

MOUNTAINS  
2  
OPS

**MOUNTAIN  
DEFENDER**

GUTS & GLORY ONE MISSION AT A TIME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**EM PETROVA**

eBooks are not transferable.

They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved

Mountain Defender

MT Ops

Book 2

Copyright Em Petrova 2023

Ebook Edition

Electronic book publication 2023

Cover Art by Bookin' It Designs

All rights reserved. Any violation of this will be prosecuted by the law.

[SUBSCRIBE](#) to Em Petrova's Newsletter to keep up to date and for special reader features.

## **MT Ops**

[MOUNTAIN PROTECTOR](#)

[MOUNTAIN DEFENDER](#)

[MOUNTAIN SAVIOR](#)

## **Xtreme Ops**

[HITTING XTREMES](#)

[TO THE XTREME](#)

[XTREME BEHAVIOR](#)

[XTREME AFFAIRS](#)

[XTREME MEASURES](#)

[XTREME PRESSURE](#)

[XTREME LIMITS](#)

[NORTH OF LOVE](#) **Xtreme Ops Alaska Search and Rescue**

[XTREME RULES](#)

## **Ranger Ops**

[AT CLOSE RANGE](#)

[WITHIN RANGE](#)

[POINT BLANK RANGE](#)

RANGE OF MOTION  
TARGET IN RANGE  
OUT OF RANGE

**Knight Ops Series**

ALL KNIGHTER  
HEAT OF THE KNIGHT  
HOT LOUISIANA KNIGHT  
AFTER MIDKNIGHT  
KNIGHT SHIFT  
O' CHRISTMAS KNIGHT  
ANGEL OF THE KNIGHT

**Turns out the line between love and hate is as thin as mountaintop air...**

Bryson Tripp has two missions. The first? Hunting down homegrown terrorists with the Mountain Ops team. The second is far more personal. He will find his niece's killer, and he will get revenge. Nothing's going to stand in his way. Especially not his attraction to the sexy detective who thinks he's a murderer...

Alexia Oaks will do whatever it takes to close the investigation, even if it means working closely with the number one suspect. Getting answers out of the lethal former Navy SEAL won't be easy. Neither will keeping her mind—and hands—off the impossibly hot jerk...

All it takes is a little forced proximity to test the very limits of Bryson and Alexia's self-control. But when the truth comes out, can the fragile bonds they've only just begun to forge survive?

***Action and adventure meets enemies to lovers in this steamy and spicy, contemporary military romance. 1-click your copy of Mountain Defender now and binge the entire MT Ops series.***

**MOUNTAIN  
DEFENDER**

**by**

Em Petrova

# Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

# Chapter One

---

Bryson Tripp didn't re-up. When it came time to sign on again with his SEAL team, he took the out.

His teammates called it burnout. In truth, he had a new mission—and this one could only be done solo.

Did he miss the adrenaline rush from lethal missions that bordered on suicidal once he and his team dropped into hostile territory? Hell yes. But he was only out of work for a few weeks before Homeland Security offered him a position with a new team.

MT Ops might still be in its infancy stage, but Tripp and his new brothers-in-arms were far from inexperienced. The best part of making the switch was that if they tended to stray from the rules, nobody reprimanded them for being wild cards. Right now, he needed that.

It was also easier to conceal his darker tendencies from his *new* teammates who didn't know him as well as the old. While he considered his commanding officer Rafe and the rest of the guys friends, he wasn't quite ready to unzip the heavy emotional baggage he hauled around every single minute of every goddamn day.

He rubbed his knuckle along his jawline and winced. He'd forgotten about that bruise he'd gotten during their last fight, and since he hardly ever looked in a mirror, even when brushing his teeth, it was easy to ignore.

Not that Tripp minded pain. It was a reminder to him that he'd dealt with the problem and now that person was no longer a threat to him or anybody else.

Even a boot to the jaw from the criminal who'd fled into the Cascade Mountains gave him closure because he finished it.

Unlike the other issue he was still sorting out.

A rhythmic *thinking* sound drifted through the MT Ops base. He followed the noise through the kitchen to the empty common room. When he

rounded a corner and spotted the open door leading outside, he guessed at what the sound was.

Sure enough, when he poked his head out, he found his teammate with an ax raised overhead. As he looked on, Vaughn Mathers, nicknamed Vlad for his Russian features, brought the ax down in a mighty heave and cleaved the log in two. The chunks of firewood toppled to the snow-covered ground.

Tripp stood in the doorframe, watching his buddy bury his own ghosts. After hunting that dangerous prisoner who'd fled to the mountains for nearly a week—in freezing temps with little sleep and only military rations in their stomachs—they all had demons. Especially after the way it ended.

He shook himself to cast off the images playing through his head and watched Vlad position another thick chunk of wood. His friend took a few steps backward, raised the ax and brought it down with far more force than was necessary to split the wood.

The rush of cold air blasting off the mountain struck Tripp in the face and helped to wipe away the memory of that fight.

Not wishing to disturb Vlad, Tripp ducked back into the building and left the door open. While the wind carried a chill, the place could use some airing out. Living in close quarters with five other men didn't make for the most refreshing place to stay. He was used to it after living with a bunch of sweaty SEALs, but that didn't mean it was any easier on the senses.

He paced through the common room again, eyeing up the TV remote and a deck of cards on the table where they often played everything from five card stud to euchre. He wasn't feeling up for games.

That old restlessness was burning through his bones, urging him to take to the mountains and use his short time between ops to take care of his own business.

More often than not, that involved a bottle of whiskey and too much fury, but at this point, he wasn't sure he'd ever get answers about what happened nine months before.

The incident made him *leave* the SEALs...but it was his deciding factor in *joining* MT Ops.

Not only did the new special forces unit fight terrorism solely on US soil, but was based in the very same region where his niece lost her life.

The soft sound of footstep behind him made Tripp twist his head. "You're getting lazy. I heard you coming all the way down the hall," he said

to his commanding officer.

Rafe Sheppard huffed out a laugh. “You only heard me because I wanted you to. Believe me, I could take you down before you ever knew what hit you.”

They shared a grin. “Asshole,” Tripp said with affection in his voice.

Early on, the team had a big bonding moment during mountain warfare training. Calling each other “asshole” became an inside joke that set their team apart from the rest in the division of Homeland Security known as Operation Freedom Flag.

Rafe cocked his head toward the open back door. “Vlad’s making sure we’ve got enough firewood for the bonfire.”

Tripp nodded. “He’s in the zone. I didn’t want to disrupt his flow.”

They exchanged a look. Both of them knew it was best to leave a special operator to his method of purging.

With a flick of his jaw, Rafe said, “Let’s talk.”

A worm of worry slid through Tripp’s stomach, but he didn’t let it show on his face. “Sure.”

Rafe led the way to his office. The small, cramped room was illuminated by a tall window. A simple metal desk held only a laptop and a picture frame. Without looking, Tripp knew the photo was of Rafe’s talented and adorable fiancée Zoe. She not only wore her Olympic gold medal in the skiing event but a dazzling grin of victory.

“Take a seat.”

Tripp dragged the chair another foot away from the desk in order to make room for his long legs. At six-three, he was used to making more space for himself.

They looked at each other across the desk. In a short time, he and Rafe had grown tight. Rafe often confided in him whenever chatter concerning their next target came in before he gave orders to the rest of the team.

Tripp sensed something heavy coming.

Rafe met his gaze. “There’s a detective who wants to talk to you.”

Tripp didn’t immediately respond to his statement, though it couldn’t be further off course from what he expected to hear.

“What for?” He formed his words carefully.

Rafe eyed him in the same way he did whenever Tripp returned from one

of his mountain “retreats.” Which really meant his personal quest.

In this case, to find someone. And kill him.

Rafe swiveled a little in his chair. “Her name is Alexia Oaks.”

Thanks to SEAL training, Tripp was damn good at concealing his reactions. “Never heard of her.”

“She’s been assigned to a case.”

His stomach sprouted claws that started digging into the soft flesh.

Tilting his head down, Rafe leveled him in a look. “Your niece’s case.”

*There it is.* The moment Tripp had been waiting for—when someone on his team connected all the dots.

He pulled in a deep breath and blew it out. “I don’t mind talking to this Oaks woman.”

He *did* mind discussing the rest of it.

“You’re not even going to say anything about your niece?”

He twitched his shoulder in a shrug. “What’s to say? You already know she’s dead.”

The words rattled through his hollow chest.

Fine lines etched worry around each of Rafe’s eyes. “Goddamn, man. Why didn’t you ever talk about it?”

“Not much to discuss. The investigation hit a wall, and there’s a dead trail leading to it.”

“Does this have anything to do with the trips you take into the mountains? Or you spending hours and hours of your time reading reports and looking at photos from our ops?”

Tripp held back a groan. He hated being called out, but he hadn’t exactly been hiding his activities either.

He’d been doing his own investigating. Now he studied every bit of evidence—even concerning their ops—out of habit.

“Tell the detective I’ll talk to her,” he responded.

“Okay. But you can’t bring her here.”

Tripp nodded. “Of course not.”

The base had tight security against outsiders the same as other military bases did. Their remote location helped keep them on the down-low, and even the nearby town had nothing notable to visit, as well as terrible cell

service.

“We can set up a video call,” Tripp suggested.

“And you can take the call while you’re in town getting supplies. We’re out of chocolate bars.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, reminded of the bruise on his jaw when he bumped it. “I’m still of the mindset that the government should be supplying us with s’mores fixings. And good toilet paper.”

Rafe didn’t crack a smile at his half-hearted attempt at a joke. “Tripp. Are you even going to tell me what happened to your niece?”

It wasn’t that he *couldn’t* talk about it—he just didn’t. After all, he was trained to be tight-lipped, to keep it all locked inside.

He could also see Rafe wasn’t going to back down on this. He could find out for himself, but he wanted to hear it from Tripp’s mouth.

“She was murdered last winter.”

“*Jesus*, Tripp. I’m so goddamn sorry.”

He gave a small nod in reaction before going on. “She lived in a cabin a few hours from here with her boyfriend. They’d been together for about a year.”

“And where is he?”

“Gone. Nobody can find him.”

Rafe blew out a breath. “So he’s a suspect.”

“Yup.”

“And you’ve been going into the mountains to look for any sign of him? Or do research?”

“Something like that.” He wouldn’t commit to saying much more.

Rafe gave him a long, appraising look. “Is it true that you came back to the States to kill a guy? I can only assume it’s the boyfriend.”

He shifted his shoulders. “No.”

Rafe cocked a brow.

“Okay, yes. But I *didn’t*.” His chest started filling with that horrible hot and prickly feeling, the one that sneaked up on him when he was least expecting it. Maybe he should take up violent wood-chopping like Vlad. The pair of them could supply the team with firewood for the rest of the year.

He drew in a deep breath. “I was on an op when it happened. My contract was up with the SEALs and it seemed like the out I needed to come

home and find out what happened.” He stared at the floor but wasn’t seeing anything but precious moments with his niece.

“We were close, she and I.” His throat closed and he forced it to open to emit more words. “My sister is much older than I am, and she had Kelsey when I was just seven years old. We grew up more like siblings, but once I hit my twenties I took over a protective uncle role.”

Rafe studied him. “Be careful, man. You can’t afford to make any mistakes on this. Not if you want to remain part of the team.”

He chuckled. “What do you think I’m gonna do?”

Rafe stared at him long and hard. “What you’re trained to do. Hunt down the murderer and kill him.”



Alexia’s boss was a ballbuster. And she was about to get hers metaphorically busted.

She smoothed her straight brown hair over her shoulder and braced herself. Talking to her boss always left her feeling on edge no matter how much she prepared herself. While he came down hard on all of the investigators, he pushed her harder than the rest.

If she didn’t know he did it because she was the best, she’d have a complex.

Eric Stahlman’s desk was cluttered with photos of his wife, kids and family pets, all of whom Alexia had met. Off to the side of the desk sat a plaque recognizing Eric for twenty-five years served and thousands of criminals brought to justice.

“Sorry I’m late.”

She twisted in her seat as her boss breezed to his desk and plopped into his seat.

“I see my father figure from hell is wearing the navy suit today.”

“Seriously, Alexia? The suit is midnight.”

Her lips quirked.

He heaved a sigh and focused on her. From one look, she saw they were foregoing office chitchat and getting straight to business.

Eric tapped a finger on the desk. “So...Bryson Tripp. You ready for this, Alexia?” He raised eyebrows that, in her opinion, could use a little grooming.

“I’m ready.” She was even confident. Nobody scared her. Not even a former SEAL turned Homeland special forces.

“You think you’re ready, but you’re not, Alexia.”

She held up a finger to stop him.

“This is a terrible idea,” Eric went on.

“But—”

“Bad, bad idea.” He tapped his desk to punctuate his words.

“It’s actually not a bad idea. I—”

“I don’t think you should be doing this at all.”

“How many times are you going to say that? I’m starting to get more of a complex than you usually give me during these talks.”

They eyed each other. Alexia blew an exasperated sigh through her nostrils.

“I’m smarter,” she argued.

“He’s stronger. You’ll have to be smart *and* safe. I just wish you didn’t insist on meeting him alone.” Eric rubbed a finger between his brows, the only indication that he was *actually* worried about her and not just being a misogynistic dick of a boss.

He leaned his elbows on the desk. “This guy was the most lethal killer on his SEAL team. He’s packed with rage from years of battle, and he’s no sniper. We’re talking hand-to-hand combat. He likes to look his enemies in the eye when he kills them.”

Okay...that was a little extreme.

But she could handle anything.

“And?” Alexia asked.

“You’re a woman.”

She rocked back in her chair. “Wow. You really just said that to me. I should go straight into Morrow’s office with that one. You’ll be downgraded to the mailroom by the end of the day.”

“I’m just looking out for you, kid.”

“Then I’ll tell you my plan and let you punch holes in it.”

He wagged his fingers in a bring-it-on motion.

“My plan is to get this guy to talk. Hear his side of the story—see how close he really was to the niece and her boyfriend.”

“What makes you think he’ll talk?”

She smiled. “I have some secret weapons.”

Folding his arms, Eric eyed her. “Oh, will you be wearing your usual Founding Father’s hair and Puritan woman makeup?”

If her sharing a hairstyle with the founding fathers of the United States gave her an edge, she didn’t care what she looked like.

Well, almost didn’t care.

The urge to reach back and touch her ponytail on her nape that Eric so rudely referred to as her Founding Father’s hair was strong, but Alexia kept her fingers in her lap.

“I’m going to try a different approach with this guy,” she told her boss.

Eric looked down at his desk as if an answer were written there, some words of wisdom for meeting with a government-trained killing machine suspected of a revenge crime.

Finally, Eric sighed. “I know this is going to go badly. Why can’t you just settle for the phone call instead of meeting Tripp in person?”

She leaned forward and locked gazes with her boss.

“Because I want to look him in the eye and see if he’s lying to me about hunting down and killing his niece’s boyfriend.”

## Chapter Two

---

The grocery store speakers blared eighties music, making Tripp's wait in the checkout line even more damn miserable.

He wasn't an impatient man, but the lady at the front of the lane had been fishing change out of the bottom of her purse for the past—he checked his watch—two minutes solid.

An older man behind her had his arms loaded with cans of beans and bags of fresh tomatoes. Saltine crackers balanced on top of the pile. If Tripp had to guess, the man was making chili for dinner and he was getting sick of the woman too. When she plunged her hand back inside her purse to retrieve another coin, he let out a huff.

Tripp was fourth in line, and directly in front of him a young mother had a shopping cart packed clear to the top. A kid about the age of five clung to the cart handle. Occasionally he'd dangle by one arm like a monkey and stare unblinkingly at Tripp.

Even in street clothes of jeans and a T-shirt, he always felt conspicuous. He was big and tough. He tended to stick out.

When the lady produced another coin and passed it to the cashier, Tripp stifled a grunt. Why the hell didn't the store have a self-checkout? He needed to get out of here before he blew his top at the customer who felt it important enough to use correct change she'd hold up an entire line.

The little boy dangled from the shopping cart again, wide eyes fixed on Tripp. "Are you a superhero?"

He gave the kid a slow blink. "No. I'm the villain."

A huge grin broke over the kid's face. "Cool!"

His mother turned. Tripp met her gaze. Read her scowl loud and clear.

He looked away and pulled out his phone to check his messages. He wanted to meet with the detective just about as much as he wanted to stand in this damn line. But what was the worst that could happen? Alexia Oaks

couldn't outman him or outsmart him. After all, she wasn't a SEAL.

The only thing that really mattered was getting more evidence in Kelsey's case. Since the day she was born, his role of uncle had been pretty much the only thing that truly mattered to him. He *had* to know the truth about what happened that terrible night.

The line moved forward, and the gentlemen dumped his armload of cans and tomatoes onto the conveyor belt. The kid swung from the cart.

And thankfully, another lane opened. Tripp shot into it and laid down the graham crackers, marshmallows and chocolate bars he'd been holding, along with a twelve-pack of decent toilet paper.

Luckily, the clerk was fast, and he had it all paid for and bags in hand in no time. As he walked out, his phone rang. He quickly brought it to his ear, but the call dropped.

"Fucking bad service." He strode across the parking lot into an open area that might not be blocked by the building to get a few more bars.

His phone rang again, only this time with a video call.

With the toilet paper tucked under one arm, and the bag balancing from his index finger, he accepted the call. A face popped up on the screen, and Tripp was suddenly staring into a set of beautiful light green eyes.

"Hello, Mr. Tripp. I'm Detective Alexia Oaks." Her brown hair was drawn off her face. A light source from her left highlighted good skin and light freckles spattering her cheeks.

"You want to discuss Kelsey's case?"

She nodded. "I'm not surprised you want to get right down to business. Yes, I have some questions about your niece." When she spoke, he got distracted by her lips.

She wore lipstick. Plenty of women did, as had many that Tripp had dated. But the shade that Alexia Oaks wore wasn't pink, red or a shade of brown. It was somewhere between all three hues and suited the woman's creamy, freckled skin to perfection.

Okay, it might have been a while since he slept with a woman if he was noticing small details like freckles and lipstick.

He was so focused on the screen that he didn't notice the snowplow until heavy, wet snow struck him square in the chest. Ice hit his already bruised jaw.

He sputtered and redirected his attention to the phone in his hand...just in time to hear snow and ice hitting a car.

The light coming through the detective's window went gray as the plow passed her.

*Fuck!* She was here. In the parking lot.

This was supposed to be a video call. Tripp wasn't up for talking face-to-face, and *of course* it wasn't because he was afraid he couldn't keep himself together.

"I gotta go." He ended the call and took off across the parking lot to the MT Ops SUV.

Wagging his head right and left, Tripp searched for a car that stuck out to him. The people of this small town drove older model SUVs and trucks that were able to cut through heavy snow and stay on ice-slicked roads. A few smaller cars were parked in the lot too.

He yanked open the passenger door and tossed the bag and toilet paper on the seat. He slammed it and circled to the driver's side just as an engine revved.

"Dammit!" Meeting with a person about Kelsey was a bad idea. The video call he was willing to do. Meeting in person, however, was not happening.

A black Humvee circled the parking lot at a higher speed than the townsfolk ever drove. He stopped to watch the SUV that could only be government-issue careen around the corner, coming straight at him.

Crap—she'd spotted him. He started to reach for his door—his only thought to bug the hell out—but locked eyes with her through her windshield.

Even from yards and yards apart, he read that challenge in her gaze. The one that said she was gunning for him.

"You wanna play?" He walked out into the center of the driving lane.

She continued driving straight at him.

Bracing his hands on his hips, he glared her down.

She never let off the gas.

This bitch was crazy. Who purposely drove at a person in a grocery store parking lot?

She never slowed down for a speed bump either and continued racing toward Tripp.

He jumped out of the way and took off at a brisk pace around the parked cars.

Behind him came the purr of an engine. When he glanced over his shoulder, she was *right* behind him.

Goddamn, this woman really *was* crazy. He darted between cars and threw a wave at the kid who asked if he was a superhero.

He continued in a wide loop toward the MT Ops vehicle with his keys at the ready. He planned to whip open the door, leap in and gun it out of the parking lot, out of town and away from this crazy woman chasing him in her SUV.

He stepped out into a lane.

She gunned it at him.

Tripp looked around in time to see the black, salt-covered metal rolling his direction. Through the windshield, their gazes locked again. Only when he saw the whites of her eyes did she step on the brakes.



The car wasn't stopping. Why wasn't it stopping?

Alexia let out a small scream as the tires hit a patch of ice—probably the only patch in the entire parking lot.

Annnnd now she was skidding out of control.

Tripp leaped back.

Not fast enough.

The front bumper struck him in the thigh. Another cry rattled from Alexia's throat as she gained control of the vehicle.

But Tripp was down.

On the ground.

*Damn, damn, damn!*

Panic swept through her veins like a stiff wind coming off the mountains. She threw the car in park and leaped out. When she reached the front and saw the big special operator crumpled on his side on the icy pavement, her heart gave a hard pulse.

He looked up at her, face flushed with what could be cold or pain. But one look at his brown eyes told her that it was fury.

Long fingers clamped around his thigh. “Are you fucking nuts? You hit

me with your car!”

“You were running.”

“So? The plan wasn’t to meet. It was supposed to be a video call,” he bit off through clenched teeth. His bulky muscles were locked with tension. “Why are you in town?”

She set a hand on her hip. “Why were you running?”

“I ran because a crazy chick was chasing me with her car!”

She looked him over, appraising his physical health. While he was gripping his thigh, the leg didn’t appear to be at an odd angle that would indicate it was broken.

“I was trying to make you stop,” she told him.

“You could have rolled down your window and asked.” Irritation rang out in a growl.

Another car backed out and whizzed from the parking lot, tires spinning slightly on the icy coating.

Alexia needed to regroup. “Look, are you okay? Can you get up?”

“As soon as I do, I’m going to call my lawyer.”

Anger threaded through her. She’d probably made a poor choice to chase him with her car, but he was trying to get away. For a few fleeting seconds behind that wheel, she did what Eric expected of her. She held the position of power.

Except she’d lost it the minute she clipped Tripp with the car.

She issued a sigh that turned into a frosty puff of breath on the air. Resigned, she walked over to Tripp and held out a hand to him. Not a peace offering exactly, but what was she going to do? Let him lie there?

He glared at her hand with so much venom that she was sure he was hoping her hand melted off. Then his gaze flicked to her face, dark eyes narrowed and blazing. “Are you even strong enough to help me up?”

She shifted her weight to her other foot. “Should I call an ambulance?”

He shook his head. “No. My team will help me.” He groaned louder this time. “I hope I don’t need to be airlifted...”

Jesus, this guy. He was seriously trying to play her.

Alexia eyed him, taking in his long limbs that appeared to be in working order. In fact, she didn’t see a single scratch on him. Only a guilty man would run away rather than speak to her in person.

Tipping her head, she contemplated him. “Too bad you’ll need that rescue from your team. If you didn’t, you could go with me to the crime scene. But only if you could walk.”

He planted his hand on the pavement and pushed into a sitting position. “I’ll manage.” He grunted as he shoved to his feet, making a *spectacular* show of being injured.

Once he straightened to his full height, she found herself staring at a very hard, very broad chest covered in military green cotton.

“You’re not wearing a coat.”

“In the SUV.” He took an exaggerated limping step. “I’ll just go get it. I’m feeling cold after that. Must be the shock.”

Oh dear lord. She hoped this guy was better at fighting than he was at acting.

A small horn honk brought her head around. A woman had her head sticking out the window. “Do you need help?”

“No,” Alexia said at once.

The woman’s gaze shifted to Tripp, who was making a show of limping his way to the SUV. “What about him?”

“He’s fine.” Alexia even managed a smile to punctuate her claim.

The woman darted a look at Tripp’s retreating back. Oh great—now he was hunched over like Quasimodo and dragging one leg behind him.

Alexia peered closer. Was that even the side she’d hit him on?

She swung back to the concerned woman. “You know men. They get a little bruise and they’re dying.”

The woman broke into a smile. “Oh yeah. My husband’s the same way. He had the man-flu last year. He dragged that one out for *weeks*.”

Alexia bobbed her head in agreement. While she didn’t even have a man in her life, almost every woman could agree on this phenomenon.

The woman stabbed her finger in Tripp’s direction. “Good luck. He seems to be really milking that leg injury.”

Sure enough, he was going all out with the act.

But...what if it wasn’t an act? Alexia’s stomach sank. Had she really injured him? After all, she *did* hit him with the car, and while she hadn’t been going fast at all, cars were big and heavy compared to a human, even one as jacked with muscle as Bryson Tripp.

He'd also fallen on the pavement. The icy, unyielding pavement. That couldn't have felt good.

With a wave goodbye to the driver, Alexia got in her idling car and drove around to where Bryson was limping. She tailed behind him like a flag car all the way to the end of the row where his SUV was parked.

Her stare locked on those broad shoulders that heaved with each step. His bowed spine looked to be stacked with muscle. Her gaze dropped.

*That ass.*

Even dragging one leg, she could tell his buns were hard steel just made for gripping.

*Uhhh. No.*

She rolled behind him, making sure to keep enough distance just in case she slid out of control again, or he decided to dramatically hurl himself in front of her car. When he finally reached the SUV, she pulled into an empty space beside him and got out.

“Can I give you a hand?” she asked him.

He threw her a grimace. “I think you’ve done enough.”

He was definitely faking.

She folded her arms. “My offer stands to come with me to the scene of the crime. I can drive. You know...since you’re incapacitated.”

## Chapter Three

---

Tripp eased slowly into the driver's seat of his SUV and issued a sigh of relief. *God*, it felt good to stretch out his legs. After that painstaking limp around the parking lot, he actually *was* feeling a little stiff.

Was he a dick for faking the injury? No. The woman deserved to feel bad for hitting him.

She stood outside her car, leaning against the side and talking on the phone. When he caught her looking his direction, he forced himself to wince in pain and threw her a small wave.

As she wagged her head, the straight ends of her hair brushed her coat collar. His gaze darted back to her mouth.

That lipstick...

He swore that her pale cheeks gained a hint of color before she dropped her head to break their stare.

Tripp fished out his own phone and called Rafe. His commanding officer picked up after three rings.

"Change of plans," he said in his normal voice instead of the one loaded with pain he'd affected for Alexia's sake.

"What kind of change? Did you have the video call with the detective?" Rafe asked.

"Not exactly. We met in person."

A beat of silence followed.

"I'm going with her to the scene of the crime."

"Damn. How'd you manage that one?" Rafe's voice rang with respect.

"Guilt."

Tripp shot Alexia another glance out his window. She wasn't paying attention to him but was focused on her call, her lips moving so rapidly he could only imagine the heat in her voice that must accompany those words.

“What do you mean by guilt?” Rafe pressed.

“She hit me with her car.”

“What the fuck?” he burst out.

“I’m fine. I’ll rub a little dirt on it.”

Rafe issued a low chuckle. “Well, the woman’s either brilliant or stupid.”

He glanced at Alexia again. Tall, lithe. Legs a mile long in the black trousers that every detective wore. Her coat was black and too puffy for him to tell if she had any curves under there or a set of small, sexy breasts. A white collar peeked from a V where the zipper didn’t come all the way up to her throat.

Though he couldn’t see her eyes right this minute, he remembered the exact hue of sea green—and the intelligence in her bright gaze.

“I’ll reserve my opinion about the brilliant or stupid part until I know more,” he told Rafe. “I’m sure she has an agenda in getting me involved.”

Rafe grunted. “Well, whatever you find out when you get to that crime scene... Remember, Tripp, we don’t kill people. We capture them and bring them in for questioning.”

His grumble exposed too much inner turmoil for his liking.

“Say it with me, Tripp. We don’t kill people. We bring them—”

“In for questioning,” he finished. “Yeah, yeah. I hear you.” What Rafe didn’t know was the depth of the despair Tripp experienced every single time he thought of Kelsey, which was often. Just thinking of what happened to her...and who he suspected did it...made his fists curl in rage.

Movement caught his eye. Alexia was pacing outside her car. She walked to the front of his SUV and did a little bounce turn before striding the other direction. He watched her perform this maneuver several times before he realized Rafe was still on the line and his dick was half-hard from that little bounce.

“Look, I’ll be back tonight. It’s only a three-hour drive there.” Tripp couldn’t pull his attention off Alexia.

“More like nine.”

It took a minute for Rafe’s words to sink in.

“What?”

“Nine hours to drive there.”

“What are you talking about?”

Rafe sighed. “I told you about this, man. When it gets to thirty-five degrees, that road’s impassible.”

“I thought you meant there’s a possibility of black ice.”

“Nope. Not a possibility. That road’s *all* ice. The melting—we all learned about it in our training if you recall.”

His brain had glossed over that part.

“Nine hours. One way.”

Why the hell did Rafe sound so pleased with himself?

Tripp issued a curse. “One way? You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“You’re about to find out how serious I am. The temps have been above freezing all day, which means the snow is melting on every road on that mountain pass we always use as a shortcut. The water’s about to freeze in a few hours once the sun dips behind the range...then you’ve got the black ice.”

“I get it. Impassible. Okay.” His stare locked on Alexia striding back to her own car, the one he was intimately acquainted with now that he surely bore a huge bruise the shape of her bumper.

Nine hours? Each direction? With that insufferable woman driving? She couldn’t even maneuver in a parking lot without mowing someone—him—over.

If this was happening, he had to get behind the wheel.

“Don’t kill anybody, Tripp.”

He felt his jaw creak from clenching it so hard, which made it difficult to open and force words through. “I’ll do my best. Talk soon.”

He ended the call and sat there for a moment, watching Alexia. She’d stopped pacing and was leaning against her car again, her thumb and forefinger digging into her temples and her mouth moving a mile a minute as she spoke on the phone.

The last thing he wanted was an extended trip with a woman who disliked him enough to run over him with her car, but he had to find Kelsey’s killer. If this got him one step closer to that closure he’d spent an entire year searching for, then it was all going to be worth it.

Right?

Alexia lifted her head. Through the window, their gazes locked.

Yeah, she was smart. Probably savvy too.

Definitely pretty.

She raised her free hand and flipped him off.

*Annd she's a mega-bitch.*

Just like all the investigators, detectives and police officers he'd already spoken with time and again about the case. All those dead ends and unhelpful people had driven him into the mountains to a cabin decked out with all the technology he needed to dig into the case himself.

He'd spent hours and hours doing just that—with only a bottle of Scotch as companion.

Now he was about to spend most of an entire day in close proximity with a detective who clearly had something to prove to her colleagues, her boss... maybe even the world.



Alexia stuffed her phone in her coat pocket and pushed off the side of her car. Even the cold metal hadn't done much to chill her out.

Of *course* her partner she typically went out on these calls with took their boss's side and didn't think it was a good idea for Alexia to be alone in the car with Tripp. Not only had he brought up several disasters that could befall them on the road to the crime scene, but he'd mentioned a few places along the way where bodies had been found in the past.

Tripp dropped one booted foot to the slushy pavement and lurched out of his vehicle, grabbing his thigh as he did.

She arched a brow at him. Did he really think she was going to buy into his injured act? Weren't SEALs trained to lie and get out of tough situations? She didn't believe for a minute that he wasn't totally capable of faking out every adversary he'd ever encountered in his career.

Her gaze skimmed over those muscled tree trunks he called legs up to a similarly stacked torso and then to his face. His forehead was puckered, but other than that, she didn't see any sign of real pain.

If they were going to get through the next few hours in each other's company, she needed to dust off her own acting skills.

Or were they people skills? Alexia was *really* good at her job. Her talent for solving cold cases had landed Tripp's niece's file on *her* desk.

Her train of thought hit its own slick spot and she felt her brain skidding sideways. Just how hard *was* the man to be on his feet at all? Even the

slightest of taps from a moving vehicle was known to break bones.

Tripp caught her attention by jerking a thumb toward the store. “If we’re hitting the road, I’m gonna grab some snacks.”

Snacks? She shrugged. He *was* a man.

“Knock yourself out,” she said.

He cocked a brow. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Haven’t you already done enough harm?”

She rolled her eyes and stifled a grunt. The guy was insufferable. How she was ever going to sit next to him in the car for even a few hours would be a true display of her dedication to her work. Maybe she’d get her own plaque for her service long before twenty-five years.

As soon as he limped to the entrance, she whipped out her phone again. After stabbing a fingertip at the name of the contact, she brought the device to her ear.

“Are you already calling for backup, Alexia?” her boss asked after just one ring.

“No, I’m not calling for backup,” she ground out. “I just got off the phone with my partner.”

“I know. He filled me in a second ago.”

Eric’s statement took some of the wind of fury out of her sail. “And? What do you think about taking Tripp to the crime scene?”

“You want my honest opinion, Alexia?”

She barely let that thought skim across the wrinkles in her brain before she shook her head. “No. Look, the guy doesn’t seem like he’s going to do all the terrible things you claim he will. If he is a killer, I don’t think he wants to kill me.”

She thought about that for a beat. Okay, maybe Tripp didn’t really like her, and she *had* hit him with her car, but that didn’t mean he wanted to see her in a shallow grave.

“Look, Eric, I didn’t call to get more of your opinions on the subject. I only want to keep you in the loop.”

“Because you know my position on taking Tripp to the scene of the crime.”

She scrubbed her hand over her face. “I didn’t have much choice.”

“Why is that?”

Her stomach hollowed at what she was about to admit. “I kind of...hit him with the Humvee.”

“You—” A long groan projected into her ear. “That’s a government vehicle. We’re liable, Alexia!”

“Yes, but taking him to the scene is the trade for him shutting up about me almost running him over!”

She darted a look at the store. No sign of Tripp.

Another groan from her boss filled her ear. “Where is he now?”

“He’s getting snacks.”

“Are you sure he didn’t run off? Is he really getting snacks?”

Her stomach plummeted. “Of course he’s getting snacks.”

Swinging to look at the store again, she urged her number one suspect to walk back through those automatic doors carrying a bag stuffed with... What did guys like Tripp snack on?

Potato chips. And beef jerky.

There was no sign of the man.

She started across the parking lot, trying to control her breathing so Eric didn’t know she was rushing into the store. “Here he comes now, Eric,” she lied. “I’ll be in touch.”

She ended the call and jog-walked across the slushy pavement. Tripp couldn’t have slipped away while she was on the phone. He wasn’t the type.

Would she wager her retirement pension on that? Nope—she wasn’t *that* confident.

*Ohhhh*, in attempting to cover all her bases, she’d messed this up for real.

She burst into the store. Eighties music blasted from the speakers and she inwardly cringed at the tune even as she jerked her head left and right in search of what must be the tallest person in the place.

A quick glance at the checkout where most snack food was located revealed Tripp towering over the rest of the people in the lane. And he was staring right at her.

Her stomach gave a little flip at the weight of his intense gaze. According to her boss, those eyes had looked into his enemies’ right before he killed them.

But he wasn’t about to dispatch her—at least not for something so small

as her hitting him with the Humvee.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

He wasn't stooped over in pain.

When he saw her taking notice, he slowly shuffled forward in line. Quickly, she bustled up to him.

"Get your snacks?" She opened her eyes wide and added a smile to it.

He held up a bag of beef jerky with jalapeno flavoring and dropped it onto the counter, along with several candy bars, some corn chips and a few bottles of water.

"Is all that for you?"

His stare landed on hers again. "The candy's for you. Thought it might sweeten you up a bit."

The clerk smirked. Alexia gave the guy a dead-eyed stare meant to shrivel his twenty-year-old testicles, and he rearranged his expression into a blank mask.

"I'll be waiting at the entrance," she told Tripp.

He arched a brow. "To escort me to the Humvee that you ran over me with?"

The clerk's eyes flicked to her and back to Tripp.

"To walk out with you." She emphasized each word.

"You thought I was gonna run, didn't you? You didn't really believe I was in here buying snacks." With jerky movements, he extracted a black wallet from his back pocket and peeled out a couple bills. He handed them to the clerk and received his change.

A lot of people were staring at Alexia now. The clerk, a guy bagging groceries in the next lane and several customers standing in line. They'd heard every word of their conversation and now they thought she was crazy.

They weren't wrong. At this minute, she felt like her ability to think and act rationally had blown away on the brisk mountain wind.

Or been ground to dust under Bryson Tripp's burning glare.

Why did that glare make her feel like she was teetering on the tippy-top of a rollercoaster, about to fly down?

Alexia spun on her heel and stalked to the entrance to wait for Tripp, and found herself having a mental argument with him.

*You thought I was going to run.*

*No, I didn't.*

*Did too. Why else did you come into the store?*

*I know you're not going to run because you want to return to that crime scene too much.*

Seconds later, the sound of something heavy being dragged across a floor brought her head around to see Tripp limping her way.

She adopted her sweetest tone that was really the fakest sugar—the kind created in labs and not nature. “Your leg’s really hurting, isn’t it?”

“I’ll be all right,” he grated out in his best man-in-pain voice.

## Chapter Four

---

Even with a feigned limp, Tripp reached the Humvee before Alexia. “I want to drive.”

She darted an arm around him and settled her hand on the door handle. “I can’t let you do that. Government vehicle.”

He twitched his jaw toward the MT Ops SUV parked beside hers. “You realize that I was driving a government vehicle too.”

“And what is going to happen to your vehicle if you leave with me?”

“One of my teammates will come for it.”

She eyed him with a question in her eyes. The woman would look a hell of a lot prettier without that scowl on her face, but he knew better than to speak his mind about a woman’s looks. Especially *this* woman.

He dropped his go-bag in the back of the Humvee and crowded closer to her, blocking her between the door and his body. “Let me drive. I know where we’re going.”

“Me too. GPS exists and — oh my god! — women actually know how to use it!” She inserted herself more firmly between him and the door in a crack that most women couldn’t fit in. When she tipped her pointy, stubborn jaw up at him that way, he could almost feel the tension zapping between them.

He glared down at her. “Do you know how to use GPS in these parts? Roads close for extreme weather.”

“Pretty sure GPS finds alternative routes if that happens.” She smiled but the fake effect didn’t do her appearance any favors. He only liked her freckles right now. And her lipstick.

“I have more experience driving in the mountains,” he argued.

“I have more experience driving.”

He started to laugh.

She set a hand on her hip. “Are you certified to drive any class of vehicle? Because I am—from big rigs to motorcycles.”

His brain stumbled over the thought of Alexia decked out in black leather and straddling all that horsepower.

“No, but I’ve flown a few choppers and a fighter jet. Pretty sure I can handle this thing.” He waved at the Humvee that her back was molded against.

“It’s my vehicle so I’m driving. Get in.” Her bossy tone stunned him witless for a split second, long enough for her to yank open the door and wiggle into the small crevice she made.

She slipped behind the wheel and started the engine.

With a gusty sigh, Tripp circled the front—he didn’t trust her not to back over him—and climbed into the passenger seat. Once he was settled, he reached for the seatbelt.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea for you to drive.”

She whipped the Humvee out of the parking spot. When she threw him a grin, he grunted. “I guess you can back up all right for a girl.”

She barked a laugh. “Oh, and I bet a skilled tough guy like you can do it better?”

“You know that statistically most accidents are caused by women.” He made a show of massaging his leg.

“I’m not most women.” She drove out of the parking lot and onto the main road.

“How many years of experience do you have?”

She turned her head and looked him fully in the eyes. “Are you trying to find out how old I am? Because that’s pretty rude, Tripp.”

“Now that you brought it up, yeah.”

She directed her attention to the road again. “I’m old enough to know better, how’s that?”

“I’d say we both are, so you can stop with the dick-measuring contest now.” He plugged the new route that would forego the impassable mountain pass into his phone and stuffed it into the holder on her dash.

“Dick-measuring contest?” Alexia couldn’t quite keep the stammer or outrage out of her voice.

“I’m sure you aren’t even aware that you do it. After all, you work in a

field primarily dominated by males. You probably get overlooked a lot.”

“I’ll have you know that the reason I’m on this case is that I outshine *all* my male counterparts, including my own partner!”

“I see.”

She went silent and chewed on her bottom lip, trapping it between white teeth that probably sported braces when she was a teen. When she released it, Tripp damn near let out a growl.

“I’ve met guys just like you,” she went off. “You think just because you’re trained military that you know everything. Believe me, you’ll never out-think me when it comes to crime cases.”

She kept talking, but Tripp tuned out her voice and became hyper-focused on the color of her lipstick. Not quite brown. Not quite pink. Not red either. He’d never seen anything like it.

“How’s your shooting?” he asked just to keep her talking.

Her lips moved faster with the same speed-talking he saw her do on the phone earlier.

“I have top marks with all calibers.”

“I doubt you can outshoot me.”

She issued a snort that was just as distracting as the color of her lips. A color that he was now picturing ringed around his dick.

*Fuck!* This was the second time he’d gotten aroused thinking about her lipstick.

“The only thing you can do better than me is kill people.”

Alexia’s statement slammed all the doors on his arousal and flipped the electric breaker too.

Slowly, he turned his head to pierce her with his glare. “I was a SEAL.”

“Yup.”

He continued to stare at her. “Oh my god. You think I killed the boyfriend, don’t you?”

Fucking hell, he played into this scenario she concocted perfectly. She would get him—her suspect—to the scene of the crime in order to study him in the environment.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” she said. “It matters what the facts prove.”

“Bold of you to get me in your vehicle for nine hours.”

“I’m sorry—what?” She directed her attention to the GPS map on his phone.

“Nine hours. Each way.”

“No way.”

He grinned. “The great melting. Happens every spring. Someone smart like you should’ve known.”



What had she done? Nine hours *each way*? That meant at least eighteen hours of time she would be spending in his company.

To make things *spectacularly* worse, when Tripp mentioned measuring dicks, Alexia’s brain—and her eyes—had gone right to his crotch.

That led to wondering if he was big *everywhere* or was one of those huge muscled dudes with a really *small* package.

Oh, would any woman give a damn about his size as long as those long, probably rough fingers were spreading her thighs and his long, probably scorching tongue stroked her clit?

She needed air.

A few adjustments of the controls brought cooler air blowing at her face, but that didn’t stop her from acknowledging the fact that the special operator sitting beside her was hot.

Bryson Tripp was no pretty boy like some she’d dated or worked with. His rugged features could entertain a woman for hours while he slept and she recovered from the dirty things his mouth did to her.

There was a certain degree of darkness in his gaze that appealed too.

She ran through her boyfriends in her head. Jason, Kevin, Jordan—damn, did she have a fetish for men with names that ended with the letter *N*?

She continued rolling through the list. Allen, Calum. Okay, she broke the name cycle with that one.

Ryan. Shit, she’d reverted on that guy. And to top it off, Ryan was the worst of the bunch. Why did she always go for the bad boys?

Bryson also had a name ending with *N* and he was *definitely* a bad boy. Maybe the baddest of the bunch.

She was far more attracted to Bryson than any of her past boyfriends combined.

“It’s going to be like Ryan all over again,” she muttered.

“Who’s Ryan?” Did Tripp’s deep voice have to grate over her senses that way? It irritated her and left her skin prickling with goosebumps.

This was crazy. Five minutes ago she wanted to get in the Humvee and finish the job of running him over. After ten minutes in his company, she wanted to choke the man just to make him quit talking.

But wasn’t that how it started with her ex-boyfriend, Ryan? Angry banter had turned to hate sex that led to...

“He’s my ex.” Why was she answering Tripp’s question?

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Why is it going to be like him all over again?”

“Because I don’t have a good track record when it comes to guys who piss me off.”

The man’s hard lips quirked at one corner. “And that’s me.”

“You don’t need to sound so proud of yourself.”

“So what happened with Ryan?”

“I got him sent to prison.”

He didn’t even flinch. Only a heartbeat ticked by. “Wow, you’re cold. I thought *I* was cold.”

“You look people in the eyes when you snuff out their life.”

Again, his expression showed no change from faint amusement at their discussion. “Yeah, but you sent your boyfriend to prison. That must make you undatable.”

“I am not undatable.”

“Oh yeah? Name your last date. Time, place and name of the guy.”

Her lips slammed shut. Realization stole over her.

After Ryan cheated on her, she’d done a little digging. That led to her finding out that he had a side business dealing drugs.

And ever since, she...hadn’t actually dated anyone.

Tripp made a noise that rode the line between derision and victory. “Bet you were wearing that lipstick when you hooked him in...”

Her head jerked around, and she locked gazes with him. He’d noticed her lipstick?

Tripp’s stare dipped to her mouth. In the single second that she let him look his fill, sparks skidded through her body. The way he looked at her

mouth was like flint on steel.

She whipped her attention back to the road. She could *not* give that spark an opportunity to kindle or she'd lose her position of authority.

Her dick was bigger.

So to speak.

"You were wearing that shade of lipstick, weren't you?" His question wheedled into her brain.

"Hmm?" she responded as nonchalantly as possible.

"You were wearing that lipstick when the cops arrested Ryan."

She sucked in a deep breath. She needed to gain the upper hand.

Just because Tripp knew what buttons to push to tick her off did not mean that she wanted to jump his bones.

In the same vein, just because he was trained to hunt people down and kill them didn't mean he did that to his niece's boyfriend. Murderers exhibited certain characteristics such as a lack of empathy, manipulation and a lust for power. Okay, he did bring up measuring dicks so he might have *some* need for control.

Wasn't that all military men? They were all trained to be hard-ass alphas.

Tripp wasn't exactly triggering her psycho-killer alarms either, and she'd been around a few.

His phone buzzed, and he shifted in his seat to withdraw the device from his pocket. "Tripp," he grated out.

She made out a faint rumble of a male voice projecting through the speaker but not any of the words spoken. She guessed that the call was from his commanding officer of the MT Ops team. Rafe Sheppard, former Marine who had military honors for leading strikes—much like the man sitting beside Alexia.

She shot Tripp a look and found him eyeing her back, this time with a level of suspicion rather than amusement.

What in the world was Rafe saying to cause him to look at her that way?

She didn't have a chance to consider the matter further because her own phone chimed. Taking one hand off the wheel, she brought the device to her ear. "Oaks."

Tripp swung his stare to her. They watched each other for a long heartbeat.

Eric's voice flooded into her ear. "Where are you, Alexia? Are you on the road yet?"

"Yes," she responded and heard an echo of Tripp saying the same to his contact.

She darted a look at the road. If she wrecked, he'd never let her live it down. She could just hear the bad woman driver jokes now.

"And you've got Tripp with you?"

She lowered her lashes in order to slice a look his way, then caught him openly gazing at her.

Tucking the phone against her shoulder, she placed both hands on the wheel to keep it on the road. "Yes, all is going as planned," she told Eric.

"Over the next three hours he's going to try to—"

"Nine," she cut across him.

"What?"

"Nine hours. It's going to take longer because of the melting."

Tripp smirked. *Damn* him.

"What is the melting? Is that even a thing? How do you know he's not taking you far out of your way to some remote area—"

"I just know. Look, if you have something helpful to tell me, say it now. I need to concentrate on driving."

At that second, Tripp's voice overlaid hers with a deep timbre. "Asshole."

Their gazes collided again.

Alexia forced all her attention away from the hot special operator sitting next to her.

## Chapter Five

---

“Who were you calling an asshole?” Alexia asked the minute she ended her call.

“My CO.”

“And he didn’t get pissed at you?” Her question distracted him momentarily from the fact that she stuffed her phone between her thighs.

“No. It’s kind of a thing between us.”

“Explain.”

“Well, aren’t you demanding?”

“Sorry. I’ve been out in the field for months now, hopping from case to case, so my people skills are a little rusty.”

Tripp tore his gaze away from that phone nestled between her thighs. “Shouldn’t that be the opposite? Wouldn’t being in the field, questioning people to gather more information about the cases you’re handling, give you *better* people skills?”

“I deal with a lot of assholes, so no.”

That accounted for her general attitude toward him. Only she’d all but admitted that he was a suspect on his niece’s case. The person behind Kelsey’s boyfriend Caden’s disappearance.

Tripp had a few theories about Caden. One was that after murdering his girlfriend, he’d changed his identity and taken off.

Another theory was that Caden didn’t have anything to do with the crime against Kelsey at all. They just hadn’t found out the truth yet.

The third—and most probable—involved a third party. The theory that Tripp had spent literal weeks researching in that mountain cabin in hopes of finding an answer that would help him lay his niece’s memory to rest.

He wasn’t sharing any of that with Alexia.

Feeling the need to keep the subject far away from the real reason he and

Alexia were thrown together in the first place, he said, “Calling each other asshole is a thing on my team. None of us mean it. Except I didn’t like this one asshole. Richmond. He came in as a replacement after one of our originals broke his leg.”

“Why didn’t you like him?” Alexia wiggled in her seat and the phone slipped lower between her thighs.

Tripp drew a deep breath, hoping sending more oxygen to his brain made him think clearer. He did *not* want this woman.

Except he did.

Something about her was getting under his skin, a place he couldn’t want her further away from.

“The guy was a drunk.”

If that revelation surprised her, she didn’t show it. She only bobbed her head. “I’ve seen similar things in my time. Guys who go home and get plastered every single night to the point where they pass out. Then come to the work in the morning still drunk.”

“We were all glad to see the guy go.”

“OFFMOPS gave him walking papers?” She let off the gas as they hit a patch of snow drifted across the road. The tires lost traction but didn’t send them into a slide.

“No, he was killed in action.”

“Damn.”

“You should let me drive,” he stated.

“I’m good.” Her voice held a note of brightness, as though she knew just how annoyed it made him that she was behind the wheel.

Seeing that he didn’t have much choice in the matter until she finally broke down and realized it wasn’t an easy drive, he settled back in his seat. Might as well make himself comfortable—he’d be here a while.

Nine hours, in fact.

Hours later, daylight began to fade. The sky turned to the steel gray that he’d become so accustomed to seeing and was coming to look forward to. But he wasn’t too happy that they wouldn’t actually reach that crime scene today.

He glanced over at the dashboard gauges.

“Looks like you need some gas.”

Alexia glanced down. "I'm aware."

"There's a good spot to fill up in a couple miles."

"By my estimate, we've got a good thirty miles to go before we fill up."

"That would be the case if there were actually a gas station out that far. There's not. Take the exit in two miles."

She pushed out a deep sigh. "Fine."

When she rolled up to the gas pump, Alexia set her phone, which had been trapped between her thighs all those hours, in the cup holder.

She climbed out of the vehicle. He eyed the device, thinking to give it a quick peek to see if she was hiding anything.

He snorted. Whatever she didn't want him to see would all be revealed once they reached the crime scene.

Knowing her phone was useless to him didn't stop him from reaching out and touching the plastic case.

Warm from being nestled between her thighs.

His cock stirred, and he quickly retracted his hand.

Then he climbed out of the Humvee and stretched his legs. There was never enough room in any vehicle to accommodate his legs.

As soon as his boot tread touched pavement, he felt the rime of ice from the snow melting all day long.

Alexia was busy filling up the tank when he circled to lean against the side of the vehicle. As he neared her, he remembered to limp.

"We're going to need to stop for the night."

She gave him a flat look. "We can still make it there tonight."

"No, we can't. This parking lot's already coated in black ice."

She shifted her boots around. "No, it's not."

"Not where you're standing. You're under a roof. Believe me, Alexia, we do not want to risk it. Unless you like the adventure of spending the night at the bottom of a ravine."

She stared unblinkingly.

"With me," he added.

Her eyelids drooped over her eyes in a slow blink. "I'm good. Okay, where do we get a room?" She looked around and spotted a bright sign for a motel.

“We’ll grab rooms right after I finish pumping the gas.” She didn’t sound very damn chipper about the prospect, which put a broad smile on his face. “And you can stop limping now. You’re fine.”

“You don’t know my pain.”

She said nothing, just finished pumping gas into the tank and then replaced the nozzle. He made a show of dragging his leg until he was out of view, then he climbed into the passenger seat again.

When she got in beside him, she said, “That motel looks sketchy.”

“Not any other options.”

“What if there are bedbugs?”

“I’ve slept with my head in the mud. Bugs don’t faze me.”

“Well, I don’t want to take a bag full of bedbugs home with me.” She started the engine and rolled through the parking lot to a side road that would lead them to the motel.

“Where is home?” He didn’t especially care. He didn’t know why he was making an attempt at chitchat either. He wasn’t the talkative type.

“I travel all over.”

“You must have a place though.”

“I do.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t be popping by for a visit. And if I do, I’ll be sure to leave my favorite filet knife at home.”

She lolled her head to the side so he could get the full effect of her exaggerated eye roll. Only it didn’t have the power she was going for, since the streetlights panned across her face, lighting up her sea-green eyes like shimmering glass.

When she braked to turn into a parking spot, the tires skidded on ice.

“Oh!” Her breathless exclamation worked deeper under his skin. The last time a beautiful woman made a sound like that, she was spreading her thighs for him.

He only prayed their rooms weren’t adjoining. If he decided he wanted her, no door would stop him.

He didn’t want her.

*I don’t want her.*

*I really don’t.*

Then why was he half-aroused at the thought of busting into a room and

pinning her against the wall?

By the time his brain straightened out, Alexia had control of the vehicle and slid into a spot. She cut the engine and jumped out before he could caution her about the ice on the—

Her legs went out from under her, and she let out a cry as she grappled for a grip on the door to hold herself upright.

He bit back a chuckle.

“Are you laughing at me, Tripp?”

“I’d never.”

“Yes, you are!” She got her feet beneath herself and tugged her coat down to her hips.

“Want me to get the rooms?”

“I’ve got it.” She tilted her jaw with what he could only describe as haughtiness.

“I love a woman who pays for the first date.”

She snorted. Then, with all the decorum of royalty, she tread gingerly toward the front of the building.

He let his chuckle escape and waited for her return.

When she got back, he was waiting outside for her, letting the brisk air cool him off.

“I’ve got the key.” She waved it in the air.

“Keys?” His brow crinkled.

“Key.”

“What? You mean to tell me a place like this only had one room left? The others must be condemned.”

She came to a stop in front of him. “No. I just don’t want to let you out of my sight. Position of power.”

Damn this woman and her constant need to exert some authority over him. His chest swelled, and a dozen nasty comments burned on the back of his tongue, all of which he refrained from saying.

She was driving him crazy. Now he had to spend the night with her.

That brought a smile to his face—if he was making her equally nuts, then this was going to be a fun night.

They grabbed their bags from the back, locked her vehicle and set off

toward the individual entrances.

When she slid the key into the lock and swung the door open, she stilled.

Tripp reached inside and flipped on the light, illuminating a dingy room with outdated furnishings and carpet, just as he expected.

And one bed.

He clapped her on the back as he pushed past her. “Guess you’ll have no trouble keeping an eye on me. Is that a double bed?”



“I’m just going to use the restroom.” Alexia could barely keep the whimper out of her voice.

Launching herself across the blue carpet that had seen better days—hell, better decades—she reached the flimsy door that wouldn’t keep in a single noise if she had a mental breakdown.

Quickly, she locked herself in the bathroom and braced her hands on the vanity to stare at the yellowed sink.

*Oh god.*

What had she done? Her plan to show Tripp who was boss hadn’t just backfired, it had its own mushroom cloud and radiation levels.

Now she wasn’t just sharing a room with the man but a *bed* too.

What he’d said about the motel being condemned wasn’t far off base—it was in the stages of a renovation with only a few rooms available. Unfortunately, getting Tripp his own room was out of the question because the only other one for use was at the opposite end of the building from her, and well, she *didn’t* trust him not to leave in the night, especially now that he knew she was investigating him.

Beyond the bathroom door, she heard thumping that was either Tripp making a heck of a lot of noise as he made his escape or him keeping up his exaggerated limp. She squeezed her eyes shut and released the low groan that had been bottled up in her throat for endless hours in the vehicle.

When they weren’t giving each other the silent treatment, they were arguing. Measuring dicks, as he so *eloquently* put it...

Or they were staring at each other.

Those stares were bothering her the most. What was it about him that made her want to just sit and drink him in like a fine French wine? Besides

needing him to solve this case...and okay, him being big and hot—and a bad boy—she could think of no earthly reason why she'd care to acknowledge his existence.

She'd caught him glancing her way a little too often as well. She worked with enough men to know when one showed interest toward her.

How long had she been in the bathroom? The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was taking so long because she was actually using the toilet. As far as Bryson Tripp was concerned, women didn't poop. Ever.

After washing up, she steeled herself and stepped into the room.

He stood near the door.

"Are you about to make a run for the mountains or are you guarding the door?" she asked.

"I know you're just chomping to send out an APB on me, but I'm not going anywhere, sweet cheeks. I'm heading to that crime scene with you."

He wasn't the only one who could act. With a purposeful swipe, she flipped her hair over her shoulder. "What did you just call me?"

God help her, the corner of his mouth twitched up in a bad-boy smile that would strip the clothes off some women.

Okay, not some women.

It was her—*she* was that woman.

His jeans hung low on his hips and that green cotton T-shirt molded to his body. Somehow his appearance outweighed the fact that he'd just insulted her with that very misogynistic pet name.

She swiped her tongue over her bottom lip, preparing to put him in his place, but all that came out was: "Maybe we should get some dinner."

He raked his gaze over her face. "You good?"

"Yup." She started toward the door, hoping he'd move out of the way.

He stood firmly in front of the exit. "You were in the bathroom a long time."

"I'm fine."

"You sure?"

She looked him dead in the eyes. "Tripp. I was fixing my lipstick. Okay?"

Her statement had the desired effect—he stopped talking and his focus landed on her mouth instead.

Maybe that wasn't so good.

With him distracted, she latched onto the door handle and made her escape. She made it halfway to the Humvee before he caught up with her. She slowed her gait—it sounded as if he was jogging.

She whipped around and he dragged his leg behind him.

“You can give up the act, Tripp. I already know you're not injured.”

“Can you repeat that? My mind's too riddled with pain to process it.”

She almost laughed. Digging her teeth into her bottom lip, she forced herself not to break down in giggles at how annoying—and amusing—the man was.

Once she was behind the wheel, she waited an eternity for Tripp to get into the vehicle. Punching the ignition button with her index finger, she breezed out, “Where to?”

He pointed at a red and white sign for a restaurant a short distance away.

At the sight of the peeling sign, she sighed and put the vehicle in gear. “Okay...diner slop it is.”

“Unless you want to drive another half hour, this is your only option.”

Luckily, the drive was short and Tripp didn't talk. A few minutes later, they pulled up in front of the grubby diner.

“I can smell the grease from here.” She cut the engine.

“That's good old-fashioned home cookin'.” He opened the door.

“Or the lead-up to a coronary event.”

He chuckled. “I'm sure they have some sort of salad option for you, Alexia. C'mon, I'm starving.”

They walked—or in his case, limped—into the place together. A waitress called, “Seat yourselves anywhere!”

Alexia pointed at a table for two. The booth seemed too intimate.

When they crossed the restaurant, Tripp's limp garnered a lot of attention. Several customers looked at him with concern or empathy in their gazes. The waitress stopped on her way to another table and hugged the coffeepot to her bosom with a sad expression on her face.

Ugh—was everybody buying into Tripp's act?

She leaned over to hiss at him. “If you were actually hurt, you would be seeking medical attention by now. You're not going to let an injury go when you make a living off your body.”

He grunted. “You make me sound like a male dancer.”

She almost faltered but made it to the vacant seat. The image of Bryson Tripp onstage, gyrating those muscular hips and wearing that bad-boy smirk left her panties feeling a little hot and steamy.

Luckily, they were only seated for heartbeats before a crusty-looking waitress showed up to take their orders.

Tripp pushed the laminated menu that was a little too sticky toward the waitress. “I’ll have two bacon cheeseburgers. A little pink inside. And a side of onion rings.”

Alexia leaned across the table. “You’re not sleeping in bed with me if you’re having onion rings.”

He captured her stare. “Fries, then.” He threw the waitress his dazzling smile. “Thank you.”

The waitress was of an undetermined age. She might be in her thirties or sixties. Her blonde hair could be graying. Either way, the poor woman was washed up, overworked and had probably been here since the day the doors opened.

She swung her gaze to Alexia. “And for you, hon?”

“I’ll take the grilled chicken breast and rice pilaf.”

“Sorry, that menu’s outdated. We don’t have rice anymore.”

“All right, I’ll take the broccoli cheddar soup.”

“Just dished up my last bowl.”

“What are my options?” Alexia couldn’t look at Tripp. Just seeing that smirk he probably wore made her want to smash the ketchup bottle over his head.

“Fries or onion rings, hon.” The waitress sounded tired too.

Feeling bad for the poor woman, Alexia went easy on her but held Tripp’s gaze as she said, “I’ll have the onion rings.”

Tripp’s snort gained a genuine smile from the waitress.

When she took their order to the cook, he settled his forearms on the table. “You really don’t want me sharing that bed with you, do you?”

Alexia smiled. “Not in the least.”

His deep laugh sent a throb low in her core. She spent the next ten minutes as they waited for their food thinking about why the man had any effect on her at all, let alone *that* kind of effect.

Since she traveled a lot and worked with a variety of people, Alexia was used to sharing meals with strangers. She wasn't prepared for Tripp squirting that much ketchup on the side of his plate, though.

While she meticulously sliced into her chicken breast, she shot him glances. When he dunked his burger into the puddle of ketchup, she paused mid-cut.

"What is that?" she asked.

He bit off an obnoxiously large bite and chewed for a solid minute before replying. "You've got a food thing too."

"No, I don't."

He arched a brow. "You have to finish all of one food before moving to the next."

She slid her eyes to her plate. "Not true."

"Yes, it is. Go on. Take a bite of those onion rings."

She looked at her unfinished chicken. "Uh ..."

"See?" His triumphant grin irritated her, but not nearly as much as the fact that she could not bring herself to eat an onion ring until all of her chicken breast was gone.

"I didn't even want those onion rings. I only got them to annoy you." She smiled at him sweetly and popped a bite of chicken in her mouth.

"Sure you did."

Their silence wasn't loaded despite the fact that she could be sitting across from a cold-blooded murderer. The more she thought about his niece's case, the more Alexia could see just how protective the man would be of a family member. Enough to hunt down her boyfriend and kill him, though?

Chicken finished, she picked up an onion ring and nibbled at the breading before giving up on them.

Tripp reached over and plucked one off her plate. Her jaw dropped when he took a bite and chewed.

"Did you seriously just steal my food?"

"Mm-hm. They're good. I don't know why you don't eat them."

"Maybe if you weren't so cheap. There are nicer places to eat at."

He spread his hands. "Where?"

At that moment, the waitress returned. "Are you going to offer your date some dessert? It's apple pie a la mode."

His warm brown eyes penetrated Alexia. “Do you want dessert?”

Did that question resonate with innuendo?

“No, thank you.”

He turned his attention to the waitress. “See? She’s watching her figure.”

“I am not! I’m just full.” Alexia thrust her shoulders back.

“I don’t know, hon. He’s pretty cute. I wouldn’t kick him out of bed for eating crackers...”

Tripp gulped back a laugh. “Just the check please.”

Alexia steamed as Tripp picked up the slip of paper the waitress ripped off her notepad. When he glanced at the tally, his lips twisted. “Wow, this place really is cheap.”

She sighed and waited for him to pay at the front. Her backside was glued to the seat. The more time she spent in the restaurant was less time she could be in bed. Next to a hunky special operator. Who she shouldn’t be aware of at all.

He showed up at the side of the table, and she was forced to meet his eyes.

She shoved her chair back. “I’m ready to go back to the room!”

A bracket appeared beside his upturned lips. “Yeahhh, I’m excited to get back there too.”

## Chapter Six

---

Tripp never expected to be enjoying himself. Least of all when the entire reason for him being with Alexia was to get a closer look at the murder scene.

His new favorite pastime might be annoying the shit out of the woman. She was so easy to taunt and fell right into his trap every single time. Honestly, he'd buy into Rafe's belief that she was stupid if not for what he saw for himself each time she spoke or even glanced Tripp's way.

The woman was smart. Clever. And driving him crazier by the second.

After she opened the motel door, he barged in behind her and headed straight for the bed so fast he almost forgot to limp.

He flopped onto the mattress. "Not too bad."

She reached for the zipper of the coat she hadn't yet removed in his presence. In seconds, she had the layer cast off and draped on the back of a cheap wooden chair. He didn't mean to look at her tits, but that was the first place he looked.

His gut stirred at the sight of her breasts—no more than a handful each—and a trim torso that her blouse was surprisingly tailored to.

That shirt should be the only thing she had on. And it should be unbuttoned.

A fantasy of the white cotton revealing a line of bare flesh and skimming the tops of her thighs had his cock swelling with desire.

She waved a hand. "I don't believe that bed isn't hard. Just look at it."

He patted the space beside him. "Test it for yourself."

Lips compressed, she moved to the opposite edge and sank to the bed.

God, she was so easy to lure in.

Unable to stop himself, he bounced, sending Alexia toppling onto her back. She rolled toward the center.

“You lied to me!” She braced a hand to keep from rolling into him.

He bounced up and down. A spring creaked. “Ohhh yeah, this thing’s seen a lot of miles.”

She threw herself onto her back and glared at the empty spot where a second bed had once been. “Why isn’t there another bed?”

“Look at the ceiling over there.”

She twisted her head to see what he was—a large brown water stain on the aged plaster. “Do you think it’s fixed?”

“No. It’s wet. It’s wet there now. See the carpet is darker?”

She groaned. “That can’t be good.”

He let his grin stretch. “Not as good as this big, comfy bed. We’re going to get so much rest, Alexia.”

She plastered her hand over her face.

With a laugh, he bounced off the bed, grabbed his bag and remembered to limp to the bathroom. “I’m gonna take a shower. If you fall asleep first, don’t hog all the covers.”

A pillow shot across the room and struck him in the back. When he switched on the shower, he was still chuckling.

But the minute he thought of Alexia stripping off her clothes and climbing between those sheets, he sobered.

The woman had guts, he had to hand it to her. Fortitude as well, to deal with him.

But there was the not-so-small issue that she thought he murdered Kelsey’s boyfriend.

If he’d found the motherfucker, he *would* have.

Even if Caden didn’t kill her, he’d left her alone and vulnerable for somebody else to do the job. Any man who left a loved one unprotected deserved to be buried in a shallow grave.

As he lathered up with the bar of cheap motel soap, Tripp mentally combed over the murder scene. Of course, he’d already been there a few times. Each time he drove there, he couldn’t bring himself to enter the house or even get out of the vehicle.

But when it came time to enter it with Alexia, he had no doubt that he would wear a deadpan expression and give away none of his emotions because they’d be locked deep inside where he was trained to keep them.

Alexia would be watching him closely too.

After his shower, he dressed in clean clothes from his duffel. A glance in the mirror revealed a hell of a bruise darkening on his thigh. Damn, the woman really got him good. He had half a mind to walk out in his boxer briefs and let her see the damage she'd done.

He'd last all of five seconds before he was sporting wood, though. Just being in her presence was starting to fill his head with too many lurid images of stripping her clothes off just to see the womanly curves he suspected were hidden beneath her androgenous detective garb.

Once he slipped on a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt, he stepped into the motel room.

His heart gave a hard lurch at the sight of Alexia lying on her side. She'd removed her boots and untucked her blouse, but that was as cozy as she got.

The view of her trim hips barely dipped at her waist. Tripp's cock jerked behind his fly. Just as he guessed—Alexia had one of those lean, toned bodies and what curves she lacked she made up for with those legs.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. Christ, those legs. He wanted to spread them and—

Her voice broke through his rampant thoughts. "Feel free to sleep on the floor."

"It's wet."

"I know." A smile filled her tone, which brought a grin to his face.

He walked to the bed and stretched out with his arms stacked under his head and his dick hard enough to pierce metal. He'd never slept next to a woman without putting his hands on her. If Alexia were unattractive, this would be much, much easier.

"It seems like you're teetering on the edge of the mattress. There's a good foot of space, you know," he said.

"I'm good."

"Suit yourself." The hour was much earlier than Tripp might retire on base, but he'd learned early in his military career to catch some shut-eye whenever the opportunity presented itself.

He was just starting to drift off when Alexia said, "Do you hear that dripping sound?"

"Yes," he rumbled.

Now that she'd pointed it out, he was aware of a steady *tap-tap* of water hitting the floor. By morning, the carpet would be even wetter.

*If I roll over, Alexia will be wetter too.*

Several more minutes passed.

The mattress heaved as she flipped onto her back. "How can you sleep with that noise?"

"Hm?"

The flat of her hand slammed into his arm. "The dripping. How can you sleep through it?"

"This is white noise to me."

She let out a low moan that would wake Tripp even if he'd already been dead a week. That sound...the low rasp rippling past her lips...had his heart pounding and his balls throbbing.

"What have I done?" she asked herself.

"I'm starting to ask myself the same thing."



The weak scent of coffee wafted to Alexia's nostrils but it wasn't strong enough to alert her brain that she should wake up and drink some. Then she heard humming.

She cracked an eye. Oh god, this was no nightmare—she really *was* sharing a room with Tripp.

His broad back was to her, those shoulders rivaling the size of the Humvee she'd hit him with. And that ass...

He stood at the table, fiddling with something she couldn't see. But when he turned, she saw the source of the coffee smell *and* the humming.

She issued a throaty noise. "What time is it?"

"0400. I thought you'd want to get an early start."

"It's not even light outside."

"We have a lot more hours to drive, remember."

She slung an arm over her eyes. "How many hours of sleep did you get?"

"Five or so. A full night's rest."

She scoffed. "Of course you're happy running on five hours of sleep."

"I've had sleep deprivation. That's how you get into the SEALs." He wasn't just happy. The man was *perky*.

He crossed the room, a foam cup in hand. “Wakey wakey.”

“You’re not going to leave me alone until I am sitting upright, are you?”

Wordlessly, he held out the coffee.

She pushed into a sitting position and extended a hand for the cup.

He contemplated her. “Ohhh, you definitely look like you need more sleep.”

She glared at him. “Why does it always come down to looks?”

Brown eyes glittered with amusement. “It’s an expression, princess.”

She took the coffee and brought it to her lips. Just as she suspected, it tasted as weak as it smelled. “What did you brew? Brown water?”

“Not my fault the motel has cheap...well, everything. I just knew you’d be grumpy, and I was right. We’ve *got* to get some caffeine in you, stat.”

“Stat? That’s a medical thing.”

“If it comes in an IV, even better. You’re *really* grumpy.” He threw her a smile that made her want to hurl the cup at him, but he was right—she *needed* that caffeine, even if it was diluted to a few grounds per ounce of water.

As she sipped, she watched him putter around the room. He shoved what appeared to be a shaving kit into his duffel and zipped it shut. That brought her attention to his jaw.

His freshly shaved, square jaw.

She sniffed the air and, sure enough, detected a hint of sandalwood from his shaving cream or maybe aftershave.

After she polished off the coffee, he was there to take the cup. When she reluctantly swung her legs over the side of the bed, her socked feet sank into

—  
“Agh!”

Moist carpet.

He looked her over. “Bedbug get you?”

“No! The carpet’s soaked!”

“Told ya that roof’s leaking. You’ll feel better after a nice hot shower.” He grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her around to face the bathroom.

When he gave her a pat on the ass to nudge her in that direction, she froze. With a deadly glare over her shoulder, she growled, “Don’t ever do that again.”

He laughed.

The...man...laughed.

She could still feel the imprint of his fingers on her ass as she marched into the bathroom and slammed the door. She could turn him in for sexual harassment.

But he could turn her in for assault with a vehicle.

The minute she looked in the mirror, she stifled a scream. God, her hair! She looked like a drowned possum. Her fine hair always tangled badly, but between the horrible crunchy pillow and hard mattress—and every single movement Tripp made—her restless night showed.

She flattened her hair with her hands, but she had to face the fact that she might have to give in and go with the Founding Father ponytail just to be presentable.

A quick shower—the water was hot at least—didn't do much to wake her up. Nor did that awful coffee.

Clean clothes and a hairbrush boosted her spirit the tiniest bit.

She paused with her hand near the tube of lipstick in her bag. Did she dare apply it?

The memory of Tripp's gaze locked on her mouth and how it made her stomach dip rolled through her mind.

She picked up the tube and smeared it over her pout with as much precision as she could on so little sleep.

When she walked out, his stare hit hers...then slid to her mouth.

A jolt hit her core. God, it was far too early in the day to start *this* again. She didn't have time for battling attraction or whatever it was she felt—and she certainly didn't want it to lead anywhere with Tripp.

He dangled the key fob in front of her face. "I'll drive."

She made a snatch for it, and he jerked his hand away before she could clamp her fingers around the object.

"Give it to me, Tripp."

"Told ya—I'm driving. You got your bag, or do you want me to carry it for you?"

"I got it," she grated through her clenched teeth.

He held up the fob again for her to take, but when she made another grab at it, he pulled his hand away.

“Dammit, Tripp.”

“I’ll give it to you outside.” He took off to the door.

“I see you lost your limp.”

He tossed a look over his shoulder. “Fast healer. I see you still aren’t holding the key fob.”

She hated him.

“I hate you,” she said as they reached the Humvee.

Did he mean for his grin to send her off the rails?

He strode around the vehicle. “You know what I went through to become a SEAL? Or the type of training it took to be part of this ops team? You can’t hurt me with your words.”

He was thriving on this.

He was also driving. Dammit.

She let out a resigned grunt and tossed her bag in the back. His landed beside hers.

Call her petty, but she didn’t like the thought of even their bags touching, so she tugged hers a few inches away before climbing into the passenger seat.

As soon as her backside hit the leather, Tripp said, “Was that really necessary?”

She raised her brows. “What?”

He purposely twisted to look at their bags on the back seat.

After following his gaze, she whipped around to face forward again. “Yes.”

“You really are grumpy in the morning.”

“Would you quit saying that? I’m not grumpy because it’s morning. Did you ever stop to think you’re causing said grumpiness?”

“Not really.” God, his voice was so chipper it was grating, but in contrast, the dash lights cast his teeth with a blue glow that lent him an almost wolfish appearance.

A shiver ran through her. She couldn’t forget that this man was a military-trained killer or forget her reason for being with him.

He turned his attention to the road. “Sit back and relax. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us.”

At his suggestion, she immediately felt her body relax into the contours

of the seat. The second she realized what she'd done, annoyance swept through her. What was it about his deep rumbling voice that made her want to *listen*?

A glance at the speedometer also revealed that he was much more confident driving on the slick road at a higher speed than she had been the previous day.

*That's only because I don't want to pitch us off the side of the mountain.*

He didn't seem to have any of those concerns, though.

The movement of the vehicle lulled her. Before long, the warm air blowing through the vents enveloped her body.

Next thing she knew, daylight broke through the dark haze in her brain.

"Rise and shine, princess." The energetic tone made her pinch her eyes shut harder rather than open them.

She inwardly moaned. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Yup. You even snored."

Her eyes snapped open, and she jerked her head to look at him. "Did not."

"Whatever you say."

She folded her arms over her chest. "I never sleep in the car. I don't know what happened."

"You didn't get much rest last night."

"No doubt, when *someone* was taking up the entire bed."

The sun had risen while she slept. Bands of light stretched across the mountain range and turned the ice into a glistening kingdom. Myriad shades of blue from ice blue to steel stretched as far as the eye could see and even mingled with the faint, pale blue-gray of the sky.

Alexia sat up straighter in her seat to get a better view.

"Gum?" Tripp extended a pack to her.

"Uh...thanks." She took a piece and unwrapped it. Did her breath smell? What did she care anyway? It wasn't like she was going to kiss anybody.

The flavor of mint filled her mouth, making her think of how Tripp would taste.

How they'd taste to each other.

"Maybe we got off on the wrong foot," she said.

Tripp's jaw flexed as he chomped on his own piece. "Wrong foot? You mean wrong tire."

"Ugh. You just couldn't resist."

"In my line of work, I never pass up an opportunity."

She froze at his words. Could he mean... No, surely a man like Tripp wouldn't slip up and hint that he'd taken the opportunity to kill his niece's boyfriend.

Stealing a peek at his face, she found him completely unaffected by his pronouncement, which left her wondering if she was reading into it all too much. Just because he *could* kill a man who'd hurt his family member didn't mean he *did*.

When his phone buzzed, she half expected her own to ring too. It seemed like every time one of them was on the phone, so was the other.

Tripp held the phone out to her. "That's Rafe."

She eyed the device. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"I'd love to reply, but I can't text and drive. I can't have an accident in a government vehicle now, can I?" He arched a brow.

"You want me to text for you? Now I'm your secretary?"

"I prefer to think of you as my personal assistant." He continued to hold the phone out.

"I'm not your personal assistant."

He cocked his head. "Would you rather be my big, big helper?"

She snarled. "Have I mentioned..."

"You hate me? Once. Or maybe twice? I think I heard you mumble it under your breath back at the restaurant."

Heaving a sigh, she snatched the device from him. She swiped the screen and was surprised when the phone opened.

"You don't have a passcode lock."

"Don't need one. I don't have anything to hide. Do you?" When he narrowed his eyes, she swore they smoldered. Actually smoldered.

"Of course not." She skimmed the text message. "Rafe expects a check-in."

"Tell him we're five hours out."

After she typed the response, she covertly scrolled through the conversation. None of the information was classified and didn't even seem to

be about ops. There was mention of a football game and...s'mores?

She moved to another text, this one with another member of the MT Ops team. Though she didn't know the identity of the contact by the nickname at the top, the conversation seemed to be full of teasing and talk about someone's next Friday night conquest.

Dammit, this was all so...likeable.

Why did Tripp get to be the nice guy that everybody liked *and* be so happy in the mornings?

The phone buzzed in her hand, alerting her that Rafe responded.

*Good morning, Alexia. I see Tripp is driving.*

Her mouth popped open. *How did you know?*

*Tripp doesn't talk like this.*

She glanced at the message she'd sent. It seemed simple enough. Clear and concise. What about "*we are five hours out from the crime scene*" alerted Rafe that Tripp hadn't written the text?

Then realization hit her.

She stared at Tripp's profile. "Wait a minute. If we're still five hours away, are we even going to make it back tonight?"

## Chapter Seven

---

Alexia wasn't exactly talkative. Part of Tripp wondered what the hell was going on in that—probably brilliant—mind of hers. The other part of him just wanted to get this over with and put as much space between them as possible.

Judging by her quick wit, he guessed that she was a good conversationalist. And that made him want to draw her out of her silence.

Not that he needed to break the silence. With women he'd dated in the past, he actually preferred it if they *didn't* talk. They all wanted to know what he did to get his muscles or what put that permanent scowl on his face. Since everything he did was classified—hell, MT Ops wasn't even public knowledge—he didn't have much to say.

But the five-hour drive had turned into eight when they hit more frozen spots on the shadowed side of the mountain and then a bout of freezing rain.

Alexia tilted her head side to side, stretching her neck muscles. That drew his attention to the column of her throat. Her skin was on the paler side, which made him think she spent a lot of time indoors, most likely at a desk.

Tripp sported a tan year-round, first as a SEAL in a lot of hot foreign countries, and now he received the sun reflecting off the snow.

Her skin looked a little too delicate, too easy to mark.

He got rough with his kisses. He liked to nip and bite. On that creamy skin, he'd leave red marks. Maybe even small bruises if he weren't careful with her.

Not that he was planning to touch her. She threw off “keep away” vibes like most women gave him “take me home” looks.

“How long have you been working as a detective?”

His question had her shifting out of her slouched position. “Long enough. I specialized in forensics and it wasn't very long before I started solving cases that other people couldn't. Within a few years, they started handing me cold cases.”

He'd spent a lot of time thinking over Kelsey's case. So much time, in fact, that he could almost separate himself from it.

Almost.

"Once we get to the crime scene, do you think you'll be able to see the evidence for what it really is?" he asked.

She pierced him with her gaze. "I know you aren't insinuating I'm bad at my job."

"Not bad. Maybe allowing your perception to cloud facts."

"Look, Tripp, we're both straight shooters. Just come out and say what's on your mind." When she looked down her nose at him like that, he wanted to stop the Humvee, yank her out of the seat and kiss her.

The exact opposite of how any other man's mind worked. The men he fought with wanted nothing to do with difficult women, and here he was lusting over one who wasn't only a pain in the ass, but suspected him of murder too.

"I think you see me as your answer to solving the case."

"How so?"

Did she have to pout her full lips that way too? Christ, now he was getting hard, and the timing couldn't be worse.

"I'm the easy answer. A guy who knows how to kill. How to hide bodies."

She stared at him.

"I have a personal stake in the game. My niece was like a little sister to me, and we were damn close. But that doesn't mean you're going to dig up anything on me, princess."

"Stop calling me that. I'm not a princess, and I sure as hell don't like pet names."

*Oh, we'll see about that. When you're writhing underneath me, I bet you'll like everything I call you.*

He had to stop these divergent thoughts before he got himself in deeper trouble.

"Is there a Mr. Alexia?"

She leveled him in a look. "Is that any of your business?"

"Just making small talk. And before you go into analyzation mode, no, I'm not getting friendly with you in order to inspire your sympathy toward

me and get myself off the hook. *Especially* when I don't have anything to hide."

"We'll see." Her breezy tone brought a laugh to his lips.

"Yes, we will." He shot her a grin. "So...Mr. Alexia?"

"Doesn't exist."

"Not even a boyfriend?"

"What do you care?" She twisted in her seat, angling her body toward him. One brush of his knuckles over her flesh would bring a pink heat to the surface. What would happen if he spread her thighs and buried himself between them?

Before he could respond to her question, she blurted, "No boyfriend. No husband. No significant other. Not even a pet."

"Just your love for the chase."

Their gazes locked. "I wonder," he murmured.

"What do you wonder?" Her tone was a little breathless.

"You're so passionate about your job, I can't help but wonder what you'd do for something as powerful as love."

Her jaw dropped. "Do you talk to your teammates like this?"

He laughed again. "Actually, you'd be surprised what we talk about. How deep we can dive after the heat of battle."

"Is that why you were texting someone called 'Guns' about his next Friday night conquest?"

A deep chuckle rumbled beginning in the pit of his stomach, from some spot he hadn't accessed in a very long time. "I'm not surprised you went through all my texts."

"Not all of them."

"No...just the important ones. Guns is what we call Nick Denver. I'm sure you've read the files of every man on my team."

She folded her arms over her chest.

"He's the weapons sergeant, so Guns is a pretty tame nickname compared to what we could give him."

"Or what the ladies call him," she shot back.

He couldn't quit grinning. Or laughing. He couldn't help it—he liked her mind. A lot.

That coupled with that hot-as-sin body that he wanted to bend to fit his made for some very lewd thoughts about Detective Alexia Oaks.

Finally, her stiff façade cracked. She compressed her lips, but a smile wobbled on her pretty face. Then she let out...a giggle.

His cock that had been hovering between slightly aroused and turned on hit *full mast* in a blink. His shaft swelled against his fly, and his brain found another challenge.

Make Alexia laugh...right before he buried himself deep inside her.



The closer they got to the scene of his niece's murder, the more quiet and withdrawn Tripp became.

Alexia couldn't help but take mental notes about the change in him. In a very short time, he went from laughing and teasing to the sullen, unyielding man next to her.

She stole a glance at his profile. The corner of his lips appeared white. Every muscle in his body seemed to hum with its own frequency of tension, right down to his long fingers clamped on the steering wheel.

His knuckles were grazed with light brown hair but the skin was white from his tight grip. Dare she say death grip?

Was this man really capable of taking matters into his own hands and killing his niece's murderer?

Yes. She was certain that under extreme circumstances, anybody was capable of violence. But she was having a difficult time figuring him out.

Would he brag about being able to hide bodies knowing that she was looking for evidence of just that? He spoke so matter-of-factly about the case...yet right now, he looked like he wanted to be *anywhere* but here.

Kelsey and her boyfriend had lived off the beaten path, and on a more remote area of the mountains, but they weren't so far out that they were isolated. Patches of woods separated the properties. This raised many questions in the minds of every investigator. The neighbors never heard a thing. Not a single camera picked up suspicious activity.

And there weren't any prints to speak of. Of course, that was due to the local authorities making a mess of the investigation. No search dogs were brought to the scene at the time. What forensics they had were bad and slow. Whenever she thought of what should have been done versus what *was* done,

her teeth ached from grinding them.

She picked up a barely detectable noise coming from Tripp. A low trickle of air expelled from his nostrils.

In her line of work, she saw a lot of grieving family members, and he was definitely one.

The long driveway leading to the simple ranch home in the wilderness wound through the trees into the clearing. The house sat there, still and empty. Looking almost sad that its inhabitants were gone.

Tripp's Adam's apple bobbed on a hard swallow.

"Park there." She pointed out the spot of snow that hadn't yet melted.

He parked the Humvee but didn't move. Just stared straight ahead.

"Tripp?"

When he twisted his head to meet her stare, she felt a punch to the stomach at the expression of deep torment in his eyes.

She always kept a professional distance from things like this. But right now, seeing that bald pain on his face, she got too close.

"You okay to go through with this?" she asked.

Her question swiped the look off his face, and he replaced it with a cool blank mask.

"I'm fine. I've been here before."

With that, he shoved open the door and jumped out of the SUV. She did the same, and their paths converged in front of the vehicle.

As they approached the sage-green front door, Alexia suddenly wondered if his niece had picked out the color. If her boyfriend had painted it himself.

A planter sat next to the door, the dried twigs of some fall planting poking up through the thin layer of snow on top. On the door a wreath hung in a macabre welcome.

Without hesitation, Tripp reached into his pocket and withdrew a key.

Shock rippled through Alexia. "You have a...key to the house?"

His gaze slid to her. "I told you we were close."

So he had access to the home. No reason for forced entry that was suspected but the cops hadn't found evidence of. He simply could have walked in and killed the boyfriend.

He quickly opened the door and waved for her to enter first. She stepped

into the quiet, stale space. The place wasn't tidy in the least, not after what the local PD had done to it. And after that, the cleaners had come to make sure the blood was cleaned up.

Tripp paused in the doorway for a long heartbeat.

Alexia slid into work mode. Stepping around him, she accidentally brushed against his big, hard body.

He caught her by the upper arm and held her there. Her lips parted on a gasp as she stared up at him.

"You should let me check the place out. Just in case there's a squatter."

He was going alpha protector on her?

She reached inside her coat for the weapon strapped on her side. "No need for heroics. I can take care of myself."

As she started forward, Tripp's fingers grazed over her arm, leaving parts of her tingling. Snapping her mind to attention took far more than it should have after that unexpected touch.

When she reached a closed door, a big shoulder nudged her aside.

Tripp forced her back a step and whipped the door open to reveal a pantry with shelves lined with food.

"What do you think you're doing, taking over for me? I told you I can take care of myself."

"And I'm not questioning that. I'm just not standing here while someone much smaller and weaker than me sweeps the house."

She was so astounded by his highhandedness, his archaic beliefs of the world from a special operator's point of view, that she only stood there when he said, "It'll only take me a minute." And took off through the house.

Alexia watched his broad back vanish through the kitchen doorway, the muscles competing for attention under the cotton of his shirt.

She scrubbed a finger between her brows. What just happened? Had she actually let Tripp take over? Eric would be shaking his head and saying he'd told her so. Her partner would have more than a few questionable—and misogynistic — things to add to it.

Seconds later, Tripp returned as promised. He looked her over. "You good?"

"Of course." Why was she sweating?

"You can put your weapon away now. We're alone."

Strain in his voice made her search his eyes. The depths held shadows even darker than what he'd revealed to her in the SUV.

What had he seen while sweeping these rooms?

She needed to get control—of herself, the situation and Tripp too.

She holstered her weapon. He followed the movement, gaze lingering around the open zipper of her coat.

Even sweatier now, she sliced her fingers through her hair she hadn't bothered to put in that Founding Father ponytail. "Let me walk you through what I think happened here that night."

"Fine." His expression gave nothing away. He could be mentally doing his tax return or having a breakdown. She couldn't read him.

She tipped her head. "This way."

He followed her through the kitchen. "What we know is that Kelsey was home at nine p.m. Her time of death is estimated to be between nine-thirty and ten. Her boyfriend—"

"Caden," he ground out.

Her stare met his for a shivering heartbeat. What was she hearing in his voice?

"Caden," she affirmed. "He was out of the house. He was a delivery driver who sometimes got home late from his long-distance runs."

"Motherfucker."

Alexia cleared her throat. "Moving on to the living room. There was mud on the carpet. Here"—she pointed—"and here. By the time he reached the other side of the room, the mud had worked off the soles of someone's shoes but residue was found all the way into the bedroom. The size of the shoe wasn't determined due to how wet it was out that night."

When she twisted to see if he was following her progression through the house, she found him staring at her. Hard.

Her insides... Was that a churning sensation or a ripple of awareness? He was looking at her like he was listening to something she wasn't saying. His full focus was trained on her in a way that she had that feeling moving lower into her belly.

She continued on, pointing out things that had been discovered by the cops days after neither Kelsey nor Caden showed up for work and family members grew concerned.

They reached the bedroom. The space had been cleaned. The blood gone. But Tripp froze in the doorway.

Wishing to put him at ease as quickly as possible, Alexia rushed through the rest of the scenario. “There were signs of a struggle. The covers on the bed messed up. Half on the floor. I think Caden came home that night and they had a fight. Something snapped in him and he killed her.”

Tripp’s eyes moved around the room, settling on nothing until they hit her. “You make it sound easy. Black-and-white.”

She cocked a brow. “Isn’t it?”

“You almost had it. I know better.”

Her insides felt like someone latched on to them with tough fingers and squeezed. In that moment, she realized she didn’t want Tripp to know a thing about this case. She didn’t want him to be involved at all.

## Chapter Eight

---

Tripp liked watching Alexia in action. At least she was trying to come up with a scenario that was different from the police report.

He waved a hand at the surroundings he couldn't focus his vision on. "You almost had it. I know better."

Her spine straightened with the surprise that showed clear on her beautiful face. "What do you know?"

Wordlessly, he turned away from the room and strode to the kitchen. When he stopped, Alexia bumped into him.

A soft "*Oof!*" came from her right before she pushed away.

He reached out to steady her but she'd already put space between them.

He scanned the kitchen, wishing the cleanup crew hadn't taken away evidence and put things in their place, yet thankful at the same time. No way could he walk into that bedroom and see blood on the floor.

"What do you know, Tripp?" Alexia narrowed her eyes on him.

"I know the inner workings of their relationship. I know they had a fight, you're right about that."

"Okay..."

"Were the lights in the kitchen on?"

She nodded. "The one over the kitchen sink."

He rocked a little as if the cold creeping over him was really a gust of icy mountain wind. "How many spoons?"

Her jaw dropped. "How do you know about the spoons? Did you get access to my preliminary report?"

He hadn't. He just knew.

"Answer the question."

"Two spoons. Laid out on the counter with one bowl."

His stomach dipped, but he only took a second to recover. "Here's what

happened.” He moved to the sink and flipped on the light over it. “This light is the bat signal.”

She gaped at him. “I don’t follow.”

“Think of this. It’s dark outside, but somebody could see through that window”—he pointed—“and the light is enough for them to see there’s a bowl on the table and two spoons. Kelsey and Caden *did* fight that night, but the spoons and bowl were Kelsey’s signal to Caden that she was ready to make up.”

Alexia’s eyes widened.

“They always shared a bowl of ice cream after a fight. One bowl. Two spoons.” He studied her face for a reaction. Talking about this was never easy, but talking to Alexia made it more about facts and evidence rather than pain.

She twisted to look at the light and then the counter where the bowl had sat. “So I’m right? He came home and was too angry to make up?”

“That I don’t know. Either way, the question has always been where he wandered off to.”

She stared up at him. “You don’t think he’s dead too?”

He huffed out a grunt. Of course she still believed he was involved.

“Not likely unless he took care of himself. After seeing this scene, I don’t think that the cops got it right at all.”

“How much of that report did you read, Bryson?”

The sound of his name rolling off her tongue had his attention. Up until this moment, she’d called him Tripp. Why the change? Maybe she was getting more personal hoping that he’d break down and give her a confession. But he wasn’t about to say he killed a man when he didn’t.

Yet.

“The police report didn’t say much and we both know it. I never got my hands on your report.” Though he’d attempted to hack the system and get access several times from his mountain retreat. “I know your report already has it wrong too. But I’m guessing your purpose in coming here with me is to decide whether or not I’m responsible for Caden’s disappearance.”

She widened her stance and folded her arms in a pose that was pure tough girl detective. “Are you?”

He faced her, letting her get a good look at him. “I think you know I

didn't do it, but it's the only answer you have as to why the guy hasn't popped up on the grid during the nine months since it happened. But think of this—I already proved you wrong about what happened that night.”

Their gazes locked for a minute in a battle of wills.

Out of the blue, his mind jumped to how *they* would make up after a fight. He could live without the ice cream. Plundering kisses and lifting Alexia onto the counter to take his cock would be a better start.

“I'm a little surprised at what you know.” Her admission snapped him back to reality. “You clearly know a lot about your niece and her personal life. More than the police could ever find out.”

He nodded.

She glanced around the space again. “So Caden comes inside for a makeup snack and then things go sideways. Do you think they kept arguing?”

He had to ask.

It was time to ask.

“I need to see the pictures.”

Alexia's chest inflated with a deep inhalation. “You sure you want to do that?”

“Yes,” he ground out.

“Okay. Let me pull them up.” She withdrew her phone and after flipping for a moment, handed him the phone.

His stomach pitched. A ball of disgust and grief welled in his throat, but he managed to swallow it down and hold it together. When he thrust the phone back at her, Alexia didn't close her fingers around it before he let go and nearly dropped it.

He steeled himself for what was to come. “Let's take a look around the bedroom.”



Alexia didn't need to see the photos again. It was enough that she'd seen Tripp's face.

*Of course* it hit him hard. Few people could be immune to seeing such a thing, and her heart went out to the man.

Now he was trying to impersonate rock-hard granite, revealing nothing of his true emotions that had to be popping up like forest fires inside him

right now.

He pointed to the bedroom carpet. “She was here. But the furniture was rearranged from the layout I saw before.”

She blinked. “Are you sure?”

He scuffed his knuckles along his sharp jawline. “Yes, the bench wasn’t at the foot of the bed. It was along that wall with some blankets stacked on it.” He gestured to the spot.

She held her breath, waiting to hear what he said next. “This stuff wasn’t in the report.”

“Probably because that was bungled and we both know it.”

“My guess is the bench was moved because the cleaners had to move it and failed to put it back exactly as they found it,” she said.

He tipped his head. “Or they did put it back where they found it...and it was moved before they got here.”

Her eyes widened.

Together, she and Tripp lurched forward. They knelt near the wall and Tripp hooked a finger under the carpet. Sure enough, the side was detached from the carpet tack strips that held it securely down. When he pulled it back to reveal a bloodstain, she sucked in a gasp and he went completely stone still.

Several long heartbeats passed. She watched his Adam’s apple bob in his throat and catch at the top as though he couldn’t force himself to swallow.

His words came out very slowly. “The light in the kitchen caught the attention of the killer.”

She almost fell over from her crouched position. “What!”

He looked at her, eyes cold. “You heard me. What if Caden didn’t kill her at all? What if the makeup snack brought someone else in the house first? Then when Caden came in the house, he interrupted the murder?”

He pulled back the carpet even further.

Alexia cried out.

A knife lay hidden in a place that most people would never think to look. Not even the cleanup crew.

Could Tripp really know more than he was letting on?

“Goddammit.” He flipped the carpet back down, hiding the knife again. “You can pick that up later. Or photograph it. Whatever you need to do.” He

straightened and walked out of the room.

Stunned, Alexia watched him go for a moment.

Then she shoved to her feet and rushed after him. “Where are you going?”

He continued to the front of the house. “To the woods. I’m pretty sure the boyfriend is dead.”

“And you know this how?”

He yanked the door open with enough force to rip it off the hinges. It slammed off the inner wall with a *bang* that made Alexia jump.

Without a word, he strode outside and hit the snow-covered yard.

“Dammit!” She quickly shut the door and ran after Tripp.

He stopped dead in his tracks and looked around. She didn’t slam into him this time and moved up next to him. His fists were clenched as he swung his head to look around. The day was overcast and the mountains and trees made it even dimmer.

“What would happen if I came across my girlfriend being murdered?” He raised a hand and pointed. “There. The neighbor’s light.”

“You think Caden interrupted the murderer and ran for help?”

Tripp’s gritty tone carried an edge of fury that raised a shudder in her. “I hope you’re wearing your boots, Alexia, because we’re going for a trek through the woods.”

A shiver blasted through her that had nothing to do with the cold temperature and everything to do with hiking through the dense, dim woods in search of a body.

Not that she was squeamish. But she wasn’t the first responder on crime scenes. She only came in after the blood had been cleared away, and that she only saw in photographs after the case hit a dead end.

“Uhh...can it wait until morning? It’s so dark and the woods are thick.”

He pivoted to look at her. His eyes blazed. “Either we do this now or we spend another night and come back at peak daylight hours. That means getting another hotel room.”

Her stomach bottomed out. Another night in a hotel room with Bryson sounded like a very bad idea. Even in separate beds, she’d be far too aware of every move and noise he made.

“Fine. Let’s take a look around. I’ll get the flashlights out of the

Humvee.” When she turned, the toe of her boot snagged on something. She pitched forward. The ground came rushing at her face.

Strong arms wrapped around her. Warm, firm arms that hauled her up against a very hard, muscled body.

As she tipped her head to look up at Bryson, the air punched out of her lungs. He tugged her even closer until his body heat scorched through her layers of clothes and teased her skin.

He issued a quiet groan as if he were the one who’d nearly face-planted into the snow. “You’re taller than I thought.”

She blinked. “I...” *Want you. Naked and moving inside me.* “Still hate you.”

She sounded so out of breath. This was the worst possible time to feel attraction for any guy, let alone one who was *all* wrong.

He hovered over her, leaning closer until his lips were inches away and slid one hand lower on her spine to pull her even tighter against him. The unmistakable bulge in his jeans left her panting with want.

She stared at his mouth—firm lips that took her breath away when he smiled. And when he wasn’t smiling, she could easily visualize what his enemies must see right before their lives flashed before their eyes.

Drawing in a breath was a mistake because all she could smell was him. Even that cheap motel soap he’d used in the shower smelled good when mixed with his personal manly scent.

“I really...” She darted her tongue over her dry lips.

“Hate me. I know.” He dropped his mouth closer.

The wind gusted at them, causing the trees around them to shake off the icy flakes sticking to the branches. When snow plopped on her shoulder, it broke the moment.

As she stepped away from Bryson, her body retaliated by popping a thousand goosebumps as if her skin was still reaching for him.

Oh god, that was close. Too close for her sanity.

She couldn’t kiss him. He was a suspect under investigation. The minute she let down her guard and gave up control to a man was the minute she might as well hand over the case to someone else because nobody would take her seriously, least of all Bryson.

And when did she start thinking of him as Bryson anyway? Maybe she

had when she hit him with the vehicle, but she was rattled then. He was *Tripp*.

She saw him differently now, though. She could only see the man who was shaken up after seeing those photos of his loved one and who had frozen at the sight of the weapon hidden under the carpet.

She hated how affected he was in that moment—she'd seen the internal battle raging in his eyes before he walked out. His strong emotions...shook her up.

Crap—she still had to collect the knife too, and she didn't want him in the room when she did. She could slip into the house and do that before grabbing the flashlights. "I'm..." *Going to find it impossible to stop thinking about your mouth. On every part of my body.* "Going to the vehicle."

He nodded but didn't try to stop her or go himself. When she walked away from him, his fists were clenched at his sides, as if he wanted to grab her again and maybe follow through with whatever put that look on his handsome face.

## Chapter Nine

---

Tripp hadn't felt so knotted up over a woman in a long time. What was it about Alexia? She was pretty enough. Beautiful, even. But he'd been with plenty of striking women and none of them affected him like this.

Part of him already knew the answer to that question. He wanted to prove her wrong about him. He didn't want to be seen as a killer in her eyes.

Did she really think of him that way? The woman had wanted that kiss just as damn bad as he did. Maybe she got a thrill from thinking he could commit a crime like that.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. Neither the brisk wind nor the reason they were out here in the woods in low light conditions wiped the thought of capturing Alexia's lips from his mind.

She switched on a flashlight and handed it to him.

"I was capable of turning it on myself." Great—he was grumbling. That was a bad sign. When he got too pent-up—in this case, in need of release—he got grumpy.

A tendril of straight hair blew across her face, and she swiped it away with a gloved hand. The action made him want to grab her hand and remove her glove just to feel her body heat.

Right before he placed her hand over his dick.

He growled, and her gaze shot to his. A heartbeat pulsed between them.

"Why don't we search in a grid pattern?"

Her suggestion had his lips quirking. "Trying to put some distance between us?"

She cocked her head in an I'm-so-done-with-you manner. "I'm just practical. This is how we're taught in the procedurals."

"I know, but usually there are more people."

When she switched on her own light, it was pointed at his eyes. The

beam seared directly into his brain stem.

“Sorry,” she said all too sweetly.

“Sure you are.” He blinked to bring his pupils back to a normal size and once he could see without halos of light in his vision, he fixed her with a glare.

He pointed at the neighbor’s light in the distance. “You start from here and walk toward that light. I’ll start over there.”

She nodded and set off walking in a slow sweep. The snow was thicker among the trees where the sunlight rarely broke through the canopy, but the walking was easy compared to much of the terrain Tripp navigated on a daily basis.

After a few steps, he glanced over at Alexia. She moved parallel to him in slow steps, her flashlight beam gliding across the small bumps of snow that concealed roots or branches like the one she’d tripped over earlier.

He clenched his fist, practically feeling her body under his hand. He wanted to feel her body under *his*.

Maybe a good hard fuck would work her out of his system and release some of the frustration she filled him with.

After a few more steps, she stopped. The line of her shoulders tensed.

Then he heard the noise of twigs breaking under the weight of feet.

Tripp never stopped to think before he was bounding around a thick tree and rushing toward her. When he threw his body in front of her, he kept a firm grip on her arm.

“What—”

“Shh!”

She silenced, and they both listened to the sound that seemed to be moving off in another direction, away from the house with the outdoor light.

Her body heat scorched over his side as she stepped up beside him so close that their bodies touched.

He twisted to look at her. “You okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. What was that noise? It sounded like somebody walking.”

“*Something* more than likely. A deer or a neighbor’s dog.”

She shivered. “Maybe I should have taken you up on that hotel room.”

His stare narrowed on her. Her elegant features and pale skin shouldn’t

make him feel even more protective of her, yet he still felt the rush of adrenaline in his veins. Fact was, he would have killed for her.

His hand moved on its own. Suddenly, he gently nudged her chin up with his knuckle.

“Bryson...”

“That’s the second time you’ve used my name. Next time I want to hear you moaning it.” He swooped in and laid claim to her lips.

As soon as he crushed her plump mouth under his, a rumble ripped from his throat. And god help him, she softened in his grip.

Her body moved into his hands. Looping her hand around his neck, she pulled him in while he plundered her mouth. When he slipped his tongue through her defenses, she let out a gasp that sounded too much like a moan.

Her taste was pure woman. His cock pulsed hard against his fly, and he forgot about their reason for being together in the first place. Only one thought settled in his brain—get her to a bed. Now.

Even as his brain mentally mapped out the location of the nearest motel, he lost himself in the kiss. When she pulled back, he followed her. No way was he letting her move an inch now that he had her in his arms.

Twisting her fist in his coat, she dragged him down again. They shared a sigh as their lips clashed with the same heat they argued with.

When they broke apart, she twisted her head aside, breaths coming hard and fast.

The quick gasp wasn’t a noise he’d heard from her yet.

“Bryson? There’s a...body.”

Her words didn’t immediately register. He turned his head. And saw it.

A soft cry ripped from her.

“Don’t look.” His automatic response was to cup her head and draw it against his chest. The urge to even keep her safe from what she’d seen swelled into something stronger that filled up his whole chest.

Like the need to get her away from this.

Smoothing his hand over her hair, he said the first thing that came to mind.

“Good job, my big, big helper...but why do you always gotta ruin the moment?”



Alexia swung between wanting to punch Bryson in his perfect angular jaw and rubbing her naked body all over him. Sometimes in the same moment. Hell—sometimes in the same *heartbeat*.

She finished her phone call to Eric and stowed her phone in her pocket. After their discovery, she'd put a few steps between herself and that body and placed a call for a forensics team.

Bryson walked away from the body. Through the fading daylight, she couldn't make out his features until he got closer to her.

She closed the gap between them, as if drawn by a cord. "Forensics is on their way."

He nodded.

She eyed him. "You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?"

"I knew what was going to happen? That we'd discover Caden lying face up in the snow? No. I didn't know. And I don't like what you're suggesting either. If you weren't so damn impatient, we wouldn't be out here shivering in the moonlight."

"We could have full stomachs too," she muttered.

"You really want to find a body on a full stomach? How many bodies have you seen?"

"Thousands." Mostly in photos, but he didn't need to know that. She was no rookie—but her career had taken her on a different path from normal investigations. On cold cases, she examined facts and evidence. In this case, the evidence had been screwed up pretty bad. Now there was another layer to the case and the question of why the body hadn't been found in all these months and no dogs had been brought to the scene needed answered.

"I had a hunch that we should have waited until morning to do the search," she mumbled.

"You chose not to find a hotel instead. That's on you." He sounded even grumpier than usual, which made him the equivalent of a ticked-off bear coming out of hibernation to find all the food was gone.

"Well, we're here now. We just have to wait for the team to arrive," she said.

"How long's that going to be?"

"They didn't say."

“Great. That could be hours.”

Her own irritation was rising, and she didn't want to think about how she was annoyed with her own behavior above all.

“We could just leave. Get that hotel. Come back in the morning.” Her suggestion made him look at her sharply.

“Do you think those idiots will actually *find* the body lying there in plain sight when they failed to before?”

“I thought you came to the scene too. You didn't find it.”

She felt his muscles lock more than saw it.

“You can stop suggesting that I knew where it was. Unless you make it a habit of kissing your suspects.” He fisted his hands.

Her mouth opened and then closed again. What could she say? She was making as much of a mess of this case as the local PD. First by hitting Bryson in the parking lot with her car and ending when they broke from a kiss to find themselves standing feet from a dead person.

Bryson raked his fingers through his hair. “Forget I said that.”

“Good. I will.” Her tone was haughty.

“I'm sorry.”

His words hooked her in the soft parts she rarely connected with because all her time was spent looking into horrific events.

When he didn't move or speak, she inched closer. “Bryson...”

“At least I didn't let Kelsey down. I promised her that I'd find her boyfriend. I've been kicking myself for months. I mean, what kind of guy with military training can't find a person?”

His words and the haunted tone he spoke them in left her stomach aching. She placed a hand on his chest in a show of comfort.

He swallowed. “I feel worse that I doubted her boyfriend. And now there's a killer on the loose.”

His matter-of-fact statement shouldn't send shockwaves through Alexia, but they did. Her insides trembled and nausea she'd been battling ever since seeing that body bubbled up her throat.

He looked at her hard. “You're cold.”

“I'm fine.”

“We can go back to the Humvee and warm up.”

“I'm okay. I was thinking maybe we should take another look a-around.”

Her words ended on a chatter of teeth.

Reaching out, he wrapped his fingers around her forearm. One tug and she'd be securely in his arms again with her head on his chest and he could absorb all her cares—for a moment, at least.

“You're not okay, Alexia. You're shaking.”

What was she going to say to that? He could feel it for himself.

“Dammit. Come here.” He yanked her into his arms. His body heat enveloped her, and she couldn't resist burying her face against his chest covered in a thin layer that seemed to keep him warm even in the quickly dropping temperatures.

He brushed his lips across her temple. “I'm worried about you. I'm not sure you've seen anything like this.”

“Yes, I have.”

“Oh yeah. I bet you make plenty of pitstops on the road. You've seen all the terrible gas station bathrooms.”

She shoved away from him. “At least I get bathrooms. You get a log behind a tree!”

He chuckled. “You're not wrong. But I dare you to tell me something that you've seen that's worse than what I have.”

“Is this another dick-measuring contest?”

“I'm certain mine's bigger, princess.”

She issued a sound that was part scream. How did he make her go from aroused to furious to aroused again in the blink of an eye? A warm brown eye, to be exact.

Truth be told, she *was* affected by what they'd stumbled upon.

“I've seen worse. It's just...” What? She'd never been so close to any case before because she was feeling too close to the man who was investigating it with her?

## Chapter Ten

---

In person, Alexia hadn't seen bodies that had been frozen for months and were now thawing at an alarming rate, and she was too tough to admit she wasn't handling it very well.

However, Tripp had examined the dead man enough to recognize him as Kelsey's boyfriend. Also, it was impossible not to note that the way his head was placed...that his neck had been snapped.

A fall wasn't likely. Only someone with military training would be able to snap a neck like that.

In his arms, Alexia shivered again.

He rubbed his hands down her spine. "Let's get you warmed up in the Humvee. Come on."

She didn't protest like he expected her to, which had him worrying even more as he led her through the trees and across the yard to the parked vehicle. Once they were seated, he started the engine and let it warm up a minute before turning on the heat full blast.

"You sure you don't want to go? We can find a hotel and food."

"I want to be here when the team arrives." She sat stiffly. After a few minutes, she began to relax bit by bit until she seemed more herself.

"I'm going to step out and make a call to Rafe. Keep him posted on what's going on. Okay, Alexia?"

She met his gaze. "I'm fine."

Was she saying that for his benefit or hers? Looking at her, all he saw was big eyes and pale skin. He still felt her shivering in his goddamn arms. Was she even cut out for this line of work? The people he'd met in similar shoes seemed to be unaffected.

Then again, maybe that was the problem with the world—everybody was so desensitized that nothing mattered anymore.

Hell, was he that way? He'd just spent minutes examining the body of a

person he had known. Had drunk beer and flipped steaks with during summer cookouts. The man had professed to love Tripp's niece, who he loved like a baby sister. But he'd detached his emotions in that moment and done what he had to do.

Alexia hadn't done the same. Whatever her reasons for that, whether on purpose or just because she didn't know how to distance herself on this particular case, he didn't know.

Without thinking of her reaction, he reached over and stroked his knuckles along the crest of her cheek. She blinked. Before she could nail him with a sucker-punch or, knowing her history for getting the law involved, hit him with a restraining order, he jumped out of the vehicle, leaving it running.

He walked a few steps away to make that call to Rafe. When he answered, Tripp thought of a few different reasons why his commanding officer was out of breath.

"Either I interrupted you fucking your woman or you're just getting in from an op."

"Asshole," came his instant reply.

Tripp did something he never thought he'd do again while on the property where his niece had lived—he smiled. "So I'm right?"

"No."

"About which one?"

"Neither one. We just got back from a three-mile run up the mountain."

"Glad I missed it." Actually, he wasn't. He loved pushing his body to the limits and beyond—it was what drove him to be not only a SEAL but one of the best and also put him on the MT Ops team.

"What's going on? Did you make it to the crime scene?"

Rafe's question gave him a moment's pause. He twisted to throw a look through the side window. Alexia sat there staring straight ahead. Her reaction really was bugging him. What was going on in her mind? Whatever it was, he was certain to hear about it soon. The woman held nothing back. Hell, not even the fact that she suspected him of murdering Caden.

As quickly as possible, he filled in Rafe about the situation, leaving out the part where he ravished Alexia's sweet lips and might have gone further if she hadn't seen what she'd seen.

"Damn, man. That's rough. I'm sorry." Rafe's voice radiated genuine

concern.

“It was no post-op bonfire at the base, but I’m fine. Look, I’ve got some questions for you about that couple you found in the cabin on the mountain.”

Silence beat between them for a moment.

“Jesus, Tripp. What’s going through your mind right now?”

“What can you tell me about that?”

“Zoe and I stopped at a cabin and when she went for some firewood, she found the woman dead. Then she found the man in the outhouse.”

“Both murdered. Isn’t that what the report said? Not a murder-suicide.”

“Now I *know* what’s going through your head,” Rafe confirmed.

Tripp dug his knuckle between his brows over a point that ached with tension. “How often are people killed in pairs, Rafe? As a couple?”

“It’s a small town. The cops probably don’t see anything more than some petty crimes in the area. Nothing of this caliber.”

“My thought too.”

“The FBI isn’t involved in your niece’s case, is that right?” Rafe asked.

Tripp didn’t want the image on that photograph he demanded that Alexia show him to pop up into his mind, but there it was in technicolor. He forced it away and focused on Rafe.

“No, they aren’t involved. But we potentially have to bring them in. It’s unusual for people to be killed in pairs, and we’ve got what appears to be a second couple here.” He pivoted and stared through the darkening trees at the place where the body lay.

“I’ll make the call. Let the FBI know what’s going on. I’m sure they’ll want to at least look into it.”

“Thanks. We’re just waiting on the forensics team to show up.”

“Must be getting dark there, it is here. I guess that means you’ll be getting another hotel for the night...” He trailed off.

“Yeah, looks like it. Why?”

“Another night with the pretty detective, huh?”

He snorted. “You’re not even going for subtle insinuation, are you?”

“I call it like I see it.”

Tripp snorted. “We’re not all sleeping on mountainsides with women we plan to marry.”

“Hey, you guys pulled that story out of me. I didn’t volunteer it.”

“You bragged, Rafe. Having sex in a portaledge? We’d all be bragging if we were in your shoes.”

“And all you get is a crappy hotel bed.”

“It’s not like that with me and Alexia.” He looked at her again. The windshield reflected the dark purple sky, but he wondered if she was looking back at him.

What was going on with Alexia? He liked teasing her. Wanted his mouth all over her body and his cock buried deep.

Now the tight sensation in his chest suggested that the protective feeling wasn’t just a fleeting thing.

“Sure it’s not like that. Keep telling yourself that, Tripp, but my instincts are blaring over here.”

He turned to stare at the home where his niece and her boyfriend thought they’d spend their years raising a family. Life had no guarantees for anyone, and Tripp lived, ate, breathed and slept danger.

“I’m finished with this conversation.”

“So am I. Be safe out there. Keep me updated. And Tripp?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t be silly—wrap your willy.”

“Jesus Christ.”

Now he was thinking about sinking bareback into Alexia’s tight body.

Rafe expelled a short laugh before ending the call.

Tripp took a moment to collect himself—meaning getting his cock to calm the fuck down—before returning to the Humvee and the beautiful woman waiting there for him.

His boots crunched on the snow that had begun to melt and then turned to ice again once the sun started to drop. As he moved to the driver’s door, he realized how much he needed to get off this property. Away from the terrible shit that had gone down here.

And to feel something real. A meal. A warm bed.

A woman entangled with him, legs twined, his grip on her tight and their mouths moving.

When he opened the door, the scent of her engulfed him on the currents of warm air, making him even harder for her.

She was on the phone and lowered it from her lips enough to say, “Forensics isn’t coming. Something about a big accident and roads closed. A couple local police officers are coming to babysit the body.”

Tripp spotted the cars turning into the driveway. He gestured so Alexia saw them too and then climbed behind the wheel.

Alexia continued her conversation. “All right, Eric. The cops are here. I’m going to talk to them a minute. I’ll speak to you in the morning. Tripp’s back... We’re going to find some food and a hotel. Okay, I’ll be in contact.”

When she ended the call, she shot a look at Tripp. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“I’ll be right here.” He started the engine.

True to her word, she returned after a very brief conversation with the cops and slipped in next to him.

“Everything good with your check-in?” she asked as he backed out.

“Find us a hotel on GPS.”

“Ohhh-kay?”

He felt her slicing looks his way as she searched her app for a place to stay.

This time they *needed* separate rooms.



Alexia swung toward Tripp. “Well, it’s a step up,” she said with a nervous shrug.

Was it, though? It was a king-sized bed. That they’d still be sharing.

He dropped his bag on the floor and moved to the bed. When he plopped heavily to the mattress and gave it the bounce test, she rolled her eyes.

“You’re never going to grow up, are you?”

His eyes gleamed. “Who would want to?”

“I’m going to take a shower.” She needed it to chase away the chill of seeing that body.

Or to cool down after Tripp’s kisses. God, she could still feel the man’s touch *branding* her skin.

He snatched the remote off the nightstand and switched on the TV. “Maybe I can find the game highlights.”

“Ugh. You’re so male.”

He flicked his brows up as if to say *duh*. That only made her more aware

of just how masculine he was, and in turn, more nervous around him.

With her bag in one hand, she hurried to the bathroom and closed the door. Sharing another room wasn't by choice this time but out of necessity. Since the roads leading away from the nearby town were shut down due to the accident, travelers had filled up the rooms quickly. She and Tripp were lucky not to be sleeping in the Humvee.

As it was, sharing a bed with a man she'd kissed long and hard would be difficult.

Especially since those kisses were all she could think about.

Peeling off her boots and clothes and stepping under the spray of hot water brought a satisfied hum to her lips.

She cut it off immediately. God, she sounded as if Tripp were pleasuring her.

Lurid images of the man cupping her hips and parting her thighs to slip his tongue into her pussy left her heart pounding and her fingers inching lower.

She jerked her hand away. What was she doing? She didn't seek out a meeting with Tripp so she could end up spending hours in the vehicle and two nights with him, let alone fantasize about the things he could do to her.

Those things would be so damn good, she knew just from those brief but scorching-hot kisses. Each pass of his tongue across hers, and the tight way he gripped her, left her aching.

Grabbing the washcloth, she squirted some bodywash—at least it wasn't that cheap bar of soap the last motel had on offer—and lathered her body. When she brushed the terrycloth across her breasts, her sensitive nipples were already pebbled.

As she dragged it over her pussy, her clit throbbed with arousal.

In a rush, she finished her shower but the entire time she rinsed, dried off and put on new clothes, a soft moan of want hovered at the edge of her lips.

When she stepped out, she expected the TV to be blaring sports news and Tripp to be sprawled out on the bed.

Her stare swept the mattress and she found him perched on the edge, head in his hands.

Her heart wobbled, and she took a step closer. "Bryson?"

His shoulders gave a twitch, and he dug his thumb and forefinger into his

eyes. When he looked up, he tried for a neutral expression but she saw the struggle on his face.

Tears glistening in the depths of his eyes left a nick in her heart.

“It’s my fault that this case wasn’t solved sooner. If I had faced my emotions sooner and gone inside that house, I would have found the knife. Then my niece’s memory would be laid to rest finally, my family could have closure...and Caden wouldn’t have been left there to rot.”

In a few steps, she stood in front of him. The force that told her to throw her arms around his shoulders and pull him close wasn’t one she could deny.

With a soft noise, she drew him against her.

“I’m okay.” His voice might have tricked her if she hadn’t already seen him visibly upset.

She continued to hold him. When he dropped his forehead against her chest, she closed her eyes on the strange sensation rippling through her. Arousal was the topmost layer, but under that was a need to put that genuine smile back on his face. And at the bottom—the core part of her—was the urge to offer comfort.

“None of what you saw today could have been easy, Bryson.” Her tone lowered to a softness she never heard herself use. Especially not on the job.

He slipped his arms around her hips. The touch wasn’t sexual in the least yet her panties flooded with need.

When he tilted his head to look at her, his eyes no longer burned with tears but blazed with desire.

Her insides clutched. “I can tell we’re going to do this...”

He spread his hands over her ass. “You mean this?”

“Mmmhmm. But just for the record...I hate you.”

His teeth flashed in a grin. “I hate you too.”

She slammed her mouth down on his. The firm pressure brought a moan to her throat that turned into a squeal when he picked her up and tossed her onto the bed.

“You’re right,” she bit off between swipes of his tongue. “The mattress is bounc—”

He lifted her entire body off the bed and jerked her pussy up against his erection. The hard bulge fit perfectly into the V of her legs, and she parted them just as he lowered her to the mattress again.

She tore at his shirt, working her hands up washboard abs to steely pecs. When she ripped the cloth over his head, her hands landed on his shoulders. A deep shudder of need claimed her just as thoroughly as Bryson's mouth.

Damn, the man could kiss like a movie star taking lessons off a porn king with all the added input of the women who longed for kisses just like these. That was as far as her brain went before it short-circuited and she gave in to scorching lust.

The thermal shirt she'd donned went flying. How he managed to remove her bra and fling it across the room in so short a time was nothing less than masterful.

When he dipped his mouth and sucked her nipple...

*Dear Lord.* Her toes curled and her back arched. She moaned and dug her fingers into his shoulders as he drew on her bud with soft, insistent pulls that left her quivering.

She barely got a chance to enjoy the rough scrape of his beard over her skin before he blew her mind by plunging a hand into the stretchy waistband of her lounge pants.

"Oh my god!" She threw her head back. Pleasure tore through her. The dark heat of release surfaced far faster than any she ever had with her toy or her own fingers.

Lifting his head, his stare drilled into her. "Why are you so wet for me, princess?"

She didn't mind that endearment so much when his callused fingers were brushing sensually over her straining clit. "Your...kisses... Ah!"

He swirled his fingertip around and around her nubbin until more juices flooded out. The intense gaze pinned her to the bed. "My kisses what?"

"You want me to talk while you—" She broke off again on a throaty cry when he thrust his finger into her channel. When he pulled it out again, he added a second finger.

"While I fingerfuck you? Yes, dammit. I expect you to tell me exactly what you want, Alexia."

His deep, firm voice brought her attention to what he was saying. What he wanted—no, *demand*—to know.

"I want you to make me come, Bryson. Then I want you buried inside me!" Her plea ended on a low scream when he angled those two long fingers

and did exactly what she asked him to.

## Chapter Eleven

---

Tripp gave his cock a hard stroke and rolled the condom to the base. His balls throbbed at the sight of Alexia's small ass up in the air and ready for the taking.

A shiver snaked through her, and she twisted her head on the mattress to look at him. "Why do I have to be face-down?"

He grinned. "I think the order I gave was 'face-down, ass in the air.' But since you asked, I'll tell you." He climbed on top of her, placing his lips at the delicate shell of her ear. "Princess," he drawled nice and slow.

She gripped the sheets, face twisting toward him.

"I've been aching to feel my balls nestled against your ass since you slept beside me last night."

A gasp left her, and she twisted onto one side. "Wait! You were sleeping the whole time."

He let her feel his rumble. "Was I?"

Her expression rippled with several emotions. By his guess, her brain was busy trying to engage, to force her body to do its bidding. That was the last thing Tripp wanted.

Leaning down, he brushed his lips over her nape and across one shoulder. Feeling her tense with every tiny, nipping; bite made his cock strong enough to lance iron.

"Are you still wet for me? Let's find out." He damn near choked when he eased his fingers between her thighs and felt her dripping. Unable to hold back a grunt, he probed down her seam to apply pressure to her clit again.

She bucked her hips and let out another one of those delicious moans. The kind he could get addicted to.

And that was fucking scarier than anything he'd faced in a long time.

As he gently strummed her clit, he angled his cock straight at her core. One small push and he was buried halfway inside her.

A strangled cry escaped her, and he echoed it with a grumble of his own as he settled deep, deep, deeper in her.

Balls-fucking-deep.

His head swirled with sensation. He hadn't been lying to her when he said he'd wanted this for hours. And now that he knew her tight, clenching heat, he wasn't stopping until he got his fill.

Rocking his hips, he withdrew before thrusting into her pussy again. When he banded his arm around her waist and yanked her upward to meet him, her body moved in the unspoken rhythm they both needed.

He pulled her into every thrust. Her pussy contracted around his cock, milking him. Cum boiled in his balls, his orgasm surging up far too quick.

He was either going to disgrace himself like a teen boy right now or he would stick the landing. And Tripp never failed.

Oh goddamn, her ass cradled his body so...damn...perfectly.

He groaned to stave off his release. With a swift move, he pulled out, flipped her over and shoved inside her again.

She wrapped her thighs high on his hips, but that wasn't enough. He needed to be deeper.

Guiding her calf upward, he hooked it on his shoulder, laying her wide open for the perfect position to hammer her.

Their gazes locked. "You good?"

Her eyelids slammed shut, concealing those beautiful green eyes from view as she bucked into him.

Taking that as confirmation, he churned his hips, hit a sweet spot and just about lost his mind at the feel of so much searing wetness. A growl passed his lips as he fucked her hard and fast in smooth plunges.

She trapped her bottom lip in her teeth, but fuck that—her lip was his to nibble.

He kissed her, and she let out a muted cry, returning the caress as they more than sped toward the finish line—they fucking launched to it.

She started to come first, her pussy contracting in soft pulls at the start. When her inner walls clamped on his length, he lost his ability to stop himself from coming. Hell—probably his sanity too.

Every spurt he filled her with should have been showering her bare walls.

*Goddamn, where did that thought come from?*

“Fuck!” With a final grunt, he thrust deeper and settled there, unmoving. Maybe dead.

He roused to her breaths washing over his neck. “Still hate me, princess?”

“Yup.”

He rumbled a laugh and rolled off her. After a quick trip to the bathroom to dispose of the condom, he returned to find her on her side, eyes closed.

For a heartbeat, he stared down at her, the urge to return to the bed they were sharing strong enough to make him give into it.

He slid in next to her so their bodies were still touching, but it wasn't close enough for him. Easing his arm under her, he dragged her across the mattress until she was plastered up against his side and the silky strands of her hair fell over his chest.

Neither of them moved for long minutes. Her scent swept him away—away from the state of uproar his life had been since the day he learned about Kelsey.

“I think you should know that I don't just fall into bed with people I work with.” Her words jogged him out of his darker path of thoughts.

He twisted his head to give her a pointed stare. “Neither do I.”

Her eyes glimmered with amusement and she couldn't hold back the laughter that bubbled from her. “I never thought you did, Bryson.”

He studied her. “Let me ask you something.”

“Oh no.”

“Why cold cases?”

That intelligence that drew him to her from the get-go sparked in the depths of her eyes. “I guess I enjoy unraveling things that other people missed.”

“You're a thrill-seeker.”

“Not in that way. Well... maybe I do like the danger in some ways.” She propped her chin on her flattened hand. “You're the same. What you do.”

“I serve my country.”

“But you're known for hand-to-hand combat. I've read your file.”

“All of it?” He gave her a pointed look.

“Well, it is pretty thick. You've been on a lot of ops.”

“I’ve heard all the rumors—the ones that say I prefer to look my adversaries in the eyes when I take them out.”

She searched his stare. “So they’re wrong?”

“No.”

Her eyes flared in surprise.

“But I don’t do it because I get pleasure out of it. I do it so they know who is doling out justice and that there is no turning back.” Did it make him stone cold? At times. He killed to protect other people. But he wasn’t about to explain that to Alexia—she’d only think he was fabricating an alibi in order to shatter her belief that he killed Caden.

Protecting people and delivering justice were two very different things.

It might have been the driving force in Tripp for the first few weeks. Then he got a grip and only wanted to put his niece’s memory to rest.

“Was it difficult, leaving your SEAL team?” Alexia asked.

“Not really. You reach a point where you just know it’s time. I thought I’d have a civilian life for a while before I ran through my savings and got bored and some other opportunity would present itself. Turns out, it found me.”

“Colonel Jackson?”

Jackson gave direct orders to the MT Ops team, as well as many others in Operation Freedom Flag.

He traced the delicate bumps of her vertebrae. “I’m not surprised you know of him. Joining a special unit to fight corruption in these mountains was a new challenge I couldn’t turn down.”

When she pushed away from him and rolled off the bed, he stared at her in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“Our pillow-talk is over, Bryson.” Her lithe body moved with easy grace as she searched for her clothes on the floor.

He contained his laugh at her unpredictable, unexpected reactions. He had a feeling that spending another month in that Humvee and in hotel rooms wouldn’t tell him everything about her and she’d still be surprising him.

She yanked her top over her head and then fluffed her hair from the collar. Her stare locked on his. “And you’d better not snore tonight or you’ll find a pillow over your face.”

“Damn, woman. I just gave you two screaming orgasms and you threaten

me with bodily harm.” He shook his head. “I *knew* you were cold.”



“Wakey-wakey.”

Alexia groaned. “I must be having a nightmare.”

That low, sexy chuckle was the stuff of dreams to other women. To Alexia right this minute, not so much.

The aroma of coffee wafted beneath her nose, and she opened her eyes to find Bryson holding out a paper cup.

“No more hotel coffee.” She buried her face in the pillow.

“At least give it a try. It’s better quality than that motel had.”

She flipped over enough to crack an eye at him. “The best thing you can do is dump it down the drain and buy me a good coffee.”

“I can do that too. But…” He took a sip. Out of her cup. Then had the audacity to smack his lips. “It’s not so bad.”

She sat up and stuck out a hand.

He placed the drink in her hand, leaning in with a smile. “See? I knew you’d come around.”

When she took a tentative sip, she didn’t want to hurl it across the room at least. That didn’t make it *good*.

“That’s my girl.” He ruffled her hair.

She shot him the dirtiest look she could muster at such an early hour. No light filtered through the slats in the blinds, which told her that once again, Bryson was waking her up at an ungodly time.

“After you get dressed, we’ll grab something to eat. Then meet forensics.”

She lowered the cup from her lips. “You know what time they’re coming?”

“Yep—your boss called while you were still asleep.”

She sputtered and would have sprayed coffee if she had any in her mouth. “You answered my *phone*?”

He nodded.

“It’s passcode protected!”

He shrugged. “Did you really think the last four digits of the phone number to the pizza joint you worked at in high school would keep me out?”

Her jaw dropped, and a small squeak projected. “What about the thumbprint?”

He pointedly dropped his gaze to her hand lying face up in her lap. She grunted—she *had* been dead asleep and clearly oblivious to him using her own thumbprint to unlock her phone.

The fact that he’d gotten through two security measures and spoken to her boss left her wondering what else the man was capable of.

“Well, are you going to tell me what Eric wanted?”

“Only to pass on that forensics will be on the scene as soon as the road’s passable, which should be at first light. And to warn you about me.”

Did he have to lower his jaw like that and give her that smoldering look? It was a deadly combination. One that practically shredded her panties off last night.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course not. I’ll be waiting right here after you finish your coffee and shower.” He smoothed the bedding before sitting down and kicking back with his phone in hand.

Wait—that was *her* phone. She stormed around to his side and held out a hand for it. He gently laid the device on her palm with a wicked grin.

Sinful! The man was sinful.

And she wanted him. Again. All day long. She never wanted to leave that king-sized bed until she worked him out of her system.

She hurried into the bathroom and slammed the door. As soon as it was shut, she melted against it, closing her eyes. If forensics was on their way, she had to be at the top of her game. She needed more caffeine, not the cup of swill in her hand.

She dumped it down the sink drain and tossed the cup in the trash. When she climbed into the shower, she moaned at the great water pressure with all the hot water a woman needed to wake up, after a night like she’d had.

Everything she believed about the case had been laid out on a mental table—then Bryson grabbed it and flipped it. If she’d actually gotten a chance to speak to Eric, she would have told him that she wasn’t so sure that Bryson was involved.

It wasn’t because she’d slept with him, he’d sucked her nipples until her

insides turned to mush or the fact that he'd given her the best dick of her life either.

No...she'd seen the torment on his face, and *that* changed everything.

Her mind might be clipping along at a wild pace, but her body needed to catch up fast if they were going to meet forensics at the scene.

She hurried through the rest of her routine. She was too tired to apply lipstick without messing it up and looking like a toddler did it, so she settled for her go-to look.

The Founding Father.

She brushed the strands of wet hair off her face and secured the ponytail at her nape. With one last glance at her reflection, she stepped into the room.

Bryson glanced up from where she'd left him on the bed. His stare never left her as he gained his feet, stretched out to his full height of six-three—according to his file—and closed the gap between them.

Her stomach quivered and so did her pussy. Wasn't it much too early to feel lust? Surely, there was a time cap on that.

But when he reached a hand up and stroked her cheekbone with overwhelming tenderness, a dark twist of need began low between her thighs.

Breathing fast, she studied his intense expression as he slid his hand around her neck. In one tug, he had the elastic out of her hair and the strands falling free—right into his waiting palm.

He bundled it off her face with a light yank that arched her neck.

“Bry-son,” she hiccupped, passion surging through her veins to match the pulse of desire in her core.

Deep brown eyes captured hers. “I prefer your hair down.” His rumbled words hardly registered because he scrambled her brain by kissing her.

The force of his lips had her gasping out and clutching at him. One hand twisted his shirt front and the other dug into his hair to drag him down for more.

For long minutes, he plundered her mouth, taking control of her lips and tongue until her knees threatened to buckle.

A soft moan left her, sounding like another person made the sound. Bryson answered with a low growl. She threw herself into the kiss, darting her tongue over his and tasting the coffee he'd drank himself.

His tug on her hair and the angle he forced her neck into made her pulse

race faster and her panties damp. God, this man knew how to wake a woman up properly.

When they finally broke apart, he did something even more unexpected—he tenderly brushed his lips over her brow before he released her.

She backed up a step, with what she was sure was a stupid smile on her face.

“You good, Alexia?”

After that kiss, it was a wonder she still had any brainwaves.

She nodded and drew her shoulders back to collect herself. Then she realized her wet hair was brushing against her face and neck.

“I believe you have something that’s mine.” She held out a hand.

He pointedly looked down at the raging erection bulging the front of his jeans and back up at her.

“I don’t mean that.” Heat burned in her cheeks.

“Oh, this?” He dropped the elastic into her hand, and she folded her fingers around it.

When they walked out, she realized they hadn’t discussed their relationship change. They’d walked into the hotel room as separate people... but something had shifted between them.

Intimacy changed them.

No, that was crazy thinking. It was only one night and just sex. Being acquainted with Bryson’s very impressive cock did not make them close.

Tonight they’d part ways. He’d return to the MT Ops base and she’d be off on the next chase, finding a new suspect.

The world was encased in a thin layer of ice, which made walking to the Humvee tough.

“I’ll drive,” she said.

He chuckled. “Not in these conditions. Besides, I like my legs.” He adopted the limp all the way across the parking lot.

She compressed her lips, trying to hold back laughter, but his antics were too much and she cracked. “If you plan to sue the government for bodily harm, you don’t stand a chance. The hotel cameras surely caught you putting on the act.”

He dragged his leg so dramatically that it was a wonder he stayed upright at all.

“I’d like to see you slip and fall on your ass right now.”

“See? I told you...cold. Ice-cold.” His eyes twinkled with a look that was the complete opposite of his words.

Once they were on the road for a couple miles, he flipped on his turn signal to take an exit.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

He threw her a look. “We’re grabbing breakfast.”

“We’re about to give statements on the dead person we found. How can you eat?”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re not even a little bit bothered by what we’re going to get into with forensics?”

“As a living person, I eat, Alexia. I’m alive. To stay alive, I have to eat. And so do you.”

Her stomach lurched at the thought of food. Each time she closed her eyes, she still saw that body. Maybe that was why sleeping with Bryson was so appealing—it washed away some of that horror and replaced it with something that made her feel alive and comforted at the same time.

She had to question the reason she was so affected by this particular case. She was no rookie. She’d seen worse.

She stole a peek at Bryson. Maybe it was the fact that *he* was so close to it all that made her almost want to stop looking for answers and put the case to bed—for the sake of his niece and for the man who’d let her see how broken he was over it.

She always stayed aware that these investigations involved real people with families and people who loved them. But until now, she hadn’t been so close to one of them.

While they ordered breakfast sandwiches to go, neither of them spoke. There was none of the teasing banter that lovers shared after a night in each other’s arms.

Following that toe-curling, panty-melting kiss back in the room, Bryson was all business. They ate while they drove the icy roads that led back to Kelsey and Caden’s home.

By the time they arrived, the forensics team was pulling in behind them, and she powered into work mode.

She walked through the house and around the property with the team while they gathered more evidence, most of which came from the woods. As she dealt with them, she threw a glance across the yard to Bryson.

A couple local police officers approached him. One look at the tense lines of Bryson's shoulders told her that he was *not* happy with whatever they said to him.

He sliced a hand through the air in a sharp gesture before swinging to look her way. From this distance, she couldn't make out his eyes but it was clear to her that something was going down.

She excused herself from the head of the forensics team and strode over to Bryson.

"What's going on?" she asked as she approached.

"They expect us to go into town with them and answer questions."

She felt the waves of anger rolling off him. Could the cops feel it too? Seeking to calm him down, she closed the gap between their bodies. While she refrained from touching him, she hoped that he gathered some calm from her.

Now what made her even think that she could impact him in such a way? He was a freakin' special operator—he didn't need soothing. He needed to hit something.

Or someone.

Hopefully not one of the cops.

She let the back of her hand brush against his fist and instantly felt his fingers unfurl and the backs of his fingers press against hers.

A quiver hit her stomach, which she tried not to react to while the officers explained what they needed from them at the station.

She nodded. "We'll be right behind you."

As soon as they turned to take off for their vehicles, she pivoted toward Bryson. He moved his hand away.

"What's the problem?" She studied his pinched brow.

"I work with law enforcement all the time. I've never been asked to come in for questioning."

"To answer questions—not be questioned."

He lifted a brow. "If that's the case, why not ask us right here?"

Okay, he had a point. "I'll call Eric."

“And I’ll call Rafe.”

## Chapter Twelve

---

Alexia was separated from him. Put in separate fucking rooms for interrogation.

Tripp gripped the edge of the table so hard that he expected a chunk to bust off in his hand.

He stared at the detective sitting across from him long enough to make the man squirm.

“You don’t have any cause to keep me here. I know my Miranda rights.”

The detective nodded. “We know your background and what you do. We’re hoping that you’ll just answer a few questions for us regarding your niece’s case.”

“What are you asking Alexia?”

He shifted in his seat. “That’s not up for discussion.”

“Isn’t it now?” His voice came out low, deadly.

He spread his hands. “Look, we just have a few questions and then you’re free to leave.”

Tripp leaned back in his seat, causing it to creak under his bulk. Folding his arms, he grated, “Fine.”

The detective shuffled some papers as if searching for his notes. “Can you state your relationship to Kelsey Franklin?”

Tripp all but rolled his eyes. Giving him a bland look, he sized the guy up. “How many years you been doing this job?”

He flipped his gaze to Tripp’s. “Long enough.”

“Long enough to what? Know that you guys bungled the investigation and messed up the crime scene and now you’re looking to pin a crime on someone like me? All by acting like you can’t quite remember particulars? I guess I see your point—get somebody in custody and the people of this shitty small town can sleep easy in their beds.”

“Just answer the question.”

“I’m her uncle,” he bit off with enough force to knock a fly off a pile of shit. Which was exactly what this interrogation was—total shit.

“And where were you the night of Miss Franklin’s murder?”

He leveled him in a look. “I can’t tell you that.”

A smug expression stole over the detective’s face. “And why is that?”

Tripp leaned forward and planted his folded arms on the table, looking the guy dead in the eyes. “Because,” he said slowly, “it’s classified. I was a SEAL, and we don’t talk about ops. Especially with people who have low-level clearance.”

He swore he caught a flicker of surprise in the detective’s eyes. Did he really not know all this? He wasn’t very damn good at his job.

“I shouldn’t be a suspect because I wasn’t even in the US when Kelsey was murdered. You can check. The military keeps a tight rein on people. They know where I was.”

The man fell silent and shuffled more papers around. When he gathered them into a neat stack and pushed away from the table, Tripp felt a victory lap coming on. Only when he ran past the finish, he would be flipping the bird at everybody who decided it was a good idea to drag him and Alexia in here.

“I’ll be checking on your claims.”

“You do that.”

“You’re free to leave.”

Tripp scraped his chair back and stood to his full height so he towered over the detective. “Where do I find Miss Oaks?”

“She’ll meet you outside when she’s finished.”

Tripp held his stare until the guy shifted his aside. Then he waved a hand for the detective to precede him out of the room.

He walked out in a fast clip, like he didn’t trust Tripp not to sneak up behind him. And Tripp was definitely angry enough to give it some consideration.

With a shake of his head, he walked out the front doors. “Dickhead.”

He grabbed his phone and pulled up Alexia’s contact to shoot her a text. *I hope it’s going better for you than it did for me.*

Several seconds ticked by while he waited for a reply. Just when he was

preparing to call Rafe or hell, even Alexia's boss, she responded.

*This is a mess. They don't know what they're doing.*

*You figured that out too?* he responded.

*I gave my statement about finding that body. Did they ask the same from you?*

*Something like that.*

*I don't like the sound of that, Bryson.*

He couldn't help but smirk at her using his name. It wasn't lost on him how she'd switched from calling him by his last name to his given name. Around the time he laid claim to her lips, then her body, she must have decided it was a good idea to drop the formalities.

*I can't text more. We'll compare notes when I'm done.*

His stomach clenched as he realized that this could turn south as quick as a storm blew in from the mountain range.

Alexia had suspected him of being involved. And she was inside speaking to the cops...who believed the exact same thing.



Alexia stashed her phone in her coat pocket, making sure she kept her emotions off her face. Early on in her career, she'd learned the trick to blanking her mind, and her expression would follow.

A lot of people in her field did the same thing. Even doctors and lawyers used a similar technique because letting people read them was typically a bad idea.

Right now, she needed to keep any feelings she had growing for Bryson out of this investigation. If she started defending him now, she would be put under a magnifying glass as to why.

The answer was simple—wasn't it?

Yes, it was. She believed his story, especially after they walked through that house.

“You found a knife when you were inside the house. Isn't that right?”

Detective Heifner was an everyday ordinary guy with no distinguishing features except his very thick hair, which he kept combed back in a swoop off his forehead.

Now that she looked closer, she questioned just how real it was. Was that a smear of hairpiece glue she saw on his forehead?

She snapped back to attention. “That’s correct.”

“This knife?” He produced the knife she’d retrieved and then handed over to the forensic team when they arrived on the scene.

She stared at the baggie. “Yes.”

“And you found it beneath the carpet. What made you look there?”

Her stomach wobbled. She needed to come clean and say that Bryson thought to flip back the carpet and look. But that sounded too close to her accusing him of something. “Tripp was close to his niece and recognized the bench was out of place. It occurred to me that it was possible it had been moved for a reason, and that’s when I found the knife.”

“Is this steak knife what you found in the house under the carpet, Alexia?”

Her brain redirected like a GPS when somebody missed the turn. She zeroed in on the knife in the baggie.

She blinked.

This small-town team in no way knew what they were looking at. They were calling that a steak knife? It was clearly military.

Her heart jerked against her ribs in a painful crash. She wasn’t military trained, but she knew a tactical knife when she saw one, and that object clearly was meant to be carried as a weapon to dispatch something.

She swallowed hard. Again, the urge to protect Bryson left her head spinning.

It wasn’t just because she was blurring lines with him, was it?

No. She really believed he wasn’t involved in the case, and had *before* they fell into bed together.

She stared at the knife, committing its size and details to memory to later describe to Bryson. Just in case he — understandably — didn’t get a good look.

It was long, with a fixed blade. The handle had enough of a grip to keep it from slipping in a sweaty—or bloody—hand.

Detective Heifner eyed her. “Bryson Tripp had been in the house when visiting his niece. He knew the furniture arrangement was off.”

She cocked a brow, surprised that he put that all together himself.

She leaned over the table. “Funny that there weren’t photographs of the scene to show the furniture arrangement at the time it happened. Would that have been your oversight, Detective?”

The man slanted a look at the thick, unopened file on the table between them.

She blew out a slow breath. “What’s in that file? Are you withholding information?”

Surprise lifted his brows. “You never received a copy?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never seen any file that thick come across my desk. I’d remember. So why don’t you get your secretary to scan it all into the system so I can get a copy?”

A text caused her phone to buzz. She glanced at the screen to read another message from Bryson.

*They’ve messed up everything about this case. Tell them as much and get out here.*

His bossy command shouldn’t make her shiver inside or want to do his bidding, but it took everything in her to remain in her seat.

He had been right thus far, but she wasn’t about to tell the cops that.

She was a little uneasy about sharing when she sat there looking at a file that never crossed her desk. Ever. Between their bad investigation, not adhering to protocols and failing to provide her—a state employee who worked investigating cold cases—with *all* the information, she felt it was fine not to give them all the answers to their questions.

Questions they shouldn’t be grilling *her* with in the first place.

On top of all this, as soon as the body had been collected, the time of death would be determined. They’d already know that Caden was murdered soon after Kelsey, absolving Tripp entirely.

She swung her stare back to Detective Heifner. “I want a copy of that”—she pointed—“within the next hour. I want answers as to why I never received the file in the first place. And I want to speak with the head of the

cleanup crew and find out why things weren't put back in exactly the same spots as they found them."

She shoved her chair back and stood. Without another word on the topic or offering another answer to a single question, she walked out of the station.

When she saw Bryson standing at the Humvee, she immediately knew by the set of his shoulders that he was ticked off. She reached the vehicle and pointed to the driver's door, indicating he should drive.

Once both their doors slammed, they turned to each other.

"What the hell, Alexia? Did you know that was going to happen?" he burst out.

Her brows shot up. "How would I know they were going to have another file I've never seen?"

He stared at her for a long heartbeat. "File?"

"Yes. Didn't they show it to you too?"

"Hell no—they asked about my whereabouts the night Kelsey was killed!"

She felt the blood drain from her face, leaving it tingling. "You can't be serious. Why would they bring you in now, after all this time? And that's ridiculous. They could get that information. If they looked into your background, they'd know you weren't even in the country!"

"I don't know. Maybe because you put the idea in their heads that I was involved?" His face mottled red with rage.

Her stomach plummeted like the weight of a boulder sat inside it.

"Bryson, you can't believe I'm responsible for that questioning. Even though I kind of suspected you took out the boyfriend, I've changed my mind."

He gave her a withering look.

She latched on to his arm. His focus intensified on her. "I don't believe that now. Not after spending these past two days with you and seeing your face after you'd been in that house. I believe you, Bryson."

His uncompromising gaze sent chills through her.

"Please." She cupped his jaw. "You have to believe me. I never would have slept with you if I believed you could cause somebody undue harm."

His eyelids closed, cutting off that intense glint of pain. He bowed his head for a long moment. When he looked at her again, her chest burned at the

look he gave her.

“Thank you for that, Alexia. I—” He broke off in a second of struggle. “I wouldn’t be here right now if I had anything to hide.”

“I know that.” She chafed her fingertips lightly over his stubbled jaw.

His lips firmed with anger. “That department is going to be under fire once I get finished reporting them to my superiors. I’m pretty sure Homeland Security isn’t going to look kindly on a bunch of Podunk self-proclaimed detectives accusing one of their special operators of murder.”

She nodded. “You have a right to be pissed.” Even at her. She’d caused him stress and probably a measure of pain as well.

He acknowledged her statement with a small nod.

“Do you want to go back to your base? Now that I know there’s more evidence that’s never been seen by anybody in my office, the case is on hold until I analyze the information. I don’t need your assistance to do that. Besides, you’ve done more than enough and—”

He grabbed her, yanked her halfway over the console and kissed her.

Hard.

With all the fury and frustration—and oh god, the *need*—that sent her body into overdrive. Crying out, she sank her fingers into his hair and dragged him closer for another kiss and then another until she was so hot and bothered that she needed to find a place to be alone with him or die.

Breaking the kiss, he held her stare. “I think we should stay in town an extra day. You know,” he nuzzled her nose with his, “to make sure we get *all* the files we need.”

She latched on to his suggestion with a little bounce of excitement. Nodding enthusiastically, she nuzzled him back. “We definitely need to stay here another night. We need to keep on these guys, make sure they do their jobs and deliver that file to us.”

“Mm-hm.”

Her heart gave a small flip at his agreement. He might have only muttered two syllables, but what she heard was *much* more.

Neither of them were ready for their time together to end.

## Chapter Thirteen

---

Tripp had spent much of the past nine months of his life battling to control his rage over a situation he couldn't control. Now, thanks to Alexia, he was a few steps closer to shutting a door on that chapter and...

What? If he wasn't pouring his time and energy into finding out who killed Kelsey, where would he shift his efforts?

His teammates were good about using their free time for pleasure. At the base, they were watching sports, betting among themselves on sports, and playing cards. When they weren't engaged in those things, they liked to eat.

As Tripp drove into the parking lot of a small, dingy diner, Alexia groaned. "You've got to be kidding me. You're hungry? Again?"

He tossed her a look and put the Humvee in park. "One thing you need to know about me is that I've spent far too many days and nights with an empty belly because I'm too busy fighting. As a result, we eat when we get a chance and often, princess." He twitched his head to indicate they should go inside and sit down.

As she reached him, he held the door for her and he had to force his hand to his side to keep from placing it on the small of her back to guide her to a table.

A waitress spotted them and threw a wave at the wide-open dining room. "Take your pick. I'll be right with you."

Alexia issued a soft laugh. "Is that the same waitress that was at the last diner?"

He leaned in close to whisper in her ear. "Pretty sure every place like this has one. You pick the seat."

When she chose a booth toward the back, she started to slide into one side, but he gave her a gentle nudge toward the opposite seat.

Once they were facing each other, she leveled him in a look. "Care to explain why you didn't want me to sit there?"

“I get a better view of the room from here.”

She blinked at him. “You want to sit there so you can see danger coming.”

He gave a single nod.

“That’s kind of hot.”

His lips quirked.

“Don’t look so pleased with yourself. All this has to end soon. You know we’re only together one more day, then the big ride back.”

He only twitched a brow at her.

“This little game we played where I suggested that we *need* to stay in town for another day—not so I could fuck you like a whore while treating you like a goddess—can go on and on. Maybe you don’t realize just how long we can stretch things out.”

She jolted. “Bryson!”

“What, princess? You know it’s true. I’m not needed back at base at the moment. Rafe says the team is just awaiting our next order. They’re sitting around eating and playing poker.”

The waitress arrived, and they both ordered food. When the woman hobbled away with a painful gait, Alexia shook her head.

“These poor waitresses. I feel like every diner in every town has one who’s been working here for forty years and hates her life. I hope they at least get good tips.”

He studied her. The cold morning had left her face a little pink from windburn. He balled his fists, still feeling her soft body under his hands as she came apart for him.

“Talk to me, Tripp.”

His gaze flicked to hers. “What do you want to know?”

She gave a small shrug. “Start with your comment about having an empty stomach.”

He had been hoping she wanted to hear more about him fucking her like a whore while treating her like a goddess. But at least she didn’t want to hear more about his reaction to seeing the murder weapon in person and his fury with the police after their pitiful questioning.

“Pretty simple. You get into a skirmish, you don’t have time to stop and fix yourself an MRE. You know what that is?”

“Meal ready to eat, yeah. Never had one, though.”

“If you’re lucky, you get shipped to a spot that has decent food made by villagers. Here in the mountains, we’re lucky we’re within twenty miles of fast food.”

“Your base is in a pretty isolated spot, though,” she noted.

The waitress returned with their drinks, and he watched Alexia meticulously add sugar packets to her iced tea and stir the beverage with her straw. He took a gulp of his black coffee and winced.

Alexia’s smile transformed her face from not just pretty to breathtaking. “Is it bad?”

“Wanna try some?” He pushed the mug toward her.

“I’ll pass. After those two cups you fixed for me, I don’t want coffee for a while.”

They shared a smile. “You really are grumpy in the mornings.”

That morning even her appearance looked grumpy, with her hair restrained in that harsh ponytail low on her neck and the strands slicked against her skull. That was why he removed it and threaded his fingers through the locks.

He itched to touch her hair now. To touch all of her.

“We’re not discussing my morning moods. You were telling me about what you eat on an op.”

“I’d rather tell you about what we eat on base. It’s much more fulfilling. Guns is damn good at fixing anything that requires grill marks or can be smoked, which means the MT Ops team is fueled by protein.”

“I imagine men like you eat a lot of meat.”

“Oh yeah, we’re carnivores. One of our ongoing jokes is that if we ever get snowed in and need to start killing off each other, at least we know Guns can make us taste good.”

She giggled. “Oh god, that’s terrible but funny too.”

Tripp stared at her. Since he never dated, he didn’t get chances like this. The closest he came to sharing a meal with a woman was when Rafe brought Zoe into the barracks. Sitting across from Alexia and enjoying watery coffee made him feel...alive in a way he hadn’t in a long time.

Adrenaline rushes were the norm to someone like him who experienced them often. But this woman gave him another kind of rush, one that made

him want to sit right here and just listen to her talk.

“What don’t I know about you, Alexia?”

She took a quick swallow of her tea as if fighting nerves she never displayed on the job.

“Uh...I’m good at hitting people with cars?”

They shared a laugh. “That skill could come in handy.”

She relaxed, propping one elbow on the table and cradling her delicate chin. “There’s not much to know. I’m kind of a workaholic.”

“I know the feeling.”

“I bet you do.”

“Do you date?”

“Not often. After that last boyfriend...”

“The one you had arrested?”

“To be fair, he *was* dealing drugs out of the back of his auto parts van.”

He leaned back in his seat. “All the pieces are falling into place now.”

“What pieces are you referring to?” Her eyes glimmered with mischief.

It was odder yet, flirting with a woman in the middle of a seedy diner.

“You go for men with ambition.”

A throaty laugh bubbled up. “If that’s what you want to call dealing heroin...”

After that, they shared food that wasn’t half bad and banter that hit the spot.

Watching the woman eat was adorable and frustrating at the same time.

She set down her fork. “Okay, what is so amusing? Do I have maple syrup on my face? You keep trying not to smile.”

Using his fork, he gestured at her plate. “I’m trying not to laugh because you’re trying so hard not to eat all of one food before eating another. Surely you didn’t forget that I noticed before.”

She lifted her jaw. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He chuckled, and damn, it felt good. “I can see sweat breaking out on your forehead because you don’t want to move on to the bacon without eating all your pancakes first.”

She looked him dead in the eyes, picked up a slice of crispy bacon and bit into it.

She tried not to make a face while she chewed, but Tripp saw right through the act.

“What’s wrong, Alexia? Doesn’t taste right? Really bothering you?”

She tossed the bacon down onto the plate. “Okay, you’re right. I have a food thing.”

He threw her a grin. “It’s cute.”

Relaxed in each other’s company by now, they finished their meal. Alexia insisted on leaving a hefty tip for the waitress, which gave Tripp a deeper peek at her character.

When they walked out, she pointed at some shops across the street. From what he knew of places like these in the Cascade Mountains, some were tourist spots and others were small-town gems, and this was the latter.

“Wanna take a look around?” he asked her.

“Sure.” They began crossing the road, and he reached out to hold her hand.

The gesture made her look up at him in surprise.

“Bryson...”

“What? No one knows us here. They’re not going to turn you in for fraternizing with the enemy on the job.”

“You’re hardly the enemy.”

He moved to release her hand, but she grabbed on and held tight.



Alexia’s insides kept fluttering. And her pussy kept *squeezing* with want. Every single time Bryson skimmed any part of her body—her cheek, her waist, even her shoulder—he awakened every nerve ending inside her. In turn, that flipped a switch on her libido and now all she wanted to do was jump the man’s bones.

And what hot and sexy bones they were too. Back in the diner, she could hardly focus on what he was saying to her because she kept getting distracted by his rugged good looks.

The way his mouth moved had her thinking dirty thoughts. How he picked up his fork drew her attention to those long, callused fingers that had worked over her body parts like an artist worked a canvas.

While they browsed the small shops, she was far too aware of Bryson.

Flirting was fun. Their conversations were amazing even when they were arguing.

Okay, *especially* when they were arguing.

She couldn't get used to it, though. They needed to part ways soon. Very soon, in fact. Spending more time with him would only put unrealistic thoughts in her head.

He'd probably forget all about her the minute he stepped into his own world...but she would always remember the way he swept her off her feet without even trying.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't notice that her phone was buzzing until Bryson nudged her. "That's you."

Throwing a look around the shop for the exit, she said, "I'll just take this outside."

He nodded and continued to browse some artisan leather goods for sale while she popped out to the parking lot.

"Eric," she greeted.

"What's going on? The cop said you left the station, and then an email with a massive file attachment showed up in my inbox."

Oh. She'd forgotten to check in with her boss about what happened back there.

The chilly wind blew her hair into her face. She directed the lock behind her ear and pivoted to look at the storefront. Bryson was standing in the doorway, watching her.

Or watching out for her.

Her stomach dipped and her heart pulsed faster.

And that look on his face...

She turned her attention to her boss. "Look, the reason this case is so screwed up is because those cops messed up big-time. And they've been withholding information, which you just received in that file. I haven't gotten a chance to review it all yet, but"—she threw another look at Bryson—"I'm staying in town for a while to do that. In case I need to question anybody locally," she hastened to add. Not because the hot military man staring at her could be the incentive.

"That's why I'm calling, Alexia," Eric said. "The body has been taken to the coroner and you need to be there."

She automatically sought Bryson's gaze. Oh no. He should definitely stay away from the coroner's office. He didn't need to see his niece's boyfriend in that environment. Convincing Tripp not to join her wouldn't be easy, though.

"I'll head over there now," she said to Eric. "I'll let you know what I find out."

As soon as she lowered the phone from her ear, Bryson was at her side. He moved in fast and stood closer than a mere acquaintance would. Anybody who saw them together would see their intimate pose and guess that they were sleeping together.

Hell, just the way he was looking at her now... A person would have to be blind not to see that desire written all over the angled planes of his face.

His gaze sharpened on her. "What's going on?"

"That was my boss. Something came up and he needs me to go check it out."

"Leave town? Now?"

"I need to go to the coroner's office."

"I'll go with you." His tone was deep, gritty and no-nonsense. He caught her by the elbow and started across the quiet street to where the Humvee was parked at the diner.

When they reached the doors, she scrubbed her palms over her face. "You can just drop me off there. I'll meet you at the hotel."

"Drop you off? Why would I do that?" He twisted to face her.

"Bryson, do you really think it's a good idea to go with me?"

His eyes narrowed. "I was good enough to tag along before. What changed?"

"It's just that..." She was going to have to bring up the moment in the hotel and those tears she'd seen glinting in his eyes, wasn't she?

"Just say it, Alexia," he bit off.

"You were upset after the crime scene."

"So?"

"So I don't want you to be upset again."

"You're trying to *protect* me? Jesus, Alexia. I thought you knew I'm a tough motherfucker and nothing affects me."

Seeing that knife under the carpet had, but she chose not to bring that up.

She placed a hand on his forearm. His muscle was hard steel that rippled with power, but she knew his weakness now.

“Just drop me at the coroner’s and find us a hotel.”

“No.” He shook her off, walked around the vehicle and jumped behind the wheel before she could get another word out on the matter.

Neither of them spoke on the drive there. When she got out, he mirrored her movements and tailed her inside the office.

Alexia needed to just do her job. She didn’t get to her position by screwing up, and she wasn’t about to start now. Her job mattered to her above anything else.

Even above those amazing orgasms delivered by Bryson’s impressive cock.

They had only hours left to spend together. But they still had tonight... and she wanted that. Badly.

Unless they found another excuse for staying in town, their time was limited.

She addressed the coroner first. “I hear you have information concerning the body we found.”

The man was aging, bald with black horn-rimmed glasses that amplified his eyes. “Right this way.”

Before she took a step, Alexia threw a look at Bryson.

He glanced beyond her at the coroner and gave a stiff nod.

Dammit, she knew that she’d never be able to talk him out of staying so closely involved in this case, even when he needed distance. Lots and lots of distance.

Okay, she never wanted to see a grown man tear up like that again, dammit. Which meant ... *she* was the problem, wasn’t she? She’d grown soft—on Bryson Tripp—and now she was failing to do her job properly.

She pushed past him and hurried after the coroner.

When they approached the body on the table, her stomach gave a little flip, but she ignored it.

The coroner stared at Bryson. “And you are?”

“Investigating this case,” he said without pause.

“Okay. You look as if you have a strong stomach. You’ll need it for this.” He pulled back the sheet to reveal the body.

Alexia tried to avoid looking directly at anything and instead widened her scope of view so it was all shape and colors.

“This man’s neck was snapped,” the coroner said.

“In a fall?” she asked.

“No. It was definitely murder. Consistent with military training.”

Her gaze snapped to Bryson. He seemed...unsurprised.

Back in those woods, he had known what he was looking at—and he didn’t share his thoughts with her.

“You’re certain about that?” she asked the coroner.

“Not one hundred percent sure about the military training, no. Anybody can look up a video and learn how to do something.”

“Even break a neck? That seems a little extreme.”

“It happens, though.” The coroner looked between her and Bryson before pulling the sheet back into place. “However, it’s my belief that your killer is ex-military.”

She felt more than saw when Bryson stiffened. The rest of the report wasn’t nearly as important, and they only spent minutes there.

When they walked out, Bryson refused to meet her gaze.

His long legs ate up the sidewalk leading to the parking area. She jogged to keep up with him and then grabbed his arm to bring him to a halt.

He towed her in his wake for a couple more steps before he stopped and faced her. “You don’t have to say a word, Alexia. I know I’m a suspect again.”

Shock rippled through her. “What? No! I don’t think that. I told you I was wrong.”

His face softened at her words.

“Just because someone with military training snapped that guy’s neck doesn’t mean it was you. There are thousands of military personnel across the country, not to mention immigrants who are trained in foreign countries.”

He said nothing.

“Bryson.”

His stare landed on hers, and she saw the same drive on his face that had put them on this path together in the first place.

“We’re going to find out the truth about what happened to Kelsey,” she promised softly.

A heartbeat passed between them before he nodded. “Let’s find that hotel. And hope there’s a bar. I could use a drink.”

## Chapter Fourteen

---

“There isn’t a hotel, motel, AirBnB or bed and breakfast in the entire town.” Alexia twisted in her seat to gape at him. “How do you not know this? I thought you visited.”

Tripp gritted his teeth against shooting off his mouth to Alexia and risking hurt feelings. Though he didn’t know why he cared about things like her feelings anyway. It wasn’t like they were a couple, and after this, they’d never see each other again.

“I always stayed at Kelsey’s place,” he grated out.

She folded her arms. “Well, this is just great. We’re stuck in this town with no place to sleep tonight. And nowhere to—”

He dipped his gaze over her face to her lips. “So that’s the issue. You want a bed.”

“Of course I do. People generally enjoy lying down to sleep!”

He pitched his voice low. “You want *my* bed.”

They could drive out of town easy enough. The melting was a fact that Tripp had now learned firsthand would stand in the way of them getting a room anytime soon.

“I have an idea.”

Before she could protest, he put the Humvee into gear and started driving. The sun was dropping fast, which made the wet roads slick. In spots water had pooled on the sides of the road and begun to freeze into a glistening mirror of ice. He took his time and avoided those, but he still noticed how Alexia clenched her hands in her lap.

“Calm down, princess. I’ll get us there safe.”

“Where is there?” Her voice came out a little breathy...like it sounded when he gave her release.

“Someplace with a view, I promise.”

The mountain road switchbacked for several miles. By the time they reached a place to pull off, Alexia's fingers must be aching from gripping them so tight.

He parked but allowed the headlights to pan over the view he promised. The white beams reflected off every sliver of ice clinging to the trees and projected for a good distance across a valley he knew was beautiful in the daylight.

She let out a gasp. "Bryson! It's stunning."

He turned to her. "When the sun comes up over there," he pointed, "you'll never see a prettier sight." He wasn't looking at the landscape...but at her.

When she glanced up and noticed this, her lips parted on a soft gasp.

Then they were reaching for each other. He unclipped her seatbelt so he could pull her into his lap even as she crushed her lips to his.

The soft moan they shared only played on his senses. On his defenses too. When Alexia was in his arms like this, all soft and pliant and needy...his walls fell.

Mouths fused, he tore off her coat and plunged his hands beneath her shirt. A cry escaped when he cupped her breasts and pinched each small nipple until they were sharp points.

She ground down on his cock, dragging a low rumble from his throat.

"If you keep that up, princess, I won't be going slow."

"I don't care!" she bit off. "I want you."

His brain hardly connected his next thought to get her into the back seat. Somehow, they ended up there with her on her knees with him right behind her.

He shimmied her pants and underwear down enough to reach the spot they both needed.

"Take them off the whole way." A plea laced her voice.

He caught her hair and tugged until her face was twisted enough to kiss her hard and deep. With one hand working low between her thighs, he brought whimpers to her lips.

He released her mouth, and with a hand on her breast and the other between her legs, stroked her soaked folds. Her clit strained against his finger.

When she started to tremble, he wrapped an arm around her waist and held her against him while he teased her. Between plunging his fingers into her pussy and stroking up the seam to circle her clit, he pulled cry after cry from her.

The mountain could collapse and his concentration would never break. His only goal was to make her scream his name right before he thrust his cock deep into her pussy.

“Bryson! I’m close!”

Placing his lips at her ear, he whispered, “Come for me, princess. Soak my fingers with your cum so I can get on with giving you orgasm number two.”

A shudder stole through her. Her body tensed in his arms as he worked her clit with rhythmic flicks of his fingertip. She shook and then came for him. Her pussy flooded his fingers.

“Give me your mouth,” he growled.

She twisted her head and he smothered her soft moans with his kiss while she jerked in his hold.

Passion flowed through him, welled in his chest until it felt close to bursting. When he slowly lifted his finger from her drenched folds, he reached immediately for his wallet.

“You have a condom?” Her voice was husky.

“Two.” Those he’d picked up from a restroom vending machine back at the diner.

“Get it on.”

He huffed out a laugh. “After two rounds, we’ll have to get creative.”

“We’ve got all night and we don’t have to worry about the walls being thin.”

Again, he laughed, something he never did during sex. He was always too focused on getting off and putting miles between him and his lover before someone tried to sink their claws into him.

But Alexia... Alexia was different.

He wanted all her sass and snarky comments, her difficult moments and the ones where her hair was sticking up and she was grumpy as hell.

He wanted her *most* like this...begging for him to move faster and get his cock inside her.

With shaking hands, he wrapped his dick up and grabbed her hips. Sinking his fingers into the flesh caused her to yelp.

“Fuck! I hurt you.”

“Mark me, bruise me. I don’t care. Just get inside me now!”

God, this woman was going to be the death of him.



As Bryson filled Alexia, her walls seared with every inch that he stretched her. Her insides were still quivering from her last release when he plunged deep and gave her another.

“Fuck! Slide your pussy over my cock and come for me!” He sounded like he wanted to roar but held back.

The words tripped her senses. She tumbled on the wave of her second release. He locked her body to his and plunged into her hard, pounding the perfect spot.

She’d never had sex in a vehicle before, and she’d never view this Humvee the same way again. Liquid heat soaked his cock, creating a juicy noise in the close confines. His lips on the side of her neck sent goosebumps skittering across her skin.

“Bryson! Oh god. I’m so...close...again.” Her moan didn’t even sound as if it came from her.

“I’ve only got two tries’ worth of condoms, princess. *You* get as many as you want.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she focused on him hitting *that* spot—right there—over and over. Harder and harder. She grabbed his thigh and was rewarded with the feel of that muscle tightening and releasing with his thrusts.

Suddenly, a laugh bubbled from her. “Is the car rocking?”

“Damn right it is. I’m fucking MT Ops, princess. I live fast and fuck hard.”

His brash attitude coupled with the impressive length of his cock hitting her—*oh god there*—brought her higher.

While her body gave in to the need blasting through her, her mind fixed on the man claiming her.

Bryson wasn’t anything like she’d expected him to be when she first hit

him with her SUV. Spending a few days in his company revealed a side that she couldn't read about in any file and her boss wouldn't be able to warn her away from anymore.

She liked Bryson. A lot. Too much, actually. When it came time to part ways, she knew she'd still feel his touch on her for a long, long time.

He tugged her head to capture her mouth again. God, the man could kiss and every plunge of his thick length inside her launched her up another steep mountain slope to the very edge of release.

His hips jerked out of time. Then again. She felt him stiffen and threw herself into giving him the most pleasure she could.

Leaning forward, she braced her hands on the door and arched her back to allow him deeper access. He slid home, stiffened and then came with a muffled roar, pounding her while her pussy clamped on him to milk every last drop.

Her mind blanked. Her breath fogged the window in front of her. No one moved for several minutes.

"I never want to leave your pussy," he ground out.

"There's always the other condom."

"Not yet. I'm not done pleasuring you yet, woman."

A thrill ran down her spine at such an alpha male comment. That would normally piss her off in her male-dominated field, but coming from Bryson, after amazing sex and three orgasms, it only made her pulse hammer faster.

His lips brushed over her shoulder. "I hope I didn't leave any marks on you."

She didn't care if he did. In fact, part of her hoped that when they did part, she had something to carry with her at least for a little while.

When he slowly withdrew, her body ached with regret. He opened the door behind him, and wind sliced over her body.

"Sorry," he said.

She let her head drop forward, still gaining her breath. "Don't be. It feels good."

"My kinda woman."

She heard the smile in his voice right before he shut the door. She imagined him out there in the dark, cold night dealing with the condom.

Alexia's mind whirled. For a moment, she lost sense of time and place.

Did she really just have sex in the back of a government vehicle? She couldn't believe what they'd just done. She'd always been a risk-taker, but only when it came to work.

Her heart warmed toward him.

Hell, it was reaching *for* him.

By the time he opened the door and she looked at his face, she was reeling from the realization that she was already halfway in love with him.

## Chapter Fifteen

---

Tripp had a leg cramp. And his back hurt. His neck might never be right again after sleeping in the back of a Hummer.

And *getting* a hummer too.

Damn, his cock was steely hard at the memory of Alexia's beautiful mouth wrapped around his shaft not once but twice last night.

The woman had done something few people could and made him come several times in one night. Not that he didn't have the ability, but nobody held his attention very long.

Until now.

He stared down at the striking woman sleeping in his arms. Pride stole over him at how spent and satisfied she looked. Though the day hadn't yet dawned, his eyes were sharp enough to see how rested she appeared.

One night with him was equivalent to a ten-day trip to Hawaii. Instead of sand and surf, she got snow...and cock.

He couldn't stop the smile from creeping over his face.

Her naked body plastered against every inch of his, and silky strands of hair trailed across his chest. He fucking loved smelling like sex, but smelling like Alexia gave him a different kind of rush.

What was it about the woman? Her job required guts and a level of street smarts that most people didn't possess. Layer in a dark humor that rivaled his and he wanted more.

The team would need him back as soon as possible. Then what? The case that had ruled his every spare thought wasn't solved, but it didn't dominate his mind the way it had before this trip. Maybe because they were one step closer to knowing what happened that night.

*Maybe it's HER.*

With his eyes, he traced the delicate line of her jaw up to the crest of her cheek that still wore a flush from what he'd done to her all night long.

She'd be running on even less sleep than their previous nights together. Which would leave her *really* grumpy.

His lips quirked.

As if she knew he was smiling at her expense, she roused. Cracking an eye, she took him in for a solid minute.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Just thinking about how grumpy you're going to be when you don't even get a sip of bad coffee."

A palm smacked his chest. With a laugh, he hooked his arms around her and brought her back down on top of him. "Easy, princess. We'll drive to a gas station and buy one."

She struggled in his hold until she felt his hard cock between them and went still. "What is this?"

"You should know after you rode it and sucked me dry last night. You want to be my big, big helper again?"

She scraped her teeth over his nipple, making him jerk in surprise and arousal. "Quit with the big helper already."

When she lifted her head, her hair that had seemed smooth a minute before was in total disarray. He cupped her nape. Tenderness washed through him.

"Ugh. I really could use some caffeine."

"I've got a couple packs of instant coffee in my bag. Just add water."

"By water you mean that stuff dripping off an icicle on the mountain?"

"Can't get more pure."

She laughed. "You're such a liar. Everyone knows that anything that falls from the sky is full of pollution."

"What would you say to a truck stop shower?"

She met his gaze. "I'd say I forgot my flip-flops. Is there an alternative?"

He pointed to the trickle of an icy mountain spring zigzagging down the mountainside.

She shivered. "I'll risk the foot fungus."

"That's my girl."

She climbed off him and looked around the Humvee. Her panties were hanging off the rearview mirror where they'd landed after Tripp stripped them off her.

She shook her head slowly. “I can’t believe the night we had. What was I thinking?”

He pinched her chin lightly, swinging her head toward him. “You were thinking about having the best night of your life. With me.”

Sucking in a breath, she held his gaze for a long heartbeat. “You’re right, Bryson. It was the best night of my life.”

His chest swelled with a brand of passion he hadn’t experienced before. The air caught in his throat, making it difficult to fill his lungs. What he saw shimmering in her eyes...it had him second-guessing his sanity.

This was just sex. Fun to release some steam and celebrate the fact that they were alive.

Swooping in, he kissed her softly, brushing his mouth over hers, swishing back and forth several times.

When they pulled apart, her eyes were half-lidded with a look of desire he was becoming well-acquainted with.

She gave herself a small shake. “I’d better get my panties off the mirror.”

He chuckled despite the tightness in his chest. “I think the government frowns upon ornaments hanging from the mirror.”

When she shifted forward, reaching across the front of the vehicle to snag them, Tripp got a very good view of what he’d be missing out on as soon as they went their separate ways.

Her round ass tormented the hell out of him, as did the delicious shadow between her legs where he’d bury his cock. But what he really wanted more of was that look in her eyes when she told him she’d had the best night of her life.

With him.

Only being out of condoms kept him from dragging her down on his lap to sit on his cock. He would definitely be stocking up on condoms at the truck stop, though.

While she scrambled to dress in the back seat, he stepped outside to brave the elements. The cold, exhilarating air didn’t begin to slake his lust, and he climbed behind the wheel with a stiffness that never eased up the entire drive to the truck stop.

The showers were as expected. The coffee mediocre.

Alexia’s grumpiness level hovered around a solid seven out of ten, which

surprised him after they'd slept in an SUV.

When they were back on the road, she checked her phone. "The local PD emailed the case file to Eric last night, but they have the hard copy for me that I requested. Can we swing by the station before we leave town?"

Leave town. Their time would be over soon. Would their paths ever cross again? It was unlikely, even with her investigating cold cases. The only reason they met in the first place was her belief that he was somehow involved in Kelsey's case.

He tried to picture taking his leave of her, kissing her forehead and watching her get in her vehicle and drive away.

Immediately his brain switched to a vision of her seated around a bonfire like they often threw at the base, a marshmallow speared on the end of the stick extended over the flames. Of course, she'd be lambasting his team with her sassy tongue.

"Bryson?"

He swung his head toward her. "Sure thing. We'll swing by the station."

He made a detour and he parked in front of the building. Alexia reached for the door handle.

"You want to come with me?"

"It's best if I stay here." He didn't trust himself not to blow his top at those guys after what they did.

With a nod of understanding, she went into the station. A minute later, she settled into the seat beside him again and stowed the thick file on the floor between her feet.

They started on the road leading out of town. Just knowing they were headed back left him with mixed feelings.

"You're quiet today. Are you sure you aren't the grumpy party?" Her voice pulled him from his deep thoughts.

"Just thinking that I'm not sure what to do with myself now that Kelsey's case has progressed."

She stared at him. "It's not solved, though."

"No, but we're closer to answers. My sister—her mom—will be relieved to know that Caden wasn't to blame." His throat closed up on the statement.

"So you won't be taking those long weekend trips into the mountains to do research anymore?" Alexia asked.

“I’ll give you everything I’ve uncovered and compiled so far on the case. I hope something I have helps you finish it. I’m also thinking we need to bring Rafe and the team in on things.”

He still hadn’t told her about Rafe’s find in the cabin and the murdered couple. He opened his mouth to tell her when he spotted brake lights ahead.

He gently braked on the slippery road. Alexia leaned forward to get a better look. “What the hell?”

His stomach dropped. “That car’s sliding out of control.”

“Oh no!” she cried as the other driver skidded sideways and struck the guardrail. The impact spun them in the opposite direction.

“Fuck!”

The car hit the side of the mountain and flipped, blocking the road.

As much as he hated the reason for it...at least he got more time with Alexia.



Alexia grabbed Bryson’s forearm. Her heart couldn’t even slow down. They were almost part of the accident. If he hadn’t gained control of the Humvee in time, they would have slammed into that car when it first hit the guardrail.

He shot out of the vehicle and ran for the flipped car. It took her a second longer to make her limbs cooperate, but she came to a skidding stop beside him.

The roof was crumpled. The windows had shattered.

“We have to get them out!” she cried.

Bryson was already ducking through the driver’s window and calling out to the victims of the crash.

Alexia squatted at the back window to peek in. What she saw left her stomach heaving and her blood running cold.

A child in a baby seat.

The silence cracked through her shock. Nobody was screaming.

Without hesitation, she reached inside and touched the baby’s leg. It kicked.

“The baby’s alive!”

“Baby? Jesus Christ!” came Bryson’s reply.

“I got it. I can get it out.” She fumbled blindly with buckles she was

unfamiliar with but knew fastened at several points.

A woman's shrill voice had her blood racing with relief. Noise was good. It meant the family members were alive.

"How many people are in the car with you?" Bryson was asking the woman.

"My...baby!"

"Anyone else?" His voice was firm but had a calmness meant to soothe.

Alexia loosened the last buckle and the baby slid into her hand. "I've got your baby. He's all right!"

At least she hoped he was. The little guy was wrapped in a thick blue sleeper, not nearly warm enough for the elements. Alexia cradled him to her chest and whipped her coat off with her free hand to wrap around him.

"That's it," Tripp encouraged the woman. "Slide out the window. Watch that glass. I got you."

Alexia glanced over to see Bryson extracting the driver from the wreckage.

"Is there anyone else in the car with you?" he asked the woman again.

"No. I'm on my way to the babysitter's... My baby!"

"He's okay, honey. Just sit down here. I'm going to get you a blanket. Don't move until we know you're all right." He shot Alexia a look and took off at a run for the Humvee and the extra supplies in the back.

Alexia gave her phone a voice command to call 911. The baby started to wail, and she hurried over to the mother with the child, placing him on her chest and draping her coat over the pair of them until Bryson returned with the blanket and a first-aid kit.

"She says they're the only two people in the vehicle," she reminded Bryson. "Take one of the blankets and try to edge it under her. The road's freezing and wet."

He rolled up the blanket into a long tube and lay it on the ground beside the lady. Then he gently eased it under one side of her body, moved to the other and unrolled it onto the roadway while minimizing movement.

Alexia looked on, impressed by his knowledge. When she unzipped the first-aid bag and pulled out a package of gauze, she felt his eyes on her while she worked to stop the bleeding from a cut on the woman's forehead.

"Is my baby okay?" the woman asked over and over.

“He looks all right. The car seat did its job. But we’ll let the medics check him out as soon as they arrive,” Bryson told her in a low, calming tone.

“I-I don’t know what happened,” she said.

Alexia looked into her eyes. “You hit some ice. But you’re going to be all right—both of you are.

Bryson exchanged a look with Alexia. “Help is only three minutes out now.”

*If they don’t wreck too.*

While she staunched the bleeding, Bryson went back to the vehicle in search of a diaper bag or the woman’s purse. He also shut off the engine that they’d left running.

When he returned carrying a bag with blue elephants on it, Alexia said, “Look inside for a pacifier.”

His stare met hers, holding a question in the depths.

“The baby needs soothed, and the momma needs to know he’s okay.” She looked into the woman’s eyes. “Isn’t that right?”

“Yes...”

“What’s his name?”

“John Thomas, after my father. We call him JT.”

“A great name. What’s yours?” Alexia continued prodding her with questions to keep her mind off the worst and keep her talking in case of head trauma.

The noise of rescue vehicles sounded in the distance.

Bryson unearthed a pacifier and expertly popped it into the baby’s mouth. He quieted instantly, the object moving as he sucked. He carefully tucked Alexia’s coat more securely around the baby and patted his back.

Alexia studied him. Who was this man? A big-muscled special operator who knew his way around children? God, that was hot as hell.

And she was in love.

Her mind stalled over that thought. It was just a figure of speech. In this case, a thought. She wasn’t *really* connecting that word to Bryson. They were only having a fling while getting through some rough moments like this. And finding that body in the woods.

They may have experienced plenty to bond over in the past few days, and this was yet another thing, but her feelings were just the result of being in

close contact with Bryson. They weren't *real*.

The baby began to fuss again. He laid his big hand on its small back and began to pat it gently.

The gesture tugged at Alexia's insides. He'd make a great dad.

She wasn't a bit maternal. She'd never considered having kids at all.

Until this very instant as she watched Bryson.

## Chapter Sixteen

---

More questioning. Statements to give. The mother and child were bundled into the ambulance together and driven to the nearest hospital while the tow truck arrived on the scene to take care of the wrecked car.

Alexia stood a few feet away from Tripp, conveying what happened by gesturing and pointing.

The woman was goddamn amazing. So quick on her feet. Her ability to interact with people was admirable. Now he really understood why these cold cases were placed in her hands.

She glanced over, caught his stare and didn't look away. His heart gave a little thump against his ribs as if telling him to go to her—close the distance between them and scoop her up into his arms. As strong as she was, she might need soothing too.

And he was just the man to do it.

The tow truck driver finished, and Bryson made certain he knew where to take the vehicle. Then he stood around waiting for Alexia to wrap up with the cops.

Good thing it wasn't the same detective who questioned Tripp. If the guy had shown up with that snotty, accusatory attitude again, Tripp couldn't be responsible for his actions.

He took out his phone and dialed Rafe. The call went to voicemail, so he called the next guy in line.

"Guns." Tripp was staring at Alexia but his buddy's voice transported him to the base and his team.

"Hey, asshole. I hear you're going through it right now. Rafe told us about the cops questioning you."

"It's gotten worse. Alexia and I were on our way out of town when a person wrecked right in front of us."

"Hell. Is everyone okay?"

“Looks like a happy ending, but the victims were taken by ambulance. Now we’re dealing with the police report since we were first on the scene.”

“It’s like you’re a goddamn hero or something, Tripp.”

The sarcasm in Guns’s tone brought a chuckle to his lips. “It’s all in the training.”

“I got the same training as you, asshole.”

“Anyway, we’re already running behind schedule. I hoped to make it back to base by tonight.”

“Uh-huh.”

He paused. “What’s that mean?”

“Alexia?” he drawled.

He pictured Guns with that teasing glint in his eyes that belied the stoic expression he was known for. He expected that the entire team was talking about him. If it had been one of his buddies, Tripp would do the same. Being alone with a woman for days, let alone an attractive one, was cause for ribbing.

When he returned to base, the guys wouldn’t let up for weeks. Thing was, he didn’t want the guys to think of Alexia that way at all. She was honorable and amazing and...

Fuck. He’d caught feelings for her.

Whatever Guns said into his ear was lost because he was too busy staring at Alexia across the icy pavement.

She looked straight at him and finished the conversation with the officer, who climbed into his patrol car. Then she started toward Tripp.

“Gotta go. Tell Rafe I’ll be in touch.”

“Bye, asshole.”

“Dickhead.” He was grinning when he pocketed his phone and crossed the road to meet Alexia at the Humvee.

He searched her face for signs of distress. If he saw so much as a crease between her eyebrows, he would go back and give that cop an attitude adjustment.

But she smiled at him, and he felt his chest expand with a full breath he hadn’t been able to take in what felt like hours.

“God, that took longer than I thought it would,” she said.

“It usually does.”

“You’ve seen stuff like this?”

“A time or two.”

He scanned the roadway. Broken glass had been swept off to the side but glinted in the watery sunlight.

Fuck. This could have been really bad. That could have been *him* spinning out and Alexia could have died. Seeing that look of terror on the mother’s face brought it all home and hit hard.

Losing Alexia wasn’t something he wanted to think about—ever. She was too amazing. Too damn driven, smart...and perfect.

She took a step closer. She’d donned her coat again after covering the baby in it. As long as he lived, he’d never forget the sight of her wrapping up that baby.

Reaching out, he caught her fingers and folded his around them. A long moment stretched between them while they simply stared at each other.

With a glance at the time on his phone, he said, “Would you look at that? It’s almost two. I think it’s best to stop at the next hotel.”

“Definitely! You never know when you’ll come across another one.”

“Exactly. We don’t want to be spending another night in the Humvee.”

Her eyes widened with a look of innocence. “I don’t think we should take any chances.”

When he flashed a grin, she tipped her forehead against his chest and stifled a giggle.

His gut gripped with need even as his chest warmed with emotion. He tugged her hand. “Let’s go before I lose control and hang your panties off the rearview mirror again.”

The sight of her biting into her bottom lip had him groaning and his jeans getting a little too snug.

They rushed to the vehicle and Tripp tossed Alexia a look.

Her lashes lowered over her smoldering eyes. “Drive fast, but don’t kill us on the icy road, Bryson.”

“I’ll get us there in one piece, princess.”

“Oh, I trust you.”

Her statement felt like melted chocolate spread over his senses. He paused with his hand on the gearshift. “Do you?”

She blinked. “After seeing you in action? Absolutely. You got that

woman out of her vehicle like you do it on a daily basis.”

Admiration flooded his chest. “Or you with that baby.”

“No—you with that baby! When you stuck that pacifier in his mouth and then patted his back? Oh my god. If only everyone saw this side of you.” She wrapped her arms around herself.

“Good thing they don’t. It would ruin my reputation as a badass.”

They shared a laugh. After they got on the road, Tripp reached over and took her hand.

She meshed their fingers and it gave him something he hadn’t realized he was lacking.



Bryson sauntered into the hotel room, and as predictable as always, he headed straight for the bed. Alexia dropped her bag and watched with a smirk as he lowered himself to the mattress and gave it the bounce test.

She couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across her face. “Well? Does it pass?”

He crooked a finger. “Come see for yourself.”

If she got within reach of his long arms, she’d be on that bed tangled up with him before she could blink. While the idea of rolling around on a bed that looked to be a little better quality than the first two they shared was a temptation, she wanted something else almost as much.

“I plan on taking a shower in a place that doesn’t smell like onion rings.”

He wagged a brow. “Want some company?”

She let her gaze drop to his chest and run down to his groin that was in a constant danger of busting out his fly. She opened her mouth to give a breathy: “Yes!” but her phone cut her off with a buzz.

She reached for her device just as Bryson stood and extracted his from his back pocket.

“It’s Eric,” she said before answering the call.

He glanced at his screen. “It’s Rafe.”

At nearly the same moment, they answered the calls. Alexia drifted across the room to gain some distance so Tripp’s conversation didn’t impose on her own.

“Eric. What’s up?”

“I was going to ask you the same question. You haven’t checked in today.”

“Oh. That’s because it’s been a very eventful day.” *Beginning with waking up in Bryson’s arms.*

“I’ve been reading over this file. Have you?”

“Uh, I intend to start tonight. In the hotel room.”

“What? You’re not getting back tonight?”

“Regretfully, no.”

She sent a look at her lover’s broad, muscled back and had no regrets whatsoever.

“The roads are deplorable. In fact, a car wrecked right in front of us and we were first on the scene. We pulled out a woman and her baby.”

“Dear god. I’d recommend that you stay another night, but we need to discuss this case. Moffett is breathing down my neck now.”

“Moffett?” she echoed. The big man in charge was a ballbuster, even more than Eric, and if he thought someone on his team was slacking, he made the whole department’s lives hell for months. The last time it happened, three team members couldn’t take the heat and handed in their resignations.

Alexia was chiseled from tougher stuff than that, but she didn’t want to endure his anger for months to come.

“After I explore the file, we can do a video call. I’ll get on the road first thing in the morning once it’s safe.”

In his corner, Bryson was speaking in low, urgent tones. What was going on with MT Ops? She didn’t catch what he was saying, but it kind of sounded as if he was catching hell for not being on the road too.

She could stay out of the office a few more days, but Bryson’s team needed him. People’s lives depended on him. She dealt with people who were already gone.

Dammit, she *wanted* one last night with her lover. When they returned to their lives and jobs, it would all be over. She wouldn’t see him again. He’d forget all about her.

*God, that hurts.* Automatically, she raised a hand and laid it over her aching heart.

She sucked in a fortifying breath, preparing to argue her case to her boss.

“Look, it’s man versus nature out there. We can start driving back now,

but it's going to take us *hours* longer than it normally would if we just wait for the trucks to clear the roads. What's the big hurry?"

Bryson swung around and pierced her in an are-you-getting-as-much-shit-as-I-am look.

She widened her eyes and nodded in response.

"What's really going on, Alexia?" The question in her ear rattled her.

"If you're referring to this case being messed up from the start, then you already know that we're following threads that never got unraveled months ago when the police botched that crime scene and then withheld information from us. We're doing the best we can here, Eric, and I don't appreciate you giving me so much crap!"

She shot a look at Bryson. When he gave her a thatta-girl nod, her chest warmed.

"All right, Alexia. All right. I'll handle Moffett. You get back safe—and I'll see you in the office tomorrow."

"You know I've got to drop Bryson off at his base first—"

"Bryson? You're on a first-name basis with our suspect now?"

Anger rolled through her. She had a great connection with her boss, but she couldn't stand for him saying these things.

"You don't know the things we've seen and done. Until you are in the field, you have no room to question me."

Silence pulsed on the line. She didn't realize how hard she'd been gripping the phone until her fingers started to cramp.

"One more night won't hurt anything. I'll see you tomorrow sometime—after I drop *Bryson* off at base. Copy?"

"Copy."

She quickly ended the call and spun to face Bryson. His gaze connected with hers.

He was still on the line—taking heat from his commanding officer. He also looked hot and mad and impatient...and Alexia was done waiting.

She rushed across the room and slammed her mouth over his. He checked any sound that might escape, and she didn't kiss him for long. She moved her lips down his jaw and licked his neck while kicking off her boots and going for the waist of her pants.

Tipping his head, he clamped his phone between his ear and his shoulder

so his hands were free to remove her shirt.

She tore off her bra next, and Bryson's hands were cupped and ready to knead the mounds.

With a moan trapped in her throat, she went for his fly. The button was a bit difficult to pop open when his fly was so distended by his erection, but she managed.

As soon as she accessed his boxer briefs, she withdrew his cock and hit her knees.

He dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling while responding to Rafe. "I know you need me there..."

Planting her palms on his muscled thighs, she gripped his length at the base and swirled her tongue around the head of his cock.

He shuddered at what she was doing. She was damn impressed that he kept his voice so even and didn't gasp or cry out as she sucked him off. Even more impressive was the fact that his brain kept working like nothing was happening.

"Can't Ollie fill in? He's good. Damn good. One of the best I've seen. And he's trained for mountain war...fare."

Long fingers wrapped around her hair and tilted her head up. Their gazes locked with his cock buried in her throat. She issued a soft hum that she hoped would make his legs buckle.

"I'll get there as soon as I can, Rafe. Look, Alexia just took a call about the case. I need to hear this." With a grunt of goodbye, Bryson ended the call and threw the phone onto the bed. Both hands planted on her head and he issued a low snarl as he churned his hips.

"Temptress. You're driving me crazy with that mouth. Gawd, princess. Suck my cock. Fuck!" Words that had been trapped before poured out now, one after the other.

She felt his body tense and knew him well enough by now to realize he was edging close to the release she wanted so badly to give him. Tasting him—swallowing him—would be a wish fulfilled and a great memory to carry away with her.

Running her tongue down the vein on the side, she hollowed her cheeks in a sucking pull.

"Oh, goddamn. Fucking hell. Stop. Stop, princess. I'm not coming in

your sweet mouth.” He yanked her up. Her feet barely skimmed the floor before she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Pivoting toward the bed, he slammed his mouth over hers and carried her the few steps to the mattress. They fell as one in the ultimate bounce test.

In one jerk, he had his jeans around his hips and his cock poised at the heat of her.

“Condom!”

“Fuck!”

Reaching around him, she found his wallet and plucked one from the fold. He tore it open and she slid it on.

“This kind of teamwork would make my boss proud,” she rasped.

His laugh turned into a growl when he sank balls-deep in one fast, hard, claiming glide.

## Chapter Seventeen

---

Rafe saw right through his shit, but damn if Tripp could make himself care. Truth was, the roads weren't bad enough that he couldn't travel. In fact, if he were alone, he'd be on the icy highway headed back to base right now.

What gave him pause was putting Alexia on the road in those conditions. After seeing the pain and terror on that mother's face when she wasn't certain her child was all right...well, it gave him a different outlook on things.

Like the fact that he cared about Alexia. A lot. And he wasn't about to take risks with someone he cared about.

He prided himself on being intelligent and an advanced thinker. That extended to the ability to analyze his own emotions too.

He was falling in love with her and he knew it.

After mind-blowing sex, they ended up in the shower doing more of the same. He couldn't keep his hands off her and didn't want to try anymore. When his niece's case was solved, he was determined to keep seeing her. They'd make it work. He was resourceful, and Alexia was smart and savvy.

There would be weekends away and stolen moments whenever they got a chance.

He checked the time. The restaurant was holding a table for them, not that he thought they'd be very busy with the state of the roads. But he wasn't taking any chances tonight and getting stuck eating at another crappy diner.

Tonight, he was showing Alexia that she was worth his effort. That extended to his appearance. Though his go-bag only had casual clothes comfortable enough that he could fight in, a pair of black cargo pants worked well enough for dress pants. His black T-shirt would have to do.

Impatient, he paced to the bathroom door and called out, "Everything okay?"

"Yes, Bryson. That's the second time you've asked," she said through the door.

He heard the smile in her voice.

“What’s taking so long?”

“You said we were going out somewhere decent and I want to look nice.”

“Make sure you put on that lipstick. The color drives me crazy.”

“Will you stop micromanaging our date?”

He laughed at her scolding tone. Damn, this woman was really changing him. He’d laughed more with her in the past few days than he had in all the months since his niece’s death.

He walked across the room again, letting his mind shift from Alexia to his call with Rafe. Some shit was going down with a team of snowmobilers who were caught in an ice storm and sheltered in a cave. There, they discovered that someone had stowed away explosives and weapons.

Rafe and the guys were deployed. Without him. That didn’t sit well, but there wasn’t time to reach them now, even by chopper. That was what they were discussing when Alexia dropped to her knees and started sucking his cock.

He scrubbed a hand over his face but it didn’t stop the slideshow of visuals parading through his brain.

At that point in the conversation, Tripp suggested to Rafe that they bring Ollie in as a temporary replacement for him. Ollie fit right in with the team and could fly them out if it came to that.

He knew they were fine without him. But he wanted to be there with them too.

The bathroom door opened, and he whirled. Alexia appeared in the doorway with her no-nonsense black trousers they didn’t look like every detective’s uniform now that she had a pinstriped blouse with the buttons opened all the way and the ends tucked into the waist of her pants in a wrapped fashion.

He cut his gaze over her. “One quick move and your breasts will be out.”

“Don’t worry. It’s tucked in well.” When she smiled, it drew his attention to her lips and the red-berry-brown lipstick she wore.

His stiff cock made it difficult to cross the room to her. Placing his hands on her waist, he leaned in close to breathe in her scent. “By the end of the night, I want to be wearing that shade in rings around my cock.”

Her eyes took on a smolder of desire. “I’m never going to be able to wear this color again without thinking about that.”

“Good.” This need to mark and claim was new to him. While it shocked him, he was also strangely good with it.

“You ready?” he asked.

She gave him a coy look. “Where are we going? Why are we dressed up, if that’s what we’re calling it.”

“We’re going to dinner.”

“Well, the crusty waitress will be impressed.”

He grinned and slid his palm over her lower back to the crest of her shapely ass. Leaning in, he was able to take a peek down her blouse and see more skin.

This wasn’t a traditional date, but they weren’t a traditional couple. They didn’t meet at a bar or a party. They met on the job and looked at dead bodies together.

The hotel parking lot was slippery, and he made sure to keep a grip on Alexia’s arm as they crossed. The drive was quick and completely worth it when Alexia let out a gasp. White outdoor lights crisscrossed the front of the building and ran around to an area out back. He was sure nobody ate out here at this time of year, but the glimmer on the ice and snow made it even more charming.

“I’d like to come back here in the summer and sit outside,” she said as he walked her to the entrance.

“Then I’ll bring you.” He offered her a gentle smile and saw confusion pinch her eyebrows.

Inside, the atmosphere couldn’t be called five-star or elegant, but it was ten notches above the places they’d eaten at before.

They were shown to their table and given a rundown of the wines available.

Seated at a table with Alexia across from him and the warm lights reflecting in her eyes, Tripp didn’t even feel like himself.

“We’ll have a bottle of cabernet sauvignon,” he told the hostess before she walked away.

Alexia’s brows shot up, but she waited until the woman was out of earshot before saying, “Are you sure about drinking on the job?”

“I’m not on the job. My team’s on an op without me.”

Her brows worked higher toward her hairline. “Oh Bryson, I’m sorry. I’m sure you don’t like sitting out like this.”

“I chose to be here. I didn’t have to come along with you.” He reached to take her hand, chafing his thumb back and forth over her knuckle. “I think we both know we could have left sooner.”

She nodded and squeezed his hand in return.

“Besides, I think Rafe’s trying to give me the time off to get my head on straight.” Whether that was because of his niece or Alexia, he wasn’t sure.

At that moment, a guy approached the table with a tray bearing the wine and two goblets.

Tripp looked him over. He was tall and clearly worked out. He also had that blond hair that swooped in the front.

A fuckboy, Guns would call him if he were here. He’d pointed out more than a few at the bar on a Friday night. The type of guy who thought he was God’s gift to women but disrespected them. From what he’d seen, they cared more about their hair gel than having a personality.

When he stepped up to the table and set everything down, he leaned across Alexia.

Her jaw dropped, and she stared at the guy as he straightened up with a broad smile.

Tripp sent the guy a glare. He wouldn’t have those white teeth very long if he didn’t keep his distance.

“I’m Cole and I’ll be your server. Would you like me to open your wine for you?”

Tripp leveled him in a look. “No, we would not. I’ve got it, Collin.”

“It’s Cole.”

Alexia shot Tripp a sideways glance that told him to behave.

He guessed he’d try. For her.

Cole handed her a menu and looked into her eyes as he told her the special.

“I’ll have that,” she told him.

Cole beamed and looked to Tripp.

“I want a steak I can cut with a butter knife.”

“Good choice.” He returned his attention to Alexia.

Tripp shoved his chair back, scraping the legs on the hardwood floor. When he stood to his full height, towering several inches over this pipsqueak, he gave Alexia a pointed look.

Cole avoided eye contact with him and hurried away.

Alexia tugged on Tripp's hand. "Sit down! You just had to make a scene, didn't you?"

He dropped into his chair. "Didn't you notice him looking at your breasts?"

She tipped her head. "Aww. You're cute when you're jealous," she said in baby talk.

He was done playing around.

"Maybe it's time you realize *why* I feel that way."

She straightened in her seat.

"Maybe because my feelings are growing for you. And I want to keep seeing you after this. Maybe I think there's more between us than either of us expected."

Her mouth hung open. While she processed that, he lifted the bottle and used the corkscrew the server left to open it.

When he poured the burgundy into one of the goblets, he watched the struggle playing over her face.

"Don't like that, princess? You don't know how to analyze away why you feel the same?"

She composed herself and reached for the glass he held out to her. "Of course not. I'm just thinking about that file."

"Right." He poured his own glass and brought it to his lips. "The same way I'm thinking about how *Rafe* found the love of his life."

She expelled a cough. "Love of his...life?"

He nodded and took a swallow of the wine. "Not half bad. It'll pair well with my steak."

She stared at him. "Bryson. We both know this would never work long-term between us."

"Never underestimate me, Alexia. I'm known for being stubborn. And for getting my way." He raised his glass to her, toasting his words. His feelings.

He toasted to his claim on her that she didn't know about yet—and

happiness.



Alexia focused on keeping her knee from bouncing but her nerves weren't cooperating. They were mere miles from the small-town supermarket that she had driven to that day to make the video call to Bryson.

They'd stopped talking about what came next with the whole hit-him-with-the-government-vehicle thing. But that kicked off a chain of events that led her to this point.

The point where she didn't want to part ways with him.

He was confident that they were only separating until she could get away again and come to town. Or he got leave to go to her. But either way, the man was delusional.

What did they have in common besides great orgasms? All right, so they shared a few laughs. That didn't make for boyfriend material, even if he *was* the epitome of a bad boy.

Actually, that was precisely the reason why she shouldn't entertain the notion about dating that he'd slam-dunked into her head.

God, she wished she *could* shake it. She couldn't be distracted when she returned to her office. Eric would see right through her.

She sliced a look from the corner of her eye at Bryson, sitting there looking as relaxed as could be behind the wheel.

They needed to talk this through.

What was there to say?

She'd avoided answering his offer to keep seeing her—the equivalent of turning him down.

He made it pretty clear that he wanted her. As if that endearing display of jealousy with the hot server at the restaurant wasn't enough, he declared he had feelings for her. And then proceeded to show her when he *made love* to her.

She cringed whenever she so much as heard those words, and she sure as heck never thought about it in connection to herself. She was a tough detective. She didn't do emotions.

So why was her chest so tight and warm and her nipples peaking whenever she thought about making Bryson pull over so she could slip into

his arms?

Or the back seat.

She groaned every time she recalled the pleasure they shared in that back seat.

Oh hell, this was going to wrench at her heart, wasn't it? Leaving him. Even if he said it wasn't forever, she didn't even want a few days to slip by without him.

He made her smile. And laugh. The man had limped around for more than a day just to make her feel bad, and instead it only made her like him.

A lot.

Oh yes, her boss was going to take one look at her and see the change in her. She *was* different, but was it for the better? A few days with the special operator had made her softer rather than harder. He made her see that work could be fun too, with the right person at her side.

Of course it was no picnic and much of their trip hadn't been fun at all. Especially not for Bryson. But she was there for that too.

Her inhalation was quick and silent.

She did have feelings for him. Big feelings. Or as he'd put it, big, big feelings.

What was she going to do?

They rolled up to a stop sign she recognized as being very close to the supermarket.

Were those worry lines around Bryson's eyes?

She couldn't think of anything to say to fill the awkward silence hovering between them now. Every bump on the road left her with the acute awareness that she wasn't going to see him tomorrow. She wouldn't roll over in bed and want to punch him in the throat for snoring.

He wouldn't laugh at her and call her grumpy in the morning as he handed her a cup of terrible coffee.

They rounded a corner and the supermarket came into view. Her gaze shot to the place where she'd hit him with the Humvee.

He parked near the back of the lot and took out his phone. While he made a call, she fidgeted with the zipper pull on her coat.

He looked at her and said into the phone, "We're at the drop-off point. Okay. See you in a few."

When he tucked the phone in his jeans again, Alexia chuckled. “Drop-off point? It’s a grocery store. You’re so extra.”

His lips quirked, but she noted how the smile didn’t linger in his eyes the way it had all those times over the past few days they spent together.

Without a word, they both climbed out of the vehicle to say goodbye.

Facing each other this way hurt. She couldn’t meet his stare and riveted her gaze on his chest instead.

“One of the guys is coming for me. He’ll be here in a couple minutes.”

So short a time left. She couldn’t bear using those minutes on whiny goodbyes.

“Eric’s expecting me back.”

He shuffled a step closer. “Yeah. You should go.”

They stood inches apart. Her body screamed at her to throw her arms around him and kiss him the way she wanted to and to tell him that she would love to see him again.

But she didn’t do those things.

When the back of his fingers brushed the back of hers, she jumped. Her stomach churned.

“You know where to find me, Alexia.” He ducked his head to capture her gaze. When she lifted hers to meet it, her breath caught in her throat. What she read there was a silent plea...for her to find him. For her to respond to his determined belief that they *would* and *should* see each other after this.

Unable to speak, she nodded.

He leaned in and brushed his lips over her forehead. She closed her eyes at the sensation. Then he drew away, turned and walked the distance to the grocery store.

For a moment, she couldn’t move. The soles of her boots felt frozen to the pavement, and a lump lodged in her throat, causing it to burn.

She couldn’t watch him go.

She hurried to the driver’s side and jumped behind the wheel. She put the vehicle in reverse and started to back out, then she slammed on the brakes.

No, dammit! She couldn’t let things end this way.

Quickly, she pulled back into the parking spot and cut the motor. She took off at a run to the store. He was nowhere in sight, so she had to search several aisles for him.

When she found him standing in front of a display of marshmallows, a cry escaped her.

His head jerked up and he strode toward her. Closing the distance, she threw herself into his arms.

He caught her against him, locked her to his firm body and buried his face in her hair.

“I can’t let you go this way. I don’t want this to be over!”

He cupped her face, looked into her eyes and kissed her long, hard and deep. As if they were the only two people in the town, in the store...in the world. She dug her fingers into his biceps and gave in to all the hope that she’d refused to buy into before this very second.

When they broke apart, his eyes gleamed. “We’ll figure it out, princess. I’ll call you later. Promise.”

She nodded and backed away. But he rushed at her again, hooking an arm around her middle to haul her in for another dizzying kiss. The whir of shopping cart wheels made them tear away from the kiss again.

With a laugh, he released her and gave her a pat on the bottom. “Go. Work on the case.”

“I’ll do it for you. So you have closure.”

When she turned and walked away from him this time, she had a little bounce in her step. It wasn’t over. He would call her soon.

And then just maybe she would be able to tell him what was in her heart.

## Chapter Eighteen

---

When the MT Ops SUV pulled up in front of Tripp, he opened the door and climbed in. Rafe was behind the wheel with several guys in the back.

“Hey, asshole. What ya got in the bag?” Guns reached over the seat to clap him on the shoulder.

He placed the bag on the floor between his feet. “Figured since I missed out on the op, I’d spring for s’mores fixin’s.” He looked at Rafe, then peered closer at the bandage on the back of his hand.

“You guys have a rough op without me?” he asked.

Rafe made a scoffing noise. “As if we needed you. We had Ollie.”

Tripp leaned back in his seat. “I’m not worried about Ollie taking my place. He can hardly fight,” he said, in total opposition to his previous claim about the pilot’s skills.

“We didn’t even know you weren’t with us. You hardy add anything to the team,” Guns shot at him.

Vlad chuckled. “Oh, we did have that discussion about how Tripp slows us down so much. Isn’t that right, Rafe?”

He held up a palm as if passing on the opportunity to take a piece out of Tripp.

Vlad turned to Guns. “He’s just being diplomatic, but I heard him tell Colonel Jackson that Tripp is on latrine duty for a month.”

“Now that *is* true.” Rafe’s words had everyone laughing, including Tripp.

When it died down, silence fell over them.

Tripp sensed something more. “You guys are making me nervous. What’s going on?”

Rafe cocked a brow at him. “So you fell for the fed.”

Tripp’s grin couldn’t be stopped. It spread across his face. There was no

use in denying it.

“She’s no Olympic skier, but I do love sparring with her.”

A loud complaint sounded from Guns. Cruz held out his palm. “Fork it over, asshole. You lost.”

Guns pulled out his wallet and slapped several bills into his hand. “Damn, Tripp. First you abandon us, and then you cost me sixty bucks.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t tell you to make that bet. You know I’m the most unpredictable guy on the team.”

Rafe and Cruz looked at him, then to Guns and burst out laughing.

“I’m sensing a story here,” Tripp said.

“You’ll hear all about it when we get back to base,” Rafe promised him.

All stories took a bit of time to tell, and of course every guy on the team had to tell it from his point of view as soon as they arrived. How Guns provided a distraction to get the attackers’ attention off the team and making himself a decoy.

By dropping his pants and wagging his bare ass at their adversaries.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it? And everyone gets to be depressed over how much I’m packin’,” Guns called out.

As the guys all retold the tall tale that took place, Rafe just shook his head. “It sounds like I’m going to have to send you up to medical for an examination. You must have hit your head, Guns,” Rafe said.

He waved the metal tongs he was using to flip spareribs on the grill. “I’m not kidding. The government should insure this weapon I carry around in my pants.” He waved at his groin, sending them all into another fit of laughter.

Tripp always respected the hell out of his buddy. Mostly because they got along so well, and this was one of those instances where they acted alike.

Guns wasn’t owning up to his quick thinking that pinned down two guys who were holing up in that cave with a bunch of dangerous explosives and military-grade weapons. No. He’d rather joke about mooning enemies.

Tripp shook his head. “Damn, I’m sorry I missed all the fun.” He kicked back in his lawn chair and was getting ready to—finally—open up about his niece and what happened to her. But his phone interrupted.

He blinked at the unfamiliar number before answering it with a hasty: “Tripp.”

“Tripp, it’s Eric Stahlman, Alexia’s boss.”

He leaned forward in the chair, all his attention trained on the caller. “What’s going on?”

“I’m hoping you’ll put my mind at ease by telling me Alexia is with you.”

He jolted to his feet, aware of the team going silent and staring at him. “She never made it to the office?”

“No.”

It had been hours and hours.

“I tried to call her,” Eric said. “No answer. I can’t track her phone.” Eric’s words shot icy dread through Tripp’s body.

He pictured her skidding out of control on slick roads. There had to be a reason why she never made it to the office. One of the things he loved most about her was her dedication to her work. It rivaled his own.

“She wouldn’t just disappear,” he grated out. “I’ll find her. Stay in touch.”

“I’m counting on you. She’s important.”

His throat closed off. A silent battle waged in his heart.

“She is,” he managed to say.

When he hung up, all the guys were on their feet, tense and prepared for whatever fight came their way.

He stared at his brothers-in-arms, feeling true terror for the first time in his life. Not even with Kelsey did he have a chance to feel such emotion, because by the time he learned what happened, it was too late.

“We have to find her!” He looked at Rafe. “Call Ollie. Get the chopper in the air. The roads are already frozen.”

He spun to Guns. “Reach out to the rangers. Have them look around. Vlad, you touch base with the police. See if anything has been reported.”

Everyone looked to Rafe for confirmation of these orders he hadn’t given them.

He gave a quick nod, and the team jumped to action. Even though Tripp was second-in-command and Rafe was above him, the fact that his friend took that order without ruffled feathers told Tripp just how deep Rafe’s understanding ran. He too would kill for the woman he loved.

He raked his fingers through his hair. There must be more to do. A task to perform. But goddamn if he could think straight or see straight.

The woman he was falling in love with—hell, he already *was* in love with—was missing.



Alexia wasn't one of *those* women. The ones who got caught up in fantasies. As a kid, she didn't dream about marriage or whether or not to name a son junior.

She was practical. Some people called her cold. Heck, Bryson had called her cold, though when he said it in that deep, joking tone, it had the opposite effect on her body, heating her.

So being on cloud nine as she walked out of the grocery store wasn't something she was used to. Yet after that crazy-hot kiss, she practically floated across the parking lot to the Humvee.

Bryson would call her. She was already looking forward to the banter they'd surely share.

They'd see each other too. Besides the freezes, travel wasn't so difficult that they couldn't make it work. Being away from him would just leave her feeling a little lost, especially when they'd just spent the past few days making up any old excuse to stay another night together.

She reached the vehicle and unlocked it. Sliding behind the wheel, she looked toward the entrance of the store again, hoping to see Bryson one last time before she drove away. Only a couple older ladies walked out pushing their shopping carts full of their purchases.

The sound of the engine starting gave her another rush of happiness because during the night they'd slept—or not slept—in the SUV, Bryson had turned on the engine several times to let heat blast through the vents. Not that they needed much extra heat when their bodies created plenty together.

*Calm down, Alexia. You're smitten and on your way to obsessed with the man. Which would only put a bigger, cockier smile on his handsome face.*

She pressed her cold fingers to her cheeks to calm herself. After what she'd learned about the melting, she needed to remain calm and focused for her drive.

Out of nowhere, something struck her in the back of the head. Her neck rocked forward and any cry she might make was cut off when hard fingers clamped over her mouth.

Black spots flashed in her vision, and she felt her body starting to slump.

When her vision opened on a tunnel of blackness, she looked downward toward a sliver of light coming in. She saw a wood plank floor and a pair of combat boots.

The golden splinter of light was too warm for the pain shooting through her skull, her shoulders and, oh god, her hands.

Forcing her head back took so much effort, but she brought her scope of vision off the floor to a set of calves wrapped in camouflage.

“You’re awake. Your breathing changed.”

The unfamiliar voice made her jump, which yanked at her arms. Now she understood why they hurt so much—they were bound together.

She was seated in a chair...but where? Her slow mind backtracked enough for her to recall being behind the wheel of the Humvee. After that, nothing.

Where was she? Who was with her?

“Hi, Alexia.”

A muffled scream tried to escape her lips, but hard knuckles slammed into her cheek, silencing any noise she’d make.

Panting through the explosion of pain, she tried to force her mind back to reality. Back to the beginning of what happened.

She got in her vehicle and...

Nothing.

Now, plank floors and a violent man in camo that knew her by name.

“Who are you?” Her voice came out weak and wobbly. She blinked to rearrange the scattered dots dancing across her vision even in the darkness of something across her eyes.

“No one of your concern.”

Her brain swirled that information around and around for far too long. Her mind was muddled, and that scared her. She only had her wits to fall back on.

She didn’t have any enemies, but in her job, she could easily make some. Most of the guys in her office told stories of ticking off people connected to those they investigated. It was part of the reason why Eric had been so thorough about setting up her meeting with Bryson Tripp.

Dangerous people played dangerous games. Now she was learning that firsthand.

Her head lolled on her neck, the throb in her cheek pounding to the rhythm of her pulse.

She drew a breath in through her nose. The place smelled like woodsmoke and fresh-cut pine, probably from the new planks covering the floor. She also detected something slightly sour, like cheap beer.

Her stare lifted over the man's legs to the black hoodie he wore. She peered closer at the chest, hoping to see a logo that would give her any indication of who this man was or where he'd taken her.

Obviously, he'd been hiding in the Humvee, but how? That thing had a solid alarm system and it was parked in front of a busy store. Somehow, he'd managed to breach the door and hide inside, lying in wait for the moment that she got in.

She carefully lifted her eyes to his face. He wore a mask, she knew from the brief glimpse she'd already gotten of him, and his eyes were brown. Just brown. She couldn't think of any other way to describe them.

Average height, brown eyes, wearing camo hunting pants, a face mask and a black hoodie. And he hit hard.

At that moment, she realized the pain in her cheek extended to the back of her head. He'd struck her there too, knocked her out. Then what? Made a getaway with her in her own vehicle?

Bryson. Oh god, was Bryson okay? What if her attacker came with friends and jumped him coming out of the store?

Her brain calmed. Bryson was a mean, tough, military-trained weapon of a man. He wasn't going down without one hell of a fight.

That was if her imagination hadn't run away with her and there *had* been a fight. It was far more likely that this guy bashed her over the head and drove off with her tied up—she tested the bonds around her wrists—with zip ties.

More probable still that no one knew where she was.

Her phone. She needed to find it. Was it still in her coat pocket?

Heart hammering, she attempted to keep a calm, clear head, and that meant getting the right level of oxygen to her brain for maximum capacity. Too much and she'd hyperventilate and pass out. Too little and her brain function would be slowed and even more impaired than it felt with the pain throbbing through it.

Boots scuffed on the floor. They came into her line of vision, and she realized her head had dropped again. She was really not doing well, was she? Her first kidnapping and she was messing everything up.

The thought would make Bryson laugh. One of those warm, low chuckles that smeared desire across her senses and made her panties wet with desire.

Where was he? God, would he search for her?

Forcing her neck muscles to engage, she managed to drop her head back enough to peek through the crack in her blindfold.

Or...now that she thought about it, the thing around her eyes felt like tape.

There were few windows in the space, but a single bare bulb hung over a small square table that also looked to be handmade from fresh-cut pine, the source of the smell.

On top of the table was a stack of newspapers, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Easy to light a fire as a distraction and make her escape—if she could get out of these zip ties.

“What are you going to do with me?” Her demand came out in a strong voice.

Were her feet tied too? Yes. Not together—but each ankle was strapped to the chair leg.

Fury hit like a screech of metal on metal in her brain. Her emotions derailed, and she barely kept from screaming. As soon as she opened her mouth, he’d silence her with his fist, and she needed every wit she possessed to get out of this situation.

She needed to free her hands.

The task felt as likely as her scaling Everest. She didn’t even want to hike up the mountains she and Bryson had driven through. But if she wanted to get back to the man who was cracking open her heart, then she had to do *something*.

Her captor walked to a stack of wood and fed an old woodstove two sticks of wood. When he crouched in front of the flames, she hoped he lost his balance and fell into the flames.

“Why did you kidnap me?”

She couldn’t see him, but his reply came from a few feet away from her.

“Because the world doesn’t need more people poking around in other people’s business.”

“Does that mean you’re involved in the murder of Kelsey Cameron? And her boyfriend?”

From what she could see through the crack in the duct tape over her eyes, he didn’t budge from his crouched position and seemed to be staring into the flames. She wasn’t trained in talking people down from the ledge or dealing with hostage situations. Especially when *she* was the hostage. But a man who would capture a detective was a desperate one.

Her logical mind was already profiling him and what she was guessing at scared the hell out of her.

Since he wasn’t looking at her, she began to work her wrists, wiggling them back and forth, trying to find a way to free herself. She did know how to get herself free of zip ties, and everybody has seen the videos. But with so little leverage, it would still take her a few tries.

She needed to keep him facing away from her and talking.

“You know there’s a tracker on my SUV. It’s a government vehicle. They know my location at all times.” She wasn’t at all sure that was the truth, but it might buy her some time.

He laughed. “I know government vehicles, lady.”

Her already icy blood grew more frigid.

When she was uncertain of herself, she fell back on her smart mouth. Just like she did when she first met Bryson. “Are you a pissed-off postman? I didn’t think they kidnapped women, just grabbed a weapon and climbed to the roof of a building.”

His shoulders hunched forward. Could he be laughing? Or recoiling—drawing up in preparation to whirl and strike her again?

“Maybe you were a businessman. One of those family guys who goes out for milk and takes off. You’ve been in the wilderness for the last twelve years. Your kids are grown. Your wife moved on. And you’ve got regrets.”

His head lowered a bit but he didn’t respond.

She went on. “You’ve been setting forest fires all over for years. That last one—the big one in California that left thousands of families homeless—was your doing. And you’re just biding your time, waiting for the melting here in the Cascades and for things to start drying out so you can light

another.”

She had her head tipped back all the way to see through the small crack in the tape. He lifted a hand and rubbed it over his nape.

“But if you know me...then you know I investigate cold cases. So what could I be close to finding out? Something you don’t want me to know. Did the Army Rangers turn you away? Failed to pass their tests? You don’t want to go to jail. I mean, no one does. But you *really* don’t think you’ll survive imprisonment—”

He jerked to his feet, sending some sticks of firewood toppling over the floor. His boots stomped across her vision and next thing she knew, the door opened.

A rush of cool mountain air hit her face before he slammed the door shut again.

She was alone.

But for how long? First thing she did was raise her bound hands and pry at the edge of the tape over her eyes. When she got a small corner, she yanked hard and fast.

Pain slashed across her face like a hot whip and she felt a bunch of eyelashes rip out of her lids. A scalding gasp left her. *DAMN, that hurt!*

Now that she was able to see, she glanced at her bonds. What did that guy in the video she watched do to free himself from zip ties again? His knee—he broke it over his knee.

She slammed her bound wrists over one. The tough plastic flexed but didn’t snap. Biting down on her lip, she tried again, bringing her arms over one knee with all the power fueled by adrenaline in her system.

How long before he returned? She tried twice more and failed. The third time, the tie snapped.

Relief flooded her, but she didn’t have time for a victory dance. She couldn’t dance anyway—her legs were bound to the chair. She looked around for some sharp object within reach to cut the bonds.

Her stare settled on the lighter on the table.

She was four feet away. With a hard shove off her boots, she brought the chair legs off the floor, only moving forward an inch or two.

Bryson’s voice filled her head. *You can do better than that, princess.*

She shoved upward and bounce-scooted the chair a foot, then another

and another. When she was close enough to lean forward, she snagged the lighter. As she held the flame to the plastic, the noxious smell hit her nose, but in seconds she had her legs free too.

Now for her phone. She slapped at her coat pockets and her stomach lurched in excitement when she felt the device where it always was.

“This guy’s a terrible criminal,” she muttered, jabbing a finger into the only contact she wanted to call right now.

The door burst open and the man took one look at her. He lunged forward, knocking the phone out of her hand.

## Chapter Nineteen

---

Alexia was back in zip ties, only this time her hands were behind her back and her ankles bound together so tight she couldn't move them at all.

Her head hurt from when her captive threw her in a corner and it bounced off the fresh pine floor. And the duct tape wasn't over her eyes this time—she had a strip across her mouth.

And her phone was broken. She'd heard it smash and the bellow of rage when he did it.

She knew that call never got out to Bryson. There wasn't time.

Now she was all alone with little hope of being rescued or freeing herself a second time. She lay like a helpless bug in the corner far enough away from the fire to feel the cold too.

All sense of time had fled her mind. She didn't know where she was either, only that she ached all over, even her heart.

She wanted Bryson. Wanted her lover. How would she get back to him? Her heart shattered at the thought of him calling and her never answering the phone. Of course Eric would report her missing, and that pierced her heart even deeper, thinking about Bryson out there searching.

Of tears filling his eyes for *her* sake.

*I'll get back to you. I don't know how yet, but I will.*

Her mind didn't spit out a response from the man she was falling in love with. One more conversation, one more kiss, were all she needed to be completely head over heels for the special operator.

A metallic pinging noise made her jerk on the floor, which wrenched at her already strained shoulder muscles. A whimper died in her throat because she was too busy listening to that knocking sound.

Knuckles on a pine door. Her stomach leaped.

Those boots thumped the floor again, and she twisted toward the noise.

“Who’s out there?” her captor demanded.

“It’s Park Ranger Wilksbury. Mind if we talk?”

Her captor got quiet. She counted to fifteen before he replied, “Sure.”

When the door cracked, cold air rushed across the floor at her and caused her to start shivering. She must be out of sight...but not out of earshot.

She thumped her bound hands off the floor. Then her feet too.

The guys’ voices drifted to her. “You doing some hunting up here?”

“Nah, just enjoying the scenery. My parents own this cabin and I haven’t been here for a while.”

“Mind if I have a look around inside?”

She started pounding harder. Was he able to hear her? She had worked her tongue along the sticky tape enough to get out a small cry.

“Actually, my wife’s sick. Been throwing up. You don’t want any germs.”

He gave a low, uneasy chuckle. “Sure don’t. Okay, well, I hope she feels better. You two enjoy your stay.”

From her position, she made out a move.

A khaki uniform sleeve moving as the ranger reached for his hip. For his radio.

Her captor threw himself through the door, and by the sound of it, knocked the ranger over.

Alexia scrunched her knees up and aimed a hard kick at the table leg, hoping and praying the lighter was still on it and she could get it into her hands.

She got something better—an ax.

Scooting fast like an inchworm, she reached the blade and shoved the zip tie against the steel. When it popped, she issued a strangled cry and grabbed the ax to slice through her leg restraints.

In what felt like minutes but could have only been seconds, she leaped to her feet and ran out the door.

Her captor had the ranger on the ground with his boot locked on the man’s neck.

“Stop!” Alexia’s scream echoed over what seemed to be a beautiful mountaintop but one she did not wish to explore.

“I have to kill this man because of you!” her captor raged.

“No!” Looking frantically around, she found no weapon in sight. Not even a snow shovel. She wasn’t about to run back inside for the ax.

Her gaze landed on the ranger’s truck. A vehicle had served her as a weapon once before.

She sprinted to the truck and issued a cry of relief to find the keys in the ignition. When she started the engine and stomped the gas, all the events lined up in a neat chain like she hoped for.

Her captor took off for the truck. For her. He leaped in front of it, and instead of hitting the brakes this time, she locked her foot to the floor and mowed him down.

A low moan slipped past her lips. She hit the brakes on impact and watched the man who hurt her and probably killed the ranger fly a few feet and hit the melting snow.

She gripped the wheel. Oh god. She’d killed a man with a government vehicle. She was in so much trouble.

Shaking herself, she gathered her wits. What was she thinking? The man who’d kidnapped her was dead.

She reached for the CB radio in the truck and brought it to her mouth. “Mayday! I need help. I have no idea where I’m at, but Ranger Wilksbury came to the cabin and now I think he’s dead. And another man is dead too. Please send help!”

Ignoring the voices that came back at her, she gripped the wheel tight and peered at the place where the guy had landed. Was he really dead?

Was she really going to get out and check? Absolutely. She was trained to handle herself, and she had to see.

Her stomach heaved when she climbed out of the running truck and slowly approached the still body on the ground.

Blood was spattered in the snow. The man lay crumpled on his side.

Suddenly, the noise of helicopter blades ripped through the air. Thank god! Help had arrived, and she had to say those park rangers were fast on the response time. She’d be sending them a whole box of steaks for coming to her aid so quickly.

She tipped her head back to look at the chopper zipping in.

She waved frantically to bring them in, but suddenly was wiped off her feet. She hit the ground hard—with her captor pinning her down.



Tripp's jaw was clenched so hard he could grind nails with his molars. On each thigh, his fists shook, the knuckles white.

"Can't you fly this thing any goddamn faster?" He barely held back a roar.

"Calm the fuck down, Tripp. That's an order!" Rafe's sharp bark projected into the comms device in his ear, and everyone else in the military chopper too.

Oliver "Ollie" Dutch didn't even turn his head at Tripp's outburst. "We're one minute out. Think you can keep your mouth shut until then?"

He huffed out a breath of air but didn't answer. His chest was about to blow up. Pain, fear and fury were a deadly inferno that only having Alexia back in his arms would stop.

In the past, he'd always been able to use his brand of dark humor to get through tough times. Not now. The only person who could ease him right now was Alexia.

"Let's go over what we know." Rafe brought the situation under his lead. "The grocery store camera picked up Alexia's Humvee driving out of the parking lot, but when we zoomed in, we saw she wasn't behind the wheel. We couldn't make out who was driving, only that they were wearing a mask and sat taller than her."

Hearing it all a second time just about killed Tripp. He never should have let her walk out alone. He was guilty of doing the same exact thing that he mentally accused Caden of—failing to protect the person he loved.

Leaning forward, he dug his finger and thumb into his eye sockets until the burn receded.

Rafe went on, "Alexia's call got through to Tripp's phone twenty minutes ago. Guns called the ranger station and put out the info, and they dispatched four rangers to check out the area."

Guns slid his eyes from Tripp to Rafe and gave a swift nod of agreement.

"One ranger phoned in that he spotted chimney smoke from a cabin that they all believed to be abandoned," Rafe continued.

"Guns." Tripp's voice sounded like he'd swallowed a hot poker. "See if you can get the ranger station back on the horn. We need to know if that ranger's checked in yet."

“On it.” Guns grabbed the radio and sent out the call.

“Approaching the cabin.” Ollie’s statement had Tripp craning his neck to see through the expanse of glass. The stiff mountain peak rushed by and then he saw the curl of smoke from a stacked stone chimney.

His muscles shook. Anything could be happening down there. Alexia could be—

He slammed the door on that thought.

“Get me down there, Ollie. Set this thing on the ground!”

“I gotta circle around, man. I can’t approach from this side. The wind’s against me.” His voice came muffled when transmitted through the comms even though he was sitting mere feet away from Tripp and the rest of the team.

His pulse tripled.

When they zoomed over a clearing, Tripp saw her.

“Jesus Christ! Set this thing down now!”

Alexia was below.

“Shit, did you see *that*?” Guns twisted to look out the other window as they flew over. “Did you see that body on the ground?”

Tripp launched out of his seat and rushed to the opening. “Get me down there, Ollie!”

He had to reach her. One man was already dead. He couldn’t squash the hope that it was the guy who nabbed her. He gripped the doorframe. Wind blasted his face.

“Set it down, Ollie!” His order came with what he hoped sounded like the threat to beat the shit out of his buddy if he didn’t do it now.

“I can’t land, Tripp! Not yet.”

“Can you drop me? Anything, goddammit! I have to get to her!”

They whirred around to the clearing once again. At that minute, he saw the truck rolling forward.

And striking a man down.

“Lower the ladder!” Rafe’s order had several guys on their feet. One kicked the ladder out the door.

Tripp wasted no time jumping out onto it. He descended swiftly, uncaring about safety protocols or how far the drop would be to the ground. The wind and the movement of the chopper blew left and right, and by the

time he let go and fell, he was too far from that body on the ground.

He hit his feet at a dead run, churning up the wet ground in his race to reach Alexia. When he ran past the body Guns had spotted from the air, he only gave it a cursory glance, long enough to see it was male and wearing a uniform.

“Alexia!” His bellow echoed and seemed to come back to him.

The truck was still running. When he rounded the front and saw the blood on the ground, his brain almost flatlined. He stumbled forward and saw more blood.

A pool of it.

And Alexia was on the ground, a long knife handle projecting from her abdomen.

The strands of hair blowing across her face didn’t conceal the pain slicing through her features.

“Alexia!”

The killer standing over her twisted toward him but reached for the knife. She grabbed the handle, mouth working.

Tripp dived for him.

The guy made a run for it, vanishing into the thick woods in seconds. Tripp didn’t give a damn. He hit his knees in front of his beloved.

“I’m here. Jesus, Alexia. I’m here, princess.”

“Bryson...”

“Don’t pull out the knife.” She’d bleed out in seconds if she did. The wave of helpless terror washing over him was one he never, ever wanted to feel again. He couldn’t lose her.

“Get the...killer!” she cried.

“No—get you!”

Her gaze burned into his. “What if it’s the guy who killed your niece? You promised that you’d get him. I promised I’d help you too.”

With one arm around her to support her upright position, he put out the SOS to his team. “She’s been stabbed in the abdomen. We need a rescue now! The killer escaped into the forest.”

He searched Alexia’s pale face. Her eyelashes looked odd, as if they were clumped together from crying.

“They’re coming, my love. Ollie’s good—he’ll find a place to land and

get you out of here to the hospital. He's a medic too. Goddammit, Ollie, get your ass down here!"

"He's doing his best, Tripp. Hold tight. Keep her stable." Rafe's calm tone instilled a small measure of the same in Tripp.

He cradled her against his chest. "I've got you, and I'm always going to have you. I love you, Alexia. When this is over, we're not wasting time getting to know each other. We're going straight into a relationship. A real relationship. The kind that scares most guys. But I'm not scared."

*Only scared of losing you.*

She lifted a hand and skimmed an ice-cold finger across his jaw right before her eyes rolled up in her head and she passed out.

A rough cry broke from his throat. He wrapped her in his arms, careful to keep the knife from moving even a millimeter. He could not risk causing more damage to her internal organs.

The next minute or two he focused on transferring his body heat to her and talking to her even in her unconscious state. He knew she could hear him. She *had to* hear him.

When the violent wind from the chopper blades washed across the yard in front of the cabin, he knew Ollie had done his job. The next few minutes were a blur as the pilot leaped out of the cockpit and raced to Alexia in full-on medic mode.

Ollie looked at her and then at Tripp. "I'll do my best. We need to stabilize her in the air. You have to do everything I say while I fly the bird. Got it?"

"Anything. I'll do anything." He just needed her safe and whole again.

## Chapter Twenty

---

She was stabbed. Then airlifted out. Bryson told her that she had surgery to repair the damage of the knife wound.

Every detail in between was fogged over for Alexia. She remembered nothing but the moment her captor grabbed her.

She shook her head as she tried so hard to recall the details as she viewed them as though through somebody else's eyes. The MT Ops team was gathered around her in the hospital room, listening intently to her recounting.

“All I remember is reaching for the knife in his hand. We struggled. Then I don't remember anything until I woke up here to Bryson's face.”

He slipped his warm hand into hers. The feel of his callused fingers tenderly stroking her knuckles swelled her heart with even more love for him.

“Can you tell us what you saw, Alexia?” Rafe stood at her hospital bedside like a forbidding sentry. When she woke to find herself surrounded by these big, tough guys, she thought she was still in dreamland. Every single one looked more badass than the next. But the one thing they had in common was the way they formed a circle around her like a special ops protection detail.

“I know we keep asking, but you were under anesthesia and now that it's worn off, we want to see if you can tell us about the build of the guy who kidnapped you.” Rafe's stare centered on her in quiet patience.

Suddenly it popped into her head that he'd make a terrific father. She knew he was with a beautiful and talented Olympic gold medalist, but his file stated nothing about plans for a family in the future.

Alexia shook her head both to dispel the strange thought and to answer. “Average height, brown eyes, brown hair. Nothing about him stuck out to me. I saw military boots. That's all I managed to see with tape over my eyes.”

Bryson issued a low noise that brought her attention to him. Lifting his

free hand, he scrubbed at his eyes as though trying to gouge out the image he saw behind them.

She squeezed his hand. “You okay?”

When he dropped his hand, torment stood plain in his eyes. “We found that tape, Alexia. Full of your eyelashes.”

Her jaw dropped and she yanked her hand free to touch her eyes. “My lashes? Oh my god! Am I bald?”

“No, princess. You’ve still got some. But they’re a little patchier than before.” He gazed at her like she was the most stunning woman in the world.

She gulped down a sob.

“Let’s give her some space, guys.” Rafe turned for the exit first, and one by one they all filed out.

Guns stopped to rest a hand on her shoulder. “You’re doing great, Alexia. We don’t mean to push so hard for answers, but we want to find this guy, and I know you do too.”

Sniffling, she nodded.

“And if you want, I sometimes hook up with a woman who does lash extensions.”

For some reason, the gesture, however genuine, turned her next sob into a giggle. She burst out laughing and took one of the tissues from the box that Bryson held out to her.

“Thank you. I might ask for her name next time I see you.”

“You got it, sugar. You’re family now.”

Guns grinned and bumped fists with Bryson on his way out.

While mopping her tears, Alexia watched him go. Meeting Bryson’s gaze, she gave a slow shake of her head. “Your teammates are truly a family. I’ve heard tales about special forces units and the brotherhood in platoons but...it’s real.”

“It is, princess.” He gently eased onto the mattress beside her, careful not to jostle her too much after the surgery to repair the damage that knife had done.

“I just had a thought,” she said.

“Don’t let it get out of control now.”

Jaw dropping at the audacity of this man, she gave him a light punch in the arm. “Don’t you think you should treat your girlfriend better when she’s

lying in a hospital bed?”

His humored expression sobered and his stare intensified. “Did you say girlfriend?”

“Well, yes. I don’t have another term for us, though I admit it seems juvenile at our ages.”

“What if I call you my salvation? Or big, big helper...” He brushed his lips over her temple.

“Why don’t we add queen to that and call it done?”

His deep, rumbling laugh rolled through her senses and bound her to him even more. “Deal. But only because you’re lying in a hospital bed.”

He rested against the inclined head of the bed next to her and gently took her in his arms.

With her cheek pillowed on his shoulder, she contemplated all that happened to her in such a short time.

“What ever happened to the knife they took out of me?”

“Sent to forensics for fingerprinting.”

“I wish I had gotten more answers from my attacker.”

“Thank god you didn’t spend more time with him, Alexia. I can’t stand the thought of what might have happened. It’s bad enough as it is.” He studied her face.

“Are my lashes really ugly?”

Tenderness flooded his eyes. “No, princess. You can never be ugly. They’re just spotty, but they’ll grow back quick.”

She nodded and snuggled close to him again. “There’s always the lash extension artist that Guns hooks up with.”

“I’m willing to treat you.”

“You better be joking, Bryson Tripp!” She pinched his side hard, making him yelp and jump, but it was worth the slight pain in her wound when he did.

“I’m joking, love. Just know that I’ll do anything in my power to make up for—”

She grabbed his face. “Hold up. You think what happened to me is your fault?”

His jaw flexed.

“You do! Bryson, you weren’t my bodyguard. I never *needed* one.”

“But I should have been there to protect you. I let you—”

“Walk across a small-town grocery store parking lot alone in broad daylight? Yes, you did. And so would any other man on the planet, trained or not. We had no reason to think anyone was after me. Besides...women can walk anywhere we want without a man’s permission.”

Her stomach took a sharp dive every time she thought about what might have happened to her if she hadn’t broken free.

“I hate that the ranger died for me.” Her words came out small.

“He was doing his duty. Any person in uniform...*every one of us, Alexia*...we know what we’re getting into. That park ranger heard you knocking around and reached for his radio to make a call for backup because he believed in saving you.”

“He lost his life for me.”

His stare pierced her. “I’d do the same. Over and over again.”

The fervor in his voice sent goose bumps skittering over her arms. She cradled his jaw and cuddled against his chest.

“I’m in love with you.” She whispered the admission.

When he ducked his head to capture her mouth, she felt the same words echoing through the caress. And when he broke away, she read it in his gaze right before he gave her the words.

“I love you.”

“Oh, Bryson—”

“Even though you hit me with your SUV.”

With a hand on his chest, she pressed him back an inch. “You’re not seriously still holding that against me.”

“You know, my leg’s been bothering me.”

She gave him another shove, hoping he’d fall off the hospital bed so she could laugh at him. A giggle erupted from her. “Maybe you can find a doctor and get it looked at while you’re here!”

“I will. Later. After I kiss you.” He claimed her mouth again in a long, tongue-tangling kiss. The heat low in her belly turned into a pressure between her thighs.

She slipped her hand down his chest to the waist of his jeans, drawing a groan from him.

Placing a hand over hers, he stopped the progression of her hand.

“You’re in no shape for that, princess. You have weeks of healing ahead of you.”

She shot him a coy look. “That doesn’t mean I can’t pleasure you.”

“Hell. As much as I want that, I’m going to suffer alongside you until the doctor clears you.”

“So next week.”

“Probably more like next month.”

She couldn’t stop the disappointed whine from escaping her throat. “That long?”

“Most likely six weeks.”

“Stop! I’m already going crazy at the thought of not having you inside me for that long.” Now that he’d made that comment about how his was bigger, she was always going to want it. Dick envy? Or desire.

He stared at her mouth for a long heartbeat. Her insides fluttered, but neither of them could do anything about their lust. For now, she had healing to do.

And Bryson only had minutes before he’d be going off into the wilderness to hunt for her captor.

As if he was thinking the same thing, he said, “I wish I could stay with you. Make sure you’re all right.”

“I am.”

“Eric will be checking in on you. He’ll tell me if you’re overdoing it.” He gave her a pointed look.

“I’ll be on my best behavior.”

He cocked a brow. “Well, hopefully not too good. I have a thing for bad girls.”

When she placed her hand over his fly again, he let out a growl and kissed her.



Tripp ached all over. Most of the pain could be handled with a couple painkillers. But the one he needed attention for, only one woman could help with.

He stood at Alexia’s gate at the airport, his stare trained on the place where she’d appear. Groups of people exited the gate. Everyone appeared

tired after the redevye, and he expected to pick his lover up and take her straight to the hotel so he could have his way with her right before he tucked her into bed beside him and they fell into a deep, healing sleep together.

The three weeks she'd been gone on a new case was too long, and he was the first to admit it. He was a man in love. A man who missed his love.

A couple walked by, holding hands. A family came next with two little boys in the tired parents' arms and their limp legs dangling.

Then Tripp spotted her. His heart gave a leap of excitement, and he pushed forward, going against the crowd disembarking from the plane to meet Alexia.

Her pale face turned toward him, seeking him out too. When their gazes locked, a smile tipped her sweet lips. With a grin, he rushed forward, taking her carry-on bag from her shoulder even as he yanked her close.

Without hesitation, he ran his hand up her nape to pull the elastic band from her ponytail. The silky strands of her hair fell across his knuckles and almost made him roar out.

“Three weeks is too long, princess.”

Her eyes blazed. “I know. Kiss me!”

Nothing could stop him from doing just that. He pressed her up against the wall, heedless of the people streaming around them to leave the airport, and crushed his mouth over hers.

Her sweet taste was addicting. It took him a split second to know that one kiss would never be enough to satiate the appetite they'd worked up for each other.

When her nails slipped down his chest, lightly scraping, his cock stretched to full mast.

He dipped his head to her throat and nibbled the length. “Now I can't even move or walk.”

The throaty laugh she issued drove him even crazier.

“We have to get out of here.” She pulled back to stare up at him. “Can you at least make it to the SUV?”

He gave her an enthusiastic nod. Gripping her by the hand, he led her through the airport and through the exit. The MT Ops SUV he'd driven here to pick her up in wasn't far away, but the rod of steel in his pants slowed him down.

As soon as they reached the vehicle, he whipped open a door and tossed first her bag and then Alexia into the back seat. Cradling her spine, he collapsed on top of her and kissed her with all the pent-up passion of nights spent alone.

She tore at his shirt, ripping it over his head. "I missed you!"

"I missed the fuck outta you, princess. Give me your mouth."

She leaned in to kiss him and scraped her nails over his bare back. "I'm not leaving for a long time. I told Eric I need more time in the office between cases."

"More time to fuck you." He whipped up her top and pinched one already hardened nipple into a stiffer peak.

Alexia went wild in his hold until he was able to work her pants down her hips, off her ankles, and push two fingers deep into her channel. The slick heat wrapped around his digits stole his mind.

"I can't wait to feel you around my cock." Dropping his head back on a growl, he suffered through several pulsing minutes where he thought he'd come in his pants. Need blasted through him and he poured every bit of himself into pleasuring his woman.

"I want to ride your cock!" she cried out.

He stared into her eyes. "Oh, you will be, princess. Until you beg."

"Yesss!" She hooked one leg around his waist, opening herself to the plunges of his fingers. Kissing her and fingering her at the same time brought her orgasm closer. Her body tensed with each thrust and every swirl of his tongue.

"You've been waiting for this. Thinking about this." He curled his fingers to stroke her G-spot.

"Oh...my god! Brysonnnn." Her nails skittered over his shoulders, and her hips bucked into every thrust.

When he stroked her clit, she let out a scream that told him that getting her to the parking lot to have his way with her was a good call. While waiting for her to get off the plane, he'd scouted several spots where he might be able to take her inside the airport without arrests being made.

She sucked in deeply and held her breath. Trembling, she let out a single long moan that he stole with the swipe of his tongue across hers.

Withdrawing his fingers, he continued to spread kisses from her lips to

the tops of her breasts while she popped the button, unzipped his fly and reached into his jeans to draw his cock to her soaking center. His balls clenched as he realized what they were about to do.

“God, I’m glad you got on the pill.”

Her teeth flashed in a grin. She latched on to him to pull him down and into her in one smooth glide.

When he sank home, need overtook him. Three weeks without his lover was a long time. Those late-night video chats they had didn’t do a damn thing to ease his pain of wanting either. Not when she seemed to do everything in her power to taunt him, like showing off the tantalizing line of her throat he ached to kiss or letting him glimpse her cleavage.

Two thrusts and then three almost split his mind in two. Pressure built along his spine with each carnal jerk of his hips.

“I can’t get deep enough. I’m going to show you how much I missed you,” he bit off through clenched teeth.

Cupping his face, she brought him near and kissed him as their bodies took over and time slowed. When the flicker of his release turned into a blaze, he stared deep into Alexia’s eyes.

“Come with me!” He couldn’t hold back the spurts showering her walls. In the back of his mind, he grew aware that she was milking him in rhythmic contractions.

She went limp beneath him. Bracing his weight on his arms, he pushed off her to give her more breathing room, but she wrapped her arms around him and held him close, her head pressed against his neck.

“I missed you so much,” she rasped.

His heart squeezed. “I missed the hell out of you, and I’m not afraid to admit it to anybody.”

She issued a low laugh. “The guys giving you crap again?”

“They never let up. Every chance they get they make sure I remember that loving a woman is weak.”

She stared into his eyes. “Do you believe that?”

“Not in the least. It’s the opposite, as far as I’m concerned. Loving you has given me more of a reason to fight my way back to you.” He skimmed his fingertip down her throat to her pulse throbbing at the base. “And believe me, I will fight like hell. Every. Single. Day.”

“Oh, Bryson. You make the world a better place. You make *my* world a better place.”

They shared a long look and then a tender kiss.

“When we get to base, I have something to share with everyone. But I want to tell you first.”

He opened his mouth to ask more, but she cut across him.

“And I want to do it when I’m not half naked.”

With a smile, he pushed off her. She twisted into a sitting position and they both began righting their clothes, bumping elbows and reaching across each other for garments in the tight confines of the back seat.

Once they were dressed, he climbed out first and assisted her to the ground with his hands around her middle. She only got to take a step toward the passenger door before he pinned her against the side of the vehicle and kissed her again.

Her soft moan of surrender was the only thing he ever needed to hear again. When he was too old and forced to give up the good fight, he’d have the best thing in life still in his arms.

When they finally got on the road, he kept shooting her glances.

“I feel you’re holding something back.” He swallowed hard. “Is it about Kelsey?”

She nodded. “The forensics came back on the knife under the carpet.”

“It’s about damn time. You’ve been healed for a month.”

She nodded and reached for his hand. He twined their fingers. “They took apart the handle of the knife. And you’re right—it was military issue.”

His heart throbbed. “Go on.”

“Inside the hilt were several DNA samples. Including Kelsey’s and Caden’s.”

He compressed his lips and after a long heartbeat, gave a nod. “I knew as much.”

“Two more samples were found on that knife.”

He directed his attention from the road and settled his gaze on her. “Tell me.”

“The couple from the cabin that Rafe and Zoe found.”

His lips parted and he let out the air he’d been holding inside for far too long when it came to this mystery. “So we’re right. The couples’ deaths are

connected. Our other question is why would he ditch that knife under the carpet? It's almost as if he wanted it found. He wants to show off."

She squeezed his hand tighter. "Unfortunately, it looks that way. I'll be spending a lot more time analyzing this guy, but all things point to there being a serial killer on the loose in the mountains."



Smoke curled up from the firepit. The rich scent of pine and hot dogs roasting over the flames wafted to Tripp, causing his stomach to growl.

He rubbed a hand over his abs. "Hey, Zoe!" he called. "Quit hogging that hot dog stick!"

The blonde swung around to look at him. "It's a marshmallow stick at the moment, Tripp. And I just might hang on to it a while longer since you didn't buy the jumbo marshmallows that are my favorite. Rafe, honey? Didn't you give Tripp a direct order to get the jumbos?"

Rafe moved to Zoe's side and wrapped an arm around her. "I did. But don't worry, I'll just add more time onto his latrine duty."

Tripp groaned. "Any way I can get out of that?"

"Nope." Rafe shot him a grin.

Zoe went on tiptoe to whisper something in his ear.

When Rafe nodded, Tripp knew this couldn't be good. "She says there will be pumpkin spice marshmallows on the shelves in the fall. And if you buy enough of them to last all year long for my beautiful fiancée to enjoy, then I'll knock down your three months of cleaning toilets to two."

Zoe threw him a sweet smile with a flutter of eyelashes.

Tripp let out a grunt. "I can't believe you're in love with one of those women who loves pumpkin spice. Fine. I'll buy all the marshmallows and take two months of toilets."

An arm banded around Tripp from behind. He caught Alexia's sweet perfume and leaned into her so their bodies brushed.

"Aww, did my poor Tripp get in trouble for shirking his duty?"

He pulled Alexia around in front of him. "Because of you!"

She tossed her head on a carefree laugh, and he couldn't deny his urge to kiss her open mouth.

"Okay, I see what you guys are all talking about now."

Tripp broke from the kiss before he wanted to. “What are you all talking about?”

Rafe pointed the hot dog stick at him and Alexia. The hot dog on the tip flopped. “You two are pretty cute together.”

“What? I’m not cute. I’m badass. Terrifying. You saw how that killer ran away back on the mountain.”

While it was no joking matter, they all used humor to cover things. Tripp admitted to being the guiltiest on the team.

Tripp grabbed a lawn chair and moved it closer to the fire for Alexia to sit down. She was healed, but he still liked to baby her. He didn’t want her getting worn out too soon either, not when they had a long weekend together planned.

When she accepted the hot dog stick from Guns, Tripp plucked it from her hand. “Don’t let Alexia cook. Her eyelashes just grew back.”

She threw him the middle finger, which had all the team and Zoe laughing.

When he settled in a chair beside her, he took care in placing a marshmallow on the stick for her and passing it to her to toast herself.

She gave him such a long look of love and longing that it took him a minute to get his head back into the discussion going on around them.

“We don’t have a name on the guy yet,” Rafe was saying. “Only a profile, and that’s only narrowed down to a few things.”

Tripp focused on the information, resting a hand on Alexia’s thigh.

“The DNA from the snow showed Alexia’s blood and the killer’s. He’s got the most common blood type. The most hair and eye colors. The most common boots. He could have been any branch of the military, which equals a huge pool of people.”

Alexia nodded to confirm this. Tripp wasn’t surprised she knew and hadn’t yet disclosed it to him. He knew she’d get around to it in time, and when it was important for him to know.

She spoke up to tell the team that the knife she’d been stabbed with had been rushed through forensics.

They all waited to hear what the findings were.

She looked to Tripp first. “There’s blood on it that matches multiple crime scenes. Not just Kelsey and Caden, but the couple Rafe found in the

cabin.”

Zoe sucked in a breath, and Rafe wound his arm around her, tugging her against his side.

The rest of them exchanged looks. All of them were thinking the same thing—how many more victims would they find in these mountains?

“Some of the information from our investigation and what the police had in that file they withheld suggests that this man really was military. That makes me question whether or not the police didn’t bungle the case on purpose,” Alexia said.

Everyone stared at her in shock.

“It’s been known to happen. You military heroes feel strongly about men you served with. What if one of the former cops served with the killer? Or knew about him somehow?” She shrugged. “We don’t have all the pieces yet...but I’m going to find them.”

Talk slowly edged from the cases in question to sports and skiing, which Zoe enthusiastically got in on. Alexia’s hand rested in Tripp’s, and she slipped a sideways glance at him.

He leaned close. “Do you wanna get out of here?”

“Well, we do only have the weekend before I’m off on that next case.” Her eyes twinkled in the firelight.

He bolted to his feet, hauling her up to a stand with him. “We’re hitting the road now. Guys? Zoe? It’s been great.”

“But it won’t be as great as your weekend, I’m guessing.” Guns raised his canned energy drink in tribute.

With a two-fingered salute, Tripp said, “Asshole.”

Alexia tugged at his hand, drawing him away from the fire. When they stepped into the shadows, their bodies drew closer automatically, drawn by that magnetic pull they had with each other.

His night vision was excellent, and he spotted the perfect place for them to steal a few kisses.

When he dragged her between the wall and the woodpile, she let out a little cry of surprise. He slammed his mouth over hers, and the sound turned into a moan.

Her fingers anchored in his shoulders as he thrust his tongue between her lips and tasted the marshmallow she’d eaten.

A long minute later, she lifted her head. “That’s all you got?”

With a growl, he ground his erection into her. “What do you think, princess?”

“I think you’d better get me to the Humvee quick.”

“Mm. Think we can test out that back seat again?” He dropped his mouth to her throat, and she angled her head so he could trail more kisses down the column.

“Anything’s possible, Bryson.”

He stilled at her words and slowly raised his head. “Even love for a man like me?”

“Oh, baby.” She curled her hand around his nape and drew him close again. “I never thought I’d love a man like you, but I really do.”

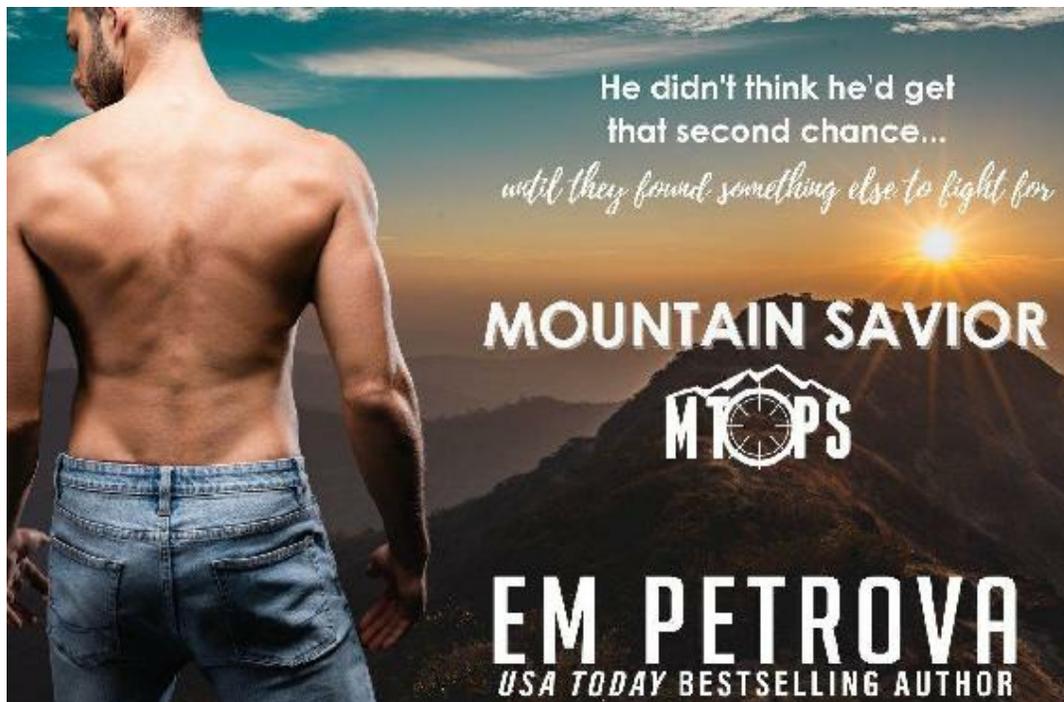
He drew back. “Wait a minute. What’s the matter with me?”

She pulled free of his arms and started walking away. “Nothing at all, even if I do have the bigger dick,” she said over her shoulder.

He caught her from behind and yanked her flush against his body. “That’s right, Alexia. You’ve got the right man for you. With the bigger dick.”

She issued a happy sigh that worked its way deep into his heart. “That’s all that matters.”

[1-CLICK THE NEXT BOOK IN THE MT OPS  
SERIES, MOUNTAIN SAVIOR](#)



He didn't think he'd get  
that second chance...

*until they found something else to fight for*

## MOUNTAIN SAVIOR

MTOPS

EM PETROVA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

[SUBSCRIBE](#) to Em Petrova's Newsletter to keep up to date and for special reader features.

## Em Petrova

Em Petrova is a USA Today Bestselling Author who was raised by hippies in the wilds of Pennsylvania but told her parents at the age of four she wanted to be a gypsy when she grew up. She has a soft spot for babies, puppies and 90s Grunge music and believes in Bigfoot and aliens. She started writing at the age of twelve and prides herself on making her characters larger than life and her sex scenes hotter than hot.

She burst into the world of publishing in 2010 after having five beautiful bambinos and figuring they were old enough to get their own snacks while she pounds away at the keys. In her not-so-spare time, she is fur-mommy to a Labradoodle named Daisy Hasselhoff.

Find More Books by Em Petrova on her [Website](#)

And Follow On:

[Goodreads](#)

[Amazon Author Page](#)

[FB Fan Page](#)

[Instagram](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

[Bookbub](#)

## **Other Titles by Em Petrova**

### **SEAL Team Blackout**

[SHATTERED TIES Bishop's Story](#)

[RUTHLESS PROTECTION Sparrow's Story](#)

[MERCILESS SURVIVAL Ramsey's Story](#)

[SAVAGE PAWN Gunnison's Story](#)

[REBEL MISSION Frost's Story](#)

[WICKED INSTINCT Lachlan's Story](#)

[FINAL TARGET Mustang's Story](#)

[DIRTY JUSTICE Apollo's Story](#)

[SWEET REFUGE Lena and Overstreet's Story](#)

### **MT Ops**

[MOUNTAIN PROTECTOR](#)

[MOUNTAIN DEFENDER](#)

[MOUNTAIN SAVIOR](#)

### **Xtreme Ops**

HITTING XTREMES

TO THE XTREME

XTREME BEHAVIOR

XTREME AFFAIRS

XTREME MEASURES

XTREME PRESSURE

XTREME LIMITS

NORTH OF LOVE **Xtreme Ops Alaska Search and Rescue**

XTREME RULES

**Ranger Ops**

AT CLOSE RANGE

WITHIN RANGE

POINT BLANK RANGE

RANGE OF MOTION

TARGET IN RANGE

OUT OF RANGE

**Knight Ops Series**

ALL KNIGHTER

HEAT OF THE KNIGHT

HOT LOUISIANA KNIGHT

[AFTER MIDNIGHT](#)  
[KNIGHT SHIFT](#)  
[O' CHRISTMAS KNIGHT](#)  
[ANGEL OF THE KNIGHT](#)

### **WEST Protection**

[HIGH-STAKES COWBOY](#) Prequel Noah's Story  
[RESCUED BY THE COWBOY](#) Ross's Story  
[GUARDED BY THE COWBOY](#) Boone's Story  
[COWBOY CONSPIRACY THEORY](#) Mathias's Story  
[COWBOY IN THE CROSSHAIRS](#) Silas's Story  
[PROTECTED BY THE COWBOY](#) Josiah's Story  
[BRAVO TANGO COWBOY](#) Corrine and Panic's  
Story  
[BREAKING IN THE COWBOY](#) Casey's Story  
[SHIELDED BY THE COWBOY](#) McCoy's Story  
[CLOSE RANGE COWBOY](#) Landon's Story  
[ZERO DARK COWBOY](#) Judd's Story  
[TOP SECRET COWBOY](#) Jace's Story  
[COWBOY UNDER SEIGE](#) Jaren's Story

### **WEST Protection Sentry**

[LONG ARM OF THE COWBOY](#) Lexis's Story

[COWBOY BREAKING POINT](#) Quaide's Story  
[SHOTGUN WEDDING COWBOY](#) Julius's Story  
JUSTICE FOR THE COWBOY Jennings's Story

## **The Guard**

[HIS TO SHELTER](#)

[HIS TO DEFEND](#)

[HIS TO PROTECT](#)

## **Crossroads**

[BAD IN BOOTS](#)

[CONFIDENT IN CHAPS](#)

[COCKY IN A COWBOY HAT](#)

[SAVAGE IN A STETSON](#)

[SHOW-OFF IN SPURS](#)

## **Dark Falcons MC**

[DIXON](#)

[TANK](#)

[PATRIOT](#)

[DIESEL](#)

[BLADE](#)

## **Moon Ranch**

[TOUGH AND TAMED](#)

[SCREWED AND SATISFIED](#)

[CHISELED AND CHERISHED](#)

## **6-Pack Cowboys Series**

[SIX-PACK RANCHER](#)

[SIX-PACK WRANGLER](#)

## **Wild West Series**

[SOMETHING ABOUT A LAWMAN](#)

[SOMETHING ABOUT A SHERIFF](#)

[SOMETHING ABOUT A BOUNTY HUNTER](#)

[SOMETHING ABOUT A MOUNTAIN MAN](#)

## **Operation Cowboy Series**

[KICKIN' UP DUST](#)

[SPURS 'n SURRENDER](#)

## **The Boot Knockers Ranch Series**

[PUSHIN' BUTTONS](#)

[BODY LANGUAGE](#)

[REINING MEN](#)

[ROPIN' HEARTS](#)

[ROPE BURN](#)

[COWBOY NOT INCLUDED](#)

[CUPID COWBOYS](#)

[COWBOY BY CANDLELIGHT](#)

[THE BOOT KNOCKER'S BABY](#)

[ROPIN' A ROMEO](#)

[WINNING WYOMING](#)

**Ménage à Trouble Series**

[UP FOR GRABS](#)

[WRANGLLED UP](#)

[HOOKING UP](#)

[ALL WOUND UP](#)

[DOUBLED UP novella duet](#)

[STIRRED UP](#)

[GETTING WARMED UP](#)

**Another Shot at Love Series**

[GRIFFIN](#)

[BRANT](#)

[AXEL](#)

**Rope 'n Ride Series**

[BUCK](#)

[RYDER](#)

[RIDGE](#)

[WEST](#)

[LANE](#)

[WYNONNA](#)

## **The Dalton Boys**

[COWBOY CRAZY](#) Hank's story

[COWBOY BARGAIN](#) Cash's story

[COWBOY CRUSHIN'](#) Witt's story

[COWBOY SECRET](#) Beck's story

[COWBOY RUSH](#) Kade's Story

[COWBOY MISTLETOE](#) a Christmas novella

[COWBOY FLIRTATION](#) Ford's Story

[COWBOY TEMPTATION](#) Easton's Story

[COWBOY SURPRISE](#) Justus's Story

[COWGIRL DREAMER](#) Gracie's Story

[COWGIRL MIRACLE](#) Jessamine's Story

[COWGIRL HEART](#) Kezziah's Story

## **Dalton Boys Collection**

[Collection Books 1-3](#)

[Collection Books 4-6](#)

[Collection Books 7-9](#)

[Collection Books 10-12](#)

### **Single Titles and Boxes**

[BOOT KNOCKERS RANCH SERIES BOOKS 1-6](#)

[PLUS BONUS](#)

[SINFUL HEARTS](#)

[JINGLE BOOTS](#)

[A COWBOY FOR CHRISTMAS](#)

### **Firehouse 5 Series**

[ONE FIERY NIGHT](#)

[CONTROLLED BURN](#)

[SMOLDERING HEARTS](#)

### **[Hardworking Heroes Box Set](#)**

**EM PETROVA**  
*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR