



**MIDAS
TOUCH**

SECURITY OPERATIONS GROUP BRAVO 
KAT BAMMER

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KILO BRAVO SIERRA PRESS

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Epilogue

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*For my lovely readers—
The other half of the equation.*



CARTER



I took a fake sip of my bottle and looked around the hotel bar.

It had been a week, and I couldn't wait to get off this fucking island. We couldn't pinpoint the day of the meeting exactly, so it had been like this every evening for five fucking miserable days.

Waiting, just waiting.

And it didn't look like anything would happen tonight either. The storm outside brushed against the complex, and the howling wind and splatter of rain against the windows weren't inviting anyone to go outside.

This OP—operation—had been a bloody stupid idea from the start.

What a waste of time, money...everything.

I wasn't a relaxed person.

Never was, never will be.

But these last few months I've been wound too tight. Even I noticed it, so when the chatter picked up about a meeting taking place, the team and I thought it was good checking it out.

I thought combining an OP and a vacation was a good idea. Thought it would chill me out: a week in Jamaica, enjoying a beer with a good friend under the sun on a beautiful beach. Palm trees, azure water with underwater life that resembled a color explosion.

All nice and shiny.

In theory.

Only I should've known the voice in my head would keep me from enjoying it.

The voice that urged me to hurry.

The voice that told me bad things were happening while I was relaxing.

The voice that woke me up at 4.30 a.m. every fucking day and created this unstoppable drive in me.

Drive to do more.

Drive to be something more.

Not the shallow multi-billionaire jet-setting around the world that I've portrayed to the world but more of the warrior.

The shadow fighter.

The one I was behind the scenes.

Me and my team.

We worked in the shadows because that's where our enemies operated. Our enemy was strong and ruthless and multi-faceted. They acted on their sick behaviors as if it was okay.

But it wasn't okay.

Preying on children and young women. Circling videos of them being abused and molested. Kidnapping them and selling those poor souls to God knows whom.

To endure God knows what.

That was the shit that drove me. That was the shit I worked every day against. Taking a fucking vacation?

Didn't relax me at all.

Destroying the enemy.

Wiping the Earth clean from those sick bastards would be relaxing. Keeping just one more child safe.

That was my mission.

That was what I needed to do. What I should have done years ago, when I found those pictures in PFC Miller's stuff.

But I didn't.

I burned those photographs in a delusional attempt to save the reputation of a man who didn't deserve saving.

Poor judgment. Very poor judgment. A split-second decision that stayed with me forever.

It haunted me in my dreams, and it gnawed on my soul.

Kids had suffered because of me.

But it stopped here.

I took my phone out for the twentieth time and opened my photo app.

My mother had sent me new pictures of Brody's first soccer practice. He looked lost on the field.

Tiny and lost.

Not part of the team, unlike the other kids in the pictures.

And I hadn't been there to protect him and cheer him on.

The familiar feeling of failing the people I loved most settled into my chest. I needed to make a change. I couldn't pretend any longer. My life, my mission, no matter how honorable, needed to expand...focus...change.

Drastically.

I'd been on the hunt since I left the service.

Settling down never held the slightest appeal for me—getting married, starting a family.

Goddammit.

I'd escaped conniving women since I was mature enough to realize they were after my money or my uniform. But that was what I needed to do. That was what Brody needed.

Stability. A family.

He was my number one responsibility now. And even though he felt more comfortable staying with my mother, he was mine now. I owed him as much—my way to make amends for not being there for his mother, my sister, when she had needed me most.

If I'd only known...

“Target inbound. ETA ten seconds, Midas.”

Adrenaline shot through my body at the mentioning of my old Marine nickname, and my senses went hyperalert. “Roger that.”

I forced myself to lounge back into my chair and raised my phone high enough so I could look at the display and the entrance to the hotel bar without shifting my eyes.

Goofy was positioned right outside in the lobby, so wherever they'd settle in for their meeting, we had it covered.

We'd hacked into the hotel's network beforehand to check on any suspicious reservations. But nothing had popped up.

And if they went up to a room? We would adjust our plans on the fly.

Contingencies always came true.

Surveillance operations this size were difficult on my little team with our limited resources and abilities. But back in my active military days, I'd learned how to be effective with a small team deep behind enemy lines—gathering reconnaissance of the enemy. That was our mission as Force RECON Marines.

Sometimes, I wished back the days working for the military.

But the government wasn't interested in this.

Wasn't even aware of what was happening on our own soil. Until the effects were glaringly visible: drugs flooding into cities all over the country, and women and children going missing or being abused at home on a broad enough spectrum, it was too obvious to ignore.

We came in way before then. Before it became obvious.

Always alert, always on the hunt.

Ready to intercept, rescue, and protect.

From the shadows.

Because that was what we were.

Shadow warriors.

Nobody entered the bar. I waited a couple more minutes until I was sure they must've stayed in the lobby—time for me to reposition.

I extracted some bills out of the pocket of my jeans, and left them on the table, my full bottle of beer on top of them. Then I sauntered out of the bar as if I didn't have a care in the world, looking for an empty chair in the hotel lobby.

Goofy met my eyes briefly, and with a near-invisible movement of his head, he motioned to a party of men to the south side of the room.

Four men sat around a table, apparently waiting for a fifth, while three burly-looking guys stood and looked around, with menacing faces and dark eyes.

Christ.

We didn't know who exactly would meet here today when we picked up on the chatter.

But if there ever was a movie scene about a cartel meeting—this was it.

Slicked-back black hair.

Cheesy mustaches.

And weapons concealed under ill-fitting jackets.

I studied the men sitting around the table. Since there was a chair still empty, and they weren't talking I assumed they were waiting for someone.

I recognized a few faces: Pepe Sormiza, the youngest son of the infamous Sormiza Cartel, a Mexican cartel that had invaded Guatemala and was now infiltrating our country.

Apparently, this was an even more top-level meeting than our initial intel suggested.

And who knew cartels now preferred tropical islands as meeting points? Considering the firepower those guys carried, if shit went sideways, we needed a way out, and fast. I picked a chair across the lobby but faced the group and pretended to study a brochure of the hotel, while figuring out the best escape route. “Peaches, you got ears?”

“Negative.” Peaches, our very own computer nerd and hacker par excellence, answered into my earpiece.

“Anything we can do?”

“Working on it.”

“Roger that.” I was back to waiting, contemplating contingency plans, if things got sideways, and studying escape routes.

Not that this op going south was likely to happen.

We would stay back.

Low vis, intel gathering only was the mission objective.

Until I saw her stumble down the stairs...

EDITH



“Hey, Carol, my flight lands tomorrow at three. Do you still got time to pick me up from the airport? You totally don’t have to if you’re busy,” I said.

“Edith? Is that you?”

“Duh, yes.”

“Sorry. I’m in the car right now. Of course. 3 p.m. sharp. Airport. Hey, how’s the work/vacation going? Checked all those boxes on your bucket list already?”

I could just imagine my best friend’s waggling eyebrows to go with the question. And regretted telling her about my stupid list the minute I told her.

Why did I even make it?

“Stop it, Terry, Junior. I’m on the phone. I mean it. If I have to say one more word, the two of you can walk home.”

I heard shuffling and squeaking in the background and suppressed my chuckle about the empty threat.

I was beyond doubt certain my best friend would never let her eight- and ten-year-old boys walk home alone.

But why did she even bring up my list when she had the boys with her in the car?

When the stuff on it wasn’t exactly kid-appropriate—or at all.

“Hey, Terry, hey, Junior.” I upped my voice, so they could hear me in the back. “Don’t give your mom a hard time. You know she’s the best mom in the world, and if you don’t behave, I’ll leave the presents I picked up for you behind.”

“Hey, Auntie Edith. We’ll be good, promise,” they replied in unison.

I bit my lip and suppressed a chuckle.

That promise would be forgotten in five minutes, max. “Okay, so I’ll see you tomorrow then. Any news about Gloria? Did she come back?”

Gloria was one of our young women who lived in the Little Women’s Home, Carol managed, and I volunteered whenever I could.

The shelter was Carol’s nonprofit center for pregnant girls and teenage mothers down on their luck. She built a home for them to get them off the streets and on the way to a self-determined future. And in my free time, I volunteered and acted as the resident career coach.

Training these women and leading them to value education while learning how to write résumés and role-playing job interviews was one of the things I truly enjoyed in life.

One of the very few things.

I just wish I could say the same about my job.

Gloria had been one of the girls I worked with—barely nineteen and not much luck in her life so far. She’d disappeared ten days ago, without taking any of her clothes or things. And none of us knew how to find her.

“Nope. Still nothing. I talked to Sheriff Travers yesterday, but...nothing. We’ll talk more tomorrow. Gary will take the kids, so we can talk about your list tomorrow, as well.” She chuckled again.

I rolled my eyes when we said goodbye, and then stared at my phone.

I wouldn’t check the list again.

Didn't need to.

My bucket list had been an epic failure so far. As had the vacation. But I shouldn't be surprised.

When my boss sent me here, I decided to extend my stay to have a mini-vacation. But I should've known this vacation/work-trip combination wouldn't work.

And on top of working by checking out some random property for some exorbitantly rich but officially to-remain-incognito client, my sleazy, slimy ex showed up in his role as the client's lawyer.

Go figure.

This dampened my mood for my vacation days after, and the thing on my bucket list? A sexy hookup—didn't happen.

Why did I ever think this was what I wanted anyhow? Because I thought it would make the vacation special. But hooking up with random guys on vacation wasn't special. It was just dangerous and dumb. And I was too old for dumb shit.

I checked my outfit in the mirror—the bright sundress looked feminine...it made me look younger, softer...nice.

Only on vacation did I allow myself to wear something that made me look soft instead of my usual armor of makeup, power suits, and high heels.

Being nice got me two ex-husbands, one of them a slimy bastard, a string of no-good boyfriends, a life that went on without me, and a bottomed-out career in middle management in a big real estate development firm.

When I stopped being nice, my career skyrocketed. My love life turned a lot hotter and fulfilling...almost.

The bad thing...deep down, I hated it.

I hated the tough-woman exterior.

I hated the pretend sex goddess.

I hated being the aggressor.

I hated feeling stuck.

So the vacations I took usually were my time-outs, vacations from my life where I could act and behave and be as soft and feminine as I liked. Short escapes that kept me sane.

Only for me.

Just not this one.

At least Don, slime-ball and ex-husband number one, hadn't been staying at my hotel, so I hadn't seen him for the past three days.

Now I was down to one last evening. And the hotel bar it was. Originally, my plan had been to spend my last evening at the beach, staring at the sunset and soaking up the ocean-infused air with a cocktail in my hand, flirting with the sexy bartender down at the beach bar. But looking outside the window—where a tropical storm whipped those palm trees around like reeds swayed by the wind—that plan was out.

I took the stairs instead of the elevator—old habits, though I regretted the decision immediately. Even though I was used to wearing high heels all the time, this pair of strappy, heeled sandals was uncomfortable and unstable as hell, and stairs were probably not a good choice.

“Edith.”

I looked behind me when I heard my name. Don's slimy grin immediately gave me the hives. And my flight instinct kicked in.

Sadly...the stairs.

I stumbled at the last step and wonkily landed. White-hot pain seared my left ankle and shot up my calf, and I groaned.

Perfect.

Just fucking perfect.

I tripped over my heels right in the middle of a busy hotel lobby like an amateur.

“There's somebody here to meet you.”

I glared at Don, who was by my side now. My ankle throbbed, but either Don hadn't seen me stumble, or he just didn't care.

Probably the latter, asshole that he was. "No."

"Yes, Mr. Caroz requested a meeting with you."

Mr. Caroz, the client for whom I'd flown all the way here and shown the property to?

The very special client, as my boss had called him?

Hell no.

This was vacation—not work.

I held my purse like a vise, the urge to punch Don rising.

I didn't want to meet anyone tonight. I wasn't prepared and I wouldn't let him ambush me like that. "Tell Mr. Caroz I'm very sorry, but—"

"He's here for you, so you shut up and meet him." Don didn't raise his voice, but something in it made my muscles stiffen and brace at his menacing command.

Something wasn't right.

I'd felt it when I showed them the property.

But at least there I was prepared: professional attire, professional smile.

Armor firmly in place.

Tonight—I just felt threatened and vulnerable. I didn't want to go with him, didn't want to meet Mr. Caroz.

Heat crept up my neck while, at the same time, shivers made the hairs on my neck stiffen.

Don grabbed my arm, and his grip tightened as if my arm was a rope, and he was dangling off a cliff.

Something wasn't right here.

Not right at all.

CARTER



I was on my feet and halfway to her when my brain caught up with my body.

This was a fucking mission, for Christ's sake.

When did I lose my ability to control my instincts?

Goofy stared at me as if I turned up naked to an OP, which, yes, I did once, but only after losing a bet.

Back then, my teammates got a good chuckle out of it.

This time...nothing funny about it.

I turned my forward motion into a saunter and pretended to do some window-shopping of the little boutique embedded in the hotel lobby while watching the woman from the side of my eye.

I'd immediately recognized her.

I'd seen her around the hotel these last couple of days.

Seen her around?

Yeah, more like watched out for her the whole goddamn day. But hey, I've never seen a woman more beautiful, graceful, and intriguing as this one.

She seemed to be alone on vacation, which made her stand out even more.

But she looked comfortable. Not like she'd been stood up at the altar and was now on her honeymoon alone.

Instead, she looked like she enjoyed her vacation.

Had been friendly to everyone from elderly to kids, from the people who worked at the hotel to the other guests.

She even gave me a fleeting smile, once, which was enough to deepen my fascination even more.

Not that I've acted on it.

Mission or not, women were dangerous.

Especially if they looked and acted like her.

Especially if they got me hot and wanting with just a smile.

“Do we have ears?” My words were curt, pissed off about my crumbling composure, and the whole OP.

I watched a man in a suit come down the stairs and stop at the woman, who was still clutching the banister with one hand and her ankle with the other.

Everything about him looked as sleazy as the other cartel guys, even though he looked less gangster and more distinguished—which made him stand out like a sore thumb.

Maybe he wasn't part of the whole thing?

A quick look at the waiting party confirmed that they were somehow connected after all, since all eyes were on the guy and my woman.

Wait, what?

No.

I mean the woman.

Not *my* woman.

The.

But the guy was either oblivious or high enough in the food chain to not care he kept the Sormiza family waiting.

“Goofy, get a pic of the guy by the stairs. Send it in.”

“Roger that.”

I didn't like the way the sleazy guy talked to mystery woman, and I especially didn't like her body language.

She'd lost her friendly face the minute he spoke to her.

Now, she looked like she'd not only twisted her ankle, but did it while stepping into a pile of dog shit.

The cartel guys got fidgety, and the old guy who'd been right next to Pepe Sormiza headed toward the stairs.

I didn't want any of them anywhere near my mystery woman, so I decided to intercept. "I'm going in."

"Bad idea, Midas. Stand down. Just wait it out," Goofy replied.

But once the sleazy guy grabbed her upper arm, I was on the move.

Single-mindedly heading in her direction.

Barely containing the rage slowly bubbling to the surface.

I zeroed in on his hand. A deadly calm came over me.

He would either let go—or I would do it for him.

By breaking his fucking hand, and his fucking face.

Shit.

Nope, not happening.

Not here, for everyone to see.

I put a lid on my murderous emotions, and when I arrived at the same time as the older guy did, I was back in control—and armed with a plan. "Babe, I'm sorry, I didn't see you coming down. What's wrong with your ankle? Are you hurt?"

The sleazy man's eyes shot from me to the old guy and back. But my eyes stayed firmly on her.

She looked at me as if the next words out of her mouth would blow my cover, so I swept in and did the only thing I could do to shut her up.

The kiss was bruising.

Intense and...not intended to rock my world.

My entire body tingled, which must have been the adrenaline pumping because I knew one thing for sure.

There was no such thing as world-rocking kisses.

Especially not pretend ones.

When I withdrew from her lips, I didn't let her get a word in. I turned to the sleazy guy and stretched my hand out—forcing him to let go.

Time to get some intel out of this extremely dangerous move. And the asshole to back away from her.

“I'm Carter.”

The sleazy guy looked down to my outstretched hand and back up into my face, clearly surprised.

“Donovan.” He shook my hand, and his handshake was weak and sweaty, like catching an eel with your bare hands.

Gross.

He had an arrow tattooed on the outside of his thumb, totally not fitting the image he was portraying with his expensive Armani suit and ostentatious golden watch.

I filed that little tidbit of information away for later.

“Well, Donovan. Nice to meet you. Thank you for your assistance, but I think we need to get some ice on that ankle. If you'll excuse us.”

I didn't wait for a reply, but leaned down, swept mystery woman into my arms and pushed Donovan to the side to carry her back up the stairs.

She was lighter than I'd expected.

She wasn't one of those tiny women. She must've easily been 5'8", but boy, feeling her body in my arms, pressed against my stomach, made me feel all kinds of inappropriate things.

“Wait until we're out of earshot,” I growled into her ear.

I didn't care if the boys listened in or not. I didn't care if I just blew my cover or the OP.

The only thing I cared about right now was getting her out of the hot zone and to safety.

When we reached the next floor, I carried her to the elevator before carefully setting her back down and taking a step back.

I pushed the button and watched her army-green eyes turning darker, as if the clouds of a brewing storm had blocked out the sun.

This wasn't a woman who let herself be pushed around.

And right now, she felt pushed around by me.

I needed to explain myself.

Just not right now.

Right now, I needed to get into a position to salvage the OP...without being seen.

EDITH



Holy shit. What just happened?

The second I saw Don, I forgot the pain in my ankle.

Not so much as forgot. But the self-control needed to not spit in his face in front of all these people took all my mental energy away from my hurting ankle.

What was this lowlife doing here in my hotel, anyway?

Our divorce had been fifteen years ago after a very short, very non-fulfilling marriage.

Stupid, young—did I mention stupid?

We had no contact whatsoever except living in the same city and occasionally—only if I truly couldn't avoid it—crossing paths.

What started as rage, right after he'd dumped me and divorced me for another woman, had morphed into a deep feeling of nothingness toward him.

Except when he was being slimy and magnanimous or touching me, talking to me, or coming within a five-mile radius of me.

Three things he did right now, and the cold showers raining down my spine in response were alarming.

I didn't expect to meet him here.

Didn't expect his sleazy offer. But what I expected the least was the absolutely gorgeous stranger, whom I never

talked to before, to sweep in and kiss me.

Hell.

And what a kiss that was. Right before he'd swept me into his arms as if I wasn't a grown-ass woman, with a grown-ass body, and carried me up the stairs.

Up. The. Stairs.

"Wait until we're out of earshot."

I wouldn't even know what to say, even if he didn't tell me to wait.

I was annoyed and strangely charmed at the same time.

Was that even possible?

I expected him to let me down the moment we hit the floor, but he carried me to the elevator and sat me down in front of it.

Now what?

Do I say thank you, or slap him in the face?

"I'm sorry?" His deep dark voice sent goosebumps down my spine.

I narrowed my eyes. Was he asking? "For what?"

"Sweeping in? Kissing you? I can't explain right now, but I needed you safe."

"And this is safe in your opinion?" I arched a brow.

He hesitated.

I pressed my lips together and when his gaze locked on them, they started to tingle.

"Probably not."

His eyes popped up to mine, then back to my lips.

He wanted to kiss me again.

And I wanted him to kiss me again—which was perfectly irrational since I didn't even know him.

Carter.

That's how he'd introduced himself to Don.

Carter, no last name.

"I need to get back. Will you make it to your room, or should I carry you?"

Should he carry me?

Really?

I almost swooned before I got a grip on myself.

Hell.

I wasn't some damsel in distress who needed a knight in shining armor. I could handle shit on my own.

I did handle shit. "I'm good. Just go."

The look of desire in his eyes turned into regret which was immediately replaced by a steely, almost detached look, void of any emotion.

He nodded and turned away.

"I'm on the move down. I'm using the back stairwell. What's the status?"

He seemed to listen to something while I watched him retreat. "Goofy, follow them, but avoid contact. Peaches, tell me you got something out of this shit show."

Those were the last words I heard before the door to the stairwell closed, and the elevator arrived with a ding that jarred me out of my staring.

Really, what the hell was that?

Was he talking to himself?

And what did he mean?

He needed me safe. Safe from what?

My ex?

Yes, Don was a spineless, soulless asshole. But he was no threat to my safety.

So what was this man, Carter, talking about?

CARTER



Yesterday was a major bust.

Whatever was said in that meeting, we couldn't get ears on it.

But at least we knew who we were dealing with and that we were on the right track.

The Sormiza cartel was known for making strategic moves, and using local assets and connections to make their decisions about where they would expand to next.

Their expansions always came with a sudden influx of drugs, an increase in violence and gang activity, and then... then the women and kids started to disappear—slowly at first but at an increasingly alarming rate after that.

But those kids weren't a statistic, at least not for us.

They were not just faceless numbers.

It hurt to look at every single one of them. But someone needed to do it.

I needed to do it.

It was my punishment, my torment, but also my privilege to protect those who couldn't protect themselves.

And I would not stop.

The mission?

Keeping those kids safe. Supporting local law enforcement and making the life of those assholes hell.

Peaches had found some intel that indicated their next move was into the area of Whitebrook.

Why there, I had no clue.

I didn't think they were onto me.

But it felt off.

Too much coincidence.

Why this area when this was where I was headed? Where my next business venture was? Was it just dumb luck, or did I blow my cover somehow, and now the whole cartel was going after me now?

Whatever.

I wasn't afraid. Saving those kids was the whole reason I was still standing when I shouldn't be.

So many close calls.

So many of my teammates that died right next to me. And me? Not so much as a scrape.

Fucking unfair.

Or maybe fate.

Her picture appeared before my mind's eye: her big, green eyes, bright with a friendly smile or dark with confusion, annoyance, and pain.

But meeting her wasn't fate, just dumb luck. Wrong time, wrong place.

I shook my head to clear those annoying thoughts. I had no time for distractions—especially not pretty ones like hers.

I focus on more pressing matters.

Brody.

I wasn't alone anymore, not the only one affected, if I were to die. And I needed to quit acting as if I was.

I needed to get home and find a way to make my chosen path suitable for a family.

But first, I got some shit to take care of: loose ends and business opportunities.

Get the lay of the land—metaphorically and in reality. Reconnect with Travers, my old teammate.

Then check in on Bryce’s widow and his parents.

And maybe zero in on what was happening in and around Whitebrook.

The bus stopped, and the doors opened. Goofy, next to me, groaned. “Why couldn’t we take a private car?”

“Low vis, remember. We’re nothing but two friends, having a bro-vacation.”

I could feel the nervous energy coming off him in waves.

He was an adrenaline junkie, just like me: dedicated, driven, loyal. We knew how to control ourselves in those high-danger situations. But everyday life? It bored the hell out of us, and still had us on high-alert.

So pretending to be relaxed was the name of the game, even when we were not. And one look at the very hippy-looking driver ensured we were most certainly not relaxed.

We boarded the bus, and each took one row right behind the driver.

I sat sideways, leaning my back against the window, and pushed my baseball cap deep into my face.

To everyone around me, it might’ve looked like I was sleeping...but I wasn’t.

I noticed everything.

I knew exactly where everyone around me was sitting. Twelve people in total on the bus. Every single person assessed and dismissed. No threat in sight.

The bus wasn’t followed either.

My gaze stopped when I caught her exiting the hotel building and heading for the bus.

Our bus.

The very one I was on.

Fuck.

“Oh shit,” Goofy murmured right before she entered the bus and settled right across the aisle.

She looked different today. Different, but still a knockout. Dressed to the nines.

Skirt, heels, creamy skin. The silky blouse enhanced the contours of her body, her bra almost shining through. Almost.

Sexy.

Wait. The world screeched to a halt.

High heels? Didn't she hurt her ankle yesterday? I looked again and saw that my imagination had played a trick on me.

Holy fuck, now I was seeing things that weren't really there?

Another look, but yes, today she wore flats.

Sexy flats.

I mentally scratched my forehead. This must be the first time I'd ever even considered what kind of shoes a woman wore.

But by God.

This woman...

She occupied my dreams last night, and I had replayed my lips touching hers over and over.

Insanity knocking on my door.

And yet, my guess?

Every man who'd ever gotten her full attention had felt it deep inside his bones...among other places. Because if that woman gave you her attention, you sure as hell felt it. Everywhere.

I repositioned to relieve the pressure of my tightened dick. Even did that...during the mission...yesterday, and right now,

even though she hadn't even looked at me, hadn't recognized me.

The doors closed, and the bus inched forward.

Finally.

I put the cap deeper onto my face; for everyone else, it would look like I was getting some shut-eye.

Suddenly mystery woman jumped up, ran forward, and screamed, "Stop," at the same time.

I instinctively grabbed my side.

No weapon.

Fuck.

I assessed the situation within a split second and was up even before the driver jumped on the brakes, anticipating what would happen next.

And sure enough.

She hadn't held onto to anything and when the driver hit the brakes flew through the air and was about to crash into the windshield.

But I got to her just in time.

I grabbed her mid-movement, slung her back, and pressed her against my body, cradling her head with my hand.

Her huge green eyes swept over me—just like they'd had, haunting me in my sleep last night.

Along with visions of her soft, yielding lips that had driven me to treat myself to a cold, bruising shower.

And when not even cold water had worked, when my hand had wrapped around my dick, pretending it was her sweet lips...

Fuck.

It took her a second before she got her bearings back, before recognition settled in, and her lips parted into a sexy O.

Sexy enough that it took all my self-restraint not to kiss her again.

Right here, right now.

Damn, the consequences.

I could almost feel the ghost of that first kiss, even now.

No matter if it was just to shut her up.

No matter if it meant nothing.

I locked my gaze with hers.

I had zero self-control just thinking of her—which was a hard pill to swallow for a guy like me, who thrived on discipline and self-control—but having her pressed against my body? Inhaling her light, spicy scent?

Fuck. Just Fuck.

I tensed and held her at arm's length before she could accidentally bump against my growing bulge. "Easy there."

She straightened and pushed against my chest, and I immediately let her go.

"Thank you."

I saluted and took another step back, increasing the distance between us.

Close call.

"What the hell, lady?" The bus driver stared at her as if she was crazy, but she just squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and pointed to the front exit. "There are two more passengers."

"Oh, okay," the driver said, shut down the engine, and opened the door once again.

I exhaled deeply, resettled into my seat, and watched the mystery woman go back to her seat, as well.

Our eyes briefly met, but she looked away immediately.

Intriguing.

Did I have the same intoxicating effect on her as she had on me?

And why wasn't she curious? Why didn't she ask me what yesterday was all about? Why did she appear so cold and unapproachable today?

I wasn't surprised about her stopping the bus, though. All week long, she'd been friendly and considerate, nice to everyone but me.

Interesting.

Goofy handed me my baseball cap with a knowing grin, but I just grabbed it and pulled it back down over my face.

The doors closed, and I relaxed after the late-comers settled farther back in the bus. They were too excited to even say thank you to the woman across the aisle from me. But she didn't seem to care.

Oddly enough, I did.

I watched her from under my cap.

She didn't glance in my direction or give me any indication I was even on her radar.

Goofy in the row next to me chuckled and murmured under his breath. "I never thought I'd see the day when a woman you kissed, or rescued, wasn't remotely interested in you. At all."

That stung.

But just as well. I chuckled.

I didn't like clingy women, anyhow. And most women I'd met were of the very clingy variety.

So if this was a breath of fresh air, then why was it needling me so much that she wasn't into me?

The drive took another half-hour, and I was beyond antsy once we arrived at the airport.

Thank God we did that extended morning run earlier because it would be another few hours sitting on flights and around airports before we arrived at our destination.

My least favorite way of spending time.

Or wasting time.

Or risking my life.

Maybe a beer would take off the edge. Not that I needed it, of course, but whatever.

EDITH



I couldn't sleep.

All night.

That kiss had been on replay in my mind, and the guy had even haunted me in my dreams, leaving me sweaty and desperate.

Enough.

I searched for my phone in my ridiculously big handbag and dialed Carol again, and waited impatiently. "Hey, girl," I said as soon as she picked up.

"Hey."

"I'm boarding the bus in a sec. I just wanted to check-in. You're gonna pick me up from the airport, right?" With three kids, I never knew if she'd pop up at the last minute.

"Mmm, of course. Didn't we have this conversation yesterday?" Carol sounded distracted.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, no, I don't know."

"What's wrong?"

"The Little Women's Home just called. Luna didn't come home yesterday."

"Did she take the girls?"

“That’s just it. The girls are still there. She would never have left them.”

Shit, first Gloria, now Luna. Something bad was going on, and I couldn’t wait to get home.

Luna, like most of the girls, had been dealt a hard hand in life. Barely nineteen, she had two little ones, but she was on an upward trajectory, and she loved her girls.

“I’m sure she’ll come back. Don’t worry too much.” Who was I kidding? But being in front of the hotel and surrounded by other tourists, this wasn’t the time and place. The bus stopped at the end of the driveway and the first people boarded the bus. “Hey, the bus to the airport just arrived. I’ll see you in a few hours, then we’ll find out what’s going on together. Deal?”

“Yeah.”

Carol didn’t sound happy, and I had a bad gut feeling, as well. I turned around and stepped onto the bus that would hopefully bring us to the airport safely. I couldn’t wait to get home and get to the bottom of this.

But one look at the driver and my trust in arriving safely dwindled.

He looked...chilled out.

Very chilled out.

The only thing missing was a bottle of beer in his hand and a joint in the other to match his straw hat, unbuttoned shirt, board shorts, and flip-flops. Were you even allowed to drive in those?

Hell.

What was the safest place if a bus crashed again? Front or Back? Shit. No clue. Should have concentrated more on survival skills, less on my increasingly unsatisfying career.

The bus doors closed and when the engine came on with a deep purr, I slipped into the first seat on the left. Front seat it was then.

Across the aisle I ogled the man who was occupying the space.

Wait a second.

With his muscular frame slouched against the glass pane, he took over the second seat with his strong jeans-clad legs. Somehow his pose looked relaxed, but his body didn't. And I knew that body.

I looked away through the window on my own side. Shit. That was the guy from yesterday evening. The guy that kissed me, carried me up the stairs, and left me outside the elevator. Did he recognize me? Probably not with his hat over his eyes. I looked back at the entrance of the hotel. The young couple who'd arrived with me at the hotel a week earlier struggled with their luggage and waved hectically at the bus.

Only the driver didn't notice.

I jumped up as the bus picked up speed, and the face of the woman outside turned anguished.

“Stop.”

I stumbled up to the driver and when he jumped on the brakes, I grabbed his shoulder...and missed.

Damn.

I saw the windshield coming at me in slow-motion. Braced for impact...which didn't come.

Instead, I got slung back like a rubber band until my nose crashed against a bare clavicle.

Hard. But not as hard as the windshield, thank God.

A low grunt was his only reaction while his powerful arm anchored me against him. His hand curled around the back of my head as if to make sure my neck didn't snap.

How anyone could move so fast I didn't know. I'd seen him out of the corner of my eye when I jumped up. He'd been half-asleep.

I looked up into his deep whiskey-brown eyes. The same eyes that had haunted me all night. And he looked down at me.

His lips pressed into a tight line, as tight as his entire body. Nothing relaxed about him now.

He released the death grip, and his hand slowly moved down my neck, shoulders, and back. The caress made my insides squeeze. Just a tiny squeeze. I laid my hand on his chest, to feel him, or push him away, I wasn't sure. He immediately took a step back and let go of me.

“Easy there.”

Another squeeze.

Hell.

Great body, great eyes, gravel-deep sexy voice...again.

The whole package. Sadly, he knew it, too. “Thank you.”

He saluted and took another step back, increasing the distance between us.

“What the hell, lady?”

The driver's voice pulled me out of my mental freeze. I had other problems to focus on than fawning over my annoyingly sexy savior. I looked at the bus driver who probably thought I had problems and realized I had some roughed-up feathers to calm.

His face said it all.

He thought I was a lunatic. Maybe he thought I had second thoughts about leaving. Whatever. I shrugged and squared off against him while he stared at me as if I'd tried to kill him.

“There are two more passengers.” I pointed out the front exit, back to the couple who was at the door now, staring inside.

“Oh, okay.”

He shut down the engine and opened the door, and I walked back to my seat on wobbly knees. My eyes briefly met with the stranger's eyes, but I looked away immediately. He didn't. I could feel his eyes staring at me inquisitively. Almost as if he wanted to figure me out. But I'd met my quota of attractive men that were not good for me, and even though I

was beyond curious what he'd been doing yesterday, I also knew getting involved with a man that intense would most likely end in heartbreak and me being alone once again. I was done with sexy, intense alpha males. When I sat down and turned to stare out the window, I could still feel his stare scorching my shoulders.

I shuffled around. Uncomfortably hot after the whole incident. Then the stranger put his hat back over his face again. Not that I was looking—it just happened to be in my peripheral vision.

While struggling with their luggage as they passed me, the young couple found a place to sit farther back. The rest of the drive was luckily uneventful. I looked at the beautiful tropical landscape, and the dread of going home slowly rose. When did I come to hate my job...my life so much?

I'd always loved my hometown, Whitebrook. I'd lived there all my life. My sisters were living there; my friends were living there. The town was just big enough to have all the amenities of a city, without the downsides, like crime rates and overly predominant concrete high-rises. Maybe I should move to Three Oaks, where I would be closer to the Little Women's Home and my best friend Carol and her family.

I must have lost myself in daydreams because we arrived at the airport too soon. When I got my luggage out, the driver threw me a dirty look, which I just shrugged off. If he had concentrated more on his surroundings than on his coolness, my interference wouldn't have been necessary.

On the way toward the airport, I didn't look at the surrounding people. I knew I should've at least been more aware of my surroundings. That's what I'd learned in all those self-defense lessons at the Little Women's. But what if I saw someone I was convinced was going to hijack the plane? What would I do then?

“Hey, wait up.”

I turned around but didn't slow my step. The young couple was right behind me and closing the gap.

“Thank you for making the bus stop for us.”

I smiled at them and shrugged my shoulders. “No problem.”

“Can we buy you a drink? You saved us twice within the week, so we really want to thank you properly.”

“Of course, let’s check in first and meet up afterward.”

I wouldn’t call it saving, but they’d arrived at the same time, and somehow, the hotel had gotten me a suite while the couple had gotten a room more suitable for...a person traveling alone...so basically me.

I’d heard them complaining at the bar that first day and offered to swap rooms. No biggie. Not that I needed the space, and their room had had the better view, anyway.

Check-in went surprisingly fast and painless, and the three of us headed for the nearest bar.

I had another hour to kill before my flight was due, so I was happy not to sit around alone, thinking about what the next week would be like.

The conversation flowed, but after about ten minutes, their flight was called which cut our chat short.

“Thanks again, Edith. You made our holiday so much better, and we would’ve missed our flight without you.”

“No problem. Have a safe flight.”

It was always awkward meeting and parting with complete strangers. But at least I didn’t look like the desperate, single, middle-aged woman alone on vacation I truly was.

I leaned back and took a sip from my coffee when my eyes landed on the stranger from the bus again. He was sitting at the bar next to his friend, nursing a beer.

I didn’t need to check my watch to know it wasn’t even 10 a.m. Mighty early for alcohol. At least in my books. But he wasn’t a drunk. At least his body didn’t look like he was. He looked...in shape...sexy...intense. Especially for a man in his late forties, I’d guess. He had that military-bossy air about

him. So maybe that's what he'd been doing yesterday. Some CIA spy shit.

He looked up, and our eyes locked before I could look away. He took that as a sign, grabbed his bottle, and sauntered over. No...sauntered wasn't the right word. Prowled. He prowled like a jaguar targeting its prey.

Only, I wasn't having it. I downed my coffee and got up before he even reached my table.

"In a hurry?"

His voice slid down my spine like deliciously warmed-up massage oil.

Crap.

I straightened even more and donned my tough-woman persona. "No, just not interested." There...couldn't get more blunt than that. To my utter dismay, he just chuckled and shook his head. "You didn't even let me embarrass myself with some cheesy pickup line."

I stared at his bobbing Adam's apple and his overly delicious pecs that peaked out of his nearly-to-the-waist unbuttoned shirt. Shit.

"No need for anyone to embarrass himself." ...or herself, by salivating all over him. I took my carry-on and rolled it out the bar and into the waiting area. I didn't wear high heels today, which made me feel significantly less like the powerful woman I pretended to be. But at least my ankle didn't hurt too bad in my flats, and the chance of stumbling with his eyes still on me was next to zero. I would just sit at the gate and wait there. Maybe check my phone one last time before the flight.

The dark timbre of his chuckle followed me out the bar... down my spine and settled somewhere deep inside my stomach. Not that it fazed me...yeah right.

I hated men.

No wait...I hated my reaction to this particular sexy man. How he could unsettle me and throw me off my game with a single well-tuned chuckle even if men who had enough sense

of humor to make fun of themselves had always turned me on...not this one.

This marked the end of my vacation. So, it was time to slip back into home mode. Into driven, work-focused, no-nonsense Edith. Back to my apartment, which I hated since I got it after my last divorce and I was in the process of selling, and my life, which I hated since... I really didn't know when exactly it started. But being successful wasn't half as fun as it looked from the outside. It was lonely. Increasingly lonely. And it took a lot of effort to uphold the image.

I settled into the waiting area and toyed with my phone—no new calls, and I wouldn't check my work email. Not while still on vacation. That was a line I wouldn't cross, not today. Back at home, my main project had been to finalize the acquisition of the property for a new development near Three Oaks which had me excited. A new community. Trees, playgrounds, a safe place for families. Finally, a project I loved to be a part of, unlike so many others my company acquired. I planned to finalize the purchase of the land before I was sent here, but the seller had dragged his feet. Well, whatever. I would get to it first thing on Monday.

I grabbed the beach read I'd not quite finished and lost myself in the story. When the boarding call came, I was reluctant to stop reading even if it was only for a little while. I waited in line, boarded the plane, and the first leg of my flight went by in a heartbeat. Thanks to the book that kept my mind captured.

I had to hurry to get my connecting flight, but once I arrived at the gate, it was smooth sailing from then on. I boarded the plane, and when I arrived at my row, my heart did a double beat.

Well, hell. This one would be a long flight.

EDITH



“Hey. I’m Carter.”

His grin looked sincere, but it annoyed the hell out of me.

What were the odds that the sexy stranger not only was on the same connecting flight to Whitebrook, but had the seat right next to me?

And where was his friend anyhow?

Well, nothing I could do against it. “Hi.”

“What a surprise.”

I could pretend I wasn’t affected by this turn of events. But then again, why lie? “Yes, indeed.”

I grabbed my carry-on, but before I had a chance to lift it, Carter got up and softly urged me to the side. “Let me.”

He lifted the carry-on as if it weighed nothing and smiled down at me.

A smile that set my body on fire. His scent engulfed me. Not in a bad, overpowering way, just a subtle reminder of his manliness.

Crap, what was I thinking. Manliness? Really? Apparently, the beach read earlier still affected my thinking.

“Thanks, but I could’ve done that myself.”

He nodded and grinned, and his straight, white teeth looked nearly too perfect to be real.

“Of course, you could. But my mother raised me better than that.”

A gentleman.

Huh.

I couldn't say I'd met a lot of them.

Ever since I decided to become the power woman at work, most men there treated me differently...not like a woman, more like one of them...almost.

But that was the way I liked it.

I didn't need a gentleman. My second husband had been one, well, kind of, in public...but not really. But he'd been polite. Even on the day when he told me he was leaving, his suitcase packed, and everything.

He told me he didn't want to live with an ice queen. Told me I didn't need him and that he was done trying.

Well, I shrugged at the memory. I sure didn't need a man now. Or want one, for that matter.

He went back to the window seat and hovered there, waiting for me to take my seat right next to him before he sat down himself.

“So, I finally get a chance to get to know you.”

“You do?”

“Yes, look, whenever I meet a lady who is clearly out of my league, I die to get to know her. It's an obsession.”

I raised my eyebrows. He was clearly bullshitting me.

Out of his league?

Dying to get to know me?

That was laughable. “I don't think so.”

Yesterday, he hadn't been interested. He'd swooped in, kissed me, carried me upstairs, and left before I could even take a breath.

He hadn't been interested then.

“You don’t think what?” He stared at me, his brows narrowed.

And out of his league? Now I knew for sure he was lying. The man next to me was way beyond good-looking. More like Hollywood-movie-star good-looking. He was strong, he was polite. He was... funny.

“Wait.”

“For you? Always.”

I tilted my head to the side. “You’re buttering me up.”

“I am?” He looked insulted.

“Yes, of course,” I face-palmed myself. “Cheesy pickup lines—you warned me yourself.”

He grinned and shrugged, not offended at all by me looking right through his bullshit.

“I’m an open book.”

“But are you really?” I shook my head and glared at him.

“Try me,” he said.

At first glance, he looked like your typical too-good-looking-for-his-own-good alpha male.

Confident.

Easy.

No care in the world.

And if I hadn’t met him yesterday, I maybe would have fallen for it.

Only I had met him. I’d looked into his eyes yesterday, and then, as right now the look in his eyes didn’t fit the easygoing picture he portrayed.

There was an intensity in them, a drive but also tiredness. Those eyes had seen too much and even though he was grinning right now, it didn’t quite change the expression in his eyes.

I should ask him what yesterday was all about. But then he would know I'd thought of him and that I was curious. Better fake indifference and keep things superficial.

“Tell me one thing you've never told anyone before.” I snapped my mouth shut. Hell, what just happened to keeping things superficial?

“You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes that borderline screamed “Player.”

I scoffed—again with the pickup lines. “You're doing this on purpose, don't you.” I glared at him.

Well, two could play this game. “Tell me something nobody has ever told me before.”

He hesitated a split second before he started talking. “You use the outfit you wear today and the way you act as armor, so nobody can see beyond that and get to know the real you and hurt you.”

I stared at him for a good three seconds before I closed my mouth and swallowed.

He was right on the money—not that I would ever admit it. His ego was already big enough without me bolstering it even more by confessing he was right.

“How many women before me have you fed that exact line?”

“Zero,” he said.

Our gazes locked and it felt as if he could see straight into my soul. Straight to that insecure little girl, that still thought she wasn't good enough.

I was saved by the safety instructions which I watched as if my life depended on it. On second thought, it could depend on it. But also, I needed a second. He was just too much.

“Are you mad?”

Was I? Not really. It was just a blow. Armor-piercing... how appropriate. “Of course not. You made good on it. Never

has anyone told me that line before.” Nobody had ever gotten close enough.

“So, you admit I’m right?”

“Hell, no.”

“Hell no, you won’t admit it, or hell no, I’m wrong?”

“Both.”

He laughed, a deep belly laugh that somehow made all the uncomfortable feelings go away.

Amazing.

“That can only mean one thing.”

“What?”

“Either you won’t talk to me for the rest of the flight.” The lines around his eyes deepened, as if that possibility would really bother him.

“Or?”

“Or I’m dead wrong.” He shrugged. But his eyes never left my face.

Gauging, waiting.

I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so...seen.

And yet.

Just because he had good people skills, didn’t mean I would flop over on my back like a dog hoping for a belly rub.

“Yeah.”

“Again, which one?”

“Both.”

“No, don’t cut me off. At least not yet. Can I tell you a secret?”

I shrugged, feigning indifference. “If you must.”

He chuckled, not at all irritated or turned off by me showing him the cold shoulder. “I hate flying.”

Right this moment, the airplane accelerated, and we got pushed back into our seats. His hands grabbed the armrests until the veins on his forearms stood out.

“Why?”

He didn't look at me, just stared straight ahead, his entire body stiff. “Why what?”

“Why do you hate flying? And why are you traveling if you do? And why to Whitebrook?”

“I thought a vacation would relax me a little. I have business to attend to and friends to meet in Whitebrook. Just staying a couple of weeks. And I hate flying ever since I survived a crash a few months ago.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

I tilted my head to the side and felt my pulse increase. I wanted to ask him about it, but one look at his white knuckles and clenched jaw made it obvious this wasn't the right time.

I wasn't afraid of flying, just hesitant enough about the loss of control to know now was the time to change the subject. “Let's play a game.”

“A game?” He cocked his head and gave me an incredulous look.

“A game. We ask each other would-you-rather questions, and since we'll never see each other again, we can be embarrassingly honest. This might be fun.”

“Fun?” I watched his body relax slightly.

Mission accomplished.

He rubbed his jaw, then grinned. “Okay. I'll begin. Would you rather have terrorists take over the plane or have both the pilot and copilot die of simultaneous heart attacks?”

An icy shiver ran down my spine just thinking about that scenario, and I stared at him with a frown. That was the question he was asking? Seriously?

“What kind of question is that?”

“The only one that came to mind, sorry.”

“Okay, I won’t answer that. Try again.”

He chuckled, paused for a second, then his signature grin came back.

“Would you rather lose your luggage or come home to find out someone broke into your apartment and cleaned it out completely?”

I bit my lip and smoothed down my skirt.

Now, that was an excellent question. I thought about my luggage—clothes I loved to wear, my e-reader, my toiletries—all the stuff I needed. Then I thought of my apartment. I hated my apartment. Every time I got home, I was reminded of my last divorce. The way I moved in...completely devastated after yet another failed marriage. And the stuff in it? Nothing I needed, nothing I would miss. Not even clothes I liked.

“The apartment. I have too much stuff, anyway. It would be an opportunity to start fresh without baggage.”

He blinked rapidly, then stared at me. “Huh.”

“You thought I’d choose the luggage.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving me.

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Not so much disappoint as surprise. I don’t know many women who would give that answer.”

“What kind of women do you know?” Where was this question coming from? I’d decided against flirting with him, so what was I doing?

“Obviously, the wrong kind.”

The way he looked at me, with renewed interest and intrigue, made me feel slightly hot.

Was it hot in here?

Didn’t I usually freeze my ass off during flights? Well, clearly not on this one.

The silence between us stretched until I felt uncomfortable on top of hot. “My turn. Would you rather lose your arms or your legs?”

A dark shadow slipped over his face, but the pained expression was gone before I could react.

Shit. Military background. He’d probably had experience with someone losing a limb. Just when I decided to retrieve my question, he answered. “Legs. Then at least I wouldn’t need to find an excuse to skip leg day.”

“Skip leg day?”

“At the gym?”

“Uh, okay.” All I ever did at the gym was take classes which for the most part, were all-body workouts, yoga, or something dancy.

“Would you rather become a mother or get promoted?”

My heart thudded dully in my chest, and I stared down at my clutched hands.

Why did I even start this stupid game?

And why did it appear as if he aimed and hit at all my weak spots?

This one hurt deep. I was too old now to become a mother. One would think with being married twice, having children wouldn’t be a sore spot. But with me being unable to conceive and being denied the family I so longed for, it still hurt.

“Too late for the first one, so I’d choose the second.” Yeah, I’d chosen my career over family, out of necessity, not out of my heart’s desire.

Shit, This was too dangerous territory. Why was I even telling him that?

He looked like a bachelor even though I couldn’t remember if he’d worn a ring, and I wouldn’t look now. If he had been married, he hopefully was divorced, not out to pick up some random woman and cheat on his wife.

He must have realized this was a sore spot because he didn't comment on my answer in any way, and I didn't look up at him to see the pity I would surely see in this stranger's eyes.

No, thank you.

Time for the next question. Maybe if I went for superficial, he would too. "Would you rather have a dog or a cat?" I looked up at him again, and his easy grin settled my nerves a little. This silly game got me entirely too riled up.

CARTER



I grinned at my beautiful female travel partner.

What started out as a silly game got me more and more interested in her. That was why I didn't play fair. My question made her uncomfortable.

But why waste time with superficial shit, if I could find out more about her using the carte-blanche permission her little game gave me.

“Both. I like both. My nephew loves dogs more, so I got a puppy for him, and my mother loves cats—she has three of them. Luckily, they all like each other. Otherwise, it would be even more mayhem than it already is.”

Was that too much information? I never told women stuff about my family.

Usually.

Just because she seemed different, just because I felt different talking to her...kissing her.

Oh, her lips. That kiss had penetrated every bone in my body. Her surprise had been sexy; she was sexy and different.

“So they live together? Your nephew and your mother?”

No surprise she zeroed in on that. She was sharp. “Yes, it's a long story.”

One I wouldn't get into. Mystery woman next to me wasn't one to fall for a sob story. With her reaction to my assessment about her earlier, though, maybe she would.

Not that I would give her one.

“How do you like to be kissed?”

She cocked her head, stared me down. “Five minutes in and you’re already trying to bend the rules,” she said with a shake of her head. “So disappointing.”

I stared at her, then conceded. “Okay, would you rather stay alone until you die or settle for a man you don’t love?”

“Why do you think I don’t have a man in my life? Why do you assume that I don’t prefer women?”

Why indeed? “Touché.”

I watched her, but she remained silent.

Well, I went with my gut on the not-preferring-women thing. Wishful thinking, probably.

But why was I so certain she wasn’t in a relationship? Somehow with the height of the walls around her, and all the body armor aka clothes, something told me there wasn’t a man in her life. At least none that counted. “Intuition.”

“Ahh. Male intuition. At last, I finally get to experience it,” she said in a theatrical, mocking tone or voice.

I grinned. She was making fun of me, but I didn’t care. The laugh lines around her eyes made her look even more attractive, and much more...approachable.

I waited her out.

Our gazes collided in a battle of strong wills, thinly veiled by humor and lightheartedness.

But I wanted to know her answer enough to not let her off the hook. I couldn’t remember the last time I was so invested in a woman I’d just met.

And during an OP, no less.

Oh, fuck that.

My usual MO these days was to avoid women for anything more than a quick romp in the hay, no matter how I met them.

Sex I could do.

With one-night stands, there was a perfect balance between nearness and distance. Just enough to be satisfied, not enough to open up to drama and deceit.

So, I would gladly stay alone rather than settle for any one woman—but I wasn't the one on the hook.

“I settled before; nothing I'm willing to do again. So, it's me, my cats, and my dogs,” she finally answered, just as I thought she would end our little game.

“You got cats and dogs?”

She chuckled. “Not yet, but I guess if I plan to become an old spinster, there's no harm in becoming a crazy, old cat lady.”

I mirrored her chuckle. Damn... Beautiful, funny. “You could never become a crazy, old cat lady.”

Her eyes squinted. “Why not?”

“Crazy, old cat ladies are inherently ugly. It's part of the whole concept. You're not, so you can't become one. Sorry.”

She squeezed her eyes even more, and her lips pressed together in a slight grimace.

Not the kind of reaction I'd hoped for my backward compliment.

“Stop bullshitting me. It's not necessary. I'm not some girl you picked up in a bar. You don't have to butter me up before I agree to have sex with you.”

The flush of adrenaline and the increased tightness of my jeans contrasted with the bark of laughter I showed her.

She got me aroused and amused at the same time—now that was a first. “So, you'll have sex with me, even without being buttered up first?”

She tipped her head back and groaned. “Nope. Sex is off the table.”

There was a history there. Somehow, I'd pegged her for being on the same page as me with regard to fun and one-night

stands. What with going alone on vacation and the flirting with the bartender I'd witnessed.

Maybe I was wrong. "That's heartbreaking."

In a very over-the-top gesture, I held my heart as if she'd stabbed me there.

She looked back at me and scoffed. At least the banter brought back the easy smile from before. "Yeah. You're not convincing."

"Not even a little?"

"Nope, sorry. You're too much of a player to be hurt by my rejection. I don't buy it."

I grinned, and she grinned back at me. Only I wasn't so sure her blow-off didn't hurt.

I hadn't met a woman half as interesting as her in a long time, maybe ever.

Paired with that kind of enticing sex appeal?

She was the whole fucking package.

And getting to know her on a more intimate level was something I strangely craved, even against my better judgment. And being shot down by her was strangely disappointing.

"Whose turn is it?" she asked.

"Yours."

She took her time and looked in the air then slowly up and down my body. Took her time to check me out.

WTF?

"Most effective martial art for self-defense?"

Wow. That one came out of left field. "Really? That's your question?"

"Yep."

"BJJ."

"Excuse me?"

“Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.”

“Okay.”

“Definitely. You should try it sometime. I’d roll with you whenever.”

“Roll with me?”

I let my mind loose for a minute, could almost feel the heady satisfaction of having her pinned down helplessly beneath me.

Fuck yeah.

She chuckled. “Will do.”

And my mind went immediately to what I would do, could do—once I got her there.

The way she stared at me—as if she could read my dirty mind, made it strangely easy to pull my head out of the gutter. I scrambled for a question though. “Yoga pants or no pants?”

She looked at me as if I’d lost my mind.

And maybe I had, because when I envisioned my sexy travel companion without pants, I shifted uncomfortably.

Hell.

My gaze slowly covered each inch of the visible part of her long legs, starting at her sexy-as-hell calves—even in flats they looked irresistible—something I’d never noticed with other women.

I tortured myself by envisioning running my tongue slowly over her skin. Her skirt ended just inches above her knees and when I slowly looked back up, I encountered...her eyes watching me, devouring her.

Fuck.

There was something dark glittering in her eyes.

Unguarded lust snapped between us like an electrical charge. For a second, the urge to grab her neck and pull her to me was overwhelming—to brush her cheek with my lips, squeeze the back of her neck, and draw her close.

Close enough to kiss her again. Close enough to feel her gorgeous breasts pressed against me.

Close enough to see up close what was really going on in her intelligent eyes.

A beautiful red tint brushed her cheeks, and before I could lean in and do something incredibly stupid, her dramatic eye roll and self-deprecating chuckle stopped me.

Stopped me from doing something incredibly dumb, like kissing a woman I'd just met whose name I still didn't know.

“What's the occasion?”

“Occasion?” I was disoriented for a minute. Disoriented and slightly embarrassed. I usually had more self-control than that.

Should I apologize for my running eyes? “I'm sorry?”

She tilted her head to the side and watched me for a second before she snickered. “I think, under the circumstances, I should take the yoga pants, no matter the occasion.”

“Yoga pants?” Oh right. My question. Wow, talk about drawing a complete blank there for a second. Or feeling completely out of control.

I needed to rein that shit in. Just because I felt insanely attracted to the woman next to me, didn't mean I could afford to lose my cool.

That would be a recipe for disaster if I ever saw one.

I shuffled in my seat and looked out the window.

I'd never felt that kind of obsession, this instant attraction, this urge to get to know more about her, to know everything there was.

Not with any woman I'd ever met.

I'd never had the problem of keeping my self-control around any of them.

Never was even tempted to throw caution to the wind.

I'd always made sure they knew I wasn't on the market for something serious. Some ignored it. Some thought they were the ones who would change me.

But none ever did.

But then again, none ever fascinated me as instantly and as completely as the woman next to me.

The plane started the descent, and the seatbelt signs came back on. And I went back to worrying about crashing instead of worrying about my reactions to the woman in the seat next to me.

EDITH



“It was really nice sharing a flight with you.” I sidestepped the passenger standing in front of me and scanned the area for a restroom. Thanks to my strict no-peeing-on-a-plane policy, I was in desperate need of one.

Desperate.

“Oh, okay.” My travel buddy’s smile got stiff, and he narrowed his eyes while he looked at me.

I guess he was surprised at my sudden goodbye, but I really needed to go.

Now.

He watched me for a second before he chuckled. “There’s a lady’s room right over there.” He pointed to the left.

How did I miss that? And why did he know? I darted there, yelping a wobbled thank you over my shoulder—no time for pleasantries. My carry-on fishtailed behind me and nearly knocked over. I could feel his eyes on my back and still hear his chuckle when I reached the door. He must think I was a lunatic, but I didn’t mind.

I really didn’t. Not right now.

The relief I felt after I’d finished and washed my hands was embarrassing. But hey, at least he didn’t know my name... and he didn’t know just how close I’d come to throw my intentions into the wind to not get hot and heavy with another sexy but not-good-for-me guy. And if I had any luck, he would be gone already once I got to baggage claim.

No such luck.

He was still there, his deep laughter audible even before I saw him. Not that the warmth pooling in my belly meant anything. But man, this guy had a nice laugh.

As soon as I spotted him, the warmth turned a few degrees colder. He was holding court, standing next to another guy, surrounded by a bunch of beautiful young women. He was having the time of his life, joking and laughing and flirting, and they were eating it up.

Gone was the nervous man sitting right next to me on the flight. Completely gone.

Now he was back to the cocky man who'd kissed me and carried me up the stairs without asking permission, who'd approached me at the airport bar a few hours ago. Only this time, he'd found some willing females who soaked up every bit of charm and attention he gave them.

Pathetic.

One of the young women leaned forward and shoved her cleavage against his arm.

At least he didn't stare. Too much.

But who was I to cast blame? As a young woman, I'd likely acted the same. Before my failed marriages and years of life-experience, I would've been one of them, standing right there, giggling at the sexy, charming older man, wishing he would single me out and whisk me away to my happily-ever-after.

"Pfff." I stayed behind his back, outside his field of sight, and tried to block out the whole scene, block out how it made something like jealousy bubble up inside me. No success. On both ends.

Those girls didn't stop giggling, and he and his friend didn't stop charming their socks off. He'd been holding off on me...charm-wise. At least on the plane, he'd dialed it back, replaced it with...raw and real instead of shallow flirting. Maybe he realized I wasn't one of those, one of those women who could be charmed by a handsome stranger with a few

superficial compliments. Or maybe it was his fear of flying, or he just wasn't that attracted to me.

Shit. That last thought stung. But why was I even thinking of this? I'd already decided I wasn't interested. Flirting with strangers wasn't what my life was about. That's what my vacation would've been for, and my vacation was over.

Luckily my bag was one of the first ones out, and I snatched it up. Should I say goodbye? Even though I didn't know him and would most likely never see him again, I felt drawn to him. During the flight, he hadn't been the pain-in-the-ass alpha-hole I'd pegged him for, but he was still a man. I didn't know any man who wouldn't enjoy himself immensely when swarmed by beautiful young women. And me being jealous was my problem, not his.

I picked up on another wave of laughter from the merry group and decided against interfering.

Off I went.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” I didn't want to stop, but I didn't want to be rude either. And with his hand wrapped around my upper arm and heat zinging up and down, ignoring him was impossible.

I turned back around and looked at him, then behind him. The girls were still at baggage claim with his friend, watching the two of us. Then I looked up into his face.

Sitting next to each other, he hadn't looked nearly as tall as he was, and even though I'm not a tiny woman, I felt dwarfed by his height.

“In a hurry to get away from me?”

And he was being funny...again. “You seemed... occupied.”

He watched me for a second, delaying his response, reading my reaction.

“And I need to get going.”

He looked like he didn't believe me. Like he could see right through me which of course he couldn't. Silly me. No man who looked like he did and had the charms to go with it, gave a shit about me or how I was feeling.

“Can I at least get your name?”

“Why? We're just two strangers who shared a flight and a conversation. We'll most likely never see each other again, so what difference does it make?”

“Maybe I want to have a name attached to the face I'll probably dream about a lot.”

“Pfff. That was a really, really bad line, and creepy.”

He chuckled again.

Oh, how I loved his kind of self-deprecating laugh. How he wouldn't take himself too seriously made me like him even more. I smiled, as well.

“I apologize for the creepiness.”

“No need, I meet creepy strangers all the time. I'm just glad they don't know my name.” With that I winked, kissed him on the cheek, turned around, and left him standing.

What an interesting man. What an irritating man. If I were on the market for a hot one-night-stand—which I wasn't—I would want someone like him. Maybe one with a little less sex-appeal and a little less charming.

I walked out the door, and the sliding doors closed behind me. Right away, I saw Carol's minivan double-parked, and she was furiously waving at me. I walked toward her and leaned inside the opened passenger-side window.

“Hey, girl.”

“Jump in.”

I put my bag into the trunk and jumped into the car as fast as I could.

“Anything new on Luna?”

Her face turned from an easy smile into a frown. “Nothing. I am alternating between being pissed off at her for leaving the kids behind and worrying that something might’ve happened.”

“Have you called Belinda?” Belinda Graves was one of the deputy sheriffs in Whitebrook, and the whole county was their area of operations. Plus, Belinda knew Luna since she held the self-defense classes at the shelter once a week.

“Yes, of course I have. But they’ve got nothing.”

I made a mental note to call Belinda later since she was a friend of both Carol and me. Belinda would know what we should do next. “Are you headed to the Little Women’s Home now?”

“No”—she shook her head—“I just came from there, and I need to get home to my kids. Gary has this game tonight.” Gary was Carol’s second husband, and she hit the jackpot with him. He was an army vet and the best man I could have wished for Carol, especially after Don, the asshole, her first husband, and my first husband, ditched her like he ditched me for her. The possibility of us becoming friends had been minuscule, but somehow we connected after Don divorced her, and we hit it off.

“I’ll just get you home, then go home myself. I’m exhausted.” And my best friend looked like it.

How she handled her three kids and additionally worked around the clock for the nonprofit she built was beyond me. “I’ll get unpacked and head over there as soon as I can, okay?”

Carol nodded and wiped away a single tear that escaped. “We didn’t get the grant. You know, we might have to close down.”

“Shit.” I grabbed her arm and squeezed, and my throat closed off for a second. We knew that the chances had been slim, but the Little Women’s Home needed funding. At least, me selling my apartment would keep us afloat for some time. But seeing her desperate like this made my heart break.

“I’m selling the apartment this week.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, you know I hate it. And we’ve already been over this. It is what I want.” Donating the money was a done deal. I had a good job. Finding an apartment to rent wouldn’t be difficult, and not going on vacation in exchange for providing those girls with a roof over their head—no-brainer. Fooling around on vacation and obsessing over my travel companion—what had I even been thinking? There were much more important things to focus my attention on. Like selling my apartment and finding Luna.

CARTER



“Hey.” I bro-hugged my former teammate, Richard Travers, at the front entrance of the Italian restaurant Richard chose.

“Gotten lazy there, old boy.” Richard patted my flat abs, and I just grinned. Lazy wasn’t part of my vocabulary; somehow I had too much nervous energy to be lazy—too much to do, too many injustices to make right.

“Hair’s gotten a little thin, too. Too much stress mingling with the rich and beautiful, Midas?”

“Not any lazier than you...and what did you do? Join a commune? What’s with all those hairs?”

Richard combed his fingers through his hair. It was a little long, but of course nowhere near anything commune-worthy. But not as groomed as it was back in our active-duty days, either. And taking shots at each other was half the fun in meeting old teammates.

“You being in my neck of the woods is a surprise,” Richard said.

“Yeah, one of my guys is from around here, and I’m looking into some business propositions nearby.” One business proposition actually, and in a few hours it would all be said and done. Before I left my hotel, Mark Green, the local lawyer I hired to close the deal, called to tell me that the seller had accepted my offer. Mark would pick me up in an hour to get the paperwork done. Buying land to develop was one of my greatest joys in life. I would make a shit ton of money while I

made sure to build beautiful, sustainable, and safe neighborhoods, with enough greenery to offset the concrete, and enough parks and playgrounds for kids to play and hang out in. Safely. Unlike the neighborhood I grew up in. Buying properties I'd only seen on paper was a thrill, but Mark had done a thorough job. He'd made sure there was potential, no political affiliations or other plans for the property, and I expected minimal problems going further.

“Do you really still need to hustle to increase your net worth? I thought you were a billionaire already. Lost that Midas touch of yours?”

I chuckled. The fact that I was successful in my investments was what earned me my stupid nickname in the first place. “In fact, I am, but I like the thrill. What about you?”

“Actually, I'm the sheriff around here.”

Huh. I tipped my head to the side. “Really?”

“Don't look so surprised.”

A slow smile built on my face. “I'm not. It's just, you haven't been back here that long.” But now as I looked at Richard, I could still see the restlessness. I knew for a fact Richard didn't need the money, so to have him still working must mean he still felt the drive to be of service.

“Long enough for you to make millions of dollars, jet-set around the world, and date all the arm candy.”

My chest tightened, but I grinned, anyway. “You're aware of that, huh?” I rubbed my neck. “Never took you for a guy to read one of those tabloids...” And I would rather they'd stop writing about me altogether. All those women...the arm candy. It meant nothing. It was just superfluous stuff that I'd rather not have, but I had an image to uphold. Infiltrating those circles wasn't easy. You needed to be one of them for them to trust you. And I was one of them. At least I pretended to be. Most of those women saw in me the ticket to get what they wanted. They were willing to give a lot to get what they wanted. But I wasn't willing to give anything. Even less now

that I had Brody to take care of. But even before him, I'd half decided to stop looking for the right one...until I'd met mystery woman on the plane. She didn't throw herself at me. Quite the opposite.

It had been a day since my arrival, but I still couldn't get her out of my mind. The few hours of sleep I usually had had been interrupted by her. A constant hard-on had plagued me until I took care of it under the shower. Like a teenager.

Richard chuckled and pulled me out of my thoughts. "Okay, let's grab some chow, and you can tell me all about your life."

We walked into the restaurant and settled into a booth, both of us choosing our positions with our backs slightly to the wall. Old habits...

"So how are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm doing okay. How long are you staying?"

"The business stuff will take me a week, tops, but I'll stay through next week. Need to check on someone."

Richard's eyes tightened. "That someone isn't me, is it?"

"Nope."

He relaxed and leaned back slightly, an easy grin back on his lips. "So business is going well?"

"Yep."

"And life in general?"

I hesitated. How was life going? Richard knew about my sister's death. He'd sent his condolences. He just didn't know the circumstances. Didn't know she overdosed, the drugs she'd scored with money I'd sent her—money that had been meant to take care of Brody, not fueling her fucking addiction. I still felt guilty. But guilt had been my constant companion ever since I found out what had happened to her. Guilt just piled on and on. Now every time I was traveling, every time I left my mom to take care of Brody for me, it was another heap on the pile. "I'm working on it."

Richard looked at me, waiting for me to elaborate. Which I didn't. So, he let it go and grabbed a drink.

“What about you? Seeing someone?”

“I've got everything under control.”

I raised my eyebrows. Since Richard's answer was completely unrelated to my question, something else must be going on that occupied my old friend's thoughts. Obviously, he was thinking about his own life, his own question. I studied him silently for a while. Richard looked a little worn out. Not bad, but also not good. If I had to guess, I'd say he wasn't sleeping. He had that haunted air around him that I'd seen time and again in former soldiers, and in myself every fucking time I looked in the mirror—from the past events and memories that kept us up all night.

“You know, I'm going to meetings sometimes. It's helping to talk about it.” I hadn't been to one in a while, but after my sister's death, I started attending—not some regular grief counseling group but a veteran-centered one. They all had stories to tell. Combat and war changed us. Losing friends left scars forever.

Richard scoffed. “Really? Never believed I'd see the day when Carter Plesak would admit to any weaknesses.”

“Yeah, you know...” I rubbed my neck. “I don't think those are weaknesses. Talking about things, getting support, and giving it—requires tons of strength. You should try it sometimes.”

“Nah, not for me.”

“Are you sleeping?”

There was a pause. Too long a pause.

“Dude, you need to do something. Waiting for it to get better, in misery, isn't going to help.”

“I'm not miserable.”

“Stop lying to yourself and face the facts, Rick. You know the facts.”

Richard nodded.

We all knew the facts. We all knew at least one buddy who struggled to adapt to civilian life. Seeing my friend in the same situation was heart-wrenching. But I'd pushed enough. I just hoped Richard was intelligent enough to get help before things got worse.

"I met a woman," I blurted out, just to slay the silence, and I regretted it instantly.

Richard's only reaction was a raised brow. "When do you ever not meet women?"

"I met her on the flight here. I think she lives here. Whitebrook's a small city. You might know her."

Richard chuckled. "I sure as hell don't know every single citizen in the county."

"But she's beyond beautiful, stands out in a crowd, has this overachiever attitude, a little on the I-hate-all-men side. But definitely intriguing."

Richard leaned his head back and burst out laughing. "I hate all men? That's what you find intriguing nowadays? So, basically you met a woman who didn't fall for your ass the moment she met you, and now you can't stop thinking about her? Does this about sum it up?"

Richard took a sip of his ice water and leaned back with a half-grin on his face.

"I'm not obsessed or anything." I shrugged. "She was just...different. Not at all like all the other women in my life."

Richard leaned back with his arms crossed over his chest. "The ones who see your prime physique, fall to your feet, and beg you to take them?"

It took Herculean effort to unclench my jaw. Richard was right. At least he had been. I'd been chasing tail for as long as he'd known me, so I might've deserved that. I'd always had it easy with women. Somehow they liked me. Yes, I'd fooled around a lot in my younger years, but that had lost its appeal. Nowadays, I was searching for something more...permanent,

maybe? A true companion. Someone I could share my values, my dreams, my aspirations with. Someone who wanted to know the real me and who got me. But women like that didn't grow on trees. The women in my past were not at all like that.

“The ones who see the money and start fantasizing about landing me as a husband. The ones who try to trick me into marriage, the ones who try to get pregnant.” Those were the kind of women I'd met, and I wasn't crazy about them.

“Ouch. Bro, you need to change the company you're hanging out with. Why don't you just tell them...like you did when we were still in?”

“I do, but they seem to have selective hearing. Or they think I'll change my mind or something. Or are just crazy, conniving bitches.”

“You're surrounding yourself with the wrong women.”

“Definitely... That's why that woman on the flight here was so intriguing. She was just different.” I omitted the fact that I'd met her before, during a surveillance OP, mingling with those Sormiza assholes. Maybe it was pure chance she'd been there.

“And she blew you off, without even giving you her name?”

“Yep.”

“Tough.”

“So what about your love life?” I paused for a second, dreaded bringing it up, but as his friend, I owed it to him. “Not that love had anything to do with it. But I'm sorry I missed Kiki's funeral.”

Richard nodded. “It's okay.”

It wasn't. Even though I never understood the strange marriage agreement Richard and his late wife had settled on, other than that it wasn't making him happy, I should've been there for him. And I would've done more than send flowers and my condolences, if Chloe hadn't died and my own life and Brody's hadn't been turned upside down. My gaze wandered

around the room—just a sweep. Until they fell on the woman from the plane. Jesus H. Christ. “This is her.” Just a few feet away, she settled down at a table with a group of women.

Richard looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. “What?”

“The blonde, the tall one with the red pencil skirt and high heels. She just came in... It’s her.”

Richard stared at me as if I’d grown a third eye. “Pencil skirt... What the fuck, dude?” Then he turned and searched the room for my mystery woman.

But I couldn’t wait. My pulse was running a mile a minute and so were my thoughts. This was fate. During my restless night, I’d wondered if I’d somewhat up-played hero appeal and my instant attraction to her. But one look and I knew. My mind hadn’t tricked me. She laughed and my stomach flipped. Holy cow, what a beautiful sound. Now I needed to make a move. Get to know her better. Get to know her name. And find out if this attraction could lead into something more than just a fleeting acquaintance.

“What are the odds, hah? I better go introduce myself and finally get her name.” I got up when Richard clamped down on my forearm and forced me back down.

“That’s Edith Cleaver you’re talking about. She’s Dorothy’s sister.”

“Dorothy? The Dorothy? The one you wrote all those letters to?” He’d done that in the weirdest-ass places imaginable. Always having a pen at the ready. We all made fun of him back then, but he never stopped, never tried to hide it, too.

He nodded.

One of the women took that moment to look in our direction and smiled as soon as she spotted Richard. That must be Dorothy, then.

I looked back at my friend who had the same dopey-looking grin on his face. Hilarious. I chuckled and settled back down. This was going to be interesting to watch. “Wait.” I straightened. “Cleaver, as in Bryce-Cleaver?” I looked over to

the group of women, one after the other, trying to remember Gracie's face. I hadn't met her in real life, and only vaguely remembered the photographs Owen Bryce had shown me of his wife—shortly before he'd been killed in Afghanistan...and died in my arms.

Richard stared at me for a second. "That's who you're here to check on?"

My neck prickled. "I was his team leader. The bullet that killed him was meant for me. He stepped in the way...and saved my life. Did you know him?" Before Owen died in my arms, I promised him I'd look after Grace. I couldn't attend the funeral, and Grace never wanted to meet, so I gave her space, watched from afar, only checked in via e-mail. And via a PI now and then. But now, five years later, it was time for a visit—see for myself how she was doing—something I couldn't judge via those emails we'd exchanged over the years, and the yearly reports I was getting.

"Are you okay, bro?"

"Yeah. I'm just... This took me by surprise. It's been five years, so..."

Dorothy got up and approached our table. She looked good with curly hair, kind eyes...a nervous smile playing around her lips. I watched Richard when she arrived at our table and laid her hand on his shoulder.

Richard's reaction was entirely smooth.

No jumping...no over-the-top reaction.

My own reactions to being surprised had never been as smooth. Still, to this day I was fighting to fit into normal society.

"Hi, hello. This is a surprise." Richard smiled up at Dorothy. They didn't kiss, but he sure looked like he wanted to. "Dorothy, meet my good friend Carter."

Dorothy's gaze went from Richard to me. It wasn't green like her sister's. Her easy smile showed her white teeth, and we shook hands.

“You’re meeting with your sisters?” Richard asked and commandeered her attention back before we could wrap up our hello.

Her other hand never left Richard’s shoulder, and she settled back to his side. “Long time overdue.” There was a pause where neither Dorothy nor Richard spoke. They were drinking each other in. It was like watching fireworks on TV—on mute. So much going on, but no noise to complete the picture. They had intense chemistry. But her nervousness around us told me my friend still hadn’t staked his claim. Dumb-ass.

“I’m sorry I bothered you. I just wanted to come over and say hi,” Dorothy said. I watched the nervousness rise in her, but before I could ease the situation, Richard stepped up.

He grabbed her hand. Good. “You don’t bother me, ever. I’m glad you came over. I’ll call you later, okay?”

She nodded, smiled, and turned to me again. “Goodbye, Carter, it was very nice meeting you.”

“The pleasure was all mine.” And it was—to finally meet the woman who had my friend in knots over the years was interesting. As it was to watch for similarities between her and her sister. They didn’t look much alike except for the eyes. Edith had kind eyes, as well. At least, when she dropped her guard, and only if I didn’t say something to make her suspicious, or when she wasn’t trying to shoot me down. Dorothy’s smile deepened, and she turned away and walked back to her sisters. *Edith was her sister*. I let my eyes linger on Edith a little while longer, but she never looked my way. When I turned back to my friend, I couldn’t believe the goofy smile on his face.

“Whew”—I shook my head—“you’re even more of a dumb-ass than I thought you were.”

Richard’s eyebrows shot up. He leaned back slightly and crossed his arms. “Really? Why’s that?”

I nodded in the general direction of the women’s table. “Just looking at the two of you, she’s clearly the one for you.

How could you fuck this up so bad?”

Richard shrugged his shoulders and his smile fell.

“I mean, you’re clearly meant to be, so...win her back and that’s an order, Marine.”

Richard’s decisive nod told me everything I needed to know. He was on it. Now, I only had to figure out for myself how to proceed. If my mystery woman had just been some stranger, I would’ve proceeded to find out if the attraction I felt was mutual. But she wasn’t just a stranger. She had ties to my friends and my past. So maybe I should cool down and forget about it.

Edith Cleaver. What a beautiful name for a beautiful woman.

But there were too many complications, too much overlap.

Which made her pretty much off-limits.

EDITH



When I showed up at my sister Dorothy's the next evening, it was already getting dark.

We hadn't made any plans.

But I needed to escape my apartment.

It had only taken being back a couple hours to know with a certainty my answer on the flight was right. I'd rather see my apartment cleaned out than lose my luggage. It had been depressing and had kicked my butt into gear.

Listing it had been a smooth process, but in the end it went super fast—surprising even me when I'd finalized the sale earlier today.

Now I needed to find somewhere to live that would give me more joy and a way to get rid of my not-making-me-happy stuff—maybe a yard sale or something like that.

More funding for the Little Women's Home...

Dorothy had been surprised when I showed up, but now—on our way to Blake's bar in Moon Lake, she looked downright nervous.

To meet Richard?

The memories of those two back in high school were bittersweet.

They'd been inseparable as teenagers. Somehow they had this awesome connection, something special, but I also

remembered how broken Dori had been after he'd betrayed her with her best friend.

Tonight, I'd better make sure to remind him of what I told him all those years ago: messing with my sister was messing with me. And I would make his life hell.

Of course, he was the sheriff now, so threatening him could potentially land me in jail.

But to protect my sister?

I was willing to do almost anything.

I should probably talk to him about Gloria and Luna before threatening him, or maybe I should let Dorothy handle things. But when it came to my sisters hurting...

Talking about sisters...

I turned the stereo down. "What's this year's schedule for taking care of Grace during the coming weeks?" In past years, Gracie had been holding it together during the year only to lose it and fall into a depression around the time of her late husband Owen's death, so we couldn't expect this year to be any different. And we wouldn't let her struggle alone. Ever.

"Felicia this week. Me next week. You...the week after that."

I nodded. "How're the in-laws holding up?"

Dorothy shrugged. "I don't know. But I think Owen's brother is there to help get them through. He's checking on Gracie, too."

"Hmm," I replied. Maybe this year it would finally be better.

Graham and June Bryce held a memorial service for Owen every year around the day of his death.

And it wasn't a small, intimate gathering either.

But then, nothing in the Bryce family had ever been small or intimate, not Gracie's wedding nor Owen's funeral.

As important members of their local country club, sometimes it appeared as if they needed to flaunt their wealth around every chance they got.

And remembering their fallen son was one of those occasions.

“Take the next exit toward Moon Lake and then turn left.”

I did as I was told. I could vaguely remember the small town from back when we were young. A few times, our parents loaded us all into the van and we spent a lazy summer day at the lake. Those had been good times. Good memories.

“This is it. This is Blake’s bar.” She pointed toward the building, and I carefully entered the gravel lot and parked the car. There was a lot going on for a Tuesday—perks of being the only bar in the vicinity.

We stepped out of the car, and I looked around, not seeing much in the darkness.

“I can’t wait to see what this Moon Lake is all about.”

I could feel nervous energy zap through my body. Like always, when I was about to leave my comfort zone, I steeled my spine. I hated new things—new places, new cities, new people. New adventures. But I learned a long time ago that if I didn’t push myself, nothing would ever change.

Like selling the apartment.

We moved toward the door, and I struggled with my high heels in the gravel—part of my body armor as my travel companion had so accurately pointed out. “Hell, these shoes are not made for this.”

Dorothy just chuckled. She’d never been one for dressing up, had always been the sensible one, practical to my flashy, two ends of the spectrum.

We entered the bar, and I looked around, then stiffened as soon as my gaze fell on a particular booth. Dorothy nearly bumped into me when I turned around and glared at her. “You didn’t tell me he would be here.”

“Who, Richard? Of course I did.”

“No, the other guy.”

Dorothy peeked around me, all doe-eyed...as if I'd fall for that for one second.

“Oh, you mean Carter.” She shrugged. “I didn't think it was a big deal. You said it wasn't a big deal.”

And it wasn't—that's what I'd been telling myself ever since I left the airport. The hordes of butterflies partying in my belly didn't agree. Now there he was, my perfect stranger. Since he didn't say hello at the restaurant yesterday, I thought we'd leave it at that.

Apparently not.

I deliberately schooled my facial expression into a mask of polite friendliness before we walked up to the table. But I stopped short when I realized there was another guy sitting at the table. Carter was enough to make me hesitate...but now James, too? Shit. This evening was going down the drain... fast.

“Fuck.” James Cullen was everything I despised in a man. Rich and good-looking, he was my company's major competitor in developing real estate around Whitebrook. He had charm on top of his charm, and he was a very good friend of ex-husband number two.

“What?”

“James is here.”

“James? Who's James?”

“Argh, whatever...” I marched on, and Dorothy followed close behind.

We stopped at the booth where Richard, Carter, and James were nursing beers and looking like they were having a good time.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” My voice was stilted. I could hear it, but I straightened my spine even more—show no weakness.

The men immediately rose and stepped out of the booth. “Hello, Edith.” Richard kissed both my cheeks and then turned toward my sister... They made gooey eyes at each other, and I suddenly felt envious.

“Edith, so nice to meet you again.”

I turned back. “Carter.” My voice was formal. Maybe if I at least maintained an air of indifference, my butterfly-filled belly would calm down. Weakness was not an option. Especially not with men with too much charm for their own good.

He just deepened his smile and looked at me. We locked eyes and my brain just went empty while my heart sped up. Man, this guy’s smile was gorgeous. Deep laugh lines were etched into his face, and I wanted to touch his lush lips with mine.

Then he turned to Dorothy, sidestepped me, pushed Richard to the side, and kissed both her cheeks. “Hey, Dori, I’m so glad you could make it. I’ve heard so many things about you over the years. I feel like I already know you.”

Dori? He knew my sister’s nickname? And Richard told him about her?

Interesting.

I looked at Richard who laughed at something James behind him was saying before he turned back.

“Hey, Dori, Edith, have you met James?” Richard said, and Carter stepped out of the way and settled next to me, close enough that our arms nearly touched. Richard did the same next to Dorothy, and James exited the booth. He kissed me on both cheeks, and I could feel Carter stiffen next to me. When James turned to my sister, I glanced sideways at Carter, and the intensity burning in his eyes when he looked back at me ignited a fire deep in my belly.

No words necessary.

So I wasn’t the only one recognizing whatever attraction sizzled between us.

I looked down, avoiding eye contact with anyone. Going out tonight had been a crap decision. Next time, I should celebrate by binge-watching something and get junk-food takeout.

“James is the mayor in town and the fire chief. I’m surprised you haven’t yet met,” Richard said, which shocked the hell out of me. I didn’t know James was the mayor of Moon Lake. But then again, why should I know? We weren’t friends or anything. Just acquaintances who competed for work. Not that I was anywhere near his level. I was a mere minion. Stuck in a big company. He was his own entity—money up the wazoo and charm and cockiness enough for an army. Oh, how I hated powerful men with money.

“I’m sorry to leave, but this is my cue. I gotta get up early tomorrow, so...have a nice evening. Ladies.” James bowed. Bowed. “And we’ll talk about the volunteering.” James pointed at Richard before he turned around and made his way to the bar. Pfff, at least he didn’t stay.

Carter laid his hand on my waist and urged me inside the booth at his side.

Only one cocky man left to deal with.

I settled down, and for the first time, watched Dorothy and Sheriff Travers—Richard or Ricky.

He laid his arm behind her onto the backrest, and they whispered to each other. Whatever they were whispering about, my sister looked...happy and the sheriff did, too. The two of them had been a cute couple in high school, and I always thought they would marry right after. It was heartbreaking to watch their relationship crumble. Should’ve been my first clue that no relationship was as safe as it seemed.

“So, on a scale of one to ten, how creeped out are you, Edith?”

I turned my attention back to the man next to me and immediately felt unsettled when I encountered his smile.

“A solid nine, now that you know my name.”

He pressed his hand against his chest as if deeply wounded by my answer. Yeah, right. “Then maybe I should leave?”

Was he being serious? For a second, I searched his eyes to see if my behavior had indeed hurt him, but they were as expressionless as a white wall.

“I didn’t mean—”

Then I saw the sparkle enter his eyes, and I felt...almost relieved. “You’re messing with me.”

His grin broadened, and he suddenly looked younger and carefree.

Sexy.

Shit.

“What a small world, right?” he said and lifted his eyebrows...twice, and I felt a tingle all the way down to the tips of my toes. Damn.

“Right.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m in real estate.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’m working for a company in town. We’re doing development around Whitebrook.

“Interesting.”

“Not very. But there’s this property in a town right outside of Whitebrook I hope to acquire. So that’s exciting. What do you do?”

He hesitated, held his breath, and looked at me if he’d just had an epiphany, but then shook his head as if dismissing it. “Oh, this and that. Mostly investments.”

It didn’t look like he was comfortable elaborating, and I was happy to not delve into my boring work life. But there was that thing in the lobby—him kissing me and carrying me up the stairs. “Well, it didn’t feel like you were doing

investments back at the hotel. Care to finally elaborate on what that was exactly?"

"Quid pro quo?"

"What?"

"I answer your questions if you answer mine."

Hadn't we played this game long enough already? "Sure."

"How did you know the guy in the lobby, the one who'd grabbed your arm?"

"Donovan?" I grimaced. Saying his name left a bad taste in my mouth.

"That his name?"

"Yep. Donovan Peterson. He's my first ex-husband."

His eyebrows shot up, and he sat down his drink. "You shittin' me?"

"Nope." I shrugged. I would've hoped I'd made a better choice back then. But...water under the bridge.

"First, as in..." He lowered his head slightly, urging me on.

It was cards-on-the-table time, apparently. "As in, I had two. But Donovan was bad. Really bad. He's a lawyer in town."

"So it was coincidence you met?"

"Hundred percent."

He rubbed his chin and looked away slightly. "Good, that's really good."

"Is it?" I still didn't understand what was going on. Hated to be kept in the dark, too.

"Yeah, I can't prove anything yet, but he might be into some shady shit."

I leaned back, exhaled, and chuckled. I wasn't the least surprised. "Well, that's Don for you. Slimeball, sleazy, asshole all around. And you?"

“What about me?” Now he took that sip he’d intended to earlier. But his eyes stayed focused on me the whole time.

“What shit were you into?”

He hesitated just a smidge of a second. “Counter-shady shit.” He grinned. But I didn’t let that derail me. I saw that moment of hesitation. There was a lot he wasn’t telling me.

“So, that’s it? That’s as specific as you’ll get?”

He swept the condensation from his drink before he looked back at me for what felt like an eternity to me. Was he sizing me up? Deeming me not trustworthy enough? “Tell you what. Give me a few more days to verify shit. Then I’ll tell you what it was all about. Can you do that, Edith? Can you trust me?”

Shit.

The look in his eyes was intense.

As if my answer to that question was really important. But did I trust him? I mean, he kissed me to shut me up. I understood that now, but he did so without my permission.

On the other hand, his actions saved me from having to deal with Don.

And then again, from crashing through the windshield in the bus.

But was that enough to trust him? He was intense, and secretive, and...male.

All things that spoke against him bigtime. But could I trust him?

I watched my sister and Richard. Richard seemed so totally into Dorothy, it almost hurt to watch. “Why didn’t you say hello at the restaurant?” I blurted out without looking at him and apparently stunned him into silence for a second there.

But he found his countenance immediately. “Would you have wanted me to say hello?”

Would I? With my sisters all around, it would’ve been one hell of a hot-seat session afterward.

He laid his arm on the backrest and slowly pulled on one of my locks. “Did you?”

I pried my eyes from the couple opposite from us and turned to Carter. Our eyes locked, and I suddenly had a hard time breathing. But the way he looked at me, really looked at me, and with the way his hand touched my back and sent tingles all the way down my legs, the answer was yes, a big resounding yes.

I would have wanted him to acknowledge me.

A server stepped up to our booth, and I tried to regain some sort of control over my body. Ridiculous. He hadn’t really touched me, and here I was salivating like a dog in heat. Dorothy stood up and awkwardly hugged the server.

“You haven’t met my sister. This is my sister Edith; Edith, this is Sharon. Remember, I told you about Sharon and her son Stevie.”

I nodded, shook Sharon’s hand, and returned her smile.

“So, what can I get you?” Sharon asked and looked from me back to Dorothy.

I followed Dorothy’s cue and ordered the special and a glass of white wine, keenly aware of Carter’s hand just inches from my back, still caressing my hair. I got lost in a daydream for a second until I watched Sheriff Travers nip my sister’s ear.

“Enough for a bathroom quickie?” he said, and I nearly gagged. Thinking about Richard and Dorothy doing it in the bathroom? Not something I needed on my mind.

“That’s so gross. And you’re the sheriff. Isn’t that...I don’t know...public display of...whatever?” I said before I could rein myself in.

Dorothy looked uncomfortable, and I immediately wished I would’ve bitten my tongue. This was exactly what Dori needed—someone to loosen her up and have fun with. Why did I spoil it for her?

Richard just grinned back at me, as did Carter. Then he shrugged, turned his head, and kissed Dorothy on the side of

her neck before he took a big gulp of his beer and grinned again. “Can’t blame a man for trying.”

I nearly swooned on behalf of my sister until my eyes met Carter’s. A mixture of amusement, appraisal, and heat had turned them dark. And his look reawakened the butterflies in my belly.

“No bathroom quickie for you then?”

His gravel voice against my ear made shivers run up and down my spine. He took a gulp from his beer, and the simple action of watching his Adam’s apple as he swallowed turned me on. Fuck.

Was he asking?

And was my answer really no?

I lost myself in his eyes for a moment and didn’t realize I didn’t give an answer until he came close again. “If you keep looking at me like that, you’d better be prepared to follow through.”

I looked away. His words worked like a cold shower. Enhanced by the heat and challenge clearly visible in his eyes.

This was really happening. No more wondering if my attraction to him was only one-sided—it was clearly not.

“How long will you stay?” Did I just say that out loud? Was I really that pathetic? He didn’t promise me anything. I didn’t want him to promise me anything. So why was that an important factor? But somehow it was.

“As long as it takes,” he whispered against my ear.

As long as what takes? What did he mean by that? Was he talking about us or whatever business brought him here? Shit, why did I even care? Shouldn’t I just shrug it off? Didn’t I peg him as just another player? Then why did I feel like I was the only woman around whenever he was looking at me. I’d never felt like that around any other man, being someone’s sole attention.

“So?” he asked.

“So what?”

“Will you meet me for coffee tomorrow?”

I stared at him for a second, unable to get my muddled thoughts in order. Coffee? He was talking about coffee while I’d seen us rolling between the sheets within the next few hours. Oh God, I was pathetic.

“I have a very important meeting in Three Oaks tomorrow. But I’m free in the afternoon.”

“Three Oaks?”

“Yeah, it’s a great little town near Whitebrook. But it’s work—my latest development project. Big day.”

“Ah, okay.” He looked uncomfortable. He’d obviously gotten my subtle work-is-boring undertones, and soon, we were chatting about this and that, never actually committing to that coffee date. I observed Dori and Richard and couldn’t be happier. They looked like they’d reconciled and couldn’t keep their hands off each other.

Carter’s arm was on the backrest behind me for the rest of the evening. His clean, manly scent surrounded me and made me feel...oddly safe and protected...when my butterflies settled down enough, that was. Only, they swarmed up every time he occasionally played with my hair or lovingly pinched my side from behind when I was being too sassy.

We laughed a lot. Richard and Carter shared funny stories from their time in the military, and the evening went by fast.

When it was time to go, the two men accompanied us to the car.

“I love you in those heels,” he murmured into my ear, and I stumbled. Hot damn.

He grabbed my elbow and gently led me to the car. Somehow, his simple gesture of caring did more to my insides than words could ever have done.

And when he kissed me on both cheeks and held my car door open, I didn’t want the evening to end. And I hadn’t asked Richard about Luna and Gloria...

CARTER



“Hey, guys,” I said and looked at one face after the other showing up on my laptop when my teammates joined the virtual meeting. Right on time; I’d really lucked out with my guys when I started my little organization. Max had been the first to join me, then Goofy, and when Peaches came on as our residential computer whiz, our proficiency skyrocketed. Even though it was never enough. “Tell me what we’ve got.”

Goofy looked down, and when nobody talked, I went on without skipping a beat. “Other than me fucking up the OP, of course. I’m sorry, guys. It was a bad move. I got...stupid there for a minute.” Stupid, emotionally attached, crazy...all of that, really. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d lost my head like that. When I came back down from leaving Edith behind at the elevator, which was far more difficult than it should’ve been, I couldn’t go back to the lobby since they’d seen my face. So, I stayed hidden while Goofy had to cover the meeting. Without backup. Boy, did I fuck this up. He couldn’t change into a position to get near enough for us to get ears on the conversation. So, we’d been stuck in a purely observational role. And a bad one at that. They seemed to go over some maps and finalized some plans. At least it seemed that way. Other than that we got nothing. The OP was a bust. And we were still in the dark. And I was responsible.

My teammates nodded and looked relieved, and soon we took turns debriefing the little incident in the hotel lobby. And by debriefing, I meant them giving me a hard time about my interference and all-around-stupid-ass behavior.

Peaches scratched his neck. “I’m sorry, guys, but basically we’ve got nothing. I’ve identified some faces, run them through our system. Your special friend’s name is Donovan Peterson; he’s a lawyer in Whitebrook. No high profile. Completely low vis. Shouldn’t be meeting some cartel higher-ups in a hotel lobby on some tropical island. Absolutely no trail connecting him to the cartel. But he has bonds to your... emotional attachment.”

The others chuckled, but something inside me squeezed tight. Edith.

“They’ve been married. So maybe we should look into her more. Maybe she’s been placed there as a distraction or she’s in on it.

This was laughable, and my first reaction was to deny any of Edith’s involvement in this case—just a gut feeling. But what if I was wrong? What if my gut was following my dick this time? What if she was somehow attached to the whole thing and was sent there as a distraction? I thought back to the evening before. Yep. If distracting me was her job, she had been spot on.

“Boys. Let’s keep an open mind about any of this. Are we still sure they are moving into the area?”

“Positive,” Peaches said. “Shipments and gang activity are picking up. Two missing women recorded in the last few weeks. They went missing in a little town called”—he looked down at his notes—“Three Oaks which is a spitting distance from Whitebrook.”

And which is where I was headed after this. The property I bought yesterday was located in Whitebrook. So many coincidences. “Okay. When are you all due to arrive?”

This time it was Max who looked uncomfortable and Goofy and Peaches wore shit-eating grins. That told me without a doubt something had gone down.

“Boys...”

“I just bought a house,” Max said, and Goofy burst out laughing.

“Again?” I asked.

Max nodded.

“Where?”

“Moon Lake—it’s just a few miles outside of—”

“Whitebrook. I know the location.”

“Yeah, I saw this house when I did some early recon online, and...”

“He bought it, sight unseen,” Peaches burst out and laughed his ass off.

“Max, why are you buying houses everywhere a case leads us?”

“Because I do... Because I can, thanks to you.”

“Oh, come on. I just gave you a few pointers.”

He remained stubbornly silent. And I wouldn’t go into that discussion again. He was one of the few who ran with the information I shared with him and put in the hard work and discipline necessary to become successful in investing. “Okay, so when will you be here, then?”

“A few days. I’m driving.”

“You’re what?” Peaches’ and Goofy’s chuckles turned back into heartfelt laughter again.

“I’m taking some stuff, so I’m driving, but it shouldn’t take more than two days.”

“Okay, great, anyone else?”

“Oh, we’re all coming down as soon as our investment mogul there has confirmed the habitability of his newest acquisition and we can set it up as our new headquarter.” Goofy snickered again, and this time Max and I joined in. More than once, one of Max’s new acquisitions had turned out to be little more than a dump. But he was aware of the risks, and without taking risks, there were no gains. In investing and in life. “Peaches and I could stay with my parents in Three

Oaks, though they don't have a lot of room, so...working from there might not be such a good idea..."

"Okay, boys, I'll cut this meeting short. Peaches, dig deeper, identify the other players. Goofy, book the flights. I'll get rooms here at the hotel for you, and you get your asses down here ASAP."

"Roger that."

I closed my laptop with more force than necessary. Why this entire operation felt like a disaster even though it hadn't even started yet, I didn't know. I looked at my watch and hurriedly packed my gear.

I had an hour till meeting the seller at the property, but I wanted to check out Three Oaks first. Two women missing in such a small town? I didn't believe in coincidences. There were no coincidences, just patterns.

It was a short ride from Whitebrook to Three Oaks, only a few miles out of town. I took the same highway I'd taken yesterday toward Moon Lake. The land here was still cheap, but it wouldn't stay cheap for long since Whitebrook was expanding and the economy was thriving, so, unlike other towns, soon Three Oaks would be right on the city limit and Whitebrook's expansion would probably continue. Another reason why the cartel had probably picked it.

When I took the turn off the highway, my phone rang. Glad for my top-of-the-line rental, I took the call.

"Hey, Uncle Carter."

As soon as my brain registered Brody's voice, heaviness settled somewhere between my heart and my stomach, and I grimaced before I put on a happy face. No matter if he couldn't see me, he would at least hear it in my voice. "Hey, my boy. How's everything going? Grandma sent me photos of your soccer game. You looked pretty good out on that field."

"I hate soccer."

Shit. "Are you enjoying summer holidays? Is Grandma taking you to the pool?"

“No.”

“No?”

“When are you coming home, Uncle Carter?”

“Two weeks. I have some unfinished business here, then I’m heading home.”

“Okay.” He sounded defeated.

I steered the car into the parking space of a diner and slumped in my seat. The painful lump in my throat made sounding positive hard. “Hey, can you put Grandma on the phone? I got an idea.”

There was some shuffling until my mother came on.

“Hey, boy.”

“Hey, Mom. How’re things going?”

“Good.”

“No, don’t give me that crap.”

“Carter Ronald Plesak, watch your mouth.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but Brody didn’t sound so good. What’s wrong?”

“He’s feeling alone. He doesn’t like the pool. I actually don’t know if he ever learned how to swim, but I can’t get him to practice with me. I think he’s ashamed in front of the other boys.”

“Mom, I have an idea. Why don’t you come here? There’s this little town called Moon Lake which is right by a beautiful lake. I drove through town yesterday. There’s a charming little inn there. I could ask if they have a free room, and the two of you could have a brief vacation. That way I could come over every day and practice swimming with Brody.”

I held my breath while I waited for my mother’s reaction.

“Carter, I love you, but this boy needs you as a father. He needs stability and love. Not a swim trainer.”

“I know.” And boy, did I know. I needed to settle down, find some more people with the unique skill set necessary to

run the on-the-ground operations for my organization, so I could get into a steadier lifestyle.

“But a vacation sounds good. Tell me as soon as you know the details, and we’ll get packed and on a plane.”

“Great. I’ll call right away.”

I ended the call and looked at the big window of the Three Oaks Diner. Coffee sounded good right now. But before leaving my car—fucking heat was sweltering out here—I phoned the Moon Lake Inn, secured their last free room, arranged for flights, and told Mom to start packing. I figured Moon Lake was far enough removed from the goings-on here, so they would be safe to enjoy their vacation. They would arrive tomorrow. And I would spend as much time with Brody as I could and would fit the rest of my schedule around him.

At least the heavy, dark pit of failing him got a bit lighter.

EDITH



“Hey, gurlies, you look fabulous. Edith, look at your tan. Enjoyed your vacation?” Aegina Day, the owner of the diner in Three Oaks, placed two huge cups in front of us and filled them with steaming hot, black coffee, no fancy stuff like cappuccino or milk foam here.

I shared a look with Carol that had us grinning at each other. No one else but Aegina would ever call us nearly-forty-year-old women “gurlies.” But hey, Aegina was the best. She fed us. She listened. And she was kind and funny and got into her customer’s business whenever she thought someone needed a push in the right direction. Basically, she was the heart and soul of Three Oaks. Or at least of the rumor mill around here.

She would be as great a place for all the little kids living in Three Oaks once my company secured the property and started building the community I hoped we would build here, as she was for the girls and young women at the Little Women’s Home. “Hello, Aegina. Yes, I enjoyed the vacation. But look at you. You look especially radiant today.”

With her signature blue, patterned blouse beneath her apron, barely containing her overflowing bosom, she really looked especially chipper today.

“Oh, my joints’ve been acting up lately, but today... nothing. So, this is a good day.”

She left us with a swing in her step that made me wonder if her non-aching joints really were all there was to it. Aegina

had long had her eyes on Bert, the owner of the local watering hole. Maybe one of them had finally made a move.

“So, no news, then?” Carol’s somber voice brought me immediately back to reality. Back to our missing girls.

“I talked to Belinda earlier. She said they’re working on it. But she sounded stressed and said something about them being swamped.” After not asking Richard about the women yesterday, I phoned up Belinda, who didn’t have any news for me.

Carol stirred her coffee and stared into the milky-brown swirl.

This was shit. Two girls missing and nothing. As if those girls were just an afterthought. There was a constant fluctuation at the Little Women’s Home. Our girls led a hard life. Sometimes, they went back to their families. Sometimes they moved to another part of the country in pursuit of a better life. And sometimes they got back on their feet and started a life on their own. But they’d never just disappeared into thin air, never to be seen or heard again. I should’ve brought it up yesterday with Richard, no matter if it’d destroyed the mood and the chemistry between Richard and Dorothy. Though they’d deserved a night out. Shit.

“Hey, isn’t that Felicia?”

I turned around, and sure enough, Felicia stood at the counter to grab a coffee to go. But something was off. Something in her body language wasn’t right, and why was she wearing sunglasses inside? Before I could pinpoint exactly what was off, I was on the move.

“Felicia?”

She flinched when I arrived at her side and said her name again. That was not her usual behavior.

“What’s wrong?” Was she favoring her left side?

She slowly turned toward me, as if she was hurting, and the forced smile on her face didn’t fool me for a second. “Roy did it again, didn’t he?”

She nodded once, but otherwise didn't reply.

"You need to leave him. Now. You know it gets worse. You can come live with me. Let's go, pack a bag, get Bobby, and be out of there."

"He's outside. Watching. Please, Edith, I can't."

I grabbed her arm, and she winced. Shit. "Please, Feli. You need to get away from him. Please, for Bobby and for yourself."

"I will. I swear. It's just..."

There was movement at the entrance, and we both froze. Then the guy who was standing behind Felicia in line shifted and blocked the line of sight. But I knew I was running out of time. "What has he done this time? Where are you hurting? Do you need to see a doctor?"

But Feli just shook her head and fell silent when her asshole boyfriend stepped up next to her. "Hey, babe, what's taking so long? Oh, hello, Edith. No work, all play, huh?" He laughed at his own joke, while I was steaming inside and silently begging Feli to stand up to him. She hadn't gotten rid of the sunglasses which I was pretty sure she used to cover a black eye.

"Well, we're in a hurry, unlike you, so, see you." He grabbed Feli by her side, and I saw her face contorting in pain. Why didn't she say something? Anything. Just one word and I would be on him to scratch his eyes out in a heartbeat. But it needed to come from her. Without Feli wanting to leave the asshole, there was nothing I could do.

Almost nothing. "Sure, you're in a hurry, with all the work you're doing being the model citizen you are and all..." I could see the hatred in his eyes. He even took a menacing step toward me, and I immediately regretted opening my mouth. Not because of me. If Roy ever laid hands on me, I would sue his ass, but Feli was the one who would pay.

The guy who'd been standing behind us took a step closer and effectively blocked Roy's forward movement with his body. But I was too focused on Felicia. Begged her silently to

just walk away but to no avail. Roy just grabbed her tighter and dragged her out of the diner. And she let him. Shit.

My gaze followed them to their car, and only when they left, did I turn and look up. Right at Carter. It'd been him standing behind us the whole time. He'd been the one who'd blocked Roy, who'd witnessed everything. His brown eyes brimming with understanding and kindness, he leaned down and whispered, "What can I do to help?"

I swallowed down my desperation and the unshed tears that always accompanied the feeling. "How about not showing up every damn time and witnessing me being desperate and vulnerable?" Did I just say that out loud?

But he just stared me in the eyes and softly laid his hand against the side of my neck with his thumb caressing my chin. Suddenly, all the air evaporated and all I could see was this beautiful, kind man looking at me with understanding. "But I like being around you. Strong or vulnerable, doesn't matter."

And with that, I melted. In the middle of the diner, my palms turned sweaty, and the only thing keeping me upright was his hand. While I yearned for a kiss. His eyes moved from mine to my lips and back, and I nearly drowned. My heart pounded, and I leaned slightly forward. This man would be the death of me. He leaned forward, as well...slowly and had me captivated, longing for his lips to touch mine.

"Ahem. Earth to Edith. I'm really, deeply sorry to interrupt...this, but didn't you have an appointment to get to?"

We both looked at Carol, who looked down at her feet, her cheeks tinged red.

Then my brain caught up with what she'd said. "Shit. Yes. Sorry. Need to go." I moved around Carter and immediately missed his touch, scrambled back to our table, grabbed my bag, and flew out of the diner. I would come by later and pay up, and then I would take a good, hard look at the circumstances and rationally decide if hooking up with my travel companion was a wise move to make. Probably not. But, oh hell, maybe it was time for some not-wise decisions that brought some fun into my life.

It was only a three-minute drive to the property that my company and I had been in the process of acquiring for months now. Today, Mr. Smith, the seller, wanted to meet at the property which I didn't know if that was a good sign or not. But I didn't want to be late because that would be unprofessional.

He was already waiting when I arrived and parked right next to the truck that had entered the dirt road right before me. I watched James Cullen dismount. I'd known there were other interested parties, but I'd secretly prayed it wouldn't be him. Well, no such luck.

“Edith.”

“James.”

He waited up, and together we walked up to Mr. Smith and shook his hand.

“Glad you both could make it.” Mr. Smith said. “But I'll make this short. I got another, better offer for the land, and we sealed the deal this morning. I'm really sorry.”

Cullen nodded, shook Mr. Smith's hand, and walked back to his truck while I just stood there and stared. I had been pretty darn sure I would seal this deal. Before I went away on vacation, that is.

Damn.

“I'm really sorry, Mrs. Cleaver, but this offer was so much better. I really wanted you, but I couldn't...”

Despite the painful lump in my throat, I held up my hand. “No need to apologize. That's business.” And I was screwed. My company counted on me making this deal. My boss told me in no uncertain terms how much hinged on it. And now I'd screwed it up.

I shook hands with Mr. Smith and slowly walked back to my car, already dreading the phone call I needed to make. Better get it over with fast. As soon as I closed the door, I grabbed my phone and with shaky hands, dialed my boss.

“Cleaver. You got news for me?”

“We didn’t close the deal.” Saying it out loud, bile rose in my throat, and I struggled to keep my composure.

“You mean, you didn’t close the deal.”

I swallowed against the sour taste in my mouth. “Yes...I didn’t close the deal. I’m sorry.” I knew it was my fuck-up. He really didn’t need to rub it in. But that’s how it went. When all went well, I was one of the team. But not when I failed. Then I was alone.

“Shit, Cleaver. The higher-ups will not be happy about it. So Cullen got it?”

My boss knew Cullen was interested, as well? And didn’t tell me? Well, I should’ve known anyway. This city was too small to have anything this size of a deal staying secret. “No. There was a third offer. Apparently a much better offer.”

“Okay, find out who. Then come back in. You have some explaining to do.”

I ended the call and for a few minutes just sat there, crushed. I didn’t want to get back out, didn’t want to talk to anyone, or ask stupid questions. All I wanted to do was go home, hide under my blanket, have a good cry and a pint of ice cream. But that sadly wasn’t an option. I took a few deep breaths to get myself back under control. My pity party had to wait until later.

What I needed to do was put on my big-girl panties and do what my boss asked me to do. Then go back to work. Then find a way to get through to Felicia and support her in leaving Roy. Then go back to the Little Women’s Home and find out what happened to Gloria and Luna.

Still, I hesitated. I was about to get out of my car again when two other cars drove up the dirt road, passed by, and parked right in front of mine. I watched the men getting out of their cars.

My mouth fell open, my ears started ringing, and my thoughts came to a crashing halt. I watched them shake hands, then walk up to the seller.

Carter.

He shook Mr. Smith's hand, then he clapped him on the back and laughed about something the guy from the other car said.

I clutched my steering wheel until my knuckles turned white and stared through my windshield.

Carter was the buyer. Carter had just snapped up my property. Why hadn't he told me yesterday? We'd talked about my job, talked about me acquiring a property. Did I mention Three Oaks to him? I hadn't mentioned details like my company name or any other specifics. But how many properties this size were available around Whitebrook? Exactly one. So, if he'd done any kind of research in the area, he could have put two and two together. Or at least ask for clarification. Or at least let it slip how he was acquiring a property, as well. Then I would've been forewarned, if nothing else. Instead, he'd flirted with me and lulled me into thinking he was oh, so great a guy.

Bastard.

He looked up at something the seller said, then turned around and our eyes clashed.

I poured every bit of disappointment into mine, let him see my desperation and hate.

But when he started toward me, I frantically started the car, revved it, and sped away.

Carter was an asshole, and I didn't want to see him, speak to him, or think of him ever again.

CARTER



Okay, now this was bad.

I watched Edith's car retreating and had the distinct feeling I'd messed up something great, lost something great. Maybe I was exaggerating...but at least it had potential—a lot of potential that had my body feeling as if it'd been connected to a source with low-voltage electricity constantly shooting through my body.

After our little moment in the diner, I'd been brimming with excitement to see her the next time.

But now...

Seeing her the next time, if ever, wouldn't go over so well.

She'd told me she worked for a real estate company around Whitebrook, but what were the odds?

If I was being honest, the odds had been high. I was the poacher in this market, and I'd done my research. But, shit.

Of all the towns, of all the areas in this country, me buying this property had more to do with luck than anything else. Max had told me about it and piqued my interest, and when I did a little research and made the connection to Whitebrook, I'd been immediately intrigued.

I walked back to Mark Green, the local lawyer I'd hired to help with handling this business transaction and Mr. Smith who'd just earned quite a wad of cash. And that's what it was—business, nothing personal. Edith might be angry right now,

but she was old enough to know how it worked in business. I just needed to apologize.

“Okay, gentlemen.”

Mark looked at his shoes, and Mr. Smith looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but here. And I couldn't blame them.

“I'm really sorry, but Mrs. Cleaver and I had been in contact for a long time, and she's usually a very competent and nice person. She would've been my preferred choice if it was up to me...” Smith's speech fizzled out, but I didn't need an explanation.

Something about Edith made me want to be a better man, so I understood completely why it was hard for Smith to see her disappointed. “Any other interested buyers with roughed-up feathers?”

Smith shook his head. “Only Mrs. Cleaver's company and James Cullen. But Cullen wasn't...as invested as Mrs. Cleaver. For him, life and business is all just a big game. And the area around here is his playing field.”

A big game. It was the same for me. Real estate investment was just something I did to keep my money working for me and my cover-up to snuff—something that kept me in the right circles and occupied. Just never for long.

“Okay, great. Now, is there anything else? Or are we done here?” Usually, I would have invited Smith to some kind of impromptu celebration, but today I didn't feel like it. What I needed to do was go after Edith. The urge to make things right was almost overwhelming. I needed to tell her how sorry I was, and I needed to salvage what was left of our relationship. Even though I was pretty sure that by now, I was the last man on her list of possible lovers and the first on her hate list. *Relationship?* Wait, what?

I stopped myself. Was that what this was all about? Did I want to have a relationship with her? I didn't once think about something short-term with Edith. A one-night stand wouldn't nearly suffice. Having an affair wouldn't be a feasible option

either. I'd never had a serious relationship. Never wanted one. So why did I want that with Edith? And why exactly did I think a sophisticated, classy woman like Edith would even have me? Because of my irresistible charms? I grimaced, groaned, and shook my head. Admitting my weakness when it came to her was hard. Admitting I wasn't good enough for a woman like her was even harder.

Well, looked like I'd doomed myself without ever knowing it. Now, I had to make sure our next meeting, most likely through either her sister Grace or Dorothy and Richard, wouldn't be too awkward, because if there was one thing worse than not seeing her again, it was meeting her and she treating me as a stranger.

I groaned again, and Mark looked at me as if I'd fallen off my rocker, and maybe I had. Edith hadn't been like all the other women in my life. She'd been...special. And seeing her so angry and hurt by me didn't sit well with me.

Not at all.

I needed to make amends.

Tell her I was sorry.

Grovel.

Maybe then, I wouldn't feel like a major asshole anymore.

Maybe then, I could forget the pain of betrayal in her eyes before she turned around and drove off.

EDITH



“I’m sorry, but we need to let you go.”

The last words my boss said to me before I went back to my desk, grabbed all my things, and left the office reverberated in my brain as if it was an annoying music track on repeat.

Fired.

I got fired.

I couldn’t believe it.

It stung.

It really did.

And at the same time...at the same time, I couldn’t believe the relief I felt when my boss uttered those words.

At least, for a second, before the fat neon-blinking sign of “You’re a failure” started flashing in my brain.

Nobody got fired over losing one lousy deal.

But apparently, they hadn’t been happy with my performance all of last year. Not that anyone ever mentioned that fact to me. The client I’d shown the property to on my work/vacation hadn’t been satisfied with my performance either, and losing the Three Oaks property had been the last strike against me.

Three strikes and I was out.

They'd kicked me out of their boy's club, a club I never really belonged to. Even though I tried so hard. And now I'd given them a reason. Or three.

I hadn't been good enough.

Subpar performance.

Game over.

My life in pieces.

I entered my apartment and looked around. I'd accepted an offer earlier today. Before the Three Oaks deal went south... before I lost my job.

I'd felt exhilarated. But not anymore with one blow after the other. The tightening in my chest I'd felt since I left the office intensified, and I rubbed my chest. Why did I sell the apartment? It had been a nice apartment. A safe place. A place of my own.

Now, I had nothing.

I inhaled but couldn't get enough oxygen into my body. My fingers started to tingle, and spots appeared in my vision. Was I dying? What had I done? Did I still have insurance, now that I didn't have a job? I couldn't afford to have a heart attack, couldn't afford any unplanned expenses. I sank down at the wall right next to the door and gasped—still too little oxygen. My ears started ringing. Was this part of the process? Of dying?

Then someone ran up to my door and knocked.

At least, I wouldn't be alone. I opened the door without getting up, and before I even saw Carol enter my apartment, her dog Zeus was all over me. Apparently, he took me sitting on the floor as an indication I wanted to cuddle.

He slobbered over my face, and I was thankful. I grabbed his ears and leaned into his fur when the tears came. At least somebody loved me no matter what.

Zeus flopped to the floor, showing me his belly, and I cuddled him as if my life depended on it.

“You’ll get your clothes dirty,” Carol said.

I didn’t care.

Carol closed the door behind her and crouched down, which Zeus took as a sign that his mommy wanted to play, as well. He jumped back up and squeezed in between the two of us. But Carol wouldn’t have any of it and pushed him to the side. “What’s wrong? What happened, Edi?”

She got up and pulled me up from the floor, as well. Then she hugged me.

She’d been running.

Carol was constantly running...training for a marathon. Besides her hectic life, her kids, the Little Women’s Home, she still found the time to train for a fucking marathon.

She was lean, strong, capable, and beautiful.

I wasn’t any of that. Not strong nor beautiful...or capable.

I was thirty-eight, jobless, and homeless. No family. Nothing to show. Nothing left.

“Tell me what happened. Did something happen to Felicia?”

I managed to shake my head but still couldn’t get a word out.

Carol marched us into the kitchen, filled a glass of water, and pushed it into my hand. “Drink, then talk. Go.”

I took a sip, then hung my head.

“Your apartment is a mess.”

“My life is a mess.”

“Why, I saw you this morning. Your life wasn’t a mess then.”

So much had happened since then. All of it shitty.

“I didn’t get the property, and I lost my job.”

“You what? Why? Are you serious?”

“No, I’m just telling you stuff. Of course I’m serious.”

“I’m sorry, but I just didn’t expect this.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“How? Why?”

Dealing with it was hard enough, but saying it out loud? “I haven’t performed well enough, and I lost the biggest project I had, so…”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I have absolutely no idea. I mean, I need a new job obviously—a new place to live too, which will be hard to get without a job.”

“But you have the money from the apartment. You can buy another place, right?”

“Yeah, about that. I won’t buy anything with the money.”

“Why?”

“Because the Little Women’s Home needs it more than me.”

“No, Edith.”

“I’d made my decision a long time ago. You’re not gonna talk me out of it.”

“But things have changed. You need the money for yourself now.”

That gave me pause. Did I really need the money now? Not that I had it just yet. All we did was sign the contract, now the papers had to be filed and whatever came next. “Okay, change of topic. I’ll figure this all out, but not right now. What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Excuse me? You left me this morning without an explanation as to why you nearly kissed some random guy in the diner, and you thought I would let that slip?”

I sighed. Just thinking about Carter, I could feel anger and hurt rise inside of me. “Remember my vacation?”

“Duh!”

“Remember my bucket list?”

“Of course.”

“So, there was this guy.”

“I knew it. Spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill. He was there with a friend. He didn’t notice me the entire time. On the last evening, I sprained my ankle and...Don was there.”

“Don...as in Donovan, our ex-husband?”

“Yep.”

“And...”

“The guy interfered, kissed me, then carried me up the stairs.” I didn’t tell her about the other side of our meeting, about the counter-shady shit he’d told me he’d been doing. He’d asked me to trust him when he told me to give him a couple of days. But that was before, right? So, I wasn’t bound to my promise to him...but still I didn’t tell Carol.

“Wow,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“And then?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Come on, Edith. Spill.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what happened. He sat me down in front of the elevator, kissed me, and ran. But I saw him the next day. He sat next to me on the flight here.” There was so much more, the bus, the bar at the airport...

Carol rubbed her hands, and I could see her trying to hide her laugh.

“It’s not funny.”

She chuckled, then sobered when she realized I wasn’t going to see the funny side of the whole thing. “Yes, it is. So what happened then?”

“He’s here.”

“And...”

“We sort of went out yesterday.”

“On a date? Why do I hear of this just now?”

“No, my sister went on a date with Sheriff Travers, and he and I were the plus ones. Or alibis. Or something. I didn’t know I’d meet him.”

“And...”

“He’s the guy from the diner.”

“Ahh.”

“And he’s the one who outbid me on the property.”

“Wha—” She looked at me as if her brain needed a moment to catch up. “Shit. That sucks.”

I nodded. “Shit” about summed it up. So what else was there to say?

“So, even though you two looked like you were about to kiss...now we hate him?”

“Uh-huh.” I didn’t know if we were really about to kiss, but there had definitely been that moment. I shook my head. It felt like a lifetime ago. And what was it about me and guys, anyway? I was a pro at being attracted to the one man who’d hurt me the most. When had I picked up that self-destructive tendency? And when would I ever learn?

CARTER



I was just done checking my emails and closed my notebook when someone knocked on my door. I opened and grinned at the coffee that was shoved into my hand.

“Hey, boss.” Max entered, looked around, and flopped his taller-than-average frame on the sofa. Nobody would ever guess his Italian heritage given his red hair and freckled skin.

“Hey, Max. How’s the new house?” Max had arrived yesterday and wanted to check on the house he’d bought before meeting me and the guys at the hotel.

“I love it.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really?” That was a bit of a surprise. Max was the one of us who had the strongest urge to stay detached from people, things, everything. For him to say the L-word in any capacity was a rather rare occasion.

“Yeah, it’s like in the pictures—mountains, forest, nature. It’s got a clean vibe. No other houses or people anywhere near.

“And it’s inhabitable?” I took a sip and looked at him over the rim of the cup.

He nodded.

“Electricity?”

He nodded again.

“Well, I’m surprised.” I chuckled.

“Yeah, me too. Actually, I think somebody has been taking care of things. At least on the outside. I already got a pet.”

“Mountain goat?”

Max chuckled. “No, it’s a cat, and if I’m not completely mistaken, she’s pregnant.”

“You’re shitting me?” I grabbed the chair from the small desk and sat down opposite from him.

“No, why?”

He looked at me as if he really was clueless. Then he snatched the cup out of my hand, took off the lid, and sipped. Teammates...just like brothers. “Remember Helmand?”

“Duh, of course. Again, why?”

“You did more work as a veterinarian than a medic back then. It was like word had gotten out, and every single stray animal showed up at our base to be treated by you.”

He chuckled at the memory even though it wasn’t true. Max and his fellow PJs had saved many more wounded soldiers and even enemy fighters than animals. Miracle workers, in addition to being damn good soldiers.

We’d been lucky to have them stationed with us. Damn lucky.

“I can’t stay long. I have an appointment. Goofy and Peaches will help me set things up.”

I nodded. “And yesterday?”

For a second, he looked surprised.

“The EMT gig?” I clarified.

“I took it, had my first introductory shift five meeting after signing on. It was good.”

“Really? You intend to stay?”

He played with his coffee cup without looking up. Max hadn’t stayed anywhere longer than six months since he’d gotten out. He was still settling into civilian life, searching... for peace or purpose, maybe. Like so many of us after we got

out. At least we had a mission, even though it didn't keep us anywhere long enough to put down roots.

"Don't know yet—will figure it out. But I'll be set up and running by tomorrow."

"That's great. I haven't heard anything. Seems like they're lying low for now. But I don't trust the peace. And there's still two women missing."

My phone rang, and I looked at the screen. Richard.
"Sorry, I gotta take that."

Max nodded, got up, and looked outside the window.

"Travers."

"Carter. Any plans later today?"

"Yes, why?"

"Lunch?"

"No can do, but I can stop by the office before then."

"Great. Be here, 11:00 sharp."

"Roger that."

I finished the phone call, and by the look Max gave me, he'd heard every word.

"What did you do to be summoned to the sheriff's office?"

"No clue."

"Did you talk to him already? Does he know what's happening and why we're here?"

I shook my head. At least, he didn't know from me. I intended to tell him. But the appearance of Dorothy and Edith did put a stop to that. But whatever Richard wanted to talk to me about, this hadn't been a friendly call. It had been an order. I looked at my watch. I had half an hour to get there. And I would be there early.

"Call me when you're set up. The boys got Room 140. I'll need a sitrep later." I put a hand on his shoulder. I had a few inches on him—not hard, when you're 6' 3". But in everything else, we were equal. "And don't call me boss."

He grinned like always, then turned around and left.

I wasn't his boss. We were just joined by a common mission, a mission that gave meaning to our life and enabled us to serve others, be part of a team, and work toward a common goal. All things that made my life...worth living. Almost.

I checked my room one last time before I turned around and left, as well. Whatever Richard wanted to talk to me about, it wouldn't be pleasant.

I rode the elevator down into the parking garage. My rental was high end—not my style at all—but at least I was independent...and mobile.

Ten uneventful minutes later, I arrived at the sheriff's offices. I parked at the curb and walked in and greeted the officer in charge.

“Hello, I'm Carter Plesak, here to see Sheriff Travers.” I looked down at the name tag of the deputy sheriff in front of me. Deputy Sheriff Fisher. I filed it away for later. He looked competent and sharp. Good. We would need every hand on deck.

“Carter.”

Richard stepped out of his office and toward Deputy Fisher and me. “Peter, have you met Carter. He was my sergeant, all around bad-ass, and real estate and investment whizz.”

“None of that is true.”

Richard chuckled and patted me on the back. “And he's really humble, too.”

I shook hands with Peter before Richard led me back to his office where he settled down behind his desk. I remained standing. Whatever motivated him to order me here, I wouldn't make it easy on him, and I sure as hell wouldn't be the first to talk or ask him what this was all about. I moved through his office and looked at the pictures on the wall. One of them showed a much younger Richard with a very young Dorothy by his side. A young version of his late wife stood

right next to them, and all three of them were grinning as if they didn't have a care in the world.

“I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you here.”

I turned around, raised one eyebrow, and looked at Richard. He didn't look hostile, more like a man who was working too hard and worrying too much. I walked back to his desk and took the chair on the opposite side. “Okay, let's have it.”

Richard then shuffled with some papers on his desk before he put the stack to the side. He dropped his hands and stared at me with laser focus. “Actually, there're two things I wanted to talk to you about. I did some digging about your companies.”

“And.”

“Sec Ops Group kinda stood out. Tell me why you're here?”

I squeezed my forehead before I looked up at Richard. He either knew something was off already or he must have had a suspicion. Why else would he go digging into my companies?

“You know something I don't. There's a shit storm on the horizon, isn't there?”

I nodded.

“So, about your organization... What I read on the homepage is that you specialize in child trafficking.”

I nodded again.

“So, we've got increased gang activity, a flooding of drugs. Are we missing the bigger picture?”

“Yes. There's this drug cartel and I don't know why or how, but from what we've gathered, they chose Whitebrook for the next expansion.”

“Fuck.” Richard sighed and dropped his head. “I figured as much. There was just too much activity going on. I'm glad you're here.”

I grinned. “I wish talking to law enforcement, telling them we're only here to help, would go over as easy all the time.”

Richard grinned, as well, but then his face turned serious again. “Now about Edith.” He paused and dropped his neck as if even bringing it up made him uncomfortable. “I just wanted to ask you to not fuck this up.” I opened my mouth, but he raised his hand to shut me up. “I watched you with her. I know you, Carter. I know you’re a player. And I ask you to please not fuck this one up. Edith isn’t like your usual conquests. She doesn’t need another guy playing with her feelings and dumping her. And you’re not able to keep a relationship. Scratch that, you never wanted to keep a relationship. It was always just fun for you. Have some fun and dump them. Edith is not like that. Hell, none of the Cleaver girls are like that. I really love Dorothy, so would you please not fuck this up for me.”

Would I really fuck this up? I mean, the possibility was there since my track record with women in the past had been really bad, but I never wanted to have a serious relationship with any of those girls or women. So maybe this time was different. I thought back to the last moment I saw her yesterday, and my heart sank. Not that any of that was of any importance because I had already fucked this up. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Because I’m pretty sure she hates me right now.”

“Didn’t look like it yesterday.”

“Did I tell you I’m here on a business deal, as well?”

Richard nodded but stayed silent.

“Well, that deal went through yesterday. I bought a property in Three Oaks.”

Richard’s eyebrows raised, and he gritted his teeth as if he knew what was coming.

“Guess who was interested in the deal, as well?”

“Edith.”

I nodded, then looked down at the hands in my lap. “She wasn’t real happy when she realized I was the opposing party.” Not happy? Major understatement. She was pissed, but what had been worse was the hurt shimmering in her eyes. And that

hurt had kept me awake all night and was still turning my stomach into an acidic pit. “So, whatever was or wasn’t developing between Edith and myself, I’m pretty sure it’s gone.”

Richard didn’t look as relieved as I thought he would. But he looked at me with compassion. “I’m sorry, man.”

I shrugged. Now the only thing I needed to do was apologize, for what my apology would be worth to Edith.

“So about that cartel thing?” Richard looked uncomfortable bringing it up again, but he was right. This should have been my first priority all along, not chasing a beautiful lady.

“I’m on it. I’m assembling my team as we speak, and as soon as they’re all here, we’ll meet up and see where we’re at.”

Richard looked relieved and nodded. “That would be great; I really appreciate the extra forces.”

“Always happy to help.” We shook hands, and on my way out of the office, I said goodbye to Peter, as well.

Outside, I took a deep breath. Law enforcement was seldom happy to see us operating on their turf. But most law enforcement offices were understaffed and overworked, and it never took long until they realized how we, with our special equipment and know-how, could be an asset instead of a liability.

I looked down at my watch. I was cutting it close for my meeting with Grace at her café. She finally agreed to meet yesterday after I told her I was in town for a couple of days. I didn’t put pressure on her because she didn’t want to meet in the past, but I was glad she was ready to meet even though I wished another Cleaver woman would be in her place.

The ride to the café was uneventful. There wasn’t a lot of traffic in Whitebrook. I even found a parking spot not far away from the café. Mom and Brody would arrive later this evening, and I would pick them up from the airport and drive them to

Moon Lake. Somehow, even being here only for a few days, my life seemed to get awfully complicated, awfully fast.

I walked toward Grace's café and felt a little trepidation before entering. Remembering a fallen brother was always hard as was living while others didn't come home. But looking into the eyes of a spouse or a loved one, feeling the weight of responsibility of answering questions about how they'd died and sitting with them, while their loved one wasn't ever coming home, was the hardest thing. And even though I wasn't sure how this meeting would go, it sure as hell wouldn't be easy.

I inhaled deeply and pushed the door open. There was a little bell attached to it which immediately settled me into the ambience of the interior of the café. It was part hipster cafe, part bookshop with a lot of little colorful details that made it feel homey and chic at the same time. There were only a couple of tables which right now were all empty but would soon fill up when the lunch crowd arrived. I watched Grace coming through the door from what surely had to be a small kitchen, and her smile was open and polite. Her long, blond hair was tied back, and her huge, blue eyes stood out in her features. She looked young. Too young to be a widow.

"Hello and welcome. You can take whatever table you want."

I stood and looked at her and must've looked like a dork because I didn't know how to introduce myself. Clearly, she thought I was just another customer, and for a second, I contemplated if it wouldn't be easier if I pretended to be. But that was a ridiculous thought, so I marched toward the bar and extended my hand.

"Hello, Grace. I'm Carter Plesak." Her beautiful smile faltered for a second. But then, it steadied, and she shook my hand. "Oh my...hello, I'm so glad you're here."

There was a little awkward silence between the two of us. But she just laughed it off, and the heaviness immediately alleviated.

“I’m sorry, I’m a little shellshocked to actually meet you in person. What can I get you to drink? My sister should arrive shortly; I asked her to take over the café so we have time to talk.”

The door opened, and the little bell above the door announced the arrival of a group of middle-aged women in yoga outfits.

“Hey, Grace,” they shouted and settled around a table by the window front.

“I’m sorry but I have to take their order. Can I leave you alone for a few minutes until my sister arrives?”

“Of course, I’ll be back there.” I pointed to the bookshelves in the back, and she nodded.

The door opened again, and another group entered. Soon the café would be brimming with people. So, as long as her sister hadn’t arrived, there was really no chance for us to sit down and have a conversation. I smiled at her and made my way to the back. Maybe I could find a book for Brody. I wasn’t any good at picking out children’s books, and I really didn’t know what he liked. I needed to get better at stuff like that. And fast. I perused the shelves. There was a large section of military history books which surprised me but immediately caught my interest.

A while later, I had a stack of books in my arms, and I even found several that sounded interesting and age-appropriate for Brody.

There had been a never-ending stream of people coming in, and once more, the bell rang which made me obsessively look at the door every time. But this time it wasn’t another customer who entered the café.

My heart skipped a beat when Edith entered. She looked stressed and a little disheveled, but it didn’t take away from her beauty at all.

She rushed toward the bar. Even though the noise level was high with all the patrons chatting and enjoying their lunch,

I heard Edith's crystal-clear voice as if she was standing right beside me.

"I'm here. Why are you here? I thought I was going to take over. Didn't you say you have an appointment or meeting or something?"

Grace looked at her, annoyed. "I'm here because I've been waiting for you. You didn't think I would close the café at lunchtime until you had the grace to arrive."

Grace's annoyed tone of voice made Edith sigh and raise her hands. "I'm really sorry for being late."

Grace nodded and her anger dissipated. "It's okay. I actually want you to meet somebody before you take over." Grace rounded the bar and grabbed Edith by her arm and dragged her toward me.

"Edith, meet Carter. He's been Owen's Sergeant. I mean, he was..." Her voice faltered, and she looked like somebody had kicked her in the shins.

Edith sighed, cursed, threw her hands in the air, turned around without saying hello, and stomped back behind the counter.

Yeah, she sure wasn't happy to see me. But I hadn't expected any different.

Grace's face registered shock as she stared at her retreating sister. Then she turned back to me, incredulity clearly visible. "I don't..."

I needed to explain Edith's behavior to her sister because she clearly needed an explanation from someone. "We know each other. I ticked her off yesterday."

Grace squeezed her eyebrows and looked from Edith to me and back to me. "I can see that."

"It's a work thing. We'll figure it out."

Grace's expression turned icy. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "Work...really?"

I nodded.

“I find that very interesting since Edith just lost her job yesterday, so what exactly work-related is this all about?”

My hands turned clammy, and I rubbed the one not holding the stack of books against my jeans-glad thigh. Shit. This was even worse than I’d thought. Did Edith really lose her job yesterday? Over a business deal? If so, it was my fault she got fired. I looked back at Edith, but she was busy serving customers and flirting with a table full of businessmen in their early 50s.

Shit.

A burning sensation settled in my chest, and I forced my jaw to unclench. I had no right to feel jealous. I had no right to anything regarding Edith. Even though I didn’t think so an hour ago, I would heed Richard’s advice—I needed to leave Edith alone.

Except for an apology. The least I owed her was an apology.

EDITH



Okay, this was not what I'd thought I'd stumble into. I marched behind the counter of Grace's café and felt bad for the way I'd behaved toward Carter in front of Grace. But really, to ambush me like that wasn't very nice on Grace's part. But then again, it wasn't as if Grace knew I'd met Carter before, or that he was instrumental in costing me my job.

I put on my apron and looked around.

The café was full, and there was enough for me to do without bitching about things I couldn't change. But really, Carter had been Owen's sergeant? How come this man popped up everywhere around me and was entangled not only with me but with my whole family? This really wasn't fair.

I walked to a table full of businessmen who must have entered just before me. "What can I get you, gentlemen?"

One of the men, the one with gray hair and a mustache, that looked so ridiculous that I choked back my giggle, answered. "Oh, we got a special treat today, boys. I think I'm falling in love. But on my way there, I would love to have some sparkling water to match the fizz I'm feeling inside."

I couldn't hold back my laugh now. The way he was talking was so whacky and out there, it was almost charming. Almost. The other men ordered, as well, and I went back to the counter to fill their order. I could feel Carter and Grace looking at me. Possibly Grace was trying to find a reason for me behaving like an ass.

Would Carter tell her? Would he tell her how he'd trampled all over my heart yesterday?

Oh, whatever. I had all of yesterday to sulk and fear about my future, which had been enough. Now it was time to pick up the pieces and look forward.

I needed a new apartment, a new job, and I needed to focus on what was important in life, my former job or Carter not being on the list. Getting Grace through the next few weeks and through the yearly memorial service Owen's parents had transformed into a weird social gathering, to enhance their social standing in their community, was one of those important things. And volunteering. I'd already talked to Carol about me taking over more responsibilities at the Little Women's Home, starting tomorrow.

I was busy for the next hour, filling orders and preparing coffee and sandwiches. It wasn't the first time I'd helped out, and I was working on autopilot until the lunch rush was over. Things really settled down and there was only one other table occupied besides Grace and Carter's. I'd made them sandwiches earlier and had watched Carter devour his. He even looked sexy eating a simple sandwich. Not fair.

Now that the noise level had gone down significantly, I could eavesdrop on their conversation without any strain.

"I really like what you've done with the café," Carter said.

"I wouldn't have it if it wasn't for you," Grace answered.

What? I was cleaning one of the tables, pretending to not listen, when what Grace said stopped me dead in my tracks and sent my mind reeling.

"I really can't thank you enough for investing in it. You didn't know me, and you didn't owe me anything, and yet you believed in me. Honestly, it took all of my courage to ask for money, when you wrote that letter."

Carter had invested in this café? I'd always thought Owen's parents, who were loaded, had given Grace the money to buy the café. But I should've known she would've been hesitant to ask for or take their money. Owen had been the

golden child of the Bryce family. Even his own twin brother had always come second to Owen, which must've led to some crazy bad feelings between the two of them. But it had also led to a crazy unhealthy hot-cold relationship between Owen's parents and Grace. And even though they still stayed in contact, it wasn't all lovely family between Grace and the Bryces.

I went back behind the counter and prepared myself a cappuccino. That was the main plus point for owning a cafe, or working in one. The professional, died-and-gone-to-heaven coffee maker.

I took out my phone and pretended to scroll through my emails while in reality I was still eavesdropping. There wasn't much I knew about Carter besides him being commanding, funny, and sexy as all hell. And getting to see this kinder, caring side of him made me want to know more.

I'd felt attracted to him, even though I knew nothing about him. And those feelings didn't stop even though he was a major contributor to my misery right now.

Well, apparently he wasn't all bad—just for me, my life, and my career.

“I really didn't want to stay in touch or in contact with any of Owen's military friends. But thank you for your letters. Thanks for being there for me through all those years even though I asked you to stay away. I wasn't very kind to you in the beginning,” Grace said and piqued my interest. Grace was usually the epitome of kindness—soft-spoken, levelheaded—she'd always been the most social one where Dorothy had been more quiet. Grace had been a lot more adaptable and sociable, whatever the circumstances.

Carter ran his hand through his hair repeatedly. The look on his face was tortured, and something inside me wanted to go to him and rub his back. Even though I had no business even listening in on their private conversation, I couldn't stop myself.

“Owen was my responsibility, my man, what happened to him...” Carter gulped down air as if he was struggling with the

words.

The need to go sit next to him and soothe the pain visible in his face was overwhelming, and I grabbed my phone harder. “My responsibility...and so are you. I’m happy to see you doing so well. Grace. I’m happy you made this café work. I’m happy that you’re close to your family, and I’m happy to see you thriving. I know this time of year must be hard for you. But I’m proud how you’re handling things.”

Grace grabbed his hand on the table and squeezed it.

And I wanted to do the same. To see this strong, funny man near tears showed how ultimately good and caring he was. He cared about people. My mind went back to the hotel where he came to my aid when Don had grabbed my hand. He hadn’t known me back then, but he had probably felt my unwillingness to be around Don. Then, the next day, I would’ve crashed through the windshield of that stupid bus if it hadn’t been for him rescuing me. And our evening at the bar in Moon Lake...he’d been funny and flirting and intensely attractive, and he’d made me feel like I was the only woman worth paying attention in the whole bar.

I didn’t know if any of the men in my past had ever made me feel like that.

And yesterday, at the diner in Three Oaks? He’d protected me against Felicia’s asshole boyfriend.

Carter Plesak was an honorable man, and probably, if he’d known that I was one of the parties interested in buying the property in Three Oaks, he surely would have talked to me about it. I wouldn’t have been blindsided by it as much as I had been. And even though it wouldn’t have changed the outcome, I might not have felt as betrayed as I did yesterday.

That’s the kind of guy I thought he was. So maybe I shouldn’t lay all the blame about my fucked-up life on his shoulders. Yes, he’d hurt me but not intentionally.

I wasn’t ready to forgive him just yet, but looking at Grace still squeezing his hand, something shifted inside me. He sure

as hell was entangled in my life, not only through Grace but also through Dorothy and Richard, and that wouldn't change.

I snuck back into the kitchen and took a minute to compose myself. How had this man come to mean so much to me in such a short period of time? He'd been a stranger just a week before—a guy, a sexy guy that I'd admired from the distance. Now he seemed to be everywhere around me, protecting me, rescuing me, and having my family's back when life got tough.

He'd laughed and flirted with me and gave me the feeling like he really wanted to get to know me.

Maybe whatever had been developing between us could work at least a little—a one-night stand or even a short affair, because I sure as hell couldn't remember the last time I was as attracted to a man as I was to Carter Plesak. And I sure could use a little pick-me-up. Maybe if I let go of his role in me losing my job. I could have at least this affair to restore my self-confidence again.

I went back out to the counter and was surprised he was standing there with both hands on the counter. "I just wanted to say goodbye. And I wanted to say I'm sorry."

I looked down at his hands and hesitated, but then I laid one of my hands on top of his. He immediately turned his hand around so our palms touched. Energy sizzled through me, and I immediately remembered the feeling of his lips on mine, and how good it felt when he kissed me.

"I didn't know you were interested in the property. I mean, I knew there were other parties interested, but we never talked about work, so..."

"I know. I was pissed yesterday. And really hurt, but I understand. You couldn't have known, and the fact that you were the highest bidder is just a fact so..."

"So, if I call you later, will you pick up?"

"Do you even have my number?"

He nodded. "Yes, I do."

“Then, yes, I will pick up if you call.”

He smiled, squeezed my hand one last time, and turned around to leave the café. Butterflies swirled around in my stomach, the ones that had been there from the moment I met him. I really had the hots for this man since the first time I laid eyes on him. Quite frankly, it was embarrassing whenever I even thought about our kiss...whew.

But, with every layer I uncovered of his, those feelings somehow shifted, deepened, became more than just lust.

More than pure animal attraction.

“Earth to Edith. You still with me?”

I looked at my little sister.

The smirk she gave me made heat creep up my neck.
“What?”

She raised her hands. “I didn’t say a thing.”

Yeah right. I didn’t need to hear the words when just the way she looked at me was enough to almost wipe that smile from my face. Almost. “We just know each other. That’s all.” All my little sister needed to know.

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“So?”

“What happened at work?”

Puff. Just like that, my good mood evaporated.

“Nothing. They let me go, is all.”

Grace stared at me as if a horn had grown on my forehead.
“Who are you and what have you done to my overachiever sister?”

I leveled her with my big-sister stare, and she raised her hands. “Okay, I’ll back off.”

“How’re you holding up, anyway?”

“I’m okay. I was with the in-laws yesterday; they have this whole big thing planned.”

“You okay with that?”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. If they need a big thing to remember Owen, that’s their decision. I just hope you all will be there. I invited Carter, as well.”

As if I needed another reason besides being there when my sister needed me. “Of course, we’ll be there for you.”

“George will come home, as well.”

Something in Grace’s voice sounded off. But I couldn’t put my finger on it. I always thought she liked Owen’s brother. “That’s great, isn’t it? At least he will manage the in-laws.”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

“So...”

“He’s bringing his girlfriend.”

Okay. Now why would Grace even care about that?
“And...we don’t like her?”

Grace looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. “Why wouldn’t we like her? We haven’t even met her.”

Grace looked down and picked at her cuticles, a sure sign something was on her mind. She’d done that for as long as I could remember. “It will be nice to see him again. When was the last time?”

“A year ago. He’s in the military, as well. So, he’s not home much.”

“Do you talk sometimes?”

“We email.”

So, she’d stayed in contact with Owen’s brother over all these years.

“He’s so funny; sometimes reading his emails, I’m just laughing my ass off.”

My eyebrows shot up. Owen had never made Grace laugh. And nobody ever made Grace laugh her ass off. So, this was quite interesting. “You like him.”

“No... I mean, yes, of course.”

So, this was what was going on. Grace liked-liked George Bryce, her late husband's brother. And he was bringing his girlfriend home. Now that should be interesting to watch.

CARTER



I didn't have to wait long until Brody and my mom arrived. Brody was jumping up and down, looking wide-eyed and excited. I tried to remember if my sister ever took him on a vacation. But I drew a blank. I'd sure given her enough money to do so. But most likely she'd pissed it away on booze or drugs or both.

Thinking about that made the bile rise up in my throat. I was still so angry at her. But not as angry as I was at myself. I hadn't protected her. Not back then, when we were kids and not later. I should have, at least after I left the military I should've instead of jet-setting around the world, trying to save as many kids as I could. Instead of spending my time gaining the intel to take those fuckers down, I should have spent it trying to save my sister...and protect Brody. Too late.

"Hello, dear." My mother made me bow down and kissed me on the cheek as she'd done ever since I'd outgrown her. Before that, she'd always kissed me on the forehead just like she did with Brody now. I was beyond lucky to have her.

"Hey, Brody, I'm so glad you're here. How was the flight?" Brody pressed his body against my mother, and my throat thickened. I went down on my knees, established eye contact, and gave him the time he needed to get over his intimidation. It always took him a while. It was as if he needed the time to get a read on me, on my mood, or whatever. Most likely, he'd learned that around my sister. But I didn't know why. Because I wasn't there to protect him? I held my smile steady even though I wanted to grit my teeth.

“Did you get pressed into your seat when the plane accelerated? I hate that feeling. How about you?”

He watched me, let the words sink in, but inch by inch, he moved from behind my mother toward me like a wild animal hesitantly moving forward but ready to jump back at any moment.

I groaned inwardly. It had already been better between us, but whenever he hadn't seen me for a few days, it felt like we started from zero again.

“Flying was awesome,” he said and jumped forward, his shyness forgotten.

I grinned and his face split into a big, toothy grin. “Hey, you've lost another tooth.”

He grinned again and nodded.

“Well done, little one.” I high fived him and that finally broke the ice.

On the way to the car, Brody didn't shut up about the flight and everything he'd experienced these last few hours. My mom just smiled and held his hand while I handled their luggage.

We all settled into the car, and I had even arranged for a booster seat for Brody.

“You will love Moon Lake. It's like this beautiful little town on a lake surrounded by mountains. The Inn is right by the water, and they have a playground and everything.”

“Will you stay with us, Uncle Carter?” Brody asked, and my mother shot me a disappointed look.

“Can't. There was only one room left for you and Grandma. I have a room here in Whitebrook, but I'll visit.”

Brody turned quiet after that and looked out the window, and I felt like shit. Why did I disappoint someone with every move I made?

I needed to change my life. Needed to retire. Needed to settle down, become the dad Brody deserved. And soon.

We arrived at the Moon Lake Inn within an hour. I might've pushed the speed limits a little just to get out of the car.

There was a big commotion at the Inn, and we were immediately enveloped in a group of kids and dogs all having the time of their lives.

Brody looked shell-shocked for a second, but then one girl handed him a ball to throw for the dogs. He looked at me and I nodded, and he was immediately engulfed in the group, and together with the other kids and dogs, off toward the meadow on the side of the big, old house.

"Welcome, sorry for the excitement," a lady with a toddler in her arm said when she came across the parking lot, followed by another woman with a toddler and a burly-looking red-headed guy covered in tattoos. It didn't take a genius to realize he was...trained. The way he moved, the way his head was on a swivel, the way he'd taken in the whole situation, assessed there was no threat whatsoever, and relaxed, made that clear. Plus, I recognized him as the bartender from the bar I'd visited with Richard, Dorothy, and Edith. And he most likely recognized me, as well.

"No problem. That was the best possible reception we could get. Brody is already off and having fun, so this is perfect," my mother said and shook hands with the women.

"I'm Mitzi Plesak. This is my son Carter. My grandson Brody will be the one staying here with me."

"I'm Lisa and this is Claire; we're the owners of the Inn. And this is Blake; he's our bellman for the day."

Blake scowled at Lisa, but when his eyes met Claire's, his scowl turned into a smile, and he kissed her and the toddler in her arms before he stepped forward and greeted me.

"You're Carter. Richard's friend, right?"

"Yep. And you own the bar, right?"

He nodded. "Good to have you. Let's get your bags and get your family settled."

If anyone found it odd that I wasn't staying there, no one said anything.

We carried the bags up to the room, and when we came back down my mother, Lisa and Claire had settled down on the porch and watched the kids down at the playground.

The girl that'd handed Brody the ball earlier dashed up the stairs and threw herself into Blake's arms. The guy grinned from one ear to the other, gave his girl a hug, and off she went again, back to the other kids.

"Isn't family the greatest thing on earth," Blake said.

I nodded.

Blake went to Claire, gave her a kiss on the head, took the toddler from her arms, and made his way down to the playground, followed by an appreciative look from his wife checking him out.

When it was time for dinner, I said my goodbyes with a firm promise to Brody to start our swim lessons the next day. Once on my way back to Whitebrook, the glimpses of idyllic small-town life floated through my mind.

Watching Claire and Blake this afternoon made me believe that having a family might not be as bad as I always thought it was. Not that I had a choice. I already had two thirds of the equation. Now, the only thing missing was a woman to love and share my family with, to share the easy days and the bad days and the joy and responsibility of seeing Brody grow up happy and develop into a functional member of society. All this wasn't too much to ask, was it?

For a second, I tried to imagine Edith sitting on that porch with a toddler on her lap, smiling at me and checking me out, like Claire had done with Blake.

Wouldn't be that bad at all.

I grabbed my phone and called her as soon as I left the mountainous area and could see Whitebrook in the distance. It was already 7 p.m., and the sun had set behind the mountains.

She picked up on the second ring, as she had promised earlier.

“Hey, Edith, it’s Carter. I thought maybe we could go out, grab a drink somewhere, and talk. What do you think?”

“I’m still at the café.”

“Then I’ll meet you there.”

EDITH



When the bell above the door chimed, I looked up from cleaning the espresso machine. We weren't technically closed yet, but only one table was still occupied and they'd just paid, so they would leave shortly.

“Hey, beautiful.”

My eyebrows must have touched my hairline because he rounded the bar and soothed a wrinkle on my forehead with his thumb before he gave me a peck right there. The grin that followed made his eyes sparkle, and heat curled down my spine.

Whoa?

My “hey” was more croaked than anything else, and I turned back to the espresso machine just to hide my suddenly hot face.

He was turning me on with a grin and a touch. Not that I hadn't been attracted to other men before, but not in that instant. Not like that. At least, not since I became an adult and possibly never. And didn't we say we'd talk? Talking was not sweeping in and kissing my forehead.

“What do you need me to do?”

I looked over my shoulder at him, and thankfully he looked around the room so I had time to really take him in. He was beyond sexy. His scraggly beard didn't soften the hard edges of his jaw or hide the lush softness of his full lips.

His lush softness?

Excuse me?

Stop that shit.

Somehow my libido was running wild. And I didn't really know why. I usually had a pretty good lock on it. No matter how sexy the guy. Why was now different? Why was he different?

When I didn't answer his question, he turned back to me and scrunched his eyebrows and locked his eyes with mine. "Everything okay?"

My breath caught, and heat pooled deep in my core. Was it? Was I okay? I clearly had the hots for him. Bad. And with all the quivering inside of me, I sure didn't feel normal. Or behaved normally. "Yep." I broke eye contact and turned back to the espresso machine.

This was ridiculous. I was ridiculous.

"Edith?"

I looked back up. A languid smile transformed his whole face, a face that was a lot closer than a few seconds ago.

He leaned in.

His breath hit my ear and goose bumps ran up and down my spine.

"Should I wipe down the tables?"

Whatever I expected him to do, that was not it. Then he leaned back, and I sucked in air as if I had been underwater for too long. "Yeah, the tables would be great."

I handed him a new cleaning rag, and only after he'd finished wetting it and left the area behind the bar, did I really start breathing again.

Why was he suddenly affecting me like that?

Why did I feel like jumping him in front of patrons was suddenly the best idea I'd had in months?

I shook my head and finished cleaning behind the bar. I needed to get a grip on myself. I wasn't a horny teenager. I

was an adult, so it was time I behaved like one.

The women on Table 5 left, and Carter showed them to the door, eliciting giggles from them when he flirted with them. It was as if he couldn't not flirt whenever a woman was around him. I watched him from behind the bar. The compliments and easy smiles rolled off his tongue as if he'd done that his whole life. One woman tried to drag out her departure, but somehow Carter got her out the door before she even knew what was happening.

Sneaky bastard.

Then I remembered what I'd overheard earlier. How Grace had thanked him. Maybe he was flirting a bit too much. But ultimately, he was a good guy.

The click when he turned the lock was deafening in the silence of the empty café.

“Thank you for all you did for Grace.”

He moved toward me. “Why would you say that?”

I looked down at my feet. Eavesdropping on private conversations wasn't something I usually did. “I'm sorry. But I overheard your conversation with Grace earlier. You helped her out. You didn't abandon her even though she pushed you away. Thank you for that.”

He swallowed, then went to the sink to rinse the rag. I didn't expect an answer. But I didn't expect the raw pain in his eyes either when he looked up at me. “It's the least I could do.”

Did he really think that? Did he really think there was more he should have done?

I didn't exactly know what happened to Owen. But war was war. There was only so much anyone could do.

“Are you feeling guilty?”

“Hmm.”

Not a yes, but not a no either.

“Are you guilty?”

He looked at me as if I'd stabbed him. But I didn't back down. Guilt was an ugly thing that could destroy lives.

Shame was even worse.

"No."

"Then why are you feeling that way?"

"Because I was responsible. I'm responsible for my men. I'm responsible for bringing them home. Alive."

Wow. If anyone understood responsibility, it might be me. I always felt responsible for my sisters. Even now. Even though they were adults, I still felt like I needed to protect them.

I laid my hand on Carter's arm, and his muscles tensed under me. "I get it."

He turned around so fast I nearly fell against him, and he diminished the little bit of space still remaining as he stepped forward. Then he crushed me against his chest and squeezed me tight. It all happened so fast, it took me a second, but then I wrapped my arms around his torso and hugged him back.

This was a man capable of intense feelings. And even though he looked and behaved tough as nails most of the time, it didn't mean he didn't feel. I pressed him firmer against me.

He smelled woody and delicious.

He nuzzled the side of my neck, then my ear. "Can I kiss you?"

A flush of desire blasted through me as if I had just downed a shot of Tequila and the fiery liquid was making its way through my body. Did I just imagine this question, or had he really just said what my libido sure hoped he did?

I leaned back and locked eyes with him.

He stared back at me. Unapologetically.

He might be vulnerable sometimes. But he sure didn't like to be. And he sure wasn't now.

Kissing would be a way out of this awkward situation. And a stronger woman might have called him on it.

But I wasn't strong. Not right now. Right now, I wanted to feel his lips on me more than I wanted my next breath.

I didn't wait. Didn't give him the permission he was asking for. Instead I got up on my toes, leaned forward, and nibbled on his lower lip.

His beard tickled less than I thought, but his lips...oh man. Those lips.

He let me have my way with him, teasing him with soft kisses for a moment. He held back even though I didn't want him to. But only for a few seconds, then he shifted us, lifted me up, and sat me down next to the espresso machine. And then he kissed me. Really kissed me.

No soft nibbles for him, but a full-blown onslaught on all my senses.

With his hand on the back of my neck, he pushed me forward, while his mouth and tongue made love to my mouth.

Delicious.

I breathed in his breath and matched his tongue with my own.

God, this man could kiss.

When he kissed his way to my neck, shivers ran down my spine, and my core clenched in anticipation. I was beyond hot and horny for him and when his hand slipped under my shirt and up my spine, a guttural sound escaped my mouth. My ears started ringing.

Really?

Not once had a man made my ears ring.

He groaned, stopped kissing, and pressed his forehead against mine while I was still panting for air.

This man just might have taken my breath away.

“Do you need to take that?”

He looked at me, and meeting the intense lust in his eyes made me want to kiss him again. “What?”

He chuckled, grabbed my phone from the cupboard above us, and showed me the screen.

I grabbed it and answered the call. “Hello—”

“Have you seen Dorothy?”

“Sheriff Travers? Is that you?”

“Yes, have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Seen Dorothy?”

“No, why?”

Carter didn’t take a step back; instead, he listened in on the call, and when Richard told us she’d been missing, he took over the phone.

“What do you need?”

He turned away and stepped toward the front windows, effectively robbing me of my chance to listen in on what they were talking about.

“Shit. Keep us in the loop.”

He listened to what Richard said. “Whatever you need, ask for it. Information, money, whatever.”

“Roger that.”

He ended the call and looked back at me.

And just like that, back was the man from the lobby—silent, intense, smooth.

He walked back to me and handed me my phone. “Dorothy is missing. Richard doesn’t know anything yet, but you should go back to your apartment in case she’s there.”

No further mention of our kiss.

Wow, that was some hot/cold shit.

But why was I even thinking about that? Dorothy was missing. Missing, as in nowhere to be found.

I jumped down from the counter, grabbed my bag from underneath the sink, and within minutes, closed the door of the café with Carter at my side.

He accompanied me to my car, but he didn't hold my hand or anything. "I'm sorry."

I looked up at him from inside my car, but he looked down at his shoes.

"For what?"

"Kissing you. I shouldn't mix business with pleasure."

"Okay." I tried to close the door, but he didn't budge. "What?"

"Edith, I..."

He didn't finish whatever he wanted to tell me. Instead, he took a deep breath. "I'll call you later. Okay?"

I nodded, and he stepped back and let me close the door.

What the hell happened?

And I sure wouldn't stick around long enough to find out.

Plus, I had more important things to do, like driving home and finding out if my sister was there.

CARTER



I established the call to Max and Goofy as soon as I locked the door to my hotel room.

It took me all the way here to get my head back in the game. Kissing Edith had been mind-blowing and wrong.

I was here on a mission. Well, more than one mission. My life was complicated already; I didn't need to complicate it any further.

“Hey, boss.”

“Hey, boys. Sheriff Travers just called me; there's another woman missing. Dorothy Cleaver. What's the status on the other two?”

“We still don't know much. They've definitely disappeared, not moved away. We're monitoring chatter, but they haven't yet resurfaced. And there's nothing concrete. Although, we've intercepted a chat about a shipment tonight. But we think it's about drugs incoming, not humans trafficking.”

I sighed, then rubbed my neck. “Can you give me all you got so far? I'll forward them to the locals.”

“Sure, boss.”

I ended the call, snagged a bottle of water from the mini fridge and sat down at the single chair in the room. Shit. When had my life become so messy? I'd always been a pro at compartmentalizing the areas of my life, and look at me now.

Work, family, and a woman all mixed up in one huge pile of shit.

Well, I needed to get my priorities straight. That was it. Focus on the mission and let that lead my decisions and actions.

Who needed me most? Clear answer to that: Brody. Number one priority, bar none. He didn't deserve this life. He didn't deserve the blow he'd been dealt. He deserved better. A stable home life, routine...someone he could depend on.

A parent.

Not that my mother couldn't give him that, but it wasn't fair of me to let her handle things, when I was perfectly capable to do so myself.

Then the girls and the fight against the cartel—that sure as hell was important—saving lives, keeping this place from descending into mayhem. But that was only necessary for the short-term. Soon they would have enough intel so Richard could handle it. No need for me to be here.

And Edith?

She didn't need me. Seeing her today proved that. She was perfectly capable to pick up the pieces. Maybe I could even give her a job. She would be perfect for handling the development of the Three Oaks property. She could take over that job, and everything and everyone would be taken care of. Though, that would mean a hard no to whatever was simmering between us. No more kissing. No more flirting.

She wasn't the type of woman to sleep with the boss, and it would be wrong of me to get her in that kind of predicament. I looked at my watch. I'd promised to call her. My left leg bounced on the floor, and my stomach vibrated. Just the prospect of hearing her voice made me feel giddy inside.

Oh crap.

Not pursuing her would suck. Especially if she was to work for me.

I grabbed my phone and thumbed through my contacts. I'd taken a photo of her this afternoon when she wasn't looking, and when it came up on my screen, desire made the muscles in my stomach clench.

Fuck.

Well, no harm in hearing her voice just one more time before going to sleep.

Wow, when did I become such a pussy...and a hypocrite?

It had been little more than an hour since I'd last seen her. Less than five minutes since I'd decided not to further pursue her, and here I was...practically salivating and thinking things like how I missed her voice, her laughter, her sarcasm... I stood up, pushed the phone into my pocket, and looked outside my window. Somewhere in the distance, a fire truck went by. I'd watched her with Grace today. How tight their bond was. Brody would never have that—have siblings to fight with but ultimately always have in his corner.

Had it ever been that way between my sister Chloe and me? We'd been inseparable when we were young. With her only two years older than me, we'd played and fought and love/hated each other, like only siblings could.

Until that fateful day.

The day our neighbor had invited her into his garage.

I hadn't realized it right away, but the longer that went on, the more closed off she became. The more fragile and distant.

Our bond had shattered because I hadn't protected her. Because I had failed her as a brother.

Stop.

I turned around, grabbed my phone, searched for Edith's name, and called.

It took a few rings until the call connected, and I heard sirens over the telephone and someone crying.

“Edith?”

“Carter.” She burst into tears, and all I heard were more sirens. Ear-shattering. Then she dropped the call and my heartbeat skyrocketed. Something had happened. I grabbed my wallet and my keys and ran out the room.

I called her again from the car, but the line was dead. All the images of what could have happened played in my mind and drove me mad while I sped toward her home address.

EDITH



I blinked and looked down at the phone vibrating in my hand. The flames from the burning building—my building—reflected on the screen. It was the one thing I grabbed from my apartment. Why? Why didn't I take my purse, or my passport, or my old photo album? All far more valuable than that stupid phone.

What had apparently started as a little fire in one of the apartments had turned into a fiery inferno in record time. I looked back up, and the bright flames were equally shocking and mesmerizing. The thick clouds of smoke engulfed everything—including my brain.

I took the call like a woman on autopilot even though my hands were shaking...as was my entire body. It took a lot of strength to raise it to my ear, and when I heard Carter's voice, something broke loose inside of me. I'd held the tears at bay, had been more shocked than anything...until that moment. Until hearing his voice pushed me over the edge.

Another fire truck arrived, and its siren drowned everything out.

"Carter." A sob escaped. Then someone grabbed me by the shoulders and startled me enough so I let go of my phone. It slipped through my fingers and smashed screen first onto the asphalt by my feet. Fuck.

"Ma'am, you need to move away from here. It's getting too hot.

I quickly picked up my phone. The screen had turned into one giant, nasty spiderweb crack, and the phone was dead. Useless. Served me right for bringing the stupid thing.

The officer led me to an area with waiting ambulances.

“Ma’am, how are you feeling? Do you have trouble breathing? Feeling dizzy?”

I shook my head and let the EMT check me. All around me were neighbors waiting to be checked, as well. They all looked shell-shocked, some of their faces black. Some in their PJs, some still dressed. At least I still had my clothes on as I was too wound up for bed, trying to make sense of that kiss this afternoon.

The EMT released me with a blanket over my shoulder and a bottle of water. And I snorted. Who needed a blanket when it was at least a thousand degrees?

I stumbled onto the side, somehow removed from the entire scene. I didn’t feel anything watching the burning building. Was that wrong? Shouldn’t I at least feel something since my livelihood was quickly going up in flames?

At least, huddled together with all my neighbors, most of whom I hadn’t even met, I wasn’t alone.

I looked back up at the building and released a prayer.
Please let everyone have made it out alive.

But I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything.

“Edith. Are you okay?”

I turned toward the man who’d spoken to me—familiar, but completely out of place. “Mr. Caroz? What are you doing here?” He took my hand and kissed it. The action was so out of place, all I could do was stare at the man. What was Don’s creepy client doing here? I shook my head in an attempt to clear my vision; maybe he was just my imagination. But he didn’t budge. I pulled on my hand, but he didn’t let go of my hand either. And that creepy smile while his eyes never left my face—as if the burning building beside us wasn’t there. Or maybe I was hallucinating? Did smoke inhalation cause

hallucinations? Because why would that man show up here? I shook my head, then turned my focus back on the building.

Suddenly, I was grabbed by the shoulders and turned around, away from the thick smoke and bright orange flames. And Mr. Caroz.

“Oh, thank God.”

I caught a quick look at Carter’s worried face before I was forcefully pressed against his warm body. My nose hit his chest, and when I inhaled his clean scent, my knees turned liquid.

Save.

I couldn’t control what came next, neither the shaking nor the tears streaming down my face. But he held me close, caressed my hair, and whispered into my ear, “It’s okay, love. I got you. You’re okay. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

His words and feeling his solid body against me gave me so much comfort, it was ridiculous. Somehow, even having him by my side made everything less awful...less threatening. When had I become so weak? When had I become the kind of woman who longed to be protected by a man? I had worked hard to become the independent, ball-busting woman I’d been. And now here I was...clinging to him as if my life depended on it.

And feeling like it, too.

“Shh. Everything will be okay, love. I have to go check something real quick. Wait for me here?”

He set me aside, and I immediately started shaking again. I hadn’t even realized how his body against mine had calmed me down in just a few seconds.

He bent his knees and looked me in the eye, still squeezing my shoulders until I nodded. Right now I would do anything he told me to do.

He set me free and moved through the people standing around us. Soon I lost sight of him in the crowd and was back to staring at my apartment building and the flames licking out

the windows. My apartment was actually in the back, so I didn't know if it was engulfed in flames, as well, but I didn't really care about my stuff. I said a quick prayer, praying once again for all of my neighbors to have made it out. There was a loud crack as if the building was breaking down, and a collective gasp moved throughout the surrounding people. Everybody scrambled to move farther back. I looked to my side, expecting to see Mr. Caroz standing next to me, but he was gone, as well. Had Carter seen him? Or had I been imagining things? Somehow, I couldn't rein in my thoughts. Too much was happening. Too much. I hugged myself, aware of the shivering causing my bones to rattle against each other in a way I'd never experienced before. Then my eyes locked on Carter approaching.

I couldn't wait to lean on his strength.

"Come on, love. I just had to make sure you're accounted for. You're coming with me. Have you been medically checked out?" He nodded toward the ambulances, and I nodded.

"Good." He slung his arm around my shoulders and led me through the crowd and out of the cordoned-off area.

"My rental is parked a block away."

I stumbled, and he propped me up. "Easy."

I couldn't remember how to walk any more, couldn't have made the distance without him.

"You got this, E, only a few more steps."

I stopped when I realized I had nowhere to go. My entire life was in boxes in my apartment. Ready to be moved out of there...somewhere. Technically, it wasn't my apartment anymore, or was it? Shit. "Where are you taking me?"

He urged me on. "Let's get you out of here first, then we'll talk."

Tears built back up behind my eyes, and I rubbed them away. I didn't want him to see me cry again. I'd already broken down once in his arms; I shouldn't be that frail. And

yet. But reality was slamming into me, and reality was. Kicking. My. Butt.

I had nowhere to go. I was homeless.

He opened the passenger-seat door and maneuvered me inside. He even held my head, so I wouldn't hurt myself. He propped himself against my seat. The muscles in his left arm bulged under his skin when he slowly leaned in and fastened my seatbelt. I inhaled another wave of his clean scent which made my breath stick in my throat, and when his right hand briefly touched my thigh, my senses went into overdrive.

“I got you.” Still bent over me, his kind, brown eyes bored into mine, his face just inches from mine, and I felt a pang deep inside my core.

I wanted to kiss him.

I wanted him to kiss me.

I couldn't look away, and for a moment, I thought he might do it. But then he wiped a tear from under my eye, backed out of the car, and closed my door.

I felt the rejection like he'd hit me. But was it a rejection? Somehow, my feelings were all over the place; between the shock and desperation, I got pangs in my belly and warmth tingling through my limbs. Maybe those were just side effects of smoke inhalation, nothing more.

Either way, those feelings were completely inappropriate, and I needed to shut them down. Right now.

He rounded the car, and once inside, turned us around, away from the burning building.

“I'm bringing you to my hotel, if that's okay with you. You can take a shower and relax for a while, and we'll go from there, okay?”

I nodded. A shower would feel good right now. And maybe once I'd cleaned up a little, my mind would stop spinning and I could figure out the next step.

I looked at my broken phone in my hand. “I need to replace this.”

We stopped at an intersection, and he looked at me with one sexy brow raised.

“My phone.” I raised it from my lap. “It slipped and broke.”

He nodded. “We’ll take care of that.”

CARTER



Adrenaline had surged through my body as soon as I heard the siren and realized Edith was crying. Then when the call dropped, I nearly lost my mind. It took every ounce of self-discipline and lifelong training to calm myself down.

The first scenario running through my head was her being in a car accident, and pictures of her bloody and injured body flashed through my mind only to be replaced, moments later, once I made it to her street, by even more horrendous pictures of her being trapped in a burning building.

I parked the rental and immediately tried to call again. But no matter how often I tried, it always went straight to voicemail.

I was stopped by some officers who secured the cordoned-off the area, but the second my eyes landed on Edith, nothing was going to stop me. I guessed the young firefighter saw that since she waved me through, once I told her my wife was over there.

I didn't know why I told her Edith was my wife. But in that moment, I couldn't have felt more protective and anxious to have her in my arms even if she had been my wife.

She looked forlorn, her face dirty, and strands of tears were clearly visible. An older man was holding her hand. I didn't care. All I wanted was to take her into my arms and bring her somewhere safe.

I didn't think, just acted on impulse once I reached her. I pressed her against me, and then when she leaned against me...shivering...I couldn't believe the relief I felt.

Safe.

But it wasn't enough. I wanted her cleaned up. Comfortable. And standing on the street, with a blanket over her shoulders, dirty and reeking of smoke, wasn't acceptable.

I talked to one of the guys in charge to make sure Edith was accounted for before I got her out of there.

She'd been silent on the drive, clinging to her broken phone in her lap as if it was the most important thing.

Once in the hotel room, I led her to the bathroom and turned on the shower for her.

"You okay on your own? I'll go grab some clothes."

She nodded, and I backed out to give her some privacy.

I grabbed a T-shirt and shorts, knowing they'd be far too big on her, but it was the best I could do for now. I stopped in front of the closed door with the bundle of clothes in my hands, unsure what to do. So, I listened. The monotonous flow of the shower made me think she wasn't in yet. I rapped my knuckles against the door and waited. There wasn't an answer. I strained my ears and heard sniffing inside. Was she crying again?

"Edith?"

She didn't answer which caused my muscles to tighten. "I'm coming in."

With my eyes glued firmly on the floor, so as not to catch her naked, I entered, but when my eyes fell on her feet still in her shoes. I looked up. She sat on the toilet, fully clothed, tears dripping down her cheeks, and something in my chest squeezed. "Hey there." I shut off the shower and squatted in front of her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, then shook her head as if she didn't know herself.

“Let me help you, then.”

Somehow, Edith evoked feelings of tenderness in me that I hadn't felt in a long time. Maybe never. At least not to this extent. I stood up and started to fill the tub next to the shower with hot water. Luckily, there was some kind of bubble bath in there, which filled the room with a lavender scent and produced a nice thick layer of foam almost immediately. Then I helped her undress, keeping my eyes averted the whole time which was far harder than it should've been.

Dang. I had it bad for this woman.

Whenever I caught a glimpse of creamy, soft skin, my stomach tightened. I wanted to carry her to the bed and make love to her until she forgot everything else.

And though my brain knew this was not the time for anything sexual, my body didn't get the message. Not that I would act on it.

I helped her into the tub and reached for a cloth, thankful for the suds obstructing any vision of her body. Not that my mind wasn't on high speed, conjuring up images of a naked Edith that made my cock stiffen anyhow.

“Thank you.” Her voice sounded weak, almost unrecognizable. She'd always been tough. Tough, sexy, and quick-witted, giving as good as she got. But seeing this softer side of her made her irresistible.

And made my protective instincts soar.

I cleaned her face with the washcloth, then urged her to slip down into the water to wet her hair before I poured some shampoo into my hands and lathered it up. Her beautiful strands were dark when she emerged, and I carefully massaged her scalp.

She closed her eyes and groaned, and even though the muscles in my lower back screamed from the contortions necessary to reach her, my stomach squeezed and my cock throbbed at the sound. It would be incredibly easy to let my hands slip down into the hot water. Incredibly easy and incredibly inappropriate.

I stood up, turned away for a moment to rearrange my slightly uncomfortable crotch, then turned on the shower head attached to the tub and rinsed off the shampoo, taking extra care to not get any in her eyes. After her hair was done, I handed her a small bar of soap, not trusting myself for one second to keeping my libido from taking over if I so much as touched her body.

I turned around while she lathered herself up. I didn't need to actually see because the mental images alone brought me to the brink of arousal.

Like a fucking teenage boy. Damn. I conjured up images of how she looked in front of her burning apartment building. So freaked out and vulnerable, and my chest tightened again. That did the trick to get me at least back to manageable levels.

I took a big towel and waited with my eyes glued to the side for her to step out of the tub. When she did, her scent mixed with lavender hit me in waves, and for a moment I felt like drowning in it would be a good way to go. I hugged her with the towel but didn't let go. I knew I should step back, let go, but having her in my arms, having her near, and vulnerable, and close, and safe, awakened a myriad of feelings inside of me. I wanted to protect her, keep her safe, and at the same time, I wanted to devour her. Kiss every inch of her body, get to know her intimately, and watch her reveal more of her vulnerable side to me. She was a ball-buster...usually, so I was curious what she was holding back. Was there a softer side in there somewhere?

She leaned against me, steaming and smelling of lavender, and I was almost certain there was a side to her I had yet to see.

But when I nuzzled her hair, I could still make out some undertones of smoke which brought me right back down to Earth. Pictures of her burning building invaded my mind. Moments of panic before I'd spotted her. I squeezed her tighter against my body.

No matter my past experiences with women, no matter how cautious I'd usually been, no matter my priorities, this

woman was different. Being around her, I wanted to be different. And no matter what it took. I would find out if there was a possibility of us being together. But all that had to wait. It wasn't fair to pounce on her when she was already off-kilter. I would give her time to get back up. But as soon as she was back to her old self, I would swoop in, wooing her off her feet. And I wouldn't take no for an answer or let myself be fooled by her tough exterior. "I brought you some clothes. Can you take it from here? I'll wait outside, okay?"

She sighed and her whispered "yes" against my chest was almost too much.

I couldn't wait for her to get back on her feet. Because then the question would be another one, and if she sighed and said yes, there would be no holding back.

EDITH



I laid in his bed, inhaled his scent on his pillow, but I couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts and images ran through my head.

He'd worked on his laptop for a while, then stared out the window, then worked some more.

I'd listened to him taking a shower, and now, he was sitting in the chair beside the bed.

Why wouldn't he lie next to me? I needed him to hold me even though this was probably not the time or place to make decisions like that. My feelings were all over the place, but I knew one thing: I wanted him to hold me. I needed him to hold me. "Can you hold me?"

Silence stretched after my question, and I was almost sure he hadn't heard me. Or maybe I hadn't said the words out loud.

But then I heard him move. "Edith?"

He grabbed my shoulder and urged me to turn around, his hand on my shoulder warm, warm enough that I could feel it through the duvet. I was so cold.

I turned and looked at him as he was kneeling in front of the bed, his face level with mine. The only light source of the room was a small lamp on the desk which was behind him, so his face was cast in shadow, and I couldn't make out his facial expression.

"Are you okay?"

He'd asked me this same question again and again, and I still couldn't say yes.

Was I bodily okay? Thank God, yes.

Was I shaken? Yes.

Did I want him next to me in bed? Yes.

He waited, and I grabbed his hand which was right next to mine on the bed. "Not yet, but I will be. Can you hold me?"

He hesitated. Maybe he thought I didn't know what I was doing. But I did...mostly. There was nothing like fleeing from a building on fire to set your priorities straight. Life was short, and I was done playing it safe. Was done holding back.

He stood up, rounded the bed, and got in beside me. He didn't get under the duvet, but instead took me in his arms with that barrier between us.

Not enough.

We stayed like this for the next ten minutes. I knew because there on his bedside table was an old-fashioned alarm clock, and my eyes were glued on the digits. This was ridiculous.

Not talking wouldn't do.

I turned around and looked into his face, his chiseled jaw even more pronounced with the dim light.

"Thank you."

He watched me, his eyes soft.

"I don't know how you do it. But thank you." I leaned forward and gave him a kiss. He hesitated for a split second before his lips softened and his hand came around my head and pressed me against him. Thank God.

He deepened the kiss, dove in, and took over. I didn't mind being dominant in every aspect of my life. Hell, I made a career out of projecting that image all day long. But in bed, with him, I wanted to let go. I wanted to be swept off my feet and taken out of my head. No decisions. No thinking necessary. Just feeling.

And boy, was I feeling.

He kissed me like I'd never been kissed before. His tongue and lips made love to me, not just sex, love. Every nibble, every moan shot straight to my core. Heat pooled deep in my belly, and restlessness swept through me like a thunderstorm, leaving behind chaos and longing.

More, I needed more.

But when I tried to urge him, he put on the brakes.
“Please.”

“Please what, love?”

“More.”

“More what?”

Did he want me to spell it out for him?

“What do you need, love?”

“I want you to have sex with me. I want you to hold me. I want you to kiss me. And I you.”

He hesitated. What the fuck? Did he not want me? I hadn't anticipated that.

“Edith. I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Why?”

He stroked my cheek with a single finger. “I don't think you know what you want right now.”

I scowled. “Why would I not know?”

“Because adrenaline is a strange thing.”

“Hmm.”

He stroked my cheek again. “It changes the chemistry of your brain and body.”

“Hmm.”

“And I don't want you to have regrets tomorrow.” He leaned forward until his forehead touched mine.

Was he right? Was this adrenaline? I mean, I felt beat, not as if I was on a high like when we kissed in Grace's café. So, no adrenaline there. Was I attracted to him? Hell, yes. Was I entirely sure this was a good idea? No. But this was just sex, not a marriage proposal. And I was done playing it safe, so yes, I was sure I wanted him.

"I'm sure. And I promise, no regrets."

It was like I'd uttered some magic words because he didn't hold back then.

He turned me on my back and kissed me thoroughly. And if I'd had doubts before...not anymore.

He slowly made his way to my neck and kissed me there. Then he went deeper, his hands gliding over my breasts, over my belly, until he reached the hem of the T-shirt, then he drew it up slowly, kissing every inch of bare skin he uncovered.

I watched him, and it was the sexiest thing I'd ever experienced.

When he came to my breasts, he kissed first one nipple then the other, then he sucked. Hard. And the jolt of arousal that hit my core was unbelievable. Fuck.

He repeated the same treatment with the other nipple, and the same happened.

Then he pushed the T-shirt over my head, and in one swoop, removed his own.

God, he was sexy: hard planes, sinewy muscles, a smattering of hair on his chest. He was beyond fit, and for a second, insecurity tightened my throat.

I hadn't thought anyone could be so acutely tuned in, but he reacted immediately, backed off, and looked at me.

"Everything okay?"

My breath barely hitched, so how the hell did he know I hesitated?

He backed off even more. "Okay, ground rules."

"Ground rules?"

He nodded.

“I want honesty. Complete honesty. No holding back. No pretending. Got it?”

I swallowed. His intensity scared me a little. “Well, I’m not a virgin.”

He looked at me, one sexy brow slightly elevated. But a small smile played around his lips.

Mission accomplished.

“Smart-ass.” Then he rewarded me with a kiss. “I need you to tell me what you like, what feels good, what doesn’t. And if anything comes up, we can put the brakes on anytime.”

Yeah. As per his reaction to my hesitation earlier, I didn’t think I needed to tell him much; he seemed to sense my reactions better than anyone ever had. Did he get that from experience? I mean, I’d had my fair share of sex. So who was I to blame anyone, but...

“Edith?”

“Yes, complete honesty, got it.”

He shook his head but then dove back, kissing. His bare skin rubbing against my breasts felt divine, and soon I couldn’t do anything but feel.

He made his way down by kissing every square inch of my body; he sucked my breasts until I could feel the wetness pooling between my thighs. When he reached his destination, he slipped down the shorts he gave me earlier, and in seconds, he spread my legs and settled between them. He inhaled deeply, gave me one sheepish grin, and bent down.

He waited, breathed on me, held me in suspense, and when his tongue finally touched my clit, I almost jumped off the bed, but with one strong hand splayed across my belly, he rendered me immovable while the other hand parted my folds and did some delicious things in unison with his magical tongue.

It couldn’t have been more than a minute before he had me on the brink. But then he held me there, always slowing down

and backing off right before I reached the finish line until I was writhing under him. Increasingly frustrated. Barely able to hold on.

It was a dance, and he kept me there a long time. Until I'd had enough. I grabbed his hair and pulled until I got his attention. "Give it to me."

He grinned, leaned back down, not letting go of my eyes, and made me come.

Just like that.

I had never experienced anything like that.

Never.

But he wasn't finished with me.

He slowly crept back up and gave me a searing kiss. When he undid his jeans and his cock sprang out, I realized I hadn't even properly touched him. Time to remedy that.

He got rid of his jeans, then kissed me again, and I let my hands wander—on his chest and abs, the bunched-up muscles underneath his skin making me want to explore. But I had a mission. Exploring had to wait.

I slipped farther down, and his cock bounced against my hand before I slowly glided up and down his considerable length, strong, hard, delicious. My eyes were glued to the motion, and he groaned.

It couldn't have been more than a few seconds before he stopped my hand with his. "Love?"

I looked from our hands on his cock up to his face.

"Are you sure you want this?"

I almost laughed, but when I saw the sincerity in his eyes, I didn't. Instead, I let go of his cock, cupped his chin, and kissed him, then whispered against his lips, "Never been so sure in my entire life."

And I was. Somehow this felt natural and much less awkward than any first-times-having-sex with any guy I'd

ever had. Maybe because I knew he was always looking out for me. Protecting me.

And sure enough, he got up, grabbed his wallet, and came back to the bed with a condom.

“Tell me this isn’t one of these things that’s been forever in your wallet.” I was teasing and by his hearty laugh, I could tell he knew I was.

“After our kiss earlier, I decided I needed to mount up. So, this is fresh out of the box, love. Do you want to see...the box?” He kneeled on the bed and gave me a teasing kiss.

And then he seduced me all over again.

The kiss turned hotter. Then he got back between my legs. When his cock nudged against my core, ripples swept through me, and my pussy turned even wetter. I grabbed his hips to hold on or urge him on, I didn’t know, but it didn’t matter.

Because when he slowly pushed inside me and started moving, I was in bliss.

He pulled my feet up and changed the angle and hit a spot deep inside of me that left me a breathless, quivering mess.

It took only a few thrusts until I was right back at the brink, and this time, he didn’t leave me hanging. He pushed me over with a single well-placed thrust and followed me with a shudder and a groan.

Holy hell.

CARTER



I couldn't believe how good being inside her felt. I had my fair share of sexual encounters over the years, but this...this was next-level stuff. Tasting Edith had nearly done me in, and hearing her throaty groans once I'd entered her went to my head like a shot of tequila.

Watching her come might have been the single best thing I'd ever witnessed. And feeling the urgency to cuddle after sex had been a first.

Fuck.

Now I couldn't bring myself to shut my eyes. I stared down at the woman in my arms. She'd snuggled against me as if it was the most natural thing to do and I wished the morning away even though I glimpsed light already through the half-drawn curtains.

Seeing this strong woman relinquish control and trust me enough to completely let go was heady stuff.

But now what? I'd planned my stay for only two weeks. Now that Brody and Mom were here, I could maybe expand a little.

But then what?

This was Edith's home. Her family was here, and she wasn't some flighty twenty-something girl who would drop everything for a guy.

But maybe we could make it work somehow; I just had to find a way. But first things first.

We needed to find out about the damage to her apartment. I'd alerted Goofy about Edith's broken phone yesterday, and my boys had promised to have it fixed by morning.

She needed clothes, as well.

Luckily, I got a text from Richard last night about Dorothy being okay, so at least that had been taken care of.

Edith sighed and stretched against me.

"Good morning, love." God, I had to quit calling her that even though it felt pretty good.

"Morning." She opened her eyes and smiled, and my heart picked up speed.

I kissed her softly, waiting for when realization hit, if she would close up again—or worse—regret it.

"Did yesterday really happen?" she said.

"If you mean by yesterday, us having spectacular, Earth-shattering sex, then yes, it wasn't a dream, it really happened."

She snorted.

It shouldn't have been sexy, but here I was, finding even her snort sexy.

Then she sobered up, and I could see the vulnerability in her eyes. "My apartment." She struggled to get away from me and off the bed, but I held her back. "Easy. Let's have breakfast first, then we'll drive to your place and see about the damage, but you'll need some clothes first."

She hesitated for a moment, thinking about her next move. "Can you drive me to Three Oaks real quick?"

"Three Oaks?"

"Yes."

"Of course, but why?"

"Clothes."

I didn't understand.

“There’s a women’s shelter where I volunteer. I donated a bunch of clothes, so I’ll find something there.”

I nodded. The shelter. Both missing women had lived there, but I didn’t know Edith had volunteered there, too. That connection didn’t sit right with me at all. She’d been at the hotel...at that cartel meeting. Her ex-husband was one of the bad guys. Did she play a role in all that? Was she somehow entangled in what happened in and around Whitebrook?

Was I willing to even acknowledge she couldn’t be as innocent as I thought she was?

There was a knock on the door, and she fled into the bathroom while I donned my jeans and went to open it.

Peaches grinned when he handed Edith’s phone back. “Fixed the screen, planted a bug...should be back to working, boss.”

I blocked his attempt to catch a glimpse of the room. “Thanks.”

It had been perfect timing that the boys had arrived yesterday.

They came to the room while Edith was dressing in the bathroom, and I handed her damaged phone off to them. Peaches wasn’t only our resident computer geek, but there hadn’t been a thing invented he hadn’t known how to fix or infiltrate, and he got off on doing both, including repairing cracked screens or getting into people’s phones without them realizing.

If Edith was not who I thought she was—her phone would prove it.

“We’ll talk later.” I shut the door in his face and knew I would come to regret it. If there was one thing I knew about my guys, it was how they wouldn’t let the chance slip to make fun of my protective instincts.

“Who was that?”

“Someone who fixed your phone.” The moment I handed her phone back to her, I knew our little time out would end

sooner rather than later. But I didn't want it to end. "Will you stay with me until you can go back to your apartment?"

That came out wrong. I groaned beneath my breath and scrubbed my hand through my hair. Dumbass. Why did I ask her that? How needy was I going to get, practically begging her to stay with me?

Pathetic.

I didn't look at her when I sidestepped her, so when she stopped me with her hand on my chest and kissed my cheek, I froze.

"Yes, and Carter..."

I looked up and caught a soft smile.

"Thank you."

I didn't expect the flush of satisfaction tingling through my body or how her consent ignited a throbbing deep in my belly. My eyes flew to the mussed-up bed, then back to her face.

Another round sounded good about now. But deep inside, I knew this could be more than just sex.

And I didn't expect the spear of longing to get a glimpse into how our merged lives would fit together.

EDITH



I knocked on the door of the Little Women's Home and waited, keenly aware of Carter's eyes on me from the distance of the car. He wanted to come in with me, but I convinced him to go to the diner and grab a coffee instead.

The door opened, and before I could say hello, Carol tackled me and drew me into a hug. "I tried calling you yesterday; I thought you were dead until we heard on the news how everybody got out. What happened?"

I hugged her back and shrugged. "Don't know yet; we're about to go back to the building and find out, but I need clothes first."

She held me a while longer, then grabbed my shoulders. "Okay, who's the hunk in the car watching us like a hawk? What are you wearing and why are you even here?"

I turned from Carol back to the car and waved at Carter. He'd been amazing yesterday...and through the night...and this morning.

After another bath this morning...together, which caused a flooding in the bathroom, I felt halfway like a normal human being again. At least as long as I didn't let my mind obsess over my apartment or my neighbors. Carter had ordered room service and fed me. Every feministic fiber in me bristled when I thought about how he'd taken over yesterday. But at the same time, I felt immensely grateful. After the shock of escaping the burning building, I hadn't fired on all cylinders, and he'd taken care of things...of me.

“That’s Carter, remember. From the diner?”

Carol’s eyebrows squeezed down. “Yeah, I remember. That doesn’t answer my questions.” She hesitated. Looked me up and down. “Or maybe it does. You’re wearing his clothes. And he”—she pointed over my shoulder—“brought you because...”

“I don’t have my car and...” I hesitated, but what the hell, Carol was my best friend. “I spent the night with him...”

“You whaaat?” Carol sputtered.

“He called me yesterday after I’d escaped the building. I was crying and dropped my phone, so he came, picked me up, and swept me off to his hotel room, where I spent the night.”

“With-him with him?”

“With him...”

Carol just looked at me, her eyes dancing, and I couldn’t hide my smile when I thought about him caressing my body.

And why even try? I still wasn’t 100 percent sure having sex with Carter had been a good decision on my part. But it was what it was. I’d made that decision. And the sex had been spectacular.

Carol grinned. “Look at you, back on the horse...good for you.” We took a few seconds, just grinning at each other, before we both sobered up.

“Now tell me how’re you feeling, besides the afterglow.”

She took me in her arms again, and I had a hard time shoving down the emotions bubbling to the surface. Yesterday still didn’t feel real. “I don’t know, it’s all so surreal. I don’t know if every single thing I’ve ever owned is gone. I don’t even know if it’s still my apartment since technically I signed the contract yesterday. I really don’t know how I’m feeling.”

“But nobody got hurt, right? They said on the news that everybody got out in time.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I heard, as well.”

“So then, why are you here?”

“Clothes...remember, and I needed my best friend.”

Carol gave me a nod, then dragged me inside and straight to the storage room where I changed into an old pair of jeans and one of my discarded sweaters. My phone rang when I was just about ready to leave the storage room, and I answered, “Hey, Grace.”

“Oh God, Edith. I’m so glad to hear your voice.” Grace’s voice sounded unusually gloomy. “I mean, Carter let us know you’re okay, last night, but the news, and Dorothy and everything.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “How’s Dori? I haven’t had a chance to talk to her, yet.”

“Oh, she’s not great, but she’s going to be okay. A bit dinged up. She got kidnapped—did Carter tell you that—oh, of course he did, but Richard got her out okay. Then there’s the thing that happened to Eric...”

I couldn’t remember ever hearing Grace so bent out of shape. And why was this the first time I’d heard details about Dorothy’s kidnapping. Why hadn’t Carter told me? “Who’s Eric?”

Grace sighed. “Eric was one of Dori’s foster kids. He died. The funeral is tomorrow. We’re all attending, of course...since the boy didn’t have anyone else...”

Wow. One of Dori’s kids was dead? She would be devastated about that.

“Hey, I gotta go. I got customers coming in. I’ll text you the details later. You’re coming, right?”

“Yes, of course. Tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow. Gotta go, bye.”

I stared at my phone a couple seconds, my mind still reeling about what Grace had just told me. I had been caught up so much in my own drama, I hadn’t even realized what was going on in Dori’s life.

“Are you almost done? I’m waiting here, remember,” Carol said from outside the door. Since the storage room was

little more than a tiny closet, there really wasn't enough place for her to be in here with me.

"I'm coming, I just need..." I searched the stacks of clothes. There had been that black dress...ah, I stretched, got it, and added it to my stack of clothes. It was perfect for a job interview...or a funeral.

I stepped out of the storage room, and we moved on into the community kitchen. Time for me to take care of all the other things going on, besides my own life. "Is there any news?"

Carol didn't need me to say more to know exactly what I meant. Her face fell, and she shook her head. "We still haven't heard anything. Child Services took Luna's kids and placed them with emergency foster parents." She paused and looked at me as if she was pondering if I was strong enough to hear it. "Something's going on. I've got a bad feeling. First Gloria's gone missing, then Luna. You know Luna loved her kids. She wouldn't just leave them behind."

I nodded. Luna wouldn't win any award for mother of the year, but she sure as hell loved her kids. For her to leave them? I didn't believe that for a second.

"There's chatter."

"Chatter?"

Carol checked the hallway, then closed the door to the kitchen. "I overheard the girls talking about a sudden influx of boyfriend material hanging around town, throwing around cash. They think Gloria's and Luna's disappearance has something to do with them."

My eyes grew huge. What was Carol talking about? Three Oaks was as safe and small-town as it got and even though Whitebrook was a significantly-sized town, the crime rate was relatively low and abductions weren't a daily, monthly, or even yearly occurrence. A year or two ago, there'd been a case of a woman who was later found murdered, but there hadn't been much in the news about that. "Are you sure?"

Carol shook her head. “No, I’m not, but the girls are spooked, and that’s enough evidence for me. I called Belinda and she’ll be here in the afternoon. So...”

“What?”

“Carter...” she asked.

“What about him?”

“You had sex, and...”

“And...”

“Nothing. I just thought—since the two of you almost kissed at the diner, and we hated him for making you lose your job and now with him taking care of you and all—maybe there’s more to it?”

“You’ve thought wrong. He’s just being kind. And it was just sex.”

“So it was what? Revenge sex and we still hate him because he bought the property and cost you your job?”

“Nope.”

“So...we’re what exactly?”

Gosh. I didn’t know where I was at. Two days ago, my life had been on track. Boring but on track. Now? I didn’t even know where I would spend the next night and if I had money or a burned-down apartment. I didn’t know how I felt about Luna and Gloria missing or the girls being spooked. Aside from a text from Richard saying Dorothy was safe, I didn’t know what was going on at that front. I still was unemployed, and I had yet to talk to Felicia about what happened with Roy, and I sure didn’t know how I felt about Carter.

Ever since he’d entered my life, he was there for every single low point. Not that he’d caused any of them, besides the property thing. But he was there, trying to protect me. Taking care of me. Saving me.

Only I didn’t need saving...usually. I was my own woman. I could take care of myself.

And I didn’t want to be saved by a man...usually.

So then, why did it feel so good to just let someone take over the reins? Why did it feel so good when he washed my hair, spoonfed me breakfast, or arranged to have my phone fixed? Why did it feel so good when he protected me against Don, or when he stepped between Roy advancing on me?

I'd sworn myself to never again let a man have any power over me or my life. So why did I crave Carter's strong arms last night? Why did I let him take the lead and completely let go of control?

He was there for me afterward, physically and emotionally. I'd laid in his arms and felt cherished and...safe.

Safe and protected instead of domineered and disregarded. Huh?

Not once had he made me feel inferior, or incapable, or weak. To care was just a part of him, like he cared for Grace all those years. And now he cared for me. And I for him.

"Hello, Earth to Edith? You still with me?"

I slowly came out of my stupor, and Carol was looking at me as if I'd lost my mind.

She tilted her head and grabbed my hand. "Are you sure everything is okay? You didn't suffer from smoke inhalation or anything, right?"

My chest expanded, and I squeezed her hand. "No. I'm fine. I'm lucky to have such good friends who care about me."

When she teared up, I did, as well, and seconds later we hugged. Best friend ever.

Then she took a step back and squeezed my shoulders. "Don't think for one minute I didn't realize you haven't answered my question."

"What question?"

"Carter."

I inhaled, took a chair by the table, and exhaled with a sigh. "Carter."

Carol went to the always-filled thermos and prepared two cups of coffee. When she returned to the table, she grinned as she placed the cup in front of me. “You got the hots for him?”

I didn’t look at her, didn’t have to. Carol had been my best friend for almost fifteen years. I’d never lied to her even in the beginning when she was the enemy for stealing my man. In retrospect, it was beyond ridiculous. If anyone had been my worst enemy, it had been Don, not Carol, who’d had no clue Don had been married while dating her. She’d shown up at my doorstep to apologize a couple months later when Don did the same to her as he did to me. We didn’t sugarcoat anything... ever. I’d been honest in my hatred, and she’d been honest in her remorse. And we became friends from there. “I got the hots for him.”

Carol squealed. “I knew it, I knew it the moment I watched you two having that moment at the diner. Spill.”

I chuckled, feeling giddy and easy—the first time in what felt like forever. At least despite all that had happened, I hadn’t lost my humor. “He’s charming, sweet, incredibly sexy, and good in bed.”

“And...”

“And nothing. He’s only here for a couple more days. I still don’t know anything about him—”

“Despite him being hot.”

“...And I don’t know how he feels about me.”

“Girl, let me give you a reality check. He’s feeling protective of you. The way he looked at you at the diner made my lady parts quiver, and he’s there for you when you need him. I don’t think there’s any doubt about your mutual attraction. And even if it doesn’t go anywhere, dusting off your vagina is probably worth it.”

My eyes skipped to the door, making sure it was still closed, when I flipped Carol the bird. Nothing like your best friend telling you your vagina needed some dusting off.

Yes, it had been a while, but my vagina had been perfectly dust-free. Even before Carter had taken a look at it last night.

But, of course, if he wanted to make sure it stayed that way, I might say yes...just to make sure.

EDITH



The very inappropriate and silly sex-motions Carol made against the old doorframe behind Carter's back made me laugh out loud.

"Everything okay?" Carter looked at me as if I'd lost my mind when he took the short black dress from my arm.

Maybe I had. How else could I explain my absolute teenage-like attraction to him? How else could I explain how he made me giddy beyond belief, how I luxuriated in the feeling of being taken care of by him? Like, right now, when he took the dress and carried it for me...and looked deliciously male doing it. And how he steered me to his car, which was parked at the curb, with his hand on the small of my back. How could I not be insanely attracted to him?

Gone was the tough woman I'd worked so hard on becoming. Completely gone. And I didn't even miss her. Didn't feel for one moment like I was letting my fellow feminists down. And how could I? He was observant, honed in on me, like I'd never experienced before. "I'm okay. There's one thing I have to do tomorrow, though."

"And that is?"

It didn't take more than his smoldering, brown eyes focusing on at me and me desperately wishing to be back in his hotel room, back in his bed. "Grace called. One of Dorothy's kids died, and there's a funeral tomorrow that I need to attend." I didn't dare ask if he would go with me even though I desperately wanted him to.

He took a moment.

I liked the way he was mulling things over in his mind before he talked.

Considerate. And sexy.

“How is your stance on company?”

“In general or yours to the funeral?”

He looked at me, waiting, a soft smile playing around his lips.

And I suddenly felt seventeen again. “I would love your company.” Was I swooning? I could swear I was swooning. When did I become one of those bimbos who swooned if a guy so much as smiled at them?

He leaned over and gave me a tender kiss on the cheek and then nuzzled my ear. “Is your friend mimicking having sex with the doorframe or is she having a seizure?”

I grinned. Of course, he had super observation skills, as well. “Seizure, definitely a seizure. But she’ll be okay.”

He winked at me and gave me another kiss on the lips before he led me to his car.

Wow.

How he managed to handle the clothes, myself, and opening the car door, I didn’t know.

I waved at Carol. She would have a fit had she known he’d seen her, but I loved her silly side.

He got in, and we drove to the end of the road where he could turn the car around.

We passed the Little Women’s Home, then the two other big, old mansions on the outskirts of Three Oaks. All three houses had been built around 1920 for the three daughters of the local lumber tycoon, and sadly, the other two houses had been abandoned, as had the old lumber mill a little farther up the hill. The mill actually belonged to the property Carter had acquired. “I love those old houses.”

“You do? Why?” He looked outside the window and slowed down.

“They’re like great old ladies, whose dresses are all shabby, but they still stand tall and proud.”

“The dress.”

I looked from the broken houses to Carter. “The dress?”

“The dress. I’d been wondering about the dress when you came out... Oh nevermind. There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

I turned in my seat to look at him. “What is it?” Why had he turned all serious all of a sudden?

“I wanted to offer you a job.”

A job? “What job?”

“I have plans to develop the property.” He pointed outside the property he’d bought and which I’d lost my job over sprawled alongside the road. It’s extent spanned from the center of town, all the way past the Little Women’s Home, and farther up to the dilapidated mill, and it contained quite a few acres of forest as well as grassland and fields. “And I want you to be my local coordinator and right-hand woman.”

Wow. I turned back around and stared out the windshield. He wanted me to work for him while all I wanted was to be back under him, feeling him deep inside me, making me feel incredible.

Fuck.

That was not something I had anticipated. Not at all.

If I took that job, it probably meant we wouldn’t have sex anymore—shouldn’t have since technically he would be my boss and I’d be his employee. And sleeping with your boss was always a bad idea. “I really don’t think—”

“This has nothing to do with our relationship.”

I still looked straight ahead, not risking a glance at him, not giving him any indication about the exact direction my mind was going, but he’d really hit the nail on the head. But in

all honesty, how could it not have anything to do with our relationship? How could I keep having sex with him and working for him and let the one not effect the other? It wouldn't work. That's how. And I wanted the sex.

Shit, I was falling for him. I rejected the thought as soon as it entered my mind. Nobody was falling for someone they'd just met and spent one, single night with. It was just some kind of weird infatuation, possible a hero complex—well, not a hero complex, a hero-infatuation complex or infatuation-with-my-hero complex or something like that.

“I decided to offer you the job, before we”—he hesitated, and I could see his chest expanding from the side of my eye —“got intimate.”

Got intimate... Yeah, just bad timing on the job offer. Or the sex. Or both.

“I don't think that's how it works.”

“How what works?”

If I said “feelings,” he would probably throw me out of the car, and I would never see him again. This was probably just sex for him. And everything else, everything more, was just happening inside my stupid head. And maybe I should just take the job and forget about the sex. He would be gone in a few days anyhow. By then our “relationship” would have ended, and if I took the job, at least it would be one thing less to worry about. “Can I think about it?”

“Of course, why don't you take a few days? Let everything settle and give me your answer then.”

I nodded. I should probably ask him to drive me back to the Little Women's Home. Or maybe drop me off at the diner. I could always ask Carol to take me in for a couple days until I could go back to my apartment. And I should get cracking on going apartment hunting as well. Probably.

Wow, things were really fucked-up right now.

But somehow, I didn't say anything, and he kept silent, as well. We drove to my apartment building which was still cordoned-off. I called the building management, and they told

me that it would be a few days before all the damage would be assessed, and the building would have to be inspected—only then could the building be opened back up. But apparently, the fire hadn't spread to my side of the building, so my apartment should be fine.

What a mess.

All this time, Carter stayed quiet—strong and quiet. He didn't try to take over my life; he was just there, beside me, giving me strength. He didn't ask questions, and I didn't tell him, didn't need to tell him.

“You're coming with me.”

That was all he said and then nothing on the way back to the hotel. From the parked car, the elevator ride up to his room, and once the door closed with a heavy click, silence enveloped us. I didn't know how to break it.

Only, he turned around suddenly, and instinctively, I took a step back until my body pressed against the door.

“This does not change anything.”

It was a statement. A demand, not a question. And I didn't even know what “this” he meant. Did he mean the job offer, or me not being able to go back home, or did he mean us having sex? “It doesn't?”

“Nope.” And then he charged like a dart toward the bull's eye. Only the bull's eye was my lips and the dart...well.

When his tongue clashed with mine, he wasn't hesitant, he wasn't asking, he demanded, and my body delivered.

He picked me up as if I weighed nothing and set me down on the bed. He pushed up my sweater and then his. He had me out of my jeans in record time and was so smooth doing it. Too smooth. He'd probably had a lot of experience undressing women. But once he lowered his own jeans, thoughts about other women left my mind instantly.

I expected him to come to me on the bed, but instead he urged me up again. Led me to the small desk with his closed laptop on top. He pushed it to the side and urged me to lean

over the desk. My eyes met his through the mirror behind the desk, a mirror I hadn't noticed before. A mirror where I could see the bed perfectly just by sitting at the desk...working. My eyes flitted back to his, and a hungry grin entered his face.

"I watched you, yesterday...but you were in shock. I didn't want to take advantage of you. I would've waited."

Waited?

"But now you're mine."

With that, he pulled my panties off, went down on his knees behind me, urged me to widen my stance, and when his tongue parted my lips, I couldn't suppress a moan. Magical tongue.

"You're wet already."

Duh. What did he expect?

"And you taste like heaven."

Heat rose from my chest up my throat.

He took a few more licks, then slowly straightened. He bit my left ass cheek on the way up, and I jumped. Apparently, he liked my reaction because after he soothed the stinging sensation of the bite, he then slapped the other cheek. Hard.

I yelped, but before I could straighten and turn around, he pushed himself against me and soothed the sting with his hand. "You react beautifully, love."

I did? Was he one of those who got off on BDSM stuff? Because I'm not sure I did.

But then his erection pressed against me, and the thoughts about sexual preferences had to wait.

He conjured up a condom and entered me, his eyes holding mine hostage in the mirror.

His left hand engulfed my breasts while his right hand snaked down to the apex of my thighs, searching...and finding the bundle of nerves there, like a missile.

When it all became too much, my eyes fell closed, and all I could do was feel.

“Open your eyes, Edith.”

I snapped them open.

“I want to see you. Want you to watch us.”

I should've wondered what else he wanted me to do, but I was too far gone to care. The feelings were too much, and seconds later, I came and just a breath later, I could feel him shudder, and with an almost silent curse, he followed me into the abyss.

We stayed that way for a while, watching each other through the mirror.

“I have never seen a woman as beautiful and sexy as you, Edith Cleaver.”

My breath hitched, but I didn't look away. He demanded to see me, and I let him.

Let him really see me.

CARTER



As it turned out, Edith's sister Dorothy had not only gone missing, but there was an entire story behind it. One of Dorothy's foster kids had died, and Dorothy had taken it upon herself to seek revenge.

Apparently, the gang activity aspect was a lot more established than we'd initially anticipated. We needed to gather the troops and have an in-person meeting to get a handle on the situation.

Now, Dorothy was luckily back in Richard's arms, even though today they were mourning the death of the little boy. And all of Richard's and Dorothy's friends were in attendance. As were Edith's sisters.

As soon as we arrived, we were greeted by Lisa, Claire, Blake, and Peter and invited to Richard's house after the funeral.

"How do you know all these people?" Edith asked, standing next to me, close but not close enough. She didn't hold my hand like I wanted her to. I wanted her to lean on me because I knew she was hurting. I knew it the minute she saw Dorothy crying and let out a low hiss.

I looked down at her somber face. "Let me see. We've met Blake at the bar, and Lisa and Claire are the owners of the Inn in Moon Lake, and Peter is one of Richard's deputy sheriffs."

I suddenly realized I hadn't even told her about Brody. I'd mentioned him on the plane, but he'd never come up since. I

hadn't told her about my nephew and mother staying in Moon Lake. Hadn't told her that I was more or less a single dad. What did that say about me? What did it say about our relationship? Well, maybe it only showed that our relationship was exactly two days old. We'd spent two nights together. Two amazing nights, but still.

"I see."

Did she? Really see? Because I had no clue how to integrate the different parts of my life. How does a man welcome a woman into his life? How and when should I tell her about Brody and all the other stuff I had going on?

The funeral wasn't a big affair, so it went by fast. Richard read a letter he'd written to Dori quite a few years back. I had been there. I had seen what he'd seen. I felt his words; the images he evoked tore at me as if it had been yesterday.

Shit.

"Carter, are you okay?" Edith squeezed my hand, and my mind came back from that FOB in the Afghan mountains—from that horrible day. I shook my head to clear it of the memories and looked at her. She was wiping tears from her eyes and staring at me.

Could she see? Could she see how broken I was inside? How all the things I shoved down deep sometimes bubbled back up?

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I wiped away a tear on her face and inhaled deeply. Of course I was okay. I looked up and realized the service was over. Huh? Maybe I wasn't as okay as I thought I was since I zoned out completely.

"Let's go then." She grabbed my hand, and together we made our way to the car.

"Felicia looks better."

Another hiss from Edith, and I knew there was still unresolved business there, as well. "You haven't talked to your sisters at all?"

She shook her head.

“You haven’t told them you can’t go back to your apartment? Why?”

“Because I haven’t gotten around to talk to them, unlike you. And there’s nothing to tell. My apartment is fine; I’m fine. So, there’s no reason to talk about it.”

My eyebrows shot up, but I refrained from telling her how fucked-up that was. But who was I to judge? My relationship with my sister had been fucked-up times ten, so if Edith didn’t want to tell her sisters, it was not my place to criticize her.

We arrived at Richard’s, and I could tell Edith liked what she saw.

Once we’d rounded the house and she took in the lake behind it, she stopped. “Look at that view. I’d kill for that view.”

I nodded. This was a great piece of land. I watched her take it all in. Would she be happy living in the county or was she a city girl? If I would’ve judged her a few days ago, I would have said city girl. But since I’d gotten to know her better, I didn’t know.

I’d met her as this tough, sexy woman who wore stilettos as if she was born in them and would take no prisoners. But when she really let go, she wasn’t nearly as tough. She’d been soft, sweet, and funny, vulnerable and surprisingly low maintenance. Sharing my room with her...I was having the time of my life. And it was not just the sex. It was...easy.

“Hey”—she grabbed my arm and squeezed it—“I’ll need to talk to my sisters real quick, okay.” With that, they convened on Dorothy and disappeared into the house.

I did my rounds, greeted everyone I knew. Lisa and Claire told me that Brody and my mother were having a good time.

I looked at the house, but Edith and her sisters still hadn’t come out. I needed to tell her, needed for her to meet my family. I saw Richard a few steps away from the others and approached him. When I was almost at his side, I saw that a couple arguing had caught his attention. I recognized the man

and woman from Blake's bar. Blake had introduced Lucas as a fellow teamguy and Sharon had been their waitress.

When the couple stopped fighting and made up again, Richard turned around and nearly ran into me.

"Hey." I looked over Richard's shoulder to where the couple was now kissing, and then back to him. "Let's take a couple steps."

Richard nodded, and together we made our way toward the pier.

I hesitated before I started talking. It was still hard even though I'd learned over the years how important it was to talk about things. Maybe I should just tell Edith. Tell her about my sister, her death, and my nephew. "I remember that day...in Afghanistan," I said.

"Hm?" Richard looked at me as if he had no clue where I was going with this.

"I remember the look in your eyes even hours after it happened."

"Okay." He rubbed his neck and looked out at the lake, but this was important, so I grabbed his arm until he turned and looked at me.

"Look. We all had to deal with a lot of shit. Had to do a lot of shit. Talking helps."

"Okay," was all he said.

This was not going anywhere. Working on those things was hard work. But he had to be aware first that there was work to be done. Maybe he wasn't quite there yet.

"You gotta take care of Lucas. Having a temper, being angry is a sign."

"Hmm."

"You got a lot of good people around. Men who were in combat. Men who understand. You need to help each other. We're all dealing with this shit. We're all having good days

and bad days. But you gotta talk about it, man. They need you to talk about it.”

Richard stared at me as if a third eye was growing on my forehead. But I could see my words sinking in, and that was all that mattered.

“Who made you the king of the wise?” He sounded tired.

I chuckled.

Then his face lit up, and I watched him turn around and make his way back to the yard. Dori stepped out of her group, and they met somewhere in the middle, kissing and hugging and smiling at each other.

My eyes searched and found Edith back on the porch. She was looking at Dori and Richard, and a grin split her beautiful lips. My heart suddenly hammered in my chest as if her smile was meant for me. Something heavy settled deep in my stomach: lust, desire, possessiveness. What was this woman doing to me? Why did a simple smile affect me like that? Why did it feel as if she was the perfect woman for me? And why did I feel envious of a simple, innocent grin directed at her sister and my friend? Was that how Richard felt toward Dori?

And what did that mean? And where did that leave us, me? Was she the one for me?

EDITH



My eyes fell from the kissing couple to Carter, who also watched them from his position on Richard's small private pier. With the backdrop of the lake and the mountains behind him, he looked...droolworthy.

The way my belly flopped was weird, but then again, the kind of attraction I felt for him was equally weird.

Somehow this whole gathering put me on edge. Oh, who was I kidding? I'd been on edge ever since his job offer. Everything since then had turned into some strange kind of limbo. We'd had sex, and he'd held me through the night, but all I could think was how weird me staying with him was. Having sex was one thing. Having sex didn't make us a couple. Couples did...things together. Things like living together...albeit temporarily. Attending a funeral of an innocent little boy together. Having shared friends. And it all appeared so...right. It felt easy when it shouldn't, and that set me on edge. I should have a talk with him. Like now. I watched Grace and Felicia say their goodbyes...or maybe that talk had to wait a bit longer.

I made the split decision to drive home with my sisters. At least, on the way from Whitebrook to Three Oaks, I would have Felicia in the car alone—the perfect opportunity for that long overdue conversation. And in the car, she couldn't avoid me like she'd excelled at these last few months.

I could feel Carter beside me, but I didn't take my eyes off my sisters. Only when his hand settled at the small of my

back, I turned my attention to him. “I need to catch a ride with my sisters.”

His eyebrows shut up at first but immediately settled with a knowing look and a nod. “Give me a call when you need a ride home.”

Home...that word tripped me for a moment, but then I nodded because what else do you do if a virtual stranger understands you better than anyone ever had?

“So call if you need me; otherwise, I’ll see you later at our room.”

Our room? Did he just say our room as if I wasn’t the homeless one impeding on him? Wow. I slowly nodded. “Okay.”

He gave me a quick peck on the lips—too short—but then again, totally appropriate. What wasn’t appropriate was the lurid grin he cast, promising later would contain a whole lot of inappropriate behavior.

God, I loved this guy.

Shit. No. Nope. Potential future boss. No, love. Just sex.

I looked around and panicked until I saw Felicia entering the house. No time to dream about the perfect hunk that made me act and think completely out of character.

I dashed after my sisters, waving goodbye to everyone around me.

“Feli, Gracie, can you take me back with you?”

Grace smiled, and Felicia looked as uncomfortable as she should. She’d been avoiding me. But this thing with her boyfriend had been going on too long. Now, it was time for me and her to have the talk and for us to face the music.

We settled into the car, and as sweet as Grace’s smile was, I saw in her eyes how her mind was reeling. “So, you and Carter? How? When? Why? Spill!”

Oh shit. I never, not once, thought about how my not-quite-relationship to Carter would affect Grace. “I’m sorry, we

just met and hit it off, kind of. But it's nothing serious." If I just repeated it often enough...

"Well, you sure looked cozy enough. What about your apartment?"

"They're still inspecting the building, and when they deem it safe, I can go back."

I waited for the question as to where I was spending my nights, but luckily it never came.

Grace and Felicia talked about the boy, Eric, whose funeral we'd all attended and whom none of us knew.

"How're you feeling about the memorial service next week? Is George already in town?" Felicia asked Grace.

Grace groaned and shook her head. "Graham and June are as busy and important as every year. Sometimes, I wonder if they've somehow made Owen bigger and better in their memories than he really was." Grace slapped her hand over her mouth as if she regretted saying it out loud.

I squeezed her shoulder softly from behind. "He was still young. Gracie, of course, they make him bigger in their mind. They forgot all the bad things, and now, he's their precious fallen hero."

"And George will forever be second place. Not as bright, as good, or as heroic as Owen."

"But isn't he some hotshot pilot or something?"

"Helicopters, as far as I know, but he doesn't talk about that. At least not with me."

"So, he's in town already?"

"Nope, he's cutting it close this time, but June called. Apparently, his girlfriend is now his fiancée."

"Fiancée? Wow. Did you know they were that serious?"

A shadow slipped over Gracie's face. At least I thought so. "No. He's never mentioned her before. But June said she comes from a good family, some kind of South American royalty. So, there's that."

The way Grace made air quotes around the words “good family,” made me sad to see how she was still yearning for her in-laws’ acceptance even after all these years. But Edith’s sweet, amiable sister, who swept their golden boy off his feet, and made vows to him in front of an altar, would never measure against the Bryce’s impossible-to-meet standards.

“Well, at least they’ll concentrate on them, then and not parade you around like last year.”

Gracie nodded but silently stared out of her window.

“Where’s Bobby today?” As soon as I asked, I could see Felicia’s hands choke the steering wheel. She was gearing for battle. And I was almost happy to see that at least a little bit of fight was still left in her. Only it shouldn’t be geared toward me. She needed all the fight in her to kiss her asshole-boyfriend goodbye and let him have a bit of her temper.

“He’s with a friend.”

Not with her boyfriend, at least. Gracie looked from Felicia to me and back to Felicia, undercurrents of years of growing up together palpable for all of us—the non-verbal, non-tangible, usually not up for discussion.

But that was not the case today. Today, Feli and I would have that talk, a straight talk. And if that didn’t help, I didn’t know what to do next.

We arrived at Whitebrook, and I could see the surprise in Felicia’s face when I took the seat previously occupied by Grace. “I’m coming with you to Three Oaks.”

“Ookay.” She bristled, but I wouldn’t make this easy on her. Somebody had to talk straight. And as the oldest, this job fell on me.

“How are things?”

“Good. The shop is doing pretty well.”

I smiled. “That is great to hear, I haven’t been in forever. What’s the flavor of the month?” Feli was the owner of a cute little shop in Three Oaks not far from the diner. It started out with her working for a lovely old lady, who sold all kinds of

knickknacks. Then Feli started making all kinds of lotions and soaps for family and friends at home, but soon the demand grew and they'd started offering it at the store, then came workshops on making soaps, lotions, and natural cosmetics. Last year, the old lady retired and moved to live with her daughter's family, and Feli took over.

"It's citrus. Best for battling the hotness of summer."

I nodded. As far as small talk went, this was all I had. "How are things at home?" I watched her like a hawk and didn't miss her face paling a little and how she wrinkled her forehead. I squeezed her hand on the steering wheel, demonstrating my support without saying something.

"Is his behavior escalating?"

Feli nodded, and it broke my heart to see my little sister suffering.

"You need to get out."

She nodded again, and a sigh of relief unlodged itself from my chest.

Finally.

"Whatever you need, I'm here for you. Just say the word."

She cast a glance to me before looking back at the road in front. "I don't know how."

Her voice was frail, so unlike when she was little. Back then, between Grace and her, Felicia had always been the one bossing Grace around and generally knowing exactly what she wanted and what she didn't like. Even when she wound up pregnant after a one-night stand, she'd been strong and marching on, bending the world to her will. But she'd changed. And with the hesitation and desperation in her voice, I almost didn't recognize my fierce little sister.

"You're strong, you're gifted, and you're an intelligent businesswoman. Whoever is in your life should treat you exactly like that."

Felicia nodded, and her whole body seemed to shift.

“I love you and Bobby so much. We all do.”

I watched a tear slide down Felicia’s cheek, and it broke my heart. Seeing my baby sister hurting was killing me inside. But I needed to stay tough. Needed to stay strong for her. “If you need to leave town for a while, I can keep the shop running for you. Or you can come live with me as soon as I know about my apartment, or at the Little Women’s. There’s always a place for you there.”

She nodded, then shook her head. “It’s my home. He’s the one who has to leave.”

Her words didn’t sound convincing, but it was the first time in a long time that I’d heard her standing up for herself. “Just think about how you want to do this, and we’re all here for you, I promise. You’re not alone and you don’t have to do this alone.”

We arrived at her neighborhood, and Bobby bolted out the door as soon as the car turned to a stop.

Felicia turned to me. “I need to go in, say thank you to Patricia.”

I nodded. “I’ll walk to the Little Women’s from here. Thank you for the ride.”

But before I could even unbuckle, Felicia threw her arms around me. “Thank you.”

I choked on my words because I had done nothing yet; only when this asshole was out of my little sister’s life, and everything was back to normal, was I going to breathe easy again.

I got out and hugged Bobby. “Hey, nephew. What’s new and cool?”

Bobby looked nothing like Felicia or any of us. Whoever the father was, since Feli never told us, none of us knew the asshole. He at least had some damn strong genes.

“Hey, Auntie E. We played this super fun board game. Maybe you and me can play it together some time.”

“I would love that. How’s school?”

His face fell, and something inside of me squeezed tight. Bobby was my only nephew so far. Somehow neither Dorothy nor I had been blessed with kids of our own. But we'd both been deeply involved during Bobby's baby years. Only since Felicia started dating the asshole had our contact somewhat lessened.

Guilt ran through me like ice water. Did I abandon them? Did I abandon Felicia as well as Bobby? "Hey, tell you what, why don't I pick you up in a couple of days and we'll go get this game for ourselves? Maybe do a sleepover, maybe your mommy wants to come, too?"

He grinned at me as if I promised him the moon. He seemed happy.

I opened the car door, and he jumped into his booster seat. "Let's buckle you in, champ." But Bobby just looked at me with disdain.

"I can do that alone."

I raised both hands and took a step back. "Of course. Not a baby anymore." And he was right, he wasn't a baby anymore, so did he realize the full extent of what was going on with his mother?

Felicia came back out and walked toward the car.

"I gotta go, Bobby. I'll call your mom and we'll talk about that date, okay?"

"Yes, Auntie E." I watched him struggle with his seatbelt, but then he fastened it and grinned his toothy grin at me.

Felicia stepped up. "Should we drive you to the Little Women's?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you, I'll walk."

And I needed a little air. This situation with Felicia was a mess. My home was a mess. Carter's job offer on top of our relationship was a mess.

So maybe a walk would help me figure things out a little.

CARTER



My step faltered when I saw the crowd after entering the meeting room at the Sheriff's Department behind Richard. This was supposed to be a small briefing. Besides my team of Goofy and Peaches in attendance was Richard's deputy sheriff Peter, a woman in street clothes, and two other guys. My breath hitched when one of those guys turned around. He looked exactly like an aged Owen Bryce. For a split second, I feared I was having some kind of episode. I'd never forgotten the face of one of my fallen brothers, and sometimes, they still haunted me in my dreams.

Only, as far as I knew, I was wide awake. And this guy was certainly not a dream. Could this be a coincidence? Too many coincidences had happened these last few days—people who knew each other or were related even though they shouldn't be. People belonging in one area of my life who trespassed into other areas, which made compartmentalizing a full-time job.

Richard pointed at the table. "Welcome, everyone. Let's sit and get this party on the road."

Everybody stopped talking and settled around the big table.

"You're all probably wondering why I asked you to attend this meeting, and we'll explain in a minute. But first, introductions. These are Peter and Belinda, my deputy sheriffs." He motioned to Peter, who waved. The woman next to him looked tiny. She wore street clothes, and her long,

wavy, dark brown hair went way down her back. She didn't look like a deputy sheriff, but on closer look, her eyes and face held a fierce determination, so maybe she didn't look the part now, but she sure must be good at her job for Richard to keep her on.

“And those gentlemen over there are Jeremy, he's DEA, and...”

“George.” The man Richard introduced as Jeremy stepped in.

Richard nodded at George before picking back up. “Jeremy is our liaison, so I asked him to attend.”

There was some unspoken undercurrent going on between Richard and Jeremy, but finally they both grinned and moved on.

Richard turned back to me. “And now the elephant in the room.” This made my eyebrows shoot up. Elephant, me?

“This is my old friend Carter. Carter, I'll let you introduce yourself and your men.”

I stood back up. “Hello, name's Carter, these are Peaches and Goofy.” I settled back down again since everyone else was playing it close to the vest. We would do, too—for now.

Richard looked a bit frustrated...but then nodded once. You couldn't stuff a room full of warriors and expect a party. “You all know we've experienced a surge in gang-related incidents and an influx of drugs in and around Whitebrook lately. Carter came to me a few days ago to disclose how those things are related, and he painted a much more sinister picture than I had expected. Carter, why don't you take it from here?”

I nodded. This wasn't my first rodeo. Our usual MO was to work with the local law-enforcement agencies, supply them with the tools and intel we had, and help them out however we could. Trust had to be earned, not to be expected. “My men and I are part of an organization called SOG: Security Operations Group. Our mission is to locate and extract victims of child-trafficking, sex-trafficking and child and sex slavery.”

Belinda stiffened, and I saw the exact moment realization settled in. Apparently, she was the one fastest in connecting the dots.

“We’ve been monitoring the Sormiza Cartel for a while now, related to another case we’ve been working on, and we’ve come to the conclusion they’ve been branching out their in-country operations. We don’t know exactly why they’ve chosen Whitebrook, because usually they target bigger cities. But evidence is strong that’s what’s happening.”

Richard cleared his throat. “So, in the light of this... movement, if we’re connecting the dots, then all those seemingly unrelated incidents are creating a big picture, including the two missing women from the shelter in Three Oaks.”

Belinda nodded and looked almost relieved. “So, what do we do now?”

I sighed, but thankfully Goofy, who had been unusually quiet up until now, spoke up. “We’re good at what we do. We’ve been monitoring chatter in the online communities, but so far, we’ve got no leads to the two women who’ve gone missing. They’re usually setting up a base in the area of operation, a house where they keep the victims for a few days or weeks before they’re either released or transitioned elsewhere. We haven’t been able to locate that. So, we’re a few steps behind, but we’re just getting started.”

Belinda didn’t look amused at all. “I’m in contact with the shelter. Carol and Edith are adamant about something not being right. They told me the girls are bringing home expensive gifts from their new boyfriends.”

Edith. How this woman popped up in every aspect of my life was unnerving. Was there more to her than met the eye? Was she somehow involved in this shit show? Her phone had been clear.

Peaches leaned forward. “This is the most common tactic of traffickers. They lure the victims in, make them dependent, then isolate them and demand more and more until the victims are de facto slaves. Abducting victims isn’t usually how this

goes. So, the two girls who've gone missing actually was a big red flag for us.”

Richard laid his hands on the table. “Jeremy, you don't look surprised—anything you want to share?”

Jeremy resettled himself on his chair, then deliberately relaxed his body before his eyes moved from Carter's little group to Richard. “I need to report this intel back to the office before I can say anything definitive. But I suggest building a task force and joining forces would be the way to go. We've worked closely together in the past, Richard, so I don't think there will be any problems.”

He didn't say anything, but I could feel his reservations against me and my guys. And I couldn't fault him for that. I wouldn't trust anyone without a proper background check either.

“That's what we'll do,” Richard said, “I'll be in contact. For now, let's close this meeting. And as soon as I have everything in order, we'll meet again. I suggest until then, everybody prepare some plans to counterattack this invasion of evil.”

Everybody around the table agreed and stood up. As expected, Belinda rounded the table and came straight toward me. “I need to be involved.”

“Involved?”

“In the search, the rescue, whatever. I'm an asset. I've been training the girls of the Little Women's Home in self-defense for years. I know the missing girls; I can talk to the others. I know the two women who run the place.”

I nodded, put my hand on her shoulder, and squeezed it. She was clearly distressed by what was happening, and I totally understood her need to be able to do something. “Why don't you talk to Goofy and Peaches and create a plan on how to best cooperate?”

I had other fish to fry, and it had to do with a certain DEA Agent who looked too familiar. Since Richard didn't know

George's name at first, he wouldn't be a help. So, the direct approach would be best.

"Hey, I'm Carter Plesak. Have we met before?"

George hesitated a millisecond. He looked at Jeremy, the other DEA Agent, who was deep in conversation with Richard, then he seemed to straighten and his face changed into a calm mask.

"I'm George Bryce. I don't think we've met."

Bryce...same last name. Brothers then. Carter shook his head and felt the familiar pain in his chest. Meeting relatives was never easy.

"You're Owen's brother."

His eyes widened and his head jerked back slightly.

"I think we've been on the phone once, after Owen's death."

George rubbed his forehead, then squished his eyes together before realization settled in. "Carter Plesak, Owen's team leader, right?"

Carter nodded.

"Wow, great to meet you in person. What a coincidence."

Well, no. Not really. Since I was here to check on Grace, it wasn't really a coincidence we'd met. Only the circumstances...so much coincidence.

"And perfect timing, too. My parents are holding a memorial service in memory of Owen next week. You should definitely come."

"I will." Grace had invited me already, but he didn't need to know that. "Just tell me when and where, and I'll be there." I'd planned on visiting George's parents anyway even though they had refused to take my calls back when it happened. But everybody handled grief differently, so I hadn't taken offense at their behavior.

We exchanged numbers, and he promised to call with the details. I still didn't know his role in all of this. He'd been in

the military back then, as well, but I hadn't been keeping tabs on him, so now he apparently worked for the DEA.

Richard ushered us out of the conference room and once outside turned to me. "Carter, can I talk to you for a sec?" He walked to his office and held his door open for me to step inside.

"Jeremy was a little reluctant to share information with you, but I told him to check you and your men out and if afterward, he has any more concerns, we'll talk."

I nodded. We didn't need the DEA to share information with us. Most of the time, our work with local law enforcement was a one-way street anyhow. We shared all of our gathered intelligence, insights, and evidence for them to be able to act on it.

The only thing that mattered was the mission and the end result—to find those kids and bring them home safe.

EDITH



My life was chugging along nearly perfectly. Spending the nights with Carter was fantastic. Except we'd still barely talked about our lives. At least, I didn't know much about his. He was busy during the day, so I made myself scarce. My apartment building was still off-limits, but I, at least, was allowed to get my car out of the underground parking and had been spending most days at the Little Women's Home in Three Oaks ever since.

I balanced the to-go coffee cups from the Three Oaks diner in my right hand while I opened my door. This was routine by now: get up; have breakfast with Carter; drive to Three Oaks; get coffee; meet up with Carol; and go over the daily to-do list.

I was keeping myself busy while I waited for my life to restart.

I backed out of my parking spot when a green truck sped by and nearly took out my back bumper. Shit. Didn't see that one coming; plus the truck had definitely been going way too fast.

I only got a short look at the truck and didn't recognize it, but I could've sworn there was one of the girls from the home in the passenger seat.

I shook my head; we had to have a serious conversation with our girls about safety.

I followed the truck at a much lower speed, and sure enough, he stopped at the Little Women's, let the girl out,

turned around like a maniac, and drove right at me. Finally, I could take a look at the driver. Only before our cars met, he took a tire-squealing right turn.

Strange.

The turn the truck took led to a road leading absolutely nowhere. Even calling it a road was a euphemism because it was barely more than potholes connected by gravel leading up to the old lumber mill. I'd been up there just a couple of months ago with Mr. Smith. The old mill had been empty and derelict for years. Nobody lived up there; there were no houses, no infrastructure or anything.

Nothing to do or see there. So what was this guy doing up there?

I made the split-second decision to find out, slowed down, and took the turn at a much more reasonable speed.

I slowly drove on, bumping along, realizing my car was definitely the wrong model to chase a truck along that road. Maybe it wasn't such a bright idea to drive up there alone, anyway. When a dirt road that led into the wood appeared on the right, I stopped the car, then backed it up the dirt road until I was far enough removed from the road to be concealed by trees. I would just wait until they came back down. And since nothing was up there anyhow, it couldn't take long.

That's what I thought, at least.

I was wrong.

Half an hour later, and after consuming both coffees, I couldn't feel my legs anymore and desperately needed to pee. I got out of the car, strained my ears but could only hear sounds of nature, and quickly finished my business behind a big tree. What if I went up there on foot and checked the place out? Couldn't be more than a couple of miles, and I had my running shoes in the trunk, so no problem there.

For a good five minutes, I contemplated calling Carol or Carter, and wondered if I should let them know where I was going, but what could happen? This wasn't some Wild West anything. This was Three Oaks, for God's sake.

I changed into my running shoes and up I hiked, parallel to the road but hidden by the tree line. The forest scents of damp moss and rotten bark surrounded me, and I took a deep breath, inhaling amazingly cool air despite the heat of the summer.

After walking ten minutes, I heard the sound of a motor and instinctively ducked down behind a tree. I wouldn't even think about all the crawly thingies down where I was huddled. I recognized the green truck barreling down the road. It was the same one I'd followed earlier, and apparently, the driver always drove like a maniac. No matter the terrain. Sadly, from my angle...and due to his speed, I couldn't get a good look inside the truck. Was it only the driver or did he pick up someone? But who would he have picked up, up there? The truck passed and didn't slow down. And I stayed put until I couldn't hear it anymore. By this point, he must've passed my car already.

What had he been doing up there? I hiked farther until I could see the mill through the trees.

There were barracks behind the main building which didn't seem to fit in. They looked new and old at the same time, as if someone had rebuilt them but tried to make them fit in, and they sure as hell hadn't looked like that a couple months ago. I hunkered down and watched and listened for any sound or movement.

Nothing. Everything remained silent.

I circled the compound but kept to the trees in case I'd misjudged the situation and someone was still up here. Something told me I wouldn't want to be found sniffing around up here. Though technically all of this belonged to the property Carter had bought, so I had every right to be up here.

When I was level with the barracks, I hunkered down again, listening. But besides the soft breeze that held the summer heat at bay up here, nothing moved.

I counted five barracks in total, all equally built, no windows, the structures old but reinforced with newer wooden planks.

I'd been to the mill before. Everyone who'd spent their teen years in and around Whitebrook had. Though it wasn't a typical hangout place, I'd made the trip out here with my friends once or twice. But those barracks...

Should I look inside one?

What if whoever had reinforced the old structures came back? What if they were hiding drugs, or something like that? I froze. Oh, crap. I was freaking myself out thinking stuff like that. I would just check them out quickly, then go back to my car and forget about this whole I'm-a-super-secret-detective-episode. No biggie.

I hurried to the first one; the door looked dilapidated, but it swung open on sturdy hinges, without a squeak.

Inside, the structure was empty, and dust danced in the rays of light that entered through the opened door. Silly of me to think I would find something here.

Just to make sure, I dashed to the next one which was equally empty. The third one had an opened padlock hanging from the door which caused a shiver to slither down my back. The padlock looked new—nothing old or rusty about it. I removed the padlock and swung the door open—nothing—but before I could close the door again, something caught my eye. There was something on the floor—a paper or a flyer. I took a step inside, only far enough until I could reach the paper, snapped it up, and hurried outside. Something about the place freaked me out. I closed the door, put the padlock back on, and rounded the barrack. From there, I stumbled into the underbrush and only after I was hidden behind a big tree did I look at the paper...and froze.

The photograph showed two adorable toddlers.

Luna's kids.

Shit.

How the hell did a photograph of Luna's babies end up on the floor of one of those barracks? Did she come here? Did she hide? Or was she taken? The padlock meant someone could've kept her captive.

My eyes were drawn to the last two barracks; I hadn't checked them out yet. Should I do that? Or should I call Belinda?

Yeah, calling Belinda was definitely the right decision. I took a deep breath and looked down at my shorts. Shit. It had been a hot day, so when I'd left Carter's hotel room this morning, I'd only worn tight shorts with no pockets and one of his T-shirts. I'd put my stuff on the passenger seat of my car and forgotten to take my phone. *Wow, girl. Too stupid to live much?*

What if I'd broken a leg during this foray into the wilderness? I wouldn't have been able to call and nobody would ever find me here by chance.

Fuck that.

I cast my eyes back to the two remaining barracks. I would just dash in and out, make it quick, then run back to my car and alert Belinda from there.

I searched the forest floor for somewhere to stash the picture and found a tree stump nearby—not ideal, but at least it looked dry enough.

I was just about to exit the tree line again when I heard the rumbling of a car coming up the gravel road.

Shit.

I hurried back and hid behind a big tree. My racing heartbeat caused my chest to heave, but my eyes stayed fixated on the road. The guy was back.

The picture I left on the tree trunk was just out of reach, but I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't have moved even if I tried.

The sound of the motor got louder until a truck entered the clearing—not the same one I'd followed earlier.

The truck drove up toward the main building of the mill, and the motor stopped seconds later.

I didn't move. My stomach felt rock hard, and I strained to hear any noises. Whoever came with the truck must've gone

into the building, not the barracks. Thank God.

I really wasn't made for this cloak-and-dagger shit.

I turned my head and incrementally crept to the other side of the tree. From there, I could see the barracks and the main building.

Nothing moved.

I reached out and uttered a soft "thank God" when my fingertips reached the photograph.

I needed to go, now—back to the car, back to my phone.

I pulled my hand back until I hit the tree with my back, then skidded out of sight and stopped there for what felt like forever.

But whatever they were doing in the main building, they didn't seem to come back to the barracks or anywhere near my hiding place.

I stayed quiet nevertheless.

The windows of the mill were nonexistent, and they could come near or hear me any minute.

Slow and quiet, I would walk deeper into the forest, away from the compound and then, when I was out of sight of the mill, I would hike back down to my car.

Once I'd settled on the plan, I started moving.

My instincts told me to run as fast as I could. But I kept my pace steady and slow and as quiet as I could. Ten minutes later, I stopped and looked back but couldn't see the mill anymore. I transferred the photograph from one hand to the other and swept my shaky hand across my forehead to get rid of the sweat. Then I turned and moved down the hill in a slight circle back toward the road.

Every time I stopped and looked around I could feel the panic simmering in my stomach well up.

It took some mental discipline, but I knew the mountains and hills around Three Oaks. I knew the general directions and there was only one way down the hill.

It took me half an hour until I stumbled across the road, then another five minutes until I arrived at my car. Finally.

Once inside, I locked the doors and tried my cell. Belinda didn't take the call.

What now? What next?

I opened my window and listened for any cars, and only after I was pretty sure nobody was coming up or down the road, I started my car and drove out of the dirt road and onto the bigger gravel road. I sped down as fast as I dared and held my breath until I was back in Three Oaks and on a paved road again.

I thought about driving to the sheriff's department in Whitebrook, but all I really wanted was to go back to Carter, be held by him and feel safe again. From there I could try Belinda again. And tell her what I'd found.

EDITH



When I stepped into the hotel room using my key card, Carter was on the phone, looking out the double doors to the small balcony. He acknowledged me by turning around, and although he raised his brows when he looked me up and down, he immediately turned back and kept on talking.

I hovered at the entrance, unsure if I should leave and give him privacy or if it was okay to come in. By coming back so early, I'd clearly broken the unspoken rule, we'd developed these last few days of our temporary relationship, of staying out of his way during working hours.

Awkward.

He rubbed his neck, and a weight settled on my chest. I'd held it together during the drive here but only by a thread. Now I needed his hand rubbing my neck instead, telling me everything was going to be okay.

I looked down at myself. Running through the woods had me sweaty and made my clothes pretty dirty, so I closed the door behind me and hurried to the bathroom. Once inside, the shower looked too enticing to ignore. I turned it on, placed my phone and the photograph I hadn't let go of, next to the sink, and left my clothes in a pile on the floor.

The hot water felt heavenly until I applied soap. Then those scratches on my shins and forearms, which I must have gotten running through the wood, playing superwoman, burned like bloody hell. Idiotic.

Once finished, I brushed my teeth, just to stall for time, but finally exited the bathroom and tightened my robe.

“I love you, too. I’m sorry I can’t make it today, but I promise to come by tomorrow. Pinky swear.”

Pinky swear? My throat suddenly felt uncomfortably dry, and I stopped in my tracks. WTF? Who was that on the phone? Why did he say he loved her, too? And if there was someone else, what was I still doing in his room? Was there another woman? Was I the other woman? Because if I had one hard-and-fast rule, it was to never, ever be the other woman.

He ended the call, put his phone on the table, and turned his attention to me. “What’s wrong?”

I poked my tongue into my cheek and inhaled slowly. Did he really need to ask? Well, if he wanted to play that game. “Who was that on the phone?”

“Nobody, why?”

Nobody? Was he fucking kidding me? “I heard what you just said.”

“And...”

“You told—whichever nobody is—how you love them, too...”

He looked at me as if I’d lost my mind, but I sure wasn’t the crazy one here, and I sure wouldn’t back down from this. If he wanted to cheat, fine, but it wouldn’t happen with me.

“That was my nephew. He’s on vacation in Moon Lake with his grandma, and I didn’t get to meet them today.”

I swallowed and my ears suddenly felt impossibly hot. His nephew. Great. Just great. Now, he thought I was jealous even though we’d never committed to anything.

“That aside. What happened to you?”

I shoved my hands into the pocket of the robe and stared back at him. “Why?”

He crossed the room until he stood directly in front of me. “When you came in here earlier, your hair was a mess”—he

raised my right arm and pulled the sleeve back—“you had scratches all over your body as if you’d gotten into a fight with a street cat, and you were sweaty and white as a sheet at the same time. So, what happened?”

“I found something.”

I struggled until he released my arm and hurried back into the bathroom, then came back out with the picture.

“There are two young women missing from the Little Women’s Home. They just disappeared without a word, or anything. The other girls are nervous, and a few of them have new “boyfriends” that are too good to be true. So, I followed one of the boyfriends up to the old lumber mill in Three Oaks. There’s nothing up there, so he shouldn’t have gone up there.”

“And you followed him? With your car?”

“Yes, first with my car, and then I hiked the rest of the way. The road up there sucks.”

“You hiked?”

“It’s just a short way up the hill. I hid the car on a dirt road off the gravel road leading to the mill and hiked the rest of the way.”

“Okay.”

“I found this in one of the barracks.” I handed him the photograph.

He studied it, then looked at me with a blank look in his eyes even though his features had tightened. “And...”

I exhaled and stomped with my bare foot. Of course, he didn’t get it. I needed to get the picture to Belinda. “These are Luna’s kids. She left them behind when she disappeared. But she loved them more than anything. I’m convinced she wouldn’t just leave them. So, they must’ve taken her there. Taken her against her will and locked her into one of those barracks up there.”

He looked back down at the picture, then back up at me. “Have you called the sheriff about this?”

I shook my head. “I left my phone behind in the car.” I held up my hand when his eyes turned dark like a storm brewing in the distance. “Don’t say anything, I know, but I tried to call Belinda once I was back at the car. She hasn’t returned my call, yet.”

“You left your phone behind?” His tone was icy.

I studied his face—tight lips, narrowed eyes. He wasn’t happy.

“It was an accident.”

“An accident...following someone you don’t know, hiking up a mountain, without proper gear, and leaving your phone behind? That is not an accident. That’s reckless...and dumb.”

“Hey!”

“You will hand this over to the sheriff, and you will let them handle things and not do anything this stupid again in the future, got it?”

My body tensed, and I crossed my arms. He was right, of course, but who did he think he was, telling me what to do? “You don’t have the right to tell me what I do or where I go, got it?”

His lips flattened even more, and his eyes turned cold. “You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into. Stay out of it. Let the sheriff’s department do their job; you’re neither equipped nor able. You don’t know anything about these people. Common sense should’ve told you to stay off that mountain.”

My body tightened, and I sucked in my cheeks. He was right—logically, I knew he was—but how dare he speak to me like that. “I know all that. I was safe and kept hidden the whole time. I’m not some dumb blonde, who doesn’t have enough brainpower to survive, and I sure as hell don’t need or asked for your expert opinion. I survived thus far...without you. So, thanks for your opinion, but no thank you for your commands.” I turned around, ready to get back into my dirty clothes and leave the room.

But before I could even fully turn, he grabbed me by my arms and shoved me until my back hit the wall.

“You don’t understand...”

“Oh, I understand perfectly.”

“No, you don’t, Edith. Listen to me. This is important.” His face looked anguished as if he was in serious pain. “You don’t know who these people are. They’re dangerous, so please...”

“I—” I wanted to reassure him. I wasn’t out to do anything risky. Hiking up that mountain had been stupid, leaving my phone behind even more so. I wouldn’t do something like that ever again, but before I could tell him all that, he assaulted my lips with his.

I could feel his frustration in the tightness of his body. But I wouldn’t just keel over. I ignored the fluttery feelings in my stomach, the desire that pooled deep within me, incited by his familiar scent and expert lips. He pried open my lips with his tongue and even though I didn’t want to, a moan escaped. Damn.

That was all the invitation he needed to step closer until his body was flush against mine. His hard-on pressed against my belly and caused my core to clench.

He released my arms and his hands made short progress with the belt on my robe. He pushed it to the side and roamed my body, leaving electric charges wherever he touched me.

His kiss was intoxicating, and when he cupped my breasts and pinched my nipples, I cried out, the exquisite pain instantly turning into pleasure.

He moved and nuzzled my neck, then my ear. “You’re precious, love. Don’t you see... I need to protect you. I can’t bear the thought of something happening to you.”

He slowly kissed his way down my body, with one hand splayed across my stomach, keeping my body imprisoned against the door.

Once he reached his goal—that most sensitive place—he kneeled down. A few nibbles, then he urged my thighs apart with his hand, used his fingers to spread me wide open, then plunged his tongue into me. With deep, well-placed licks circling my clit, he had me on the precipice within seconds, and without prolonging the agony, he pushed me right over the edge. Then he straightened, picked me up as if I weighed nothing, carried me to the bed, and laid me down as if I would break if he didn't handle me with the utmost care. Man, this never got old.

Then he laid down flush against me, wedged my thighs apart, and slowly pushed deep inside. He combed back my wet hair with his hands, his fingers massaging my scalp. “I can't bear having anything between you and me. Do you have a problem with that?”

It took me a second to realize what he was talking about. He didn't use protection—that's what he'd been referring to, but the way he stared into my eyes, unflinching...waiting, I got the feeling the condom wasn't the only thing he meant. Or was it?

I nodded. But in the back of my mind, a niggling voice started chiming in: Could I open up like this again? Trust and let myself be vulnerable? I didn't know Carter, didn't know enough to make that decision.

He pulled back and pushed back in, invading me fully.

A hiss escaped my lips, but he soothed it with a kiss, coaxed me to surrender, and I welcomed him even deeper. Could I?

I looped my legs around him, and my hands searched for something to hold onto. What if he broke my heart? What if I opened up fully and history repeated itself?

Then he intertwined our fingers and pulled my hands above my head. He held me there, staring into my eyes, penetrating more than just my body.

Did I want to take that risk again? I wasn't a naïve twenty-something anymore, blue-eyed and in love, hoping for the best

and thinking everything would work out just fine.

He increased the speed, and changed the angle slightly until he was rocking against me, thrusting deep against that special place inside, where his touch tickled the edge between pain and pleasure...but felt so good.

He didn't wait for me to get there, he demanded it. With every whimper, his strokes turned even fiercer, his hungry eyes never once leaving mine until it got too much and mine fell closed, and when I reached the peak, he was right there with me, following me down into the abyss. Shattering not only my body but also my soul.

We laid like that for a long time, neither one of us speaking. Because there were no words.

How could a connection like ours feel so profound and threatening at the same time?

I hardly knew anything about the man still inside me. Except he was opinionated and dominant, a man who acted however he wanted. He didn't mince words, and he was insanely protective.

He wasn't the type of man who would accept anything less than complete and utter openness.

But to open myself up would mean being vulnerable.

Vulnerable meant defenseless.

Which led to broken-hearted and hurt when it ended. Which was almost inevitable.

CARTER



I stepped out on the patio with my still wet hair soaking the collar of my T-shirt. Swimming in the lake had been refreshing, and Brody had done good. He still had a long way to go, but his flutter kicks were getting stronger and better.

I looked at Edith across the patio at the Inn. I'd taken her with me to Moon Lake to meet Brody and my mom, and it had ended up as an impromptu barbecue. Richard and Dorothy were here. I'd stumbled upon Peter making out with his wife Lisa in the kitchen. Blake and Claire manned the grill. The town doc, named Alan, was chasing around a sweet little boy while his wife Jessie was playing dolls with two adorable little girls.

Brody had changed in seconds and was playing tag with other kids his age. He seemed happy.

I watched my mom in deep conversation with Lisa's mother, Dorothy, and Edith. They seemed to like each other with none of the awkwardness I had anticipated.

But something wasn't right. Ever since I'd shut her up yesterday, ended our conversation by having sex, Edith had been uncommonly quiet and guarded.

Having sex only left things unsaid. It left a wedge between us. And I hated that.

I'd told her I was sorry, and she'd let me hold her through the night, but I could feel her distancing herself...pulling back.

Slipping through my fingers. I thought bringing her here would make it better, only it didn't.

I'd gone too far. I shouldn't have pushed her like that. Shouldn't have said the words I'd said. I'd been brash and too intense. But she didn't understand. Then again, how could she? I should have told her what was going on, should have told her how I'd had a meeting just hours before. Jeremy and George had called it. I assumed they'd run us through a successful background check, and only then would they let us into the know—and it happened exactly like that. Apparently, George had been undercover with the cartel for some time now since he'd been approached to work as a pilot for them. They didn't tell us the details, just asked us to stand down for a while longer and to please not mess things up. So, it was back to gathering intel which frustrated my team.

Which frustrated me. And when Edith showed up with the photograph, and told me in how much danger she'd gotten herself into, I'd lost my mind there for a minute.

So why didn't I talk to her when I knew I should've opened up and told her everything there was about my life—starting with the situation with my nephew and ending with what was going on with those missing girls?

Why didn't I?

It wasn't that she wouldn't understand. Edith was smart—beautiful and smart—unlike so many of my former conquests.

Those I could easily keep in a box. And not only the women. I'd compartmentalized my whole life—no area touching the other, no overlap—military life, my family, the women I'd dated, my investments, SOG.

Everything in its own little pocket, not interfering, not overlapping.

But it didn't work that way anymore. Edith was too entrenched in every aspect of my life. And she deserved more. She deserved everything.

But was I willing to do that? Trust her? Lay it all out there for her to judge and decide I wasn't what she wanted?

“Hey.” Richard offered me another beer, and I gladly took it. The summer heat was a little less suffocating out here close to the water, but it was hot, nevertheless.

“So Edith found a photograph up at the old mill?”

Of course, Richard knew. Belinda had called Edith back yesterday, and earlier today, she’d gotten the photograph.

“Yep.”

“And she was up there, alone, following one of those guys?” Richard took a gulp, but my eyes never left him.

I gritted my teeth, but then forced myself to loosen my jaw.

“Yep.”

“That’s dangerous business.”

I nodded. Oh, didn’t I know that?

“Did you tell her what’s going on? Did you tell her just how dangerous things could get?”

I shook my head.

“So she doesn’t know? What you’re doing in your spare time? The reason you’re here?”

“Nope.”

“Should have told her.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I didn’t need my friend to tell me all I did wrong.

“We’ve just started dating.”

He looked at me as if I wasn’t the brightest tool in the toolbox. “What does time have to do with anything? Are you serious about her?”

Was I? Serious? I sure as hell wanted her more than I’d ever wanted a woman before. My protective instincts where she was concerned? Off the charts. If anything, I was feeling too much. I’d never, ever felt as possessive and acted that way before. “Maybe.”

With that, Richard let loose a deep chuckle, patted my back, and said, “Dude, you’re a goner. Better make things

right after whatever you did to make her pissed at you.”

I shook my head and groaned. If even Richard recognized something was off, then I really needed to clear the air.

I sidestepped him and made my way toward my mother, Dorothy, and Edith. Once I arrived, my mother turned toward me. “Hey, boy, did you know Edith’s apartment building was on fire a few days back? She’s still not allowed to enter, but luckily Dorothy offered Edith her own apartment since she’s moving in with the sheriff.”

My gaze shot from my mother to Edith, who looked down at her feet. She was leaving me? Leaving without even telling me?

“Isn’t that a great solution?”

I smiled and nodded at my mom. No way in hell would I show anyone how much that information had knocked me off-kilter.

Why did I feel hurt? Because she didn’t tell me she’d made plans to move in with her sister? Or because she didn’t need or want me like I did her?

I stared at her until she looked up directly at me. She wasn’t avoiding looking at me; at least, for that I was thankful. “Can we go for a walk?” I said.

“Yes.” She steeled herself as if she prepared for battle. But there wouldn’t be one. I was already on my knees.

Now I needed to tell her...trust her...lay it all on the line, and then, if she still wanted to go, at least I hadn’t held anything back.

We stepped off the patio and walked across the meadow toward a nice copse of trees.

“I like your mom.” She looked at me sideways, and I nodded. “She told me about your nephew.”

My old über-private self reared up—planets colliding.

But did I not just decide Edith was worth opening up to? Was worth getting to know the real me? All the aspects of my

life? “Okay.”

“I planned on talking to you, about the apartment. Dorothy just made the offer...and I accepted.”

“I understand. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“Then why do I feel I do?”

“Maybe it’s the same reason I feel like I need to explain a couple of things.”

“What things?”

“My nephew...did Mom tell you he’s mine?”

“Yours as in you’re the father?”

She looked so shocked I nearly chuckled. “No, well, not his biological father. But I’m his legal guardian since his mother killed herself.”

“Wow, I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “We lost her to drugs long before we lost her.”

She looked so sad when she took my hand and intertwined her fingers with mine. And I didn’t deserve it. Didn’t deserve any of her sympathy. I’d lost so many people in my life. But war was something different. War was brutal and quick and random. Every soldier knew the stakes, knew the enemy was out there to kill him.

It hadn’t been that way with Chloe. I hadn’t protected her when we were kids, hadn’t even realized what was going on until way later. But then it was too late. Then something inside her had already died. And the choices she’d made and the life of drugs she’d chosen was the external manifestation of her internal battles, her internal brokenness. I could’ve prevented it. I needed to believe I could have. But far worse than me not preventing what happened to her, was me not providing the help she needed to overcome it, to heal, or at least cope with the damage that was already done.

I hadn’t. And in doing so had robbed Brody of his family.

“She was abused as a teenager... I should’ve seen it. Should’ve known something was wrong. But I never did.”

“Is Brody...” She left the question hanging in the air, and I shook my head.

“Nope, his father was one of the junkies she hung around. She never told us who it was, and after Brody moved in with Mom and me, it didn’t matter anyhow.”

She nodded. We arrived at the tree line and followed the well-worn path through the wood.

“I’m rich.” Damn. Saying that felt lame. I looked like one of those morons who tried to impress women by telling them what studs they were. “I mean, I don’t... I started investing young and got dealt a good hand. Then I dabbled in real estate, and it snowballed from there.”

She looked at me with a grin splitting her beautiful lips. “I knew that; I googled you.”

“And?”

“I read about all your investing, jet-setting antics, and conquests, too.”

Oh shit. “And despite the picture those tabloids painted of me, you’d still have me?”

Her gaze turned annoyed and guarded. “Well...we’re just having a good time. Nothing serious, right?”

Shit, that hurt. But of course she was right. Our...thing was never meant to be anything but a quick fling. If that. It wouldn’t have amounted to anything if she wasn’t somehow involved in every aspect of my life. And despite that, we’d known each other for what? Two weeks? How could it be anything other than a casual thing at this point? Even though her low opinion of my expectations stung. “The jet-setting is just a means to an end.”

She raised one eyebrow and smirked. “Getting to know rich people and getting in on some insider trading and real estate deals?”

Yeah, that was exactly what I wanted to make people believe—my public persona. So why did it make me mad if Edith thought of me that way? She wouldn’t know. Not that

I'd shared anything about my true self with her. "Getting to the money behind the people I'm hunting."

"Hunting?" She looked confused, and why wouldn't she? I was the bastard who hadn't shared an inch of my life with her.

"I spend my days working for an organization called Sec Op Group. We're searching for and rescuing missing children, fighting against child-trafficking and sex-trafficking, and it all starts and ends with money."

Her eyebrows shot up, then she frowned, and I wanted to kiss her beautiful forehead to wipe away the deep wrinkle that had formed there. "I couldn't figure out why you were so... different in person than what I've read about you, but..." She stopped in her tracks. "Is that why you're here? Because of Luna and Gloria?"

"That, and the property acquisition, and checking in on your sister, and Richard..." *And now you.* I didn't say that to her, but maybe I should have. "That's why I freaked out yesterday. There's dangerous things going on, and I need you to be super careful."

She nodded with newfound understanding in her eyes. "I promise." Then she whipped her head around. "The hotel in Jamaica? That's what you were doing there, as well?"

I nodded. "I needed you out of that situation, and kissing you and whisking you off was the only way I could think to accomplish that. I'm really sorry."

She nodded.

I thought I would get at least a bit of pushback from her, but she seemed to understand. Seemed to get it.

Maybe laying all my cards on the table would be the right move—let her really see all of me—let the chips fall where they may, and let her decide how to move forward with our... relationship.

But relinquishing control of any aspect of my life was scary. Scary and completely foreign. And not my MO when so much was at stake. But I couldn't force her into staying with me, falling in love with me.

Even though every fiber inside me screamed that's exactly what I should do. Because that's what I'd done.

I'd fallen in love with her.

EDITH



We'd both been silent while heading back to the patio.

He'd opened up to me like I hadn't expected him to. I'd wondered what happened yesterday, why he'd gotten all super-intense and dominant on me. Now I knew. He'd been scared for me. But what did he want now? He didn't say anything about us, didn't say we had a future beyond the time he planned on staying in Whitebrook. He hadn't repeated his job offer, and what about Brody?

I still didn't know a whole lot about his life, but he seemed incredibly busy which didn't exactly leave much space or time to raise a little boy...or for a family. If that was even what he wanted.

And if he wanted a family, he'd probably want a younger wife, one that would give him his own kids.

Well, that was obviously not me.

I needed to back off. Retreat. Create some distance.

"Edith, Richard and I are leaving. Do you want to ride with us? We could go to Whitebrook together and settle things with the apartment," Edith said.

Yep, distancing myself was the way forward, so why not start that process immediately? Plus, it would give Carter some alone time with his family.

I'd been depending on him, inserting myself into his life. So, he was probably happy to have his room to himself again.

I looked up at him, and he looked back, his face calm, emotionless.

“You can go with them, or I can drive you—whatever you want.”

I couldn't get a read on him. Did he want to go with me, or did he want me to go with them? At that moment, Brody and a group of kids came running. “Uncle Carter, tell them.”

He chuckled and crouched down until he was eye level with his nephew. He would make a good dad. I could see by the way he treated Brody. Earlier, when they'd gone swimming together, Brody's screeches and their laughs had been loud enough to be heard even on the patio.

“Tell them what, Brody?”

“About being a soldier.” Brody swung a stick-sword through the air, as if he was battling an invisible enemy.

“My dad and his friends are Navy SEALs; that's way cooler than being a soldier,” a girl, probably a couple years older than Brody, said.

Carter chuckled, then looked up at Richard who pointed at two guys, who both sat on a blanket playing with their toddlers. “Navy SEALs are soldiers, as well, but you're right, they're cool.”

Edith hadn't had any connection, or known anyone in the service, other than her brother-in-law Owen and his brother George and now Carter.

She looked at the two men. Both looked gorgeous and fit...and kind of badass even though they were rolling around with their toddlers.

Just not as gorgeous as Carter.

“Being a soldier is about duty, service, and sacrifice, protecting your country and defending the people who can't protect themselves, not about being cool.” Carter straightened to his full length and ruffled Brody's hair.

Soon the kids got bored around the adults on the patio and took off again.

“Edith?” Dorothy grabbed my arm.

“I’m coming with you. Be there in a sec.”

I turned around and nearly bumped my nose on Carter’s chest. I hadn’t realized he was standing so close. “I’m gonna catch a ride with Dori. I can move into her apartment until I know what’s happening with mine.”

He nodded. He didn’t look happy, but then again, I couldn’t just stay with him forever.

“I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay.” He kissed my forehead and stepped back.

I immediately missed his warmth. Stupid to get so dependent. I was falling head over heels for a guy I hardly knew. And I should know better. With my relationship track record, I should’ve been guarding my heart and preparing for things to end.

We’d never promised each other anything. Never even talked about it, so why was I feeling like my heart was freezing over?

Because I’d watched too many movies, that’s why.

I was too old to believe in fairy tales. Just because he’d saved me again and again, didn’t mean he was a knight in shining armor who’d swoop me off my feet and promise me forever.

Nope...not happening.

He’d move on. As would I.

And didn’t I have enough to worry about? Sorting out my living conditions? Needing to concentrate on keeping Felicia and the girls in the Little Women’s Home safe? Things like finding a job should also be on that list, because I sure as hell couldn’t work for Carter when we were over.

CARTER



“She’s a very nice woman. I like her.”

I turned around and looked at my mother, and for the first time, I was struck by how worn out she looked.

It was my fault for burdening her with taking care of Brody, while I selfishly did my thing.

I needed to stop doing this. Needed to change. Now. “I’m sorry for being away so much and not taking care of Brody.”

She looked at me, the creases around her eyes even more pronounced. “Carter, you’re a good boy. Always have been. I’m proud of who you’ve become as a man, and I’m proud of the work you’re doing. It’s important work, and I support you. But you’re restless. Searching. You’ve been that way all your adult life. Brody needs stability. He needs a home, a place where he’s safe. He needs a father, a family.”

I looked down at my feet, then at the lake. She was right. I couldn’t pretend like everything would fall into place miraculously. Because things didn’t work that way.

“You need it, too. Which brings me back to her.”

My eyebrows squished together. “What? Who?”

“Edith.”

“Why?”

“Because of the way you two look at each other, when the other one isn’t looking.”

“And how do we look at each other, Mom?” Why did I get instantly annoyed when my mother said things like that?

“You’re always aware of where she is; you didn’t once let her out of sight. You’re protective and caring. You look like you’re in love with her.”

I grimaced. “And you could tell all that by watching us interact for how long? An hour?”

She chuckled. “Oh, boy. I could tell you’re smitten the minute you arrived. Plus, she’s the first woman you’ve ever introduced to me. So that says something.”

I rubbed my neck which had suddenly grown uncomfortably hot.

“And I like her...a lot. I had a wonderful conversation with her and her sister Dorothy. Such amiable, polite women.”

“Yep.”

“And the way her eyes light up, when she talks about you...”

“Her eyes?”

“Yes, her eyes.”

Okay, that was taking it too far. I couldn’t talk to my mother about all that.

“Dorothy thinks Edith’s in love with you, too.”

Wait, a minute. “She does?”

“Yeah. Dorothy also told me about Edith’s failed marriages, how she’d developed a certain...attitude toward men.”

Edith? No. She’d developed an armor of makeup and high heels to protect herself from getting hurt, and an attitude to keep everybody at arm’s length. But she’d let that go with me early on—let her guard down a while ago. I should’ve done the same with her. Maybe then, we wouldn’t be in this strange kind of limbo now. “So, Dorothy thinks Edith...”

“Fell in love with you? Yes. And you would be a fool to let her go.”

I looked at my mother, and she winked. Winked. Oh, God. I suddenly felt thirteen again.

“What about Brody...and us returning home soon?”

“What about him?”

“He needs to get back to school. He needs stability—that’s what you’re always telling me.”

“Or, and hear me out, before you dismiss the idea, you could find us a house around here. We could move and find a new school for Brody. I like it here. The weather is nice. I like the people, and Brody loves it. He’s happy here. Maybe a change of location would be good for him. Would be good for all of us.”

I stared at my mom. How could it be that at forty, I still needed my mom’s kick in the ass to see what was right in front of me? She was right. I wanted to build a life with Edith, wanted to at least get the chance to see where our relationship could go. I could buy a house around here, either in Moon Lake or in Three Oaks.

Now, I just had to find a way to make Edith get on the same page.

My mother patted me on the back and turned back to the others.

“Carter?”

I turned around and watched Peter and Blake approach. Navy SEALs—I should’ve caught that. They sure had that special cockiness. “What can I do for you, gentlemen?”

“We’ve been thinking, maybe your organization could use some more staff?”

“You volunteering?”

They both nodded. Great, I could always use a couple more people, and ex-military? Always welcome. “You’ll need a PI license,” I said to Blake and looked at Peter. “I don’t

know what you'll need, but we'll figure it out. Have any more friends?"

"Yeah, he's not so quick on his feet anymore, but he sure needs a new mission."

I had the distinct feeling I knew who they were talking about. "Let's bring him on. I'll set up a meeting with the team, show you around...metaphorically speaking."

We fist-bumped, and just like that, moving here became a distinct possibility. With more people, we could expand our services. Prevention came to mind; self-defense and awareness training were all things we could provide locally—maybe we could even set up a local facility. For realistic training scenarios, I really needed to talk to my team.

But first Edith. I needed to tell her that I loved her.

Tell her that I didn't plan on leaving and ask her for a shot at a future.

Together.

EDITH



I hadn't intended to stop by the hotel on my way to the Little Women's Home, but this was as good a time as any to get my stuff out of Carter's room and leave my key card.

Dorothy's apartment was perfect, small and homey and perfectly fine. She offered for me to take over her lease until I sorted things out with my apartment...whenever that would happen.

I opened the room, and his scent immediately hit me, along with longing and a wave of mourning.

Walking into the empty room felt...final.

Like whatever had happened and developed between us was coming to an end.

Why was I feeling sad about that?

I wasn't leaving him. I mean, I was, but I wasn't. This was just the natural run of things.

An affair. A fling.

That's what we'd had.

I hadn't expected our talk earlier, hadn't expected him opening up to me almost like... Nope. Not going there. Just because we started talking about our lives didn't mean shit.

Even though I was falling for him.

The realization hit me over the head like a brick.

I was falling for him.

Listening to him telling me about his life, I longed to be a part of it.

Only I wouldn't be. Couldn't be. I'd worked hard to have control over my life.

Men?

They messed everything up.

And Carter?

He wouldn't let the woman in his life have any control. I could see him barge in, in his charming, super sexy, over-protective way and take over my life completely.

Not going to happen.

But why did I even think about that? That's not what we were about. What we had was a fling, a mutual attraction, deepened through family entanglements.

He never said he wanted more, never gave me any promises. Never asked for anything more.

And neither did I.

Thinking about the whole thing was completely moot. He would leave in a few days.

And all I would be left with were some amazing memories and a job offer, I still didn't know what to do about.

Work for him?

I couldn't do that, couldn't hear his voice on the phone and know there would never be more between us than him being the boss. A clear break was what I needed. What I wanted. I didn't need a man to run my life. I could do that on my own. Freedom and independence and control was all I'd ever wanted. Letting a man in only led to heartbreak. And I'd had enough of that, enough to last me a lifetime. And even when I decided I wanted a man back in my life, it wouldn't be someone like Carter. Not someone demanding, controlling, possessive...with a family of his own. Even though Brody was a hoot. I wasn't mother-material. I'd wanted that a long time ago, but when it didn't happen, I'd made peace with that, too.

And hadn't Brody's life been upended enough? He didn't need me in the mix, complicating things further.

I walked around and picked up the few things of mine. Room service had been in, so the room was clean and tidy—no ruffles in the bed, nothing disturbed, just like our lives would be once Carter had gone back to his and I had gone back to mine.

When I was just about done, I heard a click at the door, and when his large frame entered, the room immediately seemed smaller.

“Hey, I didn't know you were coming back so soon.” He looked at the clothes in my hands, and he narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing?”

My chest tightened for a moment, and my grip around my clothes tensed. “I'm getting my clothes.”

He stared at me, his deep, brown eyes holding me captive on the spot. “Why?”

I shrugged. “I'm moving into Dori's apartment.” Hadn't I told him that before?

He took a couple steps until our toes nearly touched, took the clothes from my hands, and laid them on the bed next to us. “We gotta talk.”

“Talk?” My fingers tingled, and I clenched my fists to keep them from shaking. Why was I suddenly this nervous? “About what?”

He looked serious when he grabbed my upper arms. “I don't want you to leave.”

He...wait...what?

“Why don't you stay with me for a couple more days, and we'll see where this is going?”

A couple more days? So he wanted me with him until he left? Wanted to prolong our affair? It would only make saying goodbye harder—harder for me—obviously not for him. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

He looked at me, as if gauging if I really meant what I said, and I could feel my armor forming. I meant what I said. Prolonging the inevitable was only going to hurt. Better split now.

“So you don’t want to be with me? Is that what you’re saying because—”

“Look, Carter.” I inhaled deeply; this talk was killing me. How could he be so cool and controlled when I was falling apart at the seams? Fucking feelings. “We had a great time, and I’m beyond grateful for all you’ve done for me these last few days. But we both have our own lives to get back to. This was just a short time out from the real world, right? You have a lot on your plate, a lot to figure out...to take care of.” Brody. I didn’t have to say it out loud, but I could feel him stiffen. “And I do, too. This was fun while it lasted. Thank you.”

He looked down at his feet, then gave one sharp nod and stepped back.

That was it.

I grabbed my stuff, gave him a peck on the cheek, and fled, leaving a bit of my heart behind. Just a tiny bit.

All the way to my car, I controlled the tears that threatened to slip out. No way was I crying.

Nope.

I reached Three Oaks and the Little Women’s Home in a flash. But I didn’t get out of my car. A thickness in my throat made it hard to breathe, and my chest squeezed until a sob tore out.

I looked down at my wringing hands. A couple more days. He’d promised a couple more days. Not forever. Not “Let’s try to make this work for real.” All he’d promised were a couple of days. And a couple of days weren’t nearly enough. But why, if what I just said to Carter was true, and if what I just said was what I truly wanted, then why did I hurt so badly?

I’d made a mistake.

That’s why.

I should've begged him to love me. Should've told him I was falling in love with him.

Instead, I chickened out.

I'd let my experiences, my past hurt, decide my future. Control, independence...all shitty replacements for a chance at love, at companionship. What a shitty move. What a dumb thing to do. *Go back. Ask for a chance.* Tell him I was falling in love—that's what I needed to do. That's what I was going to do.

But just at that moment, a truck parked in front of me—a truck I'd seen before—the truck I'd followed.

Two men exited the truck, and one of them opened the rear, leaned inside, and grabbed someone.

Luna.

Her hair was a dirty mess, and she appeared too weak to stand on her own.

The guy manhandled her, and when he hit her in the face, I was out of the car before I realized what I was doing.

“Hey, you assholes, let go of her.”

The guy looked at me and chuckled. Clearly, he didn't feel threatened by me.

My heart raced, but I wouldn't let fear hold me back. I took a couple steps until I stood right next to Luna and grabbed her arm.

“Let go.”

He grinned again. “Want to take her place?”

I narrowed my eyes and squared my shoulders. “No, you asshole, let go of her and fuck off.”

The second I saw his jaw squeeze, I knew I'd made a mistake. He let go of Luna, who slid down along the truck, and then he squared off with me. “You cunt.”

The other man rounded the hood of the car and grabbed the guy by the arm. “Stop it.”

I went down, grabbed Luna by her hands, and dragged her away from them. I'd only made a couple of steps before the other guy looked at me and his eyes widened. "That's her."

Her? What the hell did he mean? Her?

"You sure?"

"Hundred percent."

The two guys looked at each other, then the one who'd manhandled Luna grabbed me before I could even let go of her.

Hell.

He tried to drag me back to the car, but I escaped his grip, turned around, screamed and then...wham...everything turned black.

CARTER



I stopped my car at The Oaktree. According to Goofy, the beat-down bar I was staring at was the local watering hole.

My experience told me if someone in Three Oaks was looking for trouble, they would probably come here first...and find it.

Perfect choice.

I had absolutely no desire to meet with the boys, not after the brush-off I'd received from Edith.

But wasn't that exactly what I'd wanted?

All my life, I'd always had my pick with women, and I had a whole spiel about how I was neither the marrying kind nor had any desire to have a family now or in the future. Basically, I was a dick to them even though not a single one seemed to mind too badly. Instead, they all tried to turn me around. Trick me, trap me, manipulate me.

But I'd always escaped, always marched on, and everything went exactly as I wanted.

So, splitting up now should've been the right move. If it was what she wanted.

Only this nagging feeling in my gut told me...crap.

I unfastened my seatbelt and looked around to see if the others had arrived yet. It was getting dark outside, and the bar offered no illumination of the parking lot. Not safe.

After this meeting was over, I would go to my empty hotel room. Empty and cold. Alone.

I looked myself in the eyes in the rearview mirror and shook my head at my weakness.

If all those arguments about why ending things between Edith and me were true, then why did I feel like someone pissed into my coffee ever since she'd left?

Was it because she was the one saying the words? Was this my bruised ego feeling sorry for myself?

Edith was the only woman ever ending things with me instead of the other way around. Surely that was why I was feeling like crap. Not because I wanted to build a future together. Right?

Wrong.

I'd felt horrible immediately after the door closed behind her. And not because of my ego but because of my heart.

I banged my head against the steering wheel. How could I be so dumb and say nothing? Why did I let her go without going after her and begging her to give us a chance? Why didn't I tell her I loved her?

The thought gave me pause.

I loved her.

I looked at the Oaktree again. First, I'd meet up with the boys, and after that, I would find Edith and man up.

Since talking to Blake and Peter this afternoon, the whole thing quickly gained momentum, and tonight was the only night they all could make it.

So, I needed to get my act together. But what if she was right? What we had was never meant to be anything serious. It was just a mutual attraction gotten out of control a bit.

I chuckled at myself. Who was I trying to bullshit?

I wanted her. Period. I wanted her to come to me, tell me she'd made a mistake, tell me that she wanted to try, and that

she loved me. But since Edith was as stubborn as they came, that would likely not happen.

No problem there. I would just do the talking, and the begging, and everything it took to get her.

This was a new one for me. A new one for me being the one pining after a woman. For me being the vulnerable one.

Looked like I'd picked the wrong type of women all my life...until now.

The time spent with Edith was definitely different. I was different around her. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I was attracted by her strength.

I'd kissed her before I even knew her name. Granted it was to protect her, but I could've found another way. And on the plane...God, she'd been gorgeous. And with every layer I uncovered about her, it stripped away a layer of myself. Things that I thought I wanted. The kind of life I thought I wanted. The kind of woman I thought I wanted...it was all bullshit.

I didn't want to be a lone warrior.

Didn't want to be unattached and free.

What I wanted was an attachment. A family...with her.

I would take her in my arms, make love to her until she couldn't think straight, then I'd ask her to marry me and never let her leave again. Ever.

That was the truth. I should've done that earlier. Shouldn't have let her insecurities and presumptions get the upper hand. I'd known about her shield of armor, known how she was projecting being tough, even if she wasn't. And hadn't I been relieved for a second there, too? Hadn't I doubted our ability to make this work long-term?

I was as much a coward as Edith. We both were. Cowards.

I groaned, then shot up at a knock on the roof of my car. Max and Goofy stared at me through the passenger-side window before they opened the door.

“Hell, boss. What’s wrong?” Max said.

I looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. “Why?”

He just stared back at me. Max knew me inside and out. We’d known each other a long time, trusted each other implicitly—a bond forged by fighting side by side for the same goal and conducting numerous missions together.

Max shook his head and chuckled. “I’ll be damned. I never thought I’d see the day.”

Goofy looked from him to me and back and raised his eyebrows.

“Women trouble, Goofy, boss got women trouble.”

“One woman, to be precise, and she just gave me the boot.”

“And, so you sit here and feel sorry for yourself? Is that how we’re dealing with stuff now, boss?”

Max was a fucker. A highly trained, highly capable fucker. But one nonetheless.

He’d served as a PJ. A pararescue jumper, the best of the best, even though...airforce. We’d met back in Iraq, and it started a lifelong friendship.

“Where’s Peaches?”

“Incoming,” Goofy said, then he suddenly took off. Both Max and I followed him, approaching a woman who exited the bar. She looked...classy. Too classy to be seen in a bar like that. Goofy chatted her up, but she shooed him away as if he was an annoying fly bothering her. She got into her car and drove away with Goofy staring after her. What was going on there?

I looked back at Max, who shrugged. So, he didn’t know what that was all about either.

I’d asked my men to arrive earlier, so I could break down my plans with them before the new recruits arrived. Even though, after the thing with Edith, settling down in Three Oaks had lost a bit of its appeal.

“Let’s get inside. Grab a beer. I’m parched.” The summer heat was finally cooling as the sun set. I didn’t expect it to be so hot, so close to the mountains, but what the hell did I know about the local weather?

We entered the bar, and I immediately felt at home.

It was old, rundown but pristine, not a flat-screen in sight, just a long, dark, wooden bar and a couple of tables with chairs around them.

The burly guy behind the bar looked ancient but friendly. “I didn’t expect you to be back so soon, son...and bring your friends. Niki just took off for the evening, you know. She was still steamingly mad...like old times.” He grinned at Goofy who grinned back.

“I didn’t even dare look her in the eyes, Bert. I swear.” Goofy said, deepening his grin.

The barkeeper grumbled and shook his head at the same time. “Same old, too-stupid-for-his-own-good boy.” There was an affectionate undertone...a shared story in the past.

I raised my brows.

“Don’t ask,” was all Goofy said.

I ran a tight ship, and all the boys knew what my code of conduct was. And I trusted them. Goofy might be a prankster and a clown, but he was a stand-up guy if I’d ever met one. So, whatever the story behind him and...Niki was, I was almost sure Goofy wasn’t being an ass. Almost.

We settled down around a table in the back.

“Guys, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“No kidding. Boss, we’re already ahead of you,” Peaches, who’d arrived at our table, said, and settled down in one of the empty chairs.

I raised my eyebrow and looked at one after the other. “You are? Then please”—I made a sweeping gesture—“enlighten me on what you think you know.”

The three men around looked at each other.

“You need to settle down, boss. And since this is as good a place as any, you’ve chosen to do it here,” Max said.

“We like it here, so we’ve chosen to stay with you,” Peaches said, making googly eyes.

“And we’ll expand the team. Which is good,” Goofy concluded.

Hell, my team knew me well.

“I’ve bought this property here in Three Oaks. I planned to develop it, but it might be a good place to make camp. There’s enough room for all kinds of training scenarios: indoor training, shooting range, outdoor survival training, stuff like that.”

The three men nodded.

“We still need to travel, of course, if our help is needed elsewhere, but with more people, we could start courses. Increase prevention and awareness. Stuff like that.”

All three nodded again.

“Nothing you have to say?”

“Nope.” Max looked at the others, then back at me. “We’re good.”

“There’s one more thing,” I said, “I want the four of us to be partners in this.”

Max nodded again, but Peaches and Goofy looked stunned.

“I don’t have enough to invest…” Goofy looked down at his hands.

“Did I ask you to invest? Or did I ask you to be a partner?” I replied. Thank God, money wasn’t an issue.

“I need you, all of you, to step up so I can get more balance. Brody…” They all nodded. I didn’t need to say anything else. They all knew I needed to do right by my nephew. And that included spending more time with him. More time than I had right now.

“We’re in, Carter...anything you need,” Goofy said.

The bar owner stepped up to us and sat four bottles of beer and a bowl of nuts on the table. “Anything else you need, gentlemen?”

“Bert, meet my partners Carter, Max and P...Thomas,” Goofy said.

Bert nodded and Peaches groaned.

“You can call me Peaches, but only if you keep those nuts coming.”

We all laughed. Thomas Pechy, aka Peaches, hated his nickname only slightly less than his given name. He’d apparently gotten it when he showed up at bootcamp with his name and sporting a peach fuzz, and it stuck ever since.

“Why would I call you Peaches, Thomas?” Bert said, clearly seizing the chance for a friendly ribbing.

“Because everyone else does.” I shook hands with Bert. “So, what did Goofy do, when he was here earlier?”

“Goofy?”

I pointed at Scott with my beer. “Scott here is always goofing off, so he’s earning his nickname daily.”

Bert laughed a deep belly laugh. “You military guys are all the same. Well, Scotty here, has had an eye on my niece ever since he recognized girls were...girls. But my Niki wouldn’t give him the time of day...back then, and as he experienced earlier, that hasn’t changed.”

He chuckled, then patted Goofy on the head as if he was five years old. “I’m still rooting for you, boy.”

Bert went back to his bar.

Good man.

Good choice of a hangout. Good thing, too, since it looked like we’d be spending a lot of time here.

I looked at Goofy who looked down at his lap. “So, Niki?”

He looked up and shrugged, his signature grin back on his face.

“Looks like Boss is not the only one with girl troubles... am I right...Max?” Peaches said and gave Goofy a bruising tap on the back while he stared at Max.

Max focused on his beer as if his life depended on it.

“What’s going on?”

“Max has gotten himself a girl...” Goofy said in a silly sing-songey voice.

My eyebrows shot up. “You have?”

Max was still peeling the label off his bottle but then straightened. “She had an accident.”

I nodded. “So you met her through your EMT gig?”

He shook his head. “Milli had an accident up at the house. She has hurt her leg, and she’s all alone, so...”

“...Max is taking very good care of her...” Goofy pitched in, and Max shot daggers at him.

“She’s this tiny woman, scared of her own shadow, though kinda spunky, as well,” Peaches chimed in and earned another bruising look by Max.

“Why am I hearing this only now?” I looked at Max, waiting. It wasn’t like SOG had been a full-time gig until now. But I hadn’t realized just how caught up I’d been in my own drama these last few weeks.

“There’s not much to tell. I’m taking things slowly; she’s...different.”

There was a lot Max wasn’t saying. But then again, he’d always been a man of few words.

So...Max...Goofy... “Peaches, how about you?”

Goofy grinned and earned himself an elbow to the ribs after he mouthed “deputy sheriff” in my direction. So, all of my guys had a reason to stay around, other than the business. Weird.

EDITH



I woke up with a start, looked around, and immediately knew where I was—one of the barracks, up by the old mill.

Very little light entered through the cracks. It was getting late, and the sun had likely already set. But that meant I wasn't gone long.

Fuck.

My head throbbed like a herd of wild mustangs stampeded through it.

What had those assholes done? I was just about to get away...about to scream for help...

I tried to sit up, but dizziness swamped me, and I laid back down. I touched my head where it hurt the most. I felt a big bump on my forehead but no blood. Had he hit me with something from behind? But if he did, why was my head hurting up front? Did I take a fall?

I'd been in and out of consciousness for a while, had tried to stay awake but couldn't quite hold on.

What had happened to Luna?

Did they take her again or leave her at the Home? She looked hurt, out of it, like she needed medical attention.

Would that be my fate, as well?

Being drugged and injured?

I tried to remember what exactly Carter had said to me about coming up here. He'd told me it was dangerous. Carter...

Then I heard footsteps, and my heartbeat started racing until my chest hurt.

The door opened, and a cone of light shone into my face, rendering me blind to whoever had come inside.

CARTER



The door to the Oaktree opened, and in came Peter and Blake, followed by the guy I'd witnessed having a fight at Richard's place—Lucas.

Max next to me looked up, then a big grin transformed his face. "I'll be damned."

My eyes flew from Max back to Peter and Blake. Blake did a double-take, then he gave a heartfelt chuckle and stopped right in front of Max, who'd stumbled to his feet.

"If this isn't my favorite PJ in the whole world," Blake said.

They knew each other? How? Where? Well, since Blake and Peter had been Navy SEALs and Max had been a pararescue jumper, them serving together was a possibility. Though, what were the odds?

"Well, somebody gotta help you frogmen out," Max said.

They hugged and slapped each other on the back like old friends.

Peter came next. "I can't believe this." They shook hands, then hugged, both almost giggling like little girls.

"Motor," Max said to Lucas as he sidestepped Blake and Peter and bro-hugged him.

Then he took a step back, looked him down, and then rubbed his neck. "Shit."

He must've recognized the limp. Or he'd known all along.

The other two looked at the floor, the mood suddenly solemn. Then Blake cracked a joke and slapped Lucas, aka Motor, on the back. Lucas looked stiff as if he already regretted coming here.

I got up, moved my chair to the side, and carried a couple more from the next table to ours. “Come sit.”

Once they’d settled down, I didn’t need to ask how they knew each other since it was story time.

Apparently, Max had been part of Peter, Lucas, and Blake’s team, back when they were all on active duty.

Small world, indeed.

The door opened again, and Jeremy and George entered. My eyebrows shot up. “Who invited the DEA guys?”

Peter raised his hand. “I did. A couple more volunteers never hurt, right?”

I shrugged my shoulders. My plans for expansion hadn’t quite gone that far, but why not? This was a get-to-know-each-other after all—no commitments.

We shook hands with Jeremy and George when Peaches got an alert on his phone and jumped up. “Need to check on something. Got my laptop in the car. Be back in a sec.”

Max jumped up and ran after him.

That wasn’t unusual behavior for those two. Peaches was the brain of our operation, the very nerdy brain. Back when he was active duty, he worked on cyber networks’ defense. Now, he more often than not worked on the other side, creeping inside networks, finding incriminating evidence. Max was assisting him in sifting through relevant sites and forums and gaining information. If Peaches and Max were the brain, Goofy and I were the muscle, boots on the ground, in-person decoy, and acting as liaison to the local authorities. We had a small and effective team.

And were about to expand.

I thought about taking the rest of the chairs from the other table when Bert appeared.

“Looks like you’ve got quite the meeting. Why don’t you boys take the back room?”

The back room? I looked around. The bar wasn’t the greatest, but I hadn’t expected a back room. And for what was it used? Illegal gambling?

Peter got up and patted Bert on the back. “That’s a great idea. How’s Niki these days?”

Bert’s face softened. “She’s great. Working hard. And in between shifts, she’s helping out here.”

“Tell her I said hi,” Peter said.

“Will do.” Bert walked back to the bar, but instead of getting behind it, he opened a door right next to it and turned on the lights in the other room. “Gentlemen.”

We all gathered in the back room. It was big, with pool tables and dartboards on the wall and one big table. Maybe it wasn’t used for illegal activities but most likely gambling.

We settled down, George right beside me. “I talked to my parents, and they told me to make sure you’ll come to the memorial service.”

I looked at him. It was a bit unnerving. It had been years, but somehow I’d never forgotten Owen’s mannerisms. And George’s were unnervingly similar. “I’ll make sure to be there. How’s everything going?” I didn’t need to spell it out for him.

“I’m getting closer to the inner circle though I’m still only in the orbit, not in the center. Something out of the ordinary must’ve happened earlier today, though. It caused a lot of commotion, but I couldn’t find out what exactly it was. There’s also talk about an auction, but I don’t know what this is all about. I’m still very low on the totem pole—an arms dealer with the right connections and the ability to fly a heli. It’s slow-going.”

The fact that he’d told me even this much proved how much he trusted us. Being undercover couldn’t be easy. Keeping it separate and in balance with his normal life couldn’t be easy either.

I turned to Lucas who had caught a chair on the other side of the table. “I’m glad you could make it, Lucas.”

He took a sip from his water and looked at me with his clear blue eyes, waiting... assessing, incredibly still. I held his gaze. This was important, getting him to share our cause was important.

I’d seen warriors like him—medically retired, unable to do the job they still longed to do. I’d seen those who overcame it, who carried on, even thrived, and I’d seen some who didn’t.

Lucas wasn’t anywhere near thriving yet.

“I really hope you decide to work with us. We need all the help we can get.”

He nodded. I thought he’d need more time, would keep his distance, but instead, he got up and rounded the table. His limp was hardly recognizable. So, Max must’ve known somehow.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Lucas settled down on the chair George had just vacated.

It was a get-together, all right. Everybody mingled and got to know each other.

“Of course.”

“Why do you do what you do? Why this? What’s your motivation?” Lucas said, his eyes never leaving mine. It was unnerving. He must’ve been a damn good operator.

His was a hard question to answer. I’d told a million answers to that same question over the years. But he deserved the truth. “Two things happened. One, my sister was repeatedly molested and raped by our neighbor when we were kids. I didn’t know back then. But I should’ve known. Everybody should’ve known and done something.” I looked down, then shook my head. “She turned to drugs, to get over the things she’d experienced. And later she wouldn’t let me help her any other way besides giving her money—which she used for more drugs.”

Lucas stayed silent for a while, pondering my reason. “And the second thing?”

I exhaled sharply. “I knew a guy who turned out to be one of those perverts. He died, and I found things in his possession... I would’ve never believed that otherwise. Those sick assholes live right amongst us—predators, monsters. This needs to stop. So, I made it my business to stop them.”

I’d looked up to this guy, not only directly above me in the chain of command, but a decent guy, a family man. At least he’d appeared that way. Never would I have guessed he consumed child pornography, but when I’d seen it black on white, the truth had stared me in the face. And I couldn’t and wouldn’t look away.

Lucas looked at me, his clear blue eyes devoid of emotion. “Count me in.”

I nodded, and we shook hands.

“Carter, there’s something you need to see.” Peaches and Max had come back. Peaches was pale, his voice devoid of any emotion, which immediately put me on high alert.

He put his laptop down in front of me, with a video app opened, but he didn’t need to press play. The still frame of a disheveled, bleeding Edith froze the blood in my veins.

EDITH



Still blinded by the light, I felt a stroke on my face. I slapped the hand attached to the bodyless voice away

“Oh, Edith. What have you done to yourself?”

Don? Was this really Don-the-ex-asshole’s voice, or was I hallucinating? I tried to say something, but my mouth was drier than it ever had been, and my throat was sore. So, all I could manage was a groan, elicited from my move backward away from Don’s creepy hand and the sharp pain in my head caused from the movement.

“You’re finally up. You got a pretty nasty gash on your head.” He turned away to talk to someone behind him.

Not that I could see a damn thing with the light still in my eyes and my head throbbing.

“You shouldn’t have thrown her to the ground, Rolo.” He turned back to me, and the light slipped from my eyes to my forehead. It took a couple seconds, but then I could at least make out his face. “Imagine my surprise when Rolo called and told me he’d brought you up here. I just had to see for myself.” He chuckled, then shook his head. “Mr. Caroz will be delighted.”

Mr. Caroz? My company’s client? The one I showed the property to? Why would he be delighted? The sharp pain from moving backward earlier had turned into a dull pounding—manageable, but my brain still felt muddled. What wasn’t I

getting? Why was Don here, and what had it all to do with Mr. Caroz?

Don's phone rang, and when he took the call, his hand lowered the flashlight to the ground and I could finally see. Though there wasn't much to see. The door was still open, and there was a guy standing guard. Behind him, at the main building of the mill, there were some lights, but not enough to penetrate the darkness of the barrack.

"Hello, sir...I was just talking about you."

My eyes shot back to Don who listened to the guy on the other side of the phone call.

"She's right here, sir. Yes, of course." He pulled the phone from his ear, pushed a button, and shoved it into my face.

"He wants to talk to you." Then he aimed his damn flashlight back at my face.

"Edith. So glad to talk to you."

I blinked. Glad? He was glad? The older man in the video call was dressed in white, puffing on a cigar. He looked like a cliché South-American gangster. Even the white hat was spot-on. But he was obviously the top dog around here, so I'd better play nice. "Hmm."

"You're a hard woman to catch."

To catch? I didn't even know he wanted anything from me. Let alone catch me. "I'm sorry, I didn't know you needed something from me."

He chuckled. He didn't have a beard or he would probably have drilled the ends like a cartoon gangster. "Oh, I need something all right. I've watched you over the years. Waited."

My eyebrows shot up. He'd watched me? Goose bumps ran up and down my spine. Why would he watch me?

"I met you a while ago when Don and you got married. Isn't that right, Don?"

"Yes, that's right, sir."

I sneered at Don. Fucker.

“You were an extraordinary young lady, even back then. See, Donovan has told me so much about you before you got married. And then, when I met you, you were so charming.”

I couldn't for the life of me remember ever meeting this guy. Must've been during our honeymoon since that really was the only truly happy time I'd shared with Don.

“Ahem, thank you?”

“See, I kept tabs on you over the years. My wife died last year.”

I schooled my features even though I wasn't sure if he could even see my face. But what the hell. He'd kept tabs on me? And the way he said it, as if it was a normal thing to do, even though it was the farthest thing from normal. And what had his wife to do with anything? My whole body was hurting. I'd been brought up here, for what? A polite video call? Fuck that. But even though I wanted nothing more than to quit that farce and go home, my instincts screamed at me to just go with it—just don't piss him off. “I'm very sorry to hear that.”

He nodded. “But I'm ready for something new, and I just knew you were the one.”

My chest tightened and my breathing accelerated. Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

“I set up our meeting so you could get to know me. Though you weren't very...forthcoming.”

No, I wasn't. Shit.

“But it didn't matter at the time because I'd set everything up so our paths would cross again and again. I requested your representation of the acquisition of the property you're currently residing on.”

Could he speak any more pompous? But wait, the property? This property? The one I'd lost my job over? The one Carter bought right from under my nose? I was representing him? Nobody ever told me that. Nobody ever told me I'd been requested for that particular job? And if he requested me for that, was he the one responsible for me being let go, as well?

“I’m very sorry this didn’t work out either, and that I had to take more...drastic measures.”

I swallowed. More drastic. Like me losing my job. Or wait, the picture of Mr. Caroz latching onto my hand in front of my burning apartment building lashed into my head. “My apartment building?”

“I thought those steps would weaken your position enough...”

Weaken her enough for what? For her to cling to a stranger and beg to be rescued?

“...For you to be open for what I could give you, for all the possibilities a relationship with me entails. But it didn’t quite work out that way. Instead, you threw yourself at that playboy and went on as if nothing could throw you off your path. It saddened me.”

What the fuck? I’d clung to Carter, and he’d swooped me up and rescued me. Not unlike what Mr. Caroz apparently had wanted to do. But why? “Why? I don’t understand...”

The older man shrugged, took a puff from his cigar, and released the smoke slowly. “I want what I want, and I always get what I want. Plus, I like the chase. Especially if the mouse doesn’t know it’s being chased. Only you didn’t play right. You ignored me at the hotel in Jamaica—every hardship I’d thrown at you, you just took in stride and hunkered down with that playboy.” He shook his head. “I didn’t like that.”

Fuck. My chances of getting out of here had suddenly evaporated.

“And now?”

He smiled.

Shivers ran down my spine.

“Now, I’ve caught you. And you’ll come visit me. See for yourself how life with me would be like. I’m sure you will love being treated like a queen.”

Nope. Not going to happen. “I’m very honored by your kind offer, but I must decline. I have responsibilities here, my

family to think of.”

“I can take care of your family.”

That sounded ominous. Was he threatening them? Would he harm them if I didn't agree to go with his plans? Did I even have a choice?

“I'd say, you'll see for yourself what I'm prepared to offer before you make up your mind. See if you can learn to like your new life, and I will arrange for your travel in the morning.”

Oh shit. I was doomed.

CARTER



Just as Peaches was about to press play on the video on his laptop, Richard stormed into the back room. “Carter.”

I looked up into his eyes. He knew.

All my senses screamed to get up and go go go. But Max’s hand on my shoulder pushed me back down.

I inhaled sharply, once, twice; I could feel the pounding of my blood in my veins, could feel adrenaline shooting through my body, but at least the white haze that had clouded my vision just a moment ago subsided. *Deep breaths.*

“Edith has gone missing. Right in front of the shelter.” Richard sat down beside me. “They found the girl that went missing twelve days ago. She’s in the hospital, too drugged up to be of any help. The women at the shelter heard a scream, but they didn’t see what happened.”

I looked down at my fists, then up again. I turned the screen, so Richard could watch, too, then pressed play.

I wasn’t prepared to watch whatever it was that I would see and hear, not with Edith in harm’s way. But it didn’t matter. My feelings didn’t matter. When a thumb with a tattoo in the shape of an arrow came into view, I ground my teeth and squeezed my fists even tighter. Edith’s ex was holding the phone.

When the video finished, Richard looked at me. “How did you get that?”

Peaches cleared his throat. “I might’ve hacked into a couple of phones, just as an exploratory measure. When one of those made contact with a flagged number, I decided to see what’s happening.”

Richard looked at me and shook his head. This wasn’t legal, and it wouldn’t hold up in court. But I didn’t care.

“It’s common knowledge among his guys how Sormiza Senior is obsessed with this one particular woman. I’ve never met him, and I didn’t know that woman was Edith,” George said. “Guess that’s what had them all buzzing with excitement this afternoon.”

“Now we know,” Lucas said, and I turned around. All the guys were gathered behind us and had watched the video in silence.

“She’s up at the old mill, isn’t she?” Peter said.

Richard nodded. “Most likely. We haven’t had time to check the place out after Edith told us about it yesterday.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Well, no time like the present. Anyone know the place?”

Peter was way ahead of me. He pushed a sheet of paper in front of me, where he drew a rough blueprint of the compound while Peaches drew up an aerial map on his laptop.

“There’s one road up the hill, ending at the clearing. The old mill is in the middle of the compound, barracks to the west of the building toward the tree line. It’s forest and mountainous terrain from there to the west and south. The only way up or down is the road or to the east through yet more trees down the hill and farmland from there.”

“Who owns the place?” Jeremy asked.

Peter shrugged, and I groaned. “I do.”

They all looked at me as if I’d grown a third eye. “I bought the property a couple days ago.”

“Well then.” Richard patted my back.

I got up and turned around. “Let’s block the road, spread out, and flank those bastards.” I looked at the group of men around me—all hardened warriors, ready for battle. “Come on, guys, I don’t need a couple yes-men. Let’s come up with a plan.”

There was a brief discussion. The guys organized themselves into small teams, and within five minutes, we were crammed into two trucks. Once on the backseat of Max’s truck, I could feel Richard’s eyes on me through the rearview mirror. “So, you hack into people’s phones now?”

Jeremy beside me chuckled.

“Not often. But the opportunity presented itself. Peaches did it while they repaired Edith’s phone. From her number, they sent her ex a message with a link to the story of the burning apartment building, but once he clicked on that link, it installed a nifty little malware that gained us access to his phone. Simple as that.”

Richard nodded. He probably didn’t want to hear anything else. “Did you tell Edith?”

I hadn’t let myself think about Edith for the last hour, but as soon as Richard asked, a renewed sense of urgency thrummed through me.

I’d been a fucking coward earlier. I shouldn’t have let her go. I should’ve told her what I truly wanted—about my plans, about how she perfectly fit into my plans, about how I wanted us to try.

I should’ve told her I loved her which was so obvious now that I thought of it: my reaction to her getting herself into harm’s way; those overprotective feelings; the force and dominance I exerted when making love to her. I’d never let myself lose control with a woman before. Never trusted one enough to let my control slip. I’d never felt this way before.

And what did I, dumbass do?

I let her leave, thinking it was just sex between us. I groaned and rubbed my neck.

I'd stayed silent. Like a wuss. I'd doubted my feelings, and I'd doubted us.

Would it be too late now?

They could already be on their way to some airport, flying her to God-knows-where.

I took a deep breath to settle my nerves. I couldn't think that way. Couldn't even entertain the thought.

Chances were slim they were already on the road. They didn't know we were onto them. Didn't know we were coming. Didn't know we knew exactly where they were holing up and what they were planning.

Thank God.

Richard's eyes were still focused on me. I met his gaze in the rearview mirror. "I'm in love with her and will ask her to marry me as soon as I get the opportunity."

There was an audible gasp coming from Max and Goofy... shit. Now if Edith wouldn't have me, I'd forever be the laughingstock of my team. The boys and I, we usually didn't do feelings, and by the way Jeremy avoided looking in my direction, I'd say he would fit right in. Would they see me as weak from now on? Only Richard was still looking at me through that damn mirror. Then he nodded once.

Enough said.

Only Edith would have a say in this.

I could see the Little Women's Home ahead. It was lit like a Christmas tree. They were probably scared shitless with all that had happened.

But right before we took a left turn and hit the gravel road up the mountain and the rough terrain shook the vehicles, I was transferred back to the many times we'd rolled out back in Iraq, stuffed into a vehicle, not knowing what awaited us once on target but anticipating the worst and ready for battle.

EDITH



Don ended the call. And I knew he was my only chance. I wasn't a fighter. I wouldn't make it two days.

But we'd been married once. We'd once had feelings for each other.

"Please, Don, don't let him take me."

Don hesitated, then stood up and shoved the phone into his pocket. "It's not that bad. He's a nice guy."

He looked at me, and I thought his eyes conveyed the sorrow he felt for me though I could've been mistaken since the only source of light was the flashlight in his hand.

"Please, Don. Please, don't do it."

He shook his head, turned around, then tapped the guy who stood guard at the door on the shoulder. "Let's go."

My heartbeat raced, and my hands and feet started shaking uncontrollably. How I'd kept calm for as long as I had, I didn't know.

But this was it—my last chance. And I was not above begging. Whatever it took, I would do it.

My life would be over once they'd gotten me out of here, the chances to escape slim to none. Not that I would ever stop fighting. My mind went back to Luna, drugged up and not even able to stand upright on her own, bruised and broken.

"Please, Don." I got up though the pounding of my head got worse, and my voice trembled along with my body.

The other guy took a couple of steps, then waited. Don closed the door with a definite click, then fiddled loudly with the lock. The click when it locked was deafening, and I suppressed a cry.

This was it. I would stay here in the darkness until they brought me somewhere else. Nobody knew where I was. Nobody knew what had happened. Oh boy, I'd been thinking I'd been so smart. I'd thought I was strong and independent and in control. How could I've been so wrong? How could these things I'd believed to be true about my life have been so wrong? Every major thing that had happened, like my job, and the property, and the fire in my apartment, had been secretly influenced by forces I knew nothing about. Now, who was the stupid one? I'd made myself miserable in the name of independence, led a life where I believed I wanted only to be in control. And I left Carter because I thought it was the thing I wanted.

And all for nothing.

I tried the door one last time, then sunk back into a corner. My life was over. And the worst thing? Carter would never know. He would never know how much I loved him.

Suddenly, I heard movement outside my barrack. Someone sneaked around the side. An animal? There was a distinct click, then the door opened.

Just a crack.

Whoever opened the door had given me a chance.

I listened for steps, voices, anything. "Come on, let's go. We gotta hurry."

A woman? Was that a woman's voice? I waited, counted the seconds in my head. Then I stood up. For a moment, I got dizzy, had to lean against the wall until my head cleared enough to walk a couple of steps.

Whoever she was, she'd given me an out. And I would sure as hell take that chance. I needed to move.

Now.

I recalled my visit just a day earlier. The forest was right behind the barracks—just a couple of yards. I could totally make it there, then slowly make my way down the hill. I'd done it before.

I stopped breathing and listened: no sounds other than nature all around. Was she waiting outside?

I stepped up to the door and laid my hand on it.

I would only have one chance. Once I pushed it open enough to step out, I needed to run around the barrack into the woods—no hesitation, no stumbling. I took a deep breath, a second. I envisioned the way. Envisioned how it had looked yesterday.

I pushed on the door—measured, not too much force, then stepped out into the grass.

No shoes.

I was barefoot. Where were my shoes?

My gaze darted back into the barrack. In there?

Should I go back and look? I squeezed my eyes shut for a millisecond, tried to quench my sawing breath, tried to make the right decision.

Shit. I slowly closed the door behind me, then took the first step away, then another. I rounded the barrack—no movement at the main building. Once on the backside, there she was. “Belinda? How?”

She shushed me, then dashed toward the trees. I took one deep breath, then I ran.

I reached the tree line in a matter of seconds, but I didn't slow down. Under the canopy, it was even darker, just pitch black, hidden from the moonlight. I stumbled over a root and face-dived into the dirt.

Shit. My toes.

No time.

When I put weight on my left hand to rise up, I felt something sharp bore itself into my hand and just barely

suppressed the cry.

No time.

Belinda helped me up. My hand throbbed, my bare feet hurt, but I didn't care. Belinda was there, holding her finger against her lips. We slowed down from a sprint to a fast jog, but not too much. We needed to put as much space between them and us as fast as possible. When I heard a commotion behind us, I hunkered down behind a big tree trunk, hoping she was doing the same. My breath was sawing in and out of me.

What was happening?

I waited, the sound of my heartbeat thrashing in my ears. Shit, they'd probably found out I was missing. I couldn't slow down now. Surely, they would come searching for me. I needed to go.

Now.

My hand and feet were slowly going numb, and adrenaline was shooting through my body.

I wiped over my eyes and forehead. I'd hoped the bright spots clouding my vision were caused by sweat. Nope. Not sweat. Stupid throbbing head.

No time.

I couldn't hear Belinda anymore. Did she not stop? The moonlight filtering through the canopy was too little to see more than the outlines of the next couple trees. I stopped, listened, but I didn't hear her. And I sure as hell wouldn't call. I inched forward, slower still, down to a tiptoe, but at least I was still moving. I walked, still slightly uphill, away from the compound.

I could hear muffled shouting behind me, even more distant by now. I was far enough away to make the turn to the right. I hoped Belinda was somewhere around.

Downhill from here.

One step after the other.

I stumbled again, this time landing on my knees. But I didn't even feel the pain. Didn't have time.

Walking on. One measured step after the other.

For a moment I froze. A shudder ran down my spine—a feeling as if I had eyes on me, as if someone was watching me. I stopped breathing. Listened.

But there was nothing. No twigs breaking, no sound except nature around me. And thinking about whatever was around me caused another shudder. I didn't like wildlife...or nature, especially not in the dark.

I walked on. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and with the slower pace, I could even get my breathing under control.

Until something brushed against me from behind and stole my breath away.

CARTER



We stopped on the road before we reached the compound, then we dismounted. We needed a better plan than to barge in and create chaos.

“What’s the plan?” Goofy looked from me to Richard, unsure of who was in command. As if that was really relevant.

“Richard?” I said.

Richard nodded at me. “I’d say we need to get eyes on the situation first, so why don’t we split up into two teams? Flank the road, patrol by foot, see what’s happening up there.”

“Incoming,” Blake shouted. We all scrambled to get our things out of the trucks and disappeared into the trees. We didn’t expect anyone coming up the hill behind us. What an error in judgment. Now, our two vehicles prominently blocked the road, and we’d just lost the element of surprise.

Shit.

The car that was driving up screeched to a halt just before it hit the rear truck. Two men got out, went around our trucks, then stood between our rear truck and theirs, and the smaller, stockier one took out his phone.

Now was the time to act.

I nodded at Richard who nodded back.

Peter and Blake moved right alongside us and took care of the taller one, while Richard and I took down the one with the phone.

Smooth. As if all those years after we worked together hadn't happened.

They both went down without so much as a yelp.

I grabbed the phone and ended the call, leaving whoever had been on the other side clueless as to what had just happened.

“Okay, guys, let's step it up; time is of the essence here. Lucas, Peter, block the road and hold the line. Nobody in or out. Roger?” I took charge even though this was Richard's turf. But it was my woman in danger.

“Roger that,” Peter said.

For a second, I doubted my decision to have Lucas stay behind. But I wasn't yet sure what he could or couldn't do with his leg, and making headway up the hill, in the dark, in heavily wooded terrain, would be hard enough on two legs.

I looked over the group. Everyone looked determined, which caused an almost-smile. I loved working as a team, loved the feeling of being part of a group with the same goal. “Let's haul our asses up there and assess the situation. Go. Go. Go.”

When we reached the compound, we split up into two-man teams, with one team covering the road on each side, one on the west side, and one covering the east side. We'd be in a half-circle around the compound, controlling all exit routes. “Hang back toward the road, but be prepared to catch any squirts coming your way.”

All nodded.

“You're staying with me,” Richard said, his tone not leaving an inch to argue.

But I didn't care; I wouldn't stay back when, according to Peter's drawn map of the compound, Edith would most likely be held in one of the barracks to the west. “Blake can stay with you, and I'll cover the west side with Max.”

Jeremy, George, Peaches, and Goofy crossed the road in a silent and measured sprint to get into position to better cover

the east side.

Max and Blake hung back, their gazes jumping from Richard to me, like they were watching a ping-pong match, silently waiting for the final word.

Well, it would be me having the last word. This was my woman in danger. My responsibility, so I wouldn't hold back. No way, no how.

Richard leveled me with one long look. "You gotta detach."

That was all he said, and I shut my mouth and fell in line. He was right. For one, it was his turf, his command. And two, he was fucking right. For a moment there, I'd lost my head. Losing your head led to mistakes, and mistakes got people killed.

I looked down at my shoes, took a deep breath to the count of five, held it while counting to five, released it to five, held it, and so on. Every instinct inside me yelled to rush. But I pushed them down. Deep down. Coolness spread through my body, and along with my combat-breathing, my insides resembled that of a halfway functioning soldier again.

Richard had been right. I'd been a mess where I needed to have my feelings and emotions under control. Right the fuck now.

I couldn't afford to have anything cloud my judgment, not when Edith's safety depended on it. When our future depended on it. I needed to trust—trust that the boys knew what they were doing. Trust that everything would work out just fine. Trust that it would be fine. "Roger that."

Max and Blake took off, and it took only a few seconds before the forest swallowed all the noise.

Once in position, Richard and I ducked down right by the tree line.

The compound was dark except for the lights in and around the main building. Two cars were parked there.

“Let’s get the lay of the land,” Richard said, and I agreed through gritted teeth. As much as I wanted to go in there, guns blazing, it wouldn’t be a smart move. We had no idea how many men were in there, and we had no chance of knowing if Edith wasn’t being held in the main building with them.

Ten minutes stretched into forever. Ten minutes without movement. Then two men came out. They were too far away to see their faces, but they jumped into a truck and revved the engine.

Richard grabbed his radio from his belt. “Peter, you’re getting company. Two guys, one vehicle.”

I didn’t let the truck out of my sight when it breezed by. “They will need reinforcement.”

Richard nodded.

Right this moment, Max announced his approach. “She was being held in one of the barracks. We think she escaped. Blake is following her tracks.” He held up a single shoe. Edith’s shoe. My jaw clenched. She’d been here, after all.

But where was she now? “Where?”

He pointed in a general direction.

“Take my position,” I said to Max and took off in an all-out run. Richard could chew my ass later for going against his orders.

I didn’t care. All I cared about was to find her, to make sure she was okay. And then, I needed to tell her that she was the one for me and I was the one for her. And how I wouldn’t let her go ever again. Only I needed to find her first.

EDITH



I needed to fight.

Instead, I froze.

Until whatever had brushed against me was gone.

Only my skin didn't stop crawling. This was too much. I wasn't some kind of outdoor aficionado. No hunting, or fishing, or camping for me. Ever.

I liked pretty shoes. I liked beds with soft sheets. Not this.

Never this.

That thought still reverberated through my brain while my body tensed. I felt a shift in the air. A noise, maybe a movement, too far to be seen but near enough, it was freaking me out.

They'd found out I was missing.

They'd found out, and now they were searching for me.

My eyes frantically searched the dark for something, anything...and I suppressed my sigh when I found it. A dark patch. Impenetrable. I took a few measured steps until I could hide between the big knobby roots of a huge tree. Measured because I was suddenly aware of my surroundings. Wind brushing against me. Was that a voice?

I didn't care. I made myself as small as possible...as invisible as possible.

I would not be found. I could not be found.

I became still. Everything inside me stilled. This was important.

This was my life.

I could feel someone near. But I didn't look. Something slithered by my left foot. A snake?

My heartbeat thundered away. Here I was, on the brink of dying of a heart attack. Now wouldn't that make for a headline...Edith Cleaver, found years after she went missing, died of a heart attack because she couldn't survive the wild.

Bullshit. I gritted my teeth. I would survive anything. Anything.

I listened to the steps behind me—so silent I would've missed them if I was still standing.

But I wouldn't be found. I willed myself to become one with the tree.

The steps got pretty close, close enough that I held my breath before they veered away again, circling outward...away from me.

CARTER



It took endless minutes until I found where Edith and Blake had entered the forest. Reading tracks wasn't my strong suit. Never had been. But once I locked in, I followed them, never let them out of the cone of light of my flashlight. I stumbled on.

Would she be okay? Just thinking about how she looked on that screen, how surprised and scared, she probably hadn't known she was being watched. Manipulated.

She wouldn't like that one bit.

I didn't like that one bit.

I heard footsteps, then Blake suddenly stood in front of me and scared the shit out of me.

"Boy, you need your situational awareness adjusted," he said with a grin.

Oh, didn't I know that? How come I was so caught up in my head? Usually, it wasn't hard for me to detach, to isolate my thoughts from my feelings, to keep my emotions in check. But ever since Edith had stepped into my life, all of that went awry. "You need your people skills adjusted."

"I've lost her tracks," Blake said through gritted teeth.

"Let's go," I said.

He turned around, and I followed him. Peter and Blake, ex-Navy SEALs—Richard had vouched for them, and they hadn't

hesitated one second when we mobilized. They were in the fight. Good men. They would push SOG to be better. Push me.

We went on, deeper into the forest, not straight, but more in a zigzag line away from the compound. Did Edith do that on purpose—most likely not. She wouldn't know to do that, wouldn't know any tactics of survival in wooden terrain or otherwise. Shit.

“She took a fall here.”

I hunkered down. There was a drop of blood on a stone. “Blood.” I sighed and closed my eyes for a second. My throat thickened. She was bleeding. Edith was hurt and frightened and out of her element.

I needed to find her.

With a renewed sense of urgency, I crowded Blake until he picked up speed, then he suddenly stopped. “This is it.”

“Where you lost her tracks?”

“Yep, she stopped here, but then...”

I looked around. What had triggered her stop? What would she have seen? Where would she go from here? The cone of light from my flashlight fell on a tangle of gigantic roots. It would be a hiding place. Maybe something had spooked her.

I took a couple of steps, and sure enough, there she'd been, hunkering down on the forest floor. But not anymore.

Blake joined me, then we searched the perimeter.

“Here,” he said.

I followed him again. It took us only a couple of minutes, until we stopped. We could both hear her, stumbling, breathing hard, but alive.

Edith.

EDITH



Someone was behind me.

I could feel it, and it was too late for me to hide.

I was at a disadvantage, being caught from behind, but I wouldn't go down fighting.

Whoever or whatever was behind me would be sorry.

I didn't know if it was an animal or one of those bad guys. But it didn't matter. My heartbeat thrashed in my ears, and I squeezed my fists before I spun around and laid all my weight into my fist, hitting whoever was behind me.

It hurt, but it evoked an "oof" by my opponent; only he didn't go down like I'd hoped. Hitting him didn't even get him off me. Instead, his arms came around me...and I panicked.

I wiggled and slithered and started to kick. My hands turned to claws scratching the face above me. No way was I losing this. No way was I giving up. I kicked him in the nuts, and his grunt was music to my ears.

He went limp for a second, then brought me down with his body above mine, which wasn't so great.

He caught my arms with his big hands and pushed them up next to my head.

Next, he straddled me and rendered my feet ineffective. "Calm down, love, everything is fine. You're safe."

My body went limp like a deflating balloon and I blinked, then blinked again. My brain slowly caught up with my body.

No accent. Big, muscular, voice that had followed me into my dreams.

No animal, no bad guy. Carter.

I yelped, eager to get some oxygen back into my lungs.

Carter must have realized I couldn't breathe. He got up and pulled me with him, but when he let go of me, I realized just how weak my knees were, and just before I went down again, he propped me up by my arms.

"It's me, love. Are you okay?"

I couldn't see jack shit, but inhaling his scent was enough to calm my nervous system down. "Why...how?" My voice cracked, and still I heaved for oxygen.

A guy next to Carter chuckled. "Well, your man would move Heaven and Earth for you, that's for sure."

He would?

"Let's go back, okay?" Carter sounded breathless. Tortured.

I nodded. My brain was so muddled. Not that I'd have found the way on my own anyhow.

"Was that a yes?" He let go of me, and the light from a flashlight hit my face and rendered me blind. I could hear a sharp inhale.

"Yes."

Another light pointed in a direction I was almost headed.

Almost.

I would've wandered through these woods all night long. I was shit at survival.

"Are you okay?"

Carter's voice sounded more like his own now. Caring... worried. I wanted to reassure him, wanted to, but when he touched my cheek, the release of tension made my legs weak, and I went down.

“No.” My voice sounded broken and high-pitched at the same time. Weak. Too weak to be heard. But I didn’t care. I was done pretending to be strong. The only thing I wanted was to be safe in Carter’s arms. I’d almost lost that chance, almost lost telling him that I loved him and that I wanted to make the most out of it. And if I got hurt again...well, I would survive.

Being without him...trying to live without him, would hurt. Pretending to need no one and being happier alone, hurt. Though he still didn’t know all that.

Carter squatted down next to me. “Edith?”

CARTER



When she went down, my heart went with her.

She sat there, dirty, her eyes swollen, caused by the gash on her forehead. And my heartbeat took a stumble, then raced. I scrambled until I hunkered down in front of her. “Edith?”

She looked at me, tears spilling down over her cheeks.

“Oh, love.”

That only made her cry harder. Looking at her, seeing her in pain, made one thing crystal clear to me.

She was the one I wanted. The one for me. Whatever would happen between us, whatever life would throw at us, she was mine.

And I needed to tell her that. But first I needed to make sure she was physically okay.

“Carter?”

“Yes, love.” The look in her eyes nearly killed me. “Can you get up?”

If she couldn’t it would be fine. I would carry her, no big deal.

“Carter?”

“Yes, love?”

“I’m sorry for being a stubborn coward.”

I shook my head. “Look at you. You’re not a coward.” I helped her up and kissed her on the nose. We needed to have a talk, needed to hash things out. I needed to tell her how much I loved her. But now...with her hurt...all I wanted to do was get her to the hospital and hear that she was okay. “We’ve got time for talking later; let’s take care of you first.”

That’s when I heard Blake groan and mumble something that sounded like “stupid dumbass” under his breath.

EDITH



I felt lightheaded.

“Carter?”

“Yes, love?”

“I’m sorry for being a stubborn coward.”

“Look at you. You’re not a coward.”

He held me up, but the muscles in my legs felt like jelly. No way was I going anywhere on my own.

He kissed me on the nose. “We’ve got time for talking later; let’s take care of you first.”

Blake groaned when Carter kissed me on the lips—just a sweet innocent kiss, but it was enough to turn me upside down, and even though I wanted to talk right now, he was probably right. Yes, I loved him, and I needed to tell him, but there was time for that later.

I nodded. Probably, if I opened my mouth now, I would start crying in earnest, and once I started, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

Carter took my hand—luckily the good one—in his and urged me to follow him.

I took one step, hissed, and he stopped at once. “What’s wrong?”

He shone his flashlight down on my bare feet and swore, then he took the light slowly up over my banged-up knees and

farther up my body. He grasped my right hand, raised it, and looked at my scraped elbow; when he took the left arm, I flinched. He examined the hand, and for the first time, I could see something sticking out of it. So that was why it hurt like hell.

“Where else are you hurt?” His voice was cold, matter-of-fact, but when I didn’t answer, he brushed his hand over my cheek, then he took a step closer until his forehead touched mine. Just barely. “Where else do you hurt, my love?”

My muscles went liquid. “My head.”

“Where?”

I took his hand, his forehead still against mine, and guided it to the bump.

“Jesus.”

It hurt like a bitch, but somehow his featherlight touches didn’t make it worse. He kissed me on the nose, then took a step back, and I immediately missed his warmth. His touch. I needed his arms around me, needed him close, needed him to hold me and keep me safe.

But he didn’t know all that. The last thing I told him was how we should go our separate ways.

I nearly scoffed at my own stupidity. What was I thinking, letting him go so easily? Why had I been so sure we wouldn’t work out? So sure that I would get hurt? Granted, those were all real possibilities. But being too afraid to potentially try? Major chicken move, and I was done f’ing around.

“And my heart.”

Carter was about to hand his flashlight to Blake but brought the cone of light back to my face in a sharp motion. “Your heart?”

“My heart hurts because I love you.”

“Hallelujah,” Blake said as if he couldn’t believe how dumb we behaved.

“What?”

“I love you. I should’ve told you in your room, but I got scared. I want us to try. Anything. A couple of days, the rest of our lives... I’m down for whatever.”

“You’re down for whatever?” He chuckled and I couldn’t read his facial expression, what with being blinded by the light. Did he not want to anymore? Well, tough luck. I shrugged, then nodded. Both moves hurt.

Whatever. If he didn’t want me, he at least had to spell it out and tell me to my face.

“Oh, Edith.” He shook his head, brushed his hand against my cheek, and pulled me close with the hand holding the flashlight. It was dark now, but I felt his heart beating against mine and his breath on my face.

“I love you, Edith...and I want all of it. Love, life. All of it...with you.”

He smiled—I could feel his smile when his lips brushed against mine—once, twice. “I love you. And I’ll never let you go. Never.”

I kissed him back. “Never” sounded damn good to me.

He handed the flashlight to Blake, then bent down in front of me and pulled me over his shoulders.

Just like that.

“I got you, love. Try to relax. It’s only a couple of minutes.”

And with that, we were off. Once again, he was caring for me. Rescuing me. Protecting me.

Keeping me safe.

CARTER



I carried her through the wood, with Blake leading the way. How we'd found her here was a miracle, a miracle I'd take every day over any other alternative.

She was severely hurt, hurt but still standing.

I was so proud of her. My warrior queen. My love.

It took us maybe ten minutes to get back to the others. Ten minutes where her words reverberated through my brain. I searched for the panic, searched for the unease that usually came with giving up control, with embarking on something as scary as a relationship, committing to a future with Edith. There was none.

When we stepped out on the clearing, it appeared as if the others had brought the situation under control. All the cars were lined up plus a few more. The compound was lit. Our guys had taken over the compound and had rounded up four guys, including Edith's ex, who was in zip-ties in the back seat of a sheriff's truck.

I searched and found Max standing with George and Jeremy, who were instructing a group in blue DEA-jackets, probably to search the area. "Max, check her out. She's got bruises and abrasions on her extremities, a head-wound, and an object sticking out her right palm."

Blake helped me carefully slide Edith off my shoulders. She'd been quiet. But the feeling of her breathing against me was enough to keep me calm.

“Hey, girl, had a run-in with a bear?” Max said while he systematically checked on her.

“Well,” Blake said, then chuckled, “she’s a lot stronger than she looks, and she fights dirty...let’s leave it at that.” He winked at Edith, and her beautiful lips turned into a lopsided grin.

My anxiety about that head wound spiked. Anything lopsided wasn’t good. Not good at all.

It took a couple of minutes before Max finished up and I took her back into my arms.

“Peter, can you call an ambulance?” Max shouted across the compound.

“Already on the way,” Peter shouted back.

Then Max turned back to us. “Even though I don’t believe it’s more than a concussion, you need to get it checked out, and you need to get that thing in your palm surgically removed and those scrapes taken care off.”

He caressed Edith’s cheek, and she nodded. “You’re one hell of a fighter.”

That made Edith smile and lean more solidly against me. “Thank you.”

He nodded, then made space for Richard, who stepped up to us.

“Tough evening?”

Edith nodded.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“Can’t that wait until tomorrow?” I said, pressing her firmly against me. No way would I stand by and have her endure more than absolutely necessary.

Richard nodded, but Edith took a step forward and grabbed his arm before he could turn away. “Wait. I’m fine. We can talk.” She turned to me and leveled me with a look until I raised a hand in defeat. That’s what I got for falling in love with a strong woman—no controlling her.

“They brought back Luna, and one of them recognized me, and then they took me.”

“Recognized you?”

She nodded but stopped because it probably hurt her head. I took a step and pressed her against my side, just to make sure she didn't overdo it.

“I didn't understand why, but it became clear later. See, there's this man, a former client. I really didn't know.”

“Didn't know what?”

“Didn't know that he'd been keeping tabs on me for years.”

Richard nodded.

“He wanted me to come visit him in South America.”

“Visit?”

She shrugged. “Well, he decided he wanted me there, with or without my consent.”

“Does this gentleman have a name?”

“Mr. Caroz. That's his name.”

Richard's eyebrows shot up when she mentioned his name, and my stomach tensed. I was lacking some vital information. We got the face but could never identify the guy. “What?”

Richard searched the compound, and once he found who he was looking for, shouted, “Mulberry!”

Jeremy removed himself from the group he was talking to and walked toward us. “Richard, Carter, Edith.”

“Edith just told me who's behind this operation. There's a former client of hers who demanded her company.”

Jeremy looked to Edith, then back to Richard. “And...”

“And, his name is Mr. Caroz.”

“Hmm,” Jeremy said without giving me any clue as to why that name was so important. And if it was so important, then

why didn't I know about it? "Mr. Caroz is actually a DEA-cover."

"A cover...for whom?"

"Diego Sormiza."

I inhaled sharply. The elusive head of the Sormiza Cartel? Holy shit.

I could feel Edith's eyes on me and held her tighter. "Why don't I know about this?" I had to ask even though I knew the answer since I'd been in this business long enough. Rarely did law enforcement share any vital information with PIs. It was mostly a one-way street. Not that it mattered. We got our own intel which we shared with the authorities, so they could act on it. That was the deal.

Jeremy rubbed the back of his neck. He was probably evaluating how much he was willing to tell. "A decade ago, he was an informant under the name of Diego Caroz. That was before he began his rise to the top of the bad crop."

I nodded. Now I knew. And now we had definitive proof that indeed the Sormiza Cartel was behind all of this.

"This will be a battle; we got enemies behind our lines," Jeremy said.

Richard and I nodded. It would be a battle but one I intended to win. Since Three Oaks would be my new home, I wanted it and subsequently the whole area cartel-free. I looked down at Edith. Her eyes were nearly swollen shut. Did they hit her? So many things I had yet to find out.

But there was time. The ambulance arrived, and I led her there. My eyes met Peaches' and Max's who'd been hovering nearby, never letting Edith out of their sight.

Good men.

I let the EMTs help Edith onto the stretcher. But before they could push her into the ambulance, Belinda stepped up to her.

"Thank you," Edith said, but Belinda just shook her head and motioned her to be quiet, then leaned down and whispered

something in her ear.

What was that all about? I surveyed the compound once more. It was the perfect place for our future business headquarters. Of course, I needed to make sure if Edith would be okay with that, too. Belinda stepped back, and I followed Edith into the ambulance and took her hand.

Her small smile caused a flutter in my stomach. I loved this woman, and she loved me. Everything else would take care of itself.

EDITH



“Good morning, love.”

Carter kissed me on the nose, then my forehead where the gash was already beginning to heal, then my hand, right on the butterfly bandages where a small branch had impaled my palm, luckily without damaging any nerves. Only then did he hand me a cup of coffee, and all I could do was grin.

It had been a week from heaven. Lucky for me I didn't even have to stay overnight at the hospital so, I got to go to bed and wake up next to my gorgeous man every day.

He'd been even more protective of me than before, but I never had the feeling he wanted to control me. And not once did I feel threatened or suffocated. I felt free. Free to be vulnerable, free to express all my feelings...free to be...me. I took my first sip and ogled him over the edge of the cup, and heat radiated through my chest.

His blue jeans were riding low on his hips, and I loved watching his naked torso, the way he moved through Dorothy's apartment, so sure of himself, so...alpha.

Sexy.

His hair was wet, so he'd probably just had a shower. Carter, naked...water running down his muscular legs...my nipples hardened just thinking about it.

“Hey, there's something I want to show you before we attend Owen Bryce's memorial service. You down for that?”

I loved how he always asked, never assumed. The only time he stopped asking was when we had sex. But he didn't need to ask then. Somehow, he knew my body better than I knew it myself. He anticipated my reactions before they even happened. And boy, did he know what my body liked. Just last night... I pressed my legs together to quench the throbbing the memory elicited.

He turned around and caught me eyeing him up, probably saw right through me.

His lips split into a naughty grin, and he approached the bed like a jaguar on the hunt.

Once he reached the bed, he sat down beside me, took the cup from my hands, and put it on the nightstand. Then he leaned over me, his hands on both sides, rendering me unable to move. He teased me with his lips until I opened mine. Our tongues danced, and the throbbing between my legs increased. Oh, how I loved this man.

His hand delved under the bedsheet. He swept my panties to the side and pushed his digit against my bundle of nerves while his lips stayed locked to mine.

He circled my clit, increased the speed, and I groaned against him. God, he was good.

My heart rate increased, and my muscles tightened when he pushed his finger inside, then spread my wetness over my clit.

I moved my hand to his bulge, but he caught it in his and moved it back to his cheek.

“But—”

“Shh. This time it's about you.”

He kissed me again and rubbed my clit until the pleasure became almost painful. A few more strokes a flick... pressure... I threw my head against the headboard and exploded with a howl.

He kissed me on the nose again, then got up and took the bedsheet with him. “I love watching you come. Now, up you

go; I need to show you something. And we really need to get going.”

Excuse me? I’d just had one of the best orgasms of my life and he was just back to business? “Hey, I need proper aftercare.”

He stopped, turned around, and his lecherous grin made me crawl to the other side of the bed.

“Tell you what...little one—”

Oh God, little one...I’d read about that term of endearment...in BDSM romance novels. And with him being so dominant in bed, he was probably well-versed in all things BDSM.

“I’ll take you through a proper scene...and then you’ll get all the aftercare you need.”

Yep, thought so.

“Until then”—he came around the bed to the side where I now was on all four—“I really want to show you something, and if you like it, why don’t you thank me later, and I’ll promise to cuddle with you until you’re sick of me? Can we do that?” He ended his speech with a peck on my lips that ended in a hiss on my side. Then he bit my lip and first caressed then gave me a playful smack on my ass.

My ass!

“So?”

“So what?” My mind was still in the gutter.

“Do you need a spanking now or are you coming with me?”

He laughed at my state of confusion—a hearty laugh, a laugh that showed me he was down with either one of the two.

Yep, I was definitely lucky. “Let’s go.”

I jumped out of bed, got my teeth brushed and my cut-off jeans and T-shirt on in under ten minutes. Not wearing makeup or my power outfits, including high heels, all the time was still strange yet freeing. Carter loved me just the way I was.

Naked, in high heels, or jeans. He didn't care.

We drove and made it a game to show the other our favorite songs on the way. He liked hard rock which I could live with. "We'll meet Max and Goofy there since Goofy's got the keys."

"We'll meet them where?"

"You'll see."

I watched him for a good five minutes, but he ignored me. He was good at that. Self-assured, not afraid of silence...or arguments.

We left Whitebrook and when we passed through Three Oaks, I was more than intrigued. We passed the diner where we'd had breakfast with Judith, Carter's mother, and Brody yesterday before we drove them to the airport.

Carter would follow them home tomorrow. But not for long. During yesterday's breakfast, Carter made clear that Three Oaks was where he intended to live. He must've had a conversation with his mother about it before because she was all for the move, and Brody seemed happy, as well. Apparently, he'd made friends in Moon Lake and hadn't had much luck making friends back home.

Now all that was left was for Carter to find a home for the three of them and a school for Brody. Felicia could probably help with that.

I'd been a bit anxious meeting them as the official girlfriend, but Judith had taken me aside and told me how happy she was for the both of us to have found each other.

Lucky me.

Brody had been a bit more reserved, but I was prepared to give him all the time he needed, and I would wear him down with being there for him and showering him with love.

Carter took the street that led to the Little Women's Home, but then took a right and entered the long driveway to one of the other old mansions and set the car to park.

It looked a little less abandoned than I remembered it since there was construction going on. “What are we doing here?”

“I bought it.”

“You bought it?”

“Yes, it’s perfect for us.”

“For us?”

“You, me, Mom and Brody. You told me how much you loved those old houses and how much it pained you to see them so rundown. So, I thought you’d approve.”

My skin tingled, and I went completely still. Wa-ait a minute. Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

“You bought that house?”

“Yes, Goofy has taken over overseeing the restorations until I’m back, so he’s got the keys. Blake and Peter got me this great contractor. She was able to start right away, which was why I hired her on the spot.”

“You hired a contractor?”

“Yep.”

“For restorations?”

“Yep. I told her to keep as close to the original structure as possible since you said you liked it like that, and I want you to meet her, so the two of you can hash things out. Just tell her however you want things to be.”

Wow. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe. He was taking over without even consulting me. Without asking me. I looked at the house through the windshield. Then again, he’d bought the house because I said I liked it. He wanted me to meet the contractor, so I could have a say in things. Somehow, that pressure in my chest subsided. None of his actions had been purely selfish or controlling. Every move he’d made, he’d had me and my wishes and dreams in mind. He was looking out for me...in his alpha...overprotective way. He would never be passive, or a pushover. But that wasn’t the kind of man I

needed, or wanted anyhow. “Are you asking me to move in with you?”

He looked at me like a deer in the headlights. Probably it had just now occurred to him that he’d missed a step in the process.

But I couldn’t keep my straight face on for long, so I smiled at him. This was amazing. I mean, it had only been a throwaway comment about how much I loved those old houses, and what did he do? He went on and bought one for us to live in and was having it restored to its former glory, because I liked it that way. It would be big enough so his mom could have her own rooms. Hell, we could house a couple more families, it was that big.

“Edith?”

“Yes?”

“Would you consider moving in with me and my family?” He was hesitant, not sure of himself at all, which was so totally unlike him that I couldn’t wait to let him out of his misery. I jumped out of the car, rounded the hood, threw open his door, and jumped on his lap and slapped a big kiss on him. “I do, thank you for asking.”

I could feel the vibrations of his deep belly laugh against my body which made me incredibly giddy. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so happy, so carefree. Despite the lingering threat and the words of caution from Richard, Jeremy, and Carter on how Mr. Caroz wouldn’t just back down, right now I felt incredibly happy. A measly three weeks ago, my life had sucked and I’d been miserable. And look at me now.

I was mostly happy. Of course, there was that thing with my apartment still not taken care of. The shelter still needed money, I needed a job, and I needed Felicia to be safe. But, all in all, I was a lot happier than I’d been just a couple of weeks ago. I kissed him again.

“Gross.”

I looked out the open door and met Goofy’s rolling eyes.

“Don’t you have a home?”

He smiled and jumped back when Carter moved me off his lap and tried to hit him in the thigh.

We got out of the car, and Goofy jingled with the keys.

Carter took them from him and offered them to me.

“Where’s Max?”

Goofy rolled his eyes again. “He’s having a crisis. He met this girl, Milli. He’s fallen head over heels for her, and there was some kind of misunderstanding, or they had a fight or something.”

Carter’s eyebrows nearly hit his hairline. “Serious?”

Goofy nodded. “As a heart attack. Total goner.”

“Well”—Carter shook his head, smiled, and pulled me against him—“good for him. I can’t wait to meet her. Maybe it’s time for all of us to settle down.”

Carter gave me a peck on the lip, so he didn’t see the light red tinge covering Goofy’s neck when he looked down at his feet.

Interesting. Maybe Goofy had found someone he was thinking about settling down with, as well.

CARTER



The memorial service was a rather stiff black-tie affair. I'd met with George once more before the event. Since apparently the Sormiza cartel was or had been infiltrating his agency, nobody knew if George's cover was still intact. That made for a very dangerous situation. With all the new intel we'd gathered since Edith had been taken, our newly increased SOG got together to assess the situation and get a contingency plan going. Lucas had proven to be our best bet, so he was taking on the role as a fellow gun runner to protect George's back. Our mission had just taken on an additional dimension—high stakes—unknown outcome.

But with the increased manpower, we would manage just fine.

Today, George looked and acted completely different, as usual. Almost as if the regal, aristocratic environment of his parents' mansion demanded a different behavior. Or maybe it was the parents who looked as if they'd just crossed over with the Mayflower. I couldn't even imagine the young, full-of-life Owen Bryce lived here.

"The Bryces are ridiculously stiff. They'd never fully approved of Grace either, so we don't like them," Edith whispered in my ear while I watched Grace who awkwardly stood in between her in-laws and George, and his perfectly coiffed girlfriend, who clung to his arm as if she couldn't stand upright on her own.

I was a bit surprised when Jeremy Mulberry, along with my local lawyer Mark Green, stepped up and shook our hands, then Richard's and Dorothy's. Though I shouldn't have been. Everybody seemed to know everybody around here.

"If you'll excuse us for a second." Dorothy and Edith walked up to Grace and took her to Felicia, who was hiding in a corner.

"Who's that Edith is talking to?" I looked from the four sisters to Jeremy, who'd asked that question. "Her sisters?"

"All of them?" He looked a bit green under his tan, which surprised me.

"Yeah, Dorothy, Grace, and Felicia." I watched his reaction like a hawk. Something was going on there.

"Feli..." was all he said, as if a long-buried memory just sprang to life.

He excused himself and marched toward the group of women like a man on a mission. Whatever was going on there, it was almost fun to watch now that I wasn't the one feeling like a hormonal teenager chasing around the woman of my dreams.

"Carter, do you have a minute?"

"Sure." I turned my back to the women and faced Mark Green. He'd been a good local liaison for the property, and since I would stay in the area, I'd decided to transfer some more of my affairs to his law firm. Affairs like making a sizable anonymous donation to the women's shelter right next door to our new home.

"It's done. They will receive the donation in the next few days."

"Non-traceable?"

"Yes, at least not back to you."

"Good."

He squirmed and shuffled from one leg to the other. "Can I ask you a question?"

“Sure.” I widened my stance and crossed my arms.

“Why are you going to such lengths to not have your name attached to it?”

“I’m donating money to all kinds of charities all the time.”

“Yeah, but going to those extremes to stay invisible. Is it because of Edith?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m trying to figure you out.”

I watched him. He was a stand-up guy, competent, loyal. I trusted him. At least enough...and for now. “Well, don’t.”

“She’s your woman; everybody knows that.”

“Doesn’t mean she’s not an incredibly strong and independent woman who makes things happen on her own.”

“Of course not.”

“So, she will have no reason to doubt that.”

Understanding dawned on his face and he nodded. “Sure. Got it.” Then he stepped away, and when I turned back, I could feel Grace’s eyes on me. Shit. There went my plans to keep this anonymous. Not that I had any doubt it was the right thing, or at least hoped Edith would appreciate the gesture.

But I knew her good enough to know she was still off-kilter from the knowledge that Diego Sormiza had kept her in his crosshairs for a very long time. She felt manipulated and violated and as if her achievements in life weren’t her own, which was, of course, complete and utter bullshit. I’d never met a more accomplished woman—a woman who was there for everyone around her. Who did so much and took so little for herself. But it would take a while for Edith to get back her self-confidence, and I sure as hell didn’t want or need the publicity. It was a win-win kind of thing.

At least that’s what I thought before Grace listened in on our conversation.

Best laid plans...

EPILOGUE



Edith

“Hey, sis, you look pissed. What’s wrong?”

I stepped next to Grace who was in a foul mood today. Not that she didn’t have any right, but usually she held it together in front of her in-laws.

“It’s nothing.”

“Why don’t we go outside, take a couple of steps, fresh air...sound good?”

“Hey, what’s wrong with the woman hanging on George’s arm? Can’t she stand on her own?” Felicia said when she stepped up to us.

Grace huffed. So, this was the cause for her sour mood. “That is George’s fiancée.”

“Fiancée? He’s getting married?” Dorothy asked, joining our little group.

“Apparently.” Grace looked down at her shoes.

“And we don’t like that?” I said.

Grace’s relationship with George had me wondering...a lot.

She’d met both George and Owen when all of them were teenagers. Dorothy and I thought she’d had a crush on George for the longest time, so when Owen proposed and Grace accepted, we had been surprised. But all of them had seemed

happy enough. So, we thought she hadn't been in love with George after all. Or George hadn't been, or whatever. Grace had seemed happy back then. So that had been enough to not question the relationship she had with the brothers. But looking at her now, and our conversation back at the café, had me wondering anew.

“Feli...ahem, Felicia?” Jeremy Mulberry stepped up to our group, his eyes fixated on Feli. What was that all about? There was a strange silence while Felicia looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights. The rest of us looked from one to the other, not unlike watching a ping-pong game. When the silence got too awkward, I took pity on the usually so self-assured man. “Jeremy, hey. Have you met my sisters? Dorothy, Felicia, Grace, this is one of the men who saved me.”

We'd briefly discussed my kidnapping, eerily similar to what had happened to Dori just a few days before. Though, I hadn't told anybody about the mastermind plan behind the whole thing or the mastermind asshole who sat somewhere in South America, but whose reach into my life was frightening the crap out of me. I was super careful everywhere I went. Carter had taken it upon himself to teach me self-defense... which usually landed us in bed making love...and situational awareness to read situations and be aware of what was going on around me at all times.

“The best fights are the ones you avoid,” was what he always said to me...before he pounced. And even though I slowly picked up on the dirty tricks, he taught me, I sure as hell didn't look forward to using them...ever. So, avoiding it would be.

“Ladies.” Jeremy took a bow which was oddly charming.

Dorothy stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek. “Looks like you're getting up there to hero status in this family. First me, then Edith...who's next?”

Well, if I wasn't completely mistaken and the way Feli avoided looking at him and the way his eyes were fixated on her, I'd guess there was something going on between the two.

And sure enough, when he talked again, it was Feli he was singling out. “Felicia, nice to meet you again...”

Now, that would be interesting to watch. Not that we would.

“Excuse us.” I grabbed Grace and Dori and pulled them away from Feli and Jeremy.

“What?” Grace said while she disentangled herself from my hand circling her forearm. Had she lost weight again?

“Let’s give them some space,” I replied.

“I need to go to the bathroom anyhow,” Dori said.

“Me too,” I said and followed her there.

“What do you think that was all about?” Dori asked when we were both washing our hands.

“I’d guess they’ve met before. Did you see the look on his face?”

Dorothy nodded. “Like he’d seen a ghost.”

“And Feli’s reaction wasn’t much better.”

“This is going to be interesting.”

It was. And maybe it somehow triggered something so Felicia would finally leave her no-good boyfriend.

We made our way back, and I watched Carter across the room. He was in deep discussion with Richard and George, and he looked right at home. Somehow, I’d found a man who wasn’t only perfect for me but who fit in with my family and friends as if he’d always been there.

Grace stopped us before we could join our men.

“Remember when you told me never to lie to you?”

Well, that was ominous and probably twenty years ago.

“Yeah.”

“I think I overheard Carter talking about a donation to the Home.”

“You did?”

“I think so. But he doesn’t want you to know it’s from him.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t catch it all, but he said something about you being strong and independent and making things happen, or something. I guess he meant you.”

I looked at him. My man. Heat radiated through my chest, and I smiled at him which he mirrored back to me. How did I get so lucky? How did I find a man who understood me better than anyone else? Who loved me despite knowing all of my facets? Most of my faults and my weaknesses?

When I reached him, his arm settled around my waist as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“I love you,” he whispered into my ear.

My heart felt impossibly full, so full I even teared up a little. “I love you, too.”

His eyes softened. “I’ll never let you go.”

I smiled, touched his cheek, and heat radiated through my hand into my arm and reverberated through my whole body. “I’ll count on it.”



The Security Operations Group Bravo Series continues with Max & Milli’s story in [Red Hunt](#). Available [HERE!](#)



And if you haven’t gotten enough of Edith and Carter here’s a bonus epilogue. You won’t believe the surprise Carter has for Edith.

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