



PROTECTING HER
WAS ONE THING.
FALLING FOR HER?
THAT WAS NEVER
PART OF THE PLAN.

KEEPING HIS

Promise

ANNA BLAKELY

KEEPING HIS PROMISE

EAGLE'S NEST SECURITIES

BOOK 1

ANNA BLAKELY



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KEEPING HIS PROMISE

Eagle's Nest Securities Series 1

Anna Blakely

Keeping His Promise

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First Edition

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Five disbanded SEALs. A young widow who needs their help. An enemy waiting to strike...and a mystery that may never be solved.

Anna Blakely's exciting new *Eagle's Nest Securities Series* follows a group of former Navy SEALs whose team was unexpectedly—and suspiciously—disbanded. With a promise to keep in touch, the five remaining members go their separate ways. But when the widow of their fallen brother is threatened, this fierce group of loyal protectors reunite to do what they do best...

Protect the innocent.

Driven by an unbreakable promise and the need for truth and justice, these wrongfully dishonored warriors will stop at nothing to keep one of their own safe. And who knows...they may just decide to make their reconnection permanent.

After all, the only way for these former SEALs to discover the truth about the day their team came under attack is if they work the case from the beginning... Together...

No matter how long it takes.

For those who sacrificed all so that we may be free.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

To say I'm excited to start this new series would be an understatement of epic proportions. The men of Eagle's Nest have been running around rent-free in my head since the concept for this new team first came to me. A team of hot, sexy dishonored Navy SEALs coming together to protect the widow of their fallen brother... I mean, what's not to love, right?

But get ready, because this new romantic suspense series is going to take you through a series of emotions, suspense, and twists and turns unlike anything I've ever written. So buckle up, buttercups! You're in for one helluva ride! ;)

XO~

Anna

PROLOGUE

TWO YEARS AGO...

“THIS FUCKING SUCKS.”

Chief Petty Officer Logan Hayes didn't have to see the face of the man whose voice had just filled his ear to know who it was. And while he didn't disagree with Chace Boyer's assessment of their current situation, it was Logan's job to keep his men mission focused.

“Orders are orders, brother,” he reminded his teammate.

“Yeah? Well these orders suck balls. And not just any balls either. We're talkin' big, hairy, *sweaty* balls.”

One corner of Logan's mouth curved into a smirk. At thirty, Chase was the youngest member of their squadron. The Texas native liked to joke around a little too much, wasn't afraid to voice his opinion, and the man didn't always know how to hold his liquor.

But where maturity sometimes lacked, Chase's God-given talents in the field more than made up for it. The second-generation SEAL was one of the best snipers Logan had ever had the pleasure of serving with.

As for the PO1's review of their latest op...

You're spot fucking on, brother.

Their team's current mission did, in fact, suck balls. Mainly because they were just here two weeks ago looking for the same damn target...

Jamal Hassan Muhammad.

Responsible for the deaths of thousands, Muhammad was the Taliban's

top division commander. When higher-ups in the U.S. government caught wind that he'd been spotted on the streets of Kandahar, SECNAV—the Secretary of the Navy—had wanted his best boots on the ground in a hurry.

And that's where we came in.

Logan and the other five men walking beside him were members of the elite Black Squadron One. The classified Tier 1 team of operators for DEVGRU—the Naval Special Warfare Development Group—had been sent here two weeks ago to obtain first-hand confirmation of Muhammad's whereabouts.

And when they'd been here two weeks ago, the team had done exactly as they'd been ordered. They'd infiltrated the area and had set up camp along the street near the restaurant where the bastard had scheduled a business meeting. While hiding in plain sight, the deadly SEALs had then kept a watchful eye for their target, as well as any possible threats in the area.

After that, they'd waited.

But Jamal Hassan Muhammad never showed.

Intel had stated the Taliban commander was scheduled to arrive at his favorite restaurant an hour after Logan and his team had settled in that day. But rather than the man they were after making the planned appearance, Muhammad had sent three of his well-known associates to take his place.

With orders to continue the recon mission in case their HVT, or high value target, was simply running late, Black Squadron One had remained in place and continued to surveil.

Ten minutes later, the smug-looking trio had exited the restaurant. But as they'd made their way to their car, the men they'd just finished meeting with had stormed out after them.

Their voices had become raised, and the unexpected confrontation had quickly turned into a very heated exchange. Within seconds, several guns had been drawn, triggers were pulled, and the bullets had begun to fly.

Logan and his men had drawn their own weapons as they dove for cover to avoid being hit. Several long seconds later, the members of Black Squadron One were all alive and uninjured, while both groups of terrorists laid dead in the street.

But it wasn't the men who'd been keeping Logan up at night. It was the other death that had stayed with him.

The innocents always do.

This time, it had been a middle-aged woman who'd had the unfortunate

luck to come out of the restaurant at the exact wrong moment. Ironically, the woman's mahram, or Taliban-required male escort, had survived without a scratch.

Rather than take the lead like one would've thought, the lazy bastard had let the woman he'd been assigned to guard had stepped out onto the sidewalk ahead of him, putting her directly in the path of the evil men's bullets.

I can still see her face.

Even now, when Logan closed his eyes, he could picture her lying on the ground.

The hijab she'd been wearing had fallen loose when she'd flown backward, as had the black niqab that had been attached.

With the scarf-and-veil combo in disarray on the curb beside her, he'd been given a clear view of the woman's long, brown hair and beautiful face. Streaks of silver had lightened the hairline at her temples, her olive complexion aged a bit beyond her years.

Though the glimpse Logan had gotten of her that day lasted mere seconds, he'd seen enough to know the woman had probably been stunning back in her day.

And now she was dead.

Don't go there, Hayes. What's done is done. You need to focus on the present, and put that shit in the past, where it belongs.

The voice in his head was right. What happened that day two weeks ago wasn't his fault, and there wasn't a damn thing he or the others could've done to stop it. It was Jamal Hassan Muhammad's last-minute change of plans that had fucked them all.

"Bossman's right, Boyer," Hunter Garrison continued the conversation regarding Chase's disdain for their newest op. "SECNAV doesn't give two shits about our feelings or our sweaty balls. The man says jump, the only question we ask is—"

"How high," Chase drawled. "Yeah, yeah, I get it." With his TAC-338 sniper rifle held securely in his gloved hands, he shook his helmeted head and blew out a breath. "Just burns my ass that we had to come back here because we missed gettin' the son of a bitch two weeks ago."

"We didn't miss a fucking thing." Donovan Braddock's deep, gruff voice came out like a growl. "Muhammad didn't show. That's not on us."

Van's short black hair, dark, stoic demeanor, and a lethal gaze gave the six-six beast of a man his well-earned *keep the fuck away from me* vibe. And

when it came to combat, Van—who held the same Chief Petty Officer ranking as Logan—was a man of many talents.

Whether through the crosshairs of his rifle or with his bare hands, the human wall of muscle was as deadly as they came. Just like every other member of Black Squadron One.

“Damn straight, it’s not on us,” Hunter spoke up again. “Besides, none of that shit matters anymore. SECNAV doesn’t care why Jamal Muhammad was M.I.A. last time, and so what if we got our first mission failure in our jackets? We’re here now, and we’ve got our orders. So let’s just do what we came to do, so we can get our asses back home, yeah?”

Logan slid his gaze in the other man’s direction. The blond haired, blue-eyed bastard looked more like he belonged in a Barbie movie than on a field of battle. But his perfect hair and preppy looks were as deceptive as the man’s friendly smile.

As the team’s Corpsman, and Logan’s Number Two, Hunt wasn’t just a vital part of Black Squadron One. He was also Logan’s closest friend.

“You know, that’s all well and good, Hunt...” Archer Nash joined in the fun. “But I’m pretty sure our last op proved it ain’t always that easy.”

“Maybe not, but it will be this time,” Hunter countered with a confident grin. “Wanna know how I know?”

“No, but I bet you’re gonna tell us anyway,” Van sighed.

Rather than play into Donovan’s typical grumpy ass mood, an overly cheerful Hunter simply flashed the other man a toothy grin and addressed the group as a whole.

“As a matter of fact, I am.” The optimistic bastard commanded everyone’s attention. “Listen up, boys. Now, I realize some of you may be doubting whether or not we’re gonna get our man this time. And to be fair, after the clusterfuck that was our last op, I can understand why. But I’m here to tell ya... it’s *gonna* happen.” When no one responded right away, Hunter prompted them with, “How do I know this?” He chuckled. “Well, I am so glad that you asked.”

“No one fucking asked.”

Donovan wasted no time in pointing that fact out, but Hunt ignored the surly bastard and kept right on talking.

“I know for a fact we’re gonna take out Jamal Muhammad and the rest of the terrorist fucks coming to this little party. And I know this because God isn’t cruel enough to make me leave my gorgeous wife—naked and alone in

our bed, mind you—for a *third* damn time just so we can come back to this hellhole to take out the same son of a bitch again.”

Since Logan and the others weren't quite sure how to respond to that, the next few booted steps passed in awkward silence. When a member of the team finally *did* respond to Hunter's revealing prediction, Jason “Lucky” Lucas threw in the first two cents.

“Seriously?” The clean-shaven PO1 shot Hunter an incredulous stare. “*That's* what you're basing your prediction of the job's outcome on? Damn, brother. I thought maybe you actually knew something we didn't.”

“I do know something.” Hunter turned his shaded gaze back to the path ahead. With his hands clutching the sniper rifle hanging from its thick shoulder strap, he elaborated by adding, “I know I had to leave Natalie tangled in the sheets and looking like an angel to come hike through an Afghani hillside with you ugly fuckers. So I don't care *what* we have to do, we're making whatever positive IDs we've gotta make, and we're getting our asses back home.” A slight pause and then, “Did I mention Nat was naked when I left?”

Several deep chuckles later, and Lucky and Hunter began debating the odds of Muhammad showing his murdering face this time around. Archer and Chase struck up an entirely different conversation involving last week's pro football games and a bunch of stats Logan couldn't care less about, and Donovan remained locked away in his own head.

With the two separate conversations going on around him, Logan tried to ignore the way his chest had tightened when Hunter had uttered Nat's name aloud.

Natalie Baker—now Natalie Garrison—was Hunter's wife of nearly a year. Five-three, petite, brunette, and slightly freckled, the corporate bookkeeper had the whole *girl next door* thing going on.

She was smart as a whip when it came to numbers, funny in an almost innocent way, and one of the sweetest and prettiest women Logan had ever known. And if he'd gotten to that bar ten minutes earlier, she wouldn't belong to Hunt.

She'd be mine.

As if he were fearful his thoughts could somehow be heard by the others, Logan blinked, his shadowed gaze flying to the man walking on his right. But rather than Hunter's fiery glare, the other man just tossed his head back with a boisterous laugh at something Lucky had just said.

The sight coated Logan with a heavy dose of guilt and shame. Eleven months, three weeks, and five days ago today, he'd stood at the front of a small country church as Hunter's best man.

And eleven months, three weeks, and five fucking days ago today, Logan had stood to the side while his best friend married the woman he tried every damn day not to love.

But Natalie wasn't his, and he sure as fuck shouldn't be coveting his best friend's wife. Because the reality was he *hadn't* gotten to that fucking bar ten minutes earlier, and Hunter—the lucky bastard—had been the one to buy Natalie that first drink. Not him.

They're happy, dipshit. So be fucking happy for your friends.

Logan adjusted the M4A1 Carbine rifle in his fists, his gloved grip tightening with anger. He wasn't pissed at Hunt. No, the anger he was feeling now was directed at himself.

Jesus, what kind of friend was he, anyway? Another sideways glance at Hunter's smiling face, and Logan had his answer.

A shitty one. You're a shitty, shitty friend.

Logan loved all these guys like they were his brothers. Even Donovan despite his sour expressions and cantankerous moods.

But the bond Logan and Hunt shared was different. It was stronger. Ran deeper. And meant a hell of a lot more to him than some misplaced crush he knew would eventually pass.

And even if it didn't...even if he was forced to live with an unfulfilled need for a woman he'd never have...Logan would cut off his right nut before he even so much as *think* about acting on whatever it was he'd been feeling. And that shit was never going to happen.

You just need to find someone different.

That was exactly what he needed.

Logan just needed to get his ass out there and find his own version of happily ever after. A different woman whose sweet laugh blanketed him in the same gentle warmth Natalie did. Someone who created the same swarm of butterflies he felt every time he saw Nat's smiling face. And Logan really, *really* needed someone else to star in the late-night fantasies that left him covered in sweat and aching for more.

Because these feelings were just that. Dumbass feelings that didn't mean a thing and would eventually go away. They had to. For him, there was no other option.

Natalie was with Hunt. The two newlyweds as in love as any couple he'd ever seen. Hell no, he wouldn't mess with that shit. His friendship with Hunt—and with Nat—meant too damn much to even consider it.

So yeah, he'd get past...whatever this was. Because really, when it came down to it, there wasn't anything *to* get past.

It wasn't like he was *in* love with the woman. More like he loved the *idea* of what Natalie and Hunter had found.

That's really what this whole thing was about, anyway. He was simply jealous of the relationship. Not the woman, specifically.

Or that's what you want to believe so you can sleep at night.

"Ain't that right, Bossman?"

Hunter's voice broke through his frustrated thoughts, snapping Logan back to the moment at hand. Blinking he turned to see the other man staring back at him expectantly.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said SECNAV wouldn't have sent us back here if he didn't think the tax dollars were worth it. Right?"

"Oh. Yeah. Absolutely." Logan shook his helmeted head, clearing the remnants of his silent betrayal away. "No way Webb's gonna go through the trouble of dropping us in this hellhole twice in two weeks if the intel wasn't solid."

Now *that* was something he believed to his core.

"See?" Hunt arched a brow in Lucky's direction.

"Okay, fine. But what about last time?" Lucky challenged. "We thought the intel was good then, too, and look how that turned out."

With a few muttered expletives, Donovan shot Lucky an irritated scowl. "We've been over this a thousand times already. Doesn't matter how good our intel is. Fact is, we can't control every move these assholes make."

An unfortunate but valid assessment.

"Exactly my point!" Lucky motioned a grateful hand toward the other man. "Like you just said, we can't control these dumb fucks. Which makes this op even trickier than the last."

"Why this op?" Chase asked as they approached the edge of their targeted valley.

Each man on the team took great care with their steps to prevent a slip of their feet as they worked their way down the ground's sharpening descent.

"Because we have to make *two* positive IDs this time." The toe of

Lucky's left boot kicked a small rock, sending it rolling forward in the dirt with his next step. "And I don't know about the rest of you, but I have no desire to face SECNAV with our second mission failure in a row."

"Now *that* I can agree with." Hunt moved a hand around to his backside, rubbing an ass he pretended was sore. "Pretty sure my cheeks are still raw from the last one."

"That's no shit," Archer agreed. With the ends of his thick dark hair curling out beneath the tactical helmet covering the guy's head, the team's explosives expert snorted as he added, "It's a wonder *any* of us can sit after the colorful dismissal Webb gave us during our last debrief."

It was true, Secretary Webb had been less than pleased with the results of their last op.

Who are you kidding, Hayes? The man was pissed as hell.

"I believe SECNAV's parting words were something like, get the fuck out of here, you fucking bunch of fuckups," Lucky recalled with impressive accuracy. "And don't come back until you've got Jamal Muhammad and Omar Ahmed's heads on a fucking platter!"

Then, as if they'd rehearsed it to perfection, the entire team—Donovan, included—let out a unified, "And it had better be made of fucking silver!"

The collective chuckle that followed was like a soothing balm to Logan's troubled soul. The respite from his guilt was short-lived, however, when Hunter looked over at him with a sideways smirk.

"Leave it to Lucky to recite an ass chewing verbatim." The other man huffed a soft laugh. "But my case still stands. I promised Nat I'd be home to take her out for our first anniversary. Haven't broken a promise to that woman yet, and my ass don't plan on starting with that shit now."

Logan's recent thoughts left his gut tightening with guilt, but he meant every assuring word when he said, "We'll get you home, brother. Every minute..." He raised his fist.

"Every mission." Hunt lifted his hand with a smile.

A bump of their canvas-covered knuckles solidified what Logan already knew. This man meant more to him than any romantic relationship ever could. Especially one that didn't even exist.

With their targeted location half-a-mile away, he pulled his head out of his ass and got himself in check. In full operator mode, he wanted to make sure the others did the same.

"All right, boys. It's almost party time, so be ready and stay sharp."

Just like that, the six-man team became the warriors they were trained to be. A well-oiled machine made of muscles, brains, and the deadliest of aims.

Out of all the active DEVGRU squadrons, it was *this* team SECNAV turned to when shit was about to hit the fan. Or rather, the powerful man often sought out Logan and his men to prevent the shit from ever flying up in the first place.

Right now, their objective was to keep two of the Middle East's most dangerous leaders from banding together to form an even bigger, more powerful terrorist group than the ones they currently led.

And that's exactly what they intended to do.

Having switched to faster, more purposeful steps, the team covered the next quarter mile with relative ease. Though the distance traveled was minimal, the terrain on the horizon looked vastly different.

Unlike the mundane canvas of dusty plains and sharp, ugly edges, the world lying below them was an oasis of blues and greens. Knowing the homestretch was under their boots, Logan used their bird's eye view to point out the large body of water resting over five hundred feet down from their location.

According to intel, their targets were planning to meet just off the road running nearest the dam's power plant. From here, Logan and his team would be able to spot them clearly through their scopes to make the ID's without them ever being aware of Black Squadron's presence.

"That's the Arghandab Dam," he stated the obvious. "C.I.A.'s asset said to look for its southwestern tail, there, which means we're about half-a-click from our vantage point. We get there, check our sights, and hunker down. Once our boys show, we take a few pics for SECNAV's scrapbook, pack up our shit, and—"

"Get our asses home," Hunter finished for him with a grin.

Look at that smile. If there was ever a man who deserved to be that happy, it's that man right there.

The moment was brief, but pivotal. And one that was long overdue.

Nothing had changed, and yet, everything suddenly felt different. After over a year of tortured thoughts and remorseful dreams, Logan had finally pushed past the not-so-mid-life-crisis that had left his heart twisted into a million little knots.

The conflicting feelings were still there; he wasn't naïve enough to think he could flip a switch on that shit. But for reasons he may never understand

that one breath of time—along with that goofy ass smile of Hunter’s—resonated with him in a way that nothing had before.

This wasn’t some massive mid-thirties crisis, and Logan wasn’t a lovesick fool. He was a Navy SEAL for fuck’s sake. A Black Squadron operator leading the top government covert team in existence. Of *course*, he was going to get over these feelings he’d been having.

Because he had to. For himself and, most importantly, for Hunt.

Every minute. Every mission.

Those promised words rang true no matter the battle...no matter the cost. Even if it was a battle raging inside him that no one else could see.

Feeling more at peace than he had in months, Logan adjusted the grip on his weapon and wrapped up the remaining steps in their plan. “Our stopping point should be there, past that ridge.” He pointed to an area up ahead. “We’ll get into position and be weapons ready. Just remember, this is a recon mission only. Unless these assholes somehow manage to spot us, which they won’t—”

“Our bullets stay in our mags.” Chase nodded. “Copy that.”

With a dip of his chin, Logan added, “These guys have no idea we’re here, so it’ll be a quick in and out. Once we’ve made Muhammad and Ahmed, we’ll confirm with TOC and head for exfil. They’ll swoop in, take out the targets, and land in that flat area due east right over there to pick us up. Any questions?”

TOC stood for Tactical Operations Center—the physical location where their commanding officer was supposed to be monitoring communications from the team. For this mission, the team’s TOC was located inside a hotel room in downtown Kandahar.

“I’ve got one.” Archer raised his hand as he stepped away from the narrowing ledge. “Who’s turn is it to buy the first round?”

It was Black Squadron One’s tradition. After every successful mission, the team got together for drinks to celebrate. And they always took turns buying the first round.

There’d been no drinks after the last op, however. None shared between them, anyway.

Pretty sure I drank enough by myself that night to cover a few rounds.

Determined to avoid a repeat of the solo drunk fest he’d hosted in the privacy of his own home, Logan promised Lucky and the others, “Tell you what. We give SECNAV his silver platter, I’ll buy the first two rounds.”

“Hooyah!” Archer gave an approving smirk.

Sharing a high-five with Lucky, Chase said, “That’s what I’m talkin’ about.”

“I’ll do you one better,” Hunter offered from Logan’s right. When all eyes turned in the man’s direction, the generous operator announced, “We get our HVTs, drinks are on me.”

The offer even piqued Donovan’s interest. “We talking all drinks, or just the first round?”

“Every single one of ’em, my friend.” Hunt nodded. “All night long.”

Logan’s brows arched high. “Damn, Garrison. Guess you really do want to get your ass back home, huh?”

His friend turned to him, his light blue gaze filling with an affection clearly meant for his wife. With an unapologetic smile, Hunter shook his head and said, “Brother, you have no ide—”

The man’s entire upper body jerked backward as something warm and wet splattered the side of Logan’s face. The telltale whizz of the bullet he’d heard registering a fraction of a second too late.

What happened next felt as if it took hours. In reality, it was over in a matter of minutes...

Hunter fell to the ground with a dull thud, his hand flying toward the fresh wound at the side of his neck. Before Logan or the others, could even react, a second bullet flew past. Luckily it went wide, missing its target and striking a nearby boulder.

Like a rubber band pulled past its limits, Logan—along with the others—snapped out of his shocked state and went straight into action.

“*Shooter, shooter, shooter!*” he yelled out to his men. “*Hunt’s down! Cover me!*”

He dropped down to where Hunter lay bleeding. With his team’s cannonade temporarily holding off the enemy, he curled his fingers around the edge of the injured man’s protective vest and held on tight.

Logan kept the rifle in his hand as steady as he could while he dragged his teammate to safety. Using the boulder they’d been near as cover, he dropped his ass to the ground and pressed his back against the giant rock’s smooth surface.

From the comms unit attached to his tactical vest, Logan wasted no time putting a call into command. “TOC, this is One! Number Two is hit!” he yelled over the gunfire. “I repeat, Number Two is down, and Black Squadron

One is taking fire! Over!”

Releasing the mic, he returned his attention to Hunt. Ignoring the way his fingers were trembling, he carefully peeled back the blood-soaked collar of the man’s desert tan t-shirt.

Logan’s stomach completely bottomed out when he got his first good look at where the bullet had hit.

Oh, God.

The bullet had carved a deep gash along the left side of Hunter’s neck. Dark, thick blood oozed from the raw, angry wound, and Logan couldn’t move his hand fast enough to try to stop it.

Ah fuck.

He pressed his palm over the place where his friend had been shot. His fingers grew warm and sticky as the crimson liquid seeped through the thin material of his tactical glove.

Paralyzing fear threatened to take over, but he ignored it and focused on the only silver lining he could grasp. The blood his friend was losing hadn’t spurted out in wild streams, which meant Hunt’s common carotid artery hadn’t been severed.

Of course, if the bullet *had* cut through the man’s major artery, Hunt would already be dead.

You’re not dying today, brother. Not on my fucking watch!

With every cell in his body, Logan prayed that was true. But even as he told himself Hunter was going to be okay, Logan still grappled with fear from the amount of blood Hunt was still losing.

The carotid may still be intact, but the slow, steady pumps with which the blood was being forced out of the man’s neck suggested the wounded SEAL’s jugular was not.

Fuck!

“How b-bad?” Hunt’s strained voice reached his ears through the noise of gunfire and shouting.

Logan’s vision started to blur, but he blinked several times to clear away the unwanted tears. Forcing a smile, he gave a shake of his head and lied through his fucking teeth.

“It’s nothing.” He shrugged, working damn hard to make sure that smile didn’t so much as waver. “Just a scratch.”

A weak, barely-there grin lifted the corners of Hunter’s pursed lips. Almost immediately, a few rough coughs escaped from his labored chest, and

Logan had to push even harder to keep enough pressure on the wound.

When Hunter's heaving breaths finally steadied, his friend looked up at him with a choked out, "B-bull...shit."

Logan laughed, but even to him, he sounded off. Because it *was* bullshit. The thickest he'd ever tried to shovel.

But this was Hunt, goddamn it! His best friend. His *brother*. And if he couldn't get Hunter some serious medical attention soon...

No! Do not go there. This is Hunt we're talking about. You've seen guys half as strong survive a hell of a lot worse.

His subconscious was right. Hunt was one of the toughest S.O.B.s Logan knew, not to mention stubborn as a fucking mule. If anyone could pull through this, it was him.

As his mind raced to continue assessing the injury to his friend, Logan finished running through the mental triage of his friend. If Hunt's *external* jugular was severed, and Logan could stop the bleeding, there was a good chance he'd pull through.

The man would have one hell of a scar and a story to tell his grandkids, but he'd at least be alive to tell it.

On the flipside, if the problem wasn't just the external jugular, if Hunter's *internal* had been severed, it was a much different story. And far more terrifying.

It should be me. Hunt's the Corpsman. He would know exactly what to do. It should fucking be me!

Logan had gone through the standard SEAL medical training they all had, but nothing like Hunt's schooling for his bachelor's in nursing. But right now, he was all his friend had, so he took a breath and forced himself to recall as much as he could regarding anatomy and neck injuries in the field.

From what he remembered, if Hunt's internal jugular was the issue, the hopes of getting him to a hospital in time were slim to fucking none. He refused to accept that was fate's plan for his friend, however, and set about doing everything humanly possible to keep the man alive.

He's okay. It's just the external. He's going to be okay!

As if to challenge God himself, a determined Logan pushed down even harder. When he did, Hunt's pain-stricken face twisted with a groan.

"Sorry, brother," he apologized for the pain he knew the move had caused. "Have to stop the bleeding."

Only the harder he pushed, the more blood his friend spilled.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

An unprecedented fear squeezed Logan's heart to the point he thought it would burst from the pressure. Still, Logan refused to quit.

Allowing his rifle to hang loosely from its thick strap, he reached around to the small of his back to his on-belt med pouch. Pulling hard on the tab of fabric centered at the bag's bottom edge, he yanked the plastic blowout kit free and brought it around.

Using his teeth, Logan separated the bag's plastic zip seal before securing the bag between his thighs. With it held tightly in place, he reached into the bag and began pulling out its contents until he found what he'd been searching for...

A package of QuikClot combat gauze.

With the other med supplies haphazardly discarded across Hunter's vested chest, Logan once again used his teeth to open the small, vacuum-sealed bag. Spitting the strip of ripped plastic from his mouth, he held the bag in his mouth while removing the entire stack of clotting gauze at one time.

He brought it toward Hunter's neck, nausea swirling inside his gut from what he was about to do. "This is gonna hurt, brother." Logan swallowed past a thick knot of emotion. "I'm sorry, but—"

"Do what you...have t-to...do."

Admiration filled his chest, knowing Hunt was prepared to handle what had to be excruciating pain. With a tip of his chin and an understanding gaze, Logan went to work doing what needed to be done.

Moving with the speed and efficiency of a highly trained operator, he lifted his blood-soaked hand away from his teammate's neck. In an almost simultaneous move, Logan used his other hand to pack the clot-inducing gauze into the wide-open wound.

Hunter's animalistic howl of pain became lost when more deafening gunshots hailed around them. For the next several seconds, the unknown enemy's bullets continued traveling in their direction while Black Squadron One returned the bastards' fire tenfold.

Logan ignored both, his focus still locked on trying to push the gauze as deep as it would go in hopes of reaching every single minute cut, hole, or tear. Because in order for this to work—for the necessary chemical reaction to take place—the material had to physically touch the damaged area.

So if he could get it in there deep enough...if the material managed to press against the place or places threatening Hunter's existence, the clotting

agent embedded inside the lifesaving product might just activate in time.

This is going to work. You're not losing him today. You're not losing any of them today!

Accepting he'd done as well as he could, Logan sat back on his heels. Allowing himself one good, long, deep as fuck breath, he used the noticeable break in gunfire to his advantage and checked on the others.

"Everyone else okay?"

Four immediate affirmatives revealed Hunt was the only one who'd been hit.

"How's our boy?" Chase yelled back from somewhere nearby.

"Took a hit to the neck!" Logan let the others know. "Stable for now, but he needs medical ASAP!"

He'd purposely avoided any reference to the wound's potential severity, for both the team's and Hunter's sakes. If the other four men knew their brother was in as bad a shape as Logan feared he was, their focus would be split between the urge to kill and the instinct to protect.

Telling Hunter would only hinder the man's ability to remain positive and fight. And right now, above all else, Logan needed his friend to keep fighting.

"Anyone see the shooter?" Lucky called out from Logan's right. Laying several feet away, the guy was face-first in the dirt, his body partially hidden by a smaller, flatter boulder.

Before anyone could respond to Lucky's question, an explosion took out part of an overhang several yards to the team's south.

Sonofabitch!

Abandoning his rifle's grip, Logan kept pressure on Hunter's wound while trying to reach their commanding officer yet again. "TOC, we have a critical situation and need immediate air support, over!" When he was met with dead air, Logan gritted his teeth and shouted, "We have one injured, and we're pinned down thirty yards from Washington." The code name given to their intended surveillance location. "We need air support now, over!" Another pause and then, "TOC, do you copy?"

Twenty long seconds and more gunfire later, the mic finally, *finally* clicked to life. "TOC Actual," Lieutenant Commander Shaw's static-laced voice was like music to his ears. "We copy, Black Squadron One. Air support has been notified and is headed to your location."

About fucking time! "ETA?"

"Chopper's seven minutes out."

Logan looked back down, his gut tightening with fear when he realized Hunter's lids had fallen shut. "Hey!" He gave his friend a hard shake. "Come on, man. Open your eyes." Another shake. "Damn it, Hunt, you've gotta stay with me!"

How many times had Hunter rendered them aid while under fire? A couple dozen? More?

The man was always risking his ass to get them the care and treatment they needed in the field. But now it was Hunter's ass on the line, and with the others forced to keep up their defenses, it was up to Logan to save his best friend's life.

Seven minutes. Air support would be there in seven minutes. He just had to keep the man's heart beating until then.

After that, they'd be on the chopper and someone with a lot more medical training than Logan had would take over. They'd take over, and Hunter would be okay.

"Open your eyes, sailor!" he yelled down at the lethargic man. "That's a fucking order!"

Technically, the two men ranked the same. But Logan was the team's Number One, which meant he gave the orders. Orders a highly trained SEAL like Hunter Garrison wouldn't allow himself to refuse.

A sliver of blue appeared, the thin line growing a tiny bit more with each slow blink of the decorated SEAL's eyes.

"That's it, brother." Relief had Logan smiling. "Just keep looking at me, okay? Help is on the way. Air support's going to take out those fuckers, and then we'll get you all patched up."

Another RPG landed damn close to their left, sending a cloud of dirt, dust, and rocks up into the air around them. On reflex, Logan threw his body on top of Hunter's to block the falling debris.

When it cleared, he shouted out, "Everybody good?"

Chase, Lucky, and Van were quick with their standard check-ins. Arch, on the other hand, called back with a, "Be a whole lot better if that fucking chopper was here!"

Amen, brother!

Logan looked back down, his stomach immediately filling with dread. In the very short time it took for the air to clear and the team to check in, Hunter's skin had grown pale as a sheet. His lips had all but vanished, and blues of his eyes were starting to dull.

Ah, fuck.

Panic threatened to take Logan over. The blood at the surface had ceased to spill, the hemostatic gauze having done its job to perfection. But it was clear Hunt was still losing blood from *somewhere*, and if that chopper didn't show soon, Logan was going to be forced to watch his best friend in the entire world bleed out right in front of him.

So don't let him! It's your job to keep him alive, damn it! Do not let him quit!

With a quick glance at his watch, Logan needed Hunt to know, "Five more minutes, man. The chopper will be here in five short minutes, and then —"

"D-don't...have...f-five...min..."

"Yes, you do!" He refused to accept anything less. Using the last thing in his arsenal, Logan went with the one thing that mattered to Hunter the most. "You have as long as it takes to get your ass off this fucking mountain; you know why? Because you promised Natalie you'd make it back home. You promised Nat you'd be home for your anniversary, remember? So you're gonna keep your fucking eyes open; you're going to keep fighting; and you're gonna *keep* that fucking promise!"

"Not this...t-time...broth...er..." A tear leaked from the corner of Hunter's left eye, creating a silver streak through the dirt and grime covering the man's skin. "Y-you have t-to tell...N-Nat...I l-lo—"

"Nope." Logan gave a stern shake of his head. "Do *not* finish that sentence, you understand? We are *not* doing that shit, sailor. Not today."

"P-please..." A hard swallow. "Please...t-tell...h-her—"

"You can tell her yourself when we get back home." Reaching for his comms, he abandoned all sense of decorum and shouted into the mic, "*TOC, where the fuck is that chopper?*"

Logan had barely finished the transmission when another RPG landed nearby. Pieces of jagged rock flew in every direction forcing the team to immediately take cover. When he felt it was safe enough to do so, he lifted his upper body up once more.

Determination reflected back at him from Hunter's glassy, heavy-lidded eyes as he struggled to lift a trembling hand. Logan grabbed it without hesitation, holding onto his friend so tight he thought the man's bones might actually break.

"member...*your*...p-promise?"

“Mine?” Logan frowned.

His friend’s head moved with the slightest of nods. “Promised...something...happens...to m-me...you’d...take c-care...Nat—”

Ah, Christ.

This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be. They’d just been talking about who was buying the first round of beers, for fuck’s sake!

Hunt had been smiling and going on about how badly he wanted to get back home, and now... Now the man was asking him to repeat a promise made the day Hunt and Natalie got married.

Jesus, no!

Tears Logan didn’t know existed fell in streaks down his face, the ignored droplets landing on the chest of a man who was dying. Ignoring the battle still going strong around him, he tried like hell to control the one consuming his very soul.

He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t fucking *think*. And as he stared down at his friend, he did the only thing he *could* do...

Logan begged.

“Don’t do this, Hunt.” He used a shoulder to clear his blurred vision as he begged his brother by choice not to die. “Come on, man. You can’t give up now, you hear me? Our ride’s almost here! Just a couple m-more...” His face threatened to crumble, but he forced himself to finish the damn sentence. “Just a couple more minutes, okay?”

The words had barely left his lips when the sound of an approaching UH-60 Blackhawk broke through the air. Hope bloomed, his eyes widening as he swung his gaze back to Hunter’s.

“Hear that? That’s us, man. They’re *here!*” Logan looked away long enough to confirm visual. “I can see them, Hunt. So you just keep fighting, you hear me?”

“H-ayes...”

“You keep fucking fighting because they’re here! They’re gonna take out those terrorist assholes, and they’re going to—”

“D-damnit, Hayes,” Hunter growled through a set of clenched teeth. “Sh-shut up...and...l-lissen...” It was the closest the weakened man could come to yelling.

Logan shut his mouth and listened.

“N-need...know...she’s...g-going...be...ok-kay.”

Please, God. Please don’t make me do this. I can’t fucking do this!

“You can’t give up, Hunt.” He tried again, his eyes spilling over once more. “You have to keep fighting, goddamn, you! Fucking *fight!*”

“S-Say...it!” Hunter coughed three times before finishing with, “P-please...Log...an. I n-need...”

The longer the man spoke, the more labored his breathing became. And the longer it took the Blackhawk to make its way to their position, the more hopeless Logan felt.

He was losing him.

The man who’d fought by his side from the very beginning. A man who knew him better than he knew himself. Who’d saved countless lives during his time in the Navy...including Logan’s and every other member of Black Squadron One. But what Hunt was asking him to do now...

“You know I’ve got her, man,” Logan choked out the solemn vow.

His nose burned, the roof of his mouth tingling with pressure as his sinuses became flooded with yet another rush of tears. The muscles in his lower gut clenched, his heart—his very soul—feeling as if it were being ripped from his body piece by devastating piece.

“N-need...hear...the...p-promise.”

The man was using the last of his breaths to beg Logan to repeat a promise he’d spent years praying he’d never have to keep. A promise that, at the time, he’d been more than happy to make.

Not because he wanted Nat for himself. That shit was hell and gone, as far as he was concerned. And it wasn’t ever coming back. *Never!*

No, Logan hadn’t given the wedding day promise a second thought because he never believed the time would come when he’d have to make good on the damn thing. Never thought something like this would happen.

Not to Hunter.

You have to say the words. You owe this man that much.

That wasn’t true. He owed Hunter more than he could repay in ten lifetimes. But yes, he would—*could*—do this. Because his brother deserved nothing less.

Logan wiped his face dry. Every muscle in his body was taut, his throat physically hurting with its effort to keep from completely breaking down. And with dust and bullets flying around them in the middle of a country none of them wanted to be in, he gave his closest friend one final gift.

“I’ll take care of Natalie,” he vowed with a shattered heart. “I’ll watch over her, and...” His voice cracked, and it took every ounce of strength he

possessed to get the rest out. “I’ll keep her safe, brother. I promise.”

A peaceful expression fell over his fallen friend, Hunter’s lips curving into an unexpected smile as he stared up at Logan and said, “Th-thank... you...”

“Never have to thank me for that.” Logan sucked in a hitched breath. “Goddamnit, Hunt. I love ya...you know that, right?”

Hunter’s grip on Logan’s fist tightened as much as the other man could manage. He opened his mouth, his lips clearly forming a run of intended words. But the helicopter’s mounted machine guns chose that exact same moment to open fire on their enemy.

Logan didn’t need to hear the words to understand them...

“Love...y-you...t-too, bro...ther. Ev..ry...m-minute.”

“Every mission.” His face collapsed as the reality of the situation became too much to bear.

He held onto Hunter’s hand in his, refusing to let go. Tears fell freely from his eyes, and his nose filled with snot as he sat on his knees next to his dying friend, praying for a miracle he knew would never come.

Please don’t do this. Ah, Christ, you can’t do this! You can’t take him away from us, damn you! You can’t!

A powerful wind interrupted the silent pleas as the chopper flew directly over the team on its way back around. Just as he had when the RPG’s had hit, Logan hovered protectively over Hunter’s upper body to keep the dust and dirt and anything else from flying into the man’s face.

Seconds later, the whip of the wind had lessened, and the shooting had all but ceased. Lifting himself up, he saw the sixty-five-foot Blackhawk landing on a stretch of level ground less than two hundred feet from him and his men.

With a hope he shouldn’t have allowed himself to feel, Logan started talking before his gaze had fully shifted from the giant metal bird back down to Hunter’s.

“It’s over, Hunt! The chopper’s right over there, and it’s ready to take you home! Hear that? You’re going—” Logan froze, his entire world tilting on its axis.

Hunter was looking up, staring straight into Logan’s gaze just as he’d been before. Only those faded blue eyes could no longer see.

Not Logan. The chopper. The four men who’d just gathered around them with concern for their fellow SEAL...

The same eyes that had once been filled life and love and joy couldn’t see

anything anymore, because...

It's too late. He's already gone.

Less than fifteen minutes earlier, Hunter had been walking right next to him. Hunt had been talking, and smiling, and laughing...not realizing he was going to die minutes from being rescued.

A stretch of time later, and Logan and the others were silently carrying thirty-four-year-old Chief Petty Officer Hunter Eugene Garrison toward his final exfil. And as his boots moved woodenly across the dry, dusty ground, Logan made his best friend a final silent promise.

A vow he was willing to die to keep.

I'll find out what happened here today, Hunt. I don't care what it costs or how long it takes.

A terrorist's bullet may have caused the man's fatal wound, but Hunter's death was caused by someone else. Someone who'd tipped off the men who'd done their damndest to kill his entire team.

And come hell or high water, Logan wouldn't rest until he uncovered the truth...and made them pay.

TWO YEARS LATER...

NATALIE GARRISON KNOCKED ON THE OPEN OFFICE DOOR. “MR. SCHWARTZ?” she addressed the white-haired man sitting behind his large, mahogany desk. “I’m Natalie Garrison. My boss said you wanted to see me?”

Albert Schwartz, owner of Schwartz and Associates—the largest corporate accounting firm in Seattle—looked up from the papers he’d been studying and smiled.

“Mrs. Garrison, yes.” He waved her in. “Please, come in. And shut the door behind you, if you would.”

An unscheduled, closed-door meeting with the owner of the company. This is not a good sign, Nat. Not good at all.

Swallowing her nerves, she did as the man asked and stepped inside the impressive office. Closing the door softly behind her, Natalie made her way across the marble tile floors. Halfway to the man’s desk, Mr. Schwartz motioned to one of the two empty chairs facing his desk.

“Have a seat.”

Once she’d reached the nearest chair, she sat spine-straight on the edge of its smooth leather cushion. The nerves she’d already been feeling ramped up to DEFCON 1 levels, though she wasn’t sure why.

Her performance at the company since she’d first been hired nearly two years ago had been nothing less than stellar. The attaboys she’d received from both her direct supervisor and clients, as well as the glowing reviews in

her personnel file were proof of that.

But it was just like when she was younger and a teacher—or God, forbid, the principal—asked to speak with her out of the blue. In every one of those instances, Natalie had gone into those conversations knowing she hadn't done anything wrong. And yet, she'd also approached the authoritative figures completely scared out of her wits.

Now here she was, a thirty-two-year-old accounting audit specialist with an infallible employment record and her mind was *still* racing to explain why the most powerful man in the company had requested her presence.

Don't forget the shutting-the-door part. That means he wants the conversation kept confidential. And everybody knows confidential means serious business.

Mr. Schwartz gathered the papers on his desk with a sigh. "I apologize for not being ready before you got here. Let me just put these away, and..."

More time to sit and drive myself crazy trying to figure out why you asked for me by name, but please...take your time.

If Hunter were here, he'd probably tell her to take a deep breath and calm her crazy. Then he'd demonstrate while instructing her to breathe through her nose and out through her mouth. And then he'd remind her that it's possible Mr. Schwartz called her to his office because he recognizes what a kick-ass job she does for his company.

And then he'd kiss her and tell her how proud he was of her. And after that...

He'd kiss me again.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you here."

Natalie blinked as she realized the man behind the desk had spoken. "Oh," she gave a nervous chuckle. "I have to admit, I was a bit surprised when Brenda told me you'd sent for me."

"Well, you can relax, Mrs. Garrison." Mr. Schwartz responded with his own kind smile. "The reason I asked you here has nothing to do with the work you've done for us here at Schwartz and Associates. Actually, I suppose it does, but in a positive manner, I can assure you."

Thank the Lord.

"That's good to know." She did relax, then. "And please, call me Natalie."

I'm no one's Mrs. anymore.

"All right, Natalie. So the reason I wanted to visit with you is a bit..."

sensitive. An unfortunate situation has arisen, I'm afraid. One which requires...kid gloves, if you will."

Confusion had her brows turning inward with a frown. "Kid gloves, sir?"

"I just got off the phone with the firm's biggest client. They've requested we conduct their annual audit a couple months early. Not unheard of, by any means. However, this client is very particular about who we send to look over their books. Sadly, Peter Weiss was the specialist assigned to this account." A somber expression fell over the older man's face. "I'm assuming you knew Peter?"

"I did." Natalie nodded, her heart aching for the poor man and his family. "It's still so hard to believe."

Peter, her co-worker and the office's senior audit specialist, had been killed in a car accident the week before. According to the rumor mill, he'd missed a curve on his drive home from the office after having worked late several nights in a row.

"Yes, it was very upsetting news, for sure," Mr. Schwartz nodded. "But as crass as it may sound, business must go on. Which brings us to why you're here. I'd like for you to start gradually taking over Peter's accounts. Starting with this one."

Natalie swallowed so hard, if she were a comic book character, her eyes would have bugged straight out of their sockets, and there would have been a decidedly large speech bubble above her head with the word "gulp" printed in its center.

In bold print.

With a giant exclamation point behind the *P*.

"Sir, our biggest client is Frost Avionics." She stared back at the man expecting him to realize his error any second now. Because someone had clearly messed up and sent for her by mistake.

He wouldn't want *her* handling an external audit of a multi-billion-dollar aviation company's major finances. Alone. No way that's what he actually meant to say.

Peter had conducted the company's audit solo, sure. But Peter had also been with the accounting firm for over ten years. She hadn't even hit her official two-year mark yet.

"I can tell by the look on your face my decision surprises you."

The man's nothing if not perceptive.

"Uh...yeah. I mean, yes, Sir, it does surprise me." She swallowed again.

“A lot, actually.”

His thin lips curved into a grin as he dipped his head in a single nod. “I thought as much.”

“Mr. Schwartz, please don’t misunderstand. I’m not being ungrateful. This is an incredible opportunity. It’s just...” Natalie sighed. “I’ve only been with the company two years, Mr. Schwartz. There are others in my office who’ve been here much longer and have more experience.”

“All true.” He smiled. “But when I called Brenda and asked for the best auditor she had, your boss didn’t name your co-workers. She named you.” An assessing stare met her stunned gaze. “Do you feel Mrs. Velasquez made an error in judgment?”

Natalie hesitated to answer. Not because she didn’t think she was capable of handling an account as big as Frost Avionics. It would be a challenge, sure, but she’d conquered worse.

Much, *much* worse.

See, Nat? Told you it was good news.

The words Hunter would’ve spoken rolled through her like a bittersweet balm; soothing yet heartbreaking, all at the same time. Because Hunter was no longer here to say them.

If he were, though...if he hadn’t died on that damn mountainside...he’d be right. This was good news. Great, even!

Because if she could do this job as well as she’d handled every other one before it—and there was no reason for her to think that she couldn’t—this could potentially lead to an honest-to-goodness promotion.

Senior Audit Specialist Natalie Garrison.

She had to admit, it did have a certain ring to it. So yep. Great news!

For you, yeah. Poor Peter...not so much.

A sliver of guilt left her chest feeling a bit tight. Of course, she’d much rather the friendly father of three still be alive and well. Of *course* she would.

But the unfortunate fact of the matter was Peter was dead, and someone had to take over his accounts. If it wasn’t her, it would probably be that smooth talker, Vance.

According to the breakroom gossip she’d tried to ignore, Vance had a wife and toddler at home...and a revolving door of mistresses on the side. While Natalie got along with pretty much everyone in her office, she’d never been one to play into the drama that came with whispered watercooler conversations.

She came to work, did her job, and treated her co-workers all with the same level of professional respect and genuine politeness she felt every human being deserved. Even Vance. But between the rumors and the heebie-jeebies vibe she always got when the auburn-haired Casanova was around, she knew he wasn't the kind of person she cared to associate herself with.

And she definitely didn't want to pass up an opportunity like the one that had just dropped into her lap out of some misguided obligation to someone who wouldn't think twice to snatch it right out of her hands if given the chance.

"No, Sir," she responded to Mr. Schwartz's question with a confidence she believed in. "I am absolutely up to the task, and I promise, I won't let you down."

"That's what I was hoping to hear. And I have no doubt you'll give Frost Avionics the same dedicated effort you've shown with your other accounts." The intimidating man pushed himself to his feet and walked around the edge of his desk. "Stop by Jared's desk on your way out. He should have a copy of the company's last two audit reports. Take the rest of the day off, take them home, and read them over. The more familiar you are with their accounts and the manner in which the company's monies are handled, the better off you'll be."

A chance at a promotion *and* an unexpected day off with pay? Didn't have to tell her twice.

Natalie stood and accepted his outstretched hand. "I'll take meticulous notes as I read through them. Anything I think might help the process go more smoothly. For us, as well as the client."

Mr. Schwartz's lips lifted in an approving smile. "Excellent."

The two professionals parted hands as the man in charge motioned for her to go ahead of him. Walking her to the door, he ended their little chat with a parting, "I also had Jared provide you with your point of contact at Frost Avionics. You'll be working directly with Dennis Atkinson, so when you get to their headquarters in the morning, just ask for him, and they'll take care of you. Dennis is expecting you at nine sharp, by the way. So make sure you leave home in time to avoid getting stuck in rush hour traffic."

"Atkinson..." She let the name roll off her tongue as he reached to open the door, her eyes growing wide when she realized why it sounded so familiar. "Wait, isn't Dennis Atkinson the name of the company's CFO?"

"That's him." The firm's owner nodded as the two crossed over the

marble threshold. “But don’t worry. I’ve known Dennis many years, and he’s truly the most down-to-earth billionaire I’ve ever met. You need anything during your time there, he’ll make sure you have it.”

“Good to know.” They shook hands again. “Thank you, Mr. Schwartz. I really appreciate the opportunity.”

“Well, I’d say good luck, but I know you’re not going to need it. Don’t forget to grab that file on your way out.”

Natalie gave him a parting smile as she promised, “I won’t.” She’d just started toward the desk where the man’s personal assistant was working when she heard...

“Oh, and Natalie?”

“Yes?” She spun on her heels to face him.

“If you come across anything you have questions about, bring them directly to me.”

Her brows dipped low with a slight tilt of her head. “Sir?”

“I know the normal chain of command would have you going to Brenda, however I’d prefer to keep a more hands-on approach with this one. Nothing against you or my faith in your abilities. If I didn’t trust you to get the job done, this conversation never would have happened. It’s just with this being our most important client...”

“Understood, Sir.”

She didn’t, really. To her, their clients were equally important, and deserved the same level of professionalism and attention no matter the number of zeroes listed behind their net worth. But he was the boss, so...

“Outstanding. I look forward to hearing your regular updates as well.”

“Of course. Have a good day, Mr. Schwartz.”

“You, too, Natalie. And...congratulations. You should be proud of yourself and the work you’ve done here.” The man returned to his office, shutting the door behind him as he went.

“Wow.”

Natalie swung her gaze in Jared’s direction. Tall, a bit lanky but handsome, the young man she’d seen around the building stared up at her with an arched brow.

“What?”

“He must really like you.” Mr. Schwartz’s right-hand-man grinned. “I love my boss and all, but the man does not hand out compliments willy-nilly. So good for you.”

Yes. It did seem this was very, *very* good for her.

“Thanks.” She went to Jared’s desk, which was centered in front of one of the building’s countless floor-to-ceiling windows. “He said you should have a copy of Frost Avionics’ file for me?”

“Got it right here.” He remained seated as he picked up the awaiting accordion folder that looked stuffed to the gills and handed it to her. “Everything from the last two audits is in there, along with Mr. Atkinsons’s information. I’ve seen you around, but we haven’t officially been introduced. I’m Jared, by the way.”

“Natalie.” She took the folder from his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too. Oh, and there’s a sticky-note inside the folder you’re going to want to be sure not to lose. It has Mr. Schwartz’s direct line to his office here, as well as his personal cell. He wanted to be sure you could reach him with any questions that may arise while you’re at Frost Avionics.”

The firm’s owner had seriously given her his direct office line *and* his personal phone number?

Wow, indeed.

“Thanks, Jared. Have a nice day.”

“No problem.” The young man smiled back at her with a dip of his chin. “And you, as well.”

With that, Natalie turned and left the office of the man in charge of over one hundred-fifty employees, feeling like she’d just been sent to the top of the class.

Proud of you, baby cakes!

Her steps faltered slightly as she walked down the elegant hallway. The silly nickname was one in a seemingly endless list Hunter had come up with.

Baby cakes, honey, darlin’, sweet cheeks...

The goofy man had always enjoyed mixing them up, and hearing them had always made her smile. Only she wasn’t smiling now.

Chest tight, Natalie pushed past the unsettling feeling and veered toward the elevators a few feet away. Pressing the round button, she took a step back and waited.

Her lungs filled slowly with a big, deep breath. Slowly exhaling, she refusing to let her grief-damaged mind ruin what should be a reason to celebrate.

Mr. Schwartz had just handed the largest account the firm had under their massive accounting umbrella. But rather than doing a happy dance, she was

standing in the hallway trying to decipher what had changed.

It wasn't anything obvious, really. Not one specific thing she could pinpoint down and address. But *something* had started to shift lately. Something that, even though her husband had been gone two years, now, Natalie wasn't sure she was prepared for.

I'll get there Hunt. Promise. I just need...

What? More time? The man had been gone two full years, for crying out loud.

But time was a funny thing when it came to grief and moving on. For some, it was simply making the decision to put the past behind them and focus on the future. Unfortunately for her, it hadn't been that easy.

Seattle was big. Huge, even. And filled with all kinds of attractive men. Yet she had zero interest in trying to start up that kind of relationship with *any* of them.

A few women in her office had offered to set her up with ones they knew. Guys who, from the pictures her well-meaning co-workers had showed her, were self-sufficient and admittedly handsome.

But none of those men—or any others who'd crossed her path since—had ever created even the slightest of sparks. Not like the one she'd felt when she'd gotten her first glimpse of Hunter in that bar so long ago.

Liar, liar.

Of its own accord, the image of another man's face filled her mind's eye...

A straight nose dividing sharp, chiseled, symmetrical features. Full, kissable lips that always lifted into a heart-thumping sideways grin she'd come to love. A light layer of dark scruff covering a jaw that screamed masculine strength.

Green-blue eyes she insisted were *not* the ones she'd been seeing in her most recent, late-night dreams.

Nope. It wasn't him in last night's arousing dream. Was. Not.

No, it most certainly wasn't, and she sure as hell shouldn't think of *his* lips as kissable or anything else. Shouldn't be thinking about his lips at *all*, for that matter.

The elevator dinged, the shiny metal doors sliding open in an even divide. Stepping inside the empty cart, Natalie forced the unsettling thoughts away.

She'd given the most important job of her professional career and needed to stay focused on that. Because minus her sister—and the man whose face

had no business being anywhere *near* her sexual fantasies—this career was the only real thing she had left.

LOGAN DROPPED his toolbox into the bed of his truck on his way to the driver's door. The day had been a long one, and he was exhausted and starving. With plans to go home, shower, eat, and crash, he reached for the handle and—

“Yo, Hayes! Hold up!”

He froze, his eyes closing with frustration. The shouted voice coming from behind was one he recognized all too well. It was also the last man on their crew Logan had any desire to interact with.

Doing his best not to audibly growl, he gave Ronnie Beecham a straight-faced glance from over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“You grabbed my wrench.”

Surprised you know what a wrench is, you entitled prick.

“Didn't take your wrench, Ronnie.” Logan shook his head and looked away.

“Don't turn your back on me, asshole! I know you've got my fucking wrench, and I want it back!”

For fuck's sake. “Maybe you set it down and forgot.”

He pulled the handle and started to open his door, but a hand shot out and slammed it back shut.

“Or maybe you've had it out for me since the day I got here, and you're trying to do anything you can to screw me over!” The newest member of their construction crew barked near Logan's ear.

Logan looked at the dirty, grimy hand still pressed against his truck. Filling his lungs slowly, he forced a purposeful calm into his next words.

“Get your hand off my truck.” Low. Steady.

And crystal fucking clear.

“My wrench. Now, asshole!”

Fists tight at his side, he worked his throat and swallowed the urge to pound the son of a bitch into the ground.

Terrorists are one thing. Kill this fucknut, you go to jail.

His inner voice had a point. Not that he could kill terrorists and get away with it, either. Not anymore.

“Tool box is in the back. Check for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“What am I, your errand boy? You stole my wrench; *you* get it.”

And then Ronnie made his biggest mistake to date. He put his hand on Logan.

With what was presumably meant to be a powerful move, the other man’s grip tightened as he shoved Logan away from his truck. Stepping back, Logan let the asshole move him, but only because he knew they had an audience now.

Don’t ever throw the first punch.

Words to live by, and the only advice his piece shit dad ever gave that was worth a damn.

“You’re going to want to back off now, Ronnie.”

Ronnie didn’t back off. In fact, the five-foot-seven tough guy wannabe put himself even deeper into Logan’s personal space.

“Or what? I’m not scared of you, ya know. And I don’t give a fuck that you used to some big, bad Navy *SEAL*.”

That last part was spat out as if it were a curse word. Something to be taken as an insult, rather than the greatest achievement of Logan’s entire thirty-six years.

And it pissed him the hell off.

“I didn’t take your wrench. I’ve offered to let you check for yourself, and now I’m done. Either get out of the way or man the fuck up, because I don’t have time for some entitled asshole suffering from Little Man Syndrome.” Because the short, skinny bastard was sure as hell acting as if he were about ten feet tall.

He also took Logan’s baited words hook, line, and...

Logan didn’t even try to dodge Ronnie’s balled fist. He just stood there as the blow struck, letting his head turn with the hit that didn’t so much as hurt.

Here we go.

Logan struck hard and fast, his knuckles slamming into the other man's jaw just below the chin. The powerful uppercut sent Ronnie flying backward.

"Oh, shit!" This came from someone watching from the sidelines.

"*Dayum* brother!" Another shared his admiration loudly. "You knocked his ass out *cold!*"

He glanced down at the man lying flat on his back in the gravel. Eyes closed, splayed limbs limp and unmoving.

"Hayes!"

Fuck. "Yeah, Boss?" He turned to face the man who'd hired him nearly two years earlier.

Fuming, the silver-haired foreman stormed Logan's way, his fiery gaze bouncing between Logan and the still-unconscious troublemaker. "What the hell is going on here?"

"What, this?" He spared Ronnie a glance and shrugged. "Oh, this is nothing. Just a simple misunderstanding."

Technically it was the truth. And while he couldn't stand the mouthy asshole, Logan just wanted to put the drama behind him and go home.

"A misunderstanding, huh?" The intelligent man in charge of the building sight narrowed his gaze as he looked back down. "Looks like it was a little more than that. Now how 'bout you tell me what really happened?"

Logan sighed. Bill had been damn good to him since he'd taken the construction job shortly after moving to Seattle. The fifty-five-year-old ran a tight ship and treated his guys well. And he didn't deserve to be lied to.

"Ronnie thought I stole his wrench and didn't like it when I told him I didn't."

"It's true, Bill." One of the workers who'd been standing close by approached them. "We saw the whole thing. Logan tried to tell Beechman he didn't have his tool."

"Dumbass got in Logan's face and wouldn't let it go. Then he hauled off and punched Logan in the face." A second witness confirmed.

By the time a third man came to Logan's defense, Bill was letting loose with a string of muttered curses and shaking his angry head. "That's it. Adam"—he looked at one of the others—"go grab Ronnie's things and bring them over here."

"On it, Boss." A minute later, the man was back. "Uh...where do you want me to put them?"

Logan's focus was drawn to tool box in one of his co-worker's hands...

and the wrench that was held loosely in the other.

Bill cursed under his breath, his lined face twisting into a scowl when he spotted the supposedly stolen tool. "I'd say up his ass, but I don't think they'll fit." A frustrated huff. "Just set it all in a pile next to the idiot." To Logan, he said, "Go on. I'll keep an eye on him until you leave."

With a sideways glance, Logan looked down at Ronnie then back up to Bill. "We good?"

"We're fine." He tilted his head in the downed man's direction. "But he's done."

Message received and accepted.

Ronnie groaned as the first slivers of consciousness reached him.

"Go on," Bill ordered. "This asshole comes to while you're still here, he's liable to wake up swinging. That happens, I'll be very tempted to let you finish what he was stupid enough to start."

Logan grinned. No one on the crew liked Ronnie. Not even Bill.

Unfortunately for them all, good, hardworking construction guys were nearly impossible to find. And as annoying as Ronnie was, the guy showed up and did the job.

He was always late, slow as shit, and the man couldn't go five minutes without bitching about something...but he got the work done. Eventually.

Still, Logan couldn't bring himself to feel even the tiniest bit bad knowing he'd seen the last of Ronnie Beechman.

The two men shared a look of understanding before he went back to his truck, climbed behind the wheel, and left. He'd covered the first half of the twenty-minute drive home when the theme song from a classic horror flick came to life inside his pocket.

His heart thumped and his gut tightened.

Knowing this was a call he would always, *always* take, Logan leaned back in his seat and tilted his upper body to the right. With one hand on the wheel, he slid a hand into the pocket of his jeans and pulled the device free.

"Hey, you." He kept the wheel steady with one hand while using the other to hold the phone to his ear. "What's up? No wait, let me guess. The garbage disposal go out on you again?"

A slight pause followed before the sweetest voice he'd ever heard greeted him with, "I don't know which is worse. That you think I only call when I need something fixed...or that it's true."

Logan's shoulders shook with laughter, and just like that...all thoughts of

mouthy assholes and unfounded accusations vanished. Of course, it was always like that when Natalie called.

I hear her voice and poof! Everything else disappears.

Not that she had the slightest clue of the affect she had on him. Not that he'd ever tell her.

The woman is stronger than you give her credit for. She deserves to know the truth.

For the first time in maybe forever, his inner voice was dead fucking wrong.

Not about Natalie being strong. In terms of perseverance and the ability to overcome, Logan knew no one stronger. Himself included.

But Nat was doing so well lately. Probably the best he'd seen her since Hunter's funeral. The last thing she needed was to hear was that the man claiming to be her friend had lied to her for the past two years.

He was her friend, sure. Her best one, he'd venture to say. And she was his.

So hell no, he wasn't going to admit to being a fraud. No fucking way. Because that would mean she'd see him for what he was.

A pretender.

He pretended Natalie's face wasn't the first one to flash through his mind when he first woke up. Logan pretended she wasn't his last thought before he fell asleep at night.

He chose to ignore the fact that he secretly lived to see her gorgeous smile. And that Nat's laugh filled him with so much happiness his heart nearly burst every time he heard it.

Most of all, Logan really, *really* didn't want to stare into those incredible, soul-stealing eyes of hers while he confessed his deepest, darkest secret. So rather than hurting the most important person in his life, Logan continued doing what he did best these days...

He pretended he wasn't head over boots in love with a woman who'd could never be his.

"I was just giving you shit," he teased. "Although it does sound like you may have another rogue appliance on your hands."

She'd had three go out in the last five months. First the dishwasher, followed by her water heater. After that, it was the garbage disposal.

"I swear, it's like they've become possessed and decided to form a coup."

Logan chuckled again. "One of the downsides of buying all new, all at the

same time. It's great when they're all shiny right out of the box, but then—"

"When one starts to go bad, the rest seem to follow," Natalie finished for him with a sigh. "You know anything about dryers?"

As a matter of fact...

"I do." Thanks to a summer job at a major home improvement chain store while he was in high school. "Tell me the symptoms."

"It still dries the clothes and everything, but when I close the door, the drum starts spinning and the motor keeps going, even though I've pressed the power button off."

"So it won't shut off at all?"

"Yes and no. The digital display shuts off like normal, but even after that, the drum continues spinning and the motor keeps going. The only thing to stop it is to either leave the door open or unplug it completely."

Her deep, almost defeated exhale was all he needed to hear.

"I'm ten minutes from my place. Let me run in for a quick shower, then I'll be over."

The woman would need a gas mask if she got anywhere near him in his current, sweaty state.

"Oh, I didn't mean for you to come over *tonight*," Natalie responded with a rush. "I was just hoping maybe you'd have some time in the next few days to stop by and take a look."

Typical. No matter how many times he told her she wasn't a bother, the woman still worried about being an inconvenience or putting him out.

"It's no big deal, Nat. Really. I'll wash up and be right over."

"You've been working all day, and I can tell you're tired. I should've just waited and called the repair places in the morning."

"Wrong. The deal was, something breaks or stops working right, you call me first. Remember?"

"That deal was made a long time ago, Logan," she offered a reminder of her own. "You know, before every freaking appliance in my house decided to join the We Hate Natalie Club."

She wasn't wrong, but something the adorable woman still didn't seem to get...

"The offer to help with stuff like this didn't come with an expiration date, Nat."

A long, silent pause ensued before her sweet voice filled his ear once more. But rather than folding to his insistence, she countered with, "Are you

hungry?”

Logan frowned. “What does my being hungry have to do with—”

“You agree to stay for dinner, and I’ll let you drive all the way over here to look at the Devil’s dryer.”

He barked out a laugh at the disagreeable appliance’s new nickname. God, he loved that about her.

Didn’t matter how shitty the day was, or how pissed he’d gotten at Ronnie or some other random asshole who’d been...well...an asshole... No matter what was going on in his life or inside his head, Natalie always managed to make him laugh.

Laugh.

Smile.

Love.

The sexy, dimpled brunette made Logan do things—*feel* things—that, not so long ago, he’d convinced himself were impossible. Because he shouldn’t get to experience that side of life. Not when her husband couldn’t.

Not when he looked at her and he wanted.

Not when she makes me crave.

At first, Logan had thought those early months would be the hardest. Seeing her tears, hearing her share details of the couple’s lost plans for the future. Hell, just being *near* her during that time had ripped his own grief-stricken heart to shreds.

But then things changed.

Natalie’s tears started to come less and less. Their conversations started to center more around the present, rather than always focusing on the past. And now...

Now I’ve turned into a full-blown masochist.

The very definition of the word fit him to a fucking T.

With each day that passed, he fell deeper and deeper. Every additional moment he spent staring back into those beautiful brown eyes more agonizing than the ones before it. And yet, here he was, jumping at the chance to put himself directly in the path of an unstable bomb just waiting to explode.

It’s you. You’re the bomb. And if you detonate...if you tell Natalie the truth...it could very well destroy you both.

Ignoring the silent warning in his head, he heard himself saying, “That’s cheating. You know I can’t resist your cooking.”

Her cooking. Her dimples. The light spattering of freckles he'd dreamed about kissing.

"So...is that a yes?"

With you, the answer will always be yes.

"I'll be there in thirty," Logan confirmed.

"Good." Natalie's triumphant smile was damn near audible. "I'll start the lasagna."

My favorite.

"See you soon."

TWENTY-SEVEN MINUTES LATER, LOGAN HAD PARKED HIS TRUCK ALONG THE curb in front of Natalie's two-story home and was making his way up the quaint brick walkway. With his toolbox in hand, he studied the house Nat had used Hunter's death benefit to buy.

The light gray, modern-farmhouse-style home was a mixture of sleek style and cozy comfort. Simple, yet warm and welcoming. Just like the woman who owned it.

Speaking of...

"Hey!" Natalie appeared suddenly. Propping the door open with one hip, she crossed her arms casually at her front.

Dark jeans hugged a set of curves he longed to hold. A plain white t-shirt stretched across a set of perfectly proportioned breasts his palms itched to feel. But it was the smile shining back at him that filled his chest with a warmth only she created.

Goddamn, she's beautiful.

"Right on time." Natalie moved out of the way to give him room. "Lasagna still has about forty minutes left, so I thought we could tackle the dryer while we wait."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Logan flashed her a grin as he stepped past.

The familiar scent of lavender and vanilla overpowered the delicious aroma coming from the kitchen. But like every other time he was around her, he pretended not to notice.

There you go, pretending again.

"Thanks again for coming over." Natalie shut the door before taking the lead toward her small laundry room at the back of the house. "I know I said I'd call around, but work's going to be keeping me pretty busy the next few

weeks, so if you *can* fix it, that would be a huge help.”

The two entered the small room that housed her washer, dryer, a few cabinets, and a sink.

“What’s going on with work?” Logan asked as he covered the distance to the dryer.

While he worked to find the problem—and hopefully a solution—Natalie filled him in on her meeting with Anthony Schwartz, the owner of her accounting firm. She also shared the unfortunate story of her co-worker who’d been killed in a recent crash.

“So that was my day. How was yours? Any exciting construction news to share?”

“Exciting?” Logan pulled a connector free from its place in the machine’s motherboard. Bringing it closer to his lips, he blew on it a few times to clear away any dust that may have been collected inside its little crevices. “Not really. More like...unexpected.”

“Ooh...that sounds interesting.” Natalie pushed herself up so she was sitting on top of the washer beside him. “Do tell.”

His lips curved with small chuckle. “It’s not that interesting, trust me.” He pushed the connector back in place before removing a second one. “Remember that guy Ronnie I told you about?”

“He the little guy with a big mouth?”

“That’s Ronnie.” Logan nodded with a smirk.

As he continued giving each of the remaining connectors the same treatment as the first, he went through the whole ridiculous scene with his co-worker. Or rather, his former co-worker.

“He *hit* you?” She leaned closer, her brown gaze assessing his face for possible injuries.

“If you can even call it that.” He snorted. “Guy hits like a gir—”

Logan stopped himself short, but the damage was already done.

Natalie’s eyes were already forming a set of sharp, narrowed slits. “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. The guy hits like a what, now?”

Talked yourself right into this one, dumbass.

“Uh...I was gonna say the guy hits like a...gir...rilla?”

Natalie stared at him a beat longer, and then...she threw her head back and laughed.

“A Gorilla?” She laughed again. “You realize if an actual gorilla punched you in the head you’d die, right? I mean...props for trying, but as far as

substitutions go, I think you missed the mark on that one.”

“Yeah, well. In my defense...” His mind raced, but all he could come up with was, “I spend my days surrounded by a bunch of guys.”

Humor lit her stunning gaze. “*That’s* you’re defense? I don’t know.” A quick shake of her head. “That’s pretty weak.”

Logan’s mouth parted with another attempt to fix the foot-in-the-mouth moment. At the same time, a loud, incessant beeping came from the adjoining kitchen, effectively cutting the conversation short.

“Lucky you.” Natalie slid back down to the floor. “Saved by the bell.”

Lasagna for the win!

“This is the last one.” He pressed the final connector securely in place. “Okay, so the hope is the board just needed a good cleaning to ensure an uninterrupted connection. If that’s all it was...”

Logan let his voice trail as he plugged the dryer back into the socket. Pushing the digital power button, he shut the door and...

“It worked!” The woman beside him beamed. “Oh my gosh. You are seriously a life saver.”

Her choice of words threatened to fill his heart with another dose of grief and regret, but he refused to acknowledge it in her presence. Especially when she was throwing herself into his arms to give him a giant bear hug.

“Thank you so much!”

A half-a-second later, Logan was wrapping his arms around her petite form and hugging her back. “You’re welcome.”

He gave her a gentle squeeze, his lids falling closed as he reveled in the feel of her body pressed against his. Without being obvious, he drew in as much of the lavender-vanilla scent as he could, praying it would never leave.

She fit against him so perfectly, as if her body was made to curl into his.

So perfect, I could stay just like this. Forever.

Even as the thought registered, Natalie began pulling away. Rather than step fully away, however, she stopped before their connection could be broken.

It wasn’t the first hug they’d shared. Or even the hundredth. But this *was* the first time she’d ever looked up at him the way she was now.

Confusion, fear, curiosity, guilt....

As Logan’s gaze remained locked with hers, he found a spectrum of emotions staring back at him. But the one thing that made his heart begin to thump and his dick standing up and taking notice...

Heat.

He wasn't blind, nor was he stupid. Plenty of women had thrown that same type of look his way over the years. But never this woman. Never...

"Nat..." Her name feathered softly across his lips.

She blinked, the quick drop of her lashes effectively ending the spell they'd both fallen victim to. Pulling out of his gentle hold, the smile on her startled face looking suspiciously forced.

"I-I should get the lasagna before it burns." The perfect excuse. "Do, uh...do you need help putting the top back on, or—"

"Nah, I've got this." Logan schooled his own expression. "You go do whatever you need to do. I'll be in shortly."

"Okay." A quick, nervous lick of her lips. "Just come into the kitchen when you're done. It's nice out, so I thought we could fill our plates and then go sit outside to eat. I-If that's okay with you, of course."

"Sure." He nodded with a tight grin. "Sounds great to me."

"Perfect."

"Perfect."

Their gazes remained locked for a few more awkward breaths before she spun on her Converse-covered heels and disappeared through the room's open doorway.

WHAT. The. Fuck?

Logan's smile fell the second Natalie's back was to him. It took a full ten seconds after she left the room for him to regain the ability to move.

Oh, this is bad. So, so bad.

Turning away from the doorway, he ran a hand over the scruff on his jaw on his way back to the dryer. Jesus, he'd really fucked up this time. What the hell had he been thinking, holding her close like that?

Fantasizing about Hunter's widow was one thing. But *acting* on those fantasies...

Relax, Casanova. A hug does not a blow job make.

Only the hug hadn't been what caused his lower belly to tingle. It wasn't a hug that had left his thoughts whirling. And it wasn't a hug that had his dick so swollen the damn thing felt like it would burst free from his zipper any second.

It was the look.

Natalie had never looked at him that way before. Her gaze had never held even the tiniest sliver of heat or attraction when turned his way.

But just now, when she been standing there with her arms draped loosely around his waist, she'd been looking up at him as if she wanted nothing more than for him to kiss her.

Or maybe she hadn't wanted that at all. Maybe he'd imagined the look because that's what he'd *wanted* to see.

"You about done in there?" The hollered question came from a place he couldn't see.

“Yep!” he lied a little too cheerfully.

As Logan hurried to put the dryer back together again, his mind continued traipsing through the string of possible explanations for what he thought he’d seen.

Perhaps it was nothing more than a byproduct of the long day he’d had. He *was* pretty tired, after all. So maybe...maybe it was simply a case of his eyes playing tricks on him.

Or maybe it had nothing to do with his eyes. Maybe it was the hug, itself.

Logan couldn’t deny it had meant more to him than she could ever know. The feel of her in his arms, the scent of her favorite lotion mixed with the sweet smell of her hair...

Everything about that moment had felt so perfect—so *right*—he could’ve gotten caught up in his own hidden desires. So maybe he really had imagined the look of attraction crossing over Natalie’s gorgeous face.

It was the only thing that made any sense.

Nat wasn’t attracted to him. She didn’t want him the same way he wanted her. She couldn’t. And yet...

You didn’t imagine a damn thing. It was there, and it was fucking real.

Logan’s heart pounded as he gave the last bolt an extra turn. Dropping the wrench into the toolbox at his feet, he gripped the edge of the dryer and pushed it back to its rightful place with ease.

But he didn’t immediately let go.

With a tight hold on the frame’s smooth, rounded edge, he locked his elbows tight and hung his head low between his tense shoulders.

Jesus, man. Pull yourself together. You can’t let her see you like this!

Eyes squeezed shut, Logan used every ounce of strength he had to clear the hurricane of thoughts and emotions spiraling around inside him. For a split second, he considered bailing on dinner. But couldn’t—wouldn’t—do that to her.

Not when she’d already gone through the trouble of making it, and he’d already promised to stay.

You leave now, she’s going to know something’s up.

Yeah, if she didn’t already feel as thrown off balance as he did, his cutting out early would definitely raise suspicions. And if she suspected something was wrong, she’d ask questions.

Questions he sure as fuck didn’t want to answer.

Omitting the truth was one thing. But looking the most important person

in his world square in the eyes and flat-out *lying*... That was something Logan simply couldn't do.

With no other choice, he sucked it up and pushed it all aside. He could make it through a helping or two of lasagna, pretending as if everything was A-okay. He'd been doing it for the last two-plus years, and he'd gotten pretty damn good at it, too.

If he did say so himself.

This was proven minutes later as they were sitting on Natalie's patio enjoying the delicious meal she'd prepared. Though things had admittedly been a bit awkward when he'd first joined her in the kitchen, once they'd settled themselves outside and began to eat, Logan once again felt like the master of deception.

And boy, wasn't *that* something to be proud of.

"What do you think of the new recipe?"

Logan swallowed the heaping bite he'd just taken and nodded emphatically. "This is seriously the best lasagna I have ever eaten."

"Really? Thanks." Natalie smiled. "It was my mom's recipe. Although I'm pretty sure she got it from my grandma. I'd have to ask Tessa to be sure. She found it in a box of old cookbooks she had stored away."

"How is your sister?" he asked with genuine curiosity.

He liked Tessa Baker. Like Natalie, her older sister was pretty, smart, and even more of a smartass than Nat.

"She's good. Her new practice seems to be going really well."

"That's right." Logan took a quick sip of iced tea. "I forgot she opened her own office downtown. She's keeping pretty busy, then?"

Tessa, who was two years older than Natalie, was a family psychologist who specialized in relationship counseling. From what she'd shared with Logan in passing, Tess had left the multi-discipline medical group she had been working for to branch out on her own.

"Most days." Nat nodded. "I think she said her schedule's full three of the five days, and the other two are getting close to being half-booked."

"Nice."

"Yeah. I'm really happy for her."

A stretch of thick silence passed as the two became lost in their own thoughts. For a while, they ate in silence, finishing off the lasagna before moving on to the chocolate cake she'd made the night before.

The uncomfortable pause in dialogue was interrupted a few minutes later

when several short, high-pitched squeals sounded from somewhere high in the distance.

The twin dimples in Natalie's flawless cheeks deepened with the sweetest of smiles. "Sounds like someone's hungry."

I fucking love that smile.

"Sounds like it," Logan agreed. He'd recognized the noise, as well. Known as a juvenile Bald Eagle's peal call, the sound was typically made when the baby bird was hungry.

"Mama better hurry." He glanced at the sky around them. "It's almost dark, and Bald Eagle's almost never fly at night."

"Okay, so *I* knew that, but I grew up around here.' Natalie tilted her head with an assessing gaze. "But how does a boy from small-town Iowa know so much about them? The Navy make you take a class on the country's national bird or something?"

"No, smart ass." Logan wiped his mouth with a paper napkin before dropping it in the center of his empty plate. "I'll have you know, Bald Eagles are quite common in Iowa, where I grew up. Especially during the winter."

"Really?"

"Yes, ma'am." He flashed her a smile, relieved to have fallen back into their usual, easy conversation. Settling into his patio chair, he rested an ankle over one knee and gave up a tiny piece himself he hadn't shared with her before now. "Ft. Madison, where I grew up, is in the southeastern corner of the state and runs along the banks of the Mississippi River."

"Ahh...that makes sense." Understanding seemed to click. "They need the water."

"They need the *fish* in the water," he smirked playfully. "Fun fact, the Balds are so common in that area, the city actually named a park after them."

"Really? That's cool."

"Eagle's Nest Park." Logan's lips spread into a reminiscing smile. "God, I must've spent a years' worth of hours there as a kid." A tightness filled his chest as old ghosts worked their way inside. "My parents fought a lot back then. They divorced when I was fourteen. But before they split, when the yelling would get really bad, I'd ride my bike the four blocks to the park and stay until dark. Sometimes a little later."

"I'm sorry things were rough with your parents," Natalie offered softly. "But I'm glad you had a safe place to go when you needed an escape." She paused a moment before asking, "What was your favorite part about the

park?”

A collage of memories surfaces, making his faltered smile return. “All of it, really. It had the normal things like swings and all that. But the entire structure was built from wood. There was a fort with one of those bridges made of planks and chains. You know, the kind that bounced and swung with every step?”

“Those always terrified me.” Natalie chuckled, adding a muttered, “Probably still would.”

“It scared me, too, the first time I walked on it. But I got over it pretty quick.” A huff of a laugh. “My friends and I would race to see who could make it across the fastest.”

“And I bet you won every time.”

“Not every time.” One corner of his mouth lifted. “I lost. Once. Because I tripped.”

She laughed again, her delicate shoulders bouncing with the heartwarming sound. Staring across from him, she started to say something else, but a long, hard yawn stole the words that had been a hair’s breadth away from falling off her tempting lips.

Natalie put a polite hand over her open mouth, and when the yawn had subsided, she offered a heartfelt, “I’m so sorry. That came out of nowhere.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.” He checked his watch, shocked to see they’d been sitting outside for over an hour. “Damn. That time flew past.”

“Yeah, it did.” But then Natalie groaned. “And I still have so much work I need to do before I can even think about going to bed.”

“The new account?”

A nod. “Mr. Schwartz sent me home early today so I could look over the company’s last two audit reports. But I still have half of the second one to finish going over, which means a few more hours of work for me.”

“Well, shit. You should’ve said something earlier.” He pushed himself to his feet, immediately gathering up the plates, forks, and napkins from the small outdoor table. “I could’ve fixed the dryer and left.”

Natalie took her time standing, picking up their half-empty glasses without urgency. “I didn’t say anything, because I wanted you to have a nice meal for a change.”

“Hey, now. I take offense to that.”

“Really? When was the last time you ate something green?” As an afterthought, she hurried to add, “And the salad you had tonight doesn’t

count.”

Logan pressed his lips back together because...yeah. Before the delicious Caesar salad he'd eaten tonight, he honestly *couldn't* remember the last time he had something green. And the vixen arching a cocky brow his way knew it.

Because she knows you better than you know yourself.

Balancing the short stack of dishes in the crook of one arm, he held the back door open while she passed by. “Pretty sure I had a green Life Saver the other day,” he teased, just to get a rise out of her.

“Nice try.” Natalie walked across the kitchen and carefully set the two glasses in the otherwise empty farmhouse sink. “You can just set those in here,” she referred to his haul. “I’ll deal with them later.”

“You have work to do. I can wash them real quick before I—”

“Not a chance.” She took the dishes from his hands and put them in the sink herself. “I’m pretty sure I’ve gotten enough free labor from you for one night. Or more like a lifetime.”

“Told you a million times, I don’t mind.”

“I do, though.”

The soft-spoken words were so low, Logan thought for a moment he’d imagined them. But then those eyes he loved so much found his once more, and he knew he hadn’t misheard a damn thing.

Resting her lower back against the counter behind her, Natalie wore an expression of gratitude and remorse as she crossed her arms at her front. “I honestly don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay you for all you’ve done these last couple years.” Her delicate throat worked with a hard swallow. “But I also know why you’re always so willing to drop everything to rescue me from my latest crisis.”

She did? “You do?”

How the hell could she possibly—

“Hunter told me.” A sad smile lifted the corners of her rosy lips. “At our wedding reception. We were dancing, and he looked over at you chatting it up with Archer and Lucky. Hunt told me he’d bullied you into promising to take care of me if something ever happened to him.”

Ah, hell. “He, uh...” Logan cleared his suddenly thick throat. “He told you about that, huh?”

For a second there, he thought she’d somehow figured out the truth about his feelings. The fear she was going to tell him to get the fuck out of her

house had been instant.

But talking about this—with her—was damn near just as terrifying.

“We told each other everything,” Natalie confessed. “Well, everything except all that classified SEAL stuff. But yeah. Hunt told me he needed to know I’d be taken care of if the worst happened. And I have been, thanks to you.” Her eyes glistened with what he suspected were burgeoning tears, but she blinked them away before they could fully form. “You’ve been nothing short of amazing, Logan. And I’ll never forget that.”

“But?” Because his gut was screaming one of those three-letter bastards was headed his way.

“But, I think you’ve done more than enough to repay any debt you feel you owed him. And if he were here, he’d tell you the very same thing. I know he would.”

Okay, so maybe she *was* about to kick his ass out. Sure as hell sounded like it, anyway. Not that he could blame her.

He’d overstepped, and now she felt uncomfortable around him. Now she was asking him to back off. Even so, he had to know for sure.

“Where’s this coming from, Nat?” Logan rested his hands low on his hips.

“Nowhere, really. It’s just...” A low exhale. “Earlier, when I was in here and you were finishing up with the dryer, I realized...this isn’t fair to you.”

“What isn’t fair?”

“This.” She motioned between them. “Us.”

“Us?”

“You know what I mean.” She gave a roll of her eyes that made him want to both laugh and spank her ass, all at the same time.

“Actually, I don’t know what you mean.”

They’d never been an “us”. No matter how often he’d wished otherwise.

“This. Tonight.” Natalie motioned toward the laundry room doorway behind him. “You should be able to go home after a long day of work and relax. Not rush through a shower so you can run over here to help me.” Her shoulders dropped with a sigh. “And I know I’m the one who called and asked you to come, and I realize I even went as far as bribing you with food to get you here. But I just feel like I’ve been monopolizing a lot of your free time lately, and I need you to know that stops now.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m not going to keep calling you for every little thing that needs fixing.

Hell, I got along just fine when Hunt was alive. I mean, you guys would be gone a month at a time...sometimes even more...and I survived. So I should be able to take care of myself now, too.” She added an emphasized, “I *can* take care of myself.”

He knew he’d fucked up. The second she left that fucking laundry room, Logan had known. And apparently their shared moment had shaken her up as badly as it had him.

Enough she was basically asking for some distance where he was concerned.

Goddamnit.

“Nat, I’m—”

Logan started to say he was sorry. Was prepared to do whatever he needed to do, say whatever needed saying to explain away his unacceptable behavior.

But before he could get the rest of his apology out, Natalie had already started to put his worried mind at ease.

“I’m not saying we can’t still be friends or hang out,” she said in a hurry. “Or share a decent meal now and then.” A playful lift of her lips. “I’m just trying to say you don’t have to worry about me constantly bombarding you with handyman requests anymore. And while I truly appreciate everything you’ve done for me, I think I’ve become a little *too* dependent on you.”

“Too dependent?” He frowned.

The determined woman gave a small dip of her chin. “I feel like I’m taking advantage of you.” Her tongue darted out, swiping nervously along her bottom lip. “I feel like I’m taking advantage of the promise you made to Hunt.”

And there it was. She wasn’t pissed about the hug. Wasn’t upset that they’d stared into each other’s eyes longer than was socially acceptable.

She felt bad because *she* thought she was taking advantage of *him*.

Ah, Nat. You are so, so mistaken.

Stepping forward, Logan needed her to hear the truth in his next words more than he needed his own breath. “You’re not taking advantage of a fucking thing, Nat. If I didn’t want to be here, I wouldn’t be. Plain and simple.”

“I know you feel responsible for what happened to him, Logan.”

That hold she had on herself tightened, and damn if it didn’t make his fingers twitch to reach for her.

It should be my arms around her.

“I was the one in charge of the mission.”

“Secretary Webb told me everything that happened that day.” She gave a tiny shrug. “As much as he could, anyway.”

“Then you don’t know everything.”

“I know enough.” That slightly dimpled chin jutted with the challenge. “I know the team was ambushed. I know the shot came from a place you and the others couldn’t have possibly seen prior to. I know you were right by his side from the minute he got shot until...” She didn’t finish the sentence because there was no need. “You’re not the reason Hunter died, Logan. In fact, from what Secretary Webb shared with me, you’re the only reason my husband stayed alive as long as he did.”

Natalie’s gorgeous face lost focus, and it took Logan a second to realize it was because his own damn eyes were starting to fill. Almost instantly, he began to blink, his lids moving at high-speed to clear the unwanted rush of emotion away.

When Natalie had first begun this little heart-to-heart, he’d been sure she was pissed about...*whatever* it was that had passed between them earlier. But as usual, the caring, selfless woman had pulled the rug right out from under him.

She wasn’t tossing his ass out. The misguided woman was trying to fire his fix-it man services because she’d somehow convinced herself she was taking advantage of him.

Trust me, sweetheart. You’re not the one taking advantage.

And damn if he’d stand here another second longer while she obviously believed she was.

That apologetic look in her eyes was killing him. She obviously believed the bullshit she was spewing, and he’d be damned if he let her think she’d done a single fucking thing wrong.

Eyes on hers, Logan dug deep into her gaze as he took another step forward. “You’re right.” A sharp nod. “I did make that promise to Hunt the day you two got married. And I’d make it a million times over. Not just because he was my friend...but because I care about you, too.” His insides churned as he added a daring, “I care a whole fucking lot.”

“Logan—”

“I’m not finished.” His pointed gaze held hers. “I still feel a certain loyalty to Hunt, sure. But after the team got our walking papers”—a twisted

web he was still working to unravel—“there wasn’t even a question as to where I was going to move.”

Her glassy stare met his as Natalie’s adorable face twisted with confusion. “But...why?”

“I told you.” He was standing inches from her now. “I care about you.”

A single tear escaped the corner of her eye, and before he thought better of it, Logan was reaching up to wipe it away. His thumb whispered across her smooth skin, the warm droplet disappearing with the gentle move.

Natalie slowly reached up, her delicate fingers wrapping around his thick wrist. Her watery gaze remained locked as she whispered back, “I care about you, too, Logan. Which is why I don’t want you to feel obligated—”

“I’m not here because I feel obligated, sweetheart. I’m here because there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. Funny thing was he couldn’t bring himself to wish them back.

Natalie swallowed but said nothing. With his eyes still on hers, Logan could see the rise and fall of her luscious breasts in his peripheral. Could tell the way her breathing had shallowed, her lungs fueled by the very same nervous energy threatening to consume him.

His gaze lowered to her lips.

Full and bow-shaped, they parted slightly with what he could’ve sworn was a tiny hitch of a breath. Dusty rose was their color, and he just bet they tasted as sweet as they looked.

And God, did he want to taste her.

Logan leaned in as Natalie lifted her chin upward. Her lids fell shut, their mouths touching in the lightest of kisses. And then—

A car horn began to honk loudly, the sudden, repetitive noise obliterating what was left of the moment.

Noah jerked back. Natalie did the same. For a moment, they simply stood there. Both completely dumbfounded by what had almost happened.

When they *did* recover from the shock of unexpected turn of events, they both began talking at once.

“I’m so sorry!”

“I shouldn’t have done that!”

A united pause and then...

“I’m sorry, Nat.” Logan shook his head. “I don’t...” A rough hand over his jaw. “Hell, I-I don’t know *what* that was.”

“I, uh...” She gave her lips a nervous lick. “I’m pretty sure the kids call *that* a kiss.”

Without conscious thought, Logan’s tongue swiped along his own mouth, the flavor of chocolate and something uniquely Natalie nearly bringing him to his knees.

Doing his best to become a statue to avoid doing something stupid like taking her in his arms and going for more, he swallowed hard before trying to explain why he’d lost his damned mind and kissed her.

“I know what it’s called.” Another swallow. “That’s not what I—”

“I know what you meant, Logan. I just have a tendency to use sarcasm when I get nervous.”

Despite the situation—or the fact that he’d made the person he cared most for in the world nervous—Logan felt his lips twitch with the urge to smile. “Know that, too, sweetheart.”

The endearment slipped, but they both chose to ignore it and move on.

“Right. Sorry. I guess my head’s just kind of...” Her voice trailed with a frown. “Wait. Is that...that’s not *your* truck’s horn, is it?”

Logan tilted his head and listened closely. He’d been so wrapped up in what was going on between them, he hadn’t bothered to pay close attention to

—
Son of a...

“Shit.” He spun around, Natalie right on his heels as he ran from the kitchen and through the living room to the front door. Pulling it open, he made sure not to let it slam shut in her face before running outside.

It took no time at all to see the reason for the annoying alarm...

Natalie gasped from behind him. “Oh my god!”

His truck was still parked in the same spot on the street. Natalie’s car was parked in her narrow driveway.

And from what Logan could tell from her front stoop, at least two of the tires had been slashed on both vehicles.

Frost Avionics Executive Conference Room
One week later...

NATALIE CLOSED THE FOLDER ON THE LAST SPREADSHEET OF THE DAY AND fell back into the expensive leather chair. After giving her sandpapered eyes a good rub, she pushed the heels of her palms against the enormous mahogany conference table and rolled herself backward far enough to stand.

A quick glance at the wall-mounted clock near the front of the room showed it was after seven, which explained why she was so exhausted. She'd been staring at numbers, spreadsheets, and expense reports for ten straight hours.

Eyes spent, she was tired and hungry. All she wanted to do now was to reorganize the stacks in front of her, so it was ready for tomorrow and go home.

Home.

Her gut clinched with trepidation as the word fluttered through her mind. Not because she was afraid to go there after what had happened to both hers and Logan's tires last week. Although she'd been plenty scared when it had first happened.

No, Natalie found herself dreading tonight's ride home because she knew...

Logan won't be there.

Just as he hadn't been the past three nights.

She ground her back teeth together, angry at herself for still feeling this way. Pissed that she was even acknowledging the fist of disappointment squeezing her heart.

Because she shouldn't feel this way. *She shouldn't.* Not after already having spent the past three nights alone.

Not when you all but kicked his sexy ass to the curb.

She'd done exactly that, too. Four, almost five days ago, now, Natalie had stood in the middle of her living room and all but told her closest friend he was no longer allowed to stay.

And she'd felt like the worst human being on earth ever since.

He was only trying to help. He just wanted to keep you safe.

The truth in that only added to the guilt she already felt.

At first, the former SEAL's presence in her home had been a godsend. An instant and complete sense of safety she'd only experienced one other time in her life.

A time when another American hero hadn't just slept under the same roof as her, but also in her bed.

Logan would sleep in your bed. All you'd have to do is ask.

Natalie froze, the folders in her hands hovering over their rightful place inside one of the many boxes. Though she'd never admit it out loud, it wasn't the first time her subconscious had made the suggestion.

But it was the first time she'd heard the words in Hunter's voice.

I can't do that to you, Hunt. I would never—

I'm gone, baby girl. The best thing you can do for me now is to be happy. And Logan can do that for you.

A well of unshed tears threatened to spill, but Natalie blinked them away before they could ruin the papers held tightly in her hands. Those weren't Hunter's words. It was just her overactive hormones trying to manipulate her into making a move on a man she had no business seeing in that way.

If you shouldn't be thinking of Logan like that, then why is that all you've thought about since that near-kiss in your kitchen?

With a rough shove, she put the reports into their corresponding folders and tossed them angrily into the nearest box.

So what if she'd spent the entire last week thinking of a barely-there kiss that had literally made her toes curl? And who cares if the memory of Logan's hot breath hitting her lips a millisecond before their mouths touched had her toes curling in her shiny black heels this very second?

It didn't mean anything. It *didn't*.

And she needed to put it out of her head and move the hell on. Because this kind of obsession wasn't healthy. Especially when the object of that obsession was her closest and dearest friend.

So there it was.

Decision made, Natalie silently sentenced Logan to life in the friend zone without the possibility of parole. For his sake and hers.

Because she couldn't keep doing this. She couldn't keep torturing herself morning and night with questions that would forever go unanswered.

Things like, what if she'd stayed in that laundry room—in his arms—rather than turning tail and running? Or what if she'd lifted onto her tiptoes and slammed her mouth to his?

Would he have kissed her back? Held her close? Lifted her on top of the washing machine and had his way with her right there?

Or the most agonizing mystery she wished like hell she could solve...

What would have happened if the person who'd sliced and diced their tires had picked a different block? What if he'd gone to a different part of the city, and the unexpectedly wonderful moment she and Logan had shared wasn't cut short by that damned truck alarm?

You know exactly what would've happened.

Natalie shook her head—and the thought—away. She was tired and hungry, and it was a complete and total waste of her time to even imagine an alternate ending to that night.

The fact of the matter was Logan's alarm *had* gone off, and the moment had effectively been destroyed. The. Freaking. End.

Except...

I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop thinking about *him*.

Even now, as she was actively trying to fill her mind with anything else, all Natalie saw was the way he'd reacted in that moment.

The switch from would-be lover to warrior had been an instant, seamless transition. Without hesitation, Logan had sprang into action, having instructed her to go inside, lock the doors, and call nine-one-one.

On his way out the door, he'd drawn the concealed pistol he always kept low on his back and vanished into the shadows. The weapon held so naturally in his powerful fist, it was like an extension of the man's hand.

A few minutes later, when he'd returned from checking her home's perimeter a few minutes later, she'd let him inside. The pair had spent the

next fifteen minutes waiting for the cops to arrive.

During that time, Logan had asked her ridiculous questions. Things like whether she knew of anyone who'd have a reason to want to come after her like this.

To which she'd responded with a sarcastic...

Uh...last I checked, I'm not the former Special Forces bad ass with countless enemies all over the world. Oh, and in case it's not clear, that would be you.

Of course, the infuriating man had simply stared back at her with an infuriatingly arched brow and waited. That expectant look on his handsome face was one she was powerless to deny. Still, her answer had been a resounding no.

She didn't have enemies. Natalie certainly couldn't think of anyone who'd want to hurt her. Not like that. Not in *any* way.

Which, in her eyes, left only two options...

It was a random attack, or someone had targeted Logan, and her tires were just collateral damage. And she refused to even think about someone trying to purposely hurt Logan.

The man was literally the kindest, most generous guy she knew. A fact solidified by the phone call he'd made that night while they'd waited for the cops to arrive.

Unbeknownst to her, the former Frogman had a contact within one of the local auto repair shops. One brief phone call later yielded an arrangement to replace the damaged tires for both their vehicles—something Natalie still intended to pay Logan back for, despite his objections to the contrary.

Then, the man whose lips had so lightly caressed hers minutes before the madness had ensued, insisted he sleep on her couch. And she'd let him.

For those first three days following the whole tire-slashing incident, Logan had been a constant presence in her life. He drove her to and from work, only leaving her to go to his own job. As soon as he was done for the day, he'd drive straight to Frost Avionics.

Using the temporary visitor's badge she'd managed to get for him, Logan would ride up to the Executive Floor—otherwise known as the building's fifth floor—and he'd patiently wait until she was ready to leave.

And then he'd driven her home.

Home.

There was that word again. Only her house didn't really feel like a home.

If she were being honest, it never had.

It does when he's in it.

Natalie's movements faltered again, but this time forced herself to ignore the truthful thought as she continued stacking more folders. Her lips curved into a disbelieving smirk. The thought was so ridiculous it was laughable.

The man had his own house and a couch of his own. And given the palpable tension that had filled the space between them that last morning together, this little break between friends was probably not the worst idea in the world.

It actually is the worst idea in the world, and you're an emotional mess. This is Logan we're talking about, Nat. The guy was Hunt's best friend, for crying out loud. You have to fix this.

Natalie blew out a breath and lidded the second-to-last box. Shoulders falling, she realized her inner voice was only half right.

She did need to fix things with Logan, but not because he was Hunt's best friend.

Because he was *hers*.

Gathering the stack of files she'd already gone over, Natalie was sliding them back into the last available cardboard box on the table when a familiar male voice sounded from behind.

"I have to say, I'm impressed. I think you may actually work longer hours than I do."

She turned her head toward the man standing in the doorway. Billionaire entrepreneur Dennis Atkinson was Frost Avionics' Chief Financial Officer. He was also Glenn Frost's business partner.

The two men shared a fifty-one, forty-nine split of the corporation's controlling interest. Of course, given the company's name, Frost possessed the higher of the two.

"Mr. Atkinson." Natalie greeted him with a polite smile. "I didn't realize you were still here."

"A boss's work is never done, I'm afraid. And please, Mrs. Garrison. Call me Dennis." The forty-something man stepped farther into the room. "Mr. Atkinson is my father."

"Only if you'll call me Natalie."

If you don't want people addressing you as Mrs., maybe you should stop wearing Hunter's ring.

ALL RIGHT, NATALIE,” DENNIS AGREED. “YOU HAVE A DEAL.” HE HELD OUT his hand, as if to solidify the agreement.

With a slight chuckle, Natalie felt obligated to side return the gesture. Sliding her palm against his, she gave the man’s large hand a single shake. “Deal.”

Tall, handsome, with light blue eyes that felt as if they were staring straight through her, the powerful CFO made his way closer to where she stood. As usual, he was dressed to impress with his tailored blue dress pants, light blue button-down, and blue-gray sports coat.

His brown hair was short on the sides and back, but thicker and a bit longer on top, and held a hint of silver at the temples. As usual, every strand on the man’s attractive head seemed to be in its place, and if Natalie wasn’t mistaken—and she was pretty sure she wasn’t—there was definite interest swirling around inside his slightly arrogant gaze.

It was there yesterday, too. And the day before that. And the day before that...

The well-known man hadn’t said or done anything inappropriate for the workplace, and he hadn’t exactly made her feel uncomfortable, per se. It was just a sort of vibe he put off.

Intentional or not, the man was gorgeous, single, and he had a bank account so full the guy could finance a small country all its own. Yes, for all intents and purposes, Dennis Atkinson was the quintessential perfect man.

Yet when Natalie looked at him, she felt...

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

“Excellent.” He kept a strong hold of her hand a moment longer before slowly releasing his grip and letting her pull herself free. “You finally making a dent in all this?” His chin lifted toward the boxes on the table behind her.

“I think so.” Natalie went back to what she was doing before he showed up. “Audits like these can take weeks, sometimes months, to complete. Depending.”

“On?”

She picked up the last of the files still needing gone over and shrugged. “Lots of things, really. The size of the company definitely plays a part.”

Natalie began placing the folders in with the others. But as she started to adjust one of the many in her hands, a file from the center of the stack slid out of the bottom of the pile, landing neatly in the box resting on the table below her.

Wanting to keep them all in order, she reached inside the box and started to pick it back up. She stopped mid-grab when she realized this folder was different than the others.

This is wrong. This folder doesn't belong here.

She frowned. Every other file in the mix was clearly marked with built-in labels specific to its contents. The one in her hand was blank.

Not only that, but all the other folders were also the same bland shade of tan. The unmarked folder in front of her was a light, creamy beige.

Enough of a difference to notice, but not so noticeable it was obvious when mixed with the rest.

Curious by nature, Natalie kept the folder in place inside the box and flipped it open. The contents she found were more than a little suspicious.

Hand-written notes. Pictures of planes and plane parts. Reports that looked like they'd been hastily copied, some of the captured images crooked with black space showing at their corners.

What is all this?

Per regulations, the only things that were supposed to be included in corporate files such as these were the company's official printed reports, graphs, and of course, spreadsheets. Things like scribbled notes on photographs were not allowed.

A small, scribbled note on top of the folder's contents stole her focus, and Natalie's gaze zeroed in on its words.

*FROST WA-800
Recert request vs fuel usage/cost
Embez? Traff? Both?*

THE CRYPTIC NOTE MADE NO SENSE TO HER AT FIRST, BUT THEN...

Embez? Embezzlement, maybe? But what is Traff?

Those unspoken questions spawned even more.

Did whoever wrote this mean they thought someone at the company was involved in some sort of illegal trafficking ring? Traffic was the first thing that came to mind, but when she put it together with possible embezzlement, she instantly thought of...

Trafficking.

And if that was the case—if the other contents included with the note were proof of criminal activity taking place within Frost Avionics, then why hide it inside a bunch of accounting files?

Why not take it all straight to the police?

“Bigger the company, the longer the audit, huh?” Dennis’s voice reminded her the man was still there.

“Huh?” Natalie’s heart smacked against her ribs as she rushed to shut the folder before he could see it. “Oh, yeah.” She smiled a bit too widely. “Although sometimes that’s not always the case either. Again, it all just—”

“Depends.” The GQ-looking CFO finished for her with a grin.

Damn. Even the slash of a dimple caving in on his left cheek did nothing to spark interest in her underwhelmed libido.

Because he’s not the one you really want.

And just like that, all thoughts of mystery files and cryptic notes vanished, replaced by the image of Logan’s tempting face.

Sexy, rugged, panty-dropping Logan. And in her mind’s eye, she was back in that moment in her kitchen. Back to noticing every shade of blue and green in those incredible, soul-stealing eyes of his.

Eyes that had been looking down at her as if she were his world.

“Natalie? Are you okay?”

The hand waving in front of her face erased the memory’s imagined visual, snapping her back to the present.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Dennis slid his hands into his pockets and tilted his head just so. “Everything okay?” His attentive gaze slid to the box and back up to her.

“Oh, yeah.” Another forced chuckle. “Everything’s great. I-I just thought I put a file in the wrong box. That’s all.”

“And the audit? I trust all is as it should be on that front?”

Like I’d risk my career by telling you if it wasn’t.

“I’m sorry. I’m not really allowed to—”

“Say no more.” Dennis raised a hand to keep her from continuing. “My apologies. I guess you’ve spent so much time here this past week, I feel like you’re a permanent part of the team.” When Natalie didn’t respond, he added, “You could be, you know? One phone call, and you’d have your own office, company expense account, credit card...”

Was this guy serious?

“I sure hope you aren’t suggesting I accept a bribe, Dennis. Because something like that could get us both in a lot of trouble.”

“A bribe?” He threw his head back in a pretentious laugh. “Oh, heavens no. I was trying to offer you a job.”

“I already have a job.”

The man smiled. The same hand she’d shook minutes earlier running across his smooth jaw. “I know. I’ve asked around about you, Natalie. And I know the kind of employee you are for Schwartz. I think, and Glenn agrees, you’d be an even more valued part of *our* team.”

He’d spoken to Glenn Frost about her? *The* Glenn Frost?

Okay, even Natalie could admit that made her feel pretty cool. Still...

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not looking to leave Schwartz and Associates anytime soon.”

“Understood.” Dennis tipped his head her way. “And respected.” An awkward pause in conversation blanketed the room before he asked, “On a totally different note, there’s a retirement party starting downstairs in about...” He paused to check a watch that probably cost more than her car. “Now, actually.” Dennis’s chest shook with a huffed laugh. “You’re welcome to join the crew in our celebration. All the food you can eat and an open bar, courtesy of Frost Avionics, of course.”

“Of course.” She grinned. “I appreciate the offer, but again, we’re not supposed to socialize with the clients or their employees outside the office while we’re actively conducting official business for said company.”

And before he asked, yes. She *had* memorized almost every policy in her own company’s employee handbook. Because that was the type of woman she was.

When she was in something, she was *all* in. Work...relationships...it didn’t matter.

Nope. We’re not going back to the topic of relationships. That is off limits for...the rest of the year. At least.

The voice in her head was right. She was done with getting caught up in her own head, done with stressing over this audit, and more than ready to be done with this bizarre day.

And the longer she stood here talking to Dennis, the longer the day would last.

You can’t leave until after he does. Otherwise, he’ll see you take that file.

Because she was definitely taking it home with her. Rules were one thing,

but if something was going on inside the company that directly impacted the safety of Frost Avionics' planes, then that meant potentially affecting people's lives.

And she knew better than most just how precious a gift life really was.

"Again, I apologize for not being more considerate of your position and why you're here," Dennis offered.

"It's okay." Natalie flashed him another quick smile, praying the man would just go to that overpriced party already, and leave her alone.

A moment later, she got her wish. Sort of.

"Well." He pulled his hands from his pockets and grinned. "I don't want to keep you any later than you already are." Turning away, Dennis sauntered toward the door with a swagger only a man of his status could pull off. "Have a good night, Natalie."

"You, too."

She watched and waited, her insides screaming when he stopped at the door and looked back at her. "I understand and respect the rules where fraternization with Frost employees is concerned. Perhaps we can plan a time to meet for drinks after the audit is complete." That overly attentive gaze of his slid to the boxes on the table. "Do you think you'll be done soon?"

Natalie did a quick mental run-through of what she still had left to do before filing her final report. "I think so. As long as nothing unexpected comes up"—*like a mystery file filled with things I'm dying to look at, for example*—"I should have everything wrapped up by the end of next week."

"Excellent." The interest was more than a little obvious now. "Okay, then. I assume I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be here with bells on."

Or police sirens, depending on what that file says.

With a parting wave of his hand, the man exited the room and headed toward the hallway housing the elevators. Natalie waved back, walking over to where her jacket and purse were hanging from a mounted hook on the wall near the door.

Being as inconspicuous as possible, she made sure Dennis was still out of sight as she carried her things back over to the table. After draping her jacket and small purse over the back of the chair next to her, she gave her surroundings another careful once-over.

If anyone saw her put that folder in her personal computer bag, it would open a whole can of worms. For the time being, Natalie needed to keep a lid

on it. At least until she'd had a chance to look it all over herself, first.

Seeing the coast was clear, she hurried to remove the folder from the box before sliding it into her padded bag. With it nestled next to her work computer she'd put into the bag earlier; Natalie zipped the bag closed and hoisted its padded strap over her shoulder.

Several minutes later, she was in her car and on the highway home.

NATALIE'S GAZE bounced between the road and her bag as she maneuvered through the thick Seattle traffic. She'd always loved a good mystery, and this was one that had dug its claws into her at first sight.

Watch it be something stupid, like a practical joke left by a man who had more money than God and a wandering eye.

Dennis Atkinson's face flashed before her.

She doubted a man like that would stoop to such a juvenile level as some silly office prank. She'd also all but convinced herself the folder wasn't anything more than something innocent, misplaced by a pimple-faced intern.

Unfortunately she wouldn't know for sure until she got the chance to sift through it all. And thanks to heavier-than-normal traffic—and an unexpected detour she'd no choice but to take—the twenty-minute drive home was going to take close to forty.

Natalie sighed. Normally this would be where she'd connect to her car's Bluetooth and make a call to Logan. But since he was why she needed a distraction in the first place...well, him and Flirty McFlirtsalot, calling him was out of the question.

Talking to him about Tessa or normal work stuff was one thing. Going to Logan to discuss being asked out by another man would just be...weird.

Not if you only thought of Logan as a friend and nothing more. Which means he must be something more.

Ready to knock her inner voice straight into the stratosphere, Natalie kept her eyes on the road while using her steering wheel's controls to make a call. As soon as the telltale beep sounded from the car's speakers, she gave the

appropriate command.

“Call Tessa.”

“Calling...Tessa.” A robotic female voice confirmed the vehicle was following the given command. Her sister’s voice came through after two rings.

“I was just thinking about you,” Tessa greeted cheerfully.

“Uh, oh. That’s scary.”

“What, that I was just thinking, or that it was about you?”

“Both.”

The two sisters’ laughs were nearly identical, which made them laugh even harder. She realized in that moment, this—her sister—was exactly what she’d needed.

“So what were you thinking about that had to do with me?”

“Oh, nothing big. Just that it had been over a week since we’d talked. Which is like a record for us, isn’t it?”

Natalie thought back and nodded. “I think it is.”

The two women usually talked at least a handful of times every week. Sometimes more. But between her work at Frost Avionic and the whole Logan-Kiss-Tires-Couch fiasco, Natalie had used her long work hours as an excuse to avoid having an actual phone conversation with her sister.

Because Tessa saw things in people most others didn’t. It’s what made her so good at her job. Having a shrink for a sibling, however...

That was a whole different story altogether.

“Sorry I haven’t called before now.” She really was. “Things have just been...crazier than normal.” It really had.

“It’s okay,” Tessa’s response was immediate. “I had a crazy week, too. I now only have four full-session slots open in my schedule.”

The pride in her sister’s voice was unmistakable. It was also shared tenfold.

“That’s great, Tess. Really. I’m so stinkin’ proud of you. Mom and Dad would be, too.” A rush of emotion took her by surprise., and it took Natalie a minute to swallow past it.

Luckily, Tessa picked up right where she’d left off.

“Aw, thanks, Sis. That means a lot. Oh, I almost forgot to ask. How is it working with two of Seattle’s richest men?”

“Technically, I don’t work with *either* of them,” she clarified. “I’ve only met Glenn Frost once, and that was only in passing.”

“And Atkinson? He’s the one I really want to know about. Is he as hot as his pictures?”

Natalie laughed. “He’s attractive,” she admitted. “He actually asked me out.”

“You’re kidding!” Tess clearly hadn’t been expecting that last part. “Wait...are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious.” Natalie chuckled.

“When? How? What did you say? Tell me everything.”

A wide grin spread across her face as she switched lanes to pass the car in front of her. God, she loved her sister.

“Maybe you should go with half-a-cup next time, yeah?” She couldn’t keep from teasing the other woman.

“I’m serious! You can’t just drop that bomb on me and not elaborate.”

Well get ready, ’cause it’s not the only bomb you’re gonna get hit with.

First things first, though...

“It was right before I left their corporate headquarters. Dennis came into the conference room where I’ve been working from and struck up a conversation. He said something about getting drinks sometime, to which I reminded him it’s against policy for me to hang out with or date anyone under his company’s employment.”

“Like...ever?”

“At least until I’ve filed my final report. And I’ll have to check, but I’m pretty sure that policy remains in place as long as I’m the one in charge of their account.”

“That sucks.” Tessa sounded disgruntled on her behalf. “You’d think they’d make an exception for a freaking billionaire.”

Natalie chuckled. “I’m sure Dennis could smooth-talk Mr. Schwartz into just about anything. But it would be a waste of both their times.”

“Why? Is Dennis a jerk or something?”

Something. Just not sure what.

“No, he’s been really nice so far.” Almost *too* nice. “He’s just...I don’t know. There’s just something about him. Or rather, there isn’t, which is the whole problem.”

“What?”

“Nothing about the man interests me.”

Looks, money, social status... She couldn’t care less about those things. It was that special connection she wanted. Like the one she’d had with

Hunter.

I won't settle for anything less.

"That's funny," Tess responded on cue. "Because there are a few *billion* things about the man that interest me."

"Hardy, har, har." Natalie flipped on her signal and took the next exit. "I'm serious, Sis. I mean, Dennis is good looking and all, but...I don't know. He just doesn't do it for me."

"What's Logan think? Did he say you should go out with Atkinson?"

Natalie felt her chest tighten. The conversation between sisters was about to turn serious.

"I haven't talked to Logan in a bit."

A pause and then, "How long's a bit?"

Natalie swallowed. "Tomorrow will be five days."

"Five days?" This clearly shocked her. "You guys barely go five *hours* without at least texting each other some dumb gif or meme. What gives?"

Lying would be so easy. Okay, not *easy*. Natalie never lied to Tess, which was why she hadn't called her before now.

She'd needed a few days without Logan under her roof to process all the crazy. If she'd called her sister that night—or even the day or two following—Natalie wasn't sure she would've been as willing to open up about everything.

Not so sure I'm ready now, either.

But she needed to talk it all out with someone. Usually that someone was Logan, but since he was the biggest part of the problem...

"Things with Logan have become..."

She stopped to consider the appropriate adjective to describe the relationship's shift. Not an easy task, since so many seemed to fit...

Awkward.

Scary.

Strange.

Exciting.

All of the above.

"They've become what?" Tessa prodded.

"Different." It seemed as good a word as any.

A long stretch of silence filled the car's interior before Tessa asked, "Different...*good*?"

The hopeful lift to her sister's tone didn't surprise Natalie in the least.

Tessa had made no secret about her feelings regarding Logan, even going so far as to revisit the topic every so often.

And every so often, when the conversation would arise, Natalie would make it very clear to her dear sister that she and Logan were just friends. At least, that used to be the case. But now...

“We kissed.” She ripped that band aid right off.

“You *what?* Holy shit, Nat!” Tess’s excitement was off the charts. “Why the hell didn’t you lead with that? That’s...that’s so much bigger than some dumb billionaire!”

Yeah, I thought so, too.

For the next few miles, Natalie went through the whole convoluted story. From the evil dryer, to the awkward moment with Logan in the laundry room...to the even *more* awkward conversation at dinner.

She pretty much went through the entire night from start to finish. The only thing Natalie didn’t share was the part where Logan had told her about his parents’ tumultuous marriage and how Eagle’s Nest Park had been his safe place.

His haven.

So yeah, that part of the evening was tucked safely away, hidden in a special place in her heart. Because that story was the first piece of Logan’s past he’d ever truly given her.

That’s because he’s spent the last two years making everything about you.

The truth in that only added to the already crushing guilt Natalie felt for the way she’d pushed him out of her house. She just prayed she hadn’t pushed him out of her life, too.

I need him to be in my life.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about the asshole slashing your tires before now,” Tessa admonished her when she got to the end of the story.

“It was late by the time the cops left, and there wasn’t anything you could do. Plus I knew you’d worry, and—”

“Damn straight, I’d worry! What if this guy comes back, Nat?”

“The cops said he did it in three other neighborhoods, too, so it’s not like he was coming after me or Logan specifically. And the detective in charge of the case said the offender has never returned to the same place twice.”

“Yeah, well there’s a first time for everything.” A loud sigh filled the car’s speakers before her sister’s voice softened. “Just promise me you’ll be

careful, okay?”

“I promise.” She meant it. “Now can we please back up to the part of the story where Logan’s lips were on mine?”

As far as Natalie was concerned, that was *way* more important than some random weirdo with a hard-on for tires.

“Ooh, yes, please!” Tessa’s excitement returned.

“I don’t even know how it happened. We were talking, and then all of a sudden I was in his arms and he was leaning in...” Her heart had been racing so fast. “And then the honking started, and I got really confused, and then the guilt hit, and the cops came, and...” A loud exhale. “I’ve just been...”

When she didn’t finish the thought, her sister prodded her along. “You’ve just been what, Nat?”

“Avoiding him.”

Her sister waited a beat before asking, “Has Logan reached out to you at all?”

“No.” And damn if that hadn’t hurt.

Can’t be mad when you’re the one who told him you needed some time to yourself.

“And you haven’t tried to call or text him at all in the last five days?”

Case in point.

“No.” A whispered admission.

“Ah, Nat.” Her sister’s tone oozed of disapproval. “You should call him.”

“And say what? ‘Sorry for the almost-kiss?’”

It wasn’t like she hadn’t picked up the phone a million times over the past few days. She’d wanted to call him. To apologize. Try to make things right...

Hear that deep, rumbly voice.

“If that’s really how you feel, then yes,” her sister told her bluntly. “That’s *exactly* what you should say to him. If for no other reason, you should tell him because the man deserves to hear the truth.” Tessa took a breath before asking, “So what is the truth, Nat? Are you sorry for the almost-kiss?”

Natalie parted her lips with full intentions of replying with a confident “Yes”. But what came out of her mouth—what she actually *said*—was...

“I don’t know.”

Part of her regretted the romantic moment, but only because she worried her actions had dishonored Hunter’s memory. But the other part... That part was only sorry things had stopped when they had.

And for the life of her, Natalie couldn't decide which part to listen to.

To some, the whole should she/shouldn't she debate would seem silly. But for Natalie, the decision of whether to pursue something more with Logan wasn't silly. It was monumental.

Choose the wrong path and...

I could lose him, too.

But that wasn't the only issue. If she did this, if she opened up to Logan about her burgeoning attraction, it would make him the first.

There'd been no one else since Hunter. She didn't flirt. Didn't go on any of the numerous online dating apps. Hadn't accepted even one of the offered dates she'd received from various men over the last couple years. And forget about sex...

God, I miss sex.

For a long time, she hadn't. From the day she'd stood at Hunter's grave and watched them lower that trident-adorned casket into the ground, Natalie had believed with all her heart that she'd never want any other man, ever again.

But now...

Now she found herself feeling the same sort of ache she used to feel with Hunt. Now she found herself dreaming again.

Dreaming. Fantasizing. Wishing.

Wanting.

Before when the need arose, she'd just let her trusty vibrator get the job done. But batteries and silicone could only offer a girl so much. And lately, that wasn't enough.

Real. Hot. Sweat.

That's what Natalie wanted. What she *needed*.

For the first time since being forced to forget every dream she'd ever had and start anew, Natalie found herself wanting to do it all again.

The dreams. The plans. The sex.

A future.

And when she imagined herself as a wife and mother—when she pictured herself in bed making love to a man she didn't want to live without—it was no longer Hunter's face smiling back at her.

It's Logan's.

And no matter how hard she'd tried, Natalie had no idea how to process that.

“Go back to that night,” Tessa instructed in her professional psychologist’s voice. “Put yourself back in that moment, right before you thought Logan was going to kiss you.”

Normally Natalie would balk at her sister’s attempt shrink her, but at this point, she was willing to do just about anything if it meant finding some direction.

“Are you in that moment?”

“I’m there.” She could see it so clearly, even as her focus remained locked on the road ahead.

“How are you feeling? Say the first thing that pops into your head.”

“Confused.”

“Okay, good. What else?”

“I don’t know...” Natalie went with the next word that came to her. “Nervous, I guess.”

“And?”

“And, what?”

“What else are you feeling?”

“Nothing.” *Everything.* “A lot of things. I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Yes, you do. You’re just not trying.”

“Yes, I am!”

“Then tell me what else you feel.”

“I don’t know!” Natalie’s voice rose higher than intended.

Not surprising, Tessa shot right back with an even louder, “Bullshit! First word, Nat. What the fuck else were you feeling when you thought Logan was going to kiss you?”

“Excited, okay?” Natalie blurted without conscious thought. “I felt...” *Oh, god.* “I felt excited.”

Tears began to well, that last part of the confession barely a whisper.

With a much softer, gentler tone this time, her sister asked her next question. “And what did you feel when his truck’s horn interrupted the moment before you could fully kiss him?”

Natalie kept one hand on the wheel as she used the other to wipe away the tears falling down her cheeks. Her chin quivered, her bottom lip trembled, but she did her best to respond.

“When I heard that h-horn, I f-felt...” Her voice cracked as grief and guilt threatened to take over. Clearing the thick knot from her throat, admitted softly, “God, Tess. I was so disappointed.”

A very long, very tense silence lingered. For a moment, she thought the call had lost its connection. But then Natalie heard a boisterous...

“Hallefreakinglujah!”

“Seriously?” She scowled. “This isn’t a reason for celebration, Tessa. I felt crushed that we didn’t get a chance to fully kiss, and then I felt like shit *because* I felt so crushed.” She gave her sister a moment to really let that sink in, since she clearly hadn’t processed the gravity of the situation the first time. “I mean, it’s Logan, Tess. Logan Hayes. *Hayes*.”

“I heard you.” Her sister’s voice was calm as an afternoon breeze. “I’m just not sure what your point is.”

Lord save me from this smartassed woman.

“Tess...” Natalie made the warning clear.

“I’m sorry, you’re right.”

“*Thank you.*”

“I shouldn’t celebrate. I should come over to your house and smack some sense into that thick, sweet, clueless skull of yours.”

“Clueless?” Natalie’s brows shot up. “So now we’ve resorted to name calling?”

“Oh, come on, Nat. It’s obvious you have feelings for the guy. And a person would have to be blind not to see those feelings are one hundred percent mutual.”

“Logan doesn’t see me like that.” An automatic response she’d been telling herself lately.

“Yes, because he’s the kind of guy who goes around kissing women he’s not attracted to. You’re right.” More sarcasm. “My bad.”

“Of course, Logan’s not like that,” she shot back. “I’m just saying we both got caught up in a moment, and now it’s over. The end.”

“If that’s true, then why are you still avoiding him?” Clearly meant to be rhetorical, Tessa didn’t even give her a chance to respond before she went on with, “Believe me, Sis. Logan *Hayes* is so far gone for you, he’s in a whole other hemisphere.”

“That’s not—”

“I’m serious, Natalie. You don’t see it, but I do. Have for a long damn time, now.”

“See what?” she demanded. “What exactly is it you think I’ve been missing?”

“Uh...the way the man looks at you, for starters. You don’t notice it,

because he doesn't *want* you to. But all those stolen glances and longing stares have been there, standing right in front of you this whole time."

Natalie's heart thumped so hard it physically hurt. Could what Tess was saying be true? Had Logan really been fighting the same powerful, primal need as her? Did he think about her when he laid his head down at night?

Does he dream about me, too?

"I don't...I mean, I haven't...I never noticed..." Her thoughts were so jumbled, it was hard to formulate a complete sentence. Thankfully, Tessa made sure she didn't have to.

"I know, sweetie," her sister empathized. "You didn't see it because you weren't ready to see it. But it's there, Nat. And as real and as big as all those thoughts you've got rolling around inside your head."

That last part had one corner of Natalie's lips curving. "So you're a mind reader, now. That must come in pretty handy in your profession."

The comment was meant to lighten the mood, but her sister didn't take the bait.

"It's not about reading minds, Nat. It's about understanding how human emotions affect the mind. And right now, your heart is full of guilt for something you have *no* business feeling guilty about, that there isn't room for anything else." Tessa quieted before adding, "Or *anyone* else."

She sniffed, swiping at another round of fresh tears as she made yet another turn. "It's not as easy as simply deciding to let go and move on."

"I never thought it was. I'm just saying Hunter's been gone two years, Nat. Two *years*. You've grieved. You've mourned. And now you're ready to move on, but—"

"Wow! That's really bright," Natalie interrupted as a set of blinding headlights filled her rearview mirror. Reaching up, she adjusted it, so the blinding reflection wasn't hitting her square in the eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Just some jerk who's following too close. I can't tell if they have their brights on, or they're those super bright LED kind. Either way, I'd appreciate it if they'd get off my ass."

"Bet you're thinking the same thing about me right about now, huh?" Tessa's teasing nature returned.

"No." Natalie's lips formed a small smile. "I know you're only saying all these things because you love me."

"Well yes, I do love you. But I'm telling you these things because they're

the *truth*. You like Logan. He's crazy about you. But you're scared to move on. It's perfectly natural after experiencing the loss of a spouse or significant other. But the fact that you allowed yourself to get as physically close to Logan as you did tells me you're a lot more ready than you think you are."

"Just because I haven't moved on before now doesn't mean I'm scared," she got defensive. "Maybe I just haven't met anyone I feel is worth all the time and effort a real relationship takes."

"The man moved to Seattle for you, Nat."

"Because he promised Hunt he'd look out for me, Tess."

"It may have started out as that, sure. But obligation isn't what I see on Logan's face when he's around you."

Too curious not to, Natalie asked, "And what is it you think you see?"

"A man who'd do anything for the woman he loves." Her sister didn't so much as hesitate. "But the most important question...one only *you* can answer...is what do you feel when you look at *him*?"

So many things.

And that was the crux of the problem.

But before she could attempt an answer that would make sense to her well-meaning sister, Tessa spoke up again.

"Hey, listen. I hate to cut this short, but I have some patient charts I need to finish up before bed. But I'm going to leave you with one final, parting thought to mull over."

Like she didn't have enough to sort through.

"What's that, oh wise one?"

"You're thirty-two, gorgeous, successful...and still in the prime of your life. Now I know you loved Hunter with all your heart, and that man worshiped the ground you walked on. But the sad truth of it is, he's gone, Nat. He's gone, but you aren't. And you and I both know Hunt wouldn't want you to spend every night holed up in that house with nothing but your memories to keep you company."

She's right, doll. I never could stand to see you sad.

No? Well maybe you should have thought about that before you went off and got yourself killed.

Didn't plan on leaving you, darlin'. That choice wasn't mine to make. But you still have choices, Nat. All kinds of choices. And I think you know what it is—who it is—you want.

I wanted you.

And you had me. For as long as you were meant to. But my time with you is over. It's someone else's turn to love you now. All you have to do is let them.

What if I don't know how?

“What if you don't know how to do what? Tessa's voice broke through.

Shit. She hadn't meant to say the words aloud. Of course, the fact that she'd been engaged in an imaginary argument with her dead husband probably didn't bode well for her state of mind either, so...yeah.

There was that.

“Nothing. Never mind. You have work to do, and we're just going in circles, anyway. Plus I just turned onto my road, so...”

“Okay. Just promise you'll think about what I said, okay? And you can call me any time for any reason. You know that, right?”

“I promise I'll mull over all your brilliance. And yes, I do know that.” She was incredibly blessed to have such a loving, caring sister to turn to. “Same goes for you, too, you know? You can call me whenever you want.”

“I know. But how 'bout you give me a call tomorrow? Or at least shoot me a text, if you don't feel like talking on the phone. Just so I know you're doing okay.”

“Will do.” Natalie was only a few houses away from hers, now. “And Tess?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“Always, Sis. I love you.”

“Love you back.” Tapping the screen on her dash, Natalie ended the call and blew out a breath.

Tessa had given her a lot to think about, and while none of it was easy to face, she was starting to realize her sister—and imaginary Hunter—was right. It was time.

And the longer she waited, the harder it was going to be.

The same bright lights from before filled her car's interior, and it was only then that she realized the same SUV from before was still there, following her to her house.

Maybe they're not deliberately following you. Maybe they live down this way, too.

It was getting too dark to see the vehicle's specific make and model, but from what she could tell, it wasn't one Natalie recognized from the ones

she'd seen around the neighborhood. Choosing to give the driver the benefit of the doubt—because their only offenses were being inconsiderate with their lights and being on the same road as her—she continued driving slowly down her street.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of her computer bag, reminding her of the folder tucked neatly inside. Her conversation with Tessa had pushed all thoughts of suspicious folders from her head.

But as she got closer to her house, Natalie reminded herself that *that's* what she should be thinking about right now. Not worrying about whether she should make a move on her husband's best friend.

Logan's not mine anymore, baby. He's yours.

As if the imagined words had conjured up the man, himself, Natalie spotted Logan's truck parked in her drive. Her lower belly clenched tight, her nerves firing on all cylinders when she saw him leaning casually against the truck's rear wheel well.

Jeans. Boots. Gray hoodie. Ankles and arms crossed.

Waiting.

Pressing the ball of her heeled foot against the brake pedal, she dropped her speed to a near stop before pulling onto the paved incline. The SUV that may or may not have been following her sped past, putting at least that paranoid concern out of her head.

With the car in park, she cut the ignition and released a slow exhale. Glancing down, she had a feeling this—whatever it was—with Logan would most likely take a while.

Guess the folder will have to wait.

Millions of tiny pins and needles seemed to poke her from the inside out, the uncertainty of what was about to happen so unnerving, it had her rattled to the core.

It didn't help that Tessa's and Hunter's earlier words kept swirling around through her ever-changing thoughts...

The man deserves to know the truth.

It's someone else's turn to love you now.

Logan Hayes is so far gone for you, he's in a whole other hemisphere.

Logan's not mine anymore, baby. He's yours.

Blinking, Natalie looked through her windshield to find the man in question staring straight back at her. She tried like hell to figure out what he was thinking, but Logan's stoic expression was unreadable.

Sooner you get out...

Opening her door, she climbed out from behind the wheel. Reaching over the center console, she grabbed her purse, computer bag, and jacket. With her bag and purse slung over her shoulder and her jacket folded in the crook of her arm, she drew in a deep, stealing breath and walked to where he still stood

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

God, she was nervous. But then had the fleeting thought that he’d probably just came by to make sure she was still alive and didn’t need him to fix something else.

It’s me. I’m the one in need of fixing.

Realizing Logan hadn’t said anything more, Natalie started the conversation by asking, “Is everything okay?”

“Not really,” his deep voice confirmed her suspicions. The look on his face was telling.

He was pissed, and she couldn’t blame him. And yet, she was too chicken to broach the topic first, so she took the coward’s way out and tried playing dumb.

“What’s wrong?” She took a tiny step forward.

Staring down at her with the most beautiful ocean gaze, Logan rumbled a foreboding, “We need to talk.”

Though it seemed impossible, Natalie felt her stomach sink even farther down. But she’d made this mess of a bed, and now it was time she sucked it up and laid in it.

Or you could just ask him to lay in it with you.

“Okay.” She ignored the intrusive voice in her head. “Did you want to talk inside, or...”

“Inside would probably be best, yeah.” A nod of his handsome, troubled head. Logan pushed himself off the truck and waited.

“Inside it is.” She turned and headed for the door.

Praying he couldn’t see how quickly her breaths seemed to be coming—or hear the massive thumping of her nervous heart—she lead them up the small stoop to her home’s quaint entrance.

Natalie’s hand trembled slightly as she inserted the key into the lock. Lucky for her, Logan was busy visually checking the area. He always did that, she noticed.

Always checking. Always making sure I'm safe.

"I'm sorry I haven't called or texted lately." She released the lock and turned the knob, pushing the door open as she talked. "Work has been even crazier than normal, and—"

Natalie flipped on the light switch and gasped.

My house!

The entire place was trashed.

Furniture overturned. Cushions displaced. Drawers pulled and dumped. Lamps broken. Pictures dropped.

"Oh my god!"

A deep, deadly curse growled near her ear a millisecond before Natalie felt Logan's protective grip pulling her behind him.

"Get back!"

That gun of his already drawn, his trigger finger held in a disciplined line along the pistol's slide, above the trigger well.

"Logan..."

"Stay right here and do *not* move." A sharp order.

"Pretty sure my legs are shaking too badly to move anyway," she used humor to mask the terror. "Go do what you need to do. I'll be here."

Not like she was going to go off searching the place by herself. A coward she may be, but she didn't have a death wish.

Logan was the trained operative. She was just an accountant.

An accountant riding a very thin line between sanity and a complete and total mental breakdown.

"You see anyone, yell as loud as you can, okay?" Logan's expectant gaze locked with hers.

Man, he's sexy when he's in warrior mode.

"Natalie!" The warrior in question gave her shoulders a gentle shake. "You with me?"

"What?" She blinked and then, "Yes. See something, I yell. Got it."

That green-blue gaze held hers a beat longer before he left with a promised, "I'll be right back."

And then he was on the move.

From her frozen position by the door, Natalie watched as her sweet, funny, generous friend cleared her house with the stealth and grace of a trained killer. Moving faster than a man of his strength and size should, Logan was back by her side in minutes.

“Whoever it was is gone.” He shoved the pistol back into its hidden holster at the small of his back. “I’ll call the cops while you look around and see if there’s anything missing.”

A humorless laugh shook her to her core. “How can I even tell?”

Her home wasn’t much, but it was hers. And now...

“Hey.” A warm palm was suddenly there, guiding her eyes back to his. “It’s going to be okay.” His intense stare searched hers. “I’ve got you.”

Natalie’s pulse spiked, realizing this was nearly the same position they’d been in when they’d sort-of kissed. But now...

Now all she wanted to do was fall into his arms and cry.

“I’m going to call it in, sweetheart.” Logan made sure she was listening. “Now you can’t touch anything, but the police and your insurance company are both going to need a list of anything missing. So while we wait, if you can start looking around and making a list of anything that jumps out at you, it’ll save time down the road.”

“And then?”

With his hand still cupping her cheek, the man who’d become her rock said, “And then you’re coming home with me.”

“THANKS FOR THE CALL, DETECTIVE.” Logan held the phone to his ear. “I appreciate the update.”

Seattle Detective Travis Knox had called to say the techs working the scene at Natalie’s house had offered sincere, “Wish I had better news. That’s not to say we’re blowing off the break-in. But you have to understand, without prints or some other type of evidence leading us to a specific individual, the chances of finding the individual or individuals responsible aren’t great.”

Unfortunately he understood all too well.

“What about the other?” Logan went to the fridge and looked inside.

“All evidence points to those two crimes being unrelated.”

“You really believe that?”

There was a slight pause before Knox answered with the standard, “What I believe is irrelevant. I have to go where the evidence takes me, and right now it’s telling me one has nothing to do with the other.”

Logan wasn’t convinced.

“You said the neighbors reported not seeing or hearing anything. What about security cameras?”

“The house across the street has a doorbell camera that faces Mrs. Garrison’s house, but it came up empty.”

Of course it did.

“So whoever it was came in through the back.”

“That, or maybe a window that had been left unlocked,” Knox concurred. Only one problem with that last theory...

“Natalie doesn’t leave her windows unlocked,” Logan informed the other man. “Windows or doors.”

A brief pause fell over the conversation before the law enforcement official. “At the scene, you said you and Mrs. Garrison—”

“Natalie.”

The man had been calling her by her married title all fucking night, and every time Logan heard it, he found himself wanting to punch the respectful detecting square in the throat.

“At the scene, you told me you and *Natalie* were just friends.”

“We are.” *For now.*

“Well that’s impressive.” Knox chuckled. “I couldn’t tell you my friends’ habits when it comes to locking their doors or windows.”

No, he probably couldn’t. Then again...

“You ever serve, Detective?”

If not, he may not get it. But if he did...

“Actually, I did. Army.” Knox waited a beat. “Signed out an E-8.”

“Master Sergeant. Impressive.” Logan grabbed a beer from the middle shelf and shut the door. “Well I’m not sure if you’re aware, but Natalie’s late husband was a SEAL.”

He didn’t elaborate, because he shouldn’t need to.

“And the widow of a Navy SEAL would know better than to leave her windows and doors unlocked. Especially while she’s away from home.”

Give the man a cookie.

“Exactly.”

“Okay, but the techs didn’t find any signs of forced entry.”

“Guy could’ve used a lock pick. A good one won’t leave any noticeable markings behind.”

“Especially if the asshole knows what he’s doing.” A deep exhale filled the phone’s speaker. “Unfortunately none of that changes the fact that we still don’t have a direction for this thing. But, like I said a minute ago, we’re not giving up.”

“That’s good, because neither am I.”

Logan popped the metal top from the cold bottle in his fist before taking a long, much-needed draw. The frigid bubbles burned as they fell in waves down his throat, the beer soothing in its familiarity as it helped ease the tendrils of fear still present in his system.

Because someone had targeted Natalie. He felt that shit clear to his bones.

And if she'd been home at the time of the break-in...

"You asked earlier if I thought the two attacks on Natalie's property were related," Knox returned to the earlier part of the conversation. "My response was accurate and the department's official stance on the current investigation."

Logan's brow furrowed. "And unofficially?"

Three beats of silence passed before the Army Veteran said, "I'd stay as close to your girl as I could. At least for the next few days, just to be safe."

Meaning he didn't buy that the two incidents were random any more than Logan did.

"Don't have to worry about that." He glanced up to see Natalie standing at the kitchen's entrance. With his eyes locked on her weary gaze, he vowed a solemn, "I'm not letting her out of my sight."

"Didn't figure you would." The other man cleared his throat. "I'll call if anything else comes up."

"Have a good night, Detective." Logan ended the call and set his phone on the counter next to him. "Hey."

"Hey."

With her hair pulled up in a tight bun-type-thing on the top of her head, she was still dressed in the same black, mid-calf pencil skirt, white blouse, and cherry red *fuck me* heels she'd worn to work.

The woman looked like the star of the greatest sexy CPA fantasy in history. She also looked exhausted and...scared.

And it was that fear that had Logan squeezing the bottle in his hand with a murderous rage.

Her fear.

His.

I'm fucking terrified.

He was scared, because he didn't believe in coincidences. The same woman falling victim to two acts of violence in one week...

Unrelated, my ass.

"I'm assuming that was Detective Knox?" Natalie's soft voice interrupted his thoughts.

"It was." Logan nodded. "He just called to let us know the techs came up empty on prints."

Only ones found had been hers...and his. A fact that—minus it leaving them empty-handed on a lead—had made him far happier than it probably

should have.

But after the way he'd fucked things up between them last week, the two hadn't spoken in days. For all he knew, Nat had met someone in that time, and the two had been...

"I figured as much."

With a defeated sigh, she slid onto one of the two bar stools across the counter from where he stood. Elbows resting on the smooth granite, she dropped her head between her shoulders, holding it steady with her hands.

"Hey." Logan watched and waited, but when that chocolate gaze of hers remained concealed, he gave a softly ordered, "Nat, look at me."

After filling her lungs with a deep inhale, she slowly lifted her head and met his stare with one that pulled at his heart.

"We're going to find out who did this."

"How?" A half-shrug. "You just said the police don't have anything to go on."

"I said they didn't find any prints," he pointed out. "The lab is still working to test the swabs they took from the doorknobs and other surfaces. We might get lucky and get a DNA hit from one of those."

"Maybe." She slid back off the stool and onto her feet. "Would it be okay if I took a shower? I'd really like to just...wash this day away."

"Of course. Everything's still in the same place as the last time you stayed here."

Natalie had stayed in his spare room a couple of nights last year while her carpet was being replaced with hardwood. She'd originally planned to stay with her sister, but when Tessa came down with a bad case of the flu, Logan had offered to let Nat stay with him.

To save her money on a hotel, that was all. It definitely had nothing to do with him seizing an opportunity to keep her close. He was too honorable a man to pull a stunt like that.

You sure were quick to offer, though. Then and now.

Fine. He may have taken advantage of an unfortunate situation back then. But this... This was different. This was about Nat's safety.

And that meant everything to him.

"Thanks." Natalie started to walk away, but he stopped her.

"You hungry?" He wasn't, but he knew she'd gone straight home from work, so she had yet to have dinner.

"Oh, um..." She faced him with a slight frown. "I don't know." Her hand

went to her bloused mid-section. “I haven’t really thought about food before now.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

“I had a protein bar from the employee breakroom at like...ten-thirty, I think?”

Logan glanced at his watch, cursing beneath his breath when he saw the time. “That was eleven hours ago.” He dropped his hand back to his side. “Go. I’ll make us some supper while you shower.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Not a debate, sweetheart.” The endearment slipped out. “Now go.”

Her brown gaze held his a moment longer before she turned and walked away. He waited in place, his eyes following her every step until she vanished around the corner and into the hall.

Once he could no longer see her, Logan got to work making the promised meal. Half-an-hour later, the pot of spaghetti noodles was steaming hot, the jarred sauce was simmering, and two small bowls were filled with freshly washed and torn lettuce mixed with a little ranch dressing and shredded cheddar cheese.

Not a gourmet meal by a long shot. But it was a meal, nonetheless.

“That smells delicious.”

Standing at the stove, Logan continued stirring the sauce as he looked up and smiled.

Natalie had changed out of the sexy work attire and into a pair of leggings and an oversized hoodie she’d brought from home. Her long brown hair was damp, several strands sticking to the sides of her neck.

Her face was free of makeup, those adorable freckles he loved much more prominent than before. But it was the shadows marring the delicate skin beneath her eyes that Logan couldn’t quit staring at.

Shadows created by an act of violence that had clearly left her shaken.

Gripping the wooden spoon’s handle tight, he kept his smile steady and his voice free from the anger swirling through his veins.

“Feel better?”

“I do.” She rewarded him with a tiny smile of her own. “Thanks.”

“Hope the shower helped to work up an appetite, because I may have overdone it on the spaghetti.” A quick glance at the heaping pile of cooked noodles in the large pot to his right.

That smile of hers grew a fraction as she started toward him. “I am,

actually.”

“Nope.” Logan stopped her with a raised palm. “You sit. I’ll bring it to you.”

“You don’t have to wait on me, Logan.” She ignored his directive and picked up one of the two empty bowls waiting on the counter near the stove. “I feel bad enough upending your life like this, as it is.”

You’ve got it all wrong, gorgeous.

She wasn’t upending his life. She *was* his life.

“You’re not upending a damn thing.” He waited while she filled her bowl with noodles and sauce. “And until we know for sure that tonight was random, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to stay with your sister. Just in case.”

“No, you’re right.” Natalie carried the bowls of spaghetti and salad over to the bar. Sitting on the same stool as before, she jabbed her fork into the salad. “I just hate this. First the tires, and now my house...” Her lashes fluttered with several succinct blinks. “It was supposed to be a safe neighborhood, you know?”

“Shit happens everywhere, Nat.” Logan sat down next to her. “All we can do is stay as alert as we can and take precautions.”

Although I plan to do a hell of a lot more than that from now on.

“I called in to work for the next couple of days,” she shared. “Told my boss what happened, and he was really understanding. Said he’d call Dennis Atkinson and let him know I won’t be in and why.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, except that just puts me two days behind.” She took a small bite of pasta, chewing it well and swallowing before speaking again. “I brought some stuff home with me tonight to look over, but I think I’m just going to leave it until morning.”

“Probably smart. You look dead on your feet as it is.”

A slight blush filled her flawless cheeks. “Gee, thanks.”

“You know what I mean.” Logan nudged her playfully with his knee.

A move that, a week ago, he wouldn’t have thought twice about. But now, after the kiss they’d both done a stellar job of ignoring, Logan found himself second-guessing everything.

Every look. Every spoken word. Every innocent, friendly touch.

The entire night, he’d found himself rehashing every goddamn *thing* regarding him and Natalie. And he fucking hated it.

For the next few minutes, time passed by in silence as the two focused on their dinners and their thoughts.

Logan's head filled with all the things he'd wanted to say to her tonight, but hadn't. Things he'd spent the last five days working through, and then rehearsed during his earlier drive to her house.

But then she'd gotten home, and they'd gone inside, and...

"Guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought." Natalie's voice broke the awkward silence. "This was so good, Logan." She slowly pushed herself to her feet. "I hate wasting it, but I just can't—"

"You're fine," he cut her apology short. Glancing down, he noticed both of her bowls were half-empty. *Better than nothing.* "Just leave those there, and I'll get them when I'm done."

She started to reach for her dishes anyway. "You went through the trouble of cooking. The least I can do is help with the clean-up."

Logan set his fork down into his partially eaten pasta and rose to his feet. With a quick wipe of his mouth, he dropped the paper towel he'd been using onto the counter and took the bowls out of her hands.

"I've got it." *I've got you.* "Go. Get some rest. Pretty sure you've earned it."

Her expression softened, those round eyes filling with a guarded appreciation. "Thank you. Not just for dinner, but for..." A loud sigh. "For everything."

"What are friends are for, right?"

He'd purposely kept his tone breezy, as if the question was one of those quipped things people said without giving it much thought. But Logan had put conscious thought into the words as he'd said them.

I want to see her reaction.

"Right. Friends." Natalie's lips curved into a smile that barely showed her dimples. "In that case..." She surprised him by lifting to her tiptoes and pressing her lips to his cheek. "Good night...friend."

Logan's heart kicked in response. The combined scent of her lotion and his shampoo so intoxicating, he was still standing in the exact same spot moments after she'd left him to go to bed.

When he finally did get his head on straight, he got busy taking care of the leftovers and dirty dishes. Once the mess had been cleaned and the food put away, Logan grabbed another beer and his phone, and made his way to the glass sliding door leading to his back deck. Balancing the phone and

bottle in his left hand, he slid the door open and stepped outside.

Just in case, he kept the slider partially opened. That way, if Natalie needed him for something, he'd easily hear her.

Walking the few feet to the deck's wooden railing, Logan placed the bottle on the top board and unlocked his phone. Tapping one of the contacts in his Favorites list, he put the device to his ear and waited.

He had the hands-free earbuds everyone used these days, but he preferred not to have his hearing compromised. Not when he'd brought Natalie here for protection.

"Hayes, my man!" Jason "Lucky" Lucas answered the call on the second ring. "What's up?"

Music and blurred conversations filled the background.

With his shoulder keeping the phone held snugly to his ear, Logan used the railing's edge to pop off the bottle top, the crimped metal lid falling noisily to the planks at his feet.

"You at a club?"

It was no secret the man loved to dance. And while Logan and the rest of their old team took every chance they could to give him shit about it, the guy had some seriously impressive moves.

"Yeah, hang on. Let me go outside where I can hear."

As requested, Logan waited patiently until the noise died down and Lucky came back on the line.

"Okay, that's better. What's up?"

"You got a few minutes?"

"For you? Of course."

"Good, because...I need your help."

In a flash, Lucky's easy-going tone lowered to the deadly warrior Logan remembered him to be. Without so much as a second's hesitation, the other man's offer was instant.

"Name it. Whatever you need."

"How are your hacking skills these days?"

Now *that* was cause for hesitation.

"Uh...I've been...keeping up," Lucky answered cautiously. "Why?"

Keeping things as short and sweet as possible, Logan went through everything that had happened with Natalie as of late. The tires and tonight's break-in. And by the time he was finished, Lucky sounded as pissed as Logan felt.

“What the fuck?” The other man growled. “You got any idea who it is?” Before Logan could point out the obvious, Lucky got there on his own. “Guess if you did, you wouldn’t be asking about my mad computer skills, huh?”

“Exactly.”

“What about the cops?”

“Nothing so far.” He went on to tell him about his earlier phone conversation with Detective Knox. “I don’t know. Maybe Knox is right. Maybe the two are unrelated.”

And maybe Santa Claus will come sliding down my chimney on Christmas Eve.

“Anything’s possible, but...two accounts of random vandalism on the same property in one week? I don’t know, man. I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I.” Logan glanced over his shoulder at the door behind him to make sure Natalie hadn’t come looking for him. “The cops asked Nat if she could think of anyone who’d target her like this, but she couldn’t think of a single name.”

“No surprise. The woman’s a fucking saint.”

More like an angel.

“Right. Which means we’re starting from scratch.”

“What about that accounting firm she works for?” Lucky asked. “She have any problems with anyone there?”

“None. But I’d like to run backgrounds on her co-workers, just in case. At least the others who work in the same office as her.”

“I’ll run her boss, too. Just to make sure he isn’t some twisted asshole whose developed an unhealthy obsession with our girl.”

Our girl.

Natalie was theirs. From damn near day one, the entire team had accepted her as one of them. They used to tease that she was like a little sister with five older brothers.

Only Logan didn’t see her as a sister. Not back then, and sure as hell not now.

Not even fucking close.

“Anyone else you want me to run?” Lucky spoke up again. “Boyfriend... lover...”

“Negative on both.”

Thank God.

“Okay, well, if she’s not currently seeing anyone, what about exes? Any relationships that ended badly, or—”

“She doesn’t have any exes.” None since before Hunter, anyway. “She doesn’t date.”

His friend paused. “Ever?”

“Not that I know of. No.”

“Jesus.” Lucky’s exhale hit Logan’s ear. “That’s really...sad.”

A frown left his brows turning inward. “Why is that sad?”

“Seriously? Dude. Hunt’s been gone two years. And Nat’s like, what... thirty-one?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Thirty-two,” Lucky repeated the correction. “So she’s a young, single, gorgeous woman with a huge-ass heart who hasn’t had a single date in two years. And given that it’s Nat, you know if she isn’t dating, she’s not having sex, which means she’s gone two years without any. How is that anything *but* sad?”

Ah, hell.

Jesus, he really was a selfish bastard. Here he’d spent this whole time relieved that Nat had remained single and dateless. Because the very idea of having to sit back and watch her move on with another man who wasn’t him was too fucking painful to bear.

But in all that time, Logan hadn’t given much thought to what that meant for *her*. And now that he was...now that Lucky’s comment had opened his eyes to everything the incredible woman had been missing out on by keeping to herself...

She deserves so much more out of life than this.

“If you can start with the people at her work, I’ll keep looking into things on my end. I get more names, I’ll send them your way.”

The sudden change in topic must have taken his former teammate off guard, because it took Lucky a second to react. “Uh...yeah. Sure. I’ll see what comes up and let you know.”

“Thanks, brother.”

“No thanks needed.” A slight exhale. “How’s she handling everything?”

“As best as can be expected. We just ate a bite, and she’s in bed now.”

“You staying at her place for the night?”

“I brought her to mine.”

Lucky cleared his throat. “Natalie’s spending the night with you?”

“In my spare bedroom, asshole.”

“Hey, no judgement on my end. Two years, remember?”

Logan knew the other man was only joking, but that didn't keep his gut from growing tight.

“Nat I haven't...we're not—”

“Relax, Hayes. I was just kidding. Although, you were Hunt's best friend. If ever there was a guy who could fill his boots, it would be you.”

The fuck?

“What...what would make you even go there?”

He wasn't pissed. More like curious to see where Lucky was going with this.

“Nothin', man. Really. I guess I just figured with you living there and always hanging out with her, it was inevitable.”

“What was inevitable?”

Because surely Lucky wasn't saying what Logan thought he was.

“You and Nat.”

Logan physically recoiled, his booted foot taking a stumbling step backward on his tree-covered deck. “Jason, Natalie and are just friends. That's all we've ever been.”

Unfortunately.

“I know. The other guys know that, too. Although we do have a pool going on when it finally does happen, so if you could let me know if you're thinking things are headed that way, I'd love a heads-up so I can amend my guess.”

There were so many what-the-fucks going on inside Logan's head, he didn't know which way was up.

“Let me get this straight. You're telling me you, Arch, Chase, and Van have a running bet on when I'm going to sleep with Natalie?” Was he fucking serious? “For how long?”

“Since that last fishing trip you skipped out on.”

“I didn't skip out on shit,” he reminded the asshole. “I told you guys, it was right after the first anniversary of Hunt's death, and Natalie was having a hard time. I didn't feel right leaving her for an entire week, so—”

“I know that,” Lucky assured him. “We *all* understood why you felt you need to stay there. It's not like anyone was mad or anything. Chase said something about how he was glad she had you to lean on, to which I may or may not have made some type of insinuating comment—”

“May or may not have?” Logan arched a brow the other man couldn’t see.

“Okay, so I *did* make an insinuating comment, but only just as a joke. But then Arch said something about how he thought you’d be good for her, I said she’d be better for you, and Van...” Lucky took a breath to presumably think back. “I don’t know if Van commented either way. But he didn’t get all growly like he does. Plus, he joined in on the pot, so I guess that means he’s cool with the idea, too.”

“Unfuckingbelievable.” His back teeth ground together. “You know, who Nat does or does not sleep with is none of your goddamn business. And the fact that you guys placed *money* on us like that...” He blew out a breath. “That’s so fucked up, I don’t even know what to say other than it’s over. No more bet. Got it?”

“Come on, Logan. Don’t go getting your panties in a twist. For one, it all started out as a joke like, forever ago. And two...” The other man exhaled loudly. “While it would admittedly take some getting used to, we all agreed we’d rather see her with you than some pencil-pushing jackass who cares more about his golf game than taking care of his woman.”

Logan opened his mouth to respond, but clamped it shut immediately after. Like a fish out of water, he repeated the move several times because....

What the hell was he supposed to say to that?

One of the bigger things holding him back all this time was out of respect. Namely, respect for his team and Hunter’s memory. And now he learns the guys hadn’t just discussed the possibility of him and Nat, they’d been placing *bets* on when it would finally happen.

“Boss?” Lucky used his old nickname. “You still there?”

“I’m here.”

Shocked as shit and more confused than ever, but he was here.

“Listen, man. I didn’t mean to upset you. And the guys and I...we meant no disrespect. Not to you or Hunter. And we would *never* intentionally disrespect Natalie. We just want her to be happy.” The former SEAL added a belated, “But we really don’t want her ending up with some geek with a pocket protector and a five-a.m. tee time.”

Despite the serious topic of conversation, Logan released a throaty snort and grinned. “Pocket protector?” He chuckled. “Do people still use those?”

“I have no idea. Just sounded good.”

The two men shared a laugh, but when it died down seconds later, Logan

knew it was time to come clean. With both the team and the woman sleeping in the room across the hall from his.

He'd gone to her house tonight with the intent to do just that.

After being shut out for nearly a week, he'd decided enough was enough. He was going to lay it all out for her. How he felt. What he wanted. For himself and them as a couple.

Logan had been prepared to tell her all of it, but now...

No way he'd lay all that shit on her tonight. But Lucky had broached the subject first. And since, once he did tell Natalie he wanted them to be more than friends, the team was bound to find out anyway.

And if what Lucky had just said about the guys being supportive of the idea...

Fuck it.

"Jason, I..." He stopped to swallow his nerves. He'd never said this shit out loud. Not to anyone.

"You what?"

Just say it.

"I'm pretty sure I'm in love with her."

Lucky didn't respond right away that time. But when he did, the man sounded as serious as Logan had ever heard him.

"She know?"

"No." A shake of his head. "I didn't lie when I said she and I have been strictly platonic. But..." He thought of that moment in her kitchen. "We, uh... we did almost kiss the other day." Their lips touched, so technically, *technically* they had. "It just sort of happened, and I don't even know who initiated, to be honest. But then my truck alarm went off, and we had to deal with that whole mess, and..." He blew out a breath. "Anyway, now you know."

"You planning on telling Nat you love her?"

"Not at first, no. I mean, she's my closest friend. Hell she's Hunt's widow, for fuck's sake."

"Exactly. She's his widow. Hunt's gone, man. It sucks, and it still pisses me off every single fucking day. But no amount of anger or guilt is gonna bring the guy back. And Arch was right that day on the lake when he said you'd be good for her. You are good for her. Look at what you're doing for her now."

"I'm just trying to keep her safe."

“Exactly. Her safety is always your top priority. Has been since you moved to Seattle. And who better to be with her than a man who will do whatever it takes to protect her?”

He’s right. There’s no one else on the planet who would love her more than you.

“I was going to tell her tonight,” he confessed to his friend. “That’s why I was waiting in her driveway when she got home. But then we went inside and discovered her place had been tossed, and...now we’re here.”

Now he needed to quit worrying about his would-be love life and focus on figuring out why the hell someone had targeted Natalie. Evidence or not, connected or not, Logan’s gut was screaming she’d been targeted by someone.

And he wouldn’t stop until the threat had been eliminated and the woman he’d just admitted to loving was safe.

“Look, none of my shit matters right now. Just focus on finding out what you can about the people she works with. Oh, and while you’re at it, add Glenn Frost and Dennis Atkinson to the list.”

“The Frost Avionics guys?” A low snort hit Logan’s ear just before he heard, “You’re kidding, right?”

“Natalie’s firm handles all their financials, and she was recently handed their auditing account. She’s been working at their corporate headquarters here in the city for the past week. Maybe someone there has—”

“Wait,” Lucky cut him off. “You’re telling me the tires and the break-in *both* happened at the same time Nat started conducting an audit for a multi-billion-dollar company?”

Son of a...

“Shit, Jason. I never even put the two together. But yeah. The tires happened the night before her first day there, and she’s been working on it ever since.” *Fuck.* “New plan. Start there, and then work through her accounting firm.”

“Copy that, Boss. And hey, about the other...”

Logan’s throat worked a hard swallow. “Yeah?”

“I’m happy for you, brother.” A slight pause. “Of course, that’s assuming she feels the same way. Which I *really* hope she does. And soon.”

His face fell flat. “The bet?”

“Dude, you get her on board before next month, I win the pot!”

Get her on board...

With a shake of his head, Logan couldn't keep from huffing out a soft chuckle. "Out of curiosity, how much we talkin'?"

"Four hundred Benjamins, baby!"

Jesus. "Let me know what you find. I'll call if anything turns up on our end."

"Will do. Oh, and Logan?"

"Yeah?"

"You and Nat...it's a good thing, man. Truly."

A rush of emotion knotted in his throat, and it took two tries before he could even speak. "Thanks, Jason. Talk soon."

Ending the call, Logan grabbed his bottle and walked back into the house.

With the hurricane of thoughts whirling around inside his head, he knew sleep wouldn't be coming anytime soon. So rather than laying awake in bed trying not to think about the woman sleeping right across the hall, he headed for the couch in search of some mind-numbing T.V.

But even as he flipped through the channels, Logan knew there'd never be a time he *didn't* think about Natalie Garrison. Not because she was his friend or because she was in danger. But because...

She owns me.

NATALIE THREW her covers off with a stifled growl. A quick glance at the clock on the nightstand to her right showed it was just after three in the morning.

And she had yet to get a wink of actual sleep.

She'd dozed off and on a few times since leaving Logan standing in his kitchen. But between picturing some stranger touching all the things in her house—purposely *trashing* the place, sleeping in a bed that wasn't hers, and the unresolved issues between her and Logan, a peaceful slumber had become virtually impossible.

Don't forget the whole friend comment. A highlight of the evening, don't you think?

Natalie *did* growl then. She also shot to her feet and headed for the door. Sleep was clearly a lost cause, but a midnight...er...three a.m. snack was still a possibility.

She turned the knob to Logan's spare bedroom door and pulled it open with a whisper. Her heart squeezed when she stared at the closed door across the narrow hall and thought of the man currently sleeping behind it.

A man who'd claimed a piece of her heart she'd thought no longer existed.

One with a set of broad shoulders to cry on and strong arms that gave the perfect comfort. A listener when she needed one, and an offeror of opinions, even when she didn't ask.

And that's when it hit her.

Dennis Atkinson may be flawlessly good-looking. He may be

ridiculously rich and be the smoothest talker around. But he wasn't the perfect man. Not for her, anyway.

She'd had that once. With Hunter.

Oh, he wasn't perfect by any means. No one was. But for a while, there, Natalie had been lucky enough to call him hers. And that had been enough.

But now...

Now she realized her sister was right. Her sister. Hunter's imaginary ghost-voice. Her heart...

They'd all told her Logan was the one. That he was her forever. And as she stood in his house—in his shirt—she finally, *finally* realized they were right. She'd just been too scared to admit it.

I'm not scared. Not anymore.

The pivotal moment was interrupted by a decidedly unladylike growl of her stomach. Slapping a hand to her mid-section to try to muffle the unattractive sound, Natalie quietly padded her way down the hall toward the kitchen.

As she passed through the living room, Natalie noticed the T.V. mounted above the fireplace had been left on. The current showing was a riveting infomercial about the latest and greatest food dehydration system.

Nothing she'd ever waste her money on, but at least she wasn't having to maneuver her way around Logan's house in the dark.

With slow, easy steps, Natalie walked on the hardwood path running between the wall on her right and the large, open living room to her left. She moved quietly past the couch, stopping dead in her tracks when she caught a glimpse of the man sleeping peacefully on its cushions.

Logan.

He wasn't behind that bedroom door she'd spent far too long staring at. He was right there. Asleep on his couch.

Without. A. Shirt.

Hellooo six-pack.

Natalie studied his bare, sculpted abs again.

Correction. Make that eight.

And that wasn't all.

Using the stolen moment to her advantage, she lifted her gaze to his handsome face. Even in sleep, his features seemed tense, and yet there was an almost youthfulness there she'd never seen.

She let her focus travel lower, taking in every tiny detail she could on her

way down.

Thick, masculine neck. Broad shoulders that seemed to carry the weight of the world. A chest so powerful, so perfectly sculpted, it could have been made from the most precious of chiseled stones.

And then there was Logan's impressive abs.

Tanned, bare curves and crevices perfectly aligned and spaced, divided evenly down the center by a long, shadowed line. Natalie's lips curved when she got her first glimpse of Logan's bellybutton. It wasn't exactly an innie, but it also wasn't a full on outtie, either.

For some reason, this made her smile grow.

She'd never thought about Logan's belly button before. Other parts of him, sure. But never his belly button. Now that she'd seen it, however, she couldn't help but think it made him seem more...real.

More human.

More *male*.

Her gaze lowered to the leather belt clasped neatly at his waist. To the curved zipper below. And then she started thinking about what was hidden *beneath* that zipper. What she'd like to do to what was hidden beneath it.

To.

With.

Natalie's lips parted, her lower belly tingling and her body aching with a need she hadn't felt in a long, long time. So long, it took her a moment to even realize what it was...

Hunger.

Not the hunger that had brought her out here. No, this was a different kind of craving. One that left her breaths shallow, and her panties wet with need.

Natalie wasn't sure how long she stood there, ogling her half-naked best friend's crotch. Nor did she know how long he'd been awake and *watching* her ogle his crotch.

What she did know was how utterly mortified she was when that familiar rumble of his asked...

"You okay?"

Her entire body jerked with a start, her eyes flying up to his. Their gazes met, his dark and shadowed, yet the hunger there was clear as day to see.

He wants me, too.

"Can't sleep?"

Natalie blinked, realizing he'd now asked her two different questions, and she had yet to answer either one. The slow shake of her head was an honest answer to both.

Swinging his legs around, Logan pushed himself into a seated position. "Come here." He patted the cushion to his left.

With a nervous lick of her lips, she slowly made her way around the end of the couch and over to where he sat waiting. Lowering herself down next to him, Natalie felt uncharacteristically stiff.

The complete *opposite* of how she normally felt around him.

Typically when she was with Logan, she felt totally at ease and could just be herself. No pretense of being happy all the time, or pressure to entertain. No need to have perfect hair or a face full of makeup.

With him, it had always been easy. With Logan, it had always been simple. And after two years of tears, heartache, and healing, Natalie was finally beginning to realize with Logan, things were exactly...

Right.

Her muscles relaxed, and she scooted herself back against the cushion. Eyes the color of the ocean studied her closely, concern mixing with the heat she'd seen moments ago.

It's still there. He feels it, too.

"Talk to me."

Natalie blinked, nervous butterflies swirling inside her belly. "About what?" Had her voice just cracked?

She was pretty sure it had.

"What's keeping you awake?" He brushed some hair from her shoulder in an innocent gesture he'd done a million times before.

Only this time it didn't feel so innocent. This time she'd felt every feathery touch of his fingertips as they'd trailed a path across her bare skin.

"Hunger," she blurted. "Uh...I mean...I got hungry," she attempted a lame recovery. *Smooth, Nat. Real smooth.* "I guess tossing and turning for four-and-a-half hours will do that to a girl, so..."

"So you haven't gotten any sleep at all?" That concern deepened.

Natalie shook her head. "Nope."

Their gazes held a beat before he lifted his left arm in the air, an invitation for her to lean on him. Literally and figuratively.

She didn't even think before sliding over and falling into his warm, familiar embrace. In a natural, reflexive move, Natalie laid her head in the

natural dip where his shoulder and chest came together, her hand coming to a rest along his abs.

Bare. Hot. Flexing abs.

And that hand that was wrapped around her...it was resting loosely along her hip. His fingertips precariously close to brushing against the upper curve of her rear.

Natalie's pulse raced with the urge to scoot up a little farther. Just enough to let those fingers move a few inches lower.

Oh, girl. You are in so much trouble.

Serious. Sexy. Mouthwatering trouble.

"You know you're safe here, right?" His worried question rumbled against her cheek.

"I know," Natalie whispered back, her hair swishing against his skin with a slight nod.

A few beats passed before Logan continued with, "I'd never let anything happen to you. You know that, too...right?"

"I know," she said again, lifting her head to meet his gaze. She needed him to see the truth in her next words. "I always feel safe when I'm with you."

That hand on her hip flexed. Those fingertips digging into her skin with the slightest of squeezes. And those eyes...

Those eyes darkened with desire, their fire matching the inferno blazing deep within her.

"Nat, I—"

"I'm sorry."

They both started talking at the same time, followed by simultaneous nervous laughter.

"You go," she offered.

"Nope. Ladies first."

Crap. Okay. Welp...here goes nothing.

"I'm sorry I've been such a bitch lately."

A humored frown pulled his lips upward while his brows bunched together in the center. "Woman, you've never been a bitch a day in your life."

Natalie chuckled. "Pretty sure my sister would be more than happy to dispute that fact with you."

"If this is about last week, I should have apologized a long damn time ago. I made you uncomfortable, and that's the last thing I ever—"

“You didn’t make me uncomfortable.” She shook her head, and then tilted it just so. “Okay, that’s a lie. You *did*, but not in the way you’re probably thinking.”

Logan’s dark brows twitched, those breath-stealing eyes of his filling with curiosity. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Damn, this was hard. So much harder than she thought it would be. “I wasn’t mad that we almost kissed. Or did kiss. Or...whatever. You know what I mean.”

The tip of his tongue peeked out with a quick swipe across his lips. A purposeful move, or subconscious? Either way, Natalie took it as a good sign, continuing to get out what she was struggling to say.

“Anyway, I wasn’t mad. I’m *not* mad. And I wasn’t mad at you for wanting to stay at my house to protect me. I could never be upset with you for that.”

“You said I was being an overbearing ass and you needed some space.”

Yep. She’d said those exact words. But now...

“Logan, I’m sorry.” Natalie shifted her position so she was sitting up a little straighter. “I never should have said those things to you. And you’re not an overbearing ass.”

“Well...” He gave a chagrined smirk.

She smiled, knowing that was his goal all along. “I lied about the overbearing ass part, but not about the needing space part.”

“Okay. Wanna tell me why?”

No.

Yes.

Damn it.

“Lately I’ve...” She drew in a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly. Really, *really* slowly. “I’ve started having these...feelings.” A hard, loud swallow. “For you.”

She wanted to look away, but try as she might, Natalie couldn’t tear her gaze from his. Stealing herself for the rejection she was terrified to hear, she schooled her expression, held her breath, and waited.

Logan blinked, those dark lashes of his flashing once. Twice. And by the third time, she was sure he was going to burst out laughing.

He didn’t laugh. He didn’t so much as smirk. Instead the sexy former SEAL lifted a slow, cautious hand to her face and cupped her cheek. “I have feelings for you, too, Nat. That’s why I came to your house tonight. Last

night. You know what I mean.”

She nodded. “You came to tell me you have feelings for me?”

“Yes.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “That night, when we were in the laundry room, it took everything in me not to kiss you. And then later, after dinner when we were in your kitchen...” Another swallow. “The truth is, if that alarm hadn’t gone off, I don’t know that I would’ve been able to stop at just a kiss.”

Oh

“If that alarm hadn’t gone off, I’m not sure I would’ve wanted you to stop.”

Her eyes filled with a rush of emotion she wasn’t expecting. But Natalie did her best to power through because she needed to get this out. She needed to unburden herself of the guilt and shame and everything else that had come with these new feelings she’d discovered.

New feelings that were so overwhelmingly consuming, they’d even overshadowed the fact that some asshole had broken into her home hours earlier.

But that mess would still be there in the morning. This mess, however... this was something she needed to clean up now. Before it was too late.

Before I lose him for good.

Reaching up to the hand on her face, she curled her fingers around his and gently pulled it away.

“I need to get this out, and if you’re touching me like that, I’m afraid I won’t be able to. And I really just need you to listen to it all before you respond. Can you do that?”

“Anything you want, sweetheart.” He turned his hand so his was holding hers. “You can tell me anything.”

Sweetheart.

God, she loved it when he called her that.

Praying what he’d said was true, Natalie drew in a stuttered breath and blinked the unshed tears away. With her hand in his, with his swirls of greens and blues hanging off her every word, she let it all go.

“I want you, Logan.” *Way to just blurt that shit right out there.* “I think that’s probably obvious by now,” she ignored the voice in her head. “Or maybe it isn’t. Or wasn’t. Of course, now...” A nervous chuckle. “Guess the cat clawed its way right out of that bag, huh?”

Those lips she couldn’t wait to taste—*really* taste—lifted into the sexiest

half-smile she'd ever seen.

"Both bags," he teased, presumably referencing the fact that they'd each admitted their mutual attraction.

"Both *cats*," she just had to try to one-up him.

"Touché." Logan grinned. But then, "Sorry. I promise I won't say anything more until you're done."

They shared a comfortable laugh, and Natalie realized just how close to perfect the man truly was. Here she was, risking the most important non-familial relationship she had by revealing her true feelings, and there he was...

Making me laugh.

If she wasn't already in love with Logan Hayes, that would have been the moment it happened. But there was still something he needed to know. The final brick in the wall she'd all but managed to tear down.

"I think I've felt this way for you for a while now, I just...I wasn't sure how to process it." Another deep breath and slow exhale. "And I was scared. Scared of what everyone would think. Archer and Lucky and those guys," she clarified. "I mean, they were Hunter's team, you know? *Your* team. And I would never, *ever* want to do anything to disrupt the brotherhood you five have. I can't even..." She shook her head and blew out a breath. "God, if I ever did something to cause a rift between you guys, I'd—"

"You wouldn't." Logan shook his head. "I'm sorry, I know I promised not to interrupt, but I can't sit back and let you worry yourself sick over something I know would never happen."

"You can't possibly know that for sure."

"I do know, because I wouldn't let it happen."

He sounded so sure of himself, and she realized that confidence was part of what made him such a good leader.

"It's not just the guys that worried me. I also felt..." Natalie's voice cracked, her eyes filling once again. Nose burning with the rising emotion, her bottom lip began to tremble, but she pulled it between her teeth and got herself under control. "I felt like I was betraying Hun..." She cleared her throat. "I felt like, by having these thoughts and feelings for you, I was betraying Hunter."

A tear escaped, but before she could reach for it, Logan's hand was already there. Gently brushing it away with his callused thumb before letting his hand fall back down to his lap.

And still, he kept his word and remained silent as he waited for her to finish.

“I know it probably sounds silly, given that he’s been gone two years now. But these feelings...” She searched his gaze. “They’re not just about my physical attraction to you. They’re...more.” That last part was almost a whisper. “They’re stronger than that. Deeper. And, that emotional connection I feel we have...at first, it made me feel like I was somehow cheating on Hunt.” She shook her head with a huffed chuckle. “It’s stupid, I know, but that’s how I felt.”

Sensing he was struggling to hold back, Natalie took a breath and gave him a chance to respond.

“First things first,” he started, only after she gave him the green light. “Your thoughts...your feelings...those aren’t stupid, Nat. They’re yours, and they’re valid. And anyone who ever tells you otherwise can deal with me.”

Her lips twitched at his cavemanesque attitude, but she gave him the same courtesy he had her, and simply listened.

“Two, everything you said...everything you’re worried about? I’ve been struggling with the same damn things.” Using his free hand, he began listing them off for emphasis. “The guys, betraying hunter’s memory, feeling like we’d be going behind his back...” He let his fist close but shook his head. “I’ve been struggling with that same shit for so damn long.”

Natalie’s pulse spiked, and she couldn’t keep herself from asking, “How long?”

A flash of guilt crossed in front of his gaze before he admitted, “Long enough to know this...whatever this is I feel for you...it’s not going away.”

Whatever this is...

Why did that hurt? It wasn’t like she’d expected him to declare his love for her or anything. And it wasn’t like she’d vowed to be his forever, either.

In fact, the only thing Natalie wanted to think about tonight was...

Tonight.

That was it. She didn’t want to waste time focusing on the past. Didn’t want to ruin the moment worrying about the future. She just wanted this.

Tonight.

Him.

Especially when he was staring back at her as if he were a drowning man and she was his lifeline.

Keeping his eyes laser-focused on hers, that hand of his returned. This

time when his electric touch fell over her flushed cheek, she didn't even try to pull it away.

Rather than remove it, Natalie reached out a hand of her own, the skin of her palm becoming searing from the heat of his chest. His heart beat frantically beneath her touch, letting her know he was just as nervous as she was.

That can't be right. Logan Hayes, nervous?

The man had been a door kicker for the Navy for years, taking the worst of the worst head-on. Yet this...*them*...made him nervous?

The revelation was unexpectedly empowering. Knowing she had the same sort of primal effect on him as she felt every time he was around only solidified how right this inexplicable bond they'd formed truly was.

His gaze fell to her lips. They parted; her tiny hitch of a breath audible as he started to lean in. She brought her chin up, her lids closing as his hot breath blanketed her eager mouth.

Logan's hand slid from her cheek to the base of her neck, the tip of his thumb brushing lightly against the lobe of her ear.

"Logan." It was a soft, breathy plea she wasn't even sure he heard.

The man's low, almost animalistic growl was the only sign that he had. It was also her only warning before he slammed his lips to hers in a kiss that stole her breath and captured her heart.

It wasn't a slow or gentle kiss. It dominated, just like the man himself.

A man who'd somehow managed to stand up, hoist her into his arms, and start carrying her across the room without breaking the passionate connection even once.

On reflex, Natalie wrapped her legs around his narrow waist, her arms secured around his neck. Her fists filled with the longer strands toward the top of his head.

Hot. Wet. Devouring.

The kiss was far better than she'd imagined. And Logan...

Logan had just pushed her back up against the living room wall.

Yes!

She'd denied herself this type of intimacy for so long. But now that she was here, now that she'd chosen to give herself over to *this* man, it was as if the floodgates had opened.

And as Logan began pulling at the hem of her tank top, Natalie knew there was no going back.

“Wanted to go...slow.” His words came out all panted and strained as his lips—*God, those lips!*—made their way across her chin and down along her neck. “You...deserve...slow...”

“Don’t want slow.” She tilted her head to the side to give him better access.

Knowing he’d never let her fall—physically or otherwise—Natalie released the hold she had on his hair and helped with the removal of her top. As he pushed it up over her breasts from below, she reached behind her and began yanking at the back collar.

Between the two of them, the thin cotton garment was off her body and falling to the floor within seconds.

“Jesus.” Logan leaned back just enough to get his fill.

Breaths heaving, Natalie knew her breasts were pushing up and down with the movements, but she didn’t care. As with everything else in her life, when she was in, she was *all in*.

And this was a moment she intended to see all the way through to the end.

Logan brought his mouth to one breast, his lips and tongue setting her sensitive nipple on fire. “Ah!” she cried out, those hands going back to his hair.

The primal growl let her know he didn’t mind.

Nerve endings fired to life in her lower belly as the tip of his tongue flicked the distended nub again and again. His teeth teased and nibbled, and even amid the passion, Natalie could tell he was being careful not to cause her any actual pain.

And pain was the farthest thing from what she felt. In fact, it was almost as if her nipple had a direct connection to her clit.

He flicked; she swelled. He nibbled; her body ached with a need stronger than any she’d ever experienced.

“Oh, god.” She ground her pelvis against him, desperate for a respite from the pressure she knew only this man was capable of releasing.

Logan moaned against her breast before jerking back and dropping her to her feet.

“W-what—”

“Can’t wait.” His hands went on her hips, his fingertips sliding between her skin and the elastic waist of her bottoms and lace panties.

Before she could process his intentions, he was dropping to his knees in

front of her, those hands shoving her pants and undies down the length of her thighs in one fluid motion.

“Logan, what are you—”

“Been dreaming of this for too fucking long.” He worked her pants the rest of the way off with her help.

So there I was, standing against Logan Hayes’s living room wall. Butt ass naked, with my bare pussy right there, smack dab in front of his face...

It sounded like the beginning of a mortifyingly embarrassing story. One of nightmares and years of therapy, one might say.

Except this wasn’t a nightmare. It was a dream. Her *new* dream.

And it was seconds away from coming true.

“God, you’re beautiful.” Logan was on his knees, his hands working their way up her smooth, trembling thighs. From where she stood, he almost appeared as if he were worshiping her.

From the heady look on his face and his gentle, sensual touch, that was exactly what he was doing.

He leaned up, gently encouraging her to open herself to him. Allowing him to take the lead, Natalie spread her stance wider, giving him not only her body, but her heart.

Logan took her with his mouth, his deep moan vibrating against her in the most magnificent of ways. She cried out, one hand flying to the back of his head as if to keep herself from falling.

His lips kissed her with a reverence she’d never felt. His tongue licked and laved and traced every curve. Every seam. Every fold.

Natalie knew she was wet, drenched with hunger for a man she feared she’d never cease to crave. But as he continued working her with his mouth, she couldn’t bring herself to care.

Instead she closed her eyes, let her head fall against the wall behind her, and she gave over the last of her control.

A strong, masculine hand wrapped around her left ankle. In a move she didn’t pretend to misunderstand, he guided her leg up and over his right shoulder.

Having complete and open access to her weeping sex, he turned his tongue into a delectable spear, thrusting himself in and out of her tight, neglected entrance.

“Oh, god,” Natalie moaned shamelessly. Her body was already quivering with an impending explosion. She fisted his hair, the move spurring him on

even more.

With a growl that was quickly becoming her most favorite sound in the world, Logan moved his mouth higher, his focus turning to her seriously swollen and aching clit.

Her body jerked when his tongue swiped gently across the bundle of nerves.

Once.

Twice.

The man teased and tortured as if he knew the exact right places to touch in the exact right way to drive her maddeningly wild with need.

“Oh, Logan. Oh, God. Please!”

Natalie knew she was begging. Knew she sounded unconsolably desperate. And still, she didn't care. Neither, as it turned out, did the man with his head currently buried between her trembling thighs.

Being the attentive lover that he was, Logan took his lead from her pleas and gave her what she so desperately needed...

More.

With his tongue still licking and swirling around her aching clit, his finger was slowly entering her needy core.

They moaned in unison, the glorious intrusion almost enough to send her over the edge. Almost.

“So tight.” Logan's hand was a piston, his finger thrusting in and out of her hot, wet heat.

His tongue moved faster, one finger becoming two. Her inner muscles clenched around the digits stretching her swollen flesh.

“Oh, god, Logan,” she moaned again. “I'm so close.”

So close, yet so far away.

“Don't worry, baby.” Another flick of his wicked tongue. “I've got you.”

He moved his hand faster, his fingers moving in and out of her drenched sex in a series of hard, powerful thrusts. And when Logan began moving his tongue against her clit in fast, tight circles, the release she'd been praying for finally came.

And so did she.

“Logan!” Natalie reached her powerful climax in a single, giant rush of pleasure.

Her mouth gaped open, but her lungs refused to work. Black dots filled her vision, and her entire body convulsed with the strongest, most intense

orgasm of her existence.

Logan slid his fingers from her sensitive core, her body shivering from the aftershocks still rolling through her entire system. With her eyes still closed, Natalie thought she heard a slight sucking sound just before his rough, rugged voice filled the room around them.

“Fucking delicious.”

What was fucking...wait. Surely he hadn't just... Had he?

She peeled her heavy lids open, her breath hitching at the sight before her...

Logan. On his knees. A look of pure and utter sex shining back at her from those eyes she wanted to get lost in. The fingers he'd just had buried deep inside her still surrounded by his wet, slightly reddened lips.

Oh. My. God.

With a groan of satisfaction, the brazen man finished licking off every drop of her essence before he gently lifted her leg from his shoulder and lowered it back to the floor.

Rising to his feet, Logan stood before her with a look so intense, so carnal, it would've taken her breath away. You know, if she hadn't already lost her breath with the mega-orgasm she'd just been given.

Somewhere in the midst of her climax-induced haze, Natalie had the fleeting idea of that being Logan's superhero name...

Never fear, release is near with Mega-O to the rescue!

The silly thought made her giggle, which earned her an arched brow and a stern stare from the climax crusader himself.

“Something funny?”

“Hm, mm.” Natalie rolled her lips inward and shook her head.

“You know, it doesn't bode well for me that you're laughing after that.” A twinkle of humor reflected in those green-blue swirls. The half-smile he wore making her heart skip. “I mean...that was my best work, right there. So if you weren't impressed with that, then—”

Whatever else he was going to say got lost in her bark of laughter.

A few ticks of the clock later, when she was finished laughing—when the two of them were finished laughing *together*—she took a step forward and pressed her fully naked body against his.

Wrapping her arms around the back of his neck, Natalie lifted up onto her tiptoes and brought her mouth to his. And with her lips brushing against his as she spoke, she stared deep into his loving gaze and said...

“Take me to bed.”

FUCKING BEAUTIFUL.

Logan stood at the foot of his bed, staring down at the single most beautiful creature on God's green earth.

Laying on her back in the center of his king-sized mattress, Natalie's long hair was splayed out around her like a crown of chocolate waves. Her arms were above her head, wrists crossed in a casual, comfortable position, and her legs...

I've died and gone to Heaven.

With one of her toned, butter-smooth legs stretched straight and the other lifted and bent, he'd been given a view he prayed like hell he never, ever forgot.

I'm the luckiest bastard in the world.

The woman he'd longed for—had spent years fantasizing about—was naked and in his bed. A woman who tasted sweeter than any candy ever made. And the way her body had responded to his every flick and lick and touch...

It was as if she'd been discovering the greatest pleasure known to man for the very first time, and he'd been the one to give it to her.

Logan looked into her eyes. God, he loved those eyes. So sweet. Almost innocent, though he knew she'd live through too much for that to be true.

But here, in this moment, those gorgeous brown beauties were staring up at him with so much heat, so much emotion, it squeezed his heart to the point it almost *hurt* to look at her.

“You gonna stand there all night, sailor? Or was there something else you

wanted to do?”

His shoulders shook with laughter even as his hands went to the buckle on his belt. “God, I love that smart mouth of yours.”

“Yeah?” Her lips curled into an ornery smirk.

“Yes, ma’am.” Logan released the buckle and pulled the leather strap free.

Natalie’s focus dropped to what he was doing, her fiery gaze watching his every move with such intensity, he couldn’t help but have a little fun.

Slowing his motions, he took his sweet, sweet time freeing the metal button. Logan slid his fingers lower, moving at a painstakingly slow pace as he pinched his zipper’s metal lead between his forefinger and thumb.

And he moved even slower when lowering the zipper all...the way....down.

Relief was instant as the constricting pressure of the jeans was released, allowing his hard, angry cock some room to breathe.

But the relief was slight, and not nearly enough to ease the aching filling his entire groin. And the way Natalie was staring at him—or more accurately, at his bulging boxer-briefs—was only making it worse.

“You keep looking at me like that, this is gonna be a very sad, very *quick* encore.”

“I’m sorry.” Natalie pushed herself up and onto her knees.

Not looking even the tiniest bit sorry at all, but sexy as *fuuuuck*, she crawled down to the mattress’s edge, stopping to kneel right the hell in front of him.

“Nat?” Logan stared down at her with a pointed stare.

“I’ll stop looking, I promise. Just as soon as I do this.” She reached up, using both hands to work his jeans and boxers down over his hips...and lower.

His rock-solid dick sprang forward, and Logan hissed in a tight breath from the sudden—and much needed—freedom.

When Natalie’s hitch of breath caught his attention, he looked down just in time to see her fingers wrapping as far around his thick girth as they could go. His hips jerked, that first touch damn near enough to set him off.

And then the sexy vixen started to move her hand.

She pumped him up and down, her delicate hand working him with slow, steady strokes. A deep groan filled the room, and it took Logan a second to realize it had come from him.

“Damn, Nat. That feels great, but you keep doing tha... *Ah!*”

Her mouth was on him before he even knew she’d taken her hand off his dick.

“Goddamn,” he moaned loudly. “Fuck, baby. Ah, *Jesus...*”

Slowly, teasingly, she slid him in as far as her throat would allow. Once she’d reached her limit, Natalie started to pull back, moving even slower than she had on the way down.

Torture. The woman was knowingly, purposely torturing him.

Maybe. But damn. What a way to go!

Speaking of torture...

Natalie picked up the pace, working him with a mouth that felt as if it were made solely for him. And in just a few licks and flicks of the tongue—a few tight, sheathing sucks—the talented woman had already brought him more pleasure than he could recall ever receiving from the women in his past.

Because they weren’t this woman. They weren’t—

“Natalie,” Logan spoke her name like a prayer. “Baby, you’re gonna need to...*Ah!*” He sucked in a breath. “Baby, you’re gonna need to stop.”

If she didn’t, he was going to lose it while he was still in that delectable mouth of hers. And not that he hadn’t fantasized about that scenario a time or sixty, Logan wanted to be inside that silky-smooth pussy of hers even more.

“Enough.” He took the choice from her hands, or rather her mouth, and pulled himself free from Natalie’s lips.

“But you said you loved my mouth.”

“Next time.” He motioned to the mattress behind her as he finished removing his boxers and jeans. “Lay back down, just like you were before.”

“That an order, Hayes?” she teased, her gorgeous face lifting with a challenging stare.

The challenging stare lifting her gorgeous face sent a rush of arousal straight to his dick. Reaching down, Logan pinched the throbbing tip to keep the greedy bastard under control.

Natalie noticed this, of course. Those dimples of hers deepening with a knowing grin as she lay naked, staring up at him.

Refusing to back down, Logan kept his gaze steady, rebutting with an equally challenging, “What if it is?”

His rebuttal backfired bigtime, however, when Natalie—a woman who surprised him on a daily basis—bit her lip in an almost submissive way before whispering a low, “Yes, Sir.”

And then she laid back down on the bed the way she was before. Just as he'd ordered.

Fuck. Me.

It was in that moment Logan knew he was in deep, deep trouble where this woman was concerned. And damn if he couldn't wait to see just how bad it could be. Because good was great, but bad...

Logan took in the sight before him once more.

Oh hell, yeah. Bad is so much fucking better.

He crawled onto the mattress, moving in a way that made him feel like a predator attacking its prey. But Natalie wasn't prey to be attacked. She was a precious gift meant to be treasured.

Savored.

Treasured.

Loved.

And he did love her. Body, heart, and soul. The words were there, right on the tip of his tongue. But as he carefully settled himself on top of her perfect, luscious curves, Logan knew this wasn't the time.

It was bad enough they were doing *this* after the night she'd had. Not that he had any intentions of stopping.

Let's see. Natalie Garrison is in my bed. Naked. And I'm wasting my time thinking about how I'm not thinking about pulling back and stopping it. Why, exactly?

Message received loud and fucking clear, Logan got busy making this a night neither of them would forget.

Wanting more time with her beautiful, plump breasts, he balanced himself on one elbow while using his free hand to play and explore. With the gentlest of touches, he slowly caressed each one; his fingers tracing the outside swell before slipping down along the u-shaped curves below.

Goosebumps sprung in his wake, and Logan took far more pleasure in that than he probably should have. But any reaction to his touch—every reaction—was like winning the grand prize in every category at every 4H fair he'd ever attended as a kid.

He found her rosy nipple, erect and begging for attention. More than happy to oblige, Logan leaned down, taking it into his mouth and loving it to his heart's content. When he was finished with that one, he gave the same sensual attention to the other.

Natalie ran her fingers through his short hair, and when he carefully

pulled her nipple between his teeth, she filled her fist and squeezed. His scalp burned, the pleasurable pain fueling his already overwhelming desire for more.

For everything.

But Logan held back, determined to make this as good as he could for her. *Always* for her. By the time he was finished, Natalie was writhing with need beneath him.

Which of course, had been his plan all along.

“Logan, please,” she begged, her breaths coming in short pants.

Jesus, he loved it when she begged. But only for him. Only for his touch.

Anything else this woman wants...anything she needs...it's hers. Tonight. Tomorrow.

Forever.

“You sure you're ready?”

“God, yes!” She let her thighs fall open, her legs spread beneath him in an invitation from God himself.

Because only *He* could create something so perfectly beautiful. Both inside and out.

“Please, Logan.” Natalie lifted her pelvis, grinding her hips against his in search of her second release. “I need you inside me.”

Yep. It's official. I have died and gone to Heaven.

More than ready to spend eternity locked inside an angel like the one still moving desperately beneath him, Logan settled himself between her splayed legs once more. Reaching between them, his knuckles brushed over her swollen clit as he took himself in hand.

Moisture coated his fingers from both their greedy, wanton bodies. Releasing his aching dick, balanced his weight with a forearm on either side of her head.

“You good?” He had to ask. And then... “Shit! Condom.”

He started to get up, but stopped when Natalie dug her heels into his ass to keep him from moving.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“I know you got tested regularly in the Navy. But what about since then? Didn't you have to go through all that when you got hired on at the company you're with now?”

“I did, but—”

“When was the last time you slept with someone?”

Logan blinked. She wanted to have this discussion now, with his slick, throbbing tip pressing against her hot, wet slit?

Can you think of a more appropriate time to have it?

His inner voice, the fuck, had a point. And since he'd been honest about everything so far tonight...

“I was with two women during the first six months I was here.” He swallowed the memories of those nights away.

Nights he'd gotten so desperate for a woman he couldn't dare have, he'd gone to a bar, gotten drunk, and found someone warm and willing to help him forget. Nights he'd left those stranger's beds feeling worse than he had when his drunk ass had first fallen into them.

Her expression never wavered, though he could've sworn there was a teensy, tiny sliver of jealousy lurking within those seas of brown.

Nothing to be jealous of there, sweetheart. I learned early on, there was no substitute for the real thing.

“And the last year-and-a-half?” Natalie asked softly, a hint of hesitation noticeable in her tone. “H-how many women have you—”

“As of this moment?” Logan held her gaze so she'd see the truth in his eyes. “None. Although, I'm sure hoping that number increases by one in the very near future.”

The tip of his cock was pressing against her in a way her inner muscles teased the sensitive area with several short, tight squeezes.

“You...y-you really haven't had sex for a year-and-a-half?” Natalie's dark brows frowned in the moonlight. When he nodded his affirmative, her very next question was, “Why?”

“Wasn't anyone I wanted to share my bed with.” He cleared his throat. “That's a lie. There wasn't anyone I wanted to share my bed with that was... available.”

Logan could tell the moment his riddle sank in.

“No. You didn't...” She shook her head against the mattress beneath her. “You haven't been waiting for *me* this whole time. Have you?”

“Like I said, there wasn't anyone I wanted to sleep with that was available.” A shrug. “You weren't available. Not emotionally, anyway.”

“I'm sorry.”

The look in her eyes said she meant it.

“Ah, Nat.” Logan smiled, brushing some hair from her eye. “You don't

ever apologize for that. Not to me or anyone else. I'm just trying to explain how important you are to me." He leaned down for a sweet, soft kiss. "How much *this* means to me."

"This means a lot to me, too." She nibbled his bottom lip. "And I'm sure it'll come as no surprise to you, since I pretty much tell you everything, but... there's been no one else since Hunter." A quick work of her delicate throat. "And there were only two before him."

Three. This gorgeous, amazing, sexy as fuck woman had been with a grand total of three men?

Logan didn't understand it. Couldn't even begin to. But he also wasn't going to be pissed that his woman—and make no mistake, she was his woman—could count on one hand the number of men she'd been with.

He wished he could say the same. If he could go back, if he could change those two nights from nearly two years ago, as well as a few others that had been in his life before them, Logan would take them all back.

Because there was only one woman he needed. Only one woman he wanted. And she was laying beneath him, her molten core eager to take him in, and she...

Is still waiting for you to respond, dickmunch.

"I figured as much, but I'm glad you trust me enough you felt you could tell me."

"Logan, your tongue was literally inside my crotch a few minutes ago." She kept her expression deadpan. "Pretty sure I've trusted you with a lot more this evening than the number of notches on my bedpost."

He stared at her a heartbeat longer and then...

Logan threw his head back and laughed. "God, I—"

Love you.

That's what he'd come really fucking close to saying. Because as usual, Natalie had shocked the hell out of him with her case-in-point observation. And yeah, the first thing he'd thought was how much he loved her.

Every. Fucking. Thing. About. Her.

His gaze landed back on hers, praying she hadn't noticed the almost-slip. But when she continued the conversation as if nothing had happened, Logan felt fairly confident she hadn't.

Thank God.

"My point in this little version of the Spanish Inquisition was that I know you're clean, you hopefully trust that I am." Those round eyes stared up at

him. “Oh, and I’m on birth control, but for no other reason than I’ve been on it forever, so I just felt like it was easier to stay on it than stop and have to restart it later.”

Was she saying what he thought she was?

“You don’t...want to use a condom?”

He’d never gone bareback. Not ever. Not even once. Too much risk for all parties involved.

“We can if you want. I’m just saying we don’t have to on my account.”

Logan swallowed, but no way in hell was he about to argue. And since there was no need for him to leave his bed for a condom or anything else...

He repositioned himself and waited. Without a word, he leaned down and took her mouth in his.

Unlike their first real kiss, this one was slow. Gentle. And he took his time showing her with his lips and tongue what he thought of the precious gift she’d just blessed him with.

When the kiss was over—and Logan had pulled back so he could look into her eyes—he slowly eased his hips forward, breaching her entrance with as much care and grace as was humanly possible.

While also working with all he had not to blow his wad before he was even fully seated. Easier said than done given the position he was in. *Literally*. Especially when the woman beneath him was doing everything in her power to get him there.

Control, Hayes. Must. Stay. In. Control.

Logan maintained the status quo as he made it those final few inches. He stopped, suddenly very aware that his dick was inside Natalie Garrison’s body. Without a condom.

Holy Fuuuuck!

She felt like every birthday, Christmas, and Easter present he could ever wish for...only better.

Better because Natalie wasn’t just a warm body to feed his greedy libido. She wasn’t some random woman he’d picked up in a bar in hopes of escaping his reality for a few meaningless hours.

She was Natalie. His Natalie. And being with her, like this, made Logan feel like he was finally...

Home.

Her hips arched against his, and he knew that was his cue to start moving. He eased back, careful to give her body time to finish adjusting to the foreign

intrusion.

She was tight. So tight, he feared his size would cause her pain. But as he continued slowly working himself in and out in gentle, easy thrusts, that breathtaking gaze of hers let him know she was doing just fine.

“I feel so...full.” Her lids fell closed, a satisfied smile spread across her lips as she held onto his shoulders blindly and let herself go for the ride.

That’s my girl.

Time vanished as Logan savored the moment, making sure she felt every ounce of pleasure he knew how to give. He moved; she responded. He kissed; she nibbled. He thrust; she writhed.

And Natalie gave as good as she got.

Just like out of the bedroom, the woman didn’t hold back. She told him—or in some cases, showed him—what she liked. What she wanted. And she followed his body’s natural hints and cues to quickly master in the art of bringing him closer and closer to the edge.

She’s perfect. Fucking...perfect.

After several minutes had passed, and Logan sensed his woman needed more, he pushed himself a bit harder. Worked his hips at a faster pace.

Beneath him, Natalie met every move with vigor, their bodies dancing together in the most sensual of ways, until he could feel her quivering with another impending climax.

His lower back tingled, and shards of electricity filled his aching balls. He was close. Really fucking close. But come hell or high water, he was going to get her there first.

Logan reached between their bodies, the pads of his fingers finding her clit begging for the release he knew how to give. He pressed a little harder. Moved his fingertips back and forth in a motion that sent a rush of hot liquid over his already slick cock.

“Oh, god, Logan,” Natalie breathed. “Just like that! Don’t stop!” A low, telling moan. “Oh, god, Logan. Please...don’t...”

She came hard and fast, her body arching high as her second orgasm of the night struck. And it couldn’t have happened a moment sooner, either. Because as she was still coming apart in his arms, Logan felt his own climax bubble up and over.

“Ah, fuck,” he panted, his thrusts coming in uneven, jerky moves. “Christ, Nat. I’m gonna...” Logan’s spine stiffened with a primal grunt, and as he began spilling himself into her velvety core, he called out her name.

“Natalie!” Logan came harder and longer than ever before.

So many things were like that with her. So many firsts. Mosts. Bests. It shouldn’t surprise him, though. Not really.

Because this was Natalie—*his* Natalie—and with her, everything was better.

TWO DAYS LATER...

“COFFEE?”

Natalie looked up from Logan’s living room floor and smiled. “God, yes.” She eagerly took the steaming mug from his hands. “Thanks.”

Their fingers touched, and her lower belly instantly tingled.

That seemed to happen a lot. Every time they touched, actually. It was something Natalie had observed over the course of the past forty-eight hours.

Even now, after two days of little else but sweet, amazing, wildly passionate sex, she found herself counting the hours until bedtime. Not that they couldn’t stop what they were doing any time they wanted. It’s how they’d spent, well, the last two days.

Two. Whole. Days.

Muscles she didn’t even know she had hurt, but the soreness was worth it. Every muscle. *Everywhere.*

Legs crisscrossed, she took a careful sip of the freshly brewed Heaven in a cup and moaned. “You are officially my favorite person in the entire world.”

The comment was meant to be a joke, but there was a truth behind it that had become cemented in place.

His deep chuckle did all kinds of things to her insides, and it was all she could do not to say to hell with work and jump his bones.

You did that yesterday, remember?

Oh, yeah. She remembered. Every impulsive, unabashed, erotic moment of it. And damn if she couldn't wait to do it all again.

And again.

And again.

“Hellooo...” A soft but high-pitched whistle. “Earth to Nat.”

Heat filled Natalie's cheeks as she brought Logan's handsome, perfect face back into focus. “Sorry, what?”

Wearing that panty-dropping crooked grin of his, Logan set his own mug onto the nearby coffee table before coming back to where she sat. Careful not to step on the organize chaos strategically spread out the floor in front of her, he planted his feet inches from her hip.

Her mouth went dry as she watched him do that sexy move men did...the one where they pinch their jeans mid-thigh, hiking the material up a smidge, just before they lower their powerful bodies into a deep squat.

Or maybe it was just *this* man who made the seamless move so damn sexy.

A man that tall and fit shouldn't be able to move so gracefully. Yet Logan crossed a room, and it was as if he were gliding.

But right now, his face was inches from hers, his gorgeous eyes searching hers with a knowing stare. “I asked if you'd made heads or tails of all this stuff yet.” He tilted his head toward the purposeful mess. “But it looks like you might have other things on your mind.”

“Oh it does, does it?” She tried not to smile.

And failed miserably.

“Uh, huh.” The tip of his nose brushed playfully against hers.

She was quick to remind him, “The last time this happened, I didn't get a minute's worth of work done the rest of the day.”

“Funny. I don't remember you complaining.” He pulled her bottom lip between his teeth. A tiny nibble meant to taunt and torture.

Mission accomplished.

“Not complaining, simply stating a fact.” She ran the tip of her tongue along the seam of his lips.

Two can play at this game, Hayes.

“I've got a fact for you.” The rumble of his voice filled her system, collecting in a familiar aching at the apex of her thighs.

The kiss that followed only added to her insatiable need for this man. Only for Logan.

Only him.

She still couldn't believe how easy the transition from friends to lovers had been. It was still early, of course. But even he'd agreed the weirdest part about the shift in their relationship was the fact that it *didn't* feel weird.

From that first no-holds-barred kiss two nights ago—followed by one of the most powerful, all-consuming orgasms of her entire life—it had almost felt as if they'd been a couple all along.

Tessa would probably attribute the ease with which things had changed to the fact that they started out as friends. And after sharing his roof for the past couple of days, Natalie would be inclined to agree.

While the life-altering sex had been a definite perk, it wasn't the basis of their new romance. At the root...at its very *core*...theirs was relationship was built on the friendship they'd built in recent years.

One that had started out of a mutual respect for the man who would become her husband, but had deepened, blossomed, and grown into something so much more. In their shared grief and promises made to a man they'd both love and lost, she and Logan had found each other.

And now that they had, now that they'd found *this*, Natalie knew with every fiber of her being, there was no turning back. She wouldn't, even if she wanted to. Which she absolutely, without question, did *not* want to do.

Why?

Because you love him.

Tessa was right all along. As fate would have it, Natalie had *finally* opened her eyes to what her sister had been trying to get her see all along with those every-once-in-a-while conversations she'd start about the potential for Natalie and Logan as a couple...

She was completely, fully, overwhelmingly in love with Logan Hayes.

My very own miracle.

It truly was, she supposed. At least to her it was. After all, she'd already gotten to experience one fairytale love story. Happy ending or not, Natalie had been blessed to know love once before.

A deep, soulful, unconditional love that knew no bounds.

She'd had that once. With Hunter. A man who'd worshipped the ground she'd walked on while also challenging her for the better at every turn.

And now...

Now I've found it again.

It was the same, familiar sense of belonging and yet so very different.

The love she felt for Logan didn't simply fill a void left by Hunter's death. It had slowly started to fill every cracked and broken remnant of grief still cluttering her heart and impeding her future.

Natalie wasn't naïve enough to believe it would be as if those fissures never existed in the first place. They were a part of her now. Signs of her strength, tenacity, and endurance, rather than proof of a perceived weakness.

One that had been so easy to fall victim to while lost in the deepest, most painful depths of her grief.

But that was behind her. It was behind them *both*. Not forgotten. Never that. It was simply...the past. And now, it was time she started using the days she'd been blessed with to look ahead to her future.

A future that was pulling his lips from hers after a deliciously thorough kiss that left her lungs without air and her sex throbbing with need.

She licked his taste from her lips. Sweet, salty, and so very male.

My new favorite flavor.

"That's cheating," she accused without a single drop of disdain in her tone.

"Gotta use every resource in your arsenal, baby." Those dark brows of his waggled up and down playfully.

"So that's how it's gonna be, huh? I'll have to remember that." She leaned forward for a little nibble of her own. "In the meantime, I really need to get back to this. I'm supposed to return to work tomorrow, and I want to make sure there isn't something here that needs a closer look."

"What do you have so far?" He rested his sinewy forearms on his taut thighs as he perused the documents she'd found in the mystery folder.

Funny. It had been at the forefront of her mind when she'd left work three days ago. But by the time she'd gotten home and found Logan waiting for her, and then the break-in, and then...

The sex.

Yeah, there had definitely been a lot of that going on since that night. But that had been the best distraction *ever*, so she couldn't really complain about it.

Even if I wanted to...

Speaking of distractions...

"Honestly, I'm not sure I even know what I'm looking at. Like this." She picked up the handwritten note that had first caught her attention. "So I'm pretty sure whoever wrote it is telling me to look into the recertification

request the Board of Directors approved a few months ago. Which is this.” Natalie kept the hot mug steady with one hand while reaching forward with the other. Picking up an official Frost Avionics recertification request form, she handed it to Logan. “I know these aren’t the same planes, but you and your guys are all certified to fly. Does any of that look familiar to you? Better yet, does any of it stand out or seem out of place?”

Pushing himself back into a standing position with nothing but his powerful legs, Logan paced the room as he flipped through the form.

“Looks like Atkinson went to the Board requesting the recert for some update modifications they made to their FROST WA-800 model jet airliner.” His gaze scanned the documents closely. “But everything’s in order, from what I can tell.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but I’m a numbers girl. Not an airplane aficionado.”

Logan stopped pacing and looked over at her, those striking eyes of his in a razor-sharp focus. “That’s it.”

“What’s it?” Natalie frowned.

“Numbers.”

She kept frowning. “I’m still not following.”

Walking hurriedly toward her, he explained as he moved. “You said it yourself; you’re not an expert in planes. You are, however...” His voice trailed off, his strong hand hovering the reports she’d sorted. Spotting what he’d presumably been searching for, Logan picked it up and held it out for her to take. “A numbers girl,” he finished the incomplete declaration.

Natalie reached up, pulling the report from his hand and read its heading aloud. “Bi-annual Fuel Expense/Usage Reconciliation Report.” She gave it a thorough once-over. “I’m still not seeing anything that screams embezzlement or trafficking. That’s what those abbreviations mean, right?” Natalie said to the former DEVGRU operative for confirmation. “The *embez* and *traff* that were jotted down?”

Logan glanced at the scrap of paper still in his hand. With a muttered curse, he gave a grim nod. “Yeah.” That intense stare of his held a warning as they landed back on her. “I’d say that’s exactly what those stand for.”

“What do we do?” Her stomach sank. “Should we call the police?”

Natalie fully expected that to be *exactly* what Logan thought they should do. Instead he surprised her with shake of his head.

“Not yet.” He pulled his phone from his pocket. “We go running to the

cops with some half-backed accusation, especially one as big as Frost, they'll own our asses in court for defamation." He tapped the cell's screen before putting it to his ear.

"Who are you calling?"

Rather than answer, Logan raised an index finger halfway in the air. With a mouthed "Hang on a second", he spoke to the person who had apparently just picked up. "It's me." He waited, listening to someone she couldn't see while his eyes remained solely on her. "Yep. That's it." Pause. "Okay, good. I think Nat and I just found something. Maybe." Pause. "Can't confirm until we look deeper, but if it's what we're thinking it is, it's huge." Pause. "Nope. Bigger than that." Pause. "Exactly."

He was talking to someone about all this? About her job?

Natalie frowned. Given his background, Logan understood the concept behind confidential better than most. While what she'd found wasn't necessarily classified intel—they still weren't entirely sure *what* it was—she wasn't too keen on the idea of his bringing anyone else in on it just yet.

Especially since it was her job on the line, and he hadn't even bothered to run it by her first.

Frustrated by the one-sided the conversation, Natalie used what she'd intended to be a hushed whisper when she asked him, "Can you at least put the call on speaker, so I can hear, too?"

Since this did directly involve her and all.

But the frustratingly handsome man bypassed her question by telling whoever was on the phone, "All right, man. We'll see you soon."

See you soon?

He'd barely had time to end the call before she demanded to know, "Who are we seeing soon?"

Right on cue, the man's alarm system alerted him to a vehicle pulling into the drive. He'd taught her how to turn it on and off when they'd first gotten here the night of the break-in.

The man had even blushed the teensiest bit when he'd given her the four-digit code—0324.

They were numbers that could mean anything. Or nothing. But Natalie had recognized the combination immediately for what it was...

March twenty-fourth. My birthday.

Even now, the idea that he'd used her birthday for a system he'd installed shortly after buying the place still warmed her heart. A silly thing, really. But

to her, it was just more proof that theirs was a closeness that ran deep.

And with every new moment that passed, Natalie could feel herself falling further and further into that lifechanging abyss.

The sound of multiple car doors shutting reached them from outside. Logan was already at the door when Natalie unfolded herself to stand.

“Okay, seriously.” She played a tiptoed version of Hopscotch as she weaved through the center of her many piles on her way to join him. “Who’s here?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Surprise?

“Logan, you know I hate surprises.”

She used to love them. Birthdays. Christmas. Just because.

Anniversaries.

Natalie used to be like a little kid when it came to the unexpected. But that was before the day she’d been surprised by the cruelest, most devastating news a military wife could receive.

So yeah. She and surprises weren’t exactly on friendly terms. Not anymore.

“Pretty sure you’re gonna like this one.” Logan shot her a wink and a smirk with the power to steal all her worries.

Surprise? What surprise?

Opening the door, he greeted someone she couldn’t yet see. “About time you guys got here.”

“Would’ve been here sooner, but *someone’s* flight kept getting delayed, which then put us *all* behind schedule.”

Natalie sucked in a breath, her eyes flying up to Logan.

It can’t be.

She stretched her neck this way and that to try to catch a glimpse of the man behind the voice. But with his back fully to hers, Logan’s impassable form had blocked her view of the opened doorway.

“Not my fault it’s hurricane season.” Another familiar male voice.

No way that’s—

“You’re the dumbass who decided to move to fucking Florida.”

Okay, now *that* voice was a voice she’d recognize anywhere.

Deep. Gravelly. Perpetually grumpy...

Unable to wait a second longer, Natalie pushed her way past Logan, squeezing between him and the door jamb to peek her head outside. A wave

of emotion she wasn't prepared for hit as she took in the four men staring back at her.

Archer, Lucky, Chase, and Van.

She hadn't seen them since the funeral, which probably explained the sudden tears that had threatened to ruin the moment. But even with the passing time, the badass group looked exactly as she'd remembered...

Strong, formidable, and ready to take on the world.

“HEY, NAT.” Archer greeted her first.

A light breeze carried a few tips of the man’s dark hair. Longer than before, the thick waves now fell to mid-ear length, curling ever so slightly at the ends.

“Archer!” Natalie flew into the man’s welcoming arms. “Ohmygosh! I can’t believe you’re all here!” She pulled back to meet his chocolate eyes. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Hayes filled us in on your little problem.” His neatly trimmed beard tickled her cheek as he spoke. “Figured we’d see what we could do to help.”

“My problem?” She looked over at Logan who was standing to her left. “You told them about the break-in?”

“Break-in, slashed tires...possible embezzlement scandal involving two of the country’s richest men. You sure have been a busy lady.”

Her gaze swung to the source of the comment, not surprised at all by the source. “Hey, Lucky,” Natalie greeted Jason Lucas with a warm smile.

She barely had time to prepare before he scooped her up into a giant bear hug. With a tight squeeze that was just this side of painful, the brilliant man offered a jovial, “Hey, girlie! How have you been?”

“G-good,” she choked out with a strain.

Kind of hard to talk with your insides getting crushed.

“Yeah?” He released her with a wide, toothy grin. “Well you *look* good.”

Short, dark hair, light blue eyes, and a perpetually wicked flicker in his winking eye, the unapologetic flirt looked almost *too* handsome to be a SEAL. But Natalie knew beneath Lucky’s good looks and *how you doin’* grin

was a man with lethal aim and a heart of gold.

“So do you.” Natalie chuckled again. Knowing Lucky was an equal-opportunity flirt she’d never once felt uncomfortable by his playful, feigned interest, and always took it in its intended jest.

The next hug came from Chase Boyer, a man Hunter had always seen as his slightly younger brother from another mother. With his long-on-top, light brown hair, turquoise eyes, and boyish smile, he was still as adorably handsome and sweet as ever.

Having gone down the line, Natalie got to the final member of the team.

“Hi, Van.” She offered Donovan Braddock a warm smile. “It’s really good to see you again.”

“Natalie.” The formidable man’s black gaze met hers, his deep, deep voice the same one that had sent her practically running to the door earlier.

Standing well-over six feet, his black hair and matching beard were both as short and neat as she remembered. Though Van had always been the strong and silent type, that black stare of his spoke volumes.

Natalie took a step closer. He opened his arms. And as he wrapped her up in his engulfing embrace, she felt everything he felt but hadn’t said.

I hear you, Van. Loud and clear.

Once the greetings were over and shock of the team’s presence had begun to dissipate, she returned to her earlier question of why they’d suddenly appeared on his doorstep.

“You sent for the calvary over a break-in?”

“I didn’t *send* for anyone. I called Lucky after the break-in and asked him to look into a couple things.” Eyes she’d spent the last two days getting lost in narrowed as they slid in Lucky’s direction. “Had no idea they were coming here until I got a call letting me know they’d just landed in Seattle and needed my address.”

“Hey, man.” Lucky raised a set of defensive hands. “You never asked me not to share. And even if you had, it’s not like I’d sit on something as big as our girl being in trouble.”

Natalie gave a slight tilt of her head. “Your *girl* is right here. And we’re still trying to figure out if there’s even any trouble to begin with. I hate to think you all dropped everything for a wasted trip here.”

“Never a waste to see you and our boy, darlin’.” Chase gave her a quick wink.

“Boyer’s right.” Lucky shrugged. “Besides six heads are better than two.”

“And twelve hands are better than four.” Logan’s deep voice had her returning her gaze to his. One broad shoulder lifted in a shrug. “I called Lucky the night of the break-in. Filled him in on what all had happened and asked him to look into your co-workers.”

She frowned. “At the firm? I already told you, no one there has a reason to want to hurt me.”

Another shrug, this one accompanied by an arched brow and a look that matched his next words. “Can’t take the chance.”

“I started with some of the higher-ups in Frost Avionics first, though, so I’m only about half-way through running your co-workers at Schwartz.”

Natalie shook her head, fearing everyone was going through a lot of trouble for nothing. “Digging into those people’s personal information without their permission feels wrong.”

“Not if it leads us to the person who scared the hell out of you.” Logan practically growled.

“Your boy’s right.” Archer slapped Logan on the shoulder on his way into the house. “Your safety trumps their privacy every day of the week.”

Your boy?

Her eyes shot to Logan’s, her gut tightening with dread. Surely he hadn’t

“And twice on Tuesdays.” Lucky’s quip came with a smirk as he followed Archer’s lead and went inside.

Waiting until Chase and Van were several feet past the threshold, Natalie slid close to Logan and whispered low enough only he could hear.

“Did you tell them we slept together?”

She really, really hoped he hadn’t. Not because she was ashamed or thought they could keep their budding romance a secret forever. Her trepidation had nothing to do with either of those things.

It was just that it was all still so very new that she was still processing the shift herself. And, selfishly, she kind of wanted to keep what she and Logan had found to themselves.

Just for a little while longer.

“Not their business.” Logan’s immediate response and sharp shake of his head put her anxious nerves at rest.

Good answer.

And one she should’ve already known would be the man’s response.

Of course, Logan wouldn’t have shared the precious, passionate time

they'd spent between the sheets. He was far too respectful of her—of all women in general—to cheapen what they'd found with a bunch of juvenile locker room talk.

Feeling guilty for having entertained the thought in the process, she flashed him an apologetic smile and a gentle squeeze to his impressive bicep as she joined the others inside. An hour later, she and Logan had gone back over everything that had happened, starting with the tires, and ending with the piles still waiting for her on the floor.

The rules she was breaking weren't lost on her, both personal and professional. Not to mention the actual *crimes* she was committing by allowing Logan and the others access to what she'd learned about Frost Avionics' financials up to this point, as well as the mystery folder.

But Archer had been right. Her safety was more important than worries over offending people. More important than even her job. As for the idea of having to do actual jail time, however...

Pretty sure the jury's still out on that one. Pun intended.

"Damn, Nat." Archer looked at the handwritten note again. "I hate to say it, but I think Logan's gut is spot on with this one." He glanced at the papers in his hands. "The numbers in these reports aren't matching with what I'm seeing in these graphs. I'll still need to do more digging, but there's definitely some shady shit going on at Frost."

"He's right," Archer joined in while studying the pictures of the updated fuel tanks and other modifications the company had made on the WA-800 jet. "Something about these tanks isn't jiving with me."

"What did you find?" Logan's blue gaze fell to those same images.

"The pictures Natalie found are all of the jet's fuel tanks and various parts of the fuel system." Archer's dark gaze rose to meet his."

"Yeah, I know." Logan nodded. "I looked them over, but I didn't see any defects or anything. And I did a search looking for any reported crashes or injuries involving that jet, as well as those specific tanks. Nothing popped up."

"The tanks, themselves, are fine. The problem is here." Lifting a set of stapled papers their anonymous whistle-blower had provided, the former medic explained, "According to the company's initial modification proposal, their justification for the additional tanks was to save time and money. They wouldn't have to refuel as often, and the design of the new tanks would make the entire fueling system run more efficiently, saving on the amount of fuel

needed for the same amount of airtime.”

“You smell bullshit?” Chase asked the other man point blank.

“Don’t just smell it, brother.” A negative jerk of his head. “I think our girl here’s standing right in the middle of the pile.”

All eyes turned her way, but hers had already slid to meet Logan’s. The concern she found there ramped up her own, and it took everything in her not to cross the room in search of his comforting embrace.

And the more Archer explained, the more Natalie wished she’d never seen that fucking file...or Frost Avionics.

“For starters,” Archer began again, “there’s nothing in the design of these tanks that would affect how they burn fuel. That means their efficiency is the same as the original tanks.”

“You said *for starters*.” Natalie looked over at him. “What else is wrong with Frost’s proposal?”

Meeting her inquiring gaze, he crossed the room to where she stood. “You tell me.” Archer held out a different set of stapled papers for her to take.

“What’s this?” Her focus immediately lowered to the blur of printed numbers now in her hands.

“Your mystery man...or woman...was kind enough to leave you a copy of the company’s fuel expense reports for that specific jet. They go back five years. Look at the total volume of fuel used each year. It’s the second-to-the-last column on each of the reports.”

As told, Natalie found the targeted column before sliding her focus to the very last number at the bottom. One after the other, she took in each of the last five years’ amounts. And then she shared her assessment.

“They go up each year, but it’s a steady climb,” she noted aloud. “No massive dip or jump between any of the years.” When Archer nodded, understanding finally clicked. “If those tanks were as fuel-efficient as Frost claimed, that steady incline would’ve leveled out or possibly even lowered a fraction.”

“Like I said, the tanks did nothing for fuel efficiency, which means they saved the company zilch.”

“That matches up with these,” Donovan rasped, holding up a spreadsheet of his own. “The jet’s fuel management reports, also going back five years. The pounds of fuel recorded for the overseas trips *after* the new tanks were installed increased by twelve percent.”

Natalie's brow furrowed. "Right, because they had more tanks to fill."

"Or so they'd like you to think."

She blinked with a quick shake of her head. "Okay, now you've lost me."

"I'll rephrase." The former SEAL did just that. "If they were really upping the pounds of fuel by one-fourth each trip, then that steady increase in fuel costs Arch found wouldn't have been so steady. There would have been a noticeable spike during the updated jet's initial flights."

When Donovan looked to Archer for confirmation, the other man quickly flipped through the papers still in his hands. Moving back and forth between two different pages more than once, Archer was nodding his head before his eyes found the room, once more.

"Van's right." He looked at his friends and former teammates. "There's very little change in the fuel costs for those months."

Needing clarification on what she thought they were trying to say, Natalie said, "Okay, so let me see if I'm following what you two are saying. Glenn Frost and Dennis Atkinson were given the green light to modify their largest jet airliner by adding two new fuel tanks that would supposedly save them money in the long run due to their innovative fuel efficiency." She took a breath and looked to Logan. "Is that right, so far?"

"Sounds like it to me," he nodded in confirmation.

"Okay, good." She exhaled. "So then they get their approval, install the new tanks, and everyone's happy. Except the amount of money they're spending on fuel doesn't match with the amount of fuel they're claiming to be using."

Archer and Van answered her with a unified, "Exactly."

"Always were a quick study," Logan grinned.

Her heart swelled, and Natalie's lips automatically started to smile. But then she remembered the company they were in, and her would-be smile vanished in an instant.

Clearing her throat, she kept her focus on the conversation at hand. "The note hinted to embezzlement. Glenn Frost or Dennis Atkinson—or both—could have wanted those tanks installed to hide laundered cash. Although, I haven't come across anything in their recent financials to suggest a sudden shift in revenue or expenses. Not from any of their accounts."

Red flags had been the first thing she'd checked for. A time saver when the errors—intentional or not—are obvious. But with Frost Avionics, there'd been no red flags. In fact, everything she'd come across so far had been

absolutely perfect.

“When I looked at my to-do list this morning, I realized I’ll be done sooner than expected. A day, maybe two. I have a few other reports to go over and reconcile, but nothing that would be related to any of this. After that, I’ll just have to submit my final report.”

“Does anyone at the company know you’re that close to finishing up?” The question came from Donovan.

“No.” She met the man’s stone-cold gaze. “In fact, the last time I spoke to Dennis Atkinson—he’s been my main point of contact—I thought I still had another week’s worth of work left.”

“Which means as far as they know, there’s still plenty of time for you to notice something and get suspicious,” Logan pointed out.

“Suspicious people start asking questions.” Donovan’s dropped tone sounded ominous.

“You really think it was them, don’t you?” Her heart thumped hard, her eyes in a natural slide to Logan’s. “You think it was someone at Frost Avionics.”

The man she’d fallen for gave a single, hard nod of his head, his answer clear and without hesitation. “I do.”

“But why?” That’s the part she still didn’t understand. “I mean, I get that I’m auditing these accounts. But what you guys don’t know is Glenn Frost was the one who called to request we do it now as opposed to waiting the few months they had left before it became a requirement.” She searched the group for an explanation that made sense. “Why would he do that if he was afraid of being discovered?”

Chase shrugged. “Maybe he’s not in on it. Could be his partner, or someone else.”

“It would have to be someone high on the food chain,” Lucky surmised. “Someone high enough to make a multi-million-dollar WA-800 modification happen.”

“Okay, but still. Why break into my place?” Natalie shook her head. “It’s not like I bring the boxes of files home with me.”

“You brought this home.” Logan’s gaze turned to stone as it fell on the evidence before them. “Everything needed to start an official investigation is here.”

“An investigation into what, though? We just debunked the embezzlement angle.”

“But not the trafficking.”

Logan’s comment left her blinking. Shit. She’d gotten so wrapped up in the embezzlement conversation, she’d forgotten about the other.

“Bet those new tanks would hold a whole lot of drugs,” Archer guessed.

Lucky nodded with an added, “Or guns.”

As if those weren’t bad enough, Natalie had another, even more horrific thought.

“Peter,” she whispered the man’s name more to herself than anyone else.

“Who’s Peter?”

Doing her best to ignore the sudden rush of nausea filling her gut, she answered Archer’s question for all the group to hear. “Peter Weiss was the man who handled Frost’s external audits for the past two years.” Bile burned her throat, but she swallowed it down and pushed on. “He was killed in a car wreck nearly two weeks ago.”

“How long ago did Frost ask to bump up the audit?” Lucky’s wheels were clearly spinning.

Another hard swallow was required before Natalie could reveal, “Four days after Peter died.”

“So the guy who handled the account before you dies in a car wreck days before the company’s CEO requests an external audit? That can’t be a coincidence.” Logan shared a look with the others. “I’m thinking either Frost is in on it, or he’s the one who hid that folder for you to find.”

“Or he’s just that arrogant.” Donovan shrugged on of his massive shoulders. “Kill the guy most familiar with the company’s financials, toss in someone new, maybe throw in a few interruptions or distractions for good measure, and boom. He skates by another audit and is free to continue his illegal doings.”

“Either way, we need to take this thing as deep as we can.”

“And by we, he means me.” Lucky wore a smug smile. “Because we all know I’m the smartest one on the team.”

A roll of Archer’s eyes accompanied a highly sarcastic, “And the humblest.”

“You’re right, though.” Logan met Lucky’s blue gaze. “I hope you brought your computer.”

“Dude.” Lucky’s handsome face fell as flat as his tone as he shot back with an offended, “Did you seriously just ask me that?”

“We need this ASAP,” the former team lead bypassed Lucky’s feigned

hurt. “And it needs to be clean.”

Natalie watched the two men exchange a look she didn’t understand.

A beat later, Lucky responded with a serious, “My stuff’s in the rental. I’ll go grab it and get set up.” To her, he pointed to the four-person table nearby and asked, “Care if I take that over for a bit?”

“It’s not my table, but sure. Knock yourself out.”

What was I gonna say? No?

Giving her a small glimpse into what Logan must have been like as a leader in the field, he turned to Archer and Van with their own assignments. “While Lucky works on that, you two go through the rest of this to see if there’s anything else you can use to support our suspicions. This has to be air fucking tight when we take it to the authorities. Otherwise Frost and Atkinson will fuck us worse than the Navy.”

Several grumbled agreements later, Chase was asking, “What do you want me to do?”

“Help Lucky with whatever he needs.”

“Copy that, Boss.”

Boss.

Natalie looked at Logan, who’d just turned back to her. The expression on his face one of command. “I think it goes without saying, but you don’t leave my sight for the foreseeable future. Got it?”

“Got it.” She nodded. “Not like I have some sort of death wish.”

There was a time not so long ago that she did. Or thought she did. But now—present situation excluded—she was so very thankful God hadn’t answered those particular prayers.

“Don’t even joke about that.”

Logan’s voice had dropped to such a serious, deadly tone that everyone in the room swung their heads in his direction, but his focus remained solely on hers.

He’d been there in those early days, so no. She didn’t suppose he would find the flippant comment funny.

“I’ll stick by you.” She amended her earlier response. “But does that still include going back to my house?” They’d had that discussion earlier. “Did Detective Knox ever text you back?”

“He texted while we were still outside with the guys. Techs gave him the all-clear. Your house is yours, again.”

She nodded but then considered the others standing in the room. “Where

are you guys staying tonight?”

“Don’t know yet,” Chase shrugged.

“I know where I’ll be.” Lucky returned from outside. Over his shoulder hung a black leather computer bag, and his hands were filled with two separate computer monitors. “My happy ass will be sitting right here, at this table.”

He placed the monitors down with a sigh before slipping his bag from his shoulders and setting it into the seat of the nearest chair.

“Yeah, you guys are welcome to crash here. I have the couch, the recliner, and I think there’s an air mattress in the garage.”

“They don’t need an air mattress.” Natalie shook her head at Logan. “Not if you and I just stay over at my place.” Realizing I how it probably sounded to the others, she added a quick, “I have the two rooms.”

Something flashed behind his eyes, but all he said was, “You sure you want to do that? Your place is still a wreck.”

“Doesn’t have to be clean to be slept in,” she insisted. “And you have your bed and the spare, plus the pull-out, and...” She glanced around with her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. “Okay, so you’ll still need an air mattress, but—”

“I wasn’t kidding, Nat.” Lucky shot her a look from over his shoulder. “I won’t be sleeping.”

“Oh. Okay, then, there you have it. Everyone who needs one has a bed to sleep in, and you guys don’t have to mess with finding a hotel room or paying for parking or any of that nonsense.”

“Works for me.” Archer shrugged on his way into the kitchen. “But if I’m going to be looking at reports all night, I’m gonna need some coffee.”

“Coffee and filters are in the upper right cabinet next to the sink,” Logan informed him. “Pot’s right there.”

The other man lifted a thumb in the air as he passed by. “Got it.”

“I’ll order the pizza and wings,” Chase offered.

“Hey, Knox!” Donovan called into the kitchen.

“Yeah?” Archer’s rugged face reappeared in the archway between the two rooms.

“Make sure that coffee’s strong this time. I can’t handle that weak shit you suck down.”

“Bullshit, my coffee’s weak. I use nearly double what the directions say.”

“There’s your first problem,” Donovan grumbled as he started sorting

papers in a line along the coffee table.”

Archer scowled. “I have a problem?”

“You do if you have to read the directions to make a fucking pot of coffee.”

Natalie couldn't hold back a snicker when Archer pretended to crank up his middle finger before vanishing into the kitchen, once again. Giving Donovan a quick glance, she offered him a chagrined, “Sorry, Van.”

The mountain of a man didn't say a word, but the quick wink he threw at her before turning away let her know they were good. Despite what may very well be a dangerous situation, she felt more complete than she had since losing Hunter.

She had Tessa, of course. But these guys...they were her family, too.

“Well I guess it's settled.” Logan looked her way. “I'll just throw these on again in the morning and change when we get back here.” He motioned to his jeans and shirt. “Anything you need to take with you?”

“Not a lot. I'll be quick.”

“Take your time.”

With a dip of her chin, Natalie left him and the others and headed down the hall. Though she'd been sleeping in Logan's bed the last two nights, her facewash and other toiletries were still in the spare bathroom.

Going inside the small room, she set about gathering the few things she'd need tonight and in the morning. Toothbrush, deodorant, facewash, birth control...

When she was finished with that, she went back into the bedroom to grab the small pile of dirty clothes she'd collected the past few days. She may not get her house back in order tonight, but she could at least do a load or two of laundry while they were there.

The low rumble of male voices reached her ears as she started across the room toward the door. Her steps froze when she heard Lucky say her name. Not so much because he'd said it, but more *how* he said it.

It had almost sounded light, as if he'd been teasing Logan about something. Something to do with her.

She inched closer being careful not to let her steps be heard. A sliver of guilt sank in with every silent step. Her mom had taught her and Tessa that eavesdropping was rude. But her mom wasn't here, so...

Sorry, Mom.

Natalie stood just inside the half-opened doorway and put her ear as close

as she could without being seen. It didn't take long for her to wish she'd listened to her mother.

"Come on, man. Just fess up now, so I can get my winnings." Definitely Lucky's voice.

"Shh!" Logan hushed the other man. "Will you keep your voice down? She's right in the other room, for fuck's sake."

Definitely talking about me.

"I'm just trying to put this stupid bet behind us."

Bet? What bet?

"Let it go, Lucky," Donovan demanded. "If Hayes says he didn't fuck Nat, he didn't."

Oh. My. God.

These men—her family—had placed bets on when she and Logan would sleep together? And Logan had *known* about it?

He'd known, and he'd gone ahead and slept with her anyway.

Natalie spun on her heels, making it back into the bathroom just in time for the gut-wrenching heaves to strike. Minutes later, after splashing cold water on her face and brushing her teeth, she put her toothbrush and toothpaste back into her bag and slid the strap over her shoulder.

She wouldn't cause a scene with the guys tonight. Not when they all had more dire things to concern themselves with. But once she and Logan were alone in her house...

I'm going to let him know exactly what he and the others could do with that fucking bet.

LOGAN OPENED Natalie's front door and stepped inside. His chest tightened at the scene in front of him, the fierce rage he'd felt the night it happened still a living breathing animal inside him.

But after locking the door behind them, and they began their way through the mess, there was something else at the forefront of his mind. Something he'd hoped would come up on the drive over but hadn't.

Of course, not much of *anything* had been brought up, because Natalie hadn't said more than a handful of words the entire ride here.

She heard me talking to Lucky.

It was the only thing that made sense. She'd been fine before she'd left them to go grab her things. Or as fine as she could be, given the circumstances. But the second she'd rejoined them minutes later, Logan instantly knew something was wrong.

The silent treatment on the way here only solidified his suspicions. And now...

"I'm going to go start a load of laundry," Natalie muttered softly as she started to walk away.

"Nat, wait."

She turned back, her gorgeous face unreadable. And damn if that didn't kill him.

"What?"

"I know you overheard me and Lucky talking."

She blinked, a deep crimson filling her silky-smooth cheeks. "Okay, so I guess we're going to do this now." The sexy brunette crossed her arms at her

front and jutted her chin. “You’re right. I did hear you guys.” Her gaze became glassy, the hurt in her eyes like a blade to the fucking heart. “The guys really placed bets on you and I having sex?”

“They did, but it’s not—”

“And you took me to bed without so much as a heads up?” She shook her head. “Why?”

“Okay, look.” Logan quickly jumped to his own defense. “I only found out about the bet two nights ago.”

The lines on her tense forehead smoothed, a look of disgust fell over her. “So...the same night you and I slept together for the first time.”

Fuck me. “Okay, yeah. I can see where that probably looks bad, but—”

“Bad?” A humorless chuckle filled the space between them. “Do you have any idea how *humiliated* I feel right now?”

“I swear to you, I didn’t know a thing about it until Lucky brought it up. And I shut that shit down fast, believe me.”

“Sure didn’t sound like it back at your place.”

“Come on, Na,” he pleaded with her. “You know how Lucky sometimes gets. The guy’s like a dog with a fucking bone. Once that man gets something stuck in his head, he doesn’t ever want to let it go.”

“I just can’t believe they would bet on something like that.” She shook an angry head “If Hunter were still here, they never would’ve even considered ___”

“Hunter’s not here.” He stared back at her. “I am.”

He refused to live in the shadow of a dead man. Not even one belonging to his best friend and SEAL brother.

“You’re right.” Natalie shook her head. “He’s not here. And I thought...” She paused. “I thought I was okay moving on without him, but...”

“But?” Logan’s gut filled with a dread he prayed would disappear.

She held his gaze with a soft, “Maybe I’m not ready for all this like I thought I was.”

Fucking Lucky. Swear to Christ, I’m going to strangle the loud-mouthed son of a bitch.

“Nat, don’t do this. I’ll talk with Lucky and the guys—”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the bet?” she cut him off. “I mean, I thought we told each other pretty much everything. And you’ve told me all sorts of other dumbass things Lucky and those guys have done in the past. Why not this?”

Logan knew what she was doing, and he'd be damned if he let her. "I already told you, Nat. I only found out about the bet two days ago. The same night as your break-in." He ran a frustrated hand over his jaw. "You were in the shower, and I'd called Lucky to have him start running some backgrounds. He mentioned the bet, I told him it was bullshit, I thought that was the end of it."

And if you heard us well enough to know there was a bet, then you should've heard Lucky bitching because I *didn't* tell him anything about what happened between us." He ran a frustrated hand over his jaw. "But this isn't really about the bet, is it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You might be pissed at the guys for what they did, but I also know you can never stay mad at any of them. Even Lucky. Or me." He kept his eyes on hers for this next part. "And I can't help but wonder whether you're using this as an easy way out."

It was a risk, pushing her the way he was. But if they had any hope for a future, this was a conversation that needed to be had.

"Easy?" Those dark brows shot high. "You think any of this has been *easy* for me? I never asked to become a widow at thirty, Logan! I didn't want that." A tear fell down her cheek, but it vanished with a single, angry swipe. "I never wanted to see that same look of sympathy on the faces of everyone I knew. I didn't want to be known as the pathetic young widow who couldn't even make it out of bed some mornings. And I—"

"You think this is what *I* wanted?" He took a wide step toward her. "I didn't want things to be like this either, Natalie!" So many times he'd prayed for Hunter to be alive. So many times he'd prayed *not* to love her anymore. "I didn't want to have to watch Hunt die in my arms. Didn't want to have to sit back and watch while your grief pulled you farther and farther into a depression that fucking terrified me. And I sure as hell didn't want to have to sit there and watch while my best friend married the woman I loved!"

His shouted words echoed off her living room walls.

Her sharp intake of air was audible as she stared up at him with her wide-eyed gaze. "Wha—what did you just say?"

Shit. Fuck. Damn it!

Logan hadn't meant to blurt that last part out. But he'd been on such a roll, his lips were forming the words before he even realized it.

"What?" He shook his head before lying badly. "N-nothing. I didn't...I

mean, I... should go check the perimeter. Just in case.”

Way to puss out, asshole.

He put his back to her and headed toward the home’s front door. He’d made it all of two long strides when he heard...

“Logan Nicholas Hayes, don’t you *dare* take another step toward that door!”

Logan froze but didn’t turn around.

So naturally, Natalie’s next order was for him to, “Look at me.”

Goddamn it.

The entire time he’d known the woman, he’d never been able to tell her no. This moment was no exception.

Turning around as ordered, Logan found her fiery gaze shooting daggers straight back at him. “You think you can just drop a bomb like that and run? What the hell, Logan?”

She was right. The woman was always fucking right. And he was a dick.

“I’m sorry, Nat.” A shake of his head. “I never should have said that.”

“Because you didn’t mean it?” An insecurity he hadn’t seen in a while returned in her unsure stare.

He shook his head. “I think you know that’s not true.”

“No, actually. I don’t know that, because up until a few days ago, you never so much as hinted at having any sort of romantic interest in me. You never flirted, never tried making move, or—”

“Because I *couldn’t!*” He lost the battle to hold back. “He was my best friend, Nat.” A painful knot grew in the base of his throat, his nose and eyes burning with the sudden onslaught of emotion. “Hunt was...” Logan’s voice cracked. Clearing his throat, he forced himself to go on. “Damn it, the man was the closest thing to an honest-to-goodness brother I ever had. How the hell was I supposed to tell either of you how I really felt? I couldn’t do that.” An emphatic shake of his head.

“It’s been two years, Logan,” Natalie pointed out. “We hang out all the time. You could’ve said something before now.” A pause. “You *should* have.”

Time to nut up and be honest.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “You deserved that, I just...”

Goddamn it.

Could he not make it through one fucking sentence, for Christ’s sake?

“You just what?”

He kept his eyes on hers, willing her to understand. “The truth is, I never said anything before now because I was afraid to.”

She gave him an adorably confused scowl. “I didn’t think *anything* scared you.”

“The thought of losing you terrifies me more than anything else ever has,” Logan confessed quietly.

The anger that had been so prevalent in her chocolate gaze began to fade. “Logan...”

“You’re the most important person in my life, Nat.” He took another step toward her. “And while being this close to you these last couple of years has been Hell, it’s also been a gift.”

“You just said being around me has been hell. How is that a gift? Oh, and...no offense taken to that comment, by way.”

God, he loved how feisty she got when she was pissed.

Logan’s lips twitched, but he didn’t dare risk a smile. Not when there was so much on the line.

“It was hell because I couldn’t tell you my true feelings. I couldn’t hold your hand or kiss those luscious lips.” Logan drew in a breath before letting it out slowly. “But it was also a gift, because where I lost one best friend, I also gained a new one.” He stopped inches away from where she stood. Gazes locked, he had to fist his hands at his sides to keep from reaching out to her. “I’m sorry about Lucky and that stupid bet. And if you want, we can go back to my place right now, and I’ll hold the mouthy bastard down while you beat the piss out of him.”

The ghost of a smile lifting the corners of her lips was like the greatest of rewards. “That’s a tempting offer, but no. You’re right.” A soft exhale. “I know Lucky would never purposely disrespect me. No one on the team would.” Her gaze softened as she reached up and rested her palm against his chest. “Especially you.”

“If any one of the guys thought you and I were a bad idea, they would’ve spoken up well before now.”

“Covering her hand with one of his, Logan held it close. With a gentle squeeze, he tried desperately to hang on to a love he’d only just found. “They just want you to be happy, sweetheart. And I think...no, I *know*...I can help get you there again.”

“Logan...”

“If you need some time to decide if this is what you want...If you need

time to decide if *I'm* what you want—”

“She was shaking her head before he was even finished, cutting him off with an attempted, “I don’t—”

“Nat, please!” He gave that hand another squeeze.

He knew he was begging shamelessly, but *fuck!* He couldn’t lose her. Couldn’t let her *reject* him. Not yet.

Not until he’d finished laying it all out for her.

“I know my timing’s shit,” he continued. “And I know our focus needs to be on Frost and that whole clusterfuck, and it is, but—”

“Logan—”

“I *love* you!” he shouted over her. A hard, desperate shake of his head sent a single tear falling from the corner of one eye and his chin trembled, but he ignored them both and finished giving her what was left of his heart. “God, Nat. I am so fucking in love with you. I look into those gorgeous eyes of yours and forget my own name.”

His vision blurred, a series of blinks sending two more tears crashing down. But before they could crash to the floor below, Natalie’s hand was there. Her gentle caress brushing them away with an angel’s touch.

“Are you finished?” She cupped his tense jaw.

Logan dipped his chin once, afraid if he opened his mouth to say anything more, he’d start bawling like a fucking baby.

“Good. Because I have something to say, and I really need you to hear me.”

His heart kicked the inside of his ribs so hard it was physically painful, but he blocked it and everything else around him out, focusing solely on her.

Only her.

“I’m in love you, too, Logan,” Natalie uttered the most precious words ever spoken. “I probably have been for a while now. I just didn’t see it. And then, when I did, I didn’t want to see it. But now...”

Hope bloomed, easing the painful aching in his thumping heart.

“Now?” Logan’s gaze never left hers as he held his breath and waited.

She closed the final inches separating them, pressing her delectable body up against his in a way that would make any man think of sin. With one of her tiny hands still covering his frantic heart and the other in a gentle hold of his scruff-covered jaw, Natalie stared up at him and made his dreams come true.

“Now you’re all I see, Logan.” She rose up onto her tiptoes and brushed

her lips against his. “I see you; I want you.” A light flick of her tongue. “I close my eyes, and imagine it’s your fingers between my thighs instead of my own...”

“Natalie.” A hungry growl as he lowered his hands to her hips, those fingers of his digging deep as they resisted the urge to do exactly as she was describing.

Fire flared behind her heated gaze. “I love you, Logan,” she repeated the declaration. And with her next breath, she unabashedly ordered, “Now fuck me.”

Logan’s control snapped. Using the grip on her hips, he hoisted her up much like he had their first night together. And just as she had then, Natalie wrapped her legs around his waist and used her linked arms behind his neck to keep from falling backward.

One of these days, she was going realize...

I’d never let her fall.

Careful not to trip over the various items still strewn about, he got them to the nearest clean surface that wasn’t the floor. And for the next several minutes, Logan did exactly as the woman had asked...

He fucked her.

NATALIE WAS PULLED from a deep sleep, though she had no idea what had woken her. Listening closely, only heard Logans soft, even breaths as he slept beside her.

She smiled, loving how relaxed he looked.

Unlike that first night at Logan's, there were no lines forming on his forehead or between his brows. No intent expression as if he were in deep thought, even in his sleep. Instead the man looked...

At peace.

She shifted beneath the covers and winced. The soreness in her muscles—both inside and out—was a delicious reminder of their impromptu makeup sex marathon.

The dining room table. The shower. Her bed.

Part of her felt bad for the guys still back at Logan's house. Here she'd been given multiple orgasms, which had made her scream, and that entire time, Archer and the others were working to help solve the whole Frost Avionics mystery.

They deserve every long, drawn-out hour they spend looking over all those mind-numbing documents.

The thought made that smile of hers double in size. Oh yeah. She was going to have some fun making those guys grovel.

But only for a day or two. Because Logan was right. She never could stay made at any of them for long.

Although after having experienced Logan Hayes makeup sex first-hand, Natalie thought perhaps she'd need to pick the occasional fight. On purpose.

A few times a month, at least.

She considered waking Logan up from his peaceful slumber for Round Four when she heard something that sounded like it came from downstairs. She froze but almost instantly began shaking Logan's shoulder.

"Logan," she whispered near his ear.

"Hmmm?" His voice was rough from sex and sleep.

"I think there's someone in the house."

Those seven little words were all that was needed for Logan's eyes to fly open. At first, she didn't hear anything more and was afraid she'd imagined it. But when the sound reached them once more, she knew she hadn't.

In a lightning-fast move, Logan shot up into a sitting position as he automatically reached for the gun on his right. Holding the black pistol he'd kept on the nightstand closest to him steady with one hand, he used the other to toss the covers from his naked form.

"Stay here," he whispered the stern order as he stood from the bed. "Lock the door behind me and call nine-one-one." Using one hand, he picked up the same jeans he'd worn earlier and put them on with relative ease.

"Wait, you're leaving me here?" Natalie removed the covers and climbed up from her side of the bed.

Like Logan, she'd fallen asleep completely naked. But with her clothes still piled nearby, as well, she was dressed in seconds.

"Need to know you're safe."

"Yeah, well I need to know the same about you," she countered.

"Damn it, Nat." Those striking blue eyes found hers as he whispered back, "No arguing." A shake of his head. "Not about this."

Crap. "Fine. But if I think you're in trouble—"

"Just shut and lock the door behind me." He started to leave but turned back at the last second to pull her in for a hard, fast kiss. "Don't answer it for anyone but me."

And with that, he was gone.

Fear turned her veins to ice, her pulse spiking to an alarming rate. Hands trembling, she did as Logan had asked and called nine-one-one. After relaying the pertinent information to the attentive emergency operator, Natalie had hung up to call Archer. After waking him up, she hurriedly filled him in, too. And then...

She waited.

And she waited.

Just when she thought Logan and the intruder had gone outside, the sound of a struggle preceded glass breaking from somewhere downstairs. Her heart flew into her throat, and seconds later...

Bang!

A loud, deafening eruption of sound came from somewhere downstairs. One she'd recognize anywhere.

No!

Natalie shot up from the mattress and sprinted to the door. She grabbed the knob, her slight hesitation stemming from her trust and loyalty to Logan.

He'd asked her to stay put, and she'd agreed. But...

What if he's hurt? What if that bullet hit him, and he's down there right now, bleeding out?

An image she hadn't pictured in a really long time filled her vision. One created by things she'd read and heard but had never actually seen.

Hunter, lying in the dirt. Shot and bleeding out. Only this time, Natalie realized it wasn't Hunter's face staring up at her.

It was Logan's.

Fear for the man she loved had her turning the knob and opening the door. As silently as she could, she'd made it midway down the stairs when she heard Logan yell for someone to stop just before her back door slammed shut.

First once, and then again, a few seconds later.

Unable to keep from it, she moved as fast as she could through her living room and kitchen while also trying not to bump into a million things or trip.

After what felt like hours, she finally, *finally* made it to the back door.

Not wanting to just barge outside, she looked through the storm door's screen to her brick patio and modest back yard. At first, she didn't see anything, but then—

Logan!

Natalie spotted her fierce warrior as he came out from behind the evergreens lining her property's southern border. Even from here, even with nothing more than the moon to light up his face, she could tell the man was pissed.

No, not pissed.

Murderous.

And there was blood running down the length of his arm.

No!

Natalie swung open the door. Logan's deadly gaze found hers. She opened her mouth to holler for him. She needed to know how bad he'd been hurt.

But before she could say any of those things, something shifted from behind her. At that exact same moment, Logan went from wearing a look of utter vengeance to one of complete shock and terror.

What the...

"Behind you!" Logan yelled as he took off toward her in a dead sprint.

The warning came a heartbeat too late.

Natalie had just started to turn to see the threat for herself, but the gun-wielding fist flying toward her face kept her from seeing anything other than a bright flash of light followed by her rapidly approaching kitchen floor.

"Natalie!"

She could hear Logan screaming her name, though it sounded off, thanks to the incessant ringing in her throbbing head. With tiny white stars flickering in and out of her vision and warm blood dripping down along her to her jaw, it was all she could do to stay conscious.

"Don't you *fucking* touch her!" Logan's growled threat sounded closer now.

So close, and yet...

"No!"

A meaty hand wrapped around her upper arm, the man it belonged to nearly pulling her shoulder out of the socket as he jerked her to her feet.

"Get up!" her attacker barked.

Something cold and hard was pressed painfully against her uninjured temple. With her thoughts having to work their way through a fog of pain and dizziness, it took Natalie a full two seconds to realize what it was.

A gun.

No!

"Stay back or I'll shoot!" The man using her as a human shield promised.

The voice sounded familiar. How did she...

Focus, Nat. You know him. Just try to focus.

"Put the weapon down and let her the fuck go!" Logan appeared the back doorway. His image was blurred and partially obstructed by the blood that had gotten into her left eye, but she didn't have to see him clearly to know what he looked like.

Hard, chiseled features marred with a hatred for the man pressing the gun

against her head. Strong, taut muscles holding his own gun steady, and a trigger finger itching for the first hint of an excuse.

“You don’t want to do this, Albert,” Logan spoke to the man holding her back against his front.

Albert...Albert...Alb—

“All I want is that fucking file!”

No. It can’t be.

The sound of tires skidding to a stop on the road out front registered, and Natalie assumed the cops had arrived. Still trying to process the fact that Albert Schwartz—her *boss*—was the Albert currently holding her at gunpoint in her own home, she tried to get some answers.

“M-Mr. Schwartz?” Natalie spoke to a man she couldn’t see. “W-why?”

“This wasn’t supposed to happen! None of this was!”

“So tell us how it *was* supposed to go,” Logan spoke more calmly now. “Tell me who’s in charge of the trafficking scheme. I’ve got connections with the SPD. I can make sure the D.A. knows you cooperated.”

He’s friends with the D.A.? Since when?

“I can’t!” Her boss yelled near her ear. “He’ll kill me if I tell you!”

Rather than get upset or yell, Logan simply gave a slight tilt of his head as he asked Schwartz, “And what do you think I’m going to do to you, if you so much as *think* about hurting her more than you already have?”

He took a menacing step closer, and her boss pulled her along as he took a step backward.

“I said, stay back!”

“You won’t hurt her.” Another step. “Not if you want to live.”

“I don’t want to, but—”

“There’s no ‘but’ here, Al. You try to hurt Natalie again; you die. It’s that simple.”

Logan inched close as Schwartz responded with yet another matching retreat.

“Just give me the folder, and I’ll go.”

“It’s not here,” Logan shared truthfully.

Her boss clearly didn’t believe him. “I know she took it with her!” That gun barrel was shoved painfully against her temple’s delicate skin. “Dennis saw her take it!”

The panicked man realized his mistake a moment too late.

“See Al?” Logan actually grinned. “That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?”

“D-Dennis Atkinson put you up to this?” Natalie wanted to know for sure.

“I...I never said that.”

“Didn’t have to.” Logan shook his head. With his pistol still pointed directly at Albert Schwartz’s head, he took another step toward them as he warned her boss again.

“Last chance, Albert. You let Natalie go and drop the gun, and I will personally see to it you get into Witness Protection.”

The gun at her temple eased away. Not fully, but enough she felt a slight relief from the change.

“You’re lying.”

“Let me take my phone out right now, and I’ll make the call,” Logan offered. “I’ll even put it on speaker so you can hear for yourself it’s legit.”

Several long seconds passed before Schwartz gave Logan a jerky nod. “Do it. Make the call. But don’t even think about trying to pull something. I may be older, but I’m still the one with the gun to your girlfriend’s head.”

“No tricks.”

Natalie watched with bated breath as Logan took one hand away from his weapon and slowly pulled his phone free from his back pocket. With the device balanced in his fist, he used his thumb to navigate the commands he needed to give.

“I’m going to come a step closer,” he warned her boss. “Just so the D.A. can hear you more clearly.”

The man holding onto her tensed slightly, but then the phone began to ring. Schwartz leaned a little closer to the device, lifting the gun’s barrel a tiny bit farther with each subsequent ring.

Once.

Twice.

On the third time, a voice answered the phone.

“Why the hell are you calling me so late?”

The familiar voice sounded as if it were in stereo, and it didn’t take long for Natalie—and Schwartz—to figure out why. Logan hadn’t called the District Attorney. He’d called Lucky.

And their friend was standing directly behind Albert Schwartz.

On reflex, her boss started to turn them to face their newest threat. As he did, he lifted his gun completely away from her temple...presumably so he could point it at Lucky and shoot.

Albert Schwartz didn't get the chance to point *or* shoot his gun. Not at Lucky or anyone else.

Because Lucky was already there, pressing his own lethal weapon against side of her boss's head.

"Don't fucking move, old man." The warrior's blue eyes slid to hers, his tone instantly shifting from killer to jokester. "Hey, Nat." He smiled. "Like what you've done with the place."

The man was standing in the middle of her totally trashed house, holding a gun to another man's head—a man who'd just been holding a gun to *her* head—and he was smiling.

Before she could stop it, a hysterical bubble of laughter built up and overflowed. She was *still* laughing when Logan swept in, expertly disarming her boss while simultaneously pulling her out of the other man's loosened grip.

Moving so fast it was like a blur, Logan handed both a lawyer-demanding Schwartz and his expertly dismantled weapon to Donovan and Archer.

Natalie blinked, only just then realizing both men had joined the party when she wasn't looking. Or maybe it was when she'd been busy laughing.

Or when she had a gun pushed against her head.

Or when I thought I was going to die...

Another round of inappropriate chuckles threatened to come loose, but this time, Natalie was prepared. With a hand over her mouth, she managed to force the laughter down while she stood there, wondering how she'd become her very own walking, talking true crime T.V. special.

Oh, God. They're going to make shows about me.

And there were so many questions still left to be answered. But right now, the *only* thing that mattered was the fact that the craziness was over. Or at least it would be once the police got her boss to talk more about Dennis Atkinson and his role in what had gone down.

From the way Albert was shouting about wanting his lawyer—and something about wanting immunity for his testimony against both Atkinson and Glenn Frost—Natalie didn't think it would take long before the entire sordid story unfolded on the six o'clock news.

But for now, she wasn't thinking about news stories or a psycho boss she'd once admired. She wasn't thinking about anything other than the fact that Logan had just pulled her into his frantic arms.

"Natalie!" Those strong arms were finally free to engulf her like the

warmest, safest blanket. “Jesus, baby. Are you okay? How bad are you hurt?”

Far too soon, he was gently easing her out of his embrace to begin a head-to-toe assessment. With trembling hands, he was patting her down damn near everywhere to make sure her head was the only injury she’d suffered while in the hands of a mad man.

“I’m okay,” she assured him.

She wasn’t even a little bit okay, but that was like ninety-percent emotional messiness, as opposed to the actual physical damage. At least she thought that was close.

Maybe.

Or maybe she should find a place to sit.

Like. Now.

“Logan, I—”

He hissed a breath in through his teeth as he studied a cut she couldn’t see but knew was there. The center of the throbbing pain was a couple of inches above her left temple, but the bleeding seemed to be slowing, at last.

That was good, right?

Yes, Nat. Not bleeding from your head is always good thing.

The incessant pounding, dizziness, and nausea on the other hand...

Are my lips tingling? I feel like they’re tingling.

Her vision began to tunnel, Logan’s face almost looking as if it were moving farther and farther away. That was about the time he became the size of a pinpoint that she felt her legs collapse below her.

She could see the alarm in Logan’s gorgeous eyes. Could see those lips she loved kissing so much moving as they hollered something at someone behind her. Asking for a medic, maybe? Could’ve been.

Could’ve been a *lot* of things.

Natalie wasn’t sure about that, or anything else because the darkness that had been pulling her under with vigor, seconds before had finally won.

FOUR DAYS LATER...

“A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN OUR CONTINUING NEWS STORY ABOUT THE FROST Avionics drug trafficking scandal involving CEO Glenn Frost, CFO Dennis

Atkinson, as well as Albert Schwartz. Last month, Schwartz turned State's evidence against both Frost Avionics executives, which implicates Atkinson as brainchild of the plan to use the company's WA-800 jet to traffic cocaine and other illegal drugs in and out of the country. Schwartz is the owner and CEO of Schwartz and Associates, the local high-end accounting and external auditing firm here in Seattle that handled all of Frost Avionics' external audits."

Natalie sat on Logan's lap, the couple watching the news for more answers to the ever-evolving story that was stranger than fiction.

"While it hasn't been confirmed by authorities, the station's sources within the SPD have shared that Schwartz is suspected of killing his own employee, Peter Weiss. From what we've been told, Weiss went to Albert Schwartz with concerns about his suspicions regarding the jet's upgraded tanks. Again, this has not been *officially* confirmed, however our sources are confident there will be an official charge of murder one by the end of the week. Peter Weiss's body has been exhumed per a court order for a second autopsy to be conducted by one of the state's most experienced forensic pathologists."

Logan lifted the remote in his hand and turned the T.V. off.

"I've had about enough of those three men as I can stomach."

"Same." She leaned up and gave him a sweet peck on the lips. "I still can't believe everything they're saying. I can't believe my boss actually murdered Peter by drugging him and then pushing his car down over that cliff."

"The bastard broke into your house twice," Logan growled. "He put a gun to your fucking head. Far as I'm concerned, they should save the taxpayers the cost of a trial and let me take care of him and the other two assholes."

"Three bullets are cheaper than court costs, huh?"

"Just sayin'." A playful shrug of his shoulder

Speaking of bullets....

Natalie glanced at the angry red line Schwartz's bullet had caused when he'd taken a shot at Logan while the two gave chase through her house.

She'd woken up in the hospital later that night, her doctor chalking her unconscious spell to a combination of the hit to the head and shock. But she'd remembered everything, including the fact that Logan had been bleeding before she'd passed out.

Luckily his explanation of it being "just a scratch" had turned out to be

true. Natalie had bled a lot, but he'd only had to get butterfly strips to keep it closed, rather than stitches.

They'd both gotten so very lucky.

"Detective Knox called earlier, when you were in the shower," she told Logan. "The lab confirmed the handwriting on the scrap of paper in that file matched Peter's. They also found his prints and DNA on there."

"Peter must have suspected Schwartz of being involved. Otherwise he would've just handed the file over to him, rather than hiding it in hopes of either accessing it later or that someone else would find it and investigate it more."

"At least all three men are behind federal bars," Logan pointed out. "Which means, you're safe. And *that's* the only thing I care about."

"Really?" She started tracing the collar of his t-shirt with a teasing caress. "That's *all*?"

"I know what you're doing, and it's not going to work," he rumbled. "You still have two more days before you're cleared for full activity, including anything that gets your blood pressure up or causes pressure in your head."

"What about the pressure I have in other places." Natalie pouted dramatically.

"Trust me, sweetheart. No one's counting down that doctor's appointment more than I am."

She giggled because she knew it was true.

"Told you before, Nat." He stared at her so intently, she could feel it in the center of her heart. "In bed or out, I've got you."

"Always?" She brushed the tip of her nose to his.

"Always." Logan got serious, his voice lowering to a deep rumble. "I want forever with you, Natalie." He dug into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a box.

Small.

Red.

Velvet.

Ohmygod!

"Logan—"

"I know you had your fairytale once already. But I'd like to think of this as the start of your *forevertale*."

She gasped when he opened the box, revealing a stunning solitaire

diamond ring tucked neatly inside.

Simple. Elegant. And the best part...

It's mine.

No, the best part was knowing Logan was hers. Because this wasn't just *her* forevertale.

It was theirs.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER...

LOGAN SAT IN HIS FAVORITE RECLINER, BUT IT WASN'T THE CUSHY CHAIR THAT had him feeling more content than ever before. It was the woman curled up on his lap.

His woman.

His *wife*.

The word was still foreign on his tongue, yet it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Just like the woman it belonged to.

"I can't believe you've already had an offer on your house," Lucky commented from his spot on Logan's couch.

"Two, actually," Natalie corrected with a dimpled smile. "The realtor called this morning with another one. I can't believe anyone would want to buy the place after what happened, but to each their own, I suppose."

With an elbow leaning against the rustic mantle, Chase joined the conversation from where he stood near the fireplace. "Sweet." The young sniper lifted the bottle in his hand in a cheerful gesture.

"It will be if the two start a bidding war," Logan half-joked, sipping on his own beer. "Property's stupid expensive around here."

"Yeah, but..." Lucky's light blue eyes bounced from Logan's to Natalie's and back again. "I mean, not to be tacky, but didn't you tell me Frost Avionics give y'all an insanely big check? To, you know, help soften the blow of their owner being an embezzling, drug-trafficking murderer?"

Yeah, the billion-dollar company sure had. Logan had never seen so many zeroes on one check. Definitely never one with his name on the *Pay to the order of* line.

And the check they'd sent to Natalie had even more.

At first, he'd been tempted to rip them both to shreds. Had even *started* to tear his straight down the middle, but Natalie's hand had stopped him.

Not because she was greedy or thought any amount of money could make up for what those three bastards had done. There wasn't enough money in the *world* to replace the memory of almost losing her forever.

Just thinking about seeing her lying on her kitchen floor, bleeding and unmoving...

I thought I'd lost her. Like we lost Hunt.

He hadn't lost Nat, thank fuck. They were both still here, and finally, finally ready to move on. And, as much as he'd hated the idea at first, they had a plan to use Frost Aviation's money to do it.

"I bet you guys could buy an entire city block with what those assholes paid out," Chase snorted.

"You decide whether or not you're gonna keep it?" Archer asked point-blank.

Like Donovan, the explosives expert had never been one to hold back or worry about being socially acceptable or politically correct.

He had a question, he asked it.

But Logan didn't give his friend and former teammate an immediate response. Instead he looked to Natalie who was staring up at him with a smile.

His pulse spiked, his chest filling with so much warmth and love he could barely stand it. And those eyes of hers were staring back at him with hope and love and the promise of a future, and he knew...

It didn't matter how much money they had or where they lived. As long as this woman was by his side, Logan would always be home.

But a house wasn't the only thing the newlyweds had discussed building. And the slight dip of Natalie's pretty head was the signal he'd been waiting for.

"Actually..." He addressed the group as a whole. "That's a big reason why we invited you guys this time."

"I knew it." Lucky shook his head in feigned disappointment. "Didn't I tell you?" He shot that blue gaze Donovan's way. "I told Van on the way

here there had to be a catch. I mean, nobody gives away free food and beer out of the goodness of their hearts.” His focus slid to Nat’s as he added, “No offense.”

“Uh...offense taken.” Natalie tossed that shit right back at him. “We *did* invite you here out of the goodness of our hearts, thank you very much.”

God, I love her.

“She’s right,” he backed up the woman he loved.

Because that’s what a good husband did. He supported his wife. Always.

It was something his dad had apparently never learned, but Logan wasn’t his dad. He was his own man, and only he had the power to choose what kind of husband he turned out to be.

And just as he’d vowed to her in front of the judge, family, and their closest friends, Logan would do everything in his power to be the best damn husband—and eventually, the best father—he could possibly be.

He had her back, and she had his. Forever.

“Nah, you two are up to something.” Chase clearly wasn’t buying it.

“No, really.” Logan shifted against the seat’s leather cushion to adjust his position. “We wanted to have y’all over before you left town.”

“There’s another reason, though.”

All eyes turned to Donovan who’d been standing quietly in one corner of the room. With an unapologetic shrug, the big guy’s dark, knowing eyes stared straight into Logan’s.

One corner of Logan’s mouth lifted into a smirk. “Okay, fine. There is something Nat and I wanted to talk to you all about.”

“I knew it.” Lucky gave a cocky shake of his head. “What do you think he wants now?” The other man posed the question to Archer. “I mean, it sure as hell isn’t money, because we all know they have hard tellin’ how much of that now. Oh, maybe it’s—”

“Maybe if you shut the fuck up and let the man speak, we’ll find out what *it* is.”

For the second time in as many minutes, everyone in the room looked Donovan’s way. And then...

Natalie laughed. “Man I’ve missed this.” Her gaze softened as she looked at every man in the room. “I forgot how much I loved hanging out with you guys.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, we love you, too.” Lucky playfully waved away the sincere sentiment. “Now spill it.”

A round of shared laughs and quipped comments filled the room before Logan raised a hand to quiet the small group down. He did have something he wanted to discuss with his old team.

Something with the potential to alter the course of all their lives...

“When we received the compensation checks from Frost’s company, our initial reaction was to reject every penny of it,” Logan began to explain.

“That money felt tainted,” Natalie added. “And frankly, I was ready to burn the checks and never look back. But then Logan and I got to talking about everything that had happened and how differently things could have turned out if you all hadn’t been here to help.”

“You didn’t need us for that.” Donovan shook his head. “Your boy’s the one who took care of business.”

“Maybe,” Logan countered. “But knowing you guys were here...working as a team again...it felt good, didn’t it?”

“Damn good.” Archer gave a curt nod of his dark head.

Lucky chimed in next with an overly loud, “Hell yeah, it did!”

“Hooyah!” Chase raised his bottle in the air again.

When Donovan gave his own muttered concurrence, Logan looked up at Natalie whose *I told you so* expression nearly made him laugh. “You want to tell them, or—”

“Nope.” Those dimples of hers deepened. “This one’s all you.”

Copy that.

“Natalie and I decided to use the money from Frost Avionics for something good,” he announced to the others. “Turn a negative into a positive.”

“Like what?” Lucky frowned. “You gonna donate it or something?”

“Or something.” Natalie gave the other man a sly smile.

“Jesus Christ, Hayes,” Van grumbled. “Would you to get to the fucking point already?” Van grumbled.

Logan grinned. With a deep breath, he quit pussyfooting around and got to the fucking point. “Okay, so hear it is. Nat and I want to use the money to start a private security company here in Seattle.”

“And we want to bring each of you on as equal partners,” Natalie revealed the rest.

The room grew quiet as the others processed the news, Archer being the first to toss out a question.

“Security...” The other man let the word trail. “What exactly are you

thinking?”

“Yeah.” Chase popped back in before Logan could respond. “Like...what exactly would we be doing?”

“This.” Logan looked around the room. “I want to help others the same way we helped Nat.”

“And with the money we got, we can offer the help without charging an arm and a leg to people like me who need the best but can’t always afford it.”

“So we’d be, what...bodyguards for charity?”

“Not charity, Lucky.” Logan shook his head. “We’ll still charge, and you’d all be paid well.”

“*Really* well.” His wife made sure that was clear. “And you wouldn’t just be taking on bodyguard jobs. We’d offer a number of services to our clients.”

“Bodyguards, surveillance, security systems, investigations...” Logan listed off the proposed duties. “Bottom line, I want us to use our training, skills, connections, and knowledge to help those who find themselves in danger but have nowhere else to turn.”

“Don’t get us wrong, the cops we dealt with through all this were great,” Natalie pointed out. “And I know they wished there was more they could have done. But everyone knows how understaffed and overworked the police are these days. There’s no way they could’ve afforded the manpower for the kind of personal protection I would’ve needed. And if I hadn’t had you guys and Logan looking out for me...”

She didn’t finish, but every man in that room knew what would’ve happened had they not been there to stop Albert Schwartz that day. Natalie would’ve died, and the bastard would’ve gotten away with it.

Just like he and Frost thought they’d gotten away with killing Peter Weiss.

“Not to mention the rules and policies those guys have to adhere by,” Archer commented.

Logan looked over at his friend and nodded. “Exactly.”

“Okay, just so I have this straight.” Chase pushed himself off the mantel and stepped toward the center of the room. His turquoise stare met Logan’s. “What you’re proposing is...we all quit our current jobs, move to Seattle, and start up a private security company catering to the average Joe.”

“Yes.”

That was exactly what he and Natalie were hoping would happen.

“You want us to be bodyguards.” A statement from Donovan, not a

question.

Logan clarified with a quick, “I want to keep people safe from assholes like Schwartz.”

“But not just big guys like that,” Natalie joined back in. “I mean, take Ronnie Beechman, for example. There are all kinds of assholes out there going after people the way he targeted Logan. Disgruntled co-workers, a psycho ex, an obsessive stalker... There are normal, *good* people out there dealing with all kinds of terrifying situations. And as well all know, the cops aren’t always in the position to be able to help.”

Logan was nodding before the caring woman was even finished. “Which is where we’d come in,” he told his former teammates.

The other four men in the room shared a look, but no one said anything more. Sensing they needed a little more convincing, Logan played his other hand.

“I fucking hate my job,” he confessed without a lick of shame. “Now I don’t know about the rest of you, but—minus the fact that Nat was the one in danger—it felt damn good to be in the middle of the action again.”

“Fuck yeah, it did.” Lucky agreed.

“Okay, see?” Logan motioned to the other man. “This is what I’m saying. Do you actually look forward to going to that investment firm you work for every day? He looked at the others, his focus landing on Archer. “And what about you? You like flying around a bunch of rich assholes who probably don’t even bother taking the time to learn your name? And Van...”

“You want to get the band back together.” The other man lifted a palm. “We get it.”

“We want each of you to do what you feel is best for you,” Natalie amended sincerely. “But before you can do that, there is one more thing.” Natalie looked down at him, those brown eyes of hers urging him to share the rest.

“Well don’t leave us in suspense, Boss.” Chase used Logan’s old Black Squadron One nickname.

Meeting each of his friends’ gazes, Logan filled his lungs and shared his final revelation.

“I’ve been looking into what happened the day Hunt died.” On reflex, he glanced up at his sweet wife and squeezed her hand. “That last op was a set-up, and I’m not going to stop until I find the person responsible.”

“It was a fucking ambush.” Archer scowled. “No way those assholes

should've known we were coming.”

“Not unless they were tipped off,” Lucky agreed.

“So what are you saying?” Chase looked to Logan for clarification. “We work the security stuff during the day and become super spies at night?”

“I’m saying there’s a reason our asses got kicked to the curb.”

“At least that handed us our honorable discharges as their boots were hittin’ our cheeks,” Lucky quipped. “Can you imagine what kind of work we’d be doing if SECNAV had pushed for *dishonorables*?”

A deep snort rose from the base of Donovan’s throat. “You act like Webb did us a fucking favor.”

“Van’s right.” Chase shared a look with the other man. “Fuck Webb. We’d all still be with DEVGRU if that asshole hadn’t—”

“That asshole went all the way to the President trying to keep Black Squadron One together and active,” Logan revealed. “He’s also been looking into things on his end. As much as he can without drawing suspicion, anyway.”

The room grew silent, the tension so thick it would’ve taken a fucking machete to slice through it.

Archer’s dark gaze intensified. “What the hell are you talking about, Hayes?”

With a supportive squeeze of his hand, Natalie encouraged him to tell the guys what he’d discovered so far.

“That day the hammer came down on the team, I waited until you guys left, and I went back to SECNAV’s office.”

“Why would you waste your time doing that?” The question came from Van.

“Because I wanted to let him know exactly what I thought about the decision to end our careers over something that wasn’t our fault.” A quick glance at the woman in his arms. “I wanted to remind him of everything we *lost* because someone else either fucked up or set us up.”

Chase snorted. “Fat lotta good that did.”

“It didn’t get us our Tridents back, no,” he conceded. “But I did find out that Webb went to bat for us after all that shit went down.”

Archer gave a slight tilt of his head as the man asked, “Went to bat, how?”

“Back-to-back mission failures and two unintended deaths...one of those our own man...” Logan filled his lungs and blew out a breath. “The powers

that he wanted someone's head on a spike. There were too many eyes on the situation. Too much media coverage to do their usual rug-sweep."

"They wanted a head, so Webb handed them ours." Donovan took a swig of his beer.

"Wrong." *Time to set the record straight.* "SECNAV fought to keep the team together, but his hands were tied."

"Bullshit."

"It's not bullshit, Van," Logan insisted. "I saw the emails myself. Webb tried calling in every favor he had, all the way up the chain, but it didn't matter."

"Because they all knew if we were still active duty with all those resources at our disposal, we'd eventually uncover the truth."

Everyone turned to Archer, who'd just hit the proverbial nail on the head.

Logan offered the man a nod. "And the truth is, either someone connected to that last op dropped the ball or—"

"They purposely sent your team in there *knowing* you were walking straight into the enemy's hands."

It was Natalie who finished the disturbing thought.

"Does SECNAV know about your new business venture?" Donovan stared at him from across the room.

"Not yet. I was waiting to see if there was even anything to tell. But that day in his office, he said if we ever need anything..." He gave each of the men a sincere glance as he swept the room. "There's no pressure here, guys. Do this or don't, it doesn't change anything between us. I just know the kind of work I want to do and hammering nails and driving screws isn't it. And if we do this...if you guys agree to come here and get this thing up and running, we'll be able to work together to get Hunt the justice he deserves."

"And take down the sons of bitches responsible," Archer added with a menacing tone.

"Trust me." Logan met the other man's gaze. "We get to the truth; heads will definitely roll."

"Don't want them to roll," Archer told him. "I want them fucking destroyed."

A slight dip of Logan's chin let the other man know he wanted the same.

While his men digested the entirety of the proposal they'd just been given, he and Natalie waited patiently. It was a big decision and not one he

wanted them to make lightly.

Minutes later, Archer broke the tense silence.

“A chance to work together again *and* possibly find out what happened on that last op?” He rolled his lips inward with a nod. “Hell yeah, I’m in.”

That’s one.

“Well I’m down.” Lucky was the next to confirm but then, “Unless you’re going to make us wear suits.” He shot a glare in Logan’s direction. “You’re not going to make us wear suits, are you? ’Cause I do that shit five days a week now, and I’m here to tell you—”

“I’m sure we can come to an agreement on dress code, Lucky.” Logan grinned.

“Oh. Well in that case...” The other man smiled wide as he dug his phone from his pocket and slid a finger across his screen.

When his thumbs began to fly across the glassed surface, Chase said, “Dude. What the hell are you doing?”

“Emailing my boss. Aaaand.....there.” Lucky tapped the screen a few times before shoving the phone back into his pocket and grinning wide. “Notice given.”

That’s two.

“I mean, y’all know me,” Chase spoke up next. “I love being back in the great state of Texas, but...” Those crazy-blue eyes scanned the small group. “I love y’all even more.”

“Damn, brother.” Lucky glanced over at the youngest man in the group. “I knew we all had to turn in our fins, but I didn’t realize they took your man card, too.”

Several snickers made their rounds, but Chase was too busy flipping Lucky the bird to notice. After a few more jabs of good-natured teasing, the conversation quieted back down.

“I take it that’s an affirmative from you, too?” Logan needed to hear the man say it.

Still grinning, Chase walked across the room and lifted a hand to his side. “Yeah, brother.” He swung that hand down and slapped it against Logan’s palm. “That’s definitely a yes.”

And then there was one.

“What about you, Van?” Logan asked the only man left to decide. “You in or out?”

“And there’s no pressure,” Natalie told him sincerely. “We’ll respect

whatever decision you make.”

“Uh...speak for yourself,” Lucky teased before turning his focus on the last man standing. “The peer pressure’s real, Van. Time to put up or shut up.”

Rather than take the bait, Donovan’s dark eyes slid to Logan’s before finally falling on Natalie. “Hunter Garrison was one of the finest men I ever had the pleasure of serving with. So if forming this company gets us closer to getting him justice...” The man’s Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. “Damn straight, I’m in.”

“Hooyah!” An obviously pleased Chase called out.

An immediate echo of the sentiment filled Logan’s living room as every man in the room joined in. Even Van. And then...

“Okay, so first things first.” Excitement filled Lucky’s flawless face as he clapped his hands together and smiled. “We need to come up with a company name.”

“Ooh, yes!” Chase hopped on board. “And it can’t be anything lame.”

“Agreed.” Lucky nodded. “It needs to be something really cool.”

“It needs to be something *badass*,” Archer corrected.

“Let me guess.” Lucky faced the other man. “You think we should call it Nash Security?”

“Well that would be stupid, since it won’t just be me.” Arch’s expression was deadpan. “Although we could call it B.A. Securities. You know... because it’s Bad Ass Security.”

Natalie’s petite form shook with a cute-as-fuck giggle. Over the next several minutes, Logan held her close while the troops threw out more name ideas. Some were good. Others not so much.

And then he heard...

“What about Eagle’s Nest Securities?”

Those incredible eyes of hers fell on his. Warmth spread across his chest knowing she’d remembered the story he’d shared that night on her patio. And how important that park had been to him as a kid.

Christ, I love her. So fucking much.

“Eagle’s Nest?” Lucky’s face twisted with uncertainty. “I don’t know, man. That doesn’t really sound very ‘badass private security team’ to me.”

“Really?” Archer shot a raised brow toward the other man. “You gonna fuck with an eagle’s nest?”

“Arch is right, dude.” Chase backed up the other man’s thoughts. “I’d take a tango with an M16 any day over one of those feathered bastards. I

mean, they're cool to look at, but no way I'd go messing with anything under their protection."

"Which is why Eagle's Nest Securities is the perfect name." Natalie's look of admiration fell over the other four men. "What better way to describe a team of private security experts than by telling the clients you won't let anyone mess with those under your protection." She brought that incredible gaze to his before adding. "That you'll go to any lengths necessary to keep those you watch over safe."

"She's right." Donovan gave Nat a tip of his head. "Bald Eagles have fierce protective instincts. They'll defend their nests to the death, if necessary."

"Just like we protect the innocent." Logan let his thumb rub a gentle caress across his wife's leggings-covered thigh.

"So it's settled." Chase grinned. "I think this calls for a toast."

Once everyone had lifted their drinks high into the air, Natalie said, "To Eagle's Nest Securities."

Logan shared a look with his men, adding a committed, "And to uncovering the truth."

Because the truth was out there somewhere. And now that he was no longer alone in his quest for justice, he knew...

It's only a matter of time.

Want to read more from the guys of Eagle's Nest Securities?
Pre-Order PLAYING WITH FIRE (*Eagles Nest Securities Book 2*) to see
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