



SAVED
FROM

Obsession

BLADE & ARROW SECURITY

GIA COBIE

SAVED FROM OBSESSION
(POLICE AND FIRE:
OPERATION ALPHA)

BLADE AND ARROW SECURITY

BOOK TWO

GIA COBIE



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Police and Fire: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

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

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

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

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

No matter what they said, I *knew* the threat was real.

When I first started receiving the letters, I hoped it was nothing. I hoped that the feeling of being followed was in my imagination. That the calls and texts and gifts were a weird joke or a case of mistaken identity.

But it didn't *feel* like nothing. It felt *dangerous*.

The police brushed it off. “*You’re a professional model, Georgia. Surely you’ve had admirers before. I’m sure this is just a gift from one of your fans.*”

Except, it wasn't. And one of those “gifts” was a horrific scar that ruined my life.

But it was over, right? My stalker is in jail.

So how come it's happening *again*?

And now the police are convinced it's just PTSD. *It isn't*. I'm scared, and there's only one place left to turn—Blade and Arrow Security—if they'll agree to help me.

Meeting Georgia is nothing like how I had expected it to be.

When she came to us—scared, stressed, self-conscious, but so *brave*—there was never any question of helping her. Traumatized by not just one stalker, but *two*?

This is what Blade and Arrow does.

But I wasn't expecting to be put in charge of her case.

How could I ever expect her to trust *me*? I'm the intimidating one—always the tallest and biggest in the room—the person people always want at their back, but definitely *not* as their enemy.

But when we meet? There's *something*. An electricity, a heat, a desire to protect her that's stronger than I've ever felt before. But protecting Georgia *has* to be my priority. There's no room for anything else. Or *is* there?

Maybe I can be her protector *and* her boyfriend.

Except—the danger doesn't end when her second stalker is caught. And the threat to Georgia is worse than ever.

If I don't figure out who's behind this sick obsession, I could lose Georgia *forever*.

Saved from Obsession is the second book in the ***Blade and Arrow Security*** series. It's a full-length novel about a former Green Beret and a brave heroine who must overcome a dangerous threat to find happiness together. No cliffhangers and a happily-ever-after guaranteed!

PROLOGUE

GEORGIA

Some days, I wonder if time is playing tricks on me.

Rationally, I know I've been gone for less than an hour. Just a short walk—four blocks each way—plus a quick in-and-out at the grocery store. I only grabbed the absolute necessities and ducked my head the entire time so no one would even think about talking to me.

It was probably only a forty-five minute trip, but each minute seemed to take exponentially longer. By the time I was halfway home, it felt like the sidewalk was stretching on toward infinity.

I forced myself to walk normally and not cave under the weight of dread I was feeling. To ignore my racing heart and shrinking lungs, the cold tendrils of unease sliding up and down my spine. I kept up my normal pace, even though every instinct was telling me to run the rest of the way home.

Now that I'm finally in sight of my apartment building, the wave of icy slick fear starts to recede. Not entirely—*never* entirely—but the promise of my apartment and my cozy couch and a double-locked door are a warm embrace I can't wait to return to. I already have my phone out and ready to open the door—the one good thing the property owner did in the last few years was install a keyless entry system—and take a quick glance around before I come to a stop in front of the five-story brick building.

Even though the winter sun has already set, it's not even eight o'clock, and the streets are well-lit with plenty of people around. During my short journey, I walked past couples holding mittened hands, pet owners briskly walking their dogs, businessmen intently talking on their phones, and not one of them gave me a second glance. I made it to the store and back with no issue. So there was *really* nothing to worry about.

Except. I can tell myself that a thousand times, but I can't seem to make myself believe it. I wish I could. I've been walking the same streets of my neighborhood in Astoria for years and, until recently, I've never been nervous about traveling on my own.

Until a month ago, when I realized my security was only an illusion, leaving me exposed and vulnerable.

As I unlock the heavy glass door and push it open, the tight band around my lungs releases. Warm air wraps around me as I step through the doors, drawing me into the welcome safety of my apartment building. Everything looks as it should—rows of mailboxes, worn burgundy carpet, a bulletin board with notices for cleaners and nannies and dog walkers tacked to it. Once the door closes behind me with a comforting snick, I can finally take a full breath.

I'm not doing that again. I don't know what possessed me to make this evening trip to the store. I could have waited until tomorrow, gone in the daytime. Or I could have just had everything delivered. I didn't need any of the stuff I bought *that* desperately.

But I *do* know why I went tonight. To prove a point to myself.

Two months ago, I would have run to the store at night without even thinking about it. And I hate that I'm scared to do it now. I didn't want to let my fear control me—to be *that* woman hiding out in her apartment from invisible dangers. So I forced myself to go, no matter how badly I didn't want to.

And I guess I proved myself right, in a way. Even though I was afraid to do it, I made it back home just fine. Nothing terrible happened. And now I'm minutes from my apartment,

where I can take a hot shower to wash the chill away, cuddle up on my couch to watch something mindless, and maybe have one glass of wine—not enough to compromise my senses, but enough to ease some of the tension vibrating through me.

Everything is fine. I keep repeating it to myself as I get into the elevator, pressing the button for the fourth floor. *I made it back safely. There was nothing to worry about.*

At least, that's what the police said when I went to the station last week.

They told me that *feeling* like I'm being followed isn't something they can investigate. That the hangups and blocked numbers that keep calling me are probably just spam. When I showed the officer the strange letters I received—all ominous and vaguely threatening—he said they could be a joke. And without a return address on them, or any sort of signature, there was nothing to go on.

I shared the picture I took of the black roses that showed up for me one day at work. And the accompanying note that said, *Do you know what black roses mean?*

The officer raised his eyebrows and gave me a look I've gotten accustomed to over the years—the one that says that since I'm a model, I must not have any brains. He said, with a tiny smirk tugging at his lips, “You're a professional model, Georgia. Surely you've had admirers before. I'm sure this was just a gift from one of your fans.”

I wanted to cry at his dismissive tone, but I just thanked him and left. It was clear he didn't believe me, and nothing I could say was going to make a difference. Even though I've been a commercial and print model for over ten years and never gotten letters that said things like *I'm watching you* and *I'll see you soon*. Or had someone send me flowers that I discovered after a quick Google search signify revenge and hatred.

I've had some admirers over the years, but none of them have ever sent stuff like *that*. But when the officer brushed aside my concerns, there was a moment when I wondered if he

was right. *Was* I overreacting? Could I somehow be interpreting everything wrong? Attributing random calls and the prickles at the back of my neck to something more than coincidence?

Then I got home and found another letter. Still no return address. And there was no way to interpret the message as anything *other* than threatening.

You'll be sorry. Soon you'll pay for your sins.

What sins? Aside from work, I keep to myself most of the time. I have a few friends in the city that I meet for dinner a couple of times a month. There hasn't been a boyfriend in years. Most nights, I stay home watching TV and working on my various crafting projects, or FaceTiming with my mom or my best friend in Texas.

No matter how hard I wrack my brain, I can't think of anyone I've wronged.

A loud ding snaps me back to attention, and the old elevator shudders to a stop. Whenever I get in it, I worry that it'll break and I'll be stuck there for hours, but taking the stairwell with its dim lighting and the metal stairs that echo when you walk on them? *No thanks.*

I head toward my apartment at the end of the hallway, thinking about the hot shower, glass of wine, and some trashy TV I'm going to reward myself with once I get inside.

I'm so close, only a few doors away, when my life changes in an instant.

Everything happens so quickly, I never even get a chance to run. I'm frozen as the world speeds up around me. My brain can't catch up to reality.

Footsteps thump toward me, heavy thuds muffled by the worn carpet.

A large body—radiating heat, smelling like garlic and sweat—slams into me. Almost falling to my knees from the impact, thick arms jerk me back against a solid chest.

I open my mouth to scream and a large hand slams over it.

I'm dragged into the stairwell, one arm around my stomach like a vise. Fighting to breathe past the hand clamped over my mouth, I'm dragging in tiny gasps of air, gray dots swimming in my vision. My lungs are screaming in desperation and fear.

In the stairwell, I'm shoved against the wall, and something sharp pricks my neck.

"Don't make a fucking sound." The voice is hard, rough, coarse sandpaper rubbing. His hand moves from my mouth down to my breast, squeezing hard enough to bruise. The knife—the sharp thing *has* to be a knife—presses against my throat, a whisper away from breaking the skin.

The fluorescent light casts strange shadows across my attacker's face. A baseball cap angles down over his eyes, and a gaiter covers his mouth. All I can see of him is dark clothing, a crooked nose, and pitted acne scars scattered across his cheeks.

My pulse is racing at hummingbird speed, a heavy throbbing in my chest and neck. A fleeting thought—*could I have a heart attack from this*—comes and goes in a flash. It might not matter, not if this man slits my throat right here. Or if he...

No. I can't think about *that*.

"*Please.*" The word comes out without thinking, and the man presses the knife deeper. Something wet trickles down my neck, and I realize he cut me. *Shit.*

He hisses at me, "What did I say about making noise?"

The tip of the blade digs in again, and another rivulet of blood trails down my skin. The logical part of my brain tells me it's a minor cut, nothing life threatening. But my body can't stop shaking.

He moves the knife to my cheek, tracing the cool metal from my cheekbone to my jaw. My legs feel liquid, like they could collapse at any second. But if I fall, he'll cut me. If I'm on the ground, with this man looming over me, it will be ten times worse than looking him in the face.

I've never been this scared in my life. My base instincts are shrieking in my head to scream, to shove at him, to get away however possible. Maybe if he didn't have the knife, I would. But with the sharp blade dragging along the skin of my cheek, wet blood still running down my throat, I can't move. Can't take the chance of him cutting me again.

There has to be *something*. Maybe I can't run, but I can't just *stand* here either. I'm not going to be a passive observer in my own destruction. But if I can't make a sound, or fight back or move, what *can* I do?

For a moment, I force myself to shut everything out. Ignore the fingers digging into my breast, the icy edge on my face, the stinging pain at my neck. Ignore the man's sour smell soaking into my skin, the coppery tang of the blood still leaking out of me.

I shove all of that into a little box and slam it shut to be dealt with later. Right now, I need to come up with *something*.

"I like you better when you aren't talking." The words are soft, contemplative, like he's talking to himself instead of to me. "If only *all* women would just stop fucking talking."

My spine crawls as I wonder how many women he's done this to. How many women he's stalked, trapped in a stairwell, hurt, possibly killed. Did he say the same thing to those women as well? What if I'm just one in a long line of women he's come after?

Why can't I think of anything?

At once, I'm furious with myself. Why didn't I carry pepper spray with me? Why did I have to go out tonight, just to prove a stupid point? What if I hadn't dropped my phone somewhere between my apartment and here, and could have called for help already?

Wait. How did I forget? My watch has an emergency call option, too.

Mind racing, the faintest of hopes fluttering in my chest, I try to remember how to make the call. Something about the side button...

“So *beautiful*.” The man traces the sharp metal along the lines of my face, across my forehead, my chin, then back to my cheek. His tone changes, still low and rough, but now tinged with regret. “It’s *almost* too bad I have to do this.”

Do what? Oh God, is he going to kill me right here in the stairwell? He hasn’t pulled at my clothes yet, but he still could. Is he going to force me back into my apartment and—

NO.

My brain shuts it down before the words can form. Don’t think about that. Think about the *watch*. I’m pretty sure... I *think* I remember... if I hold the side button down, eventually it’ll call 911. Can I get my other hand to my watch without him noticing?

Holding my breath, I stare straight at the man, trying not to give anything away in my expression. I’m shaking so hard already, I hope he thinks any movement is just from that, and not from me trying anything. Several terrifying seconds later, my fingers slip underneath my left sleeve and touch the side of my watch.

Please. I push down on the smooth button and hold it, praying to God that it works.

I count to ten, then ever-so-carefully slide my hand out of the sleeve, moving it back in front of me. It doesn’t seem like he noticed—he’s still staring at me, his eyes in shadow, his hand absently fondling my breast, almost as if he’s forgotten about it.

Then the man takes a breath, and all the air in the stairwell seems to get sucked along with it. In the stillness, time freezes. I’m at the edge of a precipice, and his next move is about to send me falling. How far will I fall? How badly will I be hurt?

Terror is a monster clawing its way out of my chest. Maybe when he makes his inevitable move, that will be the chance I’ve been waiting for. Maybe *then* I’ll have a chance of escaping.

“It’s time for me to go, *Georgia*.” His voice drops, now a sinister warning. “But first, I have to tell you something.” He

pauses and presses the tip of the blade into my cheekbone until it pierces the skin.

“You have to pay for your sins, Georgia.” He chuckles, a dark and horrible rumble. “It’s the only way.”

And then he drags the knife down my cheek, this time slicing open my skin. A fiery blaze of pain follows in its wake, and I cry out—both from the shock and pain. He shoves away from me, and I clap my hand to my face, warm blood filling my palm.

He turns and sprints down the stairs while I stand frozen there, all my synapses misfiring. Nothing makes sense. Random thoughts pinball through my head. *Is he coming back? I need to run. What did he do to my face?*

Run.

My heart exploding in frantic beats, I scramble for the door. After two unsuccessful tries, I manage to push the door open and rush through it. Now that I’m away from my attacker, all my barely controlled panic is breaking over me in waves.

What do I do now? I can’t see my phone, I don’t know how to get into my apartment, and my face is on fire with blood steadily pulsing from it. Is he coming back? I need to get to a hospital—I’m weak with fear and pain and I just need someone to help me.

Forcing my wobbling legs to obey, I stagger down the hallway, banging on each door as I go, shouting at each one, “Help! It’s Georgia, I need help! I live down the hall. Please help me!”

Finally, after what might be a minute or an hour, one door blessedly opens. A twenty-something man who I know only by first name pulls his door open, frowning until he sees me. Then his expression shifts to a mix of concern and horror, and he gasps, “Georgia! What happened?”

“Please.” I’m sobbing by now, all my control completely gone. “The police... Hospital. Someone... cut me. *Need help.*”

He takes my arm and guides me into his apartment and sits me down at his kitchen table. Then everything starts to go fuzzy. He's on the phone, there are voices in the hallway talking in sharp, commanding tones, and my face is throbbing. The neighbor—Paul, I think—comes over to me and hands me a large gauze bandage.

“Let's get this on your face,” he says, as he crouches in front of me. “The ambulance and police are on their way. This will help slow the bleeding.”

Then he pries my hand away from my cheek, hesitating for only a second before placing the gauze firmly over it. And even in the blur of pain and fear and panic, his reaction sears into me. He flinches, shock rippling across his features, and sucks in a hissed breath. “*God, Georgia. Your face.*”

CHAPTER ONE

LEO

No matter how old you get, mothers always seem to know how to make you feel guilty.

“It’s been a long time since you came back for a visit, Leo.” My mother somehow manages to make her tone both pleading and scolding at the same time. “You know your father would love to see you. Show you some of the new things he’s done to the store.”

“I know, Mom. Work has been really busy lately.” Sinking down into my leather office chair, I click open my email and absently scroll through the messages. When she sighs at me, I add, “I’ll try to get there soon.”

I’m hit with another industrial strength sigh, so heavy I can practically feel it gusting through the phone line. “I hope you’re not working *too* hard. You need to take some time off, Leo, relax a little, too.” She pauses, her voice shifting from scolding to concerned. “Are you doing Okay? With... everything?”

My chest tightens, the familiar pressure building. She doesn’t know everything about what happened overseas, but she knows enough to worry about me. Even though I’ve reassured my mother at least a hundred times that I’m fine, and there’s nothing to be concerned about.

“Everything is fine, Mom.” I keep my tone light, forcing a smile as I say it. I read a study online that said if you smile when you talk, it makes the words sound better. And

hopefully, more reassuring to my worried mother. “Like I said, work has been busy since the company is really taking off, but I still get days off. It’s just tough to take long periods of time off right now.”

I’ve been working for Blade and Arrow Security for the last three years, and each year we’ve gotten more business than the last. Blade and Arrow is a private security company that serves two purposes: one for profit, the other charitable. Our advertised role is providing security services to CEOs, celebrities, and other high-level executives. We train their security teams and provide added help with high-risk events and travel.

Those jobs pay the bills, and also allow us to continue our pro-bono work. People from all over the country contact us for help when they have nowhere else to turn. People who are at risk but don’t have the resources or connections to get the assistance they need. When the police have turned them away, and their finances won’t cover a private investigator or security, that’s when we step in.

The company was founded by my former Green Beret teammate after he saw one too many people slip through the cracks. After my team left the Army, Cole was working as a cop down in Texas, and he had a domestic violence case that went bad. The woman was in danger from her abusive ex-husband, but nothing could be proven, so the police weren’t allowed to arrest him.

When the woman was killed after months of threats, Cole decided he wanted to come up with a different way to help. So he founded Blade and Arrow, and decided to allot half the company’s time to helping people in need, for free. Since the company gets paid well for the high-level security jobs, it ends up covering both our salaries and the cost of the services we provide for free.

The pro-bono work was one of the main reasons I joined the company—to be able to still protect people even though I wasn’t in the Army anymore. And getting to join my five teammates—who all decided to join Cole in building his new company—was the other big reason.

We spent years together in the most treacherous of situations and I'd trust each one of them with my life. *Have* trusted them with my life, many times over. Cole, Zane, Rylan, Finn, and Nora—they're the brothers and sister I never had. And being able to work with them again is a gift I never imagined receiving years ago when I made the painful decision to transition out of the Army.

"Well, I hope you can get a vacation sometime this year." My mother's voice is muffled by the sound of running water, and I'm guessing she's washing the dishes she used to cook breakfast.

She always cooks a full meal for my dad before he heads off to open his hardware store, and always the same thing—two eggs over easy, three links of sausage, and two of her special banana bread pancakes. Although she recently told me in confidence that she's using turkey sausage instead of pork and my father hasn't caught on yet.

"I'll try, Mom." Standing up from my chair, I head over to the window and look out at the trees lining the property. They're finally in full bloom after a long New York winter, the maple trees turning bright greens and deep purples. Coming from Vermont, the winters in Sleepy Hollow don't bother me, but some of my teammates like to gripe about the seemingly endless winters here.

"You should bring your friends when you visit." The water shuts off and her voice gets clearer. "I know they can't all come, since you have a business to run. But I'm sure one of them would like to come with you. Get some home-cooked meals."

Glancing at my watch, I notice I only have a few minutes before our weekly meeting. "I'll ask, Mom. But I can't make any promises."

I take a quick look in the bathroom mirror, wanting to make sure I didn't miss a giant patch when I was shaving or leave toothpaste on my chin. But everything looks as it always does—blonde hair just slightly longer than the buzz cut I had in the Army, but not long enough to need a brush, cleanly

shaven face with no cuts or nicks, eyes that can never decide between green and brown.

“What about,” my mother pauses, and I can guess her question before I hear it, “a *woman*?” Her voice lilts up to a hopeful tone. “Have you met anyone?”

“Sorry, Mom, no.” Rummaging in my closet, I find a pair of gray Vans that should come close to matching the Henley I’m wearing. Not that anyone at the meeting is going to care if I match or not, but talking to my mother makes me feel obligated even if she can’t see it.

“I hope you’re leaving yourself open to meeting someone. You’re not getting any younger, Leo.”

And *that* is my cue to get off the phone. “Of course I am.” *I’m not.*

She huffs at me, clearly not convinced by my answer. “Just think about it. You have a lot to offer. Any woman would be lucky to have you.”

I’m not so sure about that. “Okay, Mom. I will. But I have to get to our weekly meeting now. I’m going to be late if I don’t leave right now.”

“Okay.” Her voice softens. “I love you, Leo. Your dad sends his love, too.”

“Love you, too. And give Dad a hug from me. Talk to you next week.” Tapping my earbuds to end the call, I toss them on the table by the door and head out. Another glance at my watch says I’m going to be a few minutes late, but I’m sure no one will mind.

Fortunately, it’s a quick commute to the meeting, since I live right upstairs. All of us have apartments at the Blade and Arrow headquarters—when Cole bought and renovated this place, he thought it would make things easier if he included apartments for all of us.

It’s worked out great so far. There’s a gym and a firing range in the basement for keeping our skills fresh, the security is great, of course—the building is designed to be nearly impenetrable—and there’s even a medical room for first aid if

we need it. It's not all for work though. We have a nice outdoor area in the back with grills and a hot tub that Cole installed to make his fiancée, Maya, happy.

“Hey, looks like I'm not the only one running late.” Finn jogs up from behind me, slapping me on the shoulder as he slows by my side. His black hair is messy as always, he has his ever-present giant mug of coffee in hand, and it looks like he literally rolled right out of bed. But his appearance means nothing—when it comes to the job, Finn is always one hundred percent on point.

When we were in the Green Berets serving on the Special Forces Detachment Team Alpha, or A-Team, Finn was our HAZMAT specialist, and no matter when or where we were, he was completely focused on the task at hand.

My lips quirk into a small smile. “I was on the phone with my mother. She wanted to know when you were going to come visit.”

Finn pushes open the stairwell door and motions for me to go in front of him. He chuckles. “Did she ask you when you were going to bring a woman home with you?”

A small snort bursts out. “How did you know?”

“Because I hear the same thing every time my mother calls.”

Another glance at my watch shows us three minutes late, just as I predicted. We push through the door to the conference room to see our four teammates already there and waiting. I slide into the leather chair next to Rylan, and Finn drops into the opposite one.

Cole is at the head of the table, flipping through a small pile of folders. When he looks up at us, there's a slight flush to his cheeks, like he just came back from exercising. Or having a morning quickie with his fiancée, which, based on his satisfied expression, is much more likely.

Zane is at the other end of the table, his posture relaxed but his icy blue eyes never resting. Even though we're all former

special ops and trained to find danger in any setting, Zane is always on edge, never fully relaxing.

Rylan tips his head toward me and says, “Zane and I were talking about going out for some beers and darts tonight. You in?”

I’m not really in the mood to go out tonight—I’ve been feeling oddly unsettled lately—but staying home isn’t going to make me feel any better. “Sure.”

Rylan lifts his chin at me. “Nice. I think Nora might come, too. She has her meeting tonight, but she said she’d try to meet us after.” Leaning across the glossy wood table, he says, “Finn. Beer and darts tonight?”

Finn takes a giant gulp of his coffee, then answers, “Sure. As long as we’re getting food, too.”

“What about you, Cole?” Rylan glances over at him, his eyebrows raised. “You and Maya want to come, too?”

Cole shakes his head, his mouth curving into a smile. “Sorry, maybe next time. Tonight’s date night. We’re going to that new Italian restaurant that opened downtown.”

It’s weird, until Cole met Maya, I never really thought about finding a wife. I was too focused on the Army, my computers, my friends and family. But seeing their relationship, seeing how deeply Cole loves her and how happy she makes him—it does make me wonder sometimes if I’m missing something.

“Okay.” Cole’s tone switches from casual to business, and we all straighten in response. Even though we’re all friends and can joke before a meeting, once it comes time to discuss our cases—missions—we’re totally focused. “First up, our paid jobs.”

He opens the top folder and glances inside. “We have another training session planned with the security detail for a CEO out in Los Angeles. There have been some breaches, a disgruntled employee actually got into his private residence. I need two people to head there for a week to check out the security system and give his team a refresher course.”

Looking across the table, Cole meets Zane's gaze. "I was thinking you and Finn could go. Does that work for you?"

Zane lifts his chin at Cole. "Sure thing."

Finn nods and runs a hand through his hair. "When do we leave?"

"Next Monday." Cole closes the folder and slides it to the bottom. "I'll send you the files and Maya will get the travel arrangements all set." Although Maya technically works with us as a researcher—she stays at the office and helps me out with investigative work, mainly—she also helps when we need plane tickets and hotels arranged.

"Next—" Cole opens the next folder. "We have an applicant for our pro bono program. A woman out in Maine thinks that her husband is trying to frame her, set her up so she'll lose their upcoming child custody case."

"After looking through her application and some preliminary research, I think the husband is behind everything. But he has a lot of power in the community, so the police may be looking the other way. Nora, I'd like you to meet with her, get a feel for what's going on before we decide to take on the case."

Nora turns to Cole, her dark brown gaze meeting his. "Absolutely."

He gives her a little smile. "Okay. You're set to leave on Friday. And the last case..."

Cole looks between Rylan and me, his brown eyes going somber. "This is a pro bono case, but there's no question of us taking it on. Leo, Rylan, you'll be joining me on this one."

Continuing, Cole says, "This case has a personal connection. You know Hayden, one of the cops I worked with in San Antonio. She's the one who brought this case to my attention."

I've met Hayden a few times when we all went to training exercises near San Antonio. She's one of the most competent and skilled police officers I've ever met, and I know Cole

respects her immensely. If she's asking us to take on a case, I can understand why Cole would say yes immediately.

Rylan's brows go up. "So what's the case about?"

"It's Hayden's best friend from high school. Her name is Georgia Dixon." Cole flips through the papers in the last folder, his jaw going rigid. "She was attacked by a stalker several months ago and was badly injured. She was..." his mouth presses into a hard line. "She *was* a model, and the stalker cut her face. Basically ruined her career."

"Damn." My teeth grind together as I think about it. Not only did the stalker terrorize this woman, hurt her, but he had to ruin her livelihood, too? "Did they catch him?"

"Yes." Cole looks at me, his brows pulled down in a V. "He went to jail. Georgia thought she was safe. Until a couple of months later, when she started getting letters, calls, and strange gifts again."

Zane hisses out a breath, and Finn bites out a low curse. Rylan frowns, then asks, "Is it definitely another stalker? Not just PTSD?"

"Yes." Cole shakes his head. "Hayden has known Georgia since they were in elementary school. If Hayden says Georgia is telling the truth, I believe her."

"Did she go to the police again?" I shift in my chair, tension already running through my body. I have a feeling I know what the answer is going to be.

Cole looks at us grimly. "She did. And the police brushed it off, saying she was imagining things, or she might be sending herself things as a byproduct of her PTSD."

"The fuck?" Zane grits out the low curse. "So the cops failed her two times so far."

"Exactly." Frowning, Cole says, "I'm sure you can imagine how upset Hayden is. She offered to let Georgia come stay with her, but she refused—she's too scared of anyone else getting hurt. So Hayden called me."

"When do we start?" Rylan looks as pissed off as I feel.

“Hayden is staying with Georgia at her house upstate in Ballston Spa until we get a plan in place. They’re both coming here tomorrow to meet with us, so we can get the full story. We’ll need to get as many details as possible from Georgia—she might have been hesitant to share them with Hayden, not wanting to worry her.”

Cole looks across the table at me. “I want you to take point on this. From what Hayden told me about Georgia, I think she’s going to respond best to you.”

“Me?” I can’t help a dry laugh from bursting out. “She’s been stalked by two men and you want *me* to take the lead with her?” At six feet five inches and just topping two hundred and fifty pounds of mostly muscle, I’ve been called intimidating by both men and women more times than I can count. I’m not sure *I’m* the one this poor woman will feel most comfortable around.

“Yes.” Cole nods at me, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. “You listen and don’t miss a single detail, but you don’t push people to talk. When we were trying to figure out who was after Maya, you knew you had to ask her hard questions, but you were sensitive about it.”

“And when I told Maya about this case,” Cole continues, “She said the exact same thing.”

Oh.

I’ve always been the big, scary guy. It doesn’t matter that I’m quiet most of the time, happier to listen than to be the one talking. Or that I prefer the company of computers to people, aside from my close friends and family. I’m seen as the huge guy you want to have your back, and never want to go up against.

That part is true, but it’s not *all* I am.

But if Cole *and* Maya think I could be the best person to help Georgia... Determination surges through me, the confidence of my friends pushing away any doubt. “You can count on me.” I give Cole a quick chin lift. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.”

CHAPTER TWO

GEORGIA

I've been staring out the window for the last half an hour, and I can't remember a single thing I've seen.

Just a blur of green flying by, interrupted by colored flashes of cars and road signs I don't even try to read. I can't think of anything except the same two questions spinning through my head. *What if they don't believe me? What if they say no?*

There's a tiny acrobat that's taken up residence in my stomach, forcing me to take deep breaths to stop myself from vomiting all over my best friend's rental car. My legs won't stop jittering. Whenever I command one leg to stop, the other one picks up the same rapid rhythm. I can't figure out what to do with my restless hands—I know the incessant tapping has to be incredibly annoying—until I finally give up and just sit on them.

I'm more nervous than I was when I went for my first go-see at seventeen, still in high school and so in awe of New York City, I almost fainted with the excitement of it. But that was a different kind of nervous—I *wanted* the job, but my life didn't depend on me getting it. The decision I'm getting at this meeting today is literally life or death for me.

Which is why I'm a complete wreck, and that's saying a lot considering what the last few months have been like.

"Gigi, you need to relax." A cool hand comes down on my forearm, gently squeezing. Hayden glances away from the

road, her dark green eyes narrowed in concern. “You’re going to end up having a panic attack.”

“I was actually more worried about throwing up all over the car.” Breathing through my nose and out my mouth, I try once again to convince my stomach to settle.

My best friend of over twenty years sighs at me. “I told you, G, they’ve already agreed to take your case. I understand why you’re stressed about the other stuff, but you don’t need to worry about *that*.”

“What if they don’t believe my story?” My voice wobbles, my chest getting tight at the thought of it. “Just because they believe *you* doesn’t mean they’ll trust *me*. They could think I’m crazy, just like the police did.”

Hayden flicks another quick glance at me before focusing back on the road. A moment later, she clicks the directional and crosses two full lanes of traffic without slowing, her confidence showing even as she does something as simple as exiting the highway. Having lived in New York City since I was eighteen, my driving is nowhere near as competent.

Now that we’re getting off the highway and nearing our destination, I actually pay attention to the exit sign as we pass it. It announces that we’re headed to Sleepy Hollow, New York, and I briefly wonder if having this meeting in such a well-known and creepy location is a bad omen for me.

“They already believe you, Gigi. I talked to Cole and explained everything. We aren’t coming here for them to interrogate you. They just need all the details so they can come up with the best plan to protect you.”

Ever since Hayden told me about Blade and Arrow Security, and how they provide protection to people even when the police have turned them away, I’ve been clinging to the desperate hope that they’ll help me. It was founded by a friend and former colleague from the San Antonio police department after he got discouraged by the limitations put on officers simply because of red tape and bureaucracy.

Before he was a police officer, Cole was in Special Forces—the Green Berets—and he asked his old teammates to join him. They only take on a couple of pro bono cases each month, and there are way more applicants than they can accept. If I wasn't friends with Hayden, I'm not sure they would be taking my case, so I think that's part of why I'm so scared they'll change their mind and decide to take on someone more worthy.

But they're my last hope. The police wouldn't help me, not with the first stalker or this new one. I don't have any money to hire security myself—after hospital bills, a long recovery, specialists, not to mention all my regular expenses—I'm barely scraping by. And my career as a model is definitely over.

The six-inch scar running down my face took care of that.

That's another reason why I'm nervous about this meeting. I can barely look at *myself* in the mirror. The idea of meeting total strangers, watching them flinch as they see my face—it makes me feel sick all over again.

“We're here.” I was so caught up in my thoughts, I hadn't even noticed that the car had stopped. We're parked in front of a large brick building that looks—aside from the imposing black metal fence around it—much like an ordinary office building.

Hayden lightly hops out of the car and comes around to my side, standing protectively between me and the street. In full cop-mode, she scans our surroundings before she nods at me to get out of the car. As we walk toward the building, she taps out a quick text, and the tall gate swings open for us.

In any other circumstances, I'd chuckle at the sight of my several inches shorter friend acting as my bodyguard. But considering what I've been through over the last several months, I'm so grateful I want to hug her.

Once we pass through the gate, the next few minutes are a blur. A tall brown-haired man with just the right amount of stubble greets us at the entrance, his handsome face breaking

into a grin as he sees us. After hugging Hayden, he introduces himself to me as Cole, and reaches his hand out to shake mine.

As we follow him into the building, another handsome man walks past us—this one also tall, with icy blue eyes and thick black hair. Then we enter a large conference room and I'm faced with two more arrestingly handsome men and I'm wondering if being attractive is a requirement to work here.

They're both tall—one dark-haired and one blonde—and both of them get up from their seats as we walk into the room, standing at full attention. They nod at Hayden, small smiles crossing their faces, then turn their gazes to me. Neither of them makes any visible reaction to my appearance, but given their military training, I imagine they are disciplined enough to hide any sort of emotion.

Hayden heads for the opposite side of the table from them, and I follow her lead. Before we can sit down, the shorter of the two men stretches his hand out to me, a smile breaking out across his face. His expression goes from serious to friendly at once, his bright blue eyes crinkling up at the corners. "Hi Georgia. I'm Rylan Jacobson. I'll be working on your case with Cole and Leo."

"And I'm Leo Wilder. It's nice to meet you." The other man, who is at least half a foot taller than my own five feet ten inches, gently takes my hand in his. My first impression of him is that he's huge—not just tall, but big and muscled all over. His shirt pulls at his broad shoulders and chest, and his arms are easily three times the size of mine.

His size *could* be intimidating, but something about him reassures me. It could be the way he holds my hand so carefully, like he's afraid of breaking it. Or his soft half-smile, friendly with a touch of shyness. Or it could be his warm hazel eyes—gold with a green ring around them—silently promising that he'll protect me.

"Hi." The word slips out in a whisper.

As Leo pulls his hand away from mine, his fingers brush along my palm, leaving little tingling trails behind. He keeps standing, watching me, until it hits me that he's waiting for me

to sit before he does. *Duh*. In my months of isolation, apparently I've forgotten how to behave in public.

Even though Leo's expression is kind, I can't help wondering what he thinks of me. What he *would* have thought of me in my old life, before everything came crashing down around me?

I wonder what all three of the men think about me—do they pity me? I'm sure they saw photos of me before the attack, which makes the reality of what I look like now even worse.

I drop down into the leather chair behind me, feeling overwhelmed and self-conscious and sick with nerves. I don't realize I'm tugging my hair across my face until Hayden kicks me in the shin and whispers, "Stop hiding. You look fine."

Easy for her to say. *She* doesn't look like the Bride of Frankenstein.

Now that all the men are seated, Leo opens the folder in front of him. Flipping to the back, he picks up a pen and jots something down. Then he runs a hand through his short blonde hair and raises his eyes to me. "Georgia," his voice is low, almost soothing, the opposite of what you'd expect from a man of his size. "I'm just going to ask you some questions about everything that's happened."

Hayden leans forward. Her eyes move to Leo. "Sorry to interrupt. It's nothing personal, but..." Her gaze shifts to Cole, "Aren't *you* the lead on this case?"

Cole's eyebrows go up, but Leo doesn't react. There's no flicker of irritation at Hayden's interruption or what I'd consider a slightly rude question.

"*Hayden*." I hiss her name, kicking her just like she did a minute earlier.

She turns to look at me, her brows winging down in a V. "It's nothing against Leo. But Cole and I have worked together, and I just..." Her voice cracks. "I just want to make sure you're *safe*, G."

“I specifically asked Leo to take point, Hayden.” Cole leans forward, resting his elbows on the dark, glossy wood. “Not only do I trust him with my life, but Leo is our lead investigator. We need to look into every aspect of Georgia’s life, try to figure out who’s behind all of this.”

Cole glances at Leo, giving him a tiny chin lift. “Not only will Leo be taking care of the investigation, he’s also the most skilled in surveillance. He’s the better choice for this case, for making sure Georgia is safe.”

Hayden stares at Cole for a second and her cheeks go slightly pink. “I’m sorry, Cole. This is your company, your team. I shouldn’t be presuming to know what’s best. I’ve just been so worried about Georgia.”

I hate seeing the lines of worry etched on her face. It hurts my heart to know that she’s suffering because of me. “I’m sorry, Hayden.”

She looks at me with glassy eyes. “Don’t be sorry, Gigi. This isn’t your fault. And Leo...” Her gaze shifts to him. “I’m sorry. I was out of line.”

Leo’s eyes darken to a deep greenish bronze, and he gives a little shake of his head. “It’s Okay, Hayden. I understand.” He pauses, then looks back at me. “So, Georgia, can you start at the beginning?”

I can feel everyone’s eyes on me as they wait for me to answer. But I have to steel myself to go back to the start, to remember how all of it began, back before I knew how bad it could truly get. Back when I still had hope that it was all in my imagination, or it was just some harmless admirer who would give up, eventually.

Taking a deep breath, I go back to the start of everything.

Looking down at my hands, I say, “It was almost five months ago when I got the first letter. At first, I thought it was a prank. Even though I couldn’t imagine who would send something like that. But it wasn’t threatening, just creepy.”

Leo asks, “What did the first letter say?”

“It said...” I take a deep breath. “I’m watching you. Which is creepy, like I said. But it didn’t seem dangerous.”

Hayden lets out a little huff that lets me know how little she agrees with me.

“It didn’t. Not then, at least.” I glance up at Leo, and he gives me a tiny smile and a nod, his eyes silently encouraging me to continue. “But then the letters kept coming. And the messages got more... ominous.”

“Like what?” Leo’s pen is poised over paper, but his gaze is fixed on me.

My chest tightens, the now-familiar fear and anxiety closing in. My voice is strained as I repeat the messages I’m unable to forget. “They said... *you’ll be sorry. You’ll pay for your sins. You’ll never escape me.*”

“And then?” Leo’s voice is still calm, but there’s an undercurrent of tension to it. “What happened aside from the letters?”

“I was getting hang-ups. Then texts with the same messages as the letters. I wanted to change my phone, but all my employers had my number.” There’s a weight on my chest now, pressing the air from my lungs.

“Maybe... if I had gotten a new number...” My throat gets thick, my nose prickling. “Maybe he would have lost interest...”

“No, Georgia.” Hayden’s tone is quietly commanding. “If it wasn’t your phone, it would have been something else. None of this was your fault.”

“She’s right.” Leo tilts his head at me, his handsome features creased with sympathy. “It wasn’t your fault, Georgia.”

Cole and Rylan are nodding along with him, and it gives me the courage to continue.

So I tell them about the strange gifts that started showing up: black roses, broken mirrors, creepy jewelry decorated with skulls and eyeballs. All things that weren’t overtly threatening

—nothing dead or bloody or dangerous—but they definitely scared me.

I tell Leo about the letters that came almost daily by the time a month had gone by. All with the same sinister messages. About how I went to the police with the letters and gifts, and they told me there was nothing they could do. Without a return address or any identifying marks, there was no way of knowing where they came from.

When I tell the men about how the police officer suggested the gifts were innocent tokens from my fans, Rylan bites out a low curse, Cole's expression goes thunderous, and Leo's jaw could cut glass.

Then I start to talk about the night of my attack, and I have to stop halfway through to compose myself. My pulse is roaring in my head, my heart fluttering so fast I feel light-headed. It takes a full minute of deep breathing to wrestle the rampaging memories back under control.

I tell them how my attacker was caught by the police, thanks to the emergency alert from my watch. It actually worked as intended and the police captured the man just as he was leaving my apartment building—the blood on his knife was the proof they needed to arrest him.

If only all the other evidence I gave the police had been as effective.

Tears are pressing at the back of my eyes, but I ruthlessly push them back. If I start crying now, I'll never get through the rest of it.

I know my face is contorting in awful expressions as I keep trying not to cry. Hayden takes my hand under the table, the warmth of her skin soaking into my chilled fingers. Leo's features are hard, and his jaw is working, but his eyes are kind as he looks at me.

“Can you tell me the rest, Georgia?” His words are gently encouraging. “You're doing so well. I think it will be easier if you just get through it in one go, but if you need a break, that's completely okay.”

I don't want to, but I make myself do it anyway. "Okay." My throat is so dry, the word barely croaks out. Rylan hops up from the table and grabs a water bottle from somewhere, opening the top and sliding it in front of me. "I don't need a break. I want to finish this."

In a rush of stuttered words and pauses, I push through the rest.

The hospital. Plastic surgeries. Leaving my apartment and moving in with a friend outside the city because I couldn't bear to look at the hallway where I was attacked. Then two months of recovering and trying to figure out how to piece my life back together.

As I look into Leo's hazel eyes, a kaleidoscope of greens and bronzes, I tell him about the letter I got last month. And the dozens more since then. Everything happening just as before, except my attacker is still in jail.

My jaw clenched so hard it's shooting pains down my neck, I force out the rest. "I went to the police again, and they thought I was imagining things. That it was probably just PTSD making me overreact. And then they actually suggested that I was sending the letters to *myself*."

"I couldn't put my friend at risk." Sniffing hard, I clutch Hayden's hand under the table. It's the same reason I refused to move in with Hayden and her husband. I'm not going to let anyone else get hurt like I was. "So I found a rental house further upstate."

"I had hoped maybe the stalker wouldn't find me... but a week after I moved, the letters followed me there. And now—" my voice wobbles, "I don't know what else to do. I don't have enough money left to hire private security or an investigator. And I'm *so scared*. All the time."

"*Gigi*." Hayden's voice is a pained whisper.

"Hey." Leo leans over the table, his tone rough, the expression in his eyes intense as he looks at me. "*We* are going to help you. We're going to figure this out. *I promise*."

CHAPTER THREE

LEO

Meeting Georgia is nothing like how I had expected it to be.

I went into the meeting feeling sympathy for her, knowing the trauma she'd been through. That she is *still* going through.

Just like the other clients we help, I was angry at the circumstances that sent her to us. No woman should be terrorized like that, brushed off by the police who are supposed to help her, left on her own and terribly injured.

And I was determined to get whatever information I could to help this woman. To protect her from being hurt again.

But I wasn't expecting to meet a woman like *her*.

I had seen photos of Georgia before she arrived. First, the carefully posed modeling shots, and then the awful images from the police report taken after her brutal attack. Neither of them prepared me for the woman sitting across the conference table, so beautiful and vulnerable and brave and selfless, it makes my heart hurt just looking at her.

Her eyes are the first thing I noticed about her—wide and rimmed with a brush of long lashes, sky blue with a ring of deep sapphire at the center. Her heart-shaped face is set off by high cheekbones and full rosy lips. But during most of our conversation, her mouth was bracketed by tiny lines of stress, or pressed together in a trembling line—I wonder what she'd look like when she's actually smiling.

When I leaned in to shake her hand, I saw a tiny smattering of light freckles across the bridge of her nose and her cheeks.

Georgia is tall for a woman, probably a few inches under six feet—if she stood next to me her head would fit right under my chin. She’s slender—almost too thin—with delicate wrists peeking out from her oversized shirt, the light fabric clinging to the line of her collarbone. I tried not to look at her body, not wanting to make her feel uncomfortable, but I couldn’t miss the swell of her breasts or the way her hips flared out from her narrow waist.

As Georgia talked, she would tilt her head so her hair would fall in a curtain across her scarred cheek, the sleek length of caramel and butterscotch brushing the table. She’s obviously self-conscious about the scar, and any time she looks at someone it seems like she’s bracing for their reaction.

Did someone tell her she was ugly? Or has she convinced herself of it?

The scar is a thin line about six inches long, stretching from her cheekbone to the line of her jaw. It’s light pink and slightly swollen, still healing after the attack that only happened a few months ago. But the scar isn’t ugly, it doesn’t take away from Georgia’s beauty, the only ugly thing is the event that put it there.

It’s not just her looks that drew my attention. Although I’d have to be blind not to notice her. It’s the bravery and selflessness she showed—is showing—as she’s dealt with not just one stalker, but two.

Instead of taking the chance of endangering her friends by living with them, Georgia moved to a new place on her own. After months of terror, she still hasn’t broken. And though she was cruelly hurt—scarred mentally and physically—she still had the courage to come here and ask complete strangers for help.

And one last thing.

When I touched her hand, I didn’t want to let go. Her skin was the softest silk, but our touch was electric. I’m not sure

I've *ever* felt that kind of reaction to a woman I just met.

But she's a client, Hayden's best friend, and Cole is trusting me to protect her. So it doesn't really matter *how* I felt when I touched her. What matters right now is going over the plan we've come up with, answering any questions Georgia may have, and putting the plan into action.

Especially because Georgia is still watching me with a mixture of hope and disbelief, like she thinks I'm going to say we changed our minds, and we're actually *not* going to help her after all.

Raising my gaze to Hayden, then Georgia, I say, "Okay. I'm going to go over our plan for not only protecting you, but finding the person behind all of this. If you have any questions, don't be afraid to ask."

"And if there's anything you feel uncomfortable with, tell me. Your safety is our priority, but we also want to make sure we're not causing you undue stress. Does that sound good?"

Georgia gives me a little nod, hair falling in her face again, and says quietly, "Yes. Whatever you think is best... I won't complain about *any* of it."

"If anything comes up at any time, questions, concerns, let us know. Any of us." I tilt my head toward Rylan and Cole. "We are *all* here to help you."

"Thank you." Georgia twists a lock of hair between her fingers, staring at the table before looking back up at me. "You don't know how much this means to me."

Part of me wants to get up from my chair and give her a hug—God knows, she looks like she needs one—but I shove my emotions to the side and get down to business. "We're going to be coming at this from a two-pronged approach. We'll be providing protection, of course, but also running an investigation into the identity of your stalker."

"I'll have to ask you a lot of questions about your past, people you were friends with, worked with, anyone who could be holding a grudge. I won't lie—it can be overwhelming having to go through everyone you know and consider that

one of them could have the intent to harm you, but it's something we have to do."

"I know." Her voice is soft. "I've thought about it myself hundreds of times. But if you can find something... I'll do whatever it takes."

I dip my chin at her in appreciation. "As for the protection, you're going to be under twenty-four-seven surveillance. One of us will be with you at all times, and you'll have a tracker to wear."

"What kind of tracker?" Hayden jumps in. "Wearable or subcutaneous?"

Georgia turns to look at Hayden, her eyebrows arching up in surprise. "Under the skin? Like a microchip they put in dogs?"

"That's an option, but we were thinking of something wearable. Earrings, if your ears are pierced, a necklace if not." Pausing, I catch Georgia's gaze. "Unless you would prefer an implant?"

"Um." Her brow wrinkles, and small white teeth worry her lower lip. "Maybe the earrings? I don't know how I feel about something *in* my body. If that's okay?"

"Of course it's okay." Now I have the urge to smooth the lines from her forehead. "Like I said, we're going to protect you, but if we can do it in a way that makes you feel more comfortable, that's what we'll do."

Georgia flashes me a grateful look, and I continue. "In order to keep up the surveillance without anyone suspecting we're involved, we're going to be moving you to a new location. We don't want your stalker to know that we're protecting you—we want him to make a move, so we can catch him."

"Make a move?" Her voice rises, a hint of panic bleeding through.

"Something we can catch on camera," I'm quick to reassure her. "The house we're taking you to is fully alarmed and set up with security cameras. And we will be in the house

with you at all times. So there's no way the stalker can get to you. But if he shows up, tries to leave something for you or gets inside, we'll apprehend him at once."

"Thanks to a connection of ours, we're going to be moving into a duplex upstate. It's the perfect location because not only has it been used as a safe house, but it has inside access from one side of the duplex to the other. So you'll be living on one side, and the three of us will have our own cover story for the other. That way, we can protect you without anyone knowing we're there."

"Will he know..." Georgia picks up her now empty water bottle and fiddles with it. "Will he know I'm there? If my stalker is supposed to find me..."

"You'll be listed as the tenant," I answer, "And your new address will be changed on all your records. Driver's license, credit cards, forwarding address—if he found you both times after you moved from the city, he'll be able to find you here, too."

"Okay." Her lips purse into a pink bow, "Won't that take a long time, though?"

Cole jumps in to answer her question. "Nope. It's already in the works. Leo is a whiz at computers, and a friend of mine from Texas—her name is Beth—is helping out. Between the two of them, everything will be changed by the time you move."

I lift my chin at Cole in acknowledgement, then look back at Georgia. "It'll take us a couple of days to get everything finalized. I'm sorry we can't move you in sooner. If you don't want to stay at your house until then, we have an apartment here that we use for clients. You're welcome to use it."

"I'll stay with Gigi until you guys are ready." Hayden is quick to answer. "I'll drive with her to the new place and head home once everything is all set."

"Are you sure, Hayden?" Georgia frowns at her friend. "You've already taken time off work, and I know you miss Boone."

“Of course, it’s fine,” Hayden tsks at her. “You’re my best friend. And Boone is fine. He can wait to see me for another couple of days.”

Georgia looks like she wants to argue, but instead she presses her lips shut. After a pause, she shifts her gaze to mine. “Thank you. Really.” Her eyes slide to Cole and Rylan before returning to me. “I am so thankful to you all. I wish I could pay you something... Maybe once this is over, and I find a job, I can pay you back.”

Cole immediately shuts down the idea. He says kindly, but firmly, “We won’t take your money, Georgia. Don’t even think about it.”

After another flustered round of thank yous from Georgia, I give Hayden the address of the duplex and tell her I’ll be in touch to set up the time to meet there. Georgia thanks us one more time before Hayden gently tells her they need to leave.

I get up to walk them out, and we’re just about to leave the room when Georgia’s phone starts to vibrate in her purse. Her entire body tenses, her spine going razor straight, and she stops so abruptly Hayden almost runs into her. She looks at Hayden, her eyes dark and conflicted.

“Go ahead,” Hayden urges. “If it’s a message from the stalker, these guys should see it.”

Georgia sighs heavily, her shoulders collapsing. She whispers, “okay,” and reaches into her purse. With a shaking hand, she pulls out her phone, swiping the screen to read the text that just came in.

After a moment, she lets out a shocked gasp, sharp and full of fear. All the color drains from her face and she starts to shake, little tremors wracking her body. Her fingers tighten around the phone until all her knuckles are white.

“G!” Hayden grabs her friend’s arm. “What is it?”

Georgia’s gaze is glazed and vacant—whatever she saw must have triggered her. She sways, and I wrap my arm around her waist without thinking. She doesn’t resist, just trembles

against me as I lead her over to a chair. I'm not sure if she's even aware of me, or if she's disassociated completely.

I kneel in front of her, placing my hand on her knee. Hayden hovers at Georgia's side, worry etched into her features. Cole and Rylan are up from their chairs, but are standing back so as not to crowd her. Whenever Georgia comes out of the state she's in, the last thing she'll want is three big men surrounding her.

I should probably step back as well, let Hayden comfort her friend, but I can't seem to make myself move away. Maybe it's because I've dealt with PTSD myself, and I think there's a chance I could help her. Or is it because I can't bear the thought of leaving Georgia when she's suffering?

Hayden is speaking quietly to Georgia, reassuring her she's okay. Georgia is still shaking, her skin chalk-white, breath sawing in and out in painful gasps. I rub my thumb across her knee, keeping my touch gentle and soothing. Adding my words to Hayden's, I keep saying softly, *you're safe, we won't let him hurt you, and everything is going to be alright.*

After several minutes, her breathing evens out, and awareness blinks back into her eyes. The blankness is replaced by fear and confusion, and her gaze jumps back and forth between Hayden and me. She doesn't say anything—her jaw is locked and her lips are trembling—I think she's doing everything she can not to fall apart in front of us.

I slide the phone from her icy hand, but I can't read the message without asking Georgia to unlock it. Which I'm not going to do right now, not when she's so obviously upset.

But Georgia surprises me. She takes the phone back and looks at it long enough to unlock it, then shoves it away like it's poisonous. Hayden leans over as I open the message, and we both recoil at the same time—what's on the screen is much worse than I could have imagined.

It's a video compiled of dozens of images, all of them photos of Georgia. Some are posed shots, others taken from behind by someone who was clearly following her. And some of the photos are the ones I saw in the police report, taken in

the hospital, a line of black stitches running up Georgia's face. Throughout the video, messages splash across the screen, hateful words and violent threats.

It's awful, made even worse because the target is this vulnerable woman sitting in front of me. A blaze of anger rushes through me—I want to track down the person who sent that video and beat them bloody. Torture them just like they're torturing Georgia.

"Let me see." Cole walks up behind me, and I thrust the phone back toward him.

Speaking over my shoulder, I say quietly, "Send me the video. I'll try to find out where it came from later." I doubt the sender left anything identifiable in the video, but if there's anything there, I'm going to find it.

"I'm sorry." Georgia whispers the words to her lap. "I didn't mean to..." Two bright spots of pink appear high on her cheekbones. "I'm so embarrassed..." She swallows hard, her features crumpling, then she buries her face in her hands.

She hunches over her lap, her hair falling in long curtains on either side of her face. Her shoulders shake with silent sobs—even when she cries, she's hiding it. Hayden looks miserable, distress pulling her mouth into a grimace. And I'm struck with the irrational desire to fold Georgia into my arms, rub her back, and hold her until she stops crying.

Rylan appears out of nowhere with a box of tissues, handing them over to Hayden. He returns to stand beside Cole—both of them have matching expressions of unhappy concern. Hayden hands over a few tissues and I watch as Georgia pulls herself together, straightening up, wiping her face, and sucking in long shaky breaths.

I'm still kneeling in front of Georgia, so her gaze meets mine first. Her lashes are wet, eyes red-rimmed, but the blue is bright as ever. There's a quick zap of something between us—the tingle when you get a shock from static electricity—except it's a pleasant kind of pain instead of a bad one.

The room is filled with a heavy silence. No one seems to want to be the one to break it, until Georgia finally blurts out, “I’m sorry.”

Not again. She really needs to stop apologizing for being upset. If she wasn’t upset after seeing that video, *then* I’d think something was wrong with her.

“Stop.” My voice is rougher than I meant it to be, and I gentle it before continuing. “Georgia, don’t apologize. We’re *all* upset.” I pat her knee and say, “It’s a natural reaction. Even Rylan cries sometimes, like the times we beat him in darts and he claims we’re cheating.”

“Hey.” Rylan jumps in, immediately understanding what I’m doing. “I wasn’t crying. It was dusty in there. And you did cheat. I never lose in darts. That’s a fact.”

“What about when you lost to Maya?” Cole moves so he’s in Georgia’s view. To her, he explains, “Rylan brags about being so good at darts, he trained as a sharpshooter, and he loses to my fiancée, Maya. Who has no weapons or military experience at all.”

One corner of Georgia’s mouth is pulling up, not a smile, but getting close to it. “I’m pretty good at darts.” Her voice is still soft and uncertain, but at least it’s not wobbling.

“We could get a dart board set up at the duplex.” I’m sure the owner won’t mind some holes in the wall. I can always spackle over them later.

“Oh yeah,” Rylan chuckles. “Then I’ll show you all who the champ really is.”

“What do you think?” I meet Georgia’s gaze, relieved to see some of her fear fading. “Should I bring a dart board along? Maybe some other games, too?”

I’m rewarded with a slight curve of her lips. “I would really like that.” Then a pause, and a small smile spreads across her features. “I love games. If you don’t mind...”

“I don’t mind at all, Georgia. I’m happy to do it.” If she wants games, I’ll bring a huge stack of them for her. Anything to see that smile again.

CHAPTER FOUR

GEORGIA

My emotions have been bouncing around like they're in a pinball machine ever since I got up this morning.

I start to feel hopeful that the end of this nightmare might be in sight, but then fear comes crashing into it. The best way to catch my stalker is if he shows up where I'm staying, but the thought of him getting that close to me is terrifying. Even though I know I'm going to be protected by experts, my mind can't stop what-if-ing.

Anticipation has been building since the moment Leo told me that Blade and Arrow was going to help me. There's a lift of excitement that things are headed back in a positive direction, that once the stalker is gone I can start to rebuild my life, even if it won't be the same as before.

Then worry works its way in, knocking the anticipation off track. I'm going to be essentially living with the three men who are supposed to protect me, and I haven't lived with anyone in years. They all seemed nice when I met them, and I'm not concerned that they'll hurt me, but I can't stop the anxiety from slithering in.

And then there's the constant self-consciousness that follows me everywhere I go. I know it's the least of my worries, and so superficial I shouldn't even think about it. But I can't stop. These men are going to see my damaged face every day, and I hate it.

I could have been hurt so much worse than I was. I could have been *killed*. But for much of my life, my face and body were the only things I had of value. And now that one of them has been ruined forever, and I don't know where it leaves me.

But that's something I'll have to deal with later. Once the stalker is gone—*oh please, let him be stopped*—that's when I'll have to face my new reality. A former model with only a high school diploma and barely any money left to live on, trying to find a new career and identity.

For now, I just need to concentrate on doing whatever the Blade and Arrow guys tell me. If there's anything I can do to make their jobs easier, I'll do it. Go over everyone from my past with Leo a hundred times over? Done. Cook for them whenever they're on guard duty? I'll do that, too, though I'm not sure if they will appreciate my sad attempts at cooking.

I was a model living in a tiny studio in New York City. Cooking wasn't exactly a priority for me. But I can practice. Figure out some way to show my appreciation for everything they're doing for me. I could knit them all scarves, crochet them gloves or mittens, but I don't really think that's the kind of gift they would like.

Picturing Leo, all six-plus feet of him, with a fuzzy scarf draped across his broad chest? I don't see it. He probably doesn't even wear a winter coat. I bet he's one of those men who never feels the cold, could wear a T-shirt even in the winter.

When he touched my knee, I could feel the heat of his hand nearly burning into me. I know it didn't mean anything—he was just trying to help me—but I haven't forgotten the comforting weight of his hand since then. And for such a big man, he was surprisingly gentle.

I didn't talk to Cole and Rylan as much as Leo, but they both seemed perfectly nice. Kind. Respectful of my space—I noticed they were careful not to crowd me, like they thought that because of my trauma, I might be afraid of them. And I appreciated it, even though my experience hasn't made me afraid of all men.

And when Leo looked at me with his warm hazel eyes, a small smile pulling at his lips as he asked about playing darts? I *definitely* wasn't afraid of him.

Not that I'm expecting him to actually bring a dart board. I'm sure the guys have more important things to do than play games with me. I brought a stack of books, along with a giant tote of crafting materials, and that should be enough to occupy me.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay here the first night?" Hayden sets the last of my bags on the living room floor and looks at me with concern. In the week since she got to New York to stay with me, it's become her default expression. Not that I blame her—if the positions were reversed I'd feel the same way—but I still feel bad about it.

"No, Hayden. It's really okay." I force a smile, hoping it looks more genuine than it feels. "Leo and Cole and Rylan are here, I'm totally fine. Your flight is set to leave in a couple of hours. Go home and spend some time with your sexy husband."

Her eyes flash with happiness, but it quickly fades. "I wish this wasn't happening to you, G."

"It's going to be alright." I pull my best friend into a hug. Infusing my voice with confidence—one thing I learned in my years of modeling was to fake it until you make it—I say, "You said these guys are the best. They'll catch my stalker, and then I can come visit you and Boone in Texas. Meet all your other friends I've heard so much about."

"Yeah..." Hayden's voice trails off. "You have to come visit soon."

"I will. Once this is all over. But I want to come when it's baby cow season." Hayden's husband owns a cattle farm, and he raises high quality cows and heifers. I've seen some photos of the calves and they're the cutest things ever.

Hayden's lips lift into a smile. "Well, some of them are just being born now. But they'll be small and cute for a while, so you've got a few months to work with."

I hope it's all figured out by then. Hayden must be thinking the same thing, because her green eyes go dark. “Gigi...”

“Hey, look at the time.” I’m going to start crying if she gets emotional. “What about that flight?”

“I don’t want to leave until Cole and Leo get over here.” Her tone leaves no room for arguing, and I wasn’t planning on it, either. Even though I know they’re all on the other side of the duplex, so I wouldn’t *really* be alone, I’ll feel safer with one of them here with me.

We couldn’t exactly show up at the same time, so the Blade and Arrow guys arrived yesterday. Their cover story is that they’re starting an IT management business, and most of their work will be done from home.

When Leo explained it over the phone yesterday, I have to admit I was impressed. They have business cards, decals for their cars, extra computers to take in and out of the house, even references if someone calls to look into them. The one thing is that they don’t exactly *look* like computer nerds, but since Leo is Blade and Arrow’s actual computer expert, he certainly proves the stereotype wrong.

As if I summoned him, the door between the two sides of the duplex swings open and Leo walks through, followed by Cole and Rylan.

Leo walks over to me, stopping a few feet away. His eyes turn a liquid green-gold as they look at me, his brows pulling down over them. “How are you doing, Georgia? Was the trip here alright?”

If it hadn’t been, Hayden would have called him immediately, but I just nod and say, “I’m okay. The trip was fine.”

Wow. I’m a real wordsmith here. But when I look at Leo, my brain seems to split in two directions. Half wants to meet his gaze, smile at him, make actual conversation. But the other half wants to duck away, hide so he can’t see my face.

“Have you had a chance to look around?” Leo pulls his gaze from me, and I let out a tiny breath of relief.

“Not really.” *Okay, say more words.* “Hayden and I were talking, so I haven’t checked out the place yet.” I flick a look at Hayden. “But she has to leave soon to catch her flight.”

Hayden rolls her eyes at my unspoken message, and it’s like we’re back in high school again, laughing over guys and meaningless gossip. “Yes,” she says. “I’m leaving, but I just wanted to make sure G was all set first.”

Rylan and Cole give me nods and quiet hellos before heading over to one of the living room couches. Leo gestures for me to go ahead of him, and I take a seat on the couch opposite. Once Hayden and Leo are sitting, Leo starts, “Just a few things to go over—we talked about most of it the other day.”

He crosses one muscled leg over the other, and I can’t ignore how the fabric of his jeans clings to them. *Stop it.* I give myself a mental slap. He’s here to protect me, not for me to stare at him.

“So, we’ll be on a rotating schedule.” Leo glances between Rylan and Cole, then over at me. “Each of us will be with you for eight hours, and the other two will be rotating between surveillance and sleep. Basically, we’ll have eyes on the cameras *and* you the entire day.”

Wait, what? “*All* the time?”

Rylan chuckles, and Leo’s lips spread into a grin. “Not *all* the time, Georgia. We’ll give you privacy, obviously. But we’ll always be right nearby, one room over, that sort of thing.”

“Okay.” I can feel my cheeks flushing. “Sorry if that was a dumb question.”

“It wasn’t,” Cole answers. “Always ask questions if you aren’t sure. And something else, make sure to always leave the doors unlocked so we can get to you. Not that we’re expecting trouble, but it’s better to be safe...”

I nod at him. “Got it. No locked doors.”

“And we have to keep the blinds shut.” Leo looks at me apologetically. “I know it’s not ideal, but we don’t want anyone seeing that we’re over here.”

“It’s okay, I understand.” Something strikes me, a question I hadn’t thought of until now. “If I’m not supposed to be seen with any of you, and I’m not supposed to be alone, I guess that means no going outside, either?”

“Yes.” Leo’s golden brows go down, and he runs his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, Georgia. I know it’s nice out, and it sucks to be stuck inside, but it’s the only way to keep you totally safe.”

“Won’t that seem suspicious?” Hayden leans forward, fixing her gaze on Leo. “For someone to move in and never to leave? Not even to go to the store? Or out in the yard?”

“It might to the average person,” Leo answers. “But to the person who’s been stalking Georgia, they’re going to know exactly why she isn’t coming out of her house.”

Hayden glances at me, her green eyes a dark forest. “I hate the idea of you stuck inside with no sun.”

“It’s okay.” I feel like I’ve been saying this a lot. Glancing between her and Leo, I direct my statement to both of them. “I’m willing to do whatever it takes to stop this guy. If it means staying inside for weeks, I’ll do it. Whatever you say I need to do, I’ll do it without complaint.”

Leo’s eyes move to mine, a flicker of emotion darkening his gaze. But it’s gone before I can identify it, leaving me wondering if I saw anything at all.

After a few more minutes, all our questions have been exhausted, and it’s time for Hayden to leave. She gives me a tight hug, squeezing me hard enough to make my back crack. Her voice is strained with emotion as she says, “Call me anytime, Gigi. Even if it’s the middle of the night. I mean it.”

“I will.” My chest feels tight as she pulls away, but I keep my smile steady. “Go home and tell Boone I said hi. Send me lots of baby cow pictures.”

Hayden gives me a jerky nod and heads for the door. Just before she leaves, she turns back, sweeping her gaze across the three Blade and Arrow men. “Take care of my best friend, okay?”

All three of them give her somber nods and echoing *we wills*. As she shuts the door behind her, I'm hit by a sense of loss. After months of struggling through all this on my own, it's been nice to have my best friend beside me.

Leo looks over from the couch at me standing near the front door, and I think he can tell I'm near tears, because his serious expression softens. "Why don't you take some time to unpack, Georgia? Take a look around. I'll be here for dinner. I was thinking of ordering pizza if that works for you."

Swallowing against the lump in my throat, I give him a tiny nod. "Pizza is good."

The corner of his mouth pulls up, and his eyes glint at me. "Anchovies and pineapple?"

I can't stop the instinctive face of disgust I make, and a little laugh comes out of nowhere. "Anything but that. Maybe just cheese and pepperoni?"

"You got it." He grins at me, and the knot in my chest releases a little. "And after dinner, I'll show you the surprise I brought."

A surprise?

* * *

HE BROUGHT GAMES. Not just a few, but a giant stack of them.

The pizza was all cleared away and the dishes were in the dishwasher, and I was just sitting down on the couch with my book when Leo went over to the door between the two sides of the duplex and gave it a sharp knock. A moment later, it opened and there was a rumble of voices, then an odd rustling sound.

I was trying to mind my own business, staring at the pages even though I wasn't reading a word.

Then Leo said, "Georgia," in his low, rumbly voice, and I looked over at him. Piled high in his arms was a stack of at least ten board games, almost reaching his chin.

I can't believe he remembered.

"Leo!" I drop my book on the couch cushions and gape at him.

"You said you liked games." He walks over to the coffee table and places the stack of boxes on it. His eyes search out mine, his eyebrows pulled up in question. "I wasn't sure which games you liked best, so I just got a bunch of them. I know it's going to get boring being stuck here all the time, so I thought..."

Oh. I can't believe he did this for me.

For a moment, I forget about everything else—my stalker, my scar, being unemployed, all the crap from the last few months—and I feel almost normal again. I know I'm not, and this situation isn't. I'm hiding inside a safe house with a bodyguard from not just my first, but my *second* stalker, but for a moment, all that washes away.

For a moment, I can pretend I'm spending an evening with a friend, having pizza and playing board games, and I'm so thankful to Leo for remembering I could hug him.

"Thank you." I smile at him, a real one, not forced. But the action tugs at the still healing skin on my cheek, and the urge to duck my head away is intense. Every time I forget about the scar, something brings it rushing back. But I won't turn away from Leo, not after he brought these games for me.

My hands clutch the couch cushions—I so badly want to pull my hair in front of my face. Leo stares into my eyes for a second, then turns and busies himself with the games, giving me a tiny reprieve. "What would you like to play first?" he asks, still sorting through the games. "I have Monopoly, Scrabble, Life, Jenga..."

"Scrabble." I don't have to think about it. "If that's alright with you."

Plucking the Scrabble box out of the pile, Leo turns around and gives me a crooked grin. His eyes are more green than gold and they're crinkled up in the corners. "Are you sure

about that, Georgia?” There’s a teasing note to his voice, so different from the serious tone he had when we first met.

“Yes?” Just because I think he’s teasing doesn’t mean he really is. I haven’t exactly spent a long time with Leo, and I could be reading him all wrong.

As he opens the box and starts laying out the board, he says, “I’m just asking because, in some circles, I’m known as the Scrabble King.” His gaze moves from the board to mine—this time I’m *sure* he’s joking. “I just wanted to warn you. In case you wanted to change your mind and play something else.”

“No, I want to play.” I grab the bag of tiles and give it a vigorous shake. “I’ll have you know, I actually *won* a Scrabble tournament. So I’m not afraid.”

“A tournament? That *is* impressive.” Leo settles himself on the floor across the coffee table from me, folding his large frame into an uncomfortable-looking pretzel. He selects his tiles, studying them as he places them on the tray.

His lips twitch as he looks back at me. “I don’t know that I’ve ever played against a tournament champion before. Maybe I *should* be worried.”

“It was in high school,” I admit, my own lips curving. A little laugh bubbles up at my own admission. “I can’t believe I just told you I played in a Scrabble competition. That’s pretty embarrassing, actually.”

“No, it isn’t.” Leo glances at the board. “You can go first.”

After some consideration, I play the word *checkers* on the double letter and triple word spaces. This time when I look at Leo, it’s with a little burst of satisfaction.

“Damn.” Leo chuckles. “You weren’t kidding.”

“I used to play with my mom all the time when I was a kid,” I explain. “One year the public library had a competition. The top prize was one-hundred dollars in gift cards to some of the stores in town. I thought if I won, I could give them to my mom as a Christmas present.”

Leo pauses as he's placing his tiles on the board, raising his gaze to me. "That's really amazing, Georgia. I bet your mom was thrilled. And it's not at all embarrassing."

A burst of pleasure heats my chest, radiating all the way to my cheeks. "Thanks. Not just for that." I pause, not wanting to say the wrong thing. "For remembering the games. And playing Scrabble with me. I know you don't have to be doing this right now, but... I really appreciate it."

Leo's gaze doesn't leave mine, and for once I don't feel self-conscious. "It's my pleasure, Georgia. And you don't need to thank me. I love playing board games, too."

Then his serious expression shifts to one more devious, and he quickly adds his tiles to the board. With a wide grin, he lifts his hand away to show the word *slippery*, also hitting a double letter and triple word tile. He winks at me and says, "Maybe we'll have our own tournament."

As we exchange smiles, the band around my chest loosens. "I'd like that."

CHAPTER FIVE

LEO

As it gets closer to my time to guard Georgia, I find myself watching the clock.

Even though I'm technically off duty from eight A.M. to four P.M., the time I wasn't sleeping was spent thinking about Georgia. Thinking about what craft she'd be working on when I went over to guard her, what game we'd play, what we'd eat for dinner, and how often she'd smile.

I have the four to midnight shift over on Georgia's side of the duplex, then from midnight to eight I spend my time watching the surveillance cameras and working on the investigation side of the case.

I've been pouring through all the names Georgia gave me, trying to find anyone with a possible motive for stalking her. Ex-boyfriends, former bosses, other models she beat out for a job—anyone who could have a problem with Georgia is being thoroughly investigated. There haven't been any hits yet, but it's only been a few days since I sat down with Georgia to question her.

It's my least favorite part of the process, having to press someone to come up with anyone who could want to harm them. It's not pleasant having to consider that someone from your past—someone you possibly cared about, even—could be behind something so traumatizing.

But Georgia held up like a champ; she never hesitated or shied away from giving me answers. Her eyes got damp a few

times, but she never asked for a break and refused whenever I offered one. When I asked about old relationships, she went pink before answering. At first, I thought it might have been because she'd dated a lot and was embarrassed to say it—not that she'd have any reason, and I'm not one to judge—but then she quietly told me there she'd only ever dated two men and neither relationship was serious.

I didn't say anything, but something on my face must have given away my surprise because she explained, "When I was in high school, I didn't date at all. I was shy, and I mostly focused on school and working part time. I didn't have any friends that were guys, either."

"None?"

After a little dry laugh she said, "There was the boy who used to lend me pencils in math class, and the one with the locker next to me who would kick the door when it got stuck. Plus the guy who waited at the same bus stop but only listened to music and never talked to me. I don't think any of those count."

"What about after high school, once you moved to the city?" A woman as beautiful as Georgia must have had tons of men asking her out.

Georgia frowned. "I never knew if a guy wanted to be with me, or just wanted my connections. Men would ask me out and then on the first date, they'd drop into the conversation that they were hoping to get into modeling, acting, or did I know so-and-so who could help them out with a job... it was just easier to say no instead of always wondering about their motivation."

Then she gave a little laugh, dry and self-deprecating, and said softly, "I guess I won't have to worry about *that* anymore."

In the time I've spent with Georgia, it's impossible not to see how self-conscious she is about her scar. She's always tilting her head so her hair covers her injured cheek, and when she reads or works on her crafts, her hair is a golden curtain on either side of her face.

When she talks to people, I can tell she wants to duck her head away—her expression gets tense and her eyes flicker with discomfort—but she won't let herself do it. The only time she looks at me without any worry is when we're playing games. She gets caught up in the competition, the banter between us, and she doesn't get a chance to feel self-conscious.

We've fallen into an easy routine—when I come over to her side of the duplex, first we make dinner, then pick a board game from the collection and play a few rounds of it. Then we both sit in the living room while Georgia reads a book or watches TV and I work on my laptop.

Aside from the protection part, it almost feels like we're dating.

We aren't, obviously, because she's a client. And she's certainly not looking for a relationship, not with all she's going through. But if those reasons didn't exist, I would definitely want to date Georgia. Which is crazy and ironic at the same time. I haven't been interested in dating someone in years, and the first time I meet a woman I'd want to be with, there's no chance of it happening.

But I *can* be friends with her. There's no harm in that. I can try to make this stressful experience a little easier for her. Each day I've come over, she's smiled a little more. If I can see her happy and safe, that'll have to be enough.

My watch buzzes, finally indicating that it's my turn to be with Georgia. I'm relieving Rylan, who has the eight A.M. to four P.M. shift. As I head to the interior door that connects the two sides of the duplex, I grab the new game that was just delivered today.

I know there are already plenty of games to choose from, but when I was browsing Amazon and saw this one with one-day shipping, I couldn't resist. Georgia isn't the only one who loves board games—I used to be obsessed with them as a kid.

That was back before I grew a foot and a half and started to hang around people who thought Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit and Risk were the epitome of nerdiness. And spending

fifteen years in the Army working overseas didn't leave me much time to spend on games, so it's been an unexpected pleasure having someone to play them with.

I give the door a quick pattern of raps, using Morse code to let Rylan know that I'm coming over. While I could text him the message, this way ensures that if one of our phones is compromised, we won't open the door to the wrong person. After several seconds, he knocks back, and I open the door and enter the living room on Georgia's side of the duplex.

I give a short chin lift to Rylan, who's standing by the door, before scanning the rest of the room. My eyes immediately go to Georgia. She's sitting on the couch, a book laying on the cushion beside her, and her mouth curves into a smile as she sees me.

Smiling back at her, I ask, "How's it been going over here? Has Rylan driven you crazy yet?"

Rylan lets out an indignant huff behind me, but there's a note of laughter in his voice. He turns to wink at Georgia. "Hardly. Georgia was just saying how entertaining I was."

Moving to the armchair next to the couch, I sit down and place the game on the coffee table. Looking at Georgia, I ask, "Is that so?"

"I'm not sure I used those words exactly." A little laugh bursts out, and she adds, "But Rylan is very good company."

Rylan grins at Georgia. "I knew it. Just like I said." Then his gaze shifts to me, and he gives a small jerk of his head, letting me know he wants to talk to me alone before he leaves. As he says goodbye to Georgia, I wonder what he has to tell me—I know it can't be too bad or he would have notified me right away.

I walk to the door with him, and he lowers his voice before he says, "Overall, the day went well. We talked a little about doing some self-defense training—between the three of us, I think we could teach her enough to protect herself pretty well."

"What did she say to that?"

“She said maybe.” His brow goes down, eyes darkening. “I think she’s self conscious about getting that close to anyone.”

He’s probably right, but training her in self defense would be a really good idea. “Give her a little time, maybe ask again in a few days. As she gets more comfortable with us, I think she’ll change her mind.”

Rylan nods. “Good idea. So... aside from that, she got three messages, basically the same as the ones she’s received already. I forwarded them to myself, and I’ll send them to you, but they all look like they came from a burner phone.”

Damn. While I know we need the stalker to act so we can catch him, these messages do nothing except upset her. “Is she doing okay?”

“Yeah. She got kind of quiet after each one came in, but that was it. She’s been trying to keep busy—reading, doing crafts, and she was looking up recipes for dinner.” He pauses, his mouth pulling into a small smirk. “I think you got the good shift with Georgia. Dinner, games, TV... not exactly a hardship to spend time with her.”

I raise an eyebrow at him and pitch my voice low as I say, “It’s a job. That’s all.”

Rylan lifts an eyebrow back at me. “And that’s why you brought over a new game tonight?” His smirk broadens. “I’m off to surveillance duty. If you have any leftovers, bring some over.”

Once Rylan is gone, I turn around to see Georgia leaning over the coffee table, peering at the new game I brought over. Once she sees me looking over at her, she straightens, another smile brightening her face. “Is this for us to play tonight?”

“If you want.” I cross back over to the couch, sitting down a few feet away from her. “I saw it online, and I thought it looked interesting. Unless you want to play something different.”

“No, I’d love to play it.” Her eyes sparkle a bright sky blue. “I’ve never tried one of these escape room games before. But...” The sparkle fades from her eyes, and tiny lines form

between them. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to buy things to entertain me. You already brought all these other games, and you guys are doing so much...”

“Georgia.” I put my hand on her arm without thinking—once it’s there, it feels weird to yank it away. “It’s as much for me as it is for you. The guys only want to play darts or pool or football if we’re playing outside. So it’s nice for me too. Okay?”

A little flush spreads over her cheeks, and she looks so pretty—brilliant eyes and full lips and cute little freckles scattered across her nose—it hurts my heart that she doesn’t see herself the same way. “Okay, Leo.” She starts to brush her hair across her face but stops halfway, tucking it back behind her shoulder.

She looks at me for a moment, not talking, her gaze dark and intense with an unreadable emotion. Then she blinks and says, “Dinner first. I think I can manage to make something edible, at least.”

As she gets up and heads into the kitchen, I follow along to watch and help if she needs. One thing I’ve learned already is that cooking isn’t one of Georgia’s strengths. I’m not exactly a gourmet chef myself—but one thing my mother taught me growing up was how to cook the basics. But if Georgia wants to try to cook, I’m not going to stop her.

I do end up having to save the pasta from boiling over. And the garlic bread from burning in the oven. I’m trying not to be obvious about it so Georgia doesn’t feel bad, but when I bump into her while sneaking some seasoning in the sauce, I know I’ve been busted.

I’m trying to reach around Georgia to toss in some oregano, but she turns when I’m not expecting it and steps forward right into my chest. My arms go around her instinctively, catching her before she can stagger backward and possibly hurt herself on the counter. She lets out a surprised gasp and clutches my arms to steady herself.

We both laugh, and Georgia blurts, “Sorry!” at the same time as me.

“No,” I tell her, “it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have come up behind you without warning.”

“I should have been paying closer attention.” Then she giggles, the sweetest sound I’ve heard in years. “I knew you were sneaking around behind me, fixing all the stuff I was messing up.”

She tilts her head up to look at me, and that’s when I realize I’m still holding Georgia. And *shit*. I don’t want to let her go.

Even though she’s tall, she feels small in my arms. Her breasts are soft swells pressing against me, and her back curves gracefully beneath my hands. The soft scent of oranges and vanilla wafts up from her hair, and I’m struck by the irrational desire to press my mouth to the top of her head.

Every part of her that touches me feels amazing. Which is *not* something I should be thinking about.

I also shouldn’t be noticing how her nipples are hardening under the fabric of her shirt. Or how her breath quickens, how the pulse at the side of her neck is jumping. And I *definitely* shouldn’t be thinking about the ache that’s growing for her.

Taking a deep breath, I carefully step away from Georgia, hoping I didn’t make things too awkward between us. She gazes up at me for a moment, her eyes wide and dilated, before turning back to the counter and busying herself with the sauce.

She’s staring at the sauce and stirring it vigorously, and I’m cursing myself for not letting go of her sooner. I should have been giving her more space to begin with instead of standing side-by-side with her in the kitchen. If she were any other client, I’d be sitting off to the side and doing my job instead of enjoying the experience of cooking with her.

But then Georgia relieves me from my mental flogging. She turns back around and shoves the spoon at me. “Since you’re the better cook, you can show me how to do it.” And the teasing smile pulling at her lips tells me she’s not upset in the least.

We manage to finish the rest of the meal prep without any more collisions. I'm not sure if I'm happy or disappointed about it.

As we're eating, Georgia looks across the table at me and says, "Who taught you how to cook? Because it's clear you know what you're doing. Much more than me, that is."

I finish chewing and take a sip of water before answering. "My mother did. She didn't give me lessons, exactly, but she'd have me help in the kitchen. So it kind of rubbed off on me. But she's a much better cook than I am."

A smile plays across Georgia's face. "That's really nice. Are you close with your parents?" She pauses, the smile dipping. "I mean, if you want to tell me. It's none of my business, really."

"It's fine, I don't mind." I take a quick glance around the open living space before continuing. Even though everything seems quiet and safe right now, I never want to let down my guard. "I'm pretty close with them, although I don't see them as often as I should."

"I've been busy with Blade and Arrow the last few years, so I haven't taken much time off." Any time off, really, but I don't need to get into that. "But my mother keeps telling me to come visit, so I'm going to need to make some time for that soon."

Like a lightning bolt, a thought strikes me—what would my mother think of Georgia?

Georgia tips her head, her gaze sympathetic. There's no hint of self-consciousness now. "I'm sure you've been really busy with Blade and Arrow. And what you do is so important."

"It is. But my parents live in Vermont, so it's not exactly far. I need to stop coming up with excuses."

"It happens." Her mouth twists into a little grimace. "I haven't seen my mom in over a year. I was always busy with work, and then..."

She twirls her fork on the plate, twisting the noodles around it but not taking a bite. “I haven’t told her,” she blurts out. “About the attack, or any of this.”

“Why?” The question comes out before I can stop it, and I could kick myself for being so intrusive.

Georgia answers before I can apologize, giving me a sad little smile. “She has health issues—diabetes—it’s managed, but I don’t want to put the extra stress on her. She’d want to come here, and I wouldn’t be able to let her, which would make her feel worse.”

The idea of Georgia hiding this from her mother doesn’t sit well with me. Maybe it helps her mother in the short term, but what about Georgia? Keeping this kind of thing secret from her family, not having that support... it has to make it even harder for her.

She must see something in my expression because she reaches over to pat my hand. “It’s not that bad. It’s just... she raised me on her own—my dad left when I was little—and she had to struggle a lot to get me what I needed. It was hard on her health, sometimes she didn’t have enough money for insulin. So when I got old enough, I wanted to take the burden off her. That’s the main reason I started modeling, so I could make enough money to help her out and take care of myself.”

“Georgia...” Every time I think she can’t amaze me more, she says or does something to prove me wrong.

“It’s *fine*, Leo. I know what you’re thinking, but it’s really okay.” Something flickers in her eyes, turning them sad for a moment. Then she pulls her lips back up into a smile and says, “If we’re done with dinner, I’d really like to play that new game you brought over.”

“Okay, Georgia.” I can’t resist giving her hand a little squeeze. “That sounds like a great idea.”

CHAPTER SIX

GEORGIA

Today it's a little harder than usual to smile when Leo comes through the door.

Even though, in the week and a half that I've been staying at the duplex, Leo's visits have become the highlight of my day. Each day as the time draws closer to four P.M., my spirits lift and I feel like I have something to look forward to. Not that Rylan and Cole aren't nice, but being around Leo is different.

When I'm around Leo, I can actually forget about all the crap going on in my life and just enjoy spending time with him.

And I'm intrigued by the contradiction of him—the big, tough, quietly intimidating man who is also kind and gentle and loves playing board games. On the outside, he's someone all eyes would be drawn to, with his ruggedly handsome features and kaleidoscope eyes ever changing from green to bronze. He's the kind of man who would never have trouble finding a woman for whatever he wanted.

But when it's just the two of us making dinner or laughing over one of our games, he becomes so much more than that. He watches me, not in a creepy way, but in the sense that he always wants to make sure I'm okay. And he's sensitive—he always seems to know when a wave of self-consciousness hits me and gives me the space I need to gather myself.

At least a hundred times over the last week, I've thought about how I wish things were different. That I met Leo six months ago, back when things were normal, and he could have gotten to know me as an attractive woman and not just someone in need of protection.

Protection from a stalker who decided to ramp up his threats again, which is why I'm having a hard time smiling. I've been getting texts every day from him—I'm sure it's a man, I don't know why but I just have a feeling—but I've been getting better at not letting them get to me. When a message from the stalker comes in, I give it the quickest of glances and then pass the phone over to whichever Blade and Arrow guy is with me.

Leo suggested that I just give my phone to them to hold, so I wouldn't have to deal with the stress of the messages. It would be easier to pretend the messages aren't coming, but after I thought about it for a few minutes, I told him, "I need to know. I've never hidden from the truth before, and I'm not going to start now."

I said the same thing when the letters came today and Rylan tried to keep me from seeing them. I told him I didn't want to be coddled, and I wanted to know what the letters said. As I peered around his shoulder at the vicious words on the paper, angry slashes in red ink promising to do terrible things to me, I wasn't so sure I made the right decision.

But I wasn't going to fall apart, even though the letters terrified me, not after I made a stink about seeing them. Instead, I grabbed a book and burrowed into the corner of the couch and stared at the pages without reading them. The words are still imprinted in my mind, even though I'm trying hard to erase them so I can enjoy my hours with Leo and not let the stalker ruin another thing for me.

"Hey." Leo's low rumble comes toward me, and he sits down on the couch cushion next to me. He's been talking to Rylan for the last five minutes, speaking in quiet, solemn tones, and I'm assuming Rylan was telling him about the letters.

“Hi.” I force the same smile I gave him when he came in. My voice sounds weak even to me, so I try again, pushing an enthusiasm I wish I was feeling. “Are you still going to teach me how to make that pasta dish?” Even trying, my words sound flat.

He scans my face, his gaze darkening and brows coming down. Shifting so he’s facing me, he asks me quietly, “How are you doing, Georgia?”

“I’m fine. Good.” *Smile. Sound happy.* I don’t want to ruin the time I get with Leo already.

“It’s okay to be upset, Georgia.” His eyes capture mine, soft and understanding. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” It comes out harsher than I meant. Softening my tone, I say, “There’s not really anything to talk about. I wanted to see the letters, and I have to deal with the repercussions of that. I don’t...” I swallow past the lump in my throat, “I don’t want to talk about them. I just want to have dinner and play a game and not think about any of the other stuff.”

“Okay, Georgia.” Leo pats my arm, the heat of his big hand searing into me. His voice is so gentle it makes me want to cry. He pauses, his forehead creasing, as if he’s trying to decide something.

“I got you something,” he says. “But I’m not sure if this is the right time to give it to you. I didn’t get it because I knew you were having a rough day, so I don’t want you to think that’s the reason. I just thought you might like it.”

“You don’t have to get me anything, Leo.” Although there’s a little spark of excitement kindling inside me, chasing away some of the chill that’s been lingering all day.

“I know that.” His gaze dips before coming back up to mine. “It just seemed like something you’d enjoy.”

The tiniest of an actual smile tugs at my lips. He looks almost embarrassed, and it’s melting the icy coating around my heart. “Well, you have to give it to me now. Or I’ll bug you all night to tell me what it is.”

His mouth curls up, eyes crinkling. “Well, when you put it that way.” He reaches behind him and pulls out a small box, handing it over to me. “I haven’t seen you with one,” he explains, “but you love reading, so I thought this would be nice. You can get as many books as you want now.”

He bought me a Kindle.

And not just a basic one—a fancy model with wireless charging and the charger and cover and everything. I used to have an old one, but it got lost during one of my moves. And then with all my bills and not working, I didn’t think I should spend the money on another one.

But Leo got me one. He saw how much I love to read, all the books I have scattered around, and he did this for me. I can’t stop myself from reaching over and hugging him.

“Thank you, Leo. I love it. It’s too much, but *thank you.*”

“You’re welcome, Georgia.” There’s a strained note to his voice, and suddenly I realize my arms are still wrapped around him and my head is buried in his neck.

“Sorry!” I jerk away from him like I just touched a scalding hot stove. My cheeks are also flaming hot as I clutch the Kindle in front of me and stumble over my words. “I didn’t mean to throw myself at you like that. I was just... I love it. Thank you.”

Leo’s jaw is tight, a little muscle twitching at the corner. *Crap.* I shouldn’t have hugged him like that. The heat in my cheeks spreads to my neck and chest, and my heart starts thumping double-time.

Then he smiles, and all the tension in his face is gone. “It’s fine. You don’t need to apologize for hugging me. I’m just glad you like it.”

Phew. I didn’t humiliate myself *too* badly. As my cheeks cool and my heart slows, I say, “I *do*. It’s perfect.” My hands are nearly twitching to open it up and start downloading books to it, but I can do that later when Leo isn’t here.

When I put the box on the coffee table, Leo gives me a curious look. “Don’t you want to open it up?”

“Of course.” I’m grinning at him, and I don’t even care that the skin on my cheek is tugging a bit. “But you promised to show me how to make Carbonara sauce. And then I’m going to beat you in Jenga. So I’ll wait until after I win to open up the Kindle.”

A short laugh bursts out of him. “You think you’re going to beat me? I doubt it.”

“We’ll see.” I jump up to head into the kitchen. “You said that about Scrabble, and who won?”

“Only because I let you win.” Leo brushes past me as he moves into the kitchen, his hand grazing against my hip. Just like every other time we accidentally touch, little tingles rush up and down my spine.

When I stop at the fridge and turn back to look at him, Leo’s eyes are a deep forest green, heavy with unspoken emotion. For a moment, there’s a loaded silence—then he reaches into the cabinet to grab a pot and whatever he was thinking is gone.

For the next hour, the conversation is casual and there aren’t any more lingering glances or electric touches. Leo shows me how to make his favorite dinner—pasta with Carbonara sauce—and I follow his instructions well enough to not ruin it.

Well, mostly. I may have had to fish out some pieces of eggshell from the sauce, but I got them all out in the end. And as Leo said when I fretted about missing some, “Just add more cheese. More cheese fixes everything.” And that’s one good thing about not modeling anymore. *Cheese.*

Once we finish dinner, we settle around the coffee table to play our game. Since it’s Jenga, we’re both sitting on the floor to get a better angle while we play. Today, Leo is sitting next to me, instead of across, so when he leans over to remove a piece from the tower, his leg touches mine. It’s just the tiniest of contacts, but enough to distract me.

We’re both doing pretty terribly at the game, but I don’t mind, because we’re really talking more than playing, anyway.

Between moves, we take turns asking questions—it's not planned but just seems to end up working out that way.

After Leo pulls out a block and the tower sways precariously without falling, he gives me a little triumphant smirk and I playfully swat his arm. As he waits for me to take my turn, he glances over at the basket of yarn I have next to the couch and asks, "Have you always enjoyed making things? I don't know much about crafting, but the stuff I've seen you make looks amazing."

I carefully slide a wooden block out of the pile and let out a little hoot of triumph before answering his question. "Pretty much. My mom taught me how to knit and crochet when I was in elementary school. I didn't realize then that it was a way to save money, I just thought it was fun. Once I got into high school, I took a lot of art courses, which got me into things like painting and jewelry making."

"Did you ever think about making art into a career?"

"Yeah." I turn to face Leo, meeting his gaze. "I looked into some art programs, but then I got the offer to come to New York City and sign with an agency, and—" I give a little shrug. "If I worked as a model, I could make money right away. And enough to help out my mom, so she wouldn't have to work two jobs."

Leo's eyebrows arch up in question. "So it wasn't your goal to be a model, then?"

"I never really thought about it, honestly. I lived in Killeen, Texas—not exactly a hotspot for modeling. When I was approached by a scout, I thought it was a scam. It wasn't until my mom called the agency that I knew it was for real."

Leo shifts position, and his leg brushes against mine again, setting off little flurries of electricity through my body. The sensation is so distracting, I almost miss his next question.

"So did you leave right after high school? Did your mom go with you?"

A little twinge hits me, remembering those first lonely weeks in New York City alone. "I left before graduation,

actually. I had all my credits to graduate, and there was an important go-see my agent wanted me to do, so I missed my last two months of school. My mom had to stay back in Texas to work, so I went to the city on my own, lived in one of those crowded apartments with seven other models.”

A little frown creases his features. “That seems kind of scary. Was it?”

“Sometimes.” I give him a small smile. “But I made it through. And somehow managed to keep working for another twelve years as a model. Until—”

No. I don't want to think about that. So I quickly change the subject. “Anyway, you went into the military—that sounds much more intimidating. Did you go right after high school?”

Leo's eyes narrow slightly—he knows what I'm doing—but he doesn't push it. “Yes. A week after graduation, actually.”

“What made you decide to join the Army?” Is that too personal of a question?

“A few reasons.” Leo stretches his arms, and I have to force myself not to ogle his flexing biceps. “I wanted to travel,” he explains, “and I wanted more training on computers. A teacher got me into programming in middle school, and I thought there would be a lot of opportunities to learn more skills in the Army.”

“It's funny, really.” His lips quirk into a smile, and he continues, “I thought I'd be doing something in IT, spending most of my time indoors. But once I got into basic training, I realized I really liked all the physical aspects of it. And I could use my skills for communications out in the field.”

“What made you decide to join the Green Berets? If you don't mind me asking.”

“I don't mind.” Game completely forgotten, Leo's gaze is focused on me. “I heard about the Green Berets and I was intrigued. What they stood for, their mission—it all resonated with me. So I did all the Special Forces training—over a year

of it—and eventually became a Communications Sergeant in the Green Berets.”

I can't stop a small snort of laughter from coming out. Leo looks at me with furrowed brows, his expression confused. “What?”

“Sorry. It's just... that sounds a lot more impressive than my modeling story. Here you are saving people's lives and serving our country in dangerous locations around the world. And I modeled clothes for catalogs and websites.”

Leo's eyes go a deep greenish brown, and he shakes his head at me. “No, Georgia. It's not a competition. Don't put down what you did. You built a career and a life in the city and made enough money to help your mom. Not to mention, you did it all on your own. There is *nothing* shameful about that.”

Why does he have to be so nice? It makes it so much harder to keep him locked securely in the friend-zone part of my brain. Feeling flustered and off-balance, I give Leo a quick, “Thanks,” and turn back to the game. Forcing my voice to stay light, I say, “I think it's your turn.”

There are a few moments of silence before Leo answers, “Okay, Georgia.” He hesitates again, then he nudges me with his elbow before adding in a teasing tone, “I hope you're ready to lose.”

I force a chuckle in response, but what I'm really thinking is: I've *already* lost everything. And the one good thing in my life right now I know I have no chance of keeping.

* * *

“*GEORGIA.*”

The voice filters through a haze of panic and pain. It's familiar, but too far away to reach me.

I'm back in the stairwell. Hot, stinking breath on my face. A large hand groping me. A cold edge—

Something drags at me, calling me to safety.

“Georgia. Wake up.”

A different voice, darkly chuckling. “You have to pay for your sins, Georgia. It’s the only way.”

Oh, God. The knife. My heart pounding out of my chest. Fear grabbing hold with vicious claws and shaking me. *Is this really happening?*

Then agony.

“Georgia. Sweetheart, wake up.” This voice is rough and urgent, but not frightening. “You’re safe. Come back to me. You’re okay.”

Leo.

I grab hold of his voice and pull myself out of the dream. But the sensations are like a poisonous oil clinging to me. Even as I blink my eyes open, the images of my nightmare are still there.

But then Leo’s worried eyes capture mine, forcing everything else away. *“Georgia.”* He sighs out a heavy breath. “You were having a nightmare. I couldn’t wake you up.”

Where am I? Glancing around, I realize I’m on the couch, the lights are all dimmed, and Leo is crouched on the floor beside me.

My brain understands that it was only a dream before my body does. While my brain is kicking back online, my body starts to shake.

“Leo.” His name is ripped from my mouth—I’m desperate for him to reassure me I’m safe. “The knife—“ my voice cracks. “I was there...”

“Oh, Georgia.” His face folds into creases and shadows of worry. “I’m *so sorry.*”

The memories are still crashing around in my head. My breaths are jagged gasps, words stuttered between them. “I could... feel... his... breath... then... cutting me...”

“Sweetheart.” Leo leans closer to me, and his expression is tortured. Then he pulls me into his arms, moving so he’s on

the couch beside me. One big hand comes to rest at the back of my head, the other at the base of my spine. My face is buried into his neck, and his musky scent and warm skin sink into me, drawing me further into his comforting embrace.

He rubs small circles on my back and murmurs, “It’s okay. I’ve got you,” over and over until my shaking finally settles. Then he gently sets me away from him, leaving a few feet of space between us. The loss of contact feels like a cold sheet of water crashing into me.

“Are you okay?” His jaw is clenched—almost like he’s in pain—and his brows are pulled down into a V.

“Yeah.” *Not really.* “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry, Georgia. There’s nothing to be sorry about.” His mouth pulls down, brows following with it. “I wish you didn’t have to go through this.”

My voice is soft and resigned. “Me too.”

Something flickers across Leo’s hazel gaze, then he stands and says, “I’ll go make you some tea. And there might be a flask of whiskey around here somewhere. Put a shot in the tea and that will help you go back to sleep.”

What I really would like is for Leo to stay here next to me. When his arms were around me, that’s the safest I’ve felt since everything started. But I can’t tell him that, obviously. So instead, I curl into the corner of the couch and say quietly, “Okay, Leo. Thanks.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

LEO

When the security camera at the front door goes off, every muscle in my body tenses.

I arrived for my evening shift with Georgia just a few minutes ago, and Rylan is about to head over to the other side of the duplex when we hear it—the sound snapping us both to attention. Rylan’s eyes meet mine from across the room—no words are needed for a situation like this. After all the years we’ve worked together, we’re able to communicate through a series of short nods and glances.

He takes off toward the door to the other side of the duplex while I move to Georgia’s side, quickly guiding her out of the living room and into the small first floor hallway. She doesn’t say anything, but her blue eyes are wide and startled—when I tuck her behind me, I can feel her trembling.

“Do you think it’s him?” Her voice is a hushed whisper.

“I don’t know.” Opening the security camera app, I rewind the recording to watch a man cautiously approaching the house and leaving a package in front of the door. The man isn’t hiding his face, which makes me think if this *is* the stalker, he isn’t very intelligent.

Reaching behind me to pat Georgia’s arm, I say, “Rylan went to the other side, and he’ll pursue the guy from there. We have cameras recording all up and down the street, so we’ll definitely catch him. Then we can find out who he is and what he’s doing here.”

Georgia presses against my back, breathing fast, her breaths hot on my shoulder. I wish I could turn around and hold her, reassure her everything will be okay, but my priority isn't to comfort, but to protect her. And until we know who the person at the door is and the contents of the package, I have to assume the situation could be dangerous.

Watching back through more of the security footage, I see Rylan pull out of the driveway, heading in the same direction the other man went. I know Rylan will catch the guy, but whether the information he gets is useful is another story.

A few minutes tick by in silence while I wait for the okay to move. While I could clear the house myself, that's not my designated role in our trio. Rylan is the one to give pursuit of any external threat, Cole will check the house, and my job is to keep Georgia safe.

"It's all clear around the house." Cole comes into the hallway, having left his surveillance station on the other side of the duplex.

"No sign of an intruder or any tampering with the doors or windows," he adds. "The only thing left behind is the package." Turning, he heads back toward the living room. As he walks, he says, "We'll get the package inside and I'll scan it for explosives, but my guess is it's clean."

"I think you're right." I put an arm around Georgia and pull her next to me as I follow Cole out of the hall. "The way the guy was handling the package, it would have exploded already."

Cole muses. "Unless it's on a timer, of course."

Georgia jerks against me, sucking in a shocked breath. "I'm sure it's not," I tell her, shooting Cole a what-are-you-doing look. "There are too many variables to use a timer. I'm sure it's something else."

We come to a stop in the center of the living room, Cole facing Georgia and me. Cole starts to say something to Georgia, but our phones both buzz in unison—when I look down at the message, I see it's from Rylan. "He got the guy," I

relay to Georgia, “Rylan has him in his car and is headed someplace quiet to question him.”

Which means Rylan is going to find a remote spot with no people around and no cameras, and use some creative techniques to convince the other man to spill everything. Not torture—we won’t stoop that low—but Rylan can be very intimidating if he wants to be.

When our phones buzz again less than a minute later, Cole gives a low whistle. “That was quick.” He glances down at the message. “The guy doesn’t know what’s in the package. Said it was given to him last night, and he agreed to drop it off in exchange for drugs and some cash.”

“Shit.” I bite out the curse, hating the pained look that ripples across Georgia’s face. I think part of her was hoping it was all innocent—that it didn’t have to do with her stalker—even though she *had* to know that it did.

“Georgia.” Cole turns toward her, his voice calm and commanding. “We’re going to need you to get the package and bring it inside. Quick and smooth. You’ll have to get it, unfortunately—if Leo or I do it, it’ll give away that we’re here with you.”

Dammit. I know he’s right, but the idea of her exposed, picking up a mystery box with God-knows-what inside of it? I don’t like it one bit.

“Okay.” Her voice wobbles. “What if—“ mouth snapping shut, she presses her lips together tightly before continuing. “Never mind. I’ll do it.” Her eyes flicker to mine, fear darkening them to a deep sapphire.

After a few more instructions, Georgia heads to the front door, her shoulders high and tight with stress. After a deep breath, she opens the door and carefully slides the box inside. Then she slams the door back shut and nearly leaps away from the box, scooting back until she’s back behind me.

“Are you okay?” I ask in a low tone, turning my head to look at her.

“Yeah.” Her cheeks turn slightly pink. “I can’t believe I’m this scared of a stupid box.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of, Georgia.” I tilt my head at Cole, who’s now using an explosive trace detection wand to look for any residue on the outside of the package. When that comes back clear, he waves a small metal detector around the cardboard box, searching for possible bomb components.

“Looks fine, as we thought. We should be good to open it.” Cole inclines his head towards Georgia. “You need to go back into the kitchen while we do this.”

She steps around me, her eyes wide as she looks at him. “Why? If it’s safe, I want to see what’s in there.”

“No, Georgia.” I answer before Cole has a chance to. “It’s not a good idea. Let us check it first. Just in case it’s something upsetting.”

Her eyebrows wing down, tiny lines forming between her eyes. She looks like she wants to argue with me, her jaw jutting out stubbornly. But she must see something in my gaze, because all at once her shoulders drop and she sighs heavily. “Fine.”

Once she walks back to the kitchen, I crouch down to join Cole on the floor. He pulls a switchblade from his toolkit and slits the tape around the box, pausing before he pulls the flaps open. Meeting my gaze, his expression is as somber as mine. Considering what’s been sent to Georgia already—horrible threats and violent images—I don’t have a good feeling about what we’re about to reveal.

My instincts were right.

And now that I’m looking at the contents of the box, I’m doubly glad I told Georgia to wait in the kitchen. This isn’t something she should have to see.

Inside the box is a dead crow, its neck obviously broken. It must have been put inside right after it was killed, because there’s a small stain of blood on the cardboard beneath its beak. And tacked to the wing is a note with bold, red lettering.

Just two words, but more than enough to get across the message.

You're next.

“He’s escalating.” Cole’s gaze jumps from the dead bird to meet mine. His voice is pitched low enough so only I can hear it. “I don’t like that he’s sending this to her, but—”

“The next time he may want to deliver it himself.” My words are gritted through clenched teeth. “And then we’ll catch the bastard.”

“Hopefully, Rylan will have found out something we can go on.” Cole’s brows are pulled down in a scowl. “This has been going on too long already.”

I stare down at the dead bird, feeling a sick wave of premonition. Something about the contrast of black and red, or maybe the brutal simplicity of its death has me feeling this way. Or maybe it’s because this violence is directed toward a woman I care for much more than I should.

“*Oh—*“ A swift intake of air comes from behind me, quickly stifled. I turn around to see Georgia standing behind me, her hand clapped over her mouth, eyes round with shock.

Dammit. How did I not hear her coming?

I jump up and grab her by the arms, pulling her away from the box and over to the other side of the living room. Her body is stiff but unresisting, her gaze locked straight ahead, her expression frozen in a horrified mask. She whispers from beneath her hand, “I’m... sorry... I...”

Cole comes over to join us, making the third in our unhappy trio. “Georgia,” he starts. “It’s going to be okay.”

Her eyes swing to mine, a maelstrom of shock and grief and pain. A small muffled whimper escapes, and she chokes out, “He *killed* it... the *note*...”

Face colorless, fear etched into her features, she starts shaking again, even worse than before. Tears well up, a second from falling. She sags for a moment; if I wasn’t holding onto her arms, I think she might collapse from the weight of

everything. And my heart feels like it's been squeezed in a fist, physically aching to see her in such pain.

“*Georgia.*” I can't scold her for going against what I told her, not now. “It's alright—”

Her gaze swings between Cole's and mine—she looks trapped, panicked—and one tear streaks down her cheek. “I *can't*,” she whispers, and pulls away from me. Before I can reach out to her, say something, anything, that might help, she bolts out of the room and up the stairs.

A few seconds later, a door slams shut, and I look at my friend as a wave of regret washes over me. “Dammit, Cole. We should have taken the package somewhere else. Or made her go into the bedroom. Or—I don't know—just *something.*”

“If she was determined to see it...” Cole trails off. “I'm not sure it would have made a difference.”

“But,” a band wraps around my chest. “*God*, Cole. Did you see her *face*? And now she's up there, alone, probably crying—”

Cole's dark eyes scan my face with an appraising gaze. After a weighted pause, he says, “You should go up there. See if she needs anything. Maybe she wants to be alone, but if it's you offering your support...”

“What do you mean?” Does he suspect something?

Cole stares at me, his expression giving away nothing. “It's obvious you have the strongest bond with her.” His phone buzzes and he glances at the screen. Swiping the message open, he scans it before continuing.

“Rylan said the guy was panhandling when he was approached by a stranger. The stranger offered him money if he'd bring a package here.” Cole pauses as another message comes in. “The stranger was wearing sunglasses, a hat, nondescript clothing—not much to go on. But we have a location, and there may be security cameras nearby that might have gotten a shot of him.”

I'm torn between grabbing my laptop or going to Georgia. But I know someone else who can help just as much—

probably more, if I'm honest. "Call Beth."

Cole nods at me. "That's what I was thinking. She's great at hacking into all kinds of systems. If there's something on there, she'll find it. And Leo, go check on Georgia. Rylan and I will take care of the rest for now."

I can't stop thinking about her upstairs, crying, trying to deal with her pain all alone. Giving Cole a little chin lift, I head for the stairs. As I get to the bedroom door, I can hear her muffled sobs, the sound like a sledgehammer crashing into my chest. Bracing my hand against the wood of the door, I take a deep breath before knocking lightly on it.

There's no response at first, so I knock again, this time calling her name. I try to keep my voice low and gentle, just loud enough for her to hear it, and say, "Georgia, I just want to make sure you're okay. Can I come in?"

When she doesn't say anything my stomach sinks—I want to be there for her, but I'm not going to force it. After a few seconds of silence go by, I try again. "I'm here if you want to talk, or you just want some company. But if you want to be alone, that's okay, too."

I can still hear her crying, little gasped sobs that tear at my heart. Then a soft, "Leo?" comes through the door.

"Yeah, it's me." I lean my head on the door, closing my eyes as I try to figure out the right thing to say. "I just... I'm here for you. For company, to talk, to cry on, whatever you need."

There's another pause, followed by the light tap of footsteps. Then the door opens to reveal Georgia in front of me—red-eyed and tear-streaked and still breathtakingly beautiful. "Leo." Her voice is small and strained, whispered through trembling lips. The fear and exhaustion in her eyes almost drops me to my knees.

"Ah, Georgia." There's no question of what I need to do.

My arms go around her without hesitation, pulling her into my chest, tucking her head under my chin. She shudders against me and wraps her arms around my back, clutching the

back of my shirt with an iron grip. My neck goes damp, her tears hot on my skin.

I rub one hand up and down her spine while I stroke her hair with the other, long strokes from her crown to mid back. The longer I hold her, the more she sags into me, until I'm holding most of her weight in my arms.

How long has it been since she had someone to support her like this? Someone to carry some of the weight when it's too much to bear on her own?

“What can I do, Georgia?” I keep rubbing her back, trying to massage out the tension knotted into every muscle. “How can I help?”

She sucks in a shaky breath—her tears have slowed but her breathing is still ragged—and tightens her hold on me. “You are.”

It's not enough. I don't want Georgia crying to begin with. I don't want her terrified and traumatized and trying to hide her tears.

After a few more stuttering gasps, she tilts her head back to look up at me. Her eyes are a vivid blue rimmed with a long brush of damp lashes. “I'm just so tired. Tired of being scared, never knowing what's coming next. I don't know what I did to deserve this. And I feel so alone.”

“You're not alone.” My voice is rough, sandpaper over gravel. “You have *me*.”

She blinks at me, her eyebrows arching up in confusion. I'm not sure what I'm saying either—that she has me as a protector? Or is it something much more than that?

“Leo?” Her lips are parted, rosy pink and full and still damp from her tears.

Words have escaped me. My mind is split in two directions, both sides battling for dominance. Half says *kiss her*. Do what I've been thinking about for weeks now. Taste her lips, let my hands slide beyond the base of her spine to touch the curves that keep taunting me.

But then the other. She's a client. I made a promise to protect her. Not to let my own desires take priority over her needs. And just because I think she's attracted to me doesn't mean she wants it to be more. After all she's been through, who am I to assume that Georgia wants to be anything other than friends?

Then she kisses me.

It's tentative, just a light brush of lips lingering on mine. Her eyes are still open, watching me with a guarded uncertainty. She's scared, but she's doing it anyway.

Once her mouth is pressed against mine, the rest follows instinctively. I trace the seam of her mouth with my tongue, lightly nipping at her full lower lip, tasting the mix of sweet and saltiness there. She opens for me with a tiny gasp of need, her fingers digging into my back as our kiss deepens.

As Georgia stretches up to meet me, her breasts press against my chest, the tips already hard and aroused. A little hum of pleasure vibrates into my mouth and I immediately imagine how it would feel around another part of me.

And damn. Now I'm not just hard, but throbbing, aching for her.

I *want* to pick up Georgia and take her over to the bed, peel off her clothes and kiss every inch of her body.

But the responsible voice in my head takes over, saying the same words on repeat. *She's a client. Don't take advantage of her vulnerability.* So I drag my mouth from hers, peel her body from mine, and take a few steps away to regain my footing. Georgia stares at me, her lips kiss-swollen and cheeks flushed, pupils still dilated with need.

"I shouldn't have done that." I regret the words as soon as I say them.

Georgia flinches and takes a little step away from me. Her brows draw into a small V before she says quietly, "I think *I* was the one who did it."

Shit. Now she looks hurt, dismay washing across her features. I stumble for something else to say. "I mean, you're a

client. And we aren't supposed to get involved—”

“It's fine.” Everything goes flat, her voice, her expression—wiped of all emotion. The only thing she can't hide is the pain in her eyes, darkening them to a stormy blue. “I understand. I'm sorry.”

Dammit. “It's not like that, Georgia.”

“I'm not feeling well.” She takes another few steps, her gaze darting everywhere but at me. “I think I'm going to lie down.”

My chest feels like something has been carved out of it. “Georgia ...”

“*Please, Leo.*” Sitting on the bed, Georgia wraps her arms around herself, staring down at her knees. “I need to be alone. It's fine. Okay?”

How did I screw this up so badly? I don't want to make things worse—if that's possible—so I dip my head at her and say, “Okay. I'll be downstairs if you need anything.”

She doesn't respond, so I let myself out of the room, softly shutting the door behind me. Once in the hall, I lean against a wall and take a moment to mentally castigate myself. *Why didn't I stop her before she kissed me? And why did I kiss her back?*

Now I've ruined the bond between us and hurt Georgia when that's the last thing I wanted to do. And I feel worse than ever. Worse than wanting her but never making a move. Thinking about her every day but telling myself we can only be friends. It's a hundred times worse than that.

Because now I know the reality of kissing Georgia is so much more than what I imagined. I've touched her before, even held her, but this was different. This time... her body fitting against mine like a piece I've been missing, hearing her soft little sighs and feeling her arousal for me... in all of my years, I've never experienced anything like it.

And I just pushed her away. The *wrongness* of it is suffocating.

I want her. Not just as a friend. Not only for a night. And definitely not only as a client. I want *more*.

As I stand in the hallway, only a dozen feet and one door apart, I realize I can't deny my feelings for Georgia any longer. I can be her protector and *also* her partner. That is, if she'll let me after I messed up so badly.

Maybe it's not as complicated as I'm making it. I'll go downstairs, find out if there's any more information about the guy who delivered the package, and then I'll talk to Cole. He met Maya on a case—just because they started dating after it was technically over doesn't mean he won't understand.

And then, once I've hopefully gotten Cole's blessing, I'll talk to Georgia. Beg her forgiveness. Tell her how I feel about her. And hope that she'll give me a chance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GEORGIA

I can't even bring myself to look in the mirror tonight.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've been doing better at trying to accept my new appearance. Forcing myself to look at the raised pink line stretching across my face and trying not to cry at the sight of it. I've been looking in the mirror each night and reminding myself that I should feel lucky considering how much worse it could have been.

And I've thought about how Leo looks at me, almost like he doesn't notice my scar. Sometimes I catch him watching me like a man looks at a woman he's attracted to. At least, I thought so. But clearly I was wrong, and now I'm not just stressed and scared about my stalker, I'm also feeling rejected and embarrassed.

I'm not sure which is worse.

I mean, rationally I know the stalker and his sinister package are more dangerous. But my heart doesn't seem to agree. Which is why I'm sitting on my bed hunched into a ball of misery, my heart and pride both cracked and bleeding. I can't bring myself to go back downstairs—to face Leo and his inevitable look of pity.

And if he tries to explain why he doesn't want me again, I might end up doing the stalker a favor myself and dying from humiliation.

I've only known Leo for a few weeks. It shouldn't hurt this much. I keep saying it in my head, but it's not sinking in.

Because in my heart I know I was already falling for him—this big, quietly intimidating man who’s so sweet and gentle on the inside. And his eyes, his smile, his *muscles*... even his touch makes me shiver in the most amazing of ways.

Argh. I grab a pillow and shove my face in it, muffling my cry of helpless frustration. Flopping back onto the mattress, I stare at a spot on the ceiling and realize it’s a tiny spider. Normally I would freak about a spider even being in the same room as me, but right now, I can’t muster up the energy.

I stare at the spider for a few minutes, and I’m actually contemplating talking to it—the spider won’t judge my impulsive kiss, will it—when my phone rings. At the first sound, I tense up, but my pulse settles as I recognize the familiar ringtone. Someone is calling that I actually *want* to hear from, though I’m not sure I feel like talking to anyone right now.

But if I don’t answer, she’ll worry and think something is wrong. Then she’ll call Leo, or Cole, and one of them will come charging up here to make sure I’m okay, and I’d rather just answer the phone than deal with *that*.

Grabbing the phone, I swipe across the screen and sigh at it. “Hi, Hayden.”

“Georgia. What’s wrong?” She’s using her *mom-cop* voice, as I call it, worried and authoritative at the same time. “Did something happen?”

“No. Everything is fine.” Ugh. I was trying for a light, reassuring tone, but it comes out sounding like I’m attending a funeral.

“G.” Hayden’s tone softens. “Don’t tell me that. What happened?”

I wasn’t going to tell her about the package *or* Leo, but something in her voice cracks the dam inside me, and the truth comes spilling out. “I hate how I look, Hayden. No one will ever want me now.”

Tears press against the back of my eyes, and I’m *so* tired of crying.

“What are you talking about?” Confusion bleeds into her voice. “I thought... nevermind. But G, why would you say that? It’s *not true*.”

I feel like a kid instead of a full-grown adult, about to cry to my best friend about being rejected. But my defenses are so beaten down, I can’t stop my voice from wobbling. “I kissed Leo.”

“Oh.” There’s a pause, then Hayden says, “Okay. That’s not what I was expecting you to say, but... Leo is a good guy. What’s the problem?”

“I kissed him, and he kissed me back, and then he pulled away like I was contagious.” Now I *really* sound like I’m in high school.

“Hmm. Did he say anything? What made you decide to kiss him?”

I’m not going to mention the package. “I was upset, and Leo was hugging me, and I thought there was something between us. He’s been so nice, and sometimes when he would look at me, I thought...”

Taking a deep sigh, I continue, “Well, I thought he felt something for me. But obviously I was wrong, and now I’m hiding upstairs in the bedroom feeling like the worst kind of fool.”

“You’re not a fool, G.” She pauses, “I’m sure of that. What did he say after he pulled away?”

“He said he shouldn’t have done it. And that I was a client ___”

“*Georgia*.” Hayden’s voice goes stern. “That means he’s trying to be professional. It doesn’t mean he’s not interested. You said he kissed you back, right?”

“Yes.” My voice is small.

“And he was into it?”

I think about the obvious erection pressing into my belly and the way his eyes had darkened to a burnished bronze. “Yes.”

“Okay, then.” There’s some rustling, a murmured voice in the background, then Hayden says, “Sorry. Boone was asking a question. Anyway, I think I know exactly what’s going on.”

“Leo is a protector, and he takes his job very seriously. He’s spent years in the military dedicating his life to keeping people safe. And he’s worried about doing anything that could compromise your safety. It doesn’t mean he’s not interested in you.”

“But—”

Hayden shushes me. “If he kissed you, he has feelings for you. He’s probably conflicted—torn between exploring things with you or doing what he thinks is the best way to protect you. But if you feel something for him, G, talk to him. *Do* you feel something?”

“Yes.” That’s why the rejection hurt so much. “Leo is... he’s special. He makes me feel hopeful. Safe. He’s just—yeah, Hayden. I really like him.”

Suddenly restless, I get out of bed and head over to the window. It looks out to the house next door, and I catch a glimpse of a teenage girl dancing in her room, giant headphones over her head. She looks carefree, flinging her body around with abandon, and a stab of envy jabs straight into my chest.

“So talk to him. But Georgia,” she pauses, taking a breath. “If you don’t feel comfortable being with these guys, with Leo, you know you can come here. We have lots of security, and the guys at the station, all my friends, we’ll keep you safe. So you have options, okay?”

“I know.” But there’s *no way* I’m putting Hayden and her new husband in danger.

There’s some more murmuring in the background, and Hayden’s voice goes distant as she says, “I know, I’ll be right there.” Coming back on the line, her tone turns apologetic. “Sorry, it’s later than I thought. We’re supposed to be meeting Quint and Corrie for dinner. But if you want to keep talking, I can cancel.”

“No, it’s fine. Go enjoy your dinner. Tell everyone I said hi.”

“Okay, G.” A little sigh huffs out. “Call me soon. Let me know how everything is going.”

I cross back to the bed and fall backwards onto it. “I will. Love you.”

“Love you too, G. Stay strong. And remember,” she pauses. “You *are* beautiful. You’re the only one who doesn’t see it.”

“Thanks, Hayden.” My throat gets thick for a moment. “Have fun tonight. Talk to you later.”

As I end the call, I feel hopeful for a second before the heavy weight of my reality wraps back around me. I’m still alone in my room, which isn’t really my room, and downstairs is a man I like more than I should, and I’m only a job to him.

It’s not that I don’t believe Hayden, but I can’t stop thinking if I had met Leo before that night in the stairwell, maybe he wouldn’t have pushed me away.

As I lay on the bed and search for the spider on the ceiling again, my stomach rumbles, a reminder that I skipped dinner. Maybe once Cole comes over for his shift, I can get some food... but that’ll be after midnight, and he’ll wonder why I didn’t eat earlier with Leo like I usually do. It’s ten P.M. right now, so I might as well just go to bed and eat something in the morning.

And tomorrow I’ll have to shove my inner high-schooler back in the corner and be an adult about everything. When Leo comes back over tomorrow, I’ll put on my best everything-is-fine mask and pretend like nothing ever happened. After all, it’s not *his* fault I made a move that he didn’t want to reciprocate.

As for tonight, I’m going to get some sleep and hope that everything will be better in the morning.

* * *

FOR THE THIRD time since I turned out the lights at ten o'clock, I jerk out of sleep with a panicked gasp and my heart racing.

I glance at the clock and see it's just after midnight, which means I've had three nightmares in just under two hours. That has to be a new record. Usually I can get through the night with only one bad dream, but my churning emotions must have lowered my defenses even in sleep.

I'm not going to try to sleep again right now—I know when I'm beaten. Breaths still too fast, my heart still thrumming, I look around the bedroom and feel the darkness closing in on me. I know Cole must be downstairs, Rylan and Leo next door, but right now I feel very alone.

I wish. It's a childlike notion, wishing for something that I know can't happen, but I wish Leo could be here with me.

I shouldn't have kissed him. At least then we could keep up the pretense of only being friends. Now that I bared myself to him, I don't know if there's a way to go backward. Maybe I could play it off like I was overwhelmed by my emotions after the package and the discovery of the dead bird?

But that idea tastes sour to me. I don't want to make up some story—a lie—about my feelings for him.

A soft knock on my door sends my heart rocketing into the stratosphere. Half a second later, the logical part of my brain tells me there's no way my stalker strolled into the house without anyone noticing and is casually knocking on my bedroom door after midnight. It has to be Cole checking on me.

Another knock sounds, and I call out, "Yes?"

Then a voice I wasn't expecting. "Georgia? Can I talk to you? Please?"

Leo? Why is he over here? He can't possibly want to dredge up my mistake again, can he?

I can't pretend to be asleep now that I've already said something. So I ask, "Why, Leo? There's nothing else to talk about."

There's a heavy sigh and a soft thud on the door. "*Please, Georgia.*" A thread of strain runs through his voice. "I just—I didn't want to wake you up, but I heard you moving around in here, and I really want to talk to you."

I hastily start erecting shields and barricades around my heart. As I flip on the bedside lamp, I reach up to smooth my hair but snatch my hand away. He doesn't care what I look like, anyway. Then I take a deep breath and say, "Okay, Leo. Come in and we'll talk."

CHAPTER NINE

LEO

She's been having nightmares again.

I suspected it when I came upstairs and heard her tossing and turning, her soft whimpers sneaking under the bedroom door and pulling at me. Her sheets and blankets are all twisted around her body, and there are bluish shadows under her eyes. Even her pajamas are in disarray—her T-shirt wrinkled and slipping off one shoulder.

She looks so beautiful and brave and vulnerable, I want to sweep her into my arms and protect her from everything.

Georgia's gaze is guarded, her features smoothed into a neutral mask, but she can't completely hide the pain I caused. I've spent the last five hours being angry with myself, pacing the kitchen, holding silent dialogues. Debating the best way to make things right with Georgia, and how to explain to Cole that I want to break our rule about not getting involved with clients.

When I came back down from Georgia's bedroom after my big screw up earlier, I had to push those thoughts to the side and focus on the other issue at hand. Rylan was back from interrogating the man who delivered the package and we had to discuss how it impacts our plans going forward. Now we have eyes on the CCTV near the last place the stalker was sighted—if he comes back, we'll try to identify him using facial recognition technology.

After that, Cole went back over to our side of the duplex to catch a few more hours of sleep while I went over all the ways I messed up after Georgia kissed me. I can't forget her wounded gaze, or the way she stepped away from me. How she curled into herself on the bed and asked me to leave her alone.

And I kept reliving the kiss—her little moans, the weight of her body pressing into me, and the way my heart felt almost unbearably full when I held her. How right it felt, and how I never thought I'd meet a woman who made me feel that way. By the time Cole came back at midnight for his shift, there was no way I could wait any longer to talk to him.

Cole didn't beat around the bush—he dragged me over to the dining room table and jerked his head at me to sit down. Taking a seat across from me, he raised his eyebrows and said, “What’s going on with you and Georgia?”

Nothing like getting straight to the point. But I've known Cole for a long time, have literally trusted him with my life, so I wasn't going to waste time dancing around it. I told him, “I care about her. More than just as a client.”

There wasn't a flicker of surprise in his even gaze. “And?”

“I know we have a rule. No getting involved with clients. But,” I took a deep breath and laid it all out there. “I thought I could ignore how I feel about her. But I can't, and I don't *want* to. I want to be with her, Cole, if she'll have me.”

A corner of his mouth quirked up. “Based on your expression after leaving her room earlier, things didn't go too well?”

“I pushed her away,” I admitted. “I thought I was doing the right thing, but I hurt her. And I want to see if she'll give me another chance. But I'm loyal to you, and Blade and Arrow—I don't want to do anything to compromise our team, either.”

Cole went silent for a few seconds, his brow furrowing as he looked at me. Even after all the years of knowing him, I couldn't tell what his reaction would be. Would I be forced to

decide between pursuing the woman I think I'm falling for or letting her go for the good of the team?

Then he smiled, and I knew what his answer would be. "Leo, I've known you for a long time, and I trust you implicitly. If you say you can protect Georgia to the same standard while you're dating her, I believe you."

"I can." My words vibrated with feeling. "I won't let anything happen to her."

"Then you have my blessing. Rules don't have to be black or white. Sometimes we have to live in shades of gray." His eyes crinkled, smile broadening. "And I'm happy for you, Leo. Georgia's a special woman, and I think she's just what you need."

I dipped my head at him. "I hope she thinks so, too."

"Maybe she's still awake," Cole suggested. "There's no time like the present to beg for forgiveness."

Which is how I ended up here, standing in the doorway of Georgia's bedroom, desperately hoping she'll listen to me.

She's staring at me from the bed, her brows arching into a confused little V. "Leo?"

Right. I've been hovering here while I debate what to say, letting the silence drag on much longer than I intended. I glance at the end of the bed and lift my eyebrows at her. "Can I?"

"Um." Georgia's gaze slides to the bed and then back at me, pressing her lips together tightly. "Okay."

The vise around my chest loosens by a twist. I still have a long way to go, but this is at least the first step. Crossing the room, I sit on the opposite end of the bed from Georgia. Now that I'm closer to her, I can't miss the wounded look on her face, no matter how hard she tries to disguise it.

As I inspect her face, the dark smudges under her eyes have me asking, "Did you get any sleep?"

She pauses, then admits in a quiet voice, "No. I kept having nightmares."

My hand twitches, wanting to reach out and comfort her. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Georgia blinks at me. “It’s not your fault.”

I can’t help feeling like it kind of is. Any other night, we would have had dinner together, played a game, talked until she was nodding off to sleep. She would have gone to bed relaxed and comfortable, instead of sitting up here for hours on her own.

Did she even eat? Not likely, since I would have seen her come down to the kitchen. Dammit. Another reason to be angry with myself.

“Georgia.” I lean forward and capture her gaze. “I’m sorry. About earlier.”

She flinches, her jaw tightening. After a second, she says, “No. You don’t have anything to be sorry for. If anyone should apologize, it’s me.”

I’m shaking my head before she stops speaking. “No, I handled it all wrong. I—”

“Please, Leo.” Her gaze skitters away, skipping across the room but refusing to land on me. “We don’t need to go through this again. I made a mistake, and I... I put you in an uncomfortable situation. I’m hoping... maybe we can forget it happened?”

Ouch. Each word is another punch to the chest. “I don’t want to forget it.” My voice comes out rough and urgent. All my thoughts of giving Georgia space disappear as I move up the bed to sit next to her. I tip her chin toward me with a finger, meeting her miserable gaze.

“Listen to me. That kiss was—it was incredible. I haven’t stopped thinking about it all night. You definitely did *not* make a mistake. I’m the one who screwed up.”

Georgia’s face pinches in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I thought I was doing the right thing,” I explain, holding her gaze with mine. “We have a rule, no relationships with

clients—it's supposed to ensure that we don't get distracted and compromise the level of protection.”

“I'm sorry—“ Georgia starts, but I touch my finger gently to her lips.

“Stop apologizing.” My finger traces along her soft lower lip. “You were showing me what you wanted, and I wanted it, too. I want you, Georgia. I have since the moment I saw you.”

“I've been denying the truth to myself because I thought following the rules would keep you safe. And I didn't want to take advantage of you when you've been through so much. But I realized some things tonight, and I don't want to deny how I feel about you anymore.”

“How *do* you feel?“ It's barely a whisper.

I take a deep breath before baring my heart to her. “I feel like I want to be more than just a man protecting you. I want to be everything to you. I want to hold you at night to keep the nightmares away. Kiss you whenever I want to. Spend my days making you happy, and guarding not just your body but your heart.”

“And I'm so sorry I hurt you. But I promise it was never because I didn't want to be with you. I was scared that if I let you in, I might fail you.”

“You couldn't.” Wide blue eyes regard me, adamant in her statement. “But if it's a rule...”

“I talked to Cole. Told him how I felt about you. And he agreed that the rules don't need to be absolute. But Georgia, I would have come to you anyway, even if he hadn't agreed. Because you're too special to me to lose.”

There's a long pause as I wait for her to say something. Anything. To tell me she feels the same way as I do, or worst case, to say the kiss was an impulsive mistake and I read everything all wrong.

“I feel that way about you, too.” She sucks in a breath, and I can see her pulse fluttering in her neck, the rapid rise and fall of her chest. “I want you to be... *more*. More than a friend. I want to be more than a job to you.”

“You are. You have been. Since the first time I saw you; you were never just a job.”

As Georgia stares at me, I cup her chin and stroke my thumb down her cheek. When I graze the slightly raised line of her scar, she tries to jerk her head away, but I hold her face still. “You’re beautiful, sweetheart. *Everything* about you is beautiful, inside *and* out.”

Georgia swallows hard, and uncertainty flickers in her eyes, darkening them to a sapphire blue. “But... I’m not... I don’t look like...”

How does she not see what I’m seeing?

My mouth lowers to hers, and I *show* Georgia how beautiful I think she is. I nibble her lips, licking along the seam, teasing her mouth open and plunging deep. My tongue tangles with hers, starting a sensual dance of anticipation and promises of things I want to do to other parts of her body.

I cup the back of her head, sliding my fingers through the silken fall of her hair. Tilting her head back, I change the angle of our kiss so I can taste even more of her. With my other hand, I lift Georgia so she’s on my lap, my swelling arousal notching into the apex of her thighs. As I press against the heat at her center, she jolts, thrusting against me.

Small moans spill into my mouth as she grinds herself against me—I’m hard and throbbing and aching to slide into her. She’s only wearing a thin pair of shorts to sleep in, so I can feel her damp heat and how she’s opening for me like a flower blooming. If we weren’t wearing clothes, I’d be inside her already, and my body is already screaming for release.

Georgia’s hands are clutching my shoulders, nails digging in hard enough to leave marks. I tear my mouth from hers and drag a line of kisses down her neck to her collarbone, tasting the soft skin peeking out of her shirt. She arches her neck back and I stroke my fingers down the silky column, so graceful and soft and glistening like silk.

Her hips start to jerk against mine, and I can tell she’s already close. I bring one hand between us, sliding into her

shorts and touching her swollen bud. At first slow and gentle, then harder, I flick at her bundle of nerves until she's slick and hot and moaning uncontrollably.

“*Leo*—“ It’s a strained cry. “I’m *so close*.”

Which is exactly what I wanted. Tonight I’m going to make sure Georgia gets some rest, and this is the first part of my plan. Lowering my mouth to her breast, I suck at her taut nipple through the fabric. Then I flick at her little bud until she stiffens, her thigh muscles quivering, and she lets out a low, keening cry. A second later, she collapses into my arms, her head drooping onto my shoulder.

“*Oh*,“ she breathes into my neck. “That was...”

“Beautiful.” I stroke her back while pressing soft kisses to the top of her head.

Georgia sighs—an exhale of pleasure and satisfaction—and I feel like beating my chest in pure caveman style. I may still be hard as a rock, but I made sure my woman got what she needed.

My woman. I tighten my hold on her as a wave of emotion and possessiveness sweeps over me, the sensation so intense it leaves me breathless. I don’t know how it’s possible to feel so strongly for someone so quickly, but I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.

Georgia lifts her head from my neck and peers up at me, her eyes heavy lidded and languorous. “What about you? You never...”

“Another time, sweetheart.” I guide her head back to my shoulder. “Right now, I just want you to relax.”

”I *am* sleepy,“ she mumbles, her words slurring. It’s no surprise—I wonder when she last had a full night of sleep.

“Go to sleep, then.” I kiss her head again, inhaling the soft scent of vanilla in her hair. “I’ll stay with you.”

“All night?” It’s barely a whisper.

“Yeah, sweetheart.” My heart squeezes, then expands until it’s almost bursting. “I’ll be right here. If you have a

nightmare, I'll chase it away."

"Thanks, Leo." Georgia snuggles into me, her nose nuzzling my neck. Her words are so soft I can barely hear them. "I'm glad you came back tonight."

Me too.

CHAPTER TEN

GEORGIA

I can't believe how much has changed in just one day.

This time yesterday, I was hiding out in my room, miserable and embarrassed and convinced I had ruined everything with Leo. Now, less than twenty-four hours later, not only are things okay with Leo, but I'm actually *dating* him.

Or is it *seeing each other? In a relationship?* I'm not sure what to call it, but whatever it is, I'm *definitely* on board with it. I can barely believe that Leo—basically the perfect man—feels the same way about me as I do about him.

And he thinks I'm beautiful. He doesn't show me just with words, but in the way he looks at me, too. His gaze doesn't skip over my scar like it's distasteful—he looks over every inch of my face like he can't believe how lucky he is to be with me. And the way he touches me—so reverently—makes me feel more beautiful than I ever did when I was all decked out in designer clothes and makeup while modeling.

But it's more than that. I think Leo just likes *me*. He likes all the things I never showed anyone else, like how I love to play board games and read cheesy romance novels and prefer knitting and crocheting to going out. And when I talk, he listens to me like he cares what I have to say, instead of the patronizing nods and *mmhms* I would get on the rare occasions I'd go on a date.

Leo is more than I ever dreamed of imagining. And now that we're together, everything seems so much lighter.

Happier. Every time I look at him, my heart does a little skip of happiness.

If I didn't have a stalker, things would be just about perfect. Although, if not for this stalker, I wouldn't have met Leo, either. So, I guess there's something to be said for silver linings.

In contrast to yesterday evening's misery, tonight I'm sitting on the couch with the strict instructions to read my Kindle and *not* look at what's going on in the kitchen. As it's an open concept space, it's a little difficult to do. Especially with all the sounds of activity coming from there—pots clanking, the clink of silverware, paper rustling and crinkling—I've re-read the same page of my book at least five times.

Leo woke me up this morning a little before seven—he had to shower and exercise before his shift watching the surveillance cameras started—and said he would have a surprise when he came over later. I asked him to give me a hint and he just kissed me and said, “Then it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?”

Maybe not, but my curiosity is driving me crazy. Leo showed up at four, like usual, but this time he came with half a dozen shopping bags dangling from his muscular arms and a mischievous gleam in his eye. After dropping them in the kitchen, he had a quick conversation with Rylan, then kissed me and gave me the instructions to stay in here.

It's been an hour so far and I've been trying to guess the surprise for most of the time I've been waiting. I'm guessing it's dinner, but if that were the case, I'm not sure what's going on with all the secrecy. Maybe it's some new game that requires a lot of prep to set up? Or some super complicated recipe?

“Are you ready?” Leo's voice seemingly comes out of nowhere and I let out a little bleat of fright. For such a big guy, he moves like a panther—this isn't the first time he's managed to startle me.

“Sorry.” He smooths a hand down my hair, his fingers lightly massaging my scalp. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

“It’s fine.” I tip my head back to look at him. “But you need to wear a little bell or something.”

Leo reaches down to grab my hand, pulling me up from the couch. He grins at me. “Like a cat?”

“Something like that.” Still smiling, he leans down to brush his mouth across mine, lingering for a moment before pulling away, leaving my lips tingling.

“Wait.” I slip my hand behind his neck and pull his face back down, not ready for the kiss to be over. I’ve been thinking about kissing Leo for weeks; now that I finally can, I’m eager to make up for all the time I’ve missed.

Leo responds eagerly, cupping my head as he controls the angle of the kiss, slanting his mouth over mine. I put a hand on his chest for balance, loving the solid wall of muscle that makes me feel safe and protected. He swells against me, the hard length I’ve thought about, but not yet seen, pressing into my belly.

Feeling him so excited for me sends a rush of heat straight to my core. I know we’ve only been dating for about eighteen hours now, probably too soon to take things to the next level. But I am *really* looking forward to when we do.

I’m not sure how much time goes by, but it doesn’t feel like enough when Leo pulls away. A little sigh of disappointment slips out, and he grins at me, swiping his thumb across the moisture on my lips. “As much as I’m enjoying this,” he says, “if we don’t stop, it will ruin the surprise.”

The surprise. *Right*. Focusing my lust-addled mind, I smile back at him, the tug of skin across my scar barely detracting from my anticipation. That’s another thing Leo has done for me—changed my perspective on smiling. Before I met Leo, I rarely smiled, and when I did, it was only a sad reminder of what had been done to me.

Now, when I’m with Leo, I *want* to smile. When I’m with him, it’s easier to push my worries and self-consciousness to the back of my mind instead of letting them haunt me

constantly like they used to. It's still a battle—last night for example—but the times when I don't think about it give me hope for the future. A hope that maybe someday I'll fully accept how I look and stop seeing myself as irrevocably damaged.

“You okay, Georgia?” Leo's eyes are narrowed as he gazes down at me. “It looked like you went somewhere else for a second.”

“I'm fine. I was just thinking...” I trail off, wondering if it will sound stupid if I tell him. But it's *Leo*, and I trust him, so I continue, “you make me want to smile. And I didn't for a long time. Not since... it would remind me, the way it felt. But when I'm with you, I don't worry about it as much.”

He stares at me, eyes a storm of emotions, his jaw clenching several times before he says. “Ah, sweetheart. I can't tell you how much that means to me. And just so you know—“ His hand caresses my scarred cheek. “When you smile, you are *brehtaking*.”

Oh. I only just stop myself from clapping my hand to my chest to make sure my heart hasn't exploded out of it. The feeling is so intense, I can't form words for a moment.

Leo gazes at me, a soft smile playing across his lips, and kisses my forehead before saying, “How about that surprise?” Then he slides his arm around my waist and turns to guide me out of the living room. I'm still looking at him, my heart still thumping erratically, barely noticing where we're going. So when we come to a stop and I actually look around, my mouth drops open in shock.

Whatever I was expecting—dinner, a new game—nothing I considered comes close to the scene in front of me. As I've gotten to know Leo, he's surprised me many times, but nothing could have prepared me for this. But maybe I *shouldn't* be surprised to learn that he's a romantic at heart.

After all, this six and a half foot man who could intimidate the most threatening of opponents is nothing but gentle with me. And he's been endlessly thoughtful, from the games he

bought and how he's always checking on me to make sure I'm feeling okay.

But this? *This* I wasn't expecting.

The dining room has been turned into a space that would rival the most romantic restaurants in New York City or Paris. The table is covered with a stark white tablecloth and set with delicate wine glasses and glossy black dishes that I know are brand new. In the center is a bouquet of bright blue orchids with tiny tea lights all flickering all around the base.

On either side of the table are small trees decorated with twinkling white lights. Small tables are set beside the trees, each with an arrangement of glowing pillar candles. If that weren't enough to set the mood, there's a large TV set up behind all the decorations, the screen displaying a scene of Paris at night. Instrumental music starts playing softly around us, and after a moment, I realize it's a violinist I once mentioned to Leo as being one of my favorite performers.

I'm staring at everything, awestruck, as Leo pulls the chair out for me. As I sit down, he kisses me on the cheek and says, "I know we can't go out on a date yet, but I wanted to do something special for you."

"Leo," I gasp, still having trouble catching a full breath, "this is incredible. I can't believe you did all this. When did you—"

Leo walks into the kitchen and comes back holding two covered dishes, setting them down and pulling off the lids with a flourish. On my plate is the most incredible looking shrimp scampi topped with shaved parmesan and fresh parsley. After another trip to the kitchen, he brings out an uncorked bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and pours a hefty amount in my glass. For his own, it's just the tiniest of dashes—even during a romantic date he has to stay alert and ready.

Sitting down, he flashes a little grin at me. "I asked Cole's fiancée to help. I told her all the things I needed, and Maya drove them up here from Sleepy Hollow."

I gape at him. "All this way? Just for a date?"

“It’s not just a date, Georgia.” Two spots of pink appear on his cheeks. “It’s our *first* date. I want you to have a good memory of it. And Maya was happy to help. When I told her that I met someone—” He flushes more and looks so cute I want to leap over the table and hug him. “I think she was so pleased she would have done anything to help me make a good impression.”

My chest squeezes again. At this rate, Leo is going to give me heart failure. “I love it, Leo. It’s just...” A little tingle rushes up my nose. “*No one* has ever done something like this for me.”

I leap out of my chair and rush to his side, flinging my arms around him. “Thank you.” I press kisses to his cheek between words, “I love it so much. The music, the food—you remembered it’s my favorite, the candles, the flowers—it’s all perfect. I couldn’t ask for a better first date.”

Leo’s eyes are a molten bronze as he gazes at me. “I picked out the flowers because they remind me of your eyes.”

How is this man still single? Or rather, *was* single. Because he’s mine now, and I’m not letting him go.

My long-dormant libido has decided to come out of hibernation, shouting at me to sit on Leo’s lap and attack him. But after he went through all the effort of setting this up and cooking me my favorite food, there’s no way I’m going to skip over it.

And I should take things slowly, the little skeptical voice in the dark corner of my head whispers. There’s no guarantee that after the stalker is caught and Leo isn’t forced to be here every day that our relationship will continue. I’m only opening myself up to heartbreak if I move too fast.

Shut up, I tell the voice sternly. I’m not going to let my self-doubts ruin this perfect date. So, I lock the little skeptical voice in a box and give Leo another quick kiss, this time slanting my lips across his. “I love the flowers. And I can’t wait to taste the shrimp scampi. It looks delicious.”

I return to my side of the table and take a taste of the pasta—it tastes just as good as it looks. Leo watches me with raised eyebrows until I give him an enthusiastic nod. “My mom will be happy,” he says. “I called her for the recipe. But I’ve never made it myself, only watched her do it.”

An image of me visiting Leo’s family floats through my mind, helping his mother cook while Leo stands behind me, his large hand on my hip. Sitting around the table at his parents’ home in Vermont, going outside after to walk in the snow with Leo, tossing snowballs and laughing with each other.

Too soon, I remind myself. We only *just* started dating. But the idea sticks like glitter. Nothing I do can make it go away.

As we eat, we chat about all sorts of topics—we never seem to run out of things to talk about. We fall into a conversation about what kinds of computer work Leo does for Blade and Arrow, investigative stuff mostly, but he admits that sometimes he has to do things that fall in the gray area of legality.

He almost looks hesitant as he tells me, as if I’m going to judge him for using his skills to keep people safe. I have a feeling some of the things he’s done for my case aren’t exactly to the letter of the law, but I honestly couldn’t care less. It sounds pretty cool—something I wish I was smart enough to do—and I tell him so.

“So, do you hack things?” My food is gone, but I take a small sip of my wine. “Is that the right way of saying it?”

“Sometimes.” Leo takes a drink of water, regarding me seriously over the rim of the glass. “I do ethical hacking—entering information systems to find information necessary to keep people safe. I never do anything to harm the system, or cause damage to the organization.”

“How did you learn how to do it?”

“It just took time. I took computer science courses while I was in the Army and learned a lot on my own through research and experimentation. Not that I did much of it while I was on

active duty. I was more focused on communications than hacking systems.”

“But you did something with hacking after you got out, didn’t you?” While we were talking one night, Leo mentioned he worked for a cybersecurity company between leaving the military and joining Blade and Arrow.

“Yeah.” Leo leans back in his seat. “I was a white hat hacker. So companies would hire us to look for security flaws in their information systems. We would essentially try to hack into them, then let the company know where they needed to beef up security.”

“That’s so cool.”

“Sometimes.” Leo’s eyes crinkle at me. “But I like using my skills for what I do now a lot more. Back then, I was helping big companies, mostly. Now, I can help people who really need it, and there are times when I’ve found information that helped keep them safe.”

A wave of melancholy hits me as I think about how smart Leo is, and how little I have to offer in comparison. He can help save people—what can I do? Model a new jacket? Help sell an expensive shoe?

Almost as if Leo can read my mind, he cuts right into my line of thinking. “What about your art? Have you thought more about pursuing it as a career?”

I’ve mentioned it a few times, saying I wish I could make a living selling my crafts, but I honestly have no idea where to even start. “I’d like to. But I don’t know how to take the little things I make and turn it into something that would actually make money. Maybe if I had some business experience, took some classes...”

“You could.” Leo looks at me confidently. “You could take a few business and management classes, if you wanted.”

A sad little laugh bursts out. “I don’t have the money for college, Leo. I’m almost through my savings—soon I’m going to have to tell my mom I can’t send her money anymore. I’m

not going to find a job that pays what I used to make, not without any skills or training or a college education.”

“Georgia...” His forehead creases, and his mouth presses into a small frown. “If you wanted to go to college, I’m sure we could figure something out.”

“It’s okay.” I force a smile onto my face. I’m not going to ruin our evening feeling sorry for myself. “I’ll keep doing my crafts for fun. And once this whole stalker thing is over, I’ll find a job in retail or something. It’ll all be fine.”

Leo gets up and comes over to me, pulling me out of my seat. He scoops me into his arms, one under my knees and the other behind my back, and carries me into the living room. It happens all in one fluid move, so quickly I don’t even realize what he’s doing until it’s already happened.

I gasp out, “What are you doing?” Being so tall, I’ve never had a man pick me up and carry me this way. It’s both shocking and comforting at the same time.

“Dinner is over. It’s time for the next part of the date.”

He walks over to the couch and sits down, settling me onto his lap. Sitting like this is another thing I’ve never done with a man—not that I’ve had loads of experience cuddling anyway—but Leo is the only man I’ve been with who was tall enough for me to sit on his lap without feeling like a giant.

It’s another thing I love about Leo, how big he is. I would still like him even if he was shorter than me, but there’s just something about being with him that makes me feel safe. I’ve never minded being tall—I couldn’t have made a living as a model otherwise—but there’s something to be said about being with someone who makes me feel almost... delicate. Small. Protected.

“I’ve been waiting to do this ever since I woke up this morning and had to leave your bed.” His face is only inches from mine, his gaze dark and heated and I find myself falling into it. “Waking up with you in my arms was the best feeling in the world.”

My eyes fall to his lips, full and waiting for me. “Waking up with your arms around me was more than I could have imagined.” I stretch forward to brush my mouth across his, then pull away to admit, “Last night was the first time I’ve felt safe in months.”

“*Sweetheart.*” He cups my cheek, stroking the line of my jaw with his thumb. “I never want you to feel scared to sleep. I’ll always be there to protect you.”

“*Leo.*” I can’t articulate how strongly I’m feeling. I’m overwhelmed by the warmth filling my chest and the sparks of electricity radiating through my body. It’s like every cell in my body is suddenly waking up after decades of sleeping.

In the absence of words, I close the last inches between us and kiss him. This time, I don’t pull away, and neither does Leo. I curl into his chest, draping my arms around him, putting everything I have into the connection between us. I’m tucked into his big body, fully wrapped up in his strong embrace.

We keep kissing for what feels like hours, tasting each other, our hearts so close they seem like they’re beating in rhythm. I know we can’t take things too far when we’re sitting in the living room of the duplex, not when Cole or Rylan could come over at any time. But I’m okay with it. Just being here with Leo is the best gift I’ve ever been given.

Gradually, the breaks between kisses get longer, and my eyes are beginning to droop. Even though I got a decent night’s sleep last night, I have months of interrupted sleep to catch up on. But I don’t want to miss a second of my time with Leo. So, I keep forcing my eyes back open, until he notices and lets out a low chuckle.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.” His voice is gentle and soothing. He presses a kiss to my forehead, his lips lingering for a moment. “Just rest your eyes. I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

My body decides to take Leo’s order, even if my mind doesn’t want to yet. Snuggling even closer to him, I notch my head under his chin and let my eyes close. His musky scent sinks into me, and I feel his hand stroke my hair as everything starts to fade.

And in a soft murmur, as I drift off to sleep, I hear,
“Goodnight, beautiful.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LEO

The first thing Georgia says as I walk into the living room is, “Leo! Come over here and put me in a headlock.”

What?

Glancing around the room, I notice that the couches have been pushed off to the side, leaving a wide open space in the center. Georgia is standing in the middle, stretching one arm with the other, and wearing some sort of athletic outfit that doesn't leave *anything* to the imagination.

There are padded mats laid out all over the floor, so I can only assume she's been practicing self-defense with Rylan. Which I knew she's been doing, and I think it's great, but usually she's showered and changed by the time I come over. So, I had no idea she looked *this* good when she did it.

She's wearing black leggings with little seams that seem designed to set off her curves. The shimmery fabric molds to every inch of her peach-shaped ass and her toned thighs and calves. A sliver of creamy skin peeks out below her matching top as she stretches, so soft and satiny looking, I'm at once desperate to taste it.

As my eyes move upward, I almost swallow my tongue at the sight of her breasts in the same black fabric. Georgia is a slender woman, she isn't big on the top or bottom, but everything she has is perfectly proportioned and just the right amount to fit in my hands.

Since I've been trying to take things slow with Georgia, this is the closest I've seen her to naked. And now I *definitely* won't be able to stop thinking about it.

Rylan smiles at Georgia and jealousy flares hot in my chest. Even though I know it's crazy—he's not just one of my best friends, but he's basically family—I have a momentary urge to smack him.

Turning back to me, he says, "She did a great job today. All the practice is really paying off."

I manage to force out, "That's good," through gritted teeth.

Rylan eyeballs me, his brows jumping up to his forehead. After a moment, a smirk appears, and he chuckles under his breath. "Don't worry," he murmurs. "I kept it strictly business."

"Shut it," I mutter, trying to ignore my irrational jealousy.

Georgia is watching the two of us with a confused expression, her initial grin slowly fading. That's when I realize I'm being a total idiot, getting jealous over my friend *helping* my girlfriend. And I need to stop being stupid and show her my support.

I unclench my jaw and take a deep breath before smiling back at her. "That's great, sweetheart."

"Are you sure?" Her forehead is creased with little lines of worry. "I thought it was a good idea for me to learn self-defense, right?"

"Of course." I cross the room and pull her into my arms, kissing the lines on her forehead away. "I'm really happy you're learning how to defend yourself." Pitching my voice low so only she can hear it, I tell her, "I was a little taken aback by how incredible you look in this outfit."

"Oh?" Georgia's voice lilts up with pleasure. "You like how I look in this?"

My hand drifts down to slide over the swell of her ass, and I pull her closer to me. I lower my mouth so it's only inches

from hers, a breath away from kissing her. “I *love* how you look in it.”

Her eyes go from a clear blue to a dark sapphire, and her voice goes all low and sultry. “*Good.*”

Rylan coughs loudly. “I’m going to head back over now,” he announces, looking at me pointedly and with a giant grin stretching across his face.

“Oh!” Georgia pulls away and turns to look at him. “I want you to see me try to throw Leo first. Like how you showed me. Do you mind?”

Rylan laughs. “Mind watching you knock Leo on his ass? I can’t wait to see it.”

She turns to me, straightening and shaking out her arms and shoulders. “I threw Rylan before, but since you’re taller and bigger, I want to see if I can do it to you, too.” Moving in front of me, she says over her shoulder, “Rylan says the headlock is one of the more common attacks a man will try on a woman, so I want to make sure I can escape from it.”

Georgia says the words casually, but I don’t miss the thread of tension running through them. She must wonder how things might have turned out differently had she known self-defense when she was attacked in her apartment building. Could she have gotten away before he had a chance to use the knife? Would she still be unscarred, still working, still living in New York City?

Or could she have made it worse? Because it’s one thing to use these moves against an unarmed assailant. But for an inexperienced person like Georgia to try to throw a bigger man with a knife? The very thought of it makes my blood turn to ice.

I also don’t love the idea of putting her in a headlock to begin with. Even though she says she wants me to, how will she feel when I’ve got my arm around her neck? She may have practiced it with Rylan, but he’s five inches and fifty pounds smaller than me. If I do it, will my size end up scaring her instead of making her feel safe?

“Leo?” Georgia tilts her head to look at me. Her gaze is steady, looking calmer than how I feel. “Is it okay? If you don’t want to ...”

Lowering my voice, I admit, “I don’t want you to be scared of me. Or trigger a flashback.”

“You won’t.” Her words are certain. “I trust you. I could *never* be afraid of you.”

“Okay.” I don’t like it, but if she can do this and it makes her feel more confident... With a heavy sigh, I carefully wrap my arm around her throat, ready to step away if she shows any sign of panic.

Several seconds later, I realize I had nothing to worry about. Georgia did it perfectly, like she’s been practicing for years.

There was no hesitating, just a fluid sequence of moves—head down, a sweep of her foot, a sharp turn and then I was down on the ground—followed by Georgia’s little hoot of triumph.

“I did it!” Her eyes are glowing with pride.

“Good job, Georgia.” Rylan shoots her an affectionate smile. “Now I know who to call when Leo gets on my nerves.”

I stand up and cup her face in my hands, leaning over to brush my lips across hers. “That was amazing, sweetheart. I’m really proud of you.”

Georgia hugs me, her arms wrapping around my waist, curves fitting against me perfectly. There’s not a bit of her I can’t feel through the skin-tight fabric, and I would like nothing more than to sweep her up and carry her into the bedroom, kiss her all over, show her exactly what she does to me.

But Rylan is still in the room, his grin getting bigger by the minute, Cole is next door, and I’m technically on duty protecting Georgia. All good reasons to tamp down my rampaging lust and do the right thing instead of what my body wants.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, it depends which part of my body is asked—Georgia leaps away from me with a little cry of dismay.

“What?” My eyes are everywhere, searching for the cause.

Her face pinches into an expression of distaste. “I’ve been practicing for over an hour!” Nose wrinkling, she says, “I shouldn’t be hugging you right now! I’m all gross. I have to take a shower!”

“You’re not,” I tell her, and I mean it. She looks all pink and glowy and all I smell is the faint scent of her shampoo.

“That’s nice, but I am.” She stretches up to peck me on the cheek. “I’ll go shower, then we can have dinner. And I found a movie I want to watch later. It’s a rom-com, but I really think you’ll like it.” Her blue eyes go wide and pleading.

As if I could tell her no. “Okay, sweetheart.”

* * *

EVEN THOUGH OUR evening has been unremarkable—a simple chicken stir-fry for dinner, a rematch of Scrabble, and now we’re watching a movie—every moment is charged with something exceptional.

Now I can touch Georgia’s hip, her neck, graze my hand along the curve of her breast as I reach around her to grab something off the counter as we cook. I can kiss her spontaneously, as she pulls ingredients from the fridge, or she thinks about her next move in Scrabble. As we watch the movie, Georgia can sit right up next to me, curled into my side with her head resting on my chest.

Now, when we look at each other, our gazes linger instead of rushing away. I don’t have to hide how I feel about Georgia anymore—I can tell her all the things I’ve been thinking but wouldn’t let myself say. Like how beautiful she is, how much I look forward to seeing her every afternoon and how much I love sleeping next to her every night.

Only sleeping, aside from some tame make-out sessions before we fall asleep. I'm there to help her sleep through her nightmares, to hold her when she wakes up from a particularly bad one. Not that I don't want to do more, but I don't want to rush things, especially since we've only been officially dating for a week.

And even though Georgia is my girlfriend now—which seems like too simple of a word to express how I feel about her—I still need to make sure she's protected. I need to stay alert and ready to react at the first sign of danger. If I'm doing all the things I want to do to Georgia, that's *all* I'll be able to concentrate on.

Which means sex is off the table for now. But once the stalker is caught, and Georgia is ready... Just thinking about touching her bare skin, kissing my way down her body, hearing her moan as I plunge into her welcoming heat—I've had to take a *lot* of cold showers over the last week.

I'm cautiously hopeful that we'll catch the stalker soon. While we didn't have any luck identifying the mystery man who handed over the package—there were no CCTV cameras nearby and we couldn't get a clear visual from the security cameras we hacked into—I installed a new hidden camera in the location in case he comes back.

And since Georgia is still receiving letters with a local postmark, I've set up tiny cameras near all the mailboxes I could access in town. It means a lot of cameras and surveillance footage to go through, but thanks to a program I created that cross references the date on the postmark with the times people visit each of the mailboxes, if he visits one of them, I'm going to catch him.

Of course, he could be leaving them in his own mailbox for pickup. And all my surveillance is accomplishing nothing. But Cole and Rylan agree with me that this stalker will eventually stop at one of the local mailboxes, and then we'll be able to identify him.

It can't happen too soon, either, because the stalker is definitely escalating. His letters have gotten more graphic in

their threats, more urgent, and more personal. After one of them made Georgia physically ill a few days ago, I finally convinced her to stop looking at them.

I feel nauseous reading the vicious words spewed at Georgia. To think that someone could say those things to the amazing woman sitting next to me? To *threaten* her? *Terrorize* her?

I used to think I was protective of the people I cared about, but that was *nothing* compared to now. When I think of someone hurting Georgia, every protective instinct in me comes roaring to the surface, ready to do battle with anyone who threatens her.

My arms tighten around Georgia at the very thought of it, needing to feel her safely tucked up against me. She snuggles closer in response, tilting her head to notch into the crook of my neck. Her lips graze along my skin, trailing soft kisses from my jaw and down my neck.

Then she shifts, draping one leg over mine, turning so she's half-facing me. Her hand had been resting on my chest, but it drifts downwards to land just above the button of my pants. At first I tell myself she's just trying to get more comfortable. That is, until her fingers start to trace along my waistband, dipping between the fabric and my skin.

"I thought you might be bored with the movie," she whispers against my neck. "So I thought this might be more entertaining."

Okay. *Definitely* not trying to get more comfortable. Georgia starts to nibble her way along my jawline, her fingers are leaving tingles of electricity in their wake, and I can feel the taut points of her nipples as she leans against me.

My abdominal muscles go rigid and my pants are getting unbearably tight. I'm swamped with sensations, my body is igniting right here on the couch. Feeling her fingers so close, her damp kisses on my throat, the weight of her in my arms—if we were in any other place, I would be peeling her clothes off already.

“I’ve been thinking about touching you for weeks,” Georgia admits softly. “I was waiting for you, but then I thought... why do I have to wait?”

Oh, God. Every cell in my body is screaming for me to just take her. Flip her over on the couch, pull off her clothes, taste her everywhere, see all the parts of Georgia I’ve been dreaming about. To use my mouth and hands to bring her to the edge and over, then again as I fill her, feeling her convulsing around me.

No. As much as I want this—want to be with Georgia—it’s not my priority. So, I dredge up every ounce of willpower I have and gently lift her away, setting her onto the cushion next to me. Through a jaw clenched hard enough to be painful, I grit out, “I’m sorry, Georgia. We can’t.”

“*What?*” She already looks startled, confused, her brows pulled up in a V. Now hurt ripples across her face, turning her eyes dark and wounded.

Shit. How do I explain this so she doesn’t think I’m rejecting her?

“I thought...” She pulls her legs under her arms, hunching up defensively. “I don’t understand. You don’t want me?”

“No, sweetheart, it’s not that.” My words come out in a rush. “It’s just not a good idea right now.”

Georgia flinches, and she tugs at her hair, starting to pull it in front of her face. I can see her withdrawing already, and I reach forward to tuck her hair back behind her ear. “Stop,” I tell her, my voice soft but commanding. “What you’re thinking right now isn’t true.”

“What is it, then?” Her voice is tiny, an undercurrent of hurt moving through it.

“I want you. More than anything.” I hold her gaze with mine, trying to show her I mean what I’m saying. “There is nothing I want more than to take you upstairs and make love to you all night. And I *will* do that, just not tonight.”

I tug Georgia closer to me, tucking her stiff form under my arm. “The most important thing to me is keeping you safe.”

And if I'm kissing you, tasting you, touching you everywhere, sinking deep inside you—I won't be able to focus on protecting you.”

“Sweetheart,” I cup her cheek and lean in to brush a kiss across her lips. “I swear to you, when this is all over, I am going to show you how much I want you. But for now, until the threat is over, I can't let my guard down. Because if something happened to you because I was distracted, I'd never forgive myself.”

Georgia stares at me, a little frown still pulling down her lips. But after a few seconds, she lets out a deep breath and visibly relaxes. All the lines of strain smooth off her face, and she says, “Okay.”

“Okay?” What does okay mean, exactly?

“Okay,” she replies, and leans into my side. “It makes sense. I don't like it, but I understand.” She pauses, thinking for a moment before continuing, “And I guess it would be awkward if the alarm went off and Cole and Rylan came running over while we were naked. I'm not sure I could look them in the face again.”

“They had better *not* see you naked.” It's part-growl, part-petulant statement. “The only person who's going to see you without any clothes on is *me*.”

“Not if you keep turning me down.” This time, Georgia's smirking at me.

I kiss the smirk off her face, devouring her mouth until she's pink and breathless. “After this is all over, I'll take you somewhere special. And we will definitely be making love until we're both too tired to move. That's a promise.”

Her eyes meet mine and I breathe a tiny sigh of relief—there's no sign of pain or rejection there, only a heavy-lidded desire. “Okay, Leo.” Her lips curve into a smile. “I can't wait.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

GEORGIA

At first, I can't figure out where the unwelcome sound is coming from.

It's an incessant beeping, alternating between fast and slow, dragging me out of sleep.

Still groggy, questions jumble around in my head. Did I change my ringtone? Did I set an alarm and forget about it? Is it Leo's phone ringing and not mine?

Where *is* Leo? I don't feel his warmth behind me, the comforting heat of his big body curved around mine. No reassuring weight of his arm as it wraps around my waist, his hand splayed out over my stomach. Fear crawls up my back, icy fingers sending shivers through my body.

What am I missing? Why is my brain moving so maddeningly slow?

There's a rustling beside me, then Leo's face appears in the dark just inches from mine. I stifle a yelp of startled surprise. His features are all hard lines and angles and shadows, and his eyes aren't just intense—they look dangerous.

"Don't leave the room." His voice is low and commanding. "I'm locking the door behind me. Do not come out until I'm back to get you."

In an instant, reality crashes into me. The remnants of sleep wash away in a tidal wave of panic. My heart flies into my throat, jackrabbiting in my chest.

Oh, God. The alarm. The stalker. He's here.

A whimper of terror whistles out from my frozen lungs. He's *here*.

Oh, God, not *again*. All rational thought disappears for a moment, my brain going blank except for the same words blasting on repeat. *He's here*.

Leo is staring at me, his eyes almost black in the darkness. "Georgia. You'll be okay. I promise. Now *stay here*."

I can't stop shaking and my vocal cords are paralyzed. When I try to say something, all that comes out is a terrified squeak.

Leo brushes his hand across my hair and turns to leave. He's nearly to the door by the time I coax my voice free. "*Be careful*." It's an urgent whisper, cracking at the end.

He slips through the door with a soft but confident, "I will," and the knob clicks shut behind him.

Fear is a thick band around my chest, squeezing until I can barely breathe. Sucking at air in gasping breaths, I look around the room frantically, trying to figure out what to do. Hide in the closet? Under the bed? Stay on the bed, just where Leo left me?

I feel too exposed, too vulnerable just sitting here out in the open. So I get onto the floor, putting the bed between me and the door. I'm not really any safer here—I know that rationally—but it still makes me feel just the tiniest bit better.

But I'm still alone in the nearly black room, and the only person who makes me feel safe is out there, chasing the man who's been stalking me. A man who might be in the house at this very moment, intent on harming me.

Or harming Leo.

How can I be so stupid? Leo is the one who's really in danger, not me. Leo and Cole and Rylan are putting themselves at risk, defending me from an unknown attacker. An attacker who probably has a weapon—a gun, a *knife*—and won't hesitate to use it on any one of them.

I'm getting more and more panicked, gray dots dancing in my vision, air barely making into my lungs. Horrific images are flashing through my mind—Leo hurt, shot, stabbed, bleeding. And Cole—what if something happens and he can't get back to Maya? The sweet woman who went out of her way to help Leo plan the perfect date for me?

Oh, God. What if that was our first and only date? What if the stalker catches Leo unawares and *kills* him?

In the midst of my total freakout, the faint voice of reason works its way toward me. *Stop panicking. This is what the Blade and Arrow guys do.* I pinch my arm hard; the pain dragging my attention away from all the horrible things going through my head.

Forcing myself to take deep breaths, I try to bring my panic down to a more manageable level. And I keep telling myself, *Leo is fine, so are Cole and Rylan. They're professionals who know what they're doing.* After a few minutes, or maybe a few hours—I can't tell because I left my phone on the nightstand and I'm too chicken to go over there to get it—I'm close to believing it.

Sitting hidden and huddled on the floor, chilled by the perspiration slowly drying on me, my hands still shaking as they hold on to my legs, a flash of clarity strikes me.

This isn't who I want to be. I'm a grown woman, not a child, and I don't want to be hiding from my fears anymore. Not that I want to run out there and face down my stalker—I'm not completely insane—but I don't want to allow my fear to control me, either.

That's why I'm practicing self-defense, so I'll be prepared if I ever need to use it. And that's why I'm going to get off the floor, sit on the bed, and wait as calmly as I can for Leo to come back. I don't want him to come in here and see me hiding like a little girl. I want him to see a woman who is conquering her fear.

So I gather my courage and get back on the bed, grabbing my phone as I do it. Then I stare at the screen, counting the minutes, and try really hard to keep my panic from

resurfacing. I think I'm doing pretty well, but I can't stop my hands from trembling.

Another five minutes go by before the alarm switches off—the abrupt silence feels strange to my ears, almost like I've been put in a vacuum. But that's a good sign, right? If the alarm has stopped, that means one of the guys turned it off.

And they wouldn't do that unless the threat was over. Right?

I still don't know the answer and five more minutes have dragged by. And whoever said a watched pot never boils hasn't stared at their phone desperately waiting for their boyfriend to come back after chasing down a crazed stalker. But that's not as nice of a saying or a concept, so I guess the boiling pot saying is better.

After another five torturous minutes go by, the doorknob starts to rattle, and even though I'm trying not to freak out, my pulse has other ideas. It jumps to hummingbird speed, my heart fluttering madly in my chest.

Please let this be Leo.

“Georgia? I'm coming in.” As I hear his familiar, rumbly voice, tears of relief spring free, spilling down my cheeks.

Then he walks through the door, and I've never been happier to see anyone in my life.

Every muscle in my body unclenches, my chest finally loosening enough for me to take a full breath. I can't move for a second as all the pent up fear and stress makes my legs feel all wobbly. All I can do is stare at Leo, my gaze raking up and down his body, searching for any sign of injury.

He walks toward me, his forehead creased with concern, and says gently, “Sweetheart. It's all over. Are you okay?”

I would have thought the words—*it's all over*—would have been the best thing I could have asked for. But it's not. It's seeing Leo here in front of me, no apparent injuries, knowing that he's safe.

Leo is approaching me slowly, his hands outstretched like he thinks he might frighten me. As if I'm a wounded animal ready to flee. But the only place I'm running is into his arms, and I force my shaky leg muscles to do what I want them to.

Leaping off the bed, I fling myself at Leo, slamming into his chest. His arms come around me immediately, caging me into his comforting embrace. I push my face into his neck, inhaling the slight scent of musk and salt, dampening his skin with my tears.

"I'm so glad you're okay," I gasp, my heart still thumping. "I was so worried about you."

"Ah, sweetheart." Leo leans me back, cupping my cheek as he looks at me. "You don't have to worry about me. I just want to make sure *you're* alright." He pauses, inspecting me, searching my eyes with his. "*Are* you alright, Georgia? I know that had to be scary."

Gone is the dangerous soldier I saw when he left the bedroom an hour ago. Now his expression is nothing but tender and caring, his gaze soft and worried.

"I *was* scared," I admit. "But then I remembered who you are, what you do. And I knew you'd protect me."

"With my life." Leo's eyes blaze with intensity. "And you won't have to worry about that man anymore. That's a promise."

"What happened?" I wrap my arms even tighter around his chest; I'd crawl inside of him if I could.

Leo gazes down at me, stroking his thumb along my cheek. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Yes." My response is immediate. After everything this man put me through, I definitely want to know the end of it.

"He used a glass cutter on the window in the bedroom downstairs," he explains, "then he unlocked it and was coming inside when we caught him. Cole got there first, since he was already downstairs. The guy pulled a knife, tried to run, and Cole went after him."

My heart stutters to a stop. “Is Cole okay?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, he’s fine. Cole got the knife away from him, and by that point, Rylan and I were there. There was another knife—this guy had them stashed all over—so we took a little extra time to make sure we found all of them. Then we restrained him while we waited for the police to come.”

“So, he’s gone?”

“He’s gone.” Leo brushes a kiss across my forehead. “And he’s not going to be getting out of jail, either. With the number of weapons on him, on top of the breaking and entering, not to mention he attacked Cole, the guy is going to be looking at some serious time.”

“*Oh.*” The word comes out in a gust. The relief is incredible, but I also feel... strange. Untethered. Like something weighing me down has been yanked away, and now I don’t know what to do with the freedom.

“I know, sweetheart.” How does he know when I don’t know myself? “It’s a lot,” Leo says, “the burden suddenly taken away—you’ve been running on stress and exhaustion and fear for months. It’s natural to feel off balance.”

“It is?”

“Yeah.” His gaze is full of affection. “It’ll take a little while to get your feet under you again. But it’ll happen.”

A new thought hits me, carving a hole in my chest. I try to keep my voice steady as I say, “I guess that means you’ll be leaving. Since you...” *don’t cry, I tell myself sternly.* “You don’t have to protect me anymore.”

His brows go down, little lines appearing between them. “Georgia,” he says, his tone soft but stern, “do you think I’m going to just walk away from you now?”

“No,” my voice wobbles, “but you have to go back to work, and I have to go home, and...” I sniff hard, trying to force back the tears that are looming. “I’m going to miss you. *A lot.*”

“Hey.” Leo picks me up and carries me over to the bed, sitting down and setting me on his lap. “First of all, even if we have to live in separate places, I am still going to see you. And you should know that, but I’m letting it slide right now because I know tonight has been really hard and stressful.”

“And second, I already thought about this. I have a lot of vacation time saved up and you don’t have to get home yet, so I’d like to take you on a trip. Just the two of us, going on actual dates in public, doing whatever we want.”

He pauses, his eyes going dark and heated, “and hopefully I can fulfill that promise I made you. If that sounds good to you.”

Oh. OH. All’s right with the world, my stalker is gone, and I get to go on a trip with Leo. “Yes.” Smiling, I’m emphatic as I say it, “*Absolutely.* There is nothing I’d like more. And I’m *definitely* waiting for you to make good on your promise.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LEO

“Leo, this is *wonderful*.”

Georgia turns away from her view of the lake to look at me, a huge grin stretched across her face. Her eyes are the bluest I’ve seen, sparkling and brilliant in the midafternoon sun. Light glints off her hair as the breeze catches it, blowing tendrils of gold and bronze around her face.

I reach over and catch a few strands of hair, tucking them behind her ear. “I’m glad you like it. This is one of my favorite places to visit.”

“I’ve been to Lake George before,” Georgia says, glancing for a moment at the rippling waves beneath us, “but it was only for a job, so I didn’t get to do anything like this.”

By *this*, she means taking a cruise on Lake George, enjoying the rare perfect spring day in upstate New York.

I had already planned that we’d be staying here for our trip and was hoping to be able to take Georgia out on the lake. When I checked the weather yesterday and saw that today was predicted to be mid-seventies and sunny, I knew this was something I wanted to surprise her with. After being forced to stay indoors for so long, I thought this would be the perfect activity for her to get out and appreciate her much-deserved freedom.

I picked a two and a half hour cruise of the Narrows, a stretch of islands toward the center of the thirty-two-mile-long lake, and the scenery is every bit as gorgeous as I remember

from the last time I visited. We've been standing at the rail the entire time, just taking in the view, Georgia's hand tucked into mine.

"Can you imagine having a house here?" Georgia shifts to lean against my side, tilting her head onto my shoulder. "To be able to come here every summer and see *this*?"

"It would be nice," I agree, wrapping my arm around her and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm not sure a multi-million dollar home is in my budget right now," I chuckle, "but maybe someday..."

"Oh, Leo." Blue eyes turn to me, darkening with worry, "I didn't mean it that way."

"I know you didn't, sweetheart." Spinning her around, I slant my mouth over hers, tasting the sweetness of her lips. We're on a boat surrounded by dozens of other people, so I don't kiss her as long as I'd like, but long enough that when I pull away Georgia's breathing hard and her cheeks are flushed a delicate pink.

Her gaze meets mine, the heat and desire in her eyes matching what I'm feeling. The connection between us has been like an electrical circuit charging up—each touch, each lingering glance building up our anticipation. After dreaming about Georgia for so long, my body is desperate for her.

But I'm not going to rush things, no matter how badly my libido wants me to. This is only the first day of our trip—we haven't even gotten to the hotel we're staying at yet—so there's plenty of time to let things happen gradually. After everything Georgia's been through, the last thing I want to do is put any pressure on her, so I won't make a move until she tells me she's ready.

Although if she tells me she's ready today, I'm certainly not going to say no to her. Not when I've been staring at her long legs in those worn jeans that are faded in all the right places and the little hint of cleavage peeking out from her V-neck shirt.

The captain makes an announcement as we pass by another island, interrupting the charged connection between us. Georgia gives me a little smile, one corner of her mouth tipping up wickedly. “I haven’t forgotten about your promise, by the way,” she says, her voice soft and teasing.

My pants tighten immediately, and I shove my hand in my pocket to do some careful rearranging. “Me neither.”

She glances down at my waist and her smile turns into a full-on smirk. And now I’m thinking about her mouth and all the things she could do with it. *Damn*. We’re on a crowded boat in the middle of the day, not exactly the best place to be getting excited.

Georgia takes pity on me and changes the topic. “I’m so glad you could take the time off for this trip. Are you sure no one minded?”

A short laugh bursts out, and I say, “I’m sure they didn’t. When I told Cole I was taking a week off to spend it with you, he was thrilled. And I haven’t taken any time off in over a year, so I have plenty saved up.”

When I told Cole and Rylan about my plan the morning after we caught Georgia’s stalker, after some light ribbing, they were both genuinely happy for me.

Rylan slapped me on the back and said, “Georgia’s amazing. Make sure you treat her right.” He winked like he might try to steal her away from me, but I wasn’t worried—after weeks of teaching her self-defense and helping her build her confidence, he sees her like a sister.

Cole grinned at me and said, “I knew you had it bad from the first time you saw her.” Smile broadening, he added, “Maya said she can’t wait to meet her. So once you’re back from your trip, you’ll have to bring Georgia for a visit.”

I’m hoping to have lots of visits with Georgia in the future. Though it’s still early days, and we have some obstacles to overcome—namely, me living in Sleepy Hollow and her over two hours away in Ballston Spa—something in my gut tells

me all the effort will be worth it. And if things go well, maybe this trip to Lake George will become a yearly tradition.

“Oh, Leo, look!” Georgia points across the water to a large white building overlooking the lake. It takes up the entire point of the island, surrounded by trees and multiple docks and a pool right at the edge of the water. “It’s the *Sagamore*. I’ve seen pictures of it online, but never in person. It’s so pretty.”

Sliding my hand up to her nape, I twine my fingers through her hair, each strand like silk on my skin. My chest goes tight as I ask, “How would you like to stay there?”

When I thought of making reservations at the exclusive four-star hotel in Lake George, it seemed like a great idea. A special place to bring Georgia that would show her how important she is to me. A place where she can *feel* special.

But now I’m a little worried. What if it’s *too* much? I want so badly for everything to be perfect for her, and now I’m starting to second guess my decisions.

“*Leo.*” Her eyes go wide, brows arching upward. “I would love it, it’s so gorgeous, but...” Perfect white teeth worry her bottom lip, and she pauses, sorting through her thoughts before continuing. “I don’t want you to spend all that on *me.*”

That’s one thing we haven’t talked about in all our conversations. Money. Not that I wouldn’t have told her if she asked, but it never came up and I really don’t think about it that often, anyway. But I know Georgia’s been worried—being out of work, all her medical bills, helping her mom—so I can understand where her concern might come from.

But I spent over fifteen years in the Army, overseas, getting combat pay, and I lived simply. A basic apartment for when I was home between missions, a mid-level SUV, and whatever computer components I needed. Not nearly enough to put a dent in my savings.

And now, working at Blade and Arrow, I get paid well, and my housing is free. So I can easily pay for a week at the *Sagamore* and treat Georgia to whatever she wants.

I cup her cheek—it’s her injured one, but she doesn’t seem to notice when I touch it anymore—and brush a light kiss across her lips. “Georgia, I can afford it. I’m not crazy rich or anything, but I did well enough for myself in the Army. And I *want* to do this.”

Stroking my thumb along the line of her jaw, I hold her gaze, determined to wipe away the hesitancy. “This is our first trip together, and I want it to be special. Staying there isn’t a hardship for me. So the main question is—do *you* want to stay there? If you don’t, it’s okay. We can find another hotel. Whatever you want is okay with me.”

“I think,” she starts, glancing at the hotel before looking back at me. “I would *love* to stay there with you.” Lifting onto her toes, she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me. “Thank you, Leo,” she whispers, pulling back slightly. “No one has ever done something this nice for me before. *Thank you.*”

I don’t say the next thought running through my head, but it’s a promise, nonetheless.

I’ll do anything for you, if you’ll let me.

* * *

AS THE BEDROOM DOOR OPENS, I jump to my feet, not at all surprised that Georgia is ready exactly on time.

One of the things I learned about her early on is that she hates to be late, and she gets ready faster than any other woman I’ve met. When I remarked on it one time, she explained, “When I was modeling, time was money. And I wasn’t famous enough to do whatever I wanted and expect to get re-hired. So I learned to get ready very quickly.”

The real surprise is what my heart does when I see her. It stops, does a few clumsy flips, and expands so quickly it feels like it’s going to burst out of my chest.

I’ve never felt this way before. Never knew it was *possible* to feel this way. Like my entire life has been leading up to this

moment, when I realize I'm falling in love with her.

It's not how Georgia's dressed, though there's no question she's breathtaking. Her dress is a dusky rose color that makes her creamy skin look luminous—it's flowy and drapes over her curves without being obvious. Her legs seem to go on forever and I can't help but imagine them wrapped around me.

It's not because of her full, rosy lips, or long lashes framing vivid blue eyes, or the way her hair glows liquid gold as it falls around her shoulders. It's not because Georgia is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

The realization comes from all the other little details. Her eyes as they meet mine, filled with trust and desire and hopeful anticipation. The flush across her cheeks as she looks at me, her breath quickening as her gaze drags down my body. My heart squeezes when I see her blossoming smile, her whole face lighting up as she sees me.

And there's that undeniable charge between us, one that makes my body come alive for her. But it's more than wanting Georgia physically, though I absolutely do. I want *all* of her. Her kindness, her bravery, her determination and strength, the sense of humor she never let go of, even when she had every reason to do so, and her heart.

It's indescribable, the way I feel about her.

I almost blurt out the words right here, but a more practical part of me stifles them before they can come out.

The logical voice that has saved me many times over on missions reminds me of all the reasons to wait. It's only the start of our trip—what if spending a week together without the forced proximity makes things feel different between us? What if I say it, and Georgia doesn't feel the same way? And we haven't known each other that long, just about a month—maybe it's too soon to say the words that will change everything.

So instead, I step forward to meet Georgia and say, "You look beautiful."

Her eyes flicker down and back up my body again, and a little smile pulls at her lips. “You look—“ The pink of her cheeks gets deeper. “*Really* handsome.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds, everything important said just through our heated gazes. *I want you*, hers seems to say, and I’m in total agreement. If I took her into the bedroom right now, I don’t think Georgia would protest.

But that’s not how I want things to play out tonight. I want to give her the date she *should* have gotten before. Breaking the silence, I reach out my arm and tuck hers into mine. “Are you ready for dinner?”

She tilts her head up to look at me, then stretches up to kiss me on the cheek. “Lead the way.”

I made reservations at the Italian restaurant at the hotel—I would have liked to eat outside, but the warmth of the day is quickly fading as the sun starts to set. Fortunately, I was able to request a table by the window, so we’ll still be able to look out over the lake as we eat. It has an intimate, romantic feel, just as I’d envisioned when I planned out this part of the date.

As we enter the restaurant, Georgia is still smiling, her hand tucked safely in mine, walking so close to me our shoulders are touching. I keep catching whiffs of her shampoo and whatever lotion she used—coconut and vanilla and orange. Everything seems great until we’re being led to our table and Georgia slows her pace, almost dragging her feet, her fingers tightening around mine.

The host pauses, turning back to look at us with an expression of barely veiled confusion. Georgia’s eyes flash to mine, anxiety turning them a deep blue. All the color has drained from her face except for the thin line of pink running down her cheek. She swallows hard, her gaze darting from mine to scan the room nervously.

“Georgia?” I pitch my voice low so only she can hear me, then shoot a quick glance at the host, raising my eyebrows in a silent command to wait. “What’s wrong?”

At first, I think it might be a sign of her PTSD, fear of being in an enclosed space with so many strangers. But she went on the boat without any issue, none of the fear or nervousness I'm seeing from her now.

Then she fiddles with her hair, twisting it in front of her face, and the truth behind her sudden change of mood hits me. Scanning the room as Georgia just did, I can see more than a few men looking at her, some casting surreptitious glances, others outright staring. My mind splits in two—half wanting to yell at the men to stop making her feel uncomfortable, the other half wanting to snatch her into my arms and protect her.

Unfortunately, neither of those are good options.

I know why they're all looking at her and it has nothing to do with her scar. Tall, slender, shining hair spilling down her back, eyes so arresting there's no way not to be pulled into them—Georgia is stunning, even if she doesn't think she is.

Letting go of her hand, I wrap my arm around her shoulders, leaning over so my mouth is near her ear. "Sweetheart," I murmur, keeping my tone even and soothing, "let's go sit down. There's nothing to worry about."

"I know," she whispers back to me, "I just..." Her voice goes tight and wavers, "They're *looking* at me."

Guiding her along, I follow the host to our table, settling Georgia into her seat. Then I crouch down next to her and cup her cheek. "They're looking at you because you're gorgeous, sweetheart. And I'm sorry it's making you uncomfortable. If you want to leave, we can."

I don't want to leave; I think she needs to be out in public and realize it's not scary, but I'm not going to push if she's not ready.

Her eyes search out mine, scared but determined. After a few seconds, she says quietly, "Okay." Then her hand comes up to cover mine, small and satin soft against my larger one. Her voice gets stronger, more confident. "Okay, Leo."

I slip into my seat across from her with a little sigh of relief. Georgia has gotten so much better about her self-

consciousness around me that I didn't think about how it might affect her coming here. But I'm so proud of her, facing her fears as she always does, even though I wish I could shield her from everything.

From there, dinner goes without a hitch. The shadows in Georgia's eyes fade away somewhere between giving our order and the first sips of our wine. By the time we're halfway through our entrees—salmon for Georgia and a filet for me—we're having a great time chatting and making plans for the rest of the week.

"This might sound silly," Georgia confesses, "but I saw one as we drove past it today. Maybe one day we could go to the arcade for a little while?"

A smile spreads across my face as soon as I hear her suggestion. "I'd love to go to the arcade. But I should warn you, back in the day—"

"Let me guess," Georgia laughs. "You were the skee-ball champ?"

"How did you know?" *God*, she's perfect.

"Just a feeling." Her eyes twinkle at me. "I was *also* a skee-ball champ back when I was a kid."

"Aha, so it's Scrabble all over again."

"Looks like it. So we're on for a skee-ball tournament?"

"Yes." I reach across the table and take her hand in mine. "I can't wait."

Our gazes meet again, the heat between us building. Every part of my body is craving her. I want to run my hands all over her soft skin, kiss her from head to toe, sink into her until we become one. But before I do that, there's something I need to say to her.

"Georgia." Her name comes out low and rough. "I want to take you back to our room. Make love to you all night."

Her pupils dilate until her eyes are nearly black. "I want that, too."

“I want you to know something first. So we’re on the same page.” At her little brow raise, I continue, “Once we do this, you’re mine. And I’m yours. It won’t be just dating, I’ll be fully committed to you.”

Her pulse flutters at her neck, and her tongue flicks out to wet her lips. “I’m okay with that.” A smile spreads across her face. “Now. Can we get out of here already?”

Yes. Feeling thankful that we’re at the hotel restaurant so we don’t have to mess around with the bill, I’m leading Georgia out of the restaurant as fast as possible without literally picking her up and throwing her over my shoulder. Which, as we speed walk toward our room, I’m seriously considering.

By the time I get the door to our hotel room open, I already have Georgia in my arms, and she’s pressing hot kisses all along my neck. Her nipples are hard points rubbing against my chest, a contrast to the soft fullness of her breasts. Her hands are clutching my shoulders, slender fingers digging in as she tries to pull herself even closer to me.

Once the door is shut, I lift her up, one hand cupping the ripe swell of her ass. She wraps her legs around my waist and the skirt of her dress rises to expose the rest of her thighs. With my other hand, I slide my fingers around her nape, guiding her mouth to mine.

There’s no gentle teasing or soft caresses as our lips taste and nibble and our tongues delve deep. Georgia opens for me, tasting of wine and lemon and sweetness. I show her what I plan to do to her soon, plunging into her mouth, licking and sucking. She lets out a little throaty moan and I go even harder than I am already.

With her legs spread around me, I can feel the heat at her core almost burning into me. As I devour her mouth, I think about doing the same thing to her other lips, sucking at that small bundle of nerves, hearing her cry out.

Damn. I was going to take it slowly. Lavish attention over every inch of Georgia’s body. But with her in my arms,

already wide open for me, it's all I can do not to tear away her panties and slide into her right now.

“*Leo.*“ She gasps my name, grinding her hips against mine. “*I need you.*”

“I wanted to do this slowly,” I grit out. “Take my time with you.”

“Maybe next time,” she breathes. “But Leo, I’m *aching* for you.”

As Georgia lowers her mouth to suck at the skin just above my collarbone, her tongue laving and licking, I carry her into the bedroom and lay her on the bed. She stays just where I left her, legs slightly spread, skirt hiked up high enough to reveal the pale peach lace of her panties.

Her chest is flushed, rising and falling in a rapid rhythm. Kiss-swollen lips curve into an impatient smile as she stretches her arms up over her head, causing the fabric of her dress to stretch over her nipples. Then she spreads her legs even further and I can see the dampness of her heat waiting for me.

“*Georgia.*“ It’s a primal groan as I yank off my pants and climb over her. Dipping my head, I suckle at one breast, then the other, until the fabric over her nipples is transparent. Bracing myself with one hand, I slip my fingers between the lace and her delicate folds, flicking at the little swollen bud hidden between them.

Georgia jerks her hips toward me as I increase the speed and pressure of my thumb and I slide one finger into her damp heat, feeling her inner muscles pulling at me. Another finger follows and I pump in and out—she’s even wetter than before and little moans are spilling from her as she arches up to me.

Then her hands are reaching for my throbbing length, one wrapping around it and stroking from root to tip. And I thought I was hard, desperate for her, but that was nothing compared to now. It’s a desperate, painful throbbing, a need only Georgia can satisfy.

As her fingers trail along the sensitive skin, little jolts of electricity sizzle all through my body. Just her touch has me

close to exploding, so I try to guide her hand away so I don't finish before I'm even inside her.

Her walls are fluttering around my fingers as I keep rubbing and flicking and I was going to make her finish at least once before I slide into her but then she whimpers, "I need you. Now. Please." And all my willpower is gone.

I yank her panties off in one fluid move and with the next, I'm plunging inside her. It was meant to be slow, but as soon as I started to move, Georgia grabbed my hips and pulled me all the way into her slick heat. I sink into her to the hilt, bottoming out, and it's the most incredible feeling I've ever had.

For a second, I'm worried I hurt her and I freeze—she's so tight around me—but she moans and arches up to force me impossibly deeper. Her hands are clutching my arms, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. "Don't stop. It's so good," she gasps. "I never knew..."

It's the permission I need from her, and I start to pump into her again. First slow, then faster, and I rub my thumb again at her swollen nub and her inner walls ripple around me. Then I pull almost completely out before plunging forward again—at the same time increasing the speed and pressure of my thumb—and Georgia flies apart all around me.

That's all it takes to set me off—feeling her muscles tightening, hearing her little cries of pleasure, seeing her face as the ecstasy ripples across it—and I'm following her over the edge. It's more intense than I ever remember it being, black spots flashing across my vision and tiny sparks sizzling across my skin.

It's at this moment I know I'll never get enough of her.

Pulling her into my arms, I roll over so Georgia is draped over me, her head tucked under my chin. I'm still inside her, and I realize I just did something I've never done before, but I can't bring myself to panic about it.

Stroking my hand down her hair, I say softly, "That was incredible."

“More than,” Georgia whispers, “it’s more than I even hoped for.”

I hate to say this part, but I have to. “I forgot about protection. I’m so sorry.”

She nuzzles her lips against my skin and murmurs, “It’s okay. I’m on something. And I haven’t been with anyone in... well, a lot of years.”

“Me neither.” I tunnel my fingers through her hair, brushing it away from her face. “Years, I mean. But next time, we can use protection if it makes you feel more comfortable.”

There’s a pause, and soft fingers trail across my chest. “I’m already comfortable with you, Leo. And I trust you.” Then she lifts herself off my chest and looks down at me with a mischievous smile. “And I hope our next time is going to be soon. Because I remember your promise.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” I cup her head and pull her down for a kiss. “There will definitely be a next time tonight. I’m planning on more than one.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GEORGIA

I'm in the middle of a delicious dream about sex on a cruise ship when I'm woken by Leo moaning.

It's low and pained, almost primal, like nothing I've heard come from him before. My heart seizes at the sound and I'm reaching for him instinctively, not sure if he's hurt or having a nightmare. If he's hurting, sick, I need to find out what's wrong, get him help.

But if it's a nightmare... I'm inches away from touching his shoulder when I stop, suddenly not sure if I should wake him.

I've never seen Leo have a nightmare before, but that doesn't mean he hasn't had them. Maybe he never fell fully asleep when he was guarding me, always on alert. Is it possible that kept him from having nightmares all the nights he slept next to me?

If he's having a nightmare... I've heard about men who experienced terrible things in the military waking up from a dream and becoming violent. Not that I'm scared of Leo, but if he accidentally hurt me, I don't think he'd ever forgive himself.

Leo moans again and pushes at the sheets, dragging them off his chest. It's dark in here, the only light from the cracked bathroom door, but I can still see his features pulled into a grimace. His jaw is clenched, a muscle ticking, and his brow is pulled down as if he's in pain.

I can't leave him like this—to suffer in his nightmare alone. After all the nights he held me when I woke up screaming or crying, now it's my turn to be there for him. But I'm going to be careful. Scooting back another foot from him, I tentatively stretch my hand toward his shoulder again, hoping I'm not making a mistake.

“Leo,” I whisper his name, trying to find the right balance between commanding and soothing. Lightly touching his shoulder, I say his name again. “Leo, wake up. You're having a nightmare.”

I repeat it once more, raising my voice close to a near-normal volume. This time, I give his shoulder a little shake and his eyes fly open, wide and panicked. He jerks up to a sitting position, sheet spilling around his waist to reveal the muscles in his bare chest and arms flexed and ready for battle.

For a second, fear slams into me—not of Leo, but of an unconscious reaction. If he thinks I'm someone from his nightmare, all that pent up tension could be directed at me.

But then Leo's gaze shifts to mine, and all the panic and tension and confusion fall away in a blink. He sees me sitting several feet from him on the bed, my eyes wide with alarm, and his mouth pulls down into a grimace. “*God*, Georgia, I'm sorry. I didn't—I didn't *hurt* you, did I?”

Now I just feel guilty. How could I have thought for even a moment that Leo would hurt me? “*No*.” I slide back over so I'm next to him and put my hand on his arm. “You didn't even touch me. I'm fine. I was just worried about you, and I wasn't sure about the best way to wake you up.”

Leo drags a hand across his face and through his hair, sighing heavily. “I haven't had a dream like that in a long time. I'm sorry I scared you.”

“Don't be sorry.” I lean against his side, sliding my arm around his back. His skin is slightly damp and chilled, so I rub my hand up and down the thick bands of muscles in his back. If it were any other time, I'd pause to admire the broad expanse of muscles and dusting of golden hair across his chest.

But not now, not when it's Leo who needs comforting for once, and not me.

"I've had plenty of nightmares," I tell him. "I'm the last person you need to apologize to. I just want to make sure you're okay. Do you want to talk about it?"

Leo's expression goes tight, his eyes skittering away from me. "No."

"Okay..." A slim needle of pain slides into my chest, but I can't be angry at him for not wanting to talk about it. Disappointed, yes. But not angry.

Silence fills the space between us—I don't want to push him or say the wrong thing, and he's staring at his lap with a deep frown pulling at his features.

"I'm sorry." Leo turns his head to look at me, reaching over to stroke his hand through my hair. His tone has softened again. "It's just—I don't even want to think about it. I dreamed that—that I failed you. And it was *horrible*."

Oh. My heart constricts into a painful lump that rises up in my throat. "You could *never* fail me, Leo. It's not possible. It was just a stupid dream."

"It's always *possible*." His voice goes low and his eyes are shadowed. "I thought I couldn't fail other people I cared about, and then I did."

Could this have something to do with the reason Leo left the Army? I know something went wrong on his last mission, but that's the only thing he's ever said about it. "I'm sure it wasn't like that."

"It *was*, Georgia." His gaze meets mine, and I hate the grief and guilt I see in it. He pauses, taking in a deep breath before exhaling. "You should know about it. At least, the parts I can tell you. So you don't think I'm infallible."

His shoulders are hunched over, his belief about whatever he did—or thinks he did—dragging him down. Desperate to comfort him, I climb onto his lap so I'm facing him, wrapping my arms around his chest. I rest my head on his shoulder so he

doesn't have to look at me while he talks—I know from my own experience sometimes that makes it easier.

His arms go around me, and he presses a soft kiss to the top of my head. “It was our last mission. Well, we didn't know it was at the time, but after what happened... none of us could go back.”

“We were sent to a country in the Middle East to help train foreign allied soldiers. It's something we did a lot, and this mission seemed like it would be like the others.” Pausing, he sighs and continues. “The details are classified, so I can't tell you more than that about the mission.”

“Everything was going as expected. We worked well with the men we were training, became friends with some of them. And one,” His arms tighten around me. “One of them ended up betraying us. He sabotaged the camp, the mission, everything.”

Leo goes silent for at least a full minute, and I can hear his heart pounding. Finally, he says, “A lot of people were hurt. Killed. Out of the six of us, Cole, Zane, and I got off lucky. Just minor injuries. But the others...”

He swallows hard, his voice catching as he says, “Rylan was badly injured. Finn, too. They had to be medically discharged from the Army.”

“*Rylan?*” “I can't bear the thought of the friendly man who so patiently taught me self-defense being so terribly wounded.

“Yeah.” Sadness seeps into Leo's voice. “He's better now, but it took over a year of surgeries and physical therapy for him to get close to normal. And Finn, he lost his hearing in one ear. You wouldn't know from talking to him, but it took a toll on him.”

There's one more person on the Blade and Arrow team he hasn't mentioned yet, and I have a terrible feeling Leo's saved the worst part of the story for the end.

“Then there was Nora. She was—” Leo goes silent for a few seconds. “She was attacked by the man who betrayed us.

It was brutal. I can't say more because it's not my story to tell. But I was the one who found her."

"I found her broken and bleeding. Our teammate so badly hurt by a man we all trusted. She's never been the same. And if I had just found her sooner, I could have stopped it. If I had gone through that part of the camp just ten minutes earlier, I *would* have stopped it."

Oh, God. My heart is breaking for Leo. His pain is so raw, so intense, the guilt embedded inside him, but it's all wrong. From what he's telling me, he's done nothing wrong. There's no failure other than the imagined one he perceives.

"*Leo.*" I pull back from his shoulder to look at his tortured face.

"You see?" His gaze is defeated, like he thinks I'm going to judge him for this. "I failed my team. And my greatest fear now is I'll fail you, too."

"*No.*" I grab his face and stare into his eyes. "That was *not* your fault. If it happened just like you told me, it wasn't your fault. You can't see the future—you had no idea you were about to be betrayed by a traitor."

When he tries to shake his head, I hold it steady, firming my voice as I continue. "You could *not* have known what was going to happen ten minutes earlier. You couldn't, not with the information you had at the time. Just like I couldn't have known there was a man waiting for me outside my apartment."

"If I had known that man was there, intent on hurting me, do you think I would have gone out to the store? Left my apartment? Wouldn't I have called the police or done a dozen other things that would have stopped him? Is it *my* fault he hurt me?"

He flinches. "God, *no*. Of *course* not."

"Right." I let go of Leo's face, but not his gaze. "But I did think that for months. That it was my fault. But it wasn't, no more than it was your fault that you didn't stop what happened to Nora."

“And Leo... you *did* find her. What if you hadn’t, or it had been half an hour later? I wasn’t there, I don’t know, but I’m guessing it would have been even worse than it was when you got to her.”

Leo stares back at me, emotions working their way across his face. I can’t pinpoint all of them, but I can recognize the regret, guilt, hesitant hope, and the tiniest ripple of relief. After a long silence, he breathes out, “Sweetheart. I can’t even express how much it means to me to hear you say that.”

“So you believe me?”

“I’m trying,” he admits. “I don’t think I can just switch my thinking over that quickly. But you’ve given me some things to really think about. And you’ve given me hope that maybe the burden of guilt might not be as heavy as I thought it was.”

He shouldn’t feel guilty at all in my opinion, but at least this is progress.

Leo’s gaze drifts to his phone sitting on the nightstand and he winces. “Damn, it’s five A.M. We should try to get some more sleep.” Then the corner of his mouth turns up a bit. “I don’t want you to be too tired for everything I have planned for tomorrow.”

“We wouldn’t want that.” I curl into Leo’s arms as he pulls me back down next to him, draping my arm across his chest and my leg over his. “Goodnight, Leo.”

There’s a heavy pause before he says, “Night, sweetheart.”

And as I lay there next to him, my mind not quite settled enough to sleep, I realize something changed tonight. Tonight, *I* was the protector instead of Leo. I was the one who helped *him*.

I want to protect him all the time. His soft heart, his gentle words, his dedication to helping everyone before himself. I want to be the person who *always* looks out for him.

I move my hand across his chest until it rests over his heart, and my heart gradually falls in rhythm with his. A feeling of absolute peace and certainty fills me, like the sun coming up over the horizon and setting the sky alight.

This is what I want forever. Moments like this. Not just *this* night with Leo, but *always*.

* * *

“TELL ME *EVERYTHING*, Gigi. Don’t leave anything out.”

I step out onto the balcony, shivering a little at the morning chill in the air. Sinking down into a chair, I pull my knees up underneath the giant sweatshirt I snagged from Leo’s luggage and look out across the crystalline water. “I’m not telling you *everything*, Hayden. Some things are private.”

She humphs at me, but I can hear her smiling. “Fine, I’ll just imagine big, hunky, quiet Leo doing all sorts of illicit things to you all night. Tell me you’re enjoying yourself, at least?”

After three times last night and once before Leo left for the gym this morning, I can confidently tell my friend, “Yes. Very much.”

“Mmhmm.” Hayden shifts into interrogator slash friend voice. “So, how was your first day of freedom in Lake George with Leo?”

Amazing? Perfect? The day I realized I’m in love with Leo?

“It was incredible, Hayden.” I smile to myself just thinking about it. “He didn’t tell me where we were going, so it was a surprise when we arrived in Lake George. And then we spent the afternoon taking a cruise around the lake. It was so beautiful, and we just stood by the railing the entire time.”

“What did you do after that?”

“We got dressed up and went to dinner at one of the restaurants at the hotel. Then we came back to the room and...” I trail off as the memories of last night flash through my head, my body heating in anticipation of a repeat performance.

“I get it,” Hayden laughs. “Things went well, I assume.”

“Yeah.” The skin on my cheek pulls as my smile grows bigger and I don’t even mind. “*Very* well.”

“So what are your plans for the rest of the week?”

“Well.” My gaze moves to a small boat cutting across the water, leaving a froth of white in its wake. “I think we might rent a boat one day, take it all the way to the north end of the lake. There’s a museum at that end, in Ticonderoga; it’s all Star Trek stuff, and Leo really wants to visit.”

Hayden snorts into the phone, “A Star Trek museum? I would never have imagined Leo as a fan.”

A surge of protectiveness fills me. “He likes science fiction. And I think it’s cute.”

“It is.” Her tone sobers, pacifying. “I wasn’t making fun of Leo. I guess it makes sense—he loves working with computers, so I can see the appeal.” She pauses, then says, “You *really* like him, don’t you?”

“Yes.” My response is immediate. “He’s just—it’s not like anything I’ve ever experienced before. The way I feel when I’m with him... my heart is full. I just want to be with him.”

“Georgia.” Her tone softens. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Yeah.” My throat gets thick with the things I’m *not* saying.

“So what’s the problem, then?” Hayden has known me too long not to pick up on my hesitation. “Are you worried about the long distance thing? You back in Ballston Spa and Leo in Sleepy Hollow? Because it’s not really that far. You can see each other on the weekends. Or you could move closer.”

“It’s partly that,” I sigh. “But mostly,” I hate even saying the words out loud. “I’m worried he’ll realize I’m not good enough for him.”

“*What?*” Hayden’s voice rises. “What are you *talking* about?”

“He’s so amazing, Hayden. He’s dedicated his life to helping people, first in the Army and now with Blade and

Arrow. And he's so smart, and kind, and funny, and he's so handsome—he could get any woman he wanted.”

“*And?*”

“What do I have to offer him?” My nose tingles and I sniff to keep the building tears at bay. “I don't have a job, I didn't even go to college, my career as a model was all I had and now that's gone. And I have this scar that people are going to stare at forever. It's just—I worry that Leo will realize he can do better.”

The line falls silent long enough that I have to look at the screen to make sure the call hasn't been dropped. Then Hayden's voice blasts in my ear. “*Georgia Dixon*. If I were there right now, I would slap you silly.”

“What—”

“Don't you *dare* talk about yourself like that. You are kind and smart and determined and *brave*—yes, you are, so don't even shake your head at me, I know you're doing it, but stop.”

Eeep. I freeze my head in place, wondering if she has a camera set up somewhere.

“You are beautiful, inside and out. You are the only person who thinks that scar means anything other than you survived something terrible. And you are doing Leo a disservice.”

I manage to croak out, “What?”

“Yes. Leo isn't a kid; he's a man who knows what and *who* he wants. And he wants to be with *you*. I bet he's told you how amazing he thinks you are, hasn't he?”

My voice is tiny. “Yes.”

“So, you don't believe him? Has he ever given you any reason not to trust him?”

“No. Never.”

“Okay, then.” She takes a deep breath and the next words are gentler. “I know you've been through a lot, G. And it has done a number on your confidence. But trust Leo—trust me—you *are* worth it. You *are*. I promise.”

I can't talk for a moment, my emotions too raw—I have to breathe deeply several times to wrangle them back below the surface. “Thank you,” I finally say, “not just for saying that, but for being such an incredible friend.”

“Anytime,” she says, humor returning to her words. “Now go get ready to spend the day with sexy Leo. You deserve it.”

Another day with the man I've fallen in love with, feeling much more confident thanks to my best friend? I can do that. “Okay, Hayden,” I agree, a smile building again. “I will.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LEO

Ever since I woke up this morning, time has been my enemy.

Each minute that passes—seemingly faster than the last—is one less I get to spend with Georgia.

We're at her house in Ballston Spa—we came here after checking out of the Sagamore yesterday—and I've been putting off my departure all day. Since I woke up this morning, I've been coming up with reasons to stay longer: checking the security cameras, taking Georgia out for lunch, checking her security again, and each time I glance at my watch, it keeps taunting me.

I'd stay another night if I could, but I'm scheduled to leave in two days for Atlanta to do a security consultation and training for a Fortune 500 CEO, and I need to be back at work tomorrow to prepare for it. It's the kind of job I don't usually mind—mostly finding holes in the pre-existing security infrastructure and coming up with ways to enhance it—but I never had to leave Georgia before to do it.

The job will be over on Friday and I'm planning to come here on Saturday, but that's still four days of being apart after spending over a month together. And I never imagined myself as a man who would count the number of days he's apart from his girlfriend, but that was back before I knew what it was like to love someone. To feel like she's a part of me and I won't be whole until she's with me again.

Not that I've told Georgia I love her yet. At first, I told myself I should take more time, be sure of my feelings. But after our first night in Lake George, I knew there was no question that I love her.

I could have said it a hundred times since then, but the timing always seemed to be wrong. Someone passing by us as we stood by the lake, college kids waving to us as their boat went by ours, a server asking about dessert just when the words were about to come out of my mouth. And now I'm leaving and I don't want the first time I tell Georgia I love her to be tinged with sadness.

I'll do it this weekend. I'll set up something special—maybe a picnic in the park, or I can cook her favorite meal here—just some place where we won't be interrupted, and *then* I'll tell Georgia how much I love her.

But now... it's after seven at night and I've put off leaving just about as long as I can. I'm checking her security cameras for a third time, which I'm well-aware is overkill, while Georgia watches me with sad eyes and a somber expression.

I hate seeing the sparkle in her eyes stifled, the rigid set to her jaw, the way her lips pull into a frown when she thinks I'm not looking. If I glanced in a mirror, I probably look the same way. Because it's not just that I'm sad about leaving her, I can't stop worrying about her, too.

"It's probably okay, Leo." Georgia puts her hand on my arm, stilling my hand as I adjust the camera mounted over her back door again. She gives me a little smile, but it's strained, like the ones she used to give when we first met.

Pulling my hand back from the camera, I cup her cheek, brushing a few stray strands of hair behind her ear. "I just want to make sure everything is all set for you. So you don't have to worry."

"I know." She reaches up to stroke the back of my neck, her fingers massaging gently. "And I love that you're doing it. But I don't want you to leave too late and be tired driving home."

Home. It feels less like it, knowing that Georgia won't be there.

I brush my lips over hers and say, "You could still come with me. It wouldn't have to be at my place. We have the extra apartment set aside for clients, and it hardly ever gets used. You could stay there."

It's not the first time I've brought up the suggestion, and I get the same response as before. She shakes her head, her brow wrinkling, and says, "I can't. As much as I want to be near you, I have to stay here on my own for a while. I need to prove to myself that I *can* be alone."

"And yeah, I'm scared." Her teeth worry her lower lip. "But if I don't even try... I don't want to let those men make me into someone who's afraid all the time."

But I don't *want* her to be scared. I want to protect her, and it's killing me that she's insisting on doing this. But I can't say I don't understand. "I get it," I tell her softly. "I don't like it, but I get it."

Putting my arm around her shoulder, I guide Georgia back inside and through the kitchen to the living room. We sit on the couch and she turns so her legs are draped over mine. "I know you want to prove this to yourself," I say, "but you need to promise me something."

She snuggles closer to me. "What?"

"If you start to feel overwhelmed, or you're having trouble sleeping, or eating, you call me. Any time. Don't keep it from me, thinking it's a sign of weakness. It's not." I hold her gaze, wanting to make sure she absorbs it. "Just because you need to ask for help doesn't mean you *can't* do something on your own. But you shouldn't *have* to, not if you have people who care about you and want to help."

"I know, Leo." Her voice is soft. "I will."

"And if you have a nightmare...." This is one of the things I'm most worried about. She's been doing better lately, but she still wakes up shaking and crying several times a week. And

now I won't be here to comfort her, which adds another layer to the growing pit in my gut.

"I'm not going to call you at three in the morning, Leo." Georgia scrunches her face at me. "You need your sleep, too. And what if you're working? I'm not going to interrupt you in the middle of a job."

"Yes, call me, even then." I scoop her up and settle her on my lap, then tip her chin up to look at me. "If I'm in the middle of a job, which I sincerely doubt will be the case, you can leave me a message and I'll call you back as soon as I can. But I *want* you to call me."

"If you don't," I add. "I'm going to be thinking you're having nightmares every night and not telling me. So, I'll sleep even worse than if you just call me when you *do* have them."

Her lips twitch. "That sounds a little like emotional blackmail."

"Is it working?"

She sighs, and her smile turns into a genuine one. "Yes. It is. But it goes the same for you. Okay?"

While I don't love that Georgia saw me having one of my nightmares, and I feel terrible that she had to worry about getting hurt waking me up, there were some silver linings to the experience. After I shared the story about the mission with her, she had a different perspective that I've been giving a lot of thought to. A perspective that helps lift some of the guilt I've been carrying for years.

And having Georgia next to me, to hold her as I fell back to sleep—if I were on my own, I would have lain awake for hours instead. "Okay, sweetheart. I'll call you, too."

My phone buzzes from the coffee table where I left it, and a quick glance shows it's Cole sending a message about my upcoming job. It's an unwelcome reminder that I have to leave, even though my body and heart desperately want to stay.

Georgia glances over, then lets out a little sigh. “As much as I want to keep you here, I know you have to go.”

Sorrow tugs at her features—her eyes darken and her brows wing down into a V, little creases forming between them. She clutches at the front of my shirt, but I don’t think she even notices. “You’ll call me when you get there? So I know you got home alright?”

“Of course, sweetheart.” I smooth my thumb across the lines on her forehead. “And I’ll see you on Saturday. So, it won’t be that long.”

“I know.” She forces her mouth back into something approximating a smile. “And I’ll be busy until then. I’m going to look for a job, and see about setting up an Etsy store, and maybe joining a gym if I can find one that’s not too expensive.”

If Georgia came back to Sleepy Hollow with me, she could work out at Blade and Arrow’s gym for free, but I bite my tongue to keep from saying it. Maybe after a few weeks of living on her own, I can convince her to come back with me.

“That sounds like a good idea,” I say. “But make sure you’re being careful. Don’t take anything that requires you to work at night. In fact, let me know about any business that offers you a job so I can do a background check on all the employees.”

“And—” I’m on a roll now. “I want to make sure there aren’t any complaints filed against the company. You’d be surprised how many places have lawsuits filed against them and the company just pays off the accuser to keep them quiet.”

As I’m imagining Georgia driving to and from work, another thought strikes me. “Also, you should get your car checked. When’s the last time it was inspected? How are the brakes? Actually, nevermind, I’ll take the car to the shop when I’m here this weekend.”

“Leo...”

I’m in full problem-solving mode, my mind ticking through all the things that could possibly go wrong while I’m

gone. “Make sure you keep an eye on the batteries for the cameras. You should get an alert, but it never hurts to double check. And keep your tracker on all the time, okay?”

“Leo, take a breath.” Georgia is grinning at me, her gaze amused but affectionate. She fiddles with her earring, which is actually a tracker, before she says, “I’ll do all of those things. I promise. But you don’t have to worry so much. The stalker is gone. I’m in no more danger than anyone else.”

I have to take a few deep breaths to loosen the belt tightening around my chest. *Damn*. This intense fear and worry snuck up on me—I thought I was doing okay, but now I’m dangerously close to saying *screw it* and staying here, anyway. But if I do that now, Georgia will think I don’t believe in her, *and* I’ll be leaving Cole in the lurch.

“I just worry.” It’s a massive understatement right now, but I realize if I keep going on about it, all I’m going to do is end up freaking out Georgia.

“It’s okay.” Her hands come up to my cheeks, soft and cool and comforting. “I’m glad you worry about me.”

“Always, sweetheart. I don’t think I’ll ever not worry about you.”

“Leo...” Georgia stares at me, her lips parted, right on the cusp of saying something. But she hesitates, then leans closer to slant her mouth over mine. She keeps the kiss light at first, little flutters of her lips nibbling and teasing.

Then her tongue plunges into my mouth, and I take over the kiss. I taste her, tangle my tongue with hers, slide my hand into her hair to angle her head so I can take our connection even deeper.

I devour her mouth, showing her how much I’ll miss her and how much I can’t wait to see her again soon. When I swell under her, hard and aching, she rubs against me and I can feel her heat even through all the layers of fabric. If our clothes were gone, I could sink into her right here, lean her back against the couch cushions and plunge into her over and over until she’s crying out for me.

But I have to leave, and if I do what I'm imagining to Georgia, there's no way I'm pulling myself away from her tonight. So I reluctantly draw back, taking in every detail of her face and body. Her kiss-swollen lips, flushed cheeks, dilated pupils, her chest pink and moving rapidly.

My voice is rough and strained. "This weekend. As soon as I get here."

"Okay." Georgia's gaze meets mine, so full of emotion I can barely keep myself from blurting out *I love you* right now. "This weekend. I'll be waiting."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GEORGIA

There was a time I thought I'd be relieved to *never* get another text or call again.

But now when my phone buzzes, my heart does a little skip of excitement instead of freezing in fear. Now, I know the only people contacting me are people I *want* to talk to. My mom. Hayden. *Leo*.

And it's his message I'm most looking forward to seeing—letting me know he's back in Sleepy Hollow from his job in Atlanta. I know traffic from JFK airport on a Friday afternoon has to be pretty terrible, so I'm going to breathe a little sigh of relief to hear that he's back home safely.

Leo laughed when we talked on the phone last night, and I sternly told him not to go more than ten miles over the speed limit and to watch out for aggressive drivers. He said, "Georgia, I've been driving for over twenty years. I think I can handle it."

"I know you can," I told him somewhat sheepishly, "but I worry about you, anyway." So I can't stop a sigh of relief from escaping when I pull my phone out of my bag and see his message.

Just got back to B&A and headed to my apt. I've missed you.

Smiling at the screen as if he can see me, I send back a message.

Glad you're home safe and sound. I've missed you a lot.

Three dots flash for a second and then his reply comes through.

I can't wait to see you tomorrow. I'm going to take a quick shower, grab some food, and call you in an hour?

I pause by my car door to tap out my reply.

Perfect. Can't wait to talk to you and see you tomorrow. ♥

My finger twitches over the screen, wanting to add three extra words. But I'm not telling Leo I love him over text before I've even said it to his face. Maybe this weekend will be the perfect time—I've been thinking about it for weeks now and each time I see or talk to Leo, it's nearly bursting out of me.

As I unlock my car and slide into the driver's seat, the screen lights up one more time.

Same. Talk to you soon. ♥

I tuck the phone back in my bag and turn on the car, ready to head back home. My chest is bubbling with excitement as I make the quick trip from Saratoga Springs to my rental house in Ballston Spa. *Leo is coming to see me tomorrow.* I know it's been less than four days, but when I was used to seeing him literally every day, four days feels like a *lot*.

I'm not sure how long I'll want to keep up this long distance thing—I have a feeling Leo will end up convincing me to move to Sleepy Hollow sooner than later. But staying here these last few days has been good for me, even though I second guessed my decision at least a dozen times the first night after Leo left.

Being here by myself makes me feel strong again, so if—okay, *when*—I move closer to Leo, it will be because I *want* to and not because I'm using him as a crutch. And though my accomplishments wouldn't have seemed like much a year ago, I'm pretty proud of myself now.

I've managed to make it four days without having a major panic attack or breakdown, I started to set up an online store

for my crafts, *and* I just found a job. It's a part-time position in a clothing store in Saratoga Springs, nothing monumental, but it's a place to start. I just finished filling out all the employment paperwork, and I *did* have Leo check beforehand to make sure the business was on the up and up.

Of course it was—it's a little boutique that sells overpriced clothing to tourists who come for horse racing season, not exactly a dangerous business—but I know it made Leo feel better to check. And since I gave him a hard time about speeding, I can't really complain—throwing stones at people in glass houses and that sort of thing.

I'm proud of myself, but being away from Leo is *hard*. I couldn't have imagined before meeting him that I could feel so connected to someone. Like there's a hole in my chest that can only be filled when he's with me. Talking, texting, those are fine, but I don't feel *right* when Leo isn't next to me.

It's a feeling I can't fully articulate—how *full* I feel when I'm with him. Now I understand why there are so many songs and poems and books about love, because when you're truly in love, the reality of it transcends any combination of words.

I pull into my driveway and glance at the clock on the dashboard. I have forty-five minutes until Leo is supposed to call, time enough to shower and change. And maybe put something sexy on. Just as a little teaser for tomorrow. I have a lacy camisole that might do the trick—nothing over the top, just subtly sexy.

Smiling at the thought, I unlock the front door and head inside, pausing at the entryway table to set down my bag. There's a mirror on the wall above the table and I look into it willingly, concentrating on my smile and the way my eyes are sparkling instead of the scar on my cheek. I still don't *like* to look at it, but I'm gradually coming to accept it's a new, but not necessarily bad, part of me.

I'm heading down the hall toward my bedroom, thinking about some of the cute clothes I'm going to buy using my employee discount, when I hear the tiny creak. Just a whisper of noise, easily overlooked or passed off as an old house

settling. But I haven't lived through two stalkers to ignore any strange noise, no matter how innocent its cause.

Halfway down the hallway and just a few feet from the bedroom, I hold my breath, freezing in place like I'm playing a terrifying game of red light-green light. I strain my ears to hear any other sounds, but I can't hear anything other than my pulse thundering in my head.

My phone is clutched in my hand, but I remember Rylan telling me it's always better to have both hands free. So I tuck it into my back pocket and hope that I'm getting freaked out over nothing. I'm *sure* it's nothing. But *still*.

Maybe I should get out of the house. Go back to my car, drive somewhere I know is safe. But then what? Sleep in my car and wait for Leo to get here tomorrow? Have him see me terrified instead of showing him the progress I've made?

Get out and call the police? What am I going to tell them? I heard a creaking noise? They'll probably start laughing at me.

Or I can check out the house, see that it really was the house settling—whatever that means—and have my phone call with Leo as planned. And I don't have to tell him any of this, or wait to tell him and laugh about it later.

It's fine. I'm almost convinced of it. Until I hear another tiny creak of wood.

No. I don't know the reason, don't know *who* could be here, but all my senses are now shrieking at me that *something* is wrong.

So, I start to slowly back down the hallway, trying to put my feet down carefully. My heart is pounding so hard I'm worried it will give me away, my hands are tingling, and my brain is shouting *get out get out get out!*

I've made it halfway back toward the front door—I'm debating whether to keep going slowly or lunge for it—when my foot comes down in the exact *wrong* spot. The wood creaks, and to my panicked mind the sound is deafening.

Run. Run for the door. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe it's nothing, maybe I'll go sprinting outside like a crazy person, but I just need to get out of here.

Once the decision is made, everything moves unbelievably fast.

There's another creak, and another. They're coming from the bedroom, but they aren't just creaks—they're *footsteps*. And they are coming after *me*.

All thoughts of being quiet gone, I run. Breath coming in stuttering gasps, my feet pounding, I focus on the door and *run*.

Part of my brain shouts a reminder—*keys!* But the terrified part of me doesn't care. I just need to get outside, get to a neighbor, call for help, anything to get away from whoever is behind me.

Less than six feet to the door—I'm ready to lunge for it—when a thick arm comes around my neck and yanks me off my feet.

My brain explodes in a supernova of fear. *NO! No no no no not again, NO.*

It's all the same. The weight of an arm, the dampness of sweat, the hot breath, terror, panic, *helplessness*.

A mouth comes near my ear, stinking of beer and cigarettes. "*Georgia.*" The dark voice makes my stomach churn. "I've heard a *lot* about you."

Why didn't I go with Leo? I want to cry and scream at the unfairness of it.

"I'll be taking you with me," the man says, cold and oily. "It will be easier for you if you don't give me any trouble."

NO. I'm not getting taken from Leo. I'm not letting this happen. *NO.*

Then something different from before happens. I'm still scared, terrified, shaking with fear. But I'm angry, too. Not just angry, but *furious*. And with my anger comes determination.

I don't have to let this happen. I'm *not* helpless. If I could get away from Rylan and Leo, I can get away from *this* man, who has way less training than them.

Shoving my fear to the side—it's hard but my fury helps me do it—I remind myself of the lessons Rylan taught me. Head down, sweep of my foot around his leg, then a sharp turn while putting all my weight into it.

And it works. *It works.* The man falls on the floor, but I know he's only down for a second or two, so I do one of the other things Rylan told me. I leap away from the attacker, grab what I can, which in this case is the entryway table, and I throw it at him as hard as I can.

The corner of the table glances off his head—*good*—and then I do the next thing I was taught. I scream at the top of my lungs, snatch up my car keys, and fling myself at the door. Still screaming, I sprint for my car, jabbing at the unlock button frantically.

It works the first time—thank God—and I literally throw myself into the car and hit the lock button with a wheezing sob. I can't bring myself to look back at the house, to find out if he's right behind me, I just need to get away as fast as I can.

I get the car started and slam my foot to the gas, tires screeching as I peel out of the driveway. I desperately want to keep speeding down the road, but it's a residential area and the last thing I want is to hit someone. So I force myself to keep my speed normal, even though it's going against every instinct.

Calm down, I keep telling myself, *calm down*. I'll end up in an accident if I don't get my shaking hands and gasping breath and rampaging panic under control. I need to just get somewhere safe, some place I can gather my wits about me. Then I see it. A Cumberland Farms, the parking lot filled with people getting gas and coffee and I think—I hope—I'll be safe if I stop here.

I find a parking spot and put the car into park, checking to make sure all the doors are still locked. Then I reach into my back pocket and feel my phone still there and a few tears of

relief spring free. Trying not to cry because I know once I start I won't be able to stop, I hit Leo's name and wait breathlessly for him to answer the phone.

Please don't be in the shower, I beg silently, *please*.

"Georgia. Hey sweetheart." Leo's voice wraps around me and I almost collapse from the comfort of it.

"*Leo*—" My voice cracks, "I... someone..." My breath is coming faster and faster and I have to take several deep breaths before I can speak again. "In my *house*."

"*What?*" His tone drops, now low and urgent. "Georgia. *What happened?*"

"There was someone in my house." The words come out in a shaky whisper, and I dig my nails into my hands to keep from sobbing. "He attacked me."

"*Fuck!*" Leo never curses, and I almost drop the phone in startled surprise. "*Shit.*" He takes a deep breath and his voice evens out, strained but softer. "Where are you now? Are you hurt?"

"I'm not hurt." At least, I don't think I am. Nothing more than a bruise, if anything. "And I'm at the gas station, in the car."

"*God*, Georgia." Leo sounds shaken for the first time since I met him. "How did you—nevermind, it doesn't matter. You need to get to the police. I'm coming to get you."

"I used the headlock thing," I tell him, my voice shaking. "Like Rylan taught me. Then I threw a table at him. I grabbed my keys and got in the car and came here."

"*Shit.*" Leo sucks in a shuddering breath, then breathes out, "Sweetheart, I'm so proud of you. I'm going to leave right now. You just need to wait for me. It's going to be okay."

Wait? Be stuck *here* for another two hours? Where the attacker could come for me at any moment? The panic I've barely managed to hold back slams into me in dizzying waves, and I gasp, "*No! I can't!*"

"What?" He sounds confused.

“I can’t stay here, Leo! I *can’t*! I don’t feel safe. He could be coming after me *right now*.”

“Sweetheart, just go to the police.” Rattling and footsteps travel over the line. “I’m leaving right now.”

“*No*, Leo.“ I’ve never been more certain of anything. My instincts were right in the house, and I know they’re not wrong now. “I’m coming to you. I won’t feel safe until I see you. I *can’t* stay here.”

My words are tumbling over each other, each one raising higher than the last. I set the phone down on the console and hit speaker, then shift the car into gear. “I can’t wait here, I *can’t*, Leo. I don’t trust the police. I don’t trust anyone but you and your team. I’m coming to you.”

“Sweetheart. It’s not safe. Driving like this, you’ll get into an accident.”

“I won’t.” I’m adamant. Focusing on a task—driving to Leo—allows me to shove the panic and fear to a corner of my mind to be dealt with later. “Stay on the phone with me, if you want. But I’m coming to you. I *have* to.”

“Okay.” Leo sighs, resigned. “*Please*, be careful, Georgia. And keep the call going. I’ll be here with you the entire time.”

“Okay,” I whisper, biting my lip hard enough to make it bleed. “I’ll be careful. I just—I *need* to see you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LEO

I never should have left.

The thought keeps looping through my head along with the dozen other things I could have done to keep Georgia safe. *Should* have done.

I should have postponed the job in Atlanta and stayed with Georgia for the rest of the week, if not longer.

I should have installed more security. I could have added interior cameras, alarms on all the windows and doors, and wired them to connect to the police.

I should have pushed Georgia harder to come back to Sleepy Hollow with me. I didn't want her to think I didn't trust her or respect her wishes, but what good is that if she's attacked in her own home and I'm not there to protect her?

Over the last two hours I've berated myself a hundred times. Two of the longest hours of my life, waiting for Georgia to get here and praying she doesn't get into an accident. But horrific images keep coming at me—Georgia crying and not seeing a car cut in front of her or a panic attack coming on while she's traveling seventy miles an hour.

God. My heart feels like it's going to explode out of my chest.

She's wearing her tracker—one small mercy—so I've been staring at her location on my laptop since she called me. The phone line is still open, so I have that small reassurance as

well, though I'm too worried to talk to Georgia much for fear of distracting her. I can't even imagine how much stress and panic she must be feeling right now and to add driving in Friday evening traffic on top of it? It's one more thing I wish she wasn't going through on her own.

When she said she wouldn't go to the police to wait for me, I wanted to argue. To explain why that wasn't a good idea. But Georgia sounded way too close to breaking down, and that was the last thing I wanted when she was still in danger. When we had no idea where the attacker was and if he was still coming after her.

She's been quiet during the drive. I ask her every ten minutes or so if she's still doing okay and she answers with the same strained *I'm fine* every time. And she did tell me exactly what happened at her house while I put her on speaker so Cole and Rylan could hear, too.

They're the only other members of the team still at home—everyone else is out of town for a pro bono case. But I'm glad I have Cole and Rylan to help, since they're the ones who know Georgia the best. As soon as I told them what was happening they mobilized immediately—Rylan calling the police in Ballston Spa and Cole asking Maya to gather some clothes and supplies for Georgia so she has something when she gets here.

They've kept me from losing my mind, too. Sort of. I keep jumping up from my laptop to pace around the room but then get panicked because I can't see Georgia's progress on the tracking software and lunge at my laptop to make sure she's still moving. Finally—*finally*—she turns off the highway and my fear and anxiety dial back a notch.

Just one notch—I won't be able to take a full breath until she's standing in front of me.

“Are you still okay?” I ask Georgia, breathing another sigh of relief as she quietly gives me the same answer I've heard a dozen times. *Yes, I'm fine.*

As she was *attacked*, almost *abducted* in her own house by a *third* unknown assailant, fine isn't even close to how she's

doing. *Or me.* I'm vacillating between suffocating guilt, crushing worry, and rage that burns so hot and intense it's taking all of my control not to start breaking things.

"Leo." Cole comes over to the conference table where my gaze is bouncing between the little moving dot on my laptop and the call timer ticking away on my phone. I'm concentrating so intently and wound so tightly I almost throw a punch before I realize who's talking to me.

"Sorry, man." Cole's voice is low and pacifying. "I didn't mean to startle you."

It's not his fault I screwed up and now Georgia is paying for it. Sucking in deep breaths through my nose to settle myself, I say, "Sorry I almost punched you."

"It's okay." He stares at me, his gaze appraising. "Come talk to me for a minute. Away from the phone."

"No." My voice is sharp, strained, a razor wire just about to snap. I gesture at the phone. "I need to be here."

"Rylan will talk to Georgia." Cole nods his head toward Rylan, who is cautiously approaching me from the other side. "It'll just be for a minute, Leo."

I don't want to agree, but I know Cole wouldn't ask me to do this if it wasn't important. Then I think—maybe there's news about the attacker and he doesn't want to say it where Georgia can hear it—so I step away from the table and follow Cole to the other side of the room.

As I walk away, I can hear Rylan saying to Georgia soothingly, "Hey, hun. You're doing great. Leo will be right back. He's just talking to Cole for a second."

When Cole stops and turns to face me, I ask, "What's the news?"

His eyebrows go up. "What news?"

"About the guy who attacked Georgia. Isn't that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No." Cole frowns. "It's not that. We don't have more information yet. But Leo—"

Irritation bubbles up in my chest. “Why did you drag me over here, then?”

“Because,” Cole sighs heavily. “You need to calm down. Georgia is going to be here soon, and you look like you’re about to kill someone.”

I almost snarl as I say, “I *want* to kill someone. Like the piece of shit who broke into her house and put her in a headlock and threatened to take her. I want to kill *him*.”

“I know.” His voice remains annoyingly calm. “I get it. Trust me. But Leo, you’re going to freak her out. I’m speaking from experience, when Georgia gets here she’s going to be fragile and your anger isn’t going to help her.”

Dammit. I know he’s right, but my fury is so hot it’s burning me up from the inside. But the last thing I want is to scare Georgia.

“I’m not just angry at *him*.” It’s a painful confession. “I’m so mad at *myself*. I should have been protecting her, instead of going off helping some people I don’t even know upgrade their security. *Georgia* is the one who needed help, and I wasn’t there for her.”

“It’s not your fault, Leo.”

“Yes, it *is*,” I snap. “If I had been there—”

“You didn’t know.” Cole cuts me off. “None of us did. There was no way to know this could happen.”

“But it *did* happen.” And now I say the part that’s been haunting me from the second I answered Georgia’s call, “Twice, it could be a coincidence. But the other two are in jail. Now a third man comes after her?”

Cole stares at me, a somber expression on his face. “They may be connected.”

Shit. I drag my hand down my face. It’s what I’ve been thinking, and if Cole agrees with me... “I need to talk to the guy we caught at the duplex. Find out what we’re missing.”

“Rylan will do that,” Cole says, and puts his hand up when I open my mouth to argue. “I know you want to, but he can go

tomorrow morning, first thing. I've already reached out to the warden for permission. Do you really want to leave Georgia so soon?"

"Dammit." I pause, gritting my teeth. "No. I don't. I need to make sure she's okay."

"Rylan will get the answers," Cole reassures me. "You know he will."

I know Rylan is a good interrogator, can get answers out of even the most reluctant subjects, but *I* want to be there to face one of the men who threatened Georgia. But Cole is right. Sighing, I say, "I know."

"Hey, Leo," Rylan calls over from the conference table, "Georgia is just about a mile away now. You want to meet her in the garage or out front?"

"The garage." I reach the table in two steps and snatch up my phone. "Hey, sweetheart," I say, gentling my tone, "I'm going to have the driveway gate open for you." As I start to jog toward the garage, I continue, "You can pull right into the garage, it's secure, I'll be waiting, and so will Cole and Rylan."

A shaky breath comes over the phone, and then she whispers, "Okay, Leo." And the wobble in her voice just about slays me. I want to tell Georgia a hundred things—how proud I am of her, how much I want to hold her in my arms, that I'm so sorry for not keeping her safe—but I keep my mouth shut and let her concentrate on driving.

Two minutes later, I'm in the garage with the door open and watching the headlights approaching. Cole and Rylan are out here, too—Rylan waiting to close the garage door behind Georgia and Cole ready to help in case she's hurt and needs medical attention. She *said* she was alright, but I know adrenaline can mask a lot of serious injuries, so I'm not taking any chances.

The car rolls to a slow stop in the center of the large garage—Rylan will park it in one of the spots later—and turns off, the sudden silence echoing. I walk over to the driver's side

door and wait beside it, even though every part of me is demanding that I yank the door open and pull Georgia into my arms.

But I need to be sensitive. She just went through a terrifying experience and might want a second to compose herself, and it doesn't matter what *I* want, the important thing is that Georgia gets whatever she needs.

She doesn't wait. The door creaks open—needs some lube, my brain distractedly notes—and Georgia looks up at me.

As soon as I see her face, a hurricane of emotion slams into me. Relief so powerful I have to put my hand on the car to brace myself. Pain tearing at my chest as I see the lines of strain and fear etched into her face. A desire to wrap her in my arms and never let her go. And love—so much love my heart aches from it.

Georgia climbs out of the car and takes one step toward me. The fluorescent lights in the garage accentuate the paleness of her skin and the bluish marks just above her collarbone.

Where she was choked. My rage surges forward but I wrestle it back to captivity.

“Sweetheart,” I groan, then say it more steadily, “Sweetheart, are you hurt anywhere else?”

Georgia's lips tremble, and she shakes her head. Small tremors are working their way across her body and her pulse is jumping at her throat. I'm just about to reach for her when she throws herself at me, her arms wrapping around me, hands clutching at my shirt.

I pull her against me with a desperation that feels more necessary than breathing. One hand at the middle of her back, rubbing up and down, the other cupping the back of her neck, and it's still not close enough. If I could, I'd tuck her inside me.

“Leo,” she gasps out, her face pressed into my neck. “*Leo.*” And then she starts to sob, sagging into my embrace, giving all of her weight to me.

I've never seen her cry like this before, and it's like I'm being stabbed in the chest. Georgia is shaking all over, gasping for breath, her cries painfully ripping from her throat, tears hot as they soak my neck.

As much as it hurts me, as much as I wish I could stop her tears, I know she needs to cry. Needs to let out all the fear and panic and stress and tension she's been holding onto for the last few hours. And the only way I can help Georgia right now is by doing just this—holding her and making sure she knows she's not alone anymore.

Casting a sideways glance at Rylan and Cole, I give a little lift of my chin—*thanks for everything and I'll talk to you later*. Then I scoop up Georgia into my arms, one arm under her legs and the other behind her back. She curls into my chest, arms twining around my neck, hiding her face against me.

Pressing a kiss to the top of her head, I carry Georgia back toward the main building and my apartment. And I send up a silent thanks for bringing her back to me safely.

* * *

“Do you think Rylan will find out anything?”

Georgia jumps up from the couch and paces the living room several times before coming to a stop in front of the window. Her shoulders are tense and her hands grip the windowsill until the knuckles turn white. She stares out the window for several seconds before continuing, “Is he done there yet, do you think? It's been hours since he left.”

“I don't know if he's done, sweetheart. It can take a long time to get through the process of visiting someone in jail. But if there's any information there, Rylan will get it.”

I walk over to the window and rest my hands on her shoulders, gently tugging her around to face me. “It's not safe for you here,” I tell her softly, hating how she flinches at my words. “I'm sorry. But anyone could see you standing there—”

Her features pull into a sad grimace. “Okay.” She’s never sounded more defeated.

I pull Georgia into my arms and hug her tightly before leading her back to the couch. As I sit down, I settle her onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her. “I’m sorry, Georgia.”

She sighs as she leans her head against my shoulder. “It’s not your fault.”

Yes and no. Is it my fault that someone else has set their sights on Georgia? No. But I should have made sure she was better protected, so she wouldn’t have been attacked to start with. And I should have done a better job investigating her case—obviously I missed something critical or this wouldn’t still be happening.

Guilt is a now-constant weight pulling down on me. And it’s even worse when I look down at Georgia and see what my failure has cost her. Dark shadows under her eyes, lines of worry etched across her forehead, exhaustion and worry turning her face sickly pale.

“We’re going to figure this out,” I tell her, infusing confidence into my words. Jostling her with my leg, I wait until she looks up at me before continuing. “Whatever it takes, sweetheart. We’ll fix this.”

“I thought it was over.” Georgia’s voice is barely a whisper. “I thought I was safe. How can this be happening again?” She blinks furiously, her face pinching, and I know she’s on the verge of crying.

“Ah, sweetheart.” I rest my forehead against hers and squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I could do anything to stop her from hurting.

“We’ll use every connection we have,” I promise her. “Everyone we know from the Army, Cole’s friends in Texas, and there are lots of powerful people who owe us favors. We *will* find out who’s behind this and stop them.”

Georgia tilts her head away from mine and stares at me, her eyes swimming with emotion. Her voice wobbles as she says, “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Just as I'm about to answer, my phone buzzes, and Georgia twitches like she's been shocked. I set her to the side and grab my phone, hoping and praying for good news.

"Leo." Rylan's somber voice is the first sign I'm about to be disappointed.

"How'd it go?" My heart beats faster as I wait for his answer.

He sighs heavily. "It's not great."

My jaw clenches, and I grit out, "Tell me."

"I got the guy talking, and convinced him it was in his best interest to tell me everything before I found out from someone else." There's a heavy pause before he continues, and I want to reach through the phone and rip the words from his mouth. "He was hired, Leo."

"*What?*"

"On the dark web. There was an ad looking for someone to stalk a woman. It was all anonymous. This guy got all the information about Georgia, where she lived, what she looked like, her schedule, even things he was supposed to *say* to her..."

Georgia is watching me with wide, scared eyes, even paler than before. Keeping my voice carefully controlled, I ask, "Was he the first one?"

"No." Rylan sounds almost as angry as me. "This guy was hired after the last one was caught."

Shit. "So, the guy from last night..."

"*Yeah.* I think so."

Fury beats a bass drum in my head, so loud I can't hear what else Rylan is saying. All I can hear are the terrible things Rylan told me on repeat. The dark web. Someone hiring multiple attackers to come after Georgia. That person *still* out there, an unidentified threat.

My hands are clenching and unclenching, sharp jabs of pain are radiating from my jaw, and Rylan is still talking in my

ear. Then I hear a soft, scared voice say, “Leo? What’s wrong?”

Dammit. How am I going to tell Georgia?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GEORGIA

I knew it was bad news as soon as Rylan started talking.

I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I saw Leo's reaction just from the beginning of the conversation. It wasn't a relieved *we have solid evidence and can solve this* kind of face. It was a *this is bad news already and we haven't even gotten started* kind of expression.

Then, as the call continued, Leo's expression shifted from just unhappy to downright dangerous. I've only seen him look that way one other time—when the stalker broke into the duplex. And that's what really has my stomach swooping in nauseating circles. Not that I'm scared of *Leo*, but I'm scared of what he just found out.

Leo puts his phone on the coffee table and stares at it, breathing deeply, his shoulders hunched over and tense, a muscle ticking at the side of his jaw. His silence is almost more frightening than whatever he has to say—what is it he's hesitant to tell me?

“Leo?” I ask again, my voice sounding nothing like me. It's scared and shaky, nothing like the confident woman I thought I was finally getting back to yesterday.

He turns, grim-faced, and puts a hand on my leg. His expression is similar to ones I've seen attending a funeral, and for a second I consider leaping off the couch, hiding in the bedroom, and not coming out for a week. Or a month. Maybe longer.

“Rylan found out something,” he starts, and stress makes a crazed laugh burst out of me.

As Leo’s eyebrows jerk up in surprise, I say, the random outburst having the unexpected effect of strengthening my voice, “Yeah. I guessed *that* part of it.”

Leo hesitates again, and it actually makes me feel more in control than before. “Tell me.”

“The man Rylan talked to—he was hired on the dark web,” Leo blurts out. “And he wasn’t the first one. The one who hurt you. He was the first.”

It’s so not what I could have imagined hearing, my mouth drops and I gasp, “*What?*”

“Someone has been advertising on the dark web for months.” His expression is pained and his hand rubs my leg in rhythmic circles. “When the first man was caught, the ad popped up again. And now that the second is in jail...”

It feels like I’ve been dropped into liquid ice—my heart, my lungs, my throat all freezing at once. I gasp for air, but my lungs won’t cooperate. White spots float across my vision, my brain is misfiring—I heard Leo’s words but my mind doesn’t want to accept them.

“*Georgia.*” Leo yanks me close to him, his eyes inches from mine. His gaze is hot liquid metal. “*Breathe.*”

He gives me a little shake and it cracks the ice encasing my lungs—I suck in desperate gasps so fast it makes me dizzy.

A warm hand massages my back, up and down, soothing my breathing back into a normal rhythm. “Just relax,” Leo soothes. “It’s going to be okay.”

How can it be okay? It’s not bad enough that I have had three stalker-slash-attackers come after me, but it’s actually all been masterminded by some *other* crazy person intent on hurting me? It’s absolute *lunacy*.

More crazy laughter bubbles out of me, harsh and ripping and uncontrollable. Between gasps, I sputter out, “Who... it’s

crazy... I couldn't even... make this up... it's insane... who did I... make so angry?"

Have I officially snapped? Leo is staring at me with an even more worried expression, his brows pulled down in a deep V. "Georgia," he starts.

Then my laughs abruptly turn to tears, and I bury my face in my hands, sagging against Leo when he embraces me. "It's okay, sweetheart," he croons. "I've got you. It's okay."

I can't answer—all my effort is going into reining in my out-of-control emotions. Finally—after several seconds or minutes, I'm not sure—I draw back from Leo and rub my hand over my eyes, trying to wipe away the dampness.

"Are you alright?" His gaze is worried.

"Aside from having a breakdown?" I ask dryly. "I'm great."

"You didn't have a breakdown, Georgia." One corner of his mouth pulls up a bit. "It's a lot. If I didn't have to be all manly and tough, I might have one, too."

"Are you saying I'm not tough?" It feels good to focus on banter, however simple it is, instead of my crazy reality.

Leo strokes my cheek, catching a few wet spots I missed. "No, you're very tough. Not manly, but one of the toughest people I know."

"I don't feel tough," I admit, plucking at the fabric of the couch. "I feel weak, and scared, and I hate it."

"You're not weak, and it's okay to be scared." Pulling me into the circle of his arms, Leo shifts on the couch so he's laying back with me on top of him. "But this is actually helpful information. Now we have a direction to go in with our investigation."

"It is?"

"Yes." He sounds certain. "I'll be looking online, I'm going to call Beth, and there's another guy, Tex, I'm going to ask to help. I met him a few times during some training exercises years ago—he was a SEAL until he was medically

retired—and he can find out *anything*. He does consulting work for all branches of the military and he’s always busy, but when he hears about what’s been going on, I’m sure he’ll help.”

A flicker of hope ignites inside me. Leo, Beth—who already helped, and this guy Tex—maybe things aren’t as terrible as I’m thinking. *Maybe*.

The little flame gives life to another emotion I’ve been suppressing. Anger. “I’m so mad,” I say slowly, testing out the words. “Everything that’s happened, all because of some crazy person who’s obsessed with me for some reason?”

“It’s natural to be angry about it,” Leo agrees. “I know I’m *furious*.”

“I’d even be okay with it if things ended now. I’m mad, but I can accept what happened. But to know this person is still out there?” My voice rises as the sparks of anger flare to a fire.

“All I want is to have a normal life. A job, a house I don’t have run from, to spend time out in the open with the man I love—”

Oh. My mouth snaps shut as I realize what just came out. I wanted to tell Leo I loved him, but *this* wasn’t how I planned to do it.

Leo lifts me up his chest so our faces are even. His gaze is intense and piercing. “Did you just say what I thought I heard?”

“Um. Yes?” I gulp, suddenly nervous. “I didn’t mean for it to come out that way, it just—”

He closes his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “Georgia,” he says, as his eyes reopen, fierce with emotion, “I love you. I’ve been waiting for the right moment to say it, but I shouldn’t have. I should have just told you the moment I knew.”

“You love me?” I parrot back at him.

“Yes.” His lips descend on mine, the kiss fast and rough and passionate. “I love you more than I ever thought possible. Before I met you, I didn’t think I needed a relationship, or love. But that wasn’t true. I need it, but *only* with you. *You* are the one I’ve been waiting for.”

How is it possible to find so much joy in the middle of all this chaos?

“I love you, Leo. And I was waiting, too. Waiting to meet you, even though I didn’t know it. Waiting to tell you, even though my heart was shouting it every time I saw you.”

“And Leo,” I brush my mouth across his jaw and linger on his lips before continuing, “I don’t want to sit here being upset about things out of my control. Not when I have the man I love laying under me.”

“Oh?” One eyebrow quirks up, and his voice lifts. “What *do* you want to do?”

“I want to make love to you. I want to celebrate that we love each other. I know we have things to deal with today, but I want *this* first.”

Leo’s gaze goes dark and hungry. “Cole is going to want to meet as soon as Rylan gets back. So we’d have to hurry.”

Sitting up, I straddle Leo’s lap and yank off my shirt in one tug. Tossing it across the room with a flourish, I smile at him. “I’m okay with that.”

Leo breathes out, “*Georgia.*”

His big hands curve around my waist so they’re almost completely wrapped around it. Then he drags them up my ribcage until his palms are cupping my breasts. I’m not wearing a bra so there’s nothing between my skin and his as he traces his thumbs around my nipples, teasing them until they’re so sensitive each touch sends a jolt of arousal straight to my core.

He’s swelling beneath me, thick and hard and pressing into the junction of my thighs. I rotate my hips on top of him and he lets out a low hiss of pleasure, jerking his growing length

against me. Two spots of color deepen on his cheekbones and his pupils expand until his eyes are nearly black with desire.

Leo sits up suddenly, one arm sliding behind my back so I don't fall. Then he leans forward and sucks one nipple into his mouth, flicking and licking and sucking. I arch into him without thinking, pushing my breast further into his mouth, my body instinctively seeking what he's offering.

His other hand is still at my other breast, and he alternates his fingers and lips as he drives me into a frenzy of need. I'm grinding against him—even through the layers of fabric, my folds are opening over his growing length.

I'm desperate for Leo, to feel our bodies coming together as one. I always want him, lust for him, but this is more intense than I've ever felt before. Maybe it's the chaos around us, heightened emotions, telling Leo I love him—but my body is achingly empty and I *need* to feel him inside me.

Single-minded in my mission, I fumble with the zipper of his pants, growling in frustration as the stupid thing won't come undone. The fabric is pulled too tightly over the bulge in his pants and I've never been more irritated at a pair of jeans than I am right now.

“Georgia, hang on.” Leo lifts his head from my breast and gives me a little smirk. “There's a better way to do that.” Then—in some kind of super athletic move I wouldn't have thought possible—he gets off the couch while simultaneously and effortlessly taking me along with him.

I wrap my legs around his waist as he strides to the bedroom, his arousal rubbing against me as he moves. Damp heat builds at my center and my skin is raw and tingling and my entire body is on fire for him.

Leo lowers me to the bed and peels the rest of my clothes off me. Then he yanks off his shirt, his hated pants, his briefs, and stands naked in front of me. I have a second to admire him before he moves again, and *oh*, what there is to admire.

Broad expanse of chest and defined muscles and a light dusting of blonde hair all over. Thighs thick with muscle and

his erection large and swollen and glistening at the tip, jutting out hungrily. Strong arms flexing as he leans over the bed, bracing himself above me. And his handsome face, tight with desire, all lines and angles, his hazel eyes burning into me.

“I want to be on top,” I demand, and he immediately flips over so I’m straddling him.

“Whatever you want,” he groans. “I’m yours.”

Usually I’m happy to let Leo take the lead, but this time I want control. So I plant my hands on his tight stomach muscles and slowly lower down onto his straining length, taking him a few inches before stopping. He groans again and his hands come to my hips, but he doesn’t try to move me, just resting them there.

When I raise back up, his fingers tighten—not painfully—but enough to feel his need for me. I hold myself above him for just a second, relishing in the anticipation, but it’s not what I really want. Not this time. This time I want it hard and fast and frenzied.

I sink back onto him in one quick move, taking all of Leo into me. He fills me to the hilt and I love this fullness, the man I love being inside me. My inner walls are already clenching around him and I haven’t even started to move. But once I do, every movement feels like ecstasy.

Now Leo helps me along, lifting me and plunging me back down onto him. Moans are spilling out, louder and more primal, and he’s grunting each time he bottoms out. Then I reach down and flick the bundle of nerves as I slide down and it only takes a moment before I’m exploding around him.

It’s so intense my vision blurs and I let the electricity take over my body. Leo cups my ass and drives into me, thrusting several more times before letting out a low shout and spilling his heat into me. He’s rigid beneath me for a few seconds, still moving inside me but the rest of him frozen. Then he wraps his arms around me and crushes me to his chest—not hard enough to hurt, but enough to feel possessed.

“I love you, Georgia,” he says, his voice gritty. “So much.”

I brush my lips along his collarbone. “I love you, too.”

* * *

HAVING sex really does make everything else seem better.

It’s like there’s a layer of bubble wrap laid over all the bad things, softening their edges and making them harder to see. The crushing anxiety is lifted off me a bit, the creeping fear pushed further away from me.

I don’t even mind that Leo isn’t here—not *that* much, at least—with this post-sex bubble surrounding me.

I’m not real crazy about thinking *why* he left, though. It’s sex, not a magic wand solving everything. Leo left to go back to the prison to talk to my stalker—stalker number two, how crazy is it that I have to number them—so he could get more information about the dark web stuff Rylan wouldn’t have known to ask. I understand why Leo needed to go, and why it can’t wait, which is why I told him I was fine when he asked about leaving.

He was still worried about leaving me alone, which is why he sicced Maya on me. Not that I minded, Maya is really nice, and it *is* nice to have another woman to talk to. Hayden will always be my best friend, but she’s thousands of miles away and is busy with her own life, so I wouldn’t mind having someone closer to do girl-stuff with, too.

Since Maya’s left, I’ve been trying to keep myself busy and not let myself think about all the scary stuff hanging over me. I’ve been browsing Amazon for new ebooks and looking up new patterns for blankets to knit—I’ve decided that each of the Blade and Arrow guys is going to get a blanket for Christmas this year.

And whenever an unpleasant thought pops into my head, I force my mind back to the sex from earlier. Another layer of bubble wrap goes down until a nasty fear comes along and pops it, and then the process starts all over again.

Leo has been gone for almost three hours, so when my phone buzzes, I pick it up expecting to see his name, a smile already pulling at my lips.

But it's not Leo. it's a number I don't recognize, and my stomach somersaults nauseatingly before dropping to my feet.

My finger twitches over the screen for a second before I pull it back. *No*. I'm not going to answer it. That's it. Whoever it is can leave a message, and I'll deal with it when Leo gets home. So I silence the call and put the phone off to the side, laying it face down so I don't have to look at the screen.

Ten seconds later, the phone rings again. Silenced.

Five seconds later, it rings a third time. My gut is churning and all the nice feelings from earlier are gone. I jab at the phone this time to silence it, grimacing at the same time.

I'm tense, fingers clutching the couch cushion, waiting for the phone to go off again, but ten seconds pass, twenty, thirty, and nothing. Maybe that's the end of it this time.

Then the phone rings again, and I let out a startled shriek. But this time, it's different. It's not the standard time I have set for phone calls, it's the first notes of a song. And not just any song—it's *Every Breath You Take*, by the Police.

I *know* I never set that as a ringtone.

And if I wasn't so scared, I'd cringe at the cliched song choice.

I'm staring at the phone in stunned fright, my heart jackrabbiting in my chest. The song stops, then starts again, the caller not giving up. Three more times it repeats until I finally snatch up the phone with a shaking hand and brace myself as I look at the screen.

A message flashes across it, the letters in all caps, screaming at me.

ANSWER YOUR FUCKING PHONE

A bleat of fear comes out, and I nearly drop the phone. A chill sweeps over me, cold perspiration breaking out over my body. Another message appears.

IF YOU DON'T ANSWER RIGHT NOW HE'S DEAD

What? Who? Why would I answer the phone *now*? Is the person sending these messages crazy?

The phone rings again, jittering in my hands. As the last note of the song peters out, another message pops onto the screen. But it's not like the others. It's a photo, and when I see who it is I almost throw up right here on the carpet.

It's Leo. It's Leo, leaving the prison, the shot taken from behind and zoomed in so I can see every detail of him, even the little pink scratch mark I left on the back of his neck.

Then the text follows.

If you don't answer the next time I call he's dead.

Bile rises in my throat and into my mouth and I have to swallow hard to keep it from escaping. *Leo.* I want to call him, warn him, but the phone is already ringing before I get a chance to do anything.

I answer the call with a weak, "*Please.* Don't hurt him."

"I won't unless you make me." The voice is garbled, manipulated, and gut-clenchingly terrifying.

"What do you want?" My brain is flying through options to warn Leo. *I can still text him.*

Swiping down to minimize the call, I tap to open my messages and start typing. But the app closes unexpectedly. I try again. The app closes. And again. *And again.*

A low, crackling laughter comes across the line. "You *can't*, Georgia. I hacked your phone. You can't do anything I don't want you to. And if you don't stop trying to warn your boyfriend, I *will* have my associate shoot him."

Another photo appears. It's Leo again, approaching his car. The sun glints off his blonde hair, turning it a rainbow of yellows and golds. My heart stops. *God, no.* Not *Leo.*

"What do you *want*?" My words are all shaky, trembling as much as I am.

“What I’ve been waiting for, *Georgia*.” The voice pauses. “For you to come to me.”

“*What?*”

“Listen to me. You are going to leave Blade and Arrow right now.”

A tiny gasp slips out. Of course he knows where I am if he’s hacked my phone, but the thought is still absolutely petrifying.

“Yes, Georgia. I know where you are, what you’re doing. You’re going to leave there without anyone knowing. And if I don’t see you outside the building in five minutes, *alone*, Leo is dead.”

“No talking to anyone about this, Georgia.” The robotic voice gets louder. “The microphone and the camera on your phone will be on. And don’t think about ditching the phone, either. I’ll know, and—”

”*I know.*“ A flash of anger fires through the icy chill of terror. “I’ll do what you want. Just *don’t hurt him.*”

The camera on my phone turns on, showing an image of the room in front of me. “Five minutes, Georgia. Once you get outside, I’ll send you the pin for where to meet me.”

Shit. Shit. My mind is racing. How can I find some way to warn Leo and leave a trail for him to find me?

“GO, Georgia. Or you won’t make it in time.”

I need to think of *something. Anything. And quickly.* “Okay,” I grit out. “I need to hang up so I can concentrate on getting out of here.”

“Fine.” Another garbled chuckle. “The timer starts now.”

Ideas are ricocheting in my head but none of them will work. And I don’t have time to come up with an elaborate plan. A timer starts, ticking down from five minutes. The camera is still on and watching.

Shit.

And then. I have an idea. Walking towards the front door of the apartment, I stop by the side of the small table next to it. Angling the phone so it's only focused on the door, I quickly scratch a note on the pad on the table. I hope when Leo gets back and sees me gone, he'll see it.

What if he doesn't? I can't take the chance. Now I'm down to four minutes to save Leo's life. I carefully drop the pad on the floor so it'll be the first thing he sees when he walks in, holding the phone still level with the door, so hopefully the caller won't suspect anything.

Then I put my hand on the door handle and gather up all the courage I have left. As long as I get out of here, make sure Leo is safe, I'll take whatever else comes at me.

But please, I beg silently as I open the door, *please, Leo, come find me.*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

LEO

“Did you have any luck?”

Cole cuts right to the chase as soon as he answers my call. I glance in my rearview mirror as I change lanes, then say, “More than I expected.”

His voice rises with interest. “What did you find out?”

I grit my teeth as I reply, “That I want to beat the guy, first of all.” I’m still tense, white-knuckling the steering wheel, anger simmering in my chest. As I sat across from the man who was responsible for terrorizing Georgia, it took every bit of my self-control not to lunge over the table and punch him.

Looking back, it may have been the murderous rage in my eyes that convinced him to be so forthcoming.

Cole gives a dry chuckle. “I’m sure. What else?”

“Well, he gave me part of the URL he used to access the ad. He didn’t remember all of it, but it’s enough to work from. If I start working on it tonight, and I get Beth and Tex on it as well, we should be able to access the original posting by tomorrow.”

“That sounds promising,” Cole says. “Will you be able to find out the identity of the poster once you find the ad?”

“Probably not.” I’m distracted for a moment as the car behind me speeds up, tailgating me, and I frown as I shift lanes to get out of the way. I’ve got too much other stuff on my mind to deal with asshole drivers on the highway.

“Anyway,” I continue, “I’m sure the man who posted it used a VPN—a virtual private network—so his IP address can’t be traced. But we may be able to find a workaround. If we can determine which Internet service provider he’s using, we can hack into their systems and find out his identity that way.”

“That’s good news, Leo. Hopefully we can put an end to this sooner than later.”

“I’m hoping we can.” There’s nothing I want more than to be able to tell Georgia this nightmare is behind her. “Depending on how quickly we can bypass the VPN and service providers’ systems, we should have something solid in the next couple of days.”

“Good.” Cole’s voice roughens with intensity. “This guy needs to be stopped. I talked to Cruz, an FBI agent I know from San Antonio, and he’s going to get in touch with the field office near here—once we get something specific, we can pass the information along to them.”

“We’ll find it.” I’m sure of it. With Beth and Tex helping me, it’s only a matter of time before we catch this guy. “I need to end this for her, Cole. I’m not stopping until this is all over.”

“I know, Leo. None of us will.”

We schedule a time to meet first thing tomorrow morning and I’m about to hang up with Cole when I glance at the time and realize it’s been three hours since I last heard from Georgia. Which isn’t a long time in normal circumstances, but with everything going on—I can’t help worrying about her.

“Hey, Cole?”

“Yeah?”

“Just wondering. Is Maya still with Georgia?”

Cole pauses, then says, “No. Maya came back about two, two and a half hours ago. Why? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Aside from my paranoia, that is. “I just haven’t heard from her in a few hours. Usually she texts me back right away. I’m sure it’s nothing, just—”

“I get it.” Cole’s voice is calm, reassuring. “I felt the same way after everything that happened with Maya. Worried about every little thing. I’m sure Georgia is fine. Maybe she took a nap or something.”

It’s possible. Given how little sleep she got last night, and then our exertion from this morning... But a little niggle of disquiet won’t leave me alone. I won’t say that to Cole, though, instead replying, “I’m sure you’re right.”

I wrap up the call and refocus on the road and getting back to Georgia. I know I’m being overprotective, but ever since yesterday, my protective instincts have rocketed into overdrive. Once I see her, can hold her and make sure she’s doing okay, I’m sure this weight on my chest will ease.

* * *

WALKING down the hallway to my apartment, I’m second guessing my decision not to buy flowers for Georgia. I thought about it as I got off the exit, and again when I saw the florist was still open, but I didn’t want to delay getting home any longer. Now that I’m just about to see her, though, I wish I had something nice to make up for the hours I was gone.

Not that she complained when I left. Georgia swore she would be fine, would keep herself busy, and that I should go to the prison as soon as possible. And I believed her. Except, I *still* haven’t heard from her.

Could she be mad that I left? But that doesn’t sound like Georgia. Is she upset? Did something trigger a flashback? I know she’s safe here—the Blade and Arrow building is heavily secured and no one could even try to break in without being detected.

Cole and Rylan are here, too. So if there was any sign of threat, they would handle it. And Cole said everything was okay when I talked to him less than an hour ago, so there’s really no reason for me to be so worried.

It’s just, I *know* Georgia, and she wouldn’t ignore me for hours for no reason. But whatever it is, I’ll deal with it. I’ll

help her through whatever she's going through, apologize if I did something wrong, and go back out to buy flowers if I need to.

Hoping it's just an overreaction, but bracing myself for whatever awaits me, I unlock the door and walk into my apartment. I scan the open living space, my gaze bouncing from the kitchen, across the dining area, and into the living room. No Georgia.

The apartment is almost eerily quiet—no drone of a TV on low in the bedroom, no patter of water spraying in the shower, no rustle of footsteps or any other sound that would indicate anyone being here.

Maybe she's napping, like Cole said. So I head down the hall and peer inside my bedroom, but Georgia's not there, the bedcovers are smoothed flat, and the attached bathroom is open and empty. I check the other bedroom and it's the same as the first. Still no Georgia.

The niggle of worry burrows deeper, but I'm not going to panic yet. She could be visiting with Maya again. Or maybe Georgia ventured down to the gym. I haven't shown it to her yet, but maybe Rylan did. She could have decided to go down there to practice.

If I start panicking and running around headquarters calling for Georgia just to find her working out in the basement, I'll come across like a paranoid and overprotective boyfriend. Which I am, but I'd rather not have Georgia see it in action. Yet.

If she's not in the basement... *No*. I'm sure that's where she is.

And when I walk back into the living room and notice the notepad on the floor, it seems even more obvious. I'm not sure why it's on the floor and not on the table, but it's possible it got knocked off accidentally while Georgia was leaving.

Except. Why is it face up? And why does its position look more like it was placed than it fell?

I could come up with a dozen rational explanations, but my gut is telling me *something* is wrong. When I got this feeling back in the Army, it almost always meant the mission was about to go sideways.

But not *this* time, a little voice begs silently. Not this time, not with *Georgia*.

Stomach clenching, heart pounding, I reach down and pick up the notebook. And then my heart freezes.

It's a note from Georgia. But it's so much worse than I could have imagined.

Just three lines that turn my world on its end.

3:15 - Had to meet him or he'd kill you

I have my tracker

Love you

NO. No. No. My heart is a deafening drum.

Questions shoot rapid-fire through my head. How did this happen? Who was going to kill me? I didn't see anyone. Why didn't she ask Cole or Rylan for help?

She left at three-fifteen. That's almost an hour ago. Where could she be now? Is she with *him*?

Oh, God.

I'm stuck, brain spinning in indecision. Always so logical, now I can't think straight for *anything*.

The tracker. I need to find her. Cole. Rylan.

I yank my phone out of my pocket and jab at the screen. Call Cole. Before the call even connects I sprint to my laptop, flipping open the lid and frantically pulling up the tracking software. The program lags, says it needs a critical update, and I almost scream in frustration.

Cole answers with an easy, "Leo, what's up?"

My words burst out in a sharp, staccato rhythm. "I need you. And Rylan. Georgia's gone. He got to her somehow. Threatened her. She left."

A sharp intake of breath. “*What?*“ A pause. “*Fuck.*”

“She has the tracker.” The program is still updating, almost done, and I’m going insane with waiting. “I need to find her.”

His tone drops, all business. “We will. I’ll call Rylan, have him get a car ready to go. I’ll grab supplies. Meet us downstairs, we’ll be ready to roll out in less than five.”

The tracking program finally finishes loading and I click to find Georgia’s name on the menu, almost collapsing in relief when I see her tracker active and static. She’s on the outskirts of Port Chester, about fifteen miles from here—zooming in, it looks like she’s in a building in the commercial district.

Why there?

But I’ll figure it out in the car. The important part is getting there. So I grab the laptop, still keeping it open, and race out the door. Cole is waiting at the bottom of the stairs for me, a large black duffel bag slung over each shoulder. He jerks his chin at me and we both start running again.

“Ry’s out front,” Cole calls to me. “Faster to go that way.”

I don’t answer him, just push myself even faster. We burst out the front door and make a beeline for the car—Cole remotely opening the tall security gates as we go. Cole tosses the bags into the backseat and leaps in behind them while I duck into the front and set the laptop on my knees.

“Port Chester,” I bark out, and Rylan steps on the gas.

As we speed down the road, my attention is a hundred percent on the screen in front of me. Georgia still hasn’t moved, so I find the address and rattle it off to Rylan, then stare at the satellite image of the building to figure out our best plan of action.

Cole pulls up the image on his phone and quickly inspects it, saying, “Two entrances, one front, one rear. I’ll take the front, Rylan and Leo, take the rear. We’ll go in with tranquilizers, try to keep things quiet since it’s in a crowded area. Non-lethal if possible. Only use our backups if we need to.”

“You can’t go in alone,” Rylan says, his eyes never leaving the road. “We don’t know how many people we’re dealing with.”

“*I’ll* go in alone.” My response is immediate.

“No, Leo.” Cole stares at me, his brows pulled down, eyes dark but steady. “You need to go with Rylan. And he needs to go in first.”

Shit. I know why he’s saying it, and the reason makes my body go ice-cold. “She’s *got* to be okay.” It’s less a statement than a plea. “She *has* to be.”

But the panic I’ve been keeping a vise grip on is working its way free. After a heavy pause, through a narrowing throat, my fears spill out. “What if she’s hurt? What if—”

“She’s going to be okay, Leo.” Cole’s voice is strong and confident. “Georgia’s strong, she has skills, it hasn’t been that long since she left. Don’t panic.”

I can’t bring myself to speak. All I can do is stare at the little dot on the screen and hope with all my heart that Georgia is still alive when we get there.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GEORGIA

A throbbing pain filters through layers of fog, each pulse stronger than the last.

It's radiating through my body—everything hurts. My skin. My hair. Nausea sweeps over me in powerful waves.

It's black in here. Quiet except for the echoing drums in my head.

I can't make sense of it. What's happening? Why do I hurt? My thoughts are sticky, clinging and tangling before I can make sense of them.

Something else slithers out of the fog, icy fingers dragging up my back, chills of dread following. The cold pierces through the blanket of confusion, the pain, the sickness clenching at my stomach, bringing something more terrifying.

Memories, reality, *fear* tug at me.

The fingers turn to grasping hands, yanking me toward reality. I still hurt. My gut still clenches and twists. My head is still fuzzy, pounding, pressure pushing behind my eyes. But it's the *other* things I'm so much more afraid of.

Things I don't *want* to remember. Things I don't want to know.

But I need to. An explosion of clarity bursts through the fog, its heat making the confusion recede. I need to figure this out. *Remember.* It's the only way out of this.

Remember what?

Oh, shit. Now it's all coming back.

Arriving at the address sent to me—a deserted store all boarded over—and a text telling me to go around the back. Pausing at the back door and sending back a message before I opened the door. *I won't come in unless you prove Leo is safe.*

Then the robotic voice—somehow menacing and impatient—calling me, saying, “You have no choice.”

“Yes I do,” I snapped, stress and fear making me bold. “I can leave right now. Prove to me that Leo is safe.”

A pause, and then, “Open the door. Come inside. Then you can hear me call my employee to tell him to back off.”

There was no other choice. I needed to know. So I walked inside, flinching as the door clicked shut behind me. A moment later, another voice joined the line. Standing there, trembling, I listened as the person following Leo was instructed to leave. That the job was complete.

I thought of running then, had my hand on the door handle, wondering if it was locked from the inside. But then a hand grabbed me, clamped over my mouth. Cold metal pressed against my head, hard and jabbing at my temple. Pushed further into the room, shoved to the floor, all I could see was the gun pointed at me.

The man spoke normally. Calmly told me to change into the clothes he tossed at me. Shaking, forcing back tears, I stripped down in front of the stranger and did what he said. *Could I fight back?* I remember thinking. But Rylan and Leo always said if an attacker had a weapon to wait until they weren't paying attention.

This man was *definitely* paying attention to me.

I was scared, sweating, my pulse fluttering madly. But I still had the tracker. I knew Leo would come looking for me.

But then the man said, “All the jewelry too, Georgia. You don't think I'm that stupid, do you?” Pausing, he stepped closer to me until he was only a foot away. His voice coated

me in poison as he continued, “If you don’t take it off yourself, I’ll do it for you. And you won’t like it if *I* have to do it.”

What else could I do? Fear exploding inside me, I took off the earrings and set them on the floor beside me. Before I could stand back up on my own, I was yanked up and something sharp jabbed into my neck.

Everything blurred, my legs went liquid, an arm came around my chest, keeping me from falling. Then black.

And now I’m here. Wherever *here* is.

I keep my eyes shut, hoping I can keep up the ruse of being asleep a bit longer. Give myself some time to shove down the pain and nausea and figure out my surroundings.

I’m on something soft. A bed? A couch? Still dressed—thank God—but who knows how long I’ve been out. I shift experimentally and discover my wrists and ankles are tied to something. And that’s when panic really sets in, my heart throbbing in time with my head, my lungs shriveling into two useless lumps.

No tracker, I’ve been drugged, and I’m restrained God knows where. This is *so bad*.

“Georgia, I know you’re awake.” A voice comes from my left, close enough for me to feel the man’s breath, and I jerk instinctively away from it. “See,” he went on, “I knew you were awake. You might as well stop pretending.”

When I don’t open my eyes fast enough, he slaps me on the cheek—not hard enough to bruise, but enough to sting. I grit my jaw against my growing urge to scream and blink my eyes open, wincing as the light in the room sends jagged shards of pain shooting into my brain.

“*There* you are.” The man smirks at me, his eyes glued to my face. He’s average looking—brown eyes, neat brown hair, thick eyebrows, a few acne scars on his cheeks. A black shirt and faded jeans cover his slender body, but ropey muscles in his forearms hint I shouldn’t underestimate him.

“Sorry about tying you up, Georgia.” He leans over me and I get a strong whiff of aftershave and deodorant that

doesn't quite hide the scent of sweat. After a minute, my arms come free, and I yank them around my chest protectively.

Sitting back in the chair set next to the bed, he says, "Not your ankles yet. First we need to have a discussion. So you know what will happen if you try to escape."

I force myself up to a seated position, fighting back the fresh waves of nausea. My head swims and I have to take deep breaths to push away the dizziness to focus on the man beside me. "What do you want?" I croak out, my voice hoarse from disuse.

It brings a flurry of new questions rushing at me. How long was I out? How far away am I from Sleepy Hollow? What did he do to me? Everything down there *feels* okay, but what if—

I don't notice I'm rocking back and forth until he puts a hand on my leg. "I didn't do anything to you, if that's what you're worried about." He sounds offended. "I wouldn't take advantage of you like that."

"But you'll drug me? Abduct me? Tie me up?" I bark out a short laugh, slightly hysterical. I shouldn't talk back to him, I *know* I shouldn't, but the words come out anyway. "*Why* are you doing this?"

"*Because*, Georgia. It's meant to be. It always has been. I just had to wait for you to be ready."

I gape at him, my head spinning with all the nonsensical things he's saying. "What are you *talking* about?"

His hand is still on my leg, and it tightens to the point of pain. "Don't you remember? It was *always* supposed to be us. But you screwed up, so I had to teach you a lesson before we could be together."

"Remember *what*?" The weight of his hand is horrible, a dead thing clinging to me.

His expression transforms, shifting from calm to furious in a blink. His voice lowers, going dark and dangerous. "Don't you *remember* me, Georgia?"

My throat turns to a desert. Am I *supposed* to remember him? What should I *say*? “I’m sorry,” I finally manage to force out, “I—”

His other hand comes flying toward me and I jerk back as much as I can, but he grabs my chin, digging his fingers into my face. I yelp as he squeezes hard and hisses—his face inches from mine. “We went to *high school* together, Georgia. Took *classes* together. We would have *graduated* together, if you hadn’t left me.”

Like dominoes falling in a row, flashes of memory hit me.

The awkward boy in math class loaning me pencils, beaming when I thanked him. Trying to shove his enormous backpack in his locker a row away from mine, red-faced and flustered until I offered to help him. Pairing up with me on a chemistry lab one day when my usual partner was sick.

All small moments in the chaos of high school, pleasant but forgettable. He wasn’t a friend, not even an acquaintance. Just someone I occasionally ran into. There was never any sign of interest—he never approached me, never asked me out—our only interactions were coincidence.

I never had any reason to think it could be him.

And I’m now even more terrified. How long has he been plotting this? The dark web? The stalkers? My *face*? God. Was that part of his plan as well?

“*Well?*” The fingers yank my face forward and small drops of spittle hit me. “Do you remember *now?*”

I can’t talk properly with the pressure on my cheeks; it’s just a whisper. “Frank?”

“Yes.” The crushing pressure on my face releases as he shoves me back, sending me sprawling onto the bed. “So you did remember, after all. I guess I’m not surprised you forgot about me, considering how quickly you left me the first time.”

Scrambling to sit back up again, I try to figure out some way to get through to him. “Frank.” My voice wobbles though I try to keep it steady. “*Why?* You never... we never even went out...”

He stands up to loom over me, grasping my forearms and shaking me. “You were supposed to be my girlfriend!” The simmering rage explodes as he shouts at me, “I had it all planned! All those times I was *there* for you. And then you went and fucking *RUINED* it! You *left!*”

I start to yank my legs against the ropes in earnest as I bleat, “*Please, stop.*”

“*You stop!*” His face is fuchsia, veins popping on his forehead, eyes blazing with rage. “If you hadn’t left to go to fucking New York City, to whore yourself out as a model, we would have been *together* that summer. And my life wouldn’t have been *ruined!*”

“I was going to ask you to the senior ball,” he continues, his voice slipping back into a more conversational tone. “Then we’d date all summer. You’d move to Rochester with me while I went to college. Everyone would be jealous of me with such a beautiful girlfriend. I’d get whatever I wanted.”

“When I got my degree, you’d be on my arm, impressing everyone. And then,” Frank strokes his hand down my cheek, tracing the line of my scar. “Then I’d get all the promotions I should have been given. The life I deserved. A gorgeous wife, perfect job, success... and you *stole* that from me.”

He’s *insane*. He created an entire life with me based off some chance meetings. And now it’s *my* fault he didn’t get the life he wanted?

“But now I’m getting what I’m entitled to, *Georgia.*” He slides his hand around my head, twisting my hair into a rope and tugging. Lips curving into a satisfied smile, he says, “It was all a part of my plan.”

“First, I needed to take away your job. Ruin your looks just enough that you couldn’t work anymore. Without a job, you wouldn’t have money, you’d be struggling to get by. Then, I wanted to destroy your confidence. So you’d be weak and desperate when I finally came for you.”

Tears are slipping down my cheeks, hot and fearful and angry. Everything that happened, *is* happening, all because of

the delusions of an unstable man. And the one good thing that came from it—*Leo*—is out of reach and I don't know if I'll ever see him again.

“Once you hooked up with that security guy, I knew I needed to make my move soon. I couldn't let you get too involved with him, or it would ruin everything. When I saw him at your house,” Frank bares his teeth at me. “I almost had him killed right then.”

“But I knew it would be easier if I waited until he was gone. So I hired the third guy to snatch you. Who knew he'd be so incompetent?” Pausing, then contemplatively, Frank says, “Then I knew I had to take care of it myself. And here you are. *Finally.*”

My heart is going so fast my pulse is just a constant surge in my head. I whisper, “What are you going to *do*?”

“Isn't it obvious?” Frank lets go of my hair and steps back, smiling down at me. “You're going to *stay* here. Be my wife.” His gaze drags down my body, heating, darkening. “*Mine.*”

No. NO. I can't. I'd rather die than stay here with him. I *have* to figure out a way out of here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LEO

She *has* to be okay. She *has* to.

I keep telling myself that. Hoping if I say it enough times, I'll believe it. Refusing to let myself think of all the ways Georgia could be hurt. Or why her tracker hasn't moved since I spotted her.

She *could* be restrained, drugged, unconscious. All terrible options, but not the worst. *That's* the thought I keep fighting against, ruthlessly pushing it away. I won't let myself consider *that*. I can't. Not if I'm going to get through this without having a complete breakdown.

I need to get to her. It's been almost two hours since Georgia left my apartment. Two hours that she could have been tortured and terrorized. And it's my fault.

The last time I left her, she was attacked. What was I thinking, leaving her again? I could have gotten the information from the prison some other way. I didn't *have* to go myself. But I thought she'd be safe. I never once imagined she'd leave.

What did he tell her? How did he convince her I was in danger?

My emotions are crashing into me, knocking me off balance. Fear claws at my chest while guilt presses down on it. I can barely breathe through the pressure and pain of it. But I need to get it together, or I'll be no good to Georgia.

We're parked just down the street from the address I found—a deserted liquor store in a run-down part of Port Chester. I pulled it up on Google street view as we headed here, but the updated version of it is much worse than what I saw online. Plywood in the windows with *closed* painted all over it. Trash blown into piles along the wall and doorway and a garbage-filled alley to one side with overflowing bins.

If someone was looking for a place to do something illegal, this would be it.

Which is one silver lining in this whole mess—when we break into the store, hopefully no one will notice us. We're assuming we won't be able to walk right in, so Cole will pick the lock in the front while I take care of the one in the rear. Yes, it's illegal, but in this case the ends *definitely* justify the means.

“Are we ready?” Cole is in the backseat of the car, leaning forward to talk to us.

“I'm ready,” I grit out, my jaw clenched.

“Same,” Rylan replies sharply, his eyes narrowed with determination.

“I'll go in the front, as discussed,” Cole says, his gaze shifting between Rylan and me. “Rylan will enter the back door first. Then Leo. The tranq guns are our first choice. If that won't work, try to take them down silently.”

Frustration beats at me. I want to get *in* there. “If Georgia's at risk,” I bite out. “I don't care if it's quiet. I'll do whatever it takes.”

“Agreed.” Cole jerks his chin at me. “Silent and non-lethal is preferred, but Georgia's safety is our priority.” He pauses to meet my gaze. “So let's get in there and rescue your woman.”

We get out of the car one at a time, staggering our exits so it doesn't look obvious. Rylan goes first, taking a meandering path past the alley before he loops back around, slipping between the buildings like a ghost. Cole is next, staggering like he's slightly drunk, stopping to slump to a seat amidst the trash in front of the store entrance.

Then I move out, crossing to the opposite side of the street from where the liquor store is and walking halfway down the block. On my return trip, I dart across the street like I'm hurrying to avoid traffic and keep heading straight back into the alley.

Once we're at the back door of the store, I give Rylan a quick nod and get to work. I don't pick locks often, but I make sure to practice enough to keep my skills fresh and I have the door unlocked in under a minute. As much as I want to burst inside right away, my training keeps me still and waiting for Cole's signal to move.

When my phone vibrates with the Blade and Arrow signature rhythm, I put my hand on the door handle and glance over at Rylan. "Ready?"

He lifts his chin, gaze steady on me. "As always."

Holding my tranq gun at the ready, I open the door and let Rylan slip inside in front of me. Following close behind, I enter a small storage room, empty except for some torn cardboard boxes and a few broken bottles. Clearing it quickly, we move toward the front of the store.

There's a short hallway with two more doors, both closed. Our movements in unison, communicating through quick nods and glances, Rylan and I enter a tiny office next and my heart catches when I see the large metal file cabinet inside. It's at least four feet long and two feet tall, big enough to stash—

No. I can't think of it.

When I start toward the cabinet, Rylan hisses a low, urgent, "Wait." His face is expressionless but his shoulders are tight as he tugs open the large lower drawer. Then he visibly relaxes and turns back to me, giving a little shake of his head. I'm infinitely relieved it was empty, but the question still beats at me—*where is Georgia?*

The question still remains after we've cleared the remaining rooms—a deserted employee locker room and a very dirty bathroom. Just as Rylan and I move back into the hallway, Cole sends another message.

Cleared in the front. Nothing.

How can this be? I looked at the tracker location right before we came inside. It hadn't moved since the first time I saw it. But there's no one here, and the place is eerily silent.

"What did we miss?" I ask Rylan, my voice low and stretched close to snapping. "A trap door? Hidden closet? Did you see anything outside that would indicate a basement?"

"I didn't see anything like that," Cole says as he walks into the hallway to join us. "Is it possible the tracker could have malfunctioned?"

"No." Panic swells in my chest, compressing my lungs. "I've used them dozens of times. If one stopped working, I'd get a notification. If it was tampered with, I'd get an alert. It's still working."

"Okay, let's go through here again." Rylan gestures toward the back of the store. "We'll start in the storage area and look for signs of any kind of disturbance."

We file back to the rear of the store, all still with our tranquilizers out and ready. With each step my chest gets tighter and my brain is more certain that things are about to get so much worse. As we enter the storage room, we split in three directions, scanning every inch of the floor and walls.

"*Leo.*" Cole is in the far right corner, staring down at one of the cardboard boxes. His features are rigid, his jaw working. There's an odd note to his voice. "Are these Georgia's?"

I don't want to look, but I have to. So I walk over to him, each step like walking through quicksand. And I look in the box.

It's a punch to my gut. A hammer slamming into me. My lungs expel all the air in them, and I'm gasping for breath. Georgia's clothes—I'm sure of it, I saw her put them on this morning—are in a pile inside the box.

He took off her clothes. If I find him, *when* I find him, I will *kill* him. Sinking to my knees, I pull her clothes out, my hands shaking with anger.

Then I see the earrings on the floor, neatly set together, the silver glinting under the fluorescent light.

“NO!” The word tears out of me. I snatch up the earrings, holding them so tightly they cut into my palm.

“NO,” I roar, slamming my fist against the wall. A maelstrom of emotions swirl around me. Rage. Despair. Guilt. Agony. “*Where is she?*”

No! NO! This can't be happening. How can I find her? Rational thought is gone and all my control is slipping away from me. I can't think about anything other than my Georgia being taken. Being stripped naked. At the mercy of some psychopath and I failed her *again*.

My fist is flying toward the wall again without thinking. But it's stopped in its path and I spin to lash out at whoever is blocking me. Then arms are wrapped around me, hard and unyielding, dragging me against the wall and holding me there.

“*Let me go,*” I growl. Anger and frustration are rampaging through me, too big to contain in my body.

“Leo, *no.*” Cole's dark gaze appears in front of me. “This *isn't* going to help her. We need to make a plan, get on the computer, figure out who's behind this. If we find a name, we can find *Georgia*. You said we could do it. *You* can do it. But not like this.”

Rylan stands behind Cole, somber and pained. Cole stares at me, brow pulled down and jaw set. “I know, Leo. I *know*. But get it together. She needs you.”

I stare back at him, balanced on a precipice—let the rage overtake me or rein it in.

Shit. He's right. I *can* help find Georgia. But not if I let my emotions get the best of me.

Taking a deep breath, I gather all my rampaging feelings and jam them into a corner of my brain to deal with later. Then I pull out my phone and say, “We need to get back to B and A. Work on a plan. And I'm calling Beth and Tex. I need them on this *right now*.”

* * *

“DAMMIT!” My hand thunks onto the conference table, rattling the coffee cups strewn all along it. “I still haven’t found anything. I’ve been checking all the security cameras around the liquor store, CCTV in the area, but it’s like a dead zone there. Half of the cameras are broken.”

“Beth has been scouring the satellite images.” Cole looks across the table at me. “She’s checking every identifiable vehicle within a mile radius of the store. There has to be something.”

“It’s been four hours since we got back here,” I grit out through clenched teeth. “We should have had his name already.”

“You found the URL,” Rylan reminds me, his gaze steady from across the room. “That’s the key. Tex will come through with a name soon.”

When I called Tex on the way back from Port Chester, he immediately agreed to help. Between myself, Beth, and Tex, we *should* be able to locate Georgia, but as the hours tick by, I’m having a harder time believing it.

We had a good strategy when we started. First, we’d all run a program simultaneously to locate the URL on the dark web. Then, Tex would work on hacking the VPN and ISP companies, Beth would go through the satellite images, and I would check all the surveillance cameras near the liquor store—everything from traffic cameras, commercial security systems, even private Ring systems and smart doorbells.

It seemed like a sound plan, except we still haven’t found anything solid to go on. So I’m stuck here in the conference room at Blade and Arrow with Cole and Rylan, feeling useless and worried and desperate. Hacking into security cameras and finding nothing. And imagining Georgia scared, hurt, and hopeless.

How terrified must she have been when she was forced to take off those earrings? Knowing that it meant her lifeline was

gone?

“I should have insisted she get an implant.” Dragging my hand down my face, I close my eyes for a second. “The jewelry is too unreliable. If she had an implant, I would have found her already.”

“Or it could have been cut out of her.” Rylan grimaces when he sees my face, his eyes going dark and apologetic. “I’m sorry, Leo. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Cole soothes, his voice low and placating. “What matters is finding the name of whoever took Georgia and bringing her home.”

Home. Back to Sleepy Hollow. Back with me. *When* I find Georgia—I won’t accept any other possibility—I’m not letting her go back to Ballston Spa on her own. She’s staying here with *me*.

But I need to find her first. I grab my mug and drain the last dredges of coffee, then start working on hacking into another building’s security system. One of these cameras has to have caught something. This person who took Georgia couldn’t have just disappeared. He has to be on camera *somewhere*.

Then my phone buzzes, sending my heart into my throat. Tex’s name appears on the screen and I snatch at it, praying for good news. *Please*.

“Please tell me you have something,” I blurt out in greeting.

“I do. I have a name.” There’s some clicking, then Tex says, “I’m sorry it took so long. He used multiple VPNs, so it took a while to hack into all of them. Once I found the ISP, it went much faster.”

“Who is it?” In any other circumstance, I’d be happy to hear how Tex worked his magic. But not now. I just need the name.

“His name is Frank Davis,” Tex drawls, anger making his accent more pronounced than normal. “He lives in Fairport, a

suburb of Rochester. I'm sending it to you now. It's the only known address for him—no additional properties.”

“Could he have something off the books? Something he paid for in cash?”

“Nothing that I saw. He works in IT, makes enough to own a small home, but there's nothing extra. Some cash withdrawals over the last few months totaling around ten grand, but that's it. I'm thinking that was the money he spent hiring the stalkers.”

I jump up from my chair, sending it rolling halfway across the room. “*Thank you*, Tex. I can't tell you how much. I owe you.”

“No.” I can almost hear Tex shaking his head. “You don't owe me anything. Just get your woman back.” He pauses, then adds, “One other thing. This guy—Frank—he went to high school with her. There was nothing to indicate any relationship between them, friendship or otherwise, but I think that's where he knows her from.”

High school. Has he been obsessed with Georgia for over a decade?

I can't worry about that now. First priority—getting to Fairport. So, I quickly wrap up my call with Tex, then turn to Cole and Rylan. “I'm sure you heard. We have a name. Frank Davis, lives in Fairport, just outside Rochester. He apparently went to high school with Georgia, but his name wasn't one of the ones we investigated. I don't know if she forgot about him, or—”

“She may not have even thought about him,” Rylan suggests. “He could have easily been obsessed with her from afar.”

“If he's been obsessed with her for that long, he wouldn't want to kill her. Not after waiting for over a decade. Right?” I *want* to believe it.

“Probably.” Cole glances down at his phone, tapping quickly. “Zane left the case in Connecticut to help. Nora and Finn can't leave without compromising the client's safety.”

“Where is he now? Will he get here in time?” Now that I have an address, my body is twitching to move, to take action. “We need to leave right away.” I pull up the address on my laptop, checking the quickest route to get there. “*Dammit*. It’s *five* hours away.”

That means at least five more hours that Georgia is in danger. Five hours of impotent waiting to be close enough to help her. “*Dammit*.” My voice rises. “Five hours is too long. There has to be another way.”

Cole stands up from his chair, still staring at his phone before glancing at me. “There is. I know a guy—his name is Cash Chatham—we did some work for his company, but he’s also a friend. He lives right in town and has a private plane at Westchester Airport. We can take it to Rochester.”

A quick search shows the flight time from White Plains direct to Rochester at just about an hour. “Okay. How soon can we leave?”

Cole taps at the screen sporadically, pausing to read as his phone continues to buzz. “Cash has a connection in the FAA, so the flight plan is being expedited. He said the plane should be ready to take off as soon as we get there.”

I snatch up my laptop and phone, heading for the door. “What are we waiting for, then?”

Rylan is gathering his things while Cole is still glued to his phone. “Hang on,” Cole says, and I almost growl at him. *We’ve waited long enough.*

“Alright.” His tone is calm but commanding. “We’re leaving for White Plains in five. Rylan, gather enough supplies for five people. Leo, study the address, the satellite images, any interior photos—you know the drill. And I’ll stay in communication with Cash, make sure we’re ready to go wheels up as soon as we get to the airport.”

Rylan gets to the door and hesitates, turning back. “Five bags? If Zane makes it, that’s four. Who’s the fifth?”

“Zane will be at the airport waiting for us,” Cole replies, “and Niall is joining us, too.”

“I thought he was still active duty?” I ask, jogging alongside Cole as we move toward the garage. Niall was stationed at Fort Campbell with us, part of the same Green Beret battalion, though he served on a different team. He’s a standup guy and one of the best sharpshooters I’ve ever seen.

“Niall had some family issues, so he didn’t re-enlist when his contract was up. He’s been doing some private security work in New York City, so when I knew we’d be short-handed, I asked him to help.” Cole glances over his shoulder as he opens the door to the garage. “I know he’s not a part of the team—”

“It’s fine.” I slide into the passenger seat and open my laptop back up, ready to get back to my research. “I’m just thankful so many people want to help.”

And then all the emotions I’ve been pushing down swell up again. *Please let this work. Let her be there.* If she’s hurt, traumatized, it’ll be awful, but I’ll be right by her side working through it together. I just need Georgia *alive*.

“We’ll find her,” Cole says. “When I was out of my mind with worry about Maya, you all had my back. And we found her. Just like we’ll find Georgia.”

I lift my eyes from my laptop to meet his gaze. “I can’t lose her, Cole. I *can’t*.”

Cole opens his mouth to say something, but is interrupted by the rear car door opening. Rylan slides inside and says, “Bags are in the trunk. Let’s go rescue Georgia.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

GEORGIA

If I thought Frank was crazy when I first woke up, that was nothing compared to now.

I'm not sure exactly how long I've been awake for—it's dark outside and there's no clock in here—but it's felt like an eternity. While I've been trapped here, I've been treated to an array of Frank's delusional fantasies.

He's told me how I'll look and act when he takes me to work gatherings—somehow magically convincing his bosses to promote him just by standing there and looking pretty. How he'll do my makeup and hair to make sure my necessary but unsightly scar will be as unobtrusive as possible.

I've learned about our upcoming wedding and how all his cousins will be jealous and his parents will finally be proud of him for finding the perfect wife. A wife who will only speak when Frank says it's allowed, will wear the clothes he picks out, and will never, *ever* be alone with another man.

And he's outlined in great detail about our sex life. What positions he likes and how he likes to be pleased. How he'll punish me if I displease him, but not to worry, he won't leave any lasting marks. Just enough to teach me a lesson.

I'm trying not to freak out, at least not outwardly. Inside, panic is thousands of birds trapped in a mine filled with poisonous gas, trying to break free. I can feel the panic attack simmering—it's becoming more and more a struggle to keep my breathing steady. And I'm still fighting back nausea, made

worse each time Frank tells me something awful he wants to do to me.

If my head wasn't still foggy and throbbing, I might have a better chance of coming up with an escape plan. But I'm at a significant disadvantage. Not only being tied to the bed by my ankles, but Frank also has a gun tucked into the back of his pants.

And he's on edge, erratic, his voice calm in one moment and the next a shout. His gaze bounces around the room constantly—from me, to the closet, the windows, the door—while he keeps reaching back for the gun, caressing it, almost like he's reminding himself that it's there.

And I never know how he's going to look at me. One second, he's smiling affectionately at me while the next, he's glaring in anger. Then, his expression shifts to a hungry desire, soon transforming to paranoid suspicion.

Just a few minutes ago, Frank stormed up to me, shoving his face in mine, and shouted, "Where are the other trackers? Are they still tracking you? Is there one under your skin?"

"No!" I yelled, jerking back in fear. I've tried to stay quiet, but the idea of him stripping me naked and searching for a hidden tracker is terrifying. "It was just the earrings," I told him, hating how my voice quivered. "Nothing else."

Now he's on another rant, this time about my routine when he gets home—me waiting at the door, wearing lingerie, holding a drink and slippers for him, three-course meal in the oven ready to be served—he's not only crazy but he's also apparently traveled back in time. I'm scared but I'm also pissed and I must have let a hint of that come through in my expression because he lunges at me, screaming, "*Is this a joke to you?*"

He grabs my throat and slams me down on the bed, red-faced and spittle flying. As he looms over me, his hand tight on my neck, his voice raises even louder. "*Do you know how much MONEY I paid to get you? All the effort? How DARE you disrespect me!*"

My anger is doused by a cold splash of fresh terror. “No,” I gasp past the fingers tightening around my throat, “I’m *sorry*.”

In a flash, his face smooths out and his hand releases, leaving me sucking at air. His tone goes silky smooth as he says, “I *wish* you wouldn’t make me annoyed, Georgia.” He smooths his hand across my forehead, lingering for a second before pulling away. “I don’t like having to punish you, but if it’s necessary to train you... I will.”

As soon as Frank steps away from the bed, I shove myself back up again. My throat hurts—when I swallow it’s razor blades slicing—and I’m even more scared than before. What I saw in his eyes as he stood over me—

I didn’t think he’d kill me, but now I’m not sure. And I know I need to come up with a plan. If I can’t escape, at least a way to get help. I can’t sit back and assume Leo will come for me, even though I *know* he’s trying.

Without the earrings, it’s going to take so much longer to figure out who’s behind all this. I never thought of Frank as a potential suspect. I didn’t even remember him. And I know Leo can work magic on the computer, along with his friends, Beth and Tex, but it still takes *time*.

And if I unintentionally anger Frank again, what if he doesn’t stop that time? What if he *keeps* choking me?

I want Leo. I want him with such desperation I can barely breathe. My chest is carved out, aching, empty without him. I want to be in his arms, safe, loved, feeling his body curved protectively around me.

It’s not over yet. It can still happen. I can still be with Leo. But I need to be smart, use any little advantage I have. Like playing along with Frank’s psychotic plan.

I won’t encourage him—if he tries to touch me like *that* I’ll lose my shit for sure—but maybe I can convince him I’m wavering. That I won’t fight him. That maybe I’ll come to *like* him, *if* he’s not screaming and threatening me. Maybe.

“Frank,” I start, making sure my voice is timid and uncertain. “Is it okay if I ask you a question?” I dip my eyes to

the bed and look up at him through my lashes, pleadingly. “Please?”

“What?” His brows rise suspiciously.

“It’s just...” I pluck at the bedspread and bite my lip as I look back up at him. “I don’t really know you anymore. It’s been so long, and you keep yelling at me. It’s scaring me.”

Frank blinks, then sinks onto the chair next to the bed. He looks confused, possibly at my sudden change in behavior, so I know I need to keep it up but not be too over the top, either.

“I know you want me to be perfect for you...” I let some of my fear seep into my voice, making it wobble. “But it’s going to be so hard if I’m terrified all the time.”

“You need to learn.” Frank’s tone is sharp. “Once you’re trained, I won’t have to yell or punish you anymore. But in the beginning, you’re going to make mistakes. And they need to be corrected.”

What he’s saying is both terrifying and disgusting, but at least he’s not screaming at me. And the fog is clearing from my brain, making it easier to run through possible escape plans while I try to pacify him. “How are you going to train me?” I ask softly. “It might help me be more prepared.”

Frank leans back in the chair, stroking his chin. After a few seconds he says, “Well. Allowing you small freedoms to see if you deserve them. Punishing you if you don’t.”

Oh, God. This guy is truly insane. Was he this crazy in high school? He must have been. “What kind of freedoms?” I manage to choke out without screaming.

“Oh, like going in the backyard, for example.” He sounds incredibly calm as he discusses training me like a dog. “If you go out there and don’t try to run, I might let you out again. But if you do, I’ll have to punish you. And you won’t like *that*.”

Summoning all my experience as a model at masking my emotions, I nod at Frank like it makes complete sense. “Okay.” Hesitating, I wriggle on the bed for a few moments before biting my lip and gazing at Frank again. “Would you...”

“What, Georgia?”

“Would you allow me to go to the bathroom? Please? It’s been so long, and I don’t want to embarrass myself.”

Frank stares at me contemplatively before answering. “It’s attached, Georgia. And the window is bolted shut. You can’t get out that way.”

“It’s okay,” I hurry to reply. “I just need to go. Please?”

“Fine.” Frank huffs out a sigh and goes to the foot of the bed, loosening the restraints around my ankles. When they’re both off, I stifle a small gust of relief and just give him a little smile instead.

“Thank you,” I breathe out, and start to get off the bed.

“Wait.” Frank yanks me up and holds me in front of him, his hands gripping my forearms. His eyes search my face, greedily taking it in, before he slams his mouth onto mine. His tongue prods between my lips, a slithering snake hunting its prey. Every instinct is screaming at me to shove him away, but I make myself hold still until he releases me.

I’m desperate to wipe my mouth, rinse with mouthwash, scrub my tongue—but I don’t make a move. “I was going to wait,” he says, somewhat sheepishly, “but I’ve been waiting to kiss you since I was seventeen. I couldn’t help myself.”

My stomach is rebelling, but I force it to settle. “Okay,” I whisper, then back away to the bathroom, never taking my eyes off him. But once I get inside, I turn both faucets on high and crouch by the toilet until all I’m throwing up is liquid.

Then I rinse my mouth, find a small bottle of mouthwash and swish some around, all the while searching for something I can use to get help. Because my trip to the bathroom has multiple purposes—not just to use the bathroom, but to get my legs released from the bed *and* to figure out a way to signal that I need help.

Frank’s obsession with me ends up paying off for once, as I locate some of my makeup from my house in Ballston Spa. Which is creepy and terrifying but I can’t deal with that right

now. Instead, I find my darkest lipstick and move to the window to inspect it.

It's small, and bolted shut, like Frank said, with horizontal blinds closed for privacy. I want to leave a message with the lipstick so someone outside could see it, but I can't have Frank finding out what I've done. But how?

Then an idea comes to me. Pulling the blinds away from the window, I use the lipstick to write a message on the part that will only be seen from outside, and only when the blinds are closed. I need to be quick or Frank will suspect something, so I scribble my note quickly and hope someone sees it.

Been abducted

Call 911

Georgia

By this point, my heart is slamming into my chest and I know I need to finish up my business. So, I hurriedly stash the lipstick, check the blinds to make sure they don't look like they've been disturbed, and flush the toilet one more time for good measure.

When I walk back out, Frank is staring at me, but he doesn't say anything. He gestures to the bed and I head halfway there before stopping. "Could you leave them off?" I ask, arranging my features to look sad and pained, which isn't a stretch at all. "My ankles are really sore. I'm worried they might scar if they keep getting irritated."

Frank frowns at me, his jaw going tight. "*Please,*" I beg, before he can say anything. "I'm not going anywhere. How could I? You would stop me if I tried. I'll just sit on the bed. *Please?*"

After a long pause, he nods his head. "Fine. But if you try anything, you're going back in *all* the restraints. Not just the ankle ones."

I bob my head at him and sit back down on the bed, mentally high-fiving myself. I may not have escaped yet, but I'm not tied up anymore, and I left a message that hopefully someone will see. A tiny warmth flickers to life in my chest.

Leo would be proud of me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LEO

Now that I'm this close to Georgia, *nothing* is going to stop me from reaching her.

And no *one*. *Especially* not this piece of human garbage who's taken the woman I love from me.

He has no idea what he's gotten himself into. If this *Frank* thinks he has a chance against five former special forces soldiers—one of them out for vengeance—he's in for a rude awakening. I won't hesitate to kill him if he tries to stop me from rescuing Georgia.

The rest of the team keeps shooting worried glances at me when they think I'm not looking. Like they think I'm going to lose it or something. But I've got too tight a lock on my emotions for that to happen. The bone-crushing worry, the gut-twisting fear, the stabbing agony of missing Georgia—*those* emotions have no place here.

Not if I want to find Georgia and bring her safely home with me. But incendiary rage and absolute determination—*those* I can use. It's not that I think Frank himself is dangerous. He's a five feet ten inch, one hundred and seventy-five pound IT guy with no offensive experience. I could take him in my sleep.

But crazy people are dangerous in other ways. Like harming people around them when they feel trapped. Hurting a woman they're obsessed with to keep anyone else from getting her. So I'm not taking *anything* for granted.

We're on our way to Fairport right now—it's about a twenty-minute drive from the airport and since it's midnight, the traffic is light. Which means in less than half an hour we'll be breaching the house and putting an end to this nightmare.

I hope. There are still so many variables. We think Frank is there with Georgia, but we don't know for sure. We don't know what he's done to her, if she *is* with him. Has he *hurt* her, *assaulted* her? And what if she's *not* there? *Then* where is she?

"Leo, man, are you okay?" Zane leans closer to me, pitching his voice low. He's sitting next to me in the middle row of the Expedition Cash arranged for us to use, watching me with a concerned gaze. "We got this, alright? We're going to get your girl back."

I'm saved from having to come up with a response when Cole turns around in the front seat and looks back at us. Rylan is driving, and Niall is in the third row with all our weapons. We all snap to attention as Cole says, "Let's go over the plan one more time, so we're ready to roll when we get there."

Years of military training and experience have us all sitting up straighter as we listen to Cole. There's no need to ask questions when we've worked together so long—Niall might not be a part of our team, but he's experienced enough to follow along.

"We'll park two houses down from Frank's—that house is set furthest back from the road and has good tree cover, so we shouldn't be noticed." Cole turns to look at Rylan. "Once we get on the street, cut the headlights."

"Once we get there," Cole continues. "Leo, Rylan, and Niall—you'll head along the western side of the yard to the back. Zane and I will go past the house and circle back through the trees to the front door."

"Leo, you have all the security cameras bypassed, right?" Cole knows I do, but he likes to reconfirm everything.

"Yes. They're all on a loop." As soon as I found out the address, I hacked into the security system and set up a bypass,

so the cameras won't be recording, and instead just showing a continuous repetition of earlier footage.

Cole gives me a quick nod before continuing. "Before we enter, we'll search for heat signals. Depending on where they are will determine our direction once we get inside. And once we have eyes on Frank, the goal is to incapacitate him before he has a chance to do anything to Georgia."

A growl rumbles up my chest. "Or kill him."

"If necessary, yes," Cole says, "but if it looks like he can be taken down using non-lethal methods, it will make things less complicated when we deal with local law enforcement."

I understand the reasoning, and I'm not typically the murderous type, but after knowing everything this man put Georgia through, I wouldn't be upset if he ends up not making it.

"We're at the street." Rylan turns the car and flicks the headlights off. We travel the next quarter mile in silence, running through the mission in our minds. Before I know it, Rylan is slowing to a quiet stop in front of a split-level ranch with a realtor's sign in front of it. I take a quick look around at the darkened neighborhood, the only spots of light from occasional porch lamps and lamp posts at the end of driveways.

Like phantoms, dressed all in black, we slip out of the SUV—the only sounds the quiet snicks of the doors closing. It's a residential area, middle class, mostly ranches and split-levels separated by medium-sized yards. Not many places to hide, but we move stealthily and quickly from tree to tree until we're gathered in the shadows behind a large pine on the side of Frank's property.

Zane pulls out the thermal camera and scans the house. After a moment, he murmurs, "Found them. Looks like both are in the primary bedroom, fairly close together."

My jaw clenches so hard I think I hear my teeth crack. Rage flares red-hot, but I tamp it down ruthlessly. *Not now.*

Whatever he did to Georgia, we'll get through it. I just need to get her *home*.

"It's not the ideal location," Cole whispers, "with only one point of entrance. If we try to use a distraction, it may tip him off. We'll enter the bedroom in two waves. First, Rylan, Zane, and I will target Frank. With the three of us coming at him, it should take his attention away from Georgia."

"Then Leo, Niall—you shield her and focus on getting her out of range. Then we can take down Frank without worrying about her getting hurt. And Leo," Cole puts his hand on my arm, his voice barely audible in the quiet. "No matter what you see, let *us* handle Frank."

"I *know*," I answer quietly, impatience making my voice curt. "Let's get inside, already."

In the dark, we're just five large figures in a huddle, deadly weapons ready to attack. Cole raises his hand. In a murmur, he says, "Ready."

Then with a short sweep downwards, he gives us the signal to move.

At Cole's motion, we spring into action, sprinting off in two directions. Cole and Niall dart across the yard to the far side of the house, so fast they're nothing but a flash of shadows. Rylan, Zane, and I run from the tree to the closest side of the house, pressing ourselves against the wall once we get there.

Zane takes the lead, slinking along the short side of the ranch, keeping crouched down to avoid the windows. I follow Zane and Rylan has my six—it doesn't appear there's any threat outside, but we know better than to make assumptions. As we hit the end of the wall, Zane pauses to peer around the corner before giving the command to move forward.

As we come around the back of the house, I take a quick sweep of our surroundings. Plain backyard with no furniture or decorations, just a few scattered shrubs and trees. Five windows, light filtering through blinds on the two closest. Then toward the end of the house, a small stoop with a door

that should lead to the garage—our point of access into the house.

The low rise and fall of a man's voice stretches toward us from one of the windows. I strain my ears to hear a female voice, but I can't catch any sign to confirm that Georgia is in there. My pulse is thundering from a combination of fear and anticipation and I have a crazy, irrational thought that it's so loud it will give us away.

Get it together. This is not the time to forget all my training. She's in there, we're only minutes away from rescuing Georgia, and I need to keep my head in the game instead of letting my emotions distract me.

Zane pauses as he passes the first window, then points at it before continuing along the wall. As I follow his path, my gaze lifts to the same window and I see the hastily scrawled message Georgia left for us. The relief almost makes me fall to my knees.

She's *here. Alive.* And not hurt so badly that she couldn't figure out a way to get a message to us.

"She's here," I whisper the obvious news to Zane as we gather by the entrance to the garage. "If she could get free of him long enough to write that message, he can't have hurt her too badly."

"Probably not," Zane murmurs. "It was smart, leaving the message like that on the outside of the blinds."

Rylan dips his head in agreement before pulling out his lock-picks. Thankfully it's just a standard lock, so it takes him less than thirty seconds to open it. It's surprising with all the security cameras installed that Frank doesn't have smart locks—maybe he doesn't trust them, or maybe he's so confident because of the cameras that he doesn't think he needs better locks.

We move into the garage and quickly clear the space before moving to the kitchen door. It's darker in here, so Rylan pulls out a small Maglite and aims it at the lock. Before he starts, he asks in a low voice, "The alarm deactivated?"

“All set,” I tell him quietly. When I hacked into the security camera earlier, I noticed some magnetic alarms hooked up to the wi-fi, but it was an easy fix. On the way here, I tricked the alarms into thinking they’re always closed by sniffing and cloning the signal, so we’ll be able to enter the house without Frank having any idea.

A minute later, we’re inside the house, standing in a basic kitchen illuminated by the oven clock and a small nightlight by the doorway to the dining room. On the counter is a collection of vials and syringes, some used, and another blast of rage hits me.

He *drugged* her. He had to have drugged her—there’s no other way he could have driven five hours with her without arousing suspicion. And the thought of him touching her unconscious body...

No. Lock it down.

Still following Zane, we head further into the house, meeting up with Cole and Niall in the living room. Like the rest of the house so far, it’s basic, barely any decorations, and nothing to hint at the cruelty of the man who lives here.

Until I see the large dog kennel in the corner of the room stocked with bottles of water and a blanket and pillow.

When Rylan notices what I’m looking at, his expression goes rigid. Cole and Niall already saw it and are grim-faced as they look at me. Zane hisses a low curse, his eyes going deadly. I’m barely hanging on to my control as fury engulfs me.

Thankfully, Cole doesn’t waste any time. He gestures for Rylan and Zane to follow him, slipping silently down the hall toward the bedroom. Soft-footed, Niall and I come after them, our experience allowing us to move without making a sound.

As we approach the last door on the left—the primary bedroom—I finally catch the soft sound of Georgia talking. *Thank God.* She sounds scared but not panicked, answering Frank with quiet yesses and nos, clearly trying to placate him.

He's lecturing her, his tone tense and agitated, explaining something about the perfect weekend routine.

We don't get to hear what this routine entails, because Cole is at the door and ready to breach. We've all been through the plan so no more directions are needed, just absolute concentration on our mission. On getting him away from Georgia.

When the door crashes open, time seems to slow, although everything happens quickly. Details are cataloged lightning fast. Sounds, smells, objects, shadows, even temperatures are assessed whenever we enter a new environment.

Muscle memory takes over. Our minds tick through logistics and risk factors and commands. We're sentient machines at that moment of attack, adapting, re-assessing, single-minded in completing our task.

As we burst into the room, I notice everything. Heavy oak furniture—a dresser, a desk, two stocky nightstands. Two more doors, one open to the bathroom, the other to the closet. Windows with blinds pulled down and covered with thick green curtains.

A slender, brown-haired man with a startled expression, leaping up from a chair near the bed. The bed, queen-sized, with unbuckled leather restraints attached to it.

And Georgia, hunched over her knees on the bed, her relieved gaze leaping toward me. She's wearing unfamiliar clothes, a thin T-shirt and shorts that don't cover the red abrasions on her wrists and ankles. There are fresh bruises on her upper arms and dark fingerprints marking her neck.

I want to *kill* him for putting his hands on her. But my priority is Georgia. As long as she's safe, nothing else matters.

We race into the room in a flurry of movements, but adrenaline makes them feel slow, each one a freeze-frame lingering.

I race toward the other side of the bed, opposite Frank, reaching for Georgia, ready to pull her out of the way.

Cole, Rylan, and Zane move into a semi-circle, closing in on Frank.

The tranq gun is in Cole's hand, aimed and ready to fire. Zane barks, "Don't move!"

Frank shrieks out a frantic, angry, "NO!" and yanks Georgia off the bed and in front of him seconds before I reach her.

Cole curses, jerking up his gun a moment before firing. "Let her go," he bites out, low and threatening.

Georgia yelps as Frank's arm comes around her throat, squeezing.

"Let her go!" I roar, frozen ten feet away, desperate to rush to her but afraid he'll hurt her worse than he is already.

Then his gun comes out from behind his back, pointing at me. "*You're the one,*" he screams, "*trying to keep her from me!*"

"No!" Georgia's expression shifts from fear to panic, then transforming to rage. Her blue eyes bounce from Frank to me, a steely determination in her gaze.

A cold dread blankets me, heavy and terrifying. "Georgia," I start, "just stay still—"

She nearly growls at Frank, her features strained and angry. "*I won't let you hurt him!*"

When she starts to move, I realize what she's trying to do. The move Rylan taught her, the one she used to escape the last man who attacked her. But this time she's weak, still unsteady from the drugs he gave her, and she fumbles it.

Instead of knocking him to the ground, she's now off-balance, so it's easy for Frank to block her. He shoves her, pushing her behind him, no doubt thinking to still keep her away from us.

As she falls, shock and disappointment ripple across her face. But her distraction worked. It gave Cole the opening to shoot Frank with a dart. In a flash, I think, *it's almost over.*

But then.

Georgia's head collides with the edge of the nightstand, the dull thud the most frightening sound I've ever heard. She collapses to the floor and nothing can stop me from leaping toward her—not a gun, not the threat of death, not *anything*.

Kneeling beside her, my world shrinks until it's just me and her. She's crumpled in a heap, her arms sprawled out unnaturally. Eyes closed, not even a flicker of movement beneath her lids, just as still as the rest of her body.

Around me there's noise, but it's all distant. Unimportant.

Dimly, I hear Frank whimpering, slurring, "I didn't mean to hurt her. I *love* her."

Cole is barking commands, "Rylan, Zane—tie him up and get him out of here. Niall, call the police. I'll check on Georgia."

I want to touch Georgia, but I'm afraid to hurt her. "Sweetheart," I beg, my voice shaking. "Wake up, *please*."

Her chest is still rising and falling, but the panic is shattering. I know firsthand that head injuries can range from minor to devastating. All I want to do is pull her into my arms and see those big blue eyes open up to look at me.

Not to see the woman I love more than my own life unconscious and unresponsive and—everything goes cold inside—she's *bleeding*. Spreading out from under her head, crimson is soaking into her golden hair, turning it a violent red.

"*Cole!*" It's a barely restrained shout. "She's *bleeding*."

As Cole drops down beside me, I pick up Georgia's limp hand and keep repeating, "Sweetheart, it's all over. You're safe. Come back to me."

Cole checks her heart rate, her breathing, telling me, "It's a little weak but steady." But it's not enough to reassure me.

It's not enough when he lifts her lids to look at her pupils and says, "I'm sure she'll wake up soon," because his voice is tense with worry.

Each minute that passes without Georgia waking, the deeper the panic goes.

As the sirens draw closer and her eyes still don't open, I feel my world coming down around me.

“Georgia, please.” My voice is cracking, I don't care that paramedics are now swarming into the room and can hear me. “*Please, sweetheart. It's time to wake up now. Come back to me.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LEO

I'm torn open, raw, and bleeding.

All the air seems like it's been sucked out of the room. Each breath is a struggle, my lungs too tight to work properly. My heart isn't here—it's still with Georgia—and I'm praying it's strong enough to keep her going.

I can't stop seeing the same horrific scene over and over. Georgia's face as she fell. The sound of her head hitting the nightstand. The woman I love on the ground, unconscious and bleeding. And it's my fault.

Of all the things I've failed at, this is by far the worst.

The floor is a smear of white and gray, the tile blurring as I stare down at my feet. I've been in the same position since we arrived, head in my hands, guilt dragging down at me. The guilt only goes away when a more powerful emotion—suffocating fear—steps in to replace it.

Someone sits down next to me, another in a line of many. While we've been waiting for news about Georgia, my teammates have been taking turns checking on me. I can't bring myself to respond with more than mumbled *thanks* and *okays*. All my effort is going into holding it together.

“Don't assume the worst.” It's Cole again—they must have worked their way down the line and came back to the start. “Just because she wasn't awake when she got to the hospital doesn't mean it's bad news.”

“It’s not *good* news,” I grit out, managing an actual response. “Good news would have been her waking up at the house. Or in the ambulance.”

I rode to the hospital in the ambulance with Georgia—there was no way I was letting her out of my sight again. At first, the paramedics didn’t want to let me go with her, but Cole pulled me aside and said quietly, “Just say you’re engaged.” I didn’t feel a flicker of guilt about lying—while she might not be yet, hopefully someday...

The entire ride, I kept praying that she’d open her eyes as I held her hand, reassuring her that she was safe, but nothing. Not even a blink, or a squeeze of my fingers. And each mile, each minute, my panic and fear grew thicker.

“We haven’t been here that long,” Cole says, trying to reassure me. “They’re probably still examining her.”

We’ve been in the waiting room for well over an hour, though it seems like much longer. Long enough for Cole to deal with the police, enough for everyone to get here. Long enough for Nora and Finn to call and say they were on their way, even bringing their client with them.

Would they do that if it wasn’t serious? The small, terrified voice in my brain pipes up. Do they know something I don’t? Do they think Georgia won’t make it?

“Do you remember Miles?” The question comes out without thinking. “From the SERE course?” Survival, evasion, resistance, and escape training was one of our requirements to become a Green Beret, and one of the most intense ones.

“Yeah.” Cole sighs, going silent for a moment. His voice drops as he says, “I remember him.”

I lift my head to meet Cole’s eyes. “When he hit his head during that training exercise, we didn’t think it was a big deal. He was dizzy for a few minutes, but laughed it off and kept going. And then—”

“It’s not the same thing, Leo.” He shakes his head, his forehead wrinkling. “Miles was hit in the temple, not in the back of the head. That’s a much more vulnerable spot. And

what happened to Miles was a fluke. Thousands of other people could be hit like that and they wouldn't have thrown a blood clot."

"But it *happened*," I insist, the words ripping out of me. "How do I know it won't happen to Georgia?"

"Leo..."

A fresh surge of fear crashes into me, the punishing wave stealing my breath. I can't sit here any longer. My skin is throbbing, my heart racing, I need to move *somewhere* to keep myself from breaking. As I stride over to the vending machine and brace my hands on its sides, I can feel my teammates' eyes on me. I know they're worried, and they all have my back, but I can't bring myself to think about what I'd *really* need them for.

If Georgia is okay, I will be, too. But if she's not—if she's in a coma, terribly injured, or *worse*—I'll be broken.

"Mr. Wilder?" A man's voice silences any sound in the room and I spin around to see where it came from. I spot the man—the doctor, dressed in a crisp white coat and dark gray pants, and my heart beats so fast I feel light-headed.

For a second, I can't speak. All I can do is stare at him, searching his expression for some clue about the news he's going to share. Does he look regretful? Sympathetic? Or is he relieved? Is his neutral expression hinting at good news, or something that will crush me?

Finally, I croak out, "Yes. That's me."

The few seconds before he speaks again are the longest of my life. Everything flashes before me—a future with Georgia, a wedding, a house, a family—or an expanse of devastating emptiness. One word echoes in my head. *Please*.

Then he smiles, and the ice around my heart thaws. "Your fiancée is going to be okay."

Thank God. My legs sag, and Rylan and Zane rush over to support me. Tears press against my eyes, but I push them back. There'll be a time when I let them free, but not now. Now I need to focus on Georgia.

“Georgia has a severe concussion,” the doctor says, “which is why she was unconscious for so long. But she woke up while I was examining her, she was lucid, all her vitals look good, and there’s no sign of swelling or bleeding.”

I want to ask him questions, thank him, find out when I can see Georgia, but I’m afraid if I open my mouth right now I’ll start bawling. So I’m still clenching my jaw and swallowing hard when Cole jumps in. “Is there any sign of lasting damage? Are her reflexes okay?”

“Everything looks good.” The doctor’s gaze shifts from Cole to me. “She’s very lucky. I expect to see her make a full recovery.”

“And how long will she need to stay here?” Cole asks.

“I’d like to keep her for a couple of days as a precaution, just to keep an eye out for any swelling. But I don’t anticipate any complications. And when she goes home, she’ll need plenty of rest and a couple of weeks before getting back into regular activities.”

“When can I see her?” I blurt out, finally trusting myself to speak.

“Georgia’s being moved into a room right now,” he starts, “but usually we wait a little while to get the patient situated before allowing any visitors.”

“*Please.*” I’ll beg if I need to, fall to my knees, anything so I can see her *right now*. “I don’t know if you’re aware of what happened, but Georgia was *abducted*. She’s been through a traumatic experience. I need to be there for her, so she knows she’s safe.”

The doctor stares at me, his brows coming down in a V. After a pause, he nods his head slightly. “Okay. I agree that given what she’s been through, having you there is more important than policy. Wait a few minutes—I’ll call up and let the nurses know it’s approved, and then you can go see your fiancée.”

“Thank you.” I step forward to shake his hand, though at this point I could hug him. “*Thank you.*”

“I’m just happy that we had a good outcome.” As he releases my hand, he glances at his watch. “I have other patients to get to, but I’ll check in with Georgia later.”

Then he walks off, and the rest of my team surrounds me.

“What do you need?” Rylan asks. “Food? Clothes? Whatever you need, we’ll get it for you.”

Zane claps his hand on my shoulder. “Anything, man. We’re here for you.”

Cole’s dark eyes meet mine, full of empathy and understanding. Of everyone, he knows best the terror I was going through. “Leo.” He pauses, a muscle in his jaw working. “I’m so fucking glad she’s okay.”

Emotion thickens my throat, but anticipation to see Georgia forces my words out, anyway. “Can you guys get her stuff from her house and bring it to my place? I want her to feel comfortable when she gets home.”

Niall answers first. “I can help with her house. And I’ll go find out what room she’s in.”

“I’ll help, too,” Zane says quickly. “What about her furniture?”

“Leave it for now, I think.” My forehead pinches as I go over everything. “But make sure to get her crafting supplies. She won’t be able to use them right away, but I want them there when she’s ready.”

“And I was hoping someone could help me out here,” I continue. “I don’t want Georgia alone for a second. I’ll be with her the majority of the time, but if I need to leave...”

“I’ll do it.” Rylan lifts his chin at me.

“Me too,” Cole adds. “And when I’m not here, I’ll meet with the police to make sure they have everything they need to keep Frank in prison for a long time.”

“Thank you.” I sweep my gaze around the room, “Truly. Without you...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Cole grins at me. “Now go see Georgia.”

Georgia!

As soon as Niall gives me the room number, I’m sprinting up the stairs to her floor. My body is too alive, too electric to do something as static as waiting for the elevator. I need to see her, see with my own eyes that the woman I love is truly okay.

When I get to the doorway, I force myself to stop—as much as I want to rush in there, I don’t want to startle her. So, I take a silent moment to compose myself as I look inside the room, my heart squeezing as I finally see Georgia. My eyes burn as I watch her, a slender figure tucked under crisp, white sheets, head turned slightly toward me, her eyes closed and features relaxed as she sleeps.

After taking a few steadying breaths, I move toward her, holding my breath and noticing everything.

Like how pale she is, the only color on her skin the purplish bruises on her neck and arms. Her hair spilling across the pillow, stained red in places. The brush of long lashes against her cheeks, the delicate sweep of her nose and chin.

How small she looks under the sheets, so fragile, another reminder of how close I came to losing her. The monitor attached to her finger beeping—a reassuring reminder that her heart is still beating. A slim needle in the back of her hand, long tubing attached to a half-full IV bag, helping to ease her pain.

I thought I felt protective of Georgia before, but this is all-encompassing. My entire being aches with the need to protect her, to keep *anyone* from hurting her again. My nose prickles as I take her hand—the one without the needle in it—and press a soft kiss to her skin.

“Leo?” Georgia’s voice is soft, hesitant, like she’s not sure I’m really here. Her eyes open and bright blue stares back at me, the most beautiful color I’ve ever seen.

“Yeah, sweetheart,” my voice cracks. “I’m here.”

Her gaze is a little unfocused, no doubt because of the painkillers, and she furrows her brow as she looks up at me. “Is it—“ She presses her lips together, wincing.

Dammit. Is her medication not working? Leaning closer to her, I pitch my voice low and calm, trying to hide my worry. “Are you in pain, sweetheart? Do you need more medicine? Should I get the doctor?”

“No.” She grips my hand with a strength I wasn’t expecting. “Don’t leave.” Another pause, and she says more steadily, “Sit. Please. I want to feel you near me.”

I eyeball the narrow mattress warily—I’m not sure how I’m going to fit on there without hurting Georgia—but I manage to perch half-on-half-off the bed without falling. “I’m not going anywhere,” I reassure her, leaning over to brush a soft kiss to her lips. “You’re stuck with me.”

“Good.” Then she pauses and sucks in a small breath. “Is it—is it over?”

“Yeah, it is. He can’t hurt you again.”

She exhales, closing her eyes for a second, relief washing over her face. Then she clutches my hand, and her next words are a whisper. “I was so scared.”

God. I’ll never forgive myself. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” I tell her. “So damn sorry. I should have protected you better.”

“Leo, *no.*“ Georgia winces again and I’m about ready to hit the call button when she says something that stops me. “It’s not your fault. And I was scared that he’d hurt *you.*”

“*Georgia.*“ She doesn’t just have my heart. She has *all* of me.

“*Leo.*“ She tugs her hand out of mine and now I’m afraid I’ve screwed up everything. But then she touches my cheek and says softly, “Don’t cry. I’m okay. *I’m okay.*”

And *then.* A hurricane crashing into me, tearing down all of my barriers. The moment everything catches up to me.

“I love you so much,” I choke out, and I lower my head to her chest. Her hand cups the back of my head, and now

Georgia is soothing *me*.

“I love you, Leo.” There’s a catch in her voice before she continues, “Thank you for coming for me. For never giving up on me.”

“Never, sweetheart.” It’s a vow I’ll keep to my dying breath. “I’ll *always* come for you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GEORGIA

“Are you sure you’re okay, sweetheart? Do you want me to carry you?”

Leo is inspecting me carefully, worry etched across his features. He has one arm wrapped around my waist, holding me close to him, and I think he’s truly afraid I might fall if he lets go of me. We got out of the car over ten minutes ago and we’ve only made it halfway to Leo’s apartment—every few steps he keeps stopping to check on me.

It’s sweet and I love that he’s so concerned about me, but at this rate we may never get to his apartment. And while I can walk perfectly fine, I *am* a little tired after the drive from Rochester to Sleepy Hollow, and nothing sounds better than sinking down on the couch next to Leo.

If I let him, Leo would carry me, but I *want* to walk. It might jostle my head a little, making my persistent headache throb more, but it’s worth it. After two days laying down in the hospital—only getting up to use the bathroom—it feels good to move my legs.

“I’m alright, Leo. Really.” Leaning against him, I rest my hand on his chest, seeking the steady thrum of his heart. Keeping my voice light, I say, “We only have to make it a little further to your apartment. I think I can manage it.”

Leo huffs at me but allows us to start moving again, although he’s practically lifting me as we walk. “I just don’t

want you to overexert yourself, Georgia. You know what the doctor said.”

“As soon as we get home, I’ll rest again. I promise.”

“Good.” Leo brushes the softest of kisses across the top of my head, so light it’s just a breath rustling my hair. “And Cole will be over later to check on you.”

I stifle a laugh—because I know *that* will hurt—as I think about how over-the-top protective all the Blade and Arrow guys have been since I was injured.

Like Cole insisting on checking me every day to make sure I’m healing properly. And Rylan standing guard outside my hospital room even when Leo was inside with me. When I asked Leo why Rylan would do that, Leo simply said, “He just wants to be absolutely sure you’re protected.”

It’s not just the guys I know well, either. Zane called me—while he was moving all my stuff to Leo’s apartment, no less—to tell me he was going to teach me *real* martial arts once I’m healed. Even Niall, who isn’t even a part of Blade and Arrow, told me, “If you ever want to learn how to shoot, let me know. I can teach you how to take down a target at two hundred yards, easy.”

I’m not sure how I feel about *that*, but I appreciate the offer. And who knows, maybe I will try out the gun range Blade and Arrow has in the basement. Some day.

Lost in my thoughts, I’m not really paying attention to where we’re going until Leo slows to a stop. He unlocks his apartment door and pushes it open, turning to smile at me. His expression is a sweet combination of joy and relief. Cupping my face with infinite tenderness, he feathers a kiss across my lips. “I’m so glad you’re home, sweetheart.”

Home. There was no question about me coming back with Leo. As for staying after I’ve recovered? We didn’t exactly discuss it, not with the chaos of the hospital and police visits and my frequent naps and tests and visitors.

I know I was adamant about living on my own for a while, but after everything I’ve been through, everything *Leo* has

been through—I know I’m not the only one who suffered—it doesn’t seem quite as important to me.

But I only just got here, so there’s no rush to figure everything out right away. Right now, I’m happy to change into comfy clothes and snuggle with Leo and take a nap without any doctors or nurses disturbing me.

As I step into Leo’s apartment, the last of my stress falls away from me. Even though I knew everything was okay while I was in the hospital, that Frank was in jail and the threats against me were finally over, I couldn’t fully relax. It was like my brain understood, but my body was still on alert, anticipating danger.

But now it’s really hitting me. All the months of putting my life on hold, of the constant fear and anxiety—it’s *really* over. I’m free.

Free to be with Leo however I want. Outside. Taking trips. Visiting our families. All the everyday things like grocery shopping and restaurants and sitting down to tell each other about our days. I’m free to have a life with Leo without anything holding me back.

The sheer relief and happiness of it brings tears to my eyes.

“Georgia, what’s wrong?” Leo moves in front of me, cupping my face gently. “Do you need another pain pill?” His brows come down, eyes narrowing with worry. “I shouldn’t have let you walk all this way. I knew it was too much for you.”

Before I can protest, he’s lifting me into his arms. “Leo, no,” I start, and he *shushes* me. “You need to rest,” he says as he carefully lowers me to the couch. “I’ll call Cole to come look at you now.”

“Leo, *wait*.” I catch his hand as he’s turning to reach for a pillow, pushing myself back up so I’m sitting. “I’m okay. That’s not why—” Patting the couch cushion next to me, I say, “I teared up because I’m just so *happy*.”

He hesitates a moment before sitting down, still eyeing me with concern. “Are you sure? If you’re hurting, just tell me. I won’t freak out.”

My eyebrows jump up to my hairline. “Well,” he concedes, “not *too* much, at least.”

“I’ll tell you if my headache gets worse. I promise.” Snuggling into Leo’s side, I rest my cheek on his chest. “I think I finally realized it’s all truly over. That we can do whatever we want without hiding. And I’m just so relieved and happy about it.”

“Ah, Georgia.” His voice softens, and he strokes a finger down my cheek. “I’m so happy too.”

Leaning against Leo, in the exact place I dreamed of, my fatigue finally catches up with me. My eyelids start to droop and a yawn nearly cracks my jaw. “Leo,” I yawn again, sleep coming up on me quickly. “I think I’m tired now.”

His arm curves around me and I’ve never felt safer. “Do you want to go to bed?”

“No. I want to stay here.” I’m basically sprawled across him now, using his body as a giant pillow. “With you.”

“Okay, sweetheart.” Leo shifts so he’s laying on the couch, adjusting me so I’m draped across him. Big arms draw me into his embrace, gentle but keeping me steady. I’m not worried about hitting the back of my head or falling off the couch—I know Leo isn’t letting me go anywhere.

This. This is what I was waiting for.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers. And I let myself sleep.

* * *

I JERK AWAKE WITH A GASP, eyes flying open, my heart thumping erratically.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Leo is crouched on the floor in front of me, rubbing my arm gently. “It was just a dream, Georgia. You’re okay.”

I don't even remember what I was dreaming about. All that's left is a vague, unsettled feeling. But judging from my racing pulse and Leo's concerned gaze, it was probably another nightmare. "Was I yelling?" I ask him, hoping I wasn't. He's already worried enough about me without adding violent nightmares to the mix.

"No, sweetheart." He sits on the couch and gathers me into his arms, settling me onto his lap. "But you were whimpering and moaning."

Oh. Not great, but it could be worse.

"I only got up for fifteen minutes or so," he says apologetically. "Just to answer some calls."

"It's okay. Really." As much as I want Leo near me—need to have him close right now—I don't want him to think he has to be glued to my hip. "I don't even remember it." Glancing out the window, I notice the sun has started to drop in the sky. "How long was I asleep?"

"A few hours." His lips press to my forehead. "You needed the rest." He pauses and takes a deep breath. "With the nightmare, and everything... How are you feeling? Not physically, but with everything else. What you went through..."

"I'm..." I take a few moments to collect all the thoughts that have been spinning through my head the last two days. "It's hard to explain," I start, "But even though parts of it are hard to think about, the relief that it's all over is so great it makes everything else feel so much *less*."

"It's like," I stop again, thinking. "Like I can get through anything now. Even the bad memories. Because I made it through all of this. And I know I have you to support me through all of it."

"Always, sweetheart." Then Leo's features tighten, his mouth pulling down. "But I'm *so sorry*. You shouldn't have *had* to go through it. I should have kept you safe."

"Stop." He's been apologizing to me ever since I woke up in the hospital, and I need to put an end to it. "It is *not* your

fault, Leo. It's no one's fault but Frank's. Not mine. Not yours. I don't want you to keep saying you're sorry."

"Another thing." I squeeze his arm when he starts to talk and he clamps his mouth shut, brows rising as he looks at me. "*Thank you.* For saving me over and over again. Racing across the state for me. Risking your *life* for me."

"And you saved me in so many ways. Not just my safety, but you made me believe in myself again. You made me believe I deserved happiness. You've done so much for me, Leo. I can *never* thank you enough."

"Georgia." His voice goes soft. "You never need to thank me. I *love* you. I would do *anything* for you."

"Leo." My heart is impossibly full. "I love you so much." And I know I'm not supposed to do anything physical with him right now, but I can't resist leaning forward to give him a soft kiss, lingering a few seconds to taste him.

"Georgia," he scolds, but with a smile pulling at his lips.

"What?" My face is pure innocence.

He shakes his head and chuckles. "Troublemaker." Then a buzzing from the coffee table draws his attention, and Leo swipes his phone up to glance at it. "Cole is going to be over in an hour. Do you want to have dinner before or after?"

"After, I think. Do you think I could take a shower first?"

Leo shakes his head. "Not yet, sweetheart. Not with the wound on the back of your head, and standing in the shower in the heat—I think we should wait a little longer for that. But I could give you a bath later..."

Oh. My disappointment about the shower disappears instantly. "I'd love that."

"Okay, so dinner after Cole comes, and then a bath." He smirks at me and adds, "And no funny business, either."

"Fine." I pout at him, but I'm not really upset. A quick kiss is one thing, but I know I'm in no shape for anything more than that yet. "Maybe I can call Hayden later."

“Oh, that reminds me.” Leo lifts me off his lap and settles me back onto the couch cushions. “She called while you were sleeping. She has to work tonight, but she’s going to call tomorrow morning. And she said she misses you, and that we owe her and Boone a visit when you’re feeling up to it.”

Still talking, he heads into the kitchen and opens the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water. “Tex called, too. And Beth.” He pauses, grabbing my pain pills and tapping one into his hand. “They both wanted to make sure you were doing okay. Beth said she can’t wait to meet you when you visit Hayden.”

“That’s so nice of them.” Taking the pill and water from Leo’s outstretched hands, I wash the pill down with a little grimace. I don’t love taking pain medication, so I’m hoping to transition to Tylenol in the next day or two.

“Georgia.” There’s an odd note to Leo’s voice. He sits back down on the couch, sideways to me, lifting my legs so they’re draped over his. “I wasn’t going to bring this up yet, but now that you’re actually here—”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Don’t worry.”

“*You* sound worried,” I retort. “So, now *I* am.”

“I’m not *worried*.” His eyes meet mine, darkening to a shimmering green. “I’m a little nervous.”

I scoot along the couch to move closer to him. “About what?”

Now that we’re side by side, Leo takes my hands in his, stroking his thumbs across them. He sucks in a breath, and then his words spill out in a rush. “I know we didn’t talk about it, and I know how you felt before I left Ballston Spa, but I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Another deep breath, and he looks at me, hopeful and scared and loving. “I want you to stay here. Not just while you’re healing, but permanently. I just can’t—” His voice cracks. “I can’t be away from you. Not now. Not ever.”

“And we don’t have to live here,” he continues, still rushing, like he’s afraid I’ll say no if he doesn’t get everything out at once. “If you want to find a house, or another apartment—if you want to leave Sleepy Hollow, I’ll do that, too. Anywhere you want. I just want to be with you.”

“Leo.” Still careful of my head, I climb into his lap, smoothing the creases from his forehead. “You don’t have to convince me. I’ve been thinking about it, too. And I want to stay with you. Here, with your team, in Sleepy Hollow. There’s *no* place I’d rather be.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LEO

The first thing I do as I walk into our apartment is call out to Georgia.

Once she answers, her voice drifting down the hallway toward me, *then* I let out my breath.

I'm not sure I'll ever be one hundred percent comfortable leaving her. Even though I was just downstairs for a meeting, within running distance of Georgia, I still felt unsettled. The first time I have to go away for work, I'll be a wreck.

Fortunately, the guys have been really good about taking all the jobs and cases that require travel, allowing me to do investigative and surveillance work from here. I know I'll have to leave Georgia eventually, but I'm grateful to have had these weeks here with her, to make sure she's healing both physically *and* emotionally.

Thankfully, she's been doing even better than I anticipated. The concussion hasn't seemed to leave any serious side effects, just a bit of light sensitivity and the occasional headache—which the doctor *and* Cole said is perfectly normal and should go away in time. The nightmares have dropped off—there was only one this past week—and tomorrow we're *both* going to meet with a counselor.

But if the happy note in her voice is any indication, Georgia is heading in the right direction. I can hear her smiling as she calls out, "Leo! I'm in the office. Come see what I've done!"

I have to choke back a laugh as I walk into the office. Georgia is sitting in the middle of the floor with approximately one-thousand scarves and hats spread out around her. Scattered between them are pairs of mittens and gloves in every color of the rainbow. It's like Georgia is an island, and there's a sea of yarn all around her.

She's holding a pile of paper tags in one hand and a pen in the other, but she puts them down as soon as she sees me. As she makes her way over to me, sidestepping two hats and three scarves, she says, "That was quick. Did the meeting go okay?"

"Yes." I pull Georgia into my arms as soon as she gets close enough, lifting her across the last few piles of mittens. "Everyone said hi. Finn wants to know when we're going to do pizza night again. And Cole said Maya wants us to come over for dinner soon."

"I'd love that." She stretches up on her tiptoes to kiss me. "We should probably invite everyone here for dinner soon."

"Not yet. Maybe in a week or two, sweetheart."

"Leo." Her voice is gently scolding. "I'm not an invalid, you know."

"I know that. I just want to make sure you're ready." Maybe I *am* being a little overprotective, but I don't want Georgia trying to do too much and suffering a setback. Deciding to change the topic, I ask, "So what is all this?" and lift my chin at the array of knitted accessories.

Her tiny frown clears the way for another big smile. "I'm getting my stuff ready to sell online. First, I'm organizing everything and figuring out prices. Then I'll start taking photos, and get my Etsy store stocked, make some logos, figure out shipping..."

"That's great, sweetheart. It sounds like a lot of work."

"Kind of." She turns her head to sweep her gaze across the room. "This is just the knitted stuff. Then I have the crocheted bags, the paintings, and all my jewelry. I didn't realize I had this much stuff just stored in boxes. And I have so many ideas for new things I want to make. Felted purses, oversized knit

blankets, herringbone bracelets..." She trails off, laughing lightly. "I'll stop. I'm sure you don't want to hear about it in *that* much detail."

"Of course, I do." Pushing a few loose strands of hair off her forehead, I lean forward to press a small kiss there. "I love hearing about your plans. And I'll be honest, I didn't realize it was such a big undertaking. It sounds like a full-time job."

Georgia wrinkles her nose, looking adorably frustrated. "It could be. If I wanted to launch the store in the next few weeks. But I need to look for a real job soon. The online store will just be a part-time thing."

"Why?"

"Why *what*?"

"Why does it have to be a part-time thing? Why don't you do it full-time?"

"Because I can't make enough money just selling my crafts on Etsy," Georgia explains patiently. "I need a real job so I can help with expenses."

There are little lines between her eyes and across her brow, ones I don't want to see there. After everything she's been through, I don't want her doing anything that won't make her happy. As I smooth my thumb over the fine lines, I tell her, "It *can* be your full-time job. If it's what you'll truly enjoy doing, then you should."

"But—" Georgia pauses, her eyes big and worried. "What about the money?"

"Sweetheart, we're okay with money. I have a lot saved up from when I was in the Army. And I make a good salary at Blade and Arrow. Plus, I don't have rent, or a mortgage right now, so that helps me save even more. So we definitely have a buffer if you want to work at getting your store off the ground."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Yes, I'm sure, Georgia." I cup her cheek and hold her gaze with mine, showing her the truth of what I'm saying.

“And I’m confident that you’ll be a huge success very soon. Your stuff is amazing. All the guys want hats and scarves and Maya said she wants a bag in every color.”

“Leo...” Her eyes go soft as she stares at me. “How did I get so lucky?” Arms twining around my neck, she clings to me. “Not just about the store, or the job. Or about you protecting me. It’s *everything*.”

“Out of everyone in the world,” Georgia says, her words wobbling a little. “Of all the billions of people, I can’t believe I was lucky enough to find the one person who makes me feel complete. It’s impossible to *tell* you how much you mean to me. The feeling is too big. It’s like ... like an entire universe in my heart. My love for you is infinite.”

“*Georgia*.” It’s hard to breathe past the emotion swelling big and fast inside me.

“*Leo*.” She says my name in a throaty plea. Her clear blue eyes turn to a dark ocean blue, darkening with obvious need. She clutches at me, her nails lightly scraping the back of my neck, breasts pressing temptingly against my chest.

There’s no mistaking the look she’s giving me. Or mistaking the way her nipples are tightening into stiff little peaks, how her hips are slowly rotating against me, the flush of pink spreading across her cheeks. And I can’t ignore my arousal, heavy and throbbing already.

I’m aching for Georgia, so intense and all-consuming it feels like I might die if I don’t get inside her. But I’ve been controlling my rampaging libido this long—I can keep it up longer. Long enough to make sure she’s healed, long enough to make sure I don’t accidentally hurt her.

“We can’t,” I grit out, hating the words as I say them. As I try to carefully extricate myself from Georgia’s arms, I say, “It’s too soon, sweetheart. We need to wait.”

“*No*.” Her arms tighten around me, tone defiant. “It’s been two weeks, Leo. Longer than that, because you came back here while I was still in Ballston Spa.”

My gut twists at the reminder. I hate thinking about those days when I *should* have been with her. Keeping her from being attacked, protecting her—

“*Leo*. Look at me.” Her gaze is steady. “Stop thinking about that. We’ve talked about it already. I want to think about *us*. And all the things I’ve been fantasizing about for the last week.”

Her mouth slants over mine, nipping and tasting. Between kisses, she says, “I *need* to be close to you, *Leo*. I understand waiting before, I wasn’t up to it yet, but I’m feeling *much* better. And it’s the last thing I need to feel free. Like my life is *mine* again.”

Her gorgeous eyes are staring at me pleadingly while she rubs her body over mine like a cat in heat. “*Please*, *Leo*. We can be careful. I just want to be with you. Feel you inside me.”

Damn. How can I say no to *that*? Not to mention, feeling her body heating up against me, hearing her words, tasting her mouth—I’m rock hard and *he’s* screaming silently at me to *say yes already*.

“You let me take care of everything.” Lifting Georgia into my arms, bridal style, I tell her sternly, “We’re going to be careful. Okay?”

“Yes, *Leo*.” A satisfied smirk teases her lips. “Whatever you say.”

“I should make a recording of that,” I mutter, drawing a small giggle from Georgia. As I lay her out on the bed, she reaches for me, but I gently push her back, raising her arms above her head. “Keep them there.”

Her eyes follow me, hot and hungry, anticipation turning them an electric blue. My voice roughens, and I meet her gaze. “You’re going to stay there and let me take care of you. Don’t move unless I tell you to.”

Her cheeks turn an even deeper pink and her breathing picks up speed. Her response is a breathless whisper. “*Okay*.”

First, I peel her pants off, sliding her yoga pants over her hips and down her toned legs, taking my time, letting my

fingers trail along her skin as I go. The scrap of black lace follows, damp with Georgia's excitement. Her tank top is last, tossed aside, landing on top of the pile of clothes on the floor.

Now Georgia is spread out like an offering, arms still above her head, breasts bare and rosy tipped, her legs slightly parted and waiting for me. Her chest rises and falls quickly as she watches me, her eyes darkening even further as impatience wars with curiosity.

But I don't do anything at first, just stand at the end of the bed and take in this vision in front of me. Hair spread around her face like a halo, golden in the midmorning sun. Satin skin with the lightest dusting of freckles, curves blending with hints of muscle. And full, pink lips, parted as she waits in breathless anticipation.

"Leo..." Her voice is soft, but strained. "*Please.*"

She's not the only one desperate for this. I want to touch her all over, make love to her mouth, her breasts, the soft folds at the apex of her thighs. I want to feel her inner muscles tightening, rippling, convulsing around me, to hear her soft whimpers and cries as I send her over the edge.

And with those images in my mind, I *definitely* can't wait any longer.

Then, I brace myself over Georgia and taste all of her. First gentle, then kissing her deeply, pulling away only after my lungs are bursting. From there, I move from her neck to her breasts—nibbling and licking and sucking until her nipples are tight and swollen and she's pushing into me.

When Georgia tries to grab for me—my hair, my face, my shoulders—I gently lower her arms back to the bed and remind her, "Don't move." She lets out a little huff of frustration each time, but her eyes are telling me she loves it.

My path of kisses moves down her soft belly and lower, to the junction of her thighs. Then I pull Georgia to the edge of the bed, kneeling between her legs and draping them over my shoulders. Now she's exposed, wet, pink folds like a flower

opening. She quivers before me, giving me the ultimate gift of trust and desire and need.

And I descend, sealing my mouth to her lips, tasting her excitement. I flick at her sensitive bundle of nerves with my tongue, pressing and sucking while her hips tremble against me. I find *that* spot, the one I know will drive Georgia crazy, and suck hard. She cries out, a low, keening moan, and I can feel her muscles start to flutter around me.

Pressing my hand over her belly to keep her still, I keep going, completely caught up in Georgia's taste, her scent, the softness of her skin, the sound of her breathy moans. Then she whimpers, "*Please*, Leo, I'm so close. But I want to feel you *inside* me."

My clothes are gone in seconds, flying across the room, and then I'm on the bed, bracing myself over her. I put her legs over my shoulders again, this time positioning myself at her entrance. With one hand, I hold both of hers above her head and her fingers twine around mine, nails lightly digging in.

I'm throbbing, thickening, so sensitive and tight and aching to sink in to the hilt. But I want to be gentle, careful, so I take my time, moving in languid strokes, the drag of her inner walls a torturous pleasure.

Reaching between us, I rub at her sensitive bud while I angle her legs to sink even deeper. Georgia moans, loud and throaty, arching her back and thrusting her hips toward me. Flicking my thumb faster, I can feel her trembling around me and with one last plunge, she's exploding around me.

Then I put my hand under her hips and lift—this time I'm the deepest yet and the combination of muscles squeezing me and the drag of skin on skin and I fall—tumbling over the edge and after Georgia.

It's lightning bolts and fireworks and a current of electricity sizzling through me. Everything goes blank for a second—a white wall of pure pleasure—before I roll us both over and wrap my arms around her. We lay there gasping against each other, Georgia's breath hot on my neck, and I stroke my hand gently over the back of her head.

“Do you feel okay?” I ask softly, “Any pain?”

Georgia smiles against me. “Definitely no pain. I feel *great*.”

Skin on skin, every curve molding perfectly to mine, her soft weight and trust in my arms—the love I feel for Georgia is overwhelming. Tears burn against the back of my eyes and a sliver of pain stabs between my ribs as I think about how close I came to losing her. To losing the most precious gift I’ve ever been given.

I love her so much.

And I’ve learned that waiting for the perfect moment is pointless when you’re with the perfect person.

Which is why I’m getting out of bed even though Georgia is looking up at me with her gorgeous smile and satisfied gaze and kiss-swollen lips and I want to hold her in my arms forever. But there’s something else I need to do first.

Georgia quirks one brow and raises up on an arm to watch me. “Where are you going? Come back to bed.”

I turn around halfway to the bathroom and smile at her. “Just getting a washcloth, sweetheart. Stay there.”

Once I’m back in bed and Georgia’s back in my arms, I reach over to the nightstand and rummage around in the drawer. “What are you doing?” she starts, but her mouth snaps shut when she sees the narrow, pale blue box in my hand.

“It’s something I’ve been waiting to give you,” I say, and my pulse jumps from a steady trot to a full-out sprint. “I thought I’d wait for the perfect time. When you’re completely healed, and I could take you somewhere romantic. But then I realized something.”

Georgia’s eyes are the purest blue, love shining through like the sun in the sky. “What?”

“The perfect time doesn’t matter. As long as you’re with me, any time is perfect.”

“Oh, Leo.” Her voice wobbles.

“So it’s not *exactly* what I want to give you,” I say, placing the box in her hands. “It’s not a ring. Not yet. But if you open it, I’ll explain.”

“Okay...” One eyebrow crooks up at me, along with one corner of her lips. She pulls the lid off the box slowly, gasping when she sees what’s inside.

It’s not the diamond ring I wanted to give her. Not yet. But it’s a diamond just the same—the declaration of love, the promise, the perfect facets throwing sparkles across Georgia’s face—but it’s on a delicate chain instead of the band I intend to give her later.

“*Leo*,” she breathes, her eyes going wide.

“I know it’s not a ring.” I rush to explain. “But it will be. I’m going to propose to you. But I want to give you time to heal, to get your feet back under you. To adjust to being free again.”

“And when I propose to you, *that’s* when I want to do it right. I want to take you somewhere special, somewhere romantic, and I want to plan everything down to the song that’s playing and the scent of candles lit all around us. To create a moment you’ll remember forever.”

“But Georgia,” I cup her cheek, brushing my thumb across it. “I didn’t want to wait to tell you how I feel. To let you know that I *will* be proposing, and I want you to marry me, and there is no one else in the *universe* I’d ever want to marry.”

“Oh, *Leo*.” Georgia swallows hard and her lips are trembling.

But she doesn’t give me time to worry about her reaction, because a second later, her face bursts into a brilliant smile.

“*Yes*.” Leaning in, she kisses me, leaving no doubt to her feelings. “Yes, to your non-proposal.” She laughs, beaming at me. “You’re the only person I’ll ever want to marry. And I’ll say yes when you *do* ask me.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with doing it this way? Waiting?”

“Yes, Leo.” She snuggles into me, pressing another kiss to my cheek. “I’m okay with it. And you’re right. I’m doing a lot better, but I still have some healing to do. Some adjusting, working things through in my head. But as long as I have you beside me, supporting me, I don’t need to be engaged. Not yet.”

My throat gets tight and my nose prickles. “You’ll *always* have me.”

“And one more thing.” Georgia gives me a mischievous smile. “Don’t wait *too* long. Or I’ll end proposing to you first.”

“Trust me, I won’t.” I wink at her. “I’m already making plans.”

I take the necklace out of the box, fastening it around Georgia’s neck, admiring the sparkle of fire and ice resting against her chest.

And I imagine it on her finger, after I propose to her.

I imagine it on her hand as she holds mine, at the moment she becomes my wife.

I imagine it sparkling every day when Georgia wakes up next to me.

And I imagine Georgia holding our child, the same diamond still there, bonding us together forever.

I never expected this love, but now that I have it, I’m never letting go. Heart squeezing, I say the words that mean so much more. “I love you, Georgia.”

“I love *you*, Leo.”

Georgia cuddles into my side, soft silk against my skin. I’m contemplating whether to go for another round when a forgotten thought floats its way back through my mind. “*Oh!* I almost forgot.”

“Something *else?*“ She plays with the necklace, her lips twitching. “I thought mind-blowing sex and a semi-proposal were enough for one morning?”

“Well...” I cup her breast, stroking my thumb across her nipple. “We could try for a second round of amazing sex...”

Georgia’s gaze goes hot and her nipples tighten. “I’d be alright with that.”

And just like that, I’m hard again.

As she kisses along my neck and jaw, I let out a groan. “This first. I talked to the guys and arranged for some vacation time next month. As soon as the doctor gives you the all clear, we’re going to go visit both our families. And after we see your mom, I thought we could visit Hayden, too.”

“Leo!” Her expression brightens. “I would love that!”

“I was hoping you would. Now,” my hand drifts down her stomach, tracing small circles. “What do you think about letting me have my way with you again?”

As my finger moves lower, Georgia sucks in a quick breath. “I say *yes*.”

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

GEORGIA

“Now that your sexy boyfriend is talking to Boone, I have to ask, how was the trip to Vermont?”

Hayden glances across the patio at Leo and Boone—both of them standing at the outdoor bar and chatting. His gaze shifts to me for a second, his brows going up in an unspoken question. I give him a little smile and a nod, and he returns the gesture, then mouthing, *I love you*.

I love you, too, I mouth back, then turn back to Hayden to see her grinning widely at me.

“You guys are so cute.” She takes a sip of her margarita, finishing off the last of it. “I never would have imagined Leo being such a big softie.”

“Yeah.” My eyes are pulled back over to him again, lingering on his broad shoulders and thickly muscled arms flexing. “People are intimidated by him at first because of his size, but he’s so sweet. And gentle. And—”

“I get it,” Hayden laughs. “It looks like he’s about to come back over. I don’t think he likes being away from you for long. So quick, tell me about meeting the parents.”

“They were great.” My smile stretches, remembering. “His dad is just like Leo. Kind of quiet until you get to know him, but funny once he opens up. And he’s so protective of Leo’s

mom. Always checking on her, touching her when he passes by—it was really cute.”

“What about his mother?”

“She was great. So kind and welcoming. And she was so excited to hear all about my Etsy business. I had to stop her from ordering everything—as if I would let Leo’s mom pay for anything I make. And she kept dropping not-so-subtle hints about a wedding in Vermont.”

“Well, I’m sure she’s wondering what the plan is.” Her gaze flickers down to my necklace before rising again. “Do you have any idea when Leo’s going to ask?”

“Well,” I glance over at Leo and he’s just heading back across the patio toward me. “We both thought it was a good idea to wait until everything settled down. And now that I’ve had time to meet with a counselor, and I’m all moved into Leo’s—our—apartment, I have my store up and running...”

“You’re feeling more ready?”

“I think so.” I play with my necklace, rubbing the diamond between my fingers. “We’re going back to the Sagamore next month,” I tell her, a smile playing on my lips. “Leo said it was to enjoy the fall foliage, but—”

“You can see the leaves changing in Sleepy Hollow,” Hayden finishes. “So, maybe he has something else in mind?”

“Well, it’s where we went on our first trip together. And the first time we had a date in public, and the first time we...” I drift off as Leo approaches.

“What’s *that* look about?” Leo hands me a fresh margarita before sitting down on the loveseat and wrapping an arm around me, tugging me into his side. “Are you *blushing*?”

Hayden smirks at me, leaning back in her seat. “Just talking about first trips,” she says to Leo, “and first dates. That sort of thing.”

“Ah.” His eyes light up in understanding, turning a burnished gold in the setting sun. “First *everything*s.”

“Georgia was just telling me about your trip next month,” Hayden says, her green eyes twinkling. “I’m looking forward to hearing about it.”

Leo kisses my cheek, his lips lingering on the fading pink line I’m beginning to forget about. When I look in the mirror, it’s just another part of my face—just like my blue eyes and the brush of freckles across my nose—a sign that I’m still me but *stronger*. It’s a symbol that I survived.

“I’m looking forward to it, too.” He takes my free hand and covers it with his larger one, his thumb stroking across it gently.

Hayden smiles at us—but then her attention is drawn by Boone as he walks over to us. “Sorry to interrupt,” he says, giving us an apologetic smile, “but I think it’s about time to get the bonfire going. Some of the women have been demanding s’mores. They’re getting quite adamant about it.”

Hayden laughs and grins at him. “Well, we can’t let our guests down. I’ll be right inside to get all the s’mores ingredients together.”

“Okay.” Boone leans down and captures her face in his hands, holding her tenderly as he kisses her. As he pulls away, he murmurs something to her, turning her cheeks a deep pink.

As he walks away, Hayden stares after him for several seconds before her eyes shift back to us. Her half-smile transforms to something more serious. “I just have to say—I’m so glad you found each other.”

“Me too,” I agree, snuggling closer to Leo. “I don’t know how I got this lucky, but I’m not complaining.”

Hayden stands up, her gaze sweeping across the patio, taking in all the guests in small pockets, drinking and eating and chatting. “I have to get inside. But Gigi—you’re not lucky. You *deserve* to be this happy.”

After she walks away, Leo scoops me onto his lap and kisses me, his tongue teasing along the seam of my lips before diving deeper. I can taste a hint of salt and lime as our kiss grows even deeper. If we weren’t in public—on Hayden and

Boone's patio surrounded by all her friends—I'd be *so* ready to take this further.

Pulling away with a small, regretful sigh, Leo presses a kiss to my forehead. "Later," he says, his voice rough and needy. "When we get back to the hotel."

"*Definitely.*"

"And Georgia?" His features go still and serious. "You're not the lucky one. *I am.*"

Resting my head on his shoulder, I let my body sink into his, feeling his warmth, his strength, the beat of his incredible heart.

How did I make it here? How did Leo? All the obstacles, the near-losses, the thousands of ways we could have missed each other. But instead, I'm here with the love of my life. The man who fills me, who healed my heart and my soul and made me complete.

"I think we *are* lucky," I whisper, "to have found each other. I'm never, *ever* going to take it for granted. And I'm never letting you go."

"Good." Leo's lips press against my head, "Because I won't let you."

We sit there, entwined together, even as the other guests start heading out to the field where a bonfire is sending bright flares of red and yellow into the darkening sky. Finally, when we're the last ones left on the patio, Leo gives me a wink and a small smile. "We should probably join everyone else. Get some s'mores."

"Probably." But he's so comfortable, and there's nothing I love more than cuddling with Leo, so I don't move quite yet.

Then Leo's phone buzzes in Blade and Arrow's signature rhythm, drawing both our glances over to it. Leo sighs and reaches for it, his brow pulling down a little. "I'm not sure they understand what a vacation means."

As he quickly scans it, his eyebrows raise and his mouth curves back up. "Cole wants to know if we could meet with a

potential client while we're on our way home. She lives in Virginia, so we could take a quick detour, maybe stay over in DC for a night. It wouldn't impact our trip at all. What do you think?"

I pick up on one word I wasn't expecting. "*We?*"

"Yes, *we.*" Leo holds my gaze as he explains. "Cole thought it might be helpful to have another woman there to meet with her. Make her feel more comfortable. But if you don't want to do it, if you'd feel weird about it, that's totally fine. We don't need to stop there, either. Someone else can go."

Help another woman who's in trouble? Someone who might be feeling as hopeless and trapped as I was? Let her know that there's hope, an escape from whatever is tormenting her?

"I'd be happy to help," I say, a feeling of right-ness sweeping over me. "If I can help her, I would *love* to."

*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gia Cobie (she/her) is a Librarian in Upstate New York. In her spare time, Gia enjoys reading, writing, and spending time in the Adirondacks. She has a soft spot for cheesy reality romance shows, although she also loves romantic suspense and paranormal romance. *Saved from Obsession* is the second book in the romantic suspense series, *Blade and Arrow Security*. Gia's other works include her paranormal romance series, *Tenebris Desire*, and her upcoming urban romantic suspense series, *Sovereigns of New York*.

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