



# REKINDLE

*My Heart*

AN ASHWOOD BLUES NOVEL

DIANE WIGGS

# Rekindle My Heart

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Diane Wiggs



## REKINDLE MY HEART

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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# Chapter 1

The sun dipped below the husk of the building. Detective Ryan Daniels scanned the street, not a soul in sight. He should be with his friends hanging out at the bar on this holiday weekend—the last one of the summer.

No, he stood in the worst part of Ashwood waiting for his contact.

He caught movement across the street and tensed. It didn't matter that he carried a gun or a badge in this part of town. Gang signs littered the walls of the rundown buildings reminding him that cops were outnumbered in this neighborhood.

A rat scurried from one trash can to the next. His shoulders tensed, and he checked the time. His contact was late. Unless he was inside the building. The boarded-up doors had been busted open.

Five more minutes. If this guy didn't show by then, he'd venture inside.

Cold sweat clung to his back. The warm night air did nothing to calm his nerves. He should have told Larson where he was going.

His finger hovered over her number. Just two words and she'd have his back. No. He closed down the screen and pocketed his phone. The last thing he needed was to spook the contact. It was the first solid lead to tracking down the ringleader of the corruption. Discovering they had a cop on the take was one thing, but to find out it went deeper astounded the suburban city's police department.

He rocked back and forth on his heels. A clown in full costume would be less conspicuous than him standing on a corner at this time of night.

A shadow crossed the window in the building across the street. His contact?

Could be. The email was vague on the meeting details. It just said the corner of First and Industrial Boulevard. It was the rest of the message that grabbed his attention.

*Anonymous: I heard about your partner's arrest. He wasn't working alone. Meet me.* Then it went on to set up the meeting.

He scanned the block. Not one of these businesses had been open in over a decade. From time to time, a revitalization project appeared on the books only to be shut down due to lack of funding.

More movement appeared in the building. He inched closer to the brick structure. Ryan squinted. A flash of amber caught his eye a second before the crackle touched his ears.

“Is that...? Shit.” *Fire!* The word burst in his brain as he shot into action.

He grabbed his phone, calling it in as he ran. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he'd seen a person. By the time he reached the door, flames flew out the window and licked up the wall.

*Fuck.* He jumped back. Scorching heat locked his lungs. No way he could enter.

His cop instincts kicked in, and he ran around to the back of the building. A shiny deadbolt hung on the door. Fresh tire tracks marked the gravel. Coincidence? No cop believed in that. The wail of sirens grew louder. He snapped some photos of the tracks and the lock before going back to the front to meet the fire crew and patrol officers.

By the time the first patrol car pulled up, the building was engulfed. The amber and yellow glow rose toward the sky. Ryan stared at the flames. There wasn't a chance in hell his contact would show up now. A piece of remaining glass from the upper-level window burst, scattering shards into the air.

Not only was an old building burning, Ryan feared his *in* to the corruption ring was as well.



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Erica Randall strapped on her helmet and jumped from the truck. By the way the flames had taken the building, this was going to be a containment job. No way they were saving this structure.

“I hope no one was inside.” The intensity of the heat reached her from this distance. She pulled her gear from the compartment behind the cab.

“We can hope. Come on, let’s go knock down the flames.” Firefighter Garrett Kelley stretched past her to grab the hose reel.

The crew fell into step like the practiced team they were. Hoses ran from the hydrants and pumper trucks, and the crew worked feverishly to keep the blaze from spreading to the neighboring structures. Heat cooked Erica’s face as she walked the hose closer. Her crew chief shouted orders behind her. It was twenty minutes before the team could get close to the building. The roof collapsed, and the structure had no integrity, but they still needed to get in and control the blaze. It had too much fuel. It accelerated through wood and debris at a rapid rate.

They controlled the spread with the hoses, but the closer they got to the structure, the bigger and hotter the flames inside grew.

An explosion lit under Finnigan's splash. "Whoa."

"Pull back. Contain the blaze," Chief Rivera called out.

Whatever was burning, it fed on the water like a starving dog. With each spray of the hose, the flames grew and smoke billowed, filling the interior. They halted their breach of the building until they had the flames under control, focusing their spray on the surrounding structures until the toxic cloud of smoke cleared out.

The moon was high in the sky by the time the fire was deemed safe to enter. Full gear did nothing to stop the intense heat that came off the smoldering, charred walls. Despite the heat, Erica and the crew worked their way through the dark cavern that had been a three-story building.

Two-man teams canvassed what was left of the groaning structure. Head lamps gave them meager light to search. Garrett manned the hose as Erica and two other crew members searched for any hidden flames that could ignite again. Pulse racing, she swept the area for remaining fires. On her pass of the back half of the building, her light hit a charred form.

Her heart stopped. Erica had been in the fire business long enough to know it wasn't furniture.

She signaled her crew mates and finished their area before heading outside to find the chief.

Marc Rivera was huddled with several police officers. Perfect.

She pulled off her helmet. Several wet strands of hair had slipped free from her flame-retardant hood. Erica tucked the usually reddish-blond hair, now dark with sweat, back in and crossed to the men. “Chief, I found something. You won’t like it.”

Rivera and the others turned to face her. She nodded to Sergeant Johnson and Officer Brannon. The fourth man stopped her cold. Detective Ryan Daniels.

“What do you have?” Rivera asked.

“We’ve got a body.” She turned to her boss, but her gaze bounced back to Daniels.

Daniels swore under his breath. “Are you sure?”

Did he just question her? Erica felt her spine snap ramrod-straight, not a slow stiffening of her vertebra one-by-one, more like a whip, fast and sharp. Daniels had that effect on her.

“Well, being I’ve been doing this for twelve years, and unfortunately, it’s not my first body... Yeah. It’s pretty charred. I mean, the blaze was really hot, but we were on it quick enough that the form was still intact.”

Rivera grabbed his radio and relayed orders to the crew. This long night just got longer.

The last thing she wanted to do was stand here with Ryan “Fucking” Daniels. His dark hazel eyes scrutinized her. Some things never changed.

On a sharp turn, she pulled back. Not retreating. No. She wasn’t running. At least that’s what she told herself.

“Erica, wait a minute.” The splash of him charging through the puddles reached her ears a second before he grabbed her arm.

She whirled and pinned him with a move-it-or-lose-it look.

He released his fingers. “Can you tell me anything else about the body?”

“Nope. That’s for the medical examiner.”

She started walking again. He fell into step with her.

Of course, he did. The man had long legs, and while she wasn’t short, he had a good four inches on her. Which, in some ways, was perfect.

She swept the thought from her mind.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to question your job ability.”

She spun to face him. “Really? Because that’s what you did. In front of my boss, no less.”

“I can fix this.” His hands flew up in surrender.

“I don’t need you to fix anything. Rivera knows I’m competent.” She started walking again. If her stride happened to be a little faster, so be it.

“Okay, well if you need—”

She cut him off, her tongue sharp and quick. “Listen, Daniels. We have successfully avoided each other for over a decade. It’s working. Let’s stick to that plan.”

“Fine, but it’s been thirteen years.”

*Oh no, he did not go there.* Blood flooded her face. It had nothing to do with tonight's fire and everything to do with the rage simmering inside her. She couldn't believe he wanted to have this discussion now, in the middle of a fire.

"Don't you dare. I know exactly how long it's been."

"I didn't mean..." He backpedaled, and the spark of victory flared in her chest. Not that anyone could win in this situation.

"It doesn't matter what you meant. I need to get back to work. Goodbye, Daniels." She started shoving her gear into one of the truck's compartments.

She didn't look back, but she knew he'd left. Electricity lit her body whenever he was near. That started in high school and unfortunately, hadn't changed.

The more space she could put between herself and Ryan Daniels, the better.

## Chapter 2

Tuesday morning, Ryan brushed the remainder of his drive-thru breakfast from his tie as he walked into the first official meeting for the corruption task force. After they arrested the dirty cop less than two months ago, the department's focus had shifted to the person spearheading the corruption. The one who facilitated the jobs.

He, too, had a vested interest in this investigation.

Grief, anger, and betrayal intertwined in his chest at the memory. Ryan rubbed the pain away with the palm of his hand. He couldn't even bring himself to utter his old partner's name. He wasn't the first person to break Ryan's trust. He'd learned a long time ago not to take people at face value.

He yanked open the conference room door. Ryan flashed a smile he didn't feel to the meeting participants before dropping into one of the last open chairs in the room.

"Detective Larson." He nodded at Amy across the table.

His friend beamed, and his bad mood slid away. Those detective bars looked good on her. She'd earned them and the right to be on this task force. Her smile reminded him he wasn't the only one in this room affected by the corruption. She'd almost lost her life in the apprehension of a dirty cop.

Detectives CJ Whittier, the first to suspect corruption, and Jim Swenson leaned over a laptop with Bureau of Criminal Apprehensions' agent Trey Fenley—who headed the task force. Ryan reminded himself that all of them had a personal stake in this case.

Ryan caught bits of Chief Martin and Sergeant Johnson's conversation about the Twins game. "Do you think they'll make it to the World Series this year?"

Johnson's answer slipped away when the door opened. All of Ryan's attention locked on the pretty blonde who entered. Erica. Her clear blue gaze scanned the room.

*Shit. She was here.* Those beautiful eyes turned icy as she slipped into the last open chair. The one next to him.

She gave him a polite, all-business nod. If he hadn't known her forever, he would have missed the tic in her jaw—steel cords running under the smooth skin.

Trey cleared his throat, pulling Ryan's errant thoughts back to the meeting.

"Now that we're all here, let's begin. Each of you have been personally chosen for this joint task force. While this is the first face-to-face meeting, several of us have been working on

this for months. Everything regarding this case is locked down. Only the people in this room will have authorization.” Trey made eye contact with each person around the table before he continued, driving home his point. “I want to thank Firefighter Erica Randall for joining us. I brought her in because she found some discrepancies in some of the fire reports that point to tampering.”

A few murmurs skirted around the room before the members of the task force settled back in and all introduced themselves to Erica.

“Daniels, you’re our best IT guy. I’m going to have you working with Randall.” Trey said.

He nodded, but his gaze cut to Erica. *This should be interesting.*

She stiffened next to him.

“Are there any new leads?” Chief Martin’s deep voice echoed in the room.

Ryan tore his gaze from Erica, before shifting it to the chief. “Going off the information we previously had, the connections could have been made on an off-duty police officer site. I have been monitoring several smaller sites that work with our local area officers. I put out a chat, making it clear I was open to all side work, not just the legal jobs.”

“Any takers?” CJ asked.

“No, but another anonymous user private messaged me. We were supposed to meet up Sunday night, but nobody showed.”



“Do you have the guy’s name?” Jim asked.

“I wish. I can’t even tell you if it was a man or a woman. I tried to track the username, but so far, it’s like running in circles with the VPNs they’ve run it through. It sounded like they had info for me.”

Erica looked at him for the first time since she entered the room. “The charred body.”

“Maybe. I sent them a message after the fire, and I haven’t heard back.”

“That was two days ago.” Erica frowned at the thought.

“What body?” Larson’s brows pulled in.

“Erica found a body in the fire the other night. I’m still waiting for the medical examiner’s report.” He turned to Erica. “Has the fire investigator filed his report yet?”

“No, but he did mention an accelerant was used. Evans should have it completed in the next day or so.” Erica scribbled a note on her notepad.

Trey nodded. “Ryan, let me know if you hear from your contact or get any more hits from the rent-a-cop sites. Erica, copy Daniels and me in on the fire incident report. CJ and Jim will keep searching for leads based on the information we got from the previous customers we arrested. And Johnson, keep an ear to the streets.”

The meeting ended and people filtered out. Erica scooped up her things and was out the door before he could set up a time to work on the reports.

Amy Larson walked up to Ryan. “So, you and Randall. What’s the story there?”

“No story.” Ryan shoved his files into his folder. Amy was always too damn perceptive.

“I call bullshit. You were all cow-eyed over her at the Community Carnival. Not to mention the night of the APD-AFD softball game.”

He shot her a mind-your-own-business look.

She grinned.

Trey walked up behind her. “Amy, you ready to go over those case files?”

“Is that code for making out in the holding cell?” Ryan asked. “You two need to control yourselves at work.”

“Very funny.” Amy elbowed him in the gut. “Trey and I are going over old cases looking for a tie to the corruption.”

“We already arrested... the dirty cop. What are you hoping to find?”

“A pattern. The site users. Something we can tie to the boss. In the beginning, their customers would have to know them or be connected in some way. It started somewhere.” Trey took Amy’s bag for her as they all exited the conference room. “Now that we suspect corruption in the fire crew, I think you and Randall should go through old case files there as well.”

Erica barely tolerated him as it was. No way she’d be thrilled over spending more time with him.

“Are you sure I should be the one to do that? I think Erica could handle it by herself. I mean, I’m working on the site chats.”

“Erica, huh?” Larson’s grin was so smug, Ryan was surprised she didn’t burst into a touchdown dance.

Heat tightened his collar. He fought the urge to loosen his button.

“I think you’re the perfect person. Time for us to get to work.” Trey slipped his arm around Amy’s shoulders, and they started down the hall.

“I think I liked it better when you two were faking your relationship.”

Larson’s laughter floated back to him.

Ryan’s gaze dropped to the ground. He took a deep breath. *One mistake years ago.* He wished things could have been different, but life didn’t work that way. He raised his head to find his past eyeballing him.

“Do you always do meditation in the middle of the hall?” Erica’s hands fisted on her hips. His gaze dropped to those lush curves. It may have been a decade ago, but he could still remember the feel of those hips. The way they fit to his.

“I do now. You have that effect on me.” He shot her his best panty-dropping smile.

No affect. Damn.

Ryan's expression sobered. Time to get to business. "Anyway, why don't we grab a huddle room, and you can show me what you got."

Her perfectly shaped brow jetted up. "Excuse me?"

"The fire files. Remember, that's why you're here, correct?"

"Oh, yeah. I thought... Never mind." Her gaze dropped to the floor, but he could still see the tinge of pink blooming on her cheeks. With her fair complexion, she never could hide anything.

He couldn't lie, he liked the flustered look on her face. Besides, it was good to know her mind dropped to the gutter as fast as his. Not that he meant the comment that way, but...

In the six-by-six room, Erica moved her chair as far away from Ryan as physically possible in the tiny space. She pulled a laptop from her bag and booted it up.

The extra inch of breathing room did nothing to clear Ryan's head. Her scent clouded his thoughts, and he held his breath.

She eyed him. "If you are done with this new holistic thing you've got going on, we can start."

Air whooshed out with his exhale. "Very funny. Your perfume is strong."

Not really, but what could he say—*you smell so good I'm getting a woody.*

"I'm not wearing perfume." She rolled her eyes.

Busted. He cleared his throat. “Let’s see the discrepancies you found.”

She pulled up a document. “This report was from a house fire on the third of July. The cause was listed as fireworks. I downloaded this report yesterday.”

“Okay.”

She pulled up another file. “This is the same incident. The same report. Except, I saved this one on July sixth. It shows the cause of the fire as faulty wiring.”

Ryan slid her computer closer, inspecting the reports. “How did you catch this?”

“The homeowner was a friend of mine. A fellow firefighter. He was out of town at the time of the fire. They lost everything.”

“But that doesn’t explain why you have the original report.” Ryan wanted to know her connection to this.

“Wyatt came to me after it happened, and he showed me the reports.” Her gaze scanned the room as if checking to see if anyone else was listening even though they were alone.

“Did he report the inconsistencies?” Ryan scanned the two reports, seeing if anything else was off.

“Yes.”

When she didn’t say more, he pulled his gaze from the screen to find her nodding. A hesitant up and down, as if she was nervous to speak the word.

Okay, what was she not telling him? “Why isn’t he here telling me all this?”

She gulped. “Because he died last month.”

Ryan jerked back. His gut screamed foul on the play. “I remember hearing about that. It was a car crash.”

“Single vehicle. Clean tox screen.”

He didn’t have to be a mind reader to see that Erica didn’t believe it was an accident.

“You’re telling me, Wyatt’s house burned to the ground and he found an error in the paperwork, reported it to his supervisor, and now he’s dead?”

“Yup.”

“Well.” Ryan leaned back in his chair, stroking his close-cropped beard. “That’s either shit luck or the man knew something that someone didn’t want to get out.”

“He mentioned some other things he came across, but he never showed me. After his death, I started digging into old reports and started downloading any new reports. I found two other issues. One with a car fire last month and a commercial building on First Street. The only reason I know that one was wrong is because I was inside, and no way was the flash point where the report claimed it was located.”

First Street? That was down the block from the fire on Sunday. He pulled out his card. “Could you send me those files? Also, I need to get into the fire department’s system to

see if there is evidence of hacking or if the person who made the changes left any trace.”

She nodded. A loose curl bounced. With long, slim fingers, she tapped at the keyboard. A minute later, Ryan’s email pinged. The files and a link to the site where AFD stored their files appeared.

“Thanks, I will let you know what I find.” Ryan gathered up his stuff and stood. “Trey wants us to start going through old fire reports looking for more issues, but you already started doing that, so if you find anything else, give me a call.”

He picked up his card from the table, added his cell phone number to the back, and handed it to her.

With two fingers, as if it would explode in her hand, she slipped it into her bag.

Ryan stepped toward the door.

She stood. Her back collided with his front.

“Whoa.” He braced her arms with a firm grasp to steady them both.

Over her shoulder, her gaze darted to his.

Frozen, he was fully absorbed in the feel of touching her. A lifetime ago it was so natural to touch her. A brush of hands, a bump of shoulders. Casually. Friendly... then intimately.

Now?

He waited.

Her focus locked on his hands, then crept back to his face. A brow flung up in question.

“What? You bumped into me. I was trying to keep us from ending up on the floor entwined in a mess of arms and legs.” Well, if that didn’t give him an image that shouldn’t be playing in his head. He released her.

“Sorry.” Her cheeks pinked.

Damn, he always loved the way she blushed. If he touched his lips to her ear, would that sexy blush climb higher? By the flat line of her lips, he doubted it. The hate she had for him ran deep, rooted in years of self-loathing. He should know—his did too.

Erica shoved her computer in her bag. “Listen, I know we have to work together on this, so can we agree to be professional?”

Ryan’s brows furrowed. “What did I say or do that wasn’t professional?”

Stormy eyes glared back at him, but she didn’t answer.

Okay, maybe he pushed the line with his double entendres. Humor was a pressure release for him. But no way he’d do anything to jeopardize a case. He worked hard and had too much respect for his fellow law enforcement officers to do that.

His face wiped clear of any humor, and he nodded.

“I’ll contact you if I find anything.” She had her professional expression firmly on her face now as she slipped out of the



room.

Ryan shot her a mock salute and turned to avoid watching that fine ass walk away from him... again.

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*Don't run. Don't run.* Erica controlled her pace as she left the Ashwood Police Station. Of course, it had to be Ryan Daniels she was teamed with. The man had always been a computer whiz, even in high school. That was one of the things that drew her, as well as all the other girls, to him. That and his wit. He couldn't help it. He man could always make her smile with his humor. Even if it was inappropriate at times.

She'd almost forgotten. Almost. Ryan was dangerous to her. The man had a sharp brain, a fun personality, and then there was his body. Erica bit back a groan. Thirteen years and she'd never forgotten that. And how could the man get better with age? Shit. His shoulders were wider, and though she'd tried not to look—that ass. Just as amazing as she'd remembered. She'd bit her lip trying not to imagine biting into him.

Throwing her bag in her SUV, she climbed in and started the engine. Good thing she hated him. She caught movement across the parking lot. Ryan. She waited for the hate she'd mentioned to roll in her gut. There it is, she thought at the feelings tightened her stomach. But it wasn't alone. Something else fluttered inside. An unnamed emotion.

She dropped her head against the driver's seat, and she closed her eyes. *Sarah.* The vision of her sister's face had

blurred over the years. But the hurt and anger that glared back at her that night remained.

“I’m so sorry.” She’d change it if she could.

She knuckled a stray tear from her cheek and pulled out of the lot. It didn’t matter if she hated Ryan or herself, what mattered was the case. She didn’t know who to trust at the fire station after Wyatt’s death, so when she heard about the corruption case in Ashwood PD, she reached out to BCA agent Trey Fenley about her suspicions. Knowing she’d skipped the normal chain of command made her skin itch, but if the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension was involved, it made sense to go straight to them.

Erica’s mind tripped through the cases and all the inconsistencies as she drove—a much safer topic to think about than the past. Tomorrow, she would start her two-day rotation at the fire station. She’d dig into more files if she could sneak in the time. She hoped the fire investigator’s report from this weekend’s fire would come in today, but she doubted it.

Her heart fluttered as she slowed in front of her house. Home. She smiled at her mowed lawn and the late blooms on her annuals that flanked the front door. Dad must have been here and cut the grass today.

Her small house had been a labor of love for Erica. After years of nights and weekends renovating, she got dizzy just thinking about paint stripper. From the bright blue door to the new stain on her hardwoods, this was her baby.

She pulled into the garage and turned off the engine. As she stepped from the vehicle, the deep barks of her welcoming committee reverberated through her even before she opened the house door. Her smile grew larger. Her other baby.

“Hey Karma, how’s my boy?”

The fierce barks turned to happy whimpers as Erica cleared the door to the kitchen. One-hundred-thirty pounds of wiggling dog did figure eights around her legs. Her Cane Corso pup was already two and weighed as much as she did.

She dropped her bag on the counter and gave Karma his much-needed ear scratches.

“Come on, you want a treat?” She pulled out an extra-large dog biscuit. His butt instantly dropped to the floor, and his paw lifted to shake. “Good boy.”

Slipping the treat jar back to the top of the fridge, she kicked off her shoes and removed her blazer before taking her laptop outside. Her three-bedroom rambler had an office, but the weather was too nice to stay in the house. Besides, she and her father had spent all last summer redoing her patio with new pavers, a sunshade, and a built-in gas grill. She might as well enjoy it.

Karma checked out the yard before he found his favorite spot to stand sentinel. Her lips hitched up as she watched him, her bodyguard. He took his job seriously, at least for a while.

She checked the time. She’d give him ten minutes before he’d be chewing on a stick.

When her canine security system decided it was time for a break, she glanced at her screen. “Fifteen minutes. Not bad.”

Five minutes later, her email pinged.

“Yes.” The fire investigator’s report came in. She gave a little fist pump. Her notifications were set to let her know when the new files were uploaded. Downloading a copy, she scanned the content.

Confusion squeezed her chest as she read it. That can’t be right? She reread it.

Crap! She needed to notify Ryan. Exhaling, she tapped out a message and attached the report. Her lungs tightened as her finger hovered over the send button.

“Get over yourself, Erica.” There was a time she texted Ryan daily. She squeezed her eyes shut and muttered, “This is work.” Then she clicked the button.

“That wasn’t so bad.” She could do this. Be a grown-up. They had a working relationship whether she liked it or not. She shook out the cramping in her hands as she walked into the kitchen for a drink.

Water in hand, she chugged half the glass. The cool liquid soothed more than her throat. Locking the past back where it belonged, she sat back down to work.

Ten minutes later, Karma let out a fierce bark and stared at the side of the house.

Erica jumped. A second later the doorbell rang. Between his tone and the stillness of his tail, it couldn’t be her parents.

Karma did a happy dance for Grandma and Grandpa.

As she got up, Karma bolted inside—the doggie flap swinging in his wake. He arrived first to the door. Erica reached the front room a few seconds later. She peeked out the window. All motion stopped.

Why was he here? Pushing away her annoyance, she commanded Karma to stay and flung the door open. “How did you know where I live?”

“Whoa.” To Ryan’s credit, he didn’t step back, but his eyes bulged at the sight of her dog. “Is he friendly?”

“That depends.” She laid a hand on her sweet pup’s head. Detective Daniels needed to be more worried about the owner than canine.

Ryan’s gaze locked on her furry companion. “I debated about wearing my Kevlar or at least a cup. And that was before I knew you had a monster of a dog.”

“What? Me, a vengeful woman? No.” She rubbed the dog’s large face and cooed to him. “I wouldn’t do that. Would I, Karma?”

“Really? You named him Karma?” He glanced over his shoulder, as if contemplating if he could dart to his vehicle before the dog.

A smile tugged at her lips. “Be careful, Daniels. Do you think you can make it before Karma bites you in the ass?”

He gulped. His gaze dropped to her protector before he slowly moved closer. He held out a hand, and Karma sniffed

it. “As for your question, how did I know where you live? It’s not like you’re unlisted.”

Crap, she hadn’t thought of that. Her shoulders dropped, and she stepped back, allowing him to enter.

Karma moved forward, sticking his broad face directly into Ryan’s crotch.

“Hey now. That’s more action than I’ve had in months.”

Somehow, she doubted that.

He pushed the dog’s head away and knelt down to greet him. “He’s beautiful. I love the brindle coat.”

Her ferocious guard was now licking Ryan’s hand, and his bobbed tail was a blur of excitement. *Traitor.*

## Chapter 3

The first thing to hit Ryan as he strolled into Erica's home was the coziness. The warmth of a blanket cocooning him wouldn't have been as homey as the overstuffed furniture and neutral colors. His gaze bounced from one surface to the other as he followed Erica back to the patio. He could imagine her curled up with her big dog on the oversized couch, watching TV or reading a book. She'd always loved to read.

Family photos filled the mantle. A young-faced Erica in her firefighter blues caught his attention. Her blue eyes sparkled. Her parents beamed at the camera. His gut twisted a little. They had shared all their big achievements growing up.

His perusal landed on a small photo front and center. One of her and her sister, Sarah. The twist in his midsection tightened. *Keep walking, Daniels.*

"I emailed you. I didn't expect you to come over." She sat by a wrought iron table with a patio umbrella shading her screen. The slats of the wooden sunshade cut across her face.



He scanned the yard before sitting, needing to get his bearings. The smell of fall flowers and fresh-cut grass comforted him. He could admit, the sight of Karma had him questioning his plan to swing by being he was only a few blocks away at the time. Okay, it wasn't only the dog who gave him reservations.

“Nice place.”

“Thanks, but I assumed you'd email me back.” Those blue eyes squinted. She was waiting for him to respond. What could he say? I wanted to see you again? I've missed you every day for thirteen fucking years?

“I read the report you sent, and I wanted to discuss it with you.” Ryan sighed. “Erica, we used to be friends.”

“Things change.” She picked dog hair from her blouse, avoiding looking at him.

“Can you get past this?”

Her fists clenched a split second before her head lifted. Stormy eyes shot bolts of lightning through him.

“Shit, that's not what I meant.” Karma nudged his arm, then dropped a toy on the table. Ryan threw the toy. The dog trotted off after it.

“She died. My sister died. Maybe you didn't care about her, but...”

“Bullshit. I cared. She was my girlfriend. Right up until...” His words cut off. Air sawed in and out.

Two minutes with Erica and his old regrets rushed to the surface. He never should have dated Sarah, they weren't a good fit. Not like he and Erica had been. It was clear as glass now. But it didn't mean he didn't care.

*Get a grip.* He pinched the bridge of his nose, slowing his breathing.

The rolling anxiety in his chest eased, and he continued, "Listen, I don't want to rehash this. We have a case to work, and according to the fire report, not one but two dead John Does."

The dog dropped the toy in his lap this time. He didn't even flinch at the dog slime now coating his crotch. It was par for the course the way this conversation was going.

Erica sank back into her chair. "You're right. Not the time."

Ryan reached for her hand but stopped. "It's not your fault or mine. She was an adult, and she made her choice. Accidents happen."

Watery blue eyes blinked at him. Fuck. What were the twelve steps of grief? Erica had been living in the anger level for so long, but now came the tears. He hated tears.

"I know you hate me." His voice softened. He hated himself for a long time after. He, too, felt like if he'd done something different, maybe, just maybe, she'd be alive.

"I don't hate you. Much." She cracked a smile.

She had the most beautiful lips. Full, with the upper one a touch larger. With wide eyes, he tracked the curve as it dipped.

His stomach tightened. He'd missed her smile.

The sweet curve he'd been staring at dropped.

Shit. Time to regroup.

"That's okay, I can deal with the hate." *Just not the tears.* Sarah used them like a weapon. Any time he tried breaking up with Sarah, the waterworks would start, and he'd stay. Until that last time.

Her focus dropped to her laptop.

He shifted in his seat and threw the toy again before he said, "So, I didn't see a cause of death on the victims."

"No, this is a preliminary report. The full one with the medical examiner's conclusions will take a while. But the fact that there were two bodies and an accelerant was used..."

Ryan ran the possible scenarios through his head while his fingers tapped out a rhythm on his thigh.

"Think out loud, please. I know your brain is ticking."

"We don't know who the victims are, so we can't point to a motive. But we have an accelerant, so it points to arson. My gut says one of the DBs is my contact. I hope not, but it's too much of a coincidence to have the fire start while I was waiting to meet them."

"Agreed, so where do we go from here?"

"We dig in, go back to the beginning, and hope we get more to go on when the final report comes in."

Ten seconds later, a panting dog stood beside him. Karma came back... again. "He loves fetch."

"Not really. What he wants is for you to play tug-o-war with him."

Ryan held the toy this time. Karma's strong, large jaw clamped on, and he put his whole body into the game. Ryan leaned back, but the dog's powerful mouth and muscular body had his chair sliding. "Wow. Easy, big boy."

Erica's face brightened. "Karma, drop."

The dog spit out the toy. His butt plopped to the ground.

"Well trained," he muttered.

"He has to be, or he could hurt someone. Me included. Not that he would. He's a big baby." She rubbed the dog's huge head and babbled some baby talk to him.

Karma's giant tongue rolled out of the side of his mouth, and his eyes rolled back. The dog was in heaven, soaking up the attention. *Lucky bastard.*

Shit. He was jealous of a damn dog. Ryan cleared his throat and stood. "I'm going back to the scene to see if we can find a security camera, a homeless person, or anyone who might have seen or heard something. Even if it was an hour or two before I showed up."

"I'll go through and see if I can find out more about this accelerant." She stood as well, bringing her close.

Ryan inhaled, and the floral scent of her shampoo brought a flashback of the one night he'd buried his face in that thick, jasmine-smelling mane. He stepped back.

"I'll touch base later."

"First day of my rotation starts tomorrow. I'm on twelve-hour shifts for the next two days, then I will be off for a few days. Next rotation, I go on nights, but I'll check my email." She opened the door for him but didn't make eye contact.

*Stay safe* was on the tip of his tongue, but he was afraid if he said it, she'd think he was questioning her ability as a firefighter. He fisted his hands in his pockets. He'd almost touched her on the patio. While he'd love to feel her skin again, his instincts were telling him it was a bad idea. So, he rocked back on his heels, gave Karma a pat on the head, and said, "Sounds good."

They'd made progress today with both their professional relationship and moving past a decade-old wound. He wasn't about to push his luck. Not yet. So, he ran like the scaredy-cat he was to his vehicle.

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Ryan made the turn onto Industrial Boulevard. The hollowed-out building looked worse in the bright sunshine than it did the night of the fire. He parked in front of the police barrier, crossed to the crime scene tape, and ducked under.

He hooked his shades on his collar and took in the charred remains of the building. Fire and water had reduced it to rubble. The brick walls still stood, but sections of the top were missing, and soot caked the once red façade.

He didn't pass the inner red tape, knowing this was an active crime scene and likely unsafe from the fire damage. He should have asked Erica to come with him. She'd know where he could go and what was off limits.

Not much he could do here. Returning his shades to his face, he opened the app to check his direct messages.

*Please let there be a reply from my contact.*

No response. Shit. He closed the screen and pocketed his phone.

The two DBs in the fire could have been vagrants or meth-heads who OD'd. But with each minute his contact didn't reply, Ryan's cop instincts reminded him coincidences were as likely as him making captain by thirty-three—which was only two short years away.

He scanned the street. He couldn't do anything about the identification of the bodies, but he could look for witnesses. He knew the patrol officers knocked on doors, not that there were many, but it didn't hurt to double-check, widen his search circle. Maybe he'd luck out and a neighbor who was gone that night remembered seeing someone earlier in the day.

Ryan walked up and down the block, looking for cameras of any kind. Nothing. Going from the tire tracks in the back he'd seen that night, he changed tactics and moved down the alley. The buildings were rundown, but a few of them on the next block still had open businesses. While no one was around the other night, and no cameras were running out front, the back might be another story.

A block down, across the street, a steel warehouse had a camera in the back facing the side street. It wasn't on the same block, and he didn't see it listed in any of the reports. Maybe his luck was on the upswing?

Inside the Metal Mart, it was as Ryan expected. A front desk with a cash register, and the back held open rows of steel tubing and sheeting. A man in a work-shirt with the name LeRoy on the front came out of a small office no bigger than a bathroom.

“May I help you?”

“I sure hope so. I'm Detective Daniels, and I'm looking into the fire that happened down the block last weekend.” Ryan showed him his badge.

“I don’t know what I can help you with. I wasn’t here that night.”

“I see you have a surveillance camera out back. Could I take a look at the footage from that night?”

“You got a warrant?” The large man crossed his arms over his broad chest.

“I can get one.” People in this neighborhood weren’t always the friendliest to the police. Ryan stared back. Waiting. Watching. The man didn’t budge. “Is there something you don’t want me to see on it?”

LeRoy chewed on his lip, then dropped his arms. “No, sorry. I’m not used to cops being up in my business. They don’t do any good when I need them.”

He trudged into the office. “I didn’t see anything unusual on it when I checked this morning. Not that you can make out squat. Piece of shit is grainy as fuck.”

Ryan followed him into the small office and waited while he pulled up the feed on his computer.

“It’s motion activated, so it only records when there is movement. I installed it after I had some thefts last year. I had to mount this bugger up higher on the wall. My first camera got ripped off. Damn thieves.”

“Did you report it?”

“Damn straight I did. I even had the video of the little ‘hood-rat’s face, but they never found the kid.” He turned the computer to Ryan. “Here, this was from that night.”



The camera's angle was set to pick up the Metal Mart's backyard and only caught a slice of the street and adjacent alleyway. Ryan hoped it was enough.

As LeRoy ran the footage, he watched a couple of cars drive by on the street. In the next clip, a newer, dark SUV rolled out from the alley.

Ryan leaned in. That could be the guy. He looked at the time stamp. It was earlier than when he would have been there. He watched the rest of the videos and it was officers and lookie-loos. But no other vehicles came down the alley.

“Can I get a copy of that?”

LeRoy hesitated. Ryan could see the indecision in his face. Finally, he said, “Sure. Do you have an email? I can send you the link.”

Ryan gave it to him, and a minute later, his email pinged on his phone. “Thanks for your help.”

“I'm guessing it was arson if you're here looking into it. I have to say, I'm not sure who owns that building, but it was an eyesore. I know this isn't the best part of town, but we still have businesses to run, and buildings like that attract the riffraff. You know what I mean. Squatters. Drug dealers. Trash.”

Ryan agreed. “Had you seen anyone hanging around that particular building lately?”

“Nope, except the drug dealer.”

“Dealer? You're sure he's selling drugs?”

“Well, it could be an Amway exchange, but this guy doesn’t look like the type I’d let into my living room if you know what I mean.”

“Can you describe him?” He might not be an arsonist or murderer, but he could have seen something or someone that night. Not to mention, if this was the dealer’s turf, he’d definitely have eyes and ears on the place.

“Well, he’s about five-eight, dark hair, light brown skin.” LeRoy rubbed his scruffy beard as he talked.

Hell, that could be two-thirds of the guys in this neighborhood. “You wouldn’t know his name, would you?”

“No, but he had some interesting tats. A word on his collarbone. Don’t know what it says. I don’t speak Spanish, but the other one, on his face... That one I remember. It’s a pot leaf. Right here.” LeRoy tapped his temple.

“You got a good look at him then?”

“Well, yeah. I ran him off a time or two. That shit’s bad for business.”

“Could you contact me right away if you see the guy around?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

“Thank you for your help. And if you remember anything else, please let me know.” Ryan handed him his card and left.

He didn’t know if the video would be a complete waste of time as the SUV hadn’t been there at the same time as Ryan

had, but he'd check it out. Same with this drug dealer, but the puzzle pieces were appearing. He just needed to collect some more to see the whole picture.

He climbed into his vehicle and thought about the few pieces he had as he headed back to the station. If those tire treads he snapped a photo of matched the SUV in the video, it wouldn't be a solid connection, but it would be a start.

Right now, he would welcome a jumping-off point.

## Chapter 4

**I**t was the second day of Erica's rotation. Last chore, she blew a hunk of hair from her eyes. Surveying her work, she wiped her brow.

"Not bad." She dropped the mop back into the bucket. Time for a break. All the brass and chrome shined. The gear had all been checked and stowed. The trucks were fueled, and the air tanks had been refilled. Glancing around the bay, it sparkled.

Stowing the cleaning equipment, she climbed the stairs to the common living area. Workout equipment filled an alcove on the north wall. Rivera was on the weight machines.

"How many reps today?" she asked.

"Fifty," he grunted out. By the sweat on his face, she'd bet he was on his second set.

Her phone pinged. Mom. She tapped back a reply.

"Uff." The solid wall she bumped into grunted.

"Sorry." She looked up.

Tony Winters had just come out of the locker room. He flashed a grin. “No worries. I should have known you were on shift today. The whole place smells like pine. You clean when we’re slow.”

“And you work out.” She gestured to his athletic clothes. “You better get going. You’ll have to hurry to catch up with Rivera.”

“Ha.” He waved off the challenge. “I got this. Anyway, see you later.” He looked over his shoulder, then back at her, flashed the briefest of smiles and then stepped around her.

“See you later.”

Winters was assigned to the AFD last year. He was a nice enough guy, but Erica didn’t know him that well. The man was good at his job and liked to work out. That’s all she really knew about him.

She glanced back at him. Since Wyatt’s death, she’d been looking at her teammates a little differently. Questioning.

She moved to the kitchen on the south side. Yanking open the fridge, she grabbed a water.

“The station always gleams when you work.” Brett Finnigan, Finn to his friends, stepped off the last step into the room.

“Are you insinuating cleaning is women’s work?” She cocked a hip against the counter.

“Nope, just that you’re better at it than most of the guys. Kelley and Evans must still be out on that medical call.

Otherwise, Garrett would be the one mopping. That man was a custodian in a previous life.”

No, he’d been a marine in his last life. Not to mention, he was anal retentive when it came to anything he did. Always had to be the best. She snorted. If she missed a spot, he’d re-mop the whole barn. Okay, she might have intentionally missed something to mess with him. Her cheek muscles pulled as she bit back a grin.

“Not many calls this week. I can tell, you like to stay busy. That’s why the cleaning binge.” He held up another egg. At her nod, he cracked it into the bowl with the others. Finn was the resident cook in the station. Everyone on the crew could hold his or her own, but his food was so good, they all teased him that he should open a restaurant.

“I think I’ve polished every piece of brass in this place in the last two days. But that’s okay. I’m glad we didn’t have another blaze like the one last weekend.”

“That was a bad one.” Finn cracked the shell against the counter. A second later, the sizzle of eggs hitting the hot pan rang through the room. “Did they ID the crispy yet?”

She didn’t know how much she should share with him. He was a good guy. She didn’t think he was doing anything nefarious. Besides, it was in the report. It was common knowledge.

“No. But I heard there were two bodies found in the building.”

He stopped. “Two? Homeless?”

“Not sure.” She watched to see if anything sparked in his eyes. She wasn’t sure what. Awareness? Surprise?

“Man, that sucks. Could have been some vagrants using a space heater or camp stove.”

“But if an accelerant was used...” Erica remembered the way the flames flashed, bright and white as they grew that night.

“The property owner looking to cash in on insurance?” He threw out the idea as he added cheese.

She shrugged. It could be for the money, but with two bodies and Ryan meeting an informant, she had her doubts. “Well, I think I’m going to grab my laptop and relax for a minute.”

“Here.” He slid the eggs onto a plate and handed it to her before dishing up his own.

“Thanks.” She forked a scoop into her mouth and groaned. Finn really could have been a chef.

She set her plate and laptop bag on the table. Time to do some digging. Before she could snatch her computer from her bag, the alarm sounded.

Finn groaned. “Why can’t I ever eat a hot meal?”

Erica shoved a huge helping into her cheeks like a chipmunk preparing for winter, then rushed to her turnout gear as she chewed. Years of practice had her dressed and headed to the engines before the food slid down her throat.

By the time they pulled up in front of the two-story home, flames burst out the upstairs windows, licking up to the overhangs of the roof.

A teenager and baby huddled on the curb, their frantic sobs laced with fear met Erica as she shouldered her air tank.

“She went back in. Please help them.”

“Who?” Erica asked while assessing the situation.

“My mom.” Her voice hitched. “She went back for my sister.”

“Stay here.” Erica relayed the info to her team as they focused the spray on the blaze.

Air mask in place, she adjusted the straps and listened for the beeps when she opened the tank. Erica worked to control her breathing.

The sun was bright in the sky, but once Erica and Finn entered the house, smoke blocked all external light. The only light came from their headlamps and the flames crawling up the walls.

Going in low, they cleared the first floor before going upstairs. Dropping to the ground, she crept down the hall. The intensity of the heat knocked her back a step. She pushed through. Her body grew slick with sweat, both from the heat of the blaze and the weight of the gear. It didn't matter how many times she entered a fire or how much she practiced, fear still slithered along the edges of her mind. Training and the drive to save lives propelled her forward.



Finn's voice came over the radio, "Found mom and daughter. Coming down now."

Erica finished clearing the other rooms. Fatigue set in. Squinting, she shook off the groggy feeling. She struggled more than normal. Checking her gauges, she blinked. Her air tank was low. Dangerously low. How did she miss the two-minute warning?

Taking shallow breaths, she wormed her way to the stairs. The structure crackled as she descended. Breath laboring, she fought to take in oxygen with each step.

She had to get out. Now.

On a deep inhale, she stood and sprinted for the door. Flames and smoke met her. Shit! She ducked her head and burst through them, stumbling as she reached the yard on the other side. She ripped her mask from her face and gulped in fresh air. Her captain and Finn helped her to the truck.

"What the hell happened?" The captain's voice boomed.

"I ran out of air." She checked her gauge again.

"Didn't your PASS alarm go off?" Her captain leaned in to check the gauge himself.

"No." She slipped off the tank, handing it to him for inspection.

"Here, you have a frayed spot where your hose connects to your mask." His dark brow flattened.

That wouldn't cause her PASS alarm to fail. Air backed up in her lungs.

“Go get checked out by the medic.”

“I'm fine.”

“Go. And Randall, get a new mask.” He pointed.

The paramedics must have finished their other call, because Garrett was checking over the little girl sitting on her mother's lap.

Evans flagged her over.

She sat on the back of the ambulance as he checked her vitals.

“Your blood pressure is up, but that's to be expected.” He moved the stethoscope to her chest. “Your lungs and heart sound good.”

She'd bet her lucky undies that her BP had nothing to do with the exertion and everything to do with a possible attempt on her life. This was her air mask, not anyone else's. She'd checked it over before her shift, like she did before every shift, then stowed it in her locker. Not that it had a lock, but it was her cubby for her gear.

Could she have missed the damage?

Erica's mind kept circling back to Wyatt and the reports. Could someone know she was digging into this? In the ten years she'd been on the crew, she couldn't remember an incident with the gear. Not one.

This could be the first.

“Randall, are you okay?” Winters picked up her gear.

“Thanks, but I’m good. Just had an issue with my mask.”  
She took her turnout coat back from him.

“Pack ‘em up,” the captain called out.

Erica got an all-clear from the medic and started helping stow the hoses. The fire was out and the structure, while it would need a lot of work, it wasn’t a total loss. All civilians and crew made it out alive. Overall, a good day at work.

But, she would definitely double, triple-check her gear from now on.

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A broad face popped into Ryan's cubicle. "Daniels, got a minute?"

"Sure, Sarge." He minimized the window he had open on his screen and leaned back.

Sergeant Al Johnson took a seat in the guest chair. In the year since Ryan turned detective, his old boss's dark hair held a few new streaks of gray by the ears.

The older man glanced over his shoulder before whispering, "I might have a lead on the corruption ring."

Police investigation took time, but since they arrested the dirty cop last summer, Ryan's stomach rolled every time someone mentioned the corruption ring.

"I know you're working to find the site that was the contact point. Well, I heard a couple of the rookies talking about where they were finding side jobs. You know, Armand and Connors have young kids, and they are always looking for extra hours." He adjusted in his seat. "I'm not saying they're dirty or anything."

"I get it." Everyone was on edge after Larson almost lost her life when all the shit went down. Ryan cleared his throat. "Go on."

“Connors was saying he didn’t have much luck with the hiring sites, but he did find a chat room or group on one of the social media sites. I asked him about it, and he clammed up. I think he was afraid I’d bust him for moonlighting, not that it’s against any rules.”

With one long, weathered finger, he slid a piece of paper across the desk to Ryan. “Anyway, he eventually relaxed and coughed up the name of the group. I thought you might want to check it out. I’d do it myself, but I suck at that stuff. I don’t even have social media accounts.”

Ryan scanned the info and palmed the note. He hadn’t heard of this site. It must be new. “Thanks, Sarge. I’ll check on it.”

Johnson stood and with a head nod, left.

Ryan typed the name into his computer and tapped his fingers on the desk while he waited for the search results to pull up. The department had a fair firewall when it came to spam and scammer websites, but even with Ryan’s additional security software, he still wanted to do a background on the site before he signed up.

No red flags signaled either online or in his gut, so he typed in the site name and created an account using a separate email he only used for casework. Once the setup was complete, he logged in and hovered over his avatar. Settings and additional menus pulled up. He spent some time setting up his security before he started selecting interests so the site’s algorithms could start suggesting groups for him.

He rolled up his sleeves and cracked his neck before placing his fingers back on the keys. “Well, let’s find us some dirt.”

In the next hour, Ryan had joined groups, commented on posts, and even posted a photo or two so he didn’t look like a lurker. He needed the site to put him out there—bait the hook.

He pushed back from his desk and stretched. “Now, we wait.”

“What are we waiting for?” Amy Larson leaned on his cubicle wall.

“Johnson got a new lead. I was sending out feelers on the site,” Ryan said in hushed tones.

“Good. You done for now? I’m hungry.”

Ryan closed his laptop and locked his desk. “How about the new Vietnamese place?”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “You mean the one next to the fire station?”

“Never mind. How about Mexican?” Ryan grabbed his blazer off the back of the chair.

She bumped his shoulder with hers. “Oh, relax. I get it, but someday you’ll tell Aunty Amy all about this mysterious firefighter from your past.”

“Aunty Amy?” He rolled his eyes. “First of all, I’m older than you. And secondly, we aren’t related.”

His friend cocked her head. “You know what I mean.”

Ryan's eyes scrunched as he assessed Larson. She wasn't the type to be put off with a "maybe later."

"Fine, soon, but not today." That seemed to appease her for now.

She nodded, then led the way to the door.

They climbed into his Jeep. He'd ridden with Amy behind the wheel once. One time was all it took, and he made sure to volunteer to drive from then on.

Knowing Larson, she purposely drove like a wild woman just so she didn't have to use her fuel.

It didn't matter. Ryan wasn't about to chance it.

He pulled his vehicle out onto the main road. "Have you and Trey had any hits on the old cases?"

"Not yet. It might be a waste of time, but if there is any chance of finding a link to the corruption, we'll search the files all night."

"That would put a dent into your extra-curricular activities."

"Don't worry, we take breaks." She grinned. "What about you? Last I heard you were dating Millie from the bar."

"We had a couple dates." Exactly two. She was fun, but Ryan could tell she was getting those marry-me eyes. While she was sweet, he wasn't ready to marry anyone right now.

Hell, most nights, he played video games. When the women he dated found out he played regularly, their impression of him

changed. It's like he went from hard-ass cop to silly kid in their eyes.

“Are you bringing a date to Jim and Liz’s wedding?”

“Why? Did you want to set me up with someone?” It wouldn’t be the first time.

At one point, he’d thought Amy might be someone he could settle down with. She got him, but when Trey stepped into the picture, it was clear Ryan and Larson were meant to only be friends. Now, Ryan was glad it never moved beyond the friend zone. It would be weird if they had done the deed.

“Nope, just curious.” She bit her lower lip.

He knew that look. “Spit it out, Larson.”

She bounced in her seat, turning to face him. “Okay, you know how Liz invited half of Ashwood to this wedding.”

“Makes sense being she’s related to the Whittiers, who own one of the largest transport companies in the state if not the nation. They know everyone.”

“Yeah, well and the Swensons know the rest being a law enforcement family for generations.”

“So?” he prompted as he pulled the SUV into the restaurant parking lot.

“Almost all of the firefighters are invited.” Her voice sounded bubblier than usual.

He didn’t need to turn his head to know her eyes were sparkling with excitement. He could feel those blue orbs



probing his temple, waiting for a reaction.

His gaze wandered across the street to the fourteen-foot doors on the fire station. It seemed like Erica's plan to avoid one another was going out the window.

A heavy sigh filled the Jeep. "Are you going to say something?"

"No."

"Oh, come on. I know you've got a thing for Randall. Or did. Maybe you could ask her to be your date."

By her tone, he half expected her to be wiggling like a kid at Christmas.

"Not going to happen." He opened his door and got out.

"Ugh, you are so stubborn." Amy slammed her door and followed him to the restaurant doors.

"What is with you lately? Just because you and Fenley are all in *love*." He used air quotes on the word love. "Now you think we all need to be paired up. What, so we can go on double dates? Are we in high school?"

She stopped him before he entered the building. The hard-ass detective was back. "Fine, I'll drop it for now, but I know you, Ryan. Better than you know yourself sometimes. Not only am I your co-worker, I've been your friend for a long time. You have unfinished history with that woman."

"Trust me, it's finished."

“Maybe for her, but not for you. I see the way you go all cow-eyed over her. You need to dump this baggage between you and start over.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“If Paulie and I can work through our past, then you and Erica can too. Okay, enough said, let’s eat.” Amy opened the door and left him standing on the sidewalk.

The situation Amy referenced to with her friend was nothing like his with Erica. Amy and her bestie had a falling out over suspected drug dealing at Paulie’s family restaurant, but Ryan knew Amy meant well.

With his sunglasses shading his eyes, he scanned the fire hall. The doors were open on the brick building, and the red trucks stood at the ready. Was Erica inside?

Air rushed from his lungs. Larson could be right. Not that he’d let her know that. Erica had to work with him for now, but this could be a start to unpacking the baggage. God knows he’d need an industrial-sized dumpster for all of it

But just maybe, Amy was right. It was time.

## Chapter 5

Ryan crept along the hollowed-out building in full fatigues, his M4 at the ready. He was entering the kill box and knew it but didn't have a choice. His teammates chattered in his headset.

“Go left,” RipCord15 shouted in his ear.

“Enemy fire coming in hot.” the new guy yelled. He couldn't be more than twelve, Ryan guessed by his squeaky voice.

He steadied his breath as he entered the structure. One bogie popped up as he rounded the corner. Two quick shots neutralized him. A second one entered the hollowed-out room from what was left of the stairs, bullets zinging as he descended. Ryan dove for cover, spraying a pattern of bullets in his wake. The enemy collapsed and tumbled down the last few steps.

Hoots and hollers echoed in his ear as his teammates celebrated his success.

His chest puffed up for a second before he realized he had to cross the open courtyard. He checked his supplies and health. Half health and no ammo. But he still had a grenade in his hip pocket. It was now or never.

He swept left, then right. Clear. He started to run. Two steps and he'd reach his injured teammate.

His head swiveled as he ran, surveying the battlefield.

*Hustle. Hustle. One more step.*

Bam! Red flashed on the screen. He was dead.

“Dirty, rotten, chicken fucker.” KarFire89. That asshole killed him again.

Ripping off his headset, he threw it on the couch. “Ugggh.” Placing his hands on his knees, he pushed to stand. His long legs ate up the fifteen feet of carpet in his living room.

Breathe. This was supposed to be relaxing. Ha. It would be if that prick didn't have a hard-on for Ryan every time he played. If Ryan were a lesser man, he'd hack into the game and find out who this guy was.

On the desk, his computer beeped.

“Finally.” He crossed to it. The diagnostic he was running on a fire incident report finished.

“Shit.” No traces or trails left from the changes. This was the tenth one that came back the same way. Zip.

This guy was good. Either he was an incredible hacker—Ryan was fair but even he didn't have the ability to cover his

tracks this well, or whoever changed it had admin status and rewrote the file, then wiped the log activity. Either way, Ryan hadn't gained any clues from the files. He needed to get inside the system.

A yawn snuck up on him. Ryan's jaw clicked as his mouth opened wide. He checked his watch. After midnight. He'd run the rest of the files tomorrow. Not that he expected to find anything. At least he could cross off the task and move on to the next. Something had to hit.

He scratched his midsection as another yawn snuck up on him. He needed sleep, but his mind wandered over the case.

Maybe Erica found something on her end. He looked at his phone. No. It was too late to call. Not that the time of day ever mattered before.

He dropped his head. Two days. That's all it took for him to fall back into the old routine of calling her first. But they weren't friends anymore. Hell, they were barely civil when they did speak.

Setting the phone beside his bed, he moseyed into the bathroom. It took him all of five minutes to do his nighttime routine before he slid under the covers.

Shadows danced across the ceiling as the wind blew the tree branches outside his window. He exhaled. Sinking down into the mattress, he closed his eyes. He wanted sleep. He needed it. Too bad his brain didn't agree. Even playing Call Of Duty didn't work to turn off his mind tonight. That would explain

why he kept dying spectacularly in the game. He couldn't get into it.

All the pieces he'd collected so far whirled in his head as he fought to get some sleep.

He rolled to the right, punched his pillow two times, then closed his eyes.

*The drug dealer. The SUV. The two victims.*

He flopped to the left.

*Two.* If one was his contact, then who was the other?

And how did the edited fire files fit in? Or did they?

He picked up his phone. Shit. Too late. He opened his email and typed out his thoughts, then sent it off to Fenley, Larson, and Erica. They'd get it tomorrow.

With the words out of his head, he slid down in the sheets and released a breath. His mind calmed. He started to drift.

A minute later, a notification pinged.

His eyelids flew open, and he snatched his phone from the night stand.

She was awake. Erica sent a text.

Excitement rushed through his veins. Why? He couldn't *say*.

*Bullshit.* He knew exactly why. It's the same rush he got back in high school when they talked at night. He may have dated Sarah, but Erica was the Randall sister he wanted to spend time with. She got him. Always had.

He held his breath as he opened her text.

Erica: *Saw your email. Working late?*

Ryan: *Yeah, just finished.*

Erica: *You always were a night owl.*

His cheek pulled up as he read the words.

Ryan: *You weren't. Work late?*

Erica always liked her sleep. Didn't matter what time of day.

His foot twitched as he waited for her reply.

Erica: *No. Unwinding. It was a day.*

Ryan: *That bad?*

Erica: *Had a piece of equipment malfunction. It all worked out fine.*

He didn't like the sound of that. But he knew AFD was one of the best fire stations in the Twin Cities.

Ryan: *Glad it all worked out. Want to talk about it?*

Erica: *No, I'm good. Thanks.*

Now what? He wanted to keep her chatting, but this thread of friendship was so frail. The last thing he wanted to do was pull too tight and break it. He should let her go. Give her space.

Erica: *I didn't have time to go through the files today. Too busy. Too many eyes around.*

Work. Yes, he'd emailed about work.

Ryan: *No luck on scanning the files. This guy is good or has admin access.*

They texted back and forth about the case for a few minutes.

Ryan yawned. Erica's response time was growing longer. He glanced at the time. After 1 a.m. and he had to be in the office tomorrow.

His phone pinged.

Erica: *Need sleep. Good thing I can sleep in tomorrow.*

Ryan: *Wish I could.* Lounging around all day... with Erica. He used to, so many years ago.

Erica: *Chat later.*

Ryan: *Night.*

He checked his alarm, then plugged in his charging cord. This time, as he watched the shadows of the trees through his window, he smiled. Just a few minutes texting with Erica, and his restless mind calmed. Their conversation replayed on a loop—the case files, equipment malfunction, chat later.

His smile widened. She'd used that sign-off forever.



## Chapter 6

“**E**ffing Tahoes.” Ryan fisted his mouse harder than usual as he scrolled through another page of vehicle listings. He was about thirty seconds from throwing the thing against the wall. After cleaning up grainy black and white video from the Metal Mart’s back alley, he narrowed down the SUV to a fourth-generation Chevy Tahoe.

Jim Swenson strolled in and dropped into Daniel’s spare chair. “I can hear you muttering from my desk. What are you working on?”

“Do you know how many dark-colored Chevy Tahoes are in Ashwood? Not to mention the Twin Cities.”

“Can’t say I do.” Jim propped his right calf over his left knee.

“A lot. They had that body style from 2015 to 2020.” Ryan rolled his neck. “The business down the street had a back surveillance camera. I’ve been tracking down the vehicle that

was in the alley thirty minutes before the building burst into flames.”

“Let me guess. It’s a Chevy Tahoe.” A dimple popped out as Jim grinned like he was the next headliner at the Comedy Club.

“Give the man a cookie. I’ll give you two if you can make out the license plate.” Ryan turned the screen toward the other detective.

“Have you done your magic tech stuff to sharpen the resolution?”

Ryan hurled a look that said Swenson’s jokes weren’t funny.

“Okay, okay. Let me see.” Jim stroked his jaw as he examined the video.

Ryan sat back and picked up his pen. Click. Click. He waited as the other detective scanned the video. Swenson had a few more years of this job under his belt, and Ryan wouldn’t turn down any advice.

Jim ran through it twice before dropping back in his chair. “No license.”

Ryan exhaled. At least he wasn’t the only one not able to identify the vehicle.

“But see that tag in the window?” Stopping the frame, Jim pointed to the windshield.

He leaned in. “Yeah, it’s an E-ZPass for the express lane.”

“Do you have access to check the list of registered tags on the warrant? It might shorten your search.” Jim unfolded his long torso from the chair, stretched, then strolled out of Ryan’s cubicle.

“Good idea.” Rapidly tapping the keys, Ryan pulled up the paperwork for the warrant. Hot damn. He had the authority to access the list.

Jim stopped and rapped his knuckles on the cubicle wall. “That’s a pretty nice SUV. Looking at it, I’d say closer to 2020. The odds of someone driving a nice, newer SUV in that neighborhood wouldn’t go unnoticed. Show the picture around.”

Ryan nodded. His go-to process was tech—it had always been technology. It was his strength. But sometimes, good old-fashioned legwork was the answer.

“Oh, and Daniels. Don’t go alone. People don’t open doors for a lone man as often as they do for a female or couple. Just saying,” Jim added before he slipped around the wall.

He had a point. People in that area didn’t open doors for cops. Especially male cops.

Larson crossed his mind. No, she had a large caseload as well as going through the old cases. They may partner on cases from time to time, but he wouldn’t pull her for a simple job of door-to-door.

He picked up his phone and scrolled through his contacts. Officer Swenson, Jim’s sister Michelle? No. Officer Cortis?

No. He flicked the screen and it scrolled up. A name appeared in the middle of his screen like a slot machine winner. He blinked. No... Maybe?

His finger hovered over Erica's name. She wasn't a cop, but she was on the task force. And she was definitely female.

He gripped his lower lip between his teeth and hit the button. His feet tapped with each ring.

"Ryan? What time is it?" A yawn slipped through the receiver.

"Did I wake you up? It's ten in the morning. I would assume your dog would have woken you up early."

"I worked two-twelves, and then someone kept me up texting last night." The gravelly tone of her voice sent a wakeup call to his dick.

*Down boy.* He shifted in his seat.

What was she saying? Oh yeah, texting. Ryan smirked. He'd do it again if he got the chance.

"Besides, Karma's not a morning person."

Neither was she. "Well, you can go back to bed. Or... come help me chase down a lead."

"Wait, what? You have a lead in the corruption?" Her voice was clearer now, as if she'd swept the sleepy cobwebs from her mind.

Sheets rustled in the background. He couldn't help the smile tugging at his cheek. Ryan would bet money she was out of

bed now. *Yes!* Points for him.

“It might be a lead. I’ll explain when I pick you up. I’ll bring you coffee and a cinnamon roll. Be ready in twenty.” He disconnected the call. Bubbles of laughter filled his chest. Erica never was a morning person. But he could always bribe her into action with the local bakery’s pastries. Their cinnamon rolls were the size of his head and her favorite.

He hit print on the image, then closed his laptop and packed up his gear. Time to go knock on some doors.

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Ryan was here. Erica knew it, even before he rang the bell or before Karma let out her happy bark. No, she knew it was him by the way her nipples beaded.

Dread coiled around her legs as she slogged her way to the entry. She crossed an arm over her chest and opened the door. Yup, there he stood. All sexy and ready for business in his dress slacks, button-down shirt, and blazer that showed off his broad shoulders. He had skipped the tie today, but his outfit still screamed professional.

Glancing down at her khakis and firefighter T-shirt, she was glad she hadn't opted for jeans.

She frowned. Dealing with Ryan Daniels before she had her coffee was *not* a smart move.

*Don't look at the dusting of chest hair popping out at his collar.* She averted her eyes. Police business. He was here on police business, she reminded herself—not for the first time this week.

“Smile. It's Friday, and I brought breakfast.” He held out a to-go cup and jiggled a waxed pastry bag.

She dropped her chin and shot him a you-annoy-me look.

“Here, I got a pup treat for Karma too.” He slipped her dog a bone-shaped cookie. Not that he needed to. The traitor

whimpered with excitement when he pulled up. One time. That's all it took for him to become her dog's new bestie.

She rolled her eyes. "You're sucking up. I'm starting to regret opening the door."

He rattled the bag. "Cinnamon rolls. Your favorite."

She blinked. He remembered. The man always did have a memory like a steel trap.

She snagged the bribe. Yes, she knew full well that's what it was. It had worked from the time she was in tenth grade. She turned to Karma. "Be good. I'll be back in a little while."

After she locked the door, she followed him to his vehicle. He didn't speak again until she was strapped in and had her first bite of gooey goodness.

"Oooh, these are as delicious as I remember. Are they from the little shop on Oak Street?"

"Yup. They make the best sweets in town." He put the SUV in gear and pulled out.

"I haven't been there in years." She took another bite. Her taste buds sang. Her eyes cut to him. "I kind of OD'd on them for a while after... Sarah. Anyway, I stopped going there for my waistline."

His gaze dropped to her stomach.

Shit. She could stand to lose a few more pounds. Her focus shifted from her own belly to his non-existent one. Ryan never

did have an extra ounce of fat on him. And by the way his shoulders tapered down to his lean waist, he still didn't.

“You look good. I don't think a sweet now and then would hurt.” A delicious grin crossed his handsome face.

A small flutter pattered in her chest.

Coffee. She needed coffee. She grabbed the mug and washed down more than the sugary treat—the old feelings too. One goofy grin, that's all it took to awaken the dormant longings. Damn it. She needed to stay professional.

She cleared her throat. “So, where are we going?”

“To the scene of the crime.” He explained about the video and the SUV as they drove across town.

Turning onto Industrial Boulevard, Erica took in the houses. Circa 1930s, many were rundown and all were close together. Garages were off the alley in back. A few had fresh paint, at least in the last five years. Chain-link fences mapped out tiny yards, many patchy and in need of a good mowing. Others had the end-of-season flowers blooming in milk cans or old clay pots—A pop of color in an otherwise dull street.

Ryan parked across from the burnt-out building. The brick structure, a shadow of its former self, stood behind the bright yellow crime-scene tape. The harsh light of day illuminated the destruction the fire left behind.

“We can start here and circle around the block.” Ryan grabbed the photo and notebook before stepping out of the vehicle.



The quiet morning accentuated the squeak of the gate as they entered the first yard. Ryan held a confidence around him like a cloak as he rang the bell. Erica's insides trembled. This was a part of town she didn't frequent. Ever. Her parents used to warn her and Sarah about it.

Muffled sounds came from the other side of the door. A thump. A curse. Finally, the door creaked open an inch. A bloodshot eyeball stared at them. "What do you want?"

"I'm Detective Daniels and this is Firefighter Randall. We are looking into the fire that happened Sunday night." He gestured behind him.

"I don't know nothin' about no fire. I already told the cops that." The door slammed shut.

"Okay, then." Erica stepped back, but Ryan didn't move. He rapped on the glass.

The door opened again. Two inches this time. The man scowled.

Erica stepped up, smiled, and held out the photo of the SUV. "Have you seen this vehicle around?"

The scowl softened. He squinted at the image. "Why? He do something?"

"They may have information relating to the fire. A witness." She cranked up the wattage on her smile and moved the picture closer to him.

He pushed it back to her and dropped his gaze. "Can't say."

“Well, if you remember anything else, please contact me.”  
Ryan held out his card.

The man pocketed it a second before he slammed the door.

“Well, he wasn’t very friendly,” Erica said as they walked to the next house.

“He was nervous. He’d seen the vehicle but didn’t want to say.”

His long strides had her double-timing to keep up with him.  
“How could you tell?”

“His body language, his noncommittal answer. Not a yes or no but a can’t say. I’m guessing this vehicle comes here regularly.”

“Drug dealer?” She glanced back at the house.

“Or customer. I know the local dealer has a pot leaf tattooed on his temple.”

“Really? On his face? Isn’t that a little conspicuous?” Unless it was his way of advertising. She shrugged.

“You’d be surprised at some of the things people do.”

“People surprise me all the time.” Not to mention him.

The next door was marginally more friendly. The young mom opened the door wider than a sliver but hadn’t seen the SUV in question. As they walked up to the third house, one with flowers blooming beside the front steps, she saw the curtains move.

Before they reached the bottom stair, the door opened. An elderly woman with a black curl peeking out of a shower cap eyeballed them. “Cops. It’s about time you responded to my complaints.”

“Ma’am. I’m Detective Daniels, and this is Firefighter Randall. We’re looking into the fire from the other day.”

She huffed. “You’re not here about the noise complaint? This is the fourth time I’ve had to call on those troublemakers.”

“Ma’am, could I get your name?” Ryan asked.

“Esther White.” She grew a couple inches as she spoke. She had to be no more than five-foot-two. She wagged her finger at the rundown house next door.

“Youngsters today. They blare that God-awful music, if you can call it that, at all hours of the night. They’re smokin’ that weed and who knows what else.” She tsked, then dropped her voice. “And they stole my Annabeth.”

Erica gasped. “They took your daughter?”

“What? Heck no, my daughter moved to New York City after college. She’s a smart one, that girl.” Pride straightened her stance.

“Ma’am, who is Annabeth?” Ryan’s gaze moved from the woman to the neighboring house.

“My cat. I told them not to feed her. They leave beer cans and junk food all over. The temptation was just too much. Annabeth clawed through the screens and hightailed it over to

their yard.” She sighed. “My poor baby hasn’t been home since.”

Erica’s jaw fell. “They kept her?”

“Well, the inked-up fella did bring her back a couple times, but she keeps sneaking out. It’s the jerky. It’s like catnip to her.” Brown eyes shone with tears.

Erica couldn’t see how that constituted them stealing the cat, but she did feel sorry for the older woman. She snuck a look at Ryan. His lip quivered. The jerk was holding back a laugh.

“Have you tried setting out a can of tuna? Maybe she is just... visiting.” His eyes creased.

“Have you seen the price of tuna these days? No.”

“I will inquire about your cat. As for our visit, have you seen this vehicle around the neighborhood before?” He handed her the photo.

“Sure. I see everything. I sit right there while I watch my shows.” She gestured to the window on her right.

“Do you know the owner? Do they live nearby?” Erica bounced up on her toes. Excitement energized her.

“Nope. Only seen it. About once a week. It cruises the street until one of those no-good hoodlums walks out to talk to him, then he drives off.”

“Talk?” Ryan asked.

“Well, I can’t say for sure, but I’d bet my support hose they’re buying drugs.” Her chicken neck wobbled as she

nodded.

“Do you know the person who *talked* to him?” Ryan used air quotes around the word talked.

“Can’t say.” She shuffled back a step. “My show is coming on. Check on my Annabeth.”

She slammed the door.

Erica heard three locks being set. She turned to Ryan. “Well, that was interesting.”

“Yeah, come on. I think it’s time to chat with the cat whisperers.” He slipped his hand in hers and led her down the uneven sidewalk.

Heat burned from his palm to hers. She flexed her hand before relaxing into his hold. It was wrong. She shouldn’t crave his touch, but this small contact was like a hit of adrenaline to her system.

As they started up the next walk, the warmth from his fingers traveled up. Her wrist tingled, liquefying at the connection.

She pulled her hand away. A weak moment, that’s all it was—all in her head. He was being helpful, nothing more.

The thumping bass of death-metal hit them twenty feet from the door, along with the sweet smell of pot.

Ryan knocked.

The curtain flapped. The music cut out.

“Shut the fuck up. Cops.” The words resounded from the house.

They waited. Erica’s heart ran sprints as the seconds turned to minutes. Ryan tried the doorbell. Nothing. He knocked again.

“Don’t they realize we can hear them?” Her brow crept up in disbelief. No one could be that stupid.

“I’m betting they are stoned out of their minds and think if they stay quiet for a minute we will go away.”

“Will we?”

Ryan shrugged. “Maybe.”

The curtain moved again.

Erica turned to Ryan, winked, then raised her voice and said, “I guess they aren’t home. Mrs. White will have to file a police report.”

“Yeah, catnapping is a crime. I was hoping to settle this without filing charges.” Ryan ran a hand over his face. He looked frustrated to the casual observer. But he couldn’t hide his smirk from her.

A giggle caught in her throat. Damn laughter—it was contagious.

The flip of the latch sobered her. The door opened a foot. An orange-and-white cat was held out at arm’s length. “I didn’t steal no cat. I can’t help it the thing likes Jack Links. I tried to take it back. The damn thing just keeps coming over.”

Erica blinked. She reached for the cat, but Ryan stopped her.

“I have a few questions,” Ryan said.

The arm jiggled the cat like it was baiting a bear. “Here, take it. I swear, I didn’t steal it.”

Ryan held up the photo. “Do you know this vehicle?”

A dark face with ink poked out. “That’s one of Sal’s customers. Don’t know him, only seen the car.”

“Sal?”

“Fuck.” As if just realizing what he’d said, he threw the cat out the door and slammed it.

Erica saw a flash of movement around the side of the house. She pointed. “Ryan.”

“Shit. He’s a runner. Go to the car and stay there.” He took off around the side of the house.

Erica scooped up the cat, stroked his soft fur, and looked in its bright, glazed eyes. “Hey, there, Annabeth. Oh, poor baby, you look like you have a contact high. Let’s take you home.” She crossed to Mrs. White’s house. Erica had one foot on the step and the door flew open.

“Annie. My poor baby.” She cradled the feline against her ample chest.

“Ma’am, I don’t suppose you’d be able to describe the driver of that SUV?”

She looked at Erica over her glasses. “Honey, I had my cataracts done last year. I can see a fly land on my azaleas

along the front walk.”

“Man. Caucasian. Dark hair. Glasses.” She shifted the cat higher in her arms.

Erica pulled out her phone. She frantically two-finger typed, trying to keep up with Mrs. White.

Not bad for being on the topside of eighty and from eighty-yards away but... “Is there anything else you can remember? Age?”

“I’d say he was close to my granddaughter’s age. Thirties.”

Ryan appeared around the side of the house, his hand pressed to his side. The other pulled the gangly twenty-something man from next door—shirtless, shoeless, in ripped jeans. He nudged the man, prodding him to keep moving. “I might have let the drugs slide, but you made me run.”

Erica thanked Mrs. White, then turned to Ryan. “Want me to call for a squad?”

“No, let’s go. I want to ask him some questions at the station. I can have one of the patrol officers drop you at home.”

“Listen. I didn’t do nothin’.” The guy craned his neck to look back at Daniels.

“I gave you your chance to talk, and you ran. Time to go downtown.” Ryan steered him toward the vehicle.

The guy liquefied like a limp noodle, sliding to the ground. “I can’t go back to prison. I can’t.”



It was a minor drug charge. The chances of him going to prison were low, but the guy started bawling like a two-year-old. Snot ran from his nose. He flailed as much as he could with his hands cuffed behind him.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “What’s your name?”

He sniffed, then wiped his face on his bare shoulder.

Eww. Erica dealt with blood and burns, but the stringy snot turned her stomach. Maybe she should have eaten more than the sugary roll for breakfast.

“I can’t. Mama will kill me.” He rolled from side to side. His breathing sped up. Rapid intakes and not enough exhales. The guy would hyperventilate if he didn’t calm down.

Ryan huffed and shook his head. “You need to chill. Sir, what’s your name?”

“Reggie.”

Erica stepped closer. Squatted to his eye level. “Reggie. I need you to sit up and put your head between your knees. I don’t want you to pass out.”

He rolled forward and huffed out air.

“Better.” Erica rose, sent Ryan a private message with her facial expressions. He rolled his eyes, then nodded.

“Reggie, how about we have a talk right here.”

His dark brows jumped up. “Really? Can I go?”

“I didn’t say that.” Scanning his eyes, she gauged how high he was. Not so much that he couldn’t communicate.

Dirt clung to the tear tracks on the younger man's face. "I didn't do nothin'."

Now Ryan's brow shot up. "So, if I ran a drug test right now, you'd be clean?"

The guy's gaze traveled across the yard, down the sidewalk, anywhere but at Ryan. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Sal."

"Fuck." Reggie rocked back and forth. "I don't know him."

"But you know the man in the SUV was his buyer." Erica crossed her arms over her chest. "Tell me about him?"

She caught Ryan nodding. A zip of excitement shot up her arm. It must be the good cop-bad cop thing they had going on. Because it surely wasn't his approval causing it. She didn't need that.

Resigned, Reggie slumped. Shoulder-length braids covered his face. "Salvador Ruiz is the local dealer. You want it, he can get it."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know." At their skepticism, panic flooded his face. "Really. He was living with his cousin for a while, but I heard he moved."

"But he hangs out on Industrial Boulevard?" She threw him an easy question.

Dark braids bobbed. "Yeah. But I haven't seen him in a few days."

“Can you describe him?” Ryan asked.

He shrugged. “He’s my height. Latino. Got a couple tats.”

“Hell, who doesn’t have tattoos? Tell me about his?”

Tats? Ryan? Erica’s curiosity piqued. Her gaze roamed his fit physique. Bicep? Chest? Maybe a pair of cuffs on his...

“A sleeve on his right arm. A collar.” Reggie nodded with his chin to his upper chest. “Something in Spanish. Oh, and a leaf on his temple.”

“A cannabis leaf?” Ryan’s eyes pinpointed—fully focused on the next thing out of Reggie’s mouth.

“Yeah.” Recognition lit on Reggie’s face.

Erica scanned Ryan’s hard expression for a sign. Would he arrest this kid or not? Her gaze fell to the snot-running, tear-streaked face. Dark eyes, half dilated. He was coming down but definitely still riding the wave of sweet marijuana.

Ryan rubbed the back of his neck. “Tell you what, Reggie, if you have the cousin’s address, I’ll let you off this time.”

The kid’s face brightened. His dark mop of hair waved as his head bobbed. “He lived over off Vine and Pleasant. The big house with the mean dogs.”

Ryan shook his head. “You have to do better than that.”

Thin shoulders fell. “Okay, let me think.”

Erica watched the man literally try to shake the drug-induced fog from his head.

Time slowed as he pulled numbers from the sieve that must be his mind. With the last one, Ryan nodded and removed the cuffs.

“If you are lying to me, Reggie, I’ll come back.” The words might be innocuous, but the hard edge to Ryan’s stare was definitely a threat.

Erica shivered. She and Ryan helped Reggie up as he rubbed his wrists.

“And Reggie, if you’d have talked to me in the first place, I wouldn’t have used the cuffs.”

He nodded and stumbled into the house.

She glanced back. The curtain moved in Mrs. White’s window. “I don’t think we will need to worry about Reggie. I think his neighbor will keep an eye on him.”

“And on everyone else on the street. Come on. Let’s take a stroll down Pleasant Lane.” Ryan slid his hand to the small of her back as they headed to the vehicle.

## Chapter 7

Wow, he still had his fingers. He caught the little flinch when he laid his hand on Erica's back to usher her to the vehicle. It was so natural to touch her. They used to touch all the time. Nothing sexual. Their hand would brush in the popcorn bowl while watching a movie. He'd grab her arm to pull her down the hall, so they wouldn't be late for class. Hell, he even let her paint his toenails. Black sparkles. She and Sarah busted a gut when the sparkles didn't come off with the regular nail polish remover.

A groan at the memory slipped out.

They had years of casual, friendly touches. Then one night changed it all.

Now, an instinctual brush of his hand, guiding her, felt like more.

Erica gazed out the window. "I don't think this part of town was ever pleasant."

Ryan pulled his attention to the rundown homes and dead lawns. Mostly single-level houses on this street. The development had been all tract homes from the sixties.

“There.” She pointed. “The one with the second story.”

“Sure enough, Reggie was right.” Ryan looked at the front porch with dog chains bolted to the post. A chain-link fence bordered the front yard. No dogs though.

He parked in front of the home. He clicked the vehicle’s door handle, and as if sounding a bell for the gates of hell, two massive, black and tan dogs rounded the house at full speed. Their enormous bodies charged the fence.

Ryan yanked his leg back inside and slammed the door. “Oh, hell no.”

“They’re beautiful.” Her face lit with appreciation.

Ryan frowned. She was crazy. How had he not known that?

“Look at them.” She gestured to the two dogs.

He was looking alright. Sharp white teeth, broad heads, drool foaming, Ryan didn’t know if finding this drug dealer was worth losing a limb.

“Beautiful wasn’t the word I was thinking. Beasts. Hellhounds.” He swiveled his head from side-to-side. “No, not feeling like testing my insurance today.”

“Don’t be a baby. They are just doing their job. Come on.” She opened the door.

“What the... Get in the car.” Ryan reached for her, but it was too late. She was standing on the sidewalk mere feet from those snapping jaws.

“Well, shit. She can’t have all the balls.” He said a quick prayer he wouldn’t lose his today and stepped out. The barks magnified as he exited the vehicle. Ryan touched his ear. No blood, so he took another step closer.

His love of dogs had always been from afar, and at this moment, he’d like to keep it that way. But Erica had spit on that plan and thrown good sense to the wind.

“They need to realize we are friends.” She slowly extended the back of her hand, only a few inches from the chain-link fence.

“No!” Visions of her pulling back a bloody stump flashed in his mind. His heart rate skyrocketed.

“Shhh. Stay there.” She hushed Ryan, then continued to hum to the beasts. Their barks turned to growls.

“I’m pulling out my phone and dialing nine one, waiting on the last digit, I want to be ready, in case this goes sideways.”

“That’s not going to happen. These two beauties don’t want to hurt me. They just have a job to do.”

“If you mean scaring people off, it’s working. I’m scared and man enough to admit it.”

Erica ignored him. She cooed to the monsters snarling on the other side of the way-too-short fence and smiled. She moved her hand closer.

“Woman, you’re certifiable.”

“It’s okay. The stupid man won’t hurt you,” she muttered to the dogs, who were miraculously quieting down. Their lips slid back down over their massive teeth, and the stub tails twitched. Her hand touched the fence. Long tongues licked her.

“They’re seeing if they want to eat you. Don’t offer them a sample.”

She cocked her head. “They are good dogs and just needed to realize I’m a friend.”

“She has a fucking death wish,” he muttered under his breath as she raised her hand over the fence.

The beasts’ flat-back ears twitched.

His finger itched as it hovered over the one button. Waiting. Ready.

A whimper sounded. Ryan blinked. Was that the giant dog?

It gave a short bark, then jettied his mammoth head toward Erica.

Ryan braced for action but couldn’t believe his eyes as the two dogs whimpered again and rubbed their huge heads against Erica’s hand.

“See, they just want some love.” She slowly reached out her other hand and rubbed both dogs. Tongues rolled out and their vicious expressions morphed into that of happy, attentive, lap dogs.



“How? Did you channel the dog whisperer?” Ryan stayed rooted to his spot by the vehicle.

Just then, a tall skinny man propped open the door. “Who are you? And what the hell did you do to my dogs?” He whistled, and the two dogs bounded up the stairs and into the house.

“Beautiful dogs.” Erica moved to the gate. Ryan joined her. From the corner of her mouth, she whispered, “Chicken. Buck, buck, buck, bugawk.”

Ryan bit back his smile. There was the Erica he grew up with. He pulled out his badge as they stepped into the yard. “Sir, I’m Detective Daniels, and this is Firefighter Randall. We are looking into the fire over on Industrial Boulevard last Sunday.”

“What’s that got to do with me?” He leaned a shoulder in the doorjamb.

Ryan took this as a sign to continue. “I’m looking for a potential witness. Salvador Ruiz. We understand he’s your cousin and was staying here.”

“Not my cousin. My wife’s. I threw his lying ass out two weeks ago. I told him no drugs or he was out. I have young kids.”

Now that they were closer, and the hellhounds were back inside, Ryan spied a pink bike leaning against the backside of the railing.

“Do you happen to know where we could find him?”

“Nope. Just glad he’s gone.” He muttered something in Spanish and spit on the ground.

Ryan didn’t have to be fluent in that language to catch the meaning. He asked a few more questions, then thanked him for his time and ushered Erica back to the vehicle.

She buckled her seatbelt and turned to him. “Now what? Back to knocking on doors?”

He checked the time. “Let’s grab some food. Then we can go hit the rest of the street before it gets too late. I have some other casework to do this afternoon.”

She nodded. “Oh, Mrs. White gave me a description of the man driving the Tahoe.” She rattled off the details. “You might be able to get her to work with a sketch artist.”

“Sounds like a plan. Food first.” A loud grumble erupted in his torso. “Weng’s?”

Her eyes lit, and she licked her lips. “I love their egg rolls.”

He remembered. Oh, did he remember.

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Ryan had just finished his paperwork for last week's vehicular manslaughter case and had opened the social media account to check for any new DM's or comments on his posts, when Amy's blonde head popped over his cubicle wall.

"Did you send in your report on the drunk driver case?"

"Logging it in now." He tapped the submit button.

"Cool, are you done for the day?" She sauntered into his space and plopped into the spare chair.

"Got a couple more things I was going to do. What's on your mind?"

"Trey's working late at the bureau. Seeing if you wanted to grab a drink down at Pete's?"

"Sounds like a plan. Give me ten minutes to check something." Ryan pulled up the social media account.

"What is that, some new dating app?" Amy leaned over his shoulder.

Ryan glanced around. *No rogue ears. Good.* "It's a new social media site for police. I'm checking it out."

"Ahhh. Say no more." Amy scanned the page one more time before rising and stepping back. "I'm gonna go grab my gear. I'll meet you at the bar in fifteen minutes."

Ryan waved her off and turned his attention back to his notifications. The red exclamation point blinked. His heart rate jumped. This could be nothing or it could be a lead. He held his breath and clicked the message icon.

The sender's username was BigJ648. Message was vague and brief. It said... *Your message said you were good with all types of side work. I may have something for you.*

Ryan snapped a screenshot, and saved it to a folder before he replied. *What do you have in mind? I'm flexible if the money is good.*

When no little bubbles appeared, Ryan realized BigJ probably wasn't online. He closed down the screen, shut his computer down, and grabbed his keys.

Ryan hoisted his laptop bag on his shoulder and headed out. Checking the flap to make sure it was latched, he stumbled headfirst into Sergeant Johnson. "Whoa, sorry."

"No worries. Next time I'll pay better attention." Sarge shoved his phone in his pocket. He leaned in so only Ryan could hear. "Have you had a chance to check out that new site?"

"I got some feelers out."

Sarge nodded and stepped back. "Well, have a good night, Daniels."

Ryan gave him a salute as he pushed open the door.

On the two-block drive to the bar, Ryan made a mental note to check for BigJ648 on the other rent-a-cop and social sites.

Most people chose the same username for all their socials.

Five minutes later, he walked into Pete's Bar. The local hangout for law enforcement and other first responders was in full swing tonight. The voices of the game announcers on the large televisions around the room competed with the murmur of the patrons. But despite the clash of sounds and visual clutter with all the randomly hung police and firefighter memorabilia, Ryan felt his blood pressure drop as he walked inside.

He sighed. This was a second home to many of the boys and girls in blue—the place they came after shifts to decompress. But that calm he felt slipped a notch when he caught Millie's bright eyes across the room. She picked up her serving tray and gave him an overly bright smile before she sashayed back to the bar.

Larson sat in the back with two other men. She flagged Ryan over. "Just in time. Evans here offered to buy the first round."

The dark-haired man turned, gave a head nod, and extended his hand. "Walker Evans. I don't think we've been formally introduced, but I remember you. You made that double play in the softball game last summer."

"Yeah, I remember. AFD, right?" Ryan shook his hand, hooked his bag on the back of the chair, and slid into the seat next to Amy. He extended his hand to the other gentleman with the red hair. "And I remember you. You hit it all the way out to centerfield in the seventh inning."

"Garrett Kelley. Nice to meet you."

Just then Millie, the waitress, came over with their drinks. “Here’s your round of long necks.” She set the bottles down and turned her attention to Ryan. “Hey Ry, I’m off in twenty.”

“Hey, Millie. Yeah, tonight’s not good.”

“Tomorrow?” Her dark lashes fluttered an extra time or two as she waited for his response.

He gave a pained expression. “Can’t. I’m swamped at work. Heck, I have more work to do when I leave here. I’m just stopping off for a cold one.” He threw her a casual smile.

It was mostly the truth. They had gone out a couple times. Had some laughs, but he knew it wasn’t gonna be anything more.

Her bottom, purple-colored lip jutted out. “Your loss.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder, winked at Garrett and Walker, then sashayed back to the bar.

“So, I’m guessing it wasn’t a love match.” Amy hitched a thumb over her shoulder toward Millie. “That wouldn’t have anything to do with the cute strawberry-blonde you’ve been spending time with?”

“Larson,” he snapped out. “We’re not going there.”

“Where? Come on. What’s the deal with you and her? Is it serious enough I need to threaten her if she breaks your heart...again?”

The guys at the table looked back and forth between them with rapt attention. Finally, Walker asked, “Okay, I’ll bite. Who you talking about?”

Larson leaned in and mock whispered, “You guys know Firefighter Randall?”

“Amy.” Ryan shot her a drop-it look. But nope, she was like a dog with a bone when she got on a subject. And he and Erica’s history was a juicy T-bone.

“The only thing going on between Erica and me is work.” He scowled at Amy. They shouldn’t be talking about anything to do with the task force, including who was on it, in front of other people.

“Yeah, you made eyes at her last summer a couple times, then again at the fire last Sunday.”

He pinched to bridge of his nose.

She must’ve gotten the clue because she changed tactics. Too bad she didn’t drop it. No, only changed tactics.

“How would you know that? You weren’t at the fire.” Ryan downed the last of his beer and waved the empty bottle at Millie signaling another round.

“You know police officers gossip more than old women.”

True. Ryan rolled his eyes.

Garrett leaned in. “To be fair, I was there and witnessed their interaction. The only eyes I saw being made were daggers being hurled by Erica. I could see she was pissed at him from twenty feet away.”

Finally. Maybe Amy would chill.

“Ooh, so there must be something really titillating between you two if she is still pissed.” Amy rubbed her hands together.

“No, I questioned her ability in front of her boss. That’s why she was pissed.” It was true. Not the whole story. He prayed it would appease Larson at least for a while. Shit, was it hot in here? Ryan felt like his feet were being held to the fire with the Spanish Inquisition Larson was throwing at him.

Amy nodded and let it go, or... she was working on a new angle.

Walker cleared his throat. “I heard there were two DBs in the fire.”

Ryan slumped in his seat and sent Evan’s a head tilt. Nice redirect.

Walker’s lip twitched in reply.

“Yeah, I’m waiting for the medical examiner’s conclusions.” The new beers were set on the table. Ryan pointed to his chest to indicate this round was on him. He owed Evans for the save. He took a swig and washed down the tightness that compressed his ribs.

“Well, I haven’t got all my test results back, but it was definitely arson, no doubt there,” Walker said as he peeled the label off his beer bottle.

Walker. Arson. Something clicked in Ryan’s two-beer brain. “You’re the arson investigator. Any news on the accelerant or when we’ll have the report?”



“Well, I have my preliminary worked up, but it could be another week before I get the chemical reports from the BCA labs.” Walker leaned back and lifted his beer to his lips. He scanned Ryan as he drank. The man wasn’t a cop, but if Ryan didn’t know any better, he’d swear the man was law enforcement. Military? He let his gaze catalog the two men in front of him. Both the men had a look about them. It was like they oozed a calm confidence.

Walker’s brow rose. “Are you working this case?”

Ryan nodded.

“You’re the one Erica mentioned.” Walker tipped his head. “Like I said, I don’t have the results, but I can tell you whatever was used to start the blaze burned insanely hot.”

“Hot? Like gasoline or kerosene?”

Walker shook his head. “Like flash-fire hot.”

Ryan made a mental note to check into that.

Walker took another swig of his beer, set it down, and looked straight at Ryan. “I’ll make sure I copy you on the report when I send it.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” He slipped a card from his pocket across the table.

“I might know someone who can give a nudge to the lab,” Amy said.

“Yeah, butter up that man and see if he can move things along faster.” Ryan didn’t want to know how she’d do it. That

was a visual he didn't need of his friend.

## Chapter 8

After finishing his second beer with Larson and the fire fighters, Ryan headed back to the station. He was an hour into paperwork when an email popped in from the medical examiner.

“Holy shit...” Ryan reread the results again. After reading it a third time, he forwarded it to Trey, Amy, and Erica.

It wasn't two minutes before his phone rang. He picked it up.

“Are you serious? Could this be a mistake?” Erica's voice rose with each question.

“It's there in black-and-white. Our one victim is a police officer. And our other...”

“Is our drug dealer.” Surprise flowed through the line. “Do you know the officer?”

“No, I can't say I do.” Ryan's fingers flew over the keyboard as he pulled up information on the victim, Officer Brian Kealy.

The search page pulled up. Kealy was a seasoned patrolman and had been on the neighboring city's department for fifteen years. Ryan scanned the page, then clicked to another page result. "He's not an Ashwood officer. He's stationed in Bloomington and lives in Woodbury."

"What was he doing in Ashwood? Do you think he was corrupt?"

"Don't know, but I'll find out. He's my victim now." He tapped in another search, this one for alerts. Nothing. The hairs on his arm jumped to attention. How could an officer be missing for five days and not have a Blue Alert?

Scenarios ran through his mind as he scanned Kealy's personal information. Divorced. Parents deceased. No children.

There had to be someone who would miss this guy. His superior. Unless, he was on vacation. *Slumming on the wrong side of Ashwood? Not likely.*

Ryan pulled up the organizational chart for Bloomington and fired off a quick email to Kealy's supervisor, Sergeant Roger Vu, asking for a meeting.

Ryan's gut churned. Odds were good the officer was his contact.

"What I want to know is why was Salvador there? Coincidence?" Even her voice showed she didn't believe that.

"Doubt it. He could have been his nark, or his contact if he was on the take." Ryan pulled up Kealy's bio from the city's

webpage.

“I’m going to see if I can access Bloomington’s fire reports. If not, I may know someone who can help, but I don’t want to reach out yet.”

Ryan could hear the sound of rapid-fire typing in the background. He should go back to Pleasant Avenue to tell Ruiz’s next of kin of his passing. Delivering this news always sucked, but a chill zipped up his spine at the thought of the two beasts who would greet him.

*Man up. It’s part of the job.*

He checked the time. 7:35 p.m. Tomorrow was soon enough. Erica was working on the cases tonight. It was only fair for him to go help her.

*Sure, that’s a good reason.*

“I’ll come over. I wanted to run a diagnostic on the city’s fire system. If you can access other cities, I could start that while we search the files.” Ryan bit his lip, waiting. If she rejected his idea, he’d have no excuse and have to go back and see those hellhounds.

After what seem like an eternity, she sighed. “Give me fifteen minutes. I need to shower.”

Surprise and something like hope bubbled in his veins. “Make it twenty, and I’ll bring food. I haven’t eaten yet.”

Less than thirty minutes later, Ryan strolled up Erica’s front walk with his work bag slung over his shoulder and a takeout

sack in his hand. A deep bark vibrated through the door, and his step faltered.

Karma.

As his foot touched the step, the door swung open. One hundred and thirty pounds of wiggling dog greeted him. He raised the food bag high as he stroked the broad head. “Good boy.”

Erica leaned against the door jamb in pajama pants and a U of M T-shirt. Dark, wet tendrils hung around her shoulders.

Ryan stumbled again. He couldn't say if it was the dog leaning into him or Erica. She didn't have a lick of makeup on, never did, but the deep red of her wet locks made her eyes electric.

“I brought food.”

“Here, give me the bag before it ends up being Karma's dinner.” She extended her slender hand.

He handed it over as they entered the house.

His gaze bounced around the living room. Beer on the side table, computer on the coffee table with a notebook and pen beside it. A file folder open, pages scattered across the couch.

“You were working when I called?” Ryan followed her into the kitchen. Tried not to notice the way her flannel pants hugged her hips.

“Yeah, a typical Friday night if it's not my rotation.” She flinched.

Even facing the other direction, he could tell she wished she hadn't said that. She grabbed a beer from the fridge and waved it.

"Sure. It's about as exciting as mine. I was at the station." Most of his weekends were spent working cases. He's slipped in the occasional date, but not as often as most people believed.

She twisted off the cap and handed him the beer. His fingers brushed hers as he took it. Her gaze dropped to the bottle as she shoved her hands in her pants pockets. She stepped back before meeting his gaze.

Yeah, he felt it too. The zip of awareness he had tried to bury for the last thirteen years. The one he prayed would happen again with another woman and hadn't.

The shock in her eyes mirrored his. But while he was used to the longing it left in its wake, he'd bet hers was laced with anger. They had been making headway in this new truce, but he'd seen stripper's panties that were thicker.

She grabbed plates from the cupboard. Ryan pulled out the takeout boxes. "I remembered you liked bacon cheese burgers."

"I'm a vegan." The scowl curling her lips faltered.

Erica may have changed over the years, but she hadn't developed a poker face.

He'd have believed her if her cheek hadn't twitched. Not to mention the way her eyes dilated when he held up the takeout

bag. “You’re a crap liar. Admit it, you were salivating from the smell alone.”

Her hands fisted on her hips.

And what nice hips they were. Just the right amount of curve to them. He tightened his grip on the box—*thank you, peripheral vision*—as he pinned her in place with his gaze.

A touch of pink slipped out and wet her bottom lip a second before she snatched the container from his hand.

She unwrapped the burger and inhaled deeply. “I did try to go vegan. Or was it vegetarian? I can’t remember.”

“Did you now? When was this?” He leaned on the counter and crossed his arms.

“For Lent last year.” With one last sniff, she set the food on her plate and added the fries he held out.

“And how long did you last?” Ryan and Erica had both grown up Catholic, but while he wasn’t practicing, he couldn’t say if she was.

Her gaze darted from the burger to him, then back to the delicious smelling food on her plate. “Fine, I didn’t make it the whole day. But to be fair, I put vegetables on top of my burgers.”

“Ketchup and mustard don’t count as veggies.” He plopped a thick-cut fry into his mouth.

She scoffed. “Don’t get me started. Ketchup comes from tomatoes, and mustard is derived from seeds.”



He loved the way color flooded her cheeks when she took a stand on senseless things. He stuck another fry in his mouth to hide his smile. “Okay, fine. Ketchup is a veggie. Or is it a fruit? Doesn’t matter. Now, are we eating in here or in the living room?”

“Living room.”

He scooped up his plate and beer and followed her to the couch. Taking the opposite side, he set his plate down, then pulled his laptop from his bag and set up.

The most delicious moan slipped from her lips as she chewed her first bite. The sound shot straight to his crotch. As casually as possible, he covered his growing chub with his plate.

“Damn, Pete’s makes the best burgers in town.” She licked the sauce dripping from her fingers.

“Why do you think all the police officers hang out there? It’s not only for the atmosphere.” He bit into his own burger. Melted cheese and BBQ sauce oozed from the edges.

“I forgot the napkins.” Before Ryan could react, a slim finger wiped the cheese from his chin and slipped it between her lips.

Ugh. He wanted to suck that digit into his mouth. He tracked the movement of her tongue as it slid out and licked her lips. Eyes closed. She fully enjoyed the taste. And he fully enjoyed watching her. Ryan needed a bigger plate.

Dazed eyes opened—drunk on the riot of flavors before she caught him watching her. “What?”

He blinked as if coming out of a stupor. “You really love these burgers.”

She swallowed hard and set the burger on her plate as if it had just hit her what she did. In true Erica fashion, she didn’t run from the room or spout excuses. Oh, her cheeks were as red as a stop sign, but she didn’t run. “Anyway. I pulled up the reports our department sent to the MFIRS. We have copies of them on file in our system.”

As a police officer, Ryan was familiar with the state fire incident reporting system, but rarely had a need to access anything from it.

They spent the next thirty minutes eating and running through the fire reports. Ryan set up his diagnostic and didn’t mention the fact she had intentionally eaten cheese from his face.

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Inwardly, Erica spent the last thirty minutes berating herself for touching Ryan's face. As if that wasn't bad enough, it's like the last thirteen years had just disappeared and they were back on her parent's couch, eating McDonald's and playing Call of Duty.

Work. He was here for work, not to throw her into a time warp and have her eat sauce and cheese off his face.

Oh God, she'd wanted to actually lick it off him with her tongue. Thankfully, she hadn't lost all control of herself. That would have screwed their whole working relationship. And that was the only relationship they had. It had to be the only one.

She shoved a fry in her mouth and drained the last of her beer. "I'm switching to Coke if we plan on working for the evening. Do you want one?"

"Sure."

She grabbed his plate and hightailed it into the kitchen, Karma on her heels, waiting for his treat.

"I know you love fries." Scooping the last couple from the plate, she fed them to him. "Good boy."

She placed the plates in the sink and reached in the fridge for the sodas.

Definitely needed to switch to pop. If she had one more beer, she'd probably do way more than just take food off of him with her finger.

Opening the freezer door, she stuck her head in. "Ahh." A groan slipped out. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to shake loose the image of his face when she stuck her finger in her mouth. No doubt the man was turned on. Shit, she herself clenched her thighs a little tighter.

"Are you keeping your pop in the freezer now?"

"What?" *Ouch!* Her head bounced off the top of the fridge as she jumped back. *The sneaky bastard.* She hadn't heard him approach. "Nope, um, I'm getting ice."

"I don't need ice. Thanks." He reached out a hand for the beverage can.

Can? Right. She looked at the metal cylinder in her hand. All she had to do was extend her arm and hand it to him. *Not going to happen.* Last time they touched, the jolt of lust slapped her silly. Not wanting to chance the same reaction, she set the can on the counter. Whirling around, she grabbed a glass from the cabinet. *Just getting a glass, that's all. No, I'm not evading those charged hands.*

By the dimple that popped out in his cheek, she didn't think he bought her subtle attempt to avoid his touch. Was it that obvious she really, really liked his touch?

Hell, it had been torture when he rested his hand on the small of her back this morning. Even through the fabric of her shirt,

heat licked up her spine.

His computer pinged in the other room, and he went to check it.

Closing her eyes, she dropped her head. “Get it together, Randall.”

She opened her eyes. “Shit.” Her nipples had come out to play. She could blame it on the cold air from the freezer, but both of them would know it was his damn testosterone. The man had truckloads of it, and she wished she was immune, but God didn’t like her that much.

Picking up her AFD sweatshirt, she slipped it on and grabbed her pop can. Her gaze drifted to the ceiling and a wave of guilt layered over her heated body. She whispered, “Sorry, Sarah.”

She pushed down the residual lust, but a kernel of what-if would never go away.

Shaking off her thoughts, she wiped her expression clean and strolled back into the living room to face her personal hell.

Totally clueless to the giant dog sprawled at his feet, Ryan hunched over his laptop. When her pop can clinked on the coffee table, he glanced up, then back to her can. He grinned.

Her brows furrowed as she glanced at her pop. No glass.  
*Crap!*

He cleared his throat. “I got a hit.”

“On what?” She dropped to the couch, leaving ample space between them. The last thing she needed was to get a contact high from his pheromones. No need for another self-lecture.

“The new social media app I told you about.”

She stared at him, waiting for him to elaborate. The guy was in multiple apps fishing for corruption.

He finally glanced her way. “It’s the one Sergeant Johnson told me about. I set up an account and put out feelers. I got a hit in my DMs on a side job.”

“What’s the job?” She leaned in a fraction to see his screen. The aroma of hops and grease and something that was all Ryan triggered a memory. Flashes of lust-filled eyes and drugging kisses slammed into her. She leaned back and blew out a breath.

“It’s a last-minute security job at a fancy event Saturday for the community outreach center.”

“That’s right. I heard about that.”

“Yes. They do a few events a year. Any reason to party, and it makes good money for the program.” He focused on the screen as he talked. His fingers tapped in a high-speed rhythm.

“You know a lot about it.” She eyed him.

“CJ’s mom is one of the head organizers.”

“Oooh.” Erica wasn’t close with the Whittier family, but everyone in town knew their transportation company, Whittier Trucking and Freight. Mrs. Whittier had a rep for being a

woman of class who could kick the toughest man's butt. "Is it true her own kids are scared of her?"

"I can't say, but she'd not a woman to disappoint."

Erica took a drink of her Coke and thought about it. "Didn't I read in the file a couple of the bigwigs you guys arrested were tied to the outreach program?"

"Yeah, both Gunter Lindstrom and Warden Finden."

Erica speculated about all the people who'd be there. Wealthy, powerful, connected people. All the attributes needed to buy the services of a dirty cop.

"It might be a good opportunity for you to observe. Maybe see who's making connections even if you're not."

"That's exactly what I was thinking. Well, part of it. Bingo! There are tickets still available." He turned his laptop to face her. The event page was up. He motioned to her like she should attend.

She glanced at the price, and a little gurgle popped from her lips. "Yeah no, I don't know that I can afford that kind of ticket price. Even if it is for charity."

Ryan tapped his chin. "Maybe you don't have to? Doesn't the fire department put in an item for the silent auction?"

"Yes. People can bid to be a firefighter for a day."

His mouth tipped up. "Is one of the crew in attendance?"

"Yes."

His grin widened, and his meaning sunk in.

“Oh, no. Garrett is our representative. Not me.”

“Oh, come on. You’ll do great.”

She’d stick out like Karma at a poodle convention. *No. No. No.* She shook her head.

“Garrett is our rep. They don’t need two of us.”

“You can take his place.”

“What? Why would I do that?” She wrapped her arms around her torso, keeping her from strangling him.

“You want to make contacts. Climb the proverbial corporate ladder,” he suggested.

She could feel the what-the-fuck creases between her eyes deepening. “That will never work. He’ll know somethings going on.”

“Okay, what if you tell him you always wanted to go to one of those fancy events? Whatever you say, it won’t matter, as long as you make it beneficial to him.” His hopeful look made her cringe.

“Fine.” She grabbed her phone and sent the text. Less than a minute later the reply came. She read his response. “Shut up! No way.”

“What did he say?” Ryan teetered on the edge of the couch.

“Yes. His daughter’s been sick, and he was debating about cancelling anyway. He actually thanked me for going in his place.”



“See, I told you there would be something in it for him. Plus, no guy likes to put on a monkey suit.”

Erica pulled up the event page on her laptop. The photos showed men in dark suits and tuxedos, and the women wore gowns. Were those sequins? A nervous tic pulled at her cheek. She hadn't worn a sequined anything since her second-grade dance recital. “Man, I don't think I have anything fancy enough for that.”

Ryan smiled. “I know a person who can help you. What size are you?”

“Excuse me?” She scoffed.

He scanned her up and down. “Never mind. I can guess.”

She didn't want to know how he came by that ability. Erica's foot bounced as she watched his fingers work. Chewing the inside of her cheek, nerves rolled over her. Why couldn't this event be a casual affair? She'd have to see if she still owned the heels her mother forced her to buy for her cousin's wedding.

He picked up his phone and sent a text. Thirty seconds later a reply came.

“All taken care of. The posse will be here at two to help you get ready. You'll have a dress, shoes, and everything you'll need.” He replied to his DM and closed his browser.

Erica wasn't exactly sure what she had just gotten herself into. “Ryan, I'm not a police officer. I'm not trained for this.”

“You’ll be fine. All you have to do is mingle and listen. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

Her stomach soured at the thought.

Bummer. She usually loved cake.

## Chapter 9

Erica nibbled on the edge of her fingernail, working a frayed nerve as well as her cuticle. Her grandmother's mantel clock chimed twice. Two p.m. and she still didn't know who this posse was who'd be arriving to work their magic on her.

She cringed at the reflection of the haggard woman in the entry mirror. The woman wore her favorite sweats with the hole in the knee and her AFD T-shirt. Wet strands of hair fell from her messy bun. Erica leaned closer. Were the circles under her eyes really that big?

Man, did she need a vacation. A beach or a cabin on a lake. Anywhere. She glanced at her reflection once more, then shook her head.

“Well, whoever these women were, they'd better have a magic wand.”

Karma jumped to attention. His head cocked thirty seconds before a vehicle stopped in front of her house. A low rumble

revved deep in his throat before it morphed into a bark.

She spied three women getting out of a late-model Escalade. A tiny woman with smooth dark hair, flawless makeup, and an outfit that was deceptively casual, hopped from the passenger seat. Erica wasn't a fashionista, but she'd bet this woman's clothes were the latest style.

The driver was dressed in a similar vein. She turned to grab a bag from the back seat of the vehicle and when she faced the house, Erica almost gasped. The woman was gorgeous. Dark, full hair and saucers for eyes, the kind of looks that made men turn and stare. Hell, Erica didn't swing that way, and she couldn't peel her eyeballs away.

The bombshell turned and spoke to the third woman getting out of the back seat. They all looked to be in their thirties, but this woman had a more mature vibe coming from her. It could be the casual jeans and U of M sweatshirt she wore, or the fact she just looked like someone Erica would hang out with.

Laden with garment bags and totes, the three made their way up the walk.

Karma bumped Erica's thigh.

"It's okay, boy. They're friendly." She bit her cheek. "I think."

She gave Karma a command to stay and opened the door.

The bombshell said, "Firefighter Randall, I'm Doctor Liz Garcia O'Roarke. You may have met my fiancé, Detective Jim Swenson?"

“Oh, yes, from the task... Uh, yes.”

“It’s okay. We know about the task force.” She gestured to the woman with the mom-vibe. “This is Lorna Whittier. CJ’s wife.”

“Nice to meet you.” She nodded as her hands were full of packages.

“I’m Mira. I’ll tell you how I fit in with this group, but can we do that inside? Who knew shoes were so heavy?” She lifted the bags in her hands.

Erica stepped back and let them enter.

“She should know better than anyone,” Lorna said as she passed Erica. “That woman has enough shoes to put Imelda Marcos to shame.”

“Oh, what a beautiful dog.” Liz dropped her packages on the chair and waited for Karma to check her out. When he nosed her hand, she dropped to her knee and gave Erica’s boy some love, cooing and telling him he was a pretty boy. “We have a German Shorthaired Pointer named Tigger. What’s his name?”

“Karma.”

The women all grinned, but it was Lorna who commented, “Good name.”

“Well, we’re here to make you gala-worthy.” Mira set a case on the table and opened it. The thing was filled to the brim with makeup. She started unloading the contents, every color and shade of foundation and shadow that Erica could imagine.

Apparently, her one tube of mascara and her ChapStick weren't going to cut it.

“Gala?” Erica had known this was a fancy event, but the word gala made her palms sweat.

“Yes, usually it's in October, but the ballroom had a conflict, so they moved it up a month.” Liz placed a hand on Erica's arm. “It's just a party. People mingle, then they eat dinner. Sure, it's dressy, but they won't bite. You'll be fine.”

Lorna stepped up beside Liz. “And we will all be there with you.”

“Yeah, it's kind of a Whittier family tradition. We're all part of the Whittier family or will be soon.” A brilliant smile lit Mira's face when she spoke, almost as bright as the shine off the engagement ring she flashed on her hand. “I'm engaged to Harrison, CJ's brother.”

“And my cousin,” Liz added.

“Okay.” Erica swallowed the lump in her throat the size of the Hope Diamond. All these women were related to one of the wealthiest families in Ashwood.

Erica's gaze drifted from one nodding head to the next before it cut to the back door. Crap, could she run from her own house?

Either Dr. Garcia O'Roarke was very perceptive or Erica's fight-or-flight mode was written across her forehead, because Liz gave her arm a small squeeze and smiled. “It will be fine.”

All the strength slipped from her neck and her head wobbled like a bobble-head. These beautiful, lovely women were here to help her. The least she could do was not freak out on them. She forced a smile. “Where are my manners? Can I offer you a beverage?”

The doorbell rang, and Karma raced to the door. A low rumble echoed in his wake.

“That would be the beverages.” Liz unzipped the garment bag.

“Huh? Beverages?” Erica instructed Karma to sit before she opened the door to find Detective Larson and another blonde woman standing on her step.

“Sorry, we’re late,” Amy said.

Erica pulled the door open wide to welcome the newcomers. Her little home was bursting.

Amy shifted a duffle bag to her side and extended her hand. “Nice to see you again, Erica. This is Kate Meyer. I hope we didn’t miss any of the good stuff. You didn’t try anything on yet, did you?”

Kate smiled in greeting then pulled a bottle of champagne from the brown paper bag in her arms. “You can’t get ready without mimosas.”

The ladies all chattered as Liz held up a beautiful dress. Sapphire blue with rhinestones on the collar.

With the precision of a surgical team, Mira laid out tools and tubes of color. She opened another case, this one filled with

hair products.

Kate unloaded juice. “Do you have a pitcher I can use?”

Erica stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a water jug she used to fill Karma’s bowl. She quickly washed it even though it only held water, then returned to the living room. Five sets of eyes scanned her from head to toe. She froze. “What?”

“Ryan has a good eye. I’d say we’re the same size.” Liz pulled out yet another dress, this one in the most beautiful shade of emerald green.

Amy snorted. “Ryan definitely has an eye for women’s bodies. I bet he’s on the money.”

Erica felt the heat rush to her cheeks.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it.” Amy’s mouth turned down.

Kate sauntered up to Erica and took the jug from her hands. “He may date, but I don’t think he’s as much of a horndog as they say. Heck, we went out a couple times and nothing happened.”

The women’s focuses in the room all shifted to the blonde—even Erica’s.

“What? He’s cute. And funny. Are you guys all blind?” Kate started mixing up the drinks.

“Why did I not hear about this until now?” Amy asked.

From the look in the Detective’s eyes, she and Ryan were close and not knowing was a shock.



Kate shrugged. “It was only a couple dates last year. No biggie.”

“I think Daniels and I need to have a talk about partner communication.” She shook her head, then zeroed in on Erica. “And what’s the deal with you and our boy Daniels?”

She shouldn’t have been taken aback with Amy’s question. All cops had the tenacity of a bloodhound when they latched on to a salacious bit of information. And her past with Ryan was definitely salacious.

Erica straightened her stance and squared off with the other woman. “No deal. We are working together on the task force. That’s it.”

Amy squinted. “It wasn’t. You have a past with him.”

Pulling all the badass confidence she could muster, Erica raised a brow. “Do I?”

“Ladies. We’re here to help Erica get ready for the gala. No need to go to pistols-at-dawn.” Lorna handed out the mimosas. “I think we all could use a drink to relax. I know I could,” she muttered the last under her breath.

Erica murmured, “Here, here.”

Liz set her glass on the side table, then pulled out a red gown — long fall of smooth fabric in soft pleats, with a kiss of beadwork at the bodice. It was exquisite. “I think you should try this one on first. It has some give in the hips if Ryan was off.”

“My mom used to say they were good child-bearing hips.” Erica rolled her eyes. And no way she was the same size as the curvy pinup model holding the dress. Her gaze dropped to her chest or, rather, her lack thereof, then back to Liz and her perfect hourglass shape.

“Stop that,” Lorna scolded. “Don’t compare. Trust me. We all want to hate her on principle, but she’s too damn likable.”

“Aww, thanks.” Liz gave her friend a quick hug.

“Erica, you’re a knockout, but you aren’t doing yourself any favors with these clothes. I mean, they look comfy, but they have to be two sizes too big. You need something to accentuate your assets.” Mira cupped her hands under her own chest to emphasize the point.

“Don’t feel bad. She does that to me as well,” Lorna whispered.

“You gave up on yourself when you got divorced. Your wardrobe is much improved since you and CJ hooked up.”

“Jeez, thanks.” Lorna chuckled.

“Tell you what, you look at the dresses I brought and then try a few on, and we will go from there.” Liz waited patiently for her reply.

Erica would swear the woman could see right into her soul and knew her worst self-doubt. Taking one large inhale, she pushed down her insecurities. “Okay.”

Mira cheered. “It’s dress-up time.”

Five minutes later, Erica stood in her bedroom staring at a body she didn't recognize. She slid a hand over the soft, wide straps that slipped off her pale shoulders. They added a hint of sexy to this classically beautiful dress. A slight flare below the knee fell to the floor adding to the Marilyn Monroe silhouette. But it was the deep blue that made her eyes pop that had her questioning who this vamp of a woman was.

She blinked at the transformation this piece of fabric did to her. The slightly hippy tomboy was gone, and a curvy—dare she say attractive—woman took her place.

*You look beautiful, honey.* Tears stung at the bridge of her nose as memories of the last time she tried on a long gown flashed in her mind. Her mom had swept her hair aside and whispered those words.

Erica had felt like a princess. For all of two minutes. Then Sarah came into the room in her strapless, pink chiffon, and Erica morphed in the time it took the fitting room door to bang closed. Her mother exclaimed, “Look at how beautiful my baby girl is.”

Yup, that was all it took. No more Cinderella at the ball. Nope, Erica had been relegated back to the maid scrubbing floors.

She shouldn't have been shocked. Erica had been her baby girl once, not that she could remember it, but when Sarah was born with a heart defect, all her mom's concerns, cares, and love went to Sarah. “She's your baby sister. You need to be strong for her. Take care of her.”

Scanning the gorgeous dress through watery eyes, one thought surfaced... She'd trade all the pretty dresses in the world to have Sarah back.

"Come on, we're dying. Let's see it." Kate's voice drifted down the hall.

"Does it fit?" Liz asked from the other side of the door.

Erica blinked the moisture from her eyes and pushed her memories into a box. Now wasn't the time. As if emerging from a deep sleep, she exhaled, then really looked at herself.

It didn't look like her or feel like her. But... She turned from side to side. She liked it.

She threw a seductive look at herself in the mirror. A snort bubbled out. Could she pull this off? She didn't know, but the tingling in her stomach suggested she might.

As if emerging from a deep sleep, she sucked in a deep breath. Then with one last glance at the mirror, she opened the door. A round of gasps echoed in the room.

"You look... Wow." Kate raised her glass.

"That really brings out your eyes," Lorna said.

"Yes, but I want to see the green one," Mira added, obviously not ready to settle on a dress after just one.

Amy stood quietly stroking a finger across her mouth. The woman's scrutiny chased shivers down Erica's neck. Detective Larson was a formidable cop and one of Ryan's best friends. And the woman's opinion mattered to her. Hell if she knew

why. There was nothing between her and Ryan Daniels. Not in thirteen years, and never would be again.

“I can see why Ryan is cow-eyed over you.”

Air rushed from her lungs. *What? She's got it wrong.* He had eyes for Sarah, even if they had broken up. It was just that one crazy mistake. He was drunk and she... Well, she put her wants before her sister's that one time. And it had devastating consequences.

Liz handed her the green dress. Erica blinked, pushing her thoughts back into the box she'd dead-bolted for so many years. She'd take them out later, when she was alone.

Twenty minutes and six dresses later, Erica was back in the blue dress.

“That's it.” Lorna exclaimed. The approval was unanimous.

She hung the dress back on the hanger and followed the ladies into the kitchen where Mira and Kate had spread out enough cosmetics and styling products to rival the top salons.

“I was just going to braid my hair. I don't wear much makeup.” Erica ran a hand over her ponytail.

“And you don't need to, but this is the gala. Humor us. Mira is dying to play makeover.” Liz's calm eyes and soothing tone softened Erica's nerves. Liz really was good at that.

“Trust me. It will be natural with a pop, to bring out those gorgeous features of yours.” Excitement danced in Mira's eyes.

Erica exhaled and flopped into the chair. “Okay. Make me beautiful.”

The women chatted as Kate curled and sprayed Erica’s hair. She really wished she had a mirror to see what they were doing. Visions of an eighties prom queen with hair five inches from her scalp flashed in her mind. She swallowed down her fear. These women were polished and gorgeous. They obviously knew fashion.

*Control freak much?* Yes. Yes, she was.

Erica listened with half attention as they discussed eye shadow and lashes. A ball of nerves fisted in her throat. They wanted to stick fake spider legs on her face. Sure, everyone might be wearing them, but... No, hell no. “Ladies, I can do my makeup.”

“Relax. Kate’s a pro at this.” Mira patted Erica’s shoulder.

The blonde smiled. “I saw you tense when I pulled out the false eyelashes. These are great—they’re magnetic. No glue.”

Skepticism ran through her, but she swallowed down her apprehension.

Twenty minutes later, she had giant rollers in her hair. She hadn’t looked in a mirror yet but hoped they were done with her makeup. How long did it take? She could do hers in two minutes flat.

“Okay, sweetie. You look fabulous. Kate will finish your hair. Lorna, Liz, and I need to go get ready ourselves.” Mira

air-kissed her, then cocked her head. “I can’t wait to see you all dolled up. See you there.”

Liz half hugged her, then scooped up the other dresses. “See you soon. It’ll be fun.”

Fun wasn’t the word she was thinking. Torture. That’s the word that came to mind as tiny pricks of pain tugged her scalp from the soup-can-sized rollers. Not to mention, she couldn’t stop blinking from these damn lashes. Blink. Blink. Blink.

Kate picked up another can of something and sprayed it on her hair. What was that, the third can? How many products did they need to use on her?

A tickle scratched her throat. She swallowed down a cough. Stupid hairspray.

A warm hand rested on her arm. “Breathe. I was a basket case last year at my first gala. Add the pressure of meeting CJ’s parents for the first time, and I was lucky I didn’t throw up.” Lorna’s soft smile soothed the edges of her frayed nerves. “Eat a little something before you go. It will help calm you. And the other thing. Just smile and mingle.”

Erica nodded. How did these women know her nerves were strung tighter than a guitar string? What if she heard something really important to the case but had no clue that it was and forgot to mention it?

“Don’t worry, CJ and I will be there and so will Mira, Harrison, Liz, and Jim,” Lorna said.

With their arms full of stuff, the three ladies left. Erica glanced at Kate and Amy from under the long, black wisps on her eyes. “Do you think I can pull this off? I’m not the gala type of girl.”

Kate picked up her glass and handed one to Erica. “I will share a little secret with you.”

Erica took in Kate’s confident stance and relaxed expression.

“It doesn’t matter if we think you can pull it off. Hell, it doesn’t even matter if *you* think you can. What counts is that you act like you can. Fake it until you make it.”

“I do affirmations.” Amy stared into her glass. “It’s silly, and if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll deny it. But they help.”

Erica blinked at the two women. “If it works for you, I’ll try it.”

They raised their glasses in a toast. Kate’s face turned stoic. “Erica, you will be the most beautiful, smart, confident woman there tonight.”

“Starting those affirmations, are we?” Amy asked.

“Damn straight, we are.”

Amy nodded and raised her glass. “Here, here. A Jane Bond.”

Erica giggled. “Thanks.”

They slammed the rest of their drinks, and Kate started removing the curlers from Erica’s hair. She fingered through it, did some twisting of pieces, and clipped a few of the sides up.



Then she picked up an industrial-sized can of spray and doused Erica's hair again. She sprayed. And sprayed.

Erica coughed. She only had seconds before her lungs collapsed from the fumes.

"Okay, I can't go if I'm dead." Erica waved her hand in front of her face, trying to disperse the spray.

"Time to wiggle your ass into that sexy dress." Kate shooed her off as she packed up the hair products.

Once in the dress and mile-high shoes, Erica teetered back into the living room where Amy and Kate were waiting.

"Wow, girl. You're gonna knock their socks off."

"Gorgeous. I see why Daniels is ga-ga over you." Amy's expression was reserved.

"Now I see the resemblance." Kate held up a photo Erica kept on her mantle. One of Sarah and her at prom.

"You went to Ashwood High?" Erica squinted, trying to remember the other woman, but she couldn't.

"I transferred in my junior year. I remembered Sarah. She was in my biology class."

Remorse coated her throat and weighed heavy on her chest. She never knew how to respond when someone mentioned her sister in passing.

*What did you think of her? Did you like her?* The questions sat on the tip of her tongue and died as she gulped them down. Silly thoughts, everyone loved Sarah. *Everyone?*

“I should let Karma out, then get going.” Her fur baby trotted in from his nap on the guest room bed. *Please don't drool on this dress.*

Amy picked up her duffle bag. “Wait, I have the perfect accessories.” She pulled out a case and opened it. A necklace with a single ruby pendant sat nestled in custom foam, not the fabric cases from the jewelry store.

“Is that real?” Erica’s voice rose.

“Real tech. There is a tiny high-res camera in the setting.” She opened another box. “This one has a tiny microphone and wire.”

Erica eyed the accessories. “I thought I was just listening and mingling?”

“You will be. Trey and I will be in the van outside listening and watching.”

A part of her was relieved at the thought that someone else would be hearing the chit-chat in case she missed something. But another part of her cringed at the thought of them hearing her fumble through the small talk. Or the camera.

“What if I have to use the restroom?” She gulped.

“You can turn off the mic and cover the camera.”

*I'm gonna throw up.* Maybe it was the alcohol? She looked at the tiny camera... or not.

“Not sure I need this. We don't even know if any of the corruption leaders are going to be there,” Erica said as Amy

strapped the microphone between her breasts.

“Yeah, but if you walk up and listen, we never know what you’ll pick up for conversation. It can’t hurt to gather intel.”

Erica knew she was right, but it did nothing to calm the tsunami whirling in her gut. Wired for video and sound. Holy shit. How did she end up in this situation? Daniels. “Will Ryan be wearing a wire too?”

“Yep, you guys are fully teched-out.”

“And you’ll be the envy of every woman there in that dress.” Kate smoothed the pleat in the back of the gown.

“Will the others be wearing microphones?”

“No, Joy would definitely notice, and she wouldn’t be subtle if she caught them wearing wires at the event,” Kate said as she held up a pair of diamond drop earrings with little sapphires that matched the dress. “Courtesy of Liz.”

“They’re stunning.” Erica fastened them to her ears.

“You’re the one who’s stunning. You gals might have done too good of a job. She’s going to draw the eye of everyone there.” Amy said to Kate, who shrugged.

“I don’t do substandard work, and look at the raw stock.” She motioned to Erica.

“Raw stock?”

“Girl, you know you’re a natural beauty. Mira and I just amped it up a little.” Kate gave her a quick hug. “Time for

Amy and I to get out of your space and let you go play Cinderella for the evening.”

“Thank you.” Erica closed the door behind them and surveyed their work in the full-length mirror. Pulling up the skirt, she glanced at the skyscraper shoes. If she didn’t break her neck on the way inside, she’d be okay. At least that’s what she was telling herself.

She met Karma’s watchful eyes. “I wish you could come with me.”

He did two circles, then dropped on his dog bed.

“Some help you are.” She let him out one last time for the evening, then grabbed her keys.

“Time to go play CIA Barbie.”

## Chapter 10

**R**yan had circled the perimeter twice and still no sign of Erica. He'd quizzed Larson as she wired him for sound thirty minutes ago. She'd told him everything went well when the ladies helped Erica today. So why did he have a pack of wolves gnawing at his gut? Because he knew Amy. Something about the way her eyes cut to the side when she answered him. His friend could be fiercely protective, and as nosy as his grandma.

Did Erica tell her about their past? No. He pushed off the thought. The last thing Erica Randall would do is open up to a stranger about that. Hell, he couldn't get her to talk to him. No way she'd tell Amy anything.

He scanned the crowded ballroom. Men wore tuxedos and dark suits, and the women were in a myriad of colors. Long flowing gowns, some with sparkles, added color to the silver and black theme of the event. It was a far cry from the T-shirts and cut-offs on the people he saw today when he was delivering the news of Ruiz's death. But while Sal's cousin

looked sad, her husband had a smile as big as any of the men here tonight.

Ryan was just thankful the dogs were in the house, and he didn't lose a leg when he rang the bell. Sadly, the couple didn't have any information that helped the case, but Ryan still took notes on any friends and acquaintances of Ruiz.

His phone pinged, announcing a new email. Ryan slipped it from his pocket. Sergeant Vu finally replied. He had some time later this week. Tapping a quick response, Ryan closed down the phone, put it on vibrate for the night, and got back to his surveillance.

The bar was the hot spot for most of the men, chatting with their whiskey or scotch in hand. Ryan moved around the room and scanned the power players, noting who spoke to whom.

A blue dress caught his attention. The long, blonde hair flowed down the smooth column of her bare back. Strands of red reflected in the light.

Tingles of recognition danced up his neck. Even before she turned, he started her way. The woman's delicate fingers stroked her bare arm. As if sensing him, she glanced over her shoulder.

Ryan's steps faltered. It was Erica. He'd known that but damn. He'd never seen her in makeup. He always knew she was pretty, but when she blinked those deep blue eyes, his heart skipped. The woman stole the breath from his lungs.

Her lip hitched up, and she gave a finger wave.

*Don't make contact.* Ryan covered his momentary shock by dropping to tie his shoe. Not that it was loose.

He veered to the left, giving her a slight nod of acknowledgement. Every cell in his body begged to go to her. To pull her close. Inhale her scent.

*No.* He was working. And, it was best if the other attendees didn't realize she was working with him.

He hovered off to the side and surveyed the room. Mark and Joy Whittier were making the rounds, greeting and schmoozing like only wealthy socialites can. CJ and his wife, Lorna, were chatting with his brother and his fiancé.

"How's it going?" Jim Swenson slipped up behind him.

"You clean up well." He was in a dark gray suit, not much different than Ryan's own. The subtle pink in his tie matched his fiancée's dress.

"It's all Doc. She tells me what to wear to these things. I'd be in a Wild jersey and jeans if I could." Jim raised a beer. "This is my second event of this type. I'm getting a feel for the players."

Ryan had read up on a few of the movers and shakers of Ashwood before he got here. "I see the new head of Lindgames, Lawrence Rollins, is over by the bar with wife number three."

The founder and former CEO of Lindgames was currently serving twenty-five years at Stillwater Correctional Facility. Ryan made a mental note to stay in earshot of Mr. Rollins.

Jim nodded. “Over by the silent auction tables, the tall bald man is Dr. Peter Hoffman. He’s a top thoracic surgeon in the area. He has connections in not only the medical world but he also holds the patents on some lifesaving devices. Doc and I will make our way to his side of the room.”

“With so many powerful people in one place, it won’t be easy to watch them all, especially since we don’t know who if any of them are dealing in corruption.”

“All we can do is watch, listen, and follow our guts.” Jim patted him on the shoulder and moved on.

Ryan spotted some of the other faces from his quick study this morning. There was a software guru in the corner, barely older than Ryan, most likely giving stock tips. The guy not only made a bundle in his field, but he made a killing in the market.

Mrs. Whittier’s polished voice caught his attention. He saw her talking to Erica in his peripheral vision.

“You must be new to the Outreach Gala. I’m Joy Whittier. This is my husband, Mark.” The words were polite, but her tone was all curiosity.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Whittier. I’m Erica Randall. This is a wonderful event you have here. And yes, this is my first time attending.”

“Well, I hope you check out the silent auction items before dinner starts.” The older woman pursed her lips. “My niece has that exact same gown.”



Liz slipped up beside Erica and slid her arm through hers. “Tia. I see you met my friend, Erica. She’s one of our city’s first responders.”

“Oh really, do you work with our son, Carlton? He’s a police detective.” The older woman’s chest puffed up a little as she mentioned CJ.

“I have met him, but no, I’m a firefighter and paramedic. I’m here as a representative for the Ashwood Fire Department.”

“Oh, how lovely.” Joy’s tone was anything but lovely.

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief when Liz steered her aunt away to deal with a catering issue. He caught Erica’s sigh as well.

Casually, he scanned the room and slipped around behind Erica. As if on autopilot, his fingers brushed the small of her back.

She tensed, then relaxed. “I can see why her sons would be scared of her. The woman could intimidate a bear.”

Ryan bit back a chuckle. “From what I hear, she wasn’t thrilled with CJ for becoming a cop.”

“That explains her reaction to my occupation.” Erica leaned back slightly.

“After the gala, we’ll all meet at the station and debrief,” Ryan whispered as he looked the other way.

She nodded.

Ryan's hand itched to slide around and snug her back against him. That would go over like a fart. He let his arm drop to his side. "The skinny guy in the corner with the glasses. He's Travis Stevens. A tech guy. He has the ability, funds, and connections to start a website to solicit dirty cops. You may want to sashay your sexy ass over there and see what you can pick up."

She glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes sparkled as her brow rose. "You think my ass is sexy?"

Her butt was one of his favorite features. Not that he'd ever shared that with her. Hell, everything about her was sexy, and in that dress, she amped up to a twelve.

"You know you look good. Now, go mingle." Doubt flashed in her eyes as she strolled away from him on dangerously tall heels. The long line of her calf peeked out the slit of the dress as she moved.

Ryan groaned. How could she not know she was beautiful? Sarah had confidence in spades and still dug for compliments all the time. But never Erica. In all the years they hung out, she never once asked how she looked. He always assumed she knew she looked good. But now, he wondered if she did.

Ryan didn't miss the fact that every male in the room watched her walk across the floor. Travis Stevens surely did.

An image of sending an innocent lamb to the wolves came to mind as Stevens turned his back on the man he was talking to and slid his gaze up the length of Erica.

A hot poker of jealousy stabbed him in the gut.

Fuck. What had he done?

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The Ashwood police station was anything but quiet at quarter past one in the morning. Most nights, Ryan could hear his shoes squeak on the vinyl floor tiles. Not tonight. The noise grew the closer he got to the conference room. CJ's voice echoed down the hall, followed by a high-pitched squeal of laughter. Not Larson's. Erica? It had been a long time since he heard her laugh, but he didn't think so.

He stuck his head in the open doorway. "Is this where the after-party is?"

All the officers who were at the Gala sat around the table, their significant others in tow. Erica was next to Lorna, and Chief Martin, the one man in the room with his tie still perfectly knotted, chatted with Jim.

"Good, you're here. We can get started." Trey flagged him in.

Ryan shut the door and took a seat between Amy and Jim. He gave them a greeting nod, but his gaze sought out Erica sitting directly across from him. She focused on Trey by the board, but Ryan had an itchy feeling her attention was on him. Not that she'd look at him.

Then again, it could be because his was fixated on her.

“I know this wasn’t an official operation tonight, but when an opportunity to do some recon on the possible players in this corruption ring presented itself, it was too good to miss.”

Ryan listened while Trey outlined the people of interest in the case—not yet suspects.

Learning it was run through some sort of website had the team focusing on those who would have either the ability, access to the funds, or the technical knowledge needed to set up the corruption ring.

“The recordings we got from Ryan and Erica didn’t lead to any conclusive clues, but it did help us connect who socializes in the same circles. Jim, you were looking at Dr. Hoffman. Tell us what you learned.”

Jim talked about the brilliant surgeon and why his development of a piece of lifesaving tech had him believing he had the knowledge and capital to be their guy. “The only thing I can’t pin down is the motive. On my first search of the good doctor, I didn’t find any skeletons or flags that point to corruption. But I’d keep him on the list. We could have a two-person team.”

“Doesn’t the doctor have ties to Lindstrom?” Ryan had thought of that. He still believed Gunter Lindstrom was deeper in this than hiring a dirty cop to do his bidding.

Jim shook his head. “No. The only connection is they both support the Outreach charity, but the good doctor isn’t on the board like Lindstrom.”

The thread between the two was thin, but it was there. Ryan nodded.

“Ryan, you got an earful tonight. Did anyone flag for you?” Trey asked.

“There was a lot of ‘my Mercedes is newer than your Jag’, but other than a few stock tips, I can’t say anyone said anything that tripped my cop senses. That being said, Rollins from Lindgames was chummy with a few of his cronies at a corner table. When I got close, the voices dropped, and when it resumed, the subject suddenly turned to talk about golf handicaps.”

“How did you know it changed?” Liz asked. “Half the time, that’s all I heard anyone talking about.”

“It was the way their eyes shifted when anyone got near the table. Also, I did hear one of the men ask about getting in on a deal.”

“Could be a lead. Do you know who the other men were?” Chief Martin asked.

“No, but if I run the guest list, I’m sure I could figure it out.”

Trey scribbled something on his notepad. “Good. I’ll send it to you and a copy of the recording. Maybe if you listen again, something new will click.”

“Sounds good.”

“Erica, thank you for volunteering to help tonight.”

“Happy I could help.” A soft smile crossed her lips as she answered Trey.

Ryan’s lungs expanded at the sight. Until her focus cut to him. Glare was too soft of a word to describe the venom in her eyes. It was like she pierced him with a dart and the air hissed out of his now collapsing lung.

Okay, he may have talked her into it. He scratched his cheek. No maybes, he volun-told her. And she did a great job.

Her eyes softened as she turned to address the room. “I mingled and listened. Not sure I got any vibes, but I did see several people exchanging business cards. Not sure if that was innocent or not.”

“You were talking with Travis Stevens. What was your impression?”

“He’s brilliant. Funny. I think he likes to be the head honcho.” She bit her lip, then added, “I’ll find out more tomorrow. He invited me out to his boat on the St. Croix.”

The hairs on Ryan’s neck jumped. His hands fisted under the table. “You have a date with him?”

“Yes.” She crossed her arms, daring him to say something. Oh, he wanted to say a lot of things, starting with *Hell No!*

Instead, he said, “Isn’t it a little late in the year for a river cruise?”

“He has a thirty-eight-foot cabin cruiser. I’m sure we will be fine.”

Ryan bit back his response. It wasn't the time or place with his boss and coworkers looking on. But if Travis was their guy, no way would it be safe for Erica to be alone on a boat with the man.

A few minutes later, the debriefing ended. Amy helped Erica remove her mic and camera. Ryan slipped his microphone off and handed it to Larson.

"Erica, could I have a minute?" Ryan touched her elbow and led her to the huddle room across the hall. The atmosphere changed the second he closed the door to the small space. Erica crossed her arms over her chest, and a scowl slipped into place. She didn't realize the move pushed her cleavage even higher, and the pout on her red lips made his dick twitch.

Ryan rested his hands on his hips. "Do you really think it's safe for you to go out with Travis Stevens?"

"I thought you wanted me to get close to him?"

He ran his hand through his hair, giving it a tug. "You know I didn't mean to go out with him."

"Well, what better way for me to find out if he's the head guy than to spend time around him?"

Ryan squeezed his eyes closed. *Heaven help me.* "Will you wear a wire?"

"On my date? What motive does he have? Is there something in his background that flags him as a risk to me? I'm not a cop. He can't suspect me of anything."



Ryan didn't know, but he'd be up all night running a search on the guy. "If you won't wear a mic, then at least let me know where and when you are going. I don't want you to be alone with him."

She mirrored his earlier pose and fisted her hands on those lush hips. "Trey didn't think I needed to wear a wire. Give me one good reason why?"

Trey wasn't worried about the guy seducing her. Ryan's caveman instincts were making his nostrils flare. He could think of a thousand reasons she shouldn't go, but not one of them was logical.

His shoulders sagged. "Fine. No wire. Give me your phone."

She squinted at him but handed it over. Ryan did a few taps and then handed it back. "I activated the Find-A-Friend app. I'll know where you are. Wait, before you get mad and delete it, you will know where I am as well. Also, if you have the slightest feeling that something is off, you text me. I'll come get you."

She rolled her eyes and stuck her phone in her tiny bag.

"You won't need to rescue me," she said as she walked out the door.

"We'll see." Ryan watched her hips sway like the Neanderthal he was. When she exited the precinct's doors, he checked the app. The little blue dot moved through the parking lot.

Ryan rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day and, in the morning, he needed to borrow a boat.

# Chapter 11

Erica put her car in park. It stopped the motion of her vehicle but did nothing for the sloshing of acid in her stomach.

Her phone rang, and she flinched even before she saw her mother's face pop on the screen.

"Breathe." Now was not the time to deal with her mother, but Ruth Randall would keep calling if she didn't answer. She exhaled and forced a smile before clicking the button. "Hi, Mom. What's up?"

"Mrs. Walsh let her cat out again. Poor Mittens is scratching at the screen door. That cat is in *heat*." She whispered the last word.

Erica turned off her engine. A sigh slipped out and her back slouched against the seat. "Have you tried asking her to keep her cat inside when she's in heat?"

"She should know better than to let it run wild." She huffed. "Are you stopping by today? I need to get the fall decorations

out from the attic, and your father can't climb the ladder with his bad knee."

Erica pinched the bridge of her nose. "I can't today, Mom. But I'm off on Wednesday and will come by and help you."

A loud sigh came from the other end of the phone. "I thought you had the weekend off? What are you doing today that you can't come help your parents?"

The guilt washed over her. "Sorry, Mom. I have plans today."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

She bit her lip. *Don't say it. Don't.* "I have a date. I'll be on the river all day."

"Oh. I hope you wear that little yellow dress. You know the one I bought you when we went to the mall last month?" Her mom's voice brightened. "Anyway, just wear something cute. Not those God-awful cargo shorts you love."

Her mom could smell a chance at grandbabies in the future. *Slow your roll. Not happening, Mom. At least not today.* She looked down at her button-up shirt over her swimsuit and, yes, her cargo shorts and shrugged. "Mom, I have to go. I'll come by on Wednesday."

"Okay. Have fun and be safe. I look forward to hearing all about your date when you come over." Her voice turned sad. "Your sister used to share with me."

And there it was. All this time, and she still couldn't make it through a conversation with her mom that she didn't bring up

Sarah.

“Bye, Mom.” She disconnected and slipped her phone, keys, and wallet into her pockets. Grabbing her towel, she locked her car and headed toward the dock.

Thoughts of her sister reverberated in her head. No way in hell she shared everything with their mother. If she had, Mom wouldn't think her baby girl was a perfect angel. She and Ryan knew the wild side of Sarah.

As she stepped up to the huge, glistening cabin cruiser, one last thought of her sister hit her. Sarah would have worn the cute, flirty dress. No doubt, she'd seduce information out of Travis Stevens.

Sure, Erica could flirt a little. Very little. Her flirting skills were lacking. She worked with mostly guys, and they thought of her as just another crew member.

Girly dresses and flirting weren't Erica's style. An alternative plan formed in her mind. If Ryan could try and work his way inside by appearing shady, maybe she could as well.

She bit her fingernail. It sounded stupid even to her own ears. Spy work? Her? *Right*. She had no training in police work. Heck. Like she could convince anyone she could be corrupt. Erica, Miss Goodie-Two-Shoes back in high school, still went by the book.

Even if she could pull it off, it would only work if Travis Stevens was the man behind the corruption in Ashwood.

The man in question appeared on deck. A wide smile spread across his face. Perfectly straight teeth sparkled as bright as the morning sun on the water.

“Right on time.” He reached a hand down as she climbed on board. As her fingers clasped his, she was struck by how soft his hands were. No calluses. She envisioned him having weekly manicures. Curling her hands in a ball, she shoved her rough hands with her unpainted fingernails in her pockets.

“Thanks for the invitation.” She followed him up the stairs to the upper deck. While he did a pre-cruise check, she scanned the beautiful view. They couldn’t get a better day for mid-September. The river was a deep blue this close up, and the sun sparkled on the water like diamonds. A warm breeze brought in the last remnants of summer as a few boats glided through the water.

“It’s not every day I get to hang out with a stunning female firefighter. Can I get you something to drink before we set sail?” Travis stood at the helm.

She shrugged off the compliment with a laugh, but a zip of apprehension danced up her spine. This slim, slightly nerdy tech genius in board shorts and aviators gave off an air of relaxed control. He was a complete stranger. Maybe Ryan was right, and being in the middle of the river with him wasn’t a smart move. She forced a weak smile. “Water, please.”

Their hands brushed as she took the bottle. No zing of awareness or flutter of attraction filled her either time they touched. No warning bells rang in her head either. A relieved

sigh slipped from her lips. She was being silly. He was a millionaire, if not a billionaire. She was perfectly safe. *Stupid Daniel, putting fear in her brain.*

He fired up the engine and backed the boat from the slip. She looked over the edge, the only way out now. She took in the scenery before her gaze locked on the man captaining the yacht. He looked so at home at the helm.

“Did you grow up boating?” *Smart, Randall. Start with small talk.*

“No, my father worked construction and was busy in the summers.”

“Did you ever work with him?” She couldn’t picture this polished man with his smooth hands wielding a hammer.

“No, I was sick a lot as a kid. That’s how I got into computers. I would play games and eventually got into programming.” He cut his gaze to her. “I’m surprised you didn’t know all this. Most people I meet have read my bio.”

“Oh, uh. Sorry.” A chill washed over her. Crap, she should have done some research on him. She did look up his company and social media pages, but it would seem she didn’t do a thorough job.

“No, don’t be. I find it refreshing. Most people know so much about me from interviews I’ve done that I feel like I’m at a disadvantage.” He dropped his shades and winked.

Yeah, right. This man was never at a disadvantage. He may look like a computer geek and have the mind of one, but she

could see the shrewd businessman behind those eyes.

“Well, with me, it’s an even playing field. I have to admit, you had me at cruise on the river.” She flashed what she hoped was a flirty grin, then got distracted by the sight of an eagle searching for his lunch.

“You like boating?”

“Yes, when I was young, my dad had a small fishing boat. He’d take me and my sister fishing.” She smirked.

“What’s that look for? Didn’t you like to fish?” His gaze darted between her and the river.

“I loved it. My sister, not so much.”

“When was the last time you were fishing?”

“My senior year. Dad sold the boat.” He needed the money to pay for Sarah’s funeral. Not that she’d tell him that.

A minute passed and she realized he hadn’t said anything. She glanced toward him, and he was studying her. Crap, she’d blown the mood.

“I don’t have any gear on the boat, but I could get some and we can go next time.”

He was already planning a next time? Maybe she wasn’t as bad at this flirting thing as she thought. Or, he was taking pity on this awkward woman he happened to invite on the water. “I’d like that.”

They cruised in silence for a while, enjoying the breeze and the views before they resumed casual chit chat. There were



only a few boats on the river. As they reached the lock and dam, she noticed him looking back repeatedly.

Her senses flared. “What’s up?”

“It’s probably nothing, but I think we picked up a paparazzi.”

“Do they follow you often?” She’d almost forgotten he was wealthy as they talked about video games and the outreach program.

“Some, but this small fishing boat has been on our stern for the last hour.”

Her breath caught. *No, it couldn’t be.*

“Maybe they are just out for a cruise like we are.”

“Could be, but he’s pacing us. I don’t like it.”

Erica looked over the side and almost fell in. The man in the fourteen-foot Lund had on a floppy fishing hat and sunglasses, but by the way her arm hairs rose, she knew it could only be one person. She pulled out her phone and opened the app.

“Pain in my ass,” she muttered. Ryan. The bastard had been following them. He didn’t think she could handle one tech guru. She’d show him.

“Did you say something?” He cut the engines and pulled out a cooler.

“I’m sure it’s nothing. The guy is probably jealous of your beautiful boat.” She removed her shirt, adjusted her swimsuit top, and grabbed her sunscreen. “It’s such a gorgeous day, I

think we should soak it up before the cold winds of fall move in.”

She spread lotion on her arms, then flipped her braid to the front and held out the bottle to him. “Would you mind doing my back?”

He pulled off his shirt, swaggered over to her, and took the lotion. “Only if you will do mine.”

She could almost see Ryan’s eyes bugging out.

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Erica dropped her top, and Ryan shot to stand. *Whoa!* He wobbled, then recovered. The skimpy bikini top barely covered her assets—definitely no place to hide a listening device.

He wanted to ram the guy's fancy boat and storm the decks. Not the best way to stay incognito. Slipping back a tenth of a mile, he plunked a line in the water. He cast and reeled like a pro but was unlikely to catch anything since he hadn't baited the hook. He had bigger fish to catch—like the billionaire tech kind who was currently rubbing suntan lotion on Erica.

He snarled as he casted again. At least it wouldn't be obvious that he was watching their every move.

“Here, fishy, fishy.” He wiggled his line. Where were those jumping carp when he needed one? Just one to flip out of the water and smack Travis Stevens on his smirking face.

Erica threw her head back. Damn, he wished he had sound.

Did she just flip her hair?

Ryan turned the other way. His heart couldn't take the stress of watching her flirt with this doofus. The man could be a criminal for all they knew. Ryan had done some more digging on Stevens. The guy had some interesting connections. Not all of them were aboveboard.

He pulled up his camera and angled it at the eagle in the tree, but his focus was all on the cabin cruiser and the woman currently applying sunscreen to Travis's back. Still. How much sun protection did the guy need? Ryan growled.

By the looks of it, Randall and Stevens would be staying in this location for a while.

Ryan motored his cousin's boat to the shallow river's edge, far enough away from the cabin cruiser that it didn't look like he was following them but close enough he still had a prime view of Erica and the handsy tech guy.

He dropped anchor and pulled a soft drink from his cooler. The white Styrofoam container in the corner with the word "minnows" in black Sharpie snagged his attention. He could do some fishing while he was waiting, since he had a license thanks to the family fishing trip on opening weekend.

Ryan eyed the wiggling minnows as they swam in the cup. "Sorry, guys." He closed his eyes and scooped one out. The tiny fins brushed against his palm. He gulped and opened his eyes. *Fish. Yuck.* If it wasn't for the family trip every year, Ryan would happily never touch a fish again.

"Suck it up, Daniels." His man card was in jeopardy. His gaze locked with beady, dark eyes. Seconds passed as he stared at the fish, the hook in his other hand.

*Screw the man card.* He lowered his hand over the edge of the boat. Cold water rushed over his fingers. The fish squirmed and swam in his hand.

*Don't do it. Don't. The law was clear.*

He held his breath, and his fingers relaxed. The little guy swam away.

Yeah, yeah. He knew he shouldn't release it into the river. He peeked into the cup—five more. No sense letting only the one free. He did a quick scan for the DNR officer, and with the coast clear, he popped the top on the container and dumped its buddies into the water. “Free Willy.”

An engine roared. Bubbles stirred behind Stevens's boat.

Crap! They were moving in the direction of the dock. Ryan checked his watch. An hour had passed.

He waited a few more minutes as he reeled up his empty line before steering his borrowed boat back out to the center of the river.

“What the...?” The larger boat circled back, cutting across its own wake.

“No!” By the time Ryan shifted, it was too late. A massive wave crashed down on him and filled his boat.

Not only was he drenched, but the boat had eighteen inches of standing water in it. He grabbed his cooler and started scooping out the water. On the second throw, his weight shifted.

“Fuck. Fuck... Fuck!” The word floated in the air as he hit the river. Cold September water sucked him under. His jeans pulled him down. Kicking, he reached the surface, spitting. Shivers racked his body as he clung to the side of the boat.

Worst surveillance ever. Nothing was going as planned.

With a broken cooler, he shoveled out as much water out of the boat as he could before climbing back in. He cranked the outboard motor and blew on his cold, pruned fingers as he maneuvered back to the landing.

He'd have to detail the Lund before he returned it to his cousin, Cal. And buy some new fishing gear to replace the stuff that was at the bottom of the St. Croix.

On the drive across the cities, Ryan tried to figure out where he went wrong. He'd done other surveillance and never ended up in the river. Then again, he'd been on dry land for those.

The sun was lower in the sky by the time Ryan parked in his driveway. About ten miles ago, water had finally quit running from the back of the boat.

Erica sat on his front step, scrolling through her phone. A scowl scrunched his face. What the hell was she doing here?

He got out of the vehicle, adjusted the still-wet pants sticking to his legs, and picked up his water-logged phone.

He pushed his sunglasses up his nose. Thankfully, he hadn't lost them in the water.

"Are you lost?" He grabbed his cooler and keys and closed the distance between them.

She stood. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. I didn't know Travis would capsize your boat."

“I should cite him for reckless operation of a water craft.”  
He wrung out his hat and dropped it on the hand railing to dry.

“He thought you were a paparazzi.”

“Did he, now? I’m surprised he even noticed me with all that skin you were showing.”

She stiffened.

Damn, he wasn’t going to say that. “I need to shower off the river and eat something. My sandwich ended up as fish food.”

“I’ll go. I see you’re fine.” She planted herself a foot in front of him. “You would still be dry if you’d have trusted me to do this in the first place.”

“Did you get anything good?”

“Not yet.” Determination flamed in her eyes as she fisted her hands on her hips. “Next time, don’t follow us.”

An icy wave skated along his spine. “Next time.”

“Travis is taking me fishing next week.” She crossed her arms, giving her cleavage a lift. Damn if he didn’t look.

“No. You don’t need to put yourself in danger again to get information from this guy.”

“Who said I’d be in danger? Travis was a perfect gentleman.”

Ryan snorted. “He made sure you didn’t get sunburnt. How many times did he lotion your back anyway?”

Her face turned crimson, and her breath heaved out inches from his face. “Jealous?”

“Yes.” The word slipped from Ryan’s lips. He dropped his cooler and keys and fisted his hands in her hair. “I know I don’t have a right to be, but I was.”

Her eyes widened, and her tongue slipped out. She grabbed his shirt. To pull him closer or push him away, he couldn’t say, but when her fingers brushed his chest through his wet shirt, his control snapped.

He closed the few remaining inches of space and sealed his mouth to hers. Her lips opened an inch, and he was gone. No gentle exploration. Hard kisses amped up at record speed. She made a purring sound in her throat and two seconds later, Ryan’s tongue slid between her lush lips.

Her arm looped around his neck, and her fingers tightened in his hair. Tiny tugs shot sensation straight to his groin. He broke the kiss. Air sawed in and out as they both panted, eyes locked in shock and lust.

“Erica.” The rasp of his voice begged her to come inside. But her answer flashed in her eyes. Lust cooled and regret took its place.

She dropped her hand from his hair. The heated tingles on his scalp subsided.

She tentatively touched a finger to her mouth. Inches of charged space stood between them.

“I should go.”

*No!* The word screamed in his head but couldn’t push past his lips.



She spun and ran to her car.

*Stop her. Beg her to stay. Apologize. Something. Anything.*

But she was right. They had too much water under that bridge to go there. Hell, the water had not only gone under, but it washed out the bridge completely.

He watched her drive off before picking up his things and unlocking the door.

Yes, their time had passed. So, why did it live in his dreams?

## Chapter 12

“**T**hat was a mistake. I should have kneed him in the nuts,” Erica mumbled as she drove home. He deserved it, spying on her all day, then... lips...tongue.

Ugh. She'd need to punch herself in the stomach as well. She'd been right there with him, just like the last time. And look how that ended.

Her inner peacekeeper whispered it wasn't his fault. Hers either, if she was being honest with herself. It's not like he was still dating Sarah. Her sister had effed that relationship up all by herself. Erica didn't know all the reasons behind Ryan and Sarah's split, but she did know her baby sister pushed him away and then pulled him back more than once. But the last time, Ryan broke it off.

Guilt for thinking bad of her dead sister overwhelmed her peacekeeper. Sarah wasn't perfect, no matter what most people thought, but that didn't give Erica the right to blame her. If she had only fought her feelings for Ryan back then, Sarah might still be alive.

*You did nothing wrong.* Her inner voice soothed, but logic didn't matter. Her sister was dead. She'd give up anything, even Ryan, to get her back.

*Tried that. How's it working for you?*

"Oh, shut it." Her voice echoed off the vehicle's interior.

Her vision blurred as she stared out the windshield, not registering the other cars. Moisture dampened her cheeks. Tears. She let them fall. They wouldn't change anything.

She slammed her fist against the steering wheel. Damn it. Kissing Ryan again was a mistake, so why did his lips fit hers perfectly?

Lost in her own thoughts, she pulled into the driveway. All she wanted was to wash off the sunscreen and cuddle with her dog. She put the car in park as Karma bolted from the house to greet her.

"What the hell?" Using the edge of her shirt, she wiped her face clean as she stepped from the car. "How did you get out?"

She rubbed his happy face, then scanned the yard and house. She hadn't used the front door that morning. No way it was unlocked. Palming her keys, she opened her phone and her finger hovered over the emergency button as she moved to the now open front door. Karma barked once, then raced to sit on the step, all attention focused on the house.

"What is it, boy? You're freaking me out." Erica glanced in the window as she passed. A chair was knocked over. She

clung to Karma's collar and slowly pushed the door open wider.

"Oh my God. What happened?" The silence in the room was deadly. Not even her antique clock was ticking. It laid on the floor in front of the fireplace, the wood splintered. Drops of what looked to be blood speckled the floor.

She fell to her knees and examined Karma. "You look to be fine. Not a scratch." She rubbed his shoulders as he panted, a happy smile on his face. "You surprised them, didn't you? Got a piece of them, too, by the look of it."

She took Karma back outside. Without thought, she called Ryan, the one person she didn't want to see right now.

"Erica." Ryan's voice held hesitation. She understood that. Hers did as well.

"I should have called 911. I didn't think. Just dialed." Her tone pitched up on each word. By the time she finished, only the neighborhood dogs could hear her.

"Calm down. What happened?" His tone changed to competent cop.

"Someone broke into my house." Forcing air into her lungs, she slumped. She was a first responder. She dealt with emergencies and trauma every day. But this was her house. Her life.

"Stay outside, and I'll be right over." She could hear him moving around and the door slamming. "I mean it, Erica. Don't go inside. Stay on the phone."

“I walked into the living room but didn’t touch anything. Karma and I are in the front yard.”

She heard his truck start and the phone switch to speaker. “Is Karma alright?”

“Yes, I think he was asleep but woke and startled the burglar. There’s blood or something on the floor, and it’s not his.”

“Good dog,” Ryan said before yelling at other vehicles to get out of the way. “I’m five minutes out.”

He must be breaking all the speed limits.

“I think the person is long gone.” Tiptoeing closer, she peeked in the window.

“I don’t want you taking any chances. Besides, you could contaminate the scene.”

Good point. Stepping back, she knelt down and cooed to her dog. It could have been so much worse. They could have hurt her baby.

He licked her cheek and pushed his big body into hers.

The squeal of tires snagged her attention. His truck—boat and trailer still attached—skidded to a stop in front of her house. Ryan flew from the vehicle, leaving the door open. He didn’t even slow down at Karma’s bark.

“Good boy.” He scratched the dog’s ear as he passed, his full attention focused on her. Before she could speak, he scooped her up, hugging her close. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” His freshly showered scent soothed her. She melted into his hold for a moment before remembering she needed to be strong. “The living room is trashed. Not sure if they took anything. And I didn’t go beyond that.”

“You stay here. I will clear the house and try not to disrupt the crime scene.” Ryan pulled his gun from his holster, and with sure steps, entered the house.

What seemed like an eternity was only minutes, and he was back. “I called it in. A patrol officer will be here in a few minutes.”

“Do you think it was a typical burglary?”

“Your laptop is on the table, and the other rooms look to be untouched. It could have been an attempted B and E, but they didn’t plan on Karma.” He chewed his lip as he canvassed the room.

“What aren’t you saying?”

“It’s quite a coincidence that you started looking into inconsistencies and your home is broken into.” He stroked Karma’s head as he spoke. “I’m just glad you weren’t here.”

“I was lucky.”

“They could have been scoping out your house. Or they knew you were going to be on the river all day.”

She shot him a questioning look. “You don’t really think that.”

“I’m a detective. I question all the angles.” He leaned against the door frame. “Look at it this way. Stevens gets you out of the house so his guy has the day to go through your house and grab any files or evidence you have.”

“I don’t know.”

“Even a typical middle-of-the-road thief would be smart enough to know you have a dog. Especially, one the size of a horse. He would either pick an easier target or neutralize the dog.”

She covered Karma’s ears. “I can’t believe you’d say that in front of him.”

“It’s the facts. I listened to the gala recordings last night. Stevens definitely liked what he saw when you approached him. But his interest piqued once he heard your name and occupation. I think you were on his radar before last night. But the opportunity to get you out of the house didn’t give them enough time to do their research. That’s how Karma got the jump on them.”

She didn’t want to believe his conspiracy theories, but it was plausible.

“Next time, you might not be so lucky.”

She rolled her eyes. It was a habit she’d thought she’d kicked, but around Ryan it was making a comeback. “You’re just trying to scare me, so I won’t go out with Travis next week.”

“You aren’t a cop. This isn’t in your wheelhouse.”

“Please, I run into fires for a living. Hell, last week, my air regulatory failed. I still don’t know how I missed it on the precheck.” She mumbled the last to herself, but Ryan caught it.

His posture stiffened. He shifted from mildly concerned to heightened alert. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because it was a malfunction. Nothing nefarious.”

He squinted as if performing a lie-detector test. “When was the last time the department had a malfunction?”

She examined the tip of her shoe. “A while ago.”

“Erica.” His voice pulled her attention back to him.

“Fine. I can’t remember one failing.”

The shade of red he turned was not a good look on him. He was about to blow.

She stepped back.

“Someone knows you’re digging. I’d bet my life on it.”

Just then, the patrol vehicle pulled up behind the boat. The officer joined them. “Daniels. Ma’am. I’m Officer Banks. You cleared the house?” He directed the question to Ryan but glanced down at Karma who was sniffing his legs.

“Yes.” He filled the officer in on what he knew, then motioned to her to do the same.

“Is everyone okay then?” He pocketed his notebook at her nod. “I will take some photos and process the scene before I see if the neighbors saw anything.”



“Thanks, Banks.” Ryan let the man get to work. He turned to Erica. “Do you feel safe here tonight?”

*No!* She kept that thought in her head and stiffened her spine. “I have Karma. We will be fine.”

They locked eyes.

He squinted.

She squinted.

*Don't blink.* She waited for him to demand she not stay here tonight. Or worse, that he would sleep on her couch. She stiffened her resolve. No way she'd blink first.

She blinked.

White teeth flashed when he smiled.

Shit. Time for plan B. Her argument played out in her mind. She was a grown-ass woman. And she had a dog and bug spray that worked as good as any pepper spray. And...and...

Another second passed before his hands rose, palms out. “Okay, chill. I can see the gears spooling up in that big brain of yours.”

A second patrol car pulled up, interrupting their conversation. Ryan met the officer halfway to the house. She couldn't hear their full conversation, but she caught that Ryan sent him to interview any neighbors before he returned to her.

“I need to get the boat back to my cousin. Do you want me to come back?”

Did she? The flicker behind her ribcage said yes.

“No. We’re good.” She pet Karma’s broad head.

His dark gaze searched hers, no doubt looking for an untruth. She locked her knees and held her ground.

He nodded and climbed into his truck.

She waited until he rounded the corner. *Finally*. Her body slumped.

“Ma’am. Could you come in and let me know if anything is missing?” Officer Banks asked.

She snuck one more glance to the last place Ryan’s truck had been, then followed the officer inside.

Ryan had to be wrong about the break-in. The man she spent the day talking video games and movies with couldn’t have been behind it. Could he?

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Hot coffee in hand, Ryan had just pulled up the list of gala attendees when RaeAnne, the front desk officer, rang. “You have a visitor. Sergeant VU.”

“I’ll be right there.” Perfect. Maybe Kealy’s superior could shed some light on why the officer was hanging out with a known drug dealer on a Sunday evening. He grabbed his notepad and pen and went to the front entry.

The man surveying the surroundings stood with his hands resting on his tactical belt. His stance shifted as Ryan walked in. His arms dropped and he presented a hand. “Detective Daniels, nice to meet you.”

His shake was firm but not overpowering.

“Sergeant Vu, come on back.” Ryan held the door open for him to follow. He led him to a small conference room, closed the door, and gestured to one of the chairs. “Coffee?”

“No thanks. I got a to-go cup in the cruiser.” He took the offered seat.

Ryan sat and opened his notebook before leaning on the table. Might as well just get to the meat of it. “I don’t know if you have heard, but one of the bodies found in the structure fire on Industrial Boulevard was identified as Officer Bryan Kealy.”

He watched the sergeant's reaction, mild shock, then acceptance. "I was afraid something like that happened. That explains why he missed his check-in."

He sat back in his chair and rubbed his temple. "Kealy had been doing undercover work with narcotics for the last two months. Like clockwork, he checked in, but this week... We put out feelers and beat the bushes but didn't want to set up a Blue Alert yet, just in case he was into something deep."

That made sense. Last thing they wanted to do was blow the officer's cover if he was onto something big.

"That would explain why he was found with a known drug dealer. But why was he in Ashwood?"

"Your narcotics division didn't inform you? We reached out to deconflict the situation back in early July. They knew Kealy was working his way in to find out who was the main supplier in the Twin Cities. We had a name but didn't have any evidence to tighten the cuffs."

Ryan made a note to check with Ashwood Narcotics Division. "Can you tell me about Kealy? Who he hung out with? Did he have threats?"

"He was quiet. Kealy would come out for a beer once in a while, but he wasn't one to socialize with the others." He smoothed a finger over his salt-and-pepper mustache. "As for threats, he didn't have any more than the next guy."

True. What cop didn't get a random threat weekly? Ryan asked a few more question before setting his pen down.

“Would you mind sending me the case file he was working on? I’ll fill out the requisition paperwork when we are done here.”

“Not a problem. I’ll send it over today.”

“Thanks.” They shook hands, and he showed him out.

Back at his desk, Ryan added his notes to the case and sent an official request for Kealy’s case file. Ten minutes later, he tipped his chair back.

The talk with Vu only added to his questions. According to him, Kealy was a good guy, quiet, hardworking. Your average cop. And if he was undercover, he could have been at the building meeting Ruiz and not Ryan.

Shit. He’d hoped his conversation with Vu would have filled in the holes. He scratched his scruffy jaw. Officer Kealy could still have been his contact. It made sense he’d ask to meet at the corner. It would look like he was doing a deal instead of giving Ryan information—add to his street cred.

Vu was his first interview, but he needed to talk to the other officers who worked with Kealy. The man may have kept to himself, but he’d dot the Is and cross the Ts. Who knew? He might pick up some useful information.

Scanning the list of Bloomington officers, Ryan sighed. It was going to be a long morning. He’d call Kealy’s team members. If something hit, he’d schedule a face-to-face.

He picked up the phone receiver, then looked at his empty coffee mug.

First, he needed more coffee.

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Two and a half hours later, Ryan rubbed his aching eyes. He had talked to over half of Kealy's coworkers, and it was the same story—nice guy, quiet. About an hour ago, he'd switched to cross-referencing the Tahoe owners list with the Outreach contributors. So far, nothing.

He leaned back, taking a minute to rest. Lists of vehicle owners ran behind his closed eyes. Even with the computer analyzing the data, Ryan had manually checked the names. The last thing he wanted was to miss something.

“Come on,” he mumbled as he checked the progress. Sixty-nine percent. Ryan dropped his pen on the desk and stretched. “This is taking forever.”

CJ popped his head over the wall. “Talking to yourself? Getting any answers?”

“Not yet.” He ran a hand over his hair, combing down the evidence of his frustration. “One of these guys has to be a buyer if not the organizer of the corruption. Rich, powerful, and connected, it was the trifecta for the perfect customer.”

CJ stroked his chin and gave a slow nod. “It takes time, but we'll find them. So, how's the twofer going?”

Ryan's brows rose. “Twofer? Oh, the two victims.”

“Do you know the DBs?” He crossed his arms and leaned on the cubicle wall.

“The dealer had a rap sheet a mile long. I’m still looking for the Tahoe owner. It’s possible they are connected to this whole thing.”

“Or...?”

“Or it’s Ruiz’s customer.”

“It could be the murderer,” CJ added.

Ryan nodded. He’d thought of that too. “I won’t know until I find them. As for Officer Kealy, I’m still waiting for his files from Bloomington PD. He was undercover. I have a call in to Green over in Narcotics.”

CJ tapped a finger on the partition. “Have you talked to Detective Malone? He started at BPD. Maybe he remembers him or heard something about the undercover work?”

The older detective had more experience and wisdom. Ryan valued his input. He made a mental note. “I will. Thanks.”

CJ rapped his knuckles on the edge and stepped back. A grin crept to his lips. “Well, I have to get going. Oh, one more thing.” His lip hitched up. “How was the swim yesterday?”

Ryan wadded up a piece of paper and chucked it at CJ.

The other detective ducked. His laughter boomed through the station as he walked away.

With rapid fingers, Ryan sent a direct message to Tanner Malone. Thirty seconds later his response popped up.



Tanner: *I'm at a B and E over on Second Street. Not sure when I'll be finished here. What's up?*

Ryan: *Did you work with Officer Bryan Kealy when you worked in Bloomington?*

The ellipses in the work messenger app showed Malone was typing.

Ryan checked the time. His stomach was rumbling. It was close to lunch. Maybe they could meet and talk.

Malone's reply popped up.

Tanner: *He's the one who was in the fire? I didn't work at BPD long, but I remember him. What did you want to know?*

Ryan: *Can we sit down when you have a few minutes? Maybe grab lunch?*

Tanner: *I'm heading over to Mabel's for a bite when I finish here. I can text you when I'm on my way?*

Ryan: *Sounds good.*

A message box popped up on his screen. The list of gala attendees who owned a dark Chevy Tahoe filled the screen. Twenty-two. Still bigger than he liked but manageable.

He started by crossing the list with any connection to Stevens, Doctor Hoffman, or Rollins, the CEO of Lindgames.

"Whittier?" Mrs. Whittier owned a 2020 Tahoe in black. Huh, he pictured her more as a Mercedes type of woman.

He did a little more digging, not that he thought CJ's mom would be hanging out on Industrial Boulevard. As he ran the

registration, a ticket for a Marion Jackson popped up. That made more sense. Her assistant and chef would drive the vehicle. He looked a little deeper. The Jackson's owned a house a mile from the scene of the fire. It could be she just happened to be driving by. Or, she could be running errands for Mrs. Whittier. He put a note next to her name and moved to the next person.

When he was done, his list was down to eleven. But his gut was ready to eliminate the ones he couldn't see as cruising the rough side of town for a fix. Owners like Joy Whittier. His cop training wouldn't let him remove CJ's mom altogether, but he moved her down to the bottom of the list.

Same with Doctor Hoffman. He had access to all the drugs he wanted.

But... Ryan tapped his chin. What if he was supplying Sal with prescription drugs? He'd look into this guy before he dropped him lower.

He'd just finished his first run through the list when Malone messaged. Adrenaline pumped through his limbs as he grabbed his keys and started for the door.

"Daniels, where's the fire?" Sergeant Johnson called.

"No fire, just going to lunch with Malone. What's up?" He slowed to a stroll as Sarge paced him.

The older man glanced over his shoulder, left then right. "Just wondering how that website is worked out? Did you find anything?"

“I got a hit. Not sure if will turn into anything, but I’m working it. I gotta run. I’ll touch base with you tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. Stay safe.”

“You as well.” Ryan threw a salute and hustled out the door.

He hadn’t been to Mabel’s before. “Siri, directions to Miss Mabel’s restaurant.”

His phone’s navigation linked with his truck and gave him turn-by-turn directions across town. The questions he wanted to ask Tanner ran through his head as he followed the nav system.

What were the odds that Malone would remember anything from a decade ago? Knowing Tanner, sixty-forty.

He pulled out onto Division, the main east-west street. Midday traffic buzzed by as the light changed up ahead.

A crack split the air. Ryan’s steering wheel jerked.

“What the fuck!” His fingers death-gripped the leather wheel. He fought to keep his Jeep under control. Another crack sounded. The sound of tires screeching echoed through his cab. A large box truck skidded across the line, heading straight toward him.

Ryan’s chest tightened, and he braced for impact. Metal crunched. Glass shattered. His whole body jerked. His vision whirled as the force of the hit threw his whole seat to the right. The airbags deployed. Then everything stopped.

Blood pounded in his ears. He took in a deep breath and waited for the pain. None came. Damn. He was lucky.

Pushing the white plastic bag from his view, he took inventory. He wiggled his toes, but he couldn't move his legs. He tugged. Nothing. He tugged again. Pain shot up his leg.

Shit. They were pinned under the dash. The whole console was pushed back at least a foot.

Fuck. The adrenaline spike that had masked his injuries for a few seconds was wearing off.

Was everyone okay? Dazed, he reached for the seatbelt release. The mechanism jammed. He pulled on the webbing, but it didn't budge.

His eyes stung. He rubbed his head, and his hand came away bloody. "Shit."

Closing his eyes, he exhaled. Head wounds bled a lot, but it didn't mean it was bad.

Yeah, he'd be fine. He was more concerned about the shooter. Because he damn well knew the sound of a rifle. And that's what he'd heard. Two shots.

A sharp pain stabbed him in the neck as he turned to look for his phone. "Fuck, that hurt." He needed help.

Rubbing the point of pain, he tried to release some of the pressure. Taking quick shallow breaths, he pushed it back. *Note to self, don't turn your head.* Using peripheral vision, he spied his phone on the passenger floorboard.

He inhaled deep, then stretched. His fingers brushed the edge of the glass face.

“Come on. One. More. Inch.” His vision blurred, and he blinked it away. He ignored the pain and wiggled his fingertips as if they could grow on command.

The phone slipped further away.

Pounding echoed around him. Someone was pulling on his door. His head drooped, and the banging on his window faded into the distance.

It was almost noon, and Ryan’s world went dark.

## Chapter 13

“**W**e have a multi-vehicle accident on Division and Oak Street. Multiple injuries reported,” the dispatch call announced.

Erica and Garrett were the first to the rescue truck while Finn and Rivera followed in the fire engine. As lead medic on the scene, Erica would need to assess injuries first. AFD was the main paramedic unit as well as the fire and other rescue for the city. If they needed backup, it would take up to twenty minutes for the ambulance to come from the neighboring city.

As they pulled out of the barn, Garrett flipped on the lights and sirens. Erica read off the directions and double-checked the traffic. All clear up to the block of the accident.

As they pulled up to the scene, Erica grinned. “Not bad today. You only had to lay on the horn once.”

“Stupid people,” Garrett muttered. “You would think the big red truck in their rearview would be a clue to move over.”

Not to mention they were coming in with full lights and sound. It still surprised Erica at how people could drive without actually paying attention to their surroundings.

They inched closer as the gawkers parted for them. She took in the steam from the engine compartment on the commercial truck. Something in her stomach tightened. How bad was the other vehicle? Or vehicles? Every accident was different and following procedure saved lives, but something about this one had her insides in knots. She hadn't even gotten out of the vehicle yet, and she knew it would be bad.

“The delivery truck is leaking fuel.” Garrett radioed Rivera and Finn. They were out of the truck and pulled out the solvent and cleaner before it could catch fire. All it would take was one spark.

With the spill being handled, she and Garrett grabbed the medic bags and headed to the vehicles involved. Thankfully, there were only the two.

Officers were setting up a perimeter, and they flagged them in. She stopped first at the truck driver holding his head. He was talking and waved her off.

“I don't know what happened. It's like my tire blew out just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “The guy is still in the Jeep. I think he's hurt bad.”

Erica handed him off to Garrett and jogged to the gray Cherokee. The ball in her stomach squeezed tighter. Acid worked its way up her esophagus before the people standing

around the vehicle moved. Before she got a look at the driver, she knew.

“Ryan.” She pushed the bystanders aside and gasped when she got a look at the damage. She forced back her lunch, which threatened to make a reappearance.

*Do the job. Assess the situation. Critical first.* She hadn’t had to utter those words in years, but this was personal. She inhaled to the point of bursting her lungs, then her mind clicked into work mode.

No way they were getting that door open without help. She grabbed her radio. “We need the jaws-of-life. Stat.”

“Daniels. Can you hear me?” She knocked on the glass, but he didn’t move. *No. No. No.* “Ryan, it’s Erica. We’ll get you out. Can you open your eyes?”

She pulled out a tool and shattered the window. Carefully, with gloved hands, she pulled the spider-webbed glass from the door, then pulled off the glove and reached in to check his pulse. A soft rhythm beat under her fingers.

“Thank you, Jesus.” She assessed his injuries, and his pulse and heart rate were good.

The guys brought the tool that opened the bent metal like a can opener. The next few minutes were filled with the sounds of saws and grinders as they freed Ryan’s legs from the wreckage. Once she had him fully braced, they moved him to a back board and got him on the gurney.



Ryan groaned, then his eyes fluttered as they loaded him into the rescue truck.

“Hey, can you tell me your name?” Erica asked while monitoring his blood pressure and dressing his head wound.

“Did you forget?” His words were weak, but his usual smartass comments were definitely working just fine.

“Humor me.”

“Ryan David Daniels.” His voice was soft but clear.

“Good. Are you in pain?” She attached the leads to track his vitals. The monitor beeped, and she stopped it with a tap of a button. At his pained look, she started an IV for meds. “What happened?”

“I heard a shot, then I couldn’t steer. Another shot, then the truck hit me.”

“Shot?” Was she hearing him correctly? She leaned closer. “Did you say shot, as in a bullet?”

“Yeah.” He swallowed. “Gun shot. It sounded like a rifle.”

Erica’s mouth went dry. She reassessed him, this time looking for bullet holes.

“Not me. The tires. I think they shot out the tires.” His voice was low, and his blinks were growing longer. His pupils looked good, but she didn’t want him to sleep if he had a head injury. Even though the pain med would make him drowsy.

He pushed against the gurney and winced.

“You need to rest.” She stayed him with a gentle hand to his chest.

“I need to go check the vehicle. I don’t want anyone messing with the evidence.” He lay back but fidgeted.

Ever the cop. No way he had the energy to go investigate the scene.

“You’re going to the hospital to get checked out.”

“But...” He tried to sit up, pushing his broad chest against her hand.

“Okay, Superman. I know you’re worried about the crime, but I’m more worried about your health.” She guided him to lay back down and didn’t even use any pressure.

“Erica, I have to go.” Determination bolstered his voice.

“Fine.” She sat back and gestured to the door. “Sit up and swing your legs over the side and I’ll let you go.”

He narrowed his eyes, then took an audible breath.

Erica readied to catch him. She would sedate him, if necessary, but really didn’t want to.

He reached for the IV.

“Nuh uh. Not until you can sit, and I deem you fit to work.”

He scowled but braced himself with his elbows. Small beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. Less than a foot up and he cringed.

She felt bad for the stubborn oaf, but she knew the best way to win with Ryan was to let him realize he was wrong. She just

hoped he didn't do more damage. Until he had X-rays and a complete checkup, they couldn't say if he had internal injuries.

Ryan made it halfway to sitting when the energy slid from his body. Erica quickly supported him and guided him back to the gurney.

"Call Larson. I need her to check the tires." His head dropped back, and he closed his eyes. "Promise."

"I promise." And she would, but first, she needed to make sure he was going to be alright.

Five minutes later, they wheeled Ryan into the emergency room entrance. A couple of nurses and a doctor started assessing him as they took him through the double doors.

Erica hugged herself as she watched his still body being taken away.

Garrett tapped her on the shoulder. "Let's pack up. They've got him now."

She nodded, unable to talk around the lump that formed in her throat. He was right. Ryan would be fine. But not for the first time over the last decade did a flashback hit her. It propelled her back to the night she and Ryan rushed through these same doors. But then it was her sister being sped away.

It was the last time she saw Sarah alive.

Brushing the chill from her arms, she followed her crew member. Ryan would be fine. Yeah, he was too stubborn to...

She couldn't say the word, even in her mind.

Erica climbed in the truck and pulled out her phone. She scrolled through until she found Detective Larson's number. She hesitated, hovering a finger over the call button. Her gaze cut to Garrett before she tapped the message icon and a text box popped up.

As clearly and concisely as possible, she texted out the events of the crash in Ryan's words, then hit send.

The three dots appeared a second later. Amy replied, "On it."

A second later came another text. "Thanks."

The hose coiling around Erica's chest relaxed. Amy would make sure the vehicles were processed as Ryan requested. The two were close. No doubt on that after Larson's protective line of questioning the other night. But in that one word, she could read the heart-felt emotions of the tough-as-nails detective. Larson didn't have to inquire more as Erica gave her all the information in the one text—a report of sorts.

"You good?" Garrett's low tone cut through the rumble of the engine.

"Yes." She slipped her phone in her pocket and worked to push the image of Ryan on a stretcher from her mind.

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The sun hung low in the sky by the time Erica finally finished her shift. She should be flopping into bed about now. But no, she was being serenaded by the beeps of monitors and pages

over the intercom as she walked down the white-on-white walls of the hallway. Headshots of the physicians stared back at her as she made her way to the nurse's desk at the intersection of the patient rooms. She waved to the two nurses at the desk as she moved farther down the hall, looking for Ryan's room number.

At least he had been moved to a regular room. When she called earlier, the desk clerk had told her he had been admitted for observation.

Why? Brain swelling? Internal bleeding? Her medical knowledge could be scary, so she tamped down the thoughts of rare complications that could occur.

His door was open, but the curtain around his bed was closed. It was well past visiting hours, but being a medic, the nurses at the station didn't bat an eye as she strolled right by them.

She knocked softly, not knowing if he was awake. When no reply came, she stuck her head around the curtain. Ryan lay in the bed, eyes closed. Peaceful. Her focus zeroed in on the monitors. All looked normal.

“Erica?”

She jumped. “Mrs. Daniels.”

How could she have missed Ryan's mom sitting quietly? The older woman pulled an earbud from her ear and smiled. “I haven't seen you in years. Come in.”

Erica motioned to Ryan. “Is he...?”

“Just sleeping, dear. They gave him some sedatives. You know Ryan. He wanted out of here the moment he woke.” She shook her head. “So like his father.”

Erica looked out the door. “How is Mr. Daniels?” It felt weird making small talk, but Doris and Dave Daniels had been like second parents to her growing up.

“Oh, he couldn’t sit any longer, so I sent him down to see if the vending machines had anything sweet.” She set her book aside.

“Not likely.”

“Well, I guess he might be a while.” She winked. “Come sit.” She patted the seat beside her on the small couch.

Keeping one eye on Ryan, Erica moved to sit beside Doris. The older woman instantly pulled her into a warm hug.

“It’s good to see you.” The soft smile, and faint lines around the older woman’s eyes were so comforting to her that Erica released the breath locked in her chest. When she pulled back, her attention shifted back to Ryan.

“He looks better than earlier.” At Doris’s questioning look, she continued, “I was the medic on the scene.”

“Did you talk to Larson?” A faint mumble came from the bed.

Erica startled. “You’re awake? How do you feel?”

“Fine. What did Larson say?”

“On it.” She watched as his shoulder melted deeper into the pillows.

“Other than this jackhammering in the back of my head, I’ll live.”

She could tell he was surveying her even before he opened his eyes.

He cracked his eyes open a slit.

Yup, cop eyes. Erica cut her gaze from his to his injuries.

“Your legs?” She balled her hands into fists to keep from checking them again.

“Not broken.” Ryan spied the door, then reached for the call button.

“Honey, do you need more pain meds?” Doris pushed off the couch.

“No, Mom. I need to go home. I have a headache from the damn airbag. That’s it.”

Doubtful. The man couldn’t sit up in the ambulance. If he only had a headache, they would have given him a couple Tylenol and sent him on his way.

“Did they say how long he had to be here for observation?” she asked Doris.

“I’m right here. You can ask me.” Ryan huffed.

“But would you give me an honest answer?”

He crossed his arms over his chest and grumbled.

“She always did know you too well.” Doris chuckled. “They said he had a concussion and wanted to keep him for a few hours...”

“It’s been eight.”

“Or overnight. They want to run a few more tests.” His mom fluffed his pillows before she sat back down.

“They ran the tests. I’m waiting for the doctor to come back so I can go home.”

“By the way you’re contesting, I’m sure they’ll be happy to send you on your way if you’re healthy enough.”

Doris patted Erica’s leg. “Come to dinner on Sunday. We miss you.”

Ryan watched her with an eagle eye. Did he want her at his family’s home for dinner? Did she want to?

She used to eat with them all the time. Even after he started dating Sarah.

“I will have to check my schedule.” Her heart raced as she took the easy out.

She should go. God knows this was awkward. She shouldn’t have come, but now she was trapped in Ryan’s stare.

The door opened. Dave Daniels strolled in with a chocolate bar in his hand. “Look what I found. A Snickers and his doctor.”

He stopped when he caught sight of Erica. “You found something too.”



He crossed the tiny room in two steps and pulled her into one of his big bear hugs. “Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes. It’s about time you came back around. If I knew it would take Ry here being hit by a truck, I’d have done it myself years ago.”

“Really, Dad.”

He shooed his son. “I don’t know what you did to this sweet girl to make her run away, but I’m glad to see her.”

Erica didn’t need to see her face to know her cheeks were fire-hydrant red. “It’s good to see you as well.”

“Well, if this reunion is over, let’s see if I can go home now. Doctor?”

Everyone turned their attention to the tall, middle-aged man in a lab coat. His teeth flashed bright against his dark face as he pulled the chart from under his arm. “You passed your tests with flying colors.”

Ryan swung a leg over the edge of the bed, ready to bolt. Erica hadn’t missed his deep intake of breath when his foot hit the floor. She’d bet he had a sprain, if not a bone bruise.

“Hold up. All but one. You still have a concussion. Between that and the pain meds, I don’t want you driving or unsupervised for the next twenty-four hours. At this time, if you don’t have any other symptoms, you can resume your normal day-to-day routine in a few days. But take it easy on that leg for the next two weeks.”

“So, I can go home... as long as someone is there tonight.”

“Yes, and you follow the instructions I give you. Who will be your caregiver?”

“Great. Mom?”

“Honey, I can’t. You know I would, but I have to babysit Allie and Andy in the morning. Your sister has an early appointment. Your father can do it.”

“Sure can. We just need to swing by the house so I can grab some clothes and my meds.”

“Don’t forget your CPAP machine and the distilled water. You know you don’t sleep well without it.” Doris leaned toward Erica and whispered loud enough for the whole room to hear, “We don’t want him to stop breathing. Not to mention, he could wake the dead with his snoring.”

Ryan pinched his nose. “Maybe, I should come stay at your house for the night?”

“Oh, that’s a great idea. But you would need to sleep on the couch. Your mother has been going through all the old photos. They’re spread all across the spare bed.”

“You should see. I came upon some of the cutest pictures of you two when you were in elementary school. Remember the time you two filled your shirts with sand?” She shook her head, a grin beaming. “You looked like little Buddhas.”

Erica bit back a chuckle. Doris and Dave hadn’t changed one bit. And from the way Ryan was pulling the ends of his hair with both hands, she’d say they still drove him crazy.

“You can stay at my house.” *Where the hell did that come from?*

Ryan must have thought that, too, because his eyes widened.

Well, shit. The offer was out there now. She shrugged. “I have a spare bedroom. No pictures.”

Ryan’s head tipped. “Fine. Can I go now, Doc?”

“I’ll start the paperwork. A nurse will come get you when it’s ready.” He shook Dave and Ryan’s hands, then left.

“Well, Doris.” Dave patted his belly. “Time to go get some food. Ryan’s in good hands.”

After a quick kiss on Ryan’s cheek, Doris hugged Erica. “Come to dinner on Sunday. I’ll make lasagna. Is it still your favorite?”

Damn, the woman knew her weakness. She nodded.

The room fell eerily quiet when Ryan’s parents left. Erica’s gaze bounced from the monitors to the door to the floor. Anywhere but at Ryan.

Finally, her gaze found its way to his face. He looked tired. Fresh scrapes marred his cheeks, but if anything, they made him look even more handsome. Damn him.

“I can’t believe you offered your spare room.”

“I can’t believe you accepted.”

“Hell, I’d sleep with Karma if it meant I didn’t have to move half of my father’s stuff to my house. You know how he is. I’d be lucky if he didn’t want to bring his sleep number bed.”

Her cheek pulled up as she remembered one of their camping trips as a kid. “The man does like to be prepared.”

Ryan groaned.

The nurse came in, and Ryan refused the ride to the door, opting to walk himself. The first few steps were wobbly, but by the time they exited the hospital, he was walking normally. Either the pain meds had kicked in, or he was a better actor than she thought.

Once they were in the car, he placed a hand on her arm. “Thank you. Really.”

She started the engine, then smiled. “Don’t thank me yet. The spare bed is Karma’s bed. And I’ll warn you, he’s a bed hog.”

## Chapter 14

“**W**hoa, nice to see you to fella. He sure is friendly.” Karma greeted him in the usual way—a sniff to his crotch. Ryan gently pushed the dog’s large head back as he scratched behind his ears.

The pain meds took the edge off, but his leg muscle twinged just walking to the house. A Chihuahua could knock him over at the moment. He didn’t want to think of the pain if her happy, bear-sized dog ran into him.

Erica whistled, and Karma followed her into the kitchen. Ryan did, too, only slower. She filled the dog’s water and put a couple scoops of food into his bowl before pulling out a couple glasses from the cupboard. “Water?”

“Sure.” Ryan rested on the counter stool. How could he be this tired? He’d spent the better part of the day in bed.

“What the...?” A warm wet seeped through his pants. Karma had finished his food and came to lean against Ryan’s leg. A

softball size spot of drool now darkened his thigh. “Thanks, buddy.”

Erica shrugged as she set down their waters. “The joys of living with a Cane Corso.”

Loving brown eyes stared up at him. His heart melted a little more with each blink of those furry eyelids. Ryan stroked Karma’s soft face, his disgust at the slime all but forgotten. “Does he get let out when you’re at work?”

“Yes. I come home at lunch if we don’t have a call. And my father is retired now. He comes over to check on him. You love Grandpa, don’t you baby?” She cooed to the dog, who ate it up. His tongue rolled out and what could only be termed as a grin appeared on his face.

“Are you hungry?” She turned to the freezer. “I have pizza, fish sticks, or chicken tenders.”

Ryan raised a brow. “I’m good, but I thought firefighters all took turns cooking.”

Her cheeks pinked. “That’s a myth. Sure, we all take a rotation if Finn is gone, but he and Garrett are the best cooks in the firehouse. Walker isn’t bad, but they don’t even ask me to cook anymore. It’s not in my skill set.”

He wanted to ask what was in her skill set, but his mind went to some things he knew she excelled at. *Not the time.*

“Well, I’m beat. The guest room is the door on the left. Mine is the end room.”

“What’s on the right?” He couldn’t see her as having a craft room.

“Just the office.” Her cheeks flamed this time.

“Office. Really?”

Their eyes locked in a grudge match. A stare-down of epic proportion. He gave his best Clint Eastwood squint. Her lips pursed.

He weighed his odds of reaching the room before her without collapsing or blacking out.

“Screw it.” Ryan bolted down the hall, pushing past the pain in his body.

“No, you don’t.” Her fingers brushed his sleeve but didn’t find purchase.

Ha! He reached for the doorknob. Erica was on his heels. She made a grab for his hand but was too late. He flung open the door but stopped.

His sudden halt slammed him like three-hundred-pound druggie resisting arrest. The room spun, and he gripped the door frame. Squeezing his eyes closed, he fought to steady himself.

Hands bracketed his waist, supporting him. “That was dumb. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” *Maybe.* He stood perfectly still for a moment before opening his eyes and taking in the room.

He didn't know what he was expecting. Maybe a craft room with heaps of yarn in every color. Hello Kitty collection stuffed into every nook and cranny. His mind even leapt to visions of a sex dungeon with whips and butt plugs. Okay, the last was not the Erica he had known. But what sat on the other side of the door shocked him even more.

He wandered inside. He reached out, fingers tingling with excitement.

"Don't touch." Erica stepped in front of him.

"Where did you get that? I want." Ryan salivated over the latest, never-in-stock gaming console on the market. It was front and center, adjacent to the same console he had, under a sixty-inch television. A high-end headset was hooked on the arm of one of the two gaming chairs that sat in the middle of the room. "You play?"

She rolled her eyes. "I always did. Remember?"

"Well, yeah but..." He picked up the game case, and his cheek twitched. "I play this one. What's your handle?"

Her gaze to the beige carpet, and a sexy shade of rose crossed her cheeks.

Why was she...? What were the odds that they couldn't have played together? The facts circled in his mind. She played. He played. But he'd know it was her. Wouldn't he?

"Let me guess." Ryan tapped his finger to his lip. "Are you any good? Scratch that. Of course, you are." He moved around



the room looking at the top-of-the-line setup. “Why two chairs?”

“One’s for Karma.” Hearing his name, the dog moseyed in and curled up in one of the gaming chairs.

Karma. Karma? KarFire89. No. She couldn’t be. The zip of recognition in his spine and the way she bit her lip confirmed it. Fuck. “You’re KarFire89.”

“Got it in one, BadgeBoy00.” She leaned on the chair. “With your concussion, I don’t think gaming would be wise tonight.”

“Probably not.” Damn. He couldn’t help but stare. She avoided him for years, but they played online every week all this time. “Why? I mean, did you know it was me?”

“Not at first. But I figured it out pretty quickly.” Erica wound the hem of her shirt around her fingers. “Let me show you to the spare bedroom.”

“Across the hall, right?” He motioned with his thumb over his shoulder but didn’t move. Four feet. That’s all that stood between them. Four feet of air that smelled of lavender and sweat and something that was definitely all Erica.

He swayed as he inhaled.

“I think you need to get to bed.” She reached out to steady him.

For sure, but what he had in mind wasn’t on the agenda with a concussion.

“I’m good.” He stepped back into the hall. The stark light from the overhead fixture should have washed her out. But the shadows it cast brought out the angles in her face, planes his fingers itched to trace.

“Goodnight.” She stepped back, changing the picture he was painting in his mind. It was just as beautiful but different. This version of Erica radiated longing, guilt, and... regret.

He ducked his head and opened the bedroom door. Before he entered, he whispered, “Erica.”

She paused. Waiting.

“Thank you.”

She nodded, then closed her door.

Ryan flipped on the light. He squinted at the bright, cheery room. The rest of Erica’s house was decorated in neutral tones with pops of brighter colors.

Not here. The walls reminded him of the sunshine on a bright April day, which complimented the sky-blue bedspread and curtains. A white, wrought iron, queen bed sat in the middle of the room flanked by white nightstands. Colorful pillows, a dozen of them, littered the bed.

“Fuck. Me. It’s a girlie-pit from hell.” Good thing he’d have his eyes closed in this room.

Ryan set his phone, wallet, and sidearm on the nightstand and shook his head. He’d never have expected Erica to have an uber-feminine guest room.

Damn it. Now he wondered what her bedroom looked like. He yanked his shirt free from his pants and pulled it off over his head. Throwing it on the one wooden chair, he stepped on one sock to remove it, then the other.

The matching white dresser held several photos, all in different frames. He stepped closer.

A soft rap of knuckles sounded a second before the door opened.

“Hey—” Erica popped her head in. Her long hair flowed freely. Her cheeks pinked to a complimentary color, and her eyes dropped away from his.

Ryan instinctively puffed his chest as her gaze traveled the length of him, lingering on his exposed skin for a beat too long before moving down to his bare feet.

“Yeeeesss.” He drew out the word. He couldn’t help but smirk at her obvious perusal of his body. Did she like what she saw? God, he hoped so.

Her eyes heated, and that pink tongue made an appearance to wet her lips.

Aw, those lips. He wanted them on him. All of him.

Her attention shifted from him to the room, finally landing on the floor.

“Sorry. There are spare blankets and pillows in the closet if you need them. Goodnight.” She slipped back out like smoke, silently and swiftly, closing the door behind her.

Ryan's chest fell as the hope he held tight rushed out on an exhale. He could have sworn interest flashed in her eyes. Hell. More than interest. There was out and out lust. It mirrored his.

He scanned the room. If he went by the rest of the house, nothing in here was Erica's taste. If he didn't know better, he'd say it was Sarah's room.

He scanned over the photos. Sarah and Erica. Sarah in her cheerleading outfit. Sarah at three in the hospital. But it was the one in the back that stopped him cold. One of Erica, Sarah, and him. It was taken the day Ryan had gotten his college acceptance letter.

He picked it up and studied it. The smiles were wide, but the eyes... Erica's reflected a sadness. A heaviness. Ryan understood. His, too, had held that. Erica was staying local for college, but not him. Ryan would be going a state away.

The sadness was natural. But Sarah's, they shined with glee. He pulled the image closer. Not glee but triumph?

Ryan shook off the thought. Sarah had always been competitive. Everyone who knew her could tell you that. But he didn't understand why, in that moment of time with him leaving, she looked... happy.

This was the last picture of them together. A month later, all of it went to shit.

With one last glance at Erica's youthful face, he set the photo down. He'd had a full day, and his mind couldn't take anymore right now.

He threw his pants on the chair with his shirt, killed the lights, and slipped under the covers.

Ryan took one last look at the photos before turning his back on them and pushing the memories from his head.

The last thing he needed tonight with all the shit going round in his mind were nightmares of the past haunting his sleep.

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Erica rolled over. The bright blue numbers taunted her. Five more minutes.

“Screw it.” She flipped off the covers, stepping over the sleeping Karma, then softly walked across the hall.

Why had she bothered to set her alarm? *What a waste of energy.* Sleep had eluded her since her glimpse at his shirtless chest. The light dusting of hair, a flash of a tattoo on his upper pectoral... Yum. She itched to move in, get a closer inspection. That would have been a bad idea. Instead, she'd licked her lips and shoved the lust back down to the depths of despair where it had been languishing for the last few years. Heck, she'd swear dust motes would float out if she opened her legs.

But now, as she stood staring at her guest room door, she cursed under her breath. Why Ryan? Of all the men to open the faucets to her female parts, why did it have to be him?

Flexing her hands, she shook out the anxiety creeping through her limbs as she prepared to open his door. She glanced down at her sleep shorts and old tee and sighed.

“Shit. What am I doing?” The only reason she was awake in the dead of night was medical. Not for wandering hands, or dancing tongues, and definitely not for midnight romps with the sexy off-limit detective.

*Get it together, Randall.* She was going to wake him, check his eyes, and go back to sleep. Well, she hoped for sleep. Good thing she'd texted Walker earlier, and he could take her shift tomorrow.

She sucked in a breath and tapped on Ryan's door. She didn't want to be shot after all.

When no answer came, she slowly turned the knob and pushed. The door suddenly weighed more than her sleeping dog and was as hard to move. When the crack reached a few inches, she peeked in. His chest gently rose and fell in the rhythmic pattern of sleep. So peaceful. She hated to wake him.

Ten seconds, twenty. Shit, voyeur much? Throwing her shoulders back, she shoved the door wide open. Sure, now it moved like a feather.

Best to be quick. She crossed the room and leaned over him. Shaking his shoulder ever so lightly, she whispered, "Ryan."

He grunted and flopped onto his side, giving her his back.

A silent snort echoed in her mind. No need to worry about a hair-trigger reflex. She leaned closer and nudged his shoulder again. "Hey, sleepyhead. I need to check your eyes."

The firm muscle flexed just before his lightning-fast reflexes kicked in.

"What the..." She let out a squeal as he coiled a strong arm around her and pinned her to his chest.

"Ryan... It's me... Erica," she bit out between huffs of shock.

“Erica?” He inhaled a deep breath, then relaxed back, taking her with him. “Lavender. It’s you.”

“Yup.” She gently pushed against his chest, but he didn’t release her. “Um, Ryan. I’m here to check your concussion. Let me see your eyes.”

“Mmm, hmmm. You have beautiful eyes,” he mumbled, then nuzzled her hair.

Okay. She wasn’t sure how to extract herself. And damn it... did she really want to?

Yes, yes, remembering her little pep talk in the hallway. She wanted to. She needed to.

She shoved harder this time. Those dark eyes popped open. The stream of light from the streetlamp outside cut across his face. He stared at her now. She could see his dilated pupils, but she couldn’t say if he was fully awake.

His brows furrowed. He cupped her cheek, caressing. Strong fingers slid into her hair and with light pressure, guided her face down to his.

It felt right. Natural. She didn’t fight it. Letting him take the lead, her heart stopped as his lips found hers. With each touch of his mouth, her pulse stammered. *Lord help her*. She tipped her head and changed the angle, bringing him closer.

He groaned. His tongue slipped out—licked, teased, even caressed the seam of her lips.

Her mouth parted. A tiny gasp slipped out, taking a rush of emotion she fought to suppress all these years with it.



Once their mouths locked in a battle of possession, Erica's mind blanked of anything but the man under her. His hands held her to him, the movement of his chest in time with hers.

With each breath, her nipples tightened. His chest hair brushed her shirt—a tissue-paper-thin shirt. The one barrier preventing skin-to-skin contact. Oh, how she really wanted to feel that soft, downy hair on her breasts.

With long steady fingers, he traversed the length of her side sending goosebumps down her arms. Thousands of tiny receptors all tuned in to Ryan's every touch.

He broke their kiss and stared into her eyes. The sound of their panting breaths filled the silence. She shifted, and Ryan's growing erection nestled into the vee of her thighs. *Home.*

He blinked.

She blinked.

Need swam in his eyes.

With unsteady hands, she fisted the edge of her tee. *Do something. Get off him.*

Erica leaned back, then pulled her shirt over her head and dropped it onto the floor. It seemed her body had a different idea of getting off than her brain.

His dark eyes watched her as he trailed a fingertip across the swell of her breast, gently stopping at the delicate ink above her heart. He didn't speak but continued his journey, tracing the edge of her areola with a fingertip. His motions spiraled

closer to the hard tips. A shiver that started at her breast zipped down her spine. Small releases danced along each vertebra.

What she could see of Ryan's eyes were coal black. He rose and took the tight nub between his lips, and a tidal wave of pleasure washed over her.

She was on the edge of an orgasm, and he had only touched her breasts.

Her mind started to question. Why had she pushed him away?

A low growl cut the moment. Karma barked in the other room.

Ryan tensed beneath her. Realization cracked the shell of this cocoon they were in.

Another bark came, accompanied by his low, protective growl.

Erica slipped off Ryan and picked up her shirt, slipping it over her head. "I better go see what he's barking at. It's probably a bunny in the yard."

Ryan gripped her forearm. "Wait. I'll go see."

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"Humor me." He stood in boxer briefs, sidearm snug in his palm. The picture of a warrior ready to slay her demons.

She nodded and followed him.

Karma stood sentinel, watching out the front window. The shades were mostly closed, but Erica could see movement

through the crack. “Is someone out there?”

Ryan peered through the slit. “A vehicle just turned the corner. I caught the taillight.”

“So, it was nothing.”

“No headlights.”

He didn’t need to say more. She stroked the dog’s head. “Good boy. You’re guarding the neighborhood.”

They returned to the bedroom. Ryan placed his gun on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed. He watched her... waiting.

Well, shit. She didn’t know what to do. *Yes, you do. Get your ass back in the fine man’s bed.*

Her shoulders fell. No matter how badly she wanted to jump into the sheets with Ryan, her brain was fully in control now. Yup, Karma, saved her from a big oops.

She gestured to the bed. “I didn’t plan on... that happening. I came in to wake you and check on your concussion.”

“Oh, I’m wide awake.” No doubt, judging by the still semi-hard woody he had in his underwear.

“Sorry.” The word was out, but she couldn’t say she was fully sorry for what happened. Even if it shouldn’t have.

“So, I’m guessing by the fact you’re staying in the doorway that we won’t be finishing your assessment of my... condition?”

She shook her head. “Not a good idea.”

He nodded and muttered a curse. “You’re probably right.”

The smiling faces of her sister mocked her as she scanned the room. “We better get some sleep. I’ll wake you in another couple hours and see how you are doing.”

She slipped from the room before he could reply. The fear of him tossing one of his charming schoolboy smiles at her that melted her panties was all too real.

Having a fully dressed Ryan Daniels in her house was bad enough, but a nearly naked Ryan was dangerous.

## Chapter 15

The next time Erica woke him, Ryan was a good boy. Not that he didn't want to shred that little tee-and-shorts combo she was wearing, but by morning, the bricks that had tumbled from her wall had been put firmly back in place around her.

To the disappointment of "Little Ryan," who was a little sore today, there were no more middle of the night make-out sessions.

"You're up and dressed early." Erica yawned as she shuffled into the kitchen, now sporting a long fluffy robe.

"I have to get to work."

"Unless I dreamt it, you were in a pretty bad car accident yesterday. I'm sure I remember the doctor telling you to take it easy for a few days."

"Criminals don't stop because I want a day off." Did he really just say that? He did an internal eye roll.

Erica cocked her head and stared at him. He fought to hide the fidget that worked its way up his legs. The longer she remained silent, the stronger the itch to squirm grew.

“Fine.” She broke the eye contact and popped a coffee pod into the machine. “Give me ten minutes, and I will drive you to the station.”

“No need. I have a car being dropped off any moment.”

Just then, his phone pinged. It was here. He bit back a sigh. This interaction with Erica was weirdly intimate. It had his mind wandering to places where kids with Erica’s eyes and Ryan’s nose ran down the hall.

He shook off the crazy thought and checked to make sure his holster was latched.

“Gotta go.” Suddenly, the need to leave was strong. Like if he stayed, he’d never leave. What the hell?

He reached the door, and Karma bumped his leg. “I’ll see you later, buddy.”

Erica leaned against the wall, lips pursed, cooling her coffee, and watching him.

God, he wished he could read her mind because last night was so hot... then chilled. And now... It was like he was in an episode of the Twilight Zone with this strange domestic thing happening between the two of them. He swept the growing contentment aside.

“Thanks,” fell from his lips as he slipped out the door.

The whole morning was odd but strangely comfortable. Deep down, he liked it. But with Erica blowing hot and cold, he didn't dare get too comfortable. She'd broken his heart once and didn't even know it. He didn't think he could take it if she let him in again, then slammed that door. Right now, he needed to work, and if he could get his friend back, maybe with benefits, he'd take it. But his heart wouldn't let him think long-term. Not yet.

On the drive across town, he pushed off all thoughts of Erica and her cozy home. He sighed and shifted in his seat.

Ryan pulled up in front of Old Muscle Gym a few minutes after eight. As he stepped from his rental car, every muscle in his leg throbbed.

"Suck it up. You'll be fine," he muttered to himself. Exhaling, he put his foot down.

One step. That's all the farther he got before an Olympic-sized cramp shot down his limb. "Motherfucker!"

He gripped the car door and hissed, releasing the pain along with the air.

He took a few seconds to catch his breath. Sure, he was a little stiff this morning, but not bad. He'd stretched and took pain relievers. Erica warned him in that subtle way of hers, but he blew off her concern. He figured it was because of the concussion. His leg injury never crossed his mind.

Ryan gave the thigh muscle a quick rub, then straightened. Lightly, he put weight on the injured leg and bit back a grunt.

When did he become such a wussy?

His teeth clenched as he strolled into the gym as naturally as possible. He sent a quick wave to Tommy, Amy's brother, who was cleaning the boxing ring. No time to chat. Slow and steady and with minimal hobbling, he walked to the back office. Two sharp raps alerted Trey to Ryan's presence before he opened the door. "Hard at work, I see."

Hunched over this desk, the overhead lights bounced off Trey's blond hair. He looked up from his spreadsheets, a scowl marring his face. "It's quarterly reports day."

"I thought you were giving Tommy more managerial responsibilities?"

"I am, but this is something I need to do for the bank." He slid the papers into a file and closed a screen on his laptop. "Have a seat. How are you feeling?"

"Fine." At Trey's squinted gaze, Ryan shrugged. "Still have a mild headache. Nothing some ibuprofen couldn't take care of."

His friend's steel-blue gaze dropped to Ryan's leg. Shit. All his weight was on the right leg. He shifted, but not before the BCA agent noticed.

Trey retrieved a bottle of water from the mini fridge behind him and tossed it to Ryan. "Uh huh. Stay hydrated. That will help. Now tell me, what brought you in this morning? It's doubtful you're here to do a few reps of squats."



“Larson’s in court this morning.” Ryan eased himself down to the guest chair in front of Trey’s desk.

“Yeah, and let me guess, you want to know what she found at the accident scene.” He tipped back.

“So, she did find something. What was it?”

Trey leaned back and bridged his fingers. “The abbreviated version, your tire has a hole consistent with a bullet. I can’t tell you the size until the lab results come back.”

“I knew it.” In his excitement, he smacked his leg. Big mistake. He gritted his teeth and bit back a colorful curse.

“They also found one in the truck’s tire as well.”

“I knew I heard a second shot.” The gravity of the situation hit him. “Someone took potshots at me in the middle of the day at a busy intersection.” This was not good.

“The question is who wanted to take you out? And why?”

“Could it be a random shooting?” Even as the words left his mouth, Ryan knew it wasn’t likely.

Trey scratched his one-day-old scruff. “Could be but... only two shots. There were plenty of targets for a random shooter if they wanted to take out some people and make a statement. No, my gut is telling me this was directed at you.”

“Fuck.” Ryan leaned back in his chair and thought about the shooting. He skated his hands through his hair, tugging at the ends. What cop didn’t have a pissed off ex-con gunning for he? But this didn’t feel like some old score being settled. “I

must be getting close to something in the corruption case. I'm not working on anything else that would lead to attempted murder."

"Did you see a tail yesterday morning?"

Ryan shook his head. "No. I wasn't really looking for one either."

Trey picked up his phone and tapped out a message. "I'll have them check for tracking devices on your vehicle."

"Thanks." Ryan rose. Time to dig a little deeper into the car accident.

"And Ryan." Trey grinned. "Rest up. You owe me a couple of rounds in the ring."

Ryan threw him a quick salute, then strolled out.

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Ryan threw his pen down. Over the last week, he'd gotten nowhere. The lab and crime scene techs concluded his tire had been shot out, and they had a general direction it came from, but other than that... the hoop.

He spent all his spare time digging through the victims' lives. What he could find of them. His brief chat with Detective Malone the day after the accident netted little to nothing. Tanner remembered Kealy as a good guy who worked a lot of OT. He hadn't seen the officer in over eight years.

Here it was, Friday again, and it was crickets on the social site. No jobs or gossip. Nothing. That's the way he felt his week's progress went.

His phone buzzed. Erica's name appeared. Her message was brief.

*Erica: Stevens cancelled for tomorrow.*

Ryan's first reaction was relief. It was as if he removed his tactical vest and heavy riot gear. But his emotions were more mixed than one of those fruity cocktails his mother liked to drink.

The last thing he wanted was Erica on a boat with that man—any man if he was honest. But his gut whispered doubts about Stevens's squeaky-clean rep.

Jim walked by and slapped a piece of paper on Ryan's desk.

"What's this?" Ryan read the time and address.

"Info on my bachelor party. Jordan got called into a meeting and left them for me to deliver."

"This is tomorrow." Shit. He had forgotten to put it on his calendar.

"Yeah, sorry for the late notice." Jim handed one to Brannon as he walked by. "And Ryan, you're bringing the beer."

"Will do." He'd stop at the liquor store on his way home tonight.

"Oh, Doc wanted to know if you did your last tux fitting."

"I'll stop by there this afternoon." The wedding was only one week away. He'd thought he had plenty of time. Guess not.

He gave a quick glance at his computer screen. Still no new messages. Not that he really expected them to come flooding in during the two-minute conversation with Swenson, but he could hope.

"Screw it." He shut down his screen, disconnected from the docking station, and shoved the laptop in his messenger bag. Time to call it a day. A cold one was calling him.

After the fitting. Not that he was worried about upsetting Liz. No, she was cool. But her aunt was another story.

Ryan shivered at the thought of the Whitter matriarch's wrath if he messed up the wedding in any way. He didn't

know if she'd peel his balls and have them served for dinner,  
but he wasn't about to find out.

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Erica scanned the mid-century homes lining the street. Most started their lives as one-level ramblers, but several have been remodeled to add a second floor, including her parents' house. The upper level flowed seamlessly into the original styling cues of the home. No one would have ever known the top floor had been added on the year Erica turned three.

For most of her elementary years, the interior was a work in progress as her father added trim and updated finishes in his spare time. Warren Randall was a true DIYer in every sense of the word.

She parked behind her mother's Honda and opened the door. Karma leaped over her and sprinted to the entry. His yips cut through the quiet neighborhood. He did a complete circle before he plopped down and waited to be let in.

Her dad opened the door, dog treat in hand. "Is that my favorite grand-puppy I hear?" Karma's butt shimmied with excitement, just like every other time Grandpa held out a treat. "Here you go, buddy."

Karma gently took the Milkbone and trotted past her dad into the house. In less than five seconds, he settled into the fluffy dog bed Grandma Ruth had bought him for Christmas last year.

“Hey, Dad.” Erica gave him a hug.

“Nice to see he brought my favorite daughter as well.” He held the door for her. She shook her head but didn’t correct him. He’d called both Sarah and Erica his favorites. And while he didn’t say it in front of Mom, because he knew it bothered her, he still called Erica his favorite every time she was home.

“Where’s Mom? She mentioned having some projects for me the other day.”

“Yes, and I remember you saying you’d be here on Wednesday.” Her mother’s voice preceded her into the room.

“Sorry, didn’t you get my text? I had to switch shifts this week.” She took in her mother’s summer-weight sweater and dress slacks. “I thought we were working on the fall decorating?”

“You and your father are. I’m going to play bridge at Doris’s house.”

“Doris Daniels?” Erica hadn’t realized her mother still socialized with the Daniels. Not after...

“Yes, she called yesterday to invite me. I guess Pat Edmund is visiting her son in Illinois this week, and they are short a player.”

Erica opened her mouth, but she couldn’t think of anything to say.

“What, Erica? Spit it out. Don’t just stand there like a babblehead, dear.”

Babble? Oh. Realization dawned—her head was moving.

“It’s bobblehead,” Dad chimed in.

“Whatever.” Ruth waved her hand in the air as if to dismiss his words.

“It’s just... I didn’t realize you were friends. I ran into her the other day.”

Ruth picked nonexistent lint from her pants. “Just because her boy broke my Sarah’s heart doesn’t mean I would be so petty as to blame his mother.”

Warren snorted.

If her mom’s look could kill, Erica would be doing CPR on her father at this very moment.

“Well, I have to go. I don’t want to be late.” She gathered Erica’s cheeks in her hands and kissed her daughter’s forehead. “I left a list of chores for you and your father on the counter.” She picked up her purse and keys before turning back to her daughter. “I have a roast in the crockpot. Are you staying for dinner? There’s more than enough.”

Erica nodded.

“Good. Please add the carrots a couple hours before. You know I don’t like them overcooked.” With a final air kiss, she was gone.

A big arm wrapped around her shoulders. “Come on, honey. Let’s grab those decorations, then you can tell me how work is while we clean out the garage.”



“Sounds like a plan.” Erica would make sure to check Mom’s note to see what else was on the list.

She reached for the latch on the ceiling and pulled the attic door down. It squeaked as she tugged but only opened a couple inches. She pulled harder.

*Come on.* With a firm yank, it finally opened completely. Unfolding the ladder, she crawled into the unfinished space. Memories of treasure hunts and hide-and-seek games filled her mind. Stale, hot air assailed her, and something that made her nose itch... mold?

Reaching out, she found the light string. She pulled, and the one incandescent bulb threw light over a litter of boxes, antique furniture, and lots of dust. *Antiques Roadshow* would have a field day in here.

Trailing her fingers over the oak crib that both she and her sister had used, she wondered why they’d kept it. She gazed at the spindles and the wide base, then back at the attic opening. “How the heck did they get it up here?”

“Do you need help?” her father called from the bottom of the ladder.

“No, I’m good.” Abandoning her thoughts, she found the boxes labeled “fall” and started handing them down one at a time. As she picked up the third box, she saw a fourth. She shrugged and grabbed that one as well.

She climbed down, closed the door so it sat tight to the ceiling, then reached for the first box.

“Leave it. Your mother will get to those later. Besides, the list only said to get the decorations out of the attic, not put them up.”

She shook her head. Her dad was a sly one. Always looked at the details. Now she knew why her mother always spelled everything out for them. But he had a point, so she followed her father outside.

The garage was the one place in the house that was Dad’s domain. It held the usual items like bikes, yard tools, and the mower, but Warren Randall loved to tinker. Whether he was fixing the car or making new patio benches, the man liked to stay busy. He grabbed the remote and turned on the fifty-inch television hanging on the wall over the work bench.

“How’s retirement going?” She picked up the broom and started sweeping out the dirt.

“Okay. I’m thinking about getting a job.” He picked up tools from his workbench and started putting them away in the toolbox.

She stopped, broom pulled back in mid-stroke. “Really? I thought you wanted to travel.”

He’d retired last year from the fire department with a full pension. She thought he was happy puttering around, doing projects.

“I do, but Dr. Nick is retiring next year, and she doesn’t want to make him train a new person if it’s only for a year. So, I

might as well work part-time until she's ready to quit at the chiropractic office.”

“That makes sense. I can see if they need some help at the station. I know you don't want to go back out on calls, but maybe the chief could use help in the office.”

“Thanks, but I was thinking about applying at the local hardware store.” He slid his chisel into the drawer of his toolbox.

“I could see you doing that. But if you change your mind, let me know.”

“Thanks. I still have a few contacts there as well.” He smirked.

“I know. Heck, you trained most of my superiors.”

“Geez, now I feel really old.”

“With age comes wisdom.” She quoted back one of his favorite sayings.

They fell silent as they got to work straightening the area. The only sounds that registered as she worked were the clanking of tools and the sound of Chuck Norris's voice as reruns of *Walker, Texas Ranger* played in the background.

Erica's mind worked double-time as she did the mundane tasks. Sarah's old Hula-hoop still hung from a nail on the back wall. She pulled it down and stepped into the ring.

“You used to love that thing.”

She did. Not this one, but hers, with rainbow stripes and sparkles.

“Mine broke. This one was Sarah’s.” She hesitated before giving it a whirl. Joy she’d forgotten filled her as her hips moved in time with the hoop.

“You still got it.” Her father leaned on the now clear bench. “Whatever happened to yours?”

The pink plastic circle slipped out of rhythm and clattered on the floor.

“Sarah left it out, and Mom ran it over.” It was an accident, but she’d cried all night over her toy. Mom wouldn’t buy her a new one. She said Erica hadn’t taken care of her first one. She’d never believed Sarah had left it out. Her mother’s words echoed in her mind. *Why would she when she had her own?*

She set the hoop in the donations pile and picked up the broom again. Sticky darts of nerves pricked her back. She could feel her father’s gaze on her. She cleared her throat. “So, do you still see Mr. Daniels?”

Way to segue into a new subject. She did an internal head slap.

“I see Dave every now and then. I know their boy, Ryan, is a detective now.”

Her head bobbed for a few seconds before she caught herself and stopped. “That’s good. They’re nice people.”

“They are. Their son is as well.” He moved to stand in front of her. His finger brushed her cheek and came away damp.

Shit. Why was she crying?

“Honey. He was your best friend long before his short-lived stint as your sister’s boyfriend.”

She blinked, then wiped her tears with her sleeve. “I know.”

“What your mother said earlier. She was wrong.”

Erica’s brows crinkled. “Sarah loved him.”

“No, she loved being the center of attention.”

She gasped.

“Don’t get me wrong. I loved her as much as I love you. You’re both my favorite daughters.” He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We made mistakes. Your mother and I. But I can’t let you continue to blame that boy for your sister’s selfish act.”

Erica shook her head. “But...”

“No. It wasn’t his rejection that pushed her over the edge.”

She knew that. It was finding her and Ryan together that did it. “Dad, I don’t want to talk about it.”

He searched her face before he nodded. “Just know. She liked to win. And it had nothing to do with love.”

He hugged her, then clamped his hands together. “Well, I think the garage looks good. How about some ice cream?”

Erica forced a smile while acid churned in her stomach. *Inhale. Exhale.* She repeated the process but wasn’t sure it was working.

She needed to calm down. If not, the dairy would likely curdle in her stomach. And the last thing she wanted was to skip her favorite treat.

She followed him, but her gaze strayed back to the Hula-hoop. He was right. Sarah liked to win. Seeing Erica with Ryan drove her over the edge.

Literally.

---

Saturday morning, Erica swung by the donation drop-off for the community outreach. She opened the back of her vehicle, slipped the hoop over her shoulder, and pulled out a box of miscellaneous toys from her youth. She was halfway to the door when it opened.

“Erica, let me help you with that.” Liz Garcia took the box from her hands.

“Thanks. Are you running errands today as well?”

“No, I’m volunteering this morning.” She set the box on a table for donations.

Erica scanned her perfect-fitting T-shirt and jeans. So, the doctor did more than go to galas and write checks. Petty jealousy whispered ugly words in her ear.

She frowned. *Not cool.*

Concern filled Liz’s eyes. “Are you alright?”

“Ugh. I need coffee.” *And maybe a swift kick in the ass.* What had gotten into her this morning? Doctor Garcia was kind and generous, the type of person Erica could be friends with... If she had female friends. She needed to work on that.

Liz’s gaze darted around the room before she dropped her voice and asked, “How did the boat ride go the other day?”

Erica's cheek twitched. "It was interesting to say the least."

"Really? Tell me." She pulled Erica into a quiet corner and waited with eager eyes.

Erica told her all about the day on the boat. About Travis offering to take her out again, and about Ryan's close surveillance and the big splash at the end.

Her laugh echoed off the high ceilings. "It serves him right for not trusting you to handle it."

"Yeah, I felt a little bad for him."

"He's a big boy. I'm sure he was fine."

"He was. I checked on him after."

"And how was he?"

"Fine."

Liz smirked. Her right brow winged up.

Was it getting hot in here? Erica cleared her throat. "Anyway, after I got home and found my house had been broken into, he left right after the other officers came."

"Wait. You had a burglary?" Concern shot across her face.

"Yes. But while my living room was a mess, they didn't appear to take anything. Karma scared them off."

"Good boy. But I have to ask, Ryan came on a break-in call?"

"Well, I called him first."

She chuckled.



“He didn’t even have time to unhitch the boat.” Memories of the trailer skidding around the corner made her smile.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Liz squeezed Erica’s arm.

“Thanks. Well, I better be going.” She turned to leave.

“Hey, are you doing anything tonight?” Liz asked.

“No, just binging some shows.” She planned on looking for more discrepancies in the incident reports.

“Good. Come to my bachelorette party. It’s not going to be a big group. You already met most of the gals.”

“Oh, no. I don’t think...”

“You have to come. I’m only getting married once.” Her dark eyes begged.

Erica bit her lip. “I don’t want to impose.”

“You won’t. I’ll pick you up at five. Dress for dinner and drinks.” Liz’s smile lit the room. She picked up the box and headed to the back. “See you later.”

What had she gotten into? She didn’t go out to parties. She didn’t even really have girlfriends. Not unless you count the online gamer gals.

Gal pals. The concept was almost foreign to her. But then, maybe it was time she enlarged her circle of friends. She shot a glance back at Liz and gave a nod.

“This could be fun.” The words had barely passed her lips, and a vision of the women all huddled around her holding curling irons and mascara wands like weapons flashed in her

mind like a PTSD episode. Maybe she should stay home. A slow shudder trickled down her back. Tiny drops of fear had her second-guessing her decision to attend the girly event.

They were all fashionable. Even Detective Larson had a style about her. It was sharp edges like a knife, but it was a fashionable knife. Then she thought about what she had for clothes. This might be the perfect occasion to wear one of the dresses her mother kept buying her.

As she pulled away from the community center, she did a mental rundown. If she did a quick walk for Karma before lunch, she might be able to get in a few hours of work on the files before she got ready for the bachelorette party.

Yeah, she could make it work. She could get ready for her shift in under twenty minutes.

*Dress.* Shit. That meant shaving her legs. She caught her reflection in the rearview mirror and cringed. Could she get away with her usual mascara only and braid?

The women had exchanged numbers the night of the gala. All she had to do was call Liz and cancel. Tell her she forgot some other plans... Or she was feeling sick... Or aliens had landed on her car.

She pushed the call button on her steering wheel. The screen flashed, waiting for her to give a prompt. She should cancel. She wasn't equipped to do girly stuff. Not really. That was Sarah's thing.

Liz's name was on the tip of her tongue. Her gut tensed.  
Before she could change her mind, she spoke.

“Call Mom.”

## Chapter 16

**T**he buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the third period. This was the life, unlimited food and drink while watching the Wild work the puck. Yup, Ryan could get used to this.

He slapped Harrison, CJ's brother, on the back. "Hey man, thanks for scoring the cool suite."

"No problem. It's just one of the perks of the job. We lucked out that the Wild had a preseason home game tonight." For a CFO of one of the largest transport and freight companies in the nation, Harrison was down-to-earth and an all-around good guy.

"Everybody, listen up." Jordan whistled. "The shuttle is outside. Grab your stuff."

The group boarded the party bus, complete with music, colored lights, and stripper poles.

Jordan cracked open the cooler and tossed out beers. A bottle of Fireball was making its way around the bus. Ryan passed.

Someone had to stay relatively sober in case these drunks need a ride home at the end of the night. No doubt a few of their vehicles would be staying at the station, where they parked, overnight.

An old Aerosmith song came on, and Jim grabbed the pole. Hoots of laughter rose as he cut loose.

Ryan nudged Brannon. “Who knew Jim could do a plank on the pole.”

Ian shrugged. “It’s not that hard.”

“Well, get up there, big boy.” Ryan gestured to the other pole.

Ian stood, ducking his head to fit his large frame in the bus. He flexed his biceps, then grabbed the pole. In one smooth move, he was horizontal four feet off the floor.

“Damn, man. You make it look easy.”

“It’s all upper body and core.” His feet hit the floor, then he motioned for Ryan to try it.

“I got twenty that says Daniels won’t do it,” Sarge heckled from the back of the bus.

Well, hell. He couldn’t let Brannon show him up. Not with money down. Game on.

Ryan slammed the rest of his beer, rubbed his hands together, then grabbed the pole. The music shifted to Lizzo. His hips swayed.

“Woot! Woot! Work it, Daniels.” A chorus of laughs and chides followed. He tuned them out and spun around the pole. He bent back and did a low dip before hoisting his body into a plank. The cheers and applause thundered around the bus. He dropped his legs and took a bow.

“Who’s next?” He gestured to the pole.

Jim’s brother in-law swayed as he stepped up. He flexed his muscles, then grabbed the pole. A squat. A jump. And he was flat on his back on the floor. His arm shot in the air, thumb up. “I’m good.”

Laughter boomed off the walls as the bus pulled to the side and parked.

“Stop number two,” CJ called.

They all stumbled from the bus. A casual onlooker would have no clue most of these guys were officers of the law. Hell, if a couple of them didn’t slow down, they’d end up drying out in a cell tonight.

Neon from the sign washed down over the dark brick wall. One small window was blacked out. The pulse of the bass seeped out through the closed door.

“I hope they have some country.” Sarge did an exaggerated amble on his way to the metal door.

Inside, upbeat music pounded. Ryan worked his jaw to pop his ears. He didn’t know which was louder, the party bus or the bar.

CJ leaned in. “I’m feeling old,” he shouted in Ryan’s ear.

So was he. Most of the clientele were in their mid-twenties, and the sweet smell of pot drifted from somewhere in the bar. He snorted. These people smoked it for recreation. A few more years and he himself would be looking into the gummies to deaden the knee pain from a decade as a beat cop.

The guys made their way through the crowd, away from the booming speakers to the room in the back. The volume dropped a few decibels as they entered the game room. Perfect. They took up residence at a couple tables in the back. Harrison and CJ went to grab a few pitchers of beer, while Ian and Sarge put quarters down for their spot in line for the pool table.

“Hey, hey!” Larson’s voice reached him a moment before she slapped him on the shoulder. “I didn’t know you guys were coming here tonight.”

She waved to someone a few tables away. Ryan guessed it was Liz and the other ladies. Amy took one step in their direction before Trey pulled her in for a sloppy kiss. Heat rolled over those two.

Ryan’s brow winged up. Someone would be burning up the sheets later. But looking at the way Larson was teetering on her heels, they’d be feeling it in the morning.

Harrison set down the beer and a round of shots. Ryan picked up a glass and reclined into a chair in the corner.

Liz slipped into Jim’s lap. The two beamed with love. It was really sickening how perfect these two were together.

Jealousy slithered through Ryan's veins, and he had no idea why. He truly felt joy for his friends, but tonight something inside his chest clenched.

Loosening the muscles in his face, he smiled and raised his beer. "A toast to the happy couple."

"Here, here." Glasses clinked and voices rose.

Sarge dropped down next to him. "Glad to see you're doing alright. It was a bad accident."

Ryan stared at the cue ball as it rolled into the corner pocket on the pool table next to them. "Yeah, but it wasn't an accident."

"What do you mean?"

He looked around, shot Sergeant Johnson a look, then made a gun with his finger and thumb and pantomimed a shot.

Sarge cocked his head. "Are you sure?"

Ryan nodded. "I must be getting close to something. Just not sure how they knew where I would be."

"Huh." He picked up his drink. "Were you followed?"

"Don't know."

"Could be random?" Sarge asked as he slammed back his shot.

"Maybe." Ryan couldn't say, but whether it was or not, it didn't *feel* like a random shooting.

Tanner slipped in. A round of "hellos" shouted around the table. "Sorry I'm late."



“Sit. You got a lot of drinking to catch up on.” CJ handed him a shot.

The hair on Ryan’s arm twitched. *Erica*. He didn’t even turn his head—he knew.

With each passing second that she was in his proximity, his anticipation climbed. His gaze bounced from the glass to the guys, then back.

He shouldn’t. Ryan played with the glass and closed his eyes. Her presence electrified his senses.

*Fuck it. The guys can take an Uber.*

In one smooth move, he swallowed the amber liquid, biting back the sting as he let the burn soothe his nerves. He readied himself one more second, then glanced over his shoulder.

Bam! The magnetic pull hit him with full force.

She appeared in the hallway, under the restroom sign, adjusting her skirt. The light backlit the curve of her hips, just the hint of her silhouette under the fabric making his mouth go dry.

Her eyes lifted. Their gazes locked. Direct hit.

Her steps faltered.

Yeah, he felt it too. The surprise. The want. The pull of attraction.

She recovered and continued to the table. Her heels touched the wooden floor in time to the beat. In his head, he could hear them click as she walked.

“Hey, Erica. Grab a shot,” Larson said.

The faint flush on Erica’s cheeks told him it wouldn’t be her first of the night. Ryan let his eyes roam from her unpainted toenails up long curvy calves to the flirty hem of her yellow dress that made him want to explore below.

She waved off the drink and slid to the chair next to Ryan.

Ryan brushed his thigh against hers. “Having a fun night?”

Erica didn’t look at him, just made an agreeable sound in the back of her throat. “It’s been fun. These ladies really can party.”

He didn’t doubt it.

“Oh yeah, we started at Gardiner’s for dinner.” Her sights fixed on something across the bar, Erica nodded.

“Is that open again?”

“Uh huh. They have the most amazing lasagna.” She groaned, and Ryan felt it all the way to his groin.

“Then after dinner and drinks, we went to a bar on Twelfth Street.” Her glossy eyes slowly blinked.

“Fire Hearth?”

“That’s it. There we had shots and a round of margaritas.”

A grin crept to his lips. He could picture her throwing back a tequila shot, then sucking on the lime. “Then did you come here?”

“Oh no. We went to a karaoke bar for a drink, and Kate and Mira dragged me up on the stage to sing backup for Lorna.”

“I didn’t know Lorna sang.”

“After all that alcohol she did.”

“And you?”

“Huh?” Her head whirled as she turned to look at him.

Ryan bit back a chuckle.

“Do you sing?” He couldn’t remember her ever singing.

“No.” She wobbled in her chair. “Maybe a little.”

A snort slipped out as Ryan placed his hands on her shoulders to steady her.

“What?”

“Singing.”

“Oh, that. The alcohol made me do it.”

Kate dropped in the chair next to Erica and picked up a beer. “This gal can sing with the best of them. Took a lot of liquid courage, but we got her up there.”

Ryan was surprised at how sober the other woman appeared. He leaned in and did a hand gesture of drinking, then pointed to her.

Kate lifted her beer. “I slowed way down after the first shot.”

Erica leaned a head on his shoulder and thumbed at Kate. “She’s lying.”

Kate’s shoulder rose. “What can I say? I can hold my liquor.” She turned to Brannon, who had just come back to the table. “Come on, big guy. Let’s dance.”

He shrugged and held out a hand for Kate.

Erica's head was still on his shoulder. Her soft purr caressed his ear.

Knowing Erica, she was probably tired of the crowds an hour ago. "Are you done peopling?"

"Ummm," she murmured.

"Would you like me to take you home?" He wanted to add, to bed, but even with the rapidly rising erection, he wouldn't take advantage of a drunk woman. Especially Erica.

Her head popped up. "I know, let's play COD."

His brows rose. "Now?"

"Yes, come back to my house. I want to see your face when I kill you this time."

His brows furrowed. "Did you really just say you wanted to kill me?"

She swatted his thigh. "You know what I mean. In the game."

Her words were slightly slurred, but her eyes, dilated as hell, were solely focused on him.

"You think you can kick my butt in your condition?"

"Watch me."

---

“I’ve never ridden in the back of a police car before. It’s so... hard.” Erica leaned against the door.

“Let’s hope this is your only time.” Ryan slumped beside her. He shouldn’t have had that last shot.

“You two okay back there?” Officer Kyle Jenkins caught his gaze through the rearview mirror.

“Just fine. Thanks for the lift.” Ryan gave him a head tip. By the spark of humor in the man’s eyes, the whole station would be buzzing about his ride in the back of the patrol car. He should have called an Uber.

Erica ran her fingers over the hard molded seats.

He leaned in and whispered, “They’re easier to clean.”

She nodded, but her face didn’t spark acknowledgement.

Ryan mimicked vomiting.

“Oh.” Blue eyes ringed to the size of quarters as her hand flew to her mouth.

“Yeah, among other things.”

She appeared to be thinking about that. Erica was quick, but the alcohol must be slowing her brain. A minute later, her brows shot up, and her lips pulled back in disgust.

Yeah, not the most romantic, but... In a low voice, he asked. "Ever want to do it in the back of a squad car?"

Large, bright eyes blinked at him. He saw her struggle to focus. "Can't say I have." She knocked on the hard resin seat. "It would be as uncomfortable as hell, but I'll try anything once." Her gaze cut to Jenkins, then back to him. "I'm not really into the whole audience thing, though."

He chuckled. That was the Erica he knew. She could go with the flow and joke with the best of them.

"We're here," Jenkins said as he pulled to the curb. He opened the door for them, offering a hand to Erica.

"Thanks, man." Ryan shook the officer's hand as the radio squawked.

"Gotta go." And he was off.

Ryan walked her to the door, not sure if she still wanted him to come in.

He rocked back on his heels as he waited for her to unlock the door. Keys jangled. Crickets chirped. The slow hum of traffic a block over serenaded them. It was a peaceful neighborhood.

He blinked.

Through the faint haze of beer and tequila, his cop senses clicked in. Too quiet. No barking.

He pushed her behind him and unholstered his gun.

"What are you doing?"

“Something’s wrong. Karma didn’t bark.”

She swatted his arm. “He’s at my parents’ tonight.”

“Why?” He lowered his gun.

“I didn’t know how long I’d be out tonight. Plus, they love him. He’s their grandpuppy.”

That made sense. He holstered his gun, then opened her door for her.

She scooted by him and into the house. Rooted on the step, he waited.

Framed by the doorway, a questioning look crossed her face. “You coming?”

He stepped up. Braced his arm on the doorframe. His body swayed, inching closer. “Do you really want me to come in?”

Her gaze traveled up his chest and locked with his. Her eyes looked clearer as she studied him.

“If you want to go home, I can beat your ass from there.”

“You want to spank me?” He feigned surprise. God, he loved to see her cheeks turn pink as he teased her.

She rolled her eyes and slapped his chest.

He trapped her hand, bringing her attention back to his face.

Damn, she was beautiful. Her eyes were black pools ringed by a tiny sphere of blue. Lust? Or booze?

He inched back and slipped a cocky smile on his face. “Come on. I want to see your face when I take you down.”

Her blush deepened.

Fuck. That wasn't what he meant. Well, he'd be a liar if he didn't admit it was what he wanted, but not with a liter of alcohol floating around in her bloodstream. His too.

“Come on, KarFire89.” He pulled her inside the house and closed the door.



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Ryan set a glass of water and two pain relievers beside her as she picked her avatar's weapons. The fuzz in her brain was slowly receding. Boy, she'd drunk way more than she'd ever had before.

That was it. She couldn't think of any other explanation for why Ryan Daniels was in her house playing video games at God-knows-what-time-of-night.

Except, she wanted him here. That realization made her thighs quake. She should stay away from him. He wasn't hers. Sarah made sure of that.

Her eyes bugged. Where did that thought come from?

She loved her baby sister. Everyone did. Ryan did. They had broken up but would get back together. Erica knew that. Sarah wanted him, and she always got what she wanted.

*That's why you took your chance.*

Erica shooed the drunk girl whispering in her head, but she was right. She had taken her chance, and one glorious night turned into a lifetime of regret.

The lie soured on her tongue.

*You don't regret him.*

She took in his broad shoulders and the dexterity in his fingers as he rapidly worked the controller to set up his player.

She groaned. Oh, she remembered those hands vividly.

“Are you okay?” Dark, inquisitive eyes watched her.

*Get out of your head, Randall.* She gripped the controller as she pushed the thoughts from her mind. Gaming was the one thing she did to clear the demons that chased her. Most nights, she played until she zoned out and sleep pulled her eyelids closed.

Picking up the pills, she threw them in her mouth, gulped a swig of water, then slammed the glass on the coffee table. “Yup, let’s play.”

Ryan selected his avatar and readied for battle. Erica grinned. She would wipe up the floor with him. As she was ready to hit play, he dropped out and re-entered the game.

“What are you doing?”

His brows arched in an innocent expression. It was bullshit. She threw him a squinty-eyed look. No. He didn’t just... Shit. He did. The sneaky asshole. “That’s my team. You can’t be on it.”

“Sure I can. Look.” He pointed to the screen. “It says so right there.”

“But that makes us teammates.” Of all the luck. What were the odds he’d be added to her team?

“Exactly.”

The bastard. By the smirk on his face, he knew the odds and had just played them.

“Fine.” She focused on the game. They spawned, and her character shot him.

“Hey, what was that for?”

“I told you I was going to watch you die. Just because we’re on the same team doesn’t mean I can’t kill you.”

He growled. “So that’s how this is going to go?”

She shrugged.

The next thirty minutes were spent killing one another off. He got her back with a sneak attack. After that, it was all-out war. The other players had abandoned them somewhere around the fifteen-minute mark.

Erica laughed so much her belly hurt.

Ryan’s character was running at her full speed with a machete when a sniper took him out.

“What the fuck! Who was that?” He threw his hands in the air.

“He’s on the roof. Three o’clock.” She sent rapid fire at the intruder.

The next hour, they worked in sync. The enemies were eliminated, and their score and levels increased. By the time they cleared the battlefield on the next level, Erica’s cheeks were sore from smiling.

“We make a good team.” Had she said that out loud?

“We always did.” The low murmur raked over her skin like a warm breeze.

Her breath caught. He was right. They had.

He watched her now—his eyes dark, his breathing deep.

She saw lust in his eyes. The same lust that churned inside her. He wanted her, and she wanted him. Always had.

Her heart beat like a machine-gun blast. Bursts of adrenaline still raced through her veins from the game.

Or was it from him?

He reached out and brushed aside a piece of hair that had fallen from her ponytail. She’d pulled it up somewhere around the one-hour mark.

Her mind scrambled.

Their gazes locked. Minutes. Hours. She couldn’t say. All she knew was he was here. She could feel his soft touch. His caress down the side of her neck. She could smell his aftershave and the faint linger of beer. Would his kiss taste of hops?

She licked her lips. Suddenly, her mouth was dry and the only thing that would quench it was him.

“Erica.” The gravelly sound tightened her nipples. “Tell me you want this.”

“This?” She did. God knows she did. But could she live with herself if she let herself be with him again?

“Us.”

The tick of the clock echoed in the room as she fought to remain unaffected by him. She internally snorted. Yeah, right. He'd barely touched her, and her panties were damp.

"Ryan, I..."

She what? Wanted to throw her legs over his lap right now and ride him like a stallion? Yes, but that wouldn't end well. She needed to go to sleep. Clear her mind. Remember all the reasons she couldn't be with him.

Sarah. Yes, but with him staring at her like he could eat her with a spoon, she couldn't even picture her sister's face.

"Sarah." She forced the name from her lips.

"Is gone. We weren't together, and you know it." He stroked the pulse point of her neck. He could probably feel it flutter from his touch. "Don't let her come between us again."

He drew tiny circles along the ridge of her shoulder, little loops with his callous fingertip. The soothing sensation caused her eyelids to droop.

"Just answer me one question."

She looked at him, knowing the question before it left his lips.

"Do you want me?"

A heavy breath released. She couldn't deny the way her body reacted to him.

"Yes," slipped out on a whisper. Soft. Tentative.

His eyes sparkled, but he didn't move. No sweeping her into his arms or throwing her over his shoulders or caveman-style dragging her to the bedroom.

“Erica, I want you. Always have, but this won't happen if you aren't one hundred percent in. I'll step back, and we can just be friends. Work together.”

She dipped her head. Friends. Were they friends again? It sure felt like the old Ryan and Erica tonight, except this version had a powerful attraction running between them. Stronger than before.

She looked him straight in the eye. Time to be honest.

“We're past the point of just being friends. Don't you think?” She reached up and slipped her hands into his hair, nestling her fingers into his soft strands. “I can't keep ignoring this pull you have on my body.”

She was going to hell. There was no doubt about it.

“Ryan, take me to bed.”

## Chapter 17

Ryan's cock saluted at Erica's words. Hallelujah sat on the tip of his tongue. He bit it back. Instead, he pulled her close and kissed that trembling mouth. Her fingers knotted in his hair, anchoring his mouth to hers.

Yes. The taste of her drove him to deepen the kiss. Thoughts of plunder and pillage filled his mind, but Erica was no helpless wench. No. She was a willing participant who gave as good as she got.

Her teeth nipped at his lip. A growl of lust slipped from his throat. *More*. He wanted more, and she obliged, opening for him, meeting him tongue for tongue.

He skated a hand the length of her torso, memorizing the dips and curves of her figure. Laying a plan for which area of her body he wanted to explore and lick first. Using his thumb, he caressed the edge of her ribs.

Breaking the kiss, he slid his lips down the column of her throat, nipped her jaw, then slipped his tongue into the hollow

of her collarbone.

She was a feast, and he was famished.

She arched her back, bringing him closer to all her glorious skin.

His hands found purchase on the rounded plane of her hips. Lifting, she wrapped her legs around his waist, clinging to him as if he was a lifeline in a storm. What she didn't realize was she was his. And if he couldn't touch every inch of her skin soon, he might explode.

Gripping his head, she pulled him up for a kiss. Devouring his mouth like it was her last breath.

Damn, they were both on the edge.

Bed. Wall. Fuck, floor. At this point, he didn't care. But his feet started moving down the hall.

Inside her bedroom, she dropped her legs and then reached for the hem of her dress.

His gaze locked on all that skin. Long. Smooth. The dress rose, revealing a hint of thigh. Slowly, painfully, she worked the fabric up one inch at a time. He salivated like a dog waiting for a big juicy steak.

She leisurely walked her fingers leisurely up, taking the yellow fabric with it. One more inch. The edge of lace peeked out.

Lace. Baby blue and cut high on her thigh. *Thank you, sweet baby Jesus.*



His dick was so hard. If this striptease went on much longer, he'd have zipper marks on it. "I'm really enjoying the show, but can I help you with that?"

A devilish smile crossed her lips. "Are you getting a little antsy?"

"More than a little." Hell, he'd waited thirteen years for another taste of her. His hands fisted and relaxed.

*This is Erica, not some one-night hookup.*

The voice in his head was right. He could wait a little longer. Hell, he'd keep it in his pants forever if it meant getting his best friend back.

But... He would be lying to himself if he didn't admit he wanted her between the sheets. He wanted it all. But was he rushing her?

The thought dimmed the excitement for "Little Ryan." Not enough to stop any forward motion, but it made him think.

He paused her with a touch to her hand. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. No hesitation.

Searching her eyes, he looked for signs of inebriation. They hadn't had a drink in several hours. She appeared to be in control.

"I want tonight... with you."

It was something. If he stopped now, would it mess up their rekindled friendship? Could he stop if he wanted to?

Yes. But only if she needed him to.

In one swift move, she tugged the dress over her head, and it hit the floor.

Ryan's train of thought went off the tracks. All he could think of was boobs and hips and all that smooth skin. His fingertips tingled. They itched to wander. To explore.

She pivoted, giving him a spectacular view of her perfect ass.

"Coming?" She shot him a half grin over her shoulder.

He might as well have been cuffed to her, because he couldn't have done anything else but follow.

She sat on the queen-sized bed. His attention was on Erica, but from the corner of his eyes, his cop mind cataloged the clean lines and neutral colors. Calming. Organized. Erica. This was her space. Not the shrine to Sarah he'd slept in the other night.

He unclipped his holster and set his gun and wallet on the nightstand. Reaching one hand behind his neck, he fisted his shirt and pulled it off in one swift movement.

Her sharp intake of breath echoed in the room.

He grinned. "You like?"

Her head bobbed up and down. "Especially the tats."

She slipped a hand around her back and unclasped her bra. Lacy cups slipped and colorful ink graced her beautiful breast.

A scrolling font. S.R. *Sarah Randall*? He opened his mouth to comment on it as she shimmied out of her panties. His mind

blanked.

Erica crooked a finger, and he unbuckled his belt and dropped his pants, taking his boxers with them.

The moment her hand touched his bare chest, it was like he had a laser focus. All Erica. He couldn't get enough of her skin, her kisses, the slide of her thighs against his.

He covered her with his body and could feel her melt into him. They touched from lips to toes and everything in between.

She stole his breath with a fiery kiss before moving her lips along his jaw.

He moaned. Fingernails dug into his back. He let an inch of air between their bodies. Not enough to cool but enough to work his way to her lovely nipples. He worshipped one. Nibbling. Sucking.

She arched off the bed, moaning. "More. Ryan, more."

He continued to caress her with one hand, while he kissed a trail over the soft skin of her abdomen. The closer he got to her promised land, the louder her moans of pleasure grew.

Fuck. He loved the mewling in the back of her throat. Just for him.

His fingers spread her folds and circled her clit.

Her body bucked. She was close, and he had barely touched her.

He worked a finger inside, and her butt left the bed.

“Oh God. Yes, deeper.”

A tiny smile tugged at his lips. She wanted deeper, he'd give her deeper. He worked a second finger in. At her groan, he thrust in a third.

She was close. He could feel it. With each move of his hand, her body shook, and the sounds she uttered grew louder.

“Ryan—I—you. Now.” Her words tumbled out.

“Yes.” He pulled a finger out and watched those beautiful eyes close.

“No.” She grabbed his hair with both fists and yanked him to the spot she needed.

“Insistent.” Laughter touched his words. It would be cruel to make her wait any longer. He might be a smartass, but he'd never be cruel. He dropped his head and circled her clit with his tongue. At her squeal of approval, he sucked. Under him, her body tightened, then released. It was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

Her head fell back, and her eyes drifted closed.

His gaze roamed her relaxed form. She was exquisite. No tension in her body. The steady rise and fall of her chest as she...

“Shit.” This gorgeous woman was out cold. He sighed. She needed sleep. He should slip into her bathroom and take care of himself.

“I have condoms in the nightstand.”

He had one leg out of the bed when she spoke. Looking back, hooded eyes watched him. She was awake.

So was someone else. His erection jumped at the sound of her voice. *Down boy*. “You need sleep.”

“Bullshit. I was just catching my breath. Now get over here before I change my mind.”

His brows furrowed. Was she sure about this? “We don’t—”

She pulled him in. Snaked her legs around his hips and slid her sex along his shaft.

“Fuck.” He grabbed the condom from his wallet and slipped it on. Within seconds, he was balls deep and couldn’t slow his pace if the room was on fire.

Her eyes glazed, and she tightened around him. *Oh God, yes*. She was close.

He increased his speed, pumping like his life depended on it. This very minute, it did.

She crested the peak.

*Thank, God*. He changed his angle and with a few more strokes, followed her over.

Dropping back to the bed, he cradled her to his chest. Thirteen years. It was the best sex he’d had in thirteen years.

Erica’s breathing leveled out, and Ryan trailed a gentle hand down her back as his mind worked. It wasn’t just the sex, it was Erica. Her being in his arms. In his life.

Last time he’d felt this way, and it turned to shit hours later.

This time, they were sticking. He just needed to convince her of that.

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Erica's butt pressed to a warm body. A very hard, warm body. She squeezed her eyes closed.

Well, shit. Add tequila and her inner slut came out to play. Now what? Just because she and Ryan had mind-blowing sex, it didn't mean they were suddenly a smitten couple.

She should thank him for the fabulous orgasms and send him on his way.

His leg slid over her thigh, and a very awake part of him poked at her ass.

She'd already sold her soul to the devil by giving in to her horny self. She didn't dare do it again. Did she?

She wiggled her ass, and a hand snaked around her, brushing ever so softly over her ribs before cupping her breast. A groan slipped from her lips.

She was so screwed.

Warm breath caressed her neck a moment before his mouth touched her skin. She cocked her head to the side, giving him more room. Yes, it was wrong, but since she was going to hell anyway...

A loud rendition of *Bad Boys* filled the room, startling her.

“What was that?” She glanced over her shoulder into the most sexy, sleepy eyes she’d ever seen.

“Work. I have a ringtone set so I know its dispatch.” Ryan stretched across her and snatched the phone. “Daniels.”

She took the opportunity to slip out of bed. Hustling to the bathroom, she closed and locked the door—something she never did in her house, being it was only her and Karma. Her pup had personal space issues and would barge in to make sure she wasn’t in distress.

She sat to do her business and dropped her head into her hands. “What the hell have I done?”

Sarah’s tear-streaked face swam in her vision. The hurt in her eyes. Her flushed cheeks. She’d been yelling and crying right before she fled.

It was the last memory of her.

Sure, now she could see her face, not last night when she was high on lust. She knotted her fingers in her hair.

This had been the best night of her life, but she’d take it all back if she could have one more chance to see her sister’s smile. Hear her laugh. Smell her perfume.

She’d failed as a sister, damn it. Her job was to protect her baby sister. One job, and she blew it. Sarah had been the weak one. Her mother always told her to watch out for her.

Erica rocked back and forth. How could she have strayed so far? She couldn’t blame it on the alcohol. Not all of it. She’d lusted for Ryan since the first hormones fluttered around in her



little-girl system, but that didn't mean she should have let him in.

Oh, he was in, all right. Not just in her body but in her head as well. Thoughts of him pushed Sarah right out.

She rubbed her palm over the ache in the middle of her chest. She feared she'd let him into her heart as well.

No. She couldn't, not in that way. This was a one-off. A "blowing off steam" kind of thing. Now they could go back to being friends. She'd like that. Friends. She'd missed him. And if that didn't work, then they'd go back to enemies. Because no way could they be lovers again.

A knock startled her. She jumped. "Yeah?"

"I have to go."

Thank goodness. "Okay."

Would it be weird if she hung out in here until he left? He'd think she had the streaming squirts. She could live with that.

His voice floated through the wooden door. "There's an SUV matching the one in the video cruising the neighborhood for the last fifteen minutes. Mrs. White called it in."

Mrs. White? "Hang on. I'll be right out." She balled up a handful of tissues and wiped her eyes before finishing up her business. Avoiding Ryan would take a backseat to the case. She didn't want to be sidelined.

She pulled up her big-girl panties. Literally. In less than two minutes, she'd brushed her teeth, pulled her hair up, and

finished her morning stuff. A new speed record for her.

Inhaling, she braced herself and opened the bathroom door. Ryan sat on the bed fully dressed. He strolled to her, framed her face, and gave her a good-morning kiss that curled her toes.

*Don't get distracted.* She broke the kiss, jogged to her closet, and pulled out clothes. "I'm going with you."

"I got this. Go back to bed. It's early."

"I'm going." She evaded his touch and snatched her keys and wallet as she slipped on her shoes. "I need one more thing."

She ran to the kitchen and grabbed a bag of jerky.

"Breakfast?" Ryan held out a hand.

She clutched the bag to her chest. "Not for us. It's for Annabeth."

Ryan's bottom lip popped out. Damn, he was even cute when he pouted.

"Fine. One piece." She opened the bag, and the aroma of spiced meat made her stomach growl. She snagged two pieces, handed one to him, then closed the bag. Annabeth would have to share.

White teeth ripped off a chunk of the jerky just before he asked, "Okay, do you mind if we take your car? Or we can swing by the station and I can grab my loaner car."

“It would be faster if we go straight to the scene. I’ll drop you after.”

“Sounds like a plan, except one thing.”

“What?”

“I’ll drive.” He held out his hand for the keys.

Erica narrowed her eyes at him. Could she trust him with her car? She clenched the keys.

“You break it, you buy it.” With some effort, she dropped the keys into his hand.

Five minutes later, they were parked in front of the burnt-out building. The sun was cresting the horizon behind the charred façade. Instead of walking up to Mrs. White’s house, they waited. Watching.

“There.” Ryan snapped a photo of the dark blue Tahoe taking the corner in slow-mo.

“Do you think it’s our guy?” Erica leaned forward. Excitement rushed through her veins. All she glimpsed was a ball cap and dark glasses.

“Only one way to find out.” He put the car in gear and followed.

“He’s definitely looking for something. Or someone. He looped the block twice.” Ryan backed off and turned left. Then parked.

“Why aren’t we following him?”

“Because if he stays to the pattern, he’ll be coming by any second.” Ryan pointed to the vehicle rounding the corner a block up. “There. Can you make out the driver?” He snapped a few more photos.

“No. I assume it’s a man by Mrs. White’s description.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t stop them just because they are driving in circles and an eighty-year-old claims they were seen talking to a known drug dealer. Hell, I’m not even in a department car. I don’t have any lights or sirens.”

“We could flash our lights at them.”

“In this neighborhood, we might get shot at. Once this week was enough for me.” He pulled into the lane and slipped up behind the unsub.

When the vehicle finally turned out of the neighborhood, Ryan dropped back. The vehicle made a sharp right turn at the next corner. By the time Ryan rounded the block, they were gone. “Damn it. They must have realized they had a tail.”

“That or they wanted out of this area.” She was with a police detective, and she still had a creepy feeling as they sat in front of a building with gang markings on the walls.

He shrugged, then circled back to the scene. They parked in front of Mrs. White’s house. “Let’s go see what she saw.”

Ryan’s hand brushed hers as they crossed the yard. A zing of attraction zipped up her arm.

*Down girl.* She shoved her hands in her sweatshirt pockets. No touching. Make it quick, then she could head to the fire

station and do some research into incident reports.

The door flung open as they walked up. “Did you see them?”

Her robe was misbuttoned and the scarf wrapping her head was crooked. “I had just set my coffee to brew when I saw them roll by all sneaky-like.”

Ryan shot Erica a side-eyed glance.

She bit back her chuckle. The older woman watched too many crime dramas.

Ryan nodded to the woman. “We did indeed. Would you mind if we asked you a few questions about the vehicle and driver?”

“Well, sure. Come on in. I don’t want Annabeth getting out again.” She rushed them inside the entry and closed the door.

A blast from the past slapped her in the face. The brown and orange floral sofa with dark wood accents could have been a twin to the one her grandmother had back in the nineties, and that couch was old then. Erica surveyed the room. It was dated and lived in, but she’d give Mrs. White credit, there wasn’t a speck of dust or dirt that she could see. Not even cat hair. The woman knew how to keep a house clean.

*Maybe she could teach me a thing or two.* Seconds after she’d sweep, new hairballs rolled down the hall. She was surprised Karma wasn’t bald by now.

“I brought something for Annabeth.” Erica held up the jerky.

“Oh, aren’t you sweet.” Mrs. White nudged Ryan’s arm.  
“She’s a keeper.”

He pinned her with a knowing gaze. “I agree.”

Well, shit. If he kept looking at her like that, her knees would buckle. She cleared her throat. Time to move this along. “Mrs. White, could you give us a description of the vehicle you saw cruising the neighborhood this morning?”

“And the times if you could, please,” Ryan added as he patted his pockets, no doubt looking for his notepad.

“Let’s see. It was 4:00 a.m. when I got the call from Mother Nature...”

Ten minutes later, she had brought them up to the current time. Erica had no idea that an elderly person needed to use the bathroom that many times in three hours.

Five more minutes for her to add she had missed which way the vehicle had turned because her toast had popped up. Erica now knew exactly how both Mrs. White and Annabeth liked their breakfast. Before she could start on her morning television routine, they thanked her and walked back to the car.

“What do you think?” Erica asked.

“I think she’s blind as a bat. She thought the SUV was black, not blue, and she thought the driver had long hair this time. Last time, she thought it was a short-haired guy.”

“It could be two different vehicles?”

Ryan paused as he opened the door for her. “Could be, but the only vehicle matching the description we saw was the blue one.”

He rounded the car and got in. “I need to go home and shower before I do some digging.”

With a tight U-turn, he headed toward the station.

“I’m going to head into the fire barn and do some more digging into incident reports.”

“Sounds good.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes, then he pulled up next to his rental car. Thoughts of reports, SUVs, and the smell of Ryan circled in her brain. She was a muddled mess.

He slipped a hand around her neck and kissed her. “I’ll pick you up at quarter to six.”

“What?” By the time what he said had sunk in, he was out of the vehicle. She jumped out. “Ryan?”

“Dinner. Or do you want to tell my mother you aren’t coming to Sunday dinner?”

Doris Daniels was a saint of a woman, but it was a sin to refuse her dinner invite if you didn’t have a solid excuse, like... you died.

Erica exhaled. “Fine. Should I bring something?”

“No, you know she’ll have it all ready.” With a wave over his shoulder, he unlocked the car and slid inside.

She watched him drive away before putting her car in gear and making the short drive to the fire station.

Dinner? No, space. That's what she needed, not to be sitting across from him watching this throat muscles working up and down, up and down. She swallowed. If she didn't distance herself from him, she'd fall right back in love with him.

It took years after Sarah's death to get over him.

If she ever truly did.



## Chapter 18

“**T**here has to be a link. Some connection.” An hour into the files, Erica had found zilch. She’d looked at the incident reports from the last month. No changes so far. Maybe the person who changed them stopped.

Why? Wyatt didn’t die because someone made an error. No, someone targeted him.

“Hey, Randall. What brings you in today? Did you pick up a shift?” Walker Evans strolled into the break room.

“Just looking up some reports.” As arson investigator, Evans would have access to the files. Heck, he wrote most of them.

He plopped down in the recliner and pulled out his phone.

She eyed him from the table. If he was involved, he sure didn’t seem bothered that she was looking into incident reports. A niggling suspicion pecked at her. The need to have someone in her corner at the department was strong.

Could she trust him? Her gut said yes.

“Hey, Walker, got a minute?”

He moseyed to the table and took a seat in the chair next to her. “Sure. What can I do for you?”

“Do you remember the structure fire last May? The old liquor store building?” She spun the laptop around to face him when he nodded.

His brows pinched as he read the report. “This isn’t right.”

“You’re sure?” She watched his face and posture for signs of lying. No shifting eyes. No fidgeting. Just a straightforward gaze and confusion marking his expression.

“It wasn’t started by an electrical wiring malfunction. The wires were cut. Where did you get this report? It’s not the one I filed.”

“I know. But it’s the one in the system.”

“I need to go talk to the Chief.” He pushed back from the table.

She grabbed his arm. “Don’t. It’s already being looked into.”

His face hardened. “What’s going on?”

She pulled him down, glanced over her shoulder, then filled him in. On the reports, the suspicions, Wyatt’s death, and finally, that the BCA was involved.

“No shit?”

“Keep it to yourself for now.”

His head bobbed just as the alarm sounded. Walker checked his phone as he rose.

Erica started to rise.

“Sit. If we need you, you’ll be called in.”

Right. The fire hall cleared out. The silence was eerie. She’d never been in the station without other firefighters. She shook off the chills racing up her arms and got back to work.

There had to be something she was missing. She opened an email from Ryan with his results of the scans. He couldn’t pinpoint a user, but maybe she could narrow the list.

She tapped the keys, pulled up an Excel sheet, and started tracking who was on shift the nights of the fires and, also, the days the reports were changed. She hadn’t thought of cross-checking before. Sure, she’d looked at who worked the fires but not the dates the files were updated.

The crew’s names were entered, and she was halfway through the dates when the lights cut out.

“What the...?” The meager glow from her monitor was enough for her to find her way to the light switches. She flicked the switch. Up and down. Nothing.

Weird, they must have blown a fuse.

Pulling out her phone, she used her flashlight app to make her way down to the electrical panel. The floor creaked behind her. She whirled around.

“Hello?” Silence greeted her.

*This is silly. Stop freaking yourself out.*

Twenty feet down the hall, the floor creaked again. This time, she stopped. She wasn't crazy. She heard it loud and clear. "Very funny, guys. Who's there?"

The hairs on her arm rose. She willed her eyes to adjust to the dark. Thoughts of her air mask issue had her hastening her step.

*Find the fuse and get back to work.* She rounded the corner into the utility room and found the box. She opened the panel, then someone shoved her—hard.

Her head ricocheted off the wall. Her phone clattered on the floor. Dazed, she spun to fight back. Her arms came up to protect her face, but no one was there.

Her breath sawed in and out. Grabbing her phone, she scanned the area with the light. Empty.

She flipped the breaker and the lights flashed, temporarily blinding her. She blinked. Once, twice, letting her eyes adjust, then ran back to the break room.

Gripping the door frame, she swung into the room. Her computer sat on the table exactly where she left it. Relief washed over her.

She sat back down. She must have hallucinated. Maybe she had tripped. She could swear she felt hands on her back.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and rebooted her computer.

The screen was blank. "What the fuck?"

When she left, the file was open, and now... No file. Hell, no folder. Her folder with all the incident reports and her notes was gone.

She slammed the laptop shut and spun around in her chair.

“No, no, no.” She ran through the station. Darting in and out of all the rooms. *Where are you, you bastard?* She knew someone had been there.

Standing in the middle of the empty bay, her chest heaved. Her heart slammed against her ribs.

She ran outside. Her pulse thundered in her ears. She scanned left, then right. Nothing.

Fisting her hands in her hair, she screamed.

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After catching up on a couple other cases, Ryan circled back to Industrial Boulevard. The building had been thoroughly gone through by the techs, but the crime scene still hadn't been released. They wouldn't until every speck of evidence was collected, because when it was, what was left of the internal structure would be demolished.

Ryan slipped under the barricades and carefully walked through the scene.

Did Ruiz and Kealy meet up? If so, who killed them? There had to be a third party. The killer.

Questions ran through his mind. A user? Another cop? If so, were they corrupt?

He squatted down by the location of the bodies, then paced off the distance to the ignition source according to Evans's report. With how combustible the material was, could the killer make it out the door without getting burned? Not likely.

Ryan turned in a circle. Maybe he used some sort of fuse to give himself some time. Would Evans be able to tell that? Sure, the hottest point was there. He pointed to the floor as he walked around. But what if he had a wick, so to speak?

Even with one, he couldn't have gone out the front. Ryan would have seen him. And the back had a padlock.

The padlock? He pulled out his phone. A shiny new lock. What if the killer was the one to put the lock on? He could have come in from the back. Did Ruiz and Kealy?

Ryan shook his head. It didn't make sense. He stared at the photo of the lock. They were sold in no less than four stores in Ashwood alone, not to mention numerous locations throughout the Twin Cities.

He locked his screen and shoved the phone back in his pocket. Time to go. He had one more stop before he picked up Erica. He could bounce the scenario off her. She might have some good thoughts.

He left his car parked in front of the wooden blockade and walked to the corner. Across the street, the "open" sign was still lit at the Metal Mart.

The bell dinged as he walked in. LeRoy stuck his head out of the office. The weariness in his eyes fled, and a questioning expression replaced it. "Detective Daniels, afternoon. Did you catch the bastard?"

"Still working on it." Ryan moved to the counter.

"What can I do for you?"

"Could I take a look at your video from this afternoon?"

His expression puzzled. "Sure. It's been pretty quiet around here today."

"Just checking on something. Thanks."

He waved Ryan back and booted up the video. “Here you go.”

Ryan zipped through the video until he saw the Tahoe. A few seconds later, Erica’s vehicle followed.

“Can I get a copy of this?”

“No problem. But I don’t see what you’re looking for. It’s probably one of the dealer’s customers.”

“Could be.”

“Not that they’ll find him,” LeRoy muttered as he typed a few keys. “On its way.”

“Thanks.” Ryan’s email notification pinged. The time caught his attention. “I have to go. Thanks for your help.”

“Anytime.” LeRoy walked him out and locked the door after him.

He needed to watch the whole video but didn’t have time until after dinner. Maybe he and Erica could watch it in bed?

Memories of her soft hair on his chest this morning had him pressing down a little harder on the accelerator. He’d shaved two minutes off his usual time in driving to her house.

He was getting ahead of himself. One night didn’t make up for years of her hating him.

But it was a start.

A smile tugged at his lips when Karma’s bark drifted across the yard. She opened the door and one-hundred-thirty pounds



of welcome bounced for him. Tail wagging and eyes bright, Karma wiggled his way between Ryan's legs and back around.

"Hi, boy. I missed you too." He rubbed the dog's soft head.

Ryan was distracted, or he would have noticed the somber expression on Erica's beautiful face sooner. "Who died?"

The frown told him that wasn't the right thing to say. He wanted to add *other than Sarah*.

"No one. It was just a day." She turned and left him standing on the step.

"Okaaay." He drew out the word as he followed her inside. "What happened since you dropped me off this morning?"

She flopped to the couch; a bag of frozen peas lay on the coffee table. "I went to the station. Was working on some of the incident reports we talked about."

Did she find something new? And what was with the veggies?

"I was talking to Walker, then they got a call. I was alone... or so I thought."

His whole body tensed.

"The lights went out. So, I went to find the breaker." Her eyes went from sad to pissed to frightened.

Fuck. He didn't like that. "What happened?"

"Someone pushed me into the wall, and when I got the lights on and went back to my computer, all my files on the fires were wiped."

“Why am I just hearing about this now?” Ryan bracketed her face with his hands, and he scanned her for injuries. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, a bump on my head. Nothing to worry about. I have backups, but I didn’t think anyone knew I was working on it except...” Round blue orbs stared up at him. Her head shook ever so slightly.

“Who?” Ryan stood. His fists flexed as he thought of what he’d do to that person.

“It can’t be. I just told him today. Besides, he left on the call.” She picked up the peas and turned the bag over in her hands.

“Erica.” The growl in his voice rivaled Karma’s.

A heavy sigh escaped her lips. “Minutes before, I’d told Walker. He’s the arson investigator. He wrote the original reports. If he wanted to cover something up, he’d have done it then, not go back and change it.”

She had a point, but he didn’t like it. He made a mental note to check into Walker Evans.

“I know what will make you feel better. Mom’s lasagna. Come on.” He held out his hand.

She eyed it.

Shit. She was backpedaling. Only one way to handle it. Avoidance. She’d slice his heart in two if he gave her an opening. So, he would talk about anything and everything but them. “It will be okay. We’ll find the guy.”

She pushed up on her knees, ignoring his hand. “I don’t know if I should go to dinner.”

“Come on. Mom will never let me live it down if she can’t cook to thank you for taking care of me, her baby boy.” He batted his eyes at her.

She rolled her own eyes in return. “Will she have that yummy garlic bread she makes from scratch?”

“Uh huh.” He could see she was about to cave. Victory was on the horizon.

“Fine. But only because she makes a killer lasagna.”

*Score.* Now, he just hoped his mom’s cooking could woo her back into his life permanently.

---

The Daniels's house felt like home to Erica. It always had. That was the reason she needed to leave.

“Be a dear and set the table for me. You know where everything is.” Doris Daniels motioned to the dining area as she slid a pan of Italian bread into the oven.

As if on autopilot, Erica opened the corner cupboard and pulled out the plates, then the drawer next to the dishwasher to get the silverware. Nothing changed in this house. Nothing except her and Ryan.

Were they friends? That was what they were in the past.

Were they lovers? Her hands shook and clanked the glasses a little too hard.

“Everything alright?” Ryan gently brushed the small of her back. His voice low and oh so sexy. A secret whispered between them. And damn, if it didn't send a shiver down the back of her neck.

The forks in her hand clattered to the counter. His touch rattled her to her core.

“Just fine.” She scooted away. “Do you need any help with the salad, Mrs. D?”

“No, dear, I’ve got it. You go sit and relax.” Doris patted Erica’s arm.

Nodding, she slipped into one of the counter stools. She couldn’t quite make herself go into the living room and sit on the couch with Ryan. That felt too intimate sitting thigh to thigh as they chatted with his father. No, this was better.

“How’s Joey?” She hadn’t seen Ryan’s sister since the day she left for basic training.

“She’s in Germany. Two years into a three-year deployment.” Pride and sorrow mixed in her eyes. “We hope she’ll get to visit during the holidays.”

Doris took a pan from the oven, and visions of childhood dinners assailed Erica with each whiff of the delicious food.

“Would you tell the boys it’s time to come and eat?”

With a nod, she slipped from the stool and rounded the corner to find the living room empty.

*Weird, Ryan was just here.* Opening the door, she stuck her head out. Low voices echoed from the garage. Following the sound, she found the men, heads under the hood of David’s 1967 Mustang. The cherry-red paint gleamed.

“Wow, it looks the same as the day you bought it.” She snuck a look at Ryan. A twinkle flashed in his eyes. No doubt, he was remembering the night his parents were out of town and they took the car out for a cruise. It was before he started dating Sarah. They had such fun that night. Stopped at the DQ,

then they strolled down to the river. She bit back a smile when Mr. Daniels looked her way.

“Yes sirree.” Dave stroked a loving hand over the chrome mirror.

“There you all are.” Doris appeared behind Erica. “I know you take every spare minute you can get with your mistress, but it’s time for dinner.”

“Coming, darling.” Dave chuckled and gave the car one more pat before they all returned to the kitchen.

At the table, Ryan sat across from her. His secret smiles and foot brushes sent shivers up her spine. She shouldn’t like it, these private looks they shared.

Dropping her head, she dug into her food. “This is delicious. Thank you for the invite.”

“Anytime. You know, I’ve always considered you family.”

The telltale tingle of tears threatened. *No. Don’t cry.* Her blinks increased. A weak smile crossed her lips as she nodded her acknowledgment.

She wasn’t family and never would be. She needed to remember that.

Erica sunk her teeth deep into the garlic bread. Joy shot to her taste buds, stopping the threat of waterworks, but her mind still circled around Mrs. D’s comment.

Family. How she’d dreamt of being part of Ryan’s family. Then, when he started dating Sarah, those sweet dreams turned

into nightmares. Having to see him across the table with her at every family dinner with Sarah at his side.

Now, she didn't know what type of dream this was. Then it hit her. It wasn't a dream at all but reality. And reality was so very different. No way would they have the perfect family dinner. The day Sarah died all those dreams turned to ash. This thing between Ryan and her was temporary. Not happily ever after. Sarah took all of Erica's dreams with her.

Erica was never meant to be the one sitting here. Her sister was.

---

She was too quiet during dinner. Ryan wanted to pull her close but didn't think she wanted him to out them to her parents after one night together.

She buckled into the seat, and it was like a starter pistol going off in his head. Questions buzzed around like bees in a hive.

*Slow your roll, Daniels.* Or not. "What's going on? Are you still pissed about the files?" *Please let it be about the files.*

He put the car in gear and pulled out into the lane.

"This isn't right," she whispered as she watched his parents' house fade from view.

"What?" He knew it. Crap. Nothing in him wanted to have this talk. But since when did what he want matter?

She turned to him but didn't speak. Fuck. Her eyes glistened.

He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away. He sighed. "When are you going to stop blaming me?"

She whipped her head around. "I don't."

"Bullshit. You didn't talk to me for thirteen years. I lost you too." Ryan looked straight ahead but mumbled, "That hurt more."



A sniffle came from the other side of the car. “I blame myself.”

Ryan pulled the car over and slammed it into park. “Why? You didn’t force her to drive off that bridge.”

Tears streamed down her face. “She was mad at me.”

“Just because she was pissed that we hooked up, it didn’t mean we killed her.” He reached for her hand again. This time she let him take it. “She stole thirteen years from us. Let’s not let her steal a minute more.”

Her blue eyes glowed as tears rolled down her cheeks. Hair slipped from her braid as she shook her head vehemently. “I shouldn’t have done it. Not when I knew she still wanted you.”

“More bullshit. She knew you wanted me. It didn’t stop her.”

“What?” She pulled her hand back and stopped.

“The night we broke up, Sarah told me she only went out with me because she knew you had a crush on me. She’d played the innocent and wanted to wait, but then slept around with every guy on the football team.”

Erica’s head swiveled in shock. “No.”

“Yeah. That’s when I realized she wasn’t the only one who wasn’t really in this relationship.”

Erica was the Randall sister he wanted, but he was afraid he’d lose her if they dated and it didn’t work out. The shitty thing was it happened anyway. His heart fractured the day

Erica shut him out, and it only started repairing the day she walked into the task force meeting.

“No, I... I have to go.” She unbuckled and flung open the door. Ryan slammed on the brakes, and she slipped out of the car.

“Erica, wait. Let me drive you.” But it was too late. She disappeared between the houses and was gone.

## Chapter 19

**T**hirteen years of doubts and regrets muddled Erica's brain. She had walked two blocks before she realized she was taking the old route she used to go between the Daniels's house and her parents'. The last thing she wanted right now was to see her mother.

Making a ninety-degree turn, she cut down the alley and headed for home. The sun was still up, but the shades of coral and blue mixed in the sky, and it would be dark by the time she finally got there.

She watched the cars pass as her mind circled back to Ryan and the cluster-fuck she found herself in. She never should have agreed to work with him. Seeing him again, letting him in, it just opened old wounds, and unfortunately, her heart.

The wind picked up, and icy chills tickled her neck. She pulled her sweater a little tighter. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a truck. It slowed beside her, still a ways from the stop sign up ahead. She shrugged and kept walking.

The window rolled down. Her back straightened. The pit of her stomach screamed at her to run, but she stood her ground. As casually as possible, she looked over her shoulder.

“Randall,” came a low voice from the vehicle. “Can I give you a ride?”

Raising her hand to block the late day sun, she peered into the cab. A familiar face peered back at her. She exhaled. Tightness left her body as she moved closer to his truck. “I didn’t know you lived around here.”

“I don’t. My ex lives down the street. I just dropped off my youngest. Hop in.” The lock actuators tripped.

“Thanks.” She climbed inside. “I live on Spruce, only a few blocks away.”

He took the next turn toward her house, and she relaxed into the seat.

“You must have been in deep thought. I called your name a couple times.”

“Sorry.”

“Thinking about the case?” He didn’t have to say which case. They were both on the task force.

“No, but I will be working on it later.”

“How’s it going with you and Daniels?”

What? How did he know? Was it that obvious the other night when they left the bar?

“The fire files. Have you made any progress?” His gaze touched hers before settling back on traffic.

Oh, yeah. Those. She needed to get her mind on the case. “Some. It’s not going as fast as we’d like.”

“It’s too bad about your computer.”

She blinked. She had only told Ryan about it before dinner. He hadn’t called anyone that she was aware of. “Yes. Hey, I forgot I need to grab some bread. You can drop me off at the corner, and I’ll walk from there. I appreciate the ride.”

He huffed out a breath. “You didn’t report the incident this afternoon, did you?”

Erica grabbed the handle. Nothing. Shit. He’d tripped the door locks when she’d gotten in. Her legs trembled. She itched to get away.

“My bad.” He veered off the main road and cut toward the river.

She yanked her phone from her pocket, and her fingers flew rapidly across the screen. Before she could unlock it, stars flashed before her eyes, and pain stabbed her temple. Her phone fell to the floor.

“Don’t try that again.” His voice came out low through gritted teeth.

The man had a fist like a sledgehammer. She cradled her head in her hand, trying to stop the spinning. “Why?”

“This isn’t some cop show where I spill my guts. Just relax. This will be over soon.”

Over? As in she’d be dead? No way he’d let her live now that she knew who he was.

Panic clouded her thoughts. But the cock of a gun cleared the fog, and her full attention zeroed in on the black pistol in his beefy hand.

*Fight, fight, fight* screamed in her head, but she didn’t move a muscle as her eyes locked on the weapon.

She was going to die. Hell, she’d barely lived. If she could get out of this, and do all the things she never let herself do, she’d start by telling Ryan she loved him and always had. She didn’t know if they would have a future, but she could at least own up to the past.

Regrets swam in her mind. Sarah was dead. She wasn’t. Not yet.

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Erica would come around. She had to. He'd just gotten her back.

He'd give her time. Not thirteen years, but an hour or two. Yeah, he'd let Erica think about what he said before he went to her. Because he would go to her. Now that she was back in his life, he wasn't letting her slip away again. The plan of attack formed in his mind as he pulled into the station. He'd fight for her, even if he had to battle the memory of her sister.

Detective Malone was at his desk as Ryan walked by. "Hey, Tanner. What's got you here so late?"

"Had an armed robbery at the E-cig shop over on Seventh Street. I just finished processing the guy."

"Since you're here, I was wondering if you remembered anything else about Kealy?"

He shook his head. "Man, that was so long ago. Besides, I only worked with him for a short time."

"Thanks, I just thought I'd ask." Info on the victim seemed to lead him nowhere. The guy had a clean record and none of his coworkers had anything bad to say about him. Green in narcotics emailed back. He sent over the files, but Ryan didn't see anything that would help his case.

Kealy might not be the mole, but he had info on who was. He'd just have to keep digging.

“What did Johnson have to say about him?”

“Sarge?” Ryan leaned on the edge of the cubicle wall.

“Yeah, he was Kealy’s supervisor before he transferred to our station.”

“Sergeant Johnson?” Strange, he hadn’t mentioned anything about knowing Kealy. Ryan rubbed at a twitch at the back of his neck.

“Yeah, Sarge was tight with Kealy as far as I remember.” Malone shoved his laptop in his bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Gotta go. I’m late for supper.”

“Thanks, Malone.” At his desk, Ryan pulled up the schedule. He wanted to talk to Sarge before he made any accusations.

“Shoot, he’s off today.” He thought back to the day of the fire. Sarge and Brannon had responded to the call. No, he couldn’t be his guy.

Still, something didn’t sit right with Ryan. He tapped Sarge’s name into the system. He scratched his jaw while the computer worked. A minute later, Sergeant Alfred Johnson’s employment file popped up. He couldn’t access any of the confidential information without a warrant or some creative hacking, so he would start with the public files.

Five years in Blaine, then seven in Bloomington, then he moved to the Ashwood Department. He read down the list of Johnson’s training and certifications. Firearm instructor,



negotiations training, team management training, and the list went on. Sarge had an impressive list of certifications and training as well as accommodations.

“Damn, Sarge, you have the kind of career most officers dream of.” The more he learned about his old commanding officer, the deeper his stomach sank. Sergeant Johnson was a stellar officer. Everyone could depend on him. He put his life on the line for his officers daily.

Ryan pushed back the sinking feelings and continued reading down Johnson’s list of schooling. BS in political science and a minor in computer sciences before joining the academy.

“Not computer savvy, my ass.” Ryan needed more than a knowledge of computers and a knowing tingle to go after someone as solid as Sarge. He needed the connection.

Gunter Lindstrom had been the one to send them in the direction of the website. Ryan plugged in Lindstrom and Johnson into the search engine and hot shit, he got a hit. No matter how many times they tried to tie Lindstrom to the corruption they couldn’t. He hadn’t thought about someone else in the police department being dirty. That’s why none of the connections to Lindstrom had stuck.

The twelve-year-old article had a photo of a smiling Johnson with Lindstrom. They apparently worked together on a joint computer programming internship sponsored by Lindgames and the Ashwood PD. There was a third man in the photo. A college-age kid with long hair and glasses.

Ryan enlarged the image. The hair on his arm jumped. “No way.”

Travis Stevens? The article didn’t mention the tech billionaire, but at the time, he would have been an unknown genius.

Ryan saved the article. He’d reach out and find who was the recipient of the internship. He doubted it was Stevens. Nowhere in his bio mentioned it, but he could have been helping with the program.

“One more link in the chain.” Now that he knew where to look, the pieces were coming together, and they all pointed to Johnson being part of the corruption. But was he the boss?

Ryan typed up his thoughts and sent them off to Trey and Amy before grabbing his keys and heading to Erica’s. Not only did they need to talk about this thing between them, but he wanted to see if he could tie Johnson to any of the fire scenes that had tampered reports.

He called her phone, and it went straight to voice mail. His foot tapped as he waited for the beep.

“Erica, I’m coming over. I got something on the case. Don’t sick Karma on me.” He threw his phone in the cup holder as he pulled out of the lot.

If he could connect Johnson to the fire, either at the building on Industrial Boulevard or any of the others, he could link Johnson as the one who assaulted Erica.

Time to connect the dots.

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Johnson pulled into the marina. The same one Erica had been at two weeks ago. On the ride over, her mind ran through every action-adventure movie she'd seen, trying to think of ways to disarm this seasoned officer and call for help. Johnson had thrown her phone out the window somewhere around Eighth and Elm.

She wanted to ask questions, but he made it clear he'd shoot her if she didn't shut up. So, she zipped her lip but let her brain work on a way to get out of this.

When he parked, he pulled a pair of latex gloves from the console. Pocketing his keys, he stepped from the vehicle and slipped on the gloves.

She tried the door. Still locked. Her mind raced. She opened the glove box. Nothing but fast-food napkins. *Think, think.*

Erica lunged across the seat, took the only chance she had, and jammed her fists into the steering wheel. The horn blared.

*Please, let someone hear.*

She swiveled her head, searching for anyone who could help her. Please. A police officer? A fisherman? Teenagers on an evening rendezvous? Come on. Anybody.

No one appeared. Her breathing sped up, and the panic in her chest gripped her lungs, squeezing the air out faster and faster.

Johnson held up the key fob and scowled. With a click of his finger, the locks released.

Oh fuck. She cringed. The color his face turned couldn't be good. Not only had her plan not worked, but all it did was piss him off. She scurried backward until her spine hit the passenger door. She reached for the handle. Her hands trembled uncontrollably.

Johnson bared his teeth and pulled the door open with so much force, she thought it would rip free from its hinges. Pulling the gun from his hip holster, he jammed it to her temple.

“Enough.” He grabbed her wrists, then pulled her out of the truck. Before she could scream, he pulled her to his chest and shoved the gun deeper into her flesh. “Nice and quiet, or it will get messy.”

The lot was deserted. No one was going for a casual boat ride at night in late September. She had pushed his limits already—yelling for help would only get her shot.

She stumbled as they entered the dock. He yanked her up and shoved her toward Travis's boat. “Ryan was right. Stevens is in on it.”

Johnson snorted. “Stevens? That wimp? He might be a tech wonder-boy, but he doesn't have the backbone to run an organization like this one.”

“Then why are we here?” All the boats at the marina were dark. Her hopes plummeted.

“Leverage. We hired him to set up the site. I should have eliminated him when I had the chance.” He tightened the grip on her arm, no doubt leaving a beefy, hand-sized bruise. “I need to make you disappear, and if evidence is found on his boat, then I have a way to control him.”

She gulped. That was blunt. She knew he planned on killing her, but somewhere in the back of her mind, a tiny spark of hope whispered, “he’ll let you go.”

*No. You aren’t dead yet.* She had a chance. Even if it was the size of a frog’s hair, she’d take it.

“Does he know it’s you?” Erica hoped so. If she didn’t come out of this alive, at least, she hoped Johnson got a nice, long prison sentence and a roommate named Bubba who’d make him his bitch.

“No, it was all anonymous. Same with the site. That’s the beauty of it. No one knows who’s behind it. Hell, the clients don’t even know who the inside operative is.”

He pushed her up the ladder and then shoved her down on the cushioned seat. He pulled out a long, black zip tie and bound her hands behind her back. Then, he picked the lock on the cabin compartment. Erica wiggled her wrists. The stupid restraints cut into her skin.

The door slid open, and Johnson disappeared below.

She darted for the ladder but tripped a lifejacket. *Figures.* Instead of saving her life, it could be what ends it.

“Not so fast.” Meaty hands latched onto her braid, and her head whipped back.

Tears filled her eyes. “Just let me go.”

He laughed. “Not happening.”

“Then just kill me already.” *Stupid. Why would you say that to the bad man with a gun?* Did she have no self-preservation?

“Not yet.” Gripping her hair, he manhandled her to the cuddy below. “I have plans, and I need you alive for a little longer.”

Why? Erica thought about it. The only person involved in this whole mess who would care was Ryan.

No, he didn't know their history. He couldn't. If not Ryan, who?

Unless he was going to use her to trap Stevens. “He won't come for me. It was only one date.”

White teeth flashed as he laughed. He shoved the key in the ignition. There must have been a spare in the cabin.

“Stupid girl. I don't care about him. It's Daniels who's been ga ga over you. The whole station can see it.”

“Ryan?”

“Yeah, he's a smart one. Almost as good as Stevens on a computer. He's getting too close.”

“You were the one to shoot out his tire.” Her mouth dropped.

He didn't reply. Silently, he piloted the boat out into the middle of the river, then headed south on the Mississippi.

“I have to pee.” Erica didn’t know what to do. Maybe she could find something in the cabin.

“Piss right there for all I care. It just leaves more DNA on the boat.”

“Really? You won’t even let me use the bathroom?”

He idled back the engine, then pulled a roll of duct tape from a cubby and ripped a piece off.

Erica scooted back in her chair, wrenched her head away, but he caught her and slapped the sticky tape over her mouth.

“Finally, some quiet. Now sit back and enjoy the ride. It’s the last one you will ever have.” He spooled up the engine.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She was strong, but he was a trained, armed officer. Dark water rushed by. Her instincts screamed to fight or flee, but she couldn’t see a way to escape, not cuffed and gagged.

The events of the last twenty-four hours had led to this point. They replayed in her head. It all came down to this. If she could change one thing—not sleep with Ryan, or failing to lock her laptop at the fire station? No, she should have stayed in Ryan’s car.

Why the hell hadn’t she listened to him? She’d be having amazing sex right now. Instead, she was in the middle of the river with a criminal who planned to kill her.

Tears blurred her vision. They streamed down her cheeks. On a deep inhale, she stared at the rushing water. What were

her sister's last thoughts as her car plummeted into the dark abyss?

Erica gulped. What would hers be?



## Chapter 20

The house was dark, and Ryan could hear Karma going crazy on the other side of the door. He rang the bell again. Nothing.

Cupping his hands around his face, he peered into the windows. Where was she?

When she darted from the car, she'd cut between the houses like she did years ago. He jumped back into the car and in ten minutes was knocking on her parents' door.

Mr. Randall answered, "Yes."

"Hello, sir, I don't know if you remember me."

"Sure do. You were practically joined at the hip with our daughter."

Sarah. Ryan dropped his eyes. "Yes, my condolences."

"Thank you, but I was talking about the other daughter." He stepped back and let him in.

Ryan followed. "Speaking of her, is Erica here by chance?"

“No, I haven’t seen her today. Let me ask Ruth.” He called for his wife.

Ruth Randall’s smile dropped when she saw who stood in her living room. “Hello, Ryan. It’s been a while.”

He nodded. Now was not the time to get into it. “I’m looking for Erica. Have you spoken with her tonight?”

“No, why?” The color in her cheeks fell away.

He ran his hands through his hair. Expecting eyes watched him. Shit. He didn’t want to get into this with her parents.

“Is she alright?” Ruth pulled out her phone, dialed, then chewed on her thumbnail. “Erica. Erica, pick up. It’s important.”

Her father grabbed the phone. “Honey, it’s Dad. Call us.”

“She could be fine. I just, we had a fight. Well, not a fight, but... she stormed out, and I can’t get ahold of her.”

“I didn’t realize you two were in communication.” Ruth tapped out a text on her phone. Most likely to Erica.

“We reconnected through a work project.” He wasn’t going to say more. He handed her his card before he turned to leave. “Please call me if you hear from her. I was just at her house, and Karma was the only one home.”

Mr. Randall grabbed his keys. “I’m going to check on Karma.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ruth said.

The door closed behind Ryan. “Where would she go?”

He thought about the events since she'd joined the task force. Her air mask quit working. Not a bone in his body felt that was an accident.

Then he was shot at. Or were they aiming at the tire? An experienced shooter like Sarge could hit both those tires with clean shots. If not for his quick reaction time, the truck could have killed him. It would look like an accident. Who would expect someone to shoot out the tires?

He did.

Then the assault and erasing of her laptop files.

Now she was missing.

Fuck. He slammed his fist on the steering wheel. He scrolled through his phone, and Walker Evans's number popped up. He tapped the name.

"Hello." His voice vibrated through the car's speakers.

"Evans, Daniels here. Have you seen Erica today?"

"Early this afternoon. We had a three-car accident. A semi carrying flammable liquids was involved."

"Are you at the fire station now?"

"Yeah, she's not here."

*Shit, shit, shit.* His mind whirled. *Where are you, Erica?*

"Is everything alright? Does this have to do with those files she told me about?"

Ryan could hear the concern in his voice. "Not sure. If she shows up, give me a call."

“Will do.”

He hovered a finger over the disconnect button. “And Walker, thanks. I’ll let you know if I need your help.”

“You better.”

He ended the call. His gut rolled like a tidal wave. Every nerve in his body tightened. His spine snapped straight. Something was wrong, and it wasn’t just their relationship in peril. His cop instincts were wound so tight he would snap if he didn’t find her soon.

Ryan needed help.

He drove on autopilot to the Old Muscle Gym. In the entry, his foot tapped as he pushed the call button. With one hand, he texted Larson. the other hand pushed the buzzer again.

“Come on, answer.”

The door lock clicked, and Ryan took the steps two at a time. Amy and Trey stood in the open doorway as his foot hit the top step.

“What’s up?” Larson asked.

“It’s Sarge. I’m ninety-eight percent sure.” He strolled passed them and paced their apartment. Stinky waddled over to him and wound his black and white body around Ryan’s legs.

“I can’t find Erica. She was upset. Got out of the car... She’s gone. My gut...” He stopped and locked eyes with his friend. “It’s not a coincidence.”

Trey ushered him to a chair. “Start at the beginning.”

Ryan spilled the whole messy thing in about five minutes flat.

“Damn, I knew you had a history with her, but you dated her sister?” Amy shook her head.

“That’s all you got out of it?” He didn’t have time to explain his past relationship with Sarah. That the attraction wasn’t there. It was barely a step above a platonic relationship. He couldn’t even bring himself to make a move on her, not when Erica kept creeping into his mind.

*Erica.* Where was she? He gripped his thighs, and rocked in the chair. “I’m being absurd. Tell me she’s at the bar sipping a Mai Tai, and I’m being crazy. She makes me crazy.”

Trey leaned to Amy and whispered, “He’s a goner.”

She nodded.

“Help me.” He wrung his hands.

“I don’t think you’re crazy, but we can’t go on your gut alone.” Amy stated the obvious.

Just then, his phone rang. A blocked number. Spam. His finger hovered over the delete, but something inside urged him to answer.

No. It couldn’t be. His gaze bounced between Amy and Trey. She grabbed a pen and paper, then nodded.

Before he accepted the call, he hit the record button, then put it on speaker.

“Ryan.” Erica’s voice was soft and reedy.

“Ryan, are you there?” Tears laced her voice.

“Erica, where are you?”

“Ryan, the corruption—” The phone went dead.

“Fuck.” Ryan jumped up. “That’s proof enough for me.”

“For sure, it’s a burner phone, but we should set up a trace. He’ll call back.” Trey pulled out his phone—no doubt getting the trace set up.

His phone buzzed a second later. A text from a blocked number. He clicked on it.

Blocked: *You have proof of life. You want her alive, you’ll do as I say. No police involvement. I’ll know.*

He showed Amy and Trey. “Johnson doesn’t realize I know it’s him. You’re the first I’ve told.”

“Reply back. What does he want?”

Ryan typed out the message with shaky hands.

“It can’t be money. He must know you’re close to figuring it out.”

“Why take Erica?” Amy asked.

Trey raised a brow and gestured to Ryan.

“Sorry, stupid question,” she said.

It felt like hours but was probably only two minutes before the text came in. Ryan fought to focus his eyes as he read the message. The message instructed him to erase all the files

from the main system, then the kidnapper would text back with instructions as to where to pick her up. He was giving him one hour.

“You can’t do that. Can you?” Amy asked.

Ryan shrugged.

Trey nodded. “If anyone in the department could, it would be Ryan. He has the computer skills to override the security.”

Amy tapped an unpolished fingernail to her lip. “But if Sergeant Johnson is our guy and has computer skills, why wouldn’t he just wipe the files?”

“I don’t think he has the tech knowledge. I’m willing to bet he has just enough to run and maintain the site, but I think Stevens or Lindstrom set it up. Even with the skill I have, it would leave a trace, like a digital fingerprint.” Ryan rubbed his temples. “He’s setting me up to take the fall. Besides, I bet Trey has backup copies of all the files.”

“I do. Even screenshots and the documentation you’ve sent me.”

“Do you think he’d let Erica go?” A whisper of hope skirted along his spine.

The somber head shake from Trey said it all. “He has to know I have copies. Plus, you’d keep a copy of the text he sent.”

“You heard her. She would have risked her life to tell you who had her. He couldn’t trust her to read a message. Maybe the text was a backup plan.” Amy tapped the pen on the pad.

“Her call, besides her words, what else did we hear? Can you play it back?” Trey moved closer.

Ryan’s throat clogged at the sound of her scared voice, but he tried to focus. He got nothing.

“Play it again. Listen for background noise,” Trey said.

On the third replay, Ryan picked up a horn. “That wasn’t a car horn. What was it?”

He should be able to place it, but the sound slipped through the cracks of his stressed mind.

“I heard a rushing sound, like water. Maybe they’re by one of the dams,” Amy added.

Ryan checked his watch. “I have to get to the station.”

“Wait. How will he know if you deleted the files? He tipped his hand. All the files are protected, and he’d have to sign in to access them. If he set up a monitoring system, we will have him with his hand in the cookie jar.”

“If it were me, I’d hack in and bounce it off VPNs like it was a rubber ball.”

“But does Sarge have that much skill?” Amy asked.

“Stevens sure as hell does, but are they working together?” Trey pulled up his computer while they talked. Probably looking for a connection between Stevens and Johnson. Lindstrom had the computer know-how, but he was chilling in Stillwater Correctional Facility at the moment.



Time was ticking. Ryan was one foot out the door when he stopped and turned back. “Don’t come to the station.”

“Why?” Amy asked, her expression puzzled.

“I should have thought of this. I bet he has a camera hidden at my desk. Hell, they probably hacked into my computer and are accessing my laptop camera. If I disable it, he’ll know I figured it out.”

“Okay. No talk of the case in your cubicle or by your computer.”

Ryan closed the door. Running down the stairs, his mind worked on ways he could use it to his advantage. But if he had malware, Johnson would know he was onto him.

Fuck. He had to find Erica and now.

He was pulling into the station when his phone rang. Fenley’s name popped up on his dash display. “Yeah.”

“We caught a break. I checked with dispatch. We got a call from Travis Stevens’s assistant. Seems his boat was stolen about two hours ago.”

“Really? Was he planning on a late-night cruise?”

“No, he’s out of town, but has a camera surveillance system on the boat. It flagged movement.”

Ryan’s ears perked up at this. Moving water in the background of the call. The horn—it was a boat horn. He’d heard them the day he was following Erica and Stevens.

“But we can’t put an APB out, or Johnson will know and...” He couldn’t bring himself to voice the rest of that thought because it was a very real possibility that it would end with Erica not breathing.

He glanced to the ceiling. *Please don’t let that happen.*

“We got lucky. He has a tracking system on the boat.”

“Thank God for rich people.” Ryan exhaled. “Where is she? I’m leaving now.”

He calculated how long it would take for him to get his cousin’s boat on the water. She might not have that much time.

“I’ve called in the sheriff’s department. They already have a boat docked. Don’t worry, I didn’t go through official channels.”

“We need a plan. If he’s on the water, he’ll see them coming.”

“I reached out to a few people I trust. We’ll meet you at the dock. Sending you the address now.”

Ryan looked at the time. It was cutting it close. If he didn’t delete the information off the drives in... forty minutes... would Johnson kill Erica? Would he anyway?

Twenty minutes later, Ryan was on the dock with two Sheriff’s deputies, Trey, and Amy. Two boats were docked. One was the county boat with the sheriff’s logo on the side, and the other was a fancy speed boat with a cuddy.

“Good, you’re here.” Trey pulled gear from a large duffel bag.

Ryan broke every traffic law on the way. “What’s the plan?”

“How are your swimming skills?” Amy asked and handed him a wet suit.

“I was a lifeguard all through school.” He took the suit and started taking off his shirt as Swenson and Whittier’s heads popped up from the cabin of the other boat.

“SWAT is at a domestic across town. Without using official channels, we couldn’t pull the men.” CJ slung the rifle over his shoulder. “We’ll drop you and Jim off the side of the boat close to the island. Then we’ll fall back and wait for your signal.”

“Got it.” He slipped off his shoes and pants and pulled on the wet suit. The water would be cold. He wished for a dry suit, but this would do.

He zipped up the suit and took a moment to center himself. *Focus, Daniels. This is Erica’s life on the line.* He blew out a breath, then grabbed his gear and climbed into CJ’s boat.

“Time for a late-night swim.”

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Erica tracked Sergeant Johnson as he paced the clearing in the middle of the island. Other than the sound of the water lapping up against the shoreline, the woods were still. She slumped against a tree. Her hands were bound behind her back, and he'd slapped a fresh piece of duct tape over her mouth after her attempt to warn Ryan.

“You think you're so smart, don't you?” He checked the chamber of his gun.

Great, he had one ready to cap her ass if she got lippy again. She sat perfectly still, only letting her eyes follow his movements. The man was only a few inches taller than her, but he easily had her by fifty pounds. If she could work the ties loose, she might have a chance. She'd seen a video on social media on how to break zip ties free but that only worked if her hands were bound in front of her.

She wiggled a little. Too bad she couldn't dislocate her shoulder to slip her arm around to the front. A boy in her science class did that once. She cringed at the memory.

Her hopes deflated. It was no use. She would die on this uninhabited island. Dry-eyed, she silently hiccupped.

No. She wouldn't give up. Not yet. She had a dog that needed her. Parents who loved her. And Ryan.

Her heart dropped. Could they have the future she wanted? She didn't know, but if she got out of this, she needed to take a

long hard look at her life and their relationship. So much stood between her and Ryan, but here—right now, he was all she wanted.

“Do you hear that?” Johnson ducked behind a tree and scanned the river to the north.

The faint sound of an engine. Her mind screamed, but she bit her tongue. *Not yet. Wait until it comes closer.*

Johnson slipped up beside her. Wrapping his hands around her neck, he pressed his beefy fingers into her windpipe. He flexed—constricting. Air wheezed from her lips puffing up the silver tape. Panic kicked in. She kicked out, catching him in the shin.

“Fucking bitch.” He bit out the words. His hold tightened.

Erica fought to breathe.

He leaned in, his hot breath an inch from her ear. “One word. One mumble and I’ll ring your neck like a rag.”

Tears blurred her vision as her only chance of rescue motored by. When it was out of range, he released his grip.

That was it. She was alone on this island with a killer. The churning in her gut pushed the bile up her now-sore throat. She bit it back. Choking on her own vomit was not the way she wanted to die.

Dread coiled around her chest, squeezing the air from her lungs. Sucking in as much as she could through her nose in each breath, she fought the panic.

It wasn't working. She was hyperventilating. She knew the signs. Her training shouted at her to focus, calm down. She couldn't drop her head; she was tied to a tree. No paper bag to breathe into. Not that he'd take the tape off for her anyway.

"Hey, cool it."

Obviously, she hadn't done a very good job of controlling her panic.

"Fuck." He ripped the tape from her mouth.

"Ouch!" Needles of pain tattooed her lips and cheeks as her face grieved the newly missing skin.

"Shut it. No houses are close enough to hear you anyway." He paced a few feet away and checked his phone.

"I have to go potty." No lie. Her crotch muscles hadn't gotten this much of a workout in who knew how long. Kegels were her friend.

The light of the phone illuminated his dark glare.

She clenched her thighs tighter and prayed. *Please God, I need a break... and to pee.*

He huffed out a breath, then came closer. "Fine, but the hands stay cuffed."

*Thank you, Jesus!*

The elation was cut short as his words registered. *Stay cuffed?* Her face scrunched. She had no clue how she'd do her business without hands, but if it got her unbound from the tree, she'd figure it out. She nodded.

He loosened the ropes and zings of feeling cramped her legs as she stood. She started to walk around the tree.

“Na-ah. Not going to happen. Right here.” He motioned her to the next tree.

He walked up to her, undid her pants with one hand while holding the gun in the other.

“Can you help me get them down, please?” The last thing she wanted was him touching her, but she couldn’t do it herself.

He shifted his dark eyes away as he tugged down her pants and undies in one yank. At least he wasn’t a rapist.

Erica leaned back against the tree. Rough bark bit into her butt cheeks as she relieved herself. When she finished, she leaned forward, but her body started to slip.

“Oh shit.” She’d leveraged her weight to keep her pants from the splash zone. Now, she couldn’t get up. If she moved, she’d fall into the puddle of urine.

“Problems?” He holstered his gun and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Please, help me.” This was it. She would die in the woods in her own pee with her pants around her ankles.

“Fine.” He grabbed her under the arms and hoisted her up. He bent to grab her pants. *Now or never.*

She slipped her arm around his head, effectively putting him in a headlock with her elbow. She used her body weight to

throw them both off-kilter.

He slipped on the puddle of urine, and with a twist he didn't see coming, fell sideways, taking her with him.

The crunch she heard when they landed was deafening.

*Fuck. Did I kill him?* She wiggled her arm free and reached for his gun, but with her hands behind her, she had no way of shooting it.

Blood coated his face. He groaned.

Thank, God. He was alive.

Wait. He was alive, and she'd injured him. She looked down at his prone form. A leg moved. He was getting up.

Oh shit! She kicked off her shoes, then her pants that were around her ankles. She got up and ran. First to the water, but then what? She couldn't swim with her hands behind her.

She flung the gun in the river and ran along the shore looking for the boat she'd heard.

"Help! Anybody?" she yelled as loud as her sore throat could. Nothing. No boat. Not even lights in the distance. "Where did you go?"

"I'm right here, bitch." Johnson limped closer. Blood streamed from his nose. His eyes were wide with murderous intent. "You think you're so smart. Well, I don't need my service pistol to kill you."

She ran down the rocky shore and cut back into the trees, hoping the cover would hide her until someone motored by.



A bullet whizzed by her head. She dropped to the ground. Her heart raced. She yelled from behind a tree, “You said you didn’t have a gun.”

“No, I said I didn’t need one to kill you. But it does make it easier. I have my backup piece.”

Crap, why didn’t she think to frisk him for more weapons?

Her chest heaved as she scanned the shore. Travis’s boat was on the other side of the island. He could have left the keys in it.

She took off at a full sprint through the trees. Rocks and sticks cut her bare feet, but she didn’t slow down. She zigged and zagged, hoping to make herself a harder target to hit. She could hear the rustle of brush as he followed. She pushed harder.

A dull roar of a boat kicked up her heart rate. *Oh, please, please.* She broke free from the trees, yelling at the top of her lungs. She jumped up and down. The only light was the sliver of the moon and the light from the boat.

“Help. Over here!” Cold water splashed around her ankles.

“Bitch.” Johnson’s voice was close.

A gunshot echoed. Loud. Close. She froze.

A figure hurled itself at her from the water and tackled her to the ground. Air whooshed out of her body. The weight pinning her down was wet, heavy, and... familiar.

“Are you hurt?”

“Ryan. He has a gun.” She tried to get up, urging him to move into the cover of the trees.

He looked over her head, then back. His dark eyes softened as he canvassed her for injuries. “It’s over. Swenson took care of Johnson.”

The shot. “Is he dead?”

“No, but he’ll need a medic.” Pulling a knife from his belt, he cut her ties before running his hands down her arms and checking her torso for broken ribs. “Are you hurt?”

Her body relaxed. Tears flooded her eyes. Ryan had her. She was safe.

He stroked her face. “Erica? Baby, talk to me.”

She shook her head, then nodded. “I’ll be alright.”

“Come on. Let’s get you to the hospital to be checked out.” He helped her up, then stepped between her and the boat lights. “Erica. Where are your pants?”

## Chapter 21

Seven o'clock the next morning, Ryan entered the conference room. He glanced at the empty chair next to him. He hadn't talked to Erica after the paramedics sped off with her in the back of the ambulance.

"Let's get started." The chief called the meeting to order. "As many of you know, we took Sergeant Johnson into custody early this morning on charges of kidnapping, blackmail, and corruption." He mentioned a few lesser charges as well. "Firefighter Randall is doing well and resting this morning. I'm going to turn the meeting over to Agent Fenley."

Trey thanked him and walked to the board. He filled the room in on the events of the previous night, concluding with Johnson's arrest. "Detective Whittier and I will be interviewing him later today."

If Johnson was smart, he'd cut a deal and talk.

"Daniels, do you have any evidence connecting Johnson to the double murder and fire from the date of September the

third?”

Ryan cleared his throat. “Not hard evidence, sir. No. But Sarge, um, Sergeant Johnson had worked with Bryan Kealy before coming to the Ashwood department. Upon reviewing Officer Kealy’s accounts, it shows he had an account on the site that messaged me. I believe he was the one who contacted me to meet. I will know more when we get the warrant for the website.”

Ryan cleared his throat. “As for the online, social forum Sergeant Johnson referred me to, I haven’t found anything suspect there. It appears to be a decoy he used to throw me off the trail when I had a hit on the actual website and the corruption. To be sure, I subpoenaed the records from the forum.

“As for Salvador Ruiz, I believe he could have been a mule or contact for Kealy, who was undercover at the time, but I can’t say for sure.”

Brannon said, “The night of the third, Sarge was with me. We had a domestic from nineteen-hundred hours until twenty-one-hundred hours. And before that, he was at the station. I saw him at the start of shift.”

The timeline ticked by in Ryan’s head. No way Johnson could have been at the crime scene when the fire started.

“Thanks, Ian.” Trey turned back to Ryan. “Any other suspects?”

“No one that stands out.” If it wasn’t Sarge, he may have hired someone to handle Kealy. Ryan needed to dig into the sergeant’s phone records a little deeper.

Ryan didn’t know what Sarge’s motive was for the corruption, but he knew money was a powerful pull. From what he’d been able to access in the short amount of time, he’d found that Johnson had several overseas accounts. Ryan was willing to bet when they got access to them, he’d find way more money than a sergeant could earn.

They covered a few more things, then adjourned.

Time to review the video from the fire again and find the killer. He peered into his empty coffee mug and frowned. The measly hour of sleep he got was anything but restful. A stop by the breakroom was in order.

At nine o’clock, he sat at his desk while lists of Tahoe owners scrolled by. He couldn’t focus on the screen. His thoughts were consumed with Erica. He’d gone to the hospital last night, but her parents arrived and there wasn’t enough room. Maybe it was for the best. Let her heal and think. He wasn’t sure the latter was for the best, but he needed to focus on the killer. If it wasn’t Sarge, then who?

He stopped his scrolling and rubbed his eyes. He needed more coffee. He was compiling all the evidence he could against Johnson. Now that he knew where to look, bits and pieces showed his fingerprints all over the place.

So far, on Ryan’s preliminary search of the site used to facilitate the corruption, one local firefighter flagged, Anthony

Winters. Ryan did a run on his financials and found the man was in serious debt after his divorce two years ago, but had paid off over fifty grand to his creditors in the last six months. Ryan would bet he'd find the evidence he needed to lock down Winters when they got deeper into the site. It would be a long night now that the warrant had come in. He and the crew would be going over to search Sarge's house in an hour. But until then, he was working on the fire and the murders.

No matter how he tried to tie Sarge to the murders, he couldn't. Ryan was sure Kealy was his contact from the site, but nothing pointed to him being dirty. Ryan would bet his lucky pen—the one where the pinup girl's clothes melt away to reveal her curvy body—that Kealy's info would have pointed him to Johnson.

He kept coming back to Sal. Kealy could've walked in on a deal at the wrong time. But Sal...

Who wanted a drug dealer dead? That list was as long as his leg, single-spaced, in six-point font.

Ryan looked at the video of the Tahoe again, first from the night of the fire, then from the other day. He was missing something. He could feel it. Like a fart in the wind—it was there one minute and gone the next.

He tapped his pen on the desk. Freezing the frame, he enlarged the video. One on each monitor. It looked like the same truck, but one had a crack on the windshield and the later video didn't. If it was the same vehicle, they would have had it repaired in the last two weeks.

His fingers flew over the keyboard as he searched auto glass repair in the area. He picked up his phone and started calling.

On the fourth call, he struck gold. One Brenda Harmon had her 2018 navy blue Tahoe repaired last week. Harmon? Where had he seen that name before?

Noting it on his report, he decided to give Ms. Harmon a visit.

Her address and next of kin pulled up on the screen. His hand hovered over the mouse as he read her info.

No. It couldn't be. He closed the video and looked at the email.

“Son of a bitch.” He pulled up Harmon on the internet. *How did I miss that?*

The pieces fell into place. He didn't have enough for a warrant, but he'd get it.

Twenty minutes later, he parked in front of the Metal Mart. The sign stated they opened at ten today. He knocked anyway. LeRoy glanced at him from his office, then came to open the door.

“Detective Daniels, come on in. What can I do for you?” He stepped back.

“I have a couple more questions. Your videos really helped.”

“They did? That's good.” He held up a disposable coffee cup.

“Sure.”

LeRoy filled the cup from the freshly brewed pot and handed it to Ryan. He poured himself one, then sat at his desk chair. “Okay, I have my caffeine. What can I do for you?”

Ryan set his untouched coffee on the desk, pulled out his recorder, and with a raise of his brow, inquired if LeRoy minded. The man shrugged and Ryan turned it on and set the details. “Interview with LeRoy Harmon...” He added the date and time before asking his first question.

“When was the last time you saw Salvador Ruiz?”

LeRoy’s face scrunched like he bit into a bad apple. “That piece of trash. It’s been a couple weeks.”

“Do you remember the last day you saw him?”

“Oh. It was the Saturday of Labor Day. I chased him off the block. Damn drug dealer.” LeRoy crossed his arms and tipped back in his chair.

“And what was your connection with Officer Bryan Kealy?”

“Who? I don’t know a Kealy.”

Ryan could see the events of the night playing out in his head. Time to change tactics. “Does your wife drive a blue 2018 Tahoe?”

“Yeah.” He leaned forward. Now Ryan had his full attention.

“And do you sell magnesium here?”

Harmon squirmed a little before he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “I think I should call a lawyer.”



“Maybe you should. But let me see if I have this right.” Ryan leaned in, his hands loose at his sides. “You’re an honest business owner who wants to clean up the neighborhood.”

At LeRoy’s slight nod, Ryan continued, “On the third, you saw Salvador Ruiz, a known drug dealer, heading into the abandoned building on the corner of Industrial and First. You grab a short piece of stock, two-inch tubing and go to have a talk.”

Ryan observed him for any aggression before he went on.

“You slip in the back door, as you have the key to the lock since you put it on to keep the riffraff out, and tried to persuade him to take his business elsewhere. But he refuses. Maybe he pulls a knife, you swing... in self-defense. Either way, he goes down. You hear the front door open, and you panic. You hide, thinking it’s one of his business partners. The adrenaline is pumping and you swing for the fences.”

LeRoy’s color dropped lower with each word out of Ryan’s mouth. The light in his eyes dimmed.

“You should call the cops but would they believe you? So, you drove back to the shop.” Ryan gestured to the Metal Mart. “Then you grabbed something that could wipe out the evidence. Fast burning. Hot. Magnesium?”

LeRoy slumped in his chair. Ryan knew he had him.

“The eyesore of a building being gone was a bonus. You hadn’t even planned it.”

LeRoy dropped his head to his desk. He moaned before looking up. Dampness misted his eyes. “I didn’t... It just happened... and the other guy. He pulled a gun. I panicked.”

“That’s why I didn’t put it together sooner. You’re a nice guy. Just running your business. Helpful even.” Ryan would bet Kealy was in street clothes, not displaying his badge. Either way, Harmon killed him and covered it up.

Ryan stood. Pulled out his cuffs and motioned for LeRoy to stand.

Harmon didn’t fight. He hung his head and presented his hands. As Ryan clicked the cuffs closed, he said, “Find a good lawyer.”

He took the man’s keys and locked the door before taking him to the station.

This sucked. No excited energy at catching the bad guy, no rush of adrenaline. Instead, he felt a mix of sadness for this hardworking man and relief he could close the case.

## Chapter 22

“Honey, you relax. I can ask your father to help me with this.” Ruth Randall stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

If she relaxed anymore, she'd be in a coma. Cabin fever was real, and Erica had it after five days at home. The doctor had instructed her to take it easy, and she had. But she couldn't sit at home any longer and stare at her phone.

Ryan texted her Monday, asking if she was home and if he could swing by.

Her heart enthusiastically beat out a “Yes.” But her head muddled with thoughts of Sarah and the river... She needed time.

He'd given her time, but she honestly didn't expect so much of it. Every day, she stared at her phone, hovering her fingers over his contact info. And every day, she closed the screen.

*Tell him. You've loved him forever. You almost died. What are you waiting for?*

Good question. She just didn't have the answer yet.

That was why she was here. Avoidance. Erica hadn't planned on coming over to her parents' house tonight, but when her mother called and said she had a few old books and a box of her stuff she found while cleaning out her old bedroom, it was the perfect escape from her internal torture.

"I'm fine, Mom. There are only a couple more boxes." *Man, how many books did she have?* Erica pulled the third box of old stuff from the closet. She stared down the hall and stopped at the open door.

Sarah's room.

When her mother said she wanted to redo her craft space, Erica hadn't realized she was expanding into Sarah's room.

Ten years had passed before her mother even stepped foot inside her sister's room. It had become a shrine to Sarah. Erica glanced around the empty walls. The bed was bare. An eerie chill snaked up her spine.

It's as if the last thirteen years her sister had been away at camp. Her mother hadn't touched a thing. Photos of her cheer squad had sat on the white-washed dresser. Her pom-poms hung on the edge of her mirror.

Now... the space was devoid of all things Sarah.

Tears stung her nose. She rapidly blinked, trying to stop the waterworks that were seconds away from falling.

She was motionless—a statue holding a box. The only thing moving was her pounding heart.

The smell of lilies enveloped her a moment before a warm hand slid around her shoulders. “Hey, are you okay?”

She bowed her head. The image of her sister flopping down on the bed, a book in her hand, flashed in Erica’s mind.

The knot in her throat clogged the words. But words were tied to feelings, and at the moment, Erica was numb. Knowing Sarah’s room was always here made her being gone less real.

But looking at the faded paint that outlined photos, it sunk in. Sarah would never walk through the door again. Never giggle at the silly jokes Dad would tell, or ask Erica to braid her hair again.

It was like Erica had one foot in the past, not fully living in the present. Now, that past was ripped out from under her, like a rug sliding across the floor.

She shifted the box to one hand and knuckled a tear that escaped with her other.

“Honey, let’s go get some tea.” Her mom hugged her from behind, then steered her down the hall.

In the kitchen, Ruth set down two glasses of iced tea. “I bawled for days as I packed up her things.”

“You should have called. I would have helped.”

Her hand patted Erica’s. “What, so we could both cry? No. I needed to do it myself.”

Her mother let out a breath. A sad smile crossed her lips. “Losing Sarah had been the worst day of my life. God, she

was so bright and happy and independent. She had a stubborn streak as wide as the Grand Canyon.” Her mouth sobered as she looked at Erica.

“But the day I thought we might lose you.” Tears glossed her eyes. “You have always been my support, my helper. I don’t think I ever told you, but without you, I don’t think I could have made it through. I’m not just talking about after Sarah died.”

Her mother raised the teacup to her lips but didn’t drink. “Your father worked long hours, and with Sarah needing so much care when she was little...”

Ruth’s hand tightened on hers. Her gaze dropped to their hands.

“Mom.”

She shook her head and swallowed. “No. I know you think Sarah was my favorite, but you’re wrong.”

“Mom, I wouldn’t ask you to choose.” Her mother’s words started flutters behind her ribs—soft wings stirring up emotions.

“I couldn’t. You two were so different, like two sides of my soul. I was harder on you. She was so like me. You were more like your father. I couldn’t see how much I pushed you.”

“Mom, it’s alright.” Those wings sped up like a hummingbird, sending waves of feeling Erica didn’t want to deal with flooding her chest.

Staring into the teacup, her mom's jaw trembled. "I'm sorry."

Erica slipped from her chair and hugged her mother. Ruth's arms wound tight around her shoulders. "Sarah will always be in my heart, but I needed to move on with my life. We all do."

Her mother's gaze pinned her. Waiting for her response. As if she was looking for confirmation of life.

She looked her mother straight in the eye and lied. "I have."

The sad look her mother gave Erica had her sinking back into her seat. "No, honey. You still do what you think will make her happy."

"What do you mean?"

"I know you stopped talking to Ryan because of Sarah. You two were so close. Your father and I were a little surprised when he dated Sarah instead of you, but you know Sarah. She set her sights on him. What's the boy to do?"

*Pull back, full retreat.* The last thing she wanted to do was talk to her mother about Ryan Daniels. "I should get going. It's getting late."

Ruth pulled her in close. "Do what makes you happy. I want you to shine. Don't you forget it."

"Thanks, Mom." She kissed her cheek.

"Warren, come put the boxes in Erica's car for her."

"I got it." Erica picked up a box.

“You’re always such a help. If you don’t want the books, drop them at the donation site.”

Erica and her father loaded the boxes. She closed the back car door. “Thanks, Dad.”

He wrapped her in a bear hug. “Love you, sweetheart.”

She let his warm embrace calm her for another moment before stepping back and climbing in her car. She waved as she pulled out of the driveway.

Her phone rang, bringing a flutter of nerves to her chest. Ryan? Hope and dread warred. Longing to hear his voice, see his face, loosed the knot the decade-old guilt had tied around her heart.

Walker’s name flashed on her dash. The flock of excitement fluttering in her chest calmed. She tapped the button on the steering wheel to answer.

“Hey, Evans. What’s up?”

“Randall. How are you healing?” Concern rang through her truck along with his deep voice.

“Physically? Good.” She didn’t want to discuss her emotional toll.

“That’s good. I heard you had a shift next week. If you aren’t ready...”

“No, I’m good. I need to get back to work.” She’d met with the department-appointed therapist this week. She’d agreed



Erica could return to work as long as she continued her sessions for the next four weeks.

“Awesome.” He cleared his throat. Dropping his volume, he continued, “Did you hear about Winters?”

That had been one of the messages from Ryan early in the week. They still didn’t have proof he tampered with her regulator, but she couldn’t think of anyone else who would have a reason to. “Yes, I can’t believe Tony was involved.”

“He may have been covering up for someone else. I have been looking into those... incidents. You know. Anyway, I keep copies on my reports when I file them. Wyatt’s house fire was definitely electrical, but nothing pointed to arson.”

“Then why cover it up?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going keep looking into it.”

“And his accident? Have you looked into that?” Erica hadn’t found anything to support her belief that his car had been tampered with. She held her breath, not sure if she wanted to be right or wrong.

“I did. I know the mechanic who took his car in.”

A car honked, startling her. She was so focused on what Walker would say, she’d forgotten to go when the light changed.

“There was no tampering.”

“Really? How can that be?”

“Erica, my friend documented everything. Not only was it an accident but I found out his last text was to his wife.”

“Okay. What does that prove?”

“They had a fight right before the crash.” He sighed. “It looks like he was distracted driving.”

Speaking of distractions, she shook her head and focused on the road. “Well, thanks for checking.”

“That doesn’t explain the changed files—Wyatt’s or the others. Maybe the police will find a connection when they finish their investigation.” The alarm sounded in the background. “Shoot. Gotta go.”

The line went dead. Erica drove the rest of the way home in deep thought. If no one messed with Wyatt’s car, and it was truly an accident, then... Her brain was starting to hurt just thinking about it.

Either way, they still had a cover-up going on. But did it tie to the police corruption? She hoped Ryan would find out soon. His message only said Johnson hired Winters to keep an eye on her and to wipe her laptop files.

Unless Tony confessed, they might not have a way to tie him to the fire report tampering.

Once home, she carried the boxes as far as her kitchen table. Karma gave them a thorough sniffing. “They good, boy?”

He deemed them okay to be in the house, then went to his food bowl.

“Sorry I’m late.” Karma could be a prima donna when it came to his dinner times.

She filled his bowls and opened the refrigerator to see if she had anything quick and easy for dinner.

When no tasty four-course meal magically appeared, she pulled out the milk. Sniffed it.

“Still good. Cereal it is.” She took her Cheerios to the table.

As she took the first bite, she eyed the boxes. No time like the present. She flipped open one of the box lids. The top row was all paperbacks. She picked up one and read the back cover. As she was about to put it back, she spied a leather-bound book. Her forehead crinkled. She set down her spoon and pulled out the book.

A diary? Not hers. Sarah’s? She hadn’t known her sister kept a diary.

She ran a hand over the spine and cover. A one-inch clasp held it closed. She shouldn’t read it. She set it on the top of the box and finished her cereal. Her attention strayed to the book over and over. She had so many questions when Sarah died. So many blanks in the story of her sister’s life. Until recently, Erica thought she knew almost everything about her sister.

Maybe it would give her a clue as to her sister’s mood before she died. The police ruled her death an accident, but Erica always wondered if she and Ryan being together pushed her to drive off that bridge. Yes, she’d been drinking according to the toxicology report, but... What was she thinking?

She gave the book one more glance. It held her sister's private thoughts, words. She shouldn't. Scooting the chair back, she carried her bowl to the sink, rinsed it, and put it in the dishwasher. The numbers on the microwave reminded her she had to go to bed. She had a wedding to go to tomorrow. Ryan would be there. Hell, half the town would be in attendance. She started for the bedroom and stopped.

She pivoted. Nibbling on her thumbnail, she thought about it. She moved closer. She couldn't send it to the donations. No. She should at least take it out of the box.

She carried the diary into the bedroom with her. Dropping it on the bed, she went to do her nightly routine.

She let Karma out once more, then locked up the house and went to bed. She set the book on her nightstand and turned off the light.

Her exhale echoed in the room. Restless energy flooded her limbs. She flopped to her left. A minute later, she punched her pillow. Two minutes later, she flipped to the right. Her gaze locked on the faint outline of the book.

"Fuck it." The pull of her sister's words was too strong to ignore. She turned on the light and snagged the diary. "Sorry, Sarah, but I have to know."

The spine crackled as she opened the book to the last entry.

Sarah's scrolling penmanship had Erica blinking away tears for the second time that evening.

The last entry was the night before she died. She wrote of class and Jake and how his hair waved over his left eye. The page was full of it.

*Jake?* Erica racked her brain trying to remember a guy named Jake.

Nothing about Ryan. Erica scrunched her brows. If her sister was so in love with Ryan that she ended her life over their interlude, wouldn't she have been rambling on about *his* waves?

Maybe she didn't end her life? Could it really have just been an accident? Another case of teenage drunk driving? She had been drinking at the end-of-the-year party that night.

Erica had always believed it was her sister's broken heart that had ended her life. Now... doubts crept in.

Flipping back a few pages, Erica found more scribbling about Jake. His broad shoulders, the way he smelled.

"Huh." She looked at the snoring Karma curled up at the end of the bed. "She loved Ryan, didn't she? Who was this Jake dude?"

Karma didn't move.

Back to the diary, she flipped back a few weeks and scanned entries. Prom. Erica worked the edge of her thumbnail with her teeth. The scrolling words of young lust and being swept away had her attention riveted to the page.

*His hands slipped under my cheer sweater.*

It read like a cheesy romance novel.

*I had planned to wait for marriage, but when the feel of his calloused hands moved up my torso, I knew tonight would be the night I lost my virginity.*

Erica closed the book on her hand. She couldn't read this. The memory of Ryan's hand skirting the small of her back, caressing her spine, one vertebra after another. A long, slow, deliciously sweet exploration of her body. She shivered.

She carefully opened the book and resumed reading. The self-masochist in her made her do it.

*His lips kissed my eyes, one, then the other. Closing them was the hardest thing I'd ever done. For it meant I couldn't gaze into his blue irises.*

Blue? Ryan's eyes weren't blue.

Erica scanned the X-rated lines until she came to the one word that made her breath catch in her throat. Jake. Not Ryan.

She flipped the page and shot straight up in bed. Karma raised his big head and threw a look of disgust at her for interrupting his beauty sleep.

“Ryan caught her. That's why he broke it off.” Her jaw dropped open, and her mouth moved like a guppy. Why? Why would she do that to Ryan?

Screw sleep. Erica needed to know. She flipped back a few more weeks in the diary and started reading. Several entries held comments about the way she caught Ryan gazing at... Her? Erica.

No. Sarah must have misunderstood.

The more she read, the more she realized Sarah didn't miss much. More than once she noted that Erica was pining over Ryan.

Shit, she hadn't thought she was that obvious.

Going back further, she found entries from late September, before Ryan and Sarah started dating.

The words Erica read flamed heat in her belly. Her face broke out in a sweat. She finished the entry and slammed the book shut.

"She asked him out. She'd seen, she knew, and she still asked him out." Hell, according to her sister's own words, she pursued Ryan, planned out a seduction. Shit.

Erica threw off the covers and paced. She'd done everything for her sister. She'd even denied her attraction to Ryan because her baby sister had eyes for him. But she hadn't realized Sarah knew Erica had feelings for him before they dated. Hell, she'd thought Ryan asked Sarah out.

As she wore a trench in her carpet, she thought about all the times she watched them leave on a date. Sarah wrapped her arm around his or leaned into him.

Erica pulled at her hair. None of this mattered. Either way, Erica would have stepped back and let her sister date him. She did anything to make her happy.

*But would Sarah do the same for you?* the voice in her head whispered.

She'd always thought yes, but now... she didn't know.



## Chapter 23

**E**rica brushed her fingers over the bruise on her forehead. The week-old bruise bloomed a myriad of colors—greens, yellows, and a touch of plum on the edges. She sighed. Nothing she could do about it now. She flipped the visor up and turned off her car.

She watched men and women in their Sunday best filter into the church for the Swenson-Whittier wedding. It looked like half the town was invited.

Her foot jangled as she contemplated cranking the engine over and slinking back home to her solitude.

No. She couldn't do that to her new friend. Liz had invited her personally. Besides, no one would be looking at her. *Except Ryan.* Yeah, that's why she was still in the car.

“Oh my God. Vacillate much?” This stalemate she was locked in was her own fault. She didn't know how to break free from her indecision, her inability to jump into this relationship—that she really did want—with both feet.

Well, she wasn't going to decide it sitting in the car. She held her breath and opened the door. Slip in, congratulate the couple, and slip out. She definitely didn't want to see Ryan. Did she?

She'd hopped on their favorite video game three times this week. No BadgeBoy00.

In the last week, her head and heart had warred over the issue of Ryan Daniels. She had no doubt that she loved him. Always had. And when she thought she would die, he was the one thing she regretted. Not that she'd slept with him but that she hadn't taken the chance on them.

But now that she was safe, her old doubts crept back in. The shame. The guilt. What would her mother say or Sarah? Her sister was gone, and her mother was right; Erica still worried about making her happy.

"I hope the other guy looks worse." Kate slipped up beside her as she walked into the church.

"He does." Erica gave her a weak smile.

"Come here." Kate snagged her arm and led her to the restroom. "I have something to take care of that."

She pulled out a tube of makeup and dabbed some on the bruise. "Seriously, I'm glad you're alright. Amy filled me in on the whole crazy abduction."

Erica didn't know what to say. She dropped her eyes as the door to the restroom opened. Lorna and Mira walked in in matching bridesmaid dresses.

Mira hustled across the room in her sky-scraper heels, arms wide. She enveloped Erica in a bear hug. “I’m so glad to see you. I freaked out when I heard you’d been kidnapped.”

Lorna gave her a quick squeeze. “Glad you’re okay. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks. I’m... fine.” She blinked. Damn it, what was in her eye? She was fine.

“Oh no. That’s the look of a woman who isn’t fine. You need girl time and drinks.” Mira checked her makeup before she grabbed Lorna’s arm. “We have to go line up, but at the reception, the first round of shots are on me.”

Lorna gave a sad headshake. “Mira, it’s an open bar.”

“Even better. I’ll get the second round as well.” She winked and sent Erica and Kate air kisses as Lorna pulled her out of the room.

Erica looked at her face in the mirror; the concealer helped, but sad eyes stared back.

“She’s right. You don’t look fine. What, isn’t that sexy detective of yours not giving you enough...” she thrust her hips twice.

A laugh slipped out followed by a sob. Erica’s chest heaved.  
*Keep it together.*

“Sorry. We aren’t.... Fuck. I don’t know what we are.” A moment later, her words registered. “Oh, shit. I shouldn’t swear in church. Crap. I just did it again.”

She dropped her head. She was losing it.

“What did he do? If need be, I know the perfect spot to hide a body.”

Erica chuckled. “It’s not him. It’s me. I can’t. Sarah...”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Listen. This may sound crass but fuck Sarah. She’s dead, and you’re not.”

She wiped her head up and stared at Kate. She could feel her mouth working like a guppy, but no words came out.

“Sorry, but not sorry. I knew your sister. She was not nice. In the short time I’ve known you, I can see you would do anything for people you love. But you don’t do for you.” Kate stabbed a blue-tipped fingernail into Erica’s chest. “I’ll make it simple. Do you love him?”

Erica didn’t even blink. “Yes. But I shouldn’t...”

“Bullshit. I knew the story. Ashwood isn’t that big. Gossip gets around. The way I heard it, she cheated. He dumped her. You two hooked up. And Sarah was pissed. But I have to tell you, she talked trash all the time. She was only with him because she didn’t want you to be with him.”

Her lungs expanded until Erica couldn’t take in any more air. Ryan told her this. Her father had hinted at it. Hell, even her sister’s diary spelled it out. But hearing it from someone who wasn’t personally affected by it hit her hard. Deep down, she knew Kate was telling the truth.

“Sorry to dump this on you now. We should grab our seats—the wedding will be starting soon. We don’t want to miss Liz

walking down the aisle.”

Erica washed her hands and followed Kate into the chapel.

Ryan stood on the altar between Jim’s brother and CJ. He looked so handsome in his tux. Her gaze locked on him. His strong jaw, intense eyes. He searched the pews, looking for something. When they landed on her, he smiled. His shoulders relaxed.

*He was looking for me.* Her stomach flipped.

The music started. Lorna stepped down the aisle in time to the wedding march. Next was Mira. She sashayed as she made her way down the white runner. Amy stepped up at the end of the aisle, in a complimentary-colored dress to the other two, and made her way down to take her place next to the others.

Finally, Liz appeared at the back of the church. All eyes turned to her. She was radiant. Her stepfather and mother escorted her down the aisle.

Erica looked back. Jim’s eyes flowed with love for his bride. It was so beautiful. Erica’s own eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away as her gaze moved to Ryan. He wasn’t watching Liz. No, his gaze was locked on her. Air caught in her lungs. He wasn’t smiling. His expression was a mishmash of emotions. She could pick out some, like regret, lust. But it went deeper. Love?

Right then, while Liz and Jim stood in the front of half the town exchanging their vows, Erica realized she wanted this.

That long-abandoned dream of her and Ryan standing in front of their family and friends, professing their love.

But she'd pushed him away time and time again. Was it too late? Please God. She glanced up at the altar. She hoped not.

She whispered to Kate, "I need your help."

Kate followed her gaze back to Ryan and nodded. "I got your back, girlfriend."

For the first time in ages, she felt the future she wanted was in reach.

Now to grab for it.

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Ryan hadn't taken his eyes off Erica for more than a minute since he sat down at the head table. Her message last week was loud and clear—she needed space. He could give her enough space to fill Lake Superior, but the itch in his neck had him worrying she was telling him to pound sand with her avoidance.

Too bad. She was back in his life, and he wasn't letting her go. Not without a fight. He loved her, and he'd bet his life that she loved him. They were good together. And not just the way her body melted into his. They were meant to be together. He knew it. And soon, so would she.

Yes, he was giving her space, but no way would it be thirteen years' worth. Not this time. He'd decided, after the wedding, he'd find a way to make her listen even if he had to grovel.

“Who's winning?” Amy nudged him.

“What?” Ryan spared her a quick glance before turning his focus back to Erica at one of the back tables.

“You two have been having a staring contest for the last hour. Why don't you go talk to her?”

“I'm giving her space.”

“Why? The look in her eyes doesn't scream space to me.”

It didn't? He took in Erica's flushed cheeks. He couldn't see if her eyes were dilated from this distance, but maybe Amy was right. Not that he'd tell her that. He'd never hear the end of it.

Didn't weddings soften women? Make them all gushy and emotional? Not that he wanted to take advantage of Erica in any way. He wanted the strong, independent, knew-her-own-mind Erica. The one who wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He slammed the last swig of his drink and stood. "I'm going in."

"Good luck. Let me know if you need backup."

He shot her a raised brow.

"Just sayin'." She grabbed her wine and moved over to sit next to Trey.

Ryan lost sight of Erica when he stepped off the head table's riser platform. His internal compass pushed him in the direction of her last-seen location. He weaved around tables, dodged chairs and guests on his way to her.

"Shit, there are a lot of people here." He was halfway through the room when the microphone screeched.

"Thank you all for coming. Can I have all the single ladies come up to the dance floor? Time for the bouquet toss."

It was as if a starter pistol fired. Ryan was jostled and shoved as a stampede of women, all ages, rushed past him. Some were even being pulled.



He'd never understand this tradition. With a quarter of the room's population now on the dance floor, he could maneuver through the crowd a little easier.

By the time he reached Erica's table, she was gone. He craned his neck, scanning the banquet hall. He'd have better luck spotting her at a concert. She wouldn't have gone for the bouquet toss, would she?

He moved closer to the front. As he got to the edge of the dance floor, he spotted her. The colored lights glinted off the red tones in her blonde hair.

His jaw dropped open. Did she just elbow Jim's grandma out of the way?

No. That wasn't his Erica.

Then she widened her stance like she was defending the line. No way that scrawny teenager was getting passed her. Then he noticed she wasn't alone. Kate was at her back. The women could teach the defensive linemen for the Vikings a thing or two.

He watched with fascination. He'd never seen Erica this way. Then he remembered... KarFire89 would totally take out anyone who got in her way.

A hearty laugh rolled passed his lips.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled, "You got this!"

Liz beamed as she waved her flowers in the air. She turned her back to the women and brought the bouquet back and forth over her head as she counted.

Ryan's attention was glued to Erica. Knees bent, fingers flexing. She would get this bouquet or go down trying.

His dick twitched. She was fierce, and it was sexy as hell.

Liz yelled one, and the flowers flew. It was a mad scrabble of arms and feet, skirts flying. The volume in the banquet hall was deafening.

He caught Erica hip-checking one of Liz's friends from out east.

The dust settled and through the tangle of women, an arm rose victorious with the bouquet.

Erica. Ryan rubbed his cheeks. They ached from laughter.

As the crowd thinned, Erica looked around. Her eyes widened as she spotted him at the edge of the dance floor. He could see the nerves tighten her shoulders as she made her way to him.

"You caught it?" Ryan searched her face.

"Yeah." The flowers shook in her hands. Her gaze traveled the length of him before settling somewhere between his neck and his chest.

"So, does that mean you'll be the next to get married?"

Her head bobbed. "So they say. Now, I just need a groom." Her questioning eyes crept up to meet his. She dropped to her knees. "I was an idiot... be my friend, be my lover, be my gaming partner for the rest of our lives?"

Ryan closed the distance between them.

Her hands shook, and flower petals fell to the floor.

He stood in front of her, love threatening to burst through his chest. He clasped her by the shoulders, pulling her up, then gently slid down her arms.

His warm fingers cradled her ice cold and trembling ones. Nerves. Did she think he'd reject her? Hell, he'd fight any man in the room for her hand in marriage.

He slid to the floor and took her kneeling position. "I'm not the same stupid boy I was in our youth. I see with clear eyes it's you. It always was. Even when I didn't want to see it. I was afraid I'd lose you. And I did."

"Never again." She lowered to face him eye-to-eye and flung her arms around him. Tears leaked from her beautiful eyes, running down those soft cheeks, that trembling chin.

He kissed the wetness from her face and touched his forehead to hers.

"Erica Randall, I will be your friend, your lover, your gaming partner. Will you be my wife?"

She nodded against his as she watched him through watery eyes. A soft "yes" slipped from her lips.

A screech of the microphone cut through the room. "Gentleman, time for the garter toss."

Ryan kissed her. A brush of lips that promised more. "I'll be right back."

Her brow wrinkled. "Where are you going?"

“I need to get the garter. I can’t let my gal show me up.”

She sniffed the flowers and smiled. “Go get it. I’ll be right here when you return.”

And she was.

# Epilogue

“**W**hat are your plans tonight? Anything special for Valentine’s Day?” Erica asked Walker as they replenished the supplies.

The February snowstorm kept Erica and the rest of the fire crew busy. Car crashes, space heater fires, and medical calls, not to mention the heavy snow always brought out a few heart attacks, which was their last call this afternoon.

“Just a rare steak and a *John Wick* marathon session. You?” At her grin, he waved her off. “Never mind. Stupid question. How is cohabitation?”

“He doesn’t officially move in until the end of the month.” She had started packing up the items in her spare room to make space for Ryan’s things. It was slow going. She’d started with the easy things. Bedspread, books. The only things left before they painted were the photos. Those were a stumbling block for her. But it was time. Ryan had offered to do it for her, but she wanted, no needed, to do this herself. And tonight

was the night. She would surprise him with a cleaned-out room and her, naked, on the bed.

Erica had broken down the last box when her phone pinged. Ryan. A grin tugged at her lips.

“Let me guess. It’s from the fiancé.” Walker flashed her an eye roll as he turned the corner.

“Maybe.”

“The fact your cheeks are as red as that stop sign gave it away.” He shook his head. “Did he say any more about Johnson’s trial coming up later this month?”

She sent a quick reply to Ryan, then shoved her phone in her pocket. “Just that the district attorney is feeling confident about the case. Especially when Johnson ratted out Gunter Lindstrom as the money man behind the website. They’re trying to peg Stevens for his part in building the website, but so far, none of the records show he had knowledge of the purpose of the site when he designed it.”

“Did they find any connection between him and the fire files?”

She shook her head. “Sergeant Johnson was at several of the scenes, but Ryan said even a top-tier hacker couldn’t make changes to the fire files without leaving a trace. The evidence doesn’t point to him being our guy.”

“And Winters?”

“He cut a deal. Tony said he was hired through the site to scare me off the track of the corruption. He didn’t admit to

tampering with any reports.” Or her air mask.

Walker’s forehead creased. “You know what that means? We have a fire bug in the department.”

Erica agreed, but the thought of one of their own being an arsonist made her stomach turn.

Another text came in. Ryan’s message said he’d be bringing dinner, and by his emojis—eggplant. She giggled.

“Wow, he really makes you happy. I don’t think in all the time we’ve worked together I’ve ever heard you giggle.”

“He really does. I wasted too many years in my own head.” She glanced at Walker’s profile. His sober look marred his handsome features. “What about you? I don’t see you smiling at texts these days.”

He stared out the station’s truck doors, not speaking. When Erica thought he wouldn’t answer, he glanced over his shoulder at her.

“Seeing you and Ryan get back together after all this time gives a guy hope.”

Okay, that was cryptic, but Erica could read between the lines. He’d lost out on love in his past as well.

“Don’t give up. If something’s meant to be, it will come around again.”

He shrugged. The look in his eyes was miles away. She’d bet money he was thinking of an old flame.

Her phone pinged again, but she didn’t grab it.

Walker shook his head. “We have enough people on. I bet the captain will let you take off early.”

“Sure will,” Rivera said as he crossed the concrete floor. “Go. You’re off the next three days. Get an early start on your downtime.”

“Thanks.” She grabbed her stuff from her locker and headed out.

The roads were icy, and her drive across town took a few minutes longer. She turned the corner. No jeep. *Yes!* She smiled.

Karma’s greetings echoed around the kitchen as she entered.

“Hey, buddy. How was your day?” She scuffed his head and gave him butt scratches as he looped around her. “Come on, you need out and I need to change.”

Once she got into a pair of comfy yoga pants and her favorite AFD sweatshirt, she let Karma back in, and they went into the guest room. Her pup made himself at home on the bed while she pulled an empty bin from the closet.

Wishing she had time for a nap. She checked the time. Ryan shouldn’t be here for two hours. Maybe if she could finish up early, she’d curl up for a little shut-eye.

She pulled photos off the walls. *Yup. It was time.* Sarah’s smiling face stared back at her. Her cheer jersey and pompoms in bright orange complimented her tan skin and blonde locks.

Erica’s throat clamped shut as the swell of emotions forced its way up her windpipe.



She cleared her throat. “Damn it. I can’t cry over every piece of memorabilia in the room.”

Oh, she could and had so far. That’s why it had taken her this long to pack it up. She’d started back in November. But each time she came in the room, she ended up in a ball on the bed with one of Sarah’s photos or her cheer gear. It didn’t matter that her sister wasn’t perfect. Or even that she tried to keep Ryan and her apart. Erica loved her and still grieved.

She sucked in a few deep breaths and held them. Finally, she exhaled. She could do this. She put the first photo in the box.

“One down, fifty to go.” She picked up another and without looking at it, wrapped it in paper and slipped it into the bin.

She stared at the brown paper. Her throat itched. She gulped down tension.

Karma grunted and flipped over.

Erica glanced at him. “It isn’t like I’m throwing them out. No, just storing them in another room... Okay, the attic, but they are still in the house.”

His big eyes slowly blinked.

“I need water,” she told her dog and left the room. She pulled down a glass and opened the freezer.

“Fuck.” She stuck her head in. At this rate, she’d never get the room packed up. She let out a muffled scream of frustration.

“Is this a new form of therapy?” Ryan’s deep voice sounded from the doorway.

Erica whipped around, her heart pounding against her ribs.

“You’re early.” She slammed the freezer door.

“Surprise.” He set a bag of groceries on the counter, then gave her a soft kiss. “I said I was bringing dinner. Well, I’m making it.”

“Oh.” She glanced down the hall.

“Don’t look so thrilled. I promise, I know how to cook. It’s my mom’s lasagna recipe.”

Her stomach growled. “No, that’s wonderful. It’s just…” Her shoulders dropped. So much for her surprise. “Come here.”

She intertwined their fingers and led him to the spare room. A heavy breath heaved out, and she opened the door.

His brow rose. “Cool, you’re making headway.”

“I was hoping to have it all packed up before you came tonight.” She bit her fingernail as she studied her progress.

Warm hands framed her face. “Hey, it’s alright. I don’t have that much stuff. Take your time.”

“It shouldn’t be this hard. But I feel like she died all over again. I know, it’s crazy. I want to move on, and she’s been gone for so long, but… What if I forget?”

“Babe, you’ll never forget. None of us will. Besides, she’s always with you.” He tapped her chest just above her heart where the tattoo was. “S.R. Sarah Randall.”

She blinked. Didn't he know? She figured by the fact he hadn't said anything before now that he'd figured it out. "It's not Randall."

"What? Did she have a different last name?" His brow quirked like she was speaking nonsense.

"No, but the R isn't for Randall."

She watched as the meaning clicked. His eyes softened. His fingers tugged the wide neck of her sweatshirt down, exposing the ink. "Really?"

She nodded. "I got the tattoo a week after her funeral. I may have only buried one of you, but I lost both."

His thumb brushed her cheek and came away wet. Damn it. When had she started crying?

"I'm here now. And always will be." He kissed her, soft and sweet. A promise of forever.

She fisted her hands in his shirt, anchoring him to her. The kissed turned hot, full of heat, longing, and love.

Not a kiss of young love, but one of a love that had endured.

A love that had laid dormant for years and rekindled with the tiniest of sparks. A love that burned so bright and hot that nothing could put it out. Ever.

---

Thank you for reading *Rekindle My Heart*.

Want more?

[Join Ryan and Erica when they rescue Mrs. White's stoned-out cat in this bonus scene.](#)

(Bonus scene link available at [www.dianewiggs.com](http://www.dianewiggs.com))

# Author Notes

I hope you enjoyed Ryan and Erica's story. I loved writing it. Each book in the series leads me down a new research rabbit hole. This one led me right into the next series in the Ashwood world... firefighter. I will kick off the Ashwood Blaze series with Walker's story, coming next year. Have no fear, there will still be a few officers getting books in the future, just not with the corruption tied in. Also, the characters you love will be popping into Ashwood Blaze.

I want to thank all law enforcement officers for their service. Especially, Lieutenant Griffin and Officer Ruesink for their time and willingness to answer my questions. You guys, rock! Let me add, any procedural inaccuracies in the stories are no reflection on the officers mentioned. This is fiction, and as the author, I make choices for the story.

I want to thank my editors, Miranda Darrow and Lisa Fenley. Without them, no one would want to read the grammatical mess that was my first draft.

Thanks to my family and writing friends for all their encouragement. They keep me going when I stumble.

And to all of you who read my books and look forward to the next. Thank you for spending your time in Ashwood.

Diane

## About the Author

**D**iane Wiggs writes romance with a dash of danger. Her protector/romantic suspense novels include steamy tension and a hint of humor. When she's not writing, this Midwestern girl is juggling all of life's tasks. Occasionally, she takes a break to read a book, go on an ATV ride, or just relax at home with her husband and two crazy canines.

To learn more, follow Diane on Facebook, Instagram, or sign up for her newsletter at [www.dianewiggs.com](http://www.dianewiggs.com). It's where she shares all the good stuff.