

A.M. MAHLER



EAGLE TEAM:

Nixon

TEMPTED BY TIA

BOOK 2 IN THE EAGLE TEAM SERIES

NIXON: TEMPTED BY TIA
(SPECIAL FORCES:
OPERATION ALPHA)

EAGLE TEAM

BOOK TWO

A.M. MAHLER



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

*To all my new readers,
Thanks for coming with me on
this incredible ride!*

ABOUT THE BOOK

He saved her from hell. She took him to heaven.

Eagle Team operative Nixon Davis has seen horrific things in his job as an elite Navy SEAL. When he saved Tia Donnelly from the clutches of a ruthless sex trafficker, he never expected that she would consume his thoughts. Broken and terrified by her experience, Tia is suffering from nightmares, anxiety, drug withdrawal, malnourishment and a host of other issues that make getting close to a man nearly impossible.

Nearly.

But Nixon is there in the dark of night slaying Tia's demons and helping her heal with a gentle hand and pure heart. Through his patience, kindness, and the love of his family, she slowly learns how to live post-trauma, but the danger to her isn't over. Justus Salero is still out there, and he wants revenge for his favorite pet's escape.

Nixon will stop at nothing to ensure Tia's safety and well-being, including going against his own team where one of them has turned traitor.

CHAPTER ONE

Tia

When your father sells you to a ruthless sex trafficker to pay off his massive debt, it's hard to come back from something like that.

I had a life and a career I loved, friends, a great apartment, and as far as I knew, a semi-loving family. I couldn't imagine the desperation my father felt that he thought *selling his only child* was a good solution.

My father wasn't there the night two SEAL teams and the FBI raided Justus Salero's New Mexico compound and rescued me, my friend Lucy, and dozens of other captives. So, the addiction of the illustrious Senator Donnelly to kink and perversion was still a secret from the press.

Not for long though. I told the FBI exactly what my father did and what happened to me while I was a captive for a year and a half.

A year and a half of my life where I was drugged, raped, beaten, starved, and brutalized. I was at the point where I was going to take my own life rather than live like that anymore.

Then I met Lucy.

Lucy Solberg was kidnapped and brought to Salero by her own brother. What her brother didn't know, though, was that Lucy was dating a black ops Navy SEAL. Seventy-two hours

after Lucy showed up, the SEALs came and ruined Salero's latest human auction.

In that short time Lucy and I spent at the compound together, we formed a strong bond. After our rescue, I moved in with her and her boyfriend to recover and figure out my next steps.

That's when I met Nixon.

Nixon was my angel. He's the one that brought me out of that hellhole, watched over me when the nightmares came and I was afraid of my own shadow. The bad dreams don't happen much now, but I still get spooked in the dark.

And Nixon is the one taking me away from California and to a little town in New Hampshire called Grayson Falls. It's his hometown, and he says it will be the perfect place for me to recover and hide from my father.

I wasn't sure about that, but at this point, I was willing to try anything. I wanted to reclaim my life, and to do that, I needed to heal first—physically and emotionally.

I needed to feel safe again.

New Hampshire was as far away from New Mexico as you could get and still stay in the country. My father wouldn't think to look for me there. He had recently made a pitch on national television pleading for me to come home, saying he missed me and just wanted me back where I belonged.

It was all for image. Neither the FBI nor the Navy told my father where I was. Once the government had all the evidence they needed, they would execute my father's arrest.

I fully intended to tip off the press before that happened. I wanted my father humiliated and utterly ruined like I was. He had to have been sweating bullets not knowing what was happening in the hallowed halls of the Justice Department.

I hoped the arrest would take place on Father's Day.

Or my birthday.

I wondered if I could make a special request.

I looked around Lucy's guestroom at my meager belongings that were now packed. I had no money and no income, so Griffin and Lucy paid for the clothes I had now. Nixon's team was still working on getting access to my accounts that were frozen when I disappeared, along with the trust fund my grandparents set up for me when I was born. I never used to touch that account, preferring to financially support myself. But after what my father did to me, I planned on blowing through it, including making sizable donations to his opposing political party and every single cause he hated.

"I guess this is everything." I looked over at Lucy and gestured to the three bags on the bed.

My whole life in three tightly packed bags.

"I can send you anything else you need." She nodded her head.

Lucy was stunning. She didn't think so, but she was. With long auburn hair, deep blue eyes, freckles, and porcelain skin, and curves, she was a knockout.

Her boyfriend thought so, too. Griffin worshipped her. He loved her curves. He loved every last thing about her. Theirs was a fairytale romance. The kind I always hoped to have, but the thought of an intimate relationship with a man made me want to vomit. I had to believe that I could still have that one day with the right man. I knew that not all men were abusers. The trick was picking them out *before* they showed you their true colors.

"Remember, you can call me anytime—day or night," Lucy's cousin, Kalee said. The two looked so much alike they could pass for sisters.

Kalee was married to another SEAL named Phantom. He was on a different team. I liked him. He was grumpy and looked at his wife like he couldn't believe she was standing in front of him—like he couldn't believe his luck. His devotion to her was absolute.

I nodded to Kalee. She had gone through something similar to what I did. I hadn't talked to her about my

experience. I hadn't spoken to anyone about my captivity. Only Lucy knew some of the details.

And I thought maybe Nixon gleaned a bit from my nightmares. He didn't sleep in the room with me, but he stayed out in the hallway at night, watching over me like an avenging angel.

If I was being honest with myself, I felt safer with Nixon around. I didn't know why he decided to be my protector, but I was glad to have him. He didn't ask questions, didn't push. He was just a constant, quiet presence—always near, but never intrusive.

In truth, he made me feel things that I didn't think I ever would again.

I pushed those feelings back as I was in no way ready to face them. I wasn't sure I'd ever be ready.

"Tia," a soft male voice called from the doorway. I knew who it was right away.

Turning around, I saw Nixon standing there with Griffin, their team master chief, behind him in the doorway. Both men were tall—over six feet. Nixon was lean and didn't have a single ounce of fat on him. His muscles bulged in all the right places, but he wasn't overly large. He obviously trained extensively. But it was as if he wasn't after bulk, but strength. He had brown hair and deep green eyes with rugged features, a nose that had clearly been broken at least once, high cheekbones, and highly kissable lips.

I looked quickly away from him. He stirred things inside me that I wasn't sure I was ready to acknowledge.

"It's time."

I nodded.

Lucy threw her arms around me, and I clung to her in return. I'd become so dependent on her in the last couple of weeks I almost hated myself for it. Since moving out of my father's house, I enjoyed being independent and taking care of myself.

Now, I was needy as a newborn, and I was disgusted with myself. In New Hampshire, I'd be depending on Nixon. I tried to tell myself it was because I needed the time to heal, but the reality was I just didn't want to face the world yet.

Lucy looked at Nixon. "Text when you get there."

"Yes, Mom," Nixon smiled.

That was another thing. We'd be staying with Nixon's parents. His father was former military and owned an independent security company. They pretty much did the same thing a black ops team did.

Or so I understood.

At the very least, I knew I'd be safe, which was really all I asked for in life. Justus Salero wasn't going to let my liberation go easily. He had a very unhealthy obsession with me, but at the slightest perceived mistake on my part, he'd beat me within an inch of my life. The rapes were nightly. I never once freely gave him my body.

The worst part about it, though, was that I got used to it. I stopped fighting to lessen the physical pain. It was just my miserable life.

Nixon and Griffin came forward and picked up my bags. It was very early in the morning, and Griffin was going to drive us to the airport. He wouldn't let Lucy come with us. We had to say goodbye there at the house. Griffin was uber-protective of Lucy, and the team had confirmation that the danger to us was as real as it had been before. So, Phantom and the rest of Nixon's team would stay behind with Lucy.

I had mixed feelings as the four of us left my little sanctuary of a bedroom. I knew that this was what I needed, but at the same time, I needed this space. This comfortable, safe space where I licked my wounds and had my breakdowns. But in order to live, I had to leave. I knew that. Didn't make the doing of it any easier.

Phantom stood in the living room with his arms crossed over his chest. He was tall and lean and sporting his resting badass face. But for all his imposing stature, I knew he had a

kind heart. He was one of the best men I knew with unwavering loyalty to those he loved and considered family.

Nodding to me as I walked by, he simply said, “You call if you need anything.”

That was it. No sappy goodbye. I really did love that grouch.

Lucy stopped at the door and hugged me again, as did Kalee. Griffin didn't like her going outside without him. It sounded controlling, but after she was taken, it was with good reason. And he did take her places. She wasn't shut in. He just wanted to be with her when she went out. That was the sacrifice she made so they could be together. She knew going into their relationship how he would be. He had a lot of enemies.

Justus Salero being the main one now.

It was still dark outside when we stepped out into the early morning. The SUV was already running, as it was every time Lucy or I stepped out the front door. These guys took absolutely no chances.

I'd wonder how this became my life, but I knew it was courtesy of dear old dad.

The asshole.

I strapped into the backseat while Griffin and Nixon loaded my bags. Nixon's was already back there, and his black lab Shadow was waiting for me on the seat. I'd grown extremely attached to this dog. She'd adopted me as her human the second she walked into the house for the first time. She'd be making the trip with us since we were taking a private jet sent out to California by Nixon's father to bring us back.

Griffin got behind the wheel and Nixon into the front passenger seat. He usually sat in the back with me, but Shadow was taking up the rest of the seat.

As we pulled away from the house, I blurted out, “Did you know the space between your eyebrows is called a glabella?”

What was wrong with me? How lame could you be? But it was a flicker of my old self. Spouting strange trivia was what I did when I was nervous.

Griffin chuckled. “Is that right?”

“Uh-huh,” I nodded. “And the smell after the rain is called petrichor.”

“Well, I was today years old when I learned those two things,” he said.

Nixon turned back to me. “You nervous, angel?”

How did he know that? How could this person I’d only known a few short weeks read me so well? But that was Nixon. When he looked at me, he looked *into* me. He saw both the damage and the good that was hidden so far down.

“Very,” I admitted quietly.

“That’s okay, pretty girl. Nervousness is a feeling, and it’s good to feel. Just settle back and try to relax.”

It *did* feel good to feel again. Maybe this change would work.

I still startled a bit when Nixon called me, “angel” or “pretty girl.” I didn’t feel like either of those things, but Nixon boosted my confidence. It was a testament to his upbringing that he treated women so well. I had to admit that I was looking forward to meeting the two people who made him the man he is today.

One day I might even thank them for it.

The drive to the airport was quiet and quick. Shadow rested her head on my lap, and I stroked her fur the entire way. I really didn’t know how I would’ve coped with all this without her.

I didn’t have any pets growing up. My mother was allergic, and after we lost her, when I asked my father for a dog so I wouldn’t be alone when he was in Washington, he still said no. I guess I should have seen that as a red flag, but he wasn’t ever cruel to me. I never felt like he didn’t love me. Which made what he did to me even more shocking.

We arrived at the airport and Griffin navigated to the private hanger where the jet was sitting and ready to go. Griffin and Nixon popped out of the car to load the bags. I knew by now not to get out until they came and got me, so I stayed put. Shadow stood up, wagging her tail, and looking out at our new destination.

“Are you ready for this new adventure, pup?” I scratched behind her ears. *Am I?*

Ready or not, it was time. I’d be eating dinner tonight in New Hampshire, a place I’d never been to or ever gave much thought to. Everything about it was completely foreign to me. I’d never even been to that part of the country.

Opening my door, Nixon offered me his hand to help me out of the car. Weeks ago, I’d cringe if he came this close to me, but now, I could do at least that much.

Taking his hand, I exited the car and took my first step toward my new life.

CHAPTER TWO

Nixon

Not long after we took off, Tia fell asleep on the couch with Shadow curled up with her.

My dog was as smitten with her as I was.

That was okay. I didn't mind sharing my dog. Tia found comfort with Shadow, and that was all that was important.

My girl was hurting, and I didn't know how to help her. The depression she slipped into was beyond my expertise. My Aunt Jackie had given me the name of a therapist that specialized in trauma victims. I intended to talk to Tia about it once we were settled in New Hampshire.

Tia had become my girl the moment I saw her in Salero's mansion, terrified for her life and backed into a corner. It was the strangest sensation, looking at her and just knowing she was meant to be mine. I knew she wasn't ready for anything remotely romantic—and likely wouldn't be for quite some time. For now, I gave her my friendship and unwavering loyalty. I would do whatever it took to help her heal and get to a place where she might possibly see me as something more. Her eyes and heart already looked at me that way, but her psyche absolutely did not.

So, I would wait—years if I had to.

At least the withdrawal from the cocaine Salero pumped into her system on the regular was behind us for the most part.

The detoxing was hell. Tia was sicker than anyone I'd ever seen, and I saw people going through all sorts of things. Bathing her skin to cool down her temperature, trying to get enough food and water into her that she wouldn't throw back up, and holding her through her hallucinations and nightmares were the norm. I even took out my gun a few times and pretended to fight whatever demon was terrorizing her.

She still had nightmares and was nervous and anxious constantly.

Rising, I walked over and covered her with a blanket, pushed her hair out of her face, and sat back down.

I was grateful my father sent one of his planes out to retrieve us. Flying commercial would have been too risky for Tia's safety, and that was my top priority.

The chair I was sitting in spun to face any direction, so I turned to face her, propped my chin in my hand and stayed that way for a while. I was watching for any sign of distress, ready to jump to her rescue.

My obsession with her was confusing. I didn't know what it was about her that had me so captivated other than everything. I'd never reacted that way to a woman before. I knew Navy SEALs who fell fast and hard when they met their other half, but I'd never considered it would happen to me.

My job was dangerous. Every time we went out on a mission, we risked not coming home alive, and Eagle Team took the most dangerous missions, even above and beyond what the normal SEAL teams did. I'd done my fair share of fucked-up shit, and I wasn't without my demons from it either.

But I could put all that aside for my girl.

I was from a little town in New Hampshire called Grayson Falls. It's just a speck on the map in the Great North Woods, but it was home. Growing up, it had everything I needed.

But I had a different calling than my sisters. I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and do something to make the world a better place.

Getting rid of the dregs of humanity fit that bill.

My older sister, Emma, worked on our Uncle Ethan's farm. She loved horses and various other animals, and she loved growing things. Following in my uncle's footsteps, she became a large animal vet. Between them, they could take care of all the animals on the farm and travelled to other farms, if needed. My uncle took a small, overgrown farmette and transformed it into a sprawling, profitable, working farm.

At Emma's insistence, our uncle got milk cows. That ultimately led to a small bottling operation so they could sell the milk locally. I can't keep track of everything they sell. They've got a little stand at the end of the road leading to the farm. It's always causing traffic problems, much to the annoyance of the chief of police, my Uncle Danny.

Then there was my twin, Ellie. Blonde to my brown, slim to my bulk, light to my dark, she was the spitting image of our mother. She was a writer, and our father built her a cottage on our land. She was quite content with her quiet life.

And before you ask, yes, we do all the weird and bizarre things twins do. We can have entire conversations without speaking, feel when the other one is hurt or sick. I've been injured on missions before—nothing too serious. When I returned, there were frantic texts on my phone from Ellie wanting to know how bad I'd been hurt.

She was literally my other half and the most important being in my life.

Except now there was Tia, and I could see her taking over that position. I had mixed feelings about that.

I was looking forward to showing Tia my home and the downtime that was coming with it. I loved my job, but to be effective at it, I had to take a step back every now and then. All of us did. In a way, our sole focus right now being Salero gave us that. Griffin got his time with Lucy, which he cherished and protected, and I could bring Tia home to a quiet town where nothing was expected of her but to heal.

Tia had already met my parents at the beach a few weeks back when my father came out to speak with Griffin. That was awkward as fuck because Griffin found out then that I was his

idol's son. My father erased my identity, at my request, when I was accepted into SEAL training. While he had my family well-protected, I would be dealing with the scum of the earth. People who would stop at nothing to exact their revenge against me and my team at having brought them down. I would not allow anyone to hurt someone I loved because of something I did.

But the only scum I was concerned about now was Salero. I wouldn't be satisfied until I put a bullet in his brain ... followed by several more into his corpse. I'd never been this bloodthirsty before, but I'd also never had someone who incited it in me.

Tia.

My beautiful, tortured survivor.

And that was how I saw her, as a survivor.

Never a victim.

I wouldn't allow it.

Tia became restless as I watched her sleep. This was the worst. The waiting to see if she would settle or wake screaming. It tore me up every time.

When she whimpered, I moved.

In a split second, I was on my knees in front of her, pushing her hair back from her forehead with a gentle finger.

"Sshh ... sshh, sshh, sshh," I crooned. "I'm here, angel. I'm always here."

As I whispered to her, she settled and pressed her cheek to my fingers. I was brought to my knees—literally—by her trust in me, even if only in slumber.

Leaning forward, I rested my forehead to hers—only for a second—before pressing a kiss to her delicate skin and sitting back. I didn't go far though. Propping my knees up, I rested my elbows on them and leaned my back against my chair. I was closer to her now than I was before, and yet still so far away.

It was frustrating as hell that she only trusted me in sleep, but this wasn't about me. It was about her. It was *all* about her, and I had a feeling that it would be for the rest of my life.

Tia slept peacefully the rest of the flight, and I paced for a good chunk of it. I was restless. I wanted to get right to helping her heal from her experience, but this was at her pace, not mine. I had to have patience.

A Jedi, I was not.

When the pilot signaled the start of our descent, I carefully made sure Tia was strapped to the couch before taking my own seat and securing my seatbelt.

As the plane touched down, Tia jolted awake. She had the seatbelt off and was sitting up before I could even get my thumb to my own buckle. Despite her abrupt change in position, she didn't look at all disoriented—merely startled awake.

And damn if she wasn't the most adorable being I'd ever seen like this. Her hair resembled a nest, eyes puffy, and there was the imprint from her pillow on her cheek.

But none of that mattered to me.

For the first time since I met her, she woke up knowing exactly where she was and who she was with. It may seem like such a small thing to some, but it was a milestone in her recovery—even if she didn't make the connection.

Leaning over to look out the window, she pulled back again, running her fingers through her hair.

“Was I really out the entire flight?” she asked. “How am I going to get to sleep tonight?”

“You needed it,” I replied. “You're healing your mind and body. Just allow it to happen naturally. Rest when you're tired; be active when you're not.”

The plane taxied down the airstrip at my family's compound. Yeah, my father's property had an airstrip. He owned more land than my Aunt Jackie did, and I used to think she owned half the town.

“Do I look frightening?” She ran her fingers through her hair.

“No, you look beautiful.” I smiled at her blush. “You always look like an angel to me.”

“It doesn’t matter what I look like to *you*,” she said, deflating my balloon just a little bit. “I want to look nice for your family.”

“My family wouldn’t care if you wore a garbage bag over your head,” I said. “It’s your opinion of yourself that matters, angel.”

“Well, that definitely needs some work.” She turned and leaned on the back of the couch to look out the window. “All I see are trees.”

“It’s the Great North Woods,” I dumbly replied.

“What did you do here for fun growing up?”

“This and that,” I said, vaguely.

“I bet you were a hell-raiser.” Turning her head, she smiled at me. I immediately felt lighter.

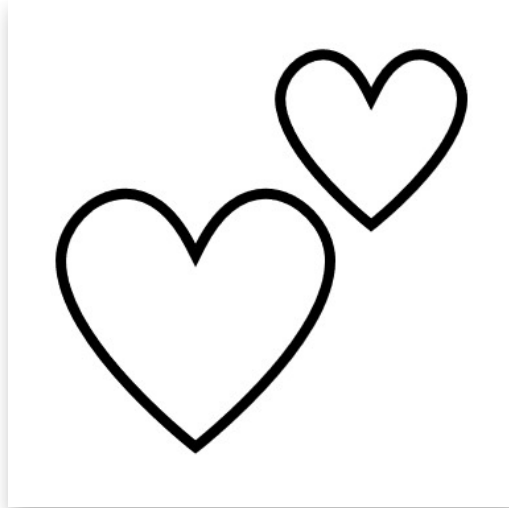
“I can neither confirm nor deny that.” I smiled back.

“Will your family spill the beans on you? Or will they circle the wagons?”

“Oh, they’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

And they would do it because they would see her as part of my inner circle. I wouldn’t be able to hide my feelings for Tia from them. I would try, but my family could sniff out juicy gossip like a fart in a car.

I was doomed.



MY PARENTS WERE, of course, waiting for us on the tarmac. Since it was my father's private airstrip, he could pretty much do whatever he wanted to—and did. Dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans, he pretty much towered over my mother. They were both blonde and beautiful—at least they always were to me.

My mother had been a nurse at the Grayson Falls Hospital where her brother and sister were doctors. She gave it up before my sister and I were born.

As the plane taxied to a stop, my mother brought a hand up to her blonde curls to shield her vision from the setting sun. My father stood next to her with his hands stuffed in his pockets, an immovable force. He was never too far from my mother. Always in what I thought of as “diving distance.” As in ready to dive on her and shield her body from, well, bad stuff, I supposed.

I wanted a love like theirs. I wanted a woman who trusted me unconditionally to provide for everything she needed to thrive and protect her from anything that could possibly cause her harm.

And just like my mother, I wanted somebody who wouldn't be a doormat, but would hand my shit right back to me. Where other men cowered before my father, my mother got right up in his face and told him to take a seat.

And he did.

Standing up, I stood in front of Tia and reached my hand down. She looked around nervously and patted her hair.

“I promise, you look beautiful,” I said.

“You could be lying to me.”

“I could be.” I shrugged, still holding my hand out and waiting. “You’ll find though that I only ever say what I mean. Shadow,” I called the dog to heel, and Tia looked at him like he was a traitor. Oddly enough, it seemed like the pooch knew exactly what she needed, which at that time was to deboard the plane.

“Our bags?” she asked.

“The crew will bring them to the house.” I stayed with my hand out. She was looking for any excuse to delay.

“Tia,” I said, “you’re safe here. I promise on my life that this property is crawling with big guys with guns. The only people better than my dad’s guys are Eagle Team. I would never have taken you somewhere you’d be in danger. Do you believe me?”

She finally looked up at me with those big, brown eyes, her vulnerability on full display.

“Come on. Let my mother smother you to death. She’s good at it.”

Placing her small, shaking hand in mine, she allowed me to gently tug her up. “I go out first.” She nodded. She was used to the routine. She made a last-ditch effort to smooth down her clothes and hair.

I was about to take a step forward when she blurted, “Did you know the noise your stomach makes when you’re hungry is called a wamble?”

I cracked a smile. She was nervous, but she trusted me. “I didn’t,” I said. “Why do you think they named that noise?”

“I don’t know. It certainly doesn’t sound like wamble.”

As we approached the door, I heard her starting to take deep breaths. Afraid a panic attack was starting, I turned to

face her. “No one will hurt you,” I said. There was steel in my voice. “I won’t allow it. My family won’t allow it.”

She stared at me, her eyes trying to communicate something to me I wasn’t quite sure I understood. Taking one last deep breath, she nodded her head. There was my brave girl.

We stepped out into the New England twilight. My mother waved at us. It was a natural reaction, I guessed, as there was no way possible to miss *the only two people on the tarmac* and the SUV they stood in front of.

Leading Tia down the stairs, we covered the short distance to our welcoming committee. When we stopped in front of them, Shadow sat down at Tia’s side.

“Mom, Dad, you remember Tia, right?”

“Of course,” my mom smiled warmly. “Welcome to our home.”

Then she did what I specifically told her not to do. She stepped in and enveloped Tia in a hug. Tia tensed, but if my mom noticed—and I was sure as shit she did—she didn’t acknowledge it.

“Thank you for having me, Mrs. Davis,” Tia said softly, not returning the embrace.

“Natalie.” My mom pulled back, smile in place. “And you remember Eric.” She nudged my father.

He nodded to Tia.

My mom nudged him again.

“Baby, she clearly doesn’t want to be hugged.”

My mother paid no mind, reaching for Tia’s other hand and turning toward the car. I was forced to drop the hand I held.

“How was the flight?” my mother asked, walking Tia to the car as my father and I stood there awkwardly left behind. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Um, I slept the whole way,” Tia croaked. My mother opened the rear driver’s door for Tia.

“Excellent! Rest is good. We’ll have a nice, quiet evening at home. You’ll stay at our house. There’s plenty of room, and you must make yourself completely at home. We want you to be comfortable. Are you feeling okay? Do you need a doctor at all? My brother and sister are both doctors in town and will make a house call. More importantly, they will be discreet.”

My mother smothered like no other mother smothered before. I promise you. If there was a mother smothering contest, mine would take first place by a mile.

After letting Shadow jump in the back seat with Tia and closing the door, my mother turned to me. You’d think, knowing that bullets were constantly whizzing by my head for work, that I’d have been the first one she hugged, but nope. It was Tia, and for some reason, that felt right.

She wasn’t careful with me, though, like she was with Tia. She yanked me forward so hard I stumbled right into her waiting arms. I released the breath I was unknowingly holding.

Home.

That’s what my mother’s hugs were. Soothing. Protective. Sheltering.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she whispered in my ear, and I hugged her tighter.

Pulling away, she patted my face gently before walking to the other side of the car and climbing in the front passenger side.

I looked at my father. Why I was suddenly nervous, I had no idea. My father and I always had a close, loving relationship. We had no contact with his side of the family. I’d never met my paternal grandparents—or my maternal ones, come to think of it.

I wasn’t lacking in the grandparent department though. I had honorary grandparents, but their relation to me was too complicated to get into at the moment. Suffice it to say, I did have a Nana and Pop in my life.

“Did you know the sound your stomach makes when it rumbles is called a wamble?” I blurted.

“The fuck?” my father predictably replied.

“Tia spouts trivia when she’s nervous,” I rambled. “She just told me that on the plane.”

He arched a single brow at me. “You nervous?”

I shifted my feet. “I feel like I’m in trouble for something.”

“Only not coming home enough,” he said before pulling me into a hug.

If my mom’s hugs were home, my father’s arms were the safest place in the world. He was always openly affectionate with his family—something I understood he never had when he was growing up. For as badass as he was, he was always hugging his kids.

“I talked your mother out of serving fatted calf tonight,” my dad said pulling away and turning to the car. “You can thank me later.”

“Thanks.” I crossed around the car and slid in next to Tia.

And we were off.

CHAPTER THREE

Tia

I was in an alternate universe. Nixon's parents were so nice. I wanted the tarmac to open and swallow me whole when his mother leaned in and hugged me, and I couldn't even muster up a half-hearted return pat.

She kept up a steady stream of chatter during the short drive, filling Nixon in on what his family was up to. I tried to pay close attention in the beginning to the names, but when there were too many, I quickly lost track. There were so many aunts and uncles and cousins that any attempt I had at all trying to make note of the players failed spectacularly.

I did manage to get his sisters' names—Emma and Ellie—and Uncle Ethan. Was I expected to meet this behemoth of a family? Would they wear name tags to help a newbie out? A big part of me hoped I wouldn't have to meet anyone, but another part of me wanted to meet Nixon's family. I wanted to know more about him and where he came from.

I understood from Lucy that Nixon was a very secretive person, even from his secretive team. They had only recently discovered where he was from. He got his military nickname, Phoenix, because of the Nix in his name. His other teammates were all named after the cities they were from. There was Griffin, who went by Boston, and the rest were Dallas, Denver, Lincoln, and Chandler. So, Phoenix wasn't from

Phoenix. But “Grayson Falls” certainly didn’t sound badass or covert.

And Nixon was a badass. I’d seen him in action. He looked like the Angel of Death coming through the darkness and finding me backed into the corner that last night at Salero’s mansion. I was frozen terrified in place. I knew it was the rescue Lucy assured me was coming, but I didn’t know where she was or who I was supposed to trust. I later found out that Salero had dragged her out the back door and to the helicopter he had just arrived in. And I, Justus Salero’s favorite pet, had been left behind for dead.

Or thankfully in my case, rescue.

Since then, Nixon was always nearby.

Always.

At first, he terrified me. An unknown man amped up on war tossing me over his shoulder when I wouldn’t move.

He hardly said a word to me when I left the hospital to stay at Griffin’s, but he was always there.

To my shock, I discovered one day that I had grown to trust him. And to my complete befuddlement, I realized I was even attracted to him. I was positive I would never want a man again after my experience, but there I was, quietly lusting over my savior.

Without realizing it—or wanting to—I grew to depend on him.

But not in the way one might take that. I didn’t depend on him to live, like I had Justus Salero. I did depend on Nixon to give me the space I needed to heal, to make sense of what happened to me, and to come to terms with being free. Somehow, I was positive Nixon would never make me do anything I didn’t want to.

But I was afraid that my growing feelings for him were just a reaction to him rescuing me, and that both worried and annoyed me.

The Davis house came into view. I don't know what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't this two-story mountain chic house with bright flowers popping up all around the front yard. I knew Nixon's parents had money—I mean, his father had his own plane—but this house didn't show anything like that. It wasn't flashy, but lovely and well-maintained—what I could see of it in the waning light.

The car came to a stop and Nixon immediately popped out. But he wasn't the one to open my door. It was his father, Eric. I came face-to-face with his broad chest. I looked up ... and up ... and up until I landed on his chiseled face. His blue eyes were hard on mine, but not in an intimidating way.

No, they were challenging. They were challenging me as if to say, *“Well, you're here now. What are you going to do with it?”*

And I had no idea.

Nixon immediately appeared over his father's shoulder and cleared his throat. When the unbending wall that was his father didn't move, Nixon cleared his throat again a little more pointedly. Eric finally stepped back, and I let out a breath I didn't even realize I was holding.

When Shadow whined behind me, I finally stepped out of the car. Nixon didn't take my hand this time. He gave me some distance. Looking around me, I saw we were surrounded by the darkening forest. There likely wasn't another house for miles.

Shaking off the shiver that shot up my spine, I turned and followed Nixon into the house.

It was cozy, warm, welcoming—everything a New England house was stereotyped to be. The house was well-maintained, but also well lived in. Unlike my own home growing up, this wasn't a showplace for precious art and antiques placed specifically to catch the eye of important guests in the political arena.

But this house said, “I've seen some things.” Late night homework sessions, Saturday cartoons, birthday parties,

sleepovers with friends, this was a house for a *family*.

Don't get me wrong, I had a good upbringing. My parents loved me. And until my father sold me into sex slavery, I never doubted that. I had birthday parties and friends over. But I never dared draw on the walls with crayons. And I just knew these walls had been drawn on.

What I didn't know was what to do now. I knew Nixon's mother said to make myself at home, but what did I do? Was I going to be shown to a room? Herded into the kitchen to help with dinner? I figured that kind of thing maybe started tomorrow.

I wished I could get recruited to help with dinner. It would give me something to do to keep my mind off, well, what I was going to do with my life while hiding here in New Hampshire. There had to be some ground rules, right?

"Nixon, I got Ellie's room all set up for Tia, so when your bags come, be sure hers makes it in there," Natalie continued. Eric walked around where I stood stuck in the foyer. I felt gentle pressure from Nixon's hand on my lower back, and I allowed him to lead me further into the house. Shadow stayed right at my side, not the least bit interested in exploring the house and all its new scents.

That dog had become my lifeline, and I didn't know what I was going to do when I moved on with my life and Nixon took him back. Get my own dog, I supposed.

But I really liked this one.

"Tia, please relax and make yourself at home," Natalie said. "I'm going to get dinner started. Is there anything you don't eat?"

There used to be, but when you're dependent on a madman to feed you, you ate anything he put in front of your face—even if you were positive it was drugged. I never knew if the opportunity for escape would come, and I needed to keep my strength up.

"Do you mind if I help?" I asked. Everyone looked surprised. Natalie looked quickly over to Nixon before

accepting my offer. Asking permission?

“I could always use help,” she said, waving her hand for me to follow, and I did. “Nixon’s sisters are coming over in a bit. I tried to hold them off to give you some time to settle in, but their brother is home, and they wouldn’t hear of it. So, I’m sorry about that.”

I said nothing as I followed her into the cheery kitchen. White, tall cabinets and a buttery yellow granite countertop made for a cozy space. The floor was brown slate, and everything had a soft feel. At the center of the kitchen was a large island that had a stove range on top. The other half was a breakfast bar, and Nixon’s mother gestured for me to sit. I perched myself up on a stool as Shadow settled at my feet.

“I hope Nixon brought dog food,” Natalie said, as she began to open cabinets and took out what she needed to cook. “It’s been too long since we’ve had a dog here. But if he didn’t, my brother Ethan can bring some over for the night.”

“I think he did,” I said, surprised at how I felt at home. Maybe because Natalie didn’t put me under a microscope and stare at me as if she was waiting for me to explode. She pattered around the kitchen, glancing my way periodically as she spoke, but she didn’t make too much eye contact. I appreciated that.

“Good,” Natalie said off-handedly as she moved about the kitchen.

“Who is Ethan? I’ve heard his name a few times before.”

A warm smile covered Natalie’s face, and I knew this Ethan was someone she loved dearly. Had anyone ever gotten that look on their face when they thought of me?

“Ethan is my brother, my twin,” Natalie said. “Nixon is named after him. His name is Ethan Nixon, but we call him by his middle name to avoid confusion. Ethan has a farm at our sister’s house. I’ll make sure Nixon takes you over there. The animals can be very therapeutic, and Ethan has a way about him that makes everyone feel at ease.”

I nodded and watched her for a minute or two when I realized she wasn't going to accept my help with dinner, at least not tonight. Tonight, I was a guest. Hopefully tomorrow she would let me help with breakfast.

Nixon made his way into the kitchen. At home, he walked to a cabinet and retrieved two glasses before moving to the refrigerator and filling them with water. He then brought them to the island, leaving one in front of me, before sliding onto the stool next to me.

I felt my body calm, which surprised me. I was relaxed in his mother's presence, but obviously, I must have still been tense. Not anymore. My own personal Xanax just sat down.

"What's for dinner?" Nixon asked.

Natalie looked up from the vegetables she had begun to chop and smiled. "It's your first night home, baby, what do you think is for dinner?"

Nixon moaned before turning to me. "My mother makes the most amazing pasta sauce you ever ate."

Not having any strong opinions on good pasta sauce, I looked forward to trying it.

"Ma!" A female voice yelled from the direction of the living room.

I immediately tensed and sat ramrod straight. I figured it to be one of Nixon's sisters arriving, and I wanted to make a good impression. Why I thought turning to stone would make a good impression, I had no idea.

I shouldn't care what his family thought of me, since I was only here temporarily until I got my life back, but, well, I *did* care. Very much as it turned out.

"That would be Em," Nixon said next to me.

As a blonde dynamo entered the kitchen, I felt Nixon's hand slide over my knee, squeeze slightly, and fall away. He was here. Right by my side. I had nothing to be afraid of.

Trivia rolled around in my head, but I would *not* blurt it out. I. Would. Not.

I desperately turned to Nixon and dropped my voice. “Your pinkie toe and finger are called a minimus.”

I was such an idiot.

When he looked at me, he gave me the full wattage of his smile. “That kind of makes sense, right?” He replied matching the volume of my voice. “They’re small, so mini, right?”

Letting out a shaky breath, I nodded.

Leaning close to my ear he said so no one else would hear, “I wouldn’t have let her come if I thought you’d be hurt by it in any way. You’ll like her. Just try to relax.”

I nodded but knew I’d never relax. I honestly wasn’t sure I’d ever relax again. I would forever go forth as a tensed-up woman always looking over her shoulder.

Nothing but good times lay ahead for me, folks.

“Everyone in my family can be trusted,” he continued. “But I won’t leave you alone with any of them until you’re comfortable.”

I closed my eyes as his words rolled over me. Who was this man? And why was he sent to *me*?

“Are you going to give me a hug, butthead?”

I finally chanced a good look at the woman now standing on Nixon’s right side.

Her blonde hair was piled up on the top of her head in a messy bun. She wore a white tank top smeared with dirt and equally messy jeans.

“I will after you wash the farm off of you,” Nixon shot back. “You smell like pig shit.”

Not to be deterred, she threw herself into his arms. Despite his words, Nixon rose and hugged his sister close. There was so much love there. He was so genuinely happy to see her. I wondered idly when the last time was that he was home.

“I missed you, little brother.” She sighed into his shoulder.

I looked over at Natalie, who had such a serene look on her face as she watched her children embrace. She swiped away a tear when she caught me looking.

I immediately felt like an intruder. Before I could come up with an excuse to flee the kitchen, Nixon sat back down and simply introduced me to his sister as Tia.

I didn't know if Emma had been prepped on who I was and why I was there, but she merely held out her hand in greeting and said, "Hello." Slowly, I stretched my hand across Nixon, and she took it in hers. Her grip was firm but warm. My handshake held zero confidence.

I was doomed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nixon

Tia was barely hanging on. The thin thread she was clutching was beginning to fray. I thanked my lucky stars that this evening didn't include my whole extended family as it would have if I had come home on my own.

When Emma pulled her hand back from Tia and turned to take a glass out of one of the cabinets, I gently rubbed the small of Tia's back, smiling encouragingly at her.

One down; one to go.

"How did you keep the masses away from the prodigal son?" Emma asked our mother.

"Easy," my mother shrugged. "I told them he was coming tomorrow."

Emma threw back her head and laughed before looking at Tia. "My mom did you a solid, Tia," Emma said. "She won't be able to hold off the curious for long."

"We can ease her into that. She doesn't need to meet everyone at one huge, loud, overwhelming affair," I said, dropping my hand. Though I wanted to continue to touch her, I made all physical contact with her brief. I wasn't going to risk our progress.

"She shouldn't have to meet them at all if she doesn't want to." My sister Ellie entered the room.

My entire being calmed at the sight of my twin. Standing up as she made her way over to me, I wrapped my arms around her and held tight. It was always as if we recharged each other.

Pulling back, she looked into my eyes for a long moment before nodding. And just like that, I was positive she knew who Tia was to me, and I couldn't ask for a stronger ally.

Lifting her hand, she cupped my cheek and smiled. "Everything is how it should be now."

I didn't know about that, but I also didn't want to open that comment up to discussion either.

"Tia, this is my twin sister, Ellie." I sat back down.

Ellie's smile was warm and welcoming, but unlike Emma, she didn't reach her hand out to touch Tia in any way. Without my telling her, Ellie knew that Tia wouldn't want to be touched by a stranger.

There was that strange twin thing.

"It's nice to meet you," Ellie said. "Any friend of my brother's is a best friend of mine."

I rolled my eyes, knowing full well that though Ellie seemed to understand not to touch Tia, that didn't mean Tia was safe from being interrogated for information as soon as I left her alone.

Since I didn't plan on leaving her alone, I wasn't too worried about that.

Whatever information my sisters wanted they could get from me.

Except my sisters were far craftier than I was and once they had their mind set on something, there was no stopping them.

Tia stiffened next to me when my father entered the kitchen. I wanted to take her in my arms and reassure her that my father would never hurt her. He was the kindest, gentlest man I knew.

Until he wasn't. If you were his enemy, he was your worst fucking nightmare.

But my words alone wouldn't set my girl's mind at ease. Only time spent around my father would accomplish that.

And if she thought my father was scary, wait until she met my Uncle Danny. At 56, my uncle was still a badass, and as my father liked to say, one cranky-ass motherfucker. I'd try and put that off if I could.

Conversation swirled around the table as we sat down to dinner. My sisters, of course, kept up the chatter, filling me in on the local gossip and what our dozens of cousins and childhood friends were up to.

I tried to appreciate the trivial dramas of the tiny town of Grayson Falls. I did care about the people they were talking about, but their life seemed so foreign to me. And it wasn't that long ago that I shared it. Things that seemed so vital to their lives, to me ... weren't anymore.

Just a few short weeks ago, I was kicking in the door of the compound of one of the most infamous sex traffickers in the world. It was astounding how much I didn't have a fuck to give about what my high school girlfriend was doing now. But in case you care, she got caught cheating on her second husband. Again.

I faked my interest and did my best to deflect any questions to Tia that were in any way intrusive. When Tia felt ready, which was not her first night in a strange place with people she didn't know, she could decide how much to share about herself. But I wasn't going to rush her. I wasn't ever going to make her do something she didn't want to do.

Mom cleared me from KP duty since I just got home. My sisters didn't even grumble. They were just happy I was home ... and with a woman. We'd never been those siblings that always fought. I wasn't the brother that complained my sisters were annoying and never wanted them around. I always wanted them around. The reason I did what I did for a living was for them. I didn't ever want to rescue them, or any of my

female cousins, from what Tia experienced. I protected what was mine.

And that included Tia.

Not really knowing what to do, Tia sat next to me and clenched her hands. She wasn't comfortable enough in her surroundings to leave the table like I knew she desperately wanted to.

Standing up, I offered my hand down to her. "Let's go walk off dinner."

She looked at my hand and then up at me.

Take it. Please take it.

She seemed frozen in place.

Then I realized I was a fucking idiot.

I quickly sat back down. A guy my size looming over her after what she'd gone through, pretty sure I'd just made a colossally dumb-ass move.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I wasn't thinking."

I was so fucking bad at this. Who the hell was I to think I could heal a traumatized woman? I didn't have any experience with this.

"Angel," I whispered. "Let's take a walk then we can go to bed."

Lip trembling, her eyes snapped to mine. She was stuck somewhere in her mind that she didn't want to be.

"Separately," I said quickly. "We have our own rooms. Come on."

I held out my hand again. Tia blinked and looked around the kitchen. My family was graciously involved in doing other things and pretending not to notice the stranger coming apart in their home.

She began to raise her hand and my breath caught, but she pulled it back down to her lap.

Dammit.

Nodding her consent, she gave me a shaky smile. This time I waited until she stood up, giving her the dominant position first. I didn't know if that was the right thing to do, but it was what felt right in the moment.

Leading her out the French doors in the kitchen, we stepped out onto a large stone patio. My father and I spent an entire week building this beast.

I made sure to keep a few feet in between us, giving her space. Wrapping her arms around herself, she drew in a big breath.

I wanted those to be my arms. The only comfort she needed would be from me, but that's not the way it was right now. I was not trusted in that way.

But I would be one day. I was determined to break through. It just took patience.

Something I sucked at.

I glanced over when my mother drew the drapes across the doors, giving us privacy.

I fucking loved that woman.

A soft glow came next. Strings of bulbs illuminated above us, while white fairy lights wound through the beds of shrubs around us.

Though I couldn't see more than a few feet into the dark woods without my night vision goggles, I knew that my father was watching from somewhere. Probably not within hearing distance, but he always knew where his children were.

Always.

"It's nice out here," Tia said, with another big inhale. "Peaceful." I didn't take my eyes off her but continued to keep my distance. "And a little terrifying." She nodded toward the darkness surrounding us.

"Believe me when I tell you, there is no safer land in the country. My father's land is more secure than Camp David."

I wasn't exaggerating either. My father was an expert in security. It was easier to bust into the President's retreat than to breach Eric Davis' sanctuary. Between his work and Tex's, if you even looked at this land on a map, my father would know somehow and nail your ass to the wall.

But that wasn't something Tia would understand at this early stage.

Closing her eyes, she raised her face to the chilled night air.

Fall was just arriving in the Great North Woods, and this small, Rockwell-esque town was about to lose its collective mind. The good people of Grayson Falls loved them some autumn. There were all sorts of festivals from now until Thanksgiving before everything turned to Christmas and the ski resort opened.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. My fists clenched. Every time she apologized for something the fucker caused, I wanted to rage. There were times I thought I was going to bust out of my skin like the Incredible Hulk.

But I didn't get that luxury when I was around her.

"You never have anything to apologize for." I was like a broken record with those words. No matter how many times I said them, she still fucking apologized.

"I just ... froze up."

"New place, new people," I shrugged. "After everything you went through, it's not really unexpected. You're doing so much better, angel." Rubbing her hands over her arms, she finally looked over at me. "You can't rush this. That's not why we're here."

"Why did you bring me here?"

Her question threw me. "You know why. I brought you here to help you heal and protect you. You're a government witness. Yours and Lucy's testimony is going to be pivotal to putting Salero and whatever piece of shit he answers to away to rot until the end of their days."

Dramatic, party of one, your table is ready.

“I get that.” She pinned me now with her stare. “But why did *you* bring me here? Why didn’t someone else on your team bring me somewhere else?”

Where was she going with this? “Do you want to go somewhere else? Tia, if you really don’t want to be here, we can go somewhere else. You don’t *have* to be anywhere. You aren’t a prisoner anymore.”

“I get that, too,” she said again. She was stronger, and those soulful eyes would not leave mine. “But if I go somewhere else, *you’re* coming with me, right?”

“Of course.”

I was so fucking confused.

“And I’m asking why? Why you?”

I wasn’t trained for this kind of interrogation.

“Do you want someone else guarding you?”

“You’re not answering my question.”

I didn’t know what the fucking question was at this point!

She wanted me to explain something I couldn’t—something I didn’t understand myself. My first instinct was to deflect again, but so many people had lied to her, and I was not going to be added to that list.

“I don’t know how to answer it without telling you something you’re not ready to hear.” My voice cracked towards the end. It hurt. It hurt not to give her what I needed to.

“Don’t tell me what I’m ready for,” she snapped. My eyebrows hiked up my forehead. She snapped at me. I couldn’t stop my lips from curling up a bit in the corners. I was getting a glimpse of the fire that I knew was inside her.

“You’re inside of me, Tia,” I confessed without my brain’s permission first. “I’m drawn to you by something I can’t explain. It has to be me.”

Well, she wasn't expecting that. Surprise stamped across her face.

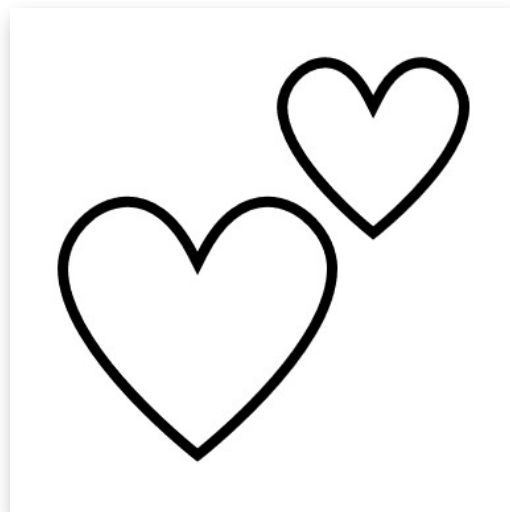
"If you want someone else, I can make other arrangements, but someone has to be with you right now. You're one of the government's star witnesses."

"I don't want anybody else," she said. I can't imagine what those words cost her, but I marveled at her bravery. Then she shocked the crap out of me. "I'm drawn to you, too. I didn't think I could be drawn to a man again after what happened to me, but I need to be near you, and that scares me."

Stepping toward her, I gently took one of her hands in mine and let them fall between us. I made sure to keep back far enough that I didn't crowd her.

"You never have anything to fear from me. I would die before I hurt you—before I let anybody else hurt you. And just because we have these feelings doesn't mean we have to act on them or otherwise do anything about them. I want nothing more than for you to get stronger. It's enough for me now that you're even feeling that."

Dropping my hand, she took a step back. The moment was over faster than it began.



THE DOOR of my bedroom slammed open. With my lightning-fast reflexes, I grabbed my gun from underneath my pillow,

sprang my body over to the other end of the bed and pointed my gun at the intruder.

My best friend, Marcus Weber.

“Well, if it isn’t the world’s shittiest best friend,” he greeted. He was a Grayson Falls police officer, and he’d recently made detective. He was leaning casually against my door jamb with his muscular and tattooed arms crossed over his chest. Marcus was an affable guy, but he could fuck someone up—and had.

“Have you lost your fucking mind? I nearly blew your goddamn head off!”

“You never call, you never write,” he continued as if I hadn’t just pulled a gun on him, committing a felony in the process. “You certainly never take me to any of these exotic places in the world you frequent.”

Faceplanting on my mattress, I kept a hand on my sidearm.

Just in case I did need to shoot the dickhead.

“There’s a woman in this house that does not react well to strange men invading unexpectedly. How did you even get in?”

“Your mother lets me in,” he said with a shrug. “It’s Tuesday. That’s pancake day.”

“My mother feeds you breakfast?” I sat up. How did I not know this?

“On Tuesdays and Saturdays, she does. Saturday is omelet day.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I’m a comfort to her when she’s missing you. She misses you a lot, by the way.”

Marcus lost his parents at a very young age. He and his older twin brothers were raised by his uncle, aunt, and grandmother. He didn’t want for anything growing up, especially love, but I had never begrudged him time with my parents when he needed it. He was like another son to them.

Even if he was a fucking mooch, who was perfectly capable of making himself breakfast or getting his ass over to the Liberty Diner for it, like the rest of the town did. Hell, my mom and two uncles have been meeting there most mornings for breakfast for as long as I can remember.

“Who’s the woman?” he asked, holding his hand palm down where Tia’s head would likely be if she were standing next to him. “Yay big, quiet as a mouse, looks at you like you’re about to kill her? Is she the girl you brought home?”

“Her name is Tia,” I said, rising out of bed and hunting around for the t-shirt I took off last night before dropping into my bed. “And yes, she is the girl I brought home.”

“She’s pretty,” he said. “A little thin for my liking. Not your usual type though.”

Pulling my shirt over my head, I wandered into my connecting bathroom to take a leak. Marcus had seen Tia, so she was already awake. Did she sleep okay? Was she scared of Marcus?

When I was finished, I returned to my room. Marcus hadn’t budged.

“So, who is she?”

“A mission.” Tucking my gun into the waistband of my pants and another at my ankle, I then reached for my phone where it was charging on my nightstand. I didn’t need to be armed in my parents’ house, but it was habit, and I wasn’t about to get complacent now.

Last night was the first night I hadn’t slept outside Tia’s door since her rescue, and I slept the sleep of the dead. I don’t know if it was because I was back in a bed again, the comfort of being home, or that it was the first time that I felt completely safe when I put my head down at night in way too long.

I hoped Tia felt the same way.

“Shit, a mission?” His joking demeanor vanished. He didn’t know specifically what my job entailed, but he had a general idea. “How bad?”

“As bad as it gets.”

He wouldn't ask for more details. He didn't need them. All he knew and cared about now was that Tia needed to be protected. Tia didn't know it, but she just got the loyalty of someone that would take a bullet for her in a heartbeat for no other reason than she'd been through hell, and Marcus would be six feet under before he let something happen to her again while he was around.

Marcus had the love of two amazing women growing up. Like me, he was raised right. He respected women. He fought for injustice against them.

It was no wonder my sister Ellie had been in love with him her entire life.

The feeling was entirely mutual, but Marcus had never acted on his feelings for her. Instead, he continued to sleep around like the manwhore he was. I was happy he didn't lump my sister into the many masses of women that came into and out of his bed.

I wasn't one of those guys that didn't let his friends around his sisters. I would *not* tolerate any of my friends sniffing around my sisters for a meaningless fuck or a friends-with-benefits thing. But if they really loved them and my sisters loved them back, then I was good with that. Why wouldn't I want my sisters happy? My friends were a hell of a lot better choice than some rando dude I didn't know. At least I knew my friends' pasts.

Marcus followed me down the hall to the living room. My eyes immediately found Tia in an oversized chair and a half in the corner, curled up with her e-reader. No one bothered her, and I sighed in relief. Then I felt like an idiot because I knew my family better than that.

Marcus walked to the kitchen. Tia watched him the entire time he was in the room. I'd be jealous of the attention she was giving him, but I knew it was because he was an unknown new male in her presence.

For once in our life, a girl I was interested in was not interested in Marcus. He tended to get the ladies because he came across as so laid back and fun. I'd always been the more serious one. I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up at a very young age, and I did what was necessary to achieve my goal by studying and a very strict exercise regimen.

Marcus' brief flings had no idea of the pain that lay within the man.

But that was a story for another time.

I crossed the room and squatted down next to Tia's chair. She didn't look at me until Marcus was completely out of the room.

"That's my best friend Marcus," I said. "You'd be safe with him."

She didn't say a word, and I hadn't expected her to.

"He's here to mooch breakfast off my mom," I continued. "It seems they have standing dates Tuesday and Saturday mornings."

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips, and I would fucking take that any day.

"Did you sleep okay?" I continued my one-sided conversation with her. She nodded. "I had my door open all night in case you needed anything, but somebody closed it, I guess, when they got up."

"I did," she said softly. My brows shot up my forehead.

"Why didn't you wake me when you got up? I would have gotten up with you." Spending the quiet morning hours with her would have been my definition of perfect.

"You looked really comfortable," she shrugged. "And I know you haven't gotten a lot of sleep since you met me. You were sleeping in a bed for once instead of the hallway floor."

"I can sleep anywhere," I reminded her. We're trained to sleep whenever we can if we're in a safe place, no matter the condition of the accommodations. Griffin's hallway floor was

like a five-star hotel compared to some of the places Eagle Team has laid our heads.

Tia shrugged. “You looked like you were really appreciating sleeping in a bed.”

I was, but that didn’t mean I would have wanted to stay there if I knew she was awake. If the choice was her or, well, anything else, I would choose her. Always.

“Did you get everything you needed this morning? Coffee? Shower? Breakfast?”

“I’m fine, Nixon,” she said. “Your mother was up when I came out here. I’ve already had my coffee and am content to wait for the pancakes.”

Not wanting to smother her, I rose and made my way to the kitchen in search of coffee. The fact that Tia left her bedroom this morning had me hoping that she was starting to feel comfortable and safe here.

Walking into my mother’s brightly lit and cozy kitchen, I found Marcus leaning on his elbows on the breakfast bar while my mother poured pancake batter onto a griddle. It sounded like they were chatting about some town event coming up. There was always some event going on in Grayson Falls during the tourist season. Whether or not they were well-attended was a different story.

Scratching my stomach and yawning—with my mouth open because I’m a fucking heathen, and I know this to be true because my sisters told me—I made my way over to the coffee pot and growled when I saw it was empty. With narrowed eyes, I looked over at my best friend and his big, steaming mug.

I briefly considered shooting him anyway. Nothing fatal, but it would be annoying to him, and that was good enough for me.

My mother was chatting away as I slammed around the kitchen retrieving a fresh coffee filter and beans while intermittently tossing death glares at Marcus.

Okay, logically, I knew someone had to drink the last cup of coffee, but it is then that person's responsibility to start another pot. It's common fucking courtesy and the least that dick could do since he's mooching free breakfast from *my* mother.

What sucked even more was that I had to grind this shit because heaven fucking forbid anyone buy already ground coffee for the sake of fucking convenience. Nooooooo, this family must have freshly ground coffee like we're some fancy rich family.

I mean, we *are* a rich family, but we're not fancy.

I measured out the beans, dumped them into the grinder, punched my finger on the button, and glared at Marcus.

Do you know that asshole didn't spare me so much as a glance?

But he did give me the finger, all the while not breaking eye contact with my mother.

Once I had the coffee going, I opened the cabinet in search of my favorite mug.

It wasn't in there.

Dropping my head with a heavy sigh, I closed my eyes and counted to ten before turning to Marcus.

Shockingly, he was not using my favorite mug.

At least I knew there were some aspects of my life in this family that he hadn't claimed as his own. Some things were sacred, and favorite coffee mugs were definitely one of them.

A second recon of the mug cabinet showed me that my favorite mug was not, in fact, in there. I frowned, staring at the cabinet and willing my favorite mug to appear.

My mug was very old. It was given to me by Ellie one Christmas. I think we were in high school. There was a chip on the rim, and it said, "I love to fart," but there was a heart in place of the word love, and the lettering was all scratched up and faded.

Plus, that sucker was sixteen ounces, and it was the size that I liked so much.

Guys will tell you that size doesn't matter, but trust me—in coffee, it does.

Resigned, I pulled down my second favorite mug, an eleven-ouncer with “Coffee before pooping” on it. This was given to me on a completely different occasion by my other sister, Emma. Listen, I'm a guy. And there is a time in every boy's life growing up when everything is, in fact, all about his ass and the disgusting things it can do. It's just the way we're wired.

When the coffee pot reached about two cups, I yanked it up as a few drops hit the burner and poured the entire contents into my second favorite mug before replacing the pot to continue filling.

I took a big gulp, not even caring that I gave myself second degree burns on my tongue and the roof of my mouth. Letting out a long breath of contentment, I closed my eyes and savored the smell and taste of the magic elixir of life.

“Okay now, princess?” Marcus asked. I pried one eye open. He was leaning against the counter, arms crossed and mug in his hand.

I didn't give him a response. One measly sip of coffee hardly lessened my morning's murderous mood.

Ellie came in the back door, and Marcus abruptly straightened and stopped his torture of me in favor of torturing himself. My twin blushed when she saw him and smiled, and I'm pretty sure my badass best friend just turned to goo.

She rounded the kitchen island and hugged me. That's when I saw what she was carrying.

My favorite mug!

She held it up sheepishly. “Sorry it wasn't here when you woke up. I use it when you're not here. I like to keep you close when you're gone.”

Well ... fuck. How can I be grumpy after that? She placed it on the counter, and I immediately poured the coffee from my second favorite mug into my first favorite mug. I am a creature of habit. I like what I like, what can I say?

The way Marcus' eyes followed Ellie as she stepped to the mug cabinet and took down a different one told me everything I needed to know about breakfast on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Pancakes and omelets were my sister's go-to breakfasts. She'd never miss them.

"Dad's looking for you, Nixon. He's in the war room." Ellie said, turning around with the coffee pot and topping me off.

It was a summons, and I wasn't at liberty to refuse it. If he was calling me away from Tia, it was important. I'd take Tia down there with me, but I think my dad's set up would intimidate the hell out of her. That, and I knew she wasn't comfortable around my dad yet.

I glanced toward the living room.

"She'll be fine," my mother said. "We'll feed her."

"I've got it," Marcus added. My parents' house was safe, even if there wasn't currently a cop standing in the kitchen. But I put nothing past Justus Salero and his network.

"He said it was important," Ellie said.

"Fuck," I swore into my mug. My mother long ago stopped chastising me for my rough language, so she said nothing.

"I'll stay until you get back up here," Marcus said.

Of course, he would because Ellie was here, but I also trusted Marcus implicitly to throw his body over Tia's if things went FUBAR while I was down talking to my dad.

I would not, however, leave without letting her know, so I pushed off the counter and walked back to living room.

"Hey," I said as I entered the room, so I didn't startle her. She looked up and smiled at me. A real fucking smile that shot

straight to my heart. I don't think I'd ever seen her smile like that. Uninhibited, not nervous or freaked out.

I didn't walk any closer. I stayed where I was, giving her distance. "My father needs to talk to me. I'll be on the property, but he has a command center—the war room, we call it—just a short walk from the house. You can come with me if you want, but I think you'll be more comfortable here."

"Okay."

"I won't be long," I assured her.

"I'll be fine."

Meaning she'd be fine without me, and I didn't like the way that felt at all. When had I become so attached to her?

"Marcus is here," I reminded her. "I know you don't know him, but he's solid."

She nodded, and reluctantly, I turned away. When I reentered the kitchen, I gave Marcus a long look as I walked. He knew what I was conveying. *Take care of my world*. He nodded slightly, and I walked out the door, coffee mug in hand.

It was a crisp and beautiful morning. I probably should have put on long sleeves instead of the t-shirt I had on, but I grew up with New England winters. It was chilly, but it felt good.

The path to my father's building was concrete with my mother's impeccable landscaping along it. Though nothing was in bloom, the leaves were changing, and it was a peaceful and short walk.

I came to the ugly concrete building. There was a safe room in the house, but there was an underground bunker here. We all knew where it was. We all knew how to get into it. My father had made a lot of enemies during his career, and he never took chances with his family.

Even I, a highly trained, lethal operative, was protected by him. I scanned my thumb on the pad by the door. At the beep,

I pulled the heavy steel door open and walked into a command center that rivaled the White House Situation Room.

I'd been in the Situation Room at the White House. So, I knew for a fact my father was better equipped.

That's what not being funded by the government got you.

That, and better pay with more flexibility in how situations are handled.

The biggest TV screen you could imagine hung from one wall, and underneath were many computers, all showing different things and doing different jobs. The room was brightly lit. A conference table sat to one side, along with plush leather couches in a seating area.

There used to be toys and a bed in here when we were younger, but they were long gone now.

Probably in storage as my mother awaited grandbabies.

But none of that was what stopped me in my tracks.

My father was leaning over the shoulder of another man, who was seated at a computer. This man was a legend. I'd only met him in person once but talked to him on the phone plenty of times.

Tex.

He was a former Navy SEAL, who retired from active duty when he lost the bottom part of his leg on a mission—coincidentally, just like my Uncle Ethan. Now, he sat behind computers, I assumed not unlike my dad's set up, and he found shit out.

That's what he did. He was the guy you turned to when you needed information or to find someone stat. Where my father had teams he sent to various places to do similar assignments that Eagle Team did, Tex dealt in intel only.

But it was solid intel. You didn't question what Tex told you.

Seeing them together in the same place was, quite frankly, stunning. I knew they often worked together, but I didn't know

they knew where each other lived. Tex lived on some farm in Pennsylvania with his family and rarely left it, but I didn't know where that was.

So, this wasn't going to be good news.

But despite the seriousness of what was going on—whatever it turned out to be—I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture of them before shooting it off to Griffin.

The Chief was going to be jealous as all fucking hell. He worshipped these two men. And rightfully so.

His response was immediate. I looked at my phone.

Boston: Well, that can't be good.

If he was fangirling over the photo, he was keeping it to himself.

“Good morning, sleepy head. Pull up a chair,” my father said.

Sleepy head? Really? In front of Tex?

Tex just grinned. Yeah, that was now my nickname whenever Tex needed to talk to me.

Awesome.

I'd give my dad the finger for that, but, well, I wanted to keep said finger attached to my hand. One did not flick off my father and expect to keep the offending appendage.

Sipping my coffee, I dropped down onto the leather couch that faced the monitors.

“Tex is here,” I said. “So, shit must be really bad.”

“It's not good. This isn't going to be easy to hear,” my father started. My heart plummeted to my stomach. It was worse than I thought, and I was already thinking bad things.

“Eagle Team's been compromised,” Tex said.

“Not fucking possible.” My answer was immediate and absolute. I trusted every one of those guys with my life.

I trusted them with *Tia's* life.

We already knew that someone high up in the government was trying to take Eagle Team down. We thought it was Tia's father, Senator Donnelly, but chatter told us he wasn't at the top of this ring.

"I assure you, it is," Tex continued in his southern drawl.

"Who?"

"We're not sure yet," my dad said.

"Then you don't know Eagle Team is compromised," I shot back.

"I told you it wasn't going to be easy to hear," my father said.

I simply could not process what they were telling me. Each of my teammates were solid. Their background checks were flawless. You did not get on this team if you had anything shifty in your past.

Then again, we weren't in charge of who was assigned to our team. We were formed by the CIA. They put the team together. There had been no new members since our inception.

But while I trusted each of my teammates unconditionally, I also held that same trust for these two men. And one of them was my father.

That meant one of my friends was a rat.

This was not happening.

"Get Boston here," Tex said. "We know it's not him or you."

So, it was Dallas, Denver, Lincoln, or Chandler. None of whom I could ever believe was selling us out.

"He'll have to bring his wife," I said, blowing out a breath. "She's tied up in this, too. I can't let her stay behind with the rest of the team if you think one of them is playing for the other side."

"We have plenty of room," my father replied. "I'll send out the jet, so they don't have to fly commercial. TJ's team will bring it out."

TJ was one of my father's team leaders and had been since before I was born. I used to look up to him growing up—still did. Short of the plane getting shot out of the air, Griffin and Lucy would be safe.

“What do I tell him?” I asked. I sure as hell wasn't going to tell him over an unsecured cell phone line that one of our brothers was a traitor.

“You tell him I said to come,” Tex said. “He won't ask questions. Or I can tell him. But Justus Salero is no longer in custody.”

The fuck?

“When did that happen?” I demanded.

“The guards noticed his empty cell very early this morning,” my dad said. “Video footage has been tampered with. At this point, we don't know who helped him.”

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes, trying to calm my building rage. Someone I was very close with was somehow involved in Tia's suffering and each suspect was as unlikely as the next.

I ran a hand down my face. “They all know where I am. Do we need to leave?”

“No,” my father said firmly. “There's more than enough protection here. I'll contact Boston for you. For now, just keep your eyes open and Tia close.”

I would have done those two things anyway without this added clusterfuck.

“Do I tell her?”

“No,” my father said at the same time Tex said, “Yes.”

“Great, thanks. Big fucking help you two were with that.”

“Do what you feel is best for her,” my father said.

I stood up. My coffee was now cold, but I gulped it down anyway. Damn right I was going to do what's best for her.

And what was best for her was me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tia

From my vantage point in the living room, I could see Nixon leave the house through the back door. As soon as he was no longer in my line of sight, the anxiety started building in my chest. Taking deep breaths, I did my best to get the shaking that was starting under control.

I knew what was going on. I had separation anxiety from that man. If I was ever going to stand on my own two feet again and live on my own, I needed to be able to function normally without someone carrying a small arsenal on them constantly by my side.

The problem with that, though, was that I didn't want to be separated from Nixon. My feelings for him were not confusing. I was falling for him. Hard. I didn't think I was ever going to be capable of feeling like this again, but here I was.

I knew that a therapist would caution me. Nixon was my protector and the one that saved me. Feelings of gratitude could get confused with romantic feelings, blah, blah, blah.

That wasn't what was happening here.

It was more the fact that with him, I felt safe. Of course, I would always feel grateful to him for rescuing and caring for me.

But it was who he was when his uniform was off.

Nixon was a quiet, thoughtful man with an incredibly loving and supportive family. The connection I could see he had with his family was something I had never felt before. To my surprise, I was happy in their presence. They were kind, welcoming, and didn't smother. Growing up, my parents were too busy with their political commitments and campaigning for me to develop any real bond with them. Certainly not one as strong as Nixon had with his family.

I longed for the kind of life Natalie Davis had. A beautiful house with children and a husband who loved you beyond reason. The devotion they had to each other was beautiful and completely foreign to me.

A brief image of Nixon and me in a similar house flashed through my mind. I flinched when I realized we were older and together.

I could have this kind of life with Nixon. I saw it in the way he looked at me. I could have a family I connected with, unconditional love.

I just had to get out of my own way.

Lucy told me her cousin went through a similar experience to mine. Eerily similar. Kalee moved on from it. I knew she still had nightmares, but she opened herself up for Phantom's love. If she was strong enough, I could be, too.

Navy SEALs married strong women, as evidenced by Lucy and Kalee, and if I had any chance of making something work with Nixon, I had to be strong, too.

Starting now.

Taking a deep breath, I stood up from my chair in the living room. Clutching my e-reader to me like a life preserver, I straightened my spine and walked with purpose toward the kitchen.

I was going to talk to Marcus.

My body trembled over the mere thought of talking to this unknown man. I could feel the anxiety tingling in my chest, but I kept going. Nixon said I was safe with Marcus, and I trusted Nixon.

Stepping into the kitchen, I saw that Nixon's twin sister was also here. Amazingly, I relaxed some. Was it because I could feel so much of Nixon from her? That was bizarre.

And kind of cool, too.

I slid onto one of the barstools before my legs gave out. Natalie, bless her soul, refilled my coffee. Caffeine would get me through this.

And whisky. That would be really nice right about now.

Since I didn't have any liquid courage, I could only depend on my own. I closed my eyes, counted to ten, and looked up at Marcus.

He wasn't even looking at me.

"Did you know illegible handwriting is called a griffonage?"

I slapped my hand over my mouth.

Really, Tia? *Really!?*

Marcus raised a brow.

"Really?" asked Ellie. "I didn't know that." Just like Nixon did, she acted like there was nothing wrong with randomly spouting off useless information.

"I bet you kill at Trivial Pursuit," Marcus said.

I. Was. So. Stupid.

"Let me try that again," I said quickly. "I understand you and Nixon grew up together."

A smile spread across Marcus' face, and I saw that he wasn't as scary as he seemed before.

I could do this. I could talk to one man with two other people present.

"We did," Marcus said, leaning his elbows onto the breakfast bar counter. "We met in first grade. Nixon was getting into a fight on the playground with a kid who messed with his sister. Me being an ill-adjusted, young terror at the time, I naturally jumped in to assist him."

“And you both sat in the principal’s office all afternoon,” Natalie said.

“But blood was shed, and best friendships were formed, right?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he grinned.

“And they were inseparable after that,” Ellie rolled her eyes. “They went everywhere together. Nixon had bunk beds when we were younger, so Marcus had a place to sleep.”

I looked at Marcus. “My house was crowded. I shared a room with my brothers. Nixon had his own room.” He shrugged, not the least bit ashamed.

“Did you two get in a lot of trouble?”

“Define *a lot*,” he said with a wince. I looked over to Natalie.

She shot him a fake perturbed look. “At least you were better behaved than my brother’s sons.”

I looked at Ellie when she giggled. “Our Uncle Ethan’s twins.”

“There are a lot of twins around here,” I noted.

“You could swing a bat and hit four pairs,” Marcus quipped. “Of course, I’d make sure Ellie wasn’t in striking distance.”

I looked over at Nixon’s twin just in time to see her turn her head with a blush spreading on her face. These two were smitten with each other. A blind person could see that.

Nixon re-entered the kitchen through the back door. I could immediately see something was very wrong, but his expression was gone as soon as he got through the door. Whatever his father had to talk to him about wasn’t good news.

Ellie sensed it, too, since her posture changed, and she watched her brother with an eagle eye.

Nixon walked right up to me and smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Want to go for a drive after breakfast?”

Was that code? Did we have to leave? No, we must not have to leave. If we did, he wouldn't wait for us to eat breakfast first. He'd just whisk me away. He did that kind of thing.

Unless ...

Maybe we were going on the run, and he wanted me to eat first because he didn't know when we'd eat again.

Leaning forward, he stunned me when he pressed a kiss to my forehead. My skin flamed where his lips had touched it.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered.

So, it wasn't *okay* now.

"What happened?" I asked. He shook his head, but I wasn't having any of the evasion.

"Cut my anxiety some slack," I said in a lower voice. "I know something happened, and I know it's not good."

He subtly glanced around the kitchen and shook his head again.

So, it was confidential, and he didn't want the others to know.

Or worry.

"Lucy's coming," he said lightly.

Now I knew it was bad.

Very bad.

"Nixon, please," I begged. My voice shook. "I can't stand not knowing."

His eyes were intense on me as he seemed to be weighing a decision.

"Mom." He broke his stare and turned to his mother. "Do you mind if we take off for a little while? We can get breakfast out."

Natalie cocked her head to the side and studied her son. "Of course, baby," she finally said, but I could see her eyes

held the same tension now as Nixon's did. This clearly wasn't her first rodeo.

I was so anxious I was going to wet my pants if I didn't get out of this kitchen and find out what had made my guardian angel so upset.

Gently he took my hand and tugged me off my stool. I trailed along behind him through the living room and right into my bedroom.

"Do I have to pack?" I asked nervously when he closed the door.

Running a hand down his face, he said, "No, you don't have to pack. We're not going anywhere."

"Why is Lucy coming? What happened?"

I heard Shadow scratching at the door, and Nixon let him in before closing it again.

"Before I tell you what's going on," he said in a low, even voice. "I need you to understand that you are absolutely safe here."

I nodded, even though I didn't believe him. If I was safe, he wouldn't be so worried.

"Justus Salero escaped from prison, and it's thought that someone from Eagle Team helped him."

Wow.

This *was* bad.

"Do you know who it is?"

"Not yet," he said. "But it's not Griffin, so he's coming here with Lucy. They don't know what's going on yet."

My body began to shake, and I could feel my bottom lip tremble. No, I would not fall apart. I was more than a mission to Nixon. We were becoming emotionally attached to each other, and if I was coming apart, he'd be focused on comforting me instead of what needed to be done to ensure our safety.

I straightened my spine and nodded. “What do we do now?”

To my surprise, Nixon smiled, and this time it *did* meet his eyes. “I thought I’d show you around town a bit, introduce you to some of my family. It’ll be a lot easier to meet them in pieces than have them show up here en masse.”

My eyes widened. “They would do that?”

“Have done it, will do it,” he said.

I didn’t want that. I didn’t want to be on display. However, I was intrigued by his family, and I did want more of them.

“Can we bring Shadow?”

“Of course,” he said. “I just assumed you’d want him to come. He’ll be welcome wherever we go.”

I nodded. “Okay, then.”

Nixon gave me a few minutes to make myself presentable. The first time I worried about how I looked since I was sold to Salero was when we touched down in Grayson Falls. But nobody knew me here, and with the exception of possibly Nixon’s parents, nobody knew what I’d lived through either.

So why ask for unwanted attention? If I looked like the wounded mouse I have been, Nixon’s family would want to know what was going on. Lucy packed makeup for me. I hadn’t felt like wearing it before, and I really wasn’t in the mood now, but this was the new, strong me.

I carefully applied my makeup. I wasn’t going for sultry or anything, I just didn’t want to look like I was going through some sort of trauma. I didn’t have anything dressy to wear, so I just put on jeans and a long-sleeved hoodie.

When I met Nixon back in the living room, a smile spread across his face when he saw me. I smiled tentatively back. He held out his hand, and I took it.

“Look at you,” he said softly.

“Time to stop looking like a zombie,” I replied.

He shook his head. “You’ve never been anything but beautiful to me, angel.”

“Did you know the day after tomorrow is called overmorrow?”

Ugh!

Stepping forward, Nixon placed another soft kiss on my forehead. “I didn’t.”

He knew I was nervous, but did he know he was the cure for my nerves? It was almost as if he sensed it.

I realized Nixon had my full trust, and if I trusted him this much, I didn’t have to be nervous or afraid around him. I just needed to take that first step.

CHAPTER SIX

Nixon

Something changed with Tia. When I came back from speaking with my father and Tex, I returned to find a more confident woman than she had been. I wasn't sure what caused it, and frankly, I didn't care. I was just happy to see her trying.

I knew she was scared by the news of Salero's escape. It freaked her out, but not as much as I expected it to. It was like she truly believed she was safe with me, and I was humbled by that.

And she *was* safe with me. I would kill for her without a thought. Death was the least that Salero deserved for the continuous torture he'd put Tia through—physical, mental, and emotional.

I would avenge her.

But before that, I wanted her to meet my family. I needed her to memorize their faces and know that she would be safe with any one of them. Though if I couldn't be with her, I preferred her to be with my dad, Marcus, or Uncle Danny. Uncle Danny and Marcus were cops. My father was a former cop, but I knew he'd shoot first and not bother to ask any questions, and that's who I wanted protecting Tia.

Tex's presence was worrisome. He was a legend among our kind, never leaving his farm in Pennsylvania, so when he did, it was a pretty good bet a bucket of shit hit the fan.

Eagle Team being compromised was pretty much the worst it could get. We weren't just picked for our skills, but also our unbending ethics and patriotism. I considered each of my teammates, *my brothers*, from every angle I could think of, and none of them came out to be traitors. My gut knew my dad and Tex were right. They never would have even hinted at such a thing to me if there was any doubt in their minds. But my heart was devastated by the betrayal and truly believed there was more to the story.

I tried to push it from my mind, preferring to discuss it at length with the chief when he and Lucy arrived later that evening. I didn't anticipate he would have any great insight, but maybe he saw or heard something I didn't.

I tried to focus on what mattered now, familiarizing Tia with my family and the area. Under the guise of showing her where I grew up and introducing her to my family, I was orienting her to where she could go to hide or seek help. Only an amateur took someone into hiding without a backup plan for when shit went FUBAR.

I was no amateur.

And shit often went FUBAR.

Our first stop was my Uncle Ethan's farm. It sat on the same land as my Aunt Jackie and Uncle Danny's house, Uncle Ryan and Aunt Sophie's house, and Uncle Ryan's multimillion-dollar stock car-building business disguised as a second barn on the farm. I always marveled at the ingenuity of the building.

I pulled up to the rock driveway of my aunt and uncle's house and pointed out the windshield. "Aunt Jackie and Uncle Danny's house. Down the road back there is Uncle Ryan and Aunt Sophie's. This property and my parents are next to each other and connect by an old trail. There are also horse trails on the property that wind through it and even over onto my Uncle Zach and Aunt Piper's property, which has a baseball camp on it. All told, I think it's a couple hundred acres."

Tia looked out the windows, taking in her surroundings. I had no idea what her thoughts were. Was she looking around

imagining what I'd been like as a small boy running around here, or was she looking for hiding places?

"Come on," I said, opening my door. Tia waited for me to come around. After I scanned the area looking for any kind of threat and seeing none, I opened the door and offered her my hand to assist her in getting out of the truck. She took it with a small smile, and when I closed the door behind her, she didn't let go.

That was new. I didn't know what to make of it, but I certainly wasn't going to draw attention to it and make her feel embarrassed about it. I was happy for any kind of physical contact I could get from her.

Despite the chill in the air, the doors to Uncle Ethan's barn were open.

A German Shepherd dog came running out before my Uncle Ethan. This wasn't his dog Bravo, who he served in the Marines with, but another one that my uncle trained just as rigorously as he did his beloved Bravo. This one was Whisky. And before you ask, yes, there was also Tango and Foxtrot, but they were police dogs that my uncle had trained.

"Do mine eyes deceive me?" That looks like my nephew, but it can't be. He's usually off on a dangerous mission somewhere in the world." My uncle was not prone to dramatics. He was the least dramatic person I knew.

But he could be snarky as hell when he wanted to be.

I offered my uncle my hand, but he pulled me into a hug that I fully expected. I was the son of his twin sister and held a special place in his heart. It came in handy a lot growing up when I needed an alibi or a place to hide.

In fact, all of my siblings and cousins have hidden out with Uncle Ethan. He was just somebody you liked to be around, whether you talked to each other or not.

"You look like you still have all your appendages," my uncle said, giving me the once over. It was more of a joke than a serious observation. My uncle lost the bottom portion of his leg when his Humvee hit a roadside bomb.

“Healthy as a horse,” I replied. Pulling Tia to my side, I snaked an arm around her waist, fully understanding that the gesture could lead my uncle to draw the wrong conclusion about mine and Tia’s relationship. I felt guilty for the ruse, but I wasn’t about to share who Tia was and why she was there with me, even among my most trusted members of the family.

“Tia, this is my Uncle Ethan, my mother’s twin brother,” I introduced. “Uncle Ethan, my friend, Tia.” I wouldn’t go as far as to say girlfriend. I wouldn’t tell an outright lie to one of the men I respected most in the world. I did have some ethics.

Ethan held out his hand, and I was surprised when Tia shook it. Though she clutched my hand with a grip of steel, I couldn’t help but admire her outer bravery. This was a side to her I hadn’t had the good fortune to see yet.

“Welcome,” Ethan said.

“Thank you.” Tia smiled slightly.

My uncle turned his attention to the dog sitting obediently next to him, and he scratched behind the dog’s ears. “This is Whisky.”

I could hear Shadow barking from the truck, clearly not wanting a strange dog anywhere near his beloved mistress. I considered letting him out but wasn’t sure how he’d react to the farm animals. Shadow was well-trained, but it was better not to stress out the animals.

“I thought I could show Tia the farm, maybe take her for a ride.”

“Of course,” Ethan said. “Kodak has an infection, so he needs to stay here, but Samson and Christmas Morning could use the exercise.”

I turned to Tia. “Do you ride?”

“Not in many years, but I used to all the time. I was a show jumper growing up,” she said.

My eyebrows winged up. “Really? I didn’t know that.” She merely shrugged in response. I realized she and I hadn’t really gotten into our backgrounds and upbringings yet in our

conversations. The focus so far had been on her recovery. I intended to rectify that.

Of course, I could just read the file Griffin had sent me on her, which was literally everything there was to know about Tia from her favorite color as a little girl to her sixth-grade report card.

But that was work. Getting to know her was personal. I didn't need to know what her favorite book was to protect her, but I *wanted* to.

Taking Tia's hand, I walked her into the barn. I'd always enjoyed spending time here, even when my uncle put me to work for loitering too long. It was hard work and there were not too many surprises in the day-to-day business. There were always cousins running about and the animals were friendly.

Well, most of them. I remembered a rooster who wouldn't let my Uncle Danny out of the car one night when he was returning late from work. It was a miracle my grumpy uncle didn't shoot the feathered fucker.

Case in point, my sister, Emma, entered the barn from the opposite side carrying metal buckets full of some sort of farm stuff. Upon closer inspection, it looked like food for the chickens. She was wearing fitted jeans with rubber boots over them, a long-sleeve waffle tee under a blue plaid flannel shirt, and her golden locks were piled on top of her head. She belonged there, but it also didn't mean she didn't look like she could be a model for the exact attire she was wearing.

"If it isn't *Sleeping Beauty*," she greeted me. Didn't take long for that one to make it through the network. "What are you doing on your day of leisure?"

Yeah, right, if she only knew.

"Showing Tia around town," I said. "We're going to go for a ride."

"Did you see Ethan?" she asked. "Did he tell you that you can't take Kodak?"

"Yes," I confirmed. Em nodded then looked between Tia and I for a moment. I knew she was trying to figure out what

the story was with us sure as I knew she'd grill me as soon as she could get me alone. Since I wasn't leaving Tia's side, she was going to have herself a bit of a wait.

"Okay," my sister finally said. She cast us one more glance before walking by us and out the other doors of the barn.

Tia looked hesitantly up at me before looking after the route Em had just taken. "Maybe we should come up with a story for your family? Why do they think I'm here?"

"I came home for a visit, and I brought a friend," I said with a shrug, walking again toward Christmas Morning's stall. "The simpler the better."

Tia followed me as I stopped in front of the festively decorated horse stall. Christmas Morning was a gray thoroughbred that my uncle acquired after some kind of racing scandal. I don't remember the details of it, but he gave her to my Aunt Brooke for Christmas one year. Christmas Morning was a very special horse. She was gentle and nurturing. How she ended up in the underbelly of the racing world, I had no idea, but she'd been around longer than I'd been alive and was enjoying the retired and pampered life.

The old beauty came right to the stall door when she saw us, swishing her tail and poking at me for a treat. My uncle had expressly forbidden us to give the horses any treats. With all us kids running around growing up, we were all giving the horses treats. When they started putting on noticeable weight, Ethan put a stop to it reminding everyone that they got multiple treats throughout the day in addition to their normal feedings.

Of course, the horses didn't know they'd been put on a diet, and so Christmas Morning continued to try to explore my pockets while Tia stroked her nose.

"She's amazing," she said, looking up at the horse.

"She is," I nodded. "All of us know how to ride—my cousins, too. We've all ridden her, but she loves Em and my Aunt Brooke the most. She's also partial to Marcus, oddly

enough. My grandparents have a sleigh. In the winter, they hitch her to it and give rides around town. They're a big hit."

"I bet."

She laughed.

I stood in awe of the sound. The way she looked right now was ... regal. Not just regal but ... *free*. Her walls were down, and the terror in her eyes, nonexistent.

I swear, this horse was an actual angel.

Christmas Morning finally noticed she had another visitor and started exploring Tia's pockets. Tia screeched and giggled at the mare's attention, crossing her arms in front of her face, and crouching when the horse tried to kiss her.

I couldn't pull my eyes away, couldn't speak, couldn't move, couldn't form any thought other than, *she's it for me*.

She's it for me. I knew it for certain, down into the marrow of my bones that this woman, joyfully squealing and teasing her new friend now, was the rest of my life.

And I didn't feel panicked. Didn't feel scared. Didn't feel like I had a choice to make. *Because there was no choice to make*. My path went with this woman's—wherever it may lead us.

Whatever that path was, I also knew it wouldn't include Eagle Team.

That was a bit harder to swallow than the sudden appearance of true love thrust in front of me.

Was this what it really felt like? This enlightened feeling in my body. The calmness was like the quiet peace of going underwater—a place I greatly enjoyed. To me, the best missions involved long swims.

"I figured it out one day," Ethan said, quietly over my shoulder. I hadn't even realized that I had stepped back from Tia to watch the full scene and take in what was happening. "All my animals are rescues. Christmas Morning was the only one that I had a burning need to know her backstory. I know she was mistreated and how, but I don't know what she *saw*."

What was so awful in her past that molded her into this compassionate being? And then I realized it one day—it was the first day Marcus came. Christmas Morning is attracted to people that have experienced pain, and she wants to help them heal like she did.”

The image before me—perfect like a stained-glass window—shattered, and the ugly truth loomed overhead.

Tia knew great pain. This spirited, braver woman I was discovering today was hiding the real woman inside. The one that felt pain.

“Em, Brooke, Marcus,” Ethan continued. “They’d be gone for hours with her. I asked your aunt about it once, and she called it her therapy. She said she’d talk for hours, and Christmas Morning would listen.”

And then he walked away.

My Uncle Ethan could be spooky as fuck, I tell you. Sometimes I wondered if he was a ghost because he sure moved around like one. For a man with a prosthetic foot, he was stealthy.

And now, I was in a tight spot.

I was taking Tia around today so I could introduce her to the people that could help her if trouble came. But then I was going to lock her in my father’s compound where nobody could get to her.

That wasn’t giving her a life. I wasn’t healing her by hiding her. She needed normal. She needed interaction.

She needed long rides on a horse.

I told you my uncle was spooky.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tia

After our ride on the horses, our next stop was the Grayson Falls General Store. Owned by two of Nixon's aunts, it had the best coffee I had ever had in my life. It also had a deli counter, which looked like it did brisk business.

I met Ethan's wife, Brooke. Nixon's other aunt, Sophie, wasn't working at the time. Brooke was stunning. Dark hair, dark eyes, tall and slim, I bet she and Ethan made a striking couple when they were together. We talked about Christmas Morning, and I learned that Brooke rode her daily, weather permitting. I was envious of all the time she got to spend with her horse.

I also realized how much I missed being on the back of a horse. I didn't miss competing, but I did enjoy riding. I asked Brooke if she'd mind if I took Christmas Morning out more over the course of my stay in town, and she graciously gave her consent.

I was one step closer to normality. Maybe the old me was still in there somewhere.

Nixon took me around the store, and I was surprised to see how large it was inside. It was a converted farmhouse. Inside were creaky, wide-planked wood floors, the walls a cozy eggshell. The store was broken up into little departments of food, clothing, toys, books, healthcare, and a hardware section where the garage used to be. It had a little of everything.

I was eyeing up one of the Aran sweaters and a comfy looking quilt. I had money again. Eric got me access to my old accounts and trust fund. How he swung that, I didn't know. My nursing license was also renewed.

I was starting to think Nixon's father was who you went to when you needed to get stuff done.

"It's going to get cold up here soon. I think both those things would be nice to have." Nixon came up behind me. My heart jumped and my pulse sped up. I looked at the colorful quilt in a new light. Now, I was envisioning us both cuddled underneath it while soft snow fell outside the window.

And that was cliché as hell.

I was so lame.

And seriously out of practice when it came to flirting with a man. I couldn't do sultry anymore, and I definitely couldn't seduce anyone. Those female skills had been stolen from me in captivity.

But I also thought that maybe Nixon didn't need them. He certainly seemed attracted to me when I hadn't put forth any effort.

Reaching my hand out, I ran my fingers over the soft fabric of the quilt. Done in white and bright blue fabrics, the contrast was gorgeous.

And you know what? I decided to get them. I was taking back my life. These two things were expensive, but they were handmade. Everything I currently had Lucy had generously taken care of buying for me. These two I was buying for myself.

I picked them up off the shelf. I had lost so much weight that I was going to be swimming in the sweater, but I didn't care. I would gain weight back. One day, I'd look like a real woman again.

I might also look like a local, too. Anything to help me blend into the background here would also be welcomed.

As Nixon drove me around, I saw the charm that the small town held. I never pictured myself living in such a place, but trauma changed you. Your priorities changed, and you take a good hard look at how your life was. Things that were so important to me before weren't any longer. I had friends in the political world, and I used to help them fundraise for their campaign or causes. That held no interest for me anymore.

Now, all I wanted was to get back to work as a nurse and put down roots. But as we drove around, I noticed something major that would get in the way of that.

There wasn't a single doctor's office anywhere we went. Not one. How was that possible? The town had its own hospital from what I understood. Didn't that mean there would be doctors around? Clearly, if I chose this little haven as my home, I'd have to work in another town.

Our next stop was that very hospital. And it was small. This was also in a converted house, and I was curious to see inside and how that worked. It was an old Victorian home across the street from the little police station.

Everything in this town was small. With such a low population, I supposed the residents didn't need too much in the way of resources.

The inside of the hospital had scarred wood floors and dark paneling on the walls. When we entered through the ER, I saw it had four beds. Nixon told me there were two floors for patients upstairs, but given the size of the building, there couldn't be that many.

Still, it intrigued me.

Two of the ER beds were curtained off, so I knew there were patients in there. What did they treat for here?

A man with dark hair peppered with gray in green scrubs and a white doctor's coat and stethoscope around his neck came out of a room just a little bit down from the emergency room. He didn't notice us until Nixon called out to him.

"Uncle Sebastian," he said. This had to be Natalie's brother then.

The doctor turned, and ... well, the only way I could describe what he did next was to say that he turned into a bad romantic comedy movie ending.

He bolted right for us. When I realized he wasn't stopping, I quickly hopped out of the way. Nixon's uncle threw himself at poor Nixon, throwing his arms around Nixon's shoulder and wrapping his legs around his nephew's waist. Nixon stepped back to support their weight.

"My boy!" Sebastian cried out. "Where have you been?"

"That's classified but thank the good Lord I was working out while I was there. Have you put on weight?"

Sebastian unwrapped himself from Nixon and shoved him playfully in the shoulder. "No, I have not put on weight, smart ass, and it's good to see you in one piece."

"Is Aunt Jackie here, too?" Nixon asked.

"This afternoon," Sebastian said.

Then his eyes fell on me with a penetrating stare. I noticed that his eyes were the same striking blue as Ethan and Natalie's.

I also knew he was assessing me, and I did my best not to shrink to Nixon's side and try to hide. I knew what doctors looked like when they were studying a patient closely, and I knew what he saw, too.

"Uncle Sebastian, this is my friend Tia. We're visiting my parents for a bit. Tia, this is Dr. Sebastian Stuart, my crazy uncle. He and my aunt are the only doctors in town. The hospital also serves as a clinic and has regular office hours. Uncle Sebastian, Tia is a nurse."

"Oh?" Dr. Stuart looked back at me and cocked his head.

"Yes. Did you know the dot over a little I or J is called a tittle?"

Dammit, Tia! Somebody kill me now.

"Really?" he replied. "You'd think it was just called a dot. Why would something like that need a title?"

Nixon stepped over and wrapped his arm around me, stroking my shoulder. It was the most he'd touched me since we arrived in Grayson Falls, and it felt good. I sank into his warmth, hoping somehow to disappear.

"I think we should do a family trivia night before we leave," Nixon said, covering for me again. "My girl here would slay."

His Girl!? That sounded ... nice.

"Sure, Sleepy Head, anything you want."

Sleepy Head. Nixon dropped his head back and groaned, his frustration evident. Was that his nickname from his family? I'd have to ask him how he got it.

"Thanks, Dr. Delicious," Nixon shot back.

Well, Dr. Stuart was rather good-looking. I didn't know who gave him that nickname, but I didn't need to know the story behind it to understand it.

"Well, I just stopped in to say hello," Nixon said. "We'll get out of your hair."

"Tia," Dr. Stuart said. "Have Nixon bring you back. We could use an extra pair of hands if you're interested."

"I would love that," I said, with a genuine smile. But then I realized I wasn't free to do whatever I wanted while Justus Salero was out there somewhere. I looked up at Nixon apprehensively.

"We'll figure it out," he said. I looked back to Dr. Stuart, who was eyeing us curiously.

"We'll see you later," Nixon said, hugging his uncle again.

I wasn't sure if Sebastian's quiet response was meant for my ears, but I heard it all the same.

"You sure will."

The doctor's observation skills were as keen as I would expect them to be.

And he knew something was up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nixon

I really wanted to get Tia back to my parents' property and out of sight, but I also wanted her to make progress healing. If it was just me as her protection, I wouldn't take her anywhere, but I knew that one of my father's teams was watching. My father didn't tell me, but in my line of work, you know when you're being followed and whether that person is friendly. This was one of the many reasons I wanted to bring Tia here. I knew there would be enough security.

Our final stop of the day was Over the Hop. It was a brew pub in our town that was popular with the locals and tourists that came to the ski resort in the winter. The owners named a beer after my Uncle Zach after he pitched a perfect game right before he retired. Sadly, I'm not a porter fan, so the Perfect Porter—which is also his last name—was a no-go for me.

As I pulled my mom's SUV into a spot right in front, I put the truck in park.

"Listen," I said, turning to Tia. Her eyes widened. "This place is awesome. But, well, you don't get to order food for yourself here. Laurie—that's one of the owners, if she's working today—just orders for you, like, what she thinks you'll want to eat. The weird thing is, she's hardly ever wrong. So, don't be surprised when she completely ignores what you want. People love coming here to see if they can stump her. I don't know anyone who has succeeded, but I'm sure she's not

always right. I mean, the law of large numbers pretty much means she must be wrong sometimes, right?”

Tia looked at me like she thought I might have just lost my mind, but I spoke the truth. Laurie was a local legend. I honestly was not sure why they even provide menus here.

“What does she do about people’s food allergies? How does she know that?”

Huh. I don’t know that I’ve ever really thought of that, but of course, there must have been people that have had allergies dining here.

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “If you have them, then just tell her when we sit down. She still won’t let you order, but at least you’ll know you won’t go into anaphylactic shock.”

“Your hometown is really quirky,” she said.

I winced. “Is that bad?”

“No,” she smiled. “I love it.”

I let out a breath of relief. For reasons I wasn’t quite sure of, her stamp of approval made me happy. I didn’t live here anymore, but it was still home to me.

“Ready to take your chances?” I nodded toward the building.

“Well, this will be an adventure,” she muttered as I got out of the car and walked around. Only after I scanned our surroundings did I open her door.

I held out my hand, and she took it. I was a little bold before when I put my arm around her at the hospital, but it felt right at the time, and I was rewarded when she leaned into me.

Based on the number of cars in the parking lot, I knew the pub wouldn’t be crowded. Once the leaves started turning, we’d start getting leaf peepers and visitors for our autumn events, one of which was a big festival.

I said it before, and I’ll say it again. *This town goes bonkers in the fall.*

“You fucking moron!” I heard as we entered. I knew that voice. Scanning the restaurant, I saw my Uncle Danny, chief of police, sitting at the bar with none other than my Uncle Zach. They were seated at one end of the bar, and the two seats catty-cornered to them were open, so I led Tia that way.

“Sleepy Head, it’s about time you came around.” Every. Single. Time. I inwardly groaned.

“Dammit, Uncle Danny, how do you always know when I’m coming up behind you? And enough with the Sleepy Head shit.”

“When I served, I was with Army Intelligence,” he said. “What do you mean how do I *know*? Also, no.”

“You should join my team,” I muttered.

“At my age, I’d still run circles around you puppies. You’d be dead before you even knew I was there.”

That wasn’t actually a joke.

I helped Tia up onto the barstool and sat to her right where I could see everyone in the restaurant as well as all the doors.

I watched the front door open as two of my father’s men walked into the restaurant. Yep, I called it. They took seats on the opposite side of the bar. I didn’t acknowledge them, and they didn’t acknowledge me.

I looked back to my uncles. They were pretty much the opposite of each other. Danny had dark hair and green eyes. His standard cop haircut was graying at the temples and starting to grow out. If he were wearing a t-shirt, you would have seen his arms tatted up. As it was, he had on well-worn jeans and a black-and-white flannel shirt over a white Henley. His police badge usually hung around his neck when he was on duty. Since it wasn’t there and my uncle had a beer in front of him, I knew it was his day off.

Then there was my Uncle Zach. Fading blonde hair and those crazy blue eyes that my mom and her siblings had. No tattoos on my Uncle Zach that I knew of. He was dressed in jeans and a New England Mavericks hoodie. He didn’t need to wear a sweatshirt with his old team on it for anyone in this

town to know who he was. But that was what Zach loved about Grayson Falls. People were used to him around here. He wasn't Hall of Fame Pitcher Zach Porter. Here, he was deaf artist Piper Lewis' husband.

"Gentlemen," I said. "This is Tia. She and I are visiting for a while. Tia, Uncle Zach and Uncle Danny."

They exchanged hellos. Uncle Danny was a master at hiding his reactions, but I was watching closely and knew all the tricks, too. His eyes stayed on Tia for a second longer than Zach's. I doubt Tia saw it. But that moment, I knew my father had told Danny all about Tia and why she was here. I couldn't even get pissed about it because a brutal sex-trafficker might show up here any time. It only made sense for my dad to tell the chief of police, whose job used to be keeping secrets. I knew he'd die before he let some psycho get their hands on anyone in his town, let alone someone that was there with his family.

"Danny is married to my Aunt Jackie, and Zach is married to Piper." I explained for Tia's benefit. I wasn't sure if she was going to remember all these people, but I wanted her to be able to follow along and partake in a conversation.

At her age, Laurie was still smoking hot. Her red hair had faded and now had streaks of silver tinsel running through it. Despite having gone through childbirth five times, she was trim, too. Then again, she was on her feet and moving all day, and I was sure that she cleared her ten thousand steps each day.

The bartender/owner/waitress set two pints of beer in front of us. "Good to see you, Nix. How long are you in town for?"

As expected, I smiled and said, "That's classified."

She immediately looked to Uncle Danny, who said, "Not as yet determined."

Laurie threw back her head with a laugh that came straight from her toes. She was the kind of person that didn't care how long you were in town for. She was just happy you were there.

I shook my head. “What do you have for us here?” I knew, but I asked for Tia’s benefit.

“What do you think you have?” she shot back. “You’ve got the Hopworks IPA, and your friend has the Great Northern Wheat.”

“Do you like beer, Tia?” I hadn’t seen her drink any alcohol since I met her. I wasn’t sure if she didn’t drink or just wasn’t interested.

“Of course, she likes beer. How can you not tell that, boy?” Laurie pushed her hand against my forearm.

Keeping my eyes on Tia, I raised my eyebrows in question. “This is great,” she said gamely. “I can’t wait to try it.”

“I’ll go order your food.” Laurie walked away, predictably not taking our order. I knew what I’d be ending up with, but I was interested in what she picked for Tia.

Raising my beer to my lips, I turned to my uncles. “So, why is Uncle Zach an idiot?”

“What!?” Uncle Zach didn’t like being called that twice.

“Because he thinks he knows baseball better than me.” Danny shrugged.

“Um, well, he was a major league pitcher ...” I hedged.

“That don’t mean shit, kid.” Danny leaned over the bar and raised his voice, so he’d be heard in the kitchen. “Hey, Red, don’t do me wrong this time!”

Sitting back, he saw me arch my brow at him.

“My wife told her that I couldn’t have red meat,” he muttered.

“You do have high blood pressure,” I replied.

“Some would say dangerously high.” Zach was sitting back with his arms crossed and watching the TV above the bar. Fall was coming. I knew baseball was on.

“Someone didn’t ask any of you,” Danny shot back. “Hey, let’s try to guess what Laurie is going to bring for Nixon’s

girlfriend.”

I was *not* going to acknowledge that comment, even though my uncle looked like the Cheshire Cat. He was just trying to get a reaction out of me. He trolled people like that.

“Burger, loaded.” Zach maintained his same position. I didn’t expect anything more. Playoffs were around the corner. His face was plastered to a television this time of year.

“Grilled chicken sandwich,” Danny guessed, pointing to himself.

“Chicken Caesar salad,” I said.

We all looked over at Tia. She was nodding her head. “All of those sound delicious. I wouldn’t mind any of it.”

I stuck those three food facts in the *Tia file* in my head for future reference.

“So, who did he take you to meet so far?” Danny asked Tia, but it was me who answered.

“She still needs to meet Aunt Megan, Uncle Ryan, Aunt Sophie, and Aunt Piper,” I listed.

“You can skip Ryan. He’s not that interesting.” Growing up we often heard them talk about each other like that. They were nemeses in school, who called a reluctant truce when Danny and Aunt Jackie got married. Danny took a sip of his beer. “Any cousins?”

“Good Lord, no,” I shot back. A person needed to ease into meeting my cousins. There were a lot, and they were maniacs. “Marcus came by the house this morning.”

“It’s Tuesday,” Danny nodded. “It’s my day off, or I’d probably be there, too. Shit, I hope she didn’t do the pineapple pancakes and I missed it.”

Such an offhand comment, and yet, it made me yearn to live back home. If I were home, Mom would make pineapple pancakes for me.

Fuck. Wait a minute. We blew off breakfast. What if she *was* making the pineapple ones, and I missed them? No, I

think my sister would have said something. Ellie didn't let me miss out.

I could see myself living here again. I wasn't going to be in the Navy forever. I never longed to be home like this before. It wasn't just the nostalgia; it was the sense of community here. Everybody knew each other, and you'd think that would piss someone off, but ... everyone looked out for each other.

Each year at the fall festival, everyone tried to beat my Uncle Sebastian at pumpkin carving, and every year, they agreed he was the clear winner. On Memorial Day weekend, my Uncle Zach organized a softball game between the police department and the fire department and umped the game. Every morning, commuters stopped at my aunts' store for coffee on their way to the train station while others had standing breakfast dates at Liberty Diner. Aunt Jackie and Uncle Sebastian took large salary cuts, so the hospital would have funding to provide quality medical care to this poor farming town.

Everybody I loved most in the world lived here. So, why didn't I?

I didn't have to worry about getting a job utilizing my unconventional skill set. I could work with my dad. That was always the unspoken plan anyway.

A strange uneasiness settled over me as a thought took hold. One I'd never really needed to think about before.

What if I didn't get the chance to experience this community again? What if something happened to me on a mission? I wanted to live here *with Tia*, and if I died on a mission, I'd leave her alone.

I didn't like that thought at all.

Shaking myself out of my melancholy, I saw Laurie heading our way with all our food. I considered myself a muscular guy, but I never could master balancing multiple plates on my arms like she did. I know this for a fact because I was a bus boy here in high school.

She set all our plates down. Uncle Zach got a burger, Uncle Danny got his greasy, bloody burger, as well, I got chili and tater tots. And Tia? She got ...

A bowl of vanilla ice cream?

That had to be the quirkiest thing I've ever seen Laurie serve someone as a meal. It was *ice cream*, not an entrée.

Laurie leaned across the bar towards Tia, and she mirrored Laurie's position. "I'm sure Nat's taking care of protein. You looked like you could use a little cheering up."

"It's perfect," Tia smiled. "I didn't even know until now that I needed it."

Tia would fit in perfectly here.

CHAPTER NINE

Tia

“That was everybody?” I asked Nixon as we arrived back at his parents’ house.

“No, but aren’t you oversaturated with meeting new people?”

“I don’t know if I’ll remember all the names, but I enjoyed meeting everyone. You’re lucky to have such a large family and a great home base. That’s not something I ever had.”

I was a “one and done” child, like the only reason my parents had was so my father could show he was a family man. Voters liked that. Meeting Nixon’s family and seeing where he grew up shined a bright light on everything I lacked growing up. I’d always thought my parents treated me well enough, but now that I was seeing how Nixon lived, I knew they didn’t. The love here was nothing I’d ever seen or experienced.

And this town was charming as hell. People could live without all the convenient benefits of city life. There was no public transportation, no rideshare services, no food delivery services. There was one supermarket, no big box stores. As a place that had a bustling tourist season in the fall and winter, it didn’t have much in the way of amenities.

This was Grayson Falls. And if you didn’t like it, you were more than welcome to leave the same way you came.

I didn't know what was in store for Nixon and me in the future, but this seemed like it was a great little haven to put down roots. I was eager to volunteer at the hospital. I wanted to know what small town medicine was like. I wondered if Nixon would have a problem with me living here. If there was no romantic future for us, would he mind me living here?

It shouldn't matter to me. I was a grown woman and was entitled to make my own life choices. But it did matter. I didn't want to impose or insert myself where he didn't want me.

But I really loved this place. I felt safe here, and that was imperative to my life going forward. I thought I might always be looking over my shoulder. Even if Justus Salero was eliminated, he was still part of a vast network of assholes, and someone high up in the government was pulling the strings. But even if he did come for me here, I still felt confident I'd be protected.

"I'm sorry for that," he said. "You deserve to have had an upbringing like I did, surrounded by love, stability, and safety. If you let me, I will do everything in my power to ensure you have that going forward."

My mouth dropped open. That sounded like he was envisioning his future with me in it. I waited for the panic to set in from the thought of depending on a man to live, but I wouldn't be dependent on Nixon. If I could get a job at the town hospital, or even one nearby, I could be financially independent. I could even use a little bit of my trust to buy a house before I donated the rest.

"Don't be so surprised by that, angel," Nixon said with a small chuckle. "I thought I was clear that I was interested in pursuing a relationship with you—at your pace, of course. Always at your pace."

Blushing, I looked down at my hands. "For the life of me, I can't understand what you see in me."

"Strength," he said. My eyes came up to his. "Compassion, beauty, a strong will. You're a survivor, Tia, not a victim. There is a fire in you that I've seen glimpses of, and I want to

help you get it back. I feel a connection with you that I've never found with anyone outside of my twin."

"What if what you see isn't actually there?" I whispered. "What if I'm not the person you think I am. I don't know who I am anymore. I'll never be the way I was."

Leaning forward, Nixon pressed a kiss to my forehead, and I sighed. He was so gentle, so kind. I'd seen him in full SEAL mode, and I never would have thought that guy that pulled me out of Salero's mansion could be like this.

I wanted Nixon like a woman wanted a man. I was terrified of taking the next step with him, but he would never advance a physical relationship with me on his own. It had to be me to make that first move. If there was one thing I was certain of, it was that Nixon would never try to make me do anything I didn't want to. Yes, he was easing me out of my comfort zone bit by bit, but he would stop if I put the brakes on.

"I think that's impossible," he said. "But in the unlikely event that is true, I'll help you discover who you are now."

Well, shit. I think my panties just evaporated.

"I'm falling for you, Tia," he said. "I'm falling hard." He held up his hand. "You don't have to be there yet, but you're worth it. You're worth anything I need to do to keep you. If I have to wait years to make love to you or even just kiss you, I'll wait."

The impulse to throw myself across the center console and climb him like a tree was, quite frankly, a little stunning, but it wasn't unwelcome. I was elated I could still feel like this.

What happened to me was horrific. It was something I'd always be dealing with. But I believed that in order to heal, I needed to take back what was stolen from me. My dignity. My dream of finding a man that looked at me just the way Nixon was looking at me now.

"We'll take everything one step at a time."

I nodded. He got out of the car and came around to my side. While he assured me his parents' land was safe, he still

scanned the area slowly looking for any threats before letting me out of the car.

The sooner that bit went away, the better.

Taking my hand, he led me toward the front door. “Is Lucy here yet?” I missed her. I couldn’t wait to see her again.

“No, angel,” he said. “They’re not going to be landing until late. The plane only flew out there this morning, but I’m sure she’ll be here when we wake up in the morning.”

I had been so enraptured by meeting Nixon’s family today and seeing where he grew up that I was able to forget what he told me this morning. I knew it was unlikely that he forgot, but he was able to take my mind off it, and I was eternally grateful for that.

Once we were back inside, we headed for the kitchen. Natalie was in there with another beautiful, lithe blonde. She was dressed in leisure wear that was covered in paint, and her hair was piled on her head in what could only be described as a nest.

But what had me fascinated was that she and Natalie were using sign language to communicate. Natalie also spoke as she signed. The newcomer was telling a story about her husband that had Natalie laughing and saying out loud, “That sounds like Zach.”

So, this must be Nixon’s Aunt Piper. When they caught sight of us, Piper came over to Nixon to give him a hug. When they broke apart, Piper signed, “*I had to come say hello since no one knows how long you’ll be here.*”

I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I was when Nixon responded, “*I’m glad you did. Your studio was closed. I just saw Uncle Zach at the brewery.*”

“*I’m on my way there.*”

Then she turned to me. Before Nixon could introduce us, I signed, “*Hello, my name is T-I-A.*”

Piper’s face lit up.

“*You sign!*”

“I do. We had a cook growing up who was deaf, and she taught me. I might be a little rusty.”

“What a nice surprise,” Natalie said, signing as well. “When Zach and Piper met, we all learned how to sign. Piper reads lips, but it was fun for us all to learn to communicate with her in her preferred way.”

“I just wanted to stop by to see my nephew while I could catch him. He slips in and out when he comes home to visit. He’s a wily guy.”

“More like on strict time constraints,” Nixon supplied, signing for Piper.

“I hope to see you for a longer visit while you’re here,” Piper said to her nephew. *“But I have to get to Over the Hop to make sure my husband and brother-in-law don’t beat each other up again. They’re watching the game, and they can get a little ... heated.”*

“They weren’t too bad when we were there,” Nixon assured her.

Piper hugged Nixon again and then surprised me by hugging me, too. *“It was so nice to see you. Nixon has never brought a woman home to meet us. I’d like to spend more time getting to know you, too. So, Nixon, make sure you bring her by.”*

“I will if I can,” Nixon replied.

“Love you, Frogman,” Piper said, and then left.

We walked into the kitchen, and I took a seat at the island. Nixon pulled two bottles of water from the fridge for us.

“Whatcha cooking up this time, mom?” Nixon asked.

“Chicken and shrimp,” she replied. Then looked at me. “I’m going to help you gain back the weight while you’re here. If you want, we can come up with a meal plan together.”

I knew it wasn’t meant as criticism, and I didn’t take it that way. She didn’t say something like, *“We’re going to put meat on those bones.”* It was something she said nurse-to-nurse.

If it was considered impolite to comment on an overweight woman's size, why wasn't it also considered impolite to comment when someone was too skinny? They didn't think women whose bodies resembled a prepubescent boy's never wished to be curvier? Body issues were body issues, people.

"That sounds great," I smiled. "And I don't have any allergies, so I'll eat pretty much anything."

"A woman after my own heart," Nixon joked, and his mother gave us a knowing look.

I was after Nixon's heart. It was good, and somehow, despite his chosen career and the things he must have done and seen, I would still say he even had a pure heart.

CHAPTER TEN

Nixon

When Griffin and Lucy arrived, my father brought them right to the war room. Needing to see Lucy, Tia wouldn't hear of staying at the house. I wasn't sure if Tia was ready to see the setup of my father's command room, but there was no talking her out of it.

Stopping just outside the door, I turned to Tia. Squeezing her hands in encouragement, I said, "Everything will be okay. They don't know what's going on yet. Nothing inside this building will hurt you."

"I'm with you," she said. "You would never let anyone hurt me." I was humbled by her faith in me.

"If anyone ever does hurt you, it will only be because my dead body is at your feet."

"Don't talk like that. I don't even want to think about you dying because you were protecting me."

"Angel, certain lives are worth saving." Before she could argue more, I turned to the security pad mounted next to the door and scanned my thumb print. At the beep, I pushed open the heavy steel door.

Tia stayed close, tension filling her small body. This life wasn't something she was exposed to before. I hated that this was her world now. But despite that, I couldn't help but be thankful she had come into my life.

Tia let out a gasp as we entered the war room. I squeezed her hand again. Griffin and Lucy were sitting on one of the large leather sofas. Lucy looked nervous. Griffin looked like a caged animal. I knew him well enough to know that he wanted to jump up and pace but didn't want to leave Lucy's side.

“What the fuck is going on, Phoenix?” Griffin demanded. “I just flew across the country with no fucking idea why. You know that kind of shit pisses me off.”

Lucy didn't say anything. I don't know what she would say in this situation anyway. She was an elementary school teacher. Before Griffin, she didn't know much about this life either, despite her cousin also being married to a Navy SEAL.

Before I could answer, my dad and Tex entered the room. I hadn't realized Tex was still here. He had a family in Pennsylvania, and he didn't like being away from them long—or at all really.

Griffin revered these two men. They were his idols, and his career goals. Having said that, I knew once they gave him their intel about Salero it would do nothing to calm him down. I was fully expecting an explosion from my Master Chief.

Griffin stood. He didn't step away from Lucy, but he didn't do well in situations where he didn't know what was going on, and I knew he wanted to assert his authority. The guy commanded any room he was in. There was a reason he rose through the ranks like he did.

The problem was, he wasn't the alpha male in this room.

“I trust the flight was okay?” my father asked.

“Other than having no fucking idea why I was on the plane, it was fine.”

“We couldn't risk comms being compromised,” Tex said. “We don't know who we can trust.”

“I'm not going to like this, am I?”

“Nope,” I said popping the P. I looked to my father. “Why don't you to do the honors?”

“Eagle Team has been compromised,” Tex said, ripping the Band-Aid off.

“Not fucking possible,” Griffin said. He looked at me. “Explain.” It was an order. He wanted to hear the explanation from me, another team member.

“I said the same thing,” I said. “Someone on our team helped Justus Salero escape prison. I didn’t want to believe it either but look at the sources.” I waved my hand in my dad and Tex’s direction. “They wouldn’t have said something if they didn’t know it to be true. One of our teammates not in this room can’t be trusted. I have rolled it over in my mind countless times trying to figure out which one of our brothers sold us out, and each is as unlikely as the next.”

Griffin ran a hand down his face and looked over to Lucy. She looked terrified. She hadn’t suffered as much as Tia did in captivity, but she was still beaten, drugged, and put on display like a horse in Salero’s sick auction.

At Lucy’s whimper, Griffin fell to his knees in front of her, cupped her cheeks, and whispered, “Nothing is going to happen to you. I’ll die first.”

Tia spoke for the first time. “Why all these declarations of death? Why does anybody have to die to keep Lucy and me safe?”

Griffin looked up at Tia like it was the first time he’d seen her. This wasn’t the same Tia that left his house in California. She was stronger now, surer of herself. I was proud as hell of her.

Griffin rose again. This time he kept a comforting hand on Lucy’s shoulder. Six months ago, I would have told you that relationships wouldn’t work for guys like us—guys that lived and thrived in the gray area. We always had to be ready to deploy, and we didn’t deploy to the nice neighborhoods of the world. That made it hard on a relationship. We couldn’t tell our women where we were going or when we might be back. That wasn’t a great foundation.

But Griffin's absolute devotion to Lucy gave me hope. He showed me that we could have a relationship if we had a supporting and understanding partner. Could Tia be that woman? I sure as fuck hoped so.

"I don't like this," Griffin said. "I don't like that that fucker is out there. Do we think he's coming for the girls?"

"We don't know where Salero is," my dad said. "But the women will be safe here. Nobody steps a toe on my land without me knowing it. Anything that flies over my property that isn't a fucking bird gets shot down. I don't tolerate anyone threatening my family. Tia is with Nixon. That makes her mine."

My chest filled with relief. I knew my father would protect Tia, but I didn't know that he already saw what she was coming to mean to me. I suppose a conversation regarding GPS trackers was likely in my future.

"And we have no idea who our traitor is?" Griffin asked.

"No, but we do have strong suspicions," my dad answered. "And we're going to keep them to ourselves for now. What we need to do now is figure out how to ferret the asshole out, and you're not going to like what we need to do to accomplish that."

"I will not, under any circumstances, use Lucy as bait. That's not protecting her."

"Tia either," I said. At my words, Tia slumped into my side. I put my arm around her and kissed her temple. I would not needlessly expose her under any circumstances. But that still left me with the issue of her healing process. Today was a good day for her, and I know that she wanted to take my Uncle Sebastian up on his offer to help at the hospital. And I wanted to let her. She needed to feel useful again.

Tex and my father shared a glance. Deep down I knew they were right. But I still wasn't willing to offer Tia up on a platter, and I didn't expect Griffin to either.

"Obviously, we have some strategizing to do," Tex said. "Why don't you two get settled, and we'll meet back here in

an hour. I'm headed home tonight, but I'll still be available to work on this. Davis has a hell of a set up, but I like using my own equipment."

I nodded. I didn't want Tia around for the strategy session. Hearing the various plans would only freak her out. She may be doing better, but she wasn't healed.

Griffin dropped his head. When he said or did nothing, Lucy squeezed his hand. That got through to him. He helped her stand then grabbed their bags.

"Any idea where we're settling?" Griffin asked.

"Up at the house," my dad said. "You're safe here. I promise."

I looked over at my father. I often wondered how he could deal with the stress of keeping everybody he loved, including his friends and our family, safe. It was a heady responsibility he placed on his own shoulders. My mother said he had been that way since the day they met. It's just what he did.

I motioned for my chief and his girl to follow Tia and me. I knew Griffin would want to talk through all this alone at some point. I didn't have any answers for him. I barely even had theories.

We walked up to the house in silence. I assumed my mother had a room ready for Griffin and Lucy. My father would've told her they were coming.

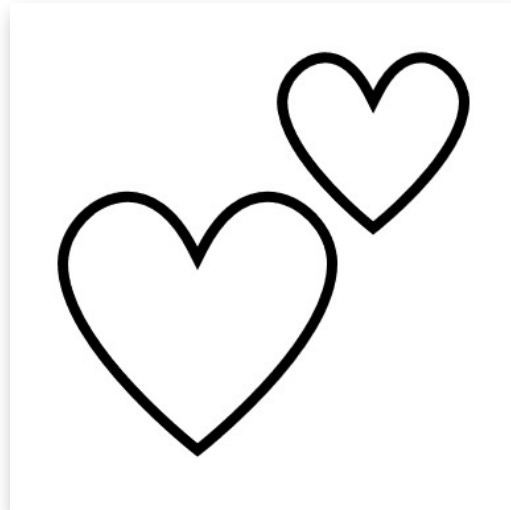
Opening the back door to the kitchen, I found my mother in there. She was working on breakfast. I was surprised that Marcus was here. It wasn't one of his designated breakfast days. He looked serious, like he had come to deliver bad news. But if he had, my mother showed no signs of it, which made me think the bad news might be for me.

I introduced my best friend to Griffin and Lucy. My mother introduced herself. Then she asked us to follow her so she could show them to their room. I assumed they would be going into Ellie's old room. For a moment, I thought maybe Ellie might be willing to give up our cottage so we could all stay there. She would do it without question, but I would feel

bad taking advantage of her like that. That's not how we worked.

Griffin dumped their bags on the bed. Looking at me, he ordered me to go back with him to the war room, leaving the girls here.

So much for waiting an hour.



TENSION COILED inside me like a loaded spring. I knew I would blow at any second. Somewhere along the way this mission had become personal. Who was I kidding? It became personal as soon as I laid eyes on Tia.

I had never felt this strong, this protective, this animalistic about someone before in my life. And I was a fucking twin.

A primal need took over my body whenever I thought of the danger Tia was in. It was a basic need to protect my mate. Was this how Griffin felt about Lucy? Was this how my father felt about my mother?

Speaking of my father, he wasn't very forthcoming with the information that he had. I knew he had more than he let on, but for some reason, he wouldn't share.

That pissed me right off.

We were getting nowhere. Master Chief and I knew that we were going to need backup. Sure, we had my dad's teams,

and they were the best for civilians, but they weren't sanctioned by the U.S. government. We needed to call the commander, but we didn't know if he was our traitor. I highly doubted it, but we literally couldn't trust anyone right now. And if we couldn't trust our own commander, who saved Eagle Team to begin with, we were unlikely to get any more help from the SEALs.

According to Tex, there was no chatter about Salero. Tex had eyes and ears in the darkest of places around the world. I don't know how he did what he did, but if he gave you information, you could trust it. I had never heard of an instance where Tex had bad intel. He vetted everything before giving it to any team he was working with. And if he said there was nothing about Salero then there wasn't. The scumbag had gone to ground, which pretty much meant Griffin and I had to be prepared for absolutely anything.

Thank fuck we had my dad.

I was tired. We had been at it for hours. I was surprised when Marcus followed us in here earlier. My dad said nothing about it, but I eventually found out that Marcus was Uncle Danny's representative.

"We have to stop Salero before he gets here," I said. "There are a lot of pretty girls in town, and I'll be damned if he gets his hands on a single one."

"If he harms one hair on any woman's head here, I will personally pull his balls off with a pair of rusty pliers," Marcus seethed.

I knew he was thinking of my beautiful sister Ellie. I couldn't stomach even a hint of a thought that my twin could be subjected to Salero's kind of torture. I knew without a doubt that I would feel everything that he did to her. I would be useless in her rescue.

"Maybe we can lock all the females in town up somewhere," Marcus continued. "If we have them all in one place, we can better protect them."

My dad rolled his eyes. “Nice thought in all, but not very realistic. This town is full of headstrong women, who will not be directed by a man. This is also a small town, and they are likely to think you’re gathering them all up to light the place on fire in some sadistic cult ritual.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. The picture my father painted of the small-town mentality wasn’t that far off the mark. Grayson Falls was a safe town and had been as long as I was alive. Uncle Danny kept things in order. These were friendly people, people who banded together when someone in town was in need. This was a town that banded around and hid my Uncle Zach when reporters or fans would try to come and suss him out. If we locked a woman up for her protection, her man would be right by her side if she had one.

That’s why I kept coming back here. That’s why I didn’t consider any other place home. This community was a special one, and I just couldn’t find its like anywhere else.

Tex was ready to head home. He and my father would stay in communication, and he would see what he could do about getting another team out here. But Griffin and I wanted to ferret out our traitorous teammate so we could have the remaining ones at our backs.

Up until now, I was never concerned about having one of my teammates at my back. I had always thought that the bond my team shared was unbreakable, and I knew that Griffin believed the same. He was shaken by the news that Eagle Team was compromised. Eagle Team was the elite. Every single one of us was vetted and tested and tested again to ensure complete loyalty. We couldn’t not put our trust in our team members. We would never be successful that way. But someone had sold us out, and I wasn’t sure I would be able to fully trust any of my teammates again—except maybe the chief.

I was beginning to think it was time to come home and work in the family business. I could set my focus on recruitment and training. That way I could be around for Tia and hopefully any family that came along in the future. I was getting ahead of myself there, I knew it. But I didn’t care. I

was a planner, and I wanted to be ready for whatever Tia needed. Even if we didn't have a romantic relationship, I couldn't imagine not feeling this protective instinct, and I would always protect her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tia

After being deserted by our men, I turned to Lucy and gave her the hug that I wanted to when I first saw her.

She pulled away. “I didn’t know what to think when Griffin said we had to leave, but I knew it couldn’t be anything good.”

“We’ll be safe here,” I assured her. “Nixon’s father has teams of badasses that protect the property and the people living on it. Nixon and I went out yesterday around town. I was pretty sure one of the teams followed us everywhere we went even though I didn’t see them.”

“His mother seems nice,” Lucy said. “But I still feel like we’re intruding, like we should be at a hotel or something. I don’t like the idea of bringing danger to someone’s door.”

“Me either. And Natalie is very nice. She mothers me a bit, and I have to say I really like that. My mother never took care of me the way Natalie does. And she does it in a way that you barely notice you’ve been handled. Nixon’s dad is ... hard to read. But I am positive we are safe here.”

Surprised, I realized that I believed that. After having seen the war room, I was confident that Eric Davis knew his stuff. That room could probably withstand a bomb and run a global war. I didn’t know who would want to bomb him, but he was ready for it. What had that man’s life been like before he

settled down that he planned for any eventuality like being bombed? I couldn't wrap my mind around it. And Nixon grew up this way, still managing to grow into a well-adjusted adult.

"I've felt so safe with Griffin since we escaped. But now that Salero is out, I can't stop shaking. I didn't even endure everything you did, and I'm terrified. How are you holding up so well?"

I didn't answer right away. I had to think about how I could explain how safe Nixon and his father made me feel. I didn't think Nixon was lying when he said he would die to protect me. I knew I didn't deserve that kind of loyalty. I was doing better since we arrived in Grayson Falls, but I wasn't strong enough yet to have confidence in myself the way Nixon did. I didn't have the faith he did. But I wanted to. And that was more than I had before.

If I were being honest with myself, I would admit that Nixon scared me. I wasn't afraid he would hurt me, at least not physically. But I knew he had the power to destroy what was left of my heart. And yet, I was still willing to take the risk to be with him.

I wanted so badly to be the girl he saw. It must be in me somewhere. The fact alone that I was attracted to him and wanted to be intimate with him said volumes of how he and I could be together.

What he didn't know was whether I could be as strong as Lucy and watch him leave. Then again, I don't think Lucy had to watch Griffin leave yet. As far as I knew, Eagle Team hadn't been deployed since the night she and I were rescued. I got the feeling that we were their current mission and that they wouldn't be deployed on anything else until they took Salero and his network down.

"I wouldn't say that I'm holding up well, but I am definitely doing better than I thought I would. Nixon told me yesterday about Salero's escape and then he took me to see the town and meet his family. It was probably a ploy to keep my mind off everything, but I was relaxed as he showed me where he grew up. You have to see this town, Luce. It's so quirky and

charming. I feel comfortable here and like I could call it home.”

A shaky smile spread across Lucy’s face. I knew she was trying to put on a brave front. I was the last person she needed to try and be brave for. She and I were bonded by a traumatic experience, and if she ever wanted to fall apart, I was willing to be there to support her.

“Really? You’ve only been here a few days and you’re already thinking about putting down roots? That’s something I wasn’t expecting.”

It wasn’t something I was expecting either. I never thought I would ever find a place that would feel like home again.

“I couldn’t help but notice Nixon kiss you back in the command center,” Lucy said giving me that knowing look women did when they suspected juicy gossip. “I mean, I knew you were comfortable having him close, but I didn’t know you were that comfortable.”

Dammit, I couldn’t stop my blush. Thinking about Nixon and him kissing me made me blush like he was the first boy to ever be interested in me. Of course, he wasn’t the first. I had boyfriends and lovers before being sold to a sex trafficker. There was a time when I liked sex. I liked being intimate with a man, and I wanted that again. I wanted it with Nixon.

I decided to be honest with Lucy. “That’s a new development but a welcomed one. I didn’t think I could ever be attracted to a man again much less want to have sex. But Nixon is different. Nixon won’t hurt me.”

“We’re lucky to have men like Nixon and Griffin. I know Griffin will go to any lengths necessary to keep me safe. I’m pretty sure he will never let me out of grabbing range. Nixon looks at you the same way Griffin looks at me. I believe you when you say we’re safe here.”

“I really like Nixon,” I whispered. “And I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen in love with him. But the darker parts of me scream that I don’t deserve him— that I’m too damaged and dirty to deserve a man as good and pure as he is.”

“Pretty sure that man’s snow is dirty,” Lucy smirked. “I highly doubt he’s as pure as you think.”

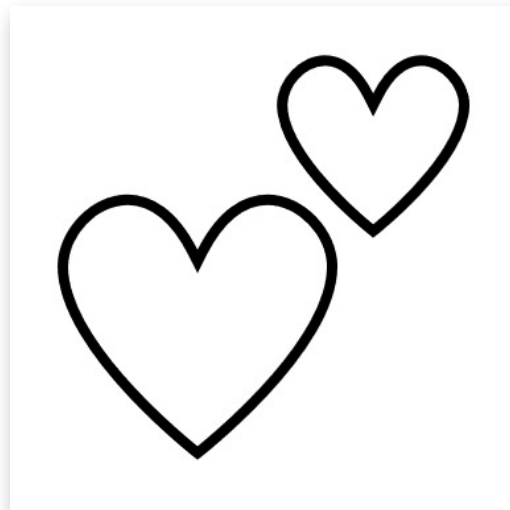
“I didn’t mean pure in that way,” I blushed. “I mean his heart is pure. He’s surrounded by so much love here, so much stability, it’s impossible for him to be anything else.”

“I was just kidding,” Lucy rushed to assure me.

I knew what she meant. But to me, Nixon *was* pure. He didn’t have to endure the horrors that I did. And he knew just the kind of help I needed. He was always close but never hovered. He slept outside my room when he didn’t even know me. He knew only that I needed help and that I was Lucy’s, and that made me his.

“Come on,” I said. “I’ll introduce you to Nixon’s best friend Marcus.”

But when we got to the kitchen, only Natalie was there. Marcus was gone. We spent the rest of the morning talking with Natalie. She had so many stories of Nixon growing up, and so much information about the town that I wanted to call my own.



LATER THAT EVENING, after the women ate dinner alone, Lucy and I helped Natalie straighten up the kitchen before the three of us retired to the living room. Lucy, still being on California time, wasn’t tired, but I was exhausted. Natalie was wonderful

keeping the conversation going throughout the afternoon, but my thoughts kept straying back to Nixon.

They were in the command center plotting their battle to take Justus Salero out. My anxiety began to build as I thought of the consequences if things went wrong. How did Nixon's mother deal with the constant fear that something would happen to him?

I'd been living in the bubble Nixon created to surround me. I knew Eagle Team would eventually get Salero, and they would be available for missions again.

Fear for his safety threatened to choke me. It was unreasonable. The whole point of recovery was to get my life back, stand on my own two feet, but I no longer knew how to do that.

Tucking a lock of hair behind my ear with trembling fingers, I took in a deep inhale.

“Are you all right, Tia?” Natalie asked.

Damn. I didn't intend for my stress to be so obvious.

“Yes,” I began, but then changed my answer to honesty. “No, I'm not. I don't know what they're planning down there, but I know it's dangerous. The thought of Nixon getting hurt because of me—”

“If he gets hurt, it won't be because of you,” Natalie said, gently. “Don't put that on yourself. This was his mission before he met you. He's very careful, and very good at his job.”

“How can you stand it?” I asked. “Aren't you worried?”

“Of course,” she said. “But I take comfort in the thought that Nixon is on the side of right. He believes in his cause, and it's important work. I'm proud. I'm also blissfully in the dark when he's on a mission, as are his sisters. Though Ellie always seems to know. It's that twin thing.”

“I think I'm going to lay down,” I said, rising.

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Lucy asked.

“No. I’m just tired.” That had the benefit of being mostly true, but I wasn’t *just* anything. I was in turmoil inside and wanted to scream. Making my way to my bedroom, I closed the door with a gentle snick.

After changing into my pajamas, pink flannel pants and pink t-shirt—I’d always been girly like that—I opened my door again and crept across the hall to Nixon’s room. I had poked my head through the door but never stepped inside.

Until now.

His room was neat as a pin, of course. I assumed that to be the military’s influence, as Griffin’s house in California was, likewise, spotless.

Tentatively, I looked around. The room was frozen in time. With trophies, awards, and pictures covering the slate-colored walls, the space really didn’t resemble an adult bedroom. There was a workspace in the corner of the room. Above the desk were Nixon’s high school and college diplomas, as well as his Naval commission all in matching frames. There was also a shelf full of college textbooks. They didn’t seem odd to me since I still had all my nursing school textbooks.

Or I did before being sold to Salero. I understood all my belongings and apartment to be gone now.

Thanks, Dad.

You dick.

But yeah, for what you spend on college textbooks, getting rid of them after you graduate seems wrong.

An impeccably made, black-spindled double bed was pushed up against one wall. It had two pillows on it. The gray sheets were tight without any wrinkles, as was the blue United States Navy blanket, neatly stretching across the bed complete with hospital corners.

At the end of the bed stood a chest of drawers with a television on top.

And that was it.

Light hardwood floors complained under my feet as I turned around again to take the space in.

It felt ... comforting being around things Nixon cared about.

Something caught my eye tucked away in the corner by Nixon's closet.

It was a guitar case.

My eyes watered unreasonably.

For god's sake, Tia, it's just a guitar.

But I also played guitar, and I missed it. I didn't dare touch it. I'd ask Nixon for permission first. For all I knew, it was a family heirloom and delicate. My fingers longed to pluck its strings, to feel the smooth wood under my palm. To express myself in ways I couldn't with words.

Until this moment, I hadn't realized how much I missed playing. Until this moment, I hadn't realized how much I *needed* to play.

Guitar lessons were the only thing I got from my parents that I actually asked for. Everything else was activities they wanted me to participate in—activities appropriate for a senator's daughter, including horseback riding. But that one I enjoyed.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I folded my hands in my lap, staring aimlessly around the room.

Just what are you doing in here, Tia? my conscience asked.

I knew what I was doing in there. I was just becoming too chicken shit to carry it through.

What if Nixon got mad at me? What if he got the wrong idea about it?

What if I put myself in a position where he could hurt me?

Of course, he wouldn't, not physically anyway, but emotionally? I wasn't sure I was strong enough yet to accept his rejection.

But then, today I had become the new, stronger Tia, and she took risks.

Without pulling back the impeccable bedding, I laid down closest to the wall.

Wrapped in Nixon's scent, I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nixon

The last thing I was expecting was Tia in my bed when I finally came back from the war room.

We learned that Commander North sent Rocco's team to hunt Salero. They had intel on where he might be. Not going to lie, that shit pissed me the fuck off.

Salero was *ours* to neutralize. After what he'd done to Tia, he deserved to die by *my* bullet, plain and simple. If I couldn't be the one to pull the trigger, then it should be Griffin. He and Lucy already had a relationship when Salero kidnapped her.

Rocco's team was fucking good. Phantom was on that team, and Lucy was his wife's cousin, so I knew it would be personal to him. But they weren't *us*.

The problem was, since we were on protection duty for two of the government's star witnesses, it couldn't be us that went after him.

And I wasn't leaving Tia's side. If I had to rely on someone else to take down Salero then I would. I swore to protect her, and I was going to be her last line of defense.

Always.

The second I stepped into my dark bedroom, I knew someone was in there. I also knew it was Tia. No one else smelled like her. It was more than the soft fruity scent of her shampoo and soap. It was an essence that was there from the

first time I laid eyes on her when we rescued her from Salero's mansion. She was spooked, terrified really, but somehow, I knew she was mine. I didn't want to be cliché or sappy, but I think my heart recognized hers.

Don't ask me for supporting scientific evidence of this phenomenon. I doubt any exists. It's one of those things that just can't be explained.

Crossing to the bed, my pulse picked up at seeing her stretched out. She hadn't gotten under the covers. Had she accidentally fallen asleep? Did she think snuggling down under the warm blankets was too intrusive? Was this a sign of her being ready to start a physical relationship?

I had no fucking idea.

Was there a man on earth that was competent at reading women's signals? It sure as fuck wasn't me. I didn't even know if this was a signal. I had two sisters and lots of female cousins. None of the woman knowledge I had gained over the years was helpful in this moment.

So, how did I handle this situation without scaring her? I considered bunking on the couch—just in case she did unintentionally fall asleep—but I didn't want to do that. Tia trusted me. She wouldn't have come in here at all if she hadn't.

Right?

I was so far out of my element here. With the trauma she suffered, a wrong decision on my part could cause a setback for her, and I really didn't want to see that vacant and haunted look back in her eyes. Seeing that shit was like a dagger straight to my heart. I hurt when she hurt.

There really was only one way to find out.

Silently, I moved around my room, changing out of my clothes and into flannel pajama pants and a U.S. Navy t-shirt. Tiptoeing back, I slowly lowered myself down onto the bed and stretched out, leaving plenty of distance between us.

Reaching my hand out toward her, I prayed. *Please don't freak out. Please don't freak out.* Gently, I tucked a lock of hair

behind her ear.

“Tia,” I whispered softly. There was movement behind her eyes. “Wake up, angel.”

Eye lids fluttering open, I saw her flinch just for a moment before she realized it was me in front of her.

“Hey, baby,” I said quietly. “You fell asleep in here. Do you want me to help you back to your room?”

Wordlessly, she shook her head.

Fuuuuuccckkk. She was killing me slowly. My outstretched arm laid between us. Tia reached out and linked our fingers together. The hope I was afraid to feel sparked just a bit in my gut.

“Do you want to get under the covers? I can sleep on top of them if you want. Or I can go bunk on the couch. Whatever you want.”

“You’re so good to me,” she whispered.

I shrugged. “I love you.”

The words tumbled out easily. I wasn’t surprised that I said them, but she sure was. Her eyes widened then softened. That was a good sign, right?

“You don’t have to say anything,” I continued. “You don’t have to do anything. Those words come with no expectations of you. But I feel them, and you should know.

“I care about you.” I could barely hear what she said. I couldn’t imagine what those words cost her to say.

“I know you do,” I said simply. And I did. We’d already admitted as much. “That’s enough for now. We go at your pace.”

Pushing myself out of bed and standing up, I said, “Let’s get you under the covers, angel.”

“You too,” she said, shimmying herself to the top of bed so I could pull the bedding back.

“All right. Me too.” I didn’t make a big deal out of it even though this was a big step for us. In any other relationship, it wouldn’t be spared a thought. But after being repeatedly raped and beaten by a man for over a year and a half, sharing a bed with me was huge.

I was humbled by her trust in me.

Once I had the covers pulled down far enough, she stretched out. Sliding between the sheets, I followed suit, coming to rest closer to her than I was before.

Baby steps.

Though there was trepidation in her eyes, she adjusted her position until she was snuggled into my chest and my arms were around her.

Well, all right, then.

Holding my whole world close to my heart, I pressed a kiss to her forehead. I was going to lean my cheek to her hair, but she tipped her head up to look at me.

That wasn’t nervousness in her eyes.

It was hunger.

My heart raced faster than I thought possible as she looked at me. This moment was different from the other charged ones we had. I shivered. I had kissed plenty of women, but none had made me shiver. I didn’t even know that was a thing for guys.

Eyes locked to hers, I leaned in slowly. I could feel her breath on my lips, the anticipation was almost too much to bear.

Please don’t freak out. Please don’t freak out.

She closed her eyes as our lips met, and the world melted away. It was just her and I caught up in this perfect moment. The kiss was soft and gentle at first as we tested the waters. Was she okay?

But it was Tia who deepened the kiss. When she did, my body responded with a rush of heat.

Christ. I was reacting like a woman.

The moment was both fleeting and eternal, and when we pulled away, the feeling of contentment that washed over me felt ethereal.

A light smile spread across her face. “I liked that,” she whispered.

Oh, god, my heart.

“Me too.” That was a lie though. I didn’t *like* it. That kiss was life changing. I want more. I wanted everything. But I would not step one toe over the line until she let me know she was ready for it.

She was too precious to me to rush this and fuck everything up.

Tia changed everything for me. So much so that I began to question whether I wanted to stay with Eagle Team when this was all over. Hell, I wasn’t sure I wanted to stay in the Navy.

If I were going to keep my job, then it wouldn’t be fair to start something with Tia. I would be away from her too much. Constantly worried about her instead of focusing on my mission. That was no way for an operative of my level to operate. I could get myself killed if I wasn’t paying close enough attention. Or worse, I could get someone *else* killed.

I wouldn’t have my teammates’ blood on my hands.

Even the traitor’s.

Griffin and I had gone around and around for hours trying to figure out which of our brothers in arms was compromised. We analyzed each man, how they’d been acting lately, what they said, what they did, were they overly interested in anything we did. We were no closer to figuring it out. Given my father’s and Tex’s individual track records for solid intel, I had to believe them. But it didn’t feel right.

I knew these men, and I just couldn’t reconcile one of them being crooked. Each of them had my back at one point or another, and I had theirs.

We'd laid still in mud in the pouring rain for hours while doing surveillance. We nearly died once avoiding capture. We never turned down a mission. We did everything the CIA asked us to do.

We didn't know much about each other's backgrounds. I kept my secrets, they kept theirs. That's what made this so goddamned difficult. Each was as likely and unlikely as the other.

"We have to let it play out," Griffin had said earlier. *"Eventually, they'll have to make a move. We have to keep our guard up."*

I didn't like it, but I also didn't have a different plan. My only suggestion was to ask my father if one of his teams would tail our other teammates. He agreed.

The problem was our brothers would know they were being followed and tracked. We were trained to watch everything, notice everything, find patterns in the mundane. It would be a bloody miracle if my father's men went undetected by my teammates.

Tia's gentle hand on my cheek brought my thoughts back to where they belonged. On her.

On us.

"You're worried," she said, running her fingers down my face.

"I feel helpless."

There, I said it. And it felt damn good to finally put a word to this feeling I had whenever I thought about keeping Tia safe.

"I feel like each time we take a step forward, something comes and knocks us back three more. No matter how much I think about it, I can't wrap my head around one of my teammates being a traitor. I don't know how to explain it, but it just doesn't feel right."

Letting out a frustrated sign, I tightened my embrace, freezing when Tia placed a soothing kiss on my neck.

She was the one being hunted by a deranged madman, and she was comforting me? How was it possible someone like her existed?

And how could anybody that knew her want to hurt her?

It was utterly unfathomable to me.

Shifting position, Tia brought herself up, so her head was laying on the same pillow as mine and we were eye to eye.

“How can I help you?”

“There is something you can do for me, but I don’t think you’ll like it.” Lucy hadn’t argued about it, but given Tia’s experiences, I didn’t think she’d like the thought at all.

“Anything,” she said.

We’d see about that.

“My father has very small tracking devices. Mine and my sisters’ are embedded just under our skin, but Lucy’s is in the form of earrings. Griffin could find her anywhere if he needed to. It won’t protect her from being taken again, but we’d find her a hell of a lot faster than we did last time.”

“You did find her fast last time.”

“If we’d been able to track her, she never would have made it to the compound. We would have had her back in hours. I’ll lose my fucking mind if you’re taken from me, just like Griffin did. Probably worse.”

I waited while she thought over what I was asking of her.

“Can they be hacked?”

“I don’t think so,” I answered honestly. “They’ve never been hacked before. They’re designed by Tex.”

“That makes them foolproof?”

“That or as close to it as anything gets. I know a team that all their wives wear them. Navy SEALs make a lot of enemies, and Eagle Team has even more.”

Swallowing, her wide eyes were on mine. Then she nodded.

“Okay. Um, you can have mine implanted, too, if it doesn’t hurt too much, and not in a place where it can’t be removed later. I may not want it down the road, but I’m scared enough to agree to it for now. It’s kind of known, at least in fiction, that jewelry can be used as recording and tracking devices. It can be taken.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, running my palm over her hair. “Only me, my father, and Tex will have access to your location at any given time.”

“If it will help you then, I’m sure.”

Some of the tension inside me drained out. That was a big load off my mind. I didn’t like the idea of it ever being removed, but if that’s what she wanted, I would respect her wishes. For more than a year and a half, her autonomy over her body was taken from her. So, if she wanted the tracking chip taken out after the danger to her had passed then that’s what she’d get.

I wasn’t here to control her. Hell, I knew there was a good chance I’d have to give her up anyway when she was finally free to live her life again. I wasn’t particularly looking forward to that, but I meant it when I said I loved her, and that meant setting her free if that’s what she wanted.

I couldn’t stand the thought.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tia

I can't remember a time when I'd ever slept better than the night spent in Nixon's arms. I'd slept okay just knowing he was close before, but last night, I slept the sleep of the dead, as they say.

Who says that anyway?

Doesn't matter.

When I woke, warm and safe in Nixon's embrace, I felt him looking at me. It's kind of uncanny how people know someone is watching them as they sleep.

A little spooky, too.

"Good morning," he said, voice husky and all sorts of sexy, when I met his eyes.

I swallowed, then blurted like an idiot, "The condition of finding it hard to get out of bed in the morning is called dysania."

He ran his finger down my nose and smiled. "I'm experiencing some of that this morning."

"I'm sorry," I groaned hiding my face in his warm, hard chest. "I don't even think about what I'm going to say. It just comes out. It's so embarrassing."

Hooking his thumb under my chin, he tipped my head up to meet his eyes. "I hope I've never made you feel

embarrassed about that. I think it's adorable."

I rolled my eyes. "Women don't want to be *adorable*, Nixon. We want to be sexy, captivating, enchanting."

"You're all those things, too," he said, running his palm over my hip and settling on my lower back. He pulled me closer, and I let him. After how tender he was last night with me, I wanted more. I could trust him with my body. He wouldn't hurt it. He'd worship it. I was sure of it.

Everything felt right when he kissed me last night. I felt safe. Ignited. *Home*. In the nightmare of my life, he felt like a balm on my heart.

Given his confession of love last night, I knew he wouldn't walk away from me when this was over—metaphorically speaking. I knew Eagle Team would have to start taking missions again, but I wasn't walking away from him. Literally or metaphorically. If he had to go back to California, I'd go with him. The unrealistic part of me hoped he'd want to leave the military and live here in Grayson Falls with me.

I'd never ask him to do that, but I secretly hoped for it.

Smiling, I said, "What are we going to do today?"

Pressing a kiss to my forehead, he said, "My vote is to stay right here. The silver lining in all this is that my only responsibility is keeping you safe, and you don't have any responsibilities at all. I say we enjoy this while we can. Eventually, we'll go back to our regular lives and work. Then we'll miss this time."

It was solid as far as lazy day plans went.

"As tempting as that is," I said. "I'm hungry, and I have to pee."

Before he could respond, the door to his bedroom began to open. "I'm coming in. Hope you're not naked, twin o' mine."

Nixon tried to look annoyed by his sister, but I didn't think he was capable of it. At least not where Ellie was concerned. He was different when she was around. It was as if part of him

was missing without her. I'd never had a connection like that before.

"What if I was?" he asked, as his sister walked fully into the room and assessed us.

"It might be embarrassing for you."

"But it wouldn't be for you?"

Ellie scoffed and raised her hand. "Please. We were naked and squished together in the womb. You're my brother. It's not like you're going to turn me on."

Nixon's nose curled up in disgust. "I'm not sure what to think of that answer," he said.

Neither was I.

"I thought Tia might want to take some horses out today," Ellie said, sitting down on the end of the bed.

Shoving myself off Nixon's chest, I bolted to sit upright, and felt Nixon's hand drop to my hip.

"I would *love* to!" It had been a long time since I had anything to get excited about.

Expecting to die in captivity, I never allowed myself to think about what I would do after I was freed. I never expected to be freed. "Do you think I'll be able to take out Christmas Morning today?"

"If she's up to it, I'm sure," Ellie shrugged. "As long as she's healthy, Aunt Brooke lets people ride her. But if she sees her horse so much as sneeze, she goes all Mama Bear and doesn't let anyone near her, not even Uncle Ethan and Emma, *who are large animal vets.*"

"I think it's wonderful to have that kind of connection to an animal," I said. "And speaking of which, I haven't seen Shadow. I figured she would have come in with us last night."

"Ah," Ellie said rising. "She's in the kitchen eating. I kind of snuck her down to my place with me last night. I was a little spooked out and wanted the protection."

“Protection from what? What happened?” Nixon was up in a flash next to me.

Ellie waved her hand. “Oh, nothing like that. But I had been reading a paranormal romance book, and the author is really good, and I got creeped out. I just wanted company.”

Nixon smirked. “You could have called Marcus.”

Ellie’s smile fell to a frown. “Ha,” she said without emotion. “Marcus will never be there for me in the way I need him to be. Shadow was much better company.”

“El,” Nixon began. Was he going to defend his best friend?

“Don’t bother, Nix.” Ellie held up her hand. “If something hasn’t happened between us by now, it’s not going to. I’ll be all right. I have my own plans to put into motion.”

“I don’t know if I’m happy or sad that nothing has happened between you two yet.” Nixon blew out a breath.

“It’s a conundrum.” Ellie leaned forward and smacked her lips against Nixon’s cheek. Rising off the bed, she turned to me. “How about we head out in an hour, so you have time to eat breakfast and get ready? It’s early yet. We’ll probably be back before your friend even wakes up.”

“That sounds great,” I said.

“The fuck!” Rang out from the hallway. “What fucking time is it?”

Nixon tossed aside the covers and stood. “Sounds like the chief is awake. I better go and make sure he’s not armed in that mood.” Then called out the door. “Get a grip, Boston.”

A grumble responded. “Get a grip, *sir*. Show some fucking respect. And don’t yell or you’ll wake up Lucy.”

He finally appeared in the doorway. I couldn’t help but laugh at his gruff and unhappy appearance. His hair was sticking up in ten different directions, the scruff on his cheeks dark, eyes bloodshot, and he was wearing rumpled black workout shorts and a military green shirt.

“Christ, you look fucking terrible,” Nixon cringed.

“Fuck you,” was all Griffin could manage. My hand slapped up to my mouth in a vain attempt to keep my laughter in.

“Yeah,” Nixon said. “Let’s get you some coffee.”

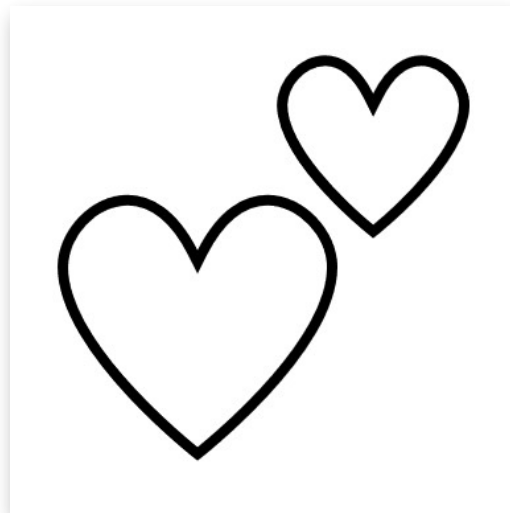
“Why the fuck are you so chipper? It’s stupid o’clock. I’m not in combat mode. I need more than two hours of sleep.”

“I’m not even going to ask you what you were up all night doing,” Nixon said, walking past his Master Chief and into the hall.

A goofy grin spread across Griffin’s face. Even his crappy attitude was no match for his thoughts of Lucy. My heart turned over in my chest. He was so gone over my friend, and he wasn’t the slightest bit embarrassed by it.

When Griffin turned to the hall, he caught Nixon’s amused grin. “The fuck you looking at, Petty Officer?”

I didn’t even try to hide my laughter that time.



BY THE TIME we made it to the barn, my belly was full, and I was warmly dressed. The morning air was crisp, but rather than feeling chilled, I felt invigorated by it. I kissed Nixon last night and didn’t have a setback. I hadn’t thought of anyone but him.

Waking up in his arms this morning, made me feel ... cherished.

If I wanted an intimate relationship with him—and I did—I was going to have to make the moves.

And that scared the hell out of me.

For so long, I did all that I could *not* to look attractive to a man. I did anything I could think of to blend into the background at the mansion. Not that it had ever worked with Salero. I never did understand what his obsession with me was. I'm not overly endowed in the breast department and my curves are gentle, nothing close to voluptuous. Even before my "sale," I wasn't too outgoing. Friendly, yes. I could make polite conversation like a champ thanks to being a senator's daughter, but I wasn't the boldest girl in my group of friends. When we went out to bars together, I went for the companionship of my friends and not to pick up men.

I was awkward.

I was still awkward, but now at least I was starting to embrace it.

That was all thanks to Nixon.

When we walked into the barn with Shadow trailing behind, I saw a man I hadn't met yet pushing a big broom along the old, thick floors as chickens scurried around him, running toward the broom and then running away.

Were they ... playing? I'd never seen chickens play before. But, I guess, why wouldn't they?

"Chasing away the chickens, Nathan?" Ellie greeted, opening her arms for the man. "Your dad will beat your ass if you get them too stressed to lay eggs."

"Nah, they're nosy. Lately, they're all up my butt, fascinated by whatever I'm doing." He hugged Ellie back.

When Ellie broke away, she stepped back and turned to me, holding out her hand. Tall, dark-haired, and strapped with those farm boy muscles women found so sexy, the man before me must have been the younger version of Ethan. He could only be Ellie's cousin. "Nathan, this is Tia. She's Nixon's."

She's Nixon's? What did that mean? Was I his girlfriend? His friend? His protectee? Just what did his family think my relationship was?

Nathan extended his hand and smiled. "Ellie has me confused with my twin brother, Lucas," Nathan said, as I took his hand and shook in greeting. "I don't have time for dating or hookups. I'm too busy sneaking around behind Em and putting everything she changes back to the way it was."

"Nathan is my cousin, if you couldn't figure that out." I could. "He's worked on the farm since he took his first steps. Where my sister and my uncle work mostly with the animals, Lucas loves working with the land. He got his degree in agricultural engineering."

"You here to help shovel shit?" Nathan looked back to his cousin, who crinkled up her nose.

"No. Tia and I are going riding."

"You can take any of them but Kodak," Nathan said. The poor horse must have still been sick.

"What about Christmas Morning?" I asked.

Wow. Look at me joining a conversation as an active participant.

Nathan tipped his head to me in interest. "Mom was in just a little while ago for their morning routine. She cleared her for riding."

Ellie rolled her eyes. "That horse is *so* spoiled."

"She should be spoiled," Nathan replied then turned his attention back to me. "She's had a hard life."

Holy crap! What was it with these men? That was the exact same look his father gave me when we met. It was spooky.

This was like a Zen barn or something.

"She'd love to stretch her legs," Nathan said to me. "She's the gentlest horse we have, but when she has a head to go, she goes. She used to race."

I smiled. She sounded perfect.

Though I didn't need it, Nathan helped me get Christmas Morning ready. I knew my way around a horse stall, but he took care of most of it all the same and led her out of the barn. I suspected it had more to do with a stranger riding the family's most beloved pet and making sure the horse was set up safely than any burning need for chivalry.

Ellie was already there waiting, stroking the neck of a beautiful brown horse with a blaze of white down its nose and breast.

"Who is this?" I asked, patting Ellie's horse on the neck.

"This is Margo."

After expertly mounting Christmas Morning and picking up the reins, I cocked my head to the side. "Margo?"

"I know, strange name for a horse, right? But I liked it."

"She's yours?" I asked, surprised to find myself a little jealous. How can I be jealous of the fact that a girl who lived on the opposite side of the country from me got to have her own horse on her family's farm? What was wrong with me?

"She is," Ellie confirmed. "We also have Kodak, as you know, Franklin, and Little Flower."

"Do they belong to anyone?"

Ellie turned her horse, and I did the same as we rode side by side. "Not really, though Em is partial to Little Flower. My Uncle Ethan typically favors Kodak. Franklin is ... kind of cranky. He only lets Nathan ride him."

"Cranky?"

She sighed. "Honestly, he's a bit of an asshole. He came to us that way. He's our newest horse. We've only had him about a year."

"Do all your cousins ride, too?" This family fascinated me. I shouldn't be so obsessed with learning all I could about them. I might not ever see them again after Nixon's mission was over.

Then again, Grayson Falls felt more like home with every hour I spent here. These people felt like they could be my family. They didn't know the trauma, shame, and humiliation I experienced. They didn't see me as weak or dirty.

On the other hand, Nixon knew exactly what I had endured, and he said he saw me as a survivor.

Was there really any question why I fell in love with him?

I was glad that Ellie took the lead as I rode behind her down the narrow path heading into the woods, and she couldn't see what I felt was a stunned expression on my face.

Once we reached the lush canopy of the forest, the temperature fell significantly. I shuddered involuntarily at the chill, glad that I was wearing long sleeves but now worrying it wouldn't be enough.

I stopped my train of thought. Taking back my life meant not worrying about every little thing, right? I mean, so what if I was a little cold. It wasn't going to kill me.

I've had a slap in the face with my mortality. It put other things in perspective. Instead of worrying if I'd be warm enough, I lifted my face and took a deep breath, embracing the beautiful nature surrounding me, and yes, even the chill in the air.

"So, tell me about yourself, Tia," Ellie said with a casual glance over at me.

"Aha! We got to the ambush earlier than I expected," I replied good-naturedly. I knew Ellie was going to grill me on behalf of her brother. I still came. As long as she answered my questions about her family as well, I'd play along to the best I was able.

"I leave the stealth up to my brother," Ellie shrugged. "So, tell me stuff about yourself."

She was leaving what I shared with her up to me, and I greatly appreciated it. I know Nixon wouldn't have given them details about what I'd endured, but I also didn't know what he had told him.

“I know you and Nixon met through his job,” Ellie continued, “and that you’re recovering from something awful. You don’t have to tell me about any of that.”

Thank god.

“Okay. Well, I grew up in New Mexico. My parents were very rich and only associated with the uppermost echelon of society, or those they considered the uppermost echelon anyway.”

Apparently, my father also associated with scumbags.

“A lot of politicians, dignitaries, CEOs, heiresses ... people like that.”

“Sounds like a fun group,” Ellie said with a snort. Her sarcasm game was strong. She maneuvered her horse around a rocky patch of the ground that looked unstable for the horses, and Christmas Morning followed all on her own.

“It was mind-numbing,” I replied dryly, as we began to ascend a hill. We meandered along, nice and slow. It didn’t seem like Christmas Morning was going to get a good run in, but that was all right with me. She and I were getting to know each other.

“Growing up, I had to participate in all the kinds of activities appropriate for a child of means—showjumping, music, trying to keep my face unpinched from disgust talking to boring people all the time. I knew how to host an intimate, catered party for a hundred people by the time I was fifteen.” I scrunched up my nose. “I hated it.”

“I would, too,” she said. “I can be pretty introverted. Big crowds give me anxiety.”

“Me too. As is stereotypical of the social class we were members of, my parents weren’t hands-on. I had nannies growing up. It wasn’t that my parents didn’t love me so much as they couldn’t relate to me as a child. That’s the way I grew up, and then I became a nurse and got out from under their thumb.”

“That’s it?” she asked suspiciously. “There’s more than that.”

“That’s the high-level overview,” I said. “Your turn. What was it like growing up in a big family in a small town? Did you ever feel like busting free?”

The path was wide enough for our horses to walk side by side when we crested the hill to a flat plain.

“Well, I went to college out of state, so I did bust out in that way,” Ellie said. “But growing up here was great. Different cousins of mine will tell you different things. Some of them hightailed it out of here and come back for holidays, family events, and such, but they all still live in New England. So, they left but didn’t go far.”

The trees opened to a large meadow. It had to be a couple of acres in size. It was a beautiful spot. The grass here was high and dying off with the arrival of fall, the leaves of the trees just starting to turn. I hoped I was still here when it was peak leaf-peeping season.

“We’re all real close. I mean, I’d take a bullet for any of them.”

That sounded ... strange to me. Was there anyone I’d take a bullet for? I guess maybe Lucy. I don’t know. I can’t say I’ve ever thought about my relationships with my friends and family in quite that way, but I *thought* that was just a phrase to emphasize how close Ellie was with her siblings and cousins.

At least, I hoped so.

“I don’t want to give you the wrong idea though. We’ve had our fair share of fights, but everyone still talks to each other. I love small-town life. I have some friends that hated it. I mean, it can get pretty boring, but with a family as big as mine there’s always something to do.”

“Makes sense,” I nodded. “What’s going on with you and Marcus?” It was a forward question, and I knew it would open the door to what was happening with me and Nixon, but I took the chance anyway.

“That boy,” Ellie sighed, shaking her head. “I think I’ve been in love with him since the day we met. I know he feels the same way, but he holds back. I can’t even get one official

date out of him. I mean, we do practically everything together, but there are no benefits, if you know what I mean.”

“Do you want to be in a friends-with-benefits relationship with him?”

“No,” she huffed. “I want to be his wife and the mother of his children. Marcus lost both his parents at a very young age, and he’s got some abandonment issues. He was raised by his aunt and uncle with some help from his grandmother. It was, and still is, a very loving home. But he feels what he feels, and if I can’t get him to try then I might have a hard decision in my future. I don’t want that.”

I couldn’t blame her. She wasn’t getting any younger, and if she wanted a family, that wasn’t something to compromise on—waiting for a guy to come around, even if he was your great love.

“Have you tried making a move?”

“Not really,” she said with a sigh. “I don’t know if I can handle that kind of rejection.”

“If he feels the same way you do, I’m pretty sure all you have to do is get naked and launch yourself at him.”

“If only I were that brave,” she said sadly.

I couldn’t agree more.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nixon

The master chief stole my fucking mug.

And what was worse, he poached my other favorite mug for Lucy, who wasn't even awake yet.

When I politely pointed out to him that those were the mugs I drank out of when I was home, that's when he took the other one for Lucy.

I tried to plead my case, but he glared at me without saying a word and didn't stop until I literally squirmed. I'm a badass operative, but I swear, he can make me want to curl up in a fetal position and whimper when he holds that glare.

Fuckface.

I grumbled into my tiny mug as we sat down at the conference table in the war room. My father was there, along with my Uncle Ethan. My uncle was in the Marines. I knew my father brought him in now and again when he needed someone to man the command center in my dad's absence or talk strategy or whatever he enlisted Ethan to do. You knew shit was really bad when my Uncle Danny was here, too.

He wasn't now, so I knew shit hadn't gone FUBAR ... yet.

My father sat at the head of the table and arched a brow at Griffin. "That's my son's favorite mug," he said. Griffin grunted. "I don't consider people for employment who steal shit from my kids."

Griffin's head snapped up and he shoved the mug in my direction.

But now I couldn't take it on principle.

"I don't want it now," I snapped.

"Take this one and give me your fucking mug," my chief ordered.

"I'm fine with what I have." No way was I going to take something my *dad* had to get for me.

"It's an order," Griffin said without a note of authority. In fact, he sounded a little desperate. I mean, he really didn't think my dad wouldn't hire him because he drank from my favorite mug.

Or did he?

"You need it more than me," I capitulated, though what I really wanted to do was grab it from his hands.

"Fine." He brought the mug back to his lips and checked his phone for any texts from Lucy. He wanted to go back to the house when she woke up so she wasn't uncomfortable in a strange house with strange people.

My uncle chuckled and linked his hands behind his head.

"I heard from Tex," my dad opened. Griffin and I were awake and paying close attention now. Ethan lowered his arms and crossed them over his chest.

"Salero is moving this way, and so is Rocco's team," my father continued.

My body tensed. The motherfucker was coming to my turf. Salero didn't know this area like I did. My body began to hum in anticipation of the fight ahead of us.

Or ahead of *them*. I wasn't going to leave Tia's side. If Salero did manage to get through everyone, he wouldn't get past me.

"Goddamn motherfucker," Griffin said under his breath.

Forcing myself to stay in my seat and not take off into the woods after Tia and Ellie, I looked back at my father. “How long?”

“A few days out,” my father said. “Rocco’s team will probably get here first.”

A few days.

A few days and this would all be over.

A few days and Tia would be free to live her life as she pleased.

I wasn’t ready to let her go.

Dammit, *I wasn’t ready.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tia

The conversation I had with Ellie, while innocent enough, stuck with me the rest of the day. There was something so inherently sad about two people that loved each other and weren't together. I didn't know Marcus well. My interaction with him had been very limited. And so, I didn't know about the reasons he held himself back from being happy with Ellie.

I spent the rest of the day taking a good hard look at myself.

When Ellie and I had returned to the Davis household, Nixon informed me that I would not be permitted to leave the property without him again. True, one of Delta Security's teams had escorted us on our ride, albeit from a distance, but something had spooked Nixon enough to pull the plug on any outings without him.

So, Lucy and I spent the rest of the afternoon talking, watching movies, and generally being pretty bored.

But we were no strangers to the shut-in life, and I knew that Griffin wouldn't let Lucy be stuck for long. Once Justus Salero was taken out and my father put behind bars, the danger to Lucy and I would be gone. I'd still be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life, but I would be out of immediate danger.

Somehow, my nursing license in New Mexico had been returned to active status. I didn't know if it was Eagle Team, Nixon's father, the mysterious Tex, or the Navy that was responsible for restoring my life, but I had started to look into what the requirements were for me to get my license in New Hampshire.

I liked it here. I liked the community that had been created in Grayson Falls. I thought that even if nothing ever became of Nixon and I as a couple, his family would still be welcoming to me. It was a slower-paced life than I had had before, and it fit me perfectly.

Natalie arranged for me to volunteer at the Grayson Falls Hospital with her brother and sister. Since I wasn't licensed in New Hampshire, I wouldn't be able to do much, but it would be nice to dip my toe back in and to feel useful again—to have a purpose and something to look forward to. I didn't have a whole lot figured out about my future, but I did know that it wasn't going to be in New Mexico.

I now had something in my life I could control. And dammit, that felt awesome.

The only other thing in my life right now was Nixon.

I realized when I was talking with Ellie that Nixon was *never* going to make a move to bring our relationship to a physical level. He emphasized that any relationship we had was at my pace. So, I needed to figure out a way to let him know I was ready.

I had no idea how to do that.

Even before my captivity, I wasn't someone that went out to pick up a guy. All my previous relationships happened organically, and I liked it that way.

Nixon and I ... we were in forced proximity. We met through my trauma. He had rescued me. But I wasn't confused about my feelings for him. I didn't feel any sort of attachment to any of the other dozen SEALs that were there that night or on Nixon's team.

I was in love with Nixon because he was a good person. No matter what sort of shocking things he may have done in the course of his job, at his core, he was good. And the last week or so with his family only solidified that.

I wanted Nixon, and I wanted what came with him.

The problem with that was that Nixon was in the Navy. He had a contract with the federal government and didn't live full time in Grayson Falls. This wasn't real life. At least, it wasn't Nixon's real life. He worked in San Diego.

He also left at a moment's notice. Sometimes without the opportunity to even say goodbye. Neither Lucy nor I have technically had to deal with that yet, but I knew from Lucy's cousin Kalee that it happened relatively often, as Kalee was married to a Navy SEAL herself.

I wouldn't think about that right now. If Nixon wanted me, and I knew he did, we'd figure that out. He wouldn't be in the Navy forever.

At least, I hoped not.

But all that would be moot anyway if Nixon and I never moved to the next level.

So, it was up to me to do that.

And I was terrified.

I don't think I was scared of rejection. I *was* scared of freaking out and then chickening out of the whole thing.

Also, I had nothing with me to aid my quest in seducing a man. No sexy lingerie, candles, music ... nothing. None of the traditional trappings were at my disposal.

Which meant all I had was— well, *me*—and I had to make that enough.

This was the long way of explaining why I was now standing in front of the bathroom mirror trying to psych myself up to throw myself at the unsuspecting Nixon.

The house was quiet. Nixon's parents had gone out for the evening. Lucy was reading on the couch in the living room,

and Nixon and Griffin were having a beer in the kitchen.

I announced I was turning in for the night, and by the look in Nixon's eyes, he wasn't going to be far behind me.

Blowing out a breath, I surveyed myself in the fluorescent lights of the bathroom. Nobody looked good under these lights, but my body wasn't back to its fighting figure. I was still too skinny, and men liked curves, right? I mean, even before everything happened, I wasn't particularly curvy, but I also wasn't built like a pre-teen either. But here I was. I mean, I had breasts that were proportional to my body. They weren't overly large or anything, but ...

Okay. I had to stop that line of thought. That was counterproductive and wouldn't get me anywhere. I couldn't make myself any different than what I was. This was the body I had. This was what I had to work with.

I was more than my physical appearance.

Right?

No, I was. This was the new me, and the new me was confident and sexy, and Nixon thought I was beautiful. Since he was the only man I wanted to seduce, nothing else mattered, right?

Right.

I was enough. I *had* to be enough. And this was something I had to do as much for myself as for Nixon and me together.

Blowing out a breath for fortitude, I nodded to my reflection, opened the door, and crossed the hall into Nixon's room with purpose. I was wearing the sexiest thing I owned.

Nixon's U.S. Navy t-shirt.

Hot.

But I didn't have anything underneath the shirt, and let's be honest. Did a guy need anything else?

And I wouldn't say I moved with purpose so much as I scurried across the hall so no one would see me without pants.

Or underwear.

Nixon had just pulled a shirt over his head when I entered the room and closed the door behind me with a quick snick.

Leaning against the door, I crossed my ankles and gave him what I really hoped was a come-hither look.

He straightened to his full height as his eyes took a cruise from the top of my head down past his shirt and to my bare legs.

A lazy smile spread across his handsome face. “Bunking with me tonight?”

“Do you mind?” I didn’t move from my spot. Mostly because I was frozen.

“Not even a little bit.”

Phew. At the very least, I would be sleeping in his arms tonight.

Brow furrowing, he faced me full on. “Everything okay, angel?”

“There’s something I need your help with, and I’m not going to lie, I’m really nervous about it and trying my hardest not to spit out trivia right now.”

Well ... crap. I was blabbering. That wasn’t at all sexy.

“There’s no reason for you to ever be nervous with me, Tia. Ever. You know I won’t judge you.”

I did know that.

“Then you’ll do something for me?” I couldn’t hide the shaking of my voice from him, but then, I didn’t need to hide anything from him.

I trusted him completely. With my life, with my heart, with my tender feelings, and most importantly to me right then, with my body.

“I’ll do anything for you,” he said simply.

Closing my eyes, I focused on taking even breaths. I could do this. I was strong. He thought I was brave.

Dammit, I *was* brave, and I could be brave with him.

“Would you make love to me?” I hated the way my voice hitched when I asked. If I was going to tremble before him, I wanted it to be in the throes of passion and not out of fear or nervousness.

As he stared at me like he couldn't believe I just said those words, I watched as his hands squeezed into fists and back out again. Was he restraining himself?

Why wasn't he saying anything?

Oh, no. Was he trying to figure out a way to let me down gently? Did he not want me in this way?

Was he afraid I was going to give him a disease?

I had a clean bill of health in that department. He knew that. He was *there* when the doctor gave me those tests results.

The wire cage that covered the cork on a champagne bottle was called an agaffe.

He was still staring at me.

That's it. I was out of here.

Quickly, I spun around and put my hand on the doorknob ready to pull it open and make my humiliating trip back to my room where I would never come out to face him again.

Nixon was fast. Before I could even get the door opened the smallest inch, he was behind me. One hand pressed to the door and the other wrapped around my waist, settling on my stomach.

The same stomach that felt like it was about to empty its contents in embarrassment.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered into my ear, burying his face in my hair. “I didn't mean to stand there and not say anything. I was just struck dumb and speechless.”

“I understand if you don't want me.” I loathed how small my voice sounded. The confident girl who walked in here had vanished.

Gently turning me to face him, he cupped my cheeks and looked directly into my eyes. Taking a deep breath, I looked

back.

And saw exactly what I needed to.

Love.

“You know that’s not true,” he said. “I’ve told you how much I want you. I want you so bad that sometimes it literally hurts. You just shocked me. My ears and my brain had a really hard time understanding what you said.”

When he let out a nervous laugh was when I knew I was completely in love with this man and would be until the day I died.

“The cry of a newborn baby is called a vagitus,” he said.

Full stop. Everything in my body went on full stop for exactly three seconds.

Oh. No. He. Just. Did. NOT!!

Did I say I’d love him until the day I died?

I’d love him in *every* lifetime.

The tears in my eyes were there now for an entirely different reason. When a sob escaped me, I quickly choked it back, gave him a lopsided smile, and felt the door at my back.

I think I was about to lose use of my legs.

This man understood me like no one had ever before.

Like, he understood me right down to my cellular level and very DNA.

Swiping my fingers under my eyes to brush away the torrent of tears streaming down my face, I then launched myself at him. I moved so fast and unexpectedly, our heads knocked a little.

Soooo seductive there, Tia.

I wrapped my arms around him and sobbed, my legs giving out. The second he felt me dip, he pulled me up, and I circled my legs around his waist.

My bare vagina was pressed to his bare skin where his shirt had ridden up!

I realized I was good with that. I didn't feel dirty or ashamed. I didn't think violence was coming for me again.

All I felt was Nixon.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nixon

I've been scared before. I'm not going to lie. I've been *very* scared before. And all of those times, I was just about to narrowly cheat death.

It's hard to explain that kind of feeling. There's thinking you're about to die because you're a nanosecond away from a car accident; then there's knowing with certainty that your number is up.

And it's not even that your life flashes before your eyes. It's more like a stunned disbelief that it's really happening, and you feel like you're in the matrix.

And then it doesn't happen, and you're left with the aftermath. That gut-punch feeling lasts about a second, but it doesn't fully go away—only feels like it's winding down.

Suddenly, you remember to breathe, but your brain still can't process what happened. Or what *almost* happened. Gradually, your regular breathing returns, and all that's left is the trembling of your body.

That was what I experienced when Tia asked me to make love to her. But this time it wasn't death that was coming for me. It was life. And my life was her.

Then it happened all over again when she turned to leave the room.

Going through those emotional extremes in a matter of seconds left my heart racing, but I somehow managed to pick her up, turn, and carry her to the bed, all without the benefit of sight because she was sucking on my face.

Comprehension was returning, but I still couldn't understand the feeling that was happening on the skin of my stomach.

Because I couldn't see where I was going, my brain was just now realizing that my hands were on Tia's ass, and I was an active participant in what was likely the hottest kiss of my life, I didn't realize how close to the bed I was. When my shins hit, Tia went tumbling back onto the mattress.

Smoooooth, Nix.

I didn't dive after her like I was about to lose my virginity, but that was only because I was speechless from the image of her lying on my bed.

She was on her back, propped up on her elbows with her knees bent up.

I could see right between her legs.

Holy shit.

I jerked my gaze up to look at her face. I don't know if she noticed what had captured my attention. I didn't see anything other than lust on her face with her swollen lips and sultry eyes.

I was looking at my entire world. Instead of my life flashing before my eyes, my future did. It happened so fast. I couldn't catch it all, but it left me with a feeling of fulfillment I didn't think I ever had before.

We were happy. There was laughter, sunny days, and playing with kids on a lush green lawn. Hugs and kisses and dancing and quiet nights. Baseball games and barbeques and little faces illuminated by a flashlight in a tent.

I wanted that. I wanted that so badly I was afraid to reach out and grab it. I was scared if I did, I'd ruin it. I'd somehow ruin Tia.

Was it better to leave perfection alone rather than risk its destruction?

Which I would do if I underestimated how strong she was.

“Don’t think, Nixon,” she whispered.

I blinked and focused on her face.

“But what if I ...”

“You can’t.” She shook her head. “I need good memories, Nixon. You’re the only one who can give me that.”

Fuuuucckk.

Could I even handle that kind of pressure? I knew what she had endured but not the details. There was no way for me to know if something would trigger her until it did.

“Baby ...” I took a deep breath. I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt her in that way, even if it was unintentional.

Sitting up, she extended her arms to me. “I’m not afraid. All I can think about is you and this overwhelming feeling I have of this being right. I want this, and I want it with you. I promise you that I’m ready. I’m ready for you. I’m ready for *us*.”

I knew she trusted me, but until that moment, I didn’t understand how deep it ran. The realization nearly brought me to my knees. What had I ever done to deserve such a wonderful person?

Slowly, I moved and perched above her on the bed. Sliding along the comforter, she backed her way to the pillows, and I followed dutifully. She could lead me off a cliff right now and I’d follow.

“And I need you *not* to think about what I went through.”

Well, that was just fucking impossible.

“Tia—”

“Hesitation because you’re not sure how I’ll react to something will only make me think of it. I want only the two

of us in this bed and what we are together. *Good* memories, Nixon.”

I nodded nervously. It wasn't a question of if I could give her what she wanted. I had to. It was as simple and as terrifying as that.

I'd rather face a group of insurgents unarmed.

Reaching behind my shoulders, I fisted my t-shirt and pulled it over my head.

I was more nervous now than I was in the back seat of Allison Hornby's Honda Civic junior year of high school when we decided to lose our virginity together because we “liked each other okay.”

When Tia reached out to me with a trembling hand, I allowed her to tug me down until I was stretched out next to her, sliding one arm across the pillow for her to rest her head on. My other hand slid down her side. When I reached the hem of the shirt she was wearing, I slid my hand under the material to rest on her bare hip.

Our eyes stayed locked as we simply explored the terrain of each other's skin. She was soft, warm, and smooth. Running my hand back up her body, I linked our fingers together and gave her hand a little tug, gently guiding her on top of me.

Eyes wide and muscles clenched, she looked down at me.

“What ... what are you doing?” She whispered.

“Giving you control,” I replied softly. “You lead, angel. You take us where you want us to go. I'm up for anything you want to do.”

Either consciously or unconsciously, she shifted her center of gravity and brought her uncovered center right down onto my erection.

Navy SEALs are trained to know their bodies well and use them as a weapon. I was acutely aware of the little sparks of pleasure from our bodies touching so intimately dancing along below my waist.

And I still had my pants on.

The anticipation was going to kill me.

Sitting back, Tia looked down and studied me. I'd have given anything to know what was going on in her head at that moment while she looked like she was deciding which part of my body to give attention to first.

"I'm out of practice in the decision-making," she said, chewing on her bottom lip.

Sitting up, I circled my arms around her waist and pulled her closer to me. Her eyes widened, and I knew for certain that she could feel what she was already doing to me when we were barely even touching.

"That's okay." Leaning my face forward, I began to press my lips to the slender column of her neck. When she quickly inhaled and held her breath, I bit my tongue to resist asking her if this was okay.

Sliding one hand up her back underneath the t-shirt and the other down to rest on one delectable butt cheek, I continued making my way down her neck and across her collarbone with my lips. Her head fell back, granting me better access.

She liked this. The heavy sigh she released was a dead giveaway.

"I think I should take my pants off," I whispered against her skin.

"I think that's a good idea." Her husky voice was driving me wild. Normally, her voice was soft and sweet, but this tone was all *come hither, sailor*.

I brought my hands to her waist and lifted her just a bit. To my surprise and utter delight, *she* was the one that reached for the button and zipper of my jeans. With trembling hands, she took the lead in tugging my pants down over my hips when I raised them. Then she did this silly little butterfly stroke type of move, using her feet to get them down my legs, when I came in for the assist, working my feet to free myself from the jeans.

“Teamwork,” I smiled.

“You go commando,” she noted, lowering herself down so we touched core to core.

Tipping her forehead against mine, she began to wiggle and roll around in my lap, rubbing her moist heat over me, marking me, claiming me with her scent.

My little angel was a captivating seductress. She could lead me anywhere, ask anything of me. She was my sexy aphrodisiac that could control me by giving me even this little bit of pleasure.

The starting gun hadn't even gone off yet, and I was already halfway around the track.

Sliding my hand down in between us, I slipped one finger inside her. Her breath caught, and she began to circle her hips.

She liked this. I added another finger, curling and swirling them around inside her. She was snug around my fingers, and the idea of this tightness encasing my dick nearly crossed my eyes.

Then she moaned.

And I nearly blew my load.

I'd never worked so hard to restrain my body in my life. Doing this with someone I loved made all the difference. My skin came alive everywhere she touched.

Grabbing my chin, she pulled my mouth to hers in a hot, long, open-mouthed kiss with lots of tongue.

All the tongue.

Damn, I loved her tongue.

Tia let loose sexy little sounds as she rode my hand and increased the depth of our kiss. She was writhing in my arms. So fucking responsive.

I was Icarus, and the heat of her body was enticing me closer and closer. When she reached between us and closed her fingers around my dick, I knew I had flown too close to the sun.

“Tia,” I groaned, but I didn’t know what I wanted. I wanted to pull her closer, speed up our rhythm, freeze in just this one spot teetering on the edge of absolution. I wanted everything, but my need was so great, things were short-circuiting in my brain, and I couldn’t comprehend what my next step was.

“It’s amazing, Nixon,” she whispered. “Perfect. You’re perfect.”

The fuck I am, but *she* was perfect.

“I want you inside me for my orgasm.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She giggled as I pulled my fingers free from her, slick with her essence and scent. At the most basic composition, the scent of my mate.

My breathing grew heavier, and my heart throbbed in my chest. I knew I should probably slow it down, but my entire body was wild with need for her. Primal instinct was taking over, and I was becoming desperate to get inside of her.

Finally, after what felt like hours but in reality was only seconds, she positioned her opening right at the tip of my dick. We both tensed for just a fraction of a second before she tentatively began to lower herself.

“Easy, angel,” I whispered. Clarity was returning. I knew she didn’t want me to think about her trauma during this, but I wasn’t wired that way. My first instinct was always going to be to protect her. It was my entire reason for existing.

I placed my hands back on her hips, prepared to stop her descent if I thought she was in pain or otherwise in distress.

Groaning then hissing, she lowered herself down the first inch of my shaft and let out a long breath.

I said nothing. I did nothing. I waited.

But the tight pressure of her around me was bringing me too close to detonation.

Hold your fire, soldier. Don’t shoot too soon.

She slid down some more.

I sucked in a breath.

She slid down some more.

I drew in more air.

She slid down some more.

My brain sent out an alert to the rest of my body to immediately pause all systems.

When she was fully seated, and I could feel her heat just a bit against my balls, all the air in my body rushed out with a shocked, “Aah!”

As she curled her legs around my waist and sank even further, my fingers pressed hard against her skin. Her arms slid around my neck and squeezed tightly. Thank god there was no oxygen in my brain, or she might have popped my head off.

“Okay.” She said it so quietly, I probably wouldn’t have heard it if my body wasn’t already shut down.

My forehead buried in her neck, as hers was in mine, I smiled. “Okay.”

“I’m going to move now.”

“I really fucking wish you would.”

A noise, a cross between a laugh and a sob, snuck past her lips.

When she didn’t move, I lifted my head and put my mouth to my ear. “Hey.” She looked up, and the turmoil I saw in her eyes was so raw and real, I knew that I would never experience a moment as intense as this with a person ever again.

I shifted my hands from her ass to her jaw, stroking my fingers gently. “I fucking love you.”

Tears filled her eyes as a slow smile spread across her face. “I fucking love you, too.”

“You ready?” I asked.

Nodding, she buried her face again in the crook of my shoulder. I rested my head against hers, rubbing my hands down her back.

She moved slowly at first, testing things out while her body adjusted to mine. She rose and fell like the gentle waves of a lake. Long, silky strokes—the slippery friction turned me mad with desire.

I couldn't take this torture. I'd never survive.

Governments were stupid when they tried to break soldiers with painful torture. Fuck, I was conditioned for that shit. But draw out the time until I could come, and let's just say I'd tell you pretty much anything right now to release the pressure coiling inside my gut. I had to keep my control, at least this first time with us. I tried to think of baseball stats.

She increased her speed just a little bit. I needed something stronger than baseball stats.

I am an American sailor. I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America ...

This time it was my hand bringing her face back to mine to kiss. I had to put my tongue in her mouth.

... and I will obey the orders of those appointed over me.

The passion I was enthralled in built higher. My hands gripped her shoulders.

I represent the fighting spirit of the Navy and those who have gone before me ...

She thrust faster. A sweaty sheen broke out along our flesh. Her skin. My skin. Our skin.

... to defend freedom and democracy around the world.

Panting, I slammed my eyes shut as her pace became frantic.

I proudly serve my country's Navy combat team ...

Her fingers dug into my hair and still she went faster.

... with Honor, Courage, and Commitment.

“Almost,” she purred.

I am committed to excellence and the fair treatment of all.

Tia bit into my shoulder as the pressure burst, and I exploded into her with stream after stream of white heat. Clutching each other, we rode the swirling bliss together as fire spread over my skin.

Tia pressed her lips to the bite spot while I continued to pulse inside her, still experiencing the longest orgasm in my life.

When the euphoria was finally over, I lifted my head as Tia did the same.

I brushed hair out of her face and ran my finger down her cheek. “How do you feel?”

Smiling and looking happy through heavy-lidded eyes, she raised her arms and looked down at me, then said simply ...

“Free.”

Then she fell to my chest in a boneless lump of satiated woman.

CURLING DOWN into my arms with a sleepy smile, she looked back up at me, blinked, and said, “Vagitus?”

“Not even kidding about that one.” Chuckling, I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Seriously?”

“Right hand to God.”

Her last words before drifting off to sleep were “Kind of ironic.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tia

Nixon Davis is a god.

He has to be. There's simply no other explanation for how amazing he is.

From the moment I laid eyes on him, it was like he already knew me. Through those horrible days that followed my rescue up until now, he knew what I needed when I needed it.

In the beginning, it was a bodyguard. The one thing I needed the most after the SEALs saved me from the hell I was existing in was to feel safe again. Really and truly safe.

Nixon assigned that task to himself. He planted himself outside my hospital room. I went nowhere without him. He always kept a safe distance from me, never saying a word that wasn't necessary.

At the time, the most important thing was that he traveled with large, visible guns, and a *fuck with me and find out* face. I didn't feel one hundred percent safe then—that would have been impossible—but I did feel out of immediate danger, and that was good enough for me then.

When we left the hospital and moved to Griffin's house, Nixon packed up his gear and dog and made himself a permanent fixture in our shaky, new fellowship. He slept on the floor of the hallway right outside my bedroom. If I was in

another part of the house, he was close, but always at a distance and never engaging with me if it wasn't necessary.

And still, I felt out of immediate danger. After some time, I wasn't nervous or distrustful of his proximity. He was just there, a constant, unthreatening presence. And that was good enough for me then.

As the weeks began to pass, he started engaging in conversation with me. Slowly and no topics of any substance. That was when I realized, whether intentionally or not, he was desensitizing me to his existence in my life. He knew when to start our innocuous small talk and when to hold back.

For instance, one afternoon we were both in the kitchen, and he was closer to the whistling tea kettle than I was. Instead of moving out of my way, he shut off the stove burner, picked up the kettle, and poured the hot water into my waiting mug. Then he asked me what my favorite kind of tea was. I answered, and that was the end of our conversation. And that was good enough for me then.

And if you're keeping score, yes, he had his mother stock my favorite tea for our stay. Because *of course* he did!

By the time we left for Grayson Falls, I was comfortable around him, and we became friends. This, of course, was a huge step in my recovery process. I trusted that he wouldn't hurt me. I didn't hold that same feeling towards any of his team members or the security guys his father sent out. As far as I was concerned, maybe I could accept that they weren't going to let anyone else hurt me, but that didn't mean *they* wouldn't. I just knew Nixon wouldn't do either of those things.

I was shocked to discover that that wasn't good enough for me then. I didn't know what I wanted per se, but I did know that Nixon had become essential to me. He had transitioned from the stone-faced, badass warrior to a secure and encouraging friend.

And still, it wasn't good enough. I didn't see him as my potential lover, but I did see him as my *always*. In what

capacity always was, I had no idea at the time. But I knew now.

It was boundless. I didn't want limits set on his place in my life. If I needed encouragement, I wanted him to be head cheerleader. If I got spooked, it would be his words and arms that soothed me and kept me safe.

And I wanted it forever. That wasn't too big of a surprise to me since I wanted to live in his hometown surrounded by his family and the life he'd had there.

I had that now. Whatever I needed, Nixon would be there for it. Because after what we just shared, there wasn't a shadow of a doubt that I was going to shackle myself to his side for eternity. He was stuck with me whether he wanted to be or not.

I fucking love you.

He was so raw, real, and open to me during our first time together. Tender, yet passionate. He was up against a monumental task, which of course he conquered with all the ease of the Tia Whisperer.

It wasn't fair of me to make him pretend I hadn't been raped and abused, but I was positive it was what I needed to get through it.

And that was a bad choice of words because I didn't want to just *get through it*. I wanted to experience it, enjoy it, and look forward to doing it again. I needed the reminder that sex wasn't the same as making love. Not all men were abusers. Some only touched with love.

And so, I compartmentalized and made Nixon do the same. I changed who he was. Nixon was a nurturer, and keeping him from being who he was wasn't fair. He was raised to be confident in his feelings and comfortable expressing them. For the love of crap, it was why I fell in love with him.

I was the world's biggest hypocrite. I wanted him to be whatever I needed, but to do that, I sacrificed part of who he was. How could I want him for being him but then not let him be himself?

The thing is, it worked.

I only thought of Nixon and what he was doing to me. I wasn't afraid of him. I didn't expect things to become violent. Even after I had stopped fighting Salero and started just laying there and waiting him out, it would still turn violent from time to time.

Sex was about power to Justus Salero.

It was about love to Nixon.

And that was what I felt from him. From the moment I stepped into his bedroom last night until I fell asleep was all an outpouring of love from him, and I took it all like a succubus. I didn't plan to stop.

A little voice in the corner of my mind piped up, "*And what about what Nixon needed?*"

When that thought struck, I felt small. I took, but did I give? Did I give Nixon what he needed from me? I'd forced him to go against his caring nature and suppress a part of himself, and he'd done it.

He had given me a gift last night, and I could never repay him for it.

I had just woken up. The house was very quiet, and I knew it was still very early. Probably not long after dawn.

Nixon was spooning me from behind as I faced away from him. I could tell by his breathing that he wasn't fully asleep anymore. He didn't speak or make any physical moves to signal his intentions for round two. He just held me in the peaceful time of day after you first wake up and before your brain realizes you have to get out of bed.

We didn't have anywhere to be and could afford to linger in our own idyllic little bubble for just a little longer.

Nothing kills tranquility like a fart.

Scrunching up our faces, we both looked to the bottom of the bed where Shadow lay snoozing away and unleashing napalm into our breathable air.

“What did she eat yesterday?” I pulled the sheet up over my nose, trying to escape the stench. It was futile. That was one potent fart.

“Who knows?” Nixon shrugged. “You know my mom likes to take her outside when she gardens. But the way it smells, my money is some sort of dead animal in there.”

“You think she murdered a chipmunk, ate it, and is now unleashing it upon us?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

I didn't.

For the first time since I met that dog, I didn't want her anywhere near me.

“I think she has to go out,” I said.

“What gave it away?”

When I sat up, the sheet fell down, revealing my naked breasts to Nixon's very hungry eyes. Blushing, I remembered all the wonderful things he did to them last night. Reaching down to the floor, I rescued my shirt from the floor and put it on.

“What a sad moment in my life.” Nixon shook his head forlornly. “Bye, Tia's beautiful breasts. I'll be seeing you later.”

I laughed, feeling free and unburdened for the first time in years. Nixon had done that. I couldn't say how long my recovery would have taken had I not had him. He was my rock, my lighthouse in the storm. I still had far to go, but as long as I kept swimming toward him, I would be just fine.

“I'm going to take her out.” I rose from the bed. “First, I need pants.”

Sighing dramatically, Nixon also sat up, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. Dammit, he was adorable. I wanted to crawl back in bed with him and stay in his arms all day, but with another stink bomb and groan from the dog, I got a move on.

Opening the door slowly, I peeked into the hall and looked both ways. I didn't want anyone to see me sneaking out of Nixon's room with no pants on. Once I determined that the coast was clear, I scurried into my room, grabbed the first pair of pants I saw, and scooted back out and into the bathroom. I needed to clean myself up and pee.

Once that was accomplished, I went back to my room, put on socks and shoes, and walked back out into the hall with Shadow happily trotting alongside me.

The dog never walked behind or in front of me. She was always directly at my side. Her loyalty almost made me forget what her rancid ass had done just a few minutes ago.

The living room was dark, but lights were on in the empty kitchen. I knew Eric and Natalie were already up. I'd discovered Nixon's father was a *very* early riser and his wife usually got up with him. Did I love Nixon enough to get out of bed that early when I didn't have anywhere else to be?

Maybe.

Shadow beat me to the sliders and began barking with excitement. I didn't look out the door as I opened it and stepped outside. I got all of three or four steps across the patio when I noticed the large men dressed in black in front of me, and I froze in terror.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nixon

Exiting the bathroom, I realized I was whistling, and that I had been since I got out of my warm bed. The realization nearly stopped me in my tracks. When was the last time I whistled like this? Like, an actual song and not just to call my dog? I couldn't remember.

I needed to stop this shit before I encountered anyone else. For some reason, my urge to protect Tia spiked, and I didn't want anyone to have confirmation of what Tia and I had done last night. My instincts said someone would judge her, maybe think she was moving too fast in her recovery, or that she might give me a disease. I knew that no one in my family would say or think anything like that, but I just wasn't ready to share that information yet.

Coffee was already hot and waiting for me in the kitchen. Both of my favorite mugs were clean and set next to the coffee maker for me.

Damn, I loved my mom. That woman was a fucking saint. She never stopped taking care of any of us. Her heart had such a huge capacity for love. Her twin brother, Ethan, was the same way.

I turned the electric tea kettle on to heat up the water for Tia's tea. In the drawer directly under the coffeemaker were a dozen different kinds of tea, all lined up like little caffeine soldiers—except for the last row. That was chamomile and

decaf tea. I plucked out a packet of Tia's favorite, tore open the little envelope it was in, and dropped it into her mug.

I was pretty sure I didn't need the caffeine to get me going this morning, having just caught myself whistling again.

My eyes moved toward the door when I heard Shadow's barking. Rocco's team had arrived, and they were standing out back.

Where Tia was.

Fuck. She had never met them before. They were part of her rescue, but she didn't interact with any of them then or any time after that. I needed to get out there.

I pulled the kettle up, not caring that the water hadn't fully heated yet, and poured it over the tea bag. There was some steam, so I knew it would be warm enough.

My first instinct was to run outside, but I resisted that urge. Tia wasn't in any danger and Shadow was next to her. After the spook she just got, she'd want her tea to help calm herself down. I couldn't constantly hover over her, though, even if I wanted to. If she stayed with me—and after last night, I knew I'd wither away if she didn't—this was what she would encounter with some frequency. Teams were always hanging out socially. Unfortunately, she'd constantly be surrounded by big, deadly men.

Pushing open the slider with my elbow I walked outside, putting my leg out behind me to close it again with my foot.

"When did you all show up?" I asked casually, approaching Tia. Raising my mug to my lips, I took my first sip.

Shadow was no longer barking. At my casual and friendly tone of voice, she knew there was no danger. But by the sound of her menacing growls, she didn't trust anyone in front of her.

"They got here last night while you were getting your pole waxed," my chief whispered to me as he passed. I shot him a very respectful death glare. So much for keeping it on the down-low.

The rest of Eagle Team were approaching behind Rocco's team. I studied each one of my teammates carefully, looking for any sign that one of them was our traitor. Whoever it was hid it well.

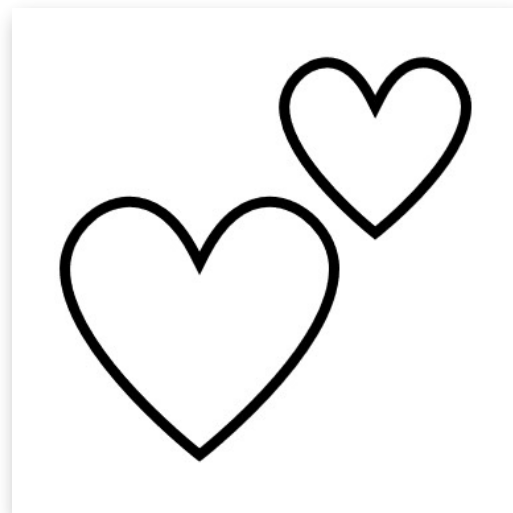
Despite knowing that one of them was likely looking for their best opportunity to screw us, I couldn't stop the feeling of relief that spread over me knowing they were here. The war faces they had on, the bulges in the muscles of their crossed arms ... they were ready to go to war.

Well, three of them were at any rate.

Looking at them now, as Chief started debriefing everyone, a little voice of hope began to whisper, "*What if my dad and Tex were wrong?*" The likelihood of that was pretty much zero, but still ... what if they were?

Lifting her mug to her lips, Tia turned to me, nodding her head toward the doors to the house indicating she was going back inside. I'd send Shadow in when she was done with her morning body elimination routine. Right now, the dog was still standing sentry. Only after Shadow knew that Tia was safe in the house did she let her guard down, sashaying herself right over to Rocco's team and taking a big, smelly shit in front of them. It was truly awful.

"Well, now we know which team she thinks is the best," Denver chuckled. Everybody laughed, and for a moment, we were a tight unit again.



THE MEETING WAS BREAKING UP. My father and Uncle Ethan briefed both teams about the property and surrounding area. After my father listed the resources that the teams would have access to, everyone looked at him with awe.

My dad was a legend in the private security industry. I hadn't realized it until I became a SEAL. More than one guy had talked about ultimately wanting to work for Delta Security, Inc.—or DSI as they were also known. It was then I learned to keep my mouth shut about who my father was and where I was from. I wasn't interested in being used as a point of access to get to my father.

“It doesn't feel right,” Rocco said, as we all sat around the conference table in my father's war room. “We followed Salero's trail. Everything pointed to him coming here, but we lost him in Illinois.”

“You think he was laying a false trail?” I asked.

“Cagey bastard,” Phantom muttered.

“I don't know,” Rocco said. “But it just doesn't feel right.”

“Then it probably isn't.” Ethan leaned back in his chair and cupped his hands behind his head, his big-ass dog resting at his feet. “Gut instinct saves lives.”

I agreed, but I also knew where Rocco came from. They were one of the best teams out there, and I trusted their instincts implicitly.

“Are we any closer to finding out who's at the top of this food chain?” Lincoln asked. I hated the way I was overanalyzing the things my teammates said and their reactions.

“Tell me why again we think there's someone over Salero pulling the strings?” Abe said. I was pretty sure it was Abe. They were all big with beards. The only two I was sure of were Rocco and Phantom.

“Tia's testimony,” I said quietly. All eyes in the room turned to me. “She never got confirmation, but what she

witnessed and heard during her ... captivity ... indicates Salero was high up, but not the top.”

I did my best to curtail my rising emotions. In this room, there was only the mission. Tia was a job, like any other we took, but it was getting hard to stay objective. I'd become too close to this mission and thus, a liability to the team. I realized I had to keep reminding myself that I wasn't the one in charge here—not remotely close to it. Wanting to stand up and take over was not a good sign. Even if by some miracle everyone above me decided to put me in charge, it would be disastrous. I didn't have enough experience.

My head knew that, but my heart was too involved.

The chief, Rocco, my dad, and my uncle had more than enough experience to competently lead the mission, and I had to put my trust in them.

And take me out of it.

Glancing over at my father and uncle, I tried to gauge what they would say to that. Would they be disappointed in me, or would they understand?

“At the risk of being beheaded for making this suggestion,” Rocco said. “Have you thought of using the girls as bait? Salero is going to stay underground until he's confident he has the access to him.”

Oh, hell no. Fuck this shit.

Standing up, I came to attention in front of my master chief. “Sir,” I said forcefully. “Permission to be relieved from this mission.”

The silence that descended the room was so heavy that you could probably hear a squirrel fart outside. I assumed they were all just as shocked to hear those words come out of my mouth as I was.

The chief rose to his feet and stood directly in front of me. I continued to stare straight ahead. “Look at me, Petty Officer,” he said, authority radiating from his being. I followed the order and looked him right in the eye.

Something strange passed between us. I didn't see disappointment in his eyes. He was contemplative. I nearly squirmed under the scrutiny, but I knew better.

Eagle Team was the best of the best and you did not show weakness.

"Granted." He sounded resigned. I was going to get a talking to later from him. I could count on that.

My gaze fell onto my father and uncle as I turned. My idols. "I'm sorry," I whispered before walking purposefully out of the war room.

Stepping outside and pulling the door closed behind me, I took a deep breath and looked up at the clear sky. I got all of five steps before I heard my name called. When I turned, I was surprised to see my teammate Denver walking toward me.

I was immediately suspicious but also relieved that it wasn't my family or Griffin coming after me.

"Who sent you?" I asked.

Arching one brow, Denver continued forward. "I sent me," he said. "I wanted to see if you were all right. That was ... rather shocking back there."

Running a hand down my face, I turned to continue walking, but Denver's hand on my forearm stopped me. "Wait a minute, Phoenix," he said. "Talk to me. We're teammates, but we're also friends. What's going on? Why are we getting the cold shoulder from you and the chief? It's like you can't even look at the rest of us."

Genuinely curious or deflecting?

"Nothing's going on," I lied. "I'm just too close to the mission now."

"You two know things you haven't shared with the rest of us," Denver continued. "That's not how we operate."

Instinct was screaming at me that Denver wasn't our traitor. There was no anger in his eyes, no calculation, just concern and maybe a little bit of hurt. I wanted to spill my guts to him, but I didn't dare.

“Sorry,” I replied. “Orders.”

His shoulders sagged, but he nodded. “All right. I’ll trust that the information will be shared when it needs to be.”

Because that’s what we did. We operated on blind faith. There were some missions where we were literally given information piecemeal and as we needed to know it. I hated those missions.

Taking a deep breath, Denver looked around and took a step back. “This is where you grew up, huh?” We began walking again toward the house.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sure you now realize why I was so secretive about where I came from.”

“Things make a little more sense now, yeah,” he said. Shadow came bounding up to us. I looked ahead and saw Tia, Lucy, and my mother bundled up in front of the outdoor fire and sipping from mugs.

A feeling of peace settled over me, replacing the turmoil I was in minutes before.

The absolute certainty that this was where I belonged, and not back in the command room, nearly knocked me over. I had six years in the Navy and didn’t realize until this moment that I was ready to give it up.

“Still, it was probably pretty awesome.” Denver was still talking.

“Depends on who you ask,” I shrugged. “It’s small-town life. It’s not for everyone.”

“Hey, baby,” my mother greeted as we approached.

“Really, Mom?” I groaned, gesturing to my teammate. “Really?”

Denver chuckled beside me. Sending my eyes heavenward, I shook my head. *Baby*. I prayed she’d stop at that and not bust out old childhood pictures and stories.

“I’m so sorry,” my mother said to Denver with no shred of remorse. “I didn’t mean to shine light on the fact that my son

wasn't actually hatched. I didn't realize having a mother was top secret."

Shit. She was good. My mother could hide a reprimand in snark like nobody's business.

Denver clapped me on the shoulder. "Phoenix here can get very cranky."

Turning to my friend—my former friend?—I ordered, "Do not bond with my mother." Denver only laughed.

"Sit down, sailors." My mom gestured to the two free Adirondack chairs in the circle. I took the one next to Tia, and Denver sat down next to my mother. Shadow took up position between Tia and me.

"What are you ladies drinking?" Denver asked.

"Hot toddies," Lucy answered immediately.

My jaw dropped. "It's eleven o'clock in the morning!" I cast an accusatory glance at my mother. "You're day drinking?"

My mother shrugged, not the least bit concerned about any societal rule she might be breaking. "We don't have any other plans. Some of your aunts are coming by later."

"Mom, this is a military operation. There are going to be SEALs all over the place, out in the woods, around the property. Maybe this isn't the best time for a family get-together."

"Son."

Uh-oh. That tone of voice was bad. At least she didn't full name me...yet.

"There are *always* former military operatives here. It's what your father does for a living. Your family is quite used to seeing them here and not asking questions."

I gave up the argument before it escalated. My mother was already clearly annoyed with me. The teams filed out of the command center and headed in the opposite direction from us.

It looked like they were headed for the garage. They were likely going to scout the property.

Griffin crossed his arms and stared at us. “That would be my cue,” Denver pushed himself up from the chair and jogged down the hill, passed the chief, and followed the others.

The three women glanced at me, clearly wondering why it wasn’t my cue, too. Griffin turned and walked the way the others had gone. I couldn’t tell if he was pissed at me or not.

“Whoa,” Lucy said, eyes wide and looking to where her boyfriend stood just a moment ago. “What’d you do?” She looked over at me.

“What makes you think that was for me?” I deflected. “You’re the ones day drinking.”

“He doesn’t have the guts to look at me like that,” she laughed. And she was right. Griffin loved her so much that I really thought it was impossible for him to get mad at her. Frustrated? Hell yes. But never mad. As far as he was concerned, Lucy was a fucking angel.

Let me assure you, she wasn’t though.

Then my father and uncle came walking up the path. Uncle Ethan broke away and walked toward us, while my father merely gave me a head nod to follow him.

The come-to-Jesus moment had arrived.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nixon

I was silent as my father and I walked through the woods, too wrapped up in my head to be conversant company. What I had just done ... well, I never imagined I would need to recuse myself from a mission. When the realization hit me, I acted on it. I didn't need to talk it out with anyone. It was what needed to be done, so I did it.

We had walked nearly a mile, and about a quarter of the way up a large hill, but not quite a mountain, before stopping. Raising his binoculars to his eyes, he peered at the surrounding area. I didn't speak until spoken to. I didn't think he was upset, but I waited for him to speak first.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked, staring over the terrain, and I watched as operatives silently moved through the woods surveilling the area. It was almost like a war game.

Furrowing my brow, I replied, "Sir?" Like I didn't know exactly what he was referring to.

"My son doesn't run away from a fight," he said. "So, when he does, I think it's important to understand why."

My body stiffened, and I turned and faced my father. "I'm not running away from the fight," I ground out between my teeth. "I'm changing my position."

"Why?" he asked again.

"I think you know why, Dad," I said softly.

I had a bottomless well of respect for my father. He wasn't wrong in asking about something that was out-of-character for me, but if I was going to have this conversation with him, I wanted his end to be as my father and not a retired, yet highly skilled, operative. "I'm in love with Tia, and I can't stomach a discussion about the safest way to put her in danger. Maybe that makes me weak, but—"

"You are *not* weak," my father hissed at me. I'd never heard that tone from him before, and it stopped me in my tracks. "You're having a hard time being objective. I get it."

"I've never known you to lose objectivity." Did I sound like a petulant child? Yep. Was he going to let me get away with it? Doubtful.

"Your mom's and my story didn't start when you were born, Nix," he said. Furrowing my brow, I waited for an explanation on that statement, but he wasn't inclined to give one. "You can't be objective in strategy meetings. Okay. What *are* you going to do?"

"I'm going to fucking stand in front of her!" The emotion and frustration burst from me like a geyser. My breathing was heavy, my muscles coiling with the tension. "I'm going to be her last line of defense against this scourge. She deserves peace. I'm going to be by her side twenty-four seven."

Cocking his head to the side, my father said, "And then what?"

What?

"What?"

"Let me tell you a little something about being overprotective and smothering. It doesn't work."

"I..." What? I couldn't comprehend what he was saying. "You had tracking devices implanted in your children. How is that not overprotective and smothering?"

"You have tracking devices because I have a lot of fucking enemies," he continued. "And the difference is, I don't check up on you unless it's absolutely necessary. And by necessary, I mean, you've gone completely radio silent, even above and

beyond the course of your job. You kids are good about texting us with mundane tidbits about your life. I consider that my safety check-ins, but Nixon, I don't control your life, and you can't control Tia's."

His words left me speechless. I didn't want to control Tia's life. I wanted to keep her safe. She was in danger now, and she needed protection. Nobody would sacrifice more for her safety than me.

"This shit will pass," he continued. "Salero will be caught, and his network will crumble, even if I have to go around the Navy to do it. Tia needs you now in your professional capacity. So, when this is all over, then what?"

"I ... I don't understand."

"Because you're too much like me and not enough like your mother," he said, then waved his hand. "Let's move. There are some things I want to check out."

I followed my father. I understood he was imparting some kind of wisdom on me, but with my current mental state, it seemed to be bouncing off my skull and not sinking in.

Walking around the woods I knew so well, I tried to decipher my father's words, but I felt like I was missing a major piece of information.

"What happened with mom?" I asked quietly, not sure he would hear me over the crunching of the leaves beneath our feet as we climbed higher. I should have known better. He heard me just fine.

"I'm not telling you everything," he said. "It's classified. But suffice it to say, when I met your mother, she was in danger. For me, it was love at first sight, and I would and did do anything to ensure her safety. But in my quest to ensure she kept breathing, she was feeling smothered and pushed me away. She already had protection, but I didn't think it was good enough. Nobody would be better than me, right? When the danger to her was over, I had a hard time letting it go and nearly lost her. You love Tia, yes. *But then what?* That's something you need to figure out."

He stopped and raised his binoculars again. I didn't know what he was scouting for, but with my father, it could be anything. For all I knew, he was scouting new hideouts for the family's quarterly paintball wars.

"I wasn't expecting any of this to get personal. I'm a SEAL on a top-secret team made up of the elite of the elite. I love my job. Our cause is righteous, but..." I trailed off with a shrug. I've always been close with my family. I knew I could tell my father anything, but I was finding myself at a loss for words.

"It's okay to leave the military, Nix," my father said. "Your Uncle Danny and I left the Army and became cops. Then we ended up here. You have a spot with DSI whenever you're ready. I can't run it forever. Hell, Danny would make you a cop if you wanted. There's no shame in walking away, son. You wouldn't be letting anyone down. There are others fully qualified to take your place."

"I'm expendable," I muttered.

"Yes," my father said frankly. "There're a hundred guys ready to step up and do your job. It's called national security, and it ain't pretty. When guys in your job start questioning whether it's what you still want to do, it isn't, and it's time to walk away. I'll bet all the money I have that your fearless leader is thinking along those lines, too."

"We already tried. A few months ago, we went to our commander and resigned as a unit. He told us no."

Throwing back his head, my father howled in delight. Guess we weren't trying to sneak up on anyone because he was *loud*. "Son, he can't do that. I mean, technically in some instances, he can, but if your contract with the Navy is up, you can leave. The world will keep spinning, I promise."

I felt ridiculous now. Eagle Team was always a point of pride, and I was still proud of the things we'd accomplished. Eagle Team was my family and my future.

Until it wasn't.

"Tia likes it here."

“We like Tia.” My father was on the move again and me with him. We were going to lose the light soon. Both of us could navigate this land blindfolded. I wasn’t worried about getting lost. But I wasn’t with Tia, and any time that happened, I started to feel edgy.

“Hell, your mother loves Tia, so do your sisters. They’re already planning the wedding.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course they were. As long as they didn’t tell Tia they were planning our theoretical wedding, I didn’t care. It would be nice if they let me ask her first though.

“So, if I wanted to leave the Navy,” I began, but stopped my thought. What was I asking him? I didn’t even know myself.

When my father stopped walking, I did, too. Holding out his hand, he squeezed my shoulder. “The decision on what to do with your life next better not have shit to do with me and any ideas you might have of whether or not you’ll disappoint me.”

Well...shit. It did. My father was larger than life. He’d always been my hero. I idolized him so much, I couldn’t see his flaws, though my mother assures me he has many. My physical characteristics favored my mother’s side of the family, but my personality and who I was inside was all from my dad.

“The only expectations I’ve ever had for any of you is to maintain a heartbeat, have the ability to breathe on your own, and do what makes you happy. Be a fucking accountant or a dog catcher for all I care. Be a fucking farmer like your sister. Just be happy.”

Aw, fuck. My bottom lip started to tremble, and tears stung my eyes. I was not going to break down and cry in front of my father. That would be fucking mortifying. Then again, if you can’t lose your shit in front of your parents, who can you lose it with?

Taking a deep breath, I settled myself and nodded. Tia and I were going to need to have a conversation soon.

My father turned to me. “You’re standing in front of her?”

“Yes, sir, until my dying breath,” I replied softly.

Nodding, he said, “Then I’ll be on her six.”

Shit. A tear was about to slip over the rim of my eye.

“For fuck’s sake.” Grumbling, my father clapped a hand to the back of my neck and pulled me into a tight hug. Had my mom done that same thing, I’d have sighed and sunk into the comfort that came with her hugs. Since it was my dad, I did my best to absorb his strength.

Both of my parents were strong people, but their strengths came from different places.

Squinting, I looked over my father’s shoulder and saw the treehouse we all played in as kids. My dad and uncles built it when all the babies started to come along. It was massive. It was added on to over the years. Now, that thing had four separate rooms. We used to sleep in there overnight all the time.

It was a solid little hideaway with actual shingles on the roof and real windows that cranked open and closed. It was even insulated. Unfortunately, there was no electric or plumbing run to it, but, hey, *four rooms*. Of course, adults couldn’t stand up all the way inside. My cousin Lucas stayed in it for a week for a science project once in high school.

Something wasn’t right about it though. I couldn’t see a difference yet, but there was one. It was still the same size I remembered it to be, same chipped white paint and faded blue fake trim.

Wordlessly, I pulled the binoculars from my dad, raised them to my eyes. There was something different all right.

A bare foot was hanging out of the door, and it was eerily still. Handing the binoculars back to my father, I pulled my gun and proceeded forward in silence. My father didn’t ask questions. He just pulled his gun and followed.

Instead of using the ladder and climbing right up, I scaled the trunk of the tree, launched off it, and grabbed onto one of

the window ledges, silently pulling myself up to peek through the window. Thank you very much, SEAL training death slide.

A man was lying on the cracked yellow linoleum floor. Blood was splattered on the walls and floor. Whoever it was, was very dead.

I looked down at my father, who was slowly rounding the beloved childhood sanctuary with his gun pointing at me—or more accurately, whatever might come flying out at me.

Keeping my weapon in my hand, I swung through the small door. Having to crouch to fit—we should really consider raising the roof—I navigated around the body before clearing the house crawling around on my stomach.

Finding it empty, I rose to all fours and moved back to the body. Poking my head out the door, I looked down at my dad. “It’s a body. Smells relatively fresh.”

My father stuffed his gun in his waistband and took the ladder like a spider monkey.

Moving out of his way, I crawled back to the body. It was a man, naked as the day he was born, muscled, and covered in blood. He was lying prone.

“Who is it?” my father asked.

“Don’t know yet.”

Putting one hand on the body’s shoulder furthest away from me and the other one on his hip, I rolled him over.

And looked right into the very dead eyes of Justus Salero.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tia

I couldn't remember the last time I laughed so hard. Nixon's Aunt Brooke had tears flowing down my cheeks. I had no idea we would have so much in common. We were from the same privileged background, and she was regaling us with hilarious stories of the time when she had broken away from the trappings and struck out on her own.

Polished and beautiful with long, deep chestnut hair and brown eyes, Ethan's wife was nothing short of stunning. Even dressed comfortably in black leggings and a burnt orange chunky sweater, black-and-white checked scarf, and fuzzy boots, she had that urban sheen to her. I could never pull off that color.

"And so ..." she laughed, wiping the tears from under her eyes, "this thing is starting to make really weird noises, and I think the top is going to blow off and set my new kitchen on fire. Ethan comes in and finds me standing there with a cookie sheet as protection like I'm setting myself up to bat."

"I love this story," Natalie laughed.

"And he's like, what the hell are you doing? When I told him the crock pot thingy on my counter started making very sketchy noises, he threw back his head, laughed, and informed me it was a pressure cooker, and it was supposed to make those noises as it was pressurizing."

Ha! I was clueless when I moved into my first place, too, but I had spent a lot of time with our family chef, and she taught me everything I needed to know. I could cook and feed myself at the very least.

Now, don't ask what happened to the first load of laundry I did all on my own. It was an experience I almost completely blocked out.

As Natalie bent forward to throw another log on our fire, Lucy turned to Brooke. "What were you going to do with the cookie sheet?"

"It was protection! What if I needed to swat the top away or something? I don't know! I didn't know how household shit worked."

We all laughed again.

Relaxed and comfortable, it felt good to be in the company of friends, laughing without a care in the world. This place fit me. This *family* fit me. I really wanted to make them mine.

"So, what do you think of Grayson Falls?" Brooke asked, eyes suddenly on me. A month ago, her stare would have unnerved me, but now that I've spent time around Nixon's family, I knew that his aunt was looking for answers but meant me no harm.

"From what I've seen, I love it!" I gushed. "It's so different from where I grew up and where I lived. It's lush and has four seasons. The community I've seen here is charming. The whole town is ... is ..." I struggled to find the right words.

"Rockwell-esque?" Natalie asked.

"Fits like your favorite pair of jeans?" Brooke chimed in.

"Both of those things," Lucy nodded. "It's quaint but doesn't feel like back woods. It feels ... just right."

Resting my head back on the Adirondack chair I was relaxing in, I looked up to the crisp, blue fall sky. "I think I want to stay here."

"Me too," Lucy said softly.

I reached my hand out to her, and she loosely joined our fingers. Squeezing first, I dropped her hand and looked back up to the sky, trying to imagine Nixon and I having a life here. When he got back, I was going to ask him to take me to the hospital to talk to his Uncle Sebastian about volunteering and the reality of coming on staff. It was time to start taking the steps forward to move on.

But that was all going to have to wait because Griffin came out of the woods like lightning. Denver and Chandler were with him. “Inside!” He hissed at us. “Now!”

The four of us watched them in stunned silence for a beat before Natalie sprang to her feet followed by Brooke then me. Griffin literally plucked Lucy out of her chair and tossed her over his shoulder like she didn’t weigh more than a toddler and hauled ass into the house while Denver and Chandler covered us.

“Uhhh ... babe?” Lucy asked, as we hurried through the living room. “What the hell?”

No one answered her.

Heart pounding, I tried not to think about the night of my rescue and the paralyzing terror I felt. In front of me, Lucy propped herself up on Griffin’s back to look at me. I saw fear and resignation in her eyes. We were going to get tossed in some dungeon without any answers.

Behind me, Brooke and Natalie were calm as a lake after a storm. Was this something that they experienced often? If Grayson Falls were that dangerous then I was going to have to rethink my position about making this my new hometown.

Moving through the master bedroom, Griffin crossed to a door and quickly punched in a code on the keypad before pulling the door open and heading down the stairs.

Dutifully, I followed him down into the darkness.

Have you ever been well and truly in the dark? You literally can’t see inches in front of your face. It’s cold and oppressive. Thankfully, that only lasted a few seconds before the room was aglow in soft light and Natalie was moving away

from the switches on the wall. How she got there in the inky blackness, I hadn't the foggiest idea. But then again, she and Brooke were so calm.

"What the hell is going on, junior?" Brooke demanded glaring at Griffin.

Okay. So, it turned out only Natalie was calm. Brooke was coming apart just as much as I was.

Griffin gently slid Lucy off his shoulder, briefly palming her cheek as if he was apologizing for not letting her feet hit the ground during our mad dash here. Honestly, I expected nothing less from him.

"Where's Nixon?" I whispered. Please don't let him be hurt. I don't think I could handle it if he were hurt. I wasn't ready to be the caregiver yet.

Was I?

"He's on the way," Griffin replied.

"He's okay?" I hated how my voice shook, but I couldn't help it. Deep breaths wouldn't help. Anxiety was coiling inside me and soon, I wasn't going to have any control.

"He's on his way back, and he's fine," Griffin assured as Chandler and Denver took up positions by the door. I couldn't help but wonder if one of them was Eagle Team's traitor. Were they going to kill all of us? Was all this just a charade to get Lucy and I somewhere away so they could shoot us?

"And what's going on?" Natalie demanded. In the time that I'd been staying at her house, I never heard this authoritative voice from her. She was always so sweet.

Nixon's mom had a badass streak to her.

"Phoenix and Davis found a dead body on the property," Griffin said, coldly. Maybe coldly wasn't the right word. Professionally? He was definitely in SEAL mode. "All I know right now is whoever's dead isn't one of our people."

That was a relief. I didn't know everybody that was here, but it was still good to hear none of the good guys were dead.

And I just realized how I would describe Griffin's voice.

Chilling.

Absolutely, terrifyingly chilling.

I thought I'd seen him in SEAL mode before when Lucy's dumbass brother tried to break into the house in California. Lucy proceeded to beat the shit out of her brother while I trembled inside with Nixon and had tea.

God, I was so pathetic. Afraid of everything and everyone around me. I couldn't trust anyone. Not really.

This was a strange moment to realize how much I'd grown in my recovery.

"They're clearing the property now, ma'am," Chandler said, quietly then winced under the death glare Griffin sent him.

"Chief speaks. We shut up," Denver hissed under his breath, but everyone heard him anyway.

"Sorry, Chief," Chandler muttered.

"Well, we'll be in here for a while then," Natalie sighed. "I say we get drunk and play cards."

"Sounds like a fun way to pass the time. Are we playing poker?"

"Good god, no, child." Brooke sounded aghast by the very thought. Natalie pulled a black box from a small, two-door cabinet against the wall, and dropped it on a gaming table that seated six people. It landed with a *thunk*.

"Is that ..." Lucy asked walking over to the table.

"Christ," Griffin muttered when he saw what game we'd be playing.

It was my lucky day. Because as luck would have it, we were going to play Cards Against Humanity.

TWO HOURS LATER ...

MY HEAD WAS SWIMMING from shots. Did you know Cards Against Humanity could be a drinking game? Yep! Those who don't win the hand take a shot. Simple.

Unless you've had shitty cards the entire game like me.

Where was I?

Oh! So, it was my turn to pick a winner. The prompt was, "*Yo mama so fat she _____.*" I'd already turned over two cards, and they were gems. So far, I had, "Yo mama so fat she the last season of *Game of Thrones*," and, "Yo mama so fat she *cumming into a black hole.*"

People get paid to come up with this stuff. Let that sink in.

I had one card left. I was pretty sure I knew who the first two belonged to just by the way they'd been playing the whole game.

"Yo mama so fat she," I began. My voice rang out in the cozy, super-secret basement room that could probably run a global war given the amount of tech on one wall. It was more than the command center. I flipped the last card so only I could see it, immediately falling into hysterical laughter.

Texas.

That was it. Just Texas. *Yo mama so fat she Texas.* I wasn't ready for the brilliance of it. Who could be?

"Pretty sure she's holding the winning card," Lucy muttered.

"I can't ... breathe ..." There was a part of me that was worried about hyperventilating right now. Either that or I was going to wet my pants from laughing so hard.

"It's mine." Brooke held her hand out for her black card of victory. "Hand it over and bow before the queen."

"What does it say?" If I didn't know better, I'd think that a was a whine in her voice.

"For fuck's sake." Muttering, Griffin yanked the card from my hand and immediately cut off my laughter.

“Hey! I’m supposed to read it!” He’s going to mess up the funniest hand of the game so far. *What a buttface!*

“Texas,” he barked, dropping the card back onto the table. “Yo mama so fat she Texas.”

Once the card fluttered to the table, dead silence followed. Then Lucy snorted.

“Christ.” Griffin rolled his eyes.

A laugh escaped Natalie next, followed by Brooke and me. Soon we were cackling, wiping our eyes, and clutching our stomachs.

The door burst open with a security beep. Sadly, my ladies and I were too drunk to be alarmed by the way Nixon and Eric came in hot.

Oooh, I like the thought of Nixon coming in hot.

“Tia.” Nixon didn’t speak my name loudly, but I heard him. Too bad I couldn’t stop laughing long enough to find out what the hell was going on.

Once we saw the seriousness of the men’s faces—and *remembered we were locked up in an underground safe room with steel doors*—the laughing subsided to hiccups peppered with small bursts of laughter and giggles here and there.

“Tia, I have to talk to you. Something very serious has happened.” Nixon said.

“Don’t bother.” Griffin waved him off. “They’re all close to blackout drunk.”

“Dammit, Nat,” Eric said without heat. “Just tell me it’s not the Macallan.”

Pursing her lips, Brooke picked up the bottle and held it high. “You mean *this* Macallan? It’s delicious.”

“It ought to be. It was thirty years old.” Eric swiped the bottle from Brooke’s dangling fingers then turned to Nixon. “Your mother and her coven just drank a five-thousand-dollar bottle of whisky.”

“Tia’s drunk?” Nixon sounded surprised. “Tia doesn’t drink.”

I stood up and swayed. “I do sometimes,” I slurred. “This was fun though.” I let out a breath. “The last time I drank like this, I got kidnapped.”

Nixon was at my side so fast I almost got motion sick. “Baby.” He put his hands out and steadied me.

“Yup.” I nodded. The room was starting to spin. “Did it happen again?” I asked, looking around the room. Everything looked distorted. “Am I kidnapped?”

“No, angel,” Nixon wrapped his arms around me. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“I went to a bar,” I said, not noticing the room had gone silent. “I had a date ... Brad ... Chad ... I don’t remember. They got him, too. I figured it out once. The bartender must have been in on it. I don’t know any other way the drinks would have been drugged. I never took my eyes off mine. But the room started to spin, kinda like it is now.” Nixon’s arms tighten around me. “When I woke up, there was Justus Slar ... Salern ... Slarro. Can we all agree just to call him douchebag?”

“Absolutely, baby girl,” Brooke said.

“Well, he was there, and he had a collar for me and a list of rules with him.” I ended with a nod, too intoxicated to notice the horrified looks on everyone’s faces. “He was a bit of a dick, and his rules were dumb.”

Something wasn’t right. My body didn’t feel like it was my own.

“He can’t hurt you anymore, Tia,” Nixon said. “He’s dead.”

Blinking, I looked up at the man I loved. What did he say?

I whispered, “Did you know the tiny plastic table put in the center of a pizza is called a box tent?”

Then I vomited.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nixon

With my mind spinning, I carried Tia up the stairs from the safe room. Both of us were covered in vomit.

Good times.

The property had been cleared. Rocco's team was bugging out the next day with the corpse of Justus Salero. Once we pulled the dead douchebag down from the treehouse, I dropped trou and pissed all over the motherfucker. It was the most insulting thing I could think to do since I couldn't kill him.

Whoever got to him first fucked him up proper. He was sliced to ribbons and ball-less before being shot in the head. I didn't know who the assassin was, but I kind of wanted to shake their hand.

If I didn't know better, I'd say it looked like a mob hit. The injuries were brutal but precise. Whoever had sliced him knew just how to keep him in pain the longest.

Justus Salero had met an anguished death.

I wasn't sure if Tia was going to remember everything—or anything for that matter—from her time in the safe room. I was positive she wouldn't have shared what she did about her kidnapping had she been sober.

Is it strange that I'm glad she got drunk? She felt comfortable enough with the people she was with to be

vulnerable. It also helped her relax in a stressful situation. If she'd been sober, she'd have been worrying about everyone but herself. On the other hand, if the room had been breached and my teammates killed, she'd have been screwed, so I take all that back.

Of course, her vomit is sticking to my skin, she stinks to high heaven, and that's nothing to be happy about either.

What she said about being drugged in a bar made my blood boil. I wanted to ask how she knew her date wasn't in on it, but if she didn't mean to tell us that, I didn't want to push.

And I was positive she didn't mean to tell us that.

But what if that asshole was still working at the bar?

That bartender could still work there. If Tia's date was in on it, he and the bartender could still be running their con. If the date hadn't been in on it, who would there have been to rat the bartender out?

I'd put my dad and Tex on the quest to find out if it was the same guy. That wasn't information in any of the files we had, nor had Tia revealed that in her original statement. If my suspicions were proven true, I was going to take that bartender apart piece by fucking piece and feed him to Shadow—who was now whimpering like crazy from my bedroom. It seemed no one stopped to make sure she got to go downstairs with Tia.

Stopping in my parents' room, I gently set Tia on her feet. She was as stable as wet spaghetti. There was no way she'd be able to stand up in a shower so a bath it would have to be.

Swinging Tia back up into my arms—hoping the motion didn't wake her up and make her hurl again—I moved smoothly down the hall, pausing briefly to open the door to my bedroom. Shadow came out like a cannonball and nearly crashed into the wall.

Lucy followed me, but she cut the corner too short and walked into the door jamb. "Ooof, dammit," I heard her mutter.

"Dammit, Luce," Griffin grumbled. "Let me see it."

“I’m fine.” Lucy moved by me and turned on the water for the tub. “My muscles are still drunk, Nixon, but my mind is sharp. I can help with this.”

“I’m going to get in with her,” I said, quietly. “Can you grab something clean and dry to put on her when we get out?”

Nodding, she walked out. I pushed the door shut behind her and locked it. No way was anyone accidentally seeing her naked. It didn’t matter if Tia never knew. I wouldn’t allow it.

Gently, I lowered her to the floor and leaned her up against the wall. Her head lolled bonelessly to the side.

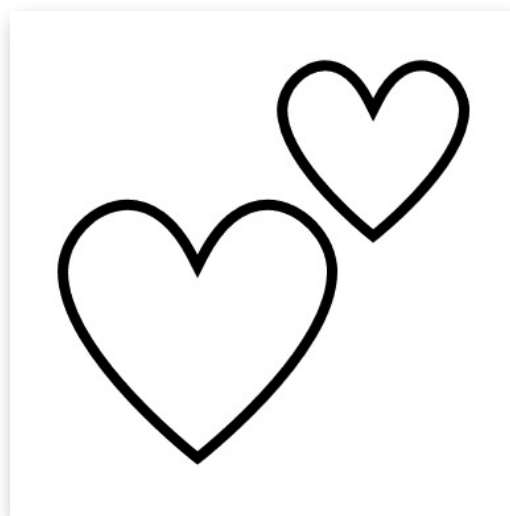
Yep, she was wasted.

Quickly shedding my clothes, I kicked them into the corner, and checked the water temperature. Perfect. I let the tub fill as I eased Tia’s vomit-soaked sweater over her head. In deference to the chilly weather, she had layered her clothing. This was going to take a few minutes.

Once that cardio workout was done, I picked her body up, stepped into the tub, and eased us down into the warm water.

I took a moment to tip my head back against the tile and sighed, clutching Tia to my chest. Moment over, I got back to work.

It had been a hell of a day.



PLACING aspirin and water on the nightstand next to my bed and a garbage can next to it, I turned, tucking Tia in before pressing a kiss to her forehead. She was burning up, but I wasn't worried. I smirked when I thought of how hungover she was going to be in the morning.

Dusk was falling outside as I walked back through the house. There was no sign of the other women, and I wondered if they'd passed out like Tia. When I got to the living room, I got part of my answer.

My Aunt Brooke was curled up on the couch and cuddling with one of the quilts that she made. Chuckling, I walked through the kitchen and out onto the patio where my father, Griffin, Ethan, and the rest of the team were all gathered.

All of them. The entire team was here.

And one of them would rather be anywhere else.

Some were sitting in the Adirondack chairs, others on large stumps. There was one chair available next to my father.

Helps to have home field advantage.

Not going to lie, there was a strut to my walk as I crossed the patio and took my seat to the right of my father. Ethan sat on his other side. I slowly looked from team member to team member. No one looked uncomfortable.

Griffin met my eyes across the fire, and I tried to discern what he was trying to convey to me with his eyes. Was he going to address the issue of the traitor? We hadn't talked about that. Not that Griffin had to discuss anything that had to do with the team with me. He was my master chief, and I followed him and his lead only.

Well, except for my dad's lead. He trumped the Navy.

With one quick clearing of his throat, Griffin commanded the group.

"Justus Salero is dead," Griffin began. None of my teammates mentioned we were about to discuss classified information in front of my father and Uncle Ethan. We bent

the rules all the time to get the job done. It was why we were the ones sent in for the most difficult assignments.

The *off-the-books* assignments.

“Our mission is to take down the operation,” Griffin continued. “Until we know that Salero was its leader, it’s still our mission.”

There were various gestures of agreement around the circle.

I knew each of my friend’s tells, and they knew mine. No one was showing one.

Maybe our intel was wrong ...

But it wasn’t. My gut told me someone wants ... well, what *do* they want? Wouldn’t it have been better to leave after he killed Salero? I mean, we’d know for sure who he was, but he’d be gone already.

Off to put his contingency plan into place.

But whoever it was, was still here. So, either *their* mission wasn’t complete yet; or this was a one off, and they would be back to business as usual; or the intel was wrong.

The intel wasn’t wrong.

“It doesn’t matter if Salero led the network or there’s someone else still out there, the immediate danger to Lucy and Tia is likely past us.”

I stayed absolutely still as I listened to Griffin. I would not show anything other than the same curiosity as everyone else.

But I knew what was going on.

This is the plan they’d come up with after I left. Griffin and my dad were behind this. We didn’t know the danger was over, and we sure as fuck didn’t move on *likely*.

“There will be chaos while Salero’s underbosses try to figure out what the hell to do and who will take power—if anyone is even strong enough to do so.”

This time, I did react, looking accusingly at my father, who glanced back briefly before looking at the rest of the men.

Et tu, Brute?

I couldn't believe Griffin agreed to use Lucy as bait. *Again.*

"Rocco will report to Commander North," Griffin continued. "We'll get our orders after that. For now, we'll stay put. In the morning, we'll follow the paper and money trail. You're dismissed until then."

No one moved. I didn't think they would. Three of my teammates didn't know anything was wrong. I wondered if they could even sense the underlying tension.

Then again, no one on this team had a problem paying attention to details.

It was quiet for a few minutes. Leaning my head back, I looked up at the stars. It had been a long ass day. It went from the best day of my life to ... well, shit. Was it still the best day of my life? Tia's tormentor was dead.

There would be confusion and in-fighting for a while, so it was entirely possible that no one would care about the freed captives.

Didn't mean I was comfortable using Tia to draw out our traitor. That's even assuming Tia was his mission.

"Phoenix," Dallas piped into the quiet. I lifted my head and looked over at him. "Did you really piss on Salero's body?"

Smiles and laughter rolled around the circle. "I sure fucking did. I never pissed so much in my life."

Griffin dropped his head back on his chair and sighed. "I would have taken a shit on him."

"Dude," I replied. "My dad was there."

Laughter carried into the night. Were we really a tight-knit band of brothers and friends? Because it sure as hell felt like it right then.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tia

Water. I needed water desperately.

It would be awesome if someone would get those drums to stop beating incessantly. They're going to wake up the whole damn house.

Awful wasn't a strong enough word for how I felt then. My mouth had that disgusting fuzzy-tongue taste, almost like I was licking an ashtray last night despite not smoking a single thing. In fact, no one was smoking. At least I don't think they were. My memories from yesterday were hazy.

I don't remember much after we started playing the card game. There was a lot of expensive whiskey being passed around. I don't know what made me take that first shot of the Macallan. I was perfectly happy nursing my hot toddy.

But I tossed it back like a college freshman.

Then proceeded to drink like a college freshman, and now I was paying the price. Because I was not, in fact, a college freshman.

I remember feeling like I was sleeping on hell's front porch and sucking down water and aspirin that Nixon, I assume, left for me.

The noise that came out of me sounded like it was from some kind wounded animal. Taking deep breaths, I began to open my eyes. There was fresh water and more aspirin on the

nightstand, and I gobbled them up, swearing I would never set foot in that safe room again—despite how comfortable and luxurious it was. Natalie told me the whole family could survive for three months down there. Three. Months. I hadn't wanted to be in there for three hours.

Nixon's chuckling had me slowly sitting up in bed, my feet nudging Shadow, who didn't budge. "Morning, angel." Peeling one scratchy eye open, I saw him leaning against the door jamb, arms crossed and smiling at me. "How are you feeling?"

I growled. I think it was a growl. It was probably more like a mewl because Nixon laughed.

He was amused, but he didn't sound like he was poking fun at me. It sounded like he was genuinely concerned.

This guy was too good for any girl.

The throbbing between my temples was beginning to subside. Hydration was what I needed most. Running a hand into my hair, it immediately got stuck. Ugh. That was going to hurt getting out.

"Yeah, sorry about the hair," Nixon said with a slight frown. "You hurled all over both of us. I had to get in the tub with you and wash your hair. I combed it, but you still slept with it wet. Have some more water, and I'll get your brush." Pushing off the door jamb, he disappeared down the hall and immediately reappeared again holding Lucy's hairbrush instead of mine. Whatever. I didn't have it in me to care about what brush I used.

Scooting himself behind me, he picked up the glass of water and reached around to the front of me. Gratefully, I took it and began to drink while he gently started working the knots out of my hair. It was sweet of him to take care of it for me before I looked into a mirror and became horrified over how it looked.

"I can't believe I drank like that," I groaned, pressing the palm of my hand against my tender head.

"I couldn't believe you did either," he said.

“How did the others fare?”

“Well, Mom and Lucy are still sleeping. My uncle took my aunt home last night. I should have warned you about Aunt Brooke though. Sorry, angel. She can drink anyone in our family under the table.”

“Lesson learned,” I said, tipping my head back. He had magic fingers. Each time he ran the brush through my hair, he stroked his other hand behind it. He was also getting in some good skull massaging. I may fall back asleep.

Natalie appeared in the doorway. She looked ... green. That wasn't good. Her blonde, curly hair was piled on her head. It didn't even have that chic kind of look. Her mission was clearly just to get it out of her face. She was also wearing chunky, black glasses. I hadn't realized she wore contacts. This was the first time I saw the glasses.

Nixon continued his work as his mother looked at us.

Then she smiled.

I assumed she was smiling at the fact that I probably looked like I was hit by a train, too. “Tia,” she said. “Once we rally, I'll take you over to the hospital. One, shots of oxygen will set us right again.” Very true. She was speaking my language. “And two, Sebastian can show you around. He and Jackie would love to have you volunteer.”

I managed to get the ends of my mouth to raise the slightest bit.

Worst. Return. Smile. Ever.

“That sounds great,” I mustered up. “Thank you.”

Without another word, she disappeared from view. Nixon and I sat in silence as he finished up with my hair.

Then he braided it.

“Where did you learn how to do that?” Astonished, I ran my hand down the perfect rope he created out of my hair.

“Are you kidding me? I have two sisters.”

Standing, he walked over to the door and closed it. I watched him as he walked back over and sat in front of me, this time on the bed. Given how serious he looked, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear what he had to say just then.

“Angel, I need to ask you something, and I don't want to upset you.”

“This isn't a very good lead into the discussion,” I replied.

“Do you remember me and my dad getting back last night?”

Closing my eyes, I thought about it. Nothing. My memories were just not there. Yay. I got blackout drunk. *Way to keep yourself safe, Tia.*

Opening my eyes back up, I looked at him and slowly shook my head. “Everything's fuzzy after your mom played, *that ball-slapping sex your parents are having*, against Brooke. She won the round with that gem.”

Nixon stared at me before he winced. “Please don't ever say those words in association with my mother ever again.” I put two and two together.

Then I laughed. “I'm sorry! All my brain cylinders aren't firing yet.”

“Yeah, I got that.” He looked disgusted but not mad at me. I wasn't sure he could actually get mad at me. I didn't think it was in his nature. “I debated telling you this because I don't want to upset you, but I think that you might be important to the mission.”

Filled with trepidation now, I said, “Okay.”

“Last night, you told me you and your date were taken from a bar,” he began. “I was wondering if you remembered what bar you were at.”

“Wow,” I said softly and took a deep breath. I said that? What else did I say? I didn't want to think about that night, but he was asking me to because he thought it was important, so I would do my best. “I'm trying to remember.”

“Take your time. Don't force it.”

“It was a new place, and I’d only been there a few times. It was just a few blocks away from the hospital I worked at. I was annoyed because I was running late and wouldn’t have time to change out of my scrubs.”

I tried to focus only on the restaurant. I’d been drugged so many times since then ... hell, I had to detox from cocaine. Not all my memories were clear.

“Boyers,” I said as it came to me. “It was a nice place, but not so classy that I’d be sticking out in my scrubs. A lot of people from the hospital went there.”

Leaning forward, he kissed my lips. “Thanks, angel. That’s all I wanted to know.”

“Why is it important?”

“I don’t know that it is. Can you wait for me to explain until I know more?”

I nodded. I trusted him. He’d tell me what I needed to know when I needed to know it. That, and I didn’t think my brain could take hard thinking just yet.

“The other thing,” he continued, “was why you were in the safe room in the first place.”

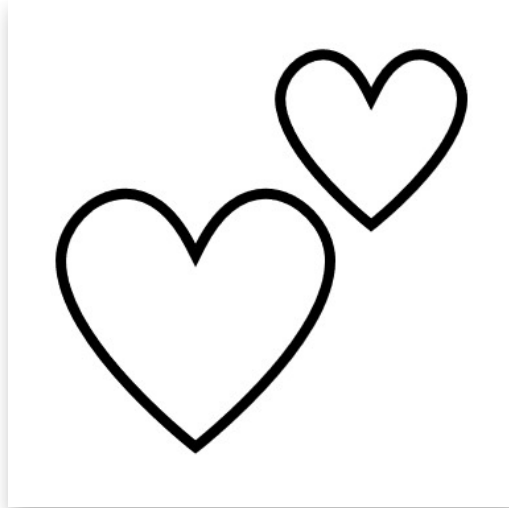
“Wow, that should have been the first words out of my mouth this morning. I can’t believe I didn’t ask what happened.”

“My father and I found Salero dead on the property. He’d been tortured.”

I sat staring at Nixon’s beautiful face. I heard his words. Individually, I knew what they meant, too. But together they just weren’t sinking in.

Did he just say Justus Salero was dead?

Some part of my brain had processed what he said while the rest of my brain couldn’t fathom that those words could ever go together. What resulted was a total meltdown.



AFTER I HAD SWALLOWED down toast and about a gallon of tea, Natalie, Nixon, and I piled into an SUV and made the short drive to the Grayson Falls Hospital.

I adored this place. It was quaint in its Victorian house. Inside, once you got past the cozy lobby, it looked more like an urgent care or glorified clinic. I hadn't had a full tour yet, but I knew the top floors were patient rooms. The hospital only admitted patients with common, less serious ailments. It wasn't a trauma center, but Natalie told me that they did get step-down patients transferred in who weren't ready to go home yet but also didn't need the resources of a bigger hospital.

The hospital also had regular doctor's office hours. I didn't know who originally designed the facility, but they were a master at use of space.

"Whoa," Nixon's Uncle Sebastian said as soon as he got a good look at his sister Natalie. "I've seen this before. Beds two and six are open. Take your pick."

"My brother has jokes," Natalie quipped, leading me past her brother.

It was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Nixon

As soon as I saw Tia pull the curtain closed around the bed she and my aunt chose to raid, my uncle pounced on his opportunity.

“So, the bastard who hurt her is dead then?” he asked, eyes on the closed curtain.

“Very much so,” I confirmed, watching the same. Tia was out of my sight; therefore, I watched where I last saw her to ensure nobody else went behind that curtain. Salero may be dead, but his killer was still out there, and I didn’t know who they were working for. “Given the location of the wounds, I’d say he bled out slowly, and given the fact that his nuts had been torn off, I think it was also very painful.”

“Any ideas who did it?” Sebastian asked.

“Nope. It wasn’t any of our guys.”

“That doesn’t give me warm and fuzzy feelings about the safety of this town.” Sarcasm dripped in this voice.

“You sound like Uncle Danny,” I said. “Whoever hit Salero is long gone.” I hoped. “They were only interested in him. This was a professional assassin, not some rando.”

“I hope you’re right,” Sebastian said. “The last thing we need is a bunch of cut up and nutless patients in here.”

I couldn't help it. I snickered. What a visual he offered with that comment. "We'll see what we can do to make sure that doesn't happen."

Taking his eyes off the curtain, my uncle turned to me. "Look at you." I could hear the awe in his voice, and it almost made me squirm. "You're a badass, a hero to your country. I'm proud of you, Ethan Nixon Davis. You live up to your name."

"If I'm half the man my namesake is, then I'll consider myself successful."

"Would that we could all be just like Ethan," Sebastian murmured. I often wondered if the family put my Uncle Ethan on too high of a pedestal. We all thought he belonged there, but I knew it tended to make him feel uncomfortable.

Ethan was special. We all knew it. He *was* a hero to his country. He worked with his beloved rescue animals and ran his small farm with the heart of a warrior. He may have been a quiet person by nature, but he didn't hesitate to jump in and help my dad when he was needed. In fact, he didn't hesitate to jump in and help when *anybody* needed him. He didn't even have to know the person that needed help.

"You're not a bad guy to emulate either, you know," I said to Sebastian. "A successful doctor, classy, loving ... gossipy."

"That's not even a word."

"Oh, I think it is," I chuckled. "Me and my sisters and cousins, we all know how lucky we were to end up in this family. Tia didn't have that growing up. She was the only child of a senator and his pampered wife. She didn't get the same love and guidance we did, though she was close to their cook, which I guess is something." Strangely, my uncle had that same story as Tia, only swap out the cook for grandparents.

Tia was the child of a senator, like my Uncle Sebastian; a socialite turned humble, like my Aunt Brooke; a nurse, like my mother; caring and quiet, like Ellie; strong and intelligent, like my sister Emma; a healer, like my Aunt Jackie. Well ... fuck. No wonder I was crazy about her. She was multiple members of my family wrapped up in one bomb-ass girl.

“It must have been,” Sebastian said. “She’s a wonderful person. That had to be somebody’s influence. Your parents are crazy about her. So is your Aunt Brooke. I hope to get to spend some time with your intended as well.”

“My intended, huh?” This time I turned and looked at him. He had his smirk on. “I swear sometimes that you should have been born a girl. You gossip just as much as my aunts do.”

“Your aunts, but not your mother,” he muttered. “I’d have an easier time getting the launch codes from the President of the United States before I could get anything out of her. It’s an annoying trait she and Ethan share. You are going to marry Tia, right?”

“If she lets me,” I said, my gaze returning to the curtain my life was behind. Everything to do with our relationship would always be her choice. I would never take that from her. If she didn’t want me, well, that just might break me. But Tia *did* want Grayson Falls, and I came with the town.

As if my uncle could read my line of thought, he said, “So, what’s next? When your mission is done, if it isn’t now, what’s next for you? From what I hear, Tia is hoping for a job here, and I’m going to give it to her. You live in San Diego.”

“I’m hoping she’ll come with me so I can resign my commission and we can settle here.” I wouldn’t force her back to the west coast, but I hoped with every fiber of my being she wanted to come, at least temporarily.

Boston and I hadn’t talked about it, but I thought he was done with the Navy, too. He had Lucy now, and she had family in California she was close to. I didn’t think moving here was in their cards. If that was the case, I’d miss that fucking grump.

I’d miss all my teammates, which was hard to reconcile since one of them was a traitor, and we still didn’t know who it was. Regardless of who it was, I knew I’d miss the man I thought he was. We were brothers—closer than brothers—and I still couldn’t reason out who turned on us and why. Each was as unlikely—or likely—as the next.

It was ironic that the town I wanted to get out of so badly when I was younger was the only place I wanted to be now. I had to travel the world, see and do the things I did, to be sure. This town fit me.

And it didn't hurt that my twin was here. As close as Tia and I had become, I hated being away from Ellie. Tia was my heart, but Ellie was the other half of my soul. She was as essential to me as breathing. As necessary as the blood running through my veins. It was difficult when we were apart.

I needed my heart and soul together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tia

After the hit of oxygen, I was feeling like myself again, if not a little embarrassed about getting into that condition in the first place.

With the woman I hoped might one day be my mother-in-law no less.

“Alright,” Natalie said quietly. “Now I can face the world.” I cleaned up our small mess while Natalie disinfected what we touched.

A commotion on the other side of the curtain drew our attention.

There was a problem. Someone was speaking in a loud, angry voice, and I heard the distinct sound of a gun chambering a bullet.

With horror, I realized the angry voice was calling my name.

“Tia, my princess! Come on out, baby girl. I’ve missed you.”

Astonished, my mouth dropped open, and I gaped at Natalie. It was my father.

Peeking through the curtain, I saw him on the other side of the nurse’s station waving a gun at Nixon ... who looked pissed as hell.

“Tia, baby, you can either come see Daddy now, or I’ll blow your lover’s head off.”

Natalie paled. That was her son my father was threatening to kill so violently. I could only imagine what was going through her mind as she heard her son’s life threatened. I wasn’t going to let that happen though. If keeping Nixon alive meant giving my life in place of his, I would.

“You can’t go to him,” Natalie hissed, touching my arm, just as I was about to pull the curtain back.

“I can’t let him shoot Nixon either.” I insisted. Of course I was going to go to my father. I would not have Nixon’s blood on my hands. Just the thought made my stomach turn and my hands shake.

“Nixon won’t want to live if something happens to you.” She shook her head. “That’s a problem for me. As much as I don’t want to know about it, I’m sure it’s not the first time he’s had a gun pointed at him. He’ll know what to do. We need to find something that will neutralize your father. Nixon is counting on that and not you running out there without a plan. That’ll only make the situation explosive.”

I want to be Natalie Davis when I grow up. Personally, I thought the situation was already explosive. All I could think about was that gun trained on Nixon; meanwhile, his mother was hatching a plan and ready to get shit done.

“The medication room,” I whispered, my brain finally focusing despite my fear. “If I can get close enough, I can inject him. I’m sure there’s something in there that will put him down.” Hopefully, whatever we found wouldn’t kill him. My father deserved to die for his crimes, but I’d rather see him tried, convicted, and sent to jail for them instead. I wanted him to rot in prison for the rest of his life, knowing I was free and living *my* best life.

Nodding, Natalie said, “Let’s go.”

With that agreement, we quietly shuffled to the far corner of the curtained room, slipping into the next bed bay, which was thankfully empty. After that one was a hallway we could

sneak down. Natalie would lead the way since I didn't know where the med room was, and she used to work here.

Natalie's shoe squeaked on the floor as soon as we took our first step, and we froze.

"Is that you, Tia? Come on out, baby girl. No more hide and seek!"

He was using a tone of voice I hadn't heard since I was a child. The man had come unhinged. I was creeped out, heartbroken, and terrified all at once. Maybe my parents and I hadn't had the closest, most loving relationship, but other than never spending time with me, I wasn't abused.

"She's not here," Nixon said in a deadly calm voice that sent chills up my spine. I wish he wouldn't give my father a reason to pull the trigger. I couldn't stand it if Nixon got hurt because of me.

Crouching down to the floor, we scurried on our hands and knees down the hallway, using the nurse's station as cover and staying low. The floors were wood and dusty along the baseboards. It was strange how clearly little details stood out to me when I was terrified for Nixon's life.

Passing a paperclip and rubber band on the floor, rounding one more corner on all fours, I followed Natalie as she stood up and dashed down the hall, grabbing a door jamb, and swinging herself into a room, which was no bigger than the size of a walk-in closet.

Where she plowed right into her brother, Sebastian.

I literally skidded to a stop when I saw them collide. Sebastian checked quickly to make sure he didn't stab Natalie with one of the needles he had filled with something.

Handing one to each of us, he said, "It's potassium chloride. If you can get close enough, give him the entire thing."

My eyes snapped to Sebastian's. Potassium chloride could kill a person if the dose was too high.

“It’s not a lethal dose,” Sebastian said. “But it will incapacitate him.”

Nodding, I backed out of the room. Stepping out after Natalie, Sebastian turned and locked the door. It seemed like such a trivial thing, and he probably just did it out of habit, but the last thing we needed was my father—or anyone he might have with him—getting access to everything in that room. I had no idea what he was capable of. He was holding a gun on a man and sold his only child into sex slavery. He had already gone to extreme lengths.

This time, I followed Sebastian down another hall, and Natalie was behind me. Sebastian quietly shooed two nurses in the opposite direction and told them to get out and call the police. Since the police station was just across the street, I was confident in a quick response time.

Drawing closer to the ER, I could hear Nixon talking to my father. He sounded like he was trying to talk a toddler out of dropping a red can of paint on a white carpet.

“Senator, she’s not going to come to you if you’re holding a gun on me,” Nixon was saying. “Waving a weapon around isn’t going to earn her trust.”

“Are you the one that got her out?” my father asked. Was that defeat I heard in his voice? “Did you save her?”

“After you sold her, yes,” Nixon replied smoothly.

“Sold her?” My father sounded disgusted. “Is that what she thinks? That I took money for her?”

“Didn’t you?”

I held my breath. I wanted to know the answer to why my father did what he did to me so badly, but now that I might get that chance, I wasn’t so sure I wanted to know.

“I didn’t sell her,” he said. A little spark of hope ignited in my heart. Could it be I misunderstood? “She was a gift.”

I could feel the blood drain from my face. Was that worse than being sold? I hated that I couldn’t decide. “Justus was my

second highest acquisitions associate,” my putrid father continued.

“Your first being the bartender at Boyers, right?”

Just as the three of us were about to move, we stopped in our tracks at Nixon’s words. Was this what he was waiting to tell me until he had more information? I had figured out a long time ago that Chad was innocent of any wrongdoing. He was raped and beaten, too. Then he was shot and killed.

With Chad cleared, that only left the bartender. My drink was in my hand the entire time after I received it from the bartender. It was the only way it could have been drugged. I hadn’t watched the bartender make my drink. I was keeping an eye on Chad’s hands and making sure they weren’t palming anything.

Ironic, isn’t it? The great bartender. The unsung hero of girls’ nights across the country. Conjuror of fruity beverages, caller of rides, angel shot rescuers ... we girls depend on our good ol’ barkeep more than we think we do. When we are at our most vulnerable, we put our drunken trust in a total stranger, hoping they brought their A game to work that night and could spot the predators.

It’s like going to a cop for help and finding out he’s in on it. It just doesn’t compute.

No woman is “asking for it,” but we don’t need to be so stupid either.

One of the things I liked about Over the Hop so much was the feeling of community. No one would dare drug a girl in Laurie’s place. She’d relieve him of his balls with a lemon zester.

It didn’t hurt that the chief of police was sitting at the bar either. I imagine that went a long way in deterring crime.

Inching back toward the main part of the ER where Nixon and my father were, the three of us peeked around the corner. Nixon should be able to see us out of his peripheral vision. And though it didn’t look like he did, I’m confident he knew we were there.

And he was probably pissed off that his mother and I didn't run out of the building. That's something he would have to live with. He wasn't the only one that could do the saving around here.

"Well, well," my father said, his voice turning cold and calculating in contrast to the devastated and pleading man we just saw. "You've been doing your homework."

"We have, yes," Nixon said casually. "But that was just a wild theory I had. You're the one that confirmed that for me. They'll be moving on him momentarily. You could share a cell."

Walking over to the nurse's station, Nixon casually leaned against it, as if he had no worries in the world, not acting at all like he had a gun drawn on him.

Waving the gun in the direction Nixon just walked from, my father started to sound desperate. Not a good sign. "Get back over there. I have the gun here. You move when I say you move. What are you going to do—take a pen and stab me with it?"

I didn't have to see Nixon get dressed in the morning to know that he had at least two guns—and a few knives—strapped to various parts of his body.

"I have an idea." My whisper was so quiet that Natalie had to pinch Sebastian because he didn't hear me, as his attention was on the tense scene still unfolding in his emergency room.

Staying out of sight, I crawled back down the hall and rounded the corner. Nixon's mother and uncle followed me.

"I'm not listening to any plans that include you running out there. Nixon wouldn't want that," Sebastian hissed.

"And also, it's a stupid idea," Natalie added. I expected both of those reactions.

"All I need is for him to think I'm happy to see him," I began. Sebastian immediately started shaking his head in the negative. "We make it look like I got away from you. We can fake a struggle that he can see, and I can run at him, throw myself into his arms, then get him with the needle."

Sebastian kept shaking his head in denial, but Natalie looked thoughtful.

“He’ll be confused,” she murmured. “He wouldn’t be expecting you to want to go with him.”

“No.” Sebastian was steadfast.

“It could work,” Natalie said.

“And if it doesn’t?”

“All Nixon needs is for Donnelly to take his eyes off him for a second so he can draw his gun.” Natalie argued. “This is what my son does for a living, Sebastian.”

That did it.

“Okay,” Sebastian reluctantly agreed. “But we do it my way.” Natalie rolled her eyes. “Tia, you go back this way so your father can see you run out. Nat and I will circle back to come from behind him if something goes wrong with the plan that everything can go wrong with.”

“It *will* work,” I insisted. “And if something goes wrong, well, it’s a good thing we’re in a hospital, right?”

“That instills no confidence in me,” Sebastian said dryly.

“It will work,” I repeated.

It *had* to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Nixon

Wherever Tia was, it wasn't in the curtained room she and my mother disappeared into. Senator Donnelly had his back to the bed bays, and so he didn't see the two shadows move from one closed curtain to the next. I never took my eyes off the gun-toting douche canoe, but I saw them move all the same. I knew better than to hope that one or both actually got out of the hospital and went for help. Two of the most important women in my life were headstrong as hell and totally capable of overthrowing my uncle if he got in their way.

My goal now was to end this fuckery before they put whatever scheme they'd come up with into play.

People with guns always thought they were in control of the situation. I didn't need a gun to win this. I just needed an opportunity. By now, my mother would have hit her panic button to call my father. More than likely, he and the rest of Eagle Team were shimmying through the duct work right now.

I didn't technically need their help either.

"You think you know so much," the senator seethed at me, cheeks reddening.

"I wonder though," I faked contemplatively. "If I know something you don't."

"You may be an elite operative, Petty Officer, but I promise, I know more than you."

“Maybe you do,” I shrugged. “Maybe you can tell me who killed Justus Salero. You send somebody after him?”

The senator may have been shrewd on the floor of Congress, but he was an amateur when it came to situations like this. His eyes widened slightly right before he blinked. Aha! Looks like someone didn't know that little nugget.

“Oh, yeah, he's dead,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest and continuing on as if I hadn't noticed his tell. “Somebody really went to work on the poor bastard, too. He had stab wounds everywhere, but none of them were fatal. I think he definitely would have bled out from having his testicles removed, though, but the bullet to the head took care of that. I tell you, Senator. It was not pretty. Can you imagine, Senator, being systematically stabbed before having your balls removed, probably with the same knife, and *then* being shot in the head?” I shook my head as if I felt sorry for the dead motherfucker. I didn't. He got less than he deserved.

“Stop calling me *Senator*,” he hissed.

“Why? That's what you are. You serve at the pleasure of the American people and the great state of New Mexico. You don't miss important votes. You sit on important committees. And supposedly, you have a higher security clearance than I do. You don't, by the way.

“So, let me tell you who *I* am. I'm not just an elite operative. I sold my soul to the devil, *Senator*. I don't even exist. The words security clearance aren't in my vocabulary because I get to know everything. It's how I do my job. But you know all about Eagle Team, don't you? You got us disbanded, but you didn't count on someone else stepping up to the plate to lead us. You weren't the only one who knew about Eagle Team. You weren't always the voice on the other end of the speaker phone.”

This time, the man paled. *Come on, asshole, lower the gun.*

“You didn't count on the very team you created being responsible for your downfall,” I continued, as everything began to fall into place. “You weren't the one who sent us after Salero in the first place though. That was the other guy. Your

back door has been breached. Just the way it's going to be when you step foot in prison for the first time."

"You can't prove any of this," Donnelly said with a sneer, his face turning red with anger again as sweat beads formed on his forehead.

Cocking my head to the side, I asked, "What makes you think that?"

I honestly had no idea how strong the evidence the FBI had against him was. That wasn't my job.

"Where is my daughter? The next time I ask, the question will be punctuated with a bullet."

With horror, I watched as Tia came running from the hallway next to the nurse's station.

Yeah, that was a dumb-ass plan.

"Daddy!"

Now I was horrified for another reason. As I watched the love of my life throw herself into her father's arms, for one heartbreaking second, I thought she might be in on it.

It would have been the perfect plan to bring Eagle Team down, and we never would have figured it out.

Thank fuck I knew better. I didn't know what she was doing, but I disapproved.

Strenuously.

Donnelly looked stunned, and for just a fraction of a second, I saw remorse in his eyes.

Too late to grow a conscience now, asshole.

Sebastian and my mom materialized from behind Donnelly. When Tia pulled out of her father's arms, she was holding a syringe. *They drugged him.*

That plan was ... brilliant actually. Or so I thought.

When the senator realized he'd been injected with something, he flew into a very brief rage and raised his gun at me.

“No!” Tia screamed, slamming down on her father’s arm. He pulled the trigger anyway, and the shot went wild.

In a flash, my gun was in my hand just as Tia pushed away from her father to get to me.

“Tia, get down!” I ordered. I couldn’t get a clear shot at her father. I was deadly accurate, but with Tia running at me and her father now convulsing, I couldn’t be sure I’d hit my target.

Wait. Her father was convulsing? What the hell had they injected him with that caused a reaction this quickly?

Tia was in my arms as her father’s body hit the floor and continued to spasm. Donnelly clutched his heart.

Sebastian was immediately down at the senator’s side injecting him with something else. I assumed whatever it was would counter what Tia gave him.

As all this was happening, my father and Eagle Team emerged from all directions with rifles drawn.

“Thanks for coming,” I said to my dad, as I wrapped an arm around Tia’s waist, still holding my gun with my free hand.

“Nat!” My father called out as I pressed a kiss to Tia’s temple.

“I’m here, Eric,” my mother answered from where she was crouched next to the unconscious senator.

“I fucking see that,” my father growled. “But are you *alright*?” My father couldn’t handle it when something wasn’t right or normal with my mother.

“Of course! Now, put the gun down and help us get the senator to a bed. I’ll get the restraints, Sebastian.”

“Are *you* alright,” I whispered to Tia, shoving the gun in the waistband of my pants and using both arms to hold her.

Nodding against my shoulder, her arms squeezed me tighter. “I thought he was going to shoot you.”

“I thought he was going to shoot *you*,” I bit back. “I had the situation under control. Don’t do shit like that again.”

Her head snapped up, eyes blazing fire. “You’re not the only one who can save people, you know. I just did a damn good job.”

She did. She scared the hell out of me, but her plan worked, and nobody got hurt. You couldn’t ask for a better outcome than that.

“Thank you,” I said simply, as I spied my Uncle Danny coming through the door.

“Speaking of punctuation,” she said, voice shaking, “did you know when you use an exclamation point and question mark at the end of a sentence it’s called an interrobang?”

Running my palm down her hair, I pressed my lips to her forehead. “I didn’t know that one, angel.”

Nodding, she continued, “And did you know—”

“Tia,” I cut her off, placing a gentle finger on her lips. “It’s okay. Everything’s okay now.”

Nodding more, her voice broke when she said, “Okay.”

“Did *you* know that I fucking love you, and I can’t stand the thought of having to leave you to wrap this mission up? Did you know I want to resign from the Navy and make a life with you *here*?”

“You ...” she began. “You would do that?”

“This is my home,” I said simply.

She smiled. My heart lifted.

If you asked me at the beginning of this mission how it would all shake out in the end, I would not have predicted how it went down.

“I can’t wait to get you alone,” I whispered. I lowered my head to kiss her, but a strong, male hand slapped the side of my head.

“Get freaky on your own time,” Danny growled. “I need statements from both of you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tia

I did not have a full appreciation for the sheer size of Nixon's family. His mother had one sister and four brothers, plus their spouses, and they each had multiple kids. None of the kids had babies yet. I can't imagine how big the family will be when that all starts.

I realized then that I didn't have to imagine it. I would witness it. Nixon wanted to leave the Navy and come back here *with me*. It seemed too good to be true considering the life I'd led for nearly two years.

There were about thirty people outside on the patio at Jackie and Danny's house seated at a long row of picnic tables pushed together. It was a noisy affair— nothing like the subdued, formal meals I shared with my parents when they were around. Everyone was talking to, over, and around each other. Yet somehow, it worked.

This was the kind of get-together Nixon wanted to avoid when we first got here, and I could see why. This would have been overwhelming then, but I had already met most of the family by the time this dinner happened.

Dinner was brisket prepared in Danny's smoker, slow cooked all day. Everyone brought a side and beverages to contribute. Noticing the empty plates around me, and the fact that no one was eating anymore, I took my plate and stacked

Nixon's on top of mine before reaching for the ones around me.

Laying a light hand on my forearm, Nixon whispered, "What's wrong?"

"Just being helpful," I shrugged, keeping my attention on what I was doing.

Unsatisfied with my answer, Nixon hooked a finger under my chin and turned my face toward him. "Angel?"

"I'm fine. I just want some quiet for a few minutes. Just a little overwhelmed is all."

"Do you want to go? We can leave."

"No, I'm fine, really." I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to ever leave this obnoxious, boisterous family. I just needed to recharge my batteries for a few minutes. Then come back to hang out on this amazing patio with a stone fireplace and industrial heaters interspersed throughout the Adirondack chairs circled around various additional fire pits. I'm not sure I ever thought I'd look forward to sitting outside on a cold New England night, but here I was.

"I'll help you," he said.

"It's really not necessary," I said. "Stay with your family. You have to leave again soon."

At first, I wasn't sure he would let me go inside on my own, but thankfully, he relented. Probably because of his vow to always let me make my own decisions.

I just didn't want to draw too much attention to myself by having him come in with me. I didn't want it to look like I was having a problem. Very few of Nixon's family members knew what happened. It was top secret after all. The rest knew me as Nixon's serious girlfriend from California, and I was fine with that. It had the benefit of actually being true now.

I added more plates to my stack and waved away offers of help. One of Nixon's gazillion cousins was coming out the door and held it open for me.

"Let me get that for you," he said, reaching for the plates.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I smiled. “Thanks for holding the door.”

Once inside, I took a deep breath and walked toward the kitchen.

This was pretty much everything I wanted in a house. Light log walls, vaulted ceiling, floor-to-roof fieldstone fireplace, large plush couches.

Walking around to the gorgeous galley kitchen, I set my stack on the granite countertop.

I loved this house. It was cozy and had all the signs of a family living here that my house lacked growing up. School backpacks on the floor by the door. Laptops strewn around the various living room tables. Lacrosse and baseball equipment was haphazardly stacked in a cubby by the door.

There were six cubbies, and I imagined there was one for each of the kids. To my understanding, there were six of them—three of whom no longer lived at home. But what must it have been like to grow up here? Two parents who were loving and engaging. Taxiing six kids to six different activities. How on earth did they manage that while working as a doctor and the chief of police? Those were jobs with long hours.

But they had managed it, and their kids were great.

“You rinse. I’ll load the dishwasher.” I jumped when Jackie entered the kitchen with more dishes. So much for the alone time, but I supposed one person would be okay.

Without a word, I took the dishes from Jackie and placed them in the sink, along with the plates she had carried in herself. Turning on the faucet, I adjusted the temperature and got to work.

“We’ll be seeing Ethan any time now,” Jackie said, as I handed her the first dish. “He likes to escape for a few minutes too, so don’t worry about that. Nobody gets offended. We may see Ellie and Nathan, too.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m not enjoying myself,” I said. “I am, and I want to get back out there.”

“You just need to recharge. I understand.”

I had to admit I was a little intimidated by Nixon’s aunt. Jackie had it all—a great job, a loving family, and a husband who would do anything for her, *and probably had*.

“I just want to get to know our new nurse,” she said casually. I dropped the plate I was rinsing into the sink. Jackie didn’t mind.

“I don’t ... I haven’t ...*really?*”

“Sebastian insists,” Jackie shrugged. “And I trust his judgment.”

That was something I would never have. A sibling I was close to. One like Ellie, who knew Nixon inside and out; or like Natalie and her siblings. My mother was gone, and my father was in jail. I was alone. Although, it looked like I was about to have one hell of a support network.

“That would be amazing,” I said, dipping my hands into the sink for another plate. “I love this town and this family.”

“It’s a pretty great town and family,” Jackie agreed, taking the dish I handed her and setting it on the dishwasher. “Don’t worry about the start date. I know Nixon isn’t extending his contract when it’s up, so you can start when he’s ready to move back. We’ll be all right until then.”

We finished the dishes we had in silence. Once we were done, I headed back outside and passed Ellie and Nathan on their way in, hands loaded with dishes.

“You get back out there,” Nathan said. “We’ll handle this round.”

Shivering a bit when I stepped outside, I quickly scooted back to Nixon and the warmth of the heaters.

As soon as I was seated, Nixon wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. “Missed you,” he whispered.

“I was just given a job,” I replied.

“I had a feeling they were going to do that,” he said, with his smile that dazzled me every time I saw it.

“Congratulations. I’m excited for you.”

“You *do* want to come back here, right? I really want to live and work here. I love it here so much.”

“Sshh, angel.” He ran a palm down my hair. “I want to come back. My contract is up in a couple of months, and I’m not going to renew it.”

“Are you going to miss it though?” I didn’t want Nixon to ever resent me for changing his life.

“Baby, if we’re ever captured and there’s no hope for rescue, we’re supposed to kill each other. We can’t be taken.”

“Oh, well, fuck that then,” I said. Nixon threw back his head and laughed. I loved seeing him so carefree and happy.

Settling down into the arms of the man I loved, I thought about how my life had changed so drastically in the last few months.

Because of this man and his team, I was free. My time with Justus Salero was just a nightmare now that I hoped would eventually fade away.

Nixon and I would settle here in this quaint and quirky town with his amazing family. We would get married here and have a family of our own. I couldn’t wait to get started.

But all was not as idyllic as one might think. A threat still lurked in the shadows. One that hopefully had nothing to do with me.

Eagle Team still had a traitor.

THE END

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Anne Marie received a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Southern New Hampshire University. She writes in the contemporary romance, historical fantasy romance, and New Adult/College paranormal romance genres. She lives in the Richmond, Virginia, area with her husband, son, two dogs and cat.

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I've always wanted to write a book like this. Thank you so much to Susan Stoker for allowing me to write in her amazing world. If you have not read Susan's work, you need to hurry up and do that! I promise you won't be disappointed. I tried to write this book in way that introduces Susan's world and mine. It is *best* read after reading Susan's *Securing Kalee*. I hope you'll love Phantom and Kalee's story as much as I did.

As always, thank you to my friend Holly for her crack proofreading skills. Any remaining typos are on me.

There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

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Lori Ryan: Nori's Delta

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Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World

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Aubree Valentine, Justice for Danielle

Maddie Wade: Finding English

Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, Fighting for Elena

Deandra Hall, Fighting for Carly.

Haven Rose, Fighting for Calliope

MJ Nightingale, Fighting for Jemma

TL Reeve, Fighting for Brittney.

Nicole Flockton, Fighting for Nadia

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

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Eagle Point Search & Rescue

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Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley (Oct 2023)

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora (Nov 2023)

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (TBA)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley

Shielding Devyn

Shielding Ember

Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

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Securing Brenae (novella)

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Securing Piper

Securing Zoey

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Securing Kalee

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Justice for Hope

Shelter for Quinn

Shelter for Koren

Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

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Protecting Alabama

Protecting Fiona

Marrying Caroline (novella)

Protecting Summer

Protecting Cheyenne

Protecting Jessyka

Protecting Julie (novella)

Protecting Melody

Protecting the Future

Protecting Kiera (novella)

Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)

Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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