wondering if we were going to see you here today.” She clasped my hand warmly, folding both of her hands around mine as she smiled. “Congratulations. I heard you were promoted to Instructor after Ron’s retirement. I knew from the first moment I saw you that you were going to make a big name for yourself in the Coast Guard. I’m glad to see I was right again.”

“Are you really surprised?” I asked jokingly as I shook her hand—or hands, as it was. “I, for one, have learned that you’re always right, but thank you. We miss you on the Station. It just hasn’t been the same since you left.”

She arranged her aged features into a stern expression as she pointed at my chest after releasing my hand. “Don’t make me come down there to set you straight now that you’re a big shot Instructor, Cortez. You take care of those new babies of ours during training, you hear?”

I chuckled. “I have been and I intend on doing it again and again. Every year until I get myself one of these fancy parties.”

The wrinkles around her mouth deepened as she shot me an approving grin. “That’s what I like to hear. You Search and Rescue guys are too hard-nosed for the kids in my opinion, but I know you’ll keep them safe, at least. Just don’t make them cry too often while you’re doing it.”

“No, ma’am,” I said obligingly. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She sniffed before she winked at me. “Well, I know you’re lying, but I’ll accept it. A bit of crying makes them better, or so my dear husband tells me. As long as you’re not too hard on them, I’ll let you do your thing.”

“You’ve still got your ear on the ground at the training center, huh?”

She batted her lashes at me and clutched the strings of pearls around her neck. “Are you implying that I’m nosy, young man?”

“Nope, I’m implying that you’ve always been incredibly invested in the future of the USCG and that I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that you’re keeping tabs on us even if you haven’t been around in a while.”

“Someone has to keep you on your toes,” she said, then waved and walked away just as another familiar face approached me.

“Santiago,” Ron said, nodding as he shook my hand. “It’s good to see you, son.”

“You too, sir.” I meant it, too. “How’s retirement been treating you?”

My mentor shrugged his broad shoulders, humor flickering behind his light green eyes. “Well, if I wasn’t afraid to put you out of a job, I’d have been back by now.”

I laughed. “I doubt Mrs. Perkins would’ve been too happy about that.”

“Mrs. Perkins would’ve allowed it,” he said lightly. “I think she’s getting sick of me being at home. Apparently, one cannot view your household as your command when it’s been hers for over thirty years.”

“Yeah, I can see that causing some tension.” I grinned. “Have you done any of that traveling you were looking forward to so much?”

“Some.” He straightened one of the many pins on his jacket even though it’d been perfectly straight to begin with. “We’re staying home for the next few months, though. The missus wants to be in town for the duration of her baby’s training.”

“Your daughter’s in training?” I asked, a little taken aback. “What’s she training for?”

In my head, the Perkins girl was still a kid. Ron had been my mentor for many years—pretty much since my first day on the Station a dozen years ago—and these days, he was a good friend. When I’d started, his daughter had been in middle school or something. Since we didn’t talk about her often, I had no idea how old she was now.

Ron narrowed those intense green eyes on mine. “You don’t know? She’s going to be in your next class, Cortez. I’d have thought you’d know that by now. Didn’t I teach you to be prepared? Shit, maybe I really should come back.”

“She’s going to be in my class?” My eyes widened. “When did she get old enough to do that?”

He chuckled. “Twelve years is a long time, son. She’s grown up a lot since those family picnics she used to come to.”

I blinked hard. “I remember seeing a Perkins in the paperwork, but I didn’t put two and two together. I honestly didn’t realize she wasn’t a child anymore.”

“I tend to forget it myself sometimes,” he said with a good-natured smile. “Since we’re on the subject, though, I’m going to speak freely.”

“Don’t we always?”

He nodded. “S’pose we do nowadays.”

Shaking his graying head, he dragged in a deep breath and fixed me with a serious look. “I don’t want you to go easy on her just because she’s my daughter, Cortez. If anything, I don’t want her getting any special treatment at all. I want you to be harder on her than you are on anyone else. She’ll be a diamond one day, but she needs the pressure to get her there.”

My heart started thudding in my chest. “Are you sure? Training is pretty intense already and you know I don’t go easy on anyone, so I’d never go easy on her, but being harder on her is going to make it tough for her to get through.”

“She’ll get through,” he said confidently as he lifted a hand and squeezed my shoulder. “I’d rather have her quit than be unprepared for any situation she might face out there. You need to help me keep her safe and the only way to do that is to put her through her paces.”

I nodded. “Sure thing, sir. I can do that, but only if you’re not going to come after me if she runs to you, crying her eyes out about her mean instructor.”

“That girl hasn’t cried to me about anything in a long time,” he assured me. “I doubt she’s going to start now. Trust me, she’d have faced much worse from me if I’d still been there than anything you can give her.”

“Challenge accepted,” I joked, but I also wasn’t really joking.

The fact of the matter was that the salt-and-pepper-haired behemoth in front of me was the reason I’d gotten as far as I had. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for this man, and if he wanted me to put pressure on his daughter, I’d do it. Especially because I understood his reasoning.

To keep her safe, she had to be the best she could be. It was my responsibility to get her there, and it was one I took seriously. I took it seriously with each and every one of my cadets, but there was no way I was letting Ron Perkins’s daughter get hurt just because I’d made things too easy for her.

I respected her father far too much for that.

Ron shook my hand again. “I’m glad you were there to take over when I left. She couldn’t be in better hands than she is with you. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

I nodded, and after he left to mingle with some other people, I did the same thing. A bunch more people came to congratulate me and more than a few wanted to know about my plans for this next class, but I wasn’t really thinking about the class as a whole right now.

I was thinking about the Perkins girl. *Layla? That’s her name, right?*

I was sure it was, but if it wasn’t, it was definitely something with an *L*. Either way, after staying at the party for a respectable amount of time, I made my excuses to head back to my office. Evidently, I needed to take a closer look at my incoming class and there was no better time than the present.

As soon as I sat down behind my desk, I pulled the file containing the cadets' paperwork closer to start getting my things in order, but before I could even open it, knuckles tapped at my door. I looked up to find Neil Patton grinning at me from the threshold.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as I stood up to shake his hand. "Has there been an incident I should be aware of?"

He chuckled. "Does there have to be an incident for a Coast Guard Military Policeman to drop by to visit his best friend?"

"Usually, yes," I said as I shook with him and then waved him in after releasing his hand. "What's up?"

"Nothing much." He dropped into the chair I'd waved at and kicked his legs right up to cross his ankles on my desk.

As I walked back to my chair, I knocked his feet off and glared at him when he smirked at me. "I know you didn't stop by just to annoy me, so what's going on?"

He made a show of looking around. "It's so peaceful when there's no one here. I thought I'd pop in before the class comes next week. After that, it's going to be pandemonium around here again."

I laughed. "And by that, you mean you're not going to risk being here if you might be asked to help us out with the cadets more than you're already going to have to?"

"Exactly."

I shook my head. "Being lazy is going to be the death of you, man. We went through training together. I'll never understand why you chose the route you did after that."

Neil smirked some more. "Lazy isn't so bad. You should try it sometime. Doing what I do is less work and I don't have to deal with all the bullshit you do. I think you'd love it once you got into it."

I snorted. "No, thanks. The action is where I want to be, and that's right here."

"You just like thinking of yourself as Tom Cruise in that new Top Gun movie. The old, awesome guy who imparts his knowledge to kids who will never be as good as he is."

"I'm not that old or that awesome," I countered. "Besides, if memory serves, those kids in the movie turned out to be every bit as good as he is. That's the dream, Neil. That's the dream."

He laughed. "As always, let's agree to disagree on that one. Hey, you

want to go grab a beer after work? While you still can, I mean.”

“It’s a new training class, not the apocalypse. It’s not like I’ve only got a few days left before the zombies come. We can grab a beer anytime.”

“You know as well as I do that’s out of the question once they get here,” he said. “You’ll be way too exhausted to go out after work. It’s early to bed these days, am I right?”

“I’m thirty-two, not sixty-two,” I countered. “Let’s get a beer tomorrow night. My paperwork and I have plans for tonight.”

He sighed but nodded as he got up. “Fine, but I’m going out anyway. Call me if you change your mind. There’s a sorority thing going on in town tonight. You may be able to score if you decide to meet me at the bar.”

I groaned. “With a sorority girl? Again, no thanks. What am I supposed to do with a twenty-one-year-old?”

“Uh, I can think of a few things,” he suggested jokingly before he shrugged. “Have it your way, Cortez. Your loss is my gain. Without your pretty face in the running, I might just have my pick of the litter.”

“Implying that they’re puppies isn’t going to make me change my mind,” I said. “In fact, it’s the complete opposite. I’m definitely not coming out with you now.”

He laughed again, threw his hand up in a wave, and then left my office. My head shook as I watched him leave, and I wondered what he saw in hooking up with people who were so much younger than us. Maybe I was just getting grumpy in my old age, but the early twenties crowd irritated the shit out of me these days—unless I was training them, that was.

Speaking of training. I pulled the file closer again and opened it, paging until the name *Layla Perkins* jumped out at me. There were no pictures of the cadets, but that didn’t matter. I didn’t care what she looked like. I cared about who she was related to.

As I thought over everything her old man had done to make me better, I vowed to myself that I would do the same for her. By the time I was done with her, she was going to be the best she could possibly be and then some.

No matter how much she was bound to hate me by the time she left here, I was going to turn her into that diamond Ron thought she could be—and that was a damn promise.

LAYLA

With our suitcases open on our beds and our living quarters slowly taking shape, Hanna and I unpacked and got our things ready for class to start tomorrow. It was just the two of us in here so far, but there were four more bunk beds that might or might not be full by the end of the day.

I was brimming with excitement, but Hanna, my classmate and best friend, was already taping a calendar to the inside lid of her suitcase. When I spotted it, I stopped what I was doing and frowned as I drifted over to her.

“Are you really counting down the days until we’re done? We haven’t even started yet.”

She shrugged, tossing her long blonde hair over her shoulder as she glanced up at me. “I know, but it’s so satisfactory to cross off the days that I decided to start as soon as possible.”

I sighed, holding my uniform closer to my chest instead of continuing to hang it on the hook like I’d been about to. “How are you not excited to get started on this next leg of our training? We’re finally getting into the practical stuff. It’s going to be amazing.”

“You’re only saying that because you’ve been looking forward to this your whole life. I don’t actually want to be here, remember?”

“I know, but you’re here now. Why not make the best of it?”

She arched a brow at me, her heavily made-up eyes flashing with a mix of anger and boredom as she shook her head. “It’s a principle thing. I’m not making the best of it because then my parents will think they did the right thing by forcing me into it.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe they did do the right thing?” I reasoned gently. “They only forced you into it because you’re their wild child, but you’re doing pretty well. And you met me. That has to count for something, right?”

She tried to keep the pissed-off look on her face for another minute but failed miserably when she started laughing and tossed a wadded-up pair of panties from her bag at me. “Fine, you’ve got me there. Meeting you is the only thing that has kept me sane, but I’m still angry at them. I don’t want to be part of the Coast Guard. I get that you do, but you were literally born for this. I wasn’t.”

“You might’ve been,” I said after dodging the panties with a neat, quick sidestep. “How will you know unless you give it a real chance? Also, those are clean, right?”

“Ew, of course they’re clean,” she said. Then her laughter subsided and she got off her bed again. “Honestly, I’m trying to give it a chance, but I’m just not feeling it.”

“Maybe you will now that we’re going to be getting our hands dirty,” I said hopefully, finally hanging up the uniform I had to wear in the morning. “Do you know how many great stories my dad has from his days here? A lot. He met a ton of the guys he’s still friends with and who he rose up the ranks with, and he said they had fun while getting their asses kicked by the instructors.”

“I hate to break it to you, hon, but your dad’s a man. We are not going to have the same experiences he did.”

“Why not?”

She rolled her eyes, then gave me an exasperated smile as she waved a hand around the dorm. “There aren’t many girls in here with us, are there? I don’t even know if there are going to be *any* other girls in our class. On the plus side, that means the guys only have us to hit on.”

“How is that a plus?” I scoffed. “I don’t know about you, but I’m not interested in any of that. I realize that it comes with the territory to get hit on, but I’m not here to get a date. I’m not giving in, no matter who takes their shot.”

“You might not, but I don’t know if I’m going to follow your example. If the guy is hot, he may get lucky with me. I don’t know. Have you seen any of them yet?”

“Nope, and I don’t care what they look like. We could be in a class of

male models and I still won't give in. There are consequences to getting caught sleeping together, you know? No hookup is worth the drama."

"I just won't get caught then," she said easily. "The grounds are big and there's more to Pensacola than just the Station. I bet there are even a few motels within spitting distance from here. As long as you're smart about it, there's no way you'd get caught."

"Around here, someone always knows," I warned her. "Plus, even if it's not the powers that be that find out, the other guys in our class definitely will. You don't want that reputation following you around either."

"I lost my reputation when I turned sixteen and it hasn't been seen since," she joked. "Seriously, though, we need to find a way to have some fun around here. They're going to be riding us pretty hard from what I've heard. If you don't blow off some steam at some point, you'll never make it."

"Sure, you will. As long as it's only the instructors riding us hard and we don't start riding our classmates hard in a whole different way, we'll be okay. We just need to hit the sack early, alone, and make sure that we eat well."

"Oh, so you want an *instructor* to ride you hard?" she teased. "I get it now. You're not interested in our classmates because you're aiming higher. Good on you, girl."

I groaned out loud, rubbing my palm over my face before I abandoned my unpacking to glare at her. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

Lying back down on her bed, she hooked her arms behind her head and put her legs on top of her suitcase as she smirked at me. "You don't have to lie to me, girl. I know what you're saying. Some older, more experienced dick—"

I raced forward to clamp my hand over her mouth before she could even complete her sentence. As I did, I narrowed my eyes, giving her a meaningful look and lowering my voice to a whisper. "Don't even joke about that. Getting involved with someone in your chain of command could get you, and them, kicked out. Please don't start any rumors before we've even had our first class."

She held her hands up in surrender, then sighed when I finally moved my hand away from her mouth. "Stop freaking out, babe. I wasn't starting any rumors. I just happen to think you're onto something. If our instructors are hot, why not let them teach us a few different moves while they're instructing us? At the very least, they'll have more to lose than we do if it gets out. It's as close as you're going to get to a guarantee that he'll keep his mouth shut

about it.”

“No one will have to keep their mouths shut about anything if we just follow the rules,” I said. “Are you forgetting that my *father* was an instructor here? You seem to think we’re going to get someone hot, but they’re old, mostly married, and as unavailable as they are uninterested.”

“No,” she said with a teasing smile on her lips. “Your dad might’ve been all that, but he’s retired. We don’t know who they got in his place. It could be a much younger, much hotter guy, in which case, since you mentioned it first, I’ll let you have first dibs on him. I’m a good friend, right?”

“You’re a friend who’s going to get both of us in trouble if you keep talking like this,” I muttered, glancing at our closed door. Mercifully, we hadn’t left it open. If we had, I didn’t doubt that we’d already have been getting yelled at in a superior’s office just for having this conversation. “It doesn’t matter who they got to replace him. The instructors are *all* much older. They’re not going to let some young guy who doesn’t have enough experience train other people.”

I actually didn’t know if that was true. Theoretically, I knew what was required to become an instructor and I couldn’t imagine someone achieving all that before they were quite a lot older than we were, but I didn’t know for a fact that none of our instructors were youngish.

I’d never even thought to ask because it didn’t matter. Their looks and age had no bearing on our training or their ability to teach us. Whoever our instructor was, they would have to be a Search-and-Rescue rock star in their own right to have been given the job.

The only thing I was interested in was becoming one of those myself. Nothing more, nothing less. I’d come here with a point to prove and a passion to make into a living. That was what I was here for.

As if he’d heard the thoughts and decided to rain on my parade, my father called at that very moment. I sighed when I saw his name on my screen, but I grabbed the phone anyway, standing up a little straighter even though I knew he couldn’t see me.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Layla,” he said briskly. “Are you settling in alright? Your mother is already worried about you.”

“I’m fine, sir,” I said.

He sighed, but if he didn’t want me to call him sir, then he had to *not* speak to me in that clipped, authoritative tone of voice. I couldn’t help it

when he spoke to me like that. It was like I automatically reverted to my default setting.

“Have you got everything ready for tomorrow?” he asked, a little gentler now. “If you need anything, Mom and I can—”

“I’m fine, Dad. Really. Hanna and I are unpacking now. I’ve already hung up my uniform and I was just about to hit the shower. After that, we’re going to go grab a bite to eat and crawl straight into bed.”

“Good to hear it,” he murmured. “Okay, baby. Good luck tomorrow. I’ll be waiting to hear how you’re doing. You know you need to get through this class no matter what, right?”

“Of course.” I waited for him to tell me he was proud of me for even making it this far, but it never came.

Instead, he simply said good night and hung up. As soon as I tossed my phone down on my bed, I squeezed my eyes shut and ran both my hands through my hair, tilting my head back as I drew in a long, calming breath.

One of these days, I was going to make him proud of me. Now that I was here at the training center he used to head up, it was only a matter of time. I knew it. Waiting for it was going to be my motivation instead of my downfall.

At least when it came, I’d know it was because it was true and because I’d earned it. Until then, I was just going to have to suck it up. I wouldn’t let his lack of faith in me trip me up. Not now and not ever. I *could* do this. Whether he believed it or not.

SANTIAGO

It was go time. Day one of week one for the new cadets had officially arrived, and with it, life had returned to the Training Center on the Station.

Neil had been right. It really *had* been peaceful here before but now that was a thing of the past. I loved it, though. The chatter in the air, the anticipation and excitement. It was a heady cocktail that infused my own veins with adrenaline.

Poor fuckers have no idea what they're in for, I thought as I watched them from my window. For now, they were being shown around by some of the other officers. They still had smiles on their faces, wearing their brand new uniforms like they'd already earned them.

They hadn't, and I would be reminding them of that real soon. An evil smile spread on my lips as I watched them horsing around without knowing they were being watched. I didn't particularly enjoy making them suffer, but I did enjoy instilling the fear of God in them until they fell in line.

An undisciplined, disrespectful cadet was worth nothing to me. It was only once they learned firsthand how things worked around here and respected it that I could start molding them properly, and I didn't like to waste time getting to that point.

I wasn't a patient man and I only had so many days with them. The longer it took me to get them to take it seriously, the more we all had our work cut out for us.

"I see that smile and I like it," Neil said as he walked into my office, rubbing his palms together as he came to stand next to me to watch their

arrival. “What have you got for the poor, unsuspecting cadets out there this morning, Master Chief Cortez?”

“You don’t have to sound so excited about it,” I said, struggling to hold back my laughter. “This isn’t the first day of school.”

“*Au contraire*, my friend. That’s exactly what it is, and I can’t wait to see you put them in their places.”

I finally laughed, but I did it softly so as not to draw any attention to the fact that I did, in fact, know how to do it. “Stop sounding so damn gleeful. You’re going to have to reel it in before we get started. We’re here to set an example. You can’t be running around looking like a kid in a candy shop about what we’re going to put them through.”

“But it’s so much fun watching them squirm,” he said before he huffed out a breath. “Fine, I’ll get to my post, but when you call out the first one, please do it somewhere I can see?”

I nodded. “You got it, but you’re not allowed to look happy about me making someone shit their pants.”

“I’ll do my best.” He winked, and then he arranged his features into a deep scowl and marched out of my office.

Once I had my own face under control, I followed him out to the table set up outside where groups of cadets were gathered, trying to figure out which building to go to get their orders. A few guys caught my attention and one, in particular, was acting like this was all a big joke.

Yes, he’s perfect. And he’s right by Neil’s post.

“You’d think they could put up proper signs,” he was saying. “We haven’t done our hands-on navigation training yet. It’s not like we can smell where we’re supposed to go.”

Obviously still oblivious to the fact that I was approaching them and had chosen him as my first target, he continued holding court for his friends. “Better yet, they could get some of those Tag Chasers from the bar last night to give us directions.”

“What, pray tell, is a Tag Chaser?” I asked as I came to a standstill behind the clown.

His friends saw me and turned a little ashen, but the guy clearly had no idea who he was talking to just yet as he snorted and started answering my question before he’d even fully turned around. “You know, man. Those chicks who’ll hit on any member of the armed forces—”

He cut himself off when he saw me, his gaze immediately pinned to the

insignia on my uniform that identified me as *not* one of them. “I’m sorry, sir. I thought you were—”

“Another one of your buddies? Yes, I got that. What I don’t get is why you’re out here talking shit instead of getting your orders. Does this look like some kind of retreat to you, cadet?” I got up in his face a little, as much for Neil’s entertainment as to prove my point to the preppy-looking asshole who was definitely going to cause problems for me in this class with this kind of attitude. “You have thirty seconds to get where you need to go, or you’re out.”

His brown eyes widened as he stared at me. Then he licked his lips and nodded, looking like he was contemplating arguing until I cocked a brow at him. With that, he spun around and hurried away, his spine ramrod straight and his pale friends rushing after him.

Good. Let them know that I’m not afraid to call anyone out in front of everyone else. The sooner they learn, the better.

Neil caught my eye as I turned to leave, and he winked before shooting me a discreet thumbs-up. I dipped my head in a nod but didn’t break stride as I headed back to my office. With the first example made, I had about two minutes to grab my phone that I’d forgotten, and then I’d have to go join the rest of the crew.

As I walked back to my office, though, I was surprised to find two women standing in it. They were both in uniform, but one had the strap of her duffel slung over her shoulder, obscuring her name tag. The other had her hair pulled up in a giant blonde bun and she was smiling as she kidded around with her friend.

“One day, this is going to be your office,” the blonde, who’s tag read Hanna Meeks, said as she elbowed the other girl. “Seriously, go try out the chair. I bet you’re going to look real good in it. Besides, whoever this Cortez guy is, he should know you’ll be coming for his job soon.”

The friend didn’t respond, and I cleared my throat from the doorway, then strode in past them. “Thanks for the warning, but I’m sure my job is safe. If you’re here to make jokes, however, you are not. You won’t make it if you came to fuck around. Who are you and why are you in my office?”

Hanna Meeks stared at me with her lips parted and her blue eyes huge, doing a double take before she nodded curtly. “Yeah, we, uh, we were just looking for the classroom and one of the guys told us it’s down this way.”

“Does this look like a classroom to you?” I asked slowly, my voice

dangerously low. “If so, then between your misunderstanding about what a training facility looks like and your affinity for jokes, you really aren’t going to make it. We might as well sign the paperwork right now for you to go home.”

As the blonde struggled to come up with a response, I cut a glance at the friend. For the briefest of moments when my gaze met hers, the air got trapped in my lungs. I still couldn’t see her name, but she was gorgeous regardless of who she was.

Pitch-black hair pulled up into a neat ponytail with not a strand out of place. Intelligent light green eyes that contrasted with her tanned skin. Delicate features that were tightened with determination and a perfectly pressed uniform.

A cadet in uniform, I reminded myself. Eyes to yourself, Cortez.

She didn’t say a word, but I still saw something in her. Other than just her being too good looking for this, there was something about her even in her silence that got to me. That quiet determination, perhaps, or the fact that even as her friend grabbed her hand and dragged her out of my office, she still looked back at me over her shoulder, not unafraid of consequences but seemingly not scared of *me* either.

I’d seen guys three times her size shrink into themselves when I spoke to them in that tone, and yet, her chin remained up and her shoulders were still square. She was definitely something else, but I wasn’t going to find out what.

All I needed to know about her was whether she had what it took to make it here. Shaking my head at myself when I found my mind briefly conjuring up an image of what she might look like out of that uniform, I took a breath and headed out after them.

They weren’t the only ones who had to get to the classroom. I wondered if that group of guys had even managed to find out yet that their first orders were reporting to class, but since I guessed I’d find out soon enough, I simply kept marching down the hall.

With every step I took, I became more and more focused on the task at hand. It would be a *job* to get this new class on the right track, but it was *my* job. Regardless of how pretty or curvy one of those cadets might be, I had to keep my head out of the gutter.

After checking with one of the petty officers that most of the cadets had reported, I straightened up to my full height and strode into the classroom.

The two girls from before had taken up seats in the very front row, and as I went to stand at the front of the room, I realized the girl who had showed no fear toward me was none other than Layla Perkins.

Internally, I groaned. *Fuck, I cannot be physically attracted to Ron's daughter. That's just out of bounds.*

On the other hand, at least it made sense now why she hadn't been scared of me. Considering who her father was. We'd have to see if she stayed in the mindset, though.

As I mentally grappled to reconcile the beautiful girl with my mentor's daughter—who I was supposed to be super tough on—I folded my hands in front of me and looked out at the rest of the class. I needed to get my head in the game, and right now, that meant starting strong.

Narrowing my eyes, I made eye contact with all of them, carefully skipping over her, and then I motioned at the windows and the dock beyond them.

Show time, Santiago. Let's go.

LAYLA

Hanna and I dropped into seats at the front of the room we'd now found out was our classroom. I felt a little bit stupid about not having known where to go from the outset, but I hadn't been on this Station in about a decade and they'd changed things up since the last time I'd visited my father here.

For starters, I didn't remember the high-ranking guys from his time looking like *that* one had. The guy whose office we'd been busted in was easily and by a mile the hottest man I'd ever seen. They definitely hadn't made them that way in Dad's time.

With eyes the color of the deepest parts of the Gulf outside and sandy brown hair in a crew cut, that uniform, and a face that must've been carved by Michelangelo himself straight out of my wildest fantasies, he was just breathtaking. As soon as he'd walked into that room, it was like all the air had been stolen right out of it.

For all my protests just yesterday about the instructors, if ours looked like that, I was in trouble. Not that I'd act on any attraction, but how the heck was I supposed to focus with a guy like him barking orders at me and sounding all commanding and sexy while he was doing it?

Okay, I've just realized I have issues.

I usually wasn't one of those girls who was affected at all by good-looking men or their deep, commanding voices, but it seemed like I was finally learning that the struggle was real.

If his office was in the vicinity of this room, it meant he had something to do with the training center, but thankfully, I was sure he was too young to be

one of our instructors. He was probably only here to teach a brief, advanced course of some kind. In my quick assessment of that office, I hadn't noticed any personal touches, so he was probably only using it temporarily.

Hanna still hadn't stopped talking about our run-in with him earlier, though, and it wasn't helping me forget that we'd ever seen him. "I really don't appreciate being spoken to like that. He was so condescending. Who the hell does he think he is, pretending like he's got my paperwork right there to send me home? It was one joke, for God's sake. It's not like he caught me doing stand-up in the middle of a lecture. Also, we weren't the only ones who didn't know where to go. He didn't have to act like I don't know what a classroom looks like. We were in there to ask, not to attend a fucking class. Asshole."

"I realize that he wasn't exactly pleasant or respectful, but you're going to have to get used to people talking to you like that. This is what we signed up for. All of the higher-ranking officers are going to treat us that way until we prove that we deserve to be here. Right now, we're not even the low men on the totem pole. We're the parasites stuck to the ground around the base of that pole. Once we work our way up, it'll get better."

"That's easy for you to say. You signed yourself up for this, but I sure didn't. I'm really not sure I can handle being treated like that indefinitely, so if everyone around here is going to speak to us that way, then I might just ask him to sign my damn papers as soon as we get out of here for the day."

"Relax," I said softly. "We'll get through this. Besides, we'll probably never even see that guy again and our instructor won't be kind, but I'm sure he won't be quite as condescending as that guy."

As I was speaking, a hush fell over the room, and when I glanced over my shoulder to see why, I looked over just in time to see none other than *that guy* walking through the door. *Shit. Fuck.*

Hanna ground her teeth and rolled her eyes at me but thankfully kept her mouth shut as he commanded our attention simply by being in the room. He strode to the front and planted his feet about a foot apart, his hands clasped in front of him as he surveyed us like he was looking for a traitor in our midst.

His stare was piercing as it swept over each of us in turn. Then suddenly, he lifted his arm and pointed outside. "People die out there."

I blinked hard, but his opening line had sure been effective. Every last person in here was suddenly at attention, all eyes on him before he continued. "I'm Master Chief Santiago Cortez. It's my job to equip you with the

knowledge you need to save some of them and with the tools you need to give you the best shot at not becoming one of them.”

Suddenly, his gaze swung back to the room and he pointed at a random guy about halfway back. “What’s your name?”

I twisted in my seat and the guy started when he realized he was the one who had been called upon. “Jameson Gray, sir.”

“Jameson Gray,” Santiago mused, then reached for a few printed sheets of paper that had been stapled together and had been waiting on the desk behind him. His gaze swept down the first page, then the second, then he finally nodded. “Right. We’ll start with you, then. Why are you here, Jameson Gray?”

As he asked the question, he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, produced a pen, and made a tick—presumably next to Jameson’s name.

The man in question stumbled over his words, stuttering so much that it was difficult to make out what he was actually saying. “I, uh, I swim well, sir. Hurricanes. Rescuing people, sir.”

Santiago gave him a few more seconds before he sighed. “Okay, that’s enough. You swim well in hurricanes, or so you say. I suppose we’ll find out. Wanting to rescue people is admirable. Let’s find someone a little less nervous.”

He worked his way through the class, pointing at people in no particular order, then marking them down on his list while he listened to them trying to articulate their answers. The first few people were as bad as Jameson had been, but after that, having had a little more time to prepare themselves, the answers started getting better.

A preppy-looking blond guy smirked at our instructor when he gave his answer, but judging by the way Santiago pressed his lips into a hard line, I assumed he didn’t like the guy’s cocky attitude. *Watch out, Jonathan Hayes. He’s going to be gunning for you once we get out there.*

When my turn finally came, he surprised me by calling me up to the front of the class. “Okay, Layla Perkins. Why don’t you come on up here and tell us why you’re part of this class?”

I nodded, my limbs feeling heavy as I got up. Since I desperately wanted to avoid putting a target on my own back, I tried my very best to appear confident but not cocky. Sure and assertive, but not a know-it-all.

As I turned toward the sea of faces in the room, my head spun a bit. These were the people I was going to come up with. Those who made it were

going to be my coworkers and my friends, but I might see some of them die and one or more of them might someday save my life.

Deep bonds were forged by people who went through this kind of experience together. The way my dad told it, even just the training was going to test us individually and as a unit. It was as important that I impress them as it was that I did the same with Master Chief Cortez, who I really needed to stop thinking of as *Santiago*.

We were *not* on a first-name basis, and we probably never would be. For the sake of my own sanity, I needed to stop thinking of him as approachable—even in my own mind. He wasn't.

He was as off limits and as forbidden to me as no other person had ever been. I needed to remember that, and the best way of doing it was to think of him not as a person but as an instructor. A mentor.

“Well, Layla Perkins, why are you here?” he prompted.

“Honor. Respect. Devotion to duty. To me, these are not just words. They're a condition to my employment and I believe that with every fiber of my being.”

I risked a glance at him, but his expression remained impassive. “Oh, good. You've been on the website. I didn't ask you to recite the values of the USCG, cadet. I asked you why you are here.”

“You did, and I answered your question. People may not respect us as much as they do the Marines or the Navy. They may not think that we do as much work or that we're as brave, but when your boat is going down in a hurricane and you're surrounded by twenty-foot waves in ten-degree water, we're the people who get called in to save you. That's a sacred duty, and it's one that I've devoted my life to fulfilling.”

“Have you now?” he mused softly as he lowered his head to one side, looking at me like he didn't believe a word that had come out of my mouth.

I stood tall, though, refusing to back down. So far, I'd been strong in my responses, but as he went on, I got the feeling that he was trying to make me understand that this wasn't the place for me. “Cadet Perkins, have you ever been surrounded by twenty-foot waves in ten-degree water? Have you ever been in a helicopter when the mother of all storms is raging outside and all you really want is to crawl home to your mama?”

I shook my head, and he snorted. “Yeah, I didn't think so. See, it's one thing to read all about it on the website. To hear other people's stories. Once you've done any of it yourself, come talk to me. Then we'll see if you still

believe it with every fiber of your being. If you're still around by then, that is."

I bristled, but he waved me back to my seat and called on the last few people remaining. Then he crossed his arms and perched himself at the very end of his desk. His jaw was tight and his posture was rigid as he looked at us like we'd all failed to impress him.

"I don't like wasting my time. If any of you are going to quit, do it now. There's the door." He inclined his head toward the back of the room, and when no one took him up on the offer, he let out a heavy sigh. "Very well, but don't say I didn't warn you. Now, some of you moved into your dorms last night. Those who haven't will have some time to take their things to their sleeping quarters now. The guys are sleeping separately from the girls. There are plenty of other dorms and living quarters between you to keep you from fraternizing at night. If any of you were planning on trying to *mingle* after hours, I'm here to tell you to stop planning right now. Rest assured that you *will* be caught, and when you are, you will have to answer to *me*."

Before he dismissed us, he gave the room another scrutinizing glare. "Everyone who still has to move in, go do it right now. The rest of you, you've got a few minutes. Use them wisely, then change into your PT gear and get ready for Hell."

With that, he nodded and got up, then strode out of the room without another word. It turned out that it was just me, Hanna, and one other girl in our dorm, and just after we'd walked in, before we could even show her around or get her name, a drill sergeant yelled from somewhere behind us.

"You have five minutes to get to your first PT, cadets!"

My eyebrows mashed together as I slung my duffel bag off my shoulder and quickly unzipped it. "Crap. I knew I should've just changed in the bathrooms at the Center. That's why I took the bag with me. I got lulled into a false sense of security when he said the others had time to move in."

"What he meant was time to drop our stuff," the new girl said.

Hanna rolled her eyes, strolling over to her clothes like she had all the time in the world. "Relax, ladies. We've got a few minutes. Wait for me, would you? I'll be done soon."

"Uh, no offense, but I'm getting my ass to PT," the other girl said, shooting us an apologetic smile as she stripped out of her uniform right there next to her bed and rushed into her workout gear. She was done less than thirty seconds later, and she waved as she jogged out of the dorm. "See you

ladies out there.”

I sighed but dutifully waited for my friend. A mistake I was about to pay for and one I definitely wouldn't make again.

SANTIAGO

Already waiting in the field for my class, I kept a close eye on the orange hands of my dive watch as time ticked by. As soon as the second hand hit the top of the clock, I nodded and stepped forward, noticing that Layla and her friend hadn't made it here yet.

Regardless of how much respect I had for the girl's father, I wasn't about to wait for her. Maybe I'd have given her an extra thirty seconds before, but since Ron had specifically asked me not to give her any special treatment, I wouldn't.

"Alright, cadets," I called as I put my whistle to my lips and blew it.

The shrill sound shut up everyone who hadn't already fallen silent, and I walked to the haphazard front row of cadets, huffing when I realized they couldn't even form a straight fucking line. "First things first, this is *not* how you assemble when you hear my whistle. First graders do better than this. Get yourselves organized. Have some damn pride and stand in proper lines."

There was some shuffling, but soon, it was looking a little better. Mercifully for the others, Layla and Hanna finally showed up and gave their classmates a reprieve from the tongue-lashing they'd been about to receive.

I checked my watch again just as they joined the back row. "Perkins and Meeks! Front and center. You're one and a half minutes late. Are your watches broken? Did you not hear the drill sergeant telling you how much time you have? Enlighten me, please."

"It's only ninety seconds," Hanna muttered, and my chest ignited with rage.

I strode closer to where they'd gathered at the front of the pack, knowing

that I was about to make a scene and hoping it would make a lasting impression. “The most important thing that all of you have to get into your thick skulls is that everything else means *nothing* if you are late. If you reach someone who’s in trouble a minute and a half after they’ve died, it doesn’t make an ounce of difference to their families that it was only *ninety seconds*. If you arrive at an airplane for a mission *ninety seconds* late, it’s gone. No matter how good you are, you’ve missed your flight. If you miss the drug runners or the boat of starving immigrants a minute and a half late, that’s it. They’re gone. Today, you’re lucky that you’re only going to have to run an extra mile and a half to make up for it.”

“Yes, sir,” Layla said, looking me right in the eyes as she dropped her chin in a curt nod. I swore I saw a flicker of shame in her eyes, but it was a pity I didn’t see something similar in Hanna’s.

I wasn’t about to interfere, but as far as I was concerned, this friendship was not good for Ron’s daughter. The Meeks girl clearly had some kind of a chip on her shoulder, and if Layla wasn’t careful, it was going to bring her down too. *Not my problem, though.*

Layla Perkins obviously was no longer the little girl whose achievements and grades her daddy had liked to brag about. If she was too stupid to see a bad influence for what it was, then I couldn’t help her.

“Fall in line, cadets!” I yelled as I spun away from them. “Before we go for a little run, let me tell you what I expect from you for the rest of this class. First, if you can’t keep the pace, you’d better start working on it. Fast. Second, if you fall behind after the first mile, you might as well turn around, head back to your dorm, and pack your bags. Last, I will not tolerate chatting or bullshit. You’re here to work, not to gossip with your friends. Let’s go.”

Immediately taking off on probably the easiest path around here, I set a brisk pace but not an unreasonable one. Hell, Perkins had us doing the most difficult route at double this pace on our second day. I preferred to get a feel for my new class on day one, to trick them into thinking it was going to be easy on day two, and then only to really let them have it on day three.

Unfortunately, after only two miles, one of my cadets was already struggling. I jogged around the others and headed back to him, then ran backward as I shook my head and pointed back at the Station. “Go wait for me in my office. I don’t have time for weak links.”

The guy exhaled heavily, then ground his teeth and clenched his jaw as he shook his head right back at me. “No, sir. I can do this.”

“We’ll see about that.”

At least he has some fire in him.

Since I’d been hoping he wouldn’t give up that easily, I let him get away with talking back to me. As I watched, he picked up his pace and managed to catch up with the others, but it remained to be seen if he was going to fall behind again.

It wasn’t much of a surprise that Jonathan Hayes and his boys were right up front, pushing the others to keep up with them. I’d clocked him as one of *those* guys, the type who came in and pushed the envelope. Cocky and annoying as fuck, but unfortunately, usually with the balls and grit to back it up.

I stayed behind the pack for a while and ended up sending a few people back after all, but I also kept a close eye on the others. Jameson Gray, for all his lack of eloquence, was right up front with Jonathan and his friends, and none of them even looked slightly winded.

In the middle of the pack were Layla and Hanna. I picked up my pace a little to reach them, and Hanna immediately slowed down but that was good by me. I honestly didn’t think she was going to graduate from this program anyway, and the sooner she accepted that, the better. As she fell back, I turned my focus on Layla.

“You know there are easier jobs than this if you want to be part of the Coast Guard, right?”

Her cheeks were only slightly flushed, her breathing even as she glanced at me. “Like what?”

“Working on the Station,” I said, not as harshly as I should’ve. “You could do paperwork. We have amazing administrative teams. There’s also PR and marketing, recruitment, outreach programs, and a whole bunch of other things that are safer and have better hours than search-and-rescue.”

With every word I said, she just ran harder. “Is it just because I’m a woman?”

I snorted. “No, it’s definitely not that. Some of the best people we’ve got are women, but it’s about being the right kind of woman. Same for men, by the way. Look around you, I’ve already sent four of those back.”

As she did what I’d said and realized I was telling her the truth, her pace picked up a little bit more. “Thank you for the career advice, but I’m exactly where I need to be.”

I hid a smile at that, pushing forward instead to go see what was

happening up front since old Jonathan seemed to be cracking jokes again. He was, this time about what he was going to do with all the pent-up energy he'd have left after this lame run.

As it happened, a lot of his suggestions involved sticking his dick in one of the female cadets. My blood boiled as I grabbed the back of his collar and yanked at it. "Do you have hearing problems? I made myself clear, cadet. You're not here to gossip, and if you think we're letting you within fifty feet of their dorm at night, you clearly haven't been listening."

Anger flared deep within those brown eyes, but his footsteps hadn't faltered. As he wrenched free of my grasp, he had the decency to eyeball the dirt. "Yes, sir. It won't happen again."

"That's strike two, Hayes. One more and you're out."

He growled somewhere in his chest, and I had no doubt that he wanted to punch me right now. He could try. It would only earn him a couple black eyes and a one-way ticket to a court martial. It didn't even matter if he was one of *those* guys.

Generally, his type made it through, but they either ostracized themselves or they got knocked down a peg or two by something or another on the job. They only became bearable once their egos deflated a bit. If we got lucky, training got the job done, but if it didn't, the job itself would. I hadn't had one yet who fell in that rare class of simply ostracizing themselves.

There were a few old-timers like that, but no one who had come up through the training recently. Either way, Jonathan was going to have to learn some respect if he was planning on passing while I was in charge.

After I left him to stew in his thoughts and fantasies of fighting me, I checked in with Gray, decided I liked him just fine, and then headed back around to the rear of the group. No one else had fallen seriously behind, but Layla had dropped back and seemed to be giving Hanna a pep talk.

I briefly considered interrupting them, but then I realized that it wasn't my place. If the girl was going to crack, she was going to crack. A few of the guys were muttering to those running alongside them as well, and I wasn't interfering with any of them.

Just because I'd already pegged Hanna as someone who lacked the drive and determination to get through this didn't mean I had to be harder on her than any of the others. My decision not to join them was absolutely not influenced by the fact that, as I made it, I realized that I actually had a pretty good view from back here.

As much as I hated myself for even noticing, I was only human and Layla's workout gear clung to her full curves like a second skin. Her shirt was a little big on her, but since she'd worked up such a sweat, it was now sticking to her in all the right places.

I could do this run without breaking a sweat, blindfolded, in the middle of the night, with one hand tied behind my back. So while the others seemed to have a bit of a hard time with it, I didn't have to focus on what my feet had to do at all.

Instead, I did the unimaginable. I let myself stare at my mentor's daughter's ass, even if I knew I'd be going straight to hell for it. I wouldn't even pretend that I couldn't help myself. This wasn't some pathetic case of body betrayal.

I could help myself. I had almost two dozen other cadets in this class to check on and a heck of a lot to think about, but I didn't. Instead, I decided to give myself just this run to get her out of my system.

Those perfectly shaped thighs and supple ass would haunt my dreams for days to come, no doubt, but they were going to do it regardless of whether I let myself look or not. The problem was that Layla was my idea of sex on a fucking stick.

She was curvy but strong. Beautiful but smart. She had fire in her soul and determination in her bones. *Getting that underneath me would be heaven. Fuck. I really need to stop thinking about her like that.*

And I would.

Just as soon as this run was over. As soon as I hit a cold shower when we got back, I would stop, but for now, the forbidden fruit was just a little bit too juicy and the run was just a little bit too boring. As I watched her toned flesh shift under all those layers, I groaned softly and sent a piercing glare up at the heavens above.

Damn it. Maybe I should've gone for one of the harder trails after all.

LAYLA

Four a.m. sure came quicker here than it did out in the real world. At least, that was how I felt when Santiago's voice suddenly invaded my dreams. "Get up, cadets! Let's go! We're moving out in five. Your dreams can wait. It's you and me now, kids. Let's go!"

I groaned, yawning into my pillow before sitting up and stretching my arms out. As I looked over, I saw Melanie, the other girl, already getting out of bed while Hanna had simply pulled her blanket over her head. "Hanna! Get up. You heard him. Come on. I'm not getting there late again."

"Leave me alone," she moaned. "I was having such an amazing dream. I know he said they could wait, but I was gutting him and it was incredible."

Despite myself, I giggled before I tossed my pillow at where I thought her head was. "I'm sure it was incredible, but we've still got to go."

Taking a page out of Melanie's book, I shed my pajamas right here and changed into my PT gear, then headed into the bathroom to brush my teeth. Less than two minutes after he'd woken us up, I was ready to go.

"I'm giving you thirty more seconds," I said to Hanna, who was dressed but was still rummaging around in the dark to find her toothbrush. "If you're not ready by then, I'm leaving without you."

"A mint it is then," she said before popping one into her mouth. She was still tying her shoelaces as we left, but we still made it to the field course with a minute to spare. Unfortunately for me, that meant that we had time to look around while Santiago waited for the last of the cadets to arrive.

The course I found myself staring at was an absolute monster, built to challenge even the strongest, fastest, most agile people here. Suddenly

terrified that he was going to expect us to get this thing done before breakfast, I felt my heartrate spike and my palms grow sweaty.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Our instructor stepped forward like a specter from the shadows, and as he checked his watch, I tried to get my nerves under control. His gorgeous blue eyes rose to look at us, and even though I couldn't see the color, I'd stared at him so intently while we'd been running yesterday that I didn't need to see him now to know what they looked like.

Seriously, the guy's eyes were something else. The blue was so deep and sparkly that it was like looking up at the sun while diving forty meters underwater in a tropical ocean. It was a color and an effect I couldn't describe, but it was so damn magical that he'd made me breathless just by looking at me on that run.

The exercise had had nothing on staring into those eyes.

Crap. I really need to get over this little crush of mine. I already knew nothing was ever going to come of it, and more than that, I really didn't like him as a person. While he was undeniably pretty to look at, as a human being, he was so *not* pretty. Whatever he had inside him, it was dark, sanctimonious, and ugly.

He was a prick of the highest order and I was quickly starting to think that I was going to hate him soon. At the moment, it was more of an intense dislike, but we were only on day two. I was pretty sure I was going to get to hate before we hit day ten.

"Good morning, cadets," he called much too cheerfully for the hour and the monster course behind him. "For those of you who are awake enough to have noticed, don't worry. I'm not expecting you to be able to conquer this thing this morning."

A few sighs of relief rang out, and mine was one of them. He smirked. "However, by the end of your training, you will be required to complete it. If you can't do it by then, you can make yourselves available to the industry because you sure as hell won't be getting a job here."

As he spoke, he started forward and we followed after him, listening intently as he pointed out all the obstacles and walked through the entire course with us. Some of it looked manageable enough, but other parts were going to be very difficult to master.

When we came to the end and I saw an eight-foot wall towering up ahead of me, my spirits crashed to the ground. I was only five foot six. There was

no way I was going to make it over that thing. *Gee, thanks for the heads-up, Dad.*

“This is going to be harder than I thought it would be,” I muttered to Hanna, who was about the same height as me, and she simply nodded.

“Right.” Santiago clapped his hands and blew his whistle when we reached the starting point again. “Let’s see how things go this morning. I’ll be waiting with a stopwatch at the wall. You’re going four at a time. Remember, it’s not a race against each other. It’s a race against yourself. Don’t try to keep up with whoever is on the course with you. Just try to make it through.”

We divided ourselves into groups when he turned and strode away, and then the games really began. Obviously, Jonathan and his merry band of assholes went first. To my utter surprise, a few of the easier-looking obstacles seemed difficult for them to manage, but I was a whole foot shorter than most of them. Realistically, some things would be easier for me to navigate than it would for them.

Unsurprisingly, all but one of them made it over the wall on their second or third tries. I let out a frustrated breath, but soon it was my turn along with Jameson, Hanna, and Melanie.

We started at the sharp snap of his whistle, but I lost track of the others after that. For the first part of the course, we had to crawl through sand on our bellies and this was definitely where the smaller people had an advantage. There was less than an inch of space between the top of my head and the bars we had to duck beneath, but that was plenty of space for me.

Jameson fell behind almost immediately, but we weren’t competing, and I also knew he’d be making up the time he was losing as soon as we were clear of this obstacle. And he did.

I was still lugging a massive tire across the sand when he sped past me, heaving his tire with ease. He even managed to smile as he overtook me. “Hey, great job back there. You made it look like a piece of cake.”

“Thanks,” I ground out between pants as I tried to return his smile. So far, Jameson was the one guy who didn’t make me feel like he was looking down on us girls, and I appreciated him for it.

After that, I was on my own again and I worked on getting back into my zone. Just as I’d expected, some of the obstacles were definitely easier to get through than others. To my surprise, I managed a few I’d expected not to be able to do and a couple some of the others had struggled with.

Before I could get too confident, however, the wall was rising up ahead of me with our hateful instructor standing right beside it. When he saw me emerge from the last obstacle before the wall, he sighed and shook his head.

“Don’t even worry about this one today, Perkins,” he called as I ran toward it. “This is where I always lose a lot of people. There’s no way you’re going to make it over, but especially not today.”

My eyes narrowed and my heart started *thwacking* against my ribs. My muscles were already aching from the exertion and I had a feeling I was barely going to be able to lift my arms, but fuck him. I wasn’t going to give up without even trying.

It made me mad as hell that he would even suggest something like that, and I channeled my anger into my first attempt at the wall. I gave it my all but to no avail. I couldn’t even come close to the top, let alone over it.

Since I’d watched a few of the guys scaling it earlier, I’d seen how they had managed it, but no matter what I tried, I just couldn’t do it. Santiago watched me without a word of either encouragement or discouragement, but eventually, he pointed at the side.

“Quit wasting everyone’s time, Perkins. Just go around it.”

After stopping to give him a gut-melting glare, I tried again, but when I failed, he snapped at me once more. “Get off my course, Perkins! Now! You’re holding up the rest of your class.”

I glanced behind me and saw what he was talking about. A few other cadets had reached this point by now, and they were all waiting for me so they could take their turns.

With a defeated groan that made me feel worthless, I walked around the wall and hung my head. It only took a few seconds before a couple more people had been told to give it up, though. Thankfully, I was far from the only one who’d failed at that final obstacle this morning.

It didn’t make me feel much better, but at least it allowed me to walk away from the course with my head held high. As we got to breakfast, Hanna and I collected our trays and got some oats, fruit, and toast.

When we sat down, Hanna moaned softly. “Dear lord, I hurt in places I’m not even supposed to have places. How the hell are we supposed to do that all over again tomorrow morning? And what is with that wall? Obviously, it’s designed to take out the women.”

“We’re going to get over it,” I said confidently. “Mark my words, by the end of this, we *are* going to have figured out the secret. There has to be one.

I've seen a lot of short women in search-and-rescue. I don't know how they did it, but we'll figure it out."

"You heard what Cortez said." She sniffed and did her best to imitate his deep voice. "*This is where I always lose a lot people.*"

I rolled my eyes, chuckling at her impression of him before I shook my head. "We're going to make that prick eat his words. That is *not* where he's going to lose us."

Of course, because the universe hated me, as I said it, a pair of gorgeous blue eyes met mine. A smirk appeared on Santiago's full lips as he passed us carrying a tray of his own breakfast. Not even pretending that he hadn't heard me, he put a piece of toast in his mouth and spoke around it.

"We'll see, Perkins," he said, making me more mad than embarrassed.

I had no idea why he seemed to want me to quit so badly, but I was going to show him. Nothing he did was going to force me out. My dad was the toughest nut of them all and he'd raised me. A chauvinistic dick like Cortez sure as heck wasn't going to crack me when not even my own father had been able to.

SANTIAGO

“**K**nock, knock.” Neil grinned as he strode into my office and held up the bag of takeout he’d brought with him. “Ah, training is definitely in session if we’re eating most of our meals in here. For the record, I told you we weren’t going to go out to grab a beer once the class got here.”

“We went out last night,” I said, rolling my eyes as I saved the notes I’d been typing on my computer. “You were right, though. I only had two beers, but I definitely felt them when I got up at three. It was a bad idea. I won’t be doing it again soon.”

He pretended to be disappointed as he sighed and sat down, but then he opened the bag and the scent of Thai curry filled my office. He smiled longingly at the contents of the bag as he pulled out the containers. “Hello, Dahkmi, my old friend. You’ve come to make me happy again.”

I laughed at his improv version of the song. “I can’t believe that restaurant is still there. Do you remember when Dahkmi opened? You and I practically lived there for a month after our training just in case the place closed down.”

“We were so afraid they were going to take our Thai from us,” he said with a hint of reminiscence in his voice. “I’m glad they made it, though. It’s been years, but it’s still the best food around here. How long do you reckon it’ll be before the new cadets find it? I always hate that initial influx of orders when they first discover it. Last time, I had to wait thirty-five minutes for our order when that asshole cadet bought dinner for everyone.”

I chuckled as I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t think you have to be too

worried about it. Most of them are as dense as a stone. There are a few that show promise, but we've got a long ass way to go with them."

"In their defense, it's only been two days. Do you remember what we were like on day two?"

I scoffed. "We were awesome."

"No, we weren't, but we thought we were. That's my point. Give 'em time. I'm sure they'll get better."

"Since when do you root for them?"

He snorted as he shook his head. "I'm not rooting for them. We were the last incredible class to pass through these hallowed halls, my friend. I'm just telling it like it is. Their class will never be as amazing as we were, but we still need a few of them to make it. Those few will prove themselves soon, and then you can send the rest on their way."

"That's not really how it works," I reminded him. "Plus, it's my job to make them as amazing a class as we were. That's just how it is. Every class believes it was the best, and then the next one comes along and believes the same thing."

"Sure, but we really were the best. Perkins didn't make us that way. We just were."

I tilted my head as I stared at him. "Are you serious? Of course, he made us that way. He had pretty amazing raw material to work with, but still. He was a fucking legend of an instructor."

Neil thought it over before he shrugged. "Maybe you're not wrong. He also got me into the CGPD when I asked for his help, so I guess he wasn't too bad, but still. The man nearly killed us how many times?"

"Nah, we were never going to *die*. It just felt that way." I pulled my container close and popped the lid, breathing in the rich scent of the green curry and practically feeling it as it took me all the way back. "We were lucky to have him. Have I told you his daughter is in the class this year?"

He suddenly tore his gaze away from lovingly staring at his curry so he could gape at me. "Are you serious? When did she get old enough for that?"

"My question exactly, but believe it or not, she's twenty-four now and she's definitely not a kid anymore."

"Shit." He scratched his jaw and slowly shook his head. "I'm really struggling to get my head wrapped around just how old that makes us. She was a lanky pre-teen the last time I saw her. Hell, at the time, we didn't even know Perkins well enough for him to introduce us to his family. I just

remember standing with you and watching him from a distance.”

“Yeah, I remember the same thing. We were both wishing he’d kid around with us the way he did with her.”

“Instead, all we got was an ass-whooping for his hangover the next day.”

I laughed. “I still don’t think it was a hangover. I’m pretty sure he was just punishing us for all that crap he saw us eating.”

Neil’s shoulders shook with a silent chuckle as he shook his head. “Man, those were not good times. Are you going to exact revenge for what her father did to us? You should. He was a terror.”

I carefully contemplated my answer, not wanting to tell him too much even though I didn’t really know why. I just felt strangely protective of her, and I didn’t want him plotting against her to exact his own revenge.

“I’m either going to get her out or make her into one of the best. Perkins gave me his blessing to go balls to the wall with her, so I guess we’ll just have to see how it goes.”

“I don’t even know her, but I hope you get to kick her out eventually. Don’t get me wrong, I love Perkins, but I hate him. It’ll be a great day for me if his daughter doesn’t end up cutting it here.”

“Why?” I asked, genuinely curious. “He’s done a lot for both of us. To be honest, I think she’s going to make it. At this point, it sure looks like she’s one of the stronger contenders. I’m not going to make it easy on her, but I’m pretty sure she’s going to stick it out, and when she graduates, she’s going to be a force to be reckoned with.”

“We’ll see,” he said. “If she’s cut from the same cloth as Daddy, then you’re probably right. Are you rooting for her, then?”

“Nah. I’m not rooting for anyone. I just have a feeling about her, but if I’m wrong, I’d rather have her fall out and so would he. This isn’t the place to be if all you’re after is sticking it to your father.”

“True,” he agreed. “Do you think that’s why she’s here? She’s just trying to prove a point to daddy?”

“I’m not sure yet. I think there’s definitely an element of that, but I doubt that’s all it is. Like I said, she’s one of the stronger contenders. She seems determined enough, but time will tell what her determination is about. Maybe she quits right after graduation, just to prove to her dad that she’s done it and that she was good enough.”

He mulled it over before he nodded. “She’s going to be an interesting one to watch. That’s for sure. I’d kind of like to see her suffer a little bit, though.

Just for all those times her dad made me want to crawl back into my father's balls and stay there."

I grimaced. "You wanted to crawl back into your father's balls?"

He smirked at me. "Don't pretend you didn't wish some nights that you'd never even been born. God, we had some great times, but if you really think about, it was tough as hell."

"It was, but we made it through," I said. "Do you remember our first drug-bust simulation when Eric got shot in the nuts by that paintball?"

Neil winced before he burst out laughing. "Yeah, I do. Do you know he maintains that's why all three of his kids have blue eyes?"

I laughed. "I've heard him talk about it. Everyone has. He tells that story every time he's had a few."

For the rest of our meal, we reminisced a bit more, and by the time my container was empty, I was so full that my body ached and I groaned. "I need to go get some fresh air, or I'm going to explode. Want to take a quick walk?"

He patted his flat stomach and shook his head at me. "Nah, I'm good. I'll wait here. The sorority president I met the other night just texted me. There are a few things I'd like to say to her you might not want to hear, so I'll hang back."

"Thanks for the warning." I got up and shook my head at him. "These young girls are going to get you in trouble, man. Make it quick, though. I won't be gone long."

He gave me a quick salute, then pulled his phone out of his pocket and I left. When I got outside, I drifted absently toward the training course, thinking about those notes I'd been making. I still had to go finish up so I could include them in my daily report, but I was still stuck on trying to come up with a better, more official way of saying *Fucking Useless*.

These reports were mostly just to have a log of the training session as a whole. Hardly anyone ever read them except for the instructors ourselves when we started getting to the end, but just in case, I didn't think I could rate half the damn group as *Fucking Useless*.

As I got closer to the course, I noticed a flash of movement near the wall and narrowed my eyes, upping my pace as I moved closer to see what was going on. When I got close enough, my jaw slackened when I saw that the movement was Layla trying to get over it.

I watched her try, fail, get up, and try again, and my head was shaking

when I realized she had no shot if she kept approaching it like that. I didn't go over to give her any pointers, but she was going to be a hard one to crack.

Her body was bound to be killing her after the day we'd had and yet, here she was, going at it just as hard as she had this morning. She needed to get some rest, though. They all did. We had time to get them to the point of completing this course.

Rome hadn't been built in a day and she wasn't going to conquer the most challenging obstacle of them all—for her anyway—in that amount of time either. As I headed back inside, I made sure Neil would hear my footsteps by smacking my feet against the tile, and sure enough, as I walked into my office, he'd just ended his call.

His cheeks were a little flushed and his pupils were bigger than usual, but I ignored it. "There's a cadet on my course. Get her off for me and show her to her bunk, won't you?"

"Fine, but she's not who I want to be getting off, and I definitely don't want to do it for you." He winked as he stood up, then chuckled at whatever horrified expression I had on my face as he left.

Once he was gone, I wondered why I hadn't told him the cadet in question was Layla Perkins. I knew he'd have been hard on her if I'd told him, and since her father had told me to do just that, I should've let him know who she was, but I hadn't.

As I sank down into my chair to finish those notes, I sighed. Ron's daughter was giving me a headache and the worst thing of all was that it wasn't just the head with my brain in it that was aching. I wanted that girl, and the more I learned about her, the more I wanted her.

While I knew it was probably just because I couldn't have her, I couldn't get her out of my head. Which meant it didn't matter why I wanted her. It only mattered that I did—and that there didn't seem to be a damned thing I could do about it.

LAYLA

“**S**hit,” Hanna moaned as we trudged into the mess hall for lunch. “How it is only noon? It feels like we’ve been up for weeks.”

My muscles protested every step I took, and my arms trembled a little when I raised them to take a tray off the stack. “You’re telling me. Today has been brutal.”

“Just today?” She scoffed as we moved down the line to get our food. “Every day here has been brutal. I have absolutely no idea why I’m still here. I should just quit.”

“No, hey. Don’t talk like that,” I said softly. “I know you’re getting worn down. We all are, but it’s going to start getting better any day now.”

“No, it’s not,” she argued, rolling her eyes as she glanced at the table with the instructors sitting at it. “They’re sadists. Serial killers in disguise, I swear. How many people do you think have died because of them?”

“During training?” My eyebrows twitched. “None? Not because of them, anyway. They’re only trying to separate the wheat from the chaff and make us the best we can be. We’re going to have to be the best if we’re going to be in this line of work.”

“Yeah, well, I’m starting to think this really isn’t for me. I mean, I’ve been pissed at my parents for forcing me into it all along, but I still thought I’d graduate just to show them I could, you know? Plus, it’s not a bad career and I’m stupid. I’ve messed up all my other prospects, so I figured that I might be able to do this, but I’m not so sure anymore.”

The raw honesty in her voice and vulnerability in her eyes made me realize just how beaten down she was. Hanna didn’t get like this. Nine times

out of ten, she deflected talking about real feelings with humor, and the tenth time, when she was getting real, it was usually because she was angry at someone.

She didn't let her guard down like this, and worry twisted my gut as we made our way over to the table we'd sort of claimed as our own. Melanie had befriended a few of the guys, so she hardly ever sat with us at mealtimes, and since it was only Hanna and me, our table was a small square one near the wall.

Today, I was thankful for that. It meant we'd have some privacy to talk while we ate, and it sounded like she desperately needed it if she was going to make it through this afternoon. With the way she was feeling right now, I wouldn't be surprised if she quit just as soon as Santiago told us what our assignment for the afternoon was going to be.

"Look, I know it's been hard," I said as we sat down. "You have to stick around, though. I can't do this without you, and besides, it really is a good career. You're not wrong about that. I know it wasn't your choice and that you wouldn't have been here at all if it had been up to you, but you're still here now. That's not an accident. It's not a mistake. You're here because this is where you're meant to be."

"I don't know anymore, Layla," she murmured with a strangely hollow look in her eyes. "I've got as much of a point to prove to my parents as you do, if not more, but at what point does it stop being worth it? I'm the wild child. I get that. My parents thought that this would help teach me discipline and respect, and it has, but when is enough enough?"

"Enough is enough when you say it is. Whether that's on graduation day or forty years from now at your retirement party, that's up to you, but you can't quit now. Look at how far you've come. The first few days were always going to be the toughest. Once they realize that they've only got those of us who are serious left, it'll get easier."

"You're fooling yourself if you think that's true," she said miserably. "It's only going to get harder. They're only going to get tougher. If you think they're going to ease up on us when we get closer to the end of our training, you're wrong. They're only going to let the best of the best graduate, and if that's separating the wheat from the chaff, then I'm chaff. I'm always chaff."

"No, you're not," I said firmly, waiting until she looked at me before I continued. "It doesn't even matter if you do end up quitting, you're not chaff. You're not going to quit, though. I know you, and I know you can do this."

Day by day, we'll get through it. Together. Okay?"

She sniffed, swiping her fingers below her eyes as she nodded. "Yeah, okay. Day by day. I'm not making any promises, though. Except that I won't quit today. I won't because I don't want to, but I also honestly don't know how much more of this I can take."

"Day by day," I repeated gently, relieved that she seemed to be over the hump but still concerned about her frame of mind. *Maybe I should talk to Santiago. Ask him for advice on how to get her through or beg him to take it easy on her for a day or two.*

I knew he'd probably laugh me right out of his office if I tried, but he was our instructor. As much as he seemed to hate me, surely he actually wanted us to succeed if we were right for this, and Hanna was right for it.

She just needed time to realize it. Time she wasn't going to get if she bailed now.

"How're we doing over here, ladies?" Bruce, one of Jonathan's friends, smirked as he came to stand next to our table. "You guys look beat. Why don't you come back to my dorm for the rest of the lunch hour and I'll massage your tired muscles for you?"

"No, thank you," I said politely, glancing at Hanna and staring until she did the same.

Bruce didn't give up, though, leering at us as he tried again. "Come on, girls. Don't be like that. We're supposed to help each other out, right? I'm offering to do that for you. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."

"Seriously, Bruce, back off," I said as I looked up at him. "We're not here for that."

He snorted. "The fuck else are you here for? Get real, Perkins. It's not like you're going to get through this program. If you didn't come to warm a few cocks, why are you even wasting your time?"

"Excuse me?" I arched a brow at him. "You're a demeaning, bullying sack of shit. If you think that's going to get one of us in bed with you, you're dead wrong."

"You're going to be in bed with me sooner or later, sweetheart. That's the only thing you're good for, anyway. Haven't you been paying attention? Cortez doesn't think you're going to make it, either. Mel, maybe, but she's more man than most of the guys here. You two? I don't think so. You're going to be barracks bunnies at best."

When he moved to put his hand on my shoulder, Santiago appeared out of

nowhere and grabbed his wrist, wrenching it away from me and jerking it up behind his back. Bruce yelped, his face contorting in pain as the blood drained out of his cheeks when he saw who was holding him.

“You,” Santiago snapped right in his face. “Come with me.”

Still holding on to the other cadet, our instructor turned and barked out a sharp command that rang through the mess hall. “Cadets, you’re with me. Lunch is over. Let’s go.”

Even though most of us hadn’t even started on our lunch, no one argued as we got up and followed him outside. Santiago frog-marched Bruce out ahead of him, his jaw tight and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Once we reached the field where we usually got together for PT, our instructor roughly let go of Bruce and shoved him away from himself as if he was disgusted about having touched him at all. “Stay put,” he barked before spinning to face the rest of us.

“Line up, cadets,” he commanded. “One long line today. I want you all to get a front row seat to what happens when you disregard my direct orders.”

Dread sank like a stone until it settled at the pit of my stomach. Not that I felt sorry for Bruce. He was an asshole who deserved everything he was about to get, but I had a feeling we were about to see a side of Santiago that Hanna didn’t need to see today.

On the other hand, maybe the fact that our instructor was standing up for us after what Bruce had said would help a bit. Either way, I had zero say in what was about to happen—even if I had had it handled back there.

Once we were standing in one solid, long line, Santiago—or Master Chief Cortez, rather—turned back to Bruce. Those blue eyes spat fire at the guy as he barked out his next command. “Repeat what you were saying to these girls. Right now. Repeat it!”

“I, uh,” he stammered, eyes hitting the dirt as his teeth ground together. Then with his cheeks flooding with heat, he pulled back his shoulders and looked back up. “I told them that I’d scratch their backs if they scratched mine.”

“What else?” Santiago—*I mean Master Chief Cortez*—demanded.

Bruce smirked when his eyes clashed with Jonathan’s. “I said that they were only good for warming our cocks and that they were going to end up as barracks bunnies anyway.”

Cortez nodded sharply. “That’s about the gist of it. Let me show you how I feel about males treating females this way. Those women are your

coworkers. Or at least, they will be. One day, you might have the privilege of working alongside them and there's a very good chance that at some point, one of them is going to save your ass. You will show them the respect that demands, or you won't be here at all."

As he glanced at me, he barked at Bruce. "You will run and the class will wait until you quit or until sunset."

"Are you crazy?" Bruce glared at him. "It's barely noon, bro. No way I can run until the sun sets."

"I am *not* your *bro*," Santiago ground out. "If you can't run until then, then you can quit. It's all the same to me, but you will not treat your fellow cadets that way and get away with it. Not on my watch."

When I realized he was serious, I did a double take—right along with most of my classmates. Bruce wasn't wrong. No one would be able to run constantly, in this heat, for that amount of time, which meant that he was going to wind up quitting.

Santiago didn't seem to care, though. Instead, he brought his whistle to his lips, folded his arms, and inclined his head toward the ground to show Bruce to get going as the sharp shriek of his whistle pierced the air.

Bruce stared at him for another beat, but then he shook his head and took off. As he did, Santiago's gaze moved back to mine, but it was only for a beat before he looked away again. Deep down, though, I was sure he was doing this for me. That this was his way of defending my honor.

Why does he care so much?

I didn't know, but he sure did seem to. Contrary to what I'd been expecting, he didn't suddenly call Bruce back. He didn't tell him that this was just a warning for what would happen next time.

Instead, he just made us watch as Bruce kept running. And running. And running.

In the end, he didn't make it to sundown, though. He gave it a good shot, but after two and a half solid hours of only pausing to drink some water every now and then, he marched up to Santiago and quit right there in front of the rest of us.

"You win," Bruce seethed quietly, his face blood red and dripping with sweat. "Take the chicks over me, that's fine, but you're going to be sorry when you realize what you lost here today."

As he turned and stormed away, Santiago's expression remained stoic. There was no flash of victory, fear, or disappointment in his gaze as he

looked back at us. “The same fate awaits anyone who tries to cross the line with the women. I told you the first time you met me that you would have to answer to me if you pulled this shit, and now you know what that looks like. Think carefully before you open your mouths, gentlemen. The same goes for you, ladies. This is the Coast Guard, not a reality dating show. If any of you are still planning on confusing the two, now is the time to leave.”

Once again, no one took him up on his offer, and after giving us a minute to consider, he gave us a curt nod. “Dismissed. Get some rest tonight. I’ll see you bright and early first thing tomorrow morning.”

SANTIAGO

Today had gone seriously sideways. It wasn't the first time I'd taken on a male cadet for hitting on a female, but it was the first time I'd let it go that far. In the past, I'd stopped them before they'd actually quit.

As I shook my head at myself for the umpteenth time since it had happened, I decided to shut it down for the day. It was late and I'd been raking myself over the coals mentally for hours. What was done was done, and to be fair, I had warned them.

More than that, those guys I'd had to teach a lesson to in the past hadn't gone quite as far as Bruce had. It was one thing to hit on a fellow cadet, it was another to call them a cock warmer and tell them that their only future if they made it through was to be a barracks bunny.

I hadn't even heard that term used in reference to a coast guard employee before, but that didn't matter. We'd all known what he meant and it'd been beyond demeaning.

Diane, a Chief Petty Officer who had come up just after me, had even stopped by my office earlier today to congratulate me for what I'd done. It wasn't that I was feeling guilty about it, but I was uncertain about my motivation for it.

As much as I wouldn't have let him talk about any woman that way, in this particular instance, the fact that he'd been saying it to Layla Perkins had made me see red. She was worth ten of that asshole.

Whatever it had been, I reached out and turned off the computer in my office. I needed to get some sleep, or I was going to be as useless tomorrow morning as they were.

As I walked outside, however, a flash of movement at the wall caught my attention again, and I frowned as I looked around, but there was no one out here to send to get whoever it was back to their bunk. Sighing as I realized I was going to have to do it myself this time, I slid my thumbs into my pockets and walked over.

Fuck my life. Does it really have to be her? Again?

“Perkins,” I said just as she huffed out a frustrated breath. “What are you doing out here so late?”

Instead of being the dick I had been to her so far, the question was sincere this time. Her eyes widened as she spun around, her ponytail messy from having been at it for so long. Tendrils of hair had escaped from the tie and framed her gorgeous, heart-shaped face, and not even the sheen of sweat on her brow was putting me off right now.

“I’m going to make it over this wall,” she said, her voice quiet but determined. Her eyes were bright too, instead of being as bleary as I’d have expected them to be. “Is it against the rules to be out here at this time of night?”

I shook my head, even allowing a tiny grin to touch just the very corners of my lips. “It’s not against the rules, but it is against common sense. You do realize that you’ve only got about seven hours to sleep, get ready, and meet me out here again, don’t you?”

“I do.” Her gaze locked on mine, those green eyes turning soft for the first time ever when they were focused on me. “Thank you for what you did in the mess hall today. I had it under control, but I appreciate you standing up for me like that.”

Fuck, so she knows I did it for her. I didn’t want to acknowledge that part of what she’d said, though. I’d be toeing a fine line if she found out I really had done it for her, and I’d literally just made someone quit for crossing said line.

I couldn’t very well go doing it myself just a few hours later. In an effort to avoid the obvious, I motioned at the wall. “You’ve got weeks left to master it. There’s no reason to work yourself to death trying to get there tonight.”

Her shoulders slumped, but her eyes remained steady on mine. “I plan on working on it every spare minute I’ve got until I can do it every time I try. I will not let this thing beat me. I can’t.”

“With that attitude, it won’t beat you, but you need to get your rest. If you don’t, it might not even end up being this that defeats you. It’ll be something

small that you would otherwise have been able to do.”

To my surprise, a small smile touched the very corners of her lips in turn. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you care about whether I make it or not. Of course, I do know better, so I’m not saying it, but you don’t have to worry about me. As long as I get about four hours of sleep, I’m good.”

I waved a hand in the vague direction of the city. “Maybe that’s true out there, but here? Here, you should try to get at least six.”

I didn’t bother telling her that I’d always only needed four myself. She lifted a pointed eyebrow at me, though, like she knew it even if I hadn’t said it. “Well, thankfully, you just told me that I still have about seven left, so I’m still good.”

“It’s just a wall,” I said, once again trying to sound nonchalant about it. “There’s more than enough time left during daylight hours to work on it. Take it from me, cadet. You don’t want to burn out on this so soon after we started.”

“I won’t,” she promised almost sweetly, then turned back to the wall. “I’ll just do a few more minutes for tonight, and then I’ll head back to my bunk.”

“Okay,” I agreed, raising my hands as I started backing away from her. “Just see to it that you’re not dead on your feet in the morning. I’m not going to take it easy on you if you’re a zombie just because I know why you stayed up so late.”

“I know. It’s not just a wall to me, though. It’s a challenge and it’s one that’s standing between me and making my dreams come true. I refuse to let it win.”

“Admirable,” I said. “Naïve but admirable. Get back to your bunk, Perkins. I’ll see you at oh-four-hundred.”

“See you then, sir.”

As I finally turned and walked away, I was not ignorant to the fact that hearing her call me *sir* in that sweet tone of voice had made my dick wake up. It was absolutely ridiculous. People had been calling me that for years now, and it’d never had that kind of effect on me before.

It simply was what people called me, but with her? In this moment? It was a damned good thing that I’d already been turning to leave her alone to work on that wall. If not, there was every chance that I might’ve pushed her up against it instead of trying to help her get over it.

Only if she wanted me to, of course, but I couldn’t find out if she did. *God forbid, I find out that she’d enjoy it as much as I did.*

My fingers curled into fists at my sides as I turned the corner. I really needed to get over this silly little infatuation I had with Ron's daughter. It didn't matter if everything about her got under my skin in a way no one else ever had before.

I'd probably just been on the Station for too long. I needed to get out. To get off. To go grab a beer with Neil and do whatever it took to get little Perkins off my mind. I didn't know when I was going to get a chance to do any of that, but I needed to make time—and I needed to do it soon.

Before I screwed up my entire damn life just because of my inability to stop thinking about Layla Perkins, her curves, and her mind. *Yeah, I really need to get out. Soon. Before I do something we're both going to regret for the rest of our lives, like find out if her lips are really as sweet as I think they are.*

LAYLA

“Hanna,” I whispered urgently as I shook her shoulder. “Hanna, wake up. We’ve got to go.”

“Huh?” she grunted, moaning as she rolled over and buried her face in her pillow. “Is it four already?”

“No, it’s three thirty, but I want to get there early. Be quiet, or you’re going to wake Mel.”

Hanna frowned before she rolled onto her back and finally blinked eyes open. “Why the hell are you waking me up before Cortez has even started barking yet?”

“I want to get to the PT course first this morning,” I whispered as I straightened up now that she was properly awake. “Come on. Let’s get dressed.”

She let out a quiet groan but nodded before sitting up and rubbing her eyes. “What time did you even get in last night?”

“Late, but it doesn’t matter. I’m up now and I’m all ready to go.”

Hanna frowned at me again, but then she shrugged, yawned, and stood up. After she hurriedly got dressed, we took off and arrived at the PT course first. I beamed at her, taking in big breaths of the early morning air.

“How are you feeling today? I think it’s going to be a good one. I don’t know why. I’m just feeling really refreshed.”

She yawned, but finally, she gave me a smile once she relaxed again. “I’m feeling better too. Call me crazy, but I’m in a better mood after Cortez did what he did for us yesterday. At least it means he’s not completely against us.”

I nodded, not telling her that I was pretty sure he'd done it for *me* and not for *us*. "Yeah, maybe he's not such a bad guy after all, or maybe he just really hated Bruce."

Hanna chuckled, finally looking more awake now that we'd been out here for a few minutes. "That's not impossible, but at least he's gone. I hope the rest of Jonathan's crew gets the boot next. They're all insufferable pricks."

"They are, but they're good, too. I wouldn't count on the rest of them going the way Bruce did. They're too smart to make the same mistake he did, and unfortunately, I think his departure is going to keep them in line. They've seen now that being good doesn't make you invincible or indispensable around here."

She groaned but nodded her agreement. "True, but they're still assholes. Do you think this means Cortez is on our side, though?"

I shook my head fast, leaning in just in case he was already here and lurking in the shadows somewhere. He'd already let me get away with calling him a prick once. After that display of his authority yesterday, I wasn't about to get caught out again.

"If anything, I think he's going to be more of a dick today than ever. Let's just hope it's not to us, but I'm still going to watch my back today and I suggest you do the same. He'll be trying to prove to the guys that he's not going to take it easy on us. I don't think he's not on our side, but I also don't think he's not on theirs."

She heaved out a breath but nodded again. "You might be right. I'll watch my back, too. It was nice of him to deal so swiftly and decisively with Bruce, but he's got to know the guys are going to be watching him closely. He won't want them to think he's more on our side than theirs."

Before I could respond, I heard his voice calling from the dorms and Hanna and I immediately stepped into formation. If he'd woken up the others, he would be coming in our direction any moment now.

Less than a minute later, he marched around the edge of the building, then paused when he saw us already waiting. I swore I saw him smile, but when I blinked, it was gone and his expression was back to being as stoic as ever as he walked up to us with his hands folded behind his back.

"Good morning, cadets. This is a surprise. I didn't think I'd ever see the day that you two got out here first." His eyes lingered on mine for just a second longer than he'd looked at Hanna, and I knew it was because he was thinking about me having been out here so late last night.

Our brief encounter before he'd left me to it had been mind-boggling. I didn't know if it had been because of the hour or because we were alone, but he'd been *nice* to me. Like, genuinely nice. Santiago the Dick must already have gone to sleep because the man I'd spoken to hadn't sounded like he'd ever even met that guy.

It'd been disconcerting to say the least, and for just a minute after I'd woken up, I'd wondered if it'd been a dream. As I'd shaken off the last remnants of sleep, I knew that it hadn't been, but it still felt that way. Hell, I had even seen a smile from him. *Who knew his mouth was even capable of moving that way?*

As I stared at him now, I wondered if he was thinking about the same thing I was, but then I realized he was still looking at us quizzically. *Oh, right. We're early.*

"We're turning over a new leaf," Hanna said brightly at my side. "From now on—"

"You're in formation, cadet," he said, cutting her off. "There's no talking when you're in formation."

She sighed but nodded and mimed zipping her lips, but as soon as his gaze swung in the direction of the dorms when the first voices started filtering over to us from there, she rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out at the back of his head. I stifled a giggle, looking down and straightening up when the slight sound that escaped me drew his attention my way again.

Hanna was eyeballing the ground suddenly too, but as I glanced up to see if he was still looking at us, my gaze landed squarely on his. It was still pretty dark and I couldn't tell for sure, but I was almost certain I saw humor dancing in the depth of those blue eyes before he gave his head a little shake and turned away again.

Soon enough, the rest of the cadets had joined us, and Santiago—who my head was now flat out refusing to think about as Master Chief Cortez—lifted that infernal whistle to his lips. Before he blew it, he looked at all of us.

"Right, you know the drill by now. Groups of four. On my whistle. Let's get started." And then he blew it.

Jonathan and his boys—minus Bruce—took off with Jameson now in Bruce's spot with them. We'd fallen into a sort of routine about who went when, and everyone just shuffled into their groups and fell in behind the people they usually went after.

As the girls and I hit the course with some other guy now in Jameson's

spot with us, I dove onto the sand and made quick work of the first bit. A lot of the course was becoming easier to navigate now that we'd done it so many times.

Some of it was even becoming second nature to me. The crawling, for instance, flew by at this point and even the tires seemed to be becoming lighter. After the tires were the wooden poles that acted as balance beams. They were angled upward, and we had to jump off the end.

That first day, it'd taken me a few tries to stop slipping off the beam and I'd hesitated before I'd leaped off the end, but now, I knew exactly how to hold my feet so I didn't slip and I was no longer cautious of the drop at the end.

It felt so damn good to know I was getting better, but then the wall rose up ahead of me and defeat flowed into my veins. No matter what I did, that thing was my nemesis and none of the hours I'd put in so far were paying off.

As I got to it, Santiago pointed around the edge. "Come on, Perkins. Just go around it."

"Fuck that," I spat, moving back before I made a run for it. I pushed off the ground at the exact spot I'd seen so many others do it, and this time, I managed to grasp the top. A sense of victory shot through me, but then my fingertips started slipping.

I just wasn't strong enough to get myself up and over, and as I dropped back to the ground, a roar tore out of me. "Fuck!"

Landing in a heap on the ground, I looked up when a hand appeared in front of my face. "This is not the place to wallow in your misery, Perkins. Get up."

I did what Santiago told me to do, but I swatted his hand out the way. As I walked around the wall, he piped up behind me. "Look at that. I didn't think you were such a quitter."

A heavy breath fell out of me. *There really is no winning with this guy.*

As more and more cadets finished, either by going over the wall or around it, I watched closely what the successful people were doing. The trouble was that they were all guys. Mel and Hanna didn't even try, but I'd seen Mel out here practicing with some of her friends when we had some free time.

She was getting close, but she hadn't managed it yet. The last guy to make it over wasn't much taller than me, but he did it with the ease and grace of a ballerina who had mastered this move in her childhood years.

I hadn't spoken to the guy before, but I was pretty sure his name was Matt Evans. After Santiago dismissed us and told us to go get some breakfast, I hurried forward to fall into step beside him. "Matt?"

He jerked his head toward me, then all but froze as his gaze darted back like he was trying to make sure Santiago wasn't in ear shot. "What do you want, Perkins?"

"I need your help," I said, then gestured back at the course when he frowned at me. "With the wall. I couldn't help notice how easy you make it look, but I have no idea how you're doing it. If you could just—"

His head was shaking before I'd even finished talking. Then he looked around again before flashing me an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Perkins, but I'm not facing the same fate as Bruce did. You're on your own. Good luck."

With that, he started walking faster in a clear attempt at getting away from me, and I wanted to rip my hair out of my damn head. He hadn't been hitting on me or saying derogatory things. It wasn't like he was going to go the same way Bruce had just for talking to me.

He'd made himself pretty clear, though. He was staying far, far away from me, which meant I really was on my own. I wasn't blind. I'd been seeing the wary looks that had been thrown my way all morning. The guys were afraid of being seen with me now, and regardless of how idiotic it was, I doubted any of them were going to change their minds.

Meanwhile, the only two other girls couldn't get over themselves yet, so I couldn't exactly ask them for help. As the realization sank in, panic tightened my chest.

I needed help, but there was no one to get it from. *How the hell am I going to do this?*

Santiago's words from the night before replayed in my head, but it didn't matter that I still had time to master it. It'd been days, and I was no closer than I had been that very first morning. At this rate, I could have years and I still wouldn't be able to do it.

As I swallowed past the sudden lump that had appeared in my throat, I closed my eyes and tried to push back the desperation rising from deep within me. I had to figure out how to scale that wall or I was out of here.

Something had to give, and if it didn't, I was as good as gone. Right now, I felt like I might as well hand the pen to Santiago myself for him to sign my papers. Because I wasn't getting over that wall by myself and there wasn't a single person here who could help me.

SANTIAGO

As we walked up to the training pool, I heard the murmurs starting up behind me. I wasn't surprised, though. The cadets usually got either excited or nervous—sometimes both—when we reached this part of the program.

At this point, it was usually becoming a little more real, but what they didn't know just yet was that it was also about to become so much more intense. This wasn't just about fitness, stamina, or endurance anymore. We were now getting to the meat of the thing, and if they thought the obstacle course was hard, then they had no idea what they were in for today.

Several of the other instructors were standing around the pool, but while they nodded at me, no one said anything as I led the cadets to the edge. Once they were all gathered around me, I nodded.

“Okay, guys. As you know, this is our first time doing any training in the pool, so before we get started, I'm going to need you to listen up.”

An apprehensive silence fell over them as they eyed the equipment surrounding the pool. It was an intimidating sight, though. I knew that much for a fact.

Once they'd finished taking a cursory look around and brought their attention back to me, I took them through the basic safety rules. Thankfully, they all kept their mouths shut and heard me out. By the time I was done explaining the dangers of the pool, a few of them were looking more at ease.

No doubt that would change as soon as I got to the part where I told them what our exercise here was going to be. Before we got there, however, I paused. “Anyone have any questions?”

One cadet put up his hand, then inclined his head toward the other instructors. “What are they doing here?”

“They’re here as an added safety measure,” I said, using the question as a springboard into explaining the first underwater exercise. “Today, we’re going to have a simulation of a helicopter crashing into the water.”

Several faces fell to the ground, but I wasn’t done yet. “How this is going to work is as follows. You see that tarp over there?”

They looked toward where I was pointing, and once I saw a few of them nod, I grinned. “Underneath it is our helicopter. It’s a highly specialized piece of equipment designed for us to run the exact kind of simulation we’re going to be doing here today. I can also tell you from experience that it’s as close as you’re going to get to the real thing.”

Although several of them paled, I wasn’t deterred. As dangerous and perhaps unhinged as it was, this happened to be one of my favorite parts of the training. “You are going to be buckled in and the simulated helicopter will be submerged. Once your heads go underwater, you will count to ten. There’s also a screen at the front that will be counting you down in case you lose it. When your time is up, you will unbuckle and get out. Simple as that.”

When I was done, I saw the concern on some of the cadets’ faces, Hanna’s included. Releasing a long breath, I made eye contact with all the scared-looking ones and nodded. “People are going to quit today. This is not for the faint of heart. We’re not going to be putting you in gently or helping you clear the wreckage in any way.”

As I said it, I glanced at Layla, wondering how she was feeling about all of this. Her face was stone, though, and she sure looked ready. On the other hand, this was a pretty infamous simulation. One we’d been running since way before Ron’s time.

In those days, the equipment hadn’t been nearly as sleek or sophisticated as it was now, but the principles remained the same. Since I’d heard Ron’s stories about this particular exercise so many times, I had no doubt that Layla had grown up with them.

She’d have known this was coming, and as I glanced at her again, I realized she didn’t even just look ready. She looked excited.

“Now getting back to your question.” I turned my eyes on the guy who’d asked about the other instructors. “Obviously, I’ll be here at all times, but they’re going to be helping out today as well. Some of us will be on the surface while others will be underwater. If it looks like anyone is in real

danger, we'll pull you out. If you see one of us coming toward you and for some reason, you don't actually want or need our help, give us any signal to back off and we'll do it. Within reason. If we make a judgment call that you are, in fact, in trouble, we're pulling you out whether you want us to or not."

A few panicked looks were exchanged this time around, and I clapped my hands to get their attention back on me. "We're doing this in groups of four. This next part is crucial. If you see someone in your group freaking out, you signal one of us and that's final. Do not approach the person who's struggling. You will not have the proper equipment to help them, nor do you have the proper training yet. If you interfere or waste time, you'll only make it worse."

With that, I nodded to the three instructors who would be going underwater. They'd been sitting on the edge with most of their gear already on, and at my nod, they lifted their masks into place, popped their air supplies into their mouths, and rolled in.

Once their bubbles had dissipated, I knew they were in place. Turning back to the cadets, I spread my arms out to my sides. "Who's first?"

Jonathan Hayes, Jameson Gray, and Jonathan's two remaining friends stepped up, but I'd expected it to be them. Drew, one of the surface instructors, yanked the tarp off our helicopter and I heard the collective breath that was sucked in when the cadets got their first real look at it.

It was pretty much a helicopter, complete with rotors—which were blunt and wouldn't be spinning—and without a nose or tail. Inside it, there were only the four seats, but other than that, it was the real thing.

"Gear up," I said to the first group. "You've got three minutes to get your gear on and your asses in that simulator or it's going in without you."

On my whistle, they took off toward the lockers, some of them already stripping out of their workout gear as they ran. Unsurprisingly with this group, they all made it into the simulator on time and they were buckled in when the mechanical arm started lifting the cylinder into the air.

But this was where things usually got interesting. As I'd told them, we wouldn't be submerging them gently. This was supposed to be a simulation of a helicopter *crash*, not a nice soft water landing. And a crash was what they got.

The thing about helicopter crashes was that it wasn't a smooth ride before you hit the water. You didn't get your feet wet with a nice clear head and knowing exactly what was going on. It was a bumpy ride from beginning to

end, and that was what we gave them.

As soon as the hydraulics started whining, the cylinder started shaking. Shaking, rolling, bucking—basically imitating all the information we had from the black boxes of one of the choppers that had actually gone down. The engineers who had designed this thing had dug deep, studying hundreds of crashes before they eventually did their thing.

We had a program that helped us choose the *intensity* of the crash, and even though we always started on easy, it still wasn't a fun time. While the cylinder rattled its way to the water, I glanced back at the other cadets. If any group was going to make it, it was this one.

I wasn't particularly concerned about them, but just in case, I was right here. Since they weren't even in the water yet, though, it was safe enough for me to check out the reaction of the others to what might have come as a surprise twist to some.

Layla seemed more curious than worried, and her lips even had a slight upward tilt to them. Obviously, she'd been expecting the jarring movements of the helicopter. The only other cadet who didn't seem too worried was Evans.

I'd been watching him, though. He was small, sturdy, and stoic, but outside of that time when he'd politely turned down Layla's request for help, he was a team player. He wasn't making friends, but he wasn't making any enemies either.

While he'd started out as decidedly middle of the pack, he was standing out more and more with each exercise. He was one of those silent types who was definitely going to make it, and today, I was putting him in a group with Layla and Hanna.

For starters, I was doing it because respecting them didn't only mean keeping your words respectful and your dick in your pants. It also meant treating them like you would any other capable coworker. Second, Hanna was getting paler and paler, and when the helicopter dropped into the pool, she looked like she was about to puke.

Layla needed someone else who knew what they were doing in that cylinder with her and it wasn't only her I was doing it for, either. I'd already switched up a few other groups in my head where I suspected one or more of the usual suspects would be in trouble.

Group one finished the simulation safely and without incident, but the next couple of groups didn't do quite as well. As time went on, more and

more of the cadets started freaking out and had to be pulled out of the water by the instructors at the bottom. They were handed off to those of us at the surface and more than one of them was sobbing as they wrapped the offered towels around themselves.

After I announced the next groups, one of the cadets stepped forward and shook his head. “Respectfully, sir, I quit.”

“On the spot? Before you’ve even been in a simulator?”

His jaw tightened as he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Go pack your bags and meet me in my office at lunchtime. We’ll get your paperwork done.”

As he left, the tension in the air ratcheted up another few notches. I could practically taste it at this point, and by the time I saw Layla strapping in, even I was on edge. This was going to be a big moment for her.

I just hope she can do this. If she was one of those who freaked out, she’d have bigger problems than the wall—and I’d have to call Ron to tell him about it. Generally, the people who struggled with this exercise had a much higher chance of falling out from here on out.

If that was about to happen with his daughter, I needed to warn him. And then I needed to figure out just why the hell I was hoping so hard that she was going to get through this with flying colors.

LAYLA

Confidence surged through me as we strapped in. My dad had told me so many stories about this exercise that I'd honestly been looking forward to it. I'd also read up about it as much as I could. I'd studied the design and I'd watched every show or video clip in which a simulation similar to this one took place.

In short, I was ready for this. I knew exactly what to do and exactly when to do it, and I couldn't wait to get started.

In the seat behind me, however, Hanna seemed to be hyperventilating. I twisted around as best I could and offered her a smile through the gap between our seats. "Deep breaths, Meeks. We've got this. We can do this."

"No, I can't," she squeaked, her eyes wide as an instructor checked her safety belt. "He didn't tell us how to get out. We're going to drown in this fucking thing."

"No, we're not," I said calmly. "We're just going to get shaken around a bit and then, once we're in the water, you're going to unlatch your safety belt and follow me out the window, okay?"

"It's not that easy." She glared at me. Fear, so potent that it made me feel it deep inside my chest, swam around in those eyes. "This isn't right, Layla. It's not. They're going to kill us."

"The instructors are right here," I said soothingly. "They're all in position. You've seen them pulling out everyone who didn't manage to get free by themselves. You're going to be fine. Santiago is timing everything. If it takes too long for someone to come up, he'll get you out."

"He won't," she spat. "He's not going get his hair wet for us."

“He will,” I said, injecting the confidence I felt all the way to my soul into my voice. “His hair is short enough to dry real fast. I doubt he’s worried about it. Okay? Just take a deep breath. They’re about to start lifting us up.”

As a kid, I used to love those simulator rides at theme parks and arcades. When I watched the instructor who had helped us get strapped in walk over to the control pad, I even grinned—only after I’d turned away from Hanna, though.

Matt caught the corner of my eye, flashed me a grin of his own, and gave me a tight nod. Since it was as close to camaraderie as I’d gotten from him, I smiled and took it as a good sign.

Then we were off, and almost immediately, the helicopter canted sharply to the side. I’d been prepared for it, though, having noticed it do it every time so far. As we rocked and shook our way to the pool, exhilaration shot through me. *This is awesome!*

Matt was white-knuckling the armrests, but I noticed that he was smiling as well. We paused briefly as the arm held us right over the center of the pool. Then I heard a slight click as we were released. My stomach bottomed out as we dropped through the air, landing in the water with a loud crash.

A lot faster than I thought it would feel, we were completely submerged and I started counting in my head. I’d taken a huge breath just before we’d gone under, so I wasn’t too concerned about running out of air at this point.

Just in case, I watched the large, red digital numbers counting down from ten. Then I unbuckled at the same time that Matt started moving. He got free really fast and even turned to wave at me before he started kicking at the window on his side of the fake chopper.

It was chaos in here. There were bubbles everywhere and weird creaking noises, but I was still okay. As I saw another foot kick past me, I realized the other cadet had gotten free as well. My safety belt was a tiny bit jammed, but I managed to get out quickly.

When I reached the door, however, I turned back in an attempt to see Hanna. Horror chilled my blood when I realized she wasn’t moving. Her eyes were wide open and there was a stream of bubbles coming out of her, so she hadn’t died, but she was definitely frozen.

Even though I was underwater, I shrieked, hurriedly looking around for the instructor who was supposed to be on this side of the pool, but there was no one there. I wasn’t quite sure why, but the point was that there was no one here to help my friend.

Santiago had given us a direct order to let them know if someone was in trouble but to remain focused on our own tasks. However, I was running out of breath and I knew Hanna would be too. By the time I managed to get out, up, and to alert them, and then adding the extra time it would take someone else to get to her, it was possible that she'd have passed out.

Making a decision on the fly to disregard his order, I swam back and shook her shoulders, so relieved when she blinked at me that I nearly forgot I was underwater and running out of air. Motioning to her safety belt, I took her hand off the buckle and then realized why she'd seized up.

The mechanism was completely jammed. Whether it was by design or from age, I didn't know, but it didn't really matter. My friend was stuck and there was still no instructor in sight to help us.

Desperately struggling with it, I tugged, pulled at the release, and tried to wind it back, but nothing worked. Eventually, I settled on yanking on her hips and letting her know that she was going to have to wriggle out.

We managed to get her free. As I followed her to the door, she swam out but I suddenly stopped moving. I kicked again, but I was stuck on something. My lungs were burning as panic weaved through me, knitting my organs together with the sheer, overwhelming intensity of it.

Instead of waving around and expending unnecessary energy, I tried to calm myself down and to twist around to see what I'd gotten stuck on. I was too anxious, though. Too close to running out of air and blacking out to think clearly.

The harder I tugged at my foot without it coming free, the more panicked I got. Although I tried, I couldn't bend over fully to see what I was stuck on, and as black spots started dancing along the edges of vision, I knew I was screwed.

The next thing I knew, however, Santiago was there. Those blue eyes rounded when they met mine. Then he swam over me and quickly unlatched my foot. I was so numb and panicked that I'd completely forgotten what to do, though.

Hooking his arm under my shoulders, he kicked me to the surface with him and then kept me on my back as he towed me to the side, all the while whispering to me. "You're okay, Layla. I've got you. You're okay."

I was still getting my wits about me as arms reached to pull me out and a massive blanket was wrapped around me. Watching as though it was happening to someone else, I felt strangely detached as I saw Santiago

pulling himself out of the water.

He was drenched, obviously, water pouring off him as he rose to his full height. Right now, he looked like a fallen angel to me. If angels could get pissed off. I didn't know if they could, but he definitely was.

As soon as he was clear of the water, he shoved the towel someone tried to pass him away and started dressing down the instructor who was supposed to have been on our side of the helicopter instead. Right there in front of everyone, he tore the guy a new one, looking like he'd have punched the guy if he could've.

I'd never seen this side of him before, but he was practically vibrating with rage as he grabbed the front of the guy's wetsuit. "Where the hell were you? They could've drowned down there, Robertson. One of the seatbelts got jammed up and Perkins's ankle got stuck. No doubt because she had to go back when she couldn't find you. Where the fuck were you?"

The other instructor shrugged. "I saw Evans, Perkins, and the other one get free, so I figured they were all about to be clear. I came up to find out how many groups we've got left. You know I have a date later that—"

"A date? A fucking date?" Santiago roared in the man's face. "I'm having you written up for this, Robertson. It's unacceptable. Get the fuck out of here."

Another instructor stepped up once Robertson flipped Santiago the bird and stormed out. "I'll take his post for the rest of the exercise."

Santiago nodded. "Thanks. Stay down there, yeah?"

The man snorted. "You got it, Cortez. I'm in no rush."

One of the other cadets, though I couldn't remember how to turn around just yet so I couldn't check who it was, suddenly protested. "We're carrying on with the simulation after that? They just almost died."

"*Almost* being the operative word in that sentence," he snapped. "Shit happens, if you can't deal with it, then quit."

Within the next thirty minutes, three people did, in fact, quit. I watched it happen, but as I slowly warmed up—the water had been freezing, but I'd only realized it later—and came back to myself, the only person I cared about, however, was Hanna.

I got up as soon as I could, hugging the sodden blanket around me until I realized it was just making me colder. As I spotted my friend huddled in a blanket of her own near the bleachers, I dropped the wet material and raced over to give her a big hug.

“Are you okay?” I breathed.

When I pulled away and looked into her eyes, I saw that she’d obviously been crying. She sniffled as she nodded, fresh tears appearing on her lids. “I am, but only because of you. I’m sorry I swam away without staying to check on you. I was so close to running out of air and you were right behind me. It was only when I came up and you weren’t there that I even realized I’d lost you. God, Cortez was in the water so fast.”

“Hey,” I said softly, swiping her tears away with my thumbs as they fell. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m okay. He got to me in time. That’s all that matters. I didn’t expect you to come back for me.”

Her blue eyes latched on mine, and when they dropped away again as her shoulders shook, I knew what she was going to say before she confirmed it for me. “I’m quitting. I quit. I can’t do this anymore. Will you come with me to tell him after this?”

Pain seared through me, but I nodded. “Of course, I will.”

As I hugged her again, I felt tears of my own leaking down my cheeks. I was going to miss Hanna so much, but I wouldn’t try to keep her here any longer. We’d both been in real danger today, and while I was already shaking it off, it didn’t look like she’d be able to. I wasn’t going to beg her to stay when there was a possibility that she could get hurt someplace she didn’t even really want to be.

About an hour later, we were dry and dressed, and she squeezed my arm as we walked into Santiago’s office. He blinked when he looked away from his computer and saw us. Then he leaned back in his seat and moved his gaze to Hanna’s like he already knew what was coming.

“I quit,” she said softly.

He gave her a surprisingly understanding smile. “I know. Would you like to do your paperwork now? If you want, we could do it tomorrow?”

She sighed. “No, I’d like to do it now, please.”

“Alrighty then. Have a seat.” He glanced at me. “You’re dismissed, cadet. Meet me here once you’re done with dinner. You and I need to talk.”

I blew out a heavy breath, but I nodded. I knew what he wanted to talk to me about. Even though I’d done it to help my friend, I’d disobeyed a direct order by doing so. I wasn’t sure that it was going to matter that I’d tried to find the instructor who was supposed to be there to help us.

If Santiago didn’t believe that I’d tried to find the guy or if he didn’t care, then Hanna and I would be packing together later, and I’d be following her

home even if it was the very last thing I wanted to do.

SANTIAGO

Thanks to Robertson, today had turned into a complete and utter shit show. We'd lost five cadets because of the simulation, and at least one would still have been here if it hadn't been for that stunt he'd pulled.

After I'd gotten away from the pool, he and I had gone a few rounds and he'd received an official reprimand, but as far as I was concerned, that wasn't enough. He'd left his post after three out of four had gotten free. It had been an irresponsibly awful thing to do, and even though he knew it, he was refusing to take accountability for it.

As I shoveled the last of my chicken into my mouth, there was a quiet knock at my open door, and when I looked up, I saw it was Layla reporting. "Come on in and close the door behind you."

Moving stiffly, she did what I'd said but stood rigidly right inside the now shut door. "Sir, if this about earlier, you need to know that I did try to signal for help."

I pushed the plastic container that had held my dinner away and leaned back in my chair, beckoning for her to come closer. "Sit down, Perkins. Make yourself comfortable, and then tell me exactly what happened today."

Blinking rapidly, she nodded and moved further into the office, sitting down right at the edge of the chair with her back so straight it looked like her spine had been replaced by a broomstick. "Hanna was really nervous before we started, sir. I tried to talk her through it, but I think she was still in a bad place when we hit the water."

She stopped to take a deep breath, and I saw the fear darkening her eyes when she refocused on me. "Everything was fine at first. Evans and I were at

the front. We both got free just fine. He turned to check on me, and we waved at each other. It wasn't his fault."

A slight crease formed between my eyebrows. "No one is saying it was his fault."

She nodded swiftly. "Good. I just wanted to clear that up. Anyway, so I swam to the door, and when I got there, I realized I hadn't seen Hanna yet. When I looked back, she was petrified. She wasn't moving at all. I stuck my head out the door, but the instructor wasn't where he needed to be so I went back to help her. At the time, I realized I was disobeying a direct order, but with respect, sir, I didn't care. I did some quick mental math, but I stand by my decision. She wasn't going to make it if I hadn't gone back."

I exhaled audibly through my nostrils. "Yeah, that's about what I thought had happened. You got stuck on your way back to the door?"

"Yes, sir," she said softly. "I was running out of breath fast and I guess I must've been swimming lower than I realized. The latch on Hanna's seatbelt refused to come free, so it was a bit of a struggle getting her loose. In the panic, I didn't realize I was swimming that close to the seats, and when I got stuck, I was too close to passing out to figure out how to free myself."

I nodded. "As soon as she broke the surface, she yelled something about the latch getting jammed, then she looked for you and screamed, which was about when I knew something had gone wrong."

For a moment, her eyes locked on mine. "Thank you for getting there so fast. I'm pretty sure I'd have blacked out if you hadn't."

The sincerity and honesty in her voice made something inside me ache. I was almost entirely sure it was my heart, but that made no sense. My heart was never involved in anything except my job. On the other hand, what I'd done had been my job, so maybe it made sense after all.

"Were you scared?" I asked instead of responding.

Her eyes widened a bit, and she tucked her bottom lip between her teeth as she nodded. After staying quiet for a beat, she finally let out a deep breath and nodded again. "Yes, sir. I was scared. It scared me when I realized I wasn't going to be able to make it out by myself, but I was also just happy that Hanna was okay."

As I looked back at her, I realized that she was being completely honest with me, and that answer more than anything else she'd done convinced me that she was made for this. She wasn't weak and being broken just wasn't in her blood.

So this was what Ron meant about applying the necessary pressure to make her into a diamond. Obviously, he knew his daughter. He'd known she'd do well enough in the program, but he also must've seen this inside of her.

She was meant to be here, but to be the best she could be, she couldn't keep floating around in the middle of the pack. She couldn't keep scraping by and completing all her tasks okay but not at the top of her class.

Those soft green eyes remained on mine. "Are you kicking me out, sir?"

"No," I said quickly. Too quickly, but hey, I really wasn't kicking her out. "Why, do you want me to? Do you want to quit?"

"No," she replied just as fast, and then I saw some of that fire returning to her eyes. It heated them to mercurial levels, the green somehow getting brighter as she stared me down. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

I blinked, taken aback by the request from the cadet, but I nodded anyway. "Sure thing, Layla. Permission granted. Say what you need to say."

Her shoulders opened up and her chin rose slightly into the air. "I don't know why you want me to quit, but it doesn't matter what your reasons are. What matters is that you're not going to succeed. I have been waiting for this opportunity my whole life, and I know that I'm going to have to work hard, but I'm not going to give up."

Since she just seemed to be getting started, I simply motioned for her to keep going by dipping my chin in a nod instead of interrupting. She clearly recognized the gesture for what it was, and I almost smiled because of how impassioned she was getting.

In truth, although I'd never admit it to anyone, she reminded me of myself in this moment, and I wasn't going to lie. It was a damn sexy sight to see her getting as worked up as only one other person I knew tended to get about this job—me.

"I know that I'm a woman, and I know there aren't many of us who do this, but this is what I was born to do. This is in my blood, and I've known it from the first moment I saw what my father did for a living. This is the only thing I've ever wanted to do with my life. While other little girls were pretending to be princesses, I was trying to design a pulley system that would take my weight so I could rappel off our roof. You can do whatever you deem necessary to do to me, but I'm not going to quit and I'd really appreciate it if you stopped asking."

I let her have her moment, watching with a smile I couldn't quite hide on

my face as she caught her breath. Those eyes were dancing with indignant flames and her cheeks were beautifully pink, but when I saw her chest cave in a little, I realized she was done.

Just in case, though, I decided to check. “Have you said everything you wanted to say?”

“I’m still speaking freely, right?”

I nodded. “There’s really more?”

She tilted her head to the left, studying me from beneath those thick black lashes that I’d never seen so much as a speck of makeup on. “Well, whether there’s more depends on if you’re going to stop asking me to quit just yet.”

To my surprise as much as hers, a chuckle came out of me. “I’ve never asked you to quit, Perkins. Never have. Never will. All I asked was if you wanted to, but I think I’m clear on that now.”

“Are you?” she asked, still not looking away from me. “Does that mean you’re going to stop trying to force me out?”

I frowned, my brows inching up when I realized she was being serious. “Do you honestly think I’ve been trying to force you out? Why the hell would you think that?”

She sank back in her seat, shrugging even as her gaze remained locked on mine. “I’ve just been getting the feeling that you don’t want me here and that you’d prefer it if I was gone. Hanna had the same feeling, and now she is gone.”

“Hanna quit of her own volition,” I said, not quite protesting, but not quite agreeing either. “Did I foresee the possibility that she wasn’t going to make it through? Yes, I won’t deny it. I didn’t think she was going to make it, but I haven’t done anything to either of you that I haven’t done to anyone else. I don’t want you to quit and I never wanted her to either. The difference is that she did it anyway.”

Layla kept staring back at me, but I saw the fight melting out of her until she finally nodded. “Where does this leave us, then?”

“Come with me,” I said as I shoved my chair back and stood up. “If you’re done, that is. If there’s anything else you’d like to say, now is the time to do it.”

“No, I’m all good,” she said, her voice smaller than usual. She got up and glanced at me curiously when I opened the door. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” I motioned for her to precede me, then shut the door behind us and led her down the corridor and out the door to the outside.

We kept walking side by side until we reached the obstacle course. When we got there, she frowned up at me. “What are we doing here? Are you going to punish me for disobeying your orders by making me do this in the dark after dinner?”

I chuckled, feeling my insides warm a little as I shook my head at the petulant, distrustful pout on her lips. Instead of annoying me, I found it kind of adorable, which was annoying in its own right but it somehow still made me smile.

Fuck me. This girl has me all twisted up inside, but I’m going to have to deal with that on my own time.

“No, I’m not going to punish you, Layla. You disobeyed a direct order, but in this instance, I’m going to let it slide. Just don’t do it again, but you’re right about what might’ve happened to Hanna if you hadn’t gone back to get her. Robertson is the only one who’s going to get punished for the events of today.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, turning those big eyes back up to mine. “What are we doing here, then?”

“I’m going to help you with this.”

She frowned, glancing at the first obstacle. “Uh, thanks, but I think I’m okay with this one.”

“Not that one.” I took her by her shoulders and turned her until she was facing the wall that was barely visible in the distance in the dark. “That’s what I’m going to help you with. I’ve been watching you and I know what you’re doing wrong. It’s still up to you, though. Do you want my help, or do you want to keep trying to figure it out by yourself?”

LAYLA

One-on-one training with Santiago Cortez. This was going to be interesting. None of the floodlights aimed at the course were on, but there were lights on the side of the building that housed the training center.

I'd gotten used to working on the wall in the low light out here at night, but it was different now that Santiago was here with me. The lack of bright lights on us made it feel strangely intimate, and with his face halfway covered by shadows, I noticed details I hadn't noticed before.

He wasn't looking at me, his gaze cast upon the wall like he was studying it even though I knew he knew it like the back of his hand. In profile like this, however, with all those shadows sharpening the edges of his features, I saw the five o'clock shadow on his jaw, the faint, dark stubble that had grown over the course of the day.

I also noticed that his nose had an elegant slant to it and that it was straight as an arrow. The man's cheekbones were a work of art with those shadows underneath them. I was pretty sure that any photographer worth his salt would've dropped a ton of money to be able to take a picture of my instructor just like this.

He'd have been able to sell it as cover art for a romance novel with absolutely no issues, and he would probably have gotten hundreds of dollars for it. As Santiago crossed his arms loosely over his chest, his head tilting as he kept studying the wall, my attention was drawn down. To his broad shoulders and muscled biceps, and the lean ropes of muscle running from his elbows to his wrists when his forearms flexed.

With his deeply tanned skin and his USCG shirt, he really did look like he could've been posing for something. A commercial for the Coast Guard perhaps. God knew we'd have had a lot more women signing up if they could see him like this. Between that and those incredibly blue eyes, the guy was the very embodiment of military porn done right.

He lifted his hand and ran it over the top of his light brown hair, then suddenly turned his head and looked right at me. My cheeks caught fire.

Busted!

"What?" he asked. "I can feel you staring and I can only assume it's because you have a question for me. You're still speaking freely, so go for it. What is it?"

"It's just, uh, not that I'm not grateful, but why are you doing this? Why are you helping me?" Technically, he hadn't helped me just yet, but I knew he would. He seemed like the type to stick to his word, and since he'd said he was going to help me, that was what he was going to do.

Also, since he'd felt me staring, I'd had to come up with something believable to ask him and that was definitely believable. Even so, his mouth curved into a slight smirk as those sparkly eyes looked into mine.

"You're stronger than you think, Perkins. You can get over that wall. You just need the technique to do it. As it happens, I'm an instructor. This is what I do. I instruct."

"Yeah, but why me? Why now? I've been struggling with this wall every night and other people are struggling with it every day."

"And I'll instruct those people on their technique when the time comes. You're up first because no one has worked harder on this than you. You've already given it your best shot, you've taken the time and made the effort to figure it out by yourself, and you still haven't managed to get over it. The others still need to do what you've already done. Once they have, I'll help them too. It's that simple."

My eyebrows slanted up just a little bit. "Are you sure that's really all that it's about? It's not about my father at all, then?"

"No, it's not about your father," he said firmly. "You and I have never even spoken about him. Why would you think I'm helping you because of him?"

"Because my last name is Perkins. We haven't spoken about him, but I know that he would've told you who I am. Did he ask you to help me?"

"No, he didn't, but you're right. I do know who you are, but I don't care."

You are not your father. You are your own person, and that person is in my class and needs help. That's really all I care about."

"I like that," I declared after thinking it over. "Part of me has been afraid that this is all because of him. That I only got in because of him. That I've only gotten this far because of him. That if I graduate, it will only be because he made you put me through."

Santiago chuckled again, and the sound was so beautiful and smooth that I honestly wondered why he didn't do it more often. On the other hand, I didn't really know anything about him other than that he was a tough taskmaster during class. Maybe he did chuckle often. Maybe he even laughed. *Who knows?*

"This has nothing to do with your father, and if it's any consolation, I didn't even know you'd gotten in until after you were already put into my class. I don't think he got you in, and he certainly hasn't gotten you this far. You're the one in training and you're the one who's been out here every night, working on this wall. Not him. None of this has anything to do with him."

"See, I know that, but I wasn't sure if anyone else did," I said honestly, not quite knowing why it was so easy to talk to him openly about things I hadn't even discussed with Hanna.

It just was, though. Honesty came naturally with him, not only tonight, but in every conversation we'd had so far. It was possible that it was like this because he was so blunt. He said things exactly as he saw them and that helped me do the same thing.

"Well, I'm happy to clear it up for you. You're not here because of him, not directly anyway. I'm not sure if you would've been interested in this career choice if it hadn't been for him, but that's a whole different conversation. Maybe, indirectly, you are here because of him, but whether you make it or not is entirely up to you."

"Alright," I said, turning my attention back to the wall. "Are we going to do this?"

"I have one last question before we do," he said, looking at me with intent curiosity in those eyes when I looked back at him. "If you'd asked your dad to help you with this, he would've been able to give you a few pointers and you'd almost certainly have made it over the wall by now. Which is why I'm thinking you haven't asked him about it. Why not?"

"Like you said, I'm my own person. I could've asked him for help, but I

want to do this by myself. When the other cadets find out that I'm related to the man who redesigned the training program and headed it up for over two decades, they're going to question whether I belong here. I want to be able to assure them that I've done it all by myself, without any special treatment, and that I do, in fact, deserve my place here."

"You do deserve your place here," he said, his voice so soft and gentle that it was almost difficult to believe I was speaking to Master Chief Santiago Cortez.

But then he ruined it by smirking and pointing at the wall. "Okay, cadet. Let's see what you've got. Show me one last time how you've been approaching this, then we'll take it from there."

I nodded, quickly making the mental shift from deep conversation to training mode. Doing it came as easily with him as honesty, which was weird, but true. With him, I just felt safe. He'd pulled me out of that pool today, and somehow, that had only cemented the fact that I trusted him.

It was that trust that allowed me to forget all about how I would look while I was failing at this and to fling myself at the wall without worrying what he was going to think about me. Once again, I took a running start, sprinting at the wall before launching myself into the air at the exact place that I knew would at least let me get my fingertips at the top, but once again, that was as far as I came.

The fingers of one hand managed to find purchase, but I slipped before I could get my other hand on the wall and I definitely wasn't strong enough to pull myself up by only the fingertips of one hand. As I slid down to the ground, I groaned and shook my head.

"Are you sure I'm strong enough?" I asked. "I feel like I need to build some muscle before this is going to be even remotely possible."

"No, it's not that," he said in a low murmur behind me, suddenly much closer than I'd thought he was. As I spun around, he was right there, like not even a foot away. My gaze snagged on his, and for just a moment, we simply stared into each other's eyes. Something passed between us in that one quiet moment in the dark, but before I could put my finger on what it was, he stepped past me and inclined his head at the wall. "Okay, do it again. This time, when you grab it, I'm going to help you up, okay?"

I nodded, blinking rapidly to shake the cobwebs caused by that moment out of my head before I moved back to my starting position. When I hit the wall again, I grabbed the top and then he was there, his hands on my legs and

I froze.

This was the first time he was touching me like this, and it was like I could feel his strength pouring into me. His grip was firm and strong, his arms powerful as he lifted me up like I weighed nothing at all. With him below me once I regained control of my body, it was almost too easy to swing my other arm up, get a good grip on the wall, and pull myself up.

In the process, however, I realized that he was right. My arms were strong enough, but it wasn't just them I should've been using in my attempts. Even with him there, I needed my legs, feet, and stomach, too.

A surprised gasp tore out of me when the realization dawned, and he chuckled. "You just got it, didn't you?"

"I think so," I said as I heaved myself all the way until I was sitting on top of the wall, one leg dangling down on either side of it. "I thought it was all about my arms, but it's not. I've seen the others using their feet, but since mine have never been able to find purchase, I've stopped trying to use them myself."

"Exactly," he said. "The technique that will get you over this thing lies in using your whole body. You really *are* strong enough, but brute strength isn't what this is about."

"Can we try it again?" I asked excitedly and he let out a soft groan, but then he nodded.

"Sure. Let's do it one more time."

"Only one?" I dropped down beside him, landing on my feet before flashing him the sweetest smile I could muster. "How about two?"

He swiped a hand across his face, his jaw tight for some reason as he nodded. "Fine, two more times, but then you're going to bed."

I had no idea what his sudden reluctance was all about, but I didn't care. I was too exhilarated about finally getting somewhere. In the end, I didn't make it over the wall by myself that night, but he'd shown me how I was eventually going to get there, and that was *everything* to me.

It was exactly the motivation I'd needed, and I was thrilled about it. My mood took a definite nosedive when I arrived back at my bunk to see all of Hanna's stuff gone, though.

Knowing that she'd quit and actually seeing the empty spaces where her things had been were two very different things, and I was struck by the feeling that I'd lost my only friend. But as I crawled into my bed, I knew I had to keep moving forward.

During training, it was every man and woman for themselves, and while it sucked that she was gone, I had to remember that I was still here. I was here, and I was ready to take this thing by the horns. This was my dream, not hers, and as sad as I was to have lost her, I was closer than I'd ever been to making my dreams come true.

That was what I had to focus on. That was what would get me through. And that was what I was thinking about as I finally closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

SANTIAGO

Over the next few days, more and more of the cadets dropped out. There was a time in every class when this happened, and it was usually around now. There were a lot of misconceptions out there about what the Coast Guard actually did, and once they started realizing that it wasn't all about sitting on the back of a fast boat and shouting in a bullhorn, that was when our numbers started dropping like flies.

Even those who'd made it through the helicopter crash simulation but who hadn't realized that wouldn't be the worst or the scariest part of their training were finally getting it. The herd was being thinned, and it suited me just fine. It left me only with those who were actually serious.

Truth be told, this was my favorite part of the program. When all the weaker contenders were gone and I could start focusing on honing the skills of those who were here because they belonged, that was when I shone. That was why I'd wanted to be an instructor.

Come next week, we'd be getting serious, but first, I had a surprise for them. As I got to the PT field where the remaining cadets were gathered and ready to go, I grinned.

"Alright, people. Your loving uncle Santiago has some good news for you. You've been working hard and we've noticed, so we're giving you a three-day weekend off, starting today."

Excited chatter began filling the air immediately and I sighed. "You're in formation. There's still no talking while you're in formation."

Thankfully, we were at the point where most of the troublemakers were gone and silence fell immediately after I said it. "Okay! Enjoy your time off,

but don't enjoy it too much. Get some rest and sleep as much as you can. You're going to need it for what we've got in store for you when you get back. Dismissed."

They ran off so fast that I laughed, but then I realized they hadn't all vanished. Layla was still here, frowning as if she wasn't sure if I'd been serious or not.

When my gaze met hers, I arched an eyebrow as I approached her. "This is not a drill, Perkins. You're free to leave. For real."

"Uh, yeah. I got that part, but what am I supposed to do?" She looked genuinely perplexed as she stared up at me.

I shrugged, shaking my head as I tried to hold back a chuckle. "I don't know, cadet. I'm not your personal party planner. Do whatever you feel like doing. Go out. Get drunk or go home and see your parents. Whatever you decide to do, though, it needs to be away from the Station."

She heaved out a heavy breath, her green eyes still cloudy with confusion as she nodded and stalked in the direction of the dorms. As I watched her leave, I really tried not to appreciate seeing her walk away, *but fuck me*.

I really just couldn't do it. The way she moved entranced me. I didn't have a choice but to stare at her ass for just a fraction of a second before I finally turned away and headed back to my office. This weekend was coming at exactly the right time, as far as I was concerned.

I didn't know what she planned on doing, but I sure as hell knew what I was going to do. And that was whatever it took to get over this thing I had for my mentor's daughter. She was twenty-fucking-four years old, a cadet in my program, and Ron Perkins's kid. It didn't get much more taboo than all that in my world, and I'd realized the other night that I really did desperately need to do something about it.

Touching her when I'd helped her get over that wall had nearly killed me. Feeling those legs I'd envisioned wrapped around me so many times had been hell the first time, and when she'd asked me to do it again, I'd groaned. Out loud.

She hadn't asked about it, but I knew she must've heard me. There was just no way she hadn't. It had only been the two of us out there and the night had been quiet. She'd heard me groan just because I'd touched her. Over her clothes. And I hadn't even been close to touching her anywhere inappropriate.

It was *not* good, and I was starting to feel like a real old pervert for

looking at her the way I was. When I walked into my office and found Neil waiting for me, I smiled. Going out with him was exactly what I needed to get me out of this Layla rut. He was the best wingman around and he was constantly pushing me to hit on anything that moved.

Tonight, I was going to do exactly that. “Hey, man. You excited about the weekend?”

He nodded, looking positively gleeful as he rubbed his palms together. “I have so many plans. It’s been way too long since this session started and it’s been such a damn intense one. I saw some of the assholes finally quit, though. That’s going to make it easier around here.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think anyone in Jonathan Hayes’s crew was going to fall out, but it’s for the best. He and the other original asshole have already gotten some of the cocky knocked out of them. They also seem to be teaming up with Jameson Gray and Matt Evans more often, which is great. The four of them are like a dream team.”

He laughed. “Think they’re going to ride this out together?”

I ran my hand over the top of my head and licked my lips, but then I nodded. “Yeah, I think they are. A few other strong contenders are emerging and they’re slowly starting to form those bonds we need them to.”

The only problem with that was Layla. She was the exception to the rule. She was one of the strongest contenders, but none of the other cadets wanted to come near her. *But I’m not thinking about her this weekend. I’ll sort it out next week. Professionally.*

Neil grinned as a faraway look crept into his eyes. “Ah, the bonding time. It was great, wasn’t it? Hell, I’m almost jealous that we’re not going to get to tear up the town with them this weekend. Those first few weekends away from the Station when you’re finally finding your tribe were the best.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m still willing to tear up the town with you this weekend. I know it’s not one of our first few weekends, but we can still have fun.”

“Of course, we can.” He shot me a lopsided grin. “At a bar, though. One they won’t go to because it’s not a club. Don’t get me wrong, I’m jealous, but I don’t really want to see them for the next three days.”

“Amen to that,” I agreed. “Want to go grab a few beers at Lucky’s later?”

“Let’s do it,” he said, then checked his watch. “Shit, I have to go. Diana wants to talk to me about that bust they made last week and I’ve got a meeting with her in three.”

“Go,” I said. “I’ll meet you at Lucky’s at six?”

“See you there.” He sped out of my office to make it to Diana’s on time, and I reviewed the notes I’d made about the cadets so far.

After crossing off the names of the ones that had quit this week, I added a few thoughts on the ones that remained and then I shut off my computer. Everyone involved with the training had the weekend off, and since I was all caught up on work, I was officially a free man as of right now.

I changed into my workout gear and went for a long run on the beach to clear my head. Then I called my mom, and later, I showered and got dressed to meet Neil. It was weird being in normal shorts and a T-shirt again, but as I kicked my feet into a pair of flip-flops and picked up my phone and wallet, I smiled.

This weekend seriously couldn’t have come at a better time.

Although I debated on waiting for Neil to walk to Lucky’s together, I finally decided against it. I needed to get away from the Station. The sooner, the better.

The bar we were going to was a hole in the wall a few blocks away. It wasn’t a regular haunt for anyone from here except for us, but that was why we liked it so much. As I walked into the dingy darkness of the interior and breathed in the scent of stale beer, I practically felt the tension melting out of my body.

There were a few pool tables in the corner, a couple of old TVs mounted on the walls, and a long, pocked bar with mats on it that had probably never been washed, but that was about it. A few tables were scattered around with mismatched chairs pulled up to them and the only lights were orange globes covered by horrendous green shades.

Gotta love it.

After grabbing a beer from an aged bartender who didn’t know or give a damn about who I was, I went to sit down at a table in the back corner. Just on the off chance that the cadets found the place, I didn’t want to be within easy view of the door.

I was almost done with my first beer when my phone beeped with an incoming text, and I groaned when I saw what it said.

Neil: Sorry, bro. Not gonna make it. I have the damn shits.

Well, so much for that plan.

Rolling my eyes, I picked up my glass again, but as I lifted my head to drain what was left of my beer, I suddenly found myself looking right at

Layla Perkins. She dropped into the seat across the table from me like she'd been invited to and everything in me screamed to get away from her before I did something stupid.

Uh oh.

"Perkins," I said lightly after I'd swallowed my last sip. "I was just about to leave, but have fun this weekend, yeah?"

Her brow puckered as she shook her head. "Don't leave. Please? Just have one beer with me. I'm buying."

It was the first time I was seeing her with her hair down—literally—and the black locks framed her face perfectly, hanging to just above her shoulders to meet the standard length requirements. I sighed and pushed my chair back.

"Thanks for the offer, but I really should get going."

Those full lips pressed into a pout. "Please? It's just one beer. Do you really want me to beg?"

Yes, but not for a damn beer, and that, dear cadet, is the problem. But I couldn't turn her down. Not when she was looking at me like she'd cry if I didn't stay. And it was then that I made the biggest mistake of my life.

I moved my chair back in and nodded. "Okay, Layla. One beer, but after that, I really do need to get going."

LAYLA

Before Santiago could even think about changing his mind and leaving me alone after all, I shot up, got us both a beer, and hurried back to the table as fast as I could. I sat back down again and grinned as I pushed his over to him, but he frowned.

“Okay, out with it, Perkins. Why did you want me to stay so bad?”

I shrugged, glancing down at the label on my beer bottle and picking at it as I tried to decide what to say. While I was still tempted to be honest with him, I couldn’t tell him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

That would involve admitting that I just wanted to spend some time with him. For some reason I couldn’t explain, I was drawn to this man in a way that made no sense whatsoever. *Okay, so maybe it does make a little bit of sense.*

Santiago Cortez in uniform was hot as hell, but Santiago in civilian clothes with a plain blue t-shirt and a pair of shorts with normal sandals on his feet? Boy, that was doing things to me.

Any woman who liked men would want to spend time with this guy, but that wasn’t the only thing it was about for me. I was attracted to him physically. I couldn’t deny and I wouldn’t try. Objectively, he really was just an incredibly attractive man.

Dressed like we were now, it would be way too easy to forget why I couldn’t make a move on him, but I also just didn’t want to lose him. Not right now.

“I haven’t made many friends in the program,” I said. “You’re the only one who’s talked to me since you made an example of Bruce for insulting

me, so that's why you're stuck with me now."

Surprise flickered in those beautiful blue eyes as he looked back at me. "You don't have any friends outside of the program either?"

I shrugged. "Most of my friends from high school have gone to college or moved away for work. I've spent the last few years doing everything I could to get into the training program, so I haven't really made much time to have a social life."

"What about your parents?" he asked. "I'm sure they'd like to see you."

"You'd think, but I called them earlier. They're out with some of Dad's old buddies tonight. I'll probably see them tomorrow, though."

"You don't want to see if you can track down the other cadets? It might help you bond with them if you hang out together away from the Station."

I shook my head. "I have no idea where they've gone. Mel hopped on the first flight out to go home to her boyfriend and the guys just disappeared."

"Try the nearest club," he suggested. "These days, I think it's called Kream. It used to be called Steelworks when I was a cadet, but it's changed hands a few times since. I can almost guarantee that's where you'll find them."

"Maybe later," I murmured as I pulled a part of the label off the bottle and then raised it to my lips to take a sip. "Right now, I'm here with you. We're having a beer together, and since you mentioned your time as a cadet, I'm interested in knowing more about it."

"What do you want to know?"

I stared back at him, wondering how he could be such a dick during training and so easygoing at other times. There was definitely more to him than just that absolute asshole he mostly was on the Station and I wanted to get to know this side of him. The other side. The easygoing, nice side with the pretty smile and the casual attitude.

"I don't know what I want to know," I said. "I just want to know what it was like for you, I guess. You've obviously risen through the ranks fast and I want to know how you did it. Were you the shining star of your class? Were you Jonathan? Or were you a late bloomer, like me?"

"You're hardly a late bloomer," he said with a slight tilt of his lips. "Don't let that wall get to you so much. You stood out from the beginning and you've handled everything else I've thrown at you remarkably well."

"Maybe, but we're not talking about me right now. We're talking about you. So what were you like, Santiago?"

Eyes firmly holding mine, he shrugged and took a long sip of his beer. I had a feeling he was going to try to drink it as fast as he could so he could get away from me, but while I had him, I was going to do what I could to show him that I could be fun.

“Honestly? I probably started out a little more like Jonathan. I thought the sun shone out of my asshole and that I was going to be the best cadet they’d ever seen.”

I laughed softly. “I can see that being true. What happened?”

He smirked. “I realized how many cadets they’d seen and that I wasn’t even close to being the best. Hell, I nearly wet myself when they strapped us into that chopper. One of the guys in the group ahead of us had gotten stuck and I was so shaken after seeing him coughing up water that I was terrified.”

“*You* were terrified?” I shook my head. “I call bullshit.”

He chuckled. “Nah, straight up? I was so scared that I didn’t buckle myself in properly and I was in the back row, so the instructor didn’t notice. I barely managed to stay in my seat until they dropped us, and I’m pretty sure I would’ve drowned if I had to get that buckle unlatched. Instead, I shot out of the water as fast as I could, then I called my mom right after just to tell her that I love her.”

Aaaaaw. “Is any part of that true?”

He crossed his heart before he picked up his bottle and pointed the open top of it at me. “If you tell anyone, I will vehemently deny that we ever had this conversation.”

I mimed zipping my lips. “Your secret is safe with me. How did you go from being the terrified cadet to the fearless instructor we’ve got now?”

“Experience,” he said thoughtfully. “Being on the job taught me a lot, but so did your dad. It all comes with time, Layla. It’ll happen for you, too. You’re already damn good. Now it’s just about honing your skills and building up your confidence.”

“The confidence thing might be an issue,” I admitted. “It took a massive hit when Hanna left. Don’t get me wrong, I’m confident in my actual skills, but not so much in my ability to be a part of my class.”

“You’ll get there. The guys are afraid of you. I don’t know if they found out who your father is or if it’s just because of what happened with Bruce, but they are afraid of you. What I did to that dimwit when he disrespected you and Meeks shouldn’t have scared the rest of them this much. It’s not that hard to treat a girl right. I think they know that, which is why I don’t think

that's what's keeping them from hanging out with you."

"Is it just me, then?"

To my surprise, he rocked his head from side to side. "Yeah, I think it is. I think they know that you're serious competition, but you're also a beautiful woman and I suspect that's why they're staying away from you."

I blinked hard. Then I did it again. "Did you just call me beautiful?"

His chest expanded on a deep breath. Then he shrugged. "Don't look so surprised. It's not like you didn't know it. All you need to do is to show them you can be a friend and a coworker and that they don't have to be afraid of being around you just because you're hot."

My heart hammered in my chest and my eyebrows shot up. "I'm hot?"

He snorted, shook his head, and took another big sip of his beer. "I'm not going there with you. I've said what I needed to say about it, and now it's over. How did you find me here?"

"I didn't come looking for you," I said honestly. "After I got off the phone with my parents, I just decided to take a walk. I saw the name of this place and recognized it from hearing my dad talk about it, so I came in. If memory serves, this was where he used to come when he just wanted to get away from it all. Not many people from the Station come here, I think."

"Which is exactly why I chose it," he said.

"Sorry for ruining your alone time."

"It wasn't supposed to be alone time." He shot a glare at his phone. "I got stood up."

My heart stopped hammering and started squeezing instead. As it did, I felt some of the blood draining out of my cheeks. "Oh, my god. Did I crash what was supposed to have been a date?"

When he saw how horrified I was, he laughed. "Not a *date* date. I was going to meet a friend, but—"

"A lady friend?" *Jeez, Layla. Way to be direct. Stop talking.*

Something flashed in Santiago's blue eyes before he drained the last of his beer. "Nope, but I'm not going there with you either. In fact, I should really be getting back to the Station. Thanks for the beer."

He got up, and an overwhelming sadness came over me as he left without so much as a backward glance. It was completely irrational to be so sad that he'd just left, but I really was. I thought we'd been having a good time. He'd called me beautiful—and hot—and now he was gone. *What is with that?*

Although I was pretty sure we'd already crossed a line we weren't

supposed to have crossed just by having that drink together. Cadets definitely weren't supposed to socialize with—or crush on—their instructors.

Once we graduated, it was different. We still weren't really supposed to get romantically involved with our superior officers, but we were allowed to be friends. To hang out together.

At this point, I didn't really only want to be a friend to him, but that was beside the point. I liked him, but judging by the way he'd just left, he didn't like me very much. He'd practically run rather than spend any more time with me.

As I exhaled deeply through my nostrils, I decided it was for the best that he was gone. Even if he did feel the same about me as I did about him, nothing could happen between us. He was also right that I needed to try with the other cadets, and so I left my beer behind and walked out of the bar to see if I could find that club he'd mentioned.

As I hit the sidewalk along the beach, though, a couple of guys that were most definitely not with the Coast Guard approached me. They stayed a few steps away, but they were leering at me in a way that made my skin crawl.

Feeling uncomfortable, I upped my pace, but they matched it, which was also when they started whistling. "Don't be like that, baby. Come talk to us. What's your name?"

Urg. Why right now? This didn't happen to me often, but it had happened before. Especially around the beach and parking lots where people with nothing better to do than just hang out.

Out of nowhere, a hand grabbed mine and I almost jerked it away until I spun to face the person who had made the guys shut up. Santiago wasn't looking at me. Instead, his jaw was clenched tight and his eyes were on the horizon.

"Come with me, Perkins," he muttered. "I'll get you out of here."

My heart skipped so many beats that I felt a bit dizzy, but his hand felt so good in mine that I tightened my grip on his fingers and tried not to swoon. I knew my crush was silly and I knew I had to get over it, but right now, with his much larger, much rougher palm pressed against mine and his strong fingers in my hand, I didn't feel so silly.

In fact, it didn't feel silly at all. It felt like he cared about me and that was much, much more dangerous than an unreciprocated crush would ever have been.

SANTIAGO

What I was doing was stupid. I'd intended on heading back to the Station just like I'd told her I was going to do, but as I took off, I saw those guys loitering near the door and some protective instinct had kicked in. So I'd decided to wait and to follow her from a safe distance. Out of sight but close enough that I could make sure she got out of this part of town without any trouble before I headed back to my place.

The plan had gone sideways. As soon as I'd realized they weren't just about to let her go and had fallen into step behind her, I'd lost it. Then I'd sped up and now, I was holding her hand and dragging her toward the path that led down to the beach.

Why I was doing it, I didn't know, but I needed to think of something to say and I needed to do it fast. "I love Lucky's, but the only problem with it is that the locals sometimes try to take advantage of anyone who's been singled out."

"Where are we going?" she asked instead of responding, but she was still gripping my hand like she was afraid I would disappear if she eased up just a little bit.

"Somewhere I used to come as a cadet. There's a pier down here no one ever uses. It's just on the other side of the bend on the beach, so no one ever goes that far."

"Okay, but why are we going there? I thought you were on your way back to the Station."

So did I. "I was, but then I saw those guys and I wanted to make sure you got back safe. For now, we're just going to hang out at the pier and give them

some time to lose interest. I doubt they'll come after you again if I stay with you, but you and I can't really be seen together, and if we keep walking that way, someone *is* going to see us."

"Right," she said slowly. "Good thinking. Okay. Do you really think we'll get in trouble just for walking next to each other?"

I shrugged, but then I nodded. "We're all on leave. You're wearing a sundress. You and I aren't supposed to be anywhere near each other when we're not on the Station. If anyone sees us heading back from town together at sunset wearing civvies, they're going to jump to conclusions. The wrong conclusions, but that won't stop the rumors that are bound to start."

"It really happens that easily?" she asked curiously. "I mean, I've heard that the grapevine here moves really fast, but is it seriously that bad?"

I winced. "The Station can feel very small sometimes. Our whole lives revolve around it. Trust me, when someone sees something they shouldn't have seen, everyone finds out about it in less than a day."

"Wow." She whistled under her breath. Then we paused to take off our shoes when we reached the sand.

After finally releasing her hand, I put a foot or so of distance between us, carrying my flip-flops between my fingers as I led her to my spot. A spot I hadn't shared with anyone. Ever. Not even Neil knew this was where I used to disappear to.

As I glanced out at the water, the sun was a giant orange ball of fire sinking slowly on the horizon and the waves rolled gently to shore. The briny scent of sea and sand hung in the air, and there was only the barest bit of a breeze when we walked around the bend.

The beach was still warm, the heat radiating off it as I pointed toward the old pier. It was half collapsed on one side, which now that I thought about it, would help hide us from view. Just the fact that I wanted to be hidden from view with her should've made me rethink this plan, but I didn't.

As soon as I'd walked out of that bar, I'd realized that I wanted to spend more time with her, and even though I knew exactly how stupid this was, I wasn't going to turn down the opportunity that had presented itself to do just that.

As soon as we sat down side by side on the warm sand, both of us facing the water and the spectacular sunset that was painting the sky in all sorts of warm pastel shades, she asked the one question I didn't want to answer honestly.

“Why did you want to make sure that I got back safe? I’m not your problem when we’re not on the Station.”

“It’s my job to keep you safe,” I said, and at least it wasn’t a total lie. “Besides, outside of all this, my mother raised me right. She’d never have forgiven me if she knew that I thought you might be in danger and I took off anyway.”

“Thank you,” she said after a brief pause. “Thank your mother for me, too. I’m not sure I was in any danger, but I hate it when that happens. Some people know how to deal with it without getting uncomfortable, but I sure don’t. I always just want to yell at people like that to leave me alone, but that only tends to excite them.”

“Yeah, I hear you. It is an uncomfortable situation that no one deserves to be in. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who think it should be taken as a compliment.”

“No, what you said earlier about me being beautiful is a compliment. What those guys did is just plain creepy. I always wonder just how far they’re willing to go. Like, would they have followed me all the way back to the Station, or would they have gotten bored and left me alone halfway there?”

“They probably would’ve gotten bored. A lot of people around here obviously know that when you start heading toward the Station, you’re probably Coast Guard. They’ll mostly leave you alone when they see that’s where you’re going, but they also know we’ve got cadets right now. You’d be surprised at how many of them make a game out of terrorizing the newcomers.”

She was silent for a beat, and when I glanced at her, I saw she’d pulled her knees up to her chest and draped her arms around them. Her loose hair danced in the breeze and her lips were slightly parted. *Fuck, she really is beautiful. Damn it.*

When she turned her head to look at me and found me already watching her, she smiled. “You’ve mentioned your mother twice today. I’m surprised. I thought they spawned you mean instructors right there in the Training Center.”

I laughed. “You’re one to talk. Your dad was my instructor. If you think I’m mean, you wouldn’t have survived training with him. I haven’t even made you cry once yet.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “You have made some of the others cry, though. Some of them call you Cruel Cortez behind your back.”

“If that’s the best they’ve come up with so far, then I obviously need to up my game this session. I must not have been hard enough on you guys just yet.”

“You want them to come up with something worse?”

I shrugged. “Some of the other groups have just been a little bit more creative than that, but let’s leave it there.”

“Why are we leaving so many things today?” she asked as she looked at me again. “Like earlier when I asked you if you were supposed to be meeting a female friend, you just said no and then told me we weren’t going there.”

“And yet, look at where we are right now,” I said. “It shouldn’t matter to you who I was meeting, Layla.”

“No, it shouldn’t,” I agreed. “I still want to know, though. You don’t have to be so mysterious all the time.”

“I’m not mysterious. I’m just not your friend.”

“Not yet,” she countered. “Once I graduate, you could be. Think of it as getting a head start on our friendship because I *am* going to graduate.”

“No doubt, but until I get you there, you’re still my cadet.”

A pleading gleam came into her eyes. “Just tell me, please? Tell me one real thing about you. Anything, but it’s got to be real and it can’t be anything about the Coast Guard.”

“Fine. I’ll tell you that I was going to meet Neil, my friend. He’s part of the military police and we trained together.”

“So you don’t have a girlfriend?”

I groaned and shook my head. “You said to tell you one thing, and I’ve told you one thing.”

“Sure, but now I’m asking you a different question.”

Deciding it was time to turn the tables, I looked deep into those spring-green eyes and cocked my head at her. “Why do you want to know?”

A faint pink blush colored her cheeks, and my heart flipped upside down in my chest. *Ah, shit. She wants to know because she’s interested in me, and now I know it. Why the hell do I have to know it? Abort! Abort!*

Instead of coming right out and saying it, she shrugged. “It’s just a question. Why don’t you want to answer it?”

“Because again, my personal life is none of your business.”

“No, it’s not,” she said, still staring at me before she bit the inside of her lower lip. “Do you want to know the truth?”

“Yes.” *No! There was a right answer there, Cortez, and yes wasn’t it.*

“What’s the truth?”

She scooted toward me, tucking her hair behind her ears before lifting her eyes back to mine. “The truth is that I want to know if you’re going to be cheating on anyone if I kiss you right now.”

“I won’t be.” *Fuck. Wrong answer. Again. Why am I doing this? Why am I not putting a stop to it?* “Regardless, you shouldn’t kiss me.”

“I shouldn’t,” she agreed, but somehow, my head was moving forward and so was hers. Her gaze dropped to my lips, her mouth only inches away from mine. “I want to, though.”

“Jesus, Layla,” I breathed as I lowered my forehead to hers, bringing a hand up to cup her cheek and stroking the soft, warm skin there with my thumb. “What are you doing to me?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered as she flicked her gaze back up to mine, her hands creeping onto my leg that was pressed against hers. “I know what I want you to be doing to me, though.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

Her chest rose against my bicep as she took a deep breath. “Kiss me.”

“I can’t.” I also couldn’t back away from her. “We shouldn’t even be doing this, Layla.”

She hummed her agreement, her fingers wrapping around my thigh. They weren’t anywhere near my junk, but I sucked in a sharp breath anyway because her warm hand on my skin was doing shit to me it shouldn’t have.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to.”

“If I kiss you, will you kiss me back?”

Fuck. “Probably.”

“Do you want to know something that’s going to make me sound so lame?”

“Please.”

Her eyes lit up as she smiled. “This is by far the sexiest thing I’ve ever done. The anticipation is killing me right now.”

A loud groan vibrated in my chest. “You’ve been killing me since the first time I saw you, and that wasn’t as lame as I was hoping it was going to be.”

“It wasn’t?”

I shook my head without lifting it away from hers. “Nope, but you’re anticipating something that’s not going to hap—”

“Fuck it,” she whispered, then pressed her lips to mine and kissed me.

For a moment, I froze, but then my grip on her face tightened and I was kissing her harder instead of pushing her away.

Shit. I knew I should have put a stop to this, but I hadn't done it. I couldn't seem to help myself with her, but I also didn't even try. The fact was that I'd wanted her since the first time I'd laid eyes on her, and if I stopped now, I was only going to leave both of us wanting more.

We were already kissing. I was already fucked. The best thing I could do right now was to follow through, to stay the course of this wherever it took us, and then to hope to everything that was holy that if we scratched this itch, it would finally go away.

LAYLA

Kissing Santiago Cortez was everything I'd hoped it would be and more. I'd expected him to be a good kisser, but I hadn't thought he would be this good.

His lips were soft but firm, hungry, and demanding. The masculine, aquatic scent of his cologne enveloped me, and as he slid his hand around the back of my neck to pull me closer, I moaned and wrapped my arms around his neck.

It turned out that a kiss with him wasn't just about mouths or lips. His whole body was getting involved and now, so was mine. My heart was racing and my panties were soaked, my core pulsing and aching with the need to be touched.

As his hands pushed into my hair and his chest pressed against mine, he spread his legs and hooked them around my ass, using the powerful muscles in them to bring me closer. My shins slid in under his thighs and he only stopped when the wet front panel of my panties collided with the bulge in his pants.

The shorts he had on were made of a thin, lightweight material, and it was immediately obvious not only that his cock was as hard as anything I'd ever felt, but also that he could feel the heat of me through the layers between us.

"Fuck, Layla," he growled between passionate kisses. "How are you that wet or that hot already?"

I smiled against his lips, deciding to keep rolling with the honesty thing now that it had gotten me to exactly where I'd been wanting to be for so long. "I told you the anticipation was killing me."

My nipples were pebbled, and when he brought a hand up my side to close it over my ribs, I moaned again and pushed my chest harder into his. Another low, needy noise tumbled out of him. “Can I touch you?”

“Are you seriously asking me that right now?” My words were punctuated by hard kisses. “I saw that flash of heat in your eyes when I asked you if you wanted me to beg earlier. I’m willing to do it now if it’ll get you to move that hand up a little more.”

“You’re driving me crazy over here, you know that?” He obliged without making me beg, cupping my breast in his large palm before pinching my nipple between his thumb and index finger. I cried out, but he swallowed the sound with kisses so ravenous it was making my head spin.

Or maybe that’s just because all the blood in my body has moved south.

With another unexpected pinch to my nipple, he groaned when I screamed his name into his mouth. “Shit, Layla. You’re so responsive. Are you always so responsive?”

I shook my head as I devoured his mouth, my hands moving up and down the length of his thighs. “Only for you. I don’t think I’ve ever been this turned on before.”

He groaned again. “Fuck, okay. Tell me to stop if I do anything that makes you uncomfortable, got it?”

“Yes, sir.” It was meant to be a little joke, but as soon as I called him that, his response was almost feral. He crushed his lips to mine at the same time that he pinched my nipple harder than he had before. Then his free hand appeared on my inner thigh and he pushed his fingers into my panties without hesitation.

I trembled when his knuckles brushed against my soaked core, already so close to the edge that my breathing was shaky and my toes wanted to curl. “Santiago, please.”

“Please what, Perkins?” he commanded between bruising kisses. “I’m already giving you what you wanted.”

“No. More.” My heart was pounding, my muscles quivering as I squirmed against him. “Please give me more. Give me everything.”

He cursed into my mouth, but then he dipped his finger into my wet heat and I nearly started crying with the relief that one digit brought. “Yes.”

“Jesus,” he ground out. “Layla, fuck. Are you really that close?”

“Yes!” I didn’t quite know if it was my response to his question or just because he’d started moving his finger in and out of me, but it worked for

both.

“Okay, baby,” he murmured almost reassuringly. “I’m going to make you come, then I’m going to lick you clean. You good with that?”

“Yes.”

With one of his arms like a steel band around my waist and his body holding me up, he kept thrusting his finger into me. Then he brought his thumb to my clit and I was done for. Pleasure sparked through me as soon as he touched the swollen bud, and as he started drawing quick, tight circles around it, I stopped kissing him because I couldn’t do it anymore.

The orgasm that was building deep down inside me was too intense for me to move, and I was afraid it was going to dissipate or worse, disappear if I didn’t keep focused on it. I’d cry if that happened, so instead, I tensed up, my forehead mashed against his as every brush of his finger brought me closer to the edge.

I felt his eyes burning into me like the hottest twin flames as he watched me trying to brace for it. Then he moved forward and caught my lower lip between his teeth, nipping it just hard enough to give me that last little bit of what I’d needed. My orgasm arrived in all its divine glory, the pleasure sweeping me under as powerful as I’d ever felt before.

Thankfully, Santiago’s mouth was right there and it captured my incoherent screams as my body spasmed, my toes curled, and a blinding white light exploded behind my eyes. I had no idea how long it lasted, but when I finally came to, he planted another bruising kiss on my lips.

“That…” He trailed off, his voice tight and hoarse. “That was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

With that, he pushed my shoulders down until they kissed the sand. Then he pushed my dress up and yanked my panties off all in almost one smooth movement. Like a man possessed, he tucked into me, licking me clean like he’d promised and making me come again as I stared at the stars above and wondered when it had gotten dark.

My second orgasm was just as powerful as the first had been, but as I lay there panting in the aftermath, I still wasn’t sated. I wouldn’t be until I felt him inside me. That much, I knew for a fact.

As he lifted his head up from between my legs, the lower half of his face was glistening but I didn’t care. Instead, I caught it in my hands and pulled him up, then spoke against his lips before I kissed him.

“I want you.”

His body was trembling just a tiny little bit as he held himself above me on his forearm, and I knew it wasn't because of physical strain. It was because he was just as worked up as I was, and yet I saw it in his eyes that he was about to deny us both.

Before he could say it, I finally kissed him, not even a little grossed out by the taste of me on his lips. He groaned and hesitated, but then his tongue delved into my mouth and he was kissing me back again, his body now fully shaking as I wrapped my legs around his hips and pulled him down.

Even though he was still wearing his pants and probably underwear, he hissed when his crotch hit mine. "Just this once, Layla. Okay? And it's not going to be slow or gentle. If you're not good with that—"

"Fuck me, Santiago. Give me everything you've got, sir. I can take it."
Good god, since when do I say stuff like that?

Evidently, he brought it out in me, but since it clearly convinced him to give me what I wanted, I wasn't going to start questioning it now. He sat up for just a minute, producing a condom from his wallet and then tearing open his shorts.

It was too dark for me to see much of him as he pushed his pants off and tore the condom wrapper open, and since he was hunched over himself, not even the moonlight gave me much of a chance at seeing him in all his glory, but I saw enough to know he'd been going commando. I also saw shiny wetness coating his tip before he covered it in latex and rolled it down the long length of his shaft.

As he positioned himself on top of me again, I knew I was going to have sand *everywhere* after this, but I wanted him too much to care. With his wide tip pushing against my entrance, he stopped and looked down into my eyes.

"You sure you're okay with this?"

"If you don't do it right now, I'm taking over."

He smirked as he lowered his mouth back to mine. "I'd like to see you try, cadet."

Then he thrust into me and I saw stars. Not the literal stars above us, but the kind that only came from being filled so well and completely that a girl just knew she was never going to be the same again.

As he'd promised, he wasn't gentle and he didn't take it slow. He didn't even give me a moment to adjust to his decidedly impressive size before he was pulling out and slamming back into me again. The hottest noises ever came out of him as he kissed me while moving in and out, hard and fast just

like he'd warned me it would be.

We definitely weren't making love, but that was just fine by me. This was probably the roughest anyone had ever been with me, but I was loving every second of it. I loved it so much and I was so sensitive at this point that it took me almost no time at all to feel another climax starting to build.

As he felt my inner muscles flutter around him, he stopped and gave me a stern look. "No. Not yet. This time, you're waiting for me."

"What?"

"You heard me," he growled. "Now be a good girl and hold it until I'm ready."

I squeaked, but I did what he said even if he had to stop a few more times. By the time he barked the command I'd been waiting for, there were tears in my eyes and they leaked out when I finally let go of the massively intense orgasm I'd been fighting to hold back.

"Come for me, Layla," he insisted, and I went off like a rogue firework on the fourth of July. Wave after wave of pleasure swept through me and I went rigid underneath him as my mind was blown to the four corners of the earth.

It took me ages to come to after, and when I finally opened my eyes, I found him looking down at me with concern painted all over his shadowy features as he patted my cheek. "Layla? Fuck, thank god. There you are. Are you okay?"

"Peachy." I managed a lazy smile before I dropped my head back against the sand, my limbs feeling like jelly and my bones pulverized by the pleasure. "That was awesome."

Relief softened those worried features, and he nodded and dropped a quick kiss on the tip of my nose before he pulled out of me. "Yeah, it was, but I meant what I said. It was just this once and no one can ever find out about it."

"They won't," I said happily as my lids fluttered. Honestly, I felt a little like I was drunk, but I'd only had that one beer. "I have just as much riding on this as you do, sir. You don't have to worry about me telling anyone. I won't."

"Good." He got up and did his pants back up, then shook the sand off himself and offered me a hand. "Do you need help getting up?"

"No, I need a few more minutes to recover, though. Jeez, Cortez. You really know how to bring it, don't you?"

He chuckled. “So do you, cadet. We’re never going to speak of it again, though, right?”

I waved him off as I nodded. “Never again, but we’re still in the moment, so I figured I could tell you.”

When he didn’t respond, I opened my eyes again and saw him scowling at the water, and my heart did a weird leap in my chest. He didn’t exactly look happy about what had just happened, and for a second, I wondered if I’d ruined the opportunity for myself to get into search and rescue.

But I dismissed the thought almost immediately. I hadn’t ruined anything except myself for other men for the immediate future. Since we probably weren’t going to get another break anytime soon, though, that was okay by me.

I would have memories of tonight to keep me warm during the long, lonely nights to come. Eventually, those memories would start fading and I’d forget just how good it’d really been, and then I’d be fine again. Besides, even if I never forgot, it had been worth it, and that was what I was going to be holding on to.

SANTIAGO

In my office the day after I'd made the biggest mistake of my life, I couldn't stop thinking about it. *How could I have done that? I fucked a cadet, for God's sake. Not just any cadet, either. I fucked Ron Perkins's little girl.*

I hadn't just fucked her. I fucked her so hard that I thought she'd passed out for a minute after. *Shit. I was like a damn animal with her.*

It had been years since I'd lost control like that, and while she definitely hadn't seemed to mind it, that only posed a bigger problem. Because not only was I now worried about having hurt her, but I also knew just how much she liked everything I had to give.

She was still so young, though. So young and so responsive, I was losing my mind thinking about it and since I couldn't stop, I had no idea how I was going to keep training her.

When I started getting hard all over again as her moans echoed in my ears and I remembered just how hot and how tight she'd been, I buried my face in my hands. *Get it together, Cortez. That's your mentor's daughter you're fantasizing about.*

To make matters worse, as if thinking about him had summoned him, there was a sudden knock on my door, and when I looked up, Ron was grinning at me from the doorway. "Rough night?"

"Yeah, I guess you can say that." I motioned for him to come in and then got up to shake his hand, hoping that he wouldn't notice the bulge in my pants. "What are you doing here, sir? Everything okay?"

He nodded as we shook. Then he sat down and looked around my office

with a fond smile on his lips. “Everything is fine. The wife and I stopped by to take Layla out for lunch and I thought I’d check in with you before we left. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Not at all. It’s good to see you. You’re welcome anytime.” *At least, that used to be true. Until your daughter rocked my world last night and now I’m in real trouble. Scratching the itch did not make it go away. I repeat, it has not gone away.*

If anything, it was worse than ever. Like the salve I’d applied had turned out to be one I was allergic to. He grinned at me as he looked me over. “Are you okay? What on earth did you and Patton get up to last night? I can’t remember the last time I saw you look this bad.”

“Oh, uh, Neil wasn’t actually involved this time. It was just me. I tied one on alone to blow off some steam. The first few weeks of this session have been rough.”

He shot me a sympathetic smile that somehow managed to make me feel even worse. “Some are definitely more intense than others, that’s for sure. Your group, for example, nearly gave me a damn heart attack every day of your session.”

I chuckled even though I was pretty sure I might just puke instead. “Sorry about that. For what it’s worth, we’re glad you didn’t really have one. No one else would’ve been able to handle us.”

“You’ve got that right,” he said before letting out a sigh. “How’s my girl doing?”

Fuck. There’s no way he knows, right? Shit. Tread carefully, Cortez. “She’s doing well. Really well, actually. So far, she’s one of the shining stars of this class. She takes everything in stride and she excels at every challenge we set.”

Pride swelled in his eyes. “It’s great to hear it. She sure is something special. I’m just glad she’s in good hands here.”

Oh, trust me. She’s been in my hands, alright. My hands were all over her just—fuck! “She definitely is something special. You don’t have to worry about her, Ron. She’s going to make it through with flying colors.”

He gave me a sharp nod. “Thank you. Are there any of the guys trying to make it hard for her?”

Well, there’s certainly one guy who’s hard for her. I swallowed past a lump in my throat as I shook my head. “No, sir. I made an example of one little prick who was pushing his luck, and as a result, they’re leaving her

alone.”

“Thanks. You made him quit?”

“Yes, sir. Gave him the good old, *run until the sun sets* order and he, uh, he didn’t make it to tea time.”

Ron laughed. “That one always works. It’s good to know some things haven’t changed. Well, I should get going. The ladies are waiting on me and I wouldn’t want them getting antsy. You know what they’re like when they want something and they’ve both told me that they’re starving, so I’m going to get them fed before I get in trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

I definitely knew what Layla was like when she wanted something. I still couldn’t quite figure out how she’d managed to break my resolve. One minute, I’d been absolutely determined to keep my distance from her, and the next, I’d been eating that sweet pussy like I’d been the one who was starving.

Somehow, she’d broken through all my defenses. She’d told me what she wanted and I’d given it to her without even really hesitating. I’d been a complete pushover for her, and I couldn’t afford for it to happen again.

As I walked Ron to my door and shook his hand again, he frowned at me. “You sure you’re okay, Cortez? It looks like there’s something other than just a hangover bothering that head of yours.”

“No, I’m good. Just preoccupied, I guess. We’ve got a long week ahead of us next week. I’m just sorting it all out.”

He nodded with understanding in his eyes, then gave me a salute and left. As soon as he was gone, I deflated. That had been too close. Not in any real way, but for me, emotionally, it had been too damn close.

Which only solidified my resolve. What had happened with Layla was *never* happening again. No matter what, I *could not* give in to her again. Even if it had to mean pushing her harder than ever before and pushing her away while I was at it.

My teeth ground together and my fists clenched, and then my door opened again. *Holy shit. Can a man not have a moment in his own fucking office around here?*

Neil gave me a weird look when he saw me, his head tilting as his gaze raked over me. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” I lied between clenched teeth. “What is it?”

My friend looked at me for another beat, then shrugged, grinned, and walked around me to drop into the chair across from my desk. “I just saw

Ron Perkins on his way out. What was he doing here?”

“Checking in on his daughter,” I said honestly. “He wanted to know how she was doing and to make sure no one was giving her any shit.”

“Are they?” he asked curiously. “I suppose this new class doesn’t have any reason to hate her father the same way we do, but I’d imagine they’re still feeling *something* about her being in class with them. You haven’t been giving her any preferential treatment, have you?”

“No, and I’m not going to either.” *Unless you count making her come so hard that she cried as preferential treatment.* “I don’t even know if the cadets have figured out who her father is yet. If they have, no one has said anything to me about it.”

“They wouldn’t, though,” he said as if it was obvious. “Do you really expect them to run to you, complaining about how their classmate’s daddy is a legend and that they’re scared they’re not being treated fairly as a result?”

I huffed out a breath, but he had a point. As I walked back to my chair and sank down on it, I cocked an eyebrow at him. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to tell you that I saw Ron and that I gave him the finger.” When I gave him a doubtful frown, he smirked at me. “Well, you know, I gave him the finger behind his back—and in my head. Not in real life. That would’ve been career suicide.”

I shook my head at him. “He really isn’t a bad guy. Everything he did during training was to make us better and it worked. I don’t hear you complaining about how I treat my cadets and I’m every bit as bad as he was.”

“Yeah, but you’re you and he’s him. It’s different.”

“No, it’s not.” I sighed. “I’ve got to get back to work. Is that all?”

“It’s Saturday, Cortez. The Saturday of a three-day weekend. You don’t *have* to work.”

I shrugged. “Okay, maybe I *want* to get back to work then. How’s your stomach?”

He grimaced. “You don’t really want me to answer that question. Suffice it to say that I exploded, but I’m getting better now.”

“No beer for you today?”

He pulled a horrified face at me. “Definitely not. Oh, uh, there was one more reason I came to find you. One of the cadets brought a woman back to the Station last night.”

My eyes narrowed. “Who was it?”

“A guy who is now in the brig,” he said. “He got all cocky when he was

caught. To be fair, he was pretty wasted at the time, but his attitude didn't do him any favors."

I sighed. "Okay, thanks for letting me know. I'll take care of it."

He nodded and stood, then waggled his brows at me as he grinned. "Make 'em pay, would you? The dude really was an asshole, hurling all kinds of profanities at the officers who brought him in and even asking if we'd lock the girl up with him because he wasn't done with her yet."

I flinched. "You can bet your ass I'm going to make them pay. It won't happen again. Why does there always have to be one in every class who pulls shit like that?"

Even as exasperation tightened my gut, I knew I was being a damn hypocrite. That cadet in the brig probably hadn't gotten nearly as far as I had last night, yet here I was, talking about how I was going to make them all pay for his mistake and being annoyed at him for making it.

If anyone should've been in the brig this morning, it was me. The mistake I'd made had been much, much bigger, and if anyone had tried to interrupt me in the middle of it, I probably also would've asked if she could come with me.

Fuck knows, I hadn't been done with her by a long shot—even by the time we'd left. Hypocrite or not, though, it was my job to make sure the cadets knew that they weren't here to mess around, and come Monday, that was exactly the lesson they were going to learn.

LAYLA

After the weekend, I was feeling refreshed and ready. I had a new outlook on training and I was going to smash it this week. At the end of the day, even if I hadn't made any friends here or had any bonding experiences, I was getting to do what I loved with a super hot guy leading the way.

Maybe friendship and bonding experiences would come, and if they did, I definitely wouldn't be opposed, but if they didn't, then it was what it was. I *still* got to do what I loved and Santiago Cortez was *still* leading the way.

As long as both of those things remained true, I was happy. The first one in formation on our first morning back, I bounced on the heels of my feet and rolled my head from one shoulder to the other. He'd said to be ready for a big week this week, and I was.

Slowly but surely, the other cadets jogged around the training center and joined me on the field, falling wordlessly and effortlessly into formation as we waited for our fearless leader to arrive. It was weird how seamless our mornings were becoming.

A few people murmured to each other, but there was no real talking. We also weren't standing in haphazard lines anymore and no one seemed unsure of where to stand or what to do. I grinned when I realized how organized we had to look right about now.

Santiago is going to be proud.

Once he arrived, however, it was immediately apparent that he was not in a good mood. There was a deep scowl etched into his features and his movements were stiff. Almost robotic. When he was standing in front of us,

he simply glowered for a few long minutes before he even said anything.

I stared at him with my hands clasped behind my back, wondering what could've happened to upset him this much. As I stared at him, I realized he hadn't looked directly at me yet. Not once. Those blue eyes were glaring at everyone but me, which was either a very good thing or a very bad thing.

Nerves erupted through me when I saw his jaw ticking and his Adam's apple bobbing. His shoulders were set in a straight, hard line, and although he looked as good as ever in his uniform, he was so tense that it kind of looked like he was about to Hulk out of it.

On the other hand, that wouldn't be the worst thing ever. I sure wouldn't mind getting a better look at that body. Friday night, I'd noticed tattoos on his abdomen that were usually hidden by his clothing, but I hadn't even really seen them yet. It'd been too dark and I'd been a little too preoccupied with what had been going on in my own body.

Which is something that I now deeply regret. If he'd been serious about it never happening again—and I didn't doubt that he had been—that meant I wouldn't get the chance to explore him the way I couldn't stop thinking of doing.

The shrill bite of his whistle pierced the early morning air before he'd even said anything, fully waking up anyone who might have needed that extra bit of help. The sound also yanked my mind right back to the present and I blinked, standing up a little straighter when I realized we were finally getting underway.

"I hope you got that rest, cadets. We're starting this morning with a five-mile run." One of the other cadets came around the building, but he was late and Santiago clearly knew it. He glanced at his watch, then shook his head. "Make that a ten-mile run. You're doing an extra mile for every minute Murphy made me wait."

Soft groans sounded around me, but I didn't mind the extra running. It would give me some time to get my head back in the game after that stroll down sexy memory lane. As soon as we took off, though, I realized this wasn't going to be just another leisurely run.

Santiago set a punishing pace right from the outset and he kept it up. He also didn't double back this time to check if anyone was falling behind, and if he heard someone say a word, he snapped at them from his position at the front of the pack.

We were all breathing hard by the time we got back to where we started.

It was time for breakfast, but as we started getting ready to go, Santiago blew his whistle again. “You’ve had three days to eat nice, long breakfasts. Get to the course, cadets. We’re not done yet.”

What?

This was a definite deviation from our usual routine, and I was starting to question if he was doing this because of us sleeping together. He still hadn’t so much as glanced in my direction, but as we got to the course, it was evident that this was going to be the hardest day of our time here so far.

He let us drink some water, but most people hadn’t even caught their breath from the run before he blew his whistle again. “Today, you’re doing this one at a time. I’m going to be at every obstacle with you and we’re going to make sure you’re doing this right.”

On the sharp shriek of the whistle, Jonathan took one for the team and volunteered to go first. Santiago went through every obstacle with him, pushing him to go faster, to do better. A trend that continued when the next cadet took his turn and for everyone who went after that.

When it was my turn, he still hadn’t really looked at me. There wasn’t so much as a hint of warmth in his eyes when he blew the whistle to signal my start, and even as we moved away from the others, he didn’t relent.

Those blues were hard as stone, supremely focused as he put me through my paces. When I got to the wall, he sighed and pointed around it. “You’re not wasting my time today, cadet.”

Cadet? Not Layla or even Perkins. Cadet.

I wasn’t one to get butt hurt. I hadn’t doodled our names in my notebook or drawn hearts around his picture in my training manual. I knew that what we had was not a relationship and that it wasn’t steering toward a happily ever after, and I was okay with that.

But cadet? Really?

Coming from the guy who’d taken me places I’d never been before just three days ago, that kind of hurt. I glanced at him once I’d walked around the wall, my muscles aching but my face, hopefully, not betraying how I really felt.

“Is everything okay?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “None of your concern, cadet. Get back to the group.”

Well, that stings.

Even so, I didn’t argue. I simply blew out a frustrated breath and did what

he said. Some of the guys who'd been around the obstacle course were now lying on the ground while others were sitting and stretching out their muscles.

Master Chief Cortez was pushing people to their brink today, and it was showing. As I sat down on the ground next to Jameson Gray, I kept my voice down even though he'd already taken off after the next cadet.

"What do you think is going on with him?"

Jameson squirted some water into his mouth and shrugged. "No idea, but if he carries on like this, half our group will be gone by the end of the week."

I looked around at the others, taking note of the panting, the pained looks, and those who were on the ground and didn't even have their eyes open. "Yeah, you might be right. Did something happen over the weekend, or do you think it's just because we're getting closer to the end?"

He shrugged again. "No idea, Perkins. I wasn't here this weekend."

He got up and his eyes darted around before he gave me a quick smile. "I'm sorry, but I'm really not going to risk talking to you today. Not with the mood he's in. I like you, but I have a feeling he's going to want to punish me for it."

I sighed but nodded my understanding. "You do know that he only did that because of the way Bruce treated us and not just because he was speaking to us at all, right?"

Jameson smiled again. "Yeah, I do. Everyone does, but until he calms down, I'm not taking any chances."

He gave me a small nod, then strode over to where Jonathan was watching the last of the cadets go through the obstacle course. Their heads bent together as they talked quietly, and while I was a little jealous that they'd obviously had the bonding experience I wasn't getting, I wasn't going to put them at risk by making them talk to me.

Especially not today.

Santiago came back to us once the last cadet was finished, and everyone scrambled to get into formation when we noticed him heading our way. Once he was standing in front of us again, not even looking slightly flushed or winded while the rest of us felt like we were dying, he swept a disapproving gaze over the group as a whole.

"One of you brought a woman back to the Station and to the dorm this weekend," he said, his voice dangerously low and quiet. "The actions of one of you reflect on all of you. Clearly, you have not learned respect for your role, your Station, or the work we do here. Until you learn that respect, you

can expect more of what you got this morning.”

Shock ricocheted through me. *He did all this because someone brought a girl back with him?*

My heart stammered in my chest. *If that's true, then this must also be about what we did on Friday. Shit. This is partially my fault.*

It was his fault, too, though. *Hypocritical freaking hypocrite. It takes two to tango, buddy.*

“This is not a brothel,” he said as he walked slowly up and down between us. “If you can’t control your baser urges, then this isn’t the place for you. I’m not going to tolerate you bringing people back to the Station and turning your dorm rooms into a live sex show. That is not what we do here. It’s not how we treat our facility, and it sure as hell isn’t what we gave you the time off to do.”

I wanted to snort so badly. For weeks, they’d been putting a bunch of twenty-somethings through hell, and then they gave us three days off. Surely, he should’ve expected someone else to do the *exact same thing he had done*.

Since I didn’t want to bring his wrath down on myself, however, I kept my snort in and the disbelief off my face. Santiago went back to the front before he’d even come close to me. “Go have breakfast. If there’s anything left for you to eat. Dismissed.”

After briefly debating hanging back to try to talk to him, I decided it was useless. A fool’s errand. The guy I’d caught glimpses of before was obviously gone, and the dick was back in full force. Gone was the guy who laughed and talked about his mother. Gone was my passionate, skilled lover with all that heat in his eyes.

Instead, he was back to being a stone-cold prick, and I had a feeling I wasn’t going to see that other side of him again. Not anytime soon anyway.

SANTIAGO

The cadets had classroom training with one of the other instructors for the rest of the day. They'd only had about fifteen minutes for breakfast, and as I watched them filter into the class from my office, I noticed that every last one of them looked beat to shit.

A tiny stab of guilt seared through me. I'd been hard on them this morning. Maybe even a bit too hard. Ron had put us through days of shit exactly the same as I'd done this morning, though, and we'd all survived.

They would, too.

I dragged my fingers over the top of my head, the short bristles of my hair scraping across my palms, and I shoved the guilt away. Ron really had put us through way more than that, way more often than I had done, and he hadn't even had a reason to do it.

To him, it'd just been training. I hadn't kicked out the guy who'd been caught with the woman and I was keeping his identity to myself. That was all the favors I had in me to do. Besides, I'd been right there with them every step of the way. I'd run with them, and on the obstacle course, I'd shown all of them what they were doing wrong on every obstacle they hadn't quite mastered yet, which meant I'd done the course myself several times over.

I was fine, and I hadn't even tried to catch the tail end of breakfast. When Mel closed the classroom door behind her and I realized I hadn't seen Layla go in, I frowned. Since it was physically impossible for me not to take notice of that girl, I knew I hadn't missed her.

Layla Perkins hadn't reported for classroom training and she hadn't been late once after that first day. Worry raced through me. *Fuck, did she get hurt*

this morning? Is she in the infirmary? Why the hell isn't she at class?

Getting up, I went to check the infirmary first, but there was no one there except one of the guys in my search-and-rescue team who was getting an old knee injury looked at. We shot the breeze for a minute, but then I left and headed toward the girls' dorm.

Only Layla and Mel were left there now, and since I'd seen Mel go into class, at least that meant that Layla would be alone if this was where she was. Just in case, however, I closed the door behind me after I walked in. Then I did a double take when I saw she was starting to pack up her stuff.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

She started, clearly having been too deep in thought to hear me come in. Then she turned her head to look at me over her shoulder. "What does it look like I'm doing, sir?"

"It looks like you're packing, so I guess the real question is why?"

Her green eyes latched on mine, and I saw the torment and indecision brewing inside them. "I'm packing because I think everything you did this morning is because of me. I don't want to be a distraction and I don't want to be the reason my class gets run ragged and has to starve."

"You're quitting?" I barely got the words out as my jaw slackened.

She shook her head. "No, I'm going to ask for a transfer."

"If you do that, you'll have to explain why you want one. What are you planning on saying?"

Her eyes rolled before she turned back to her bunk to continue folding her clothes. "Don't worry, Master Chief Cortez. I was planning on keeping you out of it. I promised you I wouldn't tell anyone what happened, and I keep my promises."

"Okay, but then what are you going to say? It's not like you can pack, request a transfer, and be someplace else by tonight."

"Actually," she said. "I think I can. When I signed up, a lot of people were unsure about letting me into the program here. Even my own father thought it might be better for me to do it somewhere other than at his old station. It's no secret that I haven't really been fitting in here, so I'm going to tell them that I made a mistake. That I should've taken their advice and that I'm willing to wait until next session if there's place in another class for me at this point."

"Don't leave, Layla." *Fuck, why does it sound like I'm begging? I don't beg.* And yet, right now, I kind of was. "What happened this morning had

nothing to do with you. I had to make an example and I had to come down on all of you hard because of what that cadet did.”

She still didn't turn to look at me again. “You can't tell me it was just because of some other person bringing someone back to the Station. What we did was worse and you know it. It's got to have factored into your decisions.”

“Look, I'm not going to lie to you. What I did this morning was hypocritical, I know that. Why do you think I was out there with you all? I didn't say it out loud, but I was accepting my punishment too. The fact of the matter is that I'm struggling with the hypocrisy, but I still did what I had to do.”

“Why did you have to do it?”

I sighed and dragged my hands over my hair again. “There's a chain of command here, Layla. In training, I might be near the top of the food chain, but overall, I'm just a cog in the machine. The cadet in question was drunk out of his mind when they caught him. He bit one of the military police officers when they tried to take his lady friend from him, then he threatened to come all over another one if they didn't let him finish with her before they took him to the brig.”

Well, that definitely shut her up. For a moment, she didn't make a sound. Then her shoulders started shaking with laughter. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack,” I promised, feeling some of the tension easing out of my muscles as I finally took a few more steps toward her. “There was talk of kicking him out for it, and I had to do something to appease the powers that be. I didn't want to kick out a guy who shows real potential just because he got drunk and horny during his time off. All of you who are left show real potential. I'd have done the same for any of the cadets, but that doesn't change the fact that I had to come out strongly against what he did.”

Her quiet laughter subsided and I saw her take a deep breath before she finally turned toward me again. “I believe you, but I still don't want to be a distraction. You and I crossed a line, and after this morning, I'm not sure if we can come back from that.”

“Don't quit on me, Perkins. You're going to be a distraction wherever you go. You're too damn beautiful for this, and I've known it all along, but stay here. Distract me.”

Those eyes flared wide open, surprise registering in them as she looked at me. “Why does it really sound like you want me to stay? Wouldn't it be easier for you if I just disappeared?”

“It would be, but I’ve never liked taking the easy way out. It sounds like I want you to stay because I do. You’re one of my cadets, Perkins. You guys may not have noticed this yet, but it’s a job I take seriously. I don’t want to lose you just because I made a mistake.”

“Don’t do that,” she said softly. “Don’t take away my part in what happened. It’s not like you took advantage of me. It might’ve been a mistake, but you’re not the only one that made it.”

“Fine. We both made a mistake, but I don’t want that to derail your career. Regardless of how well you’ve done here, they may not just transfer you into another class. I know you said you were willing to wait until next session, but that’s not fair either.”

Her gaze went slowly from one of my eyes to the other. “You didn’t even look at me this morning.”

“I didn’t,” I admitted. “It’s not an excuse, but I did tell you I was struggling with the hypocrisy.”

“You called me *cadet*.” She ran her fingers through her thick hair, not playing with it exactly but definitely using it to keep her hands busy. “I know there’s nothing going on between us, but it still stung. I’m not sure if I can stay here, see you every day, and not be hurt by stuff like that. And I shouldn’t be hurt by it. You treated me the same way you did everyone else, but I can’t help the way I feel.”

“I treated you the same as I did everyone else, but I haven’t been inside everyone else. I don’t think it’s irrational for you to be hurt by that. Hell, it hurt me to do it. There’s no other choice, though.”

“How am I supposed to stay then?” she asked after pausing for a long moment. “You and I are clearly attracted to each other. As you just said, you’ve been inside me, but we can’t be together. Isn’t staying simply going to prolong the torture?”

“No,” I said firmly, even though it was an outright lie and I was absolutely sure she knew it. “I’m not letting you quit because of this. We are attracted to each other, but we’re also adults. We can move forward from this without letting it derail either of our careers. I’m sorry about this morning, but I can’t promise that it won’t happen again. Punishment is part of the training sometimes. And the instructors will be hard on you no matter where you go. It’s part of the job description.”

“Can you look me in the eyes and tell me that you’d still have done everything you did even if I hadn’t been here?”

I nodded. “People were watching, Perkins. He *bit* a military police officer and told Neil he was going to *come* on him. It was either make everyone pay to get the point across that we take it very seriously what he did, or kick him out. At this point, I really don’t want to deprive someone of a career I genuinely think you’re all meant for. Not just for getting drunk and stupid on your first long weekend off.”

Her eyes searched mine some more, and I could see I hadn’t convinced her to stay just yet. “Do you really think we can move forward from this?”

“Yes,” I said, but even as I said it, I didn’t know if it was entirely true. All I wanted was more of that night, but the only thing that would suck more than seeing her every day and knowing I couldn’t have her was not seeing her at all. “We’re grownups, Perkins. We also happen to be two pretty determined, pretty bad-ass grownups. If we put our minds to it, we can put this behind us.”

Finally, I saw the beginning of a smile on her lips as she nodded. “We are pretty bad ass, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Okay,” she said after another long pause. “I’ll stay, but you’re going to have to cover for me with whoever is instructing the class right now. The last thing anyone needs this morning is more drama or more punishment.”

“You got it,” I said. “Let’s get you to class, Perkins. I’ll just tell Andrews that I needed you for a minute. He’ll be okay.”

In truth, I needed her for much more than a minute. A day would be nice, to start with, but I’d just promised her that we were going to put it behind us. From now on, I was going to have to make do with my hand, get her through training, and then, once she was no longer one of my cadets, I was going to have to figure out how to get over her for good.

LAYLA

After Santiago's pep talk on Monday, I was happy I hadn't put in for a transfer after all. The rest of the week had gone smoothly, even if the training was continuing to get harder by the day, and thanks to the fact that he kept treating me exactly the same as he did everyone else, no one seemed to be any the wiser about what had happened between us.

Since we'd talked about it, it also didn't sting as much now when he treated me that way. He was only doing what he had to do, and I understood that now.

At the same time, however, putting it behind us was *not* going well for me. Every night when I closed my eyes, his face was all I could see. I dreamed about his eyes, his voice in my ears, and his body moving with mine.

When he led us to the pool after our run on Friday morning, though, I groaned internally. A day with him in swimming trunks was not what I needed right now, but it seemed that was what I would be getting.

I could practically taste the anticipation in the air as we gathered next to the pool, wondering what was in store for us today. Santiago smirked when he caught a few people glancing at the tarp-covered helicopter.

"We're not doing another crash simulation today," he said to the relief of most, but to my disappointment. "While we will do a few more simulations before our time together is done, today we'll be focusing on rescue training."

He pointed at a line of dummies I hadn't noticed before that were lying beside one another at the other end of the pool. "The other instructors and myself are going to be drowning victims. You will have to dive in, retrieve

us, tow us back to the side, and then you're going to perform CPR on the dummies."

I smiled, but I hid it by looking down. My dad and I used to do rescue training for fun during the summer in our pool at home. At first, he'd thought I was kidding when I asked him to show me how to do it, but when he realized I was serious, he was over the moon.

It had been something we could do together that we were both interested in, and we'd made some good memories while he'd taught me everything he knew. As I was thinking back to those days, Santiago spoke again.

"At this point, you've been over the theory surrounding CPR hundreds of times and you've practiced on our dummy friends before, but this is the first time you'll be running through a scenario from beginning to end."

A few people around me nodded, and Santiago grinned. "Drowning victims are never calm when you reach them, unless they've either already blacked out or already died. When you reach us, we will run through various scenarios. At times, we'll be combative. People in that situation are often scared, for obvious reasons, and they're not always thinking clearly. For others, our condition will be much more dire, and that will be when you have to resuscitate your dummy once you get us to shore."

He pointed at the bleachers. "You will be waiting at the top of those. On Andrews's signal, we will start drowning and you will have to reach us as fast as you can. You are not to move from your seat until you get the signal, though. No waiting halfway down so you can get to your victim faster."

Another round of nods. He clapped his hands and motioned to the instructors lining the pool. "Those of us who are not drowning at any given moment will be watching you closely. We'll be looking at your speed, your technique, and the way you interact with your victim if conscious, as well as how you treat them when they're unconscious."

Glancing at the instructors, he waited until he received a nod from each of them before he turned back to us. "Okay, cadets. To the bleachers. On Andrews's whistle, you're going in one at a time."

Since I was standing near the back of the formation, I was one of the first to reach the top of the bleachers. Some of the others hadn't even started climbing up yet, and as I turned to take my seat, I was just in time to see Santiago pulling his T-shirt off over the top of his head.

My pulse started hammering between my legs, and I swore he was moving in slow motion. Everything else zoomed out of focus as he revealed

inch after inch of his gloriously tanned, ripped torso.

I glanced around to make sure no one was watching me watch him, but I was also careful about making it look like I was just staring absently off into the distance. Everyone else was talking quietly among themselves, though, and the instructors were either getting things ready or taking off their own shirts.

Santiago was chatting to one of the other instructors as he got his shirt all the way off and handed it over to the other guy. Meanwhile, I was doing my best not to drool. He had his back to me, and I couldn't stop staring at the toned ropes of muscle there that rippled as he moved or the way his trim hips twitched forward just a tiny bit when he laughed.

Holy mother of Moses. Why does he have to be so damn sexy?

What made it worse was that I now knew exactly what it felt like to have that body pressed against mine. I knew the weight of him when he collapsed down on me after he'd come and I remembered what it had felt like to have those hips fitted between my legs.

Jameson suddenly dropped down beside me. "You worried about this?"

I blinked a few times before discreetly pressing my legs together to try to get rid of that pulsating beat of my heart between them. "No, I'm not too worried. You?"

"Nah." He smiled as he looked out at the pool. "I'm kind of looking forward to it, actually. It's been a long time coming. I'm ready for this."

"Same here," I said confidently. "How are you guys holding up after this week?"

He shrugged. "We all knew it was going to get harder as it went on. Monday was rough, but after that, he seemed to get a little bit calmer. I heard from Matt that it was Pete who brought that woman back. He also told Matt that he wasn't proud of what he did to the guys who caught them. I don't blame Cortez for being hard on us after that. I heard Pete bit someone."

Since I didn't want him to know what Santiago had told me, I stared at Jameson blankly. "You're not pissed at Pete for putting us all in that position?"

"Nah." He chuckled. "I'd rather take the punishment than have anyone else fall out at this point. We're a unit now, you know? I'd take the punishment any day."

I wondered if that applied to punishment for something I might do, too, but I didn't ask. Instead, he and I both turned our attention back to the pool

when Santiago dove in and the whistle blew.

Matt jumped up first, racing to our instructors' aid and making it through the exercise in record time. His dummy was pronounced to be alive after he did CPR for a few moments, and then he smirked as he went to sit on the other end of the bleachers.

One by one, we went through the same exercise. It was another tough day. One of the instructors had committed to his role so much that he nearly drowned Mel in the process. As far as I was concerned, he was the one who'd been the most realistic victim so far.

My father had told me that victims were often so panicked when you reached them that a rescuer was in danger themselves. When it was my turn, I was glad I had the same instructor—especially since it meant I wouldn't have to touch Santiago while he was only wearing his trunks.

I hit the water gracefully, in my opinion, then cut through it as fast as I could but stopped about a foot away to get the instructor's attention. According to Dad, real victims were often disoriented in this scenario and it was easy to startle or scare them if you just wrapped your arm around them straight off the bat like some of the other cadets had done.

After drawing his attention to me, I gave the instructor a gentle smile. "You're safe now. I've got you. I'm going to put my arm just under your armpits now and bring you to shore."

The whole exercise of getting his attention took less than twenty seconds, but he was much calmer and more compliant with me as I towed him to the side of the pool than he had been with any of the others. Since he was alert and not in need of CPR, that was the end of it. I checked him over briefly, but then I smiled and blushed when he played the role of a very enthusiastic, very grateful victim and hugged me.

"My hero," he said with a laugh.

As I walked away, some of the other instructors burst into applause and Santiago even gave me a pat on the back. "Is Perkins really the only one who's been paying any attention in class? A person in distress is still a person and you have to treat them as such. You can't wrestle someone into submission in the middle of a turbulent ocean, but you also can't always have a nice chat like she just did. What you need to do is to find the happy middle."

With that, the next cycle started and we did it all over again. After each one of my turns, I got complimented by the instructors, and at the end, I

definitely felt like I'd been the strongest of our class for this part of our training.

The victorious feeling surging through me was short lived, though. Santiago stepped forward again when the exercise was done, and unfortunately, he had his shirt back on and a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Alright, cadets. This has been a hard week. A long one. Your weekend starts now. We'll see you back here on Monday morning.” His expression turned hard. “Don't bring anyone back to Station with you, got it?”

Everyone agreed, and Pete looked green around the gills as he nodded enthusiastically. While the rest of them hurried off, excited and already making plans, my nose scrunched up. I hadn't realized we'd have the whole weekend off again.

And once again, I had no idea what I was going to do with myself. My parents had gone away to some convention, so I wouldn't even be able to see them for lunch again, but more than that, I really just wanted to get away.

So while I had no idea what I was going to do, I did know that I refused to stay here. As the others left and Santiago followed after them, I watched him go, wondering what his plans for the weekend were and if there was any chance that he'd let me crash them.

SANTIAGO

This weekend, I wasn't taking any chances by sticking around here. Training was over for the week and I was packing up some things in my office. In five more minutes, I'd be hitting the road and getting as far away from the temptation that was Layla Perkins as I could.

And by that, I meant I was going home. It was about time, too. All my houseplants were probably dead by now. The neighbor kid forgot to water them way too often.

As I slid my laptop into its case, I looked up and found none other than the woman I wanted to avoid standing in my doorway. "Perkins? Is everything okay? What are you doing here?"

She came in and shut the door with a soft *snick* behind her. "I, uh, you know I don't have anyone here. My parents are out of town this weekend and I really don't want to just sit around all weekend."

My heart started pounding in my ears. "Why are you telling me this?"

"What are you doing for the weekend?" she asked, and before the question was even all the way out of her mouth, I was shaking my head.

"I'm going to my house, and before you ask, you can't come with me."

"Why not?" she asked. "Please let me come with you. I thought we were being grownups and putting what happened behind us. We can just be two friends hanging out for the weekend."

"We're not friends," I said immediately, then groaned when I saw that pleading gleam entering her eyes again. "Don't do this to me, Perkins. I am trying to be an adult about this and to move forward, but I don't know how to do that if you come home with me."

“Look, I understand, okay? Do you think I like being in here, begging you to let me go along with you when I know how much you don’t want me there?”

“It’s not that I don’t want you there,” I said, already realizing that I was losing this argument. “Why don’t you just stay here and get some sleep? Maybe do some reading or something.”

“All I do when we’re not in training is sleep and read,” she said. “If I promise not to make a move on you, will you let me come along?”

I blew out a breath through my nostrils, wondering why I was so damn incapable of turning this girl down. “You’re sleeping in the guest bedroom.”

A beaming smile appeared on her lips. “Does that mean I can come?”

“As long as you don’t phrase it that way,” I said. “My place is a little over an hour away from here. I’ll give you the address, but you need to wait about an hour before you leave, okay?”

She nodded. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I won’t tell anyone about this, I swear. Thank you.”

Regretting my apparent lack of any fucking backbone when it came to this woman, I jotted my address down on a post-it and handed it over. “Go now. Remember to wait at least an hour.”

“I will,” she promised again, smiling from ear to ear as she left.

Aaaand it’s official. Layla Perkins is going to be the death of me. And if not of me, then of my career.

I knew it, and yet I was surprisingly excited that she was going to be spending the weekend with me. While I knew how wrong it was and while I knew that I really shouldn’t have been happy about this unexpected turn of events, I was.

The whole drive home, I kept promising myself that nothing was going to happen. She’d asked to come with me as a friend, and that was what it was going to be. Friendship. Platonic hanging out with absolutely nothing sexual being either done or discussed.

I had a nagging feeling it wasn’t going to work out that way, but I still told myself it would. Contrary to how I’d acted at that pier with her, I wasn’t an animal. I had a little something called self-control and I was going to use it.

As I turned onto my street, my worries melted away. It always happened when I got home. I’d saved up from my very first paycheck, and a couple years ago, I’d finally managed to scrape together enough money for a down

payment.

During training, I mostly stayed at the Station, but this place really was my sanctuary. When I was here, I wasn't Master Chief Cortez. I didn't have to worry about being watched or about my cadets. My place was just for me, and I loved it.

It was a cottage on the coast with only an old stone wall separating me from the beach. Not a lot of people lived around here, hence the neighbor kid not even making it over often enough to water my plants most weeks, and it was about as private as private could be.

I didn't have much of a yard, but I didn't need it with the beach right outside, and it was pretty perfect for a lock-up-and-go, which was exactly what I needed. As I parked out front, I dragged in a deep breath and once again reconsidered my decision to let Layla come here with me for the weekend.

I'd been making all these pretty little promises to myself about keeping my hands—and my dick—away from her, but the reality was that I probably wasn't going to. This taboo crush I had was too intense at the moment, and maybe it was just because I wasn't supposed to feel anything for her, but I really did feel so many things that I hadn't really felt before.

Relationships were *not* for me. I'd learned that early on. My job was my first love, and even though I knew it'd be time to move on from this particular chapter soon, I just hadn't had time to get involved in anything serious.

When I did have time and I wasn't in training or on duty, I preferred to be out here by myself, fishing, relaxing, and preparing myself mentally for whatever challenges I might face during my next shift.

As I unlocked the old, heavy wooden front door, I pushed it open and walked in, then realized that I'd left in such a hurry the last time I'd been here that the place looked like a hurricane had hit it. It wasn't big enough inside to be untidy.

If there was one shirt on the couch or a few odds and ends on the kitchen counter, it looked like a bomb had gone off in here—and that was what it looked like right now. Checking my watch, I realized that I probably had at least fifty more minutes before Layla got here, so at least I had enough time to clean up.

As much as I'd have liked to text her to tell her I'd changed my mind about the weekend, I didn't have her number. Plus, I was still unreasonably

happy that she was coming here and I'd get to spend some time with her away from the Station.

So I probably wouldn't have told her not to come even if I could. Which was a problem because, against my better judgment, I really did want to spend time with her when we could both just relax and not have to worry about being seen.

After dropping my bag in the main bedroom, I quickly unpacked the few things I had to unpack, put my toiletries in the shower, and then I started cleaning up. Mostly, it was just about collecting laundry and stuffing it all in the hamper, and then packing away the few things cluttering up the surfaces.

By the time a car pulled up out front, I was done and lying flat on my back on the couch. The TV was off, and I'd been listening to the sound of the ocean outside until I heard the engine. I also heard it cut off, and then I heard her closing the car door.

Slowly sitting up, I closed my eyes, prayed for strength, and then I went to open my front door for her. She'd changed out of the clothes she usually wore on the Station, opting for a flowery, yellow sundress that showed off just too much of the curves of her breasts for my liking. Although that wasn't accurate. It wasn't that I didn't like it. It was that I liked it too damn much.

She smiled as I waved her in, those green eyes glittery with happiness as she released a soft breath. "Thanks again for letting me crash with you for the weekend."

"Thanks for rephrasing it," I said as I shut the door behind her. "So, uh, I think we need to set some ground rules."

"Wow. We're getting right to it then, huh?"

I chuckled as I took her bag from her. "I'll show you around while we talk about it. The place is tiny, so the tour shouldn't take too long."

She looked around as I led her through the open-concept living space at the front down a short corridor that led to the two bedrooms and the bathroom. "This is amazing. I love it. It's so bright, and warm, and cozy."

"Thanks. I like it, too."

She smiled and rocked her shoulder into mine as I opened the door to the guest bedroom. "Obviously, you like it. You live here. Is this me?"

I nodded. "Yep. There's only one bathroom, though. It's right across the hall, and that's pretty much it."

"It's perfect." She beamed at me, her pearly white teeth on display as her lips curled up and her gaze caught on mine. "So, what were you saying about

ground rules?”

“Right.” I cleared my throat, backing up a little until I was standing in the door while she was still in the middle of the small bedroom. “We’re here as friends, right? So that means no sex. No talking about sex or what happened, and no shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans?” she asked with laughter shining bright in her eyes. “Could you give me an example? Just so I know what not to do.”

“You know, just nothing like walking around without enough clothes on or leaving the bathroom door open while you’re in the shower.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, still smiling and still looking amused as hell. “When you say shenanigans, then, what you mean is no tempting each other?”

I nodded. “Sure. Whatever you want to call it, let’s just not make this too hard on ourselves, okay?”

“I can do that,” she agreed, but then some of the humor flickered out in her eyes and she took a few tentative steps closer to me. “Before we do all that, can I ask you a question?”

“Depends on the question.”

Her chest rose on a deep breath. “Do you ever think about that night at the pier? With anything other than regret, I mean.”

“I don’t regret it, Layla,” I said softly, ignoring the actual question because I thought about it all the time, but I couldn’t let her know about it. “Settle in and unpack. I’ll get us some beers and we can go for a walk. Maybe drink them on the beach?”

Her eyes still hadn’t left mine and she shook her head when I started turning to leave. “Fine, I’ll go first, then. That night is all I can think about. I know you said we’re not going to talk about it, and that’s fine, we don’t have to talk about it. I just wanted you to know where my head is at.”

“It’s all you can think about?” I asked, my feet closing the distance between us before I’d given them the conscious command to do it. “What happened to moving on?”

“I’m trying,” she whispered as I caught her face in my hands. “It’s just, uh, it’s not as easy for me as it seems to have been for you.”

“You think it’s been easy for me?” I breathed as I stared into those eyes that would make me jump off a damn mountain without a parachute if she asked me to do it. “It hasn’t been easy, Layla. In fact, it’s been so damn hard that I haven’t started moving forward at all.”

“Me either,” she admitted, and my precious self-control failed me again.

It had been less than ten minutes since she’d arrived, but with a few short sentences, she’d already blown my resolve to smithereens. In a spectacularly poor display of restraint—and it was so spectacularly poor that there was no restraint in the display at all—my mouth descended to hers and I kissed her.

The final nail in the coffin of all those pretty promises I’d made myself came when she moaned and kissed me back. I didn’t know what it was about this woman, but she had gotten under my skin and I was starting to realize that resistance, in this case, was utterly and completely futile.

LAYLA

Had I planned this? No. Had I been hoping it would happen? Hell, yes. It didn't seem to matter that I'd promised him less than a week ago that we could move forward and put what had happened behind us. It also didn't matter that I'd almost quit because it had happened at all.

When Santiago and I were alone together, nothing seemed to matter except for this. For him. He was the fuel to my flames, and I wanted the inferno even if meant the whole world burned to the ground around us because of it.

My attraction to this man knew no bounds. It didn't care that we could both lose everything we'd worked for if we were found out. I didn't even care that my father would probably disown me if he was to walk in here right now.

I was drawn to Santiago in a way that didn't seem to have any rhyme or reason. Before I'd gone to his office to ask if I could come with him, I'd tracked down some of the other cadets. They were planning on spending the weekend at a motel near the Station and they hadn't invited me to join them.

I should have asked them if I could, but I hadn't. Instead, I'd told them to have fun and then I'd gone to see Santiago.

He was the only person I wanted to spend this weekend with. When I'd told him I didn't have anything else to do, it had been true, but I was pretty sure the cadets wouldn't have turned me down if I'd asked.

Ultimately, however, this was where I wanted to be and this was who I wanted to be with. Santiago's lips were as soft as I remembered them being, but his kisses were hard and demanding again. Low groans were falling from

the back of his throat and I loved the fact that I knew those noises meant he wanted this just as much as I did.

The aquatic scent of him was intoxicating, and between that and having his hard body pressed to mine, I didn't stand a chance of escaping or pulling back. For both of our sakes, one of us probably should have, but neither of us did.

As we kissed, his tongue tangled with mine and his large, warm hands cupped my cheeks and held me to him like he was afraid I was going to disappear if he let go. That ripped torso I'd admired at the pool earlier today was crushed against mine, and I could feel his heart pounding against my chest as he walked us back in the direction of the bed.

The two of us alone together in the most beautiful, romantic cottage right on the beach had been a recipe for disaster from the moment he'd given in and said I could join him here. He'd probably known it but he still said yes. It made me feel more desired, more longed after, than I'd ever felt before. As he laid me down on the mattress, I wrapped my hand around his neck and brought him down with me, and I couldn't help the moan that slid out of me.

When I was with him, it seemed I was as vocal as he was. I hadn't been with a lot of men in the past, and I'd certainly never been with one who made the kind of noises he did. In fact, I'd always thought that men wore silence during sex as some kind of badge of honor, but not Santiago.

As I moaned, he growled, then nipped my lower lip and broke the kiss to look down into my eyes. "You have been a very bad girl, Cadet Perkins. The ground rules were specifically designed to stop something like this from happening."

I rounded my eyes, hoping that it made me look innocent before I batted my lashes at him. "Are you going to punish me, sir?"

To my surprise, he let out a soft chuckle as he nodded. "Yeah, I'm going to punish you, alright. I'm going to punish you by keeping you in bed with me until neither of us can walk tomorrow. Sound good?"

"It does, but it also doesn't sound like much of a punishment."

He smiled, then brought his lips back to mine and kissed me a lot gentler this time. When he lifted his head away from mine again, he held himself up on his elbows with his hard body pressing me into the mattress. "Okay, look, I'm going to level with you. Role play is hot sometimes and if you want to be punished, like spanked and stuff, I can do that, but right now, I'd rather just be with you."

My lips parted, but I didn't really know what to say.

Santiago's blue eyes held mine. "What's it going to be, cadet? It's one thing to joke about it, but it's another to actually do it."

"I wouldn't know," I admitted softly. "I've, uh, I've never done it before. The punishment and stuff, I mean, but I think you're right. I like joking about it, but I don't think I'd enjoy the real thing much."

"We'll see." He kissed me again, but this time, he didn't pull away until he had to so we could get his shirt over his head.

As I watched him rise up to tug the material away from his broad shoulders, my gaze caught on the tattoo placed almost right over his heart. *Semper Paratus*, it read in cursive script, and I smiled. "Always ready, huh?"

He surprised me again when he sighed, smiled, and shook his head. "That's what I thought when I got it, but it turns out I'm not always ready."

"Why not?"

Tossing his shirt to the side, he brought his head back down and ran his nose along the length of mine. "Because I thought I was always ready for anything, but then this beautiful, smart, exceptionally talented cadet walked into my class and I definitely wasn't ready for her. I wasn't ready for you, Layla Perkins."

"You might not want to say stuff like that if you don't want me falling for you," I whispered as I wrapped my arms around him again and stared up into the depths of his gorgeous blue eyes. "If it helps, I wasn't ready for you either."

Out of nowhere, he smacked the side of my ass and smirked as he rose up again. "That's enough of that. You're not falling for me, and you're also not the one who literally has the words *Always Ready* tattooed on his chest, so you clearly weren't as much of a cocky asshole as I was when I got it. I really thought it was true. Anyhow, lie down on my lap."

"What?"

"You heard me, cadet," he grumbled, inserting some of that commanding authority from training into his voice instead of keeping it as sweet as it had been just a minute ago. "You said you'd never been spanked and I think we should find out if you enjoy it."

I sucked in a breath. "Oh, right."

As I settled over his lap, feeling a bit silly for the way I was lying down and presenting him with my ass, I also felt a little thrill run through me. He'd said he just wanted to be with me, but clearly, he was also capable of being

playful in the bedroom and compromising on what he'd said he wanted.

Which I liked. It was a different side of him. When we'd been together before, he'd been so incredibly intense as much as it'd been absolutely amazing, so I was kind of looking forward to getting to know yet another different part of him.

"Tell me if it's too much, okay?" he murmured, and I nodded, but it seemed he wasn't happy with that. "No, cadet. Let me hear you say it."

"I'll let you know if it's too much, sir." I tacked it on at the end to tease him, and he laughed before he rubbed his palm over my butt.

Then it disappeared and I braced myself for pain, but instead what I got was a light smack that stung a bit, but in a nice way. My breath left me in a rush when I realized I really liked it. "Oh!"

I felt his erection twitch under me. "More?"

"Yes," I said breathlessly. "More please, sir."

"Such a good girl," he praised me lightly before he smacked me again, a little harder this time, but it still didn't hurt.

I squirmed in his lap and he didn't ask this time before his palm crashed into me again. When I moaned, he slid his fingers under the waistband of my panties and into the swollen, wet flesh between my legs. He hissed loudly, teasing me before pulling his hand out and smacking me again.

"Shit, Layla. It's like you were made for me, you know that?"

"Why?" I managed between labored breaths. "I thought you didn't like spanking and punishment type stuff?"

"I never said I didn't like it," he murmured as he helped me up, then pulled my sundress over my head and unhooked my bra. Those flames were back in his eyes as his gaze dropped to my chest before he moved his eyes back to mine. "I do like it. I just don't like actually hurting anyone, but that was fucking hot and I know it didn't hurt."

As he lay back down, I shook my head. "It didn't hurt at all. It felt really good."

"Like I said, you were made for me," he murmured insistently before his lips claimed mine in a searing kiss that made me want so much more.

Happily, it seemed he felt the same way. We stayed in bed together for the rest of the afternoon and he gave me more orgasms than I thought I was capable of in more ways than I'd thought was possible. We did more role play with him calling me cadet and me replying with sir, but it was all light. Light, fun, and exploratory, and it was great.

I finally got to lick him all over, treating his thick, hard cock as my favorite lollipop and then swallowing everything he had to offer, and that was amazing too. It felt like he was letting himself go with me, and since we were in no rush, we could both do everything we wanted to do and more.

Long after dark, we got up and made dinner together without getting dressed. Then we watched a movie naked on his couch before going back to bed. As we fell asleep, I pulled myself in closer to his side, feeling safer, happier, and more sated than I had with anyone else in the past. I knew he liked having me here too when he hooked one of his strong arms around me and tugged me in tighter until I was fitted to his body like a sheet.

Whether or not we were supposed to be together, it felt so right to be here with him that I smiled when I finally closed my eyes. One of these days, I was going to have to let him go, but thankfully, that day wasn't today.

SANTIAGO

When I woke up with Layla still in my arms and I didn't immediately try to get away, I knew I was getting in too deep with her. I didn't want to let go of her, though. I didn't want to slide my arm out from underneath her head or to extract my legs from hers.

Fuck. I'm in real trouble here.

I wanted to stay right where I was, and not just for the next few minutes, either. For the next few days at least. Weeks if I could, and months if she'd let me fall asleep and wake up next to her for that long.

Maybe even years, but that was the craziest thought I'd ever had. *Both of our careers are on the line for this. Is it really worth that?*

I lay there watching her sleep, with her dark eyelashes resting against her smooth, golden skin, and I had an even crazier thought. *Because, yes. I think it just may be worth it.*

While I wasn't going to tempt fate and kiss her during training or anything stupid like that, I also wasn't going to keep trying to push her away. I'd tried and failed. *Twice now.*

Obviously, it was time to try a different tactic, and maybe the best one was just to give in. I'd been fighting against that instinct for too long, and as I lay in my bed in the master bedroom, overlooking the sea as the sun rose slowly into the sky, I didn't want to fight it anymore.

Fuck me for even thinking this, but it's time to acknowledge that I lost this fight a long time ago. Weeks ago, even. Maybe as far back as that first run when I'd let myself look at her for much too long.

As the room slowly started becoming lighter, the rays of the rising sun

warming the space and creating a soft, otherworldly glow, I sighed. Because this was it. This was the moment I was going to stop resisting. Again, not in a stupid, grand romantic gesture right on the Station way, but in a way that was much more dangerous.

In a way that was much too real. All because I wanted to be with her and I was done with the *we shouldn't be doing this* part of our story. We both knew we shouldn't be doing it, and we were doing it anyway.

As I watched, a lazy, sleepy smile touched the corners of Layla's lips, and those eyes blinked open and immediately found mine. "You're thinking so loudly, it woke me up."

"Nah, it wasn't the thinking. It was probably the staring." *Damn, I love her waking up to me way too much.*

Leaning forward, I bent my head and stole a kiss, not even bothered in the least about the fact that neither of us had brushed our teeth yet. After that, I stole another kiss, letting my lips linger against the soft plushness of hers as I hummed at the back of throat.

"You do know you're going to be the death of me, right?"

Her smile widened as she wrapped a warm hand around the back of my neck and nodded against my forehead. "At least you've already had a good, illustrious career with the Coast Guard. They'll make a spectacle of your funeral."

I chuckled, just breathing her in for a moment before I managed to lift my head away from hers. "What do you want to do today? We could stay right here, but I doubt you asked to come here for the weekend just to stay in bed."

"We could go for breakfast?" she suggested before she blinked the thought away. "Actually, never mind. We probably can't risk being seen together."

"If it's breakfast you want, it's breakfast you'll get. We're hours away from Station and no one who lives around here could out me. I don't even think they know what I do for a living. They don't really know me at all. I haven't been able to spend much time here since I bought the place."

"So we can really go out together?" she asked, a hint of excitement creeping into her voice. I smiled. Clearly, this made her happy and I wanted to do that. Since I was past the I shouldn't phase now, I didn't even think about it along those lines.

Realistically, I shouldn't have wanted to make her happy but I wanted to anyway. *So fuck it...*

“Let’s go get some breakfast,” I said as I finally rolled away from her and got out of bed. I let her hit the shower first, despite her attempts to get me to join her, and I grabbed one once she was done. The girl wanted breakfast and showering together definitely wasn’t going to get us there any faster.

I took her to a local roadside diner down the beach that was nestled between a small coastal street and the sand, and she smiled at me when we walked in. “This is perfect. It’s so quaint.”

“Everything around here is quaint.” I didn’t resist catching her hand and pulling her into me to brush a kiss to her temple. “The food is great and the view is even better. Want to get a seat by the window?”

“Yes.” She rested her head against my shoulder for a beat while we walked, then straightened up again to point at a table in the corner. “That one?”

“Looks good to me.” We sat down and got handed menus by a kind but mercifully disinterested server who hurried away again right after he gave them to us. Why he was hurrying, though, I didn’t know. There were only two other tables in the place that were occupied, but when he came back carrying a pot of coffee, I grinned. “Thanks, man.”

He nodded at me as he filled our mugs. “You’re welcome. I’ll be back to take your orders.”

Then he left and Layla turned to me, her head lowering slightly to one side as she made a study of my face. “You’re different here. Much more smiley. It’s funny, but for those first few weeks, I didn’t think you were capable of smiling at all, and now look at you.”

I chuckled as I leaned back in my chair. “No one would be scared of an instructor who smiled all the time. It’s an occupational hazard. We need to get your attention to make you fall in line before we show any humanity.”

“Well, you certainly did that,” she said. “Now that we’re here, though, I’m looking forward to getting to know this side of you. I think I like you relaxed, unless of course you’re about to tell me to drop and give you twenty.”

“Well, I want you to give me something, but it’s not push-ups,” I joked. “If you’re offering to get down on the ground, I’d rather have you stop on your knees.”

Her brows twitched up and her cheeks turned a rosy pink. “Really? Here?”

I shrugged. “Maybe not right here, but they’ve got unisex restrooms in

the back if you're interested."

"*Public* unisex restrooms," she emphasized the word before her eyes widened. "Oh. I get it. You're kinky that way. First the pier and now the restrooms."

"The pier wasn't on me, but sure. If you want to call it being kinky, I won't stop you. The way I see it, there isn't always a bedroom available nearby, and if it's got to happen, it's got to happen."

"It's never *got* to happen." She giggled as she tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ear.

I shrugged again. "I beg to differ. There are definitely times when it's *got* to happen. The pier was one of those times."

Chest rising on a deep breath, she looked back at me for a long moment before she nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm not sure what I would've done if it hadn't happened. There's not much privacy in the dorms and I could've run twenty miles that night and still not have run it off."

"Same," I agreed easily. "On a note that's less likely to make me want to drag you into said restrooms, how're you doing with the program? Is it everything you were hoping it would be?"

The lust cleared from her eyes as she switched gears. "Absolutely. It's been amazing so far. It's like I can feel myself getting stronger from one day to the next. Every simulation is easier than the one before it. The longer we're in the program, the more I can really see myself doing this for a living."

"You didn't see yourself doing it for a living before?"

A smile touched her lips. "Well, I did, but it was like it was never actually going to happen, you know? Other kids were dreaming of becoming astronauts and rock stars, and all I ever wanted was to be part of search and rescue. The difference is that the other kids eventually realized they needed to chase more realistic dreams, but I didn't. Now, it's so close that I can almost taste it and it feels a little surreal that it's really happening."

Passion ignited behind those soft green eyes, and I found myself wanting to crawl into them. Into *her*. "You *are* close now, but you need to be careful. I know exactly how you're feeling. Like you're invincible. Like it's all finally coming together and nothing we throw at you is going to bring you down. Getting caught up in that feeling is dangerous."

"Look at you, harshing my vibe," she said playfully. "I'll be careful. I know it's dangerous to get cocky, but at the same time, I also know that I can do this. Maybe I'll get knocked down a peg or two, but I'm at the point where

I know that if it happens, I'll get back up again."

"I remember that feeling," I mused. "It's idealistic, but sure. It's what you're feeling right now. I can't and won't take it away from you. Just promise me you'll be careful, okay?"

"I'll be careful," she said dutifully. "What about you, Master Chief Cortez? Will you be careful?"

"I always am. Why, are you worried about me?"

She rocked her head from side to side before she shot me a teasing smile. "Maybe I am. What you do for a living is pretty dangerous."

No, I wanted to say. What's dangerous is this. Us. Because if you're ever in trouble, I'm going to be right there, throwing caution to the wind and disregarding my own safety so long as it means you'll be okay. "Let's just promise each other we'll be careful and move on."

Our server came back to take our order, and once he was gone again, I focused on Layla. "I feel like we've skipped a few steps. Here we are, putting our careers on the line to be together and worrying about each other, but I don't even know your favorite color."

"It's pink," she said, then hid a giggle behind her hand when my eyebrows rose. "What? I can be bad ass and feminine at the same time."

"Sure, you can. I just wasn't expecting it."

"What's your favorite color?"

I thought about it before I responded. "These days, I think it's orange."

"Orange?" she repeated incredulously. "That's not possible. Orange isn't anyone's favorite color."

"Well, not like a bright orange. A soft orange. Like the sunset. If I can see it, it means I've survived another day."

"That's not grim at all."

We debated the merits of my answer for a while, but I didn't change my mind. What I'd said was true, and while blue used to be my favorite color, it definitely wasn't anymore.

Eventually, our server brought our food and we kept exchanging basic information while we ate, and when we were done, she turned to look out the window. "So, what else is there to do around here?"

"We could go fishing," I said. "It's another one of my favorites. There's no better way to unwind."

"I'm all about that," she replied immediately. "I love fishing. Let's do it."

"Let's do it," I agreed before dropping a few bills on the table.

She tried to pay for her own meal, but I refused to let her. If we were doing this, I was doing it right. At least, right according to me. According to the way my mother raised me.

After getting the fishing gear, we drove out to the lake and I felt the serene grin that spread on my lips as soon as the shimmering, quiet surface of the water came into view. Layla let out a happy sigh next to me, then ruined the moment by poking me in the ribs.

It was the only ticklish spot I had, and I nearly shot through the roof when she touched it. Doubling over with laughter, she shook her head at me when I glanced at her again. “I can’t believe you’re that ticklish. Big, bad, search-and-rescue instructor and you can’t take a little pressure to the ribs?”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t stop the laughter that came out of me in turn. “We’ve all got our weaknesses.”

“Yeah,” she agreed as she turned back to the water. “Speaking of which, how many women have you brought here?”

“None until now, I guess. I don’t have a weakness for women, Layla.” I didn’t think I had to add that I definitely had a weakness for her. It spoke for itself, and I wasn’t about to toss that monkey wrench into the works while we were here to relax.

Things were serious enough in our real lives. The last thing we needed was to take this short amount of time we had to get away from it and turn it into a deep, meaningful conversation about our feelings. Or, God forbid, a conversation about defining our relationship.

I was good with where we were. For now, I was just hoping she felt the same.

LAYLA

The things he left unsaid hung in the air between us, and I opened the passenger door in an attempt to diffuse the tension by drawing his attention back to what we were actually doing here. “Are we fishing or are we going to just sit here and look at the water?”

“We’re going fishing.” Without hesitation, he turned to open his own door and then we got busy putting together our rods. As he watched me assemble and ready my own, I got the feeling that he had questions he didn’t want to ask, and since I was pretty sure I knew what those questions were, I smiled and answered them.

“Yes, I have done a lot of fishing. My dad used to take me when he had time, which wasn’t often enough for me, so eventually, I just learned what I had to and went out by myself. It’s not that hard, but it is that fun. It was worth messing it up a few times to be able to go whenever I wanted to.”

He grinned, running a hand over the top of his crew cut and shaking his head. “The more I learn about you, the more I want to ask where you’ve been all my life, but I already know where you’ve been. At school. Cheerleading practice, maybe? All the while, I was throwing myself out of helicopters and getting old.”

“That’s cute, but I was never a cheerleader,” I said as he picked up the tackle box, and we walked to the shore. “Also, what are you talking about? You’re not old.”

He snorted, moving those incredible blue eyes to mine for a moment when we stopped to bait our hooks. “When I was twenty-four, I used to think people in their thirties were ancient. In case you missed it somehow, I’m in

my thirties. To you, I'm definitely old."

I scoffed. "No, you're not. Older than me doesn't make you *old*."

As I bent over and worked on my bait, I felt him still staring at me. Looking up, I arched an eyebrow at him when I found him studying me with a puzzled look on his face. "What?"

"Nothing." He shrugged, hiding a smile as he shook his head again. "I just don't really understand how the age gap doesn't seem to bother you. I mean, why are you fooling around with me instead of one of the cadets? There are some pretty good-looking guys in your class. If this is just because you're horn—"

"Yeah, I'm cutting you off right there. This isn't about that. I'm not with any of them because they're not you. I didn't go into the program looking to start something. With you, it just kind of happened."

"Sure, but why me? Again, there's a pretty big age gap between us. It also would've been a lot easier for you to go with one of the cadets instead."

"Are you fishing for compliments, or are you being serious right now?"

He chuckled. "I'm fishing alright, but it's not for compliments."

As he said it, he cast his line and then slowly tugged on the reel before he glanced back at me. "Are you being serious? My age has never bothered you?"

"To be honest, I've never even really thought about it," I said. "It's never crossed my mind. How old are you, anyway?"

"Thirty-two."

I laughed. "That's an eight-year gap. It's not so bad at all."

"Uh, yes. It definitely is," he argued, but there was still amusement dancing in his eyes. "The fact that you don't realize it worries me a little. What if we wake up one morning and you see a gray hair on my head?"

"Then you'll be a silver fox and I'll be even more into you," I teased. "Does it really bother you that much that I'm younger than you?"

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Does it look like it bothers me that much? We woke up naked together just a few hours ago, and before the sun sets, we'll be naked together again. I think I've proven that it doesn't exactly turn me off."

I chuckled, feeling warmth creeping into my heart as well as onto my skin. "Does that mean you like me?"

He snorted as he turned back to the lake. "I think we've established that."

"Nah, not really," I said as I cast my own line. "We've established you

like sleeping with me, but you've also almost killed me a few times. Especially way back at the beginning and then again on Monday. Seriously, you've been brutal."

"Just doing my job. You wouldn't be feeling like you're getting stronger every day if I didn't put you through your paces."

"True, but you were such a dick at first. I think we all had dreams about torturing you at least once."

He laughed. "I wouldn't have been doing my job right if you didn't. It's not fun to see all the cadets glaring at me like they're wishing I'll drop dead on the spot, but it also kind of is."

"You're twisted," I joked. "Since you're also not really such a massive dick, though, I imagine it can be a bit hurtful at times to see people look at you that way. Only once you're done enjoying it, that is."

"I'll admit that I've been enjoying this session a little more than I have the others. My view has definitely been better this time around. Especially while we've been running or you've been doing sit-ups, or while you've been crawling through the sand for that matter."

"Wait, you've been checking me out while making us feel like you want us to faint?"

He shrugged, but the laughter twinkling in his eyes made me reach for his ribs. Neatly dodging my hand, he winked when he looked at me again. "Don't even try to tell me you haven't done the exact same thing. I feel your eyes on me all the time, Perkins. I know I'm not the only one who's been enjoying the view."

"Yeah, okay. You caught me," I admitted. "On that note, could we have more exercises at the training pool when we get back? I really enjoy those."

"You and me both," he muttered. "On the other hand, maybe I should scrap those exercises altogether. Avoid the temptation, you know?"

"As it happens, I prefer to think about it as anticipation."

He laughed. "You really do seem to like anticipation. I'll keep that in mind. Until I get so old that I start forgetting things, that is."

"What is it with you and our ages?" I teased. "Are you really that hung up on yours?"

"Not usually, but being with you has made it come up a lot more often in my mind. How can it not? I'm constantly reminded of how long it's been since I was where you are now, and of everything I've done in the meantime. We're in two completely different phases of our lives."

“What, does that mean you don’t want to meet my father and tell him we’re going steady?” I was only joking, but the horrified look he shot me in return made me laugh. “Just kidding, Master Chief. Jeez. The last thing I want is for you to meet my father as my boyfriend. He’ll have both of our asses.”

“Especially mine,” Santiago said dryly. “I know your dad and I know he’s expecting me to teach you well, but I doubt he’s been expecting me to teach you that you liked being spanked or any of that other stuff.”

Once again, my cheeks burst into flame. “Is it really that easy for you to talk about spanking me? You don’t even look a little bit embarrassed.”

“Why should I be?” He glanced at me again, looking genuinely confused as he motioned around us. “It’s just you and me here, Layla. I figure we can talk about it.”

“Yeah, but…” My teeth sank into the back of my lower lip. “How are you confident all the time about absolutely frigging everything? It’s unnatural.”

He laughed. “I’m not confident about *everything*. Meeting your father as your boyfriend, for example, I would definitely not be confident about. Mostly because I know he’d kill me, and I’m not exaggerating. I’m pretty sure my body would wash out of the ocean a couple weeks after we told him what was happening between us.”

I sighed. “You’re probably not wrong, but he’s just protective of me. It’s only really been me and him for a long time, so you can’t blame him for being on the overprotective side.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What about your mom?”

“Oh, uh, Angela isn’t my mom. I mean, she raised me, but my mom died when I was young. The current Mrs. Perkins has done her best and I love her, but she’s still not my mom.”

Santiago’s jaw worked. “Shit, I’m sorry. I really didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, my dad doesn’t like talking about it too much. Neither do I, really. It makes me feel too vulnerable. Plus, it doesn’t feel like it’s fair to Angela. She’s been a good mom to me and I know she really does care, but at the same time, it also feels like we’re betraying my mother when we refer to her as my mom.”

Something in my stomach fluttered and my chest suddenly felt hollow. When I said I didn’t like talking about this, I meant it. My emotions were all over the place about this particular subject. I was surprised I’d even told him the truth. Usually, I would’ve just gone with the assumption that Angela was

my mother and that would've been that.

Talking about it to Santiago felt different, though. My emotions were still all over the place, but I somehow felt safe expressing them to him anyway. Like some part of me deep down inside knew he'd understand and not judge me for still feeling so confused about it all even after so many years.

"My biological father died when I was eleven," he said quietly before blowing out a heavy breath. "I remember him so well, but my mother's new husband seems to think that if he just keeps saying he's my dad, it'll somehow turn him into it."

Twisting to face him, my eyes widened. "Seriously? We have this terrible thing in common?"

He offered me a sad smile. "It seems so. I suppose it doesn't really matter, though, does it? We can't bring our parents back and we've got to live with our remaining parents' choices. Frankly, it's not that I mind my stepfather. He's a decent guy and he's good to my mom. He's just not my dad."

"I get that," I said. "Angela is amazing. She really took me under her wing and she treats me like I'm her own. Can't really ask for more than that, but it still makes me feel guilty."

"Yeah." He sighed. "I know, but we're lucky we didn't get horrible step-people, you know? Besides, the guilt won't bring our own parents back, either. I think they'd be happy we're still being treated well by their successors."

"Successors?" I said, nearly choking on my laughter as I gaped at him. "I mean, I guess that's what they are, but still."

He shrugged, a grin of his own appearing on those full lips. "Yeah, I know, but it is what it is."

"You're very matter-of-fact, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Sure am. I'm a realist to the bone. More so these days. There's no point in being any different."

"I guess, but that's a little bit depressing."

"It still is what it is," he replied as he turned back to the water. "While we're on the subject, you do know that once we get back to the Station, this is all just going to be a memory, right? Just this morning, I was thinking that maybe we could just see where it goes, but now that the glow has worn off and we're talking about the reality, I'm realizing we can't really do that."

"No, we can't," I agreed. "I still can't think of anything I want to do right

now but this, though. It's fun to pretend while we can."

It really was, but pretending was also dangerous. We had about twenty-four hours of this left, and after that, I'd have to go back to remembering that this hadn't been real, and I had a feeling that was going to be more difficult than ever after this weekend.

SANTIAGO

After one of the best weekends of my life, it was tough getting my head back in the game. She wasn't the only one who hadn't wanted to be doing anything else for those forty-eight hours. Back on the Station, it was kind of weird knowing Layla was so close and yet so far.

I hadn't even seen her since we'd said goodbye at my place yesterday afternoon, and yet her car was parked in the lot not far away from mine, letting me know that at least she'd made it back safe. At five a.m. on Monday morning, the memories of the weekend already felt too distant.

Honestly, given the choice, I'd rather just have stayed home with her today, playing hooky and maybe going for another walk on the beach. We'd even discussed doing it, but both of us taking an additional day off after a weekend would've been too suspicious.

So here I was, trying and failing to get back to reality. One of the other instructors had taken over the morning run today, so I wouldn't even have an excuse to see her for at least another thirty minutes—which felt like an age to me right now.

As Commander Nicholson walked into my office, though, I was reminded of why I wasn't out on the run. He'd requested an emergency meeting with me and I was on edge about it, wondering if somehow it had come out that I'd spent the weekend buried balls deep in Perkins' daughter.

The set of the Commander's shoulders was rigid as he narrowed his deep blue eyes at me. "Thanks for giving up your run for me this morning, Cortez. I wouldn't be interfering if it wasn't serious, but unfortunately, we've got a problem on our hands."

“Yes, sir.” I had no idea what he was talking about, but that was pretty much the only appropriate reaction to anything he said.

When he spun to close my door behind him, my mouth was bone dry and a tremble ran down my arms. *Fuck, he knows. Does he know?*

If he knew, there would be no getting away from it. The man didn’t take any shit and he wouldn’t be sold on some sob story of how I just hadn’t been able to help myself with her. I could propose to Layla Perkins the very same minute that he called me out on it and he still wouldn’t believe our relationship was serious enough to bend the rules for.

At this point, if he knew, then I was as good as gone.

“What’s been going on, Cortez?” he asked as he turned and marched to the couch in my office instead of to the desk, which would’ve been worrying enough even if his next sentence wasn’t what I was expecting. “Why are all the instructors going rogue?”

“Excuse me, sir?”

He sighed, swiping his hat off his head and setting it down gently beside him before he rubbed tired-looking eyes. “You know as well as I do that a lot of them haven’t been doing what they’re supposed to be doing. Look at that incident with Robertson. Perkins’s daughter almost drowned because he wasn’t at his post. Since when do we run the kind of ship where it’s more important to get to a date than it is to do your damn job?”

I swallowed. *Shit, I knew that was going to come back to bite me in the ass.* “I don’t know, sir. I made a complaint against him for it, but I haven’t had much feedback yet.”

“You were running that simulation,” he said firmly, bringing his gaze up to mine where I was still standing like an idiot behind my desk. “What was your assessment of the situation?”

“If I may speak freely, sir, Robertson was irresponsible and negligent in his duties. He nearly caused a serious incident on our Station and he still hasn’t been held accountable for it. If there are other instructors who are going rogue, it’s because of that.”

He sighed heavily, nodding his agreement as he hooked his ankle over one knee and leaned back. “You can speak freely, but if it’s all the same to you, I’m going to do so myself. If anything like that happens again, there will be serious consequences. Bad things happen when instructors are undisciplined and it seems to be getting out of control.”

“Which means people are going to get hurt,” I finished for him. “I got it,

sir. This is a problem.”

“Yes,” he said, pressing his hands together with his fingers steeped toward the ceiling. “That’s why I’m here. We do indeed have a problem. What are you going to do about it?”

“Me?”

He nodded decisively. “Yes, you. Right now, you’re the only one I have complete faith in. In addition, these cadets are yours. It’s your responsibility to keep them safe, no matter the threat against them.”

“Yes, sir.” It truly was the appropriate response in this case. “I’ll talk to them, but if we have a real problem, it may be necessary to make an example of Robertson. The incident should have been punished more severely from the outset and now, it’s set a precedent. If we continue to allow that to be the case, nothing I say will have much of an effect.”

“Keep in touch with me.” He stood up and placed his hat back on his head. “If need be, we’ll bring him up. You’re right that the incident should have been punished more severely, but it wasn’t. It’s too late to bring him up arbitrarily, but should cause arise...”

He trailed off and I nodded. I understood what he wasn’t saying. They couldn’t suddenly backpedal now if they didn’t have reason to. Well, they could, but they wouldn’t. The rap to his knuckles had been punishment already. If they tried to bring him up on charges now without anything having changed, they’d be opening a can of worms, which was always to be avoided if possible.

I sighed once he left, knowing that I had to go join the cadets for PT but also entirely unsure how to handle this situation with the instructors. I had to talk to them, but talking and listening were two entirely different things.

Although he hadn’t given me any more examples of how the instructors had gone rogue, the fact of it was that I’d gone rogue myself. Perhaps in the worst way possible, so once again, I was the official hypocrite of the hour.

Squeezing the back of my neck, I hung my head for a moment and breathed. Then I dropped my arm back to my side and got on with it. The training center was bustling with activity at this hour, but I didn’t acknowledge anyone I passed.

I was on a mission, and it wasn’t to make small talk about people’s weekends. When I hit the obstacle course, however, that was exactly what I found my replacement doing with the cadets. I stood on the side watching him for a moment, blinking when I saw him shooting the breeze with

Jameson over which of them had had the better weekend.

As he moved down the line, the cadets relaxed little by little, opening up to him and seemingly enjoying the banter. When he got to Layla, I stepped forward to shut it down. “That’s enough of the questioning. It’s time to work.”

The cadets started when they heard my voice, spines straightening and jaws clamping. Their shoulders snapped back, their attention on me as I marched closer to the group. I sought Layla out of the crowd, seeing her hide her smile about me stepping in just when it was her turn to talk.

Since I couldn’t exactly stare openly at her, I swept my eyes on to the next cadet, but they were soon back on those twinkling green orbs. It was like I just couldn’t stop myself, but I still made a point of looking at some of the others before looking back at her.

None of them met my gaze directly, though, which made it easier to keep bringing it back to her without anyone realizing. As she stood there with that amused twinkle in her eyes, she sank her teeth into her lower lip and I almost groaned.

Knowing she was probably thinking about our weekend and everything we’d done was *not* doing me any favors. Shifting my focus back to the group as a whole before I started sporting an erection for all to see, I took in the others and wondered why all the wheels seemed to be coming off with this particular group.

By the time I reached them, the relaxed atmosphere was gone and they’d shuffled into perfect formation.

Just how I like it.

“They did the run?” I asked my counterpart, hating that I even had to check.

Wilders was as dependable as they came, and yet I’d found him chatting to the cadets about their weekends instead of explaining what they needed to know about the day ahead. He seemed taken aback by my question. Then he nodded and clasped his hands together behind his back.

“We did five miles, then we circled back around the beach. I was just killing time until you got here.” He said the last sentence defensively, like he knew what I was thinking about his idle chit chat and felt the need to justify it.

“I understand, but they should’ve been warming up for the obstacle course.” I tried to keep my tone light, but his eyes flashed with indignation

anyway.

Internally, I sighed but put the incident behind me as I turned back to the cadets. “The first group takes the course in three. What are you waiting for? The clock is ticking.”

They scattered immediately, dipping into stretches or squats while others hit the ground and spread their legs out in front of them. For just one brief moment, I smiled. The wheels were coming off, but this group was shaping up. They were doing exceptionally well and at least the drama with the instructors didn’t seem to be affecting them too much.

“They respect you,” Wilders commented quietly at my side. “As they should at this point. You’re doing a good job with them.”

“I’m doing my job with them,” I countered. “I like to think that I’m doing it well, but I don’t need a pat on the back. What I need is support from people who aren’t trying to be their friend.”

He let out a soft sigh. “They’re human. We don’t have to be like Perkins was. We can treat them well and gain their respect at the same time.”

“Perkins taught us how to stay alive. That’s all that matters. You don’t have to like the methods he used to know they worked. There will be plenty of time later to befriend them if you want to. For now, they need to learn what they need to know to graduate.”

He grimaced. “You know, everyone who came up under Perkins has mad respect for the guy, but no one likes him. I’m starting to think you might just end up being worse than he ever was.”

I shrugged. “So be it. Are you hitting the course with us?”

He shook his head. “Hell, no.”

Nodding as I glanced at him, I managed a tight smile. “Thanks for overseeing the run. I’ll catch you later.”

Realizing that he’d effectively been dismissed, he snapped his fingers to his forehead in a salute and then he was gone, leaving me to the job I had to do. His words had hit home, though. I didn’t care about being liked. I cared about the cadets graduating and surviving once they were done here at the Training Center.

At the same time, I didn’t want to be Perkins. I loved the man, but I’d never wanted to be exactly like he had been, and I definitely didn’t want to be worse.

Food for thought, that’s for sure. Now I just had to figure out what to do about it.

LAYLA

I finished my dinner and stood up, collecting my tray before I smiled at Mel and her friends. “Have a good night, guys. Thank you for inviting me to sit with you.”

Mel returned my smile. “Anytime. We all need to start sticking together more. I’ll see you back at the dorms.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll see you there. Only a bit later, though. I’m going for another run before bed.”

Lies. I’m sneaking out to the wall for more practice. I didn’t think they needed to know about that. All of Mel’s friends could make it over easily at this point and they were helping her during our breaks in the daytime. Nighttime, however, was all mine and I wanted to keep it that way.

She stared up at me. “You’re going for another run? Why? I’m beat.”

“Excess energy,” I explained. “If I don’t get it out now, I’ll only end up tossing and turning for hours.”

“Ah,” Phoenix said knowingly. “The midnight *Am-I-good-enough* plague. I suffer from that disease myself. If I’m not so exhausted that I’m out when my head hits the pillow, those doubts sink in and then I’m wide awake until three.”

I chuckled and made a finger gun, pretending to fire it as I nodded. “Good to know I’m not the only one.”

At least that part was true. While I’d lied about *how* I was going to get rid of the last bit of my energy, I absolutely suffered from that plague if I wasn’t dead on my feet by the time I hit my bunk. It was one of the reasons I worked that wall so hard every night that I could make it out there.

“You sneak away,” Mel said. “We’ll cover for you if anyone comes looking.”

I smiled. “Thank you. Have a good night.”

A chorus of *good nights* rang out and then I waved at them as I walked away. I wouldn’t say they were my friends just yet, but at least I had people to sit with during mealtimes. It felt good, even if the person I wanted to sit with was all the way at the other end of the mess hall.

During dinner, I’d felt Santiago’s eyes on me, but whenever I’d managed to risk a glance at him, he’d been laughing while he spoke to the other instructors. They’d been locked in serious conversation just after they’d sat down, though, and while I knew it had nothing to do with me, I wondered what it had been about.

Santiago’s light brown hair shone gold under the lights in here, and as his head dropped back when he laughed, it looked like he didn’t have a care in the world. I sighed and tightened my grip on my tray before disposing of it.

Today had been harder than I’d thought it would be. I’d expected everything to feel the same way it used to once we got back to the Station, but it didn’t. It turned out that the longing for him from afar had gotten even more intense now that I knew him better.

All weekend, I’d been wishing that time would slow down and now I was wishing there was a way to turn it back. It seemed almost cruel that I’d accidentally found someone like him, and now that I had, we couldn’t be together. Our relationship was taboo in more ways than I cared to think about.

Not only did we have regulation after regulation standing in our way, but there was also my father to think about. Santiago had been one of his cadets. Even if we could find a way around the regulations—which was impossible since there were no loopholes—my father would still never give us his blessing.

As I stepped out of the mess hall into the fresh night air, a flash of light over the bay caught my attention. I narrowed my eyes as I turned to face it, and when it came again, I realized it was lightning in the distance.

Another streak of light raced across the inky sky and I pursed my lips, disappointment racing through me before it was replaced with determination. If there was a storm coming, it meant I needed to buckle down before it hit.

After hurrying back to the dorms to change into my workout gear, I jogged through the quiet night to the obstacle course. Faint sounds of chatter

from those who were only leaving the mess hall now reached my ears, but they were far enough away that I wasn't afraid of being discovered.

Even so, I kept looking back over my shoulder at the glowing orange light of the mess hall on the other side of a sandy mound. My footfalls were soft as I approached the course, a light breeze licking my skin as the storm began turning toward land.

For just a moment, I paused to look out at the bay, the dark water and the bursts of light telling me that the storm was steadily getting closer. The realization snapped me into motion, and I picked up my pace until I could see my nemesis—the eight-foot wall rising from the shadows of the night like a literal barrier between me and my dreams.

I bounced on the balls of my feet as I stared it down. Then I sprang into action. The brick loomed larger and more imposing with every step I took, but I raced at it at full speed. Santiago's advice flickered in my mind, and as I pushed down before taking the leap, I was determined to use my whole body for this.

My fingers barely scraped the top of the brick before I was falling, dropping unceremoniously with my ass in the sand. Frustration warmed my belly and tightened my gut, my nails digging into my palms as my hands curled into fists at my sides.

I tried again, but tonight really didn't seem to be my night. I'd thought I could at least grab the top of the wall relatively consistently by now, but it seemed my days of not hitting it every night had robbed me of the tiny bit of progress I'd made.

A scream lodged in my throat when I hit the sand again, and my fists pummeled into the ground as my breaths came in heaving pants. *Stupid fucking wall! Who even put this thing here? If it was my dad, I'm never going to forgive him.*

Okay, that was an exaggeration. I would forgive him, obviously, but still. The damn obstacle had clearly been designed for taller, stronger people, and even though a bunch of women had managed to conquer it, I couldn't help but feel a little bit like the wall was a physical manifestation of the challenges that faced women in the armed forces.

We could enlist. We could give it our all and eventually conquer every obstacle in our way, but it was just that little bit more difficult for us. *Oh, great. I've progressed to the feminist rage part of my frustration. That's exactly what I need right now.*

As I got up, I shook my head at myself and took a deep breath. I could do this. I would do this. I just had to get back into the swing of things a little. I'd only taken the weekend off, but clearly, I had a bit of ground to make up.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, a big fat raindrop landed smack dab in the middle of my forehead as I ran at the wall again. It knocked my focus right off the tracks, and I looked up, which broke my speed, and I had to stop without even trying to grab the top.

This time, I couldn't quite hold back the scream that tore out of me. I managed to choke the sound, but *seriously? Seriously?*

The night had grown even darker while I'd been working at defeating my nemesis and the thick black clouds were right above me, blocking out any sign of moon or stars. The rain was picking up, too, thunder growling over the water as it brought the storm ever closer.

I scrubbed my hands over my face before sending one last scowl at the sky. Then I let my head drop forward as I spun to head back to my bunk. "Are you really going to quit because of a bit of rain? It's just some water. Nothing serious. Just the stuff you're going to be making a living on."

A squeak slid out of me at the unexpected sound of a voice nearby and my heart lurched into my throat. Eyes flying wide open, I whirled in the direction it had come from and pressed my hand to my chest when I realized that I knew that voice.

It was the voice I dreamed of. The voice I wanted nothing more than to hear moan my name as he thrust deep inside me. Just the thought made my panties as damp as the rest of me was getting, and I could only hope that my face didn't betray me as my gaze met his.

Santiago was standing at the edge of the course, wearing a rain jacket and a smirk as he stepped closer to me. "Well, are you really giving up?"

I swallowed past my shock of realizing he was here and planted my hands on my hips. "Were you really just watching me from the dark like a creeper?"

"I figured you should be focusing on the wall and not on me." He stopped walking when he was about two feet away, keeping a respectable distance between us while at the same time, making my nerve endings hum for having him in my proximity.

My torso suddenly felt kind of cold, like it was begging to have the weight and warmth of his arms around it, and my fingers ached to reach for his. "I was focused on the wall, but as you can see, Zeus is at work tonight."

"Are you really going to let him or Mother Nature hold you back?" His

head cocked. “I thought you were tougher than that. It’s not even pouring yet.”

“Slave driver,” I teased, but then I inhaled a deep breath and nodded. “You might be right, though. There should be time for a few more tries.”

Santiago came back to the wall with me and gave me a few more pointers. Then he stood back and watched as I pushed my body to its limit. There was something about having him here that renewed my determination and I used that fresh spark to the fullest extent, but it didn’t help.

My palm scraped against the slippery surface of the wall but even though I managed to get higher with Santiago watching than I had before, my hand just slipped right back off before I could grab on. The rain was really bucketing down now, though, and a jarring shock traveled up my spine as my tailbone hit the ground. Before I could try to get up, his hand appeared in front of me and he pulled me up.

I didn’t release his fingers for a long moment, stroking my thumb along his instead as I looked up into those blue eyes. “One more time.”

“You just fell pretty hard,” he said softly, tugging me just an inch closer before squeezing my hand and then releasing it. “You’ve got this. It’s just a wall. Don’t make it more than that.”

“I will get it,” I gritted out as I spun back to face it, my eyes narrowed against the onslaught of water from the heavens.

“You will get it, Layla, but not tonight.”

“You’re the one who just asked if I was going to let some rain stand in my way.”

“Yes, but that was a few minutes ago before we were facing a waterfall from above. Come on, let’s get you back to your bunk. You’ll get sick out here like this.”

I sighed, but as he backed away and motioned for me to follow him, I went. There was no way I was getting over that wall tonight, not with my vision impeded by the rain and the slippery surface where there should’ve been hard, dry brick.

As I followed after him, though, shivering and wrapping my arms around myself in an attempt to keep warm, I still felt like I’d failed. Because I should’ve been able to make it by now. Instead, I was further away than I had been just last week and time was running out.

I needed to make it over that wall and I definitely needed a hug, but since neither of those things were happening tonight, I sighed and promised myself

that one day, I'd have both. Even the hug would always have to come from someone other than the man whose arms I really wanted to be in.

SANTIAGO

Commander Nicholson marched into my office just as I was about to wrap up for the day. Surprised that he was here again, I shot up from my chair but he waved me off before I could do anything else. “At ease, Cortez. I’m just here to have a little chat. It’s nothing official.”

“A little chat?” I frowned as my heart catapulted into my chest. “About what, sir?”

He shut the door behind him before heading back to that spot he seemed to like on my sofa. “Given all the issues we’ve had with the instructors, we’ve been keeping a much closer eye on you all these last couple of weeks.”

I nodded. “I’ve noticed you around a lot more often. For the record, I’ve spoken to the others. They insist there’s no problem. Apparently, it’s just that we’ve had a few sessions since Perkins retired and they’re starting to think about their own legacies.”

“Let me guess,” he said thoughtfully. “They don’t want to be remembered as tyrants who nearly broke their trainees in an attempt to make them strong?”

I grimaced. “Pretty much.”

He sighed. “It’s not the first time we go through something like this when a long-standing trainer retires. It always seems to happen when the dust finally settles a couple years after they leave.”

“If you knew what it was about, why ask me to talk to them?”

He shrugged. “I needed to know for sure. Besides, regardless of the why, they’ve still got jobs to do and they need to be reminded of that. However, that’s not what I came to talk to you about.”

“It’s not?” My heart squeezed again. “What else is there?”

The man lowered his head slowly to one side, studying me intently for a moment before he nodded. “I wanted to talk to you about the work you’re doing. You’ve been great and you’ve churned out some really strong cadets during your time here.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He nodded once. “Have you ever thought about what comes next?”

I frowned again. “No, sir.”

“Maybe it’s time for you to start thinking about it,” he said. “There’s an offer on the table we’d like you to consider.”

“There is?”

“Yes, there is.” To my surprise, he chuckled, which didn’t happen very often. “Don’t look so shocked, Cortez. There’s always some kind of offer on a table somewhere for someone like you. In this case, it’s that you can move up after this session. You just need to make sure you get this class done right, and after that, it’s up to you whether you stay or whether you go.”

My heart stammered in my chest. “I thought you said I was doing a great job.”

“You are,” he repeated. “We’ll be sad to see you go, but ultimately, it’s your career. You need to decide if this is where you want to stay or if you’d like to advance.”

I had no idea what to say. “Thank you, sir. Can I have some time to think about it?”

“Of course.” He rose from the sofa and gave me a meaningful look. “You’re an excellent instructor, Cortez. Never doubt that. This is an opportunity, but it’s not compulsory for you to take it. Get back to me.”

“I’ll do that, sir.” Once he was gone, I stood frozen in place. With all the guys talking about legacy so much recently, it’d been on my mind as well.

This session would be over soon enough, though, and that was pretty soon. If I took this opportunity, it would mean moving up long before I ever thought I would. It would mean leaving being an instructor behind while I still felt like I had a lot to offer future classes.

On the other hand, I’d been thinking about doing a lot more than just that. My lids closed as I considered the silver platter that had just been presented to me. Well, the opportunity on said platter, anyway.

It was a gift. A damn considerate one, and not one I could ignore. *Shit, I really need to think about this.*

Almost as if acting on autopilot, my feet started carrying me to the door and out of the training center. I had my wallet, phone, and keys in my pocket, but I'd left everything else behind. I needed to get to my pier, though. It was the one place around here that had always helped me think clearly, and that was exactly what I needed right now.

As I emerged around the bend on the beach, I saw a silhouette sitting alone at the pier in the waning light. Whoever it was seemed to be watching the sunset and my nose scrunched up. *Of all the days for someone else to find my spot, did it really have to be today?*

Part of me considered backing off and leaving the spot-thief to their thoughts, but eventually, I decided against it. The pier was public property. I didn't have to give this person a turn here alone, and I'd simply make sure my thoughts were louder than theirs. *Maybe if I do, they'll leave me alone instead.*

Once I got close enough, however, the air whooshed out of my lungs when I recognized the back and narrow shoulders of the thief. *Layla? What the hell is she doing here?*

"Hey," I said just loud enough to warn her of my approach, but hopefully not so loud that I startled her.

At first, she went rigid, but then she turned slowly and a soft smile spread on her lips. "Imagine meeting you here. What are the odds?"

"Pretty good since you chose my special place to come watch the sunset." I slid my hands into my pockets and I took the final few steps between us and sat down beside her. "What's up? It looked like you were pretty deep in thought there."

"I was," she admitted quietly, a sadness to those eyes before she blinked it away and smiled again. "That wall is kicking my ass. All this time, I thought I'd get it eventually, but now..."

"You *will* get it." I gently rocked my shoulder into hers. "Just stop turning it into more than it is. You've got it, Perkins. Now, you just need to show it that."

She sighed, but then she took a deep breath and shook her head. "I don't know about that, but sitting here talking about it isn't going to magically help me get over. How about you? What brings you out here?"

"I just got a visit from Nicholson," I said, surprising even myself by saying it so easily and so openly.

Layla's pretty eyes widened. "The Station Commander? That

Nicholson?”

“Yep.” I gave her a quick breakdown of what he’d told me, watching as light came back into her eyes until she finally threw her arms around my neck when I was done.

“I’m so proud of you, Santiago. That’s amazing. Congratulations. You really are a freaking super star.”

“Thanks.” I squeezed her back, keeping her in my arms longer than strictly necessary for a congratulatory hug but also not willing to let her go just yet. “I haven’t decided if I’m going to take it, though.”

Regrettably, the comment made her pull away so she could look at me. “Why wouldn’t you? This is incredible. You’ve only been doing this job for a couple years and they already want to promote you. That’s, like, the dream, isn’t it?”

I chuckled as I dipped my head in a nod. “Yeah, I suppose it is. Or at least, it used to be, but I’ve, uh, I’ve been thinking a little bigger these last few weeks.”

“Bigger than a promotion.” She rounded her eyes at me before she lowered her voice. “How big are you thinking? Like taking over the world, or just the service?”

I laughed. “Wouldn’t that be something? But no. Nothing quite like that. I have no interest in taking over anything.”

She pretended to be disappointed as she pursed her lips at me and shook her head. “Well, what are we even doing here, then?”

Bumping my shoulder into hers once more, I grinned before I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve just been thinking about retiring, I guess. Doing something away from the service.”

“What?” All traces of humor vanished from her features. “Are you serious? Why?”

“This is all I’ve ever done, you know? There’s been a lot of talk about the future and legacies and how short life really is. Don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing else I’d rather have been doing with my life so far, but there’s a great big world out there. I’m not sure this is the only thing I ever want to do.”

Her jaw slackened as she stared at me. “Oh, my God. You are serious.”

“I am.” I was also realizing that I’d never talked to anyone the way I spoke to her. It was just so easy and comfortable that it came naturally, without any effort at all. “What do you think?”

She kept looking into my eyes for another long minute before she finally

smiled and touched her soft palm to my cheek. “I think you’re one of those people who will make a success of anything you put your mind to. I also think that you might just end up regretting it if you don’t follow your heart. If you really think there might be more out there for you, then I think you should seriously consider pursuing it.”

I leaned into her touch, turning my head to press a kiss to the very center of her palm. “Well, if this is my last class, then I’m happy you’re in it.”

When I turned my head to face her again, I leaned into her instead of just her hand. *Fuck it.*

My lips met hers halfway, both of us surging into the kiss like we’d die if anyone tried to keep us from doing it right now. I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her closer as I devoured her mouth like it’d been years since I’d last done it.

In a way, it felt like it really had been years. Every day I couldn’t kiss her felt like a decade at this point. As I laid her back on the sand and covered her body with my own, I knew we were still playing a dangerous game.

Once again, we were back here where anyone could happen upon us, and the decision about what to do with my future might very well get taken out of my hands if someone did see this. But I honestly just didn’t give a shit right now.

It’d been too long and too much had happened, and just for this next hour or so, I was going to pretend that it was real. That we were together and that there was nothing standing in our way.

LAYLA

Santiago kissed me passionately, but there was something different about this kiss. Like there was some kind of desperation to it that I didn't quite understand. Then again, I was pretty desperate for him myself, so maybe I understood better than I'd thought at first.

It was just that from his side, it seemed like a different kind of desperation. In my case, it was physical. My body lit up like the Christmas Tree in Rockefeller Center as soon as he touched me, but that wasn't what I was feeling from him.

There was definitely a very physical aspect to it as well, as proven by the massive bulge rapidly growing against my lower belly, but it wasn't just that. Considering what we'd just been talking about, though, it was terribly surprising.

If I'd been given a massive career opportunity but was considering turning it down to leave the service altogether, I'd have been desperate for a distraction myself. I was simply lucky enough to get to be that distraction for him.

Let him lose himself in me. Let him pour his worry and his uncertainty into me. Let me be his refuge. I sure didn't mind. He'd been my saving grace, my outlet, so many times. The least I could do was to be the rock for once.

Winding my arms tightly around his neck, I pulled him to me, kissing him back with every ounce of need that I felt swirling around in me. To back it up, I wrapped my legs around his hips and rocked into him, already feeling sparks of pleasure shooting from my core to my extremities.

He groaned into my mouth, his body melding to mine as he relaxed

slightly above me. It was at about that point that I realized that us being together had mostly been about me until now. Sure, that weekend, there had been times where he'd let me explore his amazingly ripped body to my heart's content, but again, he'd let me do it because I'd wanted to.

It'd still been about me. About what I needed. Now, it was my turn to give him what he needed. I smiled against his lips as I lifted my hip and started rolling my body to let him know that I wanted to be on top. He moaned quietly but he snaked his arm around my back to hold me to him as he rolled onto his back.

“What are you up to now?” he murmured between kisses and nips at my lips.

I let go of him to tuck my hair behind my ears. Then I smiled again as I lowered my head back to his and spoke against his lips. “I’m not up to anything. I just want to turn that brain of yours off for a while. Have you seen the remote somewhere?”

He let out a dark chuckle as I ground my core against the bulge beneath his shorts. “Yeah, I think you found it. It’s right there between your legs.”

I smirked and waggled my brows at him. “That’s great. Thanks. Now would you be so kind as to give up control of it for a while?”

“Of what, the remote? Uh, no. It’s mine. Everybody knows the remote belongs to the man.”

“Nah, us women just let you think you control it.” I winked before sliding down the length of his abdomen and pushing his shirt up to expose the perfect washboard hiding underneath it. “Besides, you’re not really going to fight me on this right now, are you?”

I looked up at him as I asked the question, batting my lashes as I shot him a sweet smile. Santiago let out a long, low groan, but then he shook his head before letting it drop down on the sand. “No, I’m not. Just go easy on me, okay? It’s been a long time and a long day. I’m not sure I have it in me to play around too much tonight.”

“We’re not playing around,” I murmured against his skin, dropping whisper-soft kisses on his flat stomach between words. “Just relax, Cortez. Let go. I’ve got this.”

He sucked in a sharp breath when my hands skated around the waistband of his pants, his hips bucking slightly underneath me. As much as feminine power coursed through me over having such an intense effect on this man with something as simple as that, I didn’t let it go to my head.

So far, Santiago had proven to be an expert at anticipating my needs and now I had to do the same for him. Plus, he'd made it a lot easier by coming right out and saying it, so I didn't even need to guess and hope I got it right.

Tonight, he didn't want to be teased or explored. Simply put, he wanted out of his head and then he wanted to come. I could do both of those things, so without any further ado, I ran my hands underneath his waistband and waited until I felt the rougher elastic of his underwear before I lifted both at the same time.

A tremor ran through him when I exposed his hot, hard flesh to the night air, and I felt a corresponding thrill travel through me. I knew exactly how he felt right now and the memory of him making me feel that way the last time we were here made me have to squeeze my thighs together.

My pulse thundered between my legs, but I didn't even try to do anything about it. For once, I could wait.

As I pushed his pants down, I bent my head to keep kissing him, running my tongue along the path of slightly coarser hair that ran down from his belly button. My cheek grazed first the tip of his cock and then the shaft, and I heard the groan that rattled out of him at the contact.

I was skating a fine line between dragging him out of his head and teasing him, and the balance was a littler harder to find than I'd expected. Santiago didn't seem to mind while I tried to find it, though. Low groans kept falling out of him, punctuated by breathy moans, and he rocked his hips up into my hand when I wrapped my fist around the concrete-encased-in-velvet length of him.

Deciding to take a different approach than just popping his dick into my mouth and sucking, I scooted down a little further, then kept pumping my hand gently up and down while running my tongue along the very top of his thigh to his groin.

I licked playfully at his balls, then grazed my teeth against the base of his shaft before starting the whole process all over again. When I felt him tense, I knew I was dangerously close to crossing that line. I was well on my way to going beyond pulling him out of his thoughts and I was venturing into teasing territory.

Although I was really enjoying myself getting to know his body more intimately, I didn't keep venturing. Instead, I gripped him a little more firmly and then licked my way up his length until my tongue hit that bundle under his tip.

I sucked on it for a moment before closing my lips over him, sliding my mouth as far down as I could until it met my hand. Santiago's approval came in a whisper-shout. "Layla! Fuck."

My lips curved into a smile, but I never let him slide out of my mouth. Instead, I simply sank down again, coordinating the movements of my hand and head until he was panting and shaking underneath me. As soon as I felt him swell, he tapped on my shoulder but I still didn't stop.

He wanted this and I wanted it too. Doubling down to let him know that I had no intention of heeding his quiet advice to lift my head if I didn't want to swallow, I moaned when I felt him swell even more.

The next thing I knew, he shot his seed down my throat and I swallowed every last drop, looking up at him writhing in the moonlight as he came. This was ridiculously stupid of us, getting it on right here all over again.

It was almost like we were asking to be caught, but it was also the only place where we could be together. A hotel was also an option, but it felt like there would be an even greater chance of someone seeing us enter or leave at some point than there was of them finding us here.

When Santiago's eyes blinked open again, I smiled, but then he was on me. Rearing forward like a predator on the attack, he cradled me in his arms before he lowered me back down on the sand, his mouth descending on mine for one of those wild, searing kisses of his.

With his pants still around his ankles, he flattened himself over me, and to my surprise, his erection didn't deflate too much. He kissed me until I was squirming, moaning, and more desperate for him than ever before.

Sensing, or perhaps feeling, how much I needed him, he shoved my pants and panties down roughly and brought his hand to my drenched folds. With a few flicks of his finger, I was approaching seventh heaven, and when he scooted down and clamped his lips over my clit, I was done for.

Coming hard and fast into his mouth, I moaned his name as quietly as I could and scraped my nails across his scalp. No sooner was I returning to reality than he was rolling a condom down over his hard length and then he was on me again, kissing me tenderly as our bodies merged together.

The sex was slower this time than it had been the last time we'd been here, but it also felt so much more meaningful. Under the pale silver glow of the moon, his mouth stayed fused to mine as he moved in and out of me.

We moved together effortlessly, seamlessly, taking each other higher and higher until we climaxed together, then caught our breath in each other's

arms. After, without a word, he let go of me and handed me my pants and panties.

I accepted them with a nod, put them on, and then bent over to press another kiss to his lips. “Good luck with your decision, baby. No matter what you decide, I support you.”

He released a low sound of pleasure as he cupped my face in his hands. “Thanks. I’ll let you know what I’m going to do.”

“See you in the morning.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you.”

Although it hurt me to do it, I left him while he was still putting his clothes back on. He’d come out here to think and I had no doubt he still wanted to do that. Besides, hanging out together after just increased our chances of being caught.

I’d almost reached the path up to the sidewalk when I caught a beam of light coming around the pier. *Oh, dear Lord, please don’t let him get caught with his pants literally down.*

Fuck. My heart was beating in my ears as I hurried up to the path and prayed that whoever was attached to that light hadn’t seen my face. If they had, and if they were one of ours, then I might’ve been a part of Santiago’s last class for an entirely different reason than the one we’d talked about before.

SANTIAGO

“C ortez?” Neil’s disbelieving voice rang out just after I’d finished pulling on my pants. “What the fuck? Is that really you?”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “It’s me. What’s up, Patton? What’re you doing all the way out here?”

Hopefully, my voice didn’t betray it, but my heart was beating so hard that it felt like my eyeballs were hopping. My friend moved the flashlight that had alerted me to his presence slowly from side to side. “What am I doing out here? I think the better question is what were you just doing out here?”

“I, uh, I came to think.”

He lowered the flashlight enough that I finally saw his features, but I kind of wished I hadn’t looked. He had a dark expression on his face, a knowing scowl that spelled trouble from where I was standing. “Cut the shit, Santiago. I know there was someone down here with you, and I also know it was one of ours. I saw the outline of the emblem on the back of her shirt just before she disappeared around the bend.”

Ah, fuck.

Since the guy was military police and my friend, I knew there was no point in trying to convince him that he was wrong. He was as eagle-eyed as they came, and for all the comic relief he’d provided to my life in the past, there wasn’t a hint of humor or laughter on his face right now.

“Okay.” I lifted my hands in surrender. “You’re right. There was someone down here with me, but she’s gone now, so let’s leave her out of this.”

“Leave her out of it?” he snapped. “Are you insane? Look, I know you’re not interested in anyone who remains from our class, which means you’re fucking someone either up or down the chain of command. Do you know what will happen if I turn you in for this?”

“Yes, I do, which is why I’m going to ask you to keep it to yourself for now.”

He let out a stream of muttered curses longer than the length of my arm before he shone his flashlight straight into my face. “You know there’s a reason for those regulations, right? I mean, I may not care much about my job and I’m definitely not as gung ho about the service as you are, but I still know what’s right and what’s wrong, and what you’re doing is wrong, man. Whether it’s up or down the chain of command, it’s still wrong.”

“I know. I won’t argue with you on that.” I stared straight into the light, slowly lowering my hands back down to my sides. “Can I buy you a beer? I won’t tell you who she is, but I’ll tell you anything else you want to know.”

He kept the light where it was for a few more seconds, but then he cursed again and finally switched it off. “Sure, but you better be honest when you answer my questions.”

“I will.”

“Good. You might want to shake the sand out of your hair. Jesus, it looks like you’ve been buried and you just crawled out of a shallow grave. The hell is wrong with you? What happened to getting a nice room if you wanted to hook up so badly?”

I chuckled, nodding my agreement as we took off toward the path. “Believe it or not, I didn’t actually plan for this to happen. A hotel is too risky for our particular situation, but I still didn’t plan it. I don’t know if I would’ve come down here if I’d known she was already here.”

“You don’t?” He glanced at me, then groaned and rubbed the back of his head. “You promised you’d be honest with me, dude. So why am I feeling like that was a lie?”

“Because it probably was, but it’s the same one I’ve been telling myself.”

He sighed. “Let’s just get to Lucky’s. I’m going to need a beer for this.”

“Yeah, same.” I was thanking God it had been him instead of anyone else who had found us, though. A beer would get me through this conversation with him, but it would’ve been straight to the firing squad if he’d been anyone else.

After we got to the bar, I ordered a round from the bartender and then

went to join Neil where he was staring sullenly into space at our usual table. “Okay, shoot. What do you want to know?”

“Superior or subordinate?” he asked as he took his beer but without looking at me.

“Going directly for the jugular, huh?” I sighed. “Subordinate.”

His gaze flicked over to me. “How far?”

“Far enough that I definitely shouldn’t be doing it,” I said, which was about as close as I could get to telling him she was a cadet without actually saying it.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and I nodded.

“Tell me about it.”

“If you know you definitely shouldn’t be doing it, then why are you?”

I took a long sip of my beer as I thought it over. “To answer that, I need to give you details that might give you more information than you might want to know regarding her identity.”

“Might?”

I shrugged. “Definitely. Trust me when I say that you don’t want to know who she is.”

“Okay, keep it light on the identifying factors, then.”

“That’s, uh, not really possible. You have more than half a brain. If I tell you the whole story, you’re going to figure it out even if you try not to.”

“So don’t tell me the whole story.”

“Okay. In that case, the long and short of it is that I’m doing it because I can’t seem to stop. No matter how hard I’ve tried, I don’t want to stay away from her. What I said earlier was true, though. I didn’t know she was going to be there tonight.”

“This wasn’t the first time? It’s not just a one-night slip-up kind of situation?”

I shook my head. “After the first time it happened, I told myself that was what it would be, but it, uh, it didn’t quite work out that way.”

“Bullshit, Cortez.” He finally turned to scowl directly at me. “You’re not one to peddle that *I couldn’t stay away* bullshit.”

“I’m not usually, but right now, that’s exactly what I’m saying. You asked me to tell you the truth and that’s the truth. I can’t stay away because I don’t want to. I’m drawn to this woman like I’ve never been drawn to anyone before. The first time we got together, I promised myself that would be it, but I couldn’t stop thinking about her and it turns out she couldn’t stop thinking

about me, either.”

His brow smoothed out when he kept staring at me. “Wait a second, are you telling me you actually care about her?”

I considered it for a short moment before I nodded. “Yeah, I really do. I like her, Neil. A lot, and as much as I want to be able to promise you that it won’t happen again, it probably will.”

He lifted an incredulous eyebrow at me. “Regardless of the fact that it puts you both in danger? Because it does, you know. There’s more to those regulations than just being afraid of accusations of harassment or quid pro quo. It’s also because people react different when they’re romantically entangled with someone. You tend to put yourself in situations where you and they could get hurt if you get involved.”

“I know.” I squeezed my eyes shut. “Trust me, I know. I think about it every damn morning of my life. Is this the day I’m going to do something stupid to save her if she’s in danger?”

He cursed. “Did you really have to say that out loud? Because that makes me think that you’ve already done the stupidest thing possible and that you’ve gone and fallen for a cadet. Of which there are only two. And one of them is the Perkins girl.” He paled as he said the words. “Cortez! No. Please tell me it’s not her. Please, for the love of God, tell me that you have not fallen in love with Ron’s daughter.”

“I’m not telling you any of that. I said I wasn’t telling you who she is, and I’m still not telling you who she is, so I’m not answering that question. Not positively or negatively.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Okay. Okay, just don’t say anything else that might confirm that suspicion, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good.”

“Great.” I grinned. “Does that mean we can put this behind us now?”

“No,” he said immediately. “How did she find your thinking spot?”

“I took her there the first time we hung out together.”

“So why was she there tonight?”

“To think,” I said. “Then I showed up there wanting to do the same thing and one thing led to another.”

“Do you know why I went down there tonight?”

“No, but it would be nice if you told me.”

He sighed and gave me a pointed look. “I was walking back to Station

from here and I heard moans. Moans, bro. That's how loud you guys were being. I wasn't sure if it was sex or trouble, so I went down to check it out."

"Shit."

"Fuck is more accurate than shit, but whatever floats your boat." He paused, his gaze completely locked on mine. "This is really more than just a fling to you?"

"I don't know what it is or what it can ever become, but it's definitely not just a fling."

Hanging his head, he buried his face in his hands and released a long, loud groan. "Fine, I'll keep my mouth shut then, but you better figure it out, my friend. I won't say anything, but the Station is small and news travels fast. This is bound to come out sooner, or later and when it does, you better be ready."

"I'll try my best," I promised. "Thank you for not turning me in. I won't put you in this position again, okay? You have my word."

"You better fucking not put me in this position again," he grunted, then lifted his bottle and waited for me to clink against it before he said his toast. "It was great knowing you, Cortez. I really hope she's fucking worth it because there's no beer in the brig and that's where you're going, brother."

Unfortunately, he was probably right. Whatever happened, though, it had been worth it. Every minute I spent with Layla was.

LAYLA

I was the first in the formation the next morning. Nerves skittered around in my belly and my palms were sweaty as hell. Every so often when I blinked, I saw that light coming around the pier again and I knew there was a chance Santiago might not be here this morning.

Depending on who had been out there and depending on whether they'd seen me, there was a possibility that our esteemed instructor found himself in a steaming heap of crap this morning. Because of me.

I swallowed hard, but my throat remained dry. With every person I saw coming over the rise, my heart leaped into my throat, but none of them were him. The other cadets arrived one by one, falling into formation until we were nearly all accounted for.

The knots of tension in my muscles tightened and I clasped my hands together even tighter, wringing them behind my back as I kept my eye on the mound. My heart was beating a million miles a minute, knees half numb from the stress.

Finally, another head popped up around the rise, and there he was. Relief flooded every last inch of me, making me feel as light as a feather as a smile broke free across my face.

I dialed it back quickly, aiming what was left of it at the ground in case one of the other cadets picked up on my undue happiness at seeing our relentless instructor arrive. When I looked up again, his features were hard as stone, stoic as he gazed upon us like he was assessing us for something.

"Cadets," he said by way of greeting, his voice quieter than usual as it rang out into the early morning air. "Today, things are going to get real."

Oh, so that's why he looks so serious. I swallowed again, the nerves back in full force as I realized this was the first time he'd ever looked so solemn about an exercise.

Santiago's blue eyes were hooded with worry, his muscles pulling and releasing as he clenched his hands behind his back before folding his arms across his chest. Almost like he was uncomfortable, which didn't happen to him. Ever.

What on earth is going on?

As if he'd heard the question I'd shouted in my mind, his gaze landed squarely on mine as his shoulders grew broader on a deep breath. "You are going to be training in a real helicopter today. The simulations have been fun for some of you and terrifying for others, but regardless of which camp you fell into, those are behind us for now."

Something slid down my spine, but I wasn't sure if it was anxiety, fear, or excitement. Maybe even a mixture of all three. I'd been up in a real helicopter before. Just once, but I hadn't been afraid. In fact, I'd loved it.

However, this wouldn't be a pleasure flight, and judging by the look on Santiago's face, there was some real danger involved. *This is the real deal then, huh?*

"Once again, some of the other instructors will be joining us." As he said it, he checked his watch and his features twisted in consternation as he gave his head a small shake. "When they finally show up."

The last bit was muttered, but I was standing close enough to hear it. I frowned when the implications of his offhanded comment hit me. It meant the instructors were late, which was not normal.

Usually, whoever was going to be involved in an exercise was there by the time we arrived. At worst, some of them arrived at the same time we did. Now, we were here and almost ready to go, and Santiago was the only instructor in sight.

Maybe they're meeting us at the chopper.

He let out a heavy breath, but then he folded his strong arms again and looked back at us, his gaze sweeping past mine much too fast for my liking, but I got it. We weren't together and we never would be.

"You'll be going up in teams of four. Once the pilot gets into position, he'll signal the instructor with your team, and then you're going to be jumping out of a perfectly functioning helicopter into the ocean."

Several people around me groaned, and Santiago rolled his eyes. "Let me

remind you that jumping out of perfectly operating aircraft into the water is literally part of your job description. You've been practicing your jumps with Petty Officer Ford, haven't you?"

I nodded. Anne Ford was one of my favorite instructors. Other than Santiago, obviously. She hadn't been involved much in our training except for the lessons and exercises on how to do the jumps, but I still smiled. It would be good to see her again.

The woman was bad ass. I admired her, and she'd certainly done her best to prepare us for this during the sessions we'd had with her.

After waiting for a round of nods from us, Santiago gave us a curt one in return. "Right. Well, as long as you've been paying attention in training with her, you're ready for this. We'll be going out on the Alex Harper, which happens to be my favorite cutter. Once we're far enough out, the first group will go up, do the exercise, and be picked up in a Zodiac. Rinse, repeat."

As he looked at us, I saw the worry darkening his eyes even more than before. "This is not an exercise you want to play games on, cadets. The instructors will be there, but we can't hold your hands every step of the way."

He turned his gaze to the bay. "That is not a swimming pool. There are currents to contend with, waves and creatures. Although the exercise will be controlled, we can't control the wind or the ocean. You'll need to have your heads in the game out there."

Petty Officer Ford arrived with a small group of other instructors then, but as they shuffled closer, talking among themselves and messing around, I saw Santiago's jaw tighten. Clearly, they weren't taking this nearly as seriously as he was and he didn't like it.

Some of his worry started making a bit more sense, especially after what had happened in the swimming pool that day with Robertson. As bizarre as it was, I was starting to get the feeling that Santiago didn't trust the other instructors as much as he should've been able to, and worse, I was starting to see why.

I knew from my dad's stories that during his time here, the instructors had been solid as a rock, a cohesive team who had served together for many years and had stuck together through thick and thin. I'd never quite understood why he'd been so proud of that fact. Surely, that was what they were supposed to be like, but now, I was getting a sneaking suspicion that the team on Station at the moment were perhaps not quite as solid.

A scary suspicion to have when my life was literally supposed to be in

their hands in just a little while. I swiped my tongue across my lips and shoved the thought away. *Nah, I've got to be wrong. They probably just had a morning briefing or something and that's why they're late. And the other stuff is just coincidence or something.*

Santiago's jaw ticked as he waited for his coworkers to settle once they joined us. Then he shot them a questioning look before he carried on explaining the exercise. "The pilot is going to take you up, then he'll fly you out for a few seconds before circling back to the cutter. It is at this point that he'll give the signal. He'll bring you as low as he can for the jump, but keep your eyes on your instructor and then do exactly as they say."

Another round of nods, then he ground his teeth and nodded. "Right, okay. That's enough talking. Let's get to the Alex."

Almost immediately, chatter broke out all around me as we followed the instructors to the cutter. Once we were safely aboard, Anne took me and Mel to get geared up while Santiago took the guys. There was a tense silence among our group as the first team ran to the chopper, staying low just like we'd been taught to do.

The last guy had barely cleared the deck when the pilot started lifting off. Then he made a dramatic swoop as soon as they were airborne—and before some of them had buckled up properly. Anxiety swirled through me as I watched Matt grab onto something as he struggled to buckle in, but then excitement took hold of me.

The pressure was finally on today and we were about to get our first little taste of what the job would really feel like. While my palms were getting sweaty all over again and my stomach definitely felt fluttery, I was also absolutely looking forward to my turn.

As I watched, the chopper rose high into the pale blue sky. Then they flew away from us for a few before they circled back. Sooner than I'd expected, I saw the instructor appear in the door. Then the helicopter descended even more.

To me, it looked like they were too close to the water, and when I glanced at Santiago, I saw him curse as his eyes narrowed. Then the first cadet—Johnathan, I assumed—appeared at the door and jumped, followed shortly by the other three and then the instructor.

I burst into spontaneous applause when the first heads started surfacing. The Zodiac pulled away from the cutter and raced toward them. A few seconds later, wind whipped overhead as the chopper came in to land and we

watched with bated breath as the others heaved themselves up on the Zodiac.

In no time at all, they were back aboard, cheering and high-fiving each other as the next group ran toward the chopper and the whole thing started all over again. Every time, just before the cadets jumped, I thought the helicopter was too close to the water, but since no one other than Santiago seemed to be concerned about it, I let it go and focused on my upcoming turn.

Today, I was grouped together with cadets I'd never really spoken to much, and they didn't look delighted to have me in their team. Even so, when our signal came, I sprinted toward the chopper right along with the rest of them, doing my best to ignore the deafening drone in my ears.

No sooner had my ass hit the seat when the pilot started lifting us off the deck, and one of the guys yelped, grabbing onto my leg for balance and leverage to drop into his seat.

As soon as he realized who he was touching and where, he yanked his hand back like it'd been burned and glared at me like I'd done something wrong. I rolled my eyes at him. He was being ridiculous. It wasn't like I was going to report him to Santiago for grabbing onto the closest possible thing when he'd been caught off guard.

But then we were airborne and I stared down at the gorgeous, glittering blue water instead of paying attention to the silly boy glaring on my other side. This was what we'd been training for. We were ready. It was going to be a walk in the park, and there was no way I was about to let this guy ruin it for me.

SANTIAGO

What the fuck is that pilot up to? My stomach had turned to stone and my mouth was bone dry. The guy was being a cowboy and I didn't think it was funny.

Meanwhile, Robertson and Ford seemed to be betting on every pass he made, putting money on whether he'd hit the water or not. The others were in on it too, and I was honestly starting to wonder if they'd put him up to it.

Everyone was having a little too much fun with this for my liking. As I watched Layla's group go up, fear turned my extremities to ice. This was what Neil had been talking about. This was why it was dangerous to get involved with someone who put their lives at risk for a living.

Not only because you had to be braced for the possibility of actually losing them, but because with the way I was feeling right now, I really would do something stupid to save her if it looked like she was in danger. And she was in danger. And I was on edge about it. And none of that was good.

My teeth pressed together so hard, my dentist would be pissed if he saw me right now. I was sure to crack at least one before she made it back to the cutter.

The cadets who'd just had their turn were boasting to those who still had to go and my coworkers were egging them on, talking smack while keeping an eye on the chopper and how low the pilot would go this time. Something reeked about the way everyone was handling this, and while I knew they didn't want their legacies to be the same as the one Ron had left, it was getting out of hand.

Way fucking out of hand.

The atmosphere around me was too light. Too festive for what we were doing. Shit, if I'd been blindfolded and dropped off on this deck, I'd have thought they'd put me down in the middle of a party.

Laughter and chatter rang out, and the boys on the Zodiac beside me were so relaxed it looked like they were on a booze cruise. No one seemed to be paying much attention as the chopper circled and dipped, but when it kept descending as it made the return trip, the stones in my stomach procreated. My fingers were curled into fists so tight that my hands hurt, but that pilot was too low.

Much, much too low.

I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I sure as fuck was going to find out before he took the next team up. This was reckless and just plain—

My mental rant died a sudden death when the chopper touched the water, and I was running for the Zodiac before I even heard the gut-wrenching sound of the crash. Metal shrieked and roared at the moment of impact, but I didn't turn to look. There was no time.

Flat out sprinting across the deck, I grabbed the railing and launched myself over without checking to see if the Zodiac was even still there. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew this was the stupid behavior Neil had warned me against, but the chopper had gone down and my cadets were in it.

My *girl* was in it. I landed with a hard thud on the hull of the Zodiac. I shoved whoever had been at the helm away and took over, planting my feet and wrapping my palm around the throttle.

I was too focused on my task to really look at anything, but at least I yelled a warning before I hit down on the throttle. "Hang on! It's going to be bumpy."

I heard a grunt of some sort, but again, I didn't stop to check. I simply gunned it away from the cutter and sliced through the water in a desperate attempt to get to her. Lifting the outboard motor slightly to get more speed faster, I bent my knees, and as soon as the crash site came into view, I desperately scanned the surface as we sped toward it.

It was a tricky situation, though. The motor could hit debris and send us all up in a ball of flame, or worse yet, I might hit a person if I got too close while they were surfacing. In my head, I kept repeating the same chant over and over again.

They'll be fine. This is what the simulation was for. She'll be fine. She

knows how to get out of a sinking chopper. They'll be fine.

Abruptly cutting the engine when we got close enough, I dove into the water without any hesitation as soon as I saw what appeared to be the first person surfacing. My training kicked in and took over, and I shouted to the cadet before helping him back to the Zodiac. He seemed to have forgotten how to swim now that he'd found his way to me, so I had to tow him, but I did it without a second thought.

I didn't have a motherfucking choice. The other instructors on the Zodiac helped me get him up, but they were all staying dry. "What are you doing?"

I had to yell to be heard above everything else as I pushed the cadet's ass up while Adams hauled him in, but the guy who was supposed to be helping me just shrugged. "They'll be fine, bro. Relax. You bring them here, we'll haul them up and check them out. We're all good."

We were not all good, but I didn't have time to argue. Instead, I helped another cadet to the Zodiac while the instructor who had been on the chopper swam beside the other. My head swiveled from side to side, but there was no sign of Layla. She hadn't come up yet.

Terror tore through me like a thunderclap, and before I could reconsider, I was going under to find her. Once again, I was acting rashly. I knew I should've gone back to the Zodiac and grabbed some gear, but the terror refused to let me swim away from the wreckage instead of into it.

I kicked toward the sinking chopper, ducking into the open door after taking one last breath. The visibility was terrible without a mask and with all the bubbles and debris around, but I squinted through it all, ignoring the stinging of the salt water on my eyes when I finally spotted Layla.

The pilot's head rolled forward like he was unconscious and she seemed to be battling to get him unbuckled. Ice cold rage simmered at the center of my being. *A cadet should not be doing that. How the fuck had her instructor left both her and an unconscious damn pilot behind?*

With a couple powerful kicks of my legs, I reached them and pushed her out before going back for the pilot. She tried to fight against me pushing her until she realized who I was. Then she shot up to the surface while I struggled with the jammed buckle.

Black spots started flickering at the edges of my vision and my lungs were burning like they were slowly being filled with hellfire, but I didn't stop. This idiot would certainly drown if I did, and he wasn't dying on my watch.

Not when I was about to put every last fucking professional on this exercise in front of a disciplinary committee—at the very least—for what had happened here today. Dying was the easy way out, and I wasn't letting him take it.

Eventually, I remembered what Layla had done when her friend's buckle had jammed much the same way, and I worked at getting the pilot free around it. This was another reason why I should've gone back for gear. Having the proper equipment in a situation like this made it far less treacherous, but I didn't have a knife nearby. All I'd had in my pocket had been my keys, and those were most certainly gone by now.

Tugging and heaving, I finally managed to get the man's limp body out of his seat, and I used the last of my oxygen and strength to get the fuck out of the wreckage before it sank all the way down. I rolled him onto his back as he hit the surface, and then the black took over my field of vision and I passed out.

The next thing I knew, faint beeping echoed in my ears and I was vaguely aware of something soft underneath me. I groaned. *Where the hell am I? What happened? Am I dead? Is this heaven? If so, why the hell does it smell like a hospital?*

"Cortez?" It sounded like someone was saying my name underwater, and that was when it all came rushing back.

The exercise. The chopper going lower and lower on every pass. The crash. Layla. Fuck! Layla!

I wrenched my eyes open and blinked hard against the harsh light above me. As I came to properly, I was vaguely aware that my body felt like it'd been hit by a truck but that was the least of my worries.

The room came into focus and with it, Commander Nicholson's face. As soon as he realized my eyes were open, relief softened his features for just a moment before they hardened again. "Cortez, thank God. What the hell happened out there?"

My throat felt like that hellfire from earlier had scorched it, too, but I pushed words out anyway. It hurt like hell, but fuck that. "Someone could have been killed because of their fucking negligence. They were reckless. I was alone. The chopper went down. I think they bet on how low he could get it. Is the pilot alive? Layla? Is everyone okay?"

He nodded briskly and handed me a glass of water. "They're all fine. Steve, the pilot, is a little worse for wear but he's next door. They're taking

care of him. We've been assured he's going to make a full recovery. Thanks to you."

"Layla?" I repeated, knowing I was dangerously close to betraying just how much I cared about her, but I couldn't help it. Not right now. My vision was still fuzzy and my throat and head were sore as shit, but I needed to know. I needed to be sure.

Nicholson frowned. "The Perkins girl? She's fine. A little shook up maybe, but physically okay. The report we got from her about the incident is alarming, though. Do you need some time to rest before you tell me your side of it?"

I shook my head as I remembered seeing Layla trying to free the pilot instead of the people whose actual fucking job it was. "No, I'm good. It was a shit show, Commander. Decatur left Perkins and the pilot behind. I saw him swimming back to the Zodiac with another cadet without even looking back. When I realized she wasn't coming up, I dove in, found her trying to get Steve out, then I pulled her away and went after him myself."

The commander's jaw tightened. "That confirms Perkins's report, then. Okay, Cortez. I'll let you rest. The docs say you need to stay for observation for at least a couple hours. I'll let them know you're awake. For God's sake, stay here and let them check you out. Follow their instructions. I'll get a detailed report from you once we know you're in the clear."

I nodded, and he spun on his heels and left, no doubt either to do damage to the others who had been on that exercise or to go do some damage control. Both had to be done, but I supposed it was up to him to decide which was more urgent.

It turned out that the doctors kept me more than just a couple hours. By the time I got discharged and back to the Station, it was dark out and everything was quiet. Everything except my doorstep, that was. As I trudged up to my living quarters, I saw a hunched-over figure waiting for me and I recognized it immediately.

Layla Perkins had been waiting here for me to get back from the hospital. It was almost certain that someone would've seen her here and that they'd be wondering why a cadet was so worried about her dick of an instructor that she'd be waiting for him to get back. This was the last thing I needed today on top of everything else that had happened.

Shit, this is not good. Not good at all.

LAYLA

With my head buried in my hands, I sat on the edge of the small step leading up to Santiago's apartment and prayed that he would be okay. The last I'd heard, they were only keeping him for observation.

A soft crunch on the path made me lift my head, and I almost cried when I saw him standing in front of me. Santiago was wearing shorts and a shirt that were slightly too big on him and he was a little pale, but he was alive, on his feet, and he looked okay.

I jumped up, but as I started toward him, he sighed, shook his head, and held up a hand to show me to stay back. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to check on you," I said as if it was obvious because, to me, it was. "How are you feeling?"

His gaze darted from one side to the other, but when he saw we were alone, he strode around me, unlocked his door, and then at least let me into his place.

As soon as I was inside, he shut the door and then leaned back against it, those blue eyes icy on mine. "You shouldn't have come here, Layla."

"I know," I agreed. "The last time I saw you, however, you were unconscious and they were pulling you out of the water. Before I even knew if you were alive, Ford ushered us all off the deck and then you were gone."

He exhaled, shook his head again, and pushed off the door, walking further into his small but neat apartment but not motioning for me to do the same. "I was worried about you too, but I have a little something called discretion. I made sure you were okay and I was going to wait until tomorrow morning to see you in person. We can't be visiting each other at night on the

Station, Perkins.”

“I hardly think anyone is going to jump to any conclusions tonight, other than us talking about what happened out there.” I thrust my hand in the general direction of the ocean as I stared at him, wondering why those blues of his were still so icy. “What’s going on, Cortez? Why are you looking at me like you wish I was anywhere other than here?”

“Because it’s true,” he said as he sat down on his sofa and groaned. “Look, I’m sore and I’m exhausted, so I was hoping to push this conversation to tomorrow morning.”

“What conversation?” I whispered as it suddenly hit me that there really was something else going on. My heartrate sped up and I felt sick as I kept looking into those cool eyes. “Are you breaking up with me right now?”

“Breaking up implies that we’re in a relationship, which we’re not, but we do need to stop this.” He waved a finger from his chest to mine. “We just... we need to stop, Perkins.”

“Why?” I could barely hear the sound of my own voice over the blood rushing in my ears. “What happened today wasn’t about us, Santiago.”

“Master Chief Cortez,” he corrected me when I called him by his given name. “I’m not Santiago to you. Not anymore. It’s too dangerous.”

Disbelief slammed into me like an out of control freight train. “Are you kidding me? Are you really blaming what happened on me?”

“No, but that’s not the point. The crash might not have been your fault or mine, but—”

He was cut off by a sharp knock at the door. At that moment, I felt like we were suspended in time, simply watching as a meteor approached our world, unable to do anything to stop it.

My breath caught in my lungs as I watched the door handle turn, and before I could move to hide or Santiago could call out for the person not to come in, the door swung open. In my worst nightmares I wouldn’t have been able to imagine this happening, but the imposing figure that came into view was the very last person I’d have wanted to find me here.

I’d have taken Commander Nicholson over my father, but there he was. Ron Perkins in all his glory. Santiago stood, his mouth agape but not a word coming out. In the meantime, I still couldn’t move. Couldn’t say anything as I blinked and wondered if I was hallucinating.

Please, God, let me still be underwater. Let me be drowning instead of this being real.

“Santiago?” my father’s booming, commanding voice ripped me out of my prayer. This was real. It was so real, and we were so screwed. “Layla? What on God’s green earth are you doing in your instructor’s apartment? I went by the dorms to check on you, but the other girl said she hadn’t seen you, so I thought I’d come by to see Cortez.”

I kept staring at him, utterly unable to remember how to form words—let alone sentences—as my heart thudded against my ribs and my hands started shaking. Thankfully, Santiago stepped up, giving my dad a calm, reassuring smile.

“Thanks for coming by to check on me, sir. It’s been a hell of a day, but I’m fine. I actually asked Layla to stop by so I could do the same thing you’re doing, check on her. I just got out of the hospital a few minutes ago.”

My dad nodded, taking the excuse as he looked between us before glancing back at Santiago. “Thank God, you acted fast. From what I’ve heard, today was a total clusterfuck. That true?”

Santiago winced, but he dipped his head in a curt nod. “Yes, sir. It was. We could’ve lost the pilot. It’s a good thing your daughter has a clear head on her shoulders. She was the only other person out there who did.”

My dad paused for a beat before he smiled at me. “You did well, baby. I’m proud of you.”

My heart nearly stopped when he said the words I’d been waiting to hear for so long, but then he looked at Santiago and said it with much more gusto when it was aimed at him. “I’m proud of you too, son. I always am, but your actions today reminded me of why. Where the hell was everyone else today? Were they even out there with you?”

“They were,” he replied, hanging and shaking his head at the same time. “I’m afraid we’re in trouble here without you, sir. The wheels have come off and no one seems to know how to put them back on.”

Dad did a double take, but then he heaved out a sigh and scratched the stubble on his jaw. “I’m sure we can find a way to work it out. How about I buy you two dinner? We can talk, you can catch me up on everything that’s been going on, and I’ll get to feed you both so at least I’ll have seen you eat with my own two eyes. You gave me quite a scare today. Both of you.”

Tears stung the backs of my eyes. I wanted more time with Santiago, who my father seemed to like and respect more than he did me, but when I glanced at the man, he gave his head an almost imperceptible shake.

“Thank you for the offer, sir, but I need to hit the hay. I ate before I left

the hospital. Food wasn't great, but they made me eat it before they signed my discharge papers. I need to be up early to do my report while it's all still fresh, but I'll give you a call as soon as I can."

"Right," Dad said, then turned to me. "It's just you and I then, kiddo. Let's go. You can tell the old man your first war story."

On the one hand, he said it so fondly that I softened a bit. For years, I'd been waiting to have a story just like this one to tell him. It probably sounded weird that I'd been looking forward to something like this, but the fact of it was that I'd just wanted something to tell him that would make him think I was worthy.

On the other hand, however, it was disappointing that he looked a bit bummed that it would only be the two of us when he glanced at Santiago again. "Sorry you won't be joining us. Maybe next time?"

"Yes, sir."

Dad held his hand out toward me. "Let's go, honey. We should get out of his hair. He's had a long day. I'm sure a cadet and his ex-boss are the last people he wants to be spending time with right now."

Santiago didn't contradict him, and it hurt. Especially since the only person I wanted to be spending time with was him.

Either way, however, that wasn't an option. My dad took my arm and steered me out of the apartment before I could even say goodbye. Then he spent the whole ride to an Italian place down the road telling me how scared he'd been after he'd gotten the call.

As we walked into the cozy dining room and sat down, my brain felt like it'd been scrambled. In one day, I'd survived a helicopter crash, failed at saving a life, and been broken up with, and now I had to have dinner with my father and pretend like everything was okay.

After all the years I'd waited for this, I couldn't even enjoy it when he told me how proud he'd been when Commander Nicholson had commended him on raising a daughter who could hold her own. It was all noise. All adding to the scramble that—*Oh, fuck it.*

"I care about Santiago," I blurted when Dad paused to take a sip of his water.

He smiled as he swallowed it, and I frowned in confusion over the fact that he didn't seem at all taken aback by what I'd just admitted. Until he spoke again and I realized he'd misunderstood. "Of course, you do. He's your instructor and I know he's been helping you. I care about him a great deal

myself. He's an excellent teacher. I'm happy you two are getting along. There's a lot you can learn from him."

"No, Dad," I said before I could stop myself. "I don't mean it like that. I mean, I do care about him as an instructor, but I also really *care* about him."

Finally, the smile melted away from my dad's lips and he blinked hard, his features turning harder than rock when realization dawned.

"Layla..." He trailed off, his head shaking as he glanced around and realized we were surrounded by other people. His jaw tightened and a flush appeared on his cheeks, and he motioned for our server and ordered a whiskey before turning back to me.

"You and I are going to talk about this later," he said quietly, his tone scathing as his eyes narrowed. "Not here and not now. What do you want to eat? We should get you back to your bunk, if that's even where you've been sleeping."

And there it was, the disapproval I'd known would be coming. *Why the hell did I even say anything?*

It wasn't like I'd expected him to be happy for me. In fact, I'd known he wouldn't approve. I'd also known he would be furious.

But I'd told him anyway.

Because he was my father and I hated lying to him.

Because I'd almost died today and I'd realized that living a lie wasn't working for me.

Because I'd thought that above all else, I was his daughter and that he'd at least *try* to understand.

And now, I might've lost Santiago and my father in one day.

Shit. I should've just gone under with the damn helicopter when I had the chance.

SANTIAGO

I'd never really felt at home in my office. As I packed up the few personal possessions I had in here, I wondered why that was. Before, I'd had no reason to think it wouldn't be mine for years to come, but I'd still always felt like it didn't really belong to me.

There had been times when people had come in when I'd frozen like they'd caught me someplace I wasn't supposed to have been. Maybe it'd been my gut all along, telling me I shouldn't get too comfortable because I was going to fuck it up anyway.

Which I'd now done. So I supposed I'd been right all along.

"What are you doing?" Neil asked as he opened the door without knocking and got a good look at the box I was packing.

I shrugged. "I'm quitting early."

My friend's brow furrowed before he shut the door firmly behind him. He strode over to my desk and crossed his arms tight. "Is this because of the girl? Are you leaving because of her?"

"No. Well, yes. In a way, maybe, but—" I looked up as I ran my hands through my hair, only to see Ron Perkins standing in my door.

I hadn't even heard it open again, but when Neil realized there was someone behind him and spun around to see who it was, the color drained out of his cheeks. Ron gave him a polite smile. "Do you mind giving us a minute?"

Neil dipped his head in a curt nod, but despite how he was always talking shit about standing up to Ron, he didn't do it now. Instead, he didn't say a single word to the man before he disappeared from my office like a coward.

I sighed but let him go. It wasn't like I could demand he stayed. That would just have made me a coward as well.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind him, Ron's gaze met mine. "What's been going on between you and my daughter, Cortez?"

Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck. Triple fuck.

My eyes slammed shut as the air left my lungs in an audible whoosh, but I didn't even try to hide it. Frankly, I had too much respect for this man to lie to him when he asked me an outright question straight to my face.

This conversation was going to suck, but I was leaving the service anyway. I hadn't told anyone yet since I'd wanted to get my stuff, quit, and then leave for good, but the fact remained that I had nothing left to lose here.

I was going anyway. There was nothing they could do to me that was worse than that. Thinking about retiring and actually packing my shit were two entirely different things, and now that it'd come down to it, I'd realized that I didn't really want to leave.

It was just that I'd had enough. I'd done the best I'd been able to here and it still hadn't been good enough. Then there was the pesky matter of having it bad for a damn cadet. I was just *done*.

When my eyes opened again, I looked right at Ron and told him the truth. I owed him at least that.

"Layla and I have been seeing each other, sir," I said, not afraid of telling him but also wishing that I hadn't betrayed him. "I didn't mean for it to happen, but it did."

Ron's face didn't give anything away as he stared back at me. "This is unlike you, Cortez. You're not one to be led astray by a pretty young face."

"No, sir. I'm not, but it's not like that. She's not just a pretty young face to me. To be honest, I don't think I realized how much she meant to me until a couple days ago. I always knew she was more than just something to look at, but it hit me when I saw that chopper go down that somewhere along the line, she's become everything to me."

I swallowed hard, my throat still burning even though it'd been more than two days since the crash. This had nothing to do with that, though. The lump I was trying to swallow now had everything to do with admitting my feelings out loud for the first time—and not even to my girl, but to her father. My mentor. The man I respected more than anyone else.

The man who cocked his head at me now, surprisingly calm despite the subject matter. "Everything? Those are fighting words, Master Chief. How

exactly has she come to mean everything to you?”

“Honestly, sir? I don’t know. All I know is that she has. I haven’t even thought about another woman since I met her, and I definitely haven’t touched one. When we’re together, I feel like I can be myself more than I can be even when I’m alone. She’s the first thing I think about when I open my eyes and the last thing I see when I close them before I fall asleep.”

He was quiet for a long moment, but his intense gaze never left mine. “Are you saying all this because you think it’s what I want to hear, or is it true?”

“It’s absolutely true, sir.”

“Cut the sir shit for now, Cortez,” he said irritably. “We’re talking about you seeing my daughter. I appreciate the sign of respect, but I think we’re past that for the moment. How did this happen? You talk about her like she’s the only thing on this earth, but how did it get this far?”

I shook my head, raising my eyebrows as I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. One day, she was just a cadet, but the more I learned about her, the more I liked her. Not romantically at first, but she’s got spunk, you know?”

“I do know.”

I smiled as I thought back to that first run when she’d barely even been winded while others had struggled to keep up and had even fallen out on their very first day. “She came into this prepared. Physically as well as mentally. I know that you probably had a lot to do with that, but she’s also talented. She’s got a natural feel for things that I can’t quite explain.”

“She does, but I still don’t understand how it went from that to this. Whatever this is.”

I licked my lips, rolling them into my mouth as I thought about it. “On one of their weekends off, I was at Lucky’s waiting for a friend. He canceled at the last minute, so I figured I’d finish my beer and head back here early. I think I told you that she’d been having a hard time with the cadets after I made an example of that guy who treated her and her friend poorly.”

He nodded but didn’t interrupt me.

“Somehow, she stumbled onto Lucky’s while I was there and asked if she could buy me a beer. I said no, obviously, but she was alone and she had no one to talk to, so eventually, I agreed.”

“You’re expecting me to believe you fell in love with her after she bought you a beer?”

“No, I don’t. I didn’t fall in love with her that night, but I made the mistake of getting to know her a little bit and that? That was how it started. You should know that I tried to stay away from her. I really did, but she draws me in like a moth to a flame.”

“She does that,” he mused. “People sit up and take notice of her, but most become intimidated or afraid. I take it that hasn’t happened to you?”

“It hasn’t,” I said. “I’ve noticed that with the other cadets, though. At first, I felt responsible because I made an example of that guy before, but then I realized it couldn’t just be that. I think it’s because they’re intimidated. There aren’t a lot of people with her natural skill set for this and most of the people who have it are men.”

“You have it,” he said, then gestured around my office. “Yet you’re packing up. Why?”

I blew out a slow breath before inhaling another. “I can’t do this anymore. With all due respect to the service, I can’t be told who to love. I won’t sneak around with her any longer. She deserves more than to be treated as a dirty little secret.”

He lowered his chin as his eyes widened on mine. “So you’re leaving because of her?”

“Not only because of her, but yes. I won’t live my life looking over my shoulder and even though I’ve broken it off, I—”

“You broke it off?” He frowned. “When?”

“The other night,” I said. “Just before you walked into my apartment, actually.”

“Why? If you feel about her the way you say you do, then why the hell would you end it?”

“Like I said, she deserves more than to be treated as a dirty little secret. She also deserves more than people thinking she’s made it this far because her commanding officer made things easy for her. Especially because nothing could be further from the truth. I haven’t made things easy for her, but if I’m still on the Station and people find out, that’s exactly what they’re going to think.”

“So you’re just going to quit?” He arched a brow at me. “That’s not the Santiago Cortez I know.”

“No, it’s not, but that’s how far I’m willing to go for her. She deserves to be here more than anyone else, sir. I’ve had my run, and it’s been a good one, but now is her time to shine.”

“Where is she?”

“PT. I asked one of the others to take over for me today.”

“Have you told anyone you’re leaving just yet?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, I haven’t. Commander Nicholson was in here just the other day telling me that if I got this class done right, I could move up, but that’s not going to happen because I haven’t done it right. I’ve gone and fallen for one of my cadets, and I’m not going to hang around to see her get reamed for it. It’s better if I’m ready to go once I’m done here. Quickly and quietly.”

His jaw worked as he stared at me. “Are you sneaking away?”

“Nope. Just leaving, but I’m doing it with as little fanfare as possible. I don’t need to be convinced to change my mind and I certainly don’t want to give anyone time to plan a going away party.”

Ron sighed. “Do you actually *want* to quit? Do you really feel like your time here is done?”

“No,” I said simply. “I thought I wanted to and I thought I was done, but now that it’s happening, I’m starting to realize how much I’ve got left to give. Unfortunately, I don’t think it matters much what I want at this point. I need to step aside.”

“Stop packing.” He got up. “Leave this to me, will you?”

“I can’t do this anymore, sir. There’s nothing anyone can do to fix it.”

“I’m trusting you with my daughter, Cortez. The least you can do is to trust me with this.”

With one last pointed look at me, he spun on his heels and marched out of my office, leaving me to wonder what he was planning and hoping that it would work. If anyone could make something happen for me, it was Ron Perkins, but I wasn’t going to get excited just yet.

For as much power as he had around here, he was only human. There was only so much he could do in the face of regulations that wouldn’t change and mentalities that had been set in stone for decades. So I stopped packing, but I also didn’t do anything else.

Instead, I just sat there, hoping for a miracle but preparing for the worst. One way or another, at least I’d know by the end of the day if there was any way to save my career or if this really was the end of the road.

LAYLA

It had been days since I'd last seen Santiago. At this point, I wasn't even sure he was still on the Station. Every morning when I woke up, I wondered if today would be the day he was back—or even the day we finally found out what happened to him.

So far, though, I'd had no such luck.

As I headed to the field for PT with the sun rising over the bay and a light breeze rustling the leaves of the trees nearby, I mentally crossed my fingers and toes that I'd round the bend and he'd be there. That he'd magically appear and tell us that it'd only been some time off after the crash.

When I got to PT and saw he was still not there, however, my heart sank to my shoes. If he really was gone, I hadn't even had the chance to say goodbye.

Wild rumors were flying around the Station about what happened to him. Some people seemed to think that the helicopter crash had been the straw that had broken the camel's back while others were of the opinion that he was simply taking some time off.

Yet others speculated that he'd been promoted because of his heroics on the day while some wondered if he'd been fired because it'd happened in the first place. No one seemed to have the faintest idea where he was or why, and if the instructors who had taken over for him knew anything, they sure weren't giving it away.

It was driving me nuts. If only I knew, then at least I'd have answers. It felt like I needed to know so I could have some closure, but again, so far, I'd had no such luck.

I was stuck in an infinite loop of wondering. Wishing. Waiting. And it was awful. So damn awful. I knew it was about time that I accepted the fact that he'd broken up with me and then disappeared, but I just couldn't.

For starters, it felt like an extreme form of ghosting for him to leave a job he loved just so he wouldn't have to see me, but it wasn't just that. Him ending things had been so out of the blue and I still had questions.

Questions it seemed I would now never get any answers to.

"With me, cadets," a stand-in instructor called. Then he took off on our morning run without waiting for us to fall into formation or checking that we were even all here. Honestly, this guy wasn't half the teacher Santiago was. If he was meant to see us through this thing, we were screwed.

But we fell into step behind him like the good little cadets we were and jogged into the sunrise. With every fall of my feet against the dirt, a memory of Santiago popped into my head. The first time he led us on this very path and of that first beer we had together.

I replayed it all. Every tiny moment we'd had and every first. Every big thing we'd shared and every last. I did this every morning, on every run. I couldn't seem to stop it from happening. As soon as my body found its groove, my head found its way to him.

The whole time I ran, he was on my mind. By the time we made it back to the Station, I felt like I'd run the gauntlet instead of a jogging track.

Bending over, my hands hit my knees but I didn't need to catch my breath. I just needed to get my brain off of memory lane and my head in the game.

"Okay, cadets. Let's hit the course. You know the drill. Four at a time. On my signal... and go."

I lifted my head to narrow my eyes at our new instructor. No doubt it would be someone else tomorrow morning, but regardless of who it was, surely they knew they were supposed to give us time to warm up.

Sure, we'd just been on a five-mile run, but Santiago—

No. Stop it. Bad Layla!

I really was going to drive myself insane if I didn't stop thinking about him. All I needed to do was to find a way to forget it ever even happened. He was gone, and clearly, he wasn't coming back. My closure wasn't going to happen. My questions were going to remain unanswered, and I needed to find a way to be okay with that.

Determined that I was going to start moving on from him right now, I

grabbed a spot in the next group facing the obstacle course and Matt frowned when I joined them at the starting line. “What’s up, Perkins? Don’t you usually go with Mel and her boys?”

“I do, but I’m looking for a new challenge today.”

He smirked. “A new challenge, huh? Okay, you’re on. Fastest through gets shameless bragging rights for the rest of the day?”

Jonathan laughed at my other side. “Bro, you brag shamelessly every day. How about best time gets to tell you to shut up for the rest of the day?”

Matt shrugged. “You’re on.”

For the first time in a few days, I smiled. The other cadets still weren’t my friends, but it felt like they were finally starting to accept me as one of their own. This had been the most casual exchange I’d been part of with this particular group, and I was going to kick their asses on the course to show my appreciation.

When the whistle blew, we took off. While I knew the others were right there, I soon forgot all about them and about kicking their asses as I focused on making this my best time yet. I channeled all my anger and frustration about not seeing Santiago into my efforts, and in a way, this felt like my swan song.

I flew through the course, only vaguely aware that I was way ahead of the others—until I got to the wall. The bane of my damn existence.

I’d been working on it and working on it, and last night, I’d even almost made it over but only almost. It still hadn’t happened for me, but today was my day. I didn’t break stride as I ran at it, remembering all the advice he’d given me and not even considering going around it instead.

I smacked against the brick as I took a flying leap at it, and somehow, miraculously, I managed to get a good grip this time. With both hands. As soon as my left palm hit the rough surface, my shoes found purchase in a groove and I used my momentum to keep carrying me up.

And it worked.

Wait, it fucking worked?

It had worked, though. Before I even knew how I’d actually managed it, I was over the wall and elation filled my bloodstream with joyful bubbles. A shout tore out of me as I went over, but I’d been so focused on getting up that I suddenly realized I’d paid zero attention at all to getting down on the other side.

Of course, I only realized this once I was airborne, and then I hit the sand

with a dull thud. A jarring shock ricocheted through me and my teeth clanged together, but as I lay on the other side, I was still grinning.

It hadn't been a graceful dismount by any means, but I'd made it. I'd gotten over and now I was pretty sure I'd be able to do it again. It was a huge moment for me, and even when I saw Jackson effortlessly flying over me as he got across the wall, I didn't move.

I was savoring this damn moment for all it was worth. Winning the right to tell Matt to shut up didn't motivate me enough to get me up right now. I barely ever even spoke to the guy. Getting to tell him to shut up just wasn't appealing enough.

My immediate instinct was to look for Santiago. Without his help, I'd never have made it, but of course, he wasn't here.

My excitement and elation died a quiet death as I lay there in the sand, now just lying there because I couldn't be bothered to get up. I'd done it. After months of trying, I'd finally done it and he hadn't even been here to see it.

If a tree falls in a forest, does it even make a sound?

I didn't know. Just like I didn't know where Santiago was or why he'd left. Tears suddenly sprang to the backs of my eyes as it finally hit me that if he hadn't been here for this moment, he was probably not going to be here for any others.

I'd known this for a few days now, but it was finally sinking in that he was gone. He was just fucking gone and there was nothing I could do about it. After all that work getting over the wall, the one person I wanted to share it with would probably never even find out that I'd actually done it.

Matt went flying over me next, then Jonathan, and even though it was official that I was now dead last out of our group, it didn't even matter. Nothing did. *Is this heartbreak? Is this what it feels like when you suddenly realize that the person you're pretty sure you're in love with has really left you?*

If so, then I now understood why it was such a thing. In the past, heartbreak hadn't made much sense to me. Relationships and romantic entanglements ended. Always. One way or another, the other person only belonged to you for a finite period, so why make such a big deal about it when your time with them ran out?

It didn't seem so simple to me right now, though. Santiago and I had been doomed from the start. We'd both known it. Somehow, however, I'd

managed to convince myself that it was fine and that it wouldn't be so bad once it was over.

As pain leaked from my heart and infused my veins with the strangest agony I'd ever felt, I sniffled and pounded my fists into the ground. *Yeah, this hurts, okay? It hurts so damn bad.*

"Are you just going to lie there or are you going to finish the course?" an amused voice asked from my side. A familiar amused voice.

When I looked up, allowing hope to replace the pain, a tear slid down my cheek when I saw him standing over me. Those blue eyes were dancing with barely restrained laughter as he reached out and offered me his hand.

"But seriously, are you hurt or are you just having a moment?" he asked.

I groaned, shaking my head before I swiped away the tear and blinked away the others. "I was just having a moment, but you've ruined it. I guess I'll just go finish the course now."

"See you at the finish line," he said, and it sounded like a promise. One I fully intended on forcing him to keep.

SANTIAGO

As I watched Layla finish the course, I wasn't even going to pretend that my chest wasn't swollen with pride. I was super excited for her for getting over that wall, and even though I couldn't show it, no one was going to stop me from feeling it.

I waited for her at the finish line like I'd promised, but I couldn't do much more than shoot her a smile before the others started realizing I was there. Matt was the first to notice me, and his eyes widened before he grinned.

"Master Chief Cortez! It's good to see you, man. How are you feeling?"

"Better," I said honestly, and I really was feeling better than I had in months.

Ron had come through for me in a big way and it finally felt like the stars were aligning. If I played my cards right, I was going to get to have a relationship with the girl of my dreams and I was going to get to keep the Coast Guard.

But for now, I had to deal with the cadets first. As soon as Matt had said my name, the others had looked over and seen me, and now a whole swarm of surprisingly excited cadets was descending on me.

"Are you back?" Jonathan asked hopefully after shaking my hand. "Please tell me you're back. We've been worried about you, and working our asses off just isn't the same without you yelling at us to pick up the pace."

I laughed. "Sorry, but it's not going to be me yelling at you anymore. I found you someone else. He yells just as well as I do, though."

Jonathan sighed, but then his gaze darted off to the side when I motioned

for my permanent replacement to join us. “Cadets! This is Chief Petty Officer Robin Brooks. He’s taking over your torture from now on.”

Robin crossed his arms and chuckled as he came to stand beside me, but then he cut the cadets a look so sharp when they laughed with us that every last one of them shut up instantly. “I’m glad to see you think this is funny, cadets. The next person who so much as smiles is going around the course two more times.”

I grinned, reaching out to pat his shoulder as I nodded my approval. “I think you’re all going to get along just fine.”

Jameson let out a loud sigh before he looked back at me. “Where are you going, Master Chief?”

“Not far, Gray. Not far.” I took a step back. “Happy Friday, cadets. My gift to you is the weekend off, but only after Brooks here has seen what you can do.”

They groaned, and I grinned. Just before I left, I finally made eye contact with Layla. Hopefully, my gaze lingered on hers for long enough to let her know that I needed to talk to her. She met my stare with a hard one of her own, but finally, she nodded and then fell into formation as Robin moved forward to address them.

As I turned and walked away, I hoped like hell that she’d come find me once they were done for the day. My afternoon was jam-packed with meetings with some of the higher-ups, and by the time I left the last one, I saw the cadets starting to leave for the weekend.

My spirits sank when I realized I might’ve missed Layla. I half-jogged to my office, hoping she’d be there, but she wasn’t. I checked my watch. Robin would’ve dismissed them almost twenty minutes ago. If she was going to come here, she’d have been here already.

After grabbing my stuff, I locked up the office and headed for the dorms, but the girls’ was empty. I went to the obstacle course next. There was a faint possibility that she’d gone back to the wall, but even as I rounded the bend, I knew the place was abandoned.

I checked anyway, but she wasn’t there.

Eventually, once I realized I was out of options, I shoved my hands into my hair and dragged in a deep breath, keeping it in my lungs for a long minute. Just because she hadn’t come to find me didn’t mean I’d never see her again, obviously.

Monday would be here soon and I was still going to be on the Station

even if I wasn't going to be their instructor anymore, but I'd really been hoping to catch her before she left. The last few days had been hectic, and since I'd been trying to do things the right way, I hadn't wanted to talk to her before I knew for sure that everything was in place.

Now, I wondered if perhaps I should've talked to her before. I also wondered if I'd waited too long. Before they'd completed the course earlier, I'd seen her talking to Matt. I saw her smiling at him before that whistle blew.

I doubted she was interested in him that way, but that hadn't stopped the jealousy from snaking through me like a living thing. Those boys in her class weren't blind, and no matter how hard I'd come down on Bruce, I wouldn't be able to keep them away from her forever. If she wanted one of them, I wouldn't try to keep them apart either, but shit.

I was really hoping I hadn't lost her for good. After everything I had gone through to get to this point, it would be a real fucking bummer if she'd already moved on. More than a bummer. Frankly, it would break my damn heart, but it would also be my fault if she was gone.

The last time we'd spoken, I'd told her it was over. I could hardly blame her if she'd taken me at my word and was trying to move on. It would probably be better for her if that was what she was doing, but selfishly, I hoped it wasn't.

Selfishly, I hoped I still had a shot.

Sighing as I backed away from the course, I headed to the pier. It was the last place I could think of where I might find her, and if she wasn't there, then I supposed I would just have to hope that I got the chance to talk to her on Monday.

Since I was going home for the weekend regardless of whether I went alone, I drove to the beach and parked at the top of the path. I was trying my best not to get my hopes up, but as I strode down and hit the sand, I wouldn't deny that I said a little prayer that she would be there.

Wonder above wonder, it worked. As soon as I came around the corner, I saw a familiar silhouette sitting in our spot. My heart did some kind of hopscotch thing in my chest as I approached her, and just as I was wondering what to say, she suddenly twisted around to look at me.

"I thought you might be here," she said quietly, her eyes sad before she turned them back to the ocean. "What is it, Master Chief? You wanted to talk to me, so here I am."

“You got that, huh?” I asked lamely. “Actually, scratch that. You obviously got it. I, uh, I was hoping I might convince you to come with me for the weekend.”

“Come where?”

“To my place,” I said. “We need to talk.”

“Sure, we do, but it won’t take us all weekend to do it. Besides, you said we needed to stop and you and I both know that if I come home with you, that’s not going to happen. We’ll just go right back to doing what we were doing before, and I can’t go through all this again.”

“Neither can I,” I agreed.

Surprise flickered in her gaze when she finally looked at me again, her head tilting slightly to one side. “You’re going through it, too?”

“Of course, I am,” I said quietly, reaching for her hand slowly enough that she could withdraw it if she wanted to. “Please come with me?”

She moved her hand away so I couldn’t take it, but she also kept looking at me for what felt like an eternity before she nodded. “Fine, but I’m taking my own car and just because I’m going doesn’t mean I’m going to stay. I want answers and if I have to drive over an hour to get them, then fine. I’ll do it, because we can’t really get into it here, but I need you to promise me that if we go all the way to your place, you’ll tell me everything I want to know.”

“Deal,” I said. “We can take my car, though. It’s parked right at the entrance to the path, and if you want to come back, I’ll drive you.”

She exhaled through her nostrils before she nodded. “Yeah. Okay. Let’s go.”

Getting up, she brushed the sand off her ass and headed for the path without waiting for me. Almost no words were spoken by either of us for the entire drive, and when we got to my place, she strode in, but then she turned and faced me, her eyes widening as she motioned for me to talk.

“I’m listening, Cortez.”

I nodded. “Okay, well, uh, first, you should know that I don’t want to stop. I never did.”

“Why did you say it, then?” she countered.

I shrugged. “I didn’t think I had a choice.”

“Do you?”

“I do now,” I said. “Do you want a beer?”

“No. Thank you. All I want is answers and then I’m out of here.” Hurt darkened those beautiful eyes, locked on mine. “Regardless of whether or not

you wanted to, you still broke up with me. I'm trying to deal with that. I'm trying to move on, so why am I here, Santiago? Just cut the crap and tell me what you want to tell me."

"Your dad got me a new job," I said, and when her eyebrows jumped, I nodded. "I know, I was just as surprised as you are, but he seems to be okay with this. With us being together."

"He is?"

I nodded. "I think so. I was going to quit so that we could be together if you still wanted me. Your dad found me while I was packing up my office. We talked and eventually he told me to stop packing and then he left."

Those green eyes were huge, and somehow, they kept getting bigger but she didn't interrupt me. "It turns out that the instructors on our Station need an instructor and you're looking at him."

"What? That's what Nicholson meant when he talked about you getting promoted?"

"No, they were actually trying to get your dad back for a few sessions, but he suggested they hire me instead."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you, but that's not really the point. The point is that I wasn't going to stay if I would have to stop seeing you. I just couldn't do it. Didn't want to. I also didn't want to keep sneaking around."

Moisture glistened her cheeks as she tensed, folding her arms over her chest as if she was protecting herself from something. Protecting herself from *me*, presumably. "What are you really saying, Santiago? You're going to have to spell it out for me because I haven't so much as seen you from a distance since you broke up with me and I'm not just going to throw myself into your arms without knowing for a fact you're not just going to turn around and disappear again."

"I'm not just going to turn around and disappear again," I said as I closed the distance between us slowly, step by step, my gaze fixed on hers. "What I'm really saying is that I love you. I love you so much that I was about to walk away from the only career I've ever wanted for you. I'm sorry that I hurt you and I know it doesn't make it any better, but hurting you hurt me, too. I guess I just realized that we couldn't be together if I was going to be your instructor. When that helicopter went down..."

I sighed as a shudder passed through me. "I was terrified and I did something stupid as a result. Something that might've gotten us both killed if

it had gone down any differently. As soon as you left my apartment that night, though, I knew I'd made a mistake by ending things."

"So why has it taken you this long to tell me?" she asked in a shaky voice as tears slid down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry about that, too. I didn't want to talk to you about it until I knew it was all definitely happening and I only got my official letter of appointment last night."

"So you're officially not our instructor anymore?"

I shook my head. "I'm not your instructor anymore, but if you'd let me, I'd like to be your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend, huh?" She smiled through her tears and looked up at me when I finally reached her, not stopping until my chest was pressed to hers. "I think I'd like that, too."

"Good." I lifted my hands to her cheeks and dipped my head. "Am I forgiven?"

"No, but I'm sure you'll find a way to make it up to me this weekend," she murmured as she looped her arms around my neck. Then she pulled me down and kissed me until I knew that while I might not have been forgiven just yet, we were definitely back together.

She hadn't moved on. I hadn't lost her, and now, I was finally going to have a chance to show her just how much I'd missed her.

LAYLA

Santiago kissed me like he never had before. He kissed me like this was *it*, like this was the beginning of forever for us.

The scary part—and the amazing part—was that it wasn't impossible that he was right. It didn't sound like there was much standing in our way anymore and he'd said that he loved me. *Freaking loves me.*

After days of confusion, uncertainty, and heartache, it all felt a little unreal. I couldn't quite believe that any of it was true, but with every one of his bruising kisses and with every beat of his heart against my chest as he held me, I was reminded that it was true.

He was here. I was here. My dad had given us his blessing—sort of—and the Coast Guard had offered him a job that didn't put him directly in my chain of command. It was too good to be true, and yet somehow, it was happening.

My head spun. Everything had changed since I'd woken up today, but as he groaned into my mouth and slid his hand up into my hair, tugging it just hard enough to keep me in the present, I tried to let go of my disbelief.

This was real. Santiago Cortez had fixed it so that he could be in my life. So that he could be my boyfriend. *And also, he said he loves me.*

I really couldn't get over that part. As I held him tighter and kissed him harder, he grinned against my lips and wrapped his arms around me to lift me against him. "Finally made it out of your head enough to make it back to me, huh?"

I smiled. "Can you blame me? You just gave me a hell of a lot to think about."

“Want to talk about it?”

“No, I just want to kiss you. We can talk more later.”

“I can get on board with that plan,” he murmured as he carried me to his bedroom and gently laid me down on the bed. Our lips didn’t part as he crawled onto it after me, covering my body with his own and stroking my cheeks with his fingertips.

We kissed for a long time, making out like lovestruck teenagers who hadn’t been able to touch one another all summer long. Our hands roamed under each other’s clothes but neither of us went for any kind of gold.

I hooked my legs around him and felt him growing against my core, but while my panties were definitely damp and my nipples were begging for attention, I still didn’t take it any further. Not yet. Instead, we just kept kissing, devouring each other like we had all the time in the world for everything else.

Which, I guessed we now did. Or at least, we could have just as much time as we wanted. Even though we’d had the weekend before, this was different. Then, it’d been only the weekend and we knew we’d be going back to reality when it was over.

Now, however, this was our reality. The thought spurred me on, making me want him more than ever before because now? Now he was mine. For real, and I wanted him to know it. I also wanted him to know that I was his and that, as far as I was concerned, we belonged to each other now.

Finally tugging at the hem of his shirt, I pulled it up and over his head, and our lips parted only to let the fabric pass before his sealed back over mine. His skin was hot under my hands as I ran my palms down his back until I hit the waistband of his pants.

Working fast, I pushed my hands between us and undid his fly, then used my feet to help me get the rest of his clothes off. He chuckled into my mouth at the sudden urgency of my movements, but he didn’t stop me.

Instead, he matched my pace, getting me naked just seconds after he was. His body felt like heaven against my own, his kisses more frantic as he ran his hands down my sides and gripped my hips. Our moans mingled in the air, our chests mashed together but our lower halves intentionally not lining up.

“Condom,” I whispered between passionate kisses.

He groaned, lifting his mouth away from mine before he nodded. “Just give me a minute.”

Breathing heavily, he rested his forehead against mine, his muscles tight

with restraint as he closed his eyes before opening them again. He smiled softly, then dropped a kiss on the tip of my nose before lifting himself up.

I pressed a hand to my chest in an attempt to control the rapid beating of my heart as I watched him climb off the bed and bend over to grab his wallet out of his pants. He pulled a foil package out of it, then tore it open and drew my attention to the long, hard length of him as he rolled it on.

The muscles in his forearms rippled with the movement as he rolled the latex to his base, then smirked when he saw me practically drooling over getting to see him this way. I couldn't help it, though. The man was seriously hot and part of me still couldn't believe that he'd even looked at me at all, let alone looked at me like he wanted to devour me whole.

"Still happy with your purchase?" he teased as he spread his arms out to his sides and turned in a slow circle like he was letting me examine the goods.

My body and my chest suddenly felt hot, but in the best way possible. Even so, I shrugged, trying to play it cool as I watched him stalk back to the bed. "I was actually wondering if it was time to trade it in on a newer model."

"Newer models might be prettier, but they're far less reliable," he joked as he crawled over me again. "Us older models know how to get you there time and time again. Without fail."

I smiled as I wrapped my arms around his neck as he positioned himself above me, the tip of his cock nestled against my entrance. "I beg to differ."

"When have I ever failed to get you there?" he asked against my lips.

I shook my head. "That's not where we differ. There is no newer model who's prettier. I think I'll keep you. Might wait another year or so before I trade you in."

He chuckled before he kissed me again, punctuating his kisses with words as he slowly pushed into me. "Only another year, huh? I think I'm going to have to convince you that I've got more than that left in me."

As he stretched me open, making me moan when his pelvis hit my swollen clit, I locked my legs around his tight ass. "On second thought, I'm never trading you in. This feels way too good. I'm keeping you forever. You're mine now."

"Good, because I wasn't planning on letting you go. Not ever." He pulled back to look into my eyes. "Love you, Layla."

"I love you too, Master Chief Cortez." With that, I lifted my head and claimed his lips in another searing kiss that neither of us stopped as our

bodies started moving together. He made love to me like he was worshipping me. Claiming me. Making me his.

We lasted much longer than I'd expected, but when I finally surrendered to the most powerful orgasm I'd ever had, he was right there with me. Our lips remained fused together, even in the aftermath as we tried to catch our breath.

We kept kissing until he left the bed to take care of the condom, but he didn't stay away for long. When he came back, he pulled me into his side and held me close, not saying anything as my own mind started racing again.

"What does this mean?" I asked, drawing patterns on his bare chest with my fingertips. "Can we really be together for real now? Even on Station?"

He drew in a deep breath, and my head rose and fell with his chest. "Well, no. I don't think we can rub our relationship in anyone's face, but with me being over the instructors now, we'll hardly ever cross paths enough to raise any suspicions. That being said, we won't need to be as careful, either. Nicholson knows we're seeing each other and he's allowing it because I'm not your direct superior anymore, but he said to keep our relationship on the down low. Not all the higher-ups know and not all of them will be so understanding toward us."

"Thank you for talking to him," I murmured as I turned my head to look up at him. "I don't really know what to say about everything else you did. Thank you doesn't seem like enough. I can't believe you were really going to quit for me."

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips and he glanced down at me, his long eyelashes framing those perfectly blue eyes as they lowered so he could see me without lifting his head off the pillow. "You don't owe me anything, especially not a thank you. I nearly ruined us before I pulled my head out of my ass. I'm proud of you for getting over that wall, though. I'd like to think that being pissed at me helped you conquer it."

I ducked my head to hide a smile as I let out a deep breath. "Next time you want to motivate me, let's find a way of doing it that doesn't involve breaking my heart. That sucked."

"It really did, but it all worked out for the best. I'm not saying the ends justified the means, but at the same time, here we are. I've got a new job that I'm pretty excited for, you've got a new instructor who I know will take good care of you, and we're together. That's the best result we could've hoped for."

“Yeah, I guess it is,” I mused, letting my lids flutter closed as I listened to the sound of his steady heartbeat underneath my ear.

The fact of the matter was if things hadn’t gone down exactly the way they had, we might not have ended up here together. It’d been really awful not knowing where he was, what he was doing, or why he’d put a stop to us, but now that I knew what he’d been up to, I was glad I hadn’t known before.

I definitely wouldn’t have let him quit for me. I probably would’ve wound up making some grand gesture like quitting myself before he could do it, and since the Coast Guard didn’t value me nearly as much as they did him, there wouldn’t have been another job offer forthcoming for me like there had been for him.

At the end of the day, he’d played things completely right and he’d even gotten my dad’s support. I really couldn’t have asked for a better outcome, but he’d still hurt me and I was still going to make him grovel a little to get me to stay.

On that note. “You know, pretty words aren’t going to convince me that this is real. I’m going to need actions to back them up.”

“Like what actions?” he asked. “Nearly quitting my job and then taking another just so we can be together?”

I chuckled. “You might have a point there, but I’m being serious. You can’t disappear on me again or keep me out of the loop on something like this.”

“Well, I’m hoping I won’t have to,” he said. “If all goes well, there won’t be another *something like this* to keep from you. If something does crop up, though, I will talk to you about it. I promise.”

“Okay,” I agreed quietly. “I’m going to keep you to that.”

He fell quiet for a beat. “Should we go see if we can rustle up something to eat?”

I shook my head against his chest. “No, I just want to stay right here for a little while longer.”

Adjusting his grip on my back, he pulled me closer and settled in, just holding me as I did the same with him. I was still struggling to get my head wrapped around everything that had happened, but if what he was saying was the truth and if we really could be together now, it meant plenty more nights falling asleep in his arms and waking up to him the next morning.

It was difficult to comprehend that something like that could be our reality from now on, but I sure wasn’t going to complain about it. Ultimately,

this was exactly what I'd wanted for months now but never believed we could have. Now, I supposed, I just had to hope that we would find a way of really making it work.

This was just the beginning of our relationship. There was plenty that could go wrong and plenty that could drive us apart, but I wasn't going to focus too much on all that right now. Right this minute, all I wanted was to be with him, and luckily, that was exactly what I got.

SANTIAGO

On Graduation Day, the weather was beautiful. It was all blue skies and there wasn't so much as a lick of wind. Ron and I sat in the front, as close as we could get to the stage that had been set up for the occasion.

"How's the new job working out for you?" he asked while we waited for the ceremony to begin. There were people all around, most of them taking their seats and peering around the others in an attempt to see the cadet they'd come here to cheer on.

Our graduating class wasn't here yet, though. Last I'd heard, Robin was calling them to fall into formation for the last time as cadets. He'd be talking to them for a few minutes before he brought them here, so we had time.

"It's good," I replied, thinking about everything I'd done since taking over. "I got a bit of pushback at first. They didn't like it that I was going to be lording it over them, quote unquote, but when they started realizing that wasn't what I planned on doing, they settled down."

"Things going better around here, then?" he asked quietly so we wouldn't be overheard.

I nodded. "We haven't had any more incidents and our training sessions have been going well. I've also made it clear that no slacking will be tolerated and that if they can't take their jobs seriously, they're out."

"Have you made an example of someone yet?"

I chuckled as I shook my head. "Robertson spent a few days in the brig, but other than that, I've been lucky. They've fallen into line quite well and I haven't had any other issues."

Ron put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it as he smiled. "They

have a strong leader now. That's all they needed. We left you kids to run amok for long enough. It was about time someone took charge. I'm glad it was you."

"So am I," I admitted, but then the music swelled and Robin appeared with the cadets behind him. We settled in for the ceremony, and when Layla was announced to be graduating at the top of her class, Ron and I cheered so loud that I probably wasn't going to have a voice later.

"Did you do this?" he asked when we sat down again.

"No, this was all her. I've been keeping my distance from the cadets. Robin has talked to me about them a few times, but I was fair. Honest. Didn't give her any special treatment even in my discussions with him."

Ron smiled and shot her a thumbs-up when she looked our way. "She's going to do well here, but you'll still keep an eye on her for me, won't you?"

"I will," I promised, then was on my feet as soon as the ceremony ended with Ron hot on my heels. We had to push past a few people to get to her, but as soon as we did, I opened my arms and pulled her into them.

"God, I'm so proud of you," I murmured against her ear, releasing her before the embrace drew too much attention our way.

So far, we'd done enough to keep our relationship on the down low that there hadn't been much talk about it. We rarely crossed paths during the day, spent most of our weekends off Station either at my place or at her parents' place, and since the training had intensified heavily to prepare them for this day, the cadets had been too wiped out at night to notice her coming to my apartment.

Even so, I didn't want the inevitable rumors to start today. She'd earned her place at the top of her class. I wasn't going to let speculation take that away from her.

"I'm so proud of you, baby," Ron said at my side as he hugged her. "Angela will be real proud of you, too. She's sorry she couldn't be here today, but she said she'd make it up to you soon."

"That's okay," Layla replied quietly as she rested her head against his shoulder and smiled at me while she hugged him. "I'm glad you made it. Thank you for coming."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

I grinned as I watched his eyes close when he rested his chin on top of her head, just holding her close for another moment before letting her go. When he opened them again, I could've sworn I saw tears brimming on his lower

lids, but he blinked them away and cleared his throat.

“Come on, I’m taking you two out for dinner to celebrate,” he said. “Do you need a few minutes with the others before we leave?”

She nodded. “Just let me say congratulations, then we can go.”

“Sure thing. I’ll meet you at the car. I have a few people I’d like to have a quick word with myself.” He gave us another smile, then left and made a beeline for Commander Nicholson while Layla’s green eyes found mine.

“They’d appreciate it if you congratulate them too,” she said softly. “Walk with me?”

“I’ll follow you anywhere,” I joked, but it also wasn’t really a joke. I would follow her into Hell if she asked me to. A group of cadets didn’t compare to demon armies, even if I’d rather have gotten her somewhere alone right about now.

I knew I was going to have to wait a few more hours before that happened, though. *Maybe I can sneak a few kisses on our way to the car. Or convince her to drive with me instead.*

Before I could do either of those things, though, I had cadets to congratulate. I’d been planning on doing it anyway, but I wasn’t prepared for just how enthusiastic they were to see me. Matt spotted me first, shooting me a huge grin as he rushed over to shake my hand.

“Thank you for everything, Master Chief. We missed you, but we did it. Can you believe it?”

“I can, actually. You all worked really hard for this. Congratulations. I’m looking forward to seeing you in action.”

He snorted. “I need to sleep for a week first, but sure. We’ll be in action soon enough.”

Jameson and Jonathan approached me next, pumping my hand so hard that my arm hurt as they grinned and talked over each other. “What do you say, Master Chief? Want to come out with us just one time before we get all serious and start putting our lives on the line?”

“Thank you for the invitation, but I’ve got plans for tonight. Maybe another time.”

“Okay, but we’re not going to stop asking,” Jameson warned me. “See you around, Cortez.”

He smirked as he used my name without a title. Then he ducked out of the way and laughed when I reached out to smack him upside the head. They were a good bunch, though. It was going to be nice seeing them come into

their own now that their training was over.

The congratulating took far too long for my liking, but it was great to see Layla getting so many jump hugs and high-fives. I nearly growled when Matt picked her up and put her on his shoulder, though. His hands were way too close to her ass, but when I saw her laugh and get yet another round of high-fives from her class, I let it go.

They'd finally accepted her and I was pretty sure they respected her enough not to try anything, even if I was pretty sure my skin had turned green about it. Eventually, though, he let her down and she made her excuses about not going with them. Then I headed off toward the parking lot and she followed a minute later after she'd said her goodbyes.

At this point, we'd taken long enough that Ron was walking back to come find us and I didn't get a chance to sneak a kiss. He bundled her into his car before I could even try to convince her to ride with me, and then we were off.

I followed them to a restaurant with a spectacular view of the bay, then, at least, I finally got to touch her when we sat down beside each other at the table he'd reserved. I grabbed her hand and held it tight, my thumb stroking her knuckles as Ron ordered a bottle of champagne.

"Congratulations again, honey," he said once it had arrived and our glasses had been filled. He raised his flute and let it hover above the table. "I'm so very proud of you, baby, but you'll be careful, right? I'm always going to worry about you."

"Thank you, and of course I will be," she responded as she lifted her glass and clinked it against his. "I'll have to be, since I've got two men in my life who will make my team leader regret it if anything happens to me."

My heart lurched into my throat when she said it. "You've got that right. Are you sure I'm not allowed to interfere with your career yet? There are definitely a few people I'd rather have you working with than with some others."

She laughed. "I'm absolutely sure you're still not allowed to interfere."

Ron chuckled but scratched his jaw. "You might not be allowed to interfere, but I've got a few strings left to pull. Just give me those names and I'll make sure she only works with the best of the best."

Layla shook her head and pointed at her father before swinging her finger toward me. "Stay out of it. Both of you. I'll be fine. Didn't you hear? I graduated at the top of my class. I'm ready for anything, and besides, I've been thinking about it and may not end up staying search-and-rescue for too

long after all.”

Ron’s eyes widened. “I thought that was your dream?”

“It was, and I’m definitely not going to make any decisions just yet, but I have been thinking and I’ve set my sights on something else now.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “What’s next for you, then?”

She glanced at me, her eyes sparkling with humor before she winked. “I’m thinking of becoming an instructor.”

I groaned and put my head in my hands. “There are easier ways to break up with me, you know? Because that’s what’s going to have to happen if I become your direct superior again.”

She chuckled. “We found a way to be together once, I’m sure we could do it again.”

I sighed as I lifted my head and looked into those gorgeous green eyes. “Well, if you’re serious about it, then I guess we’re just going to have to.”

She winked again and squeezed my hands as she raised her glass into the air again. “To the future.”

Ron and I both clinked our glasses against hers, and as I sipped on the bubbly, an idea was already starting to take shape in my mind. I knew what I wanted, and that was her. If she wasn’t joking about eventually wanting to become an instructor, then there was one way we’d be able to stay together that didn’t involve me giving up my job.

It was too soon to be thinking about what I was thinking about, but the idea was there, and by the time she was ready to take the next step, personally and professionally, I would be ready too. Truth be told, I was ready now, but I didn’t mind waiting.

Not if it meant that eventually, I really would get to make her mine. Forever.

EPILOGUE

LAYLA

One Year Later

My first time being in front of my very own group of cadets was a little more unnerving than I'd thought it would be. I was an instructor now, though, so I was just going to have to put on my big girl panties and deal with it.

The fact was that they were still more scared of me than I was of them, so as I stood at the front of the classroom and looked out at them, I vowed to myself that I would never let them know how intimidated I really was by all this.

I also vowed to myself that I would do everything for them that Santiago had done for me, so I thought back to my first time in this classroom and fought the smile that the memories brought as I slowly raised my arm to point outside.

"People die out there." I let the weight of the words sink in for a moment as I remembered what Santiago had done on our very first day here. "I'm Petty Officer Layla Perkins and I'm your instructor. It's my job to equip you with the knowledge you need to save some of them and with the tools you need to give you the best shot at not becoming one of them."

As I repeated his words from so long ago, I reached for the printed list of names lying on the desk behind me, then pointed at a guy who looked like his ego needed to be knocked down a few notches. "What's your name?"

“It’s Al Adamson, ma’am.” He smirked. “What can I do for you?”

My eyes narrowed as I sized him up, wondering if it was too soon to make an example of him. Deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt for now, I simply asked him the same question as Santiago had asked all of us.

“Why are you here?”

“Well, ma’am, I had nothing better to do,” he joked, and internally, I sighed. *Oh, you and I are going to have a problem, Mr. Big Shot.*

“That’s nice, but if you came here thinking that I was going to give you a stage to try your hand at being a comedian, you’re in the wrong place.” I sent him a scathing look before turning to the guy next to him and asking him the same question.

Al relaxed, obviously thinking that I was done with him, but I was simply making my way through the rest of my list before I did what needed to be done. I had to make sure that the whole class had reported and only then could I show him why it wasn’t a good idea to mess with me.

Once we were done in the classroom and they reported for their first PT, I was ready to teach him a lesson. And that was even before I saw him smiling at me and tapping the guy next to him as he muttered something I couldn’t hear, but judging by the way he was looking at me, it was clearly derogatory.

There were a few more girls in this class than there had been in mine, and I definitely wasn’t about to let this guy get away with thinking that he could disrespect me or any of them. “Adamson, front and center.”

The guy frowned but stepped forward, smirking again when his gaze met mine. “What’s up?”

“What’s up is that you’ve provided me with a golden opportunity to show you and your friend that we don’t tolerate disrespect around here. We also don’t tolerate cadets thinking the sun shines out of their asses. If you’re not here to work, you’re wasting my time. If you want to be the class clown or the Station’s Casanova, you’re wasting my time, and here’s the thing, I don’t like wasting time. There’s approximately two hours until the end of the day. Run until the sun sets or you quit, whichever comes first.”

“Excuse me?”

“I won’t repeat myself, cadet. You heard me, now go.” I pointed at the field. “We’ll wait here.”

He stared at me like I was utterly insane, but then he huffed out a breath, grumbling to himself about crazy bitches as he took off. I called after him. “One more word like that and it’s not going to be running until the sun sets.

It'll be running until it rises again.”

As I turned back to the group, they were all watching me with round eyes and rigid spines. I nodded as I pointed at their classmate. “This wasn’t how I’d hoped our time together would start, but make no mistake about this. Anyone who is here for the wrong reasons will not make it. Anyone who treats training as a joke will not make it. Anyone who is disrespectful or ill-disciplined will not make it. People’s lives are at stake. Your lives are at stake. You can either work hard and earn your right to be here, or you can leave. I refuse to waste my time and yours by having to put up with behavioral issues that should’ve been sorted out in elementary school.”

Translation: I’m not here to fuck around. Get serious, or get out. It’s that simple.

There were a few nods, and even a few grins that people tried to hide. Clearly, they’d received the message and a lot of them liked it.

Al ended up running until the sun kissed the horizon, looking a lot less smug by the time I finally dismissed them. When we were done for the day, I waited until they all took off before I headed to Santiago’s office.

We were having dinner there together, but frankly, I was exhausted even if I hadn’t done any running myself. It turned out that being a hard-nosed instructor wasn’t as easy as Santiago had made it seem. He smiled when I walked in, then pointed at his sofa.

“You can lie down if you want. I’ll close the shutters so no one will see you.”

I groaned as I stumbled toward it, flinging my arm over my eyes for the dramatic effect of it. “Dear heavens, please tell me it gets easier.”

A low chuckle rang out just as I heard him shut the door. “I’m assuming your first day went well, then?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? I had to make an example of a cocky, swaggering idiot who told me he was here because he had nothing else to do and then gossiped to his little friend about me when we got to the field.”

“Did he quit?”

I shook my head. “Unfortunately, he’s still here. What’s worse is that I think he’s probably going to make it. He seems like the type.”

“You’ll rein him in,” Santiago assured me as he lifted my head, sat down, and then gently lowered my head down into his lap. His fingers stroked into my hair before he bent over and placed a soft kiss on my forehead. “We talked about this, remember? You’re young and you’re a woman. It’s hard

enough for any of us to get the cadets to fall in line at first, but it's going to be harder on you. You just need to stay the course."

"I know," I mumbled. "I just wasn't expecting it to start with such a bang, I guess. Hopefully, today would've opened their eyes a little bit."

"I'm sure it did," he murmured thoughtfully. "Don't let them get you down, my love. You earned the right to be standing in front of that class. You're going to be a damn good instructor and they're lucky to have you. They'll realize it soon enough."

"I hope so," I said, finally moving my arm off my face and opening my eyes to find his peering down at me. "You're sure I earned the right to be standing in front of them? I'm still a little bit surprised that I got made an instructor so soon. I can't help but feel like it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for you and my dad."

He shrugged, his eyes twinkling as they held mine. "You definitely earned your right to be there, baby. They never would've given you the job if there was any question about it. Not now that I've only just got the instructors properly back on track. If anyone thought you weren't good enough or that you'd be putting the cadets in danger, it wouldn't have mattered what your dad and I said. You just wouldn't have gotten the job."

"Maybe, but if I'm being honest, I'm still a bit confused about how it even happened. I don't mean procedurally. I know there was an opening and that I applied, but no one even asked about our relationship even if pretty much everyone knows about it right now. You're my boss again, yet no one so much as blinked about it."

"I know the right people," he teased as he lifted my head again and got up, winking at me over his shoulder as he walked to his desk. "Besides, since our relationship is so serious, it was easier than you might think to get it past the others."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I sat up, watching him curiously as I yawned and rubbed my tired eyes. "Why would they think our relationship is serious?"

I felt like I was missing something, but I was too out of it after pretending to be a stone wall all day to figure it out. Santiago shrugged his broad shoulders as he looked back at me, something like anxiety now shining from his eyes.

"Well, they thought it was serious because I told them I was marrying you."

“What?” My face scrunched up. “What are you talking about? We’re not engaged. Sooner or later, someone is going to realize that you—”

I stopped talking when he put a stunning diamond ring down on his desk and my mouth dried up as I stared at it. “What is that? What are you doing?”

“Proposing,” he said before he picked up the ring again and strode over to me. Lowering himself down on one knee, those brilliant blues caught on mine as he held the ring out on the palm of one of his hands and twined our fingers together with the other.

“As soon as you said you might want to become an instructor one day, I knew I had to start working on a plan. The thing is, I love this job, and as it happens, I really do think you’re going to be an incredible instructor. I didn’t want to go back to sneaking around and I figured there was one way we could both have it all.”

I gaped at him. “You’re proposing because you want us both to keep our jobs?”

“Nah, I’m proposing because I love you. Honestly, I’ve been thinking about marrying you since long before you even said anything about wanting to become an instructor. I can’t give an exact date when it happened, but I’ve known you were the one pretty much since the first time I saw you. I love you, Layla Perkins. There’s no job and no regulation more important to me than you. Hell, I’ll become a very happy house-husband if you’re the wife coming home to me every day. If I thought you would say yes, I’d have proposed the day you graduated or every morning since, but I’ve been waiting for the right time.”

“And this is it?”

“Probably not, but I’m tired of waiting.” He leaned forward and kissed the back of my hand he was holding. “I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life for you. You’re it for me, Perkins. If you want to have a long engagement, we can do that. If you want me to ask again in a month or a year, I can do that too, but I’m going to keep asking. I’m going to keep being right here, ready to be yours for the rest of my life just as soon as you’ll have me.”

Tears stung the backs of my eyes as I bent over, touching the palm of my free hand to his face as I looked into those hopeful eyes. “There is no universe where I won’t have you, Santiago Cortez. There is no time in which I won’t be ready. You’re it for me too, but you already know that. I love you more than anything, so you don’t have to ask again. I’m ready to say yes right

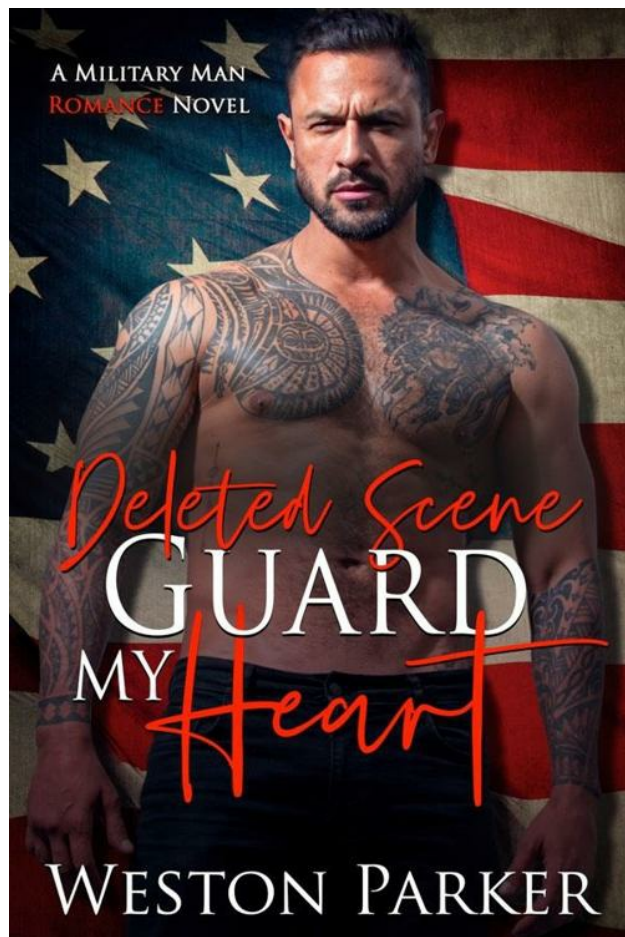
now.”

His gaze moved from one of my eyes to the other before he smiled. “Does this mean I didn’t lie about us getting married?”

“Not if I’ve got anything to say about it,” I murmured before I pressed my lips against his and sealed my promise with a kiss. I couldn’t believe this was the plan he’d come up with, but it worked. We were serious. We were very much in love and we were perfectly capable of working together regardless.

We’d made it against all the odds that had faced us and now we were finally going to get our happily ever after.

Did you love our two characters, Santiago and Layla? Want more? I’ve got a deleted scene that didn’t make the book.



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THERE'S ONLY BEEN one woman for me, and she's never truly been mine.

But I don't have much time for anyone anyway, with my focus on my career.

I'm a military man through and through, from generation to generation.

This one girl, though.

She stole my heart when we were kids, but it's taboo, forbidden.

She's my best friend's little sister, and he'd kill us both.

After my mom recently lost my dad, a quick trip home to help her brings me face to face with the past.

It was just one wild night years ago, but I can't shake it. She left before the break of dawn, going back to the sea, and I took my place up in the air once again.

But she's never left my mind.

Her soft curves and sweet heart haunted me.

And now that we're back in the same small town for two weeks, I find out she's in a bad relationship and hiding a secret from me.

A four-year-old little man with my smile and her eyes.

My dream was to stay in the Air Force until retirement, but that dream has changed.

So have I.

I gotta have this!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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Guard My Heart
A Military Man Romance Novel Book 6

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