

LONG ARM
OF THE
COWBOY

WEST PROTECTION SENTRY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EM PETROVA

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Long Arm of the Cowboy

WEST Protection Sentry

Book 1

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He's been around the block more than a few times. In fact, nothing surprises him...except her.

Former state trooper Clay Lexis has spent the last year working alongside the WEST Protection security team. When he's offered a position heading the joint terrorism task force in his home state of Colorado, he's ready for a new challenge. Then the sister of an old high school buddy careens into his life with a whole lot of sass—and a bomb in the trunk.

Lark Steele is a reporter...or at least she will be once somebody gives her the big break she needs. Meanwhile, she supplements her income with a side hustle running errands for people. When she picks up a box and finds a bomb inside, she only knows one person to turn to—the much older friend of her big brother. Okay, maybe he's not *that* much older, but she sure likes teasing him about their age gap...especially when they're between the sheets. Besides, there's a lot to be said for a man with experience.

With a bomb ticking down the minutes, Clay battles to keep Lark safe—but he didn't expect this attraction to bring him to his knees. The heat between them is just about as dangerous as the trouble that keeps finding them around every corner. Maybe they've both found the hardest thing to fight for...is love.

If steamy action and adventure romance with an age gap hits all your buttons, the first book in the WEST Protection Sentry series is your next 1-click. Don't forget to binge the entire WEST Protection series too!

Author's Note:

The color purple on a mood ring means balanced, tranquil, satisfied.

**LONG ARM
OF THE
COWBOY**

by

Em Petrova

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Chapter One

Clay Lexis gulped the last dregs of his third Red Bull of the night, washing down a pill that would keep him even more alert for the shit show he was about to walk into.

The stimulants and caffeine made him twitchy, but that was all part of the role he was playing.

Some of his former cop buddies had always said that Clay “grimed up good.” Meaning he had the ability to shift from clean-cut country boy to stalker of dark alleys where criminals lurked.

He *loved* going undercover, and even if he would suffer from the aftereffects of all the crap he’d swallowed in the past hour, he needed to be awake and alert to nab the radical ringleader he met on the dark web.

When he put together the op, he’d already been awake thirty hours, and there wasn’t time for shuteye. Once he had this guy behind bars, the stimulant crash and lack of rest would all be worth it.

If he’d learned anything in his years as a cop, it was that he had to join the criminals to beat them.

Clay only had the information he was given—meeting place, time and the unique detail of a 1986 Buick with one red panel. So far, there was no sign of the car.

He lurked in the shadows between two buildings. The street was dark and silent, but his heart was thumping like an addict’s. Damn, maybe he’d overdone it with that last energy drink. When he came down from this, he was going to crash *hard*.

Of all the jobs he'd taken in the course of his life—Army infantry, cop, small-town justice of the peace and then bodyguard for the WEST Protection security team—this was by far the one he was finding the most challenging.

The WEST team had been approached about heading a joint task force in Colorado, which happened to be Clay's home state, so volunteering was a no-brainer. Besides, back in the small, quaint town of Stone Pass, Montana, where he'd spent the past twelve years of his life, he was growing restless.

Stale? Definitely.

Washed up? *Hell* no. He was at the peak of his game, even at forty.

A drainpipe on a nearby building dripped steadily into the street. From somewhere on another street came the faint sound of a dog barking. Being alone out here he could live with—but he hated not having *any* backup.

When he agreed to head the team known as Sentry, Clay never expected to have a *task* but no *force*.

But within hours of his arrival in East Canon, he received a tip that a group was plotting to blow up a church. He had no choice but to set up this meeting, even if he was alone, and try to stop it.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. All the caffeine made him sweat, which only added to his persona. He'd chased down a few criminals who operated on the dark web. More often than not, online they acted big, tough, badass. Then he'd meet them and find a nerd with a degree in accounting in some dirty crime ring.

Usually those were the guys who thought they were invincible—beyond reach of the long arm of the law, assuming their big brains would get them where their small dicks didn't.

He pulled a breath in through his nostrils. *Ahh, the foul stench of a restaurant dumpster.* East Canon might be his hometown, but it really could use some cleaning up, and not just when it came to crime being at an all-time high.

A mixture of hot trash, stagnant rainwater and something sour hung in the humid July air. These definitely weren't the streets he'd grown up running wild in. Times were different, and the loss of factories in the old town led to poverty, which unfortunately led to desperation.

As a kid, he and his buddies would be out in the streets playing stickball by streetlight. And as teens, they cruised around in cars they fixed up in their parents' garages and looked for pretty girls to pick up.

He slicked his hair back with his fingers, aware of the slight tremor from too many stimulants rushing through his veins.

Looking around, he detected no people nearby, and the traffic he could hear was on the main street a few blocks away.

Messages had been going back and forth on the dark web between this person calling himself blackwillow73 and two other guys. From what Clay, and his FBI contact who he reported to, could make out, blackwillow73 was the ringleader.

Moving only his eyes, he glanced up at the top of a nearby building. It was damn good luck that he arrived in town when he did, and during daylight hours. It gave him the chance to scout the area, and running across a guy installing cameras at the very meeting place set for that night was a bonus.

It was even better luck that the installer had a criminal record he didn't report to the security company he worked for, and the company clearly hadn't run a background check.

The entire situation played into Clay's hands. He felt mildly guilty for threatening to expose the guy, but he *did* get the passcode to the camera system out of it, which he then managed to change, so now Clay controlled the cameras.

The surveillance system was the closest Clay would come to backup. He wasn't about to walk in there without eyes on him.

The whir of tires on asphalt had him cocking his head. He picked up the sound of the engine and gauged the speed of the vehicle coming this direction.

He checked the time on his burn phone. Blackwillow73 was running according to schedule.

The guy thought he was meeting a former Marine with a history of mental health issues but a strong understanding of explosives, but the real Marine had long since been put into psychiatric care and his dark web profile was dead. Clay hijacked it as his own, with no one the wiser.

After exchanging a few credentials, dropping some keywords that would make his claims of wanting the same outcome—in this case, a church full of people dead—the meeting was a go.

When the Buick with a red front corner panel turned the corner, he remained calm. He wasn't going to make himself known quite yet and watched from the shadows. A man climbed out of his vehicle.

In khaki pants and a sloppy T-shirt, the guy could be any twenty-something. Only this one had an investment portfolio he used to fund hate crimes.

Clay held back a snort of derision as he watched the skinny kid cross the street to the building Clay leaned against, putting himself in plain view of the cameras he controlled.

Blackwillow73 was so confident he was untouchable that he didn't even glance around as he used a key to access the place.

He ran through the next steps. He was supposed to knock twice and wait thirty seconds before knocking two more times.

These dumb criminals think having a secret knock will shield them. Read too many comic books.

After pausing for a minute or so, he looked around before stepping up to the door. He tapped twice and began counting to thirty. After the second set of knocks, the door opened just a crack.

Nobody stood there.

He let himself in. His limbs felt disjointed from his body. That was the stimulant and sleep deprivation making him feel

like he was tweaking. He might seem off on the outside, but in his mind, he was completely alert, engaged and aware of everything he did.

He found the vacant office space on the right, then he strode in, his stare locked on the man seated on a cardboard box.

Clay damn near laughed.

“NtotheWyld?” the guy asked.

He gave the kid a solemn nod.

With a confident smile, he pushed off the box and extended a hand to Clay.

He pumped it once before dropping it and bracing himself in front of the door—the only exit besides the windows. A fluorescent light flickered overhead, making Clay think of horror movies, but this meeting was far darker.

“You need explosives?” Clay’s voice sounded as rough as he felt.

Blackwillow73 nodded, sinking to his seat on the box again.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’ve done a lot of research. The church in Atlanta was taken down with a vehicle-borne IED.”

In other words, a vehicle packed with explosives.

“I want something a little fresher. Make a different statement, ya know?”

Clay kept his expression neutral.

“I’m thinking something portable that can be left inside the door. A package or a bag. This church is smaller, but it’s brick.”

Clay’s nod came off a bit jerkier than usual. The effect had blackwillow73 relaxing even more, at ease that Clay was in fact a bit off his rocker.

“The type of structure matters in these things.” *You fucking little shit-wad.*

“You say you know your way around the material.”

He fidgeted with his watch, making it look nonchalant though it gave the impression he was who he said he was—a fucked-up war veteran who shouldn’t be playing with explosives.

One who definitely shouldn’t be dealing explosives to guys who lived to hate.

“I was hoping that not only could you obtain it for me but consider setting it up. I pay well.”

Clay had all he needed from this asshole—he even had a hidden device under his shirt that recorded every word.

In one swift lunge, he grabbed the kid. Tearing him off the box by the front of his shirt, he yanked him to his feet and glared down at his pasty face.

He made a strangled noise, and Clay gave him a little shake just to hear him make it again. Yeah, he might run more to the sadistic end of the scale when it came to torturing assholes who planned on killing innocent people, but that didn’t make him the bad guy.

“Your game is up, blackwillow73. You’re going to prison for a long, long time.”

The kid’s eyes flew wide, his mouth opening and closing.

Clay yanked him higher so his feet barely touched the office carpet. “How does a dweeb like you get here anyway? Tell me. You probably didn’t lose your virginity until your senior year of college. Your sock drawer is definitely organized by color *and* occasion, and—What do you even weigh? A buck? A buck twenty?”

Blackwillow73’s face paled even further.

“You’re coming with me.” He gave him a nudge toward the exit. “It’s going to be a long drive to Boulder to deliver you to the FBI. I suggest you make use of your Miranda rights.”

He forced the kid to walk at a steady pace in front of him. He wasn't kidding that this was going to be a long drive. After being awake for forty-eight hours straight, the last thing he wanted was a drive. But he was amped to the max on Red Bull, amphetamines, and now the adrenaline of victory.

Who needed backup? Not him.

First order of business was to place this douchebag in FBI custody.

And when he got home, after all the shit he'd taken wore off? He was going to sleep eighteen hours straight.

* * * * *

Lark switched the car air conditioning on full blast and aimed the vent directly at her face. Renting an apartment over a garage sounded great for the pocketbook, but not so much when it came to eighty-degree temps.

She was parked in front of said garage. Not somebody's family garage. An actual freaking fix cars, change oil, fumes wafting up to her apartment, ogled on the daily by greasy mechanics, garage.

A tap on her window made her look over. As soon as she saw the oil-stained work shirt looming in front of her face, she let out a groan but rolled her window down anyway.

"What do you need?" she asked the guy with the endearing name of Chowder written on his nametag. How he received that nickname was not something Lark wanted to know. Ever.

He offered her a crooked smile and a cocked brow—a single unibrow that had never seen a pair of tweezers. "Hi, Lark. Just wanted to ask if your *car* needs jacked up."

Meaning her ass. He meant her ass.

At his question, an explosion of catcalls and whistles came from the open garage bay, where three other mechanics grabbed their crotches or made other rude gestures.

Lark gave him a smile. “This is called harassment. And I think the local newspaper would be very happy to report that any woman who doesn’t want this sort of treatment should never bring her car here for repairs.”

His face fell. Even his unibrow seemed to sag.

Lark rolled her window back up. She ignored the guys who were forced back to work, and she pulled out her phone.

Cool air dried the perspiration on her throat as she scrolled through an app. Quick Bunny sounded like an app for dirty-minded people like those mechanics, but it provided Lark with enough money to pay rent and buy a few groceries. Making it on her own, without the help of her big brother, was the most important thing to her right now. Running errands and doing odd jobs for people who used the app seemed like a small trade.

Besides, she was only freelancing on Quick Bunny until the East Canon newspaper had a job opening for her. She would have tried getting a job at her hometown magazine... but that didn’t exist. And the hometown television station didn’t think she had what it took to be their on-the-street reporter.

She was on the streets now, she was happy to report. And in her opinion, she’d handled that garage goon pretty well.

A job popped up on the app.

“Aha!” Deliver donuts. She was *made* for that.

She might eat all the profits, but coffee and a warm glazed donut from Murray’s sounded great right now. She needed something sweet to wash out the sour of her encounter with Chowder.

She quickly accepted the delivery job and backed out of the parking lot. A short drive later, she had the donuts delivered to the office workers celebrating a birthday and was back on the road with a fresh out-of-the-fryer glazed confection in hand.

She brought it to her lips and moaned at the indulgence she didn’t get much of these days.

Life was kicking her ass a little bit. She hated to admit that even to herself, but she *really* thought earning a college degree would get her a job right away. The things she'd pictured as a naïve twenty-two-year-old differed a lot from reality.

She'd envisioned a prestigious and exciting job in journalism and coming home to a modern, elegant apartment in the city.

Well, she was twenty-five now. Those delusions were burned out of her head by the exhaust fumes she inhaled upstairs in her apartment over the garage, and running errands for people who had more money than time didn't come with much notoriety.

But she was doing better than most of her family members had. That had to count for something.

Her phone dinged with another notification from Quick Bunny. She pulled over at the gas station on the main street running through East Canon and checked her phone. A box needed picked up at one place and delivered to another.

Easy peasy.

She paused when she saw how heavy the box was. Almost as heavy as she was.

No matter. She might be petite, but she was strong. She could handle it.

She texted the person who needed the service rendered.

I can pick this up for you ASAP.

Did you see the weight?

Yes. I can handle it. I have a dolly.

Not a complete lie. She did have a dolly, just not *that* kind of dolly. But she'd figure something out.

Lark accepted the job and got the address.

Buzzing around the city earning money in her air-conditioned car with a donut in her belly and fresh coffee in her system put her in a good mood. She switched on the radio and bopped to a popular tune about young dreams that were actually fulfilled.

When she pulled into the driveway of one of the better homes on the edge of town, she cut the music and the engine.

As soon as she climbed out of her economy car, the front door of the house opened and a man appeared. He wore jeans, a nice polo shirt and loafers.

She threw him a wave.

“The box is sitting there.” He pointed to the side of the driveway. “I have to run.” He strode to a sports car parked on the street, got in and drove away without so much as a glance her way.

“I’ll just get the box,” she said to no one.

She strode across the pavement and glanced at the taillights of the car that just drove away.

“Feel free to leave me a good review if you’re happy with my service,” she mocked.

Sheesh. Guys like that *never* left reviews let alone decent ones.

“I won’t hold my breath waiting for that tip either.”

She circled to the back of her car and looked inside. She moved aside a box filled with some garage sale junk. She was supposed to deliver the goods to the local charity donation bin, but she’d gotten sidetracked and the box was still here, that dolly she claimed to own sitting on top. It was missing an arm, and most of the blonde hair on one side of its plastic head had been plucked out by some sadistic kid.

She quickly walked over to the wooden crate. It looked bulky and too big for her short arms. Damn her parents for giving her the short genes. Her older brother hit six feet in ninth grade, and she hovered around the five-foot mark.

She crouched to pick up the box—*lift with your legs*—and couldn't even budge it an inch off the ground.

She stepped back, moved to the other side and tried again.

No luck.

The thing weighed a ton.

How was she getting it into the back of her car?

Glancing around, she hoped for helpful neighbor standing by with a dolly at the ready. But no, she was all alone on the quiet street.

She threw another look at the front of the closed-up house. Nobody was looking...so she cracked open the crate. The wood alone weighed a lot. She'd just unpack it and—

She stopped dead.

Oh god. Big mistake.

That looks a lot like a bomb.

A rasp burst from her lungs, and it wasn't from fear.

Yes! Could this be her big chance to become a hard-hitting investigative reporter?

Except...she would *become* the news if this thing detonated.

Wires projected from one side of the metal contraption and were fastened to the other. Peering closer, she saw a tiny screen with numbers on it.

Lark dug her fingers into her temples. *WWAD—what would Andrew do?* Her brother always had a solution.

He was street smart. He'd been around the block a time or twelve—everybody from their old neighborhood had. The guys who hadn't left were in prison. The girls she'd grown up with had also done time for drugs or petty crimes. Most had several kids by now.

Lark had been lucky enough to escape. Andrew made sure she got that full ride to college and finished her degree.

That was where she let her brother's generosity end. He wasn't going to provide for her all her life. Nope, she paid her own way now, and to do that, she needed to complete this Quick Bunny task.

Sucking in shallow breaths, she drilled her brain trying to come up with a solution to this problem. Thank god it had been too heavy to lift or she'd be on her way to the destination now, delivering a bomb to some poor, unsuspecting person.

Who could she turn to? Who would help now that Andrew was living halfway across the state?

The name popped into her head at the same moment that his image hit her mind's eye.

Clay Lexis.

Clay had recently moved back to East Canon. He joined the Army after high school. He was a cop.

If anybody would know what to do, it was Clay.

Now she only had to find him.

Chapter Two

Clay cracked an eye open. The lid felt like it was glued shut and the white had been baked in the scorching sun.

But that knocking sound was real.

He rolled onto his stomach and buried his face in his pillow to escape the noise.

More insistent pounding, louder this time.

“Go away!” he roared. “Come back tomorrow!”

The pounding continued.

“Jeezus.” He threw himself off the mattress. In nothing but his navy-blue boxer briefs, he strode to the door and whipped it open.

A cute little redheaded girl stood on his doorstep wearing jeans, a T-shirt with yellow polka dots and ratty Converse sneakers.

Clay’s lip curled. “I don’t want your cookies.”

She blinked up at him, light green eyes wide. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Aren’t you a Girl Scout?”

She blinked. “I’m Lark.”

He stared at her. His head was killing him.

“That’s my name—Lark.”

“Okay?”

“I need your help.”

“Call 911.”

She huffed an exasperated sigh. “East Canon doesn’t have 911. We have Roberta.”

“What does Roberta stand for?”

She shoved a loose ginger curl off her forehead. “It’s not an acronym. She’s the woman who answers the phone at the police station. And you’re a cop. The newspaper said so.”

His eyes bulged. Who was this chick? And how did she know he was a former cop?

“Did you say it says so in the paper?”

She nodded, making that curl bounce over her forehead again.

He ground his molars. He was supposed to run an undercover secret task force and he’d already been outed by the local paper?

Clay sucked in a deep breath. That was another battle to fight. First, sleep. He needed sleep, and this person was standing between him and fifteen more hours with his pillow.

“Listen, Annie, you need to go. I only handle very specific types of cases.”

She gave a chuckle that sounded throaty and way more womanly than she looked. “Annie...funny. Like I haven’t been called that before. As for the specific types of cases...do you mean things like bombs?”

“Exactly.”

She bounced a little on her toes. “Perfect. I have one in my car. I can bring it in. Might take me a little bit because it’s freakin’ *heavy*.” Her stare dropped over his bare chest to his briefs and then his muscled thighs. “You could put on pants.”

His mind was spinning from lack of sleep and a stimulant hangover. What was she even talking about? A bomb? Pants?

“Is this bothering you?” He gestured to his body.

She tipped her head. “You look like a silver fox. But... pants would be good.”

Silver fox? He issued a gruff mutter. “I’m only forty.”

She jerked her thumb toward her car. “Focus. Bomb. Remember?”

Clay looked past her at a small yellow car parked outside his rental home. Was this girl—woman, whatever she was—for real? She had a bomb in her car? The vehicle looked like one of those toys with spring-loaded wheels that you wound up by pulling it backward.

And despite the bomb and the early hour, she was this damn perky?

She was eyeing him again, her stare roaming over his bare chest and the front of his boxers. He might be flattered if she hadn’t called him a silver fox.

Okay, he had a *few* threads of silver at his temples and in his beard too. But that didn’t mean he was *old*.

I’m at my goddamn peak. In my goddamn prime.

Who was he kidding? Compared to Little Orphan Annie—Lark, whoever she was—he was ready for the raisin ranch and a diaper that would get changed once a day if he was lucky.

He shifted his stare to the car and back to her. With a heavy sigh, he pushed the door open wider. “Come in while I get some pants on.”

“Oh good.”

He stifled a groan of annoyance and left her standing in his entryway while he went in search of pants. Every step he took helped shake loose the effects of too little sleep and too many stimulants.

Could she really have a bomb in her trunk? He got the feeling this was just a bad joke on him, set up by one of the Wyntons at his last employer, WEST Protection. If it was real, why would that woman be so damn cheerful?

Any person who matched her shirt to her car was far too damn chipper for his cynical personality.

* * * * *

Clay went to put on those pants that Lark said he needed. Now she was second-guessing her statement.

Did the man *really* need pants? His perfectly carved ass in those tight-as-skin boxer briefs said otherwise. In fact, any man with a body *that* fine should just burn everything in his closet and sit around in nothing but his underwear.

All that tanned muscle and a tattoo that wrapped around one bicep and his shoulder were enough to make a woman positively twitterpated.

She always loved that word. Society didn't use it nearly enough, in her opinion.

On top of those creases around his narrowed eyes, and the silver streaks at his temples and in his dark beard, Clay Lexis had turned into one *gorgeous* man.

She breathed a little sigh of bliss, but her peace only lasted a heartbeat.

Why did she say that stuff about him being a silver fox? This was all her big brother Andrew's fault. Always rushing her to get her words out. She learned to speak without thinking things through.

This was definitely going to bite her in the ass. Also... why did Clay have to have such a nice ass? She stared at the door of the room he'd disappeared into just as the big man darkened the doorway and walked back out, fully dressed in jeans, a black T-shirt and cowboy boots.

Lark's insides gave a delicious little quiver at the sight of him looking all tough and rugged and...like he wanted to get rid of her.

He cut a hand through his hair. The brown mop of his teen years was now trimmed short and lay in spikes where his fingers mussed it.

“Come with me.” Without waiting for a response to his highhanded demand, he pivoted and walked away.

Lark’s stare snagged on his broad shoulders, they rocked side to side a little when he walked. When she dropped her stare to his straight spine and the rock-solid planes of his ass, down long, athletic legs clad in denim, she forgot why she was here, but she’d follow him *anywhere*.

At the front door, he paused to throw her a glance. “On second thought, you should stay here while I take a look in your car. If there really is a bomb—”

“There is.”

He cocked a brow at her. “Then I don’t want you anywhere near it.”

“Do you know how to defuse bombs?”

“Just stay here.”

She got caught up staring at his chest. Those pecs... She was pretty sure they were as good as the ones in the magazines. Those were air-brushed, but his were real.

He walked out of the house. She rushed to the door to watch his progress. Each step was precise and almost sexual.

Her brother’s friend had always been hot, but now Clay Lexis was a total *snack*.

As he approached her car, she realized she didn’t pop the hatchback. She hurried after him and circled to the driver’s side.

Clay stopped dead and gaped at her. “I told you to stay inside.”

“Just being helpful.”

She swore she heard him groan. Then she pressed a button to open the hatch. Clay peered inside and let out a cuss that would have once had Andrew slapping his hands over her ears to protect her young, developing mind from corruption.

Most men would step back when they saw a bomb. Clay edged closer. “Dammit. Where did you even *get* this thing?”

“I work for Quick Bunny.”

“Is that a strip club?”

“No...it’s an app that people contract me through to run errands for them.”

He didn’t look away from the crate. “This needs defused.”

She nodded.

“This task force is a shit show of one,” he muttered.

She walked over to where he stood peering into the crate. Suddenly, he jerked his head up.

“Should you be standing next to a bomb?” he asked her.

“You are.”

She didn’t remember the exact color of his eyes, and now that she saw them again, she saw all the shades of brown that made up his very beautiful irises. Nutmeg, cinnamon, toasted marshmallow, all the yummy colors she loved and reminded her of fall.

“I think we should call Roberta,” she announced.

“Fine.” When he reached for his pocket, the sleeve of his shirt tugged tight across his biceps. He brought the phone up and paused. “What do I dial again?”

“Oh, it’s 911. But you’ll get Roberta on the line.”

He pushed a violent snort through his nostrils and clapped the phone to his ear. “Hi. I have a bomb here. I need to speak to the sheriff.”

Roberta’s overly loud voice projected through the phone speaker, clear as day for Lark to hear. “The sheriff is taking care of a domestic call between Eddie Schuman and his wife. They must call three times a week. Always arguing, and sometimes it escalates.”

Clay’s stare landed on Lark’s as he said, “I’m pretty sure you shouldn’t be telling me this.”

Undeterred, Roberta proved a fount of information—a very useful trait. When Lark became a reporter, she was going

to befriend Roberta for all the breaking news.

“Fine, I’ll just take care of the matter myself. Why not? It’s all on me anyway.” Clay’s gravelly tone vibrated with irritation. Without so much as a goodbye, he ended the call and stabbed his finger into the phone screen to dial another.

As he waited for someone to pick up, he clasped Lark by the forearm and dragged her off the street and onto the brick sidewalk leading to his house.

She kept half an ear on his conversation.

“She works for Quick Bunny. No, that’s not a strip club,” Clay growled. “It’s an app that runs errands for people. Somebody contracted her to pick up the crate. We need to find out who he is. Dude, you’re the guy sitting in a big office with all the resources at your fingertips. Find out who’s behind it...”

Lark’s mind drifted from the conversation, keenly tuned into the deep gravel of Clay’s voice.

Which left her wondering just what the man had been up to all these years besides the Army and police force. How was he still *single*?

There had to be a story there—a shattered heart from a cheating wife maybe? Ohh, that was too tragic. The man must really have suffered in order for him to deny any other connections in his life...

Clay moved to the trunk again and spent some time studying the bomb while conveying what he saw to the person on the phone. He also snapped a few photos of it. Lark watched him closely. All her life, words flew onto the page of her mind when really inspired by a story. And this man and his rough talk were definitely writing fodder.

When Clay ended the call, she snapped her attention from her personal musings and focused on his face.

Rugged features and his dark beard only added to his allure. Not to mention that small bump on the bridge of his nose that told her it had been broken at least once in the years since she knew him.

Hot. Very hot.

“I should have known when you knocked on my door that you weren’t bringing me delicious mint cookies.”

She blinked up at him. “You like the mint ones? I pegged you for a Samoa kind of guy.”

He growled low in his throat. “I don’t like anything right this minute, especially the fact that my contact is instructing me to drive this thing to a location.” He waved a hand at the bomb in her car.

“What location?” she asked.

“I don’t know that. They won’t tell me,” he bit off. “They’re sending me coordinates, and I haven’t dealt with that kind of secretive shit since the Army.”

Lark was eating this up. More words poured into her mind. *Frustration rolls off him like waves of energy. He rakes a hand through his hair.*

He stopped talking and cocked a brow at her. “What are you doing?”

“This would make a great story.”

“Story?”

“Yes. I’m a reporter.”

“I thought you work for Quick Bunny.”

She tilted her head to give him her best are-you-serious look. “I’m a freelance reporter.”

He grunted. “Isn’t that the equivalent of being a waiter in LA?”

“Not funny, Clay. So which one of us is getting behind the wheel? Because if it’s you, you’re going to have to move the seat back, and I *hate* when somebody adjusts my seat. I can never get it right again. Last time my brother drove, it took me a month to be able to reach the pedals right.”

He looked her up and down. “You’re not driving. You’re not even *going*.”

“It’s my car.”

“I’m commandeering it.”

“Oh, is that what you did as a cop?”

“What? No.”

She cut him off. “If you’re commandeering my car, I’m going to have to see a badge.”

He took a step closer to her, hovering so near that she saw the swirling patterns of cinnamon and nutmeg in his eyes were actually specked with ginger as well.

“You’re not seeing my badge, kid.”

“Let’s get this straight—I’m not a kid.”

His stare dipped to her chest and her very ample cleavage. It was a trait that made up for her getting the short gene. For being so petite, she had all the curves.

His gaze jerked back up to hers. “All right. What was your name again?”

“Lark. And you know me. Or you did.”

He narrowed his eyes on her for so long she wondered if that bomb hadn’t put off some radiation that melted his brain. Finally, he heaved a big sigh. “Lark Steele. Andrew’s little sister.”

Her smile spread across her face. “Took ya long enough. Now get in. I’ll let you be the radio deejay.”

Chapter Three

Clay remembered Lark now. The Steele kids came from a tough background. If he recalled correctly, there was some trouble with the parents that left the kids' home life unstable.

Clay could understand how the past shaped and marked a person, but this woman? Was off her rocker.

She actually believed he was going to allow her to tag along with him to deliver a bomb to somebody who could disarm it, let alone drive there?

"No way," he ground out.

"Yes way."

Her juvenile response made him shake his head. "How old are you? Are you even legal?"

"Of course I'm legal. I told you, I'm a reporter, which means I graduated from college and have been living on my own for several years. C'mon, *Clay*, I'm just trying to lighten the mood. You seem to be on edge."

"On edge? Hell yes, I'm on edge. And I'm not nearly caffeinated enough for this crap."

"I can help you there. I've got a full, undrunk coffee in my cupholder."

He couldn't help but perk up at her words. He peeked through the window and saw two cups there. "Why do you have two? Are you a caffeine addict or something?"

When she smiled, the woman had a dimple. A bona fide dimple so deep that it looked like somebody poked a freckled marshmallow.

“Well, yes, I am pretty fond of my coffee, but I just did a job and delivered coffee and fresh donuts to an office. I sometimes buy two coffees and put one in my fridge at home for later. I like it cold.”

“Lark.”

“Yes?”

“Stop talking and get in. The passenger seat,” he clarified through gritted teeth.

For being so small, she moved fast. She hopped into the vehicle and slammed the door. When he got to the driver’s door, she already had her seatbelt fastened.

Her dimple flashed. Only it wasn’t just *one* dimple. Dammit, there were two of them. Two cutesy dimples that went along with her sunny disposition and her yellow car and her goddamn yellow polka-dotted shirt.

He grabbed the coffee and chugged half of it.

“Uh...that one was mine,” she said.

He swung his gaze to her.

“I already drank out of it. But don’t worry—girls don’t *really* have cooties.”

Oh god. He wasn’t going to survive a trip around the block with this woman.

He put the cup back in the holder and started the engine. “Tell me where you live.”

“Why would I do that? I’m going with you.”

He leveled her with a hell-no look. “No, you’re not.”

“It’s my car.”

“There’s a bomb in the back.”

“But there’s a really *big* countdown clock. We’ve got time. Besides, it must not be too dangerous or you wouldn’t be asked to drive it to some mystery coordinates.”

He shot a look at the sky and prayed for patience.

Suddenly, he cut the engine. “On second thought, we’re not taking your car at all. We’re taking my truck.”

Her smile widened.

“I mean, *I’m* taking my truck.”

She stabbed a finger toward his chest. “Nope, you already said we. You get the bomb. I’ll grab the coffees.”

Hell. This day—this job—was getting worse by the second.

And if he had any guys on Sentry, he’d hand this entire thing over to them.

A minute later they were both settled in his truck with the bomb secured with tie-downs in the back. From what Quaide Livingston, his FBI contact, told Clay, the device was ticking but not unstable. As long as they made the drop-off before the timer ran out, they were fine.

While this job was definitely outside his comfort zone, it was exactly what he signed up for with Sentry. The woman? Not so much.

Why was he even agreeing to take Lark on this trip anyway? He couldn’t be responsible for her safety. That was her brother Andrew’s job. As teens, they were always annoyed that Andrew had to bring his little sister everywhere with him, but the Steeles were a package deal and they wanted Andrew around. He was a solid sidekick, and with his dry wit, good for a laugh.

Thinking back, Clay realized it was more of a dark humor. And no wonder, with their upbringing.

He punched in the coordinates on his GPS app and brought the coffee to his lips. Thankfully, Lark didn’t speak for the first twenty minutes of their drive. She just looked out the window and sipped her coffee, which was actually the undrunk one,

And was also black. A very *adult* drink. A kid would drink some flavored, sweetened, whipped-creamed confection.

Clay's night was catching up with him. All those energy drinks and pills left him feeling paranoid and edgier than usual. Of course, this wasn't a normal day. He'd never dealt with a high school buddy's kid sister bringing him a bomb before.

And just what the hell was going on with that 911 operator oversharing details about a call that the sheriff was on? East Canon was more of a disaster than he originally thought before moving back here for the task force.

"You probably remember some of the old landmarks around here," Lark commented.

He grunted.

"They tore down the drive-in theater though. Made it into a parking lot. Every year there's a big town yard sale there."

What was he supposed to say to that?

"They have some good vintage items, but they're overpriced."

"What does this have to do with you picking up a bomb?"

"Nothing. I'm just trying to keep you awake."

Hell, did he look as tired as he felt? Because that was bad.

"I'm pretty sure you don't want me driving your truck." She directed a red curl off her forehead and flashed that dimple.

He noticed that she wore two gaudy rings on her fingers. One had a big green stone nearly the same shade as her eyes and the other, unsurprisingly, was a mood ring that looked purple at the moment.

What did purple mean when it came to mood rings?

She turned her gaze on him now, and he got caught in the depths of her light green eyes for a moment too long before redirecting his attention to the road.

What the hell was that? He didn't look at women, and when he did, he never searched their eyes like that.

Maybe *more* caffeine wasn't such a great idea, but he took another sip anyway.

A mile down the road, he was still thinking about her eyes. Lark had a way of not only looking at a person—but looking deep inside them. Hell, he still felt an odd awareness that came from her staring at him like she could see into his damn soul.

He remembered her doing that even as a kid, not to mention how she seemed so attuned to her big brother's moods.

It could just be her personality. Or could be a trauma response from her life.

Back in the old days, Andrew Steele carried his scars from their childhood much differently. He never let on that anything was wrong, only that he was protective of his kid sister. He even carried around a picture of her in his wallet; Clay had glimpsed it several times when Andrew emptied his wallet in search of a stray dollar bill to toss into the pizza fund.

In the photo, Lark was just turning six, sitting in front of a cupcake with six candles. She was so young and looked a lot different to present-day Lark.

Now that the coffee had woken Clay a little, he saw her *a lot* better.

He saw too much.

She might be petite, but she was most *definitely* a woman. Those full breasts and a tantalizing peek of cleavage accentuated her small waist and the flare of her hips.

Unable to stop himself, Clay glanced over at her. The woman in the passenger seat of his truck had thighs that were made for squeezing the life out of a man while he fucked her.

Goddammit. He *really* needed sleep.

“Remember that building used to be a grocery store?” She pointed at a brick structure on the outskirts of East Canon.

He nodded.

“My mom used to take me there when I was real little. They had a bubble gum machine that still took dimes. Sometimes she’d give me a dime and I could get a gumball.”

Christ. This woman had scars hidden under those yellow polka dots and behind the dimples of the soft smile she displayed.

Her dimples vanished as she continued, “That was before Mom started doing drugs and Dad went to prison.”

The story rushed back into his head, as sad a tale as he ever heard as a cop, and he’d heard a lot.

Lark twisted a curl near her ear. “After you graduated, you might have heard that Andrew got in trouble with the law.”

His brows shot up. “Did he?”

“Yeah, he got caught shoplifting in that grocery store. He was only trying to get some decent food for us because Mom... Well, you know. Anyway, the store owner was so nice. He let Andrew off and didn’t press charges. He told him to clean up his act before it was too late. That he didn’t have to follow the same path our parents did.”

Clay’s throat constricted with emotion. He considered Andrew a friend back in those days, but he was younger than Clay and hung around the edge of his friend group. He never considered him a best friend.

Now all the regrets poured in. He could have done a lot to help Andrew, and in turn, his little sister.

“Andrew went off to the Army.”

That statement had Clay sitting up straighter. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yup. He looked up to you, followed in your footsteps. He hated leaving me alone with Mom, but I’m glad he went. Then Mom OD’d and he couldn’t get back in time from South Korea, where he was stationed overseas. I had to deal with the burial and figure out my own life.”

“Jesus, Lark. I’m sorry.” He sliced his fingers through his hair.

She threw a look out the back window at the crate strapped in the bed of his truck. “That bomb really isn’t the worst thing to happen to me.” She was looking at him *that* way with the deep, probing gaze that made him feel more off-balance than a handful of stimulants.

“What was the worst? Burying your mom?” His voice was gritty.

“No... I think it was the group home.” How did she say that with so much nonchalance? As though she’d just told him about a picnic she took on the lake they all used for swimming.

He studied her profile for a heartbeat, searching for tears and listening for snuffles. But she remained dry-eyed and silent.

She was a tough little thing.

And so damn cute.

His gaze cut over her high cheekbones, pert little nose and full lips before catching on those thighs again.

When she crossed her legs, draping the left over the right and leaning back in her seat to get comfy, he couldn’t help but note how... unintentionally *sexy* she was.

She had a body men sniffed after, but gave off the air that she didn’t give a damn what anybody thought of her looks or brains or how eccentric she was.

The longer he studied her, the more she reminded him of those Russian nesting dolls. She wasn’t just one thing. The layers kept peeling away to reveal new sides of her.

She possessed a core of steel, and an amazing set of strengths were right there at her fingertips, waiting for the time she had need of them.

Clay’s instincts were good, but when had he ever read a person’s character so fast?

What was he supposed to do with her?

I know what I’d like to do TO her.

Dammit, this is wrong. So wrong.

She thinks I'm a silver fox.

But in the past half hour of trying to get rid of a bomb, Lark had stimulated him more than he had been in a very, very long time.

* * * * *

Lark squirmed on the truck seat. Who knew that the FBI had a problem with being late? They'd been sitting in this parking area off the interstate for over two hours.

Two hours that the bomb kept on ticking.

Her coffee cup was empty and the donut she'd scarfed down that morning had long since worn off. Her companion was a man of few words too, which made for dull company, even if he *was* nice to look at.

The parking area was more of a place to pull off, featuring picnic tables where travelers could stop and eat the food they brought from home. And for some reason, Clay decided to park a few steps from an outhouse.

"How much longer do you think we'll have to wait for this guy to show up?"

"He said by the time we got here, he'd be waiting."

"Well, it's been two hours." She popped the door open.

A big hand came down on her thigh right below the hem of her shorts. All five digits and a broad palm sent heat searing through her skin. Her stomach did a little flip at the touch, and she stared at his hand.

Long fingers. God, were those calluses she felt? And veins snaked up his wrist to tangle with the tendons of his forearm.

He yanked his hand away as if he'd grabbed an electric fence. "Where do you think you're going?" he ground out.

"I'm going to use that outhouse. The coffee, remember?"

He opened his own door and extended his long legs to the ground. She jumped out too, automatically snagging her purse as she did. When he circled to her side, she realized she didn't need her purse and thrust it at him.

Dropping his arms to his sides, he simply stared at the bag. "What is that thing?"

"Well, it's not a bomb."

He gave her a flat look.

"Okay, I see that you're not much for jokes. Just hold it while I use the restroom."

"Why didn't you leave it in the truck? We're only feet away."

"Habit." She held out the purse to him, which he reluctantly took. "Why didn't you stay in the truck is the better question."

He compressed his lips. "Habit, I guess."

"I'm going to need more clarification on that when I'm finished." She went into the portable toilet and locked the door. Through the door, she called out, "So when do you think your friend's going to show up?"

"Soon. What do you have in this purse? It weighs a ton."

"All the things I'll ever need in a pinch," she returned.

Silence came from outside.

"Are you looking through my purse, Clay?"

"Yes. You could get through an apocalypse with this much crap. What do you need a screwdriver for?"

"You never know," she sang out.

"The water bottle I get, but binoculars? Who are you spying on?"

"Long story." She finished up and opened the door. "Find me the hand sanitizer in my purse please."

He lifted his head from rummaging through the contents. "How am I supposed to find it in here? You find it." He held

out the purse by the long cloth strap.

She shook her head. “I’m not touching it. Who knows what kind of germs are on my hands from that toilet. I need you to find the bottle and squirt some into my hand.”

“Squirt—” He issued a low rumble that sounded a lot like a wild beast. “Fine.” He stuck his big hand inside her purse and dug around. He came out with a bottle of contact solution.

“Try again.” She gave him a smile.

He returned it with a thunderous look. Who knew it was so easy to get under Clay Lexis’s skin?

“You handle criminals on a daily basis but you’re thrown off by a woman’s purse?”

He fished a pink bottle out and held it up to her. “This it?”

“Yup. Strawberry Dream is my favorite scent. Now squirt some in my palms please.”

Another noise grated from his throat. She smiled to herself and held out her hand. When the pink glittery liquid dropped in a large glob on her palm, she rubbed her hands together.

“Next time I don’t need quite so much, but thank you, Mr. Silver Fox.”

“There’s not going to be a next time. And stop calling me that. I’m only forty.”

“It’s not an offensive term, you know. A lot of women are into older men.”

“Jesus, Lark. Just get back in the truck.” He started walking away, the strap of her purse clenched in his fist.

“Uh, I can take my purse now.”

He stopped and practically hurled it at her.

She looked around. “Your friend still hasn’t shown up, I see.”

“I think he’s detained. He’s probably busy—”

“Hunting down people who make bombs for Quick Bunny workers to pick up?” she supplied.

“No, I was thinking—”

“That we should call him again?”

He let out a growl. “He’s probably busy questioning the guy you picked up the box from.”

“Wouldn’t he notify you if he already had said person in custody?” she cut in again.

Nutmeg cinnamon toasted marshmallow brown eyes hit hers. A tendon in the crease of Clay’s jaw fluttered, giving away his lack of patience. Funny that every man seemed to have his own tell when he was trying to hide how upset he was. With her brother, it was a long, hard swallow. The minute she saw that, she knew whoever was on the receiving end of his frustration was in deep trouble. More often than not, it was *her* giving Andrew a run for his money.

Clay rolled his shoulders. Then he stretched his neck to the right and left. It popped.

“It’s been well over two hours, Clay.”

His chest inflated, ballooning its size even bigger. “He must be detained. But we can’t stick around here with a bomb in the back of my truck. Get in.”

“Okie-doke.” She bounced to the door and jumped into the passenger seat.

He didn’t immediately get in. She saw him in the side mirror on his phone, his expression unreadable.

When he settled beside her and wrapped his fingers around the wheel, she couldn’t help but recall—in vivid detail—how those long fingers fit around her thigh.

“You have a new plan, I assume,” she said to distract herself from the warmth suddenly pooling low in her belly.

“That was my contact on the phone. We’re not getting rid of the bomb today.”

“So it’s a bomb...but not a dangerous one?”

He locked his gaze on her. For a moment, he didn't speak, only stared at her. Then he scrubbed a fingertip between his brows. When he dropped his hand, a crinkle joined his brows over the bridge of his perfectly straight nose as if rubbing it had only pressed it more firmly in place.

“It's dangerous as hell—if it goes off. We have to make sure that doesn't happen by getting it to the people who can disarm it before that timer runs out.”

“Got it.”

“And we don't have time to go back to East Canon either.” That tendon in his jaw pulled with tension again. He really was *so hot* when he got fired up, even if his anger was only a low simmer.

She folded her hands in her lap. “I guess that means we're stuck together.”

Chapter Four

With the picnic area miles behind them, Clay worked through a couple different plans. First order of business, get rid of this goddamn bomb in the back of his truck.

Or maybe it was to get rid of the sexy redhead who was driving him to distraction?

No matter. Unload one and the other would be out of his life too.

Usually driving relaxed him, but having an explosive and a woman tempting him with every twitch she made were having the opposite effect. In fact, both keyed him up far more than his energy drink/speed cocktail of the previous night.

Was that only yesterday? Shit went sideways a lot in his line of work, but he had to admit he was thrown a little off balance by this.

Where was the bomb unit when a guy needed one? Not in rural Colorado, that was for sure. By now, he'd hoped to have much better backup from the FBI.

Like a guy trained in disarming explosives. Or taking Lark off his hands. Having no one on his six was going to be his breaking point, and Clay didn't do breaking points.

Nothing broke him down. He had answers for everything at all times.

He cast a sidelong look at the stunning redhead in the seat beside him. She'd slipped off her sandals and propped her feet on the dashboard, and dammit, her tiny toes were driving him crazy. It didn't help that the nails were painted sky fucking blue.

Or that her legs were toned and curvy and all he could think about was spreading them.

“Your polish is chipped,” he muttered.

She’d been zoned out and strangely silent for a good half hour. He probably should be more worried about that.

She swung her head to look at him. “What?”

“Your toenail polish is chipped.”

“Oh no!” She twisted her knee inward in an even more sensual pose to peer at her toes. “Where?”

“Your pinky toe.” He never found toes to be cute. Most people’s feet disgusted him. But Lark’s feet? Were charming.

Sexy, even.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. If only he’d gotten those eighteen hours of sleep, he’d be handling this op better.

Lark dropped her legs and rummaged in her Bug-Out-Purse. When she extracted a bottle of blue nail polish, he wasn’t surprised.

Bending her leg, she placed her foot on the seat and uncapped the bottle. “Mind if I...?”

He waved a hand like he didn’t care what she did even as his gaze riveted on how she tucked the corner of her lip in her teeth and brushed the sky-blue polish over her adorable little pinky toe.

Jesus Christ. Get ahold of yourself, man.

He was ex-military, ex-cop, ex-bodyguard, current leader of a task force fighting terrorism. And he was completely mesmerized by a woman painting her toenails.

Lucky for him, his phone buzzed. As he whipped it to his ear, he noted how Lark’s device issued a little birdsong. She went for her phone too.

“Lexis,” he stated in a rough voice.

“It’s Livingston.”

“Livingston. What the hell happened to you meeting me with a team to take this thing off my hands?” He shot a look at Lark. She was madly texting.

He propped the phone against his shoulder and plucked the phone out of her hand. Gasping, she twisted in the seat, eyes wide and lips parted in outrage. With a pointed look at her, he shoved her phone between his legs—against his crotch—and gave her a do-not-even-reach-for-your-phone warning look.

She made a small, strangled noise that made his jeans tight.

Quaide Livingston’s voice filtered into his ear, bringing Clay back to the present. “Sorry, man. Shit went sideways here,” Quaide said.

“How sideways?”

“The FBI bomb squad was attacked.”

“Jesus. By whom?”

“Don’t know yet. We’re working on it, but there are plenty of people in the region who want to stop a bomb squad from reaching a destination. I’m organizing an alternative for you, but it’s gonna take a while. I trust you can get someplace safe and wait for my word.”

“You know I can.”

Livingston snorted, which made his image materialize in Clay’s mind. They’d gone to bootcamp together. Two kids playing at soldiers—until they *became* soldiers. After the shit they’d seen and done, their bond was strengthened. Clay went to the police academy and Quaide split off to join the FBI. But they kept in touch via text and the occasional phone call, until recently when Quaide recruited him for Sentry.

Lark’s phone buzzed in his crotch with a text. He jumped, and damn if a soft giggle didn’t burst out of Lark. She quickly dipped her head, lips clamped, and he let out a heavy sigh through his nostrils.

The faint scent of nail polish reminded him of the things he didn't want reminded of.

"I'll drop you a pin once I'm situated," he said to his friend.

"Do that. I'll be in touch as soon as I figure out what the fuck's going on."

"Wait—any casualties in that attack?" Clay held his breath, waiting for a tally.

"One injured, that's all."

He released the air in his lungs. "A good day."

"Damn straight it is. Fix that in your mind, Lexis. Talk soon."

When he ended the call, Clay stuffed the phone next to Lark's. She sent a sideways glance at his crotch.

"Can I have my phone back now?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I can't risk you texting people. If there's one thing I learned as a bodyguard, it's that *everything* is traceable."

Those big green eyes landed on his and stuck there like a gymnast coming off a balance beam. She was the size of one too.

"You were a bodyguard? That's hot."

He almost let the groan explode up his throat. "I'm happy to entertain."

"In a hot, silver fox, male revue way. Have you ever thought of putting on the police uniform again? Doing a little side gig on the stage?"

"No!" His snarl came out with a lot more force than he wanted.

When he glanced over at Lark again, she shook with silent laughter. Oh, this woman got under his skin big-time by

calling him old and parading the fact that she saw the years between them as attractive.

“Just kidding, Clay! Take a breather.”

He found himself doing just that, drawing in a slow breath through his nostrils and releasing through his mouth—a response he’d learned during both military and bodyguard training sessions.

Then he realized he was taking the advice of a reporter wannabe who got paid from work on an app.

“Who was texting you?” he demanded.

“Quick Bunny. It looks like I’m still available on the app, and several people want to use my services today.”

“What kinds of services?” This time when her device buzzed he didn’t flinch, even though it tingled his nuts.

“Ordinary services.”

“Elaborate.”

“If you are finished getting a cheap thrill off my phone buzzing your dick and hand it to me, I’ll read the list to you.”

“You’re a real piece of work, Lark. And believe me when I say I don’t have need of *anything* cheap. You’re not getting your phone back yet. In fact...” He picked it up and began sifting through the open app for the settings.

“What are you doing?” She leaned across the console toward him, those perky breasts straining the fabric of her polka-dotted top.

“Making sure there’s no tracker on you.” He swiped it open and found that yes, the app did track her location to make it easy for her clients to see where she was. Anger boiled in him. “Seriously? This app is dangerous as hell. A woman like you could be targeted.”

“Who is targeting me in East Canon?” Their gazes met. “Don’t answer that.”

He thrust the phone at her. “Don’t open that until I tell you to.”

“Your use of authority is pretty hot too.”

“Lark!”

“Just sayin’. Calm down, Clay.”

Hell, by the time he unloaded the bomb and the woman, they were going to institutionalize him because he lost his mind.

He focused on the road a moment. He knew where he was, but had no clue what the best location would be to hide out and lie low for a while. After a quick internal debate, he picked up his own phone and dialed Ross Wynton’s direct line. He wouldn’t be in the WEST Protection office right now, but Clay could always count on Ross picking up.

He wasn’t disappointed.

“Lexis. I get the feeling this isn’t a call to discuss what’s happening in the bunkhouse,” Ross said right away.

Clay’s mind switched gears to the woman he’d persuaded the WEST team to help by stowing her away on the Wynton Ranch as a ranch hand. Of course, Livingston had a hand in that too, claiming that witness protection wouldn’t do her any good and she needed a safe place to sit things out.

“Everything good with the new ranch hand?” he asked Ross.

“Yes, all good on the home front. That’s why you called?”

“No. I need some assistance.” He’d trust the WEST team with his life—and Lark’s too. “Can you text me the location of a safehouse?” It hit him that he could trust his own equipment, but Lark’s phone—and even the bomb feet away from them on the other side of the rear window—might have a tracker, or worse, a listening device. “Say nothing to anyone, Ross—just text. I know my phone is safe.”

“Gotcha. Drop me a pin and I’ll get you to the nearest place.”

His chest welled with appreciation. “Thank you. I’ll be in touch.”

He ended the call and shot the pin off to Ross. Within a minute, his phone buzzed with the return text and an address.

He spotted an exit up ahead leading to another small town that was probably just as corrupt as the one they fled. He saw it far too often now—crime and terrorism moving out of big cities and spreading like wildfire through small towns and rural America.

When he switched on his turn signal and pulled over to the side of the road, Lark said, “What are we doing?”

He sliced a look at her. “I need to see if there’s a GPS tracker on your phone. I also need to check out that”—he twitched his head toward the rear of the truck — “more thoroughly.”

He caught Lark’s stare on him.

On his mouth in particular.

Seeing the way her eyelids drooped over the flames of her eyes drew a growl to Clay’s lips—a sound he would *not* expel.

He could think of a hell of a lot of things he would like to do to her...*very, very* thoroughly.

And one enormous reason why he shouldn’t.

* * * * *

Lark eyed Clay. Before getting out of the truck, he’d reached behind the seats and pulled out a cowboy hat. As soon as he settled it on his head, her ovaries had started pumping out eggs as fast as her hormones would allow.

He stood like a big, tough vigilante in front of the tailgate. The longer he stared at the bomb, the more time she had to look at him in that hat.

And at his ass.

Damn, those buns were *fine*. Hard as steel. The worn denim accentuated their carved appearance even more.

She approached the truck—and him—from the side.

He threw out a hand to hold her off. “I told you to stay back.”

“I appreciate this big strong man act you’re putting on.”

“Putting on?” He scowled at her.

“Okay, it’s who you are. But it’s ridiculous that you’re trying to protect me. I’ve been on my own ever since my brother left for bootcamp. I tried to stay in our apartment for a while, but of course when I wasn’t able to pay, I was evicted. After that...the group home.” She shuddered to think of that experience. “I’d rather live on the street than ever return to such a place.”

“I’m sorry, Lark. I really am. But right now, we have more pressing things.”

“Like?”

He gave her an are-you-kidding-me look.

She grinned in return. “Just lightening the mood. Back to the bomb... Don’t you think we would have blown up hours ago if this thing was unstable?”

He stared at it for so long that she started to worry something was really wrong. Then he said in a flat tone, “Thinking about defusing it.”

She gaped at him. She must have misheard him. Did he just say he was thinking about defusing it? He might be hot and rugged with a few naughty stray gray hairs at his temples, but the man had to be missing a few brain cells.

“Do you actually know how to defuse a bomb?”

“No.”

So she definitely wasn’t crazy.

Glancing at their surroundings, she had to question if this had been his plan all along. The remote meadow *was* an odd choice of places to stop.

“When did you decide this?” She tipped her head to look up at him.

“Just a minute ago.”

“And the field?”

“It’s out of the way if something happens.”

She started shaking her head the minute the words were out of his mouth. “Clay, think this through. You’re supposed to be the levelheaded one of our dynamic duo.”

That caught his attention. He slowly turned his head to pierce her in his steady stare.

What she saw in his eyes sent a shiver through her.

“I can’t be driving around with this thing. The bomb specialist who looked at the video footage I sent claims that it’s not unstable, but how can he really know if he hasn’t seen it in person?”

“How can *you* know?” She folded her arms. “You’re not going to be the topic of my breakout piece in the journalism world, Clay Lexis. ‘How the Silver Fox Blew Himself Up.’”

He raised a big hand and scrubbed it over his face. When he looked at her again, he appeared to be more himself. “You’re right.”

She beamed. “Knew you’d see it my way.”

“Not the silver fox part. I’m only forty,” he clarified.

“Of course. No one’s right about everything, not even you.”

He ignored her and turned his attention back to the bomb. “I need to inspect it for a listening device and tracker.”

“So how do we go about that?”

“*We* don’t. This is on me. You’re going to walk over to those trees.”

She spun around to see what he was talking about. At the edge of the meadow stood a line of trees separating it from another field.

“Those trees? They’re about half a mile away.”

“The perfect place for you to stand while I check out this bomb.”

“I carried the thing across a guy’s driveway and loaded it into my car, Clay. We just rode with it bouncing around in the back of your truck for half a day while I sat three feet away from it. *Now* you want me to get away?”

“Lark, you’re not helping me here. Just...stop talking for a minute and let me think.”

She fell silent as he asked her to, but only because most men couldn’t multitask. Apparently for Clay, that meant talking *and* thinking.

When he twitched his head, indicating she should give him some space, she backed away from the vehicle a good ten paces. As she watched, Clay reached for the crate. He lifted it up in his arms as if it weighed as much as a box of Murray’s Boston cream donuts.

When he set it gently on the ground, she sucked in a breath and let it out in a rush.

“This is unnerving the heck out of me. I have a lot of life left to live, and I’m not doing it with half my face melted off,” she said on her exhalation.

He sighed. “Lark. Please. Go to the trees.”

She stopped talking but couldn’t shut down all the scary thoughts parading through her mind. He leaned over the crate and began searching the unit. After only a minute, he bowed his head.

“I have no idea what I’m looking for. These parts aren’t the norm.”

Her eyes widened. “How many bombs have you *seen*?”

“Enough. Most guys go down to the hardware store and pick up a few common parts. Nothing on this unit points to it having a tracking device or something with a microphone.”

“Maybe it’s underneath that metal casing.”

Tension gathered in his shoulders until they were bunched like twin storm clouds as he carefully pried the metal side away from the unit and stared at the inner workings of the thing that could kill them both at any moment.

She took out her phone and snapped a photo of the exposed side. Then she zoomed in on it and did a reverse image search. Immediately, the search engine produced several similar images.

“That’s a powerful bomb,” she stated.

“You don’t say.”

“No, really. It’s right here on the search engine. Maybe you should move the truck farther away.”

He twisted his head to look at her. “What are you doing with your phone out?”

She blinked at him. “I snapped a photo and enhanced it. Then I did a reverse image search. You’re right that it isn’t an average bomb. It doesn’t look like it’s going to detonate, but if it does...the blast will reach up to a thousand feet.”

She held up her phone, letting it measure the distance with the tool. “That would make that little clump of brush a safer spot.”

He straightened. “Okay, so why aren’t you standing at the clump? And how do you know this?”

She waggled her phone in the air. “Measuring tool. I’m really good with resources. My generation knows its way around technology.”

He grunted. “If this is another stab at my age, save it. I already feel inadequate enough.”

Cocking her head, she eyed his body, remembering how he filled out those boxer briefs he answered the door in to perfection. “I’ve seen what you’re working with, sir. You’re *definitely* not inadequate.”

“Sir... Jesus Christ,” he muttered.

“Does that make you feel better?”

“No. But I’m going to move the truck. If you won’t go to the trees, for god’s sake, at least stay back.”

Before he could circle to the driver’s side, she called, “Clay!”

He paused.

She spread her hands, trying to find words that she never, ever spoke.

“It’s never been like this with anyone before. I feel... heard. Only Andrew ever really listened to me. Now you’re actually taking my advice.”

He sent her a long, unbroken look. Electricity shot between her thighs and seemed to awaken her entire body.

Chapter Five

Clay pulled off a layer of foam insulation on the side of the bomb and spotted the phone attached to the side.

“Oh fuck.”

“Fuck indeed,” Lark echoed.

Hearing that dirty word coming off her sweet lips brought his mind grinding to a halt and shifting to all the other dirty words he could make her say if he got between her thighs.

Dragging his focus back to the task at hand, he inspected the device. It was definitely hardwired into the unit. The screen showcased a map with their GPS location, and a tiny microphone icon sat in the bottom corner, indicating it was recording.

He wasn't sure why either were necessary, but that was beside the point. He needed to separate the phone from the unit. Immediately.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a finger to his lips to silence her.

Then he was stunned when she fell quiet.

Hell, he wanted to ask why she would listen to that command from him and not the one about waiting in a safe place in case this thing blew.

The wires were only twisted around one other wire that connected to the phone's charging port. Without another moment of hesitation, he reached for the wires, quickly untwisted them and let the phone drop into his hand.

He shifted to his feet, phone upraised, ready to hurl it to the ground and stomp it to pieces.

“Wait!” Lark stopped him with a hand on his arm. “It’s evidence.”

He stared at her. God, he knew better, being an ex-cop and all.

“Remove the SIM card and turn it off,” she rattled on. “It’s a brick once there’s no SIM and it’s off.”

He continued to stare at her.

“Honestly, Clay. Were you actually good at your job? Because I feel like you should know this.”

“I do know this,” he bit between clenched molars. And he did. He was just off his game, and he couldn’t even blame it on lack of sleep or a stimulant hangover.

It was Lark.

She was throwing him off.

He examined the side of the phone. “I don’t suppose in your Bug-Out-Purse you have something to pop out this SIM card.”

Her smile was so damn sweet, with a sexy twist of her lips, that he wished he’d made her feel more useful before this.

“Sure do. Hang on.” She took off at a jog toward the truck, hips swaying with each step. He imagined seeing her from the front and how her breasts must be bouncing...

Fuck. He had to stop thinking about her this way. She was far too young for him. She deserved someone from her own generation, someone without all the baggage he had. Someone who wouldn’t complicate her life by tethering her to things she was trying to leave behind.

But knowing the little he did of her personality, she was naïve. Men would take advantage of that — use her.

The thought pulled a primal noise to his lips, but he stopped short at the sight of Lark jogging back.

This time he had the view from the front.

His balls clenched, and his cock began to swell behind his fly. Her red curls bobbed around her oval face. From here, he couldn't make out those freckles or dimples but knowing they were there didn't help the tight fit of his jeans.

Were there freckles all over her body? Spattering those full, bouncing breasts? On her toned stomach?

Her inner thighs?

Fuck! Maybe *he* needed to walk to that clump of brush and wait until his cock went back to a normal size.

She strode the last few steps, barreling right up to him, a fiery look in her eyes that made him step back because he got the feeling she might throw herself right into his arms.

Which would feel goddamn amazing. The woman was all sweet and heat and everything forbidden in between.

She came to a stop in front of him and held up a tiny, sharp object. He extended a hand, and she dropped a straight pin on his palm.

“You carry around pins?”

“It's from a man's dress shirt.”

He snapped his head up. “What man?”

She stared back for a long heartbeat. “Oh. There is no man. I just bought a men's dress shirt because they look cute worn over bra tops.”

“Bra—” The word came out strangled, and he clamped his fingers around the pin, impaling himself. With a swallowed grunt at the sting, he peeled his hand open and used the pin to pop the SIM card out of the device while thoughts of Lark in a bra top looped through his brain.

What was it about her? Not to blow his own trumpet, but he was normally really sharp. He hadn't survived this long without being somewhat savvy, but around her? He became an idiot.

The woman had him completely unhinged.

When he had the card out of the phone, Lark swiped it out of his palm. Then she stowed it in the front pocket of her shorts.

His cock head pushed higher against his fly at the thought of how the plastic would nestle against her body, warm and safe.

Jee-*zus*. He had to get a grip.

“Can you back the truck up here so I can load the bomb in?” He had to ask himself if he just wanted to see her jog again. But he shook himself and focused on her face.

Which was as much of a mistake because of the way she was looking at him. Long lashes dipped over her blazing eyes like she’d just had her third orgasm of the night and couldn’t think straight.

One more thought like that and the mushroomed head of his cock would pop over the waist of his jeans. Then there would be no hiding what he thought of this stunning little beauty who had no business in his thoughts.

When he lowered his stare from hers to her mouth, he damn near let out the groan he was holding back, because the woman had her plump little lips twisted in a smile that *only* belonged in the bedroom.

He inflated his chest to bursting. “Can you back up the truck?” he prompted her.

She had been standing so still that even the slightest movement of her body responding to his question made him far too aware. Her head tilted imperceptibly. A thick curl tumbled across her forehead.

She relaxed her mouth. “Sure thing.”

Then she almost knocked him to his knees by jogging back to the truck.

He’d seen a lot of women drivers. Pulled over and fined a fair few too. But to his astonishment, Lark could back up with all the skill of a country farmer backing up a horse trailer.

She came within the perfect distance from the bomb, making it easy for him to heft the thing into the bed. After strapping it down, they got on the road again.

While he navigated to the safehouse that Ross sent him, he tried not to notice Lark's firm thighs. Or the way she crossed one over the other and relaxed back in the seat.

And he definitely wasn't going to think about yanking her across the console to straddle his dick.

Suddenly, she let out a soft humming noise. It shot his cock to attention all over again and prickled the hair on his nape too.

It took him three throbbing seconds to realize she wasn't making a sexy sound—she was humming the bars of a tune.

One more soft, throaty note and he'd come in his pants.

“We're nearly there,” he bit out to stop her.

“Where?”

“The safehouse.”

“That sounds mysterious. Should I be taking notes?”

He opened his mouth to dispute that but caught the mischievous light in her eyes and chuckled. “No, you should not be taking notes.”

You should be sitting on my face.

Agh! That was so much worse.

He stomped the gas to go faster. If he didn't get that space between them soon, he feared what he might do.

Hell, after seeing that sultry look she'd given him back in the field, he was afraid of what *she'd* do.

He couldn't reach their destination soon enough.

As soon as he pulled up in front of a small cabin nestled in some pines, Lark gave a small cry of delight that made his pulse pound.

She twisted in her seat, bouncing a little, which caused her breasts to jiggle. “This is where we're staying the night?”

He resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands. “Yes.”

Casting off her seatbelt and throwing open the door, she jumped out of the truck and ran up to the front door. He followed more slowly, trying not to stare at her round ass on the approach.

As soon as he opened the door using a code Ross provided via text, Lark rushed inside and set off to explore.

“Oh!” Her surprised gasp brought him running down the hall to make sure she hadn’t encountered a raccoon or some other critter nesting here.

Then he saw what caused it.

A king-sized bed.

* * * * *

“This is the only bedroom.” Lark’s announcement attracted Clay’s focus. His gaze riveted on her, the expression in the depths unreadable.

“You can have the bed. I’ll take the couch.” His voice was so smooth and rumbly, deep in a way that penetrated her and stroked things that had never been stroked before.

She swallowed hard. The fact that she was attracted to Clay didn’t surprise her—he was a gorgeous man with the body *and* the brains...even if he didn’t know all the tech tricks she did.

But he was skilled in other ways she wasn’t. And he made her feel safe.

She was so used to feeling like she had to be on her guard that she didn’t realize how great it would be to trust someone else with her safety.

She also wanted to scale him like a tree, wrap her legs around his waist and kiss the scowl right off his handsome face.

He didn’t step away to put distance between them. She tilted her head up, gaze fixed on his mouth.

“What do you think of the place?” he rasped.

“It’s charming,” she whispered.

Fire sparks swirled in the depths of his eyes, lighting up her core with tiny flames.

His stare lifted to her hair and lingered around her forehead. “Very charming.”

Suddenly, he jerked his head up, resuming his stiff, action-figure pose once more. “I’m going to make a call. You relax a while.”

Before she could nod in agreement, he was moving off, long legs carrying him away from her. Seconds later, she heard the front door shut.

She hurried to the front to peek out the windows. He stood in the yard in a patch of sunlight. His cowboy hat was tugged low enough that she couldn’t see his eyes but even through the door, she could discern the deep timbre of his words.

Did he realize how loud he was when there was no background noise to cover his words?

He was speaking to someone in clipped tones about sending him “the brothers.”

Now *that* had an ominous ring. Her reporter’s mind jumped to mafia men surrounding the cabin to guard them, complete with dark suits and machine guns.

If they were lucky, these brothers would be taking the bomb off their hands.

Then what? She couldn’t go back to East Canon knowing the guy who paid her to deliver the bomb knew she never had. He’d be after her. Would Clay leave her alone to deal with it? After all, everyone else in her life had. She couldn’t exactly rely on anybody, not even Andrew if she were honest.

Her big brother had done what he could, but in the end, if he hadn’t joined up when he did, he never would have gotten out of their small town. As conditions declined and more and more crime seeped in, her brother would have been very susceptible to it. He would have ended up in prison or worse.

He *had* to leave her, and she would never hold that against him. She was so proud of Andrew and all he achieved. If not for him making sure she had all she needed in college, she never could have made it through and gotten her degree.

She stood at the door listening for another minute or two, but Clay only seemed to be speaking in monosyllables or code she couldn't make sense of.

She drifted away from the door and moved around the cabin, exploring. First thing she did was check the kitchen for food. Second was a water source. She'd lived in too many ratty places in her life to know better than to trust the water.

After turning on the kitchen faucet, she let some water run into a glass she found in a cupboard. She sniffed it and found it odorless.

Good start.

A place this remote must have a well, and whether or not the water from it was filtered was anybody's guess. Without digging further, she'd just have to chance drinking the stuff—and bathing in it too.

“Ohh, a hot bath sounds good right now,” she said to herself.

Silence always got to her. There was too much silence in her life. Sometimes after the garage below her apartment closed for the night, she kept the TV on just to hear the men's voices she was accustomed to.

She pictured Andrew and his buddies—even Clay—talking together. Back in the day, nobody paid any attention to the little girl in the corner, but just listening to people talk offered her comfort.

She rummaged through cupboards and pulled out a few cans. “Black beans. Why do people even buy black beans? They'll keep you alive, sure, but they taste like crap.” She turned the cans so she didn't have to see the labels. Then she pulled out some canned processed meat.

Now *this* she could work with. She'd made many a meal out of this stuff.

When she opened another cupboard, she let out a cry. “Bread! Thank god—we’re saved!”

She hastily examined the loaf for mold and checked the expiration date as well. “At least the last occupant left something behind worth eating.”

On a shelf under a small window sat several camping lanterns, candles and flashlights. She took these and lined them up on the counter with the other supplies. Standing back, she assessed the haul.

“This should last for...a day. Damn. That makes me nervous.”

Well, she was hungry, and she knew a man of Clay’s size had to burn a lot of calories. She set to work preparing some food.

A glance at the window showed her that the sun was setting, leaving a gold cast to the world outside. The idea of seeing Clay bathed in that light almost made her look out at him again, but she held back.

She tested the camping lanterns first just to see if they worked. They set such a cheery glow in the dim space that she left them running. Then she located some matches and lit three fat white candles.

With the space looking much homier, she found a cast iron skillet and wiped it out with a towel before setting it on the range burner. When she let the canned meat slide from the can onto a plate in a satisfying plop, her stomach growled.

How long had it been since she’d made this favorite of hers? “Oh! I hope there’s mustard.” She moved to the refrigerator and opened the door to stare at the sparse contents. There was mustard, but it was just about the only thing in there.

She set it on the counter and returned to fixing the dish.

“If Clay doesn’t like it, then he’d better be ready to hunt us some meat because there’s nothing else here,” she said under her breath.

Soon she was humming as she performed a task she'd done countless times over the years, slicing the meat into slabs and setting them in the bottom of the pan. As they sizzled, she located a toaster in a bottom cupboard and tentatively plugged it in, then even more tentatively put some bread down to toast.

With two plates laid out and the candles and lanterns casting a pleasant glow, she finished making the meal.

“If only there were cheese...”

“Who are you talking to?”

The deep voice brought her head up. Clay took up the doorway, looking hot as hell with his shoulders straight and his cowboy hat throwing his eyes into shadow.

A little shiver worked through her, and she offered a small smile. “I talk to myself sometimes. No company better than your own.”

“Is that a quote?”

“Just something I learned.”

His gaze fell on the table. Suddenly, she saw what he must—two plates with candles and lanterns between them.

“It’s not what it looks like. Just some supplies I found. The kitchen’s so dark with only that itty bitty light over the sink that I needed more light to work with.” She waved toward the range. “Oh damn! I think I burned the meat.” She rushed over and grabbed the spatula, flipped all the slices and examined the dark searing on one side.

Shooting a glance at Clay, she said, “No worries. It only tastes better when it’s caramelized.”

“Caramelized?”

She plowed on, “I hope you like this dish. There’s not much in the cupboards but black beans, and well, you don’t look like the type of man to eat black beans for dinner. Soooo ...” She brandished the spatula, scooped up a slice of meat and placed it on the toast that had popped.

“Oh good! It’s still warm.” With two slices overlapping on the bread, she squirted mustard on top and topped it with more toast.

“Voila!” She held out a plate to him.

He stared at it. “What is it?”

“My specialty. Chef’s Delight.”

“It’s Spam.”

“Uh-huh.”

He was looking at her like she’d lost her mind. She started explaining, words tumbling out in a jumble.

“I wasn’t trying to make the table romantic, Clay. I swear. Even if you are a hot guy, and I would be *thrilled* to go on a real date with you.”

He set aside the dish she’d thrust at him and took a step toward her.

“The candles really are for light. It’s all we have. Plus, the food’s not that great, is it? I mean...Spam. That’s not the least bit roman—”

In one more step, he came up against her, pressing her back against the counter. She let out a gasp but not even a word crossed her lips because he kissed her.

Full-on *kissed* her.

The hard crush of his lips wiped her mind clean so there wasn’t even a thought in it, let alone a word to utter.

His broad chest brushed up against hers, causing her nipples to pucker into hard pebbles. She couldn’t just stand here like a lump—she made her hand move to rest on his shoulder.

With a heave of his chest, he broke the kiss.

She gaped up at him. “What was that for?”

“To shut you up.”

“Well, that’s not very nice—”

He slammed his mouth across hers again. The pressure of his mouth grew more insistent as he crowded closer, almost bending her backward over the counter.

She latched on to his shoulders to steady herself and he lifted one to cradle her head. God, those warm fingers working over her scalp as he angled his head, then parted her mouth with a swipe of his tongue...

He plundered her.

Her insides clutched. Her pussy squeezed, and she couldn't hold back the cry of need.

Chapter Six

Lark's sexy little noises were pushing Clay one step closer to being fitted for that straitjacket. And her mouth? Already had the men in white coats dispatched.

He nibbled on her sweet, plump lips until she leaned against him for support. More than anything, he wanted her legs to give out so he could pick her up and lay her down on the king-sized bed that seemed planted here by the universe expressly for their use.

Biting off a growl of need, he tore his mouth free and stared down at her.

Her eyes blazed into his. "If the first kiss was to shut me up, what was the second for?"

"Because I wanted to."

She rocked her body against his, stretching onto tiptoe to capture his lips once more. He let her explore the edge of his bottom lip with the tip of her tongue before he couldn't take it another second and took control.

With a hand on her spine, he crushed her against his body so she could feel every...single...inch...of what she'd be getting.

She was sexy and sweet, a mix rarely seen in women he'd met. Even her quirks, like rambling to cover her nerves, were definitely high up on his list of things he liked about her.

There weren't any constraints on him. He wasn't under contract with WEST Protection anymore, and Lark wasn't his ward. He was running his own task force—of exactly one person—and that only made him the boss of his own destiny.

Right now, that sounded like making a move on Lark.

Arching her back, she rolled her tight curves against him. “You want to take this to the bedroom?” Her whisper was sultry as hell and had his dick hammering his fly.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” he admitted.

“I’m not a virgin, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She slid her hand down his chest, strumming his nipple as she did. A groan gathered in his throat.

He met her lidded gaze. “I never thought you were.”

“Yeah, you did.”

Okay, he *had* wondered. She was in her twenties, so it was unlikely she’d never had boyfriends or played around. But kids weren’t adults at eighteen years old the same way they were back when he was eighteen. Today they took more time to settle into life, but his generation broke down the gate to get out and begin their lives.

She stroked her hand over his nipple again, causing need to zap through his entire body and yanking his focus back to their conversation. “If you’re worried about protection, don’t be. I got it covered.”

“Oh, I wasn’t worried.” He turned his head, and so did she. They both looked at her apocalypse purse.

“Of course, there is something I need to know...” She trailed off and dropped her gaze to his chest.

He waited for several thudding heartbeats. “Spill it, woman.”

She threw him a quick glance. “Uh...you’re single, right?”

He stepped away from her. “What kind of man do you think I am?”

“Well, at the risk of ruining the moment...”

“You’re right—don’t answer that. Dammit, Lark, I should be pissed that you even considered that I’d kiss you while being tied to another woman. If I were, I wouldn’t be able to

do this.” He hooked an arm around her back and yanked her onto her toes, locked her to his body and kissed her again.

And again.

Swooping his mouth over hers and forcing little cries out of her with every pass. Still, it wasn’t enough.

Hell, he was never going to *get* enough.

He picked her up—god, she was small compared to him—and stormed through the cabin with her. At the bedroom door, he hesitated only a second. “There’s no going back if I walk through this door.”

Her eyelids drooped over the smolder of her eyes. “You’re not the backing out type, Clay Lexis. Take me to bed.”

Her words pounded through him, punching holes in all his plans and good intentions. He tossed her onto the bed and followed her, toeing off his boots, before grinding his cock into those cute little shorts that had been driving him nuts for hours.

Was it only that morning that she showed up on his doorstep? It felt like he’d known her far longer than most women he took to bed.

She arched upward to find his mouth, thrusting her tongue against his.

“Damn, you must have a degree in kissing,” she murmured between passes of his tongue.

“Didn’t want to brag.”

She giggled, hooked her hand around his nape and brought him back to her. “With technique like that, you can brag all day, cowboy.” She knocked his hat off and threw herself into the kiss with passion he never expected to find today—or hell, ever.

Cupping her ass, he tugged her up and into the slow grind of his cock. Even through their clothes, the feel of her ignited him. This had undertones of make-out sessions in the back of his dad’s car but was so much hotter because now he had enough experience to back up his claims.

“I’m going to strip this polka-dotted top off you and see what’s underneath.”

Her smile spread under his lips. “Dare ya.”

He drew away, brow cocked. “I’m too old for dares, as you’ve pointed out several times. I only make good on my promises.”

He edged his hand beneath her top. The first stroke of silky bare skin had his cock leaking precum. Walking his fingers upward, he met the lace of her bra.

His brain told him it was yellow before he ever pushed up her top to see.

When he saw it was the color of her flesh, he damn near came in his jeans. Somehow, that was so...much...sexier. All woman.

Yanking her top all the way off, he dipped his lips to the swell of one full breast. She moaned out as he dotted kisses to her pebbled skin, riding along the lacy edge of the cup.

His voice pitched low. “Are you wearing matching panties?”

She went still. “Uh...no.”

He flattened his tongue over her breast and gave it a slow lick before lifting his head. “No?”

“No.”

His brow shot up. “Well, I was going to suck your nipples until I owned them, but now you have me curious.” He popped the button of her shorts.

Lark sucked in a gasp, making her belly dip. When he eased the zipper down, he was waiting for a hint of the yellow he expected to see...

And found nothing.

His stare locked on hers. “You’re not wearing any panties.”

She gave an awkward little shimmy on the mattress. “Surprise?”

“Fuck!” Knowing she’d been sitting next to him all day with nothing covering her pussy had him aching and hard enough to pound nails.

He swiped a fingertip inside the *V* of her fly, stopping short of touching a patch of trim red curls. He couldn’t go there—yet.

Braced on one forearm, he commanded, “Take off your bra for me.”

A visible shiver ran through her. “Ohh, you’re a dominant man.”

He had never bothered with talk in the bedroom before. Most relationships he had didn’t last long enough to get past the hot and heavy stage of attraction before things fizzled out. All except one, and that was enough for him to not ever want another.

Lark reached under her spine and worked open her bra clasp. When it loosened, he didn’t take more than a half a heartbeat to tear it off her and expose a set of perfect, full, creamy breasts. Her nipples strained in taut peaks just made for a man to lick.

Christ, was there a word for more than sexy?

Yeah, there is—Lark.

Ducking his head, he drew one nipple into his mouth. When he gave it a heated pass of his tongue, she let out a soft moan. Her nipple puckered for him.

Knowing he was responsible for a response like that made his cock throb. He rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him.

“Feed me those nipples, sexy.”

She never paused, only leaned over him, aiming one breast at his lips. He caught it in a light pull. Her gasping cry urged him on. Sucking and tugging on the bud for long

minutes, he cupped the other and teased the tip with the pad of his thumb.

She straddled his waist, rocking ever so slightly to rub herself against him and turning him on even more.

Drawing her nipple from his mouth, she moved the other toward it. He made a noise. "Poor Lark. This one's neglected."

"So fix it!"

He chuckled around her taut flesh. Her sassy demand became a roughened cry. For dizzying moments, he suckled each breast while kneading them. Finally, he slid his hands down to her ripe ass cheeks and squeezed.

"Take these off."

"Yes!" She threw herself off him and shimmied those yellow shorts off faster than he thought possible.

Every cell in him stilled at the sight of her perfect body. Hips made for grabbing, an ass made for spanking and her pussy made for him to bury himself in.

He pointed to his face. "Take your seat, sexy. And don't stop riding my tongue until you're thoroughly pleased."

* * * * *

Lark didn't let go of her personal control often. She learned young there were far too many risks involved and too much to lose. But letting go with Clay was easy.

His firm grip on her hips and the way his tongue worked over her pussy folds had her cranked to an all-time high.

Each twist and flick of his tongue as he fucked her with it stole louder cries from her lips. And when he slowly eased the point up to her clit? Heaven.

Her insides clutched as he swirled his tongue around and around her clit, worshipping it almost, in a way that left her brainless.

Her inner thighs clamped around his ears, and she rocked faster. The new position she'd never tried along with his

talented tongue were driving her insane. Breaths shuddered in and out of her lungs, faster and faster.

When he dipped his tongue into her channel again, she let out a long, throaty moan. “You’re soooo good at that.”

“Mmm.” The vibration of his response worked into her, driving her higher.

He released his hold on her ass and cupped her breasts. Thumbing her nipples into sharp peaks again, he drew softly on her clit until sparks shot past her vision. A hot ripple rolled through her core.

As she tensed, he released her breasts and grabbed her by the hips again, forcing her to ride his lips and tongue faster. She ground down on his hot tongue. Her insides clenched and released in a rhythm that would surely kill her in the end. If that bomb went off in the truck, she’d never know it until after the dust settled.

Her pussy squeezed out more juices, coating his tongue. He licked her all the faster, plunging deep before moving back to her clit and sucking...sucking...

On a strangled cry, she came. The pulsations commanded all her attention as the waves pounded her over and over. Heat stole through her and scorched the rest of her mind.

He brought her down with soft flicks over her clit that had her quaking with energy overload.

Unable to hold herself upright anymore, she rolled off him.

And damn if the man didn’t follow her. Gripping her hips, he hiked her ass up in the air and buried his tongue in her pussy from behind.

Fisting the covers, she pinched her eyes shut on the sensation that should surely be a sin. He continued lapping her pussy for drawn-out minutes, working her up all over again.

Suddenly, he drew away from her. She felt his weight leave the mattress and heard the thump of his feet on the floor. She twisted her head in time to see him leave the bedroom.

She couldn't even move. Still on all fours, she dropped her head to the pillow and tried to recover a brain cell or two. After all, how was she going to ever have a career in journalism if she forgot all her words?

A second later, Clay returned, carrying her purse. He dropped it on the dresser and began rummaging through the contents for what had to be the condoms she alluded to carrying.

After a short time, he picked up her purse and dumped the entire contents on the dresser. Items bounced off the surface and dropped onto the floor. A length of rope dangled from the cloth.

Clay picked up a condom and gave the stuff on the floor a cursory glance. "I'm not even gonna ask why you've got some of these things."

"The rope is—" She stopped dead when he took off his T-shirt. "Oh god..."

She rolled to a sitting position.

His chest made her mouth dry out. She might have even swallowed her tongue. Each carved shoulder bore a tan that spoke of working outdoors. The swells of his pecs drew her eyes downward to rippled abs and ended at a ring of muscle riding just above the waist of his jeans.

He reached behind his back, shooting her attention to the way all that muscle *moved*. But when he set a handgun on the dresser, her stomach pitched.

"You were carrying the whole time?"

He gave her a look. "Of course. I never leave the house without it."

Before she could say more, he stuck the corner of the condom in his teeth and held it there while those long, skilled fingers worked open his fly.

Oh god!

The words never made it past her brain because he stunned her by dropping his jeans and boxers in one fluid

motion.

With his thighs flexing, he stepped out of the fabric. He braced his legs wide, showing off the grand prize—a thick, long, impressive cock that made her certain she'd been missing out all these years.

“I...never knew...”

“Use your words, Lark.” He approached the bed and tore open the condom and rolled it over the mushroomed head of his cock.

She gulped and scrambled for something to say to convey just how damn hot he was, how impressive his body was...and that she'd never been so turned on in her life.

“I never knew you were packing eight inches—”

“Ten,” he corrected, slowly jacking his length and sliding the condom to the base.

She eyed it. “Does that thing actually fit?”

“Fits fine. If you're nervous about it breaking, we can always sixty-nine.”

Her eyes rolled back in her head at his dirty suggestion. “I want that too,” she said when she recovered.

His lips quirked up at one corner in a bad-boy smile that would have stripped her clothes off with a mere twitch.

Wetting her lips with a swipe of her tongue, she rasped, “Where do you want me?”

“On my cock. Or better yet ... ” In two strides he reached her, wrapped his hands around her knees and dragged her to the edge of the mattress. When he slammed his mouth over hers and set the tip of his cock at her entrance, she lost her mind all over again.

Need and passion blasted through her with every kiss he fed her. Between gasps, he drew back to look deep into her eyes.

Then began to stretch her with his long, steely hard cock.

“Clay!” She gripped his shoulders and angled her thigh higher to give him complete access.

“Don’t look away from me. You’re going to know who is buried in you, Lark.”

“Oh god! There are actually men who talk like you out there in the world. I thought they only existed in sex etiquette columns in magazines.”

This time he gave her a full grin.

And it stole the words right off her lips.

Holding his blazing stare, she watched the pleasure roll over his rugged features as he sank inside her.

“Can you take all of me, sexy?” His tone grew gritty.

“Uhhhh.”

He kissed her long and deep. When he lifted his mouth from hers, she realized he had fully filled her.

He gave a testing roll of his hips, withdrawing a bit before sliding back inside slowly. “Okay?”

“Okay!”

He flashed those pearly whites again and began to fuck her. The slow, smooth strokes slowly built to a faster rhythm until she was the one bucking and taking every inch of his amazing cock while he alternately kissed her and sucked her nipples.

His muscled chest was a solid wall of protection. She’d only seen him in the act of protecting her a couple times, but she knew when the time came to really see him in action, it was going to be the hottest moment of her life.

His rhythm changed. Her breasts bounced against him as he slammed harder, taking her with more force and demand. The sheer power behind every move he made sent liquid heat to her pussy, soaking his cock.

On a rough grunt, he caught the point of her chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to meet his stare.

Then she saw why.

Clay Lexis, former soldier and ex-cop, gave up total control and was coming.

Inside her.

Her own orgasm shot up from nowhere. She issued a low cry that mingled with his guttural groan. His hips churned. She rocked to meet his final thrusts as they both rode through the turbulent waters together.

When he collapsed on top of her, keeping his weight braced on his elbows, she let her eyes drift closed.

“Now *that* was an orgasm,” she panted.

“Which one?” A smile was in his voice, making her open her eyes just to see the godlike beauty of it again.

“Both of them.” She collapsed with her arms flung out to the sides. He leaned in and brushed his lips across hers tenderly before easing out of her body.

Damn, when had she last had sex that good? Probably never.

When had she ever had a man like Clay? Definitely never.

A minute later, he returned and crawled into bed beside her, tucking her against him the way every woman wanted to be treated right after sex.

She curled into him and steadied her breathing.

His breath washed over her the hair at her temple. “I may regret this, but now can you tell me what kind of man you think I am?”

She eyed him. “You asked for it.” She took a deep breath in preparation. “I think you have commitment issues.”

“What makes you say that?” His expression was now masked, which only confirmed her guess was correct.

“I mean, you’re forty-two and have never been married.”

“Forty!” He grabbed his chest, clutching it as though she’d shot him.

She leaned over him. “Are you having a heart attack?”

“Oh my god. I’m not.”

“I mean, older guys often have heart issues. It’s a sneaky killer. You should get that checked out.”

“Lark. I need you to be quiet for a minute while I recover from what you just said.”

She compressed her lips. Seconds ticked by.

When she could stand it no more, she opened her mouth.

“That was all of thirty seconds, Lark.”

Ignoring him, she said, “I think you’re committed to your job. To your stint in the Army before. But I think you don’t want to commit to a person.”

He made a snorting noise. “Huh.”

“Nailed it?” She cocked her head.

“Pretty much.”

She beamed.

“So, is this the part where you try to fix me?”

She stamped her lips over his. “You’re not broken. And I’m not looking for a project.”

His warm brown gaze intensified on her. “You’re looking for a partner?”

“Not that either.” She propped her chin on his chest and stared at him. “Can’t we just...live in the moment? Let’s just...try to live through this.”

Chapter Seven

Clay opened the dresser drawer and looked inside. Sure enough, there were stacks of clean clothes there in several sizes for both genders. He pulled a clean T-shirt in an extra-large off the stack.

Thank god for his close ties to WEST Protection. The team not only had safehouses all over the country, but they were fully equipped with enough supplies to get a pair of refugees over a hump.

Hell. A hump.

He swung his head toward the bed.

Lark was sprawled on her stomach, fast asleep. The sheet only went up to the small of her back, giving him a gut-clenching view of the dip that led to the swell of her buttocks.

Dark need swirled through him like a drug. He still wanted her.

He shouldn't, but he did.

What made him cave in and sleep with the woman last night? He couldn't blame *that* on stimulants or lack of sleep.

He grabbed his own jeans from the previous day and tugged them on. With the fly still unzipped, he plucked a pair of brand-new socks from the drawer and carried them into the bathroom with him.

He needed to make some calls. First, he needed a check-in from Livingston about how much support he'd be getting from the FBI on this matter, because so far? They'd left him with even less support than his own team of one.

WEST was coming through, though. Ross was sending him the Abel brothers. Both were wild cards to Clay—he'd worked with their three older brothers, but not Julius and Jennings. The three were solid players on the WEST Protection team. He had no reason to believe the other two couldn't help him in some way.

The two brothers were also free agents, connected to WEST but not contracted by the company.

Maybe they'd even join Sentry. Hell, he could use more people to rely on. From what he was told when he took this job, there was a hell of a lot to do in the area to clean things up. He could only spread himself so thin. The Abels could plug a leak.

If they were anything like their brothers, they'd be assets too.

He had a hell of a lot riding on his shoulders. So why had he added another layer of complication by sleeping with Lark?

Lust was no excuse. Neither was having that tie to her brother. He hadn't seen Andrew in years and had no reason to feel bound to Lark in any way.

Some guys would rush in and try to rescue her from her horrible past, but that wasn't Clay, and Lark didn't require rescuing. She was probably stronger than he was. She'd managed to grow like a flower in cracked concrete. One hit to his ego—one girlfriend who slept with his buddy on the police force—and he shut the door on the idea of relationships forever.

And Lark had called him out on it too. Dammit. The fact that she could see through him so easily shook him.

"Clay?" Her soft call had him straightening from putting on his socks and moving to the doorway.

He looked at her. Sitting in the middle of the bed, red curls tousled, eyes hooded from sleep and the sheet clutched to the tops of her bare breasts, she looked like sex and sin personified. A siren beckoning him from deep waters he didn't know how to navigate.

Her lips spread in a gentle smile that felt like a caress over his heart. “You didn’t leave.”

He blinked at her. “You thought I’d leave you alone here?”

She shrugged. “We didn’t end last night with you telling me your intentions.”

“Intentions,” he bit off.

“Plans,” she clarified. Gathering the sheet around her, she tipped her feet off the mattress and stood to her full height, and though she was petite, she looked and acted like a goddess.

A goddess he’d given several orgasms to the night before. And wanted to again.

And again.

He filled his chest with air. Pointing to the dresser, he said, “You’ll find clothes in there. Everything you need to get ready for the day is in the bathroom.”

“Really? What kind of connections do you *have*, Clay Lexis?”

“The kind only silver foxes do.”

She giggled. Which was why he’d said it.

“I’m going to check on some things here in the cabin and then make a few calls while you get ready.”

“Okay. Where’s my phone? Am I allowed to check it?”

“It’s with that crap on top of the dresser.”

She followed his gaze to the dumped contents of her purse. “You’re responsible for that mess.”

“I know.” He strode to the door. “And yes, you can check it. Just don’t text anybody, accept any calls or open anything that requires your location. I shut that off.”

“All right.”

He left her to do her thing and went in search of sustenance. Their meal of Spam sandwiches still sat in the middle of the table, untouched. After the trouble she’d gone

through to prepare food, they'd turned to carnal appetites instead.

His cock started to stiffen at the thought of what had gone on. Kissing her, then kissing her again. And what happened after...

He swallowed and directed his focus to the situation at hand. A bomb was sitting in the back of his truck out in the driveway. First order of business, he went out and checked on it.

It just sat there, looking the same as it had before, only the timer had rolled over a few more hours since he'd slipped out here in the middle of the night.

Seeing nothing to do on that front, he returned to the kitchen. After rummaging in the fridge, freezer and a few cupboards, he realized not every safehouse was as well stocked as some. There was hardly any food, and what there was Lark had set out on the counter.

Looking at the supplies made his heart squeeze painfully. She lived a hard life, one he couldn't begin to fathom. How many times had she suffered from hunger?

Yet she still exuded sunshine like a summer's day.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and chose the box of biscuit mix off the table. The candles had burned down into puddles of wax in the holders and the batteries died in the lanterns. Later, he'd have to clear it all away, but in the meantime, he was making...whatever recipe he could find on the back of the box.

Biscuits, shortcake...and pancakes.

Those he could manage.

Of course there was no milk, so he substituted it with water. Luckily, there was a single egg in the refrigerator. How fresh it might be was a risk he had to take. Before long, he had a pan sizzling.

Lark would want syrup for her pancakes, he just knew it. He dug around for some but couldn't find any.

He stepped up to the end of the hall. “Lark?” he called.

“Uh...yeah?”

“When you searched the kitchen did you see any syrup?”

A beat of silence. “Yeah, bottom cupboard in the back,” she called back.

“Bottom back,” he repeated and went to find the item.

He stopped.

Her voice sounded...strained.

He shut off the burner and rushed to the bedroom.

Lark was still swathed in the sheet, sitting on the side of the bed, staring at her phone with tears streaming down her beautiful face.

* * * * *

“What the hell happened?” Clay’s hard voice brought Lark’s head up from the phone in her hand.

“My Quick Bunny score has *plummeted!*”

In a few long strides he crossed the room and dropped to a crouch in front of her. “That’s what you’re crying about? Your score?”

She shook her head, sending a curl into her eye. She didn’t bother brushing it away. A tear dripped off her chin.

“Suddenly a bunch of my *good* reviews changed to one star. How does that even happen?” she practically wailed.

“Lark. Think about what you’re saying. It’s a job, and a bad one at that. You have to see the bigger picture here.” Clay spoke in a soothing but matter-of-fact tone.

She huffed. “Like the fact that I live above a car garage and the owner left me several calls and texts to say that he’s worried about me?”

Clay gave her a long look. “Are you involved with him?”

“Now you sound like me! Accusing you of not being free to hop in bed with me.”

His eyes seemed to darken in warning.

“But no,” she rushed on. “He told me that my apartment’s been ransacked!”

Clay’s expression hardened into a granite mask so unreadable she felt the only way to crack him would be to take a hammer and chisel to him.

“Give me your phone,” he roughed out.

She held it out to him, and he took it before shifting to a standing position. She stared at his long, muscled legs that ended in cowboy boots.

Clay looked up from the phone. “He reached out to Andrew?”

She nodded, miserable. “I didn’t even know that he *knew* my brother, but he states that Andrew is concerned and asked him how to help.”

“Of course he is coming to your aid, Lark. He loves you. And this guy says he’s worried about you too.” He held up the phone on his broad palm but didn’t look very happy about what he was saying.

“You know my brother. He’s always been protective of me.”

He cocked a brow. “Meaning?”

“I don’t want him doing something stupid.”

“Like hunting down who’s responsible for tossing your apartment and hurting them?”

She nodded.

“Why would Andrew do that? He isn’t a criminal, right? He’s a respectable member of society.”

“Yeah, but that urge still lives inside him. I’ve seen some of the extent he’ll go to in order to protect the people he cares about.”

Clay returned to his crouched position in front of her. His chest was only inches from her knees, and she wanted *so much*

to slip into his arms and let his strength erase the world.

“Having the urge to seek revenge for someone you love doesn’t make you a bad person, Lark. It makes you human. And that applies to Andrew. Though it doesn’t look like he’ll be able to do much. He doesn’t know who’s responsible.”

She scraped the curl off her forehead.

Clay’s fingers covered hers. The callused warmth of his touch left her spinning from the instant comfort he offered her. Her stomach unknotted enough to allow her lungs to inflate with a full breath.

He lowered their joined hands to the bed. “Andrew is military. He can handle himself.

A shiver sidled through her. “Did you read *all* of the garage owner’s texts?”

“Yes.”

Her stomach twisted. “You saw what he said about why he contacted Andrew about *my* place?”

Clay’s brows pinched.

“Don’t you see?” She plastered her hands over her face. “I didn’t get that apartment on my own! Andrew got it for me. I thought the landlord was just being nice, not making me put a security deposit on the apartment. He didn’t ask for first and last month’s rent either, like most places do. My brother paid it on my behalf.”

Clay’s words came out hesitantly. “And that...upsets you?”

“Yes!” She dropped her hands and glared at him through her teary eyes. His image shimmered and blurred.

He set her phone aside and slipped an arm around her waist, tugging her up against his chiseled body. Being as hard as granite, he shouldn’t be so comfortable, but she melted at first contact with him.

“You’re pretty cuddly for a tough guy, you know that?” she asked.

He jerked his head to pierce her in his stare. “I am not cuddly. I’m hard. And mean.”

She poked a finger into his muscled chest. “Cuddly.”

He groaned. “I’m just trying to offer you some comfort, Lark. Don’t you see that having a brother who loves you enough to help you out that way is what makes the world good?”

She stilled. Then sniffled. “I know you’re right. And I love Andrew so much for it. I suppose the fact that someone broke into my place and smashed all my stuff should make me more upset but... I feel like... I’ve failed at life.”

Long fingers threaded into her hair as Clay drew her head against his chest. “You’re just starting out in life.”

“Unlike you.” She added a teasing note to her voice.

“Jesus,” he muttered.

“I don’t mind the age gap between us. It’s hot having a man who knows how to give us both what we need.”

“Hell.”

She felt the rumble beneath her ear more than heard it. “Who do you think this guy is? Why is he delivering bombs to people?”

“I have no idea, but he definitely came looking for you at your apartment—then searched for the bomb or some info he could use to find you. That means you can’t go back there until it’s safe.”

She ran her hand down his chest. “He already had some readings about location from the phone on that bomb too. Thank god we got rid of it. I feel safe right here with you.”

His throat clicked on a swallow. She tipped her head up to look at him. As their eyes locked, that sizzle of attraction turned into a zap.

“No, Lark. We need to dial this down. Go get in the shower and I’ll have pancakes ready for you when you’re finished.”

Dial it down? How could she possibly do that when she felt like he'd awakened something in her? Now she only wanted more—in several ways and at all hours of the day. But he was right. They had pressing things that needed addressing.

That her brother intervened on her behalf with the apartment still cut. She thought she got it all on her own, but in hindsight it seemed like too much good luck when she had no credit and a low-paying job.

After another crappy review or two on Quick Bunny, she wouldn't even *have* a job. The app would kick her out. And then what? East Canon didn't have many options for work. Most jobs she was overqualified for, and bagging groceries with a college degree wounded her pride.

That was if she could even *return* home. Running around with a bomb that nobody seemed to be giving much importance to was the most screwed-up thing she'd experienced in a long time, and she had a history of being screwed.

Now she didn't even know how to act around Clay. How could she flip a switch as if every one of those impressive inches hadn't been inside her last night?

He didn't seem all that happy about it either.

He released her and gained his feet. With a tilt of his head toward the bathroom to indicate what her next move should be, he walked out of the bedroom.

Lark composed herself and selected some clothing from the dresser. At least it seemed better stocked than the pantry.

By the time she stood beneath the spray of hot, healing water, she smelled the mouth-watering scent of her sinfully hot, older lover fixing her post-sex pancakes.

Chapter Eight

Clay watched the final bite of pancakes disappear between Lark's lips. Seeing her swipe that drop of syrup off her bottom lip left him aching to pick her up and settle her on his lap. Something about her being so damn cute made him want to hold her in his arms, his lap—a lot. And that wasn't his norm at all.

Lark wasn't his norm.

She took a sip of water to wash down her food. When she lowered the glass, water dampened her lips, giving her pout even more allure.

What happened to his work ethics? He seemed to have left them all behind when he left WEST Protection.

He had to focus—on keeping her safe while getting rid of the fucking bomb that nobody seemed to be taking any interest in and then finding solid recruits to join Sentry.

The Abel brothers were en route. He knew little about Julius and Jennings other than what their other brothers occasionally shared. They were both hellions of the South, making their momma alternately cry and beam with pride.

But the WEST team had tried to bring them aboard several times. That meant they had skills—and Clay needed skilled teammates.

He still couldn't figure out why the hell he was the one building Sentry from the ground up. Clay was far from lazy, but it seemed to him that when the FBI formed this task force that they should have actually hired some people to work it, not leave it entirely up to him.

Hand-selecting them was ideal—if he had more time. However, he didn't.

He was presently on the run with nobody manning the fort back in East Canon and the vicinity. That kid who wanted to bomb the church probably had friends who could still be carrying out the plans by delivering bombs via Quick Bunny. If they did, Clay wouldn't be around to stop them. He'd be here, running another shit show.

Lark pushed her plate away with a happy moan. “You make really good pancakes, Clay. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“You've been a bachelor a long time. I'm sure you know how to cook all sorts of things.”

He didn't want to hear about their difference in age anymore. He shoved his chair away from the table and reached out to take their plates to the sink. Lark beat him to it, scooping them up...and dropping a kiss on his cheek on the way by.

Stunned, he sat there, feeling the echo of that kiss long after he heard the sink filling with water. What made her peck his cheek like that? Almost as if they were a couple, and they'd been having breakfast together for a long time.

He was still processing this when his phone vibrated with a text. He swiped the screen and read the incoming message from Julius.

Lark looked at him expectantly.

“The guys are here. I'm going outside to meet them.”

Lark turned from the sink as he stood, forearms damp and sudsy. “The guys your old team sent?”

“Yes.” He'd filled her in while they ate, keeping it simple so as not to feed her any information that may frighten her.

She reached for a paper towel. “I should come outside with you and greet them.”

Again, that sensation of being a couple rolled through him. Damn, he really had crossed boundaries and now was going to pay the price. Setting her straight was going to be rough—the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

“You stay here. I’ll bring them inside.”

She cocked her head as if gauging his mood. He didn’t doubt that she was. Either that or she was writing one of her columns about him in her mind.

“I’ll be back in a few.” He headed outside just as the truck rolled into the short gravel driveway.

When he spotted cowboy hats, he grinned. Just seeing those hats roused a feeling of fellowship he’d been missing since leaving WEST’s ranks.

They cut the engine and climbed out, boots crunching on gravel and broad smiles on their faces as they met in front of the truck.

“You’re Lexis,” one brother said.

He held out his hand, and the rugged guy who looked a hell of a lot like his older brothers gripped it hard. “That’s right. You’re Julius?”

He dipped his head in agreement. “You got it.”

Clay turned to Jennings next. The youngest brother had a couple inches of height on the rest of his brothers, but the directness of his gaze reminded him a lot of the oldest brother, Judd.

“Jennings. Damn, I’m glad to have backup.” They shook hands too, and when they broke away, the brothers turned to eye the bomb strapped in the back of Clay’s truck.

“That it?” Julius moved forward.

“Yep.”

They all approached the truck to examine the unit.

“Doesn’t look like a bomb to me,” Jennings said.

“Have you dealt with any before now?” Clay asked.

“A couple. Been keeping it real with some side gigs with the FBI down in Georgia. But never anything like this.”

Clay scrubbed a finger between his brows. “It’s sophisticated, and yet a simple design. At least according to the bomb specialist I sent video to.”

At that moment, the front door banged shut, bringing all their attention to the fiery woman standing on the doorstep.

Clay raked his stare over her and almost swallowed his tongue.

Goddamn.

Over pancakes, Clay hardly registered what she was wearing. He was too focused on her mouth and thinking up a dozen uses for it other than chewing food.

Now that he saw how a pair of tight black pants and an oversized T-shirt knotted tight at the waist—and probably one off the men’s stack—hugged her curves for miles, he swallowed a possessive noise.

“Well, hello,” Julius drawled.

Clay jerked his head around and glare at the man that just seconds before he was happy to have on the case. The way he was gawking at Lark had Clay rethinking his opinion about the man.

Julius and Jennings traded a look that made Clay grind off a warning noise.

It wasn’t a look he liked. Interest. The possibility of a conquest.

He stepped in front of the men, blocking their direct view of Lark. A lot of good that did, because she bounced across the small yard and right up next to Clay.

“Hi. I’m Lark.”

He didn’t miss Julius’s cocked eyebrow or the way Jennings rubbed a knuckle beneath his nose as though wiping away sweat.

Hell, Clay would be mopping up a whole bucketful. Looking at Lark in those tight pants was making *his* fit far too tight.

He quickly made the introductions. “Lark, this is Julius. And Jennings.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Guys, this is Lark. She was tasked with picking up the bomb and delivering it to an address provided on an app. But let’s go inside and discuss it further.”

With a flick of his fingers, he motioned for everybody to go into the cabin. Lark had the dishes drying on a towel next to the sink. For some reason the cozy scene made him think about that kiss on the cheek. He started lifting a hand toward the spot but stopped himself short.

Lark slipped into a seat at the small rectangular table, but the Abel brothers took up positions at each corner of the kitchen, leaning against the counters with arms folded. It was clear the men had worked as guards before, which was at least one point in their favor. After their obvious interest in Lark, they’d already lost several points each in Clay’s view.

Julius gave a nod toward Lark. “We have information to share that may be sensitive.”

She wiggled her bottom on the seat, planting herself more firmly. But that only drew the attention of all three males down on her.

“Lark, why don’t you go into the bedroom?” Clay’s suggestion made her shake her head.

“I’m staying right here. I have a right to know what’s going on. It’s my life that’s been disrupted and my job on the line. *My* apartment broken into.”

Two sets of brows shot up at her statement. “What’s this about a break-in?” Jennings asked in a low drawl.

Lark tipped her head. “You guys Southerners?”

They nodded in near tandem, giving Clay the impression these brothers were tight. Cross one, you’d cross them both.

Only in this case, he'd be crossing all five Abels.

Jennings's lips quirked at one side, and Lark returned the smile.

Clay jumped in. "Okay. Lark?"

She did the thing—crossed her legs in that way she wasn't aware drove men crazy.

"I'm not going anywhere, Clay. I have a right to know everything that you know, since we're in this together."

The Abels swung their gazes to him. He stared back at each for a long heartbeat, hoping he conveyed the message that Lark? Was out of bounds.

"Uh, Clay? Can I speak to you a second?" she spoke up.

"Sure." If it meant getting her out of the room, he was up for it.

She jumped up and then made everything far worse by sashaying out of the kitchen. The guys twisted to watch her go, and Clay let out a growl.

"Keep your peckers in your pants, guys. She's young."

"Not that young," Jennings commented. He was probably closer to Lark's age than any of them.

"She's off-limits," he said gruffly.

Striding after her, he found her in the bedroom.

"Shut the door," she whispered, waving a hand in some secret signal.

He did. As soon as he turned to her, she got right in his face. "What is going on out there? You're acting crazy!" she told him off in a low whisper.

God, she was adorable with that crinkle between her pale red eyebrows. She was freckled too. Plenty of freckles.

She snapped her fingers in front of his face, bringing him back to attention.

"Clay! Focus on me. What are you doing out there? You're acting like you're my dad—"

He planted his hands on her ass and cupped it, drawing her flush against his body. “I’m not your dad,” he grated as he stared into her eyes.

She darted her tongue over her bottom lip. “Prove it!” she rasped in challenge.

Just like when he was a cop, he didn’t even think—he just acted.

Slamming his mouth over hers, he pulled her tighter against him and dug his fingers into her curvy ass. She moaned against his lips, which gave him another advantage.

He plunged his tongue deep, trapping hers, then sucking on it until she let out a shuddering sigh followed by a husky whimper.

He had to stop.

Stop.

Tearing from the kiss, he stared into her eyes.

She immediately picked up where she’d left off with her argument. “You’re treating those guys like they’re doing something wrong by just being in my presence.”

“They should act more professional.”

She wiggled her ass into his firm hold on it. “Like you, Mr. Long Arm of the Law?”

Fuck. She had him there.

He slowly forced his fingers to unclench on her buttocks. With a hard shake, he stepped away from her. “Just stay here.”

“Not a chance. I’m coming with you.”

Yes, you will be coming. Later, when we’re all alone and I can rip those sexy fucking pants off you.

He’d already left the guys too long and devoted too much time to this argument—or make-out session, or whatever the hell madness had overcome him.

When he opened the door, Lark pushed her way past him, giving him a tormenting view of the slippery sway of her hips.

* * * * *

What the hell was *that*? Lark's senses were still reeling from Clay's behavior. The kiss, his grip on her ass and the way he slid one finger beneath the curve, inching it *so* close to her pussy left her panting.

Not to mention his gritty tone that fanned the flames he just created. And that alpha chest-thumping act had her insides clutching with want.

In fact, she already had a list written up in her mind with things she wanted to do to him when they were alone.

She got partway through the list before she realized she should be paying attention to the discussion.

Julius and Jennings had taken chairs at the table. One was kicked back with one leg extended and the other leaned an elbow on the table with his hand in a fist that he occasionally bumped pensively against his lips.

Clay sat adjacent to Lark, all business and hotter than ever.

But now that she knew how easily he could slip into being her lover, she burned to see it again.

Julius grunted, which everyone took to be the opening of his speech. "Ross wants us to give you a hand, but we're not sure where we fit into this op. Neither of us can disarm a bomb, and even if we could, you're the one working closely with the FBI. Shouldn't they be providing backup?"

Clay shook his head. "You'd think so, yeah. But that's not the case. This task force has been a fuck-up since the inception. That leaves me spread thin, a lone wolf on the hunt for justice. Two nights ago I was taking down a guy who wanted to bomb a church, and then this bomb drops into my hands the next morning."

Lark studied his face. "You didn't tell me what you were doing that night. You don't think that guy and my guy are related, do you?"

“*Your* guy? Meaning the guy off the app? Been wondering that.”

Jennings dropped his fist from his mouth again. “We received an FBI report about the bomb squad being attacked in transit to you.”

Clay and Lark tensed, waiting to hear what he had to share.

“The unit was jumped right before they hit the interstate. The one who was injured lost the fight for his life, and three others got away.”

“Damn.” Clay’s voice was quiet with the echo of regret. She was sure that anytime a man on the right side of the law fell in the line of duty, he must feel the shockwave.

“Yeah.” Jennings grew silent too.

After a heavy moment, Clay asked, “Any word on who the suspects might be?”

Julius bobbed his head. “FBI thinks the attack came from someone on the inside.”

Lark sucked in a breath and held it. This was exactly the type of story she should be reporting. Her brain was already stringing together sentences and a headline with a damn good hook.

If only she had a pen and some paper...

She glanced around and saw none. Just as well—the guys wouldn’t exactly like her scribbling notes about what they said in this very private meeting in a safehouse in rural Colorado.

Clay blew out a noisy breath. “That means we can trust no one.”

Jennings nodded. “Us against the world.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Julius’s statement kicked her literary brain into overdrive with all the meaning behind his words. What had these boys from Georgia gotten up to when it came to danger? She could only guess by their dark looks that

they were often on the wrong side of the law in order to be on the right.

Then Clay...

She shivered as she directed her attention to his face. He was running around in the dark with church bombers. At any moment he could die—and, well, that hurt too much to dwell on for more than a split second. She pushed away the thought and shifted her knee under the table.

It brushed something hard and stony.

Clay shot her a sideways glance.

That boulder was his knee.

She applied pressure with her own.

A big hand came down on top of it and rested there like a heavy weight that couldn't be budged.

“So someone on the inside knew the unit was coming to meet us to get rid of this bomb,” he continued in a methodical recounting. “Then they were stopped. So that leads me to believe that whoever is behind all this knew the FBI's moves.” He turned his focus on Julius. “Did you get the workup your brother sent on the guy on Quick Bunny?”

“Yup. It's a bogus name and that house is hijacked.”

“Hijacked?” Lark echoed, a question in her tone.

Jennings's dark eyes landed on her. “The house is actually up for sale. Whoever this dude was, he took down the For Sale sign and broke into the place to make it appear that he lived there.”

“Oh my god. At least the house was empty and nobody was hurt!” Her outburst had all three men staring at her. She realized that the idea of others being hurt hadn't even occurred to any of them—they were hunters first and foremost. Once they got a whiff of the crime and a suspect, they were bloodhounds relentlessly tracking them down.

She moved her leg away from Clay's, but he tightened his grip on her knee, locking her in place. Their stares met for a

single heartbeat before he swung his attention back to the guys.

“What do we know about the person that Lark was supposed to deliver the bomb to?” he asked.

“That’s still under investigation,” Jennings spoke up. “The WEST team can’t find anybody by that name in the database.”

“And the address?” Clay asked.

“Another home up for sale. Seems to be a lot more of those in East Canon, Colorado than most cities. Any reason for that?” Jennings aimed his question at Lark.

“The factories shut down. People can’t get work, so they’re leaving in droves. Those who stay are fighting for rank. Poverty is real, and not in an I-can’t-make-rent way. It’s becoming an entire downward spiral into addiction and crime. Even the domestic abuse cases are at an all-time high in the town.”

“Desperate times create desperate people. We’ve seen it,” Julius said. “I think we need to entertain the idea that someone is working on the inside with the FBI. They knew where they were going to be.”

“That could be a simple GPS tracker on a vehicle. What evidence of that do you have it could be someone on the inside?” Lark’s inner reporter popped up.

Julius contemplated her. “Gut instinct, that’s what.”

“But does that stand up in a court of law?”

“She’s got a point.” Clay swung his gaze from Julius to her. “But I agree. There’s something more going on.”

God, even when he disagreed with her, his mind was *so* hot. She shifted her knee, bumping his again. When he swiped a finger over it, her insides fluttered with awareness.

In fact, she was so locked in on Clay that she didn’t realize when the talk shifted to a game plan to get her to safety.

“I’ll need to talk to WEST, but now we need to consider that Lark requires a bodyguard. Her place was ransacked, and people know her name on that app and around East Canon.”

“I’m sure the Wyntons will send a guard to fetch her. Or one of us can take her to a meeting point.” Jennings cast her a glance.

Clay’s fingers fell away from her knee and he settled it in a fist on the tabletop. Her reporter’s mind was always working on a story, and that meant she read body language *pretty dang* well.

What she saw was a show of dominance. Clay would no sooner put her in a vehicle alone with one of the Abel brothers than he would ride around with that bomb in the back of his truck for much longer.

“Lark stays with me.”

There he went again with the dad act. Lark rolled her eyes and leaned back in her seat, which moved her knee from its spot up against Clay’s.

He didn’t react to the change of connection. Both guys eyed him like they detected it, though.

Lark cleared her throat. “Look, I have an old friend from college. I’ll get in touch with her. I know she’ll let me crash for a few days at her place in Boulder.”

All three heads shook, stopping her mid-thought.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Just no. You’re not going to be safe with an old sorority sister from college,” Clay ground out.

“A nerd like me would never join a sorority,” she scoffed.

Clay’s brow arched as he took in that claim. “Nerd?”

“Yes, word mavens never have a lot of friends. In fact, we have a lot more enemies because we write the truth, no matter what that may be.”

All three stares zeroed in on her. “So you could have been the target all along,” Jennings mused.

She blinked. “Target? No. Not me. I just deliver donuts to office parties and pick up people’s junk to take to charity shops. I don’t have enemies like *that*.”

Clay laid his hand over the back of hers...right there in plain view of the men to see. “You’ve never written a story about anybody that could paint a target on your back?”

“I wish! I’ve never written a story for anything but the university newspaper. I don’t even gossip with Roberta.”

At her words, the Abels’ brows pinched over their very similar noses. “Roberta?”

Clay pushed a sigh through his nostrils. “East Canon is clinging to the 1970s by keeping a real-life phone operator on instead of a 911 operator. Think small-town cop show. You get the point.”

Both guys nodded.

“Roberta knows everything about everyone and doesn’t stop herself sharing it either, from what little I’ve heard.”

“Got it.” Jennings went back to bouncing his fist lightly against his mouth again. She was beginning to wonder if this was how he worked things out in his head.

It was kind of refreshing after watching Clay, who gave *nothing* away. Even when he was about to grab her and kiss her senseless, not even a glimmer of intention came into his eyes to warn her.

Clay reached for his phone on the table. “We need to do more digging, guys. I’m calling WEST and we’re forming a better plan. Your brother Jace is great at hacking. If anybody can dig up dirt and flip over rocks, it’s him.”

Chapter Nine

Clay ended the call with his FBI contact. Livingston had almost nothing new on this case, but Clay couldn't hold that against him. He felt just as hung out to dry as Clay was on this task force.

He was beginning to think they should both skip out and start their own business. Sentry could fail for all Clay cared.

He dug his thumb and forefinger into his eye sockets. Okay, that wasn't true—he *did* care. The minute he took the job, he threw himself all in. Nothing worth fighting for was easy, and that meant sinking wasn't an option.

He disliked loose ends, and at this rate, nothing would get tied up. Livingston's insights about why the fact that a bomb wasn't taking precedence rang with undertones of corruption.

"I'm not happy about it," Livingston had told him, the stress in his voice matching Clay's own.

"I'll handle it. I'll find someone to disarm it." Clay didn't know who, but he had contacts. Even a few guys on the dark web would be able to at least guide him if need be.

He was about to make another call to WEST, but just then Lark exited the cabin. The sun struck her red hair, creating a blazing halo that made him squint at the brightness. She threw him a dimpled smile that was free of all artifice—she genuinely seemed happy to see him.

Slowly, she approached him, carrying a glass of something that looked to be iced tea. Every step that carried her his direction had his body noticing and remembering how

having her in his arms, pressed up against him—even knee to knee—left him more aware of how great she made him feel.

As she neared, he spotted the twinkle in her eyes. “I brought you some iced tea.”

“I didn’t see any in the fridge.” He reached out to accept the glass. Cool beads of condensation met the fingers that encircled the glass.

“I made it from scratch.”

Impressed, he took a sip. A hint of sweetness coated his tongue. “Is that honey I taste?”

Her smile widened. “Yes. Found a jar in the back of the cupboard. But I have to warn you, there’s not much in the way of food for dinner. Unless you want black bean soup.”

“We’ll figure something out.” He gulped half the contents of his glass in one swallow. When he lowered it, his stare met Lark’s.

The worry he saw in those green depths made his stomach twist.

“Talk to me, Lark. What has you worried?”

She shot a look skyward as though praying for patience. “Besides all that’s going on?”

He heaved a sigh. “I know this can’t be easy. But I hope you’ll trust that when I say I’ll keep you safe, I mean it.”

Her expression softened into something even more beautiful. “Of course I trust you, Clay. You haven’t shown me anything but patience and care. Coming from the baby boomer generation, that is really something.”

“I’m not a—”

Her giggle cut his words short, and he chuckled.

“I’ve been thinking about your question about my enemies. I really don’t think there’s anybody out there who wants to hurt me. Not even an ex comes to mind.”

He was drawn to take a step closer to her. “I believe you. So that means we have to focus on other people the bomb—and the whole situation might be directed toward—and work on getting rid of that.” He threw a look across the yard to his truck. The bomb seemed to be ticking down at an alarmingly fast rate. Too many hours were passing with no solutions.

He brought his glass back to his lips and polished off the rest of the tea she’d made him. She really was so resourceful. Her upbringing forced her to be, and that made him sad. But she wouldn’t be Lark without the dark, grungy past to balance out all the sunshine that she was.

When she extended a hand to take his empty glass, he looked into her eyes and passed it to her.

“We’re going to find an answer and get you back to living your life as soon as possible,” he promised.

She banded her arm over her middle, glass clutched against her chest. “That’s what I’m afraid of, Clay.” She started back to the cabin.

Panic swept him at her words.

“Lark!” His voice sounded hoarse.

She half turned, a brittle smile fixed on her face that made him think she must have worn it a lot in that group home she mentioned. “I’ll be inside.”

Without another word, she vanished into the house. Clay watched her go, chest burning with the need to jog after her and kiss her sweet lips to see if any trace of honey lingered on them.

As soon as the door shut, the Abels appeared. They’d been asking their connections too. Clay drifted toward the brothers. “Any luck finding someone to defuse that thing?” he asked.

Jennings tugged the brim of his hat down against the glare of afternoon sun angling into their eyes at this time of day. “Not a whole hell of a lot of people out there willing to do a freelance job.”

Clay grunted. “Go figure.”

Julius hitched a thumb in the front pocket of his jeans, a gesture Clay had seen his older brothers do. “We talked to Judd.” Their oldest brother.

“Any ideas?” Clay asked.

“He got with the others at the WEST office. They suggest we leave Lark with you—”

Clay’s chest seared.

“—and we drive the bomb to Montana. Wide open spaces there. The safest spot to get it detonated. Judd’s searching for a specialist to meet us out there.”

Clay compressed his lips. “I don’t like pushing off a job I’m supposed to do onto someone else.”

Julius gave a nonchalant shrug as though someone asked him to tie his boot lace. “It’s why we were called in. Besides, between guarding Lark and pleasuring her—”

“Wait. What the goddamn hell are you saying?” Clay interrupted with a growl.

Jennings didn’t bother hiding his grin. “Anybody with a pair of eyes can see you’re attracted to her. Hell, you’ve probably already slept with her.”

He started to refute the claim, but the heat creeping up from the neck of his shirt stopped him from drawing more attention to the matter with a bald-faced lie.

Swallowing down any retort he’d make, he reached for his phone.

Julius flashed a broad grin. “You look tense, buddy.”

“Who asked you?” he bit off.

Jennings and Julius laughed outright, solidifying Clay’s belief that these guys were *not* Sentry material. He needed to get back to searching for people who were.

“Just tell me when you’re about to depart. You can leave your truck for my use.”

At that moment, Lark came back outside carrying a glass of tea in each hand. Jennings grinned, but Julius concealed his interest in her a bit more. Only the corner of his mouth quirked up.

“I brought you both some tea.” She handed each a glass and looked between the brothers, oblivious that they were both eyeing her up in a very obvious way. At least it was obvious to Clay.

Then again, he was more attached to her, right? Meaning he’d known her longer. Hell, he knew her when she cuddled stuffed animals, though he didn’t doubt she still would if he put one in her hands.

Jennings took a sip and drank it all in one endless swallow. When he lowered the glass, he let out a refreshed gasp. “Almost as good as Momma’s.”

She beamed. “Seeing as your momma’s from the South, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Clay all but rolled his eyes at the exchange.

With a grin, Jennings passed the glass to Lark. Then he slapped Clay on the shoulder as he passed him on the way to Clay’s truck. “Any woman who makes tea that good’s a keeper, man. You ready, Julius? It’s time to get this bomb on the road.”

* * * * *

As Lark watched the bomb being driven away by the Abel brothers, she felt a huge wave of relief sweep through her. It crested and washed through her system, leaving her feeling... cleansed.

Clay, standing beside her, remained as stoic as a cop in a mob.

She pushed out a deep sigh. “That was the heaviest burden I’ve carried in my whole life! And that’s saying something after Andrew joined up, then Mom died and I spent months in that group home.”

“Jesus, Lark. I’m sorry all that happened to you.”

Clay's voice pulled her attention around to him. He stood next to her looking like an avenging cowboy angel. If only he had a set of wings, he would definitely fit the role of one of those childhood images of angels of light and mercy that came to the rescue of children.

She gave a light wag of her head to dispel the thought. "I don't say these things to bring on your sympathy, silly. It's just part of my life, so I talk about it."

"I know." His lips twitched at the corner. "You don't hold back from anything, do you?"

"There are a few things..." She raked her gaze over his body, from the top of his hat to the boots on his feet. Every line of his muscled body in between left her feeling more than a little hot and sticky despite the cool breeze teasing the curls on her temples.

"You need to stop looking at me that way." His throat worked on a swallow.

"What way, Clay?"

"I have no business in your thoughts."

"Even if those thoughts were already in the gutter?"

He groaned. "Even worse. I also have no business in your bed."

"Who said anything about a bed?" She reached for the hem of her top and tore it off to reveal her bra.

Clay staggered back a step. Where was that stoic man now?

"Lark."

"You can't warn me away from you, Clay Lexis. I know you want me too."

He closed his eyes and then reopened them. "How do you know?"

In one hasty step, she pressed herself up against him, compressing the bulge at the front of his jeans between their bodies. "I just *know*."

He let out a guttural rumble.

Hooking her hand around his nape, she went on tiptoe and let her lips hover inches from his. The scent of him...the feel of him...*did* it for her.

“The guys are gone,” she rasped, leaning closer. “The bomb’s gone too.”

“Yes, but Lark, this isn’t a good id—”

She rocked her body against his erection again, watching his features shudder with desire.

“I’ve had a stressful few days, Clay.”

“You’re not seriously going to try *that* on me, are you?”

“Uh-huh.” She inched closer until her lips were so close that a breeze could rock her into him and they’d be kissing.

“Lark.”

“I figured you’d want to know that I’m also not wearing any panties. Couldn’t find a pair that fit.”

With that, she dropped to her flat feet and stepped away from him. She made it halfway to the cabin before she felt a whoosh of air strike her from behind as Clay rushed at her.

He locked his hands on her waist, just beneath her ribs, pulling a gasp from her. He whipped her into his arms and bent her backward, mouth crashing down on hers.

Oh, those lips. So hard and firm. He didn’t smile often, but she liked putting one on his handsome face.

And she *loved* making him lose control for her.

Their tongues tangled in a primitive dance. They shared a wild moan. Her nipples peaked. Her pussy flooded.

A dark web of need spread through her, trapping her against her lover.

When he swung her off her feet and carried her into the house, he never broke the kiss.

As soon as they made it over the threshold, he unbound one arm from her waist to shut and lock the door even as she

plunged her hands beneath his shirt.

She ran her palms over his chest. “God, your skin is like warm velvet. All these muscles.”

He tore off his hat and tossed it aside. Lark didn’t hesitate to whip his shirt off. As they faced each other, half undressed, his eyes hooded with desire.

His chest heaved, and he closed the gap between them again, whirling her to pin her against the door. A throaty moan escaped her, and he went straight for her neck, sucking on her pulse point and trailing kisses down to the breasts spilling from her bra.

“I fucking love this thing.” He hooked a finger into one cup and tugged it low enough to swipe his tongue over her nipple.

She dug her fingers into his scalp. “I fucking love your tongue!”

“Naughty words.”

“I’m no innocent.”

He licked her nipple again. “Yeah?”

Her lungs wouldn’t fill with enough air as his beard scraped her sensitive skin. “Yeahhh.”

He raised his head and pierced her in his stare. “Prove it.”

Dark tendrils of heat worked low through her belly and gripped her between the thighs.

Her knees folded, and she dropped to the floor. A quick “Christ!” burned from his lips, but Lark was already working open his jeans, reaching inside his black briefs and pulling out his thick, hard cock.

Everything about Clay Lexis was gorgeous, and that included his cock. Veins snaked up the length and the mushroomed head reddened as it filled with more blood.

Darting a glance up at him, she made a show of running her tongue across her lips.

He didn't speak but locked his jaw enough that she saw the tendon jump in the crease.

Twining her hands behind her back, she arched her neck, bringing her lips very close to the tip of his erection. But she didn't snake out her tongue to taste that precum glistening there.

And she kept her hands locked behind her so she couldn't give him the gratification of touch either.

She brought her lips even closer and expelled the air in her lungs. The breath washing over the head made him groan out.

Her pussy throbbed for some teasing of her own, but one thing this man didn't know about her yet was just how patient she could be when the situation called for it.

She moved her mouth around the head, to the left side of his cock. Bathing it with hot air, she turned her eyes up to him again.

His gaze darkened on hers.

"I want to take this beautiful cock in my mouth. But I don't know where to start."

"Fuck!"

A thrill hit her belly, and her pussy squeezed. She was getting to him. But how long would he allow that before he took control? Clay was an alpha through and through.

"Maybe on this side." She moved her mouth back to the tip, panting on him heavily before shifting to the right. "Mmm, I bet you taste good, lover. And you want to be buried deep in my throat."

"Lark." His throat clicked.

Angling her head, she went to heat his length from underneath, moving from his balls, that were tucked up tight to his body, all the way to the tip again.

Two hands landed on her scalp and long fingers twisted in her hair. "Open your mouth, Lark."

She flicked her eyes up at him. “Like this?” And stuck out her tongue.

“Fuck, who taught you to be a tease and an innocent at the same time? You’re driving me fucking crazy. Now open your mouth and take me like a good girl.”

Shudders of pleasure and need blasted up and down her spine. She barely kept her hands locked behind her—she wanted to reach for that impressive length and pump it as he fed it past her lips.

But she let him take a little control and obeyed his command to open for him.

When the warm steel of his cock glided over her tongue, she released a moan.

Chapter Ten

Clay's muscles strained. He felt the cords on his forearms bulge to the point of snapping as he dug his fingers into Lark's soft curls. Every single inch of his cock he slid into her scorching, *naughty* mouth stole his goddamn mind.

Watching her take him, her plump lips wrapping around the base, made his blood pound. Widening his stance shifted the angle and he slipped even deeper into her throat.

He felt his cock skate along her palate before settling at the back of her throat.

And the woman swallowed.

She fucking swallowed around him.

"Hell!" He couldn't stop the rock of his hips or the urge to bury himself deeper in her sweet, hot mouth and never face reality again.

She started drawing on him in sucking pulls, working her lips at the base. He was big and there was no way she could take all— "Aghhh!"

She sucked him into her throat and held him there, not breathing, wide eyes fixed on his face.

Unable to move a muscle or even draw air, he stared down at her, stamping the vision on his mind so he could revisit it later after all this was over and they went their separate ways.

He rocked his hips back and dragged his cock along her tongue.

She lapped the head.

A guttural growl rumbled in his chest. He intended to stop this torture, pick her up and take her hard and rough against that door. But then she unlocked her hands from behind her back and wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock. The other, she used to cup his balls.

“Fuck!” His eyes rolled back in his head as she took him again, deep, pumping his length, jacking him until his toes curled in his boots.

“Lark.” He gripped her by the upper arms and pulled her to her feet, yanking her against his body. “Enough of your torment, woman.”

Her sexy smile cost him half his brain cells. “You taste yummy.”

A low groan burst from him and silenced when he slammed his mouth over hers.

With a whimper, she looped her arms around his neck. Her soft curves molded to him and made him think of a thousand other dirty ways to take her.

As he plundered her sweet mouth, he began to strip her with concise moves.

He didn’t think she was even aware that he was taking off her clothes until he broke the kiss.

He dropped to his knees in front of her.

A small gasp escaped her.

Running his hands down her curvy sides, over full hips and thighs all the way to her ankles, he ordered, “Step out of your pants.”

She shuddered. Balancing on one foot, she allowed him to remove those constricting pants off one foot and then the other. When she was stripped bare, he closed his fingers on her hips.

Their gazes connected for three long heartbeats.

In one swift move, he stood and pinned her against the door.

“Clay!”

He captured her mouth. The way she kissed him back felt like she latched on to his libido and refused to let go.

“Condom,” he roughed out.

“Still on top of the...” she panted, “dresser.”

“Fucking hell, I wanted you against this door, but I’ll settle for bent over the bed.” With a hand on her bottom, he gave her a small nudge toward the hallway.

She took a step and paused to glance at him.

“Go on, sweet thing.”

She still hesitated. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll be one step behind you, looking at your luscious ass and thinking of all the forbidden things I want to do to it.”

“Oh god!”

“Walk.” He jabbed a finger toward the bedroom.

Lark took one step, then another. He fell in behind her, his gaze locked on her ass just as promised. Occasionally, she’d falter and pause, as if the need inside her was too strong to go on.

Eventually, she made it to the bedroom door.

Stopping dead, she spun to face him. He didn’t even pause when he grabbed her and kissed her. Somehow, they made it to the bed. He tossed her down and dived between her thighs.

Fingers dug into his skull even as Lark parted her thighs to give him total access to her pussy.

With a snarl, he thrust two fingers inside her, tunneling deep. He latched onto her hard clit and sucked in soft pulls as he drew his fingers free and slammed them home again.

In seconds, she flooded his hand. Two more licks had her hips bucking off the bed.

She was so needy, so fucking beautiful. Making her come would be his new personal goal in life. To hell with Sentry. At

this moment, all that mattered in the world was making Lark scream his name.

Her stomach dipped. Her hips rocked to meet his finger thrusts and fuck her clit against his tongue.

“Come,” he urged her. “Come, sweet thing.”

She froze. Fingers stilling on his scalp, she dragged in a big breath and held it.

Her body gripped his fingers, and her hard nubbin seemed to quiver on his tongue. With one final swipe, he took her over the edge.

She screamed his name, bucked and rocked over and over as her release pounded through her.

The instant her pulsations stopped, he pushed off the bed. In two strides, he reached the dresser and snatched up a condom. More junk from her emptied purse hit the floor, but he ignored it and unwrapped the condom as he returned to her.

Lying on her back, she had one arm flung over her head and one across her chest. As he watched, she toyed with one nipple, brushing it into a stiff peak that made getting that condom on happen a hell of a lot faster.

He settled a knee on the mattress. “Spread your legs.”

A soft moan spilled from her lips. She slowly let her knees part.

“Farther. I want you wide when I enter you.”

Her eyes blazed. That fingertip gave her nipple a lazy flick.

He climbed up the bed to her. Grasping her by the inner thighs, he pushed them apart.

Her pussy glistened with her release. Hell, he wanted *one more* taste before he buried himself inside her and let her steal his last breath.

Dipping his tongue to her folds, he licked from bottom to top, gathering her juices. Her thighs clamped around his ears.

He drew his tongue free. “Wide,” he ordered.

“Oh god!” A pleased shiver ripped through her as she did what he wanted.

When she was splayed, he lowered his body over hers. “You make me so hard. Your lips drive me insane. Your eyes...Christ, I can’t even look into them without wanting to take you.”

“Yes! Clay...I need you inside me.” She reached for him. With one hand hooked around his nape and the other locked on his hip, she drew him down.

In one smooth glide, he filled her to the hilt. Her pussy walls closed on him, milking his length.

They shared a rough keen of passion and started to move. At first, he managed to hold back and give her time to adjust to his size, but after half a dozen jerks of his hips, he couldn’t find the willpower.

He slammed home. She angled her hips and took him. Bodies moving in tandem, Clay’s brain did something it rarely did—if ever — but never with a woman.

It disconnected. He just...felt.

He nibbled and sucked her lips while plunging deep into her tight cavern. The slap of their bodies only heightened the burn for her. Gripping her knee, he drew it up and back, opening her up to receive another inch.

“Ohhhhh!” A shudder rolled through her. She dug her nails into his ass and dragged him down faster, harder. They galloped toward a final end that made him wonder if he’d ever experienced a release this large—right before it erupted.

Jet after jet of hot cum spurted from his cock. A small squeak left Lark, and then she began coming a second time. Liquid heat drenched his cock. They shared a harsh moan. He collapsed and took her lips for his own again and kissed her until she gasped for air.

Long minutes later, his brain rejoined his physical being. He realized Lark was stroking his spine in small swaths.

Goosebumps rolled up his spine.

After a few more minutes, he went to the bathroom. When he returned, she was lying on her side, gaze trained on the bathroom door.

As soon as she saw him, a sultry smile brightened her face. In the cutest move ever, she buried her face into the blanket to hide.

He climbed in next to her and slipped his arms around her. “Don’t hide that smile. It’s exactly what I want to see.”

Her head popped up and she met his stare. Her beauty punched him in the solar plexus.

Brushing the pad of his thumb over her lips, he drank her in. “I’m clueless how I got here.”

“Do you mean lying in bed with me instead of being out fighting for justice?”

He gave her a single nod.

She lowered her gaze to his chest and a long beat passed between them. “Maybe I’m just too irresistible for you. Have you considered that?”

He issued a breath of a laugh through his nose. Her words made tenderness seep through his pores and filter through his veins. Running his hand down her spine to her round ass, he said hoarsely, “I always have control.”

“Except when it comes to me.”

“Always,” he repeated with more confidence.

“Except when it comes to me.”

“I shouldn’t be touching you at all.”

Her eyes narrowed, green sparks shooting from the depths. “Try to stop then. Go on.” She all but dared him, not only with her words but her curvy body and that just-been-fucked messy hair.

“I suppose the post-sex cuddling is just part of your duty,” she went on.

Her words tripped him up. Actually...she had him there. He wasn't a cuddler. In fact, he typically left right after they crossed the finish line.

So why was he still lying here with a woman far too young for him? She needed his protection, not his cock.

"You should sleep if you can." His voice came out gruff.

Her brows pinched. "I'm not tired. Why would I want to sleep?"

"In a situation like this, you never know when you'll be on the run again. That could be in an hour or six days. But it's far more difficult to be in that situation if you aren't sleeping when you can."

"But—"

He cupped her head, threading his fingers into her curls. Then he guided her head down to his chest.

She didn't even fight him. Her cheek pillowed on his pec, and she let out a happy sigh.

That sound caused a small spark to spread through his chest. Dammit. The question weighing on his mind wasn't manning the Sentry team, or finding out who placed that bomb in East Canon or had stopped the bomb unit from reaching them.

No, it was much, much worse.

What was he going to do with this woman nestling against his heart?

* * * * *

Lark had never been a good sleeper. When her mom was alive, she told Lark what a restless infant she'd been. As a young child, many nights Lark would wake and climb in bed with Andrew.

In college, every little noise kept her from drifting off and when she actually did, she would wake if her roommate so much as rolled over in bed. Sleeping above the auto garage, she was disturbed early by the bumps and thumps of men

repairing vehicles, calling out to each other and motors firing up.

So waking in a strange cabin in the middle of nowhere after a full night's sleep was a shocking experience.

Lark whistled as she moved through the bedroom, locating a set of clean clothes in the drawers filled with options. She pulled out a pair of shorts and held them up to her body.

Was it even warm outside? In Colorado, the weather could go from a hot summer's day to snowing by nightfall. She'd just have to take her chances because most of the clothes available were far too oversized on her short frame.

With the shorts in hand, she plucked a simple gray sweatshirt off the men's pile without even glancing at the size. Man, she loved having the kind of energy sleep and comfort provided.

"If I got such fantastic rest every day, imagine the things I could get done," she said to herself as she closed herself in the bathroom.

In minutes she was showered, dressed and had her teeth brushed. Then she went into the bedroom again to tidy up. Starting with the contents of her purse dumped all over the top of the dresser, and the floor too, she scooped items up and dropped them into the cloth bag.

She grabbed her phone and turned on a music playlist as she sorted through the items. Humming to a song turned to whistling. Then her very favorite song came on, and there was no way to hold back.

Heavy metal music wasn't for everybody, and she didn't listen to it exclusively either. But the hardcore vocals and lyrics had gotten her through more than one tough moment.

She started singing in the guttural tones that she'd practiced perfecting. The vocalist was female too, so Lark hit every note. Opening her mouth wide, she reached the scream she loved best.

The bedroom door flung open, banging off the inner wall. Lark cut off her scream—well, mid-scream.

Clay jerked his head, scanning the room and landing on her standing near the dresser. “What—”

She offered him a smile. “I’m just getting ready for the day.”

“You were screaming.”

“I was singing.”

“Screaming.”

“I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, you did!” His grumpy tone sounded as gravelly as the voice coming from her phone’s speaker.

Quickly, she stopped the playlist and settled a hand on her hip, swinging to face her big, tough protector.

“Aww. Now that I see the lines of worry creasing your eyes and bracketing your hard mouth, I do feel kind of bad.”

Twin furrows deepened between his brows. “I do not have lines.”

“Do too.”

He cut a hand through the air as if finished with the topic of his worry lines. “Lark.” He drew in a deep breath and let it out very slowly. “What in the world are you listening to?”

She uncapped the lip gloss she’d set aside and applied it to her bottom lip. Clay’s gaze shot to her mouth. She rubbed her lips together, which seemed to break his stare on her.

“It’s one of my favorite songs.”

“You can’t be serious, Lark. You listen to death metal?”

“Sometimes. You have a problem with my music preferences?”

“When I hear you screaming and think someone is gutting you with a paperclip, yes—I do.”

His words sank in hard and fast, leaving her feeling a bit dizzy.

“Hell.” In one step, he grabbed her by the upper arms and guided her to the bed. Easing her down, he studied her face. “You’re pale as hell now. I should never have said the gutting thing. But dammit, I thought you were *hurt*, Lark.”

The pure pain echoing in his tone snapped her out of the shock of realizing—finally—that she really, really was in danger.

She hunched forward and scrubbed her palms over her face. “I don’t know why I didn’t fully get it all before. That I really could be hurt. Or gutted with a paperclip.”

“Forget I said that.”

She shook her head, and a curl drooped over her forehead. “It’s true, though. I wasn’t the original target, but now I am. Someone ransacked my apartment. They’re coming after *me*.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt you.” He reached out, and using a callused fingertip, guided the curl off her forehead. It fell right back down, but he tried again.

After the third time, he realized it wouldn’t stay. He sank to the mattress next to her...and pulled her into his lap.

Oh god, he felt so good. Strong arms enveloped her, and his manly scent drew her closer. Leaning in, she gave his neck a light sniff.

“Are you...smelling me?”

“Uh-huh. You smell really good.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re the most confusing woman?”

“Andrew. Although he calls me a confusing kid.”

“You’re definitely not a kid.” Clay’s admission sent a shiver through her core. Heat surged right behind it, which made her pussy clench.

He pinned a hand on her hip. “Stop squirming.”

“Like this?” She rolled her ass against his groin.

Suddenly, she was tossed off his lap. She hit the bed flat on her back with her wrists pinned to her sides and a set of warm brown eyes blazing down into hers.

“You’re playing with fire.”

“Pretty sure you already set one inside me. Why don’t you put it out, Lexis?”

His eyelids slammed over his eyes, cutting her off from what he was thinking. The way his jaw locked and a pulse hammered in his neck proved that she got to him. A lot.

When he opened his eyes, the depths glittered with a warning that turned her on even more.

Lowering his mouth until it was an inch away from hers, he gritted, “I would love nothing more than to keep you in this bed coming for me all day long. But we are leaving as soon as you’re ready.”

She blinked, shuddering with anticipation at the first part of his statement and thinking harder about the second. “Where are we going?”

“I thought of something while you were still asleep. I’ll fill you in once we’re in the truck.”

Her brows shot up. “We’re really leaving?” The cabin wasn’t anything special. Hell, it didn’t even have food. But it was the first place she’d felt safe in her entire life.

Clay released his grip on her wrists and pushed upright. “As soon as you’re ready.” He glanced over her body as if noticing her for the first time. “Christ, Lark, what are you wearing?”

As she stood, the sweatshirt sagged low over her breasts and exposed one shoulder. Clay’s stare latched on to the hint of skin before trailing downward and lingering around her thighs.

She tugged at the legs of the shorts. “I admit they’re a bit snug, but it’s all I could find that I wouldn’t have to roll up twelve times so they don’t drag on the floor.”

His chest heaved. “Fine.”

“Glad you approve.” With that, she skirted around him. She only made it two steps toward the dresser before a low rumble vibrated the air in the room.

“*Jesus*, Lark. Half your ass is hanging out.”

She twisted to look at her backside, which wasn't too easy. “Really? I do feel a little draft, and the shorts may be a little on the cheeky side.”

“There's no room for *may* be. Your ass cheeks are spilling out of those shorts.”

She gave them a small tug. “Better?”

“No, that is not better. Take them off.”

“Oh! I can do that.” In half a second she had them unbuttoned and shimmied down her hips.

“Oh. My. God. You're not wearing...”

“Underwear? I told you, there aren't any here that fit me.”

“Put them back on. You just can't leave the truck.”

“Not even to go into a restaurant? I'm starving.”

“We'll hit a drive-thru.” He watched her draw the shorts back into place and even after she fastened them, his stare lingered on her body. “Finish up, Lark. We have to get on the road.”

“I love when you take charge.”

“Not helping matters, Lark.”

She let her smile grow. “I say otherwise. Just let me put on my shoes and I'm ready.” She stuffed the mascara in her front pocket to apply later and looped the long handle of her bag over her shoulder.

With a shake of his head, Clay strode out. After he cleared the doorframe, he poked his head back into the room. “No more music.”

“We'll see.” She purposely turned her back to him, exposing her ass in the tiny shorts...and was rewarded with

the sound of a low groan.

Chapter Eleven

Watching a woman apply makeup had never interested Clay at all. But watching Lark do it? Was mesmerizing.

She leaned close to the truck mirror, brushing liquid over her lashes with slow, even strokes that wasn't sexual in any way but had his balls tightening.

And she made cute faces.

“Do you have to do that right now?”

She twisted her head, lips still frozen in an oval that only made his pulse pound harder. “Yes, I do. Honestly, are you sure you don't get off on authority? Because you're sounding a lot like my dad right—”

He threw up a hand. “Stop! Don't say it. Ever.”

“I didn't say you *are*, Clay. Only pointing out that first you tell me I can't listen to the music I like—”

“Because you screamed.”

“Like I was being gutted by a paperclip.” She bobbed her head in a cheerful way.

The woman was driving him insane. Hell, she was insane. Or the most unpredictable and eccentric human being the world had ever seen.

Also wearing the tiniest shorts he'd ever set eyes on, and he'd seen a lot of prostitutes on the streets as a beat cop in Denver before settling into Stone Pass, Montana.

He twisted his stare away from her. At least her top covered what the shorts lacked.

She screwed the lid of the mascara on and dropped it into her Bug-Out-Purse. “Are you gonna tell me where we’re going now?”

“In time.”

“That wasn’t the bargain. You said when we got on the road.”

“I don’t bargain.”

“Sure you do. You let me keep the shorts on.”

He issued a slow sigh. “That was the better option.”

Driving these roads brought back a lot of memories of weekend camping trips. He was pretty sure Lark’s brother had joined him and his friends on a couple of those mountain getaways.

She distracted him from the road by crossing her legs in that sexy fashion. “What’s holding you back, Clay? Why won’t you share the reason for leaving the cabin? Not that I’m sad, exactly. I mean, it *was* our first love nest, but it wasn’t well stocked.”

“Hold up. Love nest?” He swung his head to look at her.

When she nodded, the light caught on a pair of gold hoop earrings she’d stuck in her cute little earlobes.

God, now *he* was insane. By the time this was all over, he wouldn’t be leading Sentry—he’d be staring out a window in a nice, snug straitjacket.

A laugh bubbled in his gut, but he refrained from releasing it. “All right, I’ll tell you. It has to do with the church bomber I met with the other night.”

It seemed like a month ago, but mere days had passed.

“How did you meet up with a guy like that in the first place?” she asked.

“It’s my job to dig these assholes out of their caves and stop them before they hurt people.”

She wrapped her arms around her middle. “I don’t like the thought of you doing that.”

“Well, I don’t like the thought of you driving to strange houses and picking up bombs.”

They stared at each other for a long beat.

Finally, Clay redirected his attention to the road. “I met him in an online forum. One of the posts he made sparked a memory for me.”

“Okay, what was it?” Her usual bubbly tone transformed to one he hadn’t heard yet from her—it was quiet and serious.

“It was some code. I managed to break it, which was how I found the guy. And stopped him. But anybody who can crack the code can gain access to him.”

“Like the guy who wanted the bomb delivered.”

Clay nodded. “It might be totally unrelated, or it might be connected. But it seems like I’m alone in this game, so it’s up to me to do the digging.”

“So what’s the plan?”

He glanced over her smooth, sexy legs. Now that he knew how sensitive her inner thighs were when he touched them, he wanted to reach across the console and trail his fingertips upward.

But she meant the other plan. The one that included duty, not dragging his tongue through her slick, juicy, delicious folds.

He straightened in his seat and focused on that plan. “I haven’t actually formed a plan yet. I need to get to civilization and access a private hotspot so I can fly under the radar.”

“Ooh, I can help with that.”

He shot her a look. “What do you know about the dark web?”

“Honestly? Nothing. But I’ve read some articles and I even wrote a few on the topic in college.”

They drove another few minutes in silence. At last, he said, “What do you actually want out of life, Lark?”

When she cocked her head in contemplation, she wore a very serious expression that twisted up all he knew about her thus far. She may be funny and unpredictable—that screamo song from this morning was proof enough of that—but she had another hidden layer he was just now peeling back to expose.

Something about that made him believe she was showing him an incredibly private side of herself, more vulnerable than even when she spoke of—or didn’t speak of—that awful group home experience.

“I want to write the truth. Not altered through personal agendas or political sides, just pure facts, the way it used to be. Talk to people. Get their side of the truth. Talk to more people and collect their data. Then write it exactly as they told it to me and let the reader draw their own conclusions.”

“I see.”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “What do you see, Clay?”

“That you don’t like being lied to. You don’t want smoke blown up your ass or to be given false hope.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. For a horrible moment, he thought she might break down crying. But she straightened her shoulders. “You’re right. Just about the only person who’s never lied to my face is Andrew. But he’s not here.”

“I’m here now. And I won’t lie to you, Lark. I’ll always tell it like it is.”

“So you’ll tell me if what you’re going to do is dangerous.”

Unprepared for that question, he compressed his lips. “It won’t come with a high level of danger.”

“But you don’t only plan on investigating, do you, Clay? You’re going to try to meet with someone who could be a potential threat.”

“That’s true. But I won’t bring you into it with me.”

His mind shifted to the forum posts. One word kept popping up in his mind. Something about light. While the word had no connection yet to the bomb that Lark picked up, it tripped all the alarms he'd built into his psyche over the years. His gut was telling him that word could bring in a hell of a lot more people who believed they were doing good deeds...“lighting” the world by ridding it of what they believed to be evil.

That bomb Lark picked up wasn't supposed to detonate and instantly kill people. If he had to guess, he'd say it was supposed to make some rounds. Change hands a bit. Until it reached a larger group of people.

Which was why the bomb unit was prevented from ever reaching it.

He might not have everything worked out yet, but he did require a solid plan for what to do about Lark. In the event that he was called to meet someone he made contact with, he needed to ensure she was safe and had an armed guard.

His phone buzzed, pulling him out of his mind. He grabbed it out of the cupholder and brought it up.

“Julius. What's up?”

“Hoping you haven't fucked up my truck yet.”

“The day's still young.” He grinned. “I can say the same about you driving my truck.”

Julius made a scoffing noise. “I've been driving mini-bikes since I was four. I can drive this truck backward, blindfolded, with one arm.”

Lark giggled.

“What do you say you don't try that?” Clay asked. “What's up?”

“Got some intel about that name you gave me.”

He meant blackwillow73.

“What about him?”

“He was being transferred to the prison. Someone hijacked the transport...and broke him out.”

* * * * *

Lark couldn't tear her gaze off Clay. As a man, he was impressive. As a man in action? He was glorious.

Fire and fury took turns rampaging over his rugged features. Every muscle was primed for battle. She had no doubt in her mind that if crossed, this man was deadly.

And that was both sexy and scary.

The instant Julius shared what happened with the prisoner, Clay stomped on the gas. Lawdy, the man could drive too. The momentum pinned Lark against the back of her seat. As he maneuvered on and off interstates and wove in and out of traffic at top speed, she experienced the adrenaline rush he had to be feeling too.

She never expected adrenaline would leave her horny. She'd heard all the stories about men fighting and fucking, but learning it firsthand was new to her.

From the corner of her eye, she sliced a look at him—particularly his crotch. Was he as hard as she was wet?

Clay was occupied keeping the vehicle on the road while making call after call, which he put on speakerphone. That he trusted her enough to let her listen in meant *so much* to her. When had she ever been granted that type of trust without working her butt off for it?

First, he spoke to an FBI agent called Livingston. He provided the route the prisoner was taken on, as well as the location where the transport vehicle had been hijacked.

“How'd they do it?” Clay's voice rang with command. If he knew that his tone raised goosebumps on Lark's arms and made her nipples pebble, he might change how he sounded... and she didn't want that.

“You haven't seen the news?” Livingston asked.

Livingston's gravelly voice filtered through the truck speakers. A man with a voice like that could definitely bring a woman to her knees, which had her wondering if his looks matched that sinner's voice.

"Hell no. I'm guarding Lark."

"Lark, the woman who picked up the bomb?"

"Yes. We've been hiding out in a backwoods safehouse. The only news I've had is from you and the Abel brothers."

"I forgot WEST was sending backup." Livingston paused a beat before laying out the details of what happened. "Two vans pursued the transport. One cut in front while the other hit the corner from the rear, sending the transport into a spin on the wet road. It skidded into some guardrails—took out about eight of the sons o' bitches. Then it flipped onto its side and came to a stop. The driver reported that in seconds the transport was surrounded by armed men wearing masks. They forced the door open with—get this—explosives used by military personnel."

"Then they took blackwillow⁷³ and ran," Clay concluded. His lips flattened into a line that pulled tight over his teeth. "Find us a safe place to go, Livingston. You owe me for setting me up in Sentry *knowing* I didn't even have a team. And you owe me for stranding me with that fucking bomb."

"Sorry about that." He sounded anything but sorry, which made Lark think men like Clay, Livingston, Julius and Jennings were all built of the stuff people like her only got a chance to read about.

Or *write* about.

Her mental wheels were revolving so fast that verbs tripped over nouns in her mind. She took out her phone and started frantically typing it all into a note. Clay didn't seem to notice what she was doing, and if he did, he didn't stop her.

As he and Livingston discussed the best place for them to hide, Lark divided her attention between their call and her notes. What she wouldn't give to write a piece on who was behind the bomb and how they'd managed to not only stop a

bomb unit from reaching them but broke a prisoner out of a transport van.

When the vehicle stopped, she looked up from her phone to find that Clay had thrown the truck in park and was staring at her.

“What are you texting, Lark?”

She swiped her thumb over the screen to close the note app. “Just my grocery list.”

His eyes narrowed. “Hand me your phone.”

She tucked the device between her thighs. “No.”

“You were taking notes on my conversation with Livingston.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Lark.” He ground out her name with a warning in his voice.

“I’m not giving you my phone.”

“You’re going to hand it to me.”

She tipped her chin up a little. “You’re going to have to take it from me.”

His stare dropped to her thighs pinched tightly together with only a sliver of the yellow phone case visible between them.

Clay issued a noise that sounded like a growl and rumbled into a bad word. “You’re not making this easy on me, doll.”

Need spiked in her core. “I love it when you call me pet names.”

“You’re not going to love it when I turn you over my knee and you feel my palm against your bare ass.”

She shivered. “Oh, yes, I am. Never underestimate your effect on me, Clay Lexis. Now let me get this straight. If I refuse to give you my phone...you’re going to...spank me?” Her words ended on a rasp.

He closed his eyes and scrubbed a fingertip between his dark brows. His lips moved but no sound came out.

“Are you praying?”

“I’m counting.”

“You could use a little more patience. It seems necessary in your line of work.”

His eyes popped open and trained on her. She squeezed her thighs tighter.

When he held out a hand, palm up, she couldn’t help but envision the flat of it against her bare ass.

“Have you actually ever spanked a woman before?” she burst out.

His throat worked on a hard swallow. “Lark. Hand me your phone. Please,” he added.

Seeing that she wasn’t going to get out of this, she parted her thighs, aware that his gaze locked on the phone between them.

She plucked her phone out and placed it in his hand.

Long fingers curled around the device, spiking even more need inside her. “Thank you.” He thumbed the screen. “Give me your passcode.”

“0302. My mom’s birthday.”

His gaze flashed to hers. The depths darkened with shadows. “I’m sorry, Lark.”

She nodded. So many times over the years people acknowledged her loss, but she wasn’t a person who dwelled on the past. Having her mom’s birthday as her passcode was only a small tribute to the woman who gave her life without hovering over the fact her mom had made bad choices.

He pulled up the note app, and Lark held her breath. She was certain he’d take offense to a few of those—

He snapped his head up, reading, “Lexis doesn’t look like any vigilante of justice you’ve met. His stare alone strikes fear

into the hearts of the criminals he seeks out.” A question filled his voice as he read the words she’d typed.

“Uhh ... ”

He went on, “‘The cowboy hat he tugs low over his eyes is a signal to the corrupt and immoral to stop in their tracks and hand themselves over to the authorities.’ Is this how you see me? Are you frightened by me?”

“I’m not afraid of you. Did I sound scared when you told me you’d spank me?” She cocked her head, studying him.

He blew out a noisy sigh through his nostrils. He held her stare for a beat before skimming the rest of her notes. Then he handed her the phone.

Shocked, she didn’t immediately reach for it. Tentatively, she took the device from his hand, letting her fingertips run over the small pebbles of callus at the base of his fingers.

Before she pulled her hand away, he closed his fingers around hers, phone and all. Her gaze flew to his.

“You should be more cautious,” he said.

“Of you or what I write?”

“Both.”

Extending her index finger, she stroked it over his thumb. The simple brush of flesh against flesh shouldn’t create a rush of lust in her, but her pussy squeezed.

“I’ll never be afraid of you, Clay. You’ll never hurt me.”

He didn’t shift his stare from hers when he ground out, “You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

She sensed a story there—one she would *never* write down. Before she could ask, he dropped his hand from hers and opened the truck door.

She looked out the windshield, for the first time noticing not only had they stopped but were parked in front of a bungalow. The deep blue color lent the place a charming air that she didn’t see back in East Canon.

“Where are we?”

“Our safehouse. Weren’t you listening when Livingston said it was on a lake?”

Her jaw dropped as she realized not only was the bungalow nestled in a sun-dappled wooded lot but beyond the structure, she caught glimpses of water between tree branches.

She hopped out of the truck so fast that she almost fell over, but she landed on the rubber soles of her high-top sneakers.

Clay was at her door, taking her by the elbow to steady her before she fully straightened. “You should be more careful.”

“You should stop telling people what to do.” She ducked under his arm—an easy feat when she was so much shorter than he was—and took off for the bungalow.

What she wanted to see was the lake. Colorado had over four thousand lakes and reservoirs, and Lark hadn’t seen nearly enough of them. She walked quickly, not caring if Clay followed but knowing he wouldn’t let her out of his sight.

When she stepped out of the trees onto a sandy shore and looked across the water with sun dancing on it like jewels, she sucked in a breath.

“From this minute on, I’m going to make it my mission to see every body of water in the state.” She wrapped her arms around her middle and issued a happy sigh.

Clay swung his stare from her to the lake and back again. “I’ve never heard a goal so wonderful.”

A smile stretched over her lips. “It would be even better to have a sidekick. Don’t you think?” She turned her head to find him staring.

He gave a jerky nod. “I do. Now are you finished out here? I need to get to work.”

“Do you promise to let me come out here again? I’d like to sit and watch the sun set.”

His stare cut over her hair and face, his eyes softening. “We can make that happen. But right now, I’ve got to find some criminals.”

Her sneakers sank lightly into the damp earth as she stepped up to him and looped her arm through his.

Chapter Twelve

Clay's eyes stung from staring at a screen so long. He dug his thumb and forefinger into them until stars of light sparked behind his lids.

An arm banded around his chest and he felt the tiny point of a chin dig into his shoulder. The scent of Lark's shampoo filled his nose.

"Why don't you take a break? You've been looking up information on this guy for hours."

He lowered his hand, covering Lark's forearm where it crossed his chest. "He's out there on the loose. A threat to all those people he wanted to hurt when I stopped him the first time."

She made a humming noise that grounded him in the present. Right here, right now, with Lark's arm around him and her sweet-smelling shampoo flooding his senses, he couldn't remember a time he felt so supported.

Comforted.

God, that felt good. Amazing, even. Touching her curvy body and making her scream was one thing, but this?

It was everything.

"Well, did you find him?" she asked.

When he nodded, his cheek rubbed against hers. The harsh scrape of his beard on her sensitive skin made him think of rubbing it on other parts of her body. Parts that would grow pink, then red if he were rough enough.

"Where is he?"

“I’m not sure of an exact location, but he’s been on the forum under the alternate name he uses and doesn’t think anybody knows about.”

“But you do?”

“Yes. I discovered that he’s been using darkstar76 almost as often as he logs in as blackwillow73.”

She made another soft noise of understanding. “What do the numbers stand for? Any idea?”

“My guess is, like your phone passcode, those numbers have some tie to him.”

“The dates his parents were born?”

She was damn sharp. “Very possible.” Now that he thought about it further, the theory made sense.

He grabbed his phone and shot a text to Livingston to look into the intel and then set his phone aside.

Lark straightened. Her arm lifted from his chest, but she dragged the flat of her hand slowly across his pecs. The move was probably just meant as affection, but it had Clay’s cock pounding with blood.

She circled to stand beside the desk chair he sat in and when she leaned in to peer at the laptop screen, her curls tumbled over her shoulder. “Wait—*this* is the guy who plotted to bomb a church? Then escaped from the prison transport?”

She pointed at the kid.

Clay nodded. “He’s a dweeb, I know. But you can’t look at these guys on social media and think they’re harmless. Let me show you something.” He clicked a few buttons and a guy’s profile photo came into view. “What do you think about this guy?”

“I’m pretty sure he played clarinet in his high school marching band.”

He nodded. “He walked into a grocery store with a rifle and mowed down ten people.”

Lark jerked her head to look at Clay, a gasp on her lips.

He nodded. “You can’t judge a book—or a criminal—by its cover.”

“I see. Bring up the other guy again. I want to look at his forum profile.”

Clay did so, torn between watching her scroll through the profile he’d studied for hours and gawking at the way she stood with one hip jutting to the side.

She brushed her finger over the touchpad on the laptop and brought up another photo. After scrolling for about thirty seconds, she stiffened.

He drew his attention from her round ass and centered on the screen. “Who is that?”

“It’s the guy who hired me to deliver the bomb.”

He jolted into a straighter position. “You’re kidding.”

She shook her head. In a few clicks she had five more windows open, and Clay was looking at a police website and a mugshot.

He leaned forward. “What the hell did you just do?”

“Another reverse image search.” She darted a glance at his face. “You don’t know this trick I used on that bomb too? You can drag a photo of anything into a search engine and find it. For example, I once saw a celebrity wearing these *adorable* shoes and I just had to find them.”

“Lark,” he cut in. “Less about shoes. More about criminals.”

“Oh. Right.” She waved a hand at the screen. “As you can see, the mugshot came right up. And he’s *wanted*.”

He scanned the list of charges. “For a hit-and-run.”

“See? He is a bad guy!”

“For a hit-and-run?”

“Property damage!”

He shifted his stare to her face, all lit up with excitement. So beautiful that his heart flexed.

It fucking *flexed*.

Emotions he had long ago locked in a box and denied ever belonged to *him* settled in his chest like a warm, tingly weight.

He'd lost the woman he wanted to marry to his best friend and vowed never again to give his heart. Now? He didn't think he could keep Lark from owning it.

His mind was flipping through all of this when she made another noise that brought his focus back to the screen.

She tapped a feminine finger on the glass. "We knew he didn't live at the place where I picked up the bomb. But are you seeing this?"

He peered at the address, not registering the street name or the block.

Lark cupped his jaw and swung his attention to her. "Don't you remember? It's the warehouse on Elk Street. The one that's abandoned? Where all the people went to drink and smoke dope back in the day?"

His mind connected the dots in a split second. He shoved his chair back, knocking Lark off-balance.

She planted a hand on his chest to steady herself as he reached out to hold her upright. With her face tipped up to his and those eyes blazing with the same expression she looked at him with when she was in the throes of bliss, he almost lost his mind.

Later. He'd kiss her later. Strip off her clothes and make love to her later.

She searched his eyes, and that was all it took to make him give in and stamp his mouth over hers.

He withdrew from the kiss before he let it get out of control. "You make an amazing investigator, doll. Thanks to you, we've got a place to look for the kid."

"I think I did more than give you a place to start looking."

He waited for what else she was about to drop on him.

Her smile was a little on the smug side. “I’m pretty sure I just added another person to the ranks of your team.”

His brow pinched. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Me. I’m joining Sentry.”

* * * * *

“No. Just no, Lark.”

She waved a hand at Clay’s forceful reaction to her statement. “We’ll discuss the particulars later. You know, pay, benefits. Vacation time. That’s important. Because, you know, my goal of seeing *all* the lakes.”

He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

She tapped him on the shoulder. “C’mon. You promised that we’d spend some time at the water.”

With a sigh, he pushed away from the desk. Lark bounced a little in excitement and took off to the door. On the way, she snagged a plaid throw blanket from the back of the sofa and draped it around her shoulders.

Before they stepped outside, Clay insisted on making sure the area was all clear. Only then did he lead her through the thin screen of trees separating the bungalow from the water.

The scent of nature always soothed her. Seeing the glint of the setting sun on the water filled her with more calm than she’d felt in a very long time.

At the edge of the trees, she tripped on a root and careened headfirst toward the shore. But two strong arms hauled her upright and steadied her.

Clay’s lips twisted into a smile.

“Stop laughing at me.”

“Laughing implies noise. I thought you were a word maven.”

“Really, Mr. Merriam-Webster? How do you account for silent laughter?” She gripped the blanket tighter under her chin.

Without bothering to answer, he sank to the ground, tugging her with him. Positioning her between his knees, he drew her into a seated position with her back molded to his chest.

Tiny sparks took flight in Lark's stomach. She loved being close to Clay like this. The connection between them... could he feel it too? It was so unexpected and beyond anything she'd experienced before.

In silence, they stared at the water. The irregular shape of the lake offered small coves cast in shadow and stretches of shore perfect for families to camp out for the day and enjoy the water. It was all so easy to envision — those smiling kids and parents enjoying precious time with their offspring — that for the first time in so long, Lark realized she'd been missing out on life.

“I always wanted trips to the lake when I was little.” Her voice came out small.

“Oh, Lark. You deserved all those moments. But now you can claim them for yourself.”

When she didn't respond, Clay brushed his knuckle beneath her chin. She automatically turned her head at his prompt and met his eyes.

Then he kissed her. With firm pressure that snapped her mind to another subject—him.

Twisting into his arms, she threw herself into kissing him back. The initial stroke of his tongue across hers pulled a moan from them both.

He dragged her down on the bank with him, rolling her so she fit perfectly against his body, with her pussy nestled against his bulging erection.

When he broke the kiss, his stare traveled over her hair to her eyes, to her mouth, and then worked back up to her hair. He brushed the curl off her forehead. “You make me lose my focus.”

She smiled. “You like it.”

Ducking his head, he attempted to hide the flash of white teeth when he grinned in response. “I do. You make me feel different.”

“So do you, Clay. With you, I feel...real.”

His attention narrowed on her until she felt they were the only two people on the lake. In the universe.

“Do you think right now, there’s another couple on the shore doing the same thing?” she let her fingers dance over the few silver strands of hair at his temple.

“I hope so, doll. But none of those women are going to be nearly as satisfied as mine.”

He slammed his mouth over hers. She threw her arms around him and hooked her legs behind his back to yank him down on top of her. He ground his cock into her pussy and she rocked into him as she kissed him breathless.

‘As satisfied as mine.’ MINE. He called me his woman.

While he stoked the fires inside her with his body and lips, she let the blanket drop from her shoulders and went for his shirt. Tearing it over his head provided one hell of a sight—he stretched his muscled shoulders and his biceps bulged when he hovered over her.

“I need your skin against mine!” She only had to utter the demand between kisses for him to tear her shirt off. Her shorts followed. When he ruffled his fingers through the curls between her thighs and found them damp with need, he let out a growl.

“I need to taste you,” he echoed her with his own sentiment before diving between her legs.

She lost her mind at the heated breath washing across her pulsating folds. He pressed her thighs up and back and settled his tongue on top of her clit.

Lark hissed in ecstasy and gulped down a cry when he applied pressure to her bundle of nerves. Delicious shudders of pleasure ran through her system. She lost track of any body part except the ones that her lover showered attention on.

He curled his tongue around and around, forcing small breaths from her lips. Her stomach dipped with each hitching cry he drove from her. Liquid heat squeezed from her folds.

“Fuck me with your tongue!” she begged.

A low rumble vibrated her sensitive skin as he snaked his tongue down her slit and slid it into her channel. She pounded a fist on the ground as extreme need blasted through her.

“Clay! I love your tongue. Your mouth. Your *cock!*”

He thrust his fingers inside her, stretching her while he tongued her clit. With each pump of his fingers, need shot her upward. She trembled on the edge for what felt like an hour but could have only been seconds.

Then her body gave an involuntary buck against his lips and hand and she came. Hard contractions hit. Juices flooded from her. Her vision dimmed and her mind blanked.

When she collapsed in a mass of boneless shivers, Clay had his jeans shoved down his hips and his condom-covered cock poised at her folds.

“Say you want me, Lark.” His words ground over her heightened senses.

“I want you so bad.”

“I fucking want you too.” In one hard thrust, he filled her.

She hooked her arms around his neck and yanked him into a kiss. Their mouths fused and the world vanished. Clay moved with her, inside her, and the world disappeared in a flood of sensation and emotion.

She was falling in love with him. She wanted to know all his secrets and dreams. She needed to know what held him back and propelled him forward.

She wanted to support him in everything he did, to love and care for him like she'd never cared for another human in her life.

Feeling as though every drag of his cock through her slick walls instilled more and more life in her, she clung to him. His

dirty talk transformed to incoherent grunts.

“Take my cum, doll. Take...every...fucking...drop!” He threw his head back on a roar of release that shot her overboard too. With one arm, he lifted her off the ground and pounded her through a shared orgasm that shattered them both.

When they slowed, and they could breathe again, their gazes locked...and she saw that more than their bodies had shattered.

Their walls had fallen.

Chapter Thirteen

Clay had been on a lot of stakeouts that ended in arrests being made. And he'd experienced his fair share of failed ones too. Some went south instantly and others were slow sinking ships.

One thing they all had in common was that his backup weighed more than a hundred and twenty pounds and knew how to shoot a gun if the situation called upon it.

Lark sat next to him in the truck, popping peanut M&Ms into her mouth. Though it was dark, he noted how she emptied a few into her palm and then selected certain colors. Red first, then orange, then yellow. The blue and brown she dumped back into the bag.

“What’s wrong with the other colors?” he asked after watching this phenomenon a few times.

She popped an orange one in her mouth. “Not my favorite. Do you always hand out snacks while you’re on stakeout?”

“No. You get special treatment.”

She wiggled in her seat. “Mmm. I like special treatment. Do I get more later?”

He slanted a smile at her. “If you listen to everything I tell you to do.”

She crunched another candy. “So, Livingston’s meeting us and bringing backup. I’m going to be locked in the truck while you guys storm the warehouse.”

“Something like that.” He wasn’t ready to tell her that she wasn’t going to be within a mile of the warehouse when the

raid went down. Livingston *was* bringing backup—to take Lark away.

The drive back to East Canon had taken no time at all, but it was enough time for Clay to formulate a plan to ensure she wasn't in the vicinity. Plus, the warehouse itself could be unstable if explosive materials were onsite, and that was entirely likely.

Clay and Livingston had one hell of a text thread going. They started with how an image search on the guy from Quick Bunny turned up what the FBI hadn't been able to and why they believed this to be an inside job. That morphed to how much backup Livingston could provide Clay, and ended with the man saying he just cleared his schedule and was on his way.

Deep in thought, Clay stroked his knuckles across his jaw. He'd known Quaide Livingston for a long time. Long enough to know when he was happy—and to know that he wasn't anymore.

He'd seen plenty of cops who lost the heart for their work. They soon switched to desk assignments and detective work that would take them off the beat. But that rarely helped revive their passion for the work.

How long had Livingston been with the FBI now? He didn't sign the papers to re-up with the Army at the same time Clay had passed on the opportunity. They struck out on separate journeys about the same time. That meant Quaide had been an FBI agent for a hell of a long time. The guy wasn't just burnt out—he'd been roasted over a fire, scorched to a crisp and then thrust into the coals one last time.

His realization about his friend had Clay's mind working over an opportunity for Quaide—with Sentry.

Who better to work alongside him than his own contact? Quaide knew exactly what kind of fault line Clay would be walking with the task force, and he came with a built-in web of associates.

A prospective team formed in his mind, comprised of himself and Quaide, along with Julius and Jennings. The Abels would benefit the team as long as they could stop eyeing up Lark.

If Clay had any powers of persuasion, he'd have a solid team of four by week's end.

He tossed another glance at Lark, a self-proclaimed member of Sentry. And god, the way she'd stepped up to the line, prepared to accept the challenge—the *responsibility*—touched the hell out of him and cast her in yet another color of the rainbow that made up her personality.

So many layers to the woman, and they all left him far more intrigued than he ever had been with other women. Not even his ex had held his interest like this. Oh, he believed she was everything at the time, but after she screwed his best buddy, he saw the truth of their relationship.

Hell, in two days with Lark, he felt closer than he had in months with his ex.

Lark frustrated him and made him laugh. She drove him up a wall and had him begging for more of her charm. She touched him with her deepest inner thoughts and a belief system built on her childhood. And her sense of loyalty and obligation went far beyond anything he'd witnessed, even from soldiers he fought in battle with.

The woman was a treasure.

Headlights flashed across his rearview mirror.

Seeing the glare, Lark straightened in her seat and set the candy in the cup holder. "Is that Livingston?"

"Yes."

She knitted her fingers in her lap, the first sign he'd seen from her that her nerves might be kicking in.

Reaching over, he placed a hand on her arm. "Stay in the truck a minute, okay?"

"Don't you think I need to know the plan too?"

“Just give me a minute.” His voice sounded more strained than he hoped.

“Okay, you sound weird. What’s really going on?”

He climbed out of the truck.

So did Lark.

Of *course* she’d picked up on his tone of voice. Hell, the woman had great instincts—maybe better than his. She probably deserved to be on Sentry.

The headlights cut and the driver parked a short distance away. Since Lark was already outside the vehicle, Clay moved to her, a hand lingering near his side where his weapon was tucked.

Two men exited the dark SUV and crossed the distance between them.

As soon as he saw Quaide, his anxiety dropped a notch. “Livingston.”

“Lexis. Good to see your ugly face.”

They extended fists and bumped knuckles.

Quaide waved toward the man dressed in black street clothes at his side. “This is Desantis. He’ll be—”

Clay cut him off before he spilled the news to Lark. “Excuse us a minute.” He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her several feet away.

She dug her feet in because she had a guess what was about to go down.

When he stopped, he swung to face her. “That guy—Desantis. You’re going with him.”

She was already shaking her head. “You think you can just pawn me off while you go into that warehouse—” she hissed.

He broke over her. “Yes, I do. You’re not coming with us. You’re not going in there. At all.”

“I am. I’m not leaving your side.”

“Lark, you’re not prepared for this. You can’t fight. You can’t shoot. You’re not going with me.”

“I can’t leave you.”

He stopped.

Fuck, what was she really trying to say?

“I’ll come to you when it’s all over,” he said.

“What if something happens to you? I’m not going to hear the news later. I’m not going to be the one who can’t be there, like Andrew was when Mom died!”

He jerked at her words. Then crushed her against his chest, tucking her head beneath his jaw and holding her shivering body. “Christ, doll. Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

Her voice came muffled but angry. “That’s right. Because I’m going with you.”

As if she could stop something bad just by being close to him.

He dropped his nose into her curls. “Please listen to me. You’re going with Desantis. Quaide’s got my six. I *will* come back to you. Tonight. Within the hour, if you walk away from me now.”

“Nope.” She wrenched free of his arms, whirled and stalked back to the other guys.

Christ, Clay never expected this. A fight? Yes. A dead giveaway of how close she felt to him? Not a chance.

For a moment, he could hardly breathe from the idea of Lark having feelings for him.

He rushed after her and skidded to a stop at what Quaide was saying. “Oh yeah, she’s perfect.”

Clay threw a hand up. “Hold on. Perfect for what?”

“She says you’re sending her inside the warehouse to see if our mark’s in there.”

“Hell no. Jesus Christ. She’s untrained. Unarmed. Not going.” Before any of them could argue further, he wrapped his arms around Lark and ripped her off her feet. Carrying her the ten steps to the truck and tossing her in while she fought him only made him want to deliver that spanking he promised her hours before.

“Good—you’re going with me. Now neither of us can get hurt!” Her voice wobbled with a mix of anger and fear.

He forced her struggling body into the seat and pinned her shoulders against the back. “If you even think about getting out of this truck or opening that door, you will regret it.”

* * * * *

A loaded silence hung between Lark and Clay as they drove away from the warehouse.

Mission aborted, at least where she and Clay were concerned.

Livingston and Desantis would be going it alone. And Clay didn’t appear to be very happy about that.

She shot a glance at Clay’s stony profile. His expression gave nothing away—he could be mentally concocting his shopping list.

Or he was upset by her interference.

“I suppose you’re upset with me,” she breezed out.

He shot her the side-eye. “I’m not happy with you.”

“Explain why.”

“You’re saying you have no idea what you did back there?” He spoke in clipped tones. “Your selfish behavior left me no choice but to walk away. And you knew that would happen, didn’t you? You manipulated me into not helping with the mission!”

Her stomach pitched. “You’re right. I should have done things differently.”

Like not get involved at all.

If they stayed together, eventually he *would* go out and not come back.

Okay, she *might* have allowed her emotions to influence her actions, but the thought of Clay facing danger and her being miles and miles away from him, unable to help...

It overwhelmed her.

On the flip side, he made the choice to walk away from the op. Long ago, she realized she was only responsible for her own actions and feelings, not her mother's, Andrew's, anybody's in the group home...or Clay Lexis's.

The road extended like a black streak through the countryside. She had a good guess that he was taking her back to that first safehouse. She only hoped it had been stocked with more food since their last visit.

When had her life taken such a dark turn? One minute she was picking up a package from a guy, and the next she was on the run with a man she was...

Falling in love with.

Even though Lark was not the type of young girl to dream of weddings and dancing with her groom to "their song," the revelation didn't hit her as hard as she expected it to.

Yes, she could be infatuated. She sure was enthralled with his hard muscles, his kisses and everything he could do to her in bed. But now that the warehouse was miles behind them, she could analyze her freakout moment.

"I might have acted out of character back there." Her quiet admission sounded as a loud whisper in the silence of the truck.

A long second passed. "How so?" he finally asked.

"I've never been emotional. My friends always said that I was perfect for a career in journalism because of how far I can remove myself from an event or the person I'm interviewing. But..." She nibbled her bottom lip. "That didn't happen tonight."

His throat worked on a swallow, the only movement he'd shown in half an hour on the road. "What do you think changed?"

Her throat burned with a thick, salty lump. "I think the thought of losing you terrifies me."

His chest inflated, then fell as he released a slow breath. When he swung his head to pierce her in his gaze, she felt the impact more than saw the burn in his eyes.

"You should know something about me, Lark."

The statement was equivalent to a slab of concrete landing on her chest.

"I'm listening."

"You're right that I don't want to commit to a person."

His words felt like a face punch, and she instinctively pressed her palm to her forehead.

He glanced from the road to her. "Do you want me to go on?"

"Yes."

"I had a fiancée."

Curiosity overtook her. What was this person like? Tall and thin? Blonde? She was definitely blonde. Pretty *and* a great cook.

"She was younger—years younger." He looked at her again. "Like you, Lark. She fucked my best friend on the police force."

Lark gasped sharply. "Who would ever cheat on *you*? You're so damn hot. You've got the body, the brains and the whole alpha male thing going for you." She circled a hand in the air to encompass his whole body as a perfect package.

"Thanks, but none of that mattered. She was having an affair with him for about six months before I caught them. In our bed. In our place. With our cat watching."

"Christ—the cat too? Damn."

Whatever she said made his lips twist. Then he shocked her with a low chuckle.

“Oh god. What did I say? I know it’s the wrong thing. I didn’t mean to downplay your situation or pain, Clay.”

“I no longer feel pain over it. I worked through it. Or I thought I did, until you shook me up by being so much younger than me. Can you blame me for being a little uneasy about the difference in our ages?”

Before she could respond, he went on, “I rarely think of them anymore. It was the way you said that about the cat. It brought a different light to the past that I couldn’t help but laugh at.”

She shrugged. “Well, I hope that helps a little bit?”

“It does. But I never want another relationship, Lark.”

Big ouch.

It wasn’t the first time she was rejected, by family, foster moms and dads, so-called friends in the group home who stabbed her in the back with metaphorical dull knives. Even a handful of men had turned her away for various reasons she never associated with being her problem.

But this hurt. It felt personal, especially after all they’d been through in a short time.

It was also obviously one-sided.

Was Clay attracted to her? Yes. Was he willing to bend a few rules and take her to bed? Also yes. But when this was all over, he planned on walking away.

For the first time in her entire life, she felt the scorching urge to flee her hometown. Despite all the bad that happened in East Canon, and how the town was on a southbound train, or the fact that she couldn’t find a solid job, she still always dreamed of settling there.

Of having a home of her own with a swing set in the back yard for a couple of kids. Greeting her man at the door, putting her arms around him and kissing him hello after a long day of work.

Now the town had a task force to fight terrorism, with the object of her desire at the wheel. She would see Clay around town. Run into him at the convenience store, where they'd pass each other like two strangers.

The need to cry overwhelmed her senses, and she did what she'd always done when emotions got the best of her—she put on a bright façade.

“That’s okay. I understand, Clay.”

He twisted his head to look at her. “You do?”

“Yes. We just had sex a couple times. I mean, you’re too old for me anyway.”

The past times she'd brought up their difference in ages, he'd grown agitated, made jokes and clutched his chest as though she'd mortally wounded him.

This time he stared at the road without speaking.

In the side mirror, lights from another vehicle approached. The car came up on them fast and tracked them for a good mile, matching their speed.

“Uh...should we be concerned about that car following us to the safehouse?”

“We’re not going to the safehouse. And we don’t need to worry—that’s Livingston.”

“And you know this how?”

“It was in the original plan for him to meet us.”

“The plan that I ruined.”

“Yes. That plan.”

She stared at the chiseled lines of his profile. Why did it sound like he was talking about some other plan, one that was far more personal?

Chapter Fourteen

Two beer bottles sat on the table between Clay and his friend. Livingston had polished his off before the blood on his knuckles from a fistfight back in the warehouse dried. Clay had only taken a few swigs to wet his mouth.

He wasn't in the mood to drink. After that conversation with Lark in the truck, he wasn't in the mood for much of anything.

He didn't need to see her face to know he'd hurt her. It echoed in her sweet voice and the way she'd downplayed what happened between them.

Lying to her wasn't an option, though. He was a hard man with few emotions. After he dumped his fiancée and punched his best friend in the teeth before smashing him in the nuts, Clay sold the house he bought with plans of living there with her and sharing beers with *that* person he called a friend.

Look where that landed him. Here with a *different* friend, one who would never betray Clay like that. If the past taught him anything, it was how to read people better. Livingston was a trusted friend and confidante.

Then there was Lark.

He held back a gruff noise. She was much better off without a man like him. She was young—had years and years to live that were in his rearview mirror. And she was too amazing to wait around for a man who put himself in danger for a living.

Hell, taking all those pills and drinking energy drinks to stay awake could have ended badly, and Clay was willing to

do much worse to create a believable persona to fit in with the criminals he was tasked to take down.

Livingston pushed back his chair. “Another beer?”

“I’m good.” Clay lifted his bottle and took a sip. “Who owns this place anyway?”

Halfway to the fridge, Quaide twisted to shoot him a look. “I do.”

“You own a house outside of East Canon?” This was getting better and better. He was already close—he could easily join Sentry.

“Yeah, this was my grandparents’ house. I inherited it. I only come here for the occasional weekend away. Check to make sure the roof’s not leaking. Do some hunting in the fall season.” He set the bottlecap on the edge of the counter and gave it a smack to pop the top.

“Nice place.”

Quaide sipped. “Could be, if I put some time and work into fixing it up.”

Clay sent a look at the ceiling. In one of those bedrooms upstairs, Lark was sleeping. Or probably lying awake. Fuck, he hoped she wasn’t dwelling on the pain he caused her.

He spun his bottle in a slow circle, spreading the wet ring of condensation on the table while Quaide silently drank.

“The kid wasn’t at the warehouse,” Quaide said after a heavy minute.

Clay looked up. “So who’d you punch?”

He shrugged. “Punched a couple of people. Had to shoot one.”

“Damn.”

He issued a low sigh. “All in a day’s work.” He swigged the beer.

“Just because the kid wasn’t at the warehouse tonight doesn’t mean he isn’t hiding there.”

“Yup.”

“I’m going to dig around more tonight. There has to be a trail of people who know blackwillow73.”

Quaide chugged the remainder of the beer and tossed the bottle at a trashcan in the corner. It sank into the depths, clinking off more beer bottles there.

Clay arched a brow. “You need to get anything off your chest, bro?” They’d been friends a long time—long enough that Clay knew something was eating at him.

“Nope. I’m good. Gonna find a bed and fall into it. You should do the same.”

“I will soon. After I spend some time fishing on the dark side of the lake.”

“You mean the wrong side of right.”

Clay grunted. “Aren’t they the same thing?”

With a nod, he pushed away from the counter he leaned against and walked out of the kitchen, leaving Clay alone.

He sat there for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of the house that comforted him even though the space was unfamiliar. He pulled out his phone and connected to the forum where he met blackwillow73. That thread was silent. No new activity.

He dug around a bit more and saw that this was a dead game now that the two persons involved—blackwillow73 and darkstar76—had burrowed even deeper underground.

Clay hunched over his phone, sifting through every byte of information he came across and flipping over all the rocks until something caught his eye.

A religious affiliation for the kid known as blackwillow73.

“Son of a bitch,” he murmured to himself.

After spending more time researching the churches of that affiliation in East Canon and the surrounding area, more information unfolded.

At the age of sixteen, blackwillow73 did a stint in a drug rehab upstate. And one of those local churches of the denomination that he was affiliated with held recovery meetings.

Clay sat back in his seat, breathing hard. He had the kid's motivation now—he fucking knew it. While attending the meetings, some dark evil twisted in the kid and planted the idea of bombing the church in his mind. Some anger at religion, life, the universe or even the rehab program.

Then he met up with the Quick Bunny guy and even more bombings were plotted between them.

Clay shoved to his feet, his muscles humming with the need to put his plans into action. Usually he took leaps like this in the middle of the night, but not in this case. He needed to visit the church, attend one of the meetings that blackwillow73 did. That needed to happen during daylight hours.

He could wait to share all this with Quaide too.

That left him with time on his hands...and a beautiful angel of a woman upstairs.

Should he go to her?

His feet were moving before the thought ever completed itself. He found the stairs and took them two at a time in a stealthy prowl until he reached the top. Four doors greeted him with options, his gut told him to veer left and try the first one.

Lifting a hand, he tapped a finger on the aged wood.

A very soft, "Come in," sounded from the other side.

Clay's heart lurched in his chest. Gently, he opened the door and scanned the dim room. A single lamp burned in the corner on an old desk.

Lark lay on the bed curled up on her side, wearing only a shirt. The halo of red curls against the pillow made Clay fist his hands with the urge to sink his fingers into the mass.

Her big eyes locked on his. His groin gripped with want.

“What do you need, Clay?” she asked.

For a moment, he couldn't speak or move. Only stare at her and wonder how he could claim her for his own.

He ran his tongue over his dry lips and said something he never thought he'd hear himself say in all his life.

“Will you have me?”

* * * * *

Clay's words grabbed Lark's insides and twisted them into a knot. Slowly, she pushed into a sitting position.

And opened her arms.

The relief that crossed his face filled her with even more passion for this man. The fact that he was worried about her rejecting him; but still put himself out there only gave her a stronger appreciation for the man he was.

He closed the door and took a moment to remove his boots before approaching the bed in a slow stalk. When he reached the side, she pushed onto her knees and threw her arms around him.

His lips crashed over hers. Bearing her down on the mattress, he pinned her under his big body and kissed her until she was gasping.

One broad palm cupped her breast through her top. Her nipples pebbled at the heat scorching through the fabric and spreading across her flesh.

Small noises escaped her throat. She tore off his hat and tossed it across the room, then sank her fingers into his thick mass of brown hair.

She twisted her mouth from his demanding kiss. “I want you.”

He took her lips again, commanding her with deep passes of his tongue across hers. Her pussy squeezed, and her panties flooded.

“Me too,” he rumbled.

“So bad!”

His hand slid from her breast, over her ribs. When he caught the hem of her top and yanked it up, she sucked in a sharp breath. Callused fingers worked over her skin, pattering upward to locate her peaked nipple.

They shared a moan. Scraping her nails lightly down his nape and across his shoulders, she threw herself into kissing her lover. Did he feel her heart? It was pounding. Could he feel the desperation inside her?

“I want to make this so good for you, Clay. If we don’t have much time left together, I want to give you a night to remember.”

He froze. His lips tightened against hers, and then he lifted his head. She felt the dark probe of his eyes to her very core.

To her shock, he rolled off her and sat on the edge of the bed. When he dropped his head into his hands, her heart wobbled.

“Clay?” Her voice came out soft and shaky.

He didn’t move but his voice reached her as a low murmur. “I thought I could do this, but I can’t.”

Her chest gave a painful squeeze.

“Thought you could do what?” she managed to ask.

“Keep my feelings out of this. And with any other woman, all these years, I have managed with no problem. But I can’t with you, Lark.”

What was he saying? The sexual haze fogging her mind wouldn’t let her process the meaning of his words.

Slowly, she slipped off the bed to stand in front of him. His bulky shoulders resembled a mountain range, cold and untouchable.

She shook herself. What was she thinking? He was a man, warm flesh and a heart and soul that were untapped, but that didn’t mean they didn’t exist.

She reached out and slid her hands along his shoulders, feeling sinew coil and flex. He was all power and steel.

Inching a step closer, she stood between his knees. Rough denim brushed against her thighs and raised goosebumps up and down her body.

“Clay.” She pushed closer.

With a grunt, he settled his hands on her hips and dropped his forehead against her chest. The pose brought a wave of emotion to the surface. Tenderness filled her.

She eased her hands over his shoulders and neck to cradle his jaw. Lifting his head, she forced him to look at her.

What she saw stunned her speechless. His eyes were burning with an emotion no man ever looked at her with before.

It might be lust.

It might border on love.

“We have unfinished business between us,” she whispered.

A dark shadow shifted behind his eyes. “I’m too old for you.”

She shook her head. “You’re just right for me.”

“I’ve only been in your life a few days. You could change your mind.”

“So could you.” She leaned closer, bringing her lips to his. “But we want each other right now. I’ve always lived minute by minute.” She planted a tender kiss on his mouth. “Right this minute, you’re all I want.”

He clamped his hands on her waist. She gasped, surging into his touch, into a carnal kiss. Throwing her on the bed, he stripped her with a brutal need. The rough desire in his shaking hands only ignited her.

She tore at his shirt and ripped open his jeans to get at the throbbing velvet of his unrelenting cock. Hot kisses landed on

her throat, the tops of her breasts. He captured her nipples and sucked until she arched.

Spreading her legs wide, she urged him with pleas. “Bury your fingers in my pussy, lover. I need you stretching me.”

“Fuck!” Running his hand up her inner thigh, he located her soaking folds and thrust two fingers deep.

She rocked. Clenched on his long digits. With one hand planted on the bed beside her, he leaned over to watch her face as he fingered her in slow, thorough strokes.

Her hips rose to meet him. Juices soaked his fingers more with every plunge.

With a dark look that bordered on a glower, he dragged his fingers past her inner walls. When he pulled them free, she cried out.

In a swift move, he dropped between her legs, hooked her calves over his shoulders and went down on her.

“Oh god!” Her clit throbbed under the point of his smoldering hot tongue. He flattened it to her body and lapped until her moans turned to harsh cries.

“Clay! I’m...” The rest of the sentence was lost in a strangled groan as her release slammed her.

She only pulsated twice before his cock filled her.

He went still. “Fuck. Condom.”

“Forget it! Fuck me.”

“Lark—”

She bracketed his face in her hands and kissed him long and deep. Swinging his hips back, he slid his cock through her slick walls.

He slammed deep. Once, twice.

Then pulled out and made a dive for his jeans. Thank god he’d pilfered her purse for a supply of condoms—and had the strength to use them.

The short break was enough to bring her brain cells back into alignment. She was not in a place in her life to have a child...but the prospect of having Clay's didn't frighten her.

Her thoughts were cut off again, sent into a whirlpool of sensation as he sank into her pussy in one smooth, nonstop stroke.

Their gazes locked, and what she could only call...lovemaking...began.

Chapter Fifteen

Clay had walked away from a lot of things in life. He'd changed careers several times. Left a bad relationship with a woman he once believed he wanted to share all his days with.

Leaving Lark's bed was probably the hardest thing he'd ever done.

After a pounding orgasm that shook him to the core and rocked her with another shaking release, she'd slept in his arms. Clay's mind refused to shut off, and he spent the rest of the hours before dawn staring at her beautiful face and wondering what the hell he was going to do with her.

What he was going to do with himself now that she'd changed him.

How it happened—and in a few short days—he didn't know. She barreled into his life and broke him open. Anybody else could cross him and feel the heat of his wrath, but he was only softness and heart for Lark.

Sneaking out of the house and leaving her in Quaide's capable hands had been his only recourse at that moment, but he hated to think of her waking and finding him gone, even if there was no way in hell he could stay away from her now.

I'll come back to you soon, doll. He sent the promise out into the universe and wasn't surprised to get a sassy reply in return.

You bet your ass you will, Clay Lexis. We have unfinished business.

He wanted to sit longer behind the wheel of Julius's truck he was still in possession of and dwell on exactly what that

business could be, but people were starting to file into the church for their meeting.

After climbing out, he touched a hand to his side and the weapon he concealed in the waist of his jeans. He didn't expect blackwillow73 to attend this meeting, yet he wasn't going to take any risks that the kid didn't have a few friends here.

He closed the truck door and turned—then stopped dead.

Lark and Quaide blocked his path.

He cut a hand through the air. “What the hell is this?” he demanded.

Lark rolled her eyes and said to Quaide, “Told ya he'd be ticked off to find us here.”

Minutes before, Clay thought it impossible to even be short with the woman who was slowly infiltrating his heart, but the fact that she was here told him she planned to interfere in another one of his plans. And that wasn't going to happen.

Stepping up to her, he hoped his glare was enough to send her running back to Quaide's vehicle.

“Why are you two here?”

Lark didn't respond, so he swung to his friend. “Quaide, you better start talking.”

The meeting was about to begin. A man of Clay's size always drew attention, and that was the last thing he needed when he walked into that meeting late.

Lark suddenly grabbed his arm, staring down at the tattoos that now covered the entirety of it. Her gaze flicked up to his, a question in her eyes.

“They're fake,” he ground out. He was used to fitting roles, acting the part and fitting in, so he'd left his boots and hat back at Quaide's and wore khaki pants similar to what blackwillow73 had been wearing when they met at the office the night Clay apprehended him. A white T-shirt, sneakers and a ballcap did a lot to transform him from the guy who'd spent

the last year as a bodyguard on the WEST Protection team into an addict trying to heal.

Lark turned his arm over to study the sleeve of tattoos he'd applied that morning. "These look *so real*. I've never seen anything so real."

"You'd be surprised what the FBI provides in the way of disguises."

Quaide nodded in agreement, but Lark didn't see. She tilted her face up to Clay and peered under the brim of his hat to meet his eyes.

"It's a great look on you...but I look more the part of a recovering addict."

At her declaration, his eyes flew wide. "What?"

"Look at me." She waved a hand over herself, to the rumpled shirt he'd stepped over that morning on the way to the bathroom and a pair of loose-fitting shorts that hung off her hips. "My hair's a mess. I haven't showered. My eye makeup is smudged, and I hardly slept because—"

They both shot glances at Quaide, who ducked his head to avoid their stares. Of course he overheard the noises coming from their room the night before. Neither of them were very quiet about it, either.

"Well, never mind," Lark said quickly. "I'm going into that meeting, and you"—she poked his chest—"are staying here."

He glared down at her. "No way."

"Clay. No offense, but you stand out in a crowd. Even in khakis and sporting tattoos, you're still Clay Lexis around here."

"This is your hometown too." His voice grated.

"Few people know me around here anymore, and they'll all believe I'm a crack whore. After all, I look like one. The only thing I need's a rock."

“Oh. My. God. Well, you’re not getting one. This is a terrible idea!”

Lark trained her stare on his friend. “Quaide.”

As if they’d agreed upon something before this, Quaide darted to Clay and gripped him by the shoulder. With a satisfied smirk, Lark whirled and booked it to the front of the church.

Clay strained against his friend’s hold. “You better let me go before I flatten your fucking ass.”

“You can try it, Lexis, but then we’ll only be down a man when I put you in the hospital.”

“As if you could!” he gritted, baring his teeth at the man he now was questioning why he ever considered to be a friend. He didn’t remove his stare from Lark as she climbed a few steps and vanished inside the church.

He tore free of Quaide, but the man positioned himself in front of Clay. They stood about the same height and were equally wide. In a fight, neither of them would for sure come out on top.

“You fucking planned this!”

“It was Lark’s idea, but yeah. We did. She’s right, you know—she looks the part and can play it well after my coaching.”

“You coached her? Christ!” He ripped off his ballcap and sliced his fingers through his hair.

“She’s a quick study. Have you considered adding her to Sentry?”

Clay leveled him with a look.

“She could make a great undercover agent.”

“She wants to be a reporter. You’re not twisting her dream into this dark life!”

“Calm down. I’m not forcing her to do anything she doesn’t want to do. And she most definitely wanted to play the

part of a crack whore coming in from the walk of shame to a meeting.”

“Stop calling her a crack whore before I break your jaw.”

Quaide grinned. “This one got to you, didn’t she?”

The words tripped Clay up. He stopped. His chest heaved.

“Yes,” he bit off, miserable.

“She’s pretty hooked on you too. And if last night’s anything to go by—”

He cut his hand through the air. “Enough. Dammit!” He considered punching the side of the truck then remembered it wasn’t his vehicle. If he wanted the Abels on his team, leaving fist marks in the door of Julius’s truck wasn’t going to persuade them.

Instead he squeezed the bridge of his nose hard enough to bruise. “What now? My woman’s in there with a bunch of addicts.”

“They’re in recovery,” Quaide corrected. “Give her a chance to do the job. After all, any woman in your life is going to have to trust you. If you want a relationship to work between you, you’re going to have to grant her the same amount of trust.”

He narrowed his eyes at Quaide. “You’re such a dick.”

“You only say that because you know I’m right.”

Clay watched the front of the church. A minute ago he was prepared to do anything to get names, locations, learn of terroristic plots to blow the place clear to Mars. Now he just needed Lark out of there and safe in his arms again.

Quaide angled his head for Clay to follow him. His friend strolled, but Clay’s legs felt like wooden planks as he followed to a group of picnic tables off to the side of the building. He remembered driving by this church back in the day and seeing families sitting there, talking to the pastor after services and just visiting with one another.

Innocent people who didn't deserve whatever blackwillow73 had planned for them.

No one was around now. The work week had started, and the nearby road didn't even have any vehicles passing as a distraction, which left Clay sinking deep into his thoughts.

What happened between him and Lark the previous night...it was real. But finding love on an op? It was fucked up.

Love. He only knew the need to protect her, to nurture that expression in her beautiful eyes whenever she looked at him...was very real. He didn't want to lose those things either.

Besides, the sex was phenomenal. She wasn't only a lover who took—she gave and gave. Actually, after their second round of sex the previous night, he'd drifted off for a few seconds and awakened to the feel of her mouth surrounding his cock.

He sucked in a breath, hoping to dispel the need to tear into the church, toss the woman over his shoulder and fuck her right there on the grass.

A bee buzzed nearby, its quiet drone the only sound besides the light breeze coming off the mountains.

“Lark's right—the tat's pretty good, bro.” Quaide's statement brought Clay's mind to the present.

“Thanks. Thinking about a few real ones. Dirty myself up a little more. You know, look the part.”

Quaide nodded. “With a few tweaks, you could easily drop undercover into one of the outlaw biker gangs around here.”

“I know shit's getting deep with criminal activities there. After I wrap this case up, I'll be looking into it.” He gave Quaide a sideways glance. “I could use another good guy to join the team.”

Quaide huffed in amusement. “You've never been subtle, Lexis. And believe me...I'm considering the idea.”

Clay arched a brow. “Are you?”

“Yeah. I could use a change of scenery. The four walls of my office... Let’s just say they’re not as fulfilling to me as they once were.”

“I suspect there’s a story there, but I’m not going to ask. I’m sure you’ll tell me in time.”

Quaide scrubbed a fingertip between his dark brows. “Not fucking likely.”

Clay’s phone buzzed with an incoming text. He saw the name and straightened. “It’s Lark.”

“What did she say?”

“The meeting started and she fits right in.” He groaned. “Christ.”

Quaide chuckled. “You’re the one responsible for how she looks. Think I didn’t hear you two going at it all night?”

For some reason, Clay’s chest swelled with a sense of pride that he’d left some mark on the beautiful woman.

He was already planning his next move with Lark. He wasn’t going to be happy until he had her shaking through her third orgasm and his name was carved into her soul.

* * * * *

Lark was great at remembering details. Names, dates and places all lodged in her mind to be unearthed when she had use of them. The skill came in handy when writing—she didn’t even need to glance at her notes.

She also had the ability to watch people without them knowing it. Her powers of observation always afforded her deeper insights for writing columns for the university paper.

Sitting here in the church hall surrounded by humans in the throes of struggle, she soaked it all in and filed each tidbit away to relay to Clay and Quaide later.

With an occasional sweeping glance at the room, she assessed each person in turn. They were seated in a semicircle with the pastor in the center leading the meeting. He reminded her of one of those TV evangelists with perfect silver-gray

hair. He wasn't exactly dressed like the men of faith she'd seen either—he wore a Gucci belt and loafers.

The girl speaking about her experiences with substance abuse had broken down in terrible tears. The next guy picked up where she left off, and both of them left her flooded with empathy for their hardship. Who knew what Clay might see, but neither person stuck out to Lark as being in cahoots with a bomber.

She peeked from beneath her lashes at a kid seated diagonally from her. He was slumped in his seat, seemingly not paying attention. But that didn't mean he was connected to a bomber. Right?

What would Clay think? He had different views of the world.

She picked up her phone and, shooting glances at the people on each side of her to make sure they weren't watching, she surreptitiously snapped a photo of the kid. Then she quickly turned the camera to face herself to make it appear she was on a popular social media site.

The guy beside her grunted, and she offered him a nervous smile. She went back and forth between taking photos of everyone at the meeting and herself.

When the guy beside her leaned in for the next photo, she giggled and took one of them together. He stuck his tongue out and flashed the devil horns sign.

The pastor cleared his throat loudly, and she and her neighbor straightened. Lark folded her hands over her phone and offered the pastor a nervous smile.

He waved a hand her direction. "You're new here. Why don't you introduce yourself?"

She gulped. She hadn't exactly prepared a speech.

"Uh..." This couldn't be much different from a job interview, right? And she'd had plenty of those before she went with Quick Bunny.

"Well, my name is Lana. I'm a Leo."

A few chuckles broke out, and she shifted in her seat, gaining a little more confidence.

What did Quaide tell her during his short coaching session on the drive over here? Stick as close to the truth as possible. Her name started with L. She actually *was* a Leo.

“I’m here because...” *Stick close to the truth.* She dragged in a deep breath. “I have a lifetime struggle with abuse. My parents used. My mom...lost her life to addiction.” A lump lodged in her throat.

This was heavy stuff she rarely discussed in a way that felt personal. She was the first person to veer from the subject or make a joke to distract from the matter.

And though she sat in a room full of strangers, telling her story felt strangely intimate. Every person’s eyes were on her. Some leaned forward, paying closer attention, and even the guy straightened out of his slump.

“I never realized how much their actions affected me,” she said.

Several people bobbed their heads in agreement.

“I’m here because I want to save people around me...” *Close to the truth.* “From more heartbreak.”

“Yeah, girl. You tell it.” A woman in a purple T-shirt and pajama pants raised a fist in tribute.

Lark smiled at her. “Anyway, thanks for listening. I’m glad to be among friends.”

Oddly, she spoke the truth. She warmed with the fellowship of being with people who’d faced similar challenges in life as she had growing up.

She didn’t feel anybody was better than another, only that a lot of factors went into each individual’s situation. How many times had she written about similar topics in those college writing classes?

When she came to a close, the pastor gave her a slow once-over that made her feel like cold, creepy fingers had just

stroked her. He thanked her for her introduction and moved to the dude sitting beside her.

The guy raised a hand in a wave. “Name’s Jacob. I’m a Sagittarius.” Everybody laughed at that one. He moved quickly through his reason for coming to the meeting, and that shifted the focus off Lark.

She spent the rest of her time studying everyone’s body language. When the pastor finally announced donuts and coffee were available at the back of the room, she mingled with the others and chatted about the meeting.

When the guy who’d taken the selfie with her approached, coffee and a glazed donut in hand, she smiled. “So how did you like the meeting?” he asked.

She glanced around. “It’s a small group. Are there usually more people? I was told it was a substantial group.”

“We’re missing some. There are usually a few more in attendance.”

“I prefer larger groups. You know ... easier to fade into the background.”

“Oh yeah, I get it. Usually, there are two more guys here. Maybe a handful of chicks. You should get one of these donuts before they’re gone. You know how we like to stuff our faces when we can’t give in to our vices.”

With a nervous laugh, she nodded and moved off toward the coffee. She poured herself a paper cupful and then slipped out the back door. Hightailing it across the parking lot, she was suddenly flanked by two huge men.

A scream gathered in her throat before she realized it was Clay and Quaide escorting her to the truck.

“Well?” Clay turned to her as soon as Quaide was in his own truck and they were shut in theirs.

“I got photos. Of everyone. And there were at least two men and a handful of chicks missing from the regular crowd today.”

“Chicks?”

She nodded and brought the coffee to her lips. “And I think I started to work through some of my own issues too.”

In reaching for the gearshift, he stopped and twisted to look at her. “Your issues?”

“Yeah. With my mom. I don’t know why it helped. I didn’t say much or go into deep details. It was just...having somebody listen who’s been there too.”

He stared at her. What she could only call awe filled his eyes. “My god, Lark. Are you ever *not* going to shock the hell out of me with how amazing you are?”

Tears smeared across her vision. “That’s probably the best compliment I’ve ever received. Get over here and give me some sugar.”

He chuckled at her words, leaned over the console and kissed her fully on the lips.

When they broke apart, she grinned. “Being undercover is fun. When can I do it again?”

Chapter Sixteen

“I hate when people are late.” Quaide’s statement came with a growl.

Clay shifted his shoulders in a shrug. “That’s the soldier in you talking. I’ve gotten used to the habits of humans over the years.”

Quaide paced to the front window and stared out at the driveway. “Are the Abel brothers always late?”

“Not the ones I’ve worked with. I’m less familiar with the work ethic of Julius and Jennings.” He didn’t get up from his position at the kitchen table.

Next to him, Lark exchanged a look with Clay. “Is he always this way?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“I can hear you.” Quaide paced back to the table, did an about-face and returned to the window.

“Why can’t we just go through the photos I took now? Why do the Abels need to be present?”

This time Quaide shifted his stare to Clay. Their gazes locked in an unspoken battle of wills. When Lark wasn’t paying attention, Clay had cornered his friend and told him that he wanted to delay things until he could convince Lark to step away from the shit they were dealing with.

Of course, Quaide had other views on the matter. One argument being that she took the photos and had the information stored in her head—they needed to hear the information from her.

Okay, that was true. But Clay thought that having the other guys here would be a great excuse for a task force-only meeting, and that would keep Lark from volunteering for some another dangerous job.

“We’re waiting for the Abels,” he told her firmly.

With a sigh, she sat back in her chair, arms folded. He couldn’t help but notice how she kept her phone gripped tight in her hand, as if she knew that he would happily snatch it from her if he got the chance.

Quaide continued to pace. The Abels were officially fifteen minutes late. And Lark was shooting Clay looks that had his jeans feeling more than a little snug.

He trailed his gaze over her hair. After the meeting, she grabbed a shower. The strands lay in damp curls, the ends drying in wisps. Her skin glowed.

When she came out dressed in a black men’s suit vest as a top and the shorts she’d worn before, he’d almost choked.

Quaide seemed to be studying her too. “Lark, where did you find that vest anyway?”

She glanced down at her chest. The buttons barely trapped her full breasts inside the garment. “In a closet upstairs. I hope it was okay to put it on. Getting dressed with almost no clothes to choose from, most of which don’t fit me anyway, hasn’t been easy.”

“I can see why—you’re not the average size. And it’s fine that you’re wearing that vest. I’m just surprised it still exists.”

She tilted her head. “Why is that?”

“It was mine. I wore it to my mom and stepdad’s wedding when I was twelve.”

Her spine stiffened. “Well, I’m glad it was hanging in the closet, even if I don’t relish the idea of being the size of a pre-pubescent boy.”

Clay stifled a snort. He needed her cooperative so he could ease her out of the situation they were in.

He also wanted her soft and pliant for his own reasons. The minute they were alone, he planned to worship every inch of her sumptuous body with his lips and tongue.

Quaide paced to the window and back three more times.

Clay nudged the empty kitchen chair with his boot. “Sit down. You’re making me nervous.”

Heaving a sigh, Quaide crossed the space to lean against the counter.

“This house has good bones. A few weekend warrior projects, you’d have a nice place to live.”

His buddy snorted. “I know what you’re doing, Lexis.”

He cocked a brow in question.

“Trying to get me to stay and work with you on Sentry.”

“You already said you’ve been giving it some thought.”

Quaide paused before giving him a short nod. “I just need a little time when I’m not thinking about bombs, bomb units being attacked and prisoners being broken out. There’s also the matter of who takes the leadership role in Sentry.”

“I do,” he said at once.

“But I formed the team in the first place.”

He shook his head. “And you granted me control.” He twisted his mouth. “But I might agree to go easy on you. I won’t give you *all* the worst assignments.”

Quaide barked a rueful laugh. “I appreciate that. Who knows? It might be nice to give up some of the responsibility.”

Lark set her phone on the table. “When are you going to give me my next assignment?”

He inched his fingers toward the device. The slightest twitch in that direction had her slapping a hand over it. She slid the phone into her lap and cocked a brow at him.

“You weren’t seriously about to take my phone, were you, Clay?”

“Was thinkin’ about it.”

“You’re not getting it.”

All he had to do was haul her into his lap, touch her breasts and kiss her senseless to get the phone out of her hands. But he didn’t say that in front of Quaide.

The man seemed to be watching them close—too close for Clay’s comfort. He didn’t like being under scrutiny when he didn’t totally understand what was going on between him and Lark either.

His phone buzzed, and he brought it to his ear. “Lexis.”

Was it his imagination or did Lark just shiver?

His gaze landed on her, which was the worst choice of places to look, because she was wearing that come-fuck-me expression that had been his downfall from the beginning.

“It’s Julius,” came the deep voice into his ear.

“Everything okay? You’re late.”

“Yeah, there’s gonna be a delay.”

“But you defused the bomb?”

Lark and Quaide both zeroed in on Clay’s conversation.

“We got it done. It wasn’t easy. Did you know there was a backup power source?”

“What the hell? No.”

“Yeah, it could have detonated at any moment if the right trigger was hit.”

Clay held back a groan and rubbed a fingertip across his forehead. This conversation was bringing on one of his tension headaches, which meant he’d be grinding his teeth in no time.

“You got rid of the thing, though. Now you’re supposed to be here. So what’s keeping you?” Clay demanded.

“Ross needs our backup.”

Clay shook his head at the man who couldn’t even see him. “No. You’re working with Sentry right now.”

“Sorry, man, but we go where we’re needed most. And that’s WEST Protection.”

Annoyance flared inside him. He filled his lungs with air but couldn’t ease the anger that was beginning to boil to the surface. The Abel brothers were free agents. Basically mercenaries, working for whoever paid them most at the time. Right this minute, that was WEST Protection.

Clay only had himself to be mad at. If he’d secured the brothers on the Sentry team sooner, they’d be on their way to the house right now. Then he could wrap up this op and get Lark to safety.

But that meant walking away from her too, and Clay wasn’t sure how she was going to deal with it.

Hell, he didn’t know how *he* would.

Lark was staring at her phone too, a crinkle between her pale brows.

Clay brought his focus back to Julius. “After you’re finished with whatever Ross has you doing with the WEST team, I’d like to set up a time to talk to you and Jennings.”

“Sure, man. We’ll be in touch.”

He ended the call and took a moment to stare in space. So ... he was still a team of one. That bomb was more dangerous than any of them knew—even the FBI bomb expert—and Lark could have been killed at any time.

Clay disliked that thought so much that he clamped his hand harder around his phone until his fingers began to go numb.

For the time being, he had Quaide. The man might be distracted by some personal crap, but at least he was reliable.

There was also Lark. And she had the intel on people in that meeting they needed to move forward and stop blackwillow73 and his cohorts from creating a national tragedy.

He looked to Lark. Her brows were smooth now, but he still saw a level of irritation in her eyes.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“The next meeting time’s been changed because a funeral is taking place in the church hall.”

“Probably not so unusual.”

“It’s just frustrating. I wanted to jump back in there tomorrow and get to know those people.”

Personally, he was really glad for the delay, but telling her that would only set her off. He got the feeling that an angry Lark could get *really* spicy.

The thought didn’t totally repel him if he were honest. In fact, he could think of plenty of ways to coax her out of *any* bad mood.

Quaide yanked out the chair that he’d refused to take before and plopped into it. “Was that the Abels on the phone?”

He gave a solemn nod. “They’re not coming. They defused the bomb and are on their way to the WEST team as backup on some op.”

Quaide didn’t appear to be as upset by this as Clay felt. “Okay, so it’s the three of us.”

“Two,” he corrected, leveling a look at Lark.

She rolled her eyes. “Quaide said it. I’m in. So that means ___”

“Quaide’s not in charge of manning this team. I am. And I say that you’re not part of it.”

“You’re acting like a father figure again.”

He closed his eyes and counted to ten for patience that wasn’t about to come on this matter. When he opened them, Lark offered him a sweet smile.

Hell, how did she do that? Disarm him with one quirk of her plump lips?

“For the last time...I’m not that old. Definitely not old enough for you to worry about.”

Her smile widened. He swore her teeth glinted even whiter, as if joy illuminated her from within. “About time you see that, Clay. We’ve only been sleeping together since—”

He threw up a hand to halt the flow of her words. Quaide was busy laughing.

“We’ll discuss this later,” he told her. “Right now, we need to see those pictures.”

When the woman was happy, it seemed as if bubbles of light skittered over her entire being. As she scooted her chair closer to the table and set her phone on the surface to swipe through the pictures, she fizzled with the brand of excitement that he hoped to see from the entire Sentry team someday. Whatever had been bugging her when she glanced at her phone before was gone.

Quaide scooted his chair closer to see her screen too. When she began flipping through the album and talking about each person, Clay stopped her.

“How do you remember all this?”

She stared at him. “I just do.”

Quaide slapped a hand on the tabletop. “I’m telling you, Lexis—”

“We’re not discussing the matter.” Swinging his attention to Lark again, he said, “So you’ve got a great memory.”

“For details, yes. It helped a lot in college. Anyway, this girl in the purple? She was wearing PJ bottoms with kittens on them.”

“So?”

Lark gave him an isn’t-it-obvious eye roll. “Anybody who loves kittens isn’t bombing a church or having bombs delivered.”

He and Quaide traded a look. Her logic and what he knew of humanity weren’t the same. He’d seen plenty of men who beat their wives treat their dogs with care.

“Go on,” Quaide urged her.

She flipped to another photo of a man slouched in his seat. “I’m not sure about this dude. He was really withdrawn, but that doesn’t mean he’s associated with the bomber. He might just not want to be at the meeting.”

Clay studied the image. “Possible, but we’ll run his photo through the facial recognition system.”

She swiped a few more. When she landed on one of herself and a guy with his tongue out and his fist closed in devil horns, Clay stopped her.

“You took a selfie with this guy?”

“Well, yeah, he leaned in. What was I going to do?”

“What’s his name?”

“Jacob. he’s a Sagittarius.”

“I don’t want to know how you found that out. But that at least narrows down his birthday.”

“I don’t think he’s associated with a bomber either,” she said.

“Okay, humor us. Why don’t you think that this guy”—he poked a finger at her screen—“is capable of hate crimes?”

She shrugged. “Just a vibe I got.”

Clay leveled a look at her. “A vibe.”

“Yeah.” She waved her fingers at Quaide. “Help me out here. You know how Clay can be.”

“I can hear you,” he stole Quaide’s line from earlier. “Besides, I’m not being *any* way. I’m just more suspicious than you. Jaded, even. I’ve seen a lot of shit over the years, and there’s a reason why this guy selected me to lead Sentry.” He jerked a thumb at his friend.

Quaide pushed away from the table, obviously finished with the discussion. “We’ll run all the images through the system. Lark, when’s the next meeting time?”

“It was moved two hours earlier to accommodate the funeral.”

“Be ready to attend.”

Clay shot to his feet. “She’s not going.”

She jumped up. “Yes, I am.”

In one step, Clay came up against her. “You agreed to listen to me.”

“Not on this. I was already in that meeting. Those people listened to my story. They already trust me.”

“It’s not safe. Someone could recognize you. I’m not in there with you. Someone could drag you out another exit—that church and the hall are huge and has about ten of them.”

“Not going to happen.”

“You don’t know that, Lark. I don’t know why we’re discussing this at all.”

“And I don’t know why you’re downplaying my abilities when I’ve more than proved myself.”

He grabbed her by the upper arms and pulled her onto tiptoe. Their lips were inches away, and her scent tormented him. “I’m finished putting you at risk. I’m getting you a bodyguard and you’re going into hiding.”

“I’m not leaving your side.”

“You’re not staying here.”

“Oh, yes, I am.” She edged closer and looped her arms around his neck. Her eyes blazed with determination.

“Why are you so stubborn?” He wanted to kiss her. Lay her down on the table and fuck her.

“What are you afraid of, Clay?”

“I’m afraid of ... ”

“Of?” she challenged.

“Of losing you.”

The words tumbled from his lips without thought. There was no pulling them back in either. He waited to hear Quaide’s

laugh but when Clay looked up, he and Lark were alone in the room.

Her eyes melted into twin puddles of emotion. “You don’t want to...lose me?”

“No, goddammit. I can’t lose you.”

“Why?”

She wanted the words he wasn’t prepared to utter. Not so soon, maybe not ever.

“I have no business in your thoughts,” he grated out.

“You’ve said that. Too late—you are.”

“I have no business in your bed either.”

“Again, moot point when you made me come three times last night and you’ll give me four orgasms tonight.”

He might have smiled at her demand of four orgasms if he wasn’t so fucking knotted up. “I have no business...in your heart. And fucking hell, that’s where I want to be, Lark.”

She grabbed his hand and pressed it against her chest, over her left breast. His cock jerked in reaction to her softness.

“Yet here you are, taking it over.”

Eyes slipping shut, he bowed his head. It was too late to stop what was happening between them.

But it wasn’t too late to get her to safety.

* * * * *

Every stroke of Clay’s fingers across Lark’s body ignited more need inside her. When a shudder snaked down her spine, he paused and met her gaze.

“This is scaring you.” He stopped what he was doing, which was tucking a wire inside her top and running it across her waist in a way that wouldn’t show through her clothes.

“I’m not scared. You’re turning me on.”

His brows hitched up a fraction.

“You look proud of yourself for that.” She lifted her arms to her sides. “Keep going.”

She expected him to keep wiring her with the surveillance device, so when he grabbed her by the waist and yanked her flush against his big, muscled body, she gasped.

He cut off the sound by slamming his mouth across hers. Oh god, the taste of this man drove her wild. The way he controlled a kiss like he received military training for exactly that left her panties soaked and her nipples hard.

Angling her head, she parted her lips to receive his tongue and wasn't disappointed when he swept it over hers. Again and again, he fed her his tongue and stole little noises of pleasure from her.

With her hands planted on his chest, she located his nipples and brushed her fingers across them. He growled in response.

“I can't be...late for...that meeting,” she rasped between deep passes of his tongue.

He pinched both her nipples until she shook with need. “Who cares about being late?”

“You're...trying to distract me!” Her words ended on a wail as he reached between her legs and cupped her pussy. He pressed the pad of his thumb into her clit, and even through her clothes, it made her squirm.

“Is it working?”

“Yes. No. Clay. Stop. I need to do this.”

“I need to do *you*.”

The comment threw her for a loop, and suddenly this was fun. She collapsed against his chest, horny and giggling. Perspiration had even broken out on her brow.

“Finish with the wire. There isn't much time left before the meeting.”

He cupped her ass. Every digit that dug into her backside seemed to come with its own promise of pleasure to come—if

only she'd drop the idea of attending the meeting.

She wiggled free of his grip and held her arms to her sides again. "I'm ready for this, Clay."

With a resigned sigh, he set to work again. All the while he planted listening devices on her body, she studied his handsome face. She loved his rugged features. Even the tiny crow's feet at the corners of each eye left her stunned by how beautiful he was.

The way he touched her with such tender care coaxed those words to her lips. The ones she vowed not to say yet, even though she'd been feeling it for days.

She was falling in love with Clay Lexis. Her older brother's friend from his high school days had become Lark's entire universe in a very short amount of time.

Looking at him made her heart flutter. Touching him made it pound hard.

He'd all but confessed to caring about her too. The fact he didn't want to lose her went far deeper than he was willing to admit, and that was okay. Lark was a patient person.

He raised his head and his stare locked on her mouth. She'd been nibbling on her lip and released it from her teeth.

Clay's chest heaved. As if unwilling to stop touching her, he dropped his hands and stepped back. "Now give me your phone."

She handed it over without hesitation.

"I'm programming my number into it. I should have done it before." He swiped a finger across the screen. "There. I sent a text to my phone so the line of communication's already open." He met her stare. "Now tell me the plan again."

She held out her arms and let them flap to her sides. "I'm wired. You and Quaide can hear every word while I'm in there."

He nodded. "You leave if anything seems off. Just head straight to an exit, give us the word and we'll meet you outside."

She nodded. “Do I look the part?”

His gaze cut over her. “You look fucking beautiful.”

Her heart hiccupped. “Clay...”

“You’re beautiful no matter what you wear or do to your hair and makeup. And yes, you look the part.”

Ten minutes later, they were pulling into the church parking lot a few minutes late, just as planned, since the guys of Sentry wanted to lessen their chances of being seen driving her. They parked a few feet from the entrance, and Lark reached for the door handle.

Clay placed a hand on her thigh, stopping her. “Lark.”

She swung her gaze to his. All the emotion poured from her into him and she would swear on her mother’s grave that what she saw in Clay’s eyes...was love.

She nodded. “You can’t say it yet, but I know, lover.”

He sucked in a breath.

Pushing the door open, she hopped out without giving him time to react to what she said.

Slipping into the church hall, she quietly moved to a vacant seat and sank into it. The pastor was already giving an opening prayer. She was just getting her bearings and shot a glance at the group.

It was smaller today, probably due to the early time. A few of the same faces were here and—

Lark’s brain froze as she clapped eyes on the man from Quick Bunny. The guy who asked her to pick up a bomb.

And his gaze drilled into her.

Oh fuck. What now?

Clay’s voice filled her mind. *Get to an exit!*

But she couldn’t yet. Wasn’t she here to lure the guy in?

She offered a slight smile, hoping it didn’t reveal her nerves. The dude leaned to the side to say something to the guy next to him.

Lark shifted her gaze to the guy too.

Fuck! Jacob the Sagittarius.

She swiped her finger over her phone screen to bring up Clay's text message. Her thumb hovered over the keyboard.

Then she stopped herself. If she alerted him to what was happening in here, he and Quaide would storm the place. It might be a little reckless of her, but she wanted to prove that she could do *one* job well.

Averting her eyes from the two guys was easy. Pretending not to notice how they were whispering was not.

All her senses seemed heightened. Even the pastor's discussion seemed to target her, with talk about familial substance abuse and how that often became a problem for future generations.

She swallowed the lump of fear building in her throat.

When it came time for them to go around the room and speak, she declined. The sooner she got out of here, the better. Right now, she wasn't sure she *could* handle it if that guy from Quick Bunny approached her.

"Coffee and muffins are served in the back of the hall." The pastor barely wrapped up the meeting before Lark shot to her feet.

The woman who had been wearing purple at the previous meeting fell into step with Lark. "How are you doing?"

"Uh. Fine." She didn't want to chat—she needed to get out of here, and fast.

The woman walked beside Lark, forcing her toward the refreshment table.

"Let me grab you a coffee." The woman placed a cup in Lark's hand.

Crap. She didn't want coffee and new friends. She needed to get out of this place.

The woman smiled at her over the rim of her own cup.

Lark gave her coffee a quick sip. The liquid was lukewarm, as if it had been sitting out for a while cooling off.

Then a strange feeling hit her.

Her head swirled, and her fingers went lax around the cup.

Strong hands gripped her and swept her off her feet. Lark tried to struggle, to scream, and nothing came out. People grappled at her body. She felt something snap. The wire? Oh god, they'd cut the wire.

“This can't happen here.” The male voice was muffled.

Another voice came faintly, but she made out the words. “Get her out during visitation hours.”

The fog swallowed her. Her mind drifted for long minutes.

When she came back to herself, quiet surrounded her.

Hmm. Whatever she was lying on...was kind of cozy.

Chapter Seventeen

Clay planted a hand on Quaide's chest and shoved him hard. His friend rocked and shuffled back a step but came right back at him harder.

"Get the hell out of my way, Livingston. She's not answering—something has to be happening in there!"

"Give her another minute."

"It's already been five since we lost contact!" His shoulder smashed into Quaide's as he circled him and took off in quick strides to the doors of the church hall.

Quaide leaped in front of him, barring his way. "Don't make me take you down, Lexis. Give her a chance. For all you know, she just can't respond with so many people around."

Clay's nostrils flared with a puff of air. That *was* something Lark would do.

He pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand and depressed the comms device in his ear that linked him to Lark.

"Lark. Answer me."

Dead air was his only response.

Clay narrowed his eyes at Quaide. "That's it. I'm going in."

Without another moment's hesitation, he surged around his buddy and rushed to the door. Sentry was still only a team of one. Two if he counted Lark.

Fuck, this entire op had been sinking since the minute she showed up on his doorstep. Together, they'd been paddling

long and hard to stay afloat, but fact was, he needed to get them both off the ship. To hell with blackwillow73 and all the other crap going on with the FBI behind the scenes.

Nothing mattered but getting Lark out of danger and to safety. Maybe the Wynton Ranch back in Montana could use another female ranch hand. The WEST team members owned the ranch, and he had every confidence that she'd be safe there.

He pictured Lark on a cattle ranch, red curls mashed beneath a cowgirl hat that more than likely Corrine Wynton would lend to her. Lark wouldn't like hiding from the world, but she'd cope. She was a survivor.

He slammed through the door and rushed down the main corridor leading to the hall. Two men were quickly setting up folding chairs in neat rows facing the front of the room for the funeral service. A florist was delivering baskets of flowers to the front.

Wildly, he searched the room for Lark and didn't see her.

Where was she? He couldn't lose her.

"Lark!" he snapped into his comms. Several people turned to stare at him, but he ignored them all and hurried to a door at the far side of the space.

What would Lark do if she really were in trouble? The woman was fearless.

She'd lost *everyone*, lost *everything*. But not her life. She always had a safety net.

Clay sucked in a searing breath. *I'm her safety net. I have to save Lark.*

His senses were blaring. She was in trouble. But where was she?

Practically running now, he searched the hall and rooms beyond, finding only an empty space decorated in feminine hues that was probably a bride's dressing room. He located one for grooms and then restrooms. He ducked to make a sweep of the stalls, searching for feet underneath.

No Lark.

“Goddammit! I could use some backup here, Quaide,” he ground out. “I can’t find her.”

“No one’s coming out either, only going in for the funeral. I’ll check the east exit.”

Clay’s heart alternately slammed and squeezed until the change of oxygen in his system started to affect his brain.

Focus! Stop letting your emotions get the better of you and find her!

But I fucking love that woman like no one else.

He shoved through another exit and stumbled to a halt. A parking lot spread out before him. A hearse was parked nearby and a group of guys dressed in black were hanging out smoking cigarettes.

They looked up at his explosive exit, expressions grim.

Clay ducked back into the building, letting the door slam hard behind him. “Quaide, what’s your position?”

A loud echo of shattering glass came from Clay’s left.

“Hear that? That’s me.”

“Fuck, what did you do?”

“I barreled around a corner and ran right into a guy carrying vases of flowers.”

Clay didn’t have a moment to respond because his phone buzzed.

He snapped it to his ear but the call cut off before he could even identify the caller. He swiped to look at the caller ID, but it just said call failed, no contact information. He attempted to call it back, but it wouldn’t connect.

His gut told him it was Lark. Something happened. She lost her phone.

No, a woman who carried around enough junk to survive an apocalypse would never lose something as important as her

phone, especially during this op. That could only mean it was taken from her by force.

Rage spread through his limbs, a pulsating heat that built and swelled until he couldn't see straight.

When he rounded a corner and spotted Quaide, Clay's boots crunched the broken glass from the vases.

"Something is very wrong," Clay ground out. "I just got a call that ended and I can't reach her at all."

Quaide picked his way across the glass, grinding it into the floor underfoot. A few feet away, the florist was picking up what flowers he could salvage from the disaster.

They both ignored the guy and strode to the main hall again. People were filtering into the space for the service, including those guys Clay ran into in the back parking lot.

"Wait!" He threw out an arm to stop Quaide in his tracks. "Why the hell isn't the funeral being held inside the church? Why is it being held in the hall?"

* * * * *

Lark was not okay. She was freaking out. She couldn't breathe. Meaning there wasn't enough air.

She was inside a coffin.

Those bastards had drugged her and stuffed her in a coffin.

Oh, it made for a great story, but she was *not* amused.

The feel of the satin surrounding her gave it away. That and the dark, tight confines. No way could she call this thing roomy. Good thing she wasn't claustrophobic.

Actually, there wasn't much that frightened her, but now she was starting to wonder if being buried alive could be the one trigger that had never been activated until this moment.

Her mental clock seemed to be ticking down to the time she ran out of oxygen, and that only filled her with more panic.

In the utter darkness, Lark patted down her body. Whatever they'd spiked that coffee with had hit her hard and fast but wore off just as fast. All her faculties were in perfect working order.

She touched the place where the wires had been running beneath her clothes and found them cut, the frayed ends poking her skin. She continued patting down her body.

No phone.

They'd taken her phone.

She ran her hands along her sides and her fingers brushed a hard object.

Clamping her fingers around it brought relief flooding into her veins. Her phone—they hadn't taken it after all.

But why did it feel so weird?

The back was off. Hell, what now? If they took the battery

She felt around.

Aha! They'd ripped out the battery and shoved it into the casket with her. She only had to figure out how to piece it together.

And how to get more air into this thing.

With shaking hands, she made several attempts to fit the battery into the back of her phone without the ability to see. Just when she thought she got it, the battery fell out on her chest and she had to start all over again.

The piece slipped into place almost as though it belonged there. But the screen remained black.

Lark's heart slammed against her ribs. Frustration tore through her.

Then the screen lit up.

"Yes!" She didn't mean to say that out loud—conserving air was the number one priority for her right now.

Quickly, she switched on the phone light and illuminated the interior of the space she was lying in.

Yep. It was definitely a coffin. And by the cheap fabric surrounding her, not even a very high quality one.

Not that she was a coffin snob or anything, but really, who were those people who stuffed her in here?

The guy from Quick Bunny, Jacob the Sagittarius...and the woman in purple who hadn't been wearing purple today were all in league together.

Now she recalled faces flashing past her vision after they drugged her and they bundled her out of the meeting—and into the coffin.

This can't happen here, one had said.

Anger ripped through Lark. And she'd given two of those people the benefit of the doubt.

Clay was hardened to honed steel for a reason—he'd spent years in this line of work, and she'd been at it mere days. Next time she would not be so lenient about the people who smiled or took selfies with her. And maybe not so convinced she could handle herself without any actual training or experience.

Okay, getting more air was her next priority. She'd once read that you could kick out the sides of a coffin. They were less sturdy. But she didn't have the strength for that.

Running her finger along one crack, she located the seam of the lid. Poking her fingers at the seal, she racked her brain. If she could stuff something in there, she could maybe force it open just a tiny sliver of a crack, enough to let air move.

What could she use? Her head rested on a small pillow. Whipping it out from under her, she attempted to wad it up enough to stuff into the crack, but it was far too puffy.

Hands shaking, she dropped the pillow and took up the phone again. Clay. She needed to reach Clay.

She was so damn afraid he'd leave her, just like everybody else. Andrew meant well, and he'd still left. What

was to stop Clay from doing the same?

Her mind flitted over their moments together. So many and yet so few too.

As her brain crashed into one of those instances, her breathing came in short pants, and it wasn't from the lack of air in this thing.

That look he'd given her...was filled with love.

Pure freakin' love. The kind that was forever.

Hope bubbled inside her like the champagne fountain they'd have at their wedding someday. Clay Lexis loved her. The man wasn't walking away. She wouldn't let him.

When she opened the messages, she found them blank. Her contacts had been wiped. Her phone had probably reset when they yanked the battery.

Think, Lark.

She only had to see or hear something one time in order to recall it. So why wasn't she able to pull up Clay's phone number from the recesses of her mind?

Panic swept in. She started to hyperventilate and her lungs burned for the air she was certain she wasn't getting enough of.

She had to calm down and think harder.

One time she'd lost a cheap birthstone ring that Andrew had given her for her birthday. Thinking back, he'd probably stolen it just to have something to give her when she turned nine. But that wasn't the point—she'd lost the ring.

He'd told her to retrace her steps and search until she found it. So she'd started in her bed and followed her own path to the bathroom, even pulling open the drawer where her toothbrush was kept until she finally located the ring in the entryway where the too-big band had slipped off her finger when she put on her shoes.

She could do the same with a mental map of what happened leading up to the point where Clay entered his

number into her phone.

Spinning the wheel of time backward she put herself back in the house with Clay wiring her. How grim his expression had been. Almost pissed off. But she knew that emotion wasn't for her. When he looked at her, nothing but love shone in his eyes.

Her heart peaked and dipped with the rise and fall of her own emotions for the man she'd come to love in a few short days.

She loved Clay.

"Give me your phone."

Her mind zeroed in and faded out until she mentally leaned closer to Clay to see the number he punched into her contacts.

"Yes!" she burst out and thumbed the number into her phone again.

It rang once...then the call disconnected.

Dammit, she just *had to* use the phone carrier that didn't provide reception from inside a coffin. Next time she wouldn't skimp on the service. Only the best from now on, even if she had to take twice the jobs on Quick Bunny.

But she'd be working for Sentry from now on—they could provide her with a phone.

She tried again and this time rolled as far onto her side as she could to get closer to the seal in hopes that she'd connect.

The ringing of the call stopped.

"Lark! Jesus Christ!" Clay's rough tone washed through her ear. Goosebumps erupted all over her body.

"Clay! I have to talk fast in case I drop the call again."

"Are you safe?"

"Depends on what you consider safe."

"Tell me where you are!"

"I'm...in a coffin."

Silence met her ears. Then he exploded, “Fuck!”

She talked fast, providing information about the people she believed to be responsible.

“I’m going to trace your call. Goddamn fucking shit. How did this happen to you? I should never have let you go into that meeting alone.”

She heard the pain in his voice like sharp spikes.

“You couldn’t have known this would happen. Clay, I have to say this now. There may not be time.”

“Don’t say that!” he roared.

“I love you,” she cried out in a rush. “I know I come off as flighty, but I mean this. I really love you.”

“I know, doll. I love you too. Just sit tight. I’m coming to get you.”

“Not like I can go anywhere.”

A choked noise escaped him. “Stay on the line with me.”

“Okay, but I’m worried about having enough air, so I’m just going to be quiet.”

“Christ, Lark. All right. Stay on the line. I’m coming.”

Tears of relief filled her eyes. Deep down, she knew her time wasn’t up and she wouldn’t die today. But if she did, she’d confessed her feelings to the man she loved. Not many people could say the same.

Chapter Eighteen

“Why is there an empty coffin sitting around in a church?” Quaide’s question barely registered in Clay’s brain.

He frantically stared at the phone screen, waiting for something to connect and tell him where to find Lark.

She remained on the line, but for how long? A growl like the pain of a wounded animal vibrated in his chest.

“There’s got to be something else going on in this place. What are we missing?” Quaide continued to spout questions.

Clay rounded on him. “Look, you’re not helping anything with your questions right now. We have one goal: find Lark.”

He didn’t add “before it’s too late,” but he didn’t need to. Quaide’s expression told him that he heard that loud and clear.

Hell, his hands were shaking. Quaide saw it too but twisted his stare away.

He silently urged her phone to connect. To give him a location.

A red dot appeared on his screen.

“Got it!” He peered down at it.

“She’s not far,” Quaide said.

Clay jerked his head up and pointed east. The dot moved.

“Wait—is she being moved?”

“Only one kind of vehicle can transport a coffin. Get to the truck.” Clay took off at a dead run for the truck. He jumped behind the wheel just as Quaide took shotgun. They

tore out of the parking lot with a squeal of tires. The vehicle fishtailed on the road.

“Give me your phone. I’ll navigate.” Quaide held out a hand, and Clay thrust the device at him.

“Take a right here.”

He damn near missed the quick turn and swerved too wide into the oncoming lane. A driver blasted his horn at him, but Clay only stomped the gas pedal to the floor and shot forward.

“I’ve never dealt with anything like this before.” Quaide’s statement would have made Clay gape at him in stunned awe if he weren’t so focused on reaching Lark.

“How much air is inside a coffin? How much time does she have?” He didn’t *really* want the answer.

As Quaide searched his own phone for the answer, Clay held his breath. He opened his mouth to respond, but Clay sliced a hand through the air.

Quaide stopped and met his stare. Clay pointed to his phone. Lark was still on the line. She could hear the answer to that question and panic even more.

Though she’d remained much calmer than most people would be in her situation—including him—Clay had detected the hum of fear in her voice.

Quaide held up his phone for him to read the answer.

Five and a half hours. If she remained calm.

He did the mental math and determined she’d only been missing about forty-five minutes. He pushed the pedal to the floor harder.

“Forgot what a terrible driver you are, Lexis.” Quaide grabbed the handle over the window.

“I don’t take complaints from people who aren’t part of the team.”

He huffed. “This is one hell of a time to recruit. Is there an interview process too?”

“No. You’re in.” He glanced at his friend. “I need you on Sentry, Livingston.”

Quaide tensed as they rounded a curve far too fast and nearly careened into the guiderail. At the last second, Clay jerked the truck into the lane.

“Fine, sign me up. I’ll take the position. This is the best adrenaline rush I’ve felt since—Well, never mind. But I’m tired of sitting behind a desk.”

“Welcome aboard.”

“Next time I drive, Lexis.”

“Just tell me where to go.” He scoured the road for a hearse, but traffic was sparse, and all he saw were a few SUVs that were probably headed out of town for supplies.

“Another right. Five hundred feet. See that road sign?”

He drew his lips across his teeth and gunned it. They hit a high speed, and Clay slammed on the brakes just as they reached the turn.

Quaide said nothing, but Clay had broken out in a heavy sweat. The need to rescue Lark became a throb in his chest. It had a deep rumble like a gong that spread throughout his body. His hands grew slick on the leather wheel.

It had been a while since Clay considered East Canon to be his stomping ground, but he remembered places like he knew the curves of Lark’s body.

“We’re headed to the warehouse.”

“Jesus. Are you sure?”

“Positive,” he bit off.

“Surely they’re not stupid enough to believe we won’t look there. Not after Desantis and I paid them a visit the other night.”

“The kid’s cocky as hell. I’m sure his friends feel like they’re just as untouchable. Hold on. We’re coming in hot.”

The street that ran behind the warehouse connected to a gravel parking lot. They hit hard. The truck went into a sideways skid and Clay righted it just before the passenger door slammed into the back of the building.

If Quaide was shaken by the close call, he didn't let on. He might have unpeeled his fingers from the handle, though. Clay didn't have time to look—he jumped out and hit the ground running.

A padlock on the back door would keep out common criminals, but not him.

He yanked his weapon up, took aim and fired. The lock splintered.

When he kicked in the door, Quaide was on his six. Just like the old days.

They stormed into the space. No windows let in light and the door offered only a dim gray cast on the floor to guide them.

Taking a defensive pose, he threw out his senses. At the same moment he picked up a voice, Quaide twitched a finger in the direction he'd heard it too.

They sneaked through a back room filled with boxes and junk—and possibly bomb parts if they made a delivery after Quaide and Desantis's raid. When they reached a doorway, Clay darted his head around the jamb.

He only had a split second to see. But it was enough to send his adrenaline through the roof.

A hearse was parked in the middle of the open space. Holding three fingers up behind his back, he ticked them down for Quaide.

On three, they burst into the big space with a high roof that carried sound, a fact that worked to their advantage.

The thud of their boots gained the attention of two men dressed in the black funeral attire.

“Step away from the vehicle!” Clay commanded in a bellow bordering on a roar.

“He’s got a weapon!” Quaide didn’t pause—he swung his weapon up and fired.

The man was hurled backward by the force of his bullet.

Clay quickly picked off the other man.

“Secure the area. I’ll check the hearse!” A quick scan showed nobody sat in the vehicle. When he saw the coffin in the back, his heart gave a sickening jolt of dread.

Oh god.

What if they were too late? Those guys could have done something to Lark in the time since he’d heard from her. Not a sound emitted from the coffin or from the phone line.

He threw open the back doors. “Help me!” he yelled to Quaide.

He rushed over and together they hefted the heavy coffin out. Just looking at the thing made his stomach churn.

“How do you open this thing?” His hands shook harder as he fought with clasps.

“Here! I got it.” Quaide stepped back just as Clay whipped the lid open.

His gut bottomed out.

Oh my god. Don’t let me be too late.

“Lark!” He threw himself forward and scooped her into his arms.

She let out a gasp that was music to his ears even as it shaved about a decade off his life.

Dragging her out of her silken tomb, he buried his face in her hair and drank in her scent. She flung her arms around his neck and clung to him.

Trembling and crying were good. It meant she was alive.

“Never again, Lark. Never fucking again.”

She found his lips and kissed him with an edge of desperation.

When they broke apart, he stared down at her. Swiping his thumb over the tear streak on her freckled cheek, he searched her face for harm. If he'd even seen a single bruise marring her skin, he'd resurrect those men they just shot so he could kill them again.

“I love you, Clay.”

Her declaration brought his focus to her again. He crushed her against his chest and spattered kisses over her curls. “You said I can’t commit, but I am—to you. I want you, Lark. With conditions.”

She raised her head. “Just what a girl wants to hear after she’s been rescued from death by coffin. The conditions I’ve been waiting for.”

Quaide’s chuckle reached him from around the front of the hearse where he’d taken himself off in order to give them privacy or be on the lookout for more danger.

Clay cupped her cheek. “The condition is that I need to die first.”

Her eyes sparked. “I mean, you are fifteen years older. Older men historically go first.”

He’d come to see her teasing about their difference in age as a way to lighten him up. And he loved her even more for it.

Another laugh from Quaide. Later, Clay would pound some sense into his friend—no, his teammate.

Lark leaned into his hand, and no matter what happened before now or would happen in the future, he had this woman to call his own.

* * * * *

There wasn’t enough air in the world to pull into Lark’s lungs. She sucked in gulp after gulp, and it felt *so* good to make her lungs burn like this. Even better that it smelled like Clay’s clean, masculine scent.

“Promise me, Lark.”

“How can I promise that you’ll go first?”

“I go first. Period. Don’t argue with your elder.” He couldn’t stop pressing kisses to her cheeks and forehead.

When he covered her mouth with his and kissed her long and deep, she dug her fingers into his shoulders and held on tight.

The tangle of their tongues sparked feelings inside her that made her feel more tingly and alive. After long moments, they split apart again.

His gaze traveled over her face, his expression filled with tenderness that brought more tears to her eyes.

“I agree to your condition...if you let me do the hiring for Sentry.”

He jerked in her arms. “What? I thought you wanted to be *part of* Sentry.”

“That was before I got drugged and stuffed into a coffin. From now on, I’m good with staying on the administrative side of things. And I want to recruit Jacob the Sagittarius.”

His eyes flared wide. “Are you insane?”

She shook her head. “I had time to think about it when I was in...” She shuddered. “Well, you know. I think he could really add to the team.”

“He’s a fucking criminal, Lark. He nearly killed you!”

“He didn’t do this. He was just dragged into the mess, not unlike I was. The guy who hired me to drive the bomb was responsible.” An idea hit, and she withdrew from her lover’s arms enough to pull out her phone from her bra where she’d tucked it. She opened a fresh note and began typing.

“What are you typing?”

“The article I wrote in my head while I was in the coffin. Oh, this is gonna be so good! Worth at least a month’s rent over the garage.”

He plucked the phone out of her hand and yanked her against his chest again. “You’re not going back there. And you can’t publish that article you wrote in the coffin, Lark.”

She gaped at him.

“Seriously,” he told her firmly.

“Okay, maybe later it can be an exposé. When this is all said and done,” she cozied up to him, “and we live happily ever after.”

Chapter Nineteen

Clay walked into the kitchen of his rental home and stopped. He took in the new modern desk set up against one wall. On top of it sat two monitors, and several tablets were stacked on the side, along with boxes of brand-new burn phones.

Lark twisted in the new desk chair and threw him a smile. “Surprise!”

He blinked. “What’s all this?”

“I thought Sentry needed a headquarters. I mean, there’s always a person to check in with. I’m like your personal Roberta.”

He grunted. “Without the security leaks, I hope.”

“Oh, absolutely.” She bobbed her head, causing those springy curls to bounce around her shoulders.

Clay drifted over to the desk. “Where did you get the funding for all this?”

“Quaide hooked us up.”

“Did he?” He scrubbed his knuckles over his jaw. “Son of a bitch...”

“He’s on his way over to sign the contract.”

That had Clay’s brows shooting upward. “Contract?”

“Of course. We need his commitment to Sentry now that he’s officially resigned from his position with the FBI.”

Picking up one of the burn phones, he examined the quality before setting it back on the stack.

“Is the equipment to your satisfaction so far? I mean, we still need to get the comms devices and equip the weapons storage locker—”

“Weapons storage locker? Are you serious?”

Biting down on her bottom lip, she gave an enthusiastic nod. “Let me show you.”

His stare latched on to her body as she bounced in her old Converse sneakers. She grabbed his hand and towed him behind her through the kitchen to a door leading to the garage that was filled with old junk he probably should have tossed when he moved into the place, but—

He stopped again, gaping at what he saw.

The garage had been cleared and along one wall were rows of steel storage lockers. There was also a small seating group consisting of six chairs.

“You guys have all the say on what goes into the lockers, of course. But I thought you should have your own place to keep your guns or disguises or whatever you’ll need.” She swung toward him, face tipped up to his and a nervous smile playing around her full lips. “What do you think?”

His gaze roamed over her beautiful face before he delved into the depths of her eyes. “I think you’re the most amazing secretary ever.”

She made a scoffing noise. “I’m not a secretary, Clay. That archaic word has been retired. I’m Sentry’s intelligence analyst and official dispatcher. Of course, I got most of my information from comic books.”

His brow arched.

“I’m joking! I spoke with Corrine Wynton at WEST Protection. She offered a lot of suggestions on setting you guys up in style.”

“But this is all on the government’s dime?”

“Yup. Do I at least get a pat on the head?”

His chest rumbled. “You get more than that, doll.” Hooking an arm around her middle, he yanked her flush against his body. Her body conformed to his, soft breasts pressed to his chest and a tender smile on her lips.

She curled her hand around his nape. “So I did a good thing? I was nervous because, you know, I haven’t officially been given a position on Sentry.”

He contemplated how much to say. “I was worried about letting you get involved. This isn’t a Girl Scout troop, Lark. We’re going to be involved with a lot of dangerous shit. I don’t want you anywhere near that.”

“Again with the Girl Scouts! Does this make you change your mind about me at all?” She took his hand and settled it over her breast. His cock jerked against his fly. Molding his fingers to fit her curves, he issued a moan.

“I changed my mind about you within the first ten minutes in your company, Lark. And yes, you’re amazing. You set Sentry up for nothing but success, and I appreciate my... intelligence analyst...so much.” Lowering his lips to hers, he kissed her.

The first brush of her mouth over his extracted a growl from him. He yanked her tighter against his chest, pulling her onto tiptoes.

A rough cough sounded from the doorway. He withdrew from the kiss and spotted Quaide standing in the doorway.

“When you two are finished eating each other’s faces off, I’m ready to sign that contract.” With that, he pivoted and vanished inside.

Clay barked a chuckle, and Lark hid her face against his chest, shaking with laughter.

Taking her by the hand, he led her into the kitchen. She kicked into business mode, hurrying back to her workstation. Quaide was leaning against the counter with his arms folded.

Clay walked over and held out a hand to his friend. “It’s not official until the ink hits the paper, but welcome aboard, brother.”

Quaide unfolded his arms to grip his hand. Clay thumped him on the shoulder in a bro-hug.

“Actually, there’s no ink or paper,” Lark spoke up. She held a tablet out. “Everything’s electronic. I mean, it *is* the digital age.” She rolled her eyes in a way that had them both laughing.

“I think she’s calling us old.” Quaide took the tablet from her and scribbled his signature using his fingertip.

“I know she is.” Clay grinned at Lark. His lover. The love of his life. She was here to support him in all ways, and it never felt so good.

Finished, Quaide handed her the tablet. After a couple swipes on the screen, she shot them a broad smile. “Now it’s all official. You’re part of Sentry, Quaide.”

He gave her a nod in return, but he wasn’t smiling. That tension Clay had been picking up on for a while now seemed to be knotting his friend up.

Quaide was definitely keeping something from him, but Clay figured in time the man would talk. They had formed a strong bond in bootcamp that carried on throughout the years. If Clay had to guess, though, he’d say something bad went down in the FBI that was eating at Quaide. A failed op or some heavy responsibility that gnawed at his conscientious friend.

“Knock fucking knock!” The call from the front of the house made Clay jolt. He rushed into the living room to see Julius and Jennings bursting through the door.

“How the hell did you get in?” he demanded. “The door was locked.”

Jennings closed the door behind him with a cocky grin. “You should do something about the security around here.”

Hell, these guys were real pieces of work. On the other hand, they were exactly the kind of men that Clay needed on the team.

Lark popped into the living room. “Hey, guys! Good to see you.”

Julius dragged his gaze over Lark from head to toe. “You too.”

Clay stepped between them, cutting off Lark from view. Julius’s lips quirked up.

“I thought something was going on last time we saw you. I see I wasn’t wrong.” Julius smacked Clay on the shoulder. “You did real good for yourself, man.”

He processed the good tidings and felt himself relax with the knowledge that the Abel brother wasn’t out to get Lark for himself.

“Thanks,” he grated out.

“Come in, guys. Does anybody want some sweet tea? I made it myself.”

“She makes a good pitcher of tea,” Clay agreed, and she beamed at his compliment.

Later, he’d find that bottle of honey she used to sweeten the drink and drizzle it all over her beautiful body...then slowly lick it off.

“I’ll take a glass,” Jennings said as he followed Quaide and Clay into the garage. Julius brought up the rear. They all claimed the chairs for the impromptu meeting.

A minute later, Lark bustled out carrying a tray full of drinks. “The conference table is arriving on Wednesday. You’ll just have to hold your glasses.”

They each accepted one and sipped. Clay didn’t take a drink yet, just looked at the group.

“What news do you have to share?” he asked.

Julius lowered his glass from his lips. “First, you should know that we handed over the phone that was attached to the bomb as evidence. The FBI has already matched it to half a dozen other phones attached to similar bombs that were located throughout Colorado.”

Quaide nodded as though this wasn't news to him. Of course, he'd just turned in his resignation. He had access to whatever intel had dropped before that paper crossed his supervisor's desk.

Jennings gulped half his glass and gave Lark a nod of approval. She returned it with a happy smile.

"It looks like the bombs all originated with blackwillow73. He made a lot of friends with similar views," Jennings said.

"There were several churches targeted. The bombs were distributed by guys like the one who contracted your services on Quick Bunny," Julius told Lark.

She sat back in her seat, fingers locked around her glass. Clay reached over and settled a hand on her knee. He didn't want her to be afraid anymore. As long as he was around, he'd keep her safe.

"And the bomb units getting waylaid? The kid being broken out of the prison transport?" Clay probed for more intel.

"One of the associates of blackwillow73 did have a link to the FBI. Money was traced—it changed hands."

Quaide blew out a breath. "Damn, I knew something like that had to be going down."

Jennings nodded. "They paid the guy off to redirect the bomb units since they couldn't exactly stage attacks on them after that first one."

Clay digested all this information. "The churches they wanted to bomb..."

"Were all very open and progressive. Which points to this being a hate crime."

"But the church where the recovery meeting was held wasn't on the list, was it?" Clay looked between Jennings and Julius.

They both shook their heads.

Quaide exchanged a look with Clay. They'd both suspected that something dark was taking place at that particular church. If he had to make a guess, that funeral had been a cover for some other event going down. Only Lark got in the way.

They still had questions about why there was a hearse and an empty coffin, but he and Quaide had made stabs at why that might be, too. Drugs, weapons and illegals all remained on the table as things that could be transported by way of an empty coffin and inside a hearse that would never be stopped by authorities.

"We're looking into a lot of the local activities," he said to the group. Then he redirected his attention to Julius and Jennings. "You've proved yourselves by bringing us this information. That's exactly the type of work ethic I've come to expect from your family name."

Jennings gave him a solemn nod. Julius scraped a finger along his jaw as his only way of accepting Clay's praise.

"I want to officially offer you both positions on the Sentry team."

Silence followed his statement. Lark's fingers covered Clay's on her thigh, and she squeezed his hand.

Quaide was eyeing the brothers up. "What do you say about working with a couple seasoned veterans?"

"Is that what you're calling yourselves?" Julius broke into a grin.

"We've got the years backing us up. You've got the new blood we need on the team," Clay said.

The brothers didn't even trade a glance when they both nodded. "We're in," Julius announced.

Lark jiggled in her seat. "This is *so* exciting, guys. I'm sitting here watching it all take place too."

Clay leveled her in a look. "Lark."

She gave him a side-eye.

“No writing articles. Got it?”

“Fine. But this is history. You guys are about to do some amazing things that could alter the world and make it a much better place.” Her vehemence had Clay’s chest swelling with pride.

From a team of one to four in a day, with Lark as support, he did feel the power behind her words.

Glancing around, he saw that what she said had the same effect on the team.

The team. Sentry.

“I have a suggestion for the fifth member,” she said.

“Oh no,” he interrupted.

She widened those green eyes at him. “If you’ll only just *consider* my points on the subject, you’ll see that I’m right about Jacob the Sagittarius.”

“Jacob the who?” Julius nudged the brim of his cowboy hat up to peer at her.

She shifted in her seat, and Clay could see that she was getting ready to launch into one of her persuasive speeches.

“Jacob is a guy who attended the recovery meeting when I went there undercover.”

“He helped drug her and put her in a coffin,” Clay put in.

“We heard about that. Scary shit. What would make you want a guy responsible for that working with any of us?” Julius’s throat mottled with redness that Clay interpreted as outrage.

“At least someone besides me sees this as a problem,” Clay said.

“None of us are on board with this idea,” Quaide added.

Lark looked at Jennings, but he only leaned back in his seat and folded his arms.

She hooked a curl behind the delicate shell of her ear. “We’d wait for the guy to get his life together first, of course.”

“No, Lark. There’s definitely somebody better suited to Sentry, and it’s not that guy. I can’t stomach the thought of working with a person who tried to hurt you.” Clay’s stare hit hers.

“I think if you talk to him—”

“Not happening.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it. “Sorry, I seem to have gone a little deaf in this ear. I can’t make out what you’re saying.”

“More like gone senile,” she muttered under her breath.

“That’s it!” He leaped up and lifted her out of her seat. She started to protest, but he slammed his mouth over hers to cut off anything she was about to say.

The guys’ laughter echoed behind them as Clay kiss-carried her out of the garage.

When he reached his room and kicked the door shut, he pinned her to the wall, cupped her breasts and captured her mouth in the same move.

She moaned at the demanding pressure of his lips. Sweeping his tongue through her mouth, he let her feel the bulge growing against her stomach.

“You can’t just carry me off like that,” she whispered between deep passes of his tongue.

“I can and did.” He pinched both her nipples, making her back arch off the wall.

Ducking to suck on the column of her throat, he teased her breasts for long heartbeats. Her fingers dug into his arms, and she rocked into his touch.

Feeling her resistance fade, he drew from the kiss. Staring down at her, his chest heaved. Was he really going to do this?

Yes, he fucking was. No one was going to call Clay Lexis a wimp, least of all Lark.

“Doll, there’s something I want to ask you.”

Her lips parted on a puff of air. She searched his eyes. “I already told you I’ll work with Sentry. What about all the improvements I made and the setup in the kitchen says otherwise? I’ll remember all the details and feed them to you from HQ.”

He shook his head. “It’s not about Sentry. It’s about...us.”

“Oh.”

He slipped his hand upward from her breast to the base of her throat, letting his fingers lay across her tripping pulse. “I love you, Lark. And I meant what I said about committing to you.”

Her breaths came faster. “I love you too, Clay. I’m in this for the long haul. Not that you have as much time left as I do —”

He kissed her long and hard to shut her up. When he broke away, she giggled. “What do you say about committing to staying in bed with me for a week?”

“Mmm. Hell yes.” He ground his hips against hers, flattening her to the wall.

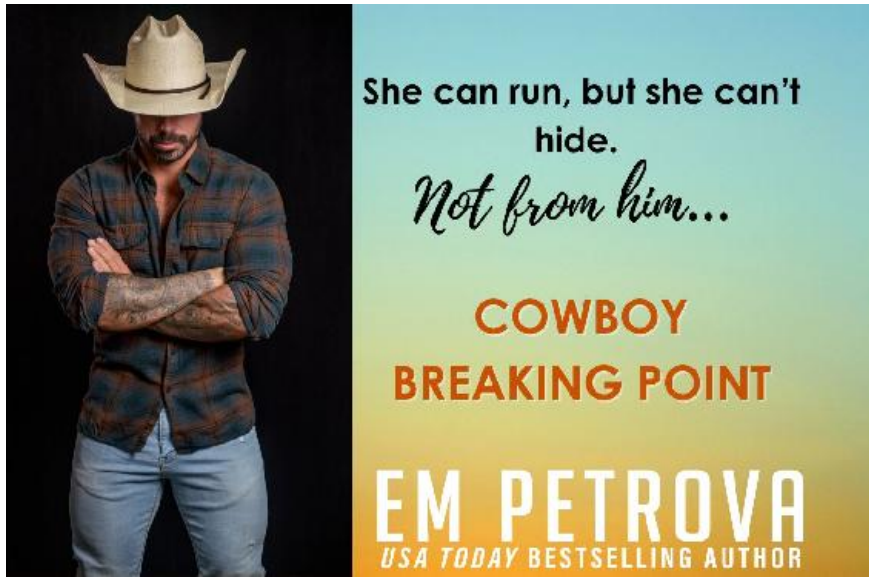
She went on tiptoe and nipped at his bottom lip, sparking a growl in his chest. “Our week begins now.”

“Who knew you’d start bossing me around so soon after committing to you?” He gripped her under the thighs and lifted her so his cock angled toward her pussy. As their mouths fused in a never-ending kiss, he gave himself up to the fierce and loyal woman in his arms. She was beautiful inside and out.

And he was going to do his damndest to make her the happiest woman in the world.

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Em Petrova

Em Petrova is a USA Today Bestselling Author who was raised by hippies in the wilds of Pennsylvania but told her parents at the age of four she wanted to be a gypsy when she grew up. She has a soft spot for babies, puppies and 90s Grunge music and believes in Bigfoot and aliens. She started writing at the age of twelve and prides herself on making her characters larger than life and her sex scenes hotter than hot.

She burst into the world of publishing in 2010 after having five beautiful bambinos and figuring they were old enough to get their own snacks while she pounds away at the keys. In her not-so-spare time, she is fur-mommy to a Labradoodle named Daisy Hasselhoff.

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WITHIN RANGE

POINT BLANK RANGE

RANGE OF MOTION

TARGET IN RANGE

OUT OF RANGE

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HEAT OF THE KNIGHT

HOT LOUISIANA KNIGHT

AFTER MIDKNIGHT

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ANGEL OF THE KNIGHT

WEST Protection

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Story

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Story.

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COWBOY CONSPIRACY THEORY
Mathias's Story.

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Story.

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BRAVO TANGO COWBOY Corrine and
Panic's Story.

BREAKING IN THE COWBOY Casey's
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EM PETROVA
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