



Saving
RACHEL

MCCALLISTER MILITARY BROTHERS | BOOK TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LESLIE NORTH

MCCALLISTER MILITARY BROTHERS

Protecting Mandy

Saving Rachel

Guarding Viktoria

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BLURB

Love is the greatest treasure of all...

Marine Raider Harris McCallister has known Rachel Winchester for years. She's a quirky tattooed beauty, whose hair is a different color every time he sees her. But after a rough night of drowning his sorrows, he never expected her to show up offering comfort—and mind-blowing sex.

Rachel's doing alright for herself, running a successful bed and breakfast. And according to an old local legend, there's hidden treasure buried somewhere on her property. But when Rachel's estranged mother shows up with a treasure hunter, offering to buy her out so they can search the grounds, Rachel gives her an emphatic no.

She's convinced the so-called pirate's treasure is fake. What's not fake, though, is the positive pregnancy test. Or the way she's beginning to feel for Harris—even though she knows he's going to return to the military soon. But while Harris is on leave, he's vowed to stay close. And it's a good thing too...

Because it's becoming clear that someone wants her dead.

MAILING LIST

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(McCallister Military Brothers Book Two)

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[End of Saving Rachel](#)

[Free book offer](#)

[Thank you!](#)

[Make an Author's Day](#)

[About Leslie](#)

[Sneak Peek: Guarding Viktoria](#)

[Sneak Peek: Sean](#)

[Also by Leslie](#)

Harris McCallister slapped his empty long-neck bottle onto the scarred wooden bar. The bartender didn't notice, run off her feet. Between off-duty Marines, local civilians needing to forget their days, and the loud music shaking the walls, he'd be waiting until hell froze over before he caught her attention.

The noise came in bursts, harsh in his ears. A game of darts bubbled over into laughter and shouts. A tray fell—more laughter, and muffled groans. In the dive bar's main dining area, a young woman called for a toast. Her friends broke out giggling as she raised her glass, then they all clinked and downed their shots. Some shuddered, unused to the cheap whisky burn. The rest smacked their lips and called for more shots. Four guys in a booth, in worn fatigues, watched the party with interest, gauging their moment to swoop in on the fun.

Harris snorted. He knew this game too well. The Marines would have no problem horning in on that particular party. These women were classic tag-chasers—women who went after military men in hopes of leading them by their dog tags straight to the altar. Why else would they choose to hold their party in this crappy dive bar, if not to tempt the Marines who traveled across the bridge from Parris Island?

Marines such as Harris. He stifled a groan. God, he was twenty-nine, but he felt about fifty. He slumped down on his stool and slid his empty bottle next to its equally empty buddy. Should he have another? Hell, yeah, he should. How else was he going to get mind-numbingly drunk?

He waved at the bartender, but couldn't catch her eye. *Shocker*. Searching for the waitress who had served him his previous two beers, he spotted her tied up with a party taking up three of the five tables in the bar area. *Shit*.

His heart ached dully, a deep, distant pain, buried in layers of numbness about a mile deep. That numbness had served him well out in the shit, let him shut down his feelings and get the job done. Back in the real world, it felt strange and wrong, a thick layer of bubble wrap between him and his life. Between him and Dad's funeral, and Shawn's before that.

He hissed through his teeth. He'd come here to forget, not to dwell on the past. To close his eyes and see darkness, not that godawful flash—Shawn's stupid smirk before he'd turned, and then *boom*. A cartoon explosion, red flames, white light. A damn IED, and his teammate was gone. His best friend blown to pieces in some Colombian hellhole. Hearing about Dad's death on top of that had felt like a joke, a bad joke, a sick one, too cruel to be true. He'd got the news the same day he'd landed stateside. Taken the call right there on the tarmac, watching as Shawn's casket was wheeled off the plane.

Harris stared at the bartop, but no tears came. No lump rose to choke off the curse in his throat. Shawn was gone, Dad was gone, and that was just...that. He'd come closest to losing it when he'd realized he'd have to choose—Dad's funeral or Shawn's? But in the end, it'd been no choice at all. His brothers would need him, and family came first. He'd put in for bereavement leave, got a thirty-day pass, and made arrangements to head home to Springwell, Georgia. Tomorrow, they'd all be home, him, Chance and Lee. Back in the house where they all grew up.

He massaged his forehead. His brothers would need him to be his level-headed self, fixing the details, lending support. And he'd do that, but first, he needed tonight. One night to get drunk enough to let it all in. To feel something, feel all of it, and get it out of his system.

"Hey..." He waved for the bartender, but she didn't turn around. Scanning for his waitress, he caught a bright flash of pink, and he swiveled toward it, jerking upright on his stool.

Rachel. Was that Rachel Winchester strolling toward him? His pulse picked up, because yes. Yes, it was—five-foot-two inches of pure, sparkling *sexy*. Her denim-clad hips swayed in a provocative rhythm. Her pale-yellow tank top showed off perfect breasts. Colorful tattoos splashed over her bared skin—birds and flowers, fairies, bright butterflies. Her hair was purple tonight, a cool, muted shade. He'd seen it blue, pink, and orange, and even pale yellow, a silky-smooth rainbow to match all her moods.

Between her gorgeous ink, her revolving hair colors, and her dainty physique, she reminded him of a fairy—a naughty fairy he couldn't resist. Oh, the dirty things he'd imagined doing to her! The wild ways he'd pictured her! She'd been his go-to fantasy for years, whenever he'd had to take care of his own needs. Ever since he'd joined his Raiders unit and got stationed at Parris Island. But it'd been a while since he'd seen her, not since—

“Rachel!” He beckoned her closer, not stopping to think.

Rachel sashayed over and leaned on the bar. “By the look in your eye,” she said, “a girl would think you missed her.” Her voice was throaty, and Harris's neck pricked with gooseflesh at the sound of it. He propped his elbow on the edge of the bar.

“By the way you disappeared, a guy would think you didn't care about him at all.”

“I didn't disappear,” she said. “I just quit bartending here. I've got my own place now, a B&B. Nobody told you?”

“Guess they forgot.”

Rachel's pretty mouth puckered into a frown. She ran her fingers through her purple-dyed hair. The twinkle in her eyes dimmed as she studied his face. “Something's wrong. What is it?”

Harris sighed and slumped against the bar. No easy retort sprang to his lips. He didn't have it in him to keep up the act.

“That bad?” Rachel leaned in, and Harris felt warm. She laid her hand on his forearm and gave him a squeeze. A shiver stole through him. He felt exposed, raw, all his layers of

numbness peeled back at once. For the first time in weeks, he felt his face go hot, and he blinked back the sting of sharp, salty tears. Christ, really? Now? Yes, he'd planned to cut loose a little on this final night to himself, but the last thing he needed was to break down here in this dive bar. He especially didn't want to lose it in front of Rachel.

"Harris?" Rachel's whisper was gentle, her breath soft against his cheek. Another tremor rocked through him, for a completely different reason—a *good* tremor, this time, ripe with excitement. How messed up was that? Getting turned on with his damn eyes still leaking?

"Talk to me," said Rachel, moving closer so her hip brushed his thigh.

Harris clenched his fists, torn. Did he dare share his grief with his fantasy woman, or would that ruin the flirtation they had going and slam the door on the possibility of anything more? He studied her lovely, concerned blue eyes. The warmth he saw there felt real and sincere.

Fuck it. Why not? He needed a friend and she fit the bill. "I lost my best friend on our last mission," he managed to croak past the lump in his throat. "And I just found out my dad passed away."

Her grip tightened on his arm. "Oh, Harris," she breathed. "I'm so sorry."

His eyes traced her plump, red-lined lips, and he suddenly had no interest in sharing his pain. All he could think about was how those lips would taste. Sweet with lip gloss? Tart from beer? He'd just have to lean forward, close his eyes, and—

"Do you trust me?"

Her question froze him in place. "What?" he asked, dazed with lust and grief.

She ran her thumb down his cheek. "I want to get you out of here. Do you trust me?"

He had about two brain cells online to process her words, but that was enough to tell him whatever she was offering would

be a hell of a lot better than what he'd find at the bottom of a bottle.

"I trust you," he said. "Let's get out of here."



Harris climbed the stairs behind Rachel, torn between staring at her amazing ass and admiring the rest of the old plantation-style house she'd fixed up for her bed-and-breakfast.

"How long have you been open?"

Rachel peered over her shoulder. "About a year now." She turned back. "I don't have any lodgers tonight, so we have the place to ourselves."

"The place" looked enormous, from what Harris could see, five bedrooms at least, between upstairs and down, plus acres of land stretching down to the beach. "How'd you afford all this? Not to be rude..."

"Got lucky," said Rachel. She turned left at the top of the stairs, and opened a closed door at the end of the hall. Harris blinked at the homey apartment inside, small but not cramped, all bright and cozy. Two doors opened onto cute little bedrooms, and a pink-festooned bathroom sat to one side.

"I inherited it," said Rachel, and let the door close behind her. "Well, me and my mom, but she has nothing to do with the B&B. I sank my own money into it and applied for all the licenses myself."

Harris grinned. "You're amazing."

"Oh, you don't know the half of it." She pushed him against the door and wound a hand around the back of his neck, and Harris needed no further prompting. Grabbing her hips, he yanked her flush to his chest, dipping his head to press his lips to hers. She moaned and he shuddered. Her taste was exquisite, better than anything he'd envisioned. Needing more, he tilted his head, darting his tongue out to dance with her own.

Rachel responded with passion and fire. She pressed up against him, hooked her leg around his waist. Ran her nails down his scalp to wring a gasp from his throat. Her stomach grazed over the bulge of his dick, straining against his fatigues as she rose on tiptoe. She captured his groan and offered one of her own, and her hand found its way up the back of his shirt, her palm soft and warm, her touch light as silk.

Harris scooped her up and carried her to the couch. The second her back hit the cushions, she broke their kiss. She lapped at his throat and nibbled his ear while her clever fingers found his belt buckle. He went for her tank top and yanked it up, exposing the lacy black cups of her bra. Her nipples peeked through them, hard and rose-pink, and he leaned in to tease them with his tongue.

Rachel arched, her hand stilling where it was stuffed halfway down his pants. “Yes,” she breathed.

Harris jerked her bra down and her breasts bounced free. He worshiped her nipples as he got to work on her jeans.

Crying out, she arched even higher, then gripped him through his boxer briefs. His dick jumped and throbbed, and a ripple of ecstasy ran through him, flooding his balls to the point he worried he’d come in her hand like a teenager. Christ, it had been too long since he’d had sex. Months, a year even. Forever and a day. And now he finally had Rachel underneath him. His fantasy fairy, except she was real.

He was not fucking this up.

Twisting out of her grasp, he planted his foot on the floor and grabbed her jeans by the legs. She lifted her hips, helping him jerk them down. In that magical way women had, she had her bra flying in the air before he’d shed his boots.

All the breath left his lungs at the sight of her naked. “Christ, you’re beautiful.” He drank in every inch of her creamy flesh. Tattoos chased over her body, up her back, down her legs. He couldn’t wait to lick them, to taste her all over.

“What are you waiting for?” She sat up and tugged on his T-shirt. Harris took the hint and pulled it over his head. Rachel

swallowed hard, and her blue eyes darkened. They tracked over his skin as he dropped the last of his clothes on the pile.

Before he could stop her—not that he would have—she lunged forward and took his cock back into her hand. She kissed the head sweetly, then bathed it with her tongue, lapping at his slit to taste his precum. He sucked in air between his teeth and dropped his head back. Her tongue caressed him from root to tip. Her purple hair swung loose and tickled his thighs, and Harris soaked in the glorious sight.

Better than I dreamed of. Better than anything.

His cock pulsed and he reached for her. “I’m not going to last if you keep that up.” He *needed* to be inside her, right now, this minute.

Rachel reached into her nightstand and grabbed a condom. She ripped the foil open with her teeth. Harris took the rubber from her, needing to roll it on himself. If she touched him, he’d come, and he wasn’t ready yet.

“Pick your position,” he managed, through gritted teeth. Until he took the edge off, he wouldn’t have much control over himself. Offering her the choice was the best he could do until round two. Then he could take his time exploring her, every luscious inch.

Her feet hit the floor and she skipped to the couch. He almost came in his hand when she bent over the armrest, half-turning to wink at him over her shoulder. Her perfect round ass bobbed in the air, begging for him to dive in for a bite.

“You’re a fantasy,” he said. He lined his cock up with her pink slit and felt her folds twitch with lust. Mustering the last of his tattered restraint, he eased himself into her welcoming heat.

“Don’t be gentle,” she breathed, rising up, eager, to the balls of her feet. “Take me like you mean it.”

“Fuck.” He clamped onto her hips and drove in hard, not stopping until she took every inch.

She cried out and quivered, slapping her hands onto the cushions and pushing back against him to get more and more.

Ecstasy blazed through him, erasing every thought but one: walking away from Rachel Winchester after tonight would not be easy.

He pounded into her, and she met his every thrust. Throw pillows hit the floor and the couch bumped out of place, scraping across the floor with every fresh thrust. Harris didn't slow down, and neither did Rachel. Her cries mingled with his grunts, and he increased his pace. His orgasm barreled over him just as Rachel's claimed her, and he came so hard, it felt like he blew the condom apart. His vision went black, and he slumped over her, holding her close till his head cleared and he thought he could stand. Then he helped her to her feet as she turned in his arms.

"Tonight," she whispered, between hungry kisses, "I want to help you forget. You take what you need, as much as you want."

He strode to the trashcan in the tiny bathroom and dropped the spent condom inside. Yes, this was what he needed before he made his way home. Just this. Just Rachel, all night.

Strolling toward her, he surveyed her like a buffet. He couldn't decide which course he wanted to feast on first. "I hope you have more condoms."

Rachel winked up at him. "A brand-new box."

Rachel Winchester paced her tiny, pink bathroom, gnawing on the end of her thumb. The digital pregnancy test sat perched on the toilet tank, its little swirling symbol spinning round and round. Why had she splurged on the digital test? Oh yeah, because the box promised the comfort of an unmistakable “yes” or “no” answer, but, *damn*, that little swirl was driving her crazy. Around and around, twirl, twirl—

Gah! She should have bought the kind with the little blue lines. She’d still be plenty anxious, with her *entire future* on the line, but at least she wouldn’t be dizzy from all the damn spinning.

“I can’t watch this.” Rachel stomped out of the bathroom. The knot in her stomach threatened to tie itself even tighter, and little black dots crowded her vision. She took a deep breath and let it out through her teeth. Cleaning the rooms vacated by the two couples who’d checked out this morning could be just the distraction she needed. Three minutes of busywork, and then she’d know.

She marched across her apartment and stepped into the hallway, just as the doorbell chimed.

“Hello?” Rachel called as she jogged down the stairs and found her mother inside already, her scrawny boyfriend dogging her heels.

“Rachel,” Tammy Winchester said, drawing herself up. She stood the same height as Rachel, at five foot two. But where Rachel loved to color her long black hair whatever shade

struck her at the moment (currently a vivid blue since the purple had faded), Tammy chose to keep hers uncolored and cut to fall at her shoulders. “Darryl has a proposal for you.”

Rachel glanced at Darryl and saw him smiling unpleasantly. Damn it. The last thing she needed right now was a fight. Darryl’s brown eyes stayed cold, full of dark, grubby greed. “I think you’ll like what I have to say.”

“I doubt that.” Rachel rubbed her stomach to ease its churning. The last time her mother had brought Darryl to the house, the two of them had tried to convince her to let them dig up the yard, searching for pirate treasure down by the beach. Rachel had refused, of course. Just like she would now.

“Listen,” she said, “if this is about the treasure, you know it’s not real. The Golden Age of Piracy was three hundred years ago. If there’d been treasure, don’t you think someone would’ve found it by now?” She wasn’t going to let them tear up the grounds she worked her ass off on all to chase some pipe dream.

“At least let us try.” Deep grooves scored her mother’s face as her lips quirked down. “This is my place too, you know. We inherited this property together. The least you could do is let us dig.”

“And disrupt my business? Wreck my lawn? Are you going to resod it when you’re done with your search?” She sagged where she stood, wanting this over. Wanting this done with, so she could crawl back into bed. “Tell you what,” she said. “There’s a metal detector in the garage. You can take that and ___”

“What if the treasure is pearls or diamonds? Those aren’t metal.” Tammy jabbed her finger at Rachel. “I have rights to this place, as much as you do. We have the *right* to dig.”

Rachel groaned. “I’ll say it again, since you didn’t listen the last ten times I told you.” She drew a deep breath to steady her anger. “The attorney I consulted the *first* time you tried this stated that no court of law would let you harm a profitable business to dig for some mythical treasure. Not without evidence it actually exists.”

Tammy's hand dropped and Darryl's eyes narrowed. Rachel couldn't help twisting the knife.

"In case you need it broken down further, that means no digging on this land as long as Winchester Manor Inn is open for business."

"And what if it wasn't?" Darryl pounced like a panther, yellow teeth bared. "What if I'm offering to buy you out?"

Rachel barked out a semi-hysterical laugh. "How? That's absurd."

"Rachel!" Tammy stamped her foot. "I've told you, don't take that tone with Darryl."

"I can take whatever tone I want." Rachel straightened to her full height, but she couldn't hide her exhaustion. "I'm not selling," she said, her voice as firm as she could make it. "I've worked hard to restore this house and turn it into a reputable, profitable business. A business I *love*, and I won't give it up."

"I'm offering cash," said Darryl.

"I don't want your cash," Rachel shot back.

"You sure about that?" Darryl's brown eyes darted down to the tops of Rachel's breasts, lingering on the chrysanthemums tattooed across them. "Wouldn't you rather start over someplace else? Someplace folks won't judge you on just your last name?"

Rachel flinched at that, because Darryl was right. Folks around here looked at her and saw trash—her mother's daughter, dyed in the wool. Still, she'd made strides—her business, for one.

"You could have that," said Darryl. "A nice, fresh start. In Atlanta or Charleston, you might even find people who don't mind all that ink and your punk hair. But here? People look at you and see trash." He stepped forward, and it took everything Rachel had not to jerk backward. "Face it, little girl. The Winchesters aren't on the mayor's Christmas card list for a reason."

"Darryl!" Tammy gripped his bicep, nails digging in. Apparently, even she had her limits.

Rachel smiled at the pair of them as best she could, pretending their words hadn't hit her like punches to the stomach.

"I'm not like you," she said. "I'm not like either of you, and I'm not like Dad. I've never been fired, and I don't drink. I don't mooch around town making nothing but trouble." She scowled at her mother, and her anger flared bright. "I've got tattoos—so what? It wasn't my tattoos nearly lost us our trailer. That was *you*, Mom, blowing the payments on booze. I'm living down *your* sins, not—"

"Rachel!" Mom slapped at her, but Rachel wasn't done.

"I can build my own name here. Build my own life. And you can go dig for treasure somewhere else. This is *my* property, and I won't let you interfere with it."

Darryl's hands clenched into fists. "It's only your property as long as this business stays open. Bed-and-breakfasts fail all the time." He took another step closer. "Your Tiktok won't save this place once the novelty wears off. Those things, social media, are just a fad. *You're* just a fad—white trash dumb enough to think you've actually made good. It'll all fall apart, you just wait and see. One day, you'll be begging me to take this place off your hands."

"Get out." Rachel pointed at the door.

Tammy glowered at her. "You can't kick us out."

"I think I just did." Rachel crossed her arms over her chest to hide the tremors in her hands. "You have thirty seconds to leave quietly, or I'll call the police."

Tammy stared for a long time, upper lip curled. Then she tossed her hair back and spun on her heel. "This conversation isn't over," she said, and flounced to the front door. "I didn't inherit half this property just to be told I have no rights to it."

Rachel slammed the door shut, then bent and clasped her thighs. Exhaling loudly, she let her muscles go loose. She shook all over—great, wracking shivers. A sob made her jerk, and she nearly fell over. Swiping her blue hair out of her eyes, she glanced at the clock on the credenza where she kept her guestbook. Nine thirty-five. It'd been fifteen minutes—well

past the three the pregnancy test required. She swallowed. *Oh, God.* Could she handle this, after that wretched showdown? Whether she could or not didn't matter. She had to know if her missed period was due to stress or....

She trudged up the steps, her flip-flops like cement weights strapped to her feet. Sweat slicked her palms, and she couldn't get enough air.

Right. Here goes nothing.

She strode into the bathroom and snatched the test off the tank, and—

“Oh God,” she wheezed. The test slipped through her fingers as she dropped to the floor. “No...no. I can't be.”

Only, she was.

Bile rose up her throat and she lunged for the toilet. She coughed up the toast she'd had for breakfast and kept on heaving until she had nothing left. Finally, spent, she slumped against the bathtub.

That cold “Yes” glared up at her from beside the trash can, a digital accusation, impossible to refute.

“Why?” she asked the ceiling. Her whole life she'd fought her family's trashy reputation. Now she'd be a single mother after a one-night stand. She'd tried to rise above, but she was a Winchester after all, just like her parents and their parents before them.

Climbing to her feet, she squirted toothpaste on her toothbrush. She cleaned out her stale mouth and spat in the sink, and jerked upright.

Was that the front door? The bell chimed again. *Son of a bitch.* If that was Mom and Darryl, back to harass her some more—

She barreled out of the bathroom and straight down the stairs, only to stop two steps from the bottom. “Harris?”

He stood framed in the doorway, six feet of masculine perfection. He seemed to fill up the foyer with his well-muscled bulk, the aura of confidence that came off him in waves. His reddish-brown hair was still shorn close to his

head, but the scruff on his face looked like it hadn't been shaved for a few days.

Rachel stood a moment, taking him in—his olive-green T-shirt and camouflage pants. His big, heavy boots, scuffed at the toes. He lifted his head, and their eyes met. He blinked at her, as if surprised to see her.

“Rachel.” His smooth tenor caressed her ears, and she hated how much she had missed it. “I...” He clasped his hands together, then shifted his feet. His eyes searched her face, then narrowed. “You’re trembling. What’s wrong?”

“You’re trembling. What’s wrong?”

He’d barely got the words out before Rachel was talking, rattling on like she hadn’t heard him at all. “Harris! You’re back. I wasn’t expecting, uh... How was the funeral?” Her strained smile vanished, and she did a facepalm. “*God*, I’m so stupid. It was a *funeral*. What—”

“It was a lot,” said Harris, and that was the truth. The last month had been a whirlwind, almost too much to take. Which was why—

“You should come in,” said Rachel, but she didn’t step aside. Harris shut the door and leaned up against it.

“You look—”

“Your brothers—”

They both chuckled, awkward. Harris waved her on.

“Sorry. Go ahead?”

“I was just going to ask, how are your brothers?” She cocked her head to one side. “It’d been a while, hadn’t it? Since you all got together?”

Harris nodded. “Uh-huh.” Rachel was shivering, hugging herself. He wanted to swoop in and cradle her to his chest, rock her and soothe her till her fears drained away. But maybe she wouldn’t want that. Was she scared of *him*? He’d probably startled her, barging in like he had.

“Chance is good,” he said. “Got a new job. A new woman, too, or make that an old one. I mean, not an old lady. His high school sweetheart.”

Rachel laughed, shaky. “And your kid brother? Lee?”

Harris smiled. “The two of us actually ended up taking Dad’s car, heading to Vegas. A road trip, you know? We’d probably still be there, but he got a job offer. He flew out to California, and—hey. *Hey*. Rachel!”

He surged forward to catch her as she swayed on her feet. She crumpled in his arms, and he pulled her against him. Rachel clung to his shirt and made herself small, ducking her head to hide her face in his chest.

“Sweetheart,” he crooned, adjusting his hold so he didn’t hurt her. She felt fragile as a sparrow, all trembling limbs. Harris tilted her face up. “Tell me what happened.”

“My mom—it’s been...” She shuddered. “I need to sit down.”

“Okay,” said Harris. He could’ve stepped back, let her lead him inside. But he could feel her heart racing, so he gathered her up instead, carrying her in his arms to a big room decorated with flowers. The couch looked comfy, so he set her down there, by the window with the sun in her hair. Her hair was blue now, a bright peacock shade, and she’d painted her fingernails and toenails to match. She wasn’t wearing much, just shorts and a tank top, and the morning sun dappled her brightly-inked arms. *A fairy*, he thought, and pushed the thought aside. That way lay fantasy, and Rachel was real, and really in need of his comfort. His help.

“What happened?” he asked again.

Rachel buried her face in the side of his neck. Harris stroked her hair, worry tightening his throat. He’d never seen her this vulnerable—or vulnerable at all. Now she curled into him like he held the key to her survival. He pressed his palm to her back and held her tight.

“Rachel? Hey, talk to me.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slow, a warm gust against Harris’s chest. “It’s been, uh...it’s been a confusing day.”

“Confusing?” He tried to peer down at her but couldn’t see anything with her face still hidden. This reaction seemed over the top for *confusing*. “How so?”

A long shudder rippled through her. Her hand burrowed into the short hairs at the back of his head. Her touch felt good, soothing, but Harris ignored that, especially when Rachel raised her head at last. Her blue eyes were wounded, swimming with tears.

“If I tell you, you’ll never look at me the same way again.”

“Hey.” He jostled her gently and offered a smile. “I think you’re amazing. Nothing’s going to change that.”

A grimace flitted across her face. “Nothing, huh? You’re not from around here. You don’t know about my family, our reputation.”

“Your reputation?” He almost laughed. “You think us McCallisters are part of some country club set?”

A small smile tweaked the corner of her mouth.

“We weren’t exactly high class. Honestly, it was all we could do to make ends meet. It didn’t help that my dad drank,” he continued, hoping to draw her out by sharing first. “Especially after Mom died—cancer, y’know.” Harris frowned. His heart still hurt, remembering Mom. “He tried—Dad, I mean—but Mom’s medical bills tapped him out. He had to work two jobs just to keep us fed, and I guess all the stress...it had to come out somehow. So he’d drink. It got pretty bad.”

Rachel nodded. “Mom, too. Dad died, and she’d drink. But she’d barely hold one job, let alone two.” She found Harris’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “That must’ve been rough on you guys, growing up.”

Harris let out a snorting sound, not quite a laugh. “You could say that,” he said. “Dad and Chance, they’d fight. Lee’d just go quiet. I was the peacemaker, stuck in the middle.” He sighed. “I thought I’d be the one with him—with Dad—at the end when his liver finally gave out. But Chance was the only one who made it in time.”

“I’m sorry.” Rachel stroked his arm, slow and careful.

“So.” He shot her a wry smile. “We’ve established that your family’s no worse than mine. Tell me what happened and why you’re bringing them up.”

“Mom came by to see me, with her new boyfriend, Darryl. He’s obsessed with this property. You see, there’s this legend...” Rachel started to fidget, drawing patterns with her fingertip on Harris’s pec and shoulder. “Involving my land.”

“Okay.” He shifted to keep his leg from falling asleep. “You’ve got me intrigued.”

“You’ll laugh, but rumor has it that three hundred years ago, a pirate buried his treasure somewhere on this property.” Her eyes twinkled.

“Seriously? Pirate booty?” Harris sat up straighter. He couldn’t help the grin that spread over his face. How cool would it be to dig up actual buried treasure?

“I see what you’re thinking.” Her finger pressed against the crease between his eyebrows. “And you can quit it right now.”

“Can’t help it,” Harris said, his grin growing wider. “Just thinking about a big ol’ treasure chest brings out the kid in me. Hey, you got a shovel?”

Rachel elbowed him, none too gently. “Well, it’s a myth. I’ve researched it to death and found nothing but vague stories—no names, no dates, nothing solid to go on. But Mom believes in the treasure, and she wants it badly. Wants to dig up my yard, and—”

“Well, it’s your yard, right? Can’t you just tell her no?”

Rachel sighed. “I can and I have, but she won’t stop nagging. The thing is, technically, we’re equal owners.”

Harris frowned. “How’d that happen?”

Rachel explained, with mounting frustration, how up till a year ago, she’d lived with her mom, cramped up together in a rundown single-wide. Then the lawyers had showed up with the answer to both their prayers: this house, an inheritance from some distant third cousin.

“You should’ve seen the place.” Rachel shook her head. “No one had lived here for, God, thirty years. It was full of dry rot, rats and mice, the whole deal. Mom wanted to sell it, get the cash for the land, but I took one look, and I saw, well, all this.” She gestured around her, at the warm, sunlit room. “I told Mom I’d do it, all the work, all by myself. I’d take out a mortgage to cover the repairs. She said okay, on two conditions: one, she’d get a percentage of the B&B’s earnings. Which, fair enough. She’s entitled to that. Two, if the business fails, I’ll agree to sell the property and we’ll split the proceeds, fifty-fifty.” Rachel went stiff in his arms. “She was fine cashing the checks and staying out of my way until Darryl convinced her the treasure was real. Now she thinks we’re sitting on bags of easy money.”

“Darryl.” Harris felt his good mood draining away. “Where’d he come from?”

“Some treasure hunting forum. They met online.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “He touts himself as a treasure hunter, but he’s just a bum. I’m sick of him. Sick of having to chase him off my damn land. Now he thinks he’s going to buy me out. I told him no, and he got pretty nasty.”

Harris felt himself bristle. “Nasty how? Did he hurt you?”

“Just my feelings.” Rachel looked away. “Called me white trash. Not that I care what he thinks of me, but it still stings after hearing that all my life. It’s hard not to believe it, when...”

“Uh-uh. No way.” Harris took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. “Let me make one thing clear: you’re amazing. You’re priceless. Look in my eyes now and tell me you’re not trash.”

“I-I’m...” Rachel drooped where she sat. The light fled her eyes, and she bit her lip. The next thing Harris knew, she was up on her feet. A clamor of warning bells was clanging in his head as he reached out to her, but she pushed him away.

“Harris. I—Something else happened today.” She visibly swallowed and the color drained from her face. “I’m...I’m pregnant and the baby is yours.”

White noise filled his ears and his vision shorted out. Had she just said—*what?* Pregnant? A baby?

“Hey! Hey, ease up.” Rachel squirmed in his grasp, and he relaxed his grip. When had he grabbed her? How long had he checked out?

Rachel paced up and down. “You don’t believe me?”

He couldn’t think straight enough to believe or not believe her. He was still stuck on *pregnant*, and *baby*, and *yours*.

Rachel stepped over to the window and stood looking out. “I only found out right before you showed up. I’m still processing, too, but the baby is definitely yours. I haven’t been with anyone *but* you in the last year.” She tossed the words at him like a grenade. Harris held up his hands, as though to ward them off. He needed a moment to get his head to quit reeling.

“It’s yours,” she said again, quieter this time. “But you don’t have to worry about it, if you don’t want to. I don’t expect you to upend your life for a baby you never expected.”

Harris opened his mouth, but Rachel kept talking, the words spilling out almost too fast to catch.

“We barely know each other. We aren’t together. And I know your career is important to you. You—”

“Wait.”

Rachel didn’t wait. She’d started pacing, flipflops snapping her heels. “I know your unit spends a lot of time off base and that you have to go wherever you’re deployed.” Pace, pace. “I don’t have any expectations and I’m fine doing this on my own. If the most you can offer is visits when you’re in town, then that’s not a problem.”

“A problem?” Harris gaped at her, but Rachel wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“I’m willing to raise the baby by myself. You don’t need to worry. We’ll be okay.”

Harris blinked. Lee had said the same thing—*I’m okay. I’m fine*. He’d said it over and over in just the same way, angry,

defiant, a challenge to the world. He'd said it, but what Harris's little brother meant was *this sucks*. But Lee's anger was aimed at the injury that disqualified him from staying in the military. Rachel was angry at...what *was* Rachel angry at?

"Are you mad at me?" he said. "Or at the situation?"

Rachel stopped pacing. "Mad? I'm not mad."

"Then why are you yelling?" Harris conjured a smile. The shock of hearing "I'm pregnant" had finally worn off. "Listen, my brother—my kid brother, Lee. He went through something too. He's still going through it. Took some shrapnel to his eye, and he's out of the Rangers. His whole life in the Army, finished like that." Harris snapped his fingers. "At first, he couldn't see anything past what he'd lost. But I think, now—"

"I'm not mad," said Rachel. "I'm just saying, I don't need anything from you."

Lee had said that, too—*I don't need you. I don't need your pity, so back off. Back off!* Was that what she was saying? She didn't need *him*? Harris's jaw tightened. "Are you pushing me out the door?"

Her pacing ground to a halt and her head shot up. "What?"

Hurt laced with anger curled in his gut. "I don't want to assume anything," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Maybe you're trying to reassure me, but that's not what I'm hearing. What I'm hearing is, you don't want me in your life. You don't want me involved in raising our child."

Her blue eyes widened, and she blinked.

"Is that what you're saying?" he asked.

"Of course I'm not saying that." Rachel snapped her mouth shut and cringed. "I see how you heard that, but that's not what I'm saying. I'm not even saying I don't want your help. I just don't want you to think I did this on purpose. I'm not trying to trap you into marriage, or even fatherhood."

Harris's head still felt foggy, but he loosened his tense muscles, took a deep breath and pushed through his shock, down through that numbness to the feelings underneath. He

edged toward Rachel, giving her plenty of time to stop him if she didn't want him near her. "Look, we've got time to figure this out." He swiped a lock of blue hair over her shoulder. A bright pink chrysanthemum decorated across her shoulder, a tiny, plump bee perched at its center. Harris touched the tattoo and found himself smiling, a warm spark of fondness lighting in his chest.

"We've got time," he said again. "My CO's deactivated me temporarily because, well, they do that sometimes. Watch your best friend get blown up, and the brass gets worried about where your head is. I'm off active duty till I pass a mental health evaluation." He cleared his throat. "That's why I showed up here out of the blue. I got the news just this morning, and it hit me pretty hard. I thought...I don't know. I just wanted to see you."

"I'm sorry," said Rachel. "You don't need this on top of everything else."

"Hey." He grasped her shoulders, trying not to focus on the smooth skin beneath his palms. "You didn't need to find out you're pregnant while you have your mom and some treasure hunter sniffing around your place." He cupped her cheek. "Way I see it, this baby makes us a team. It's a two-man mission, a mom and a dad. So, how about some team-building? We'll spend time together. I'll help set up the nursery, make sure everything's in place. We'll get to know each other, if that's okay with you?"

A hesitant smile parted Rachel's lips. The light that had vanished from her eyes sparked up anew. "I'd like that," she said.

Harris grinned. "We're going to be parents." *Parents*. Holy shit. Had he really just uttered those words? "I think the least we can do is learn to work together."

"Work together. You're right." She slid her slim fingers around his wrist. "Want to come by tomorrow morning? We can get started then."

"Absolutely." Harris pulled his car keys from his front pocket. "Be prepared for me to spend the whole day."

Rachel hugged him—a good hug—and he got in his car, but he didn't remember driving back to the base.

I'm going to be a father kept circling in his head.

Rachel lifted her head off the toilet and groaned. Her arm felt heavy, like it had an anvil attached, but somehow, she managed to depress the flush lever.

“I don’t even remember eating peas,” she croaked, grabbing the sink to pull herself up. For the second time that morning, she brushed her teeth. Studying her reflection in the mirror, she scowled at the sight—cracked lips, wild hair, pasty white skin tinged slightly green. Her puffy black eyebags were the cherry on top. Should she bother with makeup? Would it even help? A coat of foundation might give her some color, but she’d probably end up sweating it off through her next barf attack. Morning sickness was an all-day activity, not just for mornings—at least, if yesterday was any indication.

Last night had been the longest of her life. Between long crying jags, panic attacks, and bleary Google searches—*how to raise a child; how much is a crib; no, seriously, HOW much?*—she’d only managed to get a few hours of sleep.

Yanking her makeup bag from under the sink, she brushed some rouge on her cheeks and added a few swipes of waterproof mascara. “That’ll have to suffice.”

Maybe she should look into having her makeup tattooed on. Would she have time to fix her face once the kid came along? *Her* mother did, but she wasn’t much of a mom. Wait, would she turn into her? Become her own mom?

Panic churned her guts and she swayed on her feet. Motherhood. Oh, holy God. How in the hell did she end up

pregnant? Harris had used a condom every single time. She'd bought a new box not long before that night. She'd bought it for *him*, if she was honest, the same day she'd heard his unit was home. It had been stupidly, wildly optimistic on her part because they'd never done anything in the past but flirt, and yet she hadn't been able to resist. She'd bought it because, Jesus, those warm brown eyes. Those hard, corded muscles. That short-cropped red hair. She'd wanted him since she'd met him. Since he'd first caught her eye.

The condoms. She'd ripped into the wrappers with her teeth. Had she torn one, somehow? Was that what had done it?

Does it matter?

She sighed. Not really. What was done, was done. Buttoning her denim shorts, she settled her rainbow-colored tank top over the waistband and pulled back her blue hair into a ponytail. Mid-August in South Carolina came with a heaping side order of humidity on top of the heat. Once she had her cross-trainers on, she hustled down the stairs to start a pot of coffee. A quick Google search showed she was allowed a little caffeine a day, and she thanked God for it. If she had to give up coffee completely, she wouldn't survive the pregnancy.

She wasn't sure what time Harris planned to arrive, but she needed a cup—or ten, if she ignored the warnings—before they tackled how they wanted to set up the nursery. They'd need a crib, paint, what else? What else? Panic lanced through her, and she clutched the carafe tighter. What if she bought the wrong stuff? Or forgot something important?

Stop. Breathe. Focus. She filled the coffeepot with water and forced herself to think about something else. She needed to find time today to set up for the bachelorette party coming in this evening. They'd rented the veranda overlooking the ocean, and the entertainment room, to kick off the festivities. Rachel had promised decorations, trays of snacks, and games to add spice to their cocktail-palooza. If they got drunk enough, they might end up renting rooms for the night. That would be good, money in the bank. Lord knew she needed to hoard every penny now.

A car door slammed, and a jolt of excitement raced through her. Harris? She hoped so. As stupid as it was to get her hopes up, she couldn't help feeling giddy at how well Harris had taken her news. Not once had he shamed her or made her feel bad. He hadn't grilled her on past partners, nor had he implied she'd set out to trap him. He'd made her feel precious, the way he'd reached out and touched her, tucking her loose hair behind her ear. Like she was a treasure, instead of trash.

He'd been poleaxed for sure, but she didn't blame him. She'd thrown up when she'd seen the test. Of course, that might've had something to do with *everything* making her sick, and not so much the news itself.

At the sound of the front door opening, she shoved the coffeepot back into its place and hit the button to start it brewing.

"Coming," she yelled as she hurried to meet him, unable to keep from grinning. Had to be Harris. Reaching the hallway, she picked up her pace, then stopped short at the sight of a strange man peering upstairs. He was tall and thin with a scraggly mustache, in his mid-fifties. His dark eyes looked tired. Rachel took in his uniform—navy shirt, khaki pants—and the brown clipboard clutched to his chest.

"Can I help you?" Trepidation made her palms sweat, and she resisted the urge to wipe them on her shorts.

The man jerked his chin down. His Adam's apple bobbed. He smiled, quick and nervous, and glanced at his clipboard. "Are you Rachel Winchester?"

Alarm bells dinged in her head. "Yes. And you are?"

"John Massey. One of the building inspectors for Beaufort County." His wrinkles deepened as he studied his notes.

"Building inspector?" Rachel edged up and tried to peer over his shoulder. "What? Why? All my licenses are approved and up to date."

His expression soured, then, like he'd sucked a lemon. Frustration, Rachel thought, or maybe annoyance. "I see that," he said. "But I'm afraid we've received an anonymous tip—a

disgruntled guest, maybe? Someone convinced you're not up to code. We've got to take these calls seriously, so that's why I'm here. If everything's as you say it is, you should be fine."

Rachel's stomach did a backflip, and she fought the compulsion to barf on this man's scuffed loafers. A disgruntled guest? Yeah, that wasn't it. Her mother was behind this, no ifs, ands, or buts. Why else would this man show up right now, today? The very day after she'd run Mom off her land? The timing was too coincidental. Rachel swayed and had to blink back the dots crowding her vision. Did her mother really think this man would find enough violations to force Rachel to sell?

Fury mingled with the anxiety thrumming through her veins. She'd never let that happen. "I see," she managed. By some miracle, she forced the words out without snarling or throwing up. "Where do you want to start?"



Massey was polite, but he took his job seriously. Rachel watched, agitated, as he surveyed each room in turn, scribbling notes on his battered clipboard. His eyes darted about, sharp and intense. Sometimes, he made humming sounds, or he nodded his head. Or he stopped to kick a floorboard or turn on a tap.

"Tripping hazard," he said, to a humped-up carpet.

"I know," said Rachel. "I keep stapling it down."

"Might be time for a new one."

Rachel swallowed, nervous, and Massey moved on. He went through the upstairs, and down to the basement, and the black marks stacked up room after room.

"It's all minor stuff," he told her. "A lot of it seems nitpicky, but you can't ignore it."

Rachel just nodded, not trusting her voice. Taken one at a time, the problems were tiny, but with the sheer volume, they

added up. Rachel imagined Massey ringing them up on a register, the total shooting up item by item.

“I’ll need to inspect the exterior too,” Massey said, flipping to a new page. Rachel fought back a grimace.

Of course you will.

She led him outside just as Harris pulled up, clambering out of a gorgeous, restored Mustang. Her heart thundered against her rib cage as she took in the sight. The swell of his ass in tight khaki cargo shorts. Hard pecs rippling under a well-loved T-shirt. For a moment, she almost forgot Massey was there, almost forgot her repair bill ratcheting up.

Harris waved, then his gaze settled on Massey. He cocked a brow, questioning, as he strode up the drive. Rachel jogged down the front steps to meet him. She heard the crack, saw his face change, then her legs went out from under her, and she yelped in surprise, flailing and grasped out for something to stop her from falling.

“Rachel!” Harris moved faster than she’d have thought possible, catching her before she could fall on her face. He swept her into his arms, away from the steps. “I’ve got you,” he said, his voice a deep growl.

Rachel clung to him as he gathered her close. “Ow, damn, my ankle.”

He set her down on the soft grass. “Let’s see. Do you think you sprained it?”

She stretched her leg out and saw her ankle was scraped, nothing deep, barely bleeding, but still—

“Your foot went straight through,” said Massey. “The step fell right out.” He bent to examine the damage. “I’m sorry to tell you, this is a serious violation and a danger to your guests. You’ll need to shut down till you get that repaired.”

Rachel huffed. *No shit.*

“I can’t stress enough how serious this is. If you don’t have it fixed before your next guests arrive, you could be looking at losing your license.”

“Let me look,” said Harris, squeezing in next to Massey. Rachel stayed where she was, not trusting her ability to stand on her own. The adrenaline racing through her veins had made her jittery.

“Right here.” Harris nudged Massey. “See that? The wood isn’t splintered. The nails are just gone.”

Massey frowned. “Yeah, that’s clearly deliberate. Someone took this apart.”

Rachel’s head spun. Someone had done this? Mom? No—no way. Darryl must have done it. He’d sent her tumbling, and what if she’d fallen? What if a guest had—a kid or an old lady? She could’ve lost everything. Someone could’ve got seriously *hurt*.

“I won’t write it up,” said Massey. “But you’ll still need to fix it before you open up. And I’d file a police report, if I were you.”

Harris’s mouth flattened and he stood. “Can’t you call off your inspection, given what you’ve seen?”

“Wish I could,” Massey said, and he sounded sincere. “But my job’s to list damage, not investigate how it got there. I know it’s not fair. I’ll give you a month to sort this all out. You get up to code, and I’ll be pleased to sign off.”

“Thank you,” said Rachel, but the words came out faint. She pressed her hand to her heart as Massey moved away, testing the porch railings with one dusty boot.

“You’re okay,” said Harris, and crouched down beside her. Rachel leaned up against him. She didn’t feel okay.

“Darryl was here,” she said. “And I didn’t hear him. He messed up my porch, and I never heard a thing.”

Harris glanced up. “Your apartment’s on the second floor in the back of the house. No way you’d hear someone sneaking around up here.” He squeezed her shoulder. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“My God,” she breathed, disbelief robbing her of a better response. Her gaze flew to the broken step.

“Come inside,” said Harris, and helped her to her feet. He guided her into the front room. “Can I get you some water, or something to eat?”

The thought of eating turned Rachel’s stomach, but her throat *was* dry. “Yes to the water.”

Harris went to the kitchen, and by the time he got back—with a plate of grapes to go with the water—Massey was back, and hovering in the doorway.

“This is your copy,” he said. He pulled *pages* off his clipboard and held them out to Rachel. Harris took them instead, and flashed Massey a polite smile. “Thank you for coming out today. Rest assured, we’ll be ready when you come back.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Massey, and then he was gone. Rachel let herself slump back against the couch cushions. Normally, she’d have been up and asking a million questions, but today she was happy to let Harris take charge. *We’ll be ready*, he’d said, like he was part of this. Like it was his problem too. Was this what he’d meant when he’d said “We’re a team”?

“Rachel.” Harris sat down beside her and leaned in, all concern. “I’ve got an offer I really want you to consider.”

She held her breath. An offer? What now?

“Since we both want to spend time together—since we’re a team—” He inched closer, and she inhaled the masculine scent of his soap, and his skin underneath. “—how about I move in to one of your spare rooms? I can handle the repairs myself, and it’ll be easier if I stay here instead of driving back and forth every day.”

Heat rushed to Rachel’s cheeks, and she flushed with embarrassment. The last thing she wanted to be was a responsibility he felt like he had to take care of. She’d always taken pride in her independence. Poor but strong—that was her.

“It can be a trade that saves you money if that’s easier to swallow. My skills and labor in exchange for a room. Plus, what if that step was just Darryl’s first move? What if he’s not done coming after your business?” Harris kept up his

lobbying, obviously reading her reluctance but probably not understanding its cause. “This place is your home, not just your business. If the building’s not safe, neither are you. Let me be here for you and the baby.”

Well, damn. When he put it that way, she’d be stupid not to accept his help. No amount of pride was worth the chance of their baby being hurt.

“All right,” she agreed. “You can stay in the second bedroom in my apartment. But you said we’re a team, right? We’ll fix the place up together.”

Harris positively beamed at that, and Rachel smiled back. The sun caught the stubble along his jaw. A sudden urge bloomed in Rachel—the wild urge to kiss him—but she pushed it down and grabbed the list instead.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s check out the damage.”

An hour later, on the way back from stuffing his duffle with everything he could possibly need, Harris left his apartment behind and got in his car. As he drove, he debated within himself—go it alone, or call for backup?

He glanced at his cellphone where it rested against his thigh before exhaling long and loudly. “Just do it already.”

At the stop light he snatched the phone up and mashed his thumb on Lee’s contact. It rang twice, then his brother’s voice came on the line.

“I didn’t get in until two A.M., so you’re damn lucky I couldn’t sleep in.”

“Oh shit,” Harris said, his eyes darting to the clock on the dash. It’d be 8:33 A.M. in California. “I forgot about the time difference.”

A loud yawn rose from the speaker. “Yeah, well, I’m about to head out on another job.” Lee had accepted a position as a bodyguard/security for hire. “I’ll be flying in and out of the country, so it’s good you called now. What’s up?”

“I want to conference Chance in,” Harris said. “Hold on.”

The light turned green, and he gunned the engine, smiling at the way the Mustang growled in response, then pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall. No sense causing an accident trying to fill his brothers in on the latest bombshell blowing up his life. Once he had parked, he scrolled down to Chance’s number. Chance picked up on the third ring.

“Harris?” he rumbled, the sound of an air impact gun loud in the background. Well, that made sense. Chance worked full time in his fiancée’s garage. He’d initially retired from the service to take care of their father in his last days. After the funeral, he’d found his niche, transitioning from badass SEAL to mechanic in the blink of an eye. From what Harris could see, he was loving every second.

“Let me conference Lee in,” Harris said, then pushed the right buttons. “Lee? You there?”

“Yeah,” Lee answered. “Hey, Chance.”

“Lee,” Chance replied. “Not to be a dick or anything, but I’ve got a motor hanging above a car and it needs to be installed by the end of the day. What’s going on?”

Harris stifled a chuckle. That was Chance in a nutshell. He’d give you the shirt off his back, but he’d never been one for idle chit-chat.

“Two things,” said Harris, not wanting to drag this conversation out. “One, I’ve been deactivated from my Raider unit.”

“What the fuck?” Chance thundered as Lee shouted the same thing.

In as few words as possible, Harris told them about losing Shawn—about watching him die. About his CO insisting on a full psych eval. About his frustration—*what the hell? I’m not broken. I can still do my job. What’s talking supposed to do, that time won’t take care of?*

Harris finished his venting, and at first, silence reigned. Then Chance spoke up, quiet and calm. “It sucks, and I agree talking isn’t comfortable, but, shit, Harris, you could have told us about Shawn.”

I couldn’t, thought Harris, but he didn’t say it. Whenever he tried talking about Shawn, he still saw his face. Still saw that smirk, that white flash, that—

“I spent three weeks in a car with you and you didn’t say anything?” Lee made a tutting sound. “Not cool.”

Harris dropped his head back onto the headrest. “You’re right. I should’ve said something, but I can barely close my eyes without seeing it happen. Seeing him step on that damn IED.”

More expletives filled the speaker, but Harris barely heard them. His head was full of cotton, his gut full of lead. That numbness was back, that sense of *distance*, like he was watching the world through a thick sheet of glass.

“Then Dad dies on top of that,” Lee added. “I get why your CO is making sure you’re fit for duty. Just suck it up, say what they want to hear, and enjoy staying stateside instead of shipping out to some godforsaken hellhole.” He let out a chuckle. “Hell, make the most of it. Find a woman to keep you company and take your mind off things.”

Harris shifted in his seat. “Well.” He cleared his throat. “It’s funny you should say that.”

Silence met his ears. He swallowed and forged on.

“I *have* found a woman. Sort of. She’s someone I’ve known casually for a couple of years. Someone I’ve flirted with—look, the bottom line is, we hooked up the night before I came home. For Dad’s funeral.” He was stalling. *Just say it.* “And... she’s pregnant.”

The silence grew so long, Harris pulled the phone away to make sure he hadn’t lost the call.

“You’re going to be a father?” Chance finally asked.

“Yes.” Harris exhaled.

Lee cleared his throat. “Are you happy about that?”

Harris blinked. He hadn’t really thought about it. He’d been running on adrenaline, disbelief, and anxiety over what would happen next. Part of him wanted to run screaming for the hills. Another part of him was frankly in awe. Him. Harris. A father. He could hardly believe it. “I, um, I don’t know. Yes, I think I am, but it’s terrifying.” It hit him all over again, and he laughed out loud. “I’m going to be a fucking *dad*.”

“Congratulations, then,” Chance exclaimed. “Son of a bitch. I can’t believe it.”

“I keep thinking that very same thing,” Harris retorted, snorting.

“You going to marry the mother?” Lee asked.

“I don’t know.” Harris traced a finger over the steering wheel. “We’re using my forced leave to get ready for the baby—and get to know each other better. She’s amazing, no doubt, but we need to figure out how we’re going to be as parents. If it feels right, then hell, yeah, I’ll marry Rachel, but until then, I can’t even think about it.”



Harris bit into the ham and cheese sandwich Rachel had made him. She’d cut it into halves for him and secured it with toothpicks, and those little extra touches had left him feeling oddly touched. It had made him feel cared for, like when Mom was alive. He thought about telling her she’d be a good mom, but maybe it’d sound weird, just out of the blue.

It all felt surreal, when he took a moment to think—sitting at Rachel’s table, enjoying his lunch. He’d known her intimately, but he hardly knew her at all. What was her favorite sandwich? How did she take her coffee?

She snapped her fingers. “Hello? Earth to Harris?”

“Uh?” he said, intelligently.

“Is there any chance you’re wrong?”

“Wrong about...” Harris frowned. “Sorry. I must have zoned out.”

She set down her sandwich and swigged water from her glass. “The step. Is there a chance it wasn’t sabotaged? I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Harris polished off his sandwich and brushed the crumbs off his shirt. “I’m not wrong,” he said. “The nails had been pulled out. The hammer left marks, the claw gouging the wood.” He fiddled with his glass. “Someone deliberately weakened that step so it would collapse.”

She frowned, looking pained, and Harris wanted to kick himself for not wording it gently.

“I can see my mother sending a building inspector, but not sabotaging a step.” Rachel pushed her plate away. She’d barely touched the food. “Mom’s selfish, but she’s never hurt me. Even drunk, she’s not violent. That isn’t her.”

“But destroying your business is something she’d be fine with?”

Rachel pressed her lips together. “She doesn’t, uh... It’s hard to explain. I guess, in her head, the ends justify the means. She’s probably thinking she’ll dig up that treasure and give me a share, and I’ll be happy. Hell, I’ll be rich. She doesn’t get that it’s not about money. That this place, this business, means something to me.” She wiped at her eyes. “She’d hurt me. She would. She *has*. More than she knows. But she wouldn’t attack me physically. That isn’t her.”

“It’s not just her, though,” Harris interjected softly, his anger rising as she remembered seeing Rachel falling through that step. She could have been hurt, if he hadn’t caught her. Badly hurt, even. He reached for her hand. “Besides your mother and Darryl, does anyone else have a grudge against you? You have any enemies?”

“None that I can think of.” Rachel rubbed her stomach and Harris watched, fascinated. Their *baby* was growing under her hand.

“Darryl was mad yesterday. Really pissed off.” Rachel sat up straighter. “He was making threats—”

“What?” Harris jerked forward and his knee bumped the table. “You said he insulted you, but you didn’t mention threats. What did he say?”

Rachel waved a hand dismissively. “Nothing explicit. He was upset that I laughed at his offer to buy me out. Then he ranted about how I’m just a fad. How one day, I’ll beg him to buy me out.” She shook her head. “It wasn’t what he said that was threatening, exactly. It was how certain he sounded.”

Harris's hands clenched into fists on his lap. "Why didn't you tell me this yesterday?" He would have demanded to move in right then.

"It's nothing. He's just a bully. He likes to make threats, but deep down, he's a coward."

Harris wasn't convinced, but without evidence to the contrary, he couldn't argue. He frowned. "This pirate treasure—how much is it supposed to be worth?" People had been known to do crazy things when a lot of money was involved.

Rachel shrugged and a spot of color returned to her cheeks. "No one knows any details about it, so it's hard to say." She picked up her barely-touched sandwich and took a bite. That lifted Harris's spirits, at least a touch. Rachel needed to eat, but she didn't seem hungry. Weren't pregnant women supposed to eat for two? Then again, Harris knew nothing about what was normal. He'd have to remedy that as soon as possible. Google was about to become his bestest friend.

Rachel glanced up at him, and her cheeks turned pink. Harris found her blush charming, and he leaned in closer. "Penny for your thoughts?"

Rachel's flush deepened. "The treasure," she said. "I might've, y'know, tried to find it myself. Before I even owned this place. When I was a growing up."

Harris quirked a brow. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah. I was nine or ten, and I'd ride my bike to the library and scour everything they had. Not just the books either, but old magazines and newspapers. I dug up some old articles, even a map. But all I found at the X was an old grackle's nest."

Harris leaned forward, hanging on every word. He was loving this glimpse into Rachel's past. Into what made her the incredible woman she was. She smiled and kept going, getting into her story.

"The older I got, the deeper I dug." She took another bite and quickly swallowed. "I interviewed people, folks around town. This guy whose family'd been here since South Carolina was

just a colony.” Her gaze had gone faraway, focused out the window, down to the whitecaps breaking on the beach. “He said the pirate was real. His six-times-great grandma knew his lover.”

“His lover?”

Rachel’s smile softened. “The legend has it that the treasure was for her. He buried it here for her, but she never dug it up.”

Harris frowned. “Why not?”

“There are a few theories on that. Like, he wrote her a letter telling her where to dig, but the letter never arrived. Or it did, but he never came home, and she didn’t want his treasure if she couldn’t have him.” She sighed, low and sad. “One thing all the stories say: she sat here every day, where we are now, watching the seas, waiting for his safe return.”

Harris covered a grin. She was a romantic. Who would’ve guessed? This tough, gorgeous, woman—this fierce fairy—had a secret romance fetish, buried down deep. She was so steadfast and practical, but here she was, sighing over the story of a pirate and his love. Harris wondered what else he’d find beneath her tough shell, and warmth flooded through him, right down to his toes.

“As far as the treasure goes, no one can even agree on what it was, much less where it was buried, but they’ve all got their theories. Fantasies, more like.” Rachel voice lost its softness as she turned back to Harris.

Harris instantly missed the romance he’d glimpsed within her. If Rachel noticed his reaction, she gave no sign. She finished her sandwich and pushed her plate away.

“Most likely, there *is* no treasure. In hundreds of years, someone would’ve found it.”

“We could try,” Harris said. He wanted her excited and engaged again, wanted to see that spark of romance bright in her eyes. “We might not find pirate treasure, but this property’s so old, there’s bound to be *something* of interest squirreled away somewhere.”

Rachel's blue eyes flashed, and her smile began to grow as she studied his face. Entwining his hand with hers, Harris pressed his case. "Just because we're grownups doesn't mean we can't go exploring. And if Darryl and your mom are right and there really *is* something valuable here, shouldn't we try to find it before they can?"

Rachel licked her lips, and a new tension rose in the air around them. God, he wanted to taste her again. Was her mouth as soft and sweet as he remembered? He tightened his grip and inched his face closer—

"Fine," Rachel said, leaning back in her chair. "We'll join in the hunt. *But—*" She stood up, her chair scraping loudly against the floor. "—only if we find the time between working on the house repairs and preparing for the baby. And I can't stress this enough: there'll be *no* digging, *none*, till we're sure there's something to dig for."

Rachel turned away, and just like that, the spell was broken. But Harris still chalked this talk up as a win. He knew more about Rachel than when he'd started, and she continued to make plans that included him.

"In the meantime, we've got a bachelorette party to get ready for," she tossed over her shoulder as she put their plates in the sink. That was less of a win, getting roped into that, but Harris dredged up his best good-guy grin.

"Just point me to the tulle, and I'll get started on those decorations."

“He touched his toes,” yelled Sophie—or was that Mary Jo? The bachelorette party was in full swing, a jumble of pink hats and penis-themed snacks, drinks flowing freely as the evening wore on.

“He touched them again! That’s *two* times, ladies. Everyone, two drinks!”

Ten rose-pink glasses lifted as one, then slammed down in a storm of giggles and gasps.

The sun was going down now, kissing the beach with gold. Harris was down there, running through his workout, his buff silhouette driving the party wild. Rachel groaned to herself as she moved through the shadows, lighting citronella candles to keep the bugs off the veranda. She wanted nothing she could control putting a pall on the festivities. Not only could she earn a nice tip (baby fund!), but the bride had been last year’s runner-up for Miss South Carolina. A five-star review from a minor celebrity—that was pure gold for a business like hers.

Still, Harris would kill her if he caught wind of their antics. Sue her, maybe, for sexual harassment.

“I’m going to pass out if he keeps this up,” one woman protested with a huge smile on her face. “Oh my God, look at him. Is he doing pushups?”

“Pushups!” Her friend grabbed a pitcher and poured a fresh drink. “One drink for every five he does.”

The women whooped and raised their glasses, drinking in shirtless Harris as he bobbed up and down. Rachel couldn't help but steal a glimpse for herself. Would she be neglecting her duties if she ran down there with towels? Patted Harris dry, where his sweat slicked his back? His biceps would be gleaming in the declining sun, and maybe she'd lick one. Taste the salt of his labors. He'd grab her, and then—

“That's five! Drink!”

Rachel shook off her fantasy and refilled the pitchers, one with margaritas and the other with Bellinis.

“Rachel,” Sophie—the bride-to-be—exclaimed, spotting her at the refreshment table. “You are the *best*. How *did* you arrange for that delicious piece of man meat to be our entertainment?”

A green stab of jealousy took Rachel by surprise. She pushed it down and breathed deep through her nose, then instantly regretted it. The scents from the finger foods were rich and overpowering—hot cheese, fried chicken, sickly veggie snacks. Her stomach did a slow roll, and she worried she'd upchuck all over the table.

Smile. They're paying guests. “Harris, uh—” She bit her tongue. She'd been about to say Harris lived with her. Which, technically, he did, at least for now. But she had no claim on him, no right to imply their relationship was anything but friendly. *No, we're just going to be parents together, that's all.* Yikes. She had to get control of her hormones fast. “Harris, uh, is helping me with a few construction projects before he's due back on base.”

Ten jaws dropped at once.

“He's a Marine?”

“He's living here?”

“You hear that, girls? He's ours all night!” Sophie did a fist-pump, like she'd scored a goal.

Rachel's gaze wandered to the man of the hour. He'd been punishing his body with an insane routine—swimming, running sprints, pushups, and more. And Rachel had drooled over every second. God, his body was amazing, all sleek and

tan and rippling with muscle. Not long after fixing the front step, he'd taken a razor to the scruff on his face, and she missed the rumpled look, that hint of bad boy. She hoped it'd grow back soon, and Harris that would leave it be.

The maid of honor, Mary Jo, poured herself a Bellini. She turned and lifted her amber-filled glass. "We should be drinking Sex on the Beach."

Everyone cackled uproariously.

Harris stopped his pushups and seamlessly stood.

Within seconds, the two, freshly-filled pitchers were empty again.

"Check out the abs on him."

"Is that a ten-pack?"

"Shut up—he's coming. Ooh, but those pecs!"

Harris clunked up the wooden stairs, towel slung over his shoulder. The bachelorette party clapped and cat-called mercilessly.

Red broke out on Harris's cheeks, and he ducked his head with a wry smile. "I, uh—thank you, ladies." He sketched a courtly bow.

"You're the best drinking game I've played in a long time," Mary Jo sighed. She saluted him with her glass, then took a healthy gulp.

"Drinking game?" Alarm filled his expression and Rachel hid her smile by plopping a mostly empty tray of cheese onto her cart.

"Hell, yeah," said Diana, smacking her lips from her margarita—or maybe from eyeing Harris like he was her next meal. "Never thought exercise could be so much fun."

Harris stalked between the chairs and stopped beside Rachel. Sweat glistened on his skin, and it took everything Rachel had not to lean forward and taste him.

"Do I want to know?" he asked, lifting a reddish-brown eyebrow.

Rachel laughed. “Probably not.”

“Harris,” Sophie called, motioning him over with a flapping hand. The alcohol had *definitely* seeped into her blood. “I hear you’re going to be doing some construction work.”

Snickers filled the veranda, and his smile froze as he moved toward the bride-to-be.

“Can you show me how your grip your hammer?”

Laughter went up—a loose, raucous gale. Diana drained her glass. “I bet he’s an ace at drilling.”

Rachel clapped a hand over her mouth but could do nothing about her shaking shoulders. Oh, yeah. If Harris wanted to sue her, he had an ironclad case. *They catcalled me, Your Honor. Tried to grab my pipe wrench.*

Harris laughed, deep and manly, raising goose bumps on Rachel’s skin.

“You ladies are terrible.” His smile eased into one she recognized from the bar—teasing, flirtatious. She should’ve been jealous, and she *was* a little, but she’d seen the real thing now, his full-on *I-want-you* smolder. This wasn’t that, just a light, playful smile.

“We’re just getting warmed up,” Mary Jo crooned, slinking between a chaise lounge and a side table to stand next to him.

“I don’t doubt it,” said Harris, pointedly surveying the debris from the party. “But I’m thinking this party needs to be kicked up a notch.”

Whoops and clinking glasses greeted that statement.

Rachel’s hands curled into fists. The last thing she needed was this party getting too rowdy. She could just see it now—screaming bachelorettes tripping over her furniture, spilling drinks on her carpets, making matchsticks of her chairs. Driving her already-tall repair bill straight through the roof.

Harris put a hand to his ear and pantomimed listening to something. “Hear that? The dessert cart is calling your names.”

Sophie perked up. “Dessert? You mean chocolate?” She craned her head to find Rachel, her eyes wide and hopeful.

“That’s right,” said Rachel, weak-kneed with relief. “We’ve got penis cakes, regular cakes, and chocolate éclairs, iced mini-cupcakes...why don’t I just grab the cart?”

“I’ll get it,” said Harris. The women cooed and protested, but he ducked into the kitchen, and came back with the dessert cart and—God bless him—two pitchers of water.

“You’ll want to drink this,” he said, and poured them each a big glass. “It’s an old Marine trick for keeping hangovers at bay. One glass of water for one glass of booze, your head won’t be splitting when you wake from your snooze.”

“Aw, he’s so sweet.”

“And he brought chocolate...”

“Rachel, he’s perfect.”

He sure is, thought Rachel, and her lady parts agreed. Watching Harris take care of the drunken bachelorettes did something for her. Made her want to scoop him up and tend to him in turn, drip chocolate down his bare chest and—

Stop it. She forced her mind back on track. She still had the rest of the party to get through, and she’d never be able to focus on her job with Harris on her brain.

“Okay,” she called, “time for games. Truth or dare!”

The ladies all hollered and grabbed for their drinks. Rachel sipped her own water to cover a grimace. Harris or no Harris, this would be a long night.



Four long hours later, the party was done, five out of ten guests tucked in upstairs. Harris had bundled the rest of them into their limo, then headed up to the apartment to shower. Rachel should clear some shelves for him, now he’d moved in. The thought sent a shiver rolling down her spine. Harris had moved in. He was living here. Soon, his razor would sit next to

hers on the shelf. Their loofahs would cuddle up on the shower rack. *Living together*—it felt almost...real.

Rachel wheeled the dessert cart back out to the veranda. She cleared the table efficiently, grabbing half-demolished plates of brownies and mini-cheesecakes and dumping them in the trash. A sweet smell rose up—cheesecake going warm—and nausea struck so hard and so fast, Rachel had to sit down. She stumbled to the closest chair, the overstuffed chaise lounge. The cushions made a rude noise when her weight hit them, but she didn't care. Holding her head and her stomach, she groaned, furiously swallowing to keep her gorge from rising higher.

“Hey.” A warm hand lifted her hair off her sweaty neck, allowing the night breeze to waft over her. Cracking one eye open, she found Harris crouched in front of her in a fresh T-shirt and shorts, his brown eyes full of warmth.

She waved a hand toward the snack table and stuck out her tongue. Thankfully, Harris seemed to understand her lame attempt at charades. He finished clearing the table and rolled the cart out of sight—and, most importantly, out of range of her nose.

She exhaled in relief as the smells ebbed away. Inhaling deeply, she concentrated on the salty ocean air, pleasant and soothing, heavy with—

Cheese?

She jerked back as the unmistakable scent hit her nose, and she opened her eyes to find a stick of string cheese two inches from her face.

“Eat it,” Harris commanded gently. “It’ll help. I promise.”

Had he lost his mind?

Harris dragged a chair closer and sat facing Rachel. “I’m not crazy,” he said, and opened the package. Two pink spots had broken out high on his cheeks. “I, um, did some research on morning sickness. Or night sickness, I guess. Whatever time sickness you want to call this. Anyway, protein’s supposed to help, so here. Eat your cheese.”

Rachel laughed. Holy *wow*. Could he be any cuter? Taking the cheese, she reluctantly bit into it, bracing for the rush of nausea to follow. But it never came. In fact, her stomach actually felt better.

Harris toyed with her hair, smoothing it behind her ear. “I’m here for you. You know that, right?”

A rush of warmth ran through her, filling her with an unfamiliar sense of safety. All her life, she’d been taught she could only count on herself. But maybe, with Harris...

“I want to help,” he continued. His hands hovered over her arms, then dropped away to hang between his knees from leaning on his elbows. “I’ll start by fixing everything on the inspector’s list, then I’ll do whatever I can for the baby too.”

“You sure helped tonight,” said Rachel, nursing that hesitant glow in her chest. “That party was about to get some kind of wild.”

Harris chuckled. “Right? I didn’t want to butt in, but you looked like you could use a hand.” He reached for her arm, and Rachel’s heart leaped. Sophie had called him perfect, and he was, except—

If something seems too good to be true, that’s because it is. That goes double for someones, so keep those legs crossed.

Rachel stiffened as Mom’s unpleasant voice filled her thoughts. *Was* there another shoe waiting to drop, another side to Harris she hadn’t uncovered? No one had ever cared this much for Rachel. For the perfect man to swoop in and do everything right—that was for fairy tales, not for real life. But, oh, he was smiling, so bright and sincere. She wanted to believe him. It felt so good. And he’d been so wonderful about everything since she broke the baby news. Maybe he *was* for real. Maybe—

Music suddenly blared from his shorts. Harris dug out his phone. “I’ve got to take this.”

Rachel watched him saunter over to lean on the railing. He listened to somebody on the other end, but his side of the

conversation was mostly grunts, a few throaty *uh-huhs* before he hung up.

Jamming his phone in his pocket, he turned to face her. The warmth and the light had gone out of his eyes. “That was the base,” he said. His voice was distant. “The psychologist’s office has assigned me a therapist. I’m required to meet with him three times a week. The appointments will cut into my B&B time. I’m not happy about that, but I can’t do anything to change it. As soon as they email the schedule of dates and times, I’ll give you a copy.”

Rachel stared at him. He’d rattled that off like he was reading a report, his tone dry and clipped, devoid of warmth. The spark in her heart went out like he’d doused her with ice water. So, *here* was the other shoe. How had she forgotten this was all temporary? Once he cleared his psych eval, he’d be reactivated and gone. Off on dangerous missions to the ass end of nowhere. Who knew if he’d be in town—or even in the country—when the baby was born?

Rachel crumpled the empty cheese packaging in her fist. As great as it was to have his support, she couldn’t let herself count on it. That was nothing new.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. Maybe this time limit could be a good thing—she’d have enough time to get to know Harris, but not enough to get attached. Time to fix up the building, but not fall in love. They could have a fling, even, a summer romance. That could be fun. Their chemistry had been sizzling, off-the-charts hot. She wouldn’t mind one more night, or ten. What’s the worst that could happen, he could get her double-pregnant?

Rising to her feet, she stuffed the trash into her pocket. Fling or no fling, she’d be fine. She wasn’t expecting a permanent commitment from Harris. Hell, if her own mother couldn’t love her, how could she expect her one-night stand to profess undying devotion? She couldn’t, but she didn’t need him to. She’d take what he was willing to give, and she’d stand on her own two feet when he left.

With that thought in mind, she pecked his cheek, and slapped his exquisite ass on her way to the kitchen.

Harris jammed the Phillips-head screwdriver in his pocket and lowered the slatted vent, then set it on the fold-out tray. Shifting his feet for better balance on the aluminum ladder stretched over the toilet, he peered up through the square opening.

It felt good to be busy, working with his hands. Growing up, he'd followed his father around like a puppy. Every time the man had to fix something in the house, Harris would be there, wanting to help. At first, he'd just made a mess, but as he got older and Dad's lessons sank in, he found himself more and more able to actually help. He'd cherished those times with his dad, especially when things got bad and the house was full of tension, Chance and his father at each other's throats. Dad would come home from a long day of work and start on fixing whatever needed repairing. Harris would crawl out of bed to join him, and they'd work silently until the job was done. They didn't talk much, but the work brought them closer. It built a strong trust between them, which Harris missed.

Sick grief ripped through him, and he forced himself back into the present before he fell off the damn ladder.

Focusing on the exhaust fan, he noted the dust caked on the fan's paddles and motor. It hadn't been cleaned lately, or maybe ever, but he couldn't see anything that would prevent it from working. Probably just burned out. No biggie. He could pop over to the hardware store and pick up a new unit. It wouldn't take more than five minutes to plug a new one in and cross this item off the checklist.

Great, that's one mystery solved. But what about last night, that slap on my ass?

All night, he'd chewed on that. What had it meant? When he woke up this morning (alone, in the second bedroom of Rachel's apartment) he was no closer to understanding than before.

Had it been like "go team" or more like "nice ass"? His ego wouldn't mind it being "nice ass," but did that mean she was open to further exploration of their chemistry? He'd been getting mixed signals, and it was driving him nuts.

The front door creaked open—he'd have to oil that—and high heels came tapping across the foyer. Harris stilled and waited for the upstairs floor to creak, Rachel trotting down to greet her new guest. Instead, he heard retching, faint through the vent. He winced at the sound. *Aw, man. Poor Rachel.*

Harris brushed himself off and headed for the front desk. The guest had her back to him, but Harris still knew he was looking at Rachel's mother. Tammy Winchester looked just like Rachel, if time and hard living had run her through the wringer. She had on a tight, sleeveless shirt and painted-on denim jeans, and where the snug outfit might be sexy on Rachel, on Tammy it just looked...wrong.

Tammy unfolded a piece of paper and peered up at the ceiling, scouring the rafters as if they held the key to something.

Harris cleared his throat. "Can I help you?"

Tammy squeaked, hastily folded the paper, and attempted to shove it in her back pocket—a challenge, given the tightness of her clothes. It stuck for a moment, then fluttered to the floor, where the breeze caught it and whisked it behind the credenza. Tammy didn't seem to notice and scowled at Harris instead.

"Who are you?" she demanded, straightening to her full height. She zeroed in on his toolbelt, and her eyes narrowed to slits. "Are you some kind of handyman? And you're greeting guests?"

“Something like that,” said Harris, deliberately vague. “I need to see Rachel.” Tammy tried to skirt Harris, but Harris blocked her way. She dodged left, then right, then huffed in disgust. “Out of my way! Where is she? *Rachel?*”

Harris held his ground, blocking the staircase. “I suggest you call her and schedule a visit.”

“Schedule—I’m her mother!” Tammy made a shooing gesture, flicking her nails at Harris. “You have no right to keep me from seeing my daughter.”

He spread out his arms, forcing her backward. Either she kept moving with him or he’d run her over. “I’m going to ask you to leave now.”

Tammy gave him a shove, but Harris didn’t budge.

“This is my place too,” she said, and pushed him again. He didn’t budge. “I don’t know what she told you, but the property belongs to both of us. If I want to—”

Upstairs, Rachel retched again, stopping Tammy’s rant. Harris froze.

Shit.

A calculating gleam sparked in Tammy’s eyes, and Harris could practically see the wheels turning in her mind. She eyed him up and down, from his head to his boots, then stood on tiptoe to peer up the stairs. That calculation deepened, and a smile he wanted nothing to do with spread across her face.

“You’re awfully protective for a handyman.”

“Time for you to go,” he announced, widening his arms again.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s going on.” Tammy dug her heels in, but Harris kept moving, forcing her to back up or be pushed out the door.

“Like I said before.” Harris clamped onto her wrist when she tried to pivot around him. “Call your daughter later. You two can talk then.”

“Is she pregnant? Are you the father?”

He pushed her none to gently over the threshold.

“Don’t think this changes anything,” Tammy thumped on the doorframe. “I own fifty percent of this property, and that means whatever’s on this land is half mine too.”

Harris refused to react, but he really wanted to wring this woman’s neck. He wasn’t a violent man despite his profession, and he especially hated to see women hurt, but he was envisioning all kinds of ways he’d like to shake some sense into Tammy Winchester. Did she care *nothing* about Rachel? Even knowing she was pregnant, or at least suspecting?

“If you don’t leave, I’ll call the police.” Harris hustled her down the steps. The new one was lighter than the rest of the porch. He’d have to stain that later, to make it match.

Tammy stopped fighting him at the foot of the stairs. With one last glare, she whirled and marched to an aging Honda Accord, her heels leaving divots in the freshly-mowed lawn. Harris thought about yelling for her to use the walkway, but she’d probably chew up the lawn even worse out of spite. He watched as she got in her car and drove off. Only when her taillights disappeared did he march back inside.

He stopped short as he caught sight of Rachel. She’d come down the stairs and was leaning on the railing.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said. “You feel any better? I can scrounge up some protein.”

“In a while, maybe.” Her hips swayed enticingly as she stalked forward. The sun in her hair lit a fire inside him. “I thought we’d take a ride,” she said.

“Oh?”

“To the hardware store. We need some more drill bits, and I want to check paint samples.”

Not a date, then. Go team not nice ass.

“All right,” he said. “Let me just grab my keys.”

He slipped off his toolbelt and found his keys, and the two of them headed out to the car. Harris held Rachel’s door for her, and she slid inside. She leaned back in her seat and let out a soft moan.

“Mm, this is soft. Your car is amazing.”

“Dad’s car,” said Harris, even as his heart swelled with pride. “We fixed it up, me and my brothers, after he passed away. Sort of a tribute, I guess you might say.” He stuck his keys in the ignition but didn’t start the car. Rachel touched the dashboard, the ancient tape deck.

“It’s a classic,” she said. “And he left it to you?”

“He left it to all of us.” Harris felt his eyes burn. “But me and Dad were the closest, so it’s staying with me.” He cleared his throat to keep from choking up. “I told you about our road trip, me and Lee, right? I swear, there were times it was like Dad was with us. Like he’d yell from the back seat, *quit riding the clutch!*”

“It suits you,” said Rachel. “You know, I always wanted to take a road trip.”

“Oh, yeah? Where would you go?”

“Florida, maybe. Check out Disney World. Or I’d head up the coast, all the way to the border. To Canada, even. I’ve never been out of the country.”

Harris let out a chuckle. “Canada, huh?”

“Or just up the hill, to the cliffs by the beach. Y’know, where the kids go when they want to make out.”

Harris jerked around to face her. *That* was a signal. Had to be, right? And that glint in her eyes... But she hadn’t moved, hadn’t taken his hand. It wouldn’t do to take anything for granted. One night of passion didn’t mean—

“Harris?” She was smiling, leaning in close. Her hand brushed his thigh, then settled on his knee. She leaned in and kissed him, and *hell, fucking yeah!* Her breast brushed his arm. Her tongue darted out to taste his lips. She raked her nails through his short hair, and he let out a groan.

“Rachel...” He held her as close as the cramped space would allow and returned her kiss a hundredfold. She tasted of icy spearmint, but her mouth was hot. Her low sigh of hunger

went straight to his dick. He surged out of his seat and pinned her to the door, his body pressed to hers, her teeth at his throat.

She nipped him and he moaned, and—

“Wait. Hold on—Rachel?” He pulled back and released her, warning lights flashing. “I’m not hurting you, am I? Or the baby?”

Rachel chuckled. “I’d yell if you were.”

He sat back and feasted his eyes on her swollen lips and heavy-lidded expression. Ran two gentle fingers down the line of her cheek.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.”

“You’re not bad, yourself.” She kissed him again, just a quick peck this time. “You know,” she said, and her tone was one-hundred percent husky vixen, “you should be careful. I’ll start getting used to having you around.”

Finally, a clear signal. She wanted him around. But now that he’d gotten the confirmation he’d wanted, he was forced to ask himself...was that actually a good thing? He desired her, definitely. But what did he really have to offer her? He wanted to be a father, no debate there. And he wanted to explore what could happen with Rachel. But he couldn’t commit to her with his future up in the air. Ever since that last mission, he’d been struggling with whether he wanted to stay in the Marines. Shawn’s death had forced him to take a hard look at his life, and he’d realized the calling he’d once felt to serve as a Marine had ebbed away. But he didn’t have a game plan for doing anything else.

Rachel and the baby both deserved a hell of a lot more than a guy who was so lost.

“I’m good,” he deflected. “But they close for lunch, right?”

“Who? Oh, the hardware store? Yeah, right, they do.” Rachel sat back and reached for her seat belt. Harris put his on, too, and started the Mustang. He had to be careful here. If she *was* catching feelings, he shouldn’t encourage it. Not until he had a clearer idea of what he was actually capable of offering.

“I saw a cool nightlight,” said Rachel. “For the nursery. It’s shaped like the moon, with a star hanging off it.”

Harris’s heart pulsed with warmth.

“I like that,” he said. “Sounds great.” This, planning the nursery, made it all feel real. Like he and Rachel were an actual couple. Like they’d planned this pregnancy and mapped out their future together—but the truth was, there was no map for where they were going. What if something went wrong? Could they survive it? Things *did* go wrong. Murphy’s Law was real. Weren’t his teenage years proof enough of that?

He held back a grunt of frustration. He’d loved his family, his brothers, his father, but try as he might, he couldn’t hold them together. Dad and Chance had fought constantly. Lee had gone quiet, pulling away. Harris had reasoned with them, and yelled, and begged—but none of it had worked. For all his efforts, they’d drifted apart. What chance did he stand of being able to build something solid with Rachel?

“That’s the hardware store,” said Rachel.

Harris braked, a little too roughly, and swung into the parking lot. Rachel coughed, and he glanced at her. “Sorry. You okay?”

“I’m good,” she said. “But where was your head at?”

“The nursery,” said Harris, and it wasn’t exactly a lie. “We should get those stars, too. The kind you stick on the ceiling that glow in the dark. It’ll be educational, with the constellations.”

“You know any constellations?”

“I know the Big Dipper.”

“Your dick doesn’t count.” Rachel gave it a squeeze, then her hand was gone, and she slid out of the car. Harris chased her, laughing. For now, his worries could wait. Today was a good day, so why not enjoy it? That was one lesson he’d learned from his family. You never knew how many good days you’d get, so you should enjoy them while they lasted.

But always stay prepared for what might come next.

Rachel yawned and peered through the window above the kitchen sink. Harris streaked by in a pair of gym shorts and no shirt, running laps around the yard. The morning glow glistened on his sweat-slicked skin, and she took a moment to appreciate his physique. Seriously, *day-um*.

For two days, she'd been subjected to his barely clothed workouts, and her self-control was nearing its breaking point. She should have attacked him when he'd trudged up to bed last night, but her nerves had kicked in and she'd let him keep walking. But seeing him like this made her anxieties seem foolish. It'd taken her years to work up the nerve to proposition him in the bar. She could *not* wait that long to have him again.

She fumbled in the cabinet, searching for coffee. Harris ran by again as she pulled out the bag, and this time he waved at her and tipped her a wink. She bit her lip as he jogged away. His ass in those shorts ought to be a crime. Indecent exposure. Rippling without a permit. What she wouldn't give to lean in for a bite!

She set the coffee to brewing and sat down to wait. If Harris kept up with his morning workouts—not to mention his help whipping the house into shape—she was going to be hard-pressed to give him up. Add to that his adorable new penchant for Googling everything he could about pregnancy and babies, and she'd be throwing herself in front of the door to stop him from leaving.

But you can't think like that. He wouldn't be sticking around. *And you don't need him to.* She could raise their child on her own. She'd never had anyone help her before. Parenting didn't have to be any different.

Her coffee finished brewing and she poured herself a mug. She took a healthy swig and savored the liquid on her tongue...but then she frowned. What was that odd taste? Were these beans new, or—

Rachel's lips felt weird. And her tongue. Was it swelling? She made a strangled sound, a thin, desperate squeak. Her mug slipped through her fingers and shattered on the floor.

“Ha—Harris—” She lunged for the back door and dropped to her knees. Waves of panic ran through her. Clutching her throat, she tried to inhale, but her windpipe had contracted to a burning pinhole. Her lungs twitched and burned, refusing to expand.

Harris. Where was he? Had he gone upstairs? She tried to cry out again and gagged on her tongue. Hives bloomed on her arms, blotching through her tattoos. She wheezed, gagged again. What on earth was happening? It felt like an allergic reaction, but she wasn't allergic to coffee.

Searing hot acid raged up her throat and she threw up on the floor. Even after everything in her stomach came out, her body kept heaving, awful dry retches that brought up nothing but air.

“Rachel!” Harris burst in, and she lurched toward him. He caught her, holding her close as he pushed her hair off her face. “What's going on? Your face—”

She managed a croak. Her vision went dark.

“You got an Epi-Pen? *Rachel*. Stay with me.”

Purse. In my purse. The words wouldn't come. All she could do was nod.

“Okay, is it in the bathroom?”

Rachel shook her head.

“Your bedroom? Your purse?”

She nodded, shuddering in his arms. Harris lowered her down, stretched her out on the floor. She turned her head to feel the tiles on her cheek, cool against her flaming skin. She could hear Harris running, boots thudding on tile. Running away from her? Her ears were ringing, her feet and hands numb. The lights had gone out, and—

Ow—ow, goddammit. Something stung against her leg.

“You’re okay,” said Harris. He was cradling her head, running his hand through her hair. She gulped air and her lungs filled, until she coughed it back out, her body struggling to readjust to working airways.

“Go slow, just breathe. You’re fine, I’ve got you.”

Rachel opened her mouth, but no words came out. Harris was lifting her, tucking her against his chest as he carried her.

“Where—where—”

“I’m taking you to the ER,” he said. “What happened? You eat something? What set this off?”

She slapped at his arm—*put me down.* Harris didn’t.

“Hazelnuts,” she whispered. “I’m allergic, but...”

Harris paused at the counter and sniffed the air. “That coffee,” he said, and scowled at the bag. “It reeks of hazelnut. Couldn’t you smell it?”

Rachel sniffed, but she couldn’t, and she let out a whimper. “It’s the baby,” she said. “I’m all out of whack. Things taste different, smell different, the—” Rachel stopped talking, the blood leaching from her head. *The baby.* Oh, God.

“We’re going to the hospital,” said Harris. He ran out the door with her clutched to his chest and buckled her carefully into the car. Then he was flooring it down the drive, spraying up gravel as he swerved onto the road. The ride passed in a blur, but Harris didn’t slow down. Rachel stared straight ahead, through a torrent of tears. All she could think was, had she hurt the baby? Would this disaster end up stunting the baby’s growth or damaging its organs? Could that happen? Oh God.

She was already a horrible mother, and she hadn't even been pregnant for two months.

"It's okay," said Harris. "See, look, we're here." He helped her out of the car and hustled her into the busy ER. The receptionist took one look at her and beckoned them on, straight to an exam room with a long, narrow bed.

"I think I might have done something to the baby," Rachel wailed.

The receptionist blanched. "You're pregnant?" Her tone was neutral, but Rachel caught her expression, the way she took note of her hair, her tattoos.

"She needs a doctor," said Harris. "You gonna get someone?"

Before she could answer, the nurse swept in. Rachel cringed at the sight of her and blinked back her tears. She felt stupid crying in front of Cara Levine—Cara, who'd once been her very best friend. Cara, who'd turned on her halfway through sixth grade.

Cara glanced down at her. "Why do you think you hurt your baby?"

Rachel tried not to read anything into the way she said *baby*. Cora would still do her job, right? Even for trailer trash?

"Someone switched out my coffee," Rachel stammered. "I didn't notice, and I drank it." She choked on a sob. "It was hazelnut coffee. I'm allergic."

"I remember."

Rachel winced—yeah. Of course she did. Cara had been there at junior prom, when Rachel mixed up her punch with someone's sneaky Frangelico. She'd been rushed to the hospital and busted for drinking, and damn it, she hadn't been. She wasn't her mother.

She swallowed. "So, my baby—"

"Wait here. I'll get the doctor." Cara marched out and Harris went after her. Rachel shrank down as their voices drifted in.

"—so disrespectful."

“I can’t help her. I’m not—”

“Where’s your bedside manner? Isn’t that part of the job?”

Tears rolled down Rachel’s face all over again. She needed Harris with her, not out there speaking for her. She could stand up for herself, and she did when it mattered. Cara didn’t matter. Nothing did but the baby. Holding her stomach, she prayed. *Please, please, be okay.*

Dr. Martin marched through the door just as Harris returned. She smiled down at Rachel from behind her thick glasses. “Sounds like I’m out of the loop on a major event in your life.”

“She’s two months along,” said Harris, and Rachel scowled at him.

“Almost eight weeks,” she said. “I had a reaction to hazelnut. We—”

“I found her in distress. I used her Epi-Pen.” Harris’s focus was all on Dr. Martin. He hadn’t looked at Rachel since he’d re-entered the room. His voice had gone flat again, like when he’d got the news about his psych eval. He kept talking and talking, like he was delivering a report to his commanding officer. “She never lost consciousness, but she wasn’t breathing. She’d vomited, and her face was badly swollen. All in all, she was down for less than—”

“It was the usual,” said Rachel. “Swelling, hives, nausea.”

Dr. Martin nodded at Rachel, then she glanced at Harris. “Maybe come hold her hand while I do my exam?”

Rachel expected him to protest, or to keep up his monologue. But Harris sat next to her and took her hand. He didn’t squeeze or caress it, nor did he speak again. He just sat and watched, stone-faced and tight-jawed. Rachel closed her eyes and let Dr. Martin do her job.

Afterward, Harris helped her back to the car.

“It’s good news,” he said. “You’re okay. The baby’s fine.”

“Yeah.” Rachel clasped her hands together and tried to stop shaking. Now the crisis was over, the adrenaline crash was

hitting hard.

“Do you think it was Darryl who switched out your beans? Do you know if your mom has—” Harris broke off. “Rachel?”

Rachel stared at her hands. She couldn't deal with this now, on top of everything else. *You were lucky*, Dr. Martin had said. *Your body expelled the nuts right away. That might've saved your life, and your baby's as well.* What she'd heard was, she could've just as easily been unlucky. She could've miscarried or severely harmed her baby. She wanted to cry. Being a mother hadn't been in her plans, but now that it was happening, a lioness protectiveness gripped her hard.

No one threatened her baby.

“We could stop and get some food first,” said Harris. “Call the cops over after.”

Rachel shook her head no. She wanted this over with, and her baby safe.



Rachel lay on her bed, staring up at the ceiling, letting Harris massage her sore, throbbing feet. They didn't look swollen, but they sure felt that way, all tight and achy, like she'd just run ten miles. The hormones, she guessed. Nothing felt right. Her clothes rubbed her skin weird. Her socks felt too tight. Her favorite foods made her want to puke. Worst of all, her emotions were all over the place, up and down like a toilet seat, morning to night.

“Damn cops,” said Harris.

Rachel shook her head. “Don't.”

“It wasn't an accident. It wasn't some guest. This was on purpose.”

Rachel turned her head away, not wanting to hear it. Besides, he wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know. Whoever'd messed with her coffee had been smart: they'd mixed in the bad beans with her usual blend. She'd grabbed

the bag without seeing, because *it'd been the same bag as always.*

“A guest could've done it,” the detective had said. “Folks do that sometimes, if one bag's almost done. They'll dump it into another, not thinking.”

Harris had interrupted, irate. “They brought their own coffee? Dumped it into her bag?”

“These things do happen. Innocent mistakes. You could call around to your recent guests, see if anyone did it.”

She sat up, sick of thinking about coffee. Harris dropped her foot, and she swung her legs off the bed.

“I could make you some lunch,” he said. “Or run to the store.”

Rachel bit her tongue. She didn't want to snap at him, but he was driving her crazy.

“I don't need you to do anything,” she said at last. “Could we just maybe—”

“First the step and now this!” Harris surged to his feet. “This is deliberate. It's sabotage. And this time, you or the baby could have *died.*” He pulled her into his arms and hugged her hard. “I'm sorry,” he said. “You need to relax. I'm just so damn angry.”

“Yeah. Me too.” It felt good to admit it, to get it out there. She was furious, of course she was, for herself, for her baby. Wretched tears leaked from her eyes, and she could do nothing to stop them.

“I have an idea,” said Harris. “Do you trust me?”

Rachel looked up at him and saw he was smiling, tentatively but warmly. “I trust you,” she said.

“Then, come on.”

He led her downstairs and out the back door, down the long lawn to the beach.

“I didn't bring my swimsuit,” she said.

“Good, because we’re not swimming.” He picked up a pebble. “I want you to throw this as hard as you can. Toss it on out there and yell what you’re mad at, and then let the ocean take it away.”

Rachel took the rock and gripped it in her fist. She still felt shaky from her morning’s ordeal, but one rock wouldn’t hurt. One splash in the ocean.

“I hate Darryl,” she said. “And Cara Levine.”

“Who?”

She tossed the rock in the ocean. It splashed down with a *plop*.

“You’ve got to throw harder, and really yell. Scream it all out, like, uh...” He grabbed a rock of his own and wound up like a pitcher. “That nurse was a jerk,” he roared. “She treated you like crap. I wanted to smack her.” He hurled the rock out hard. It hopped over the waves, and then it was gone.

Rachel laughed. “Yeah, she *was* a jerk. And so were you.”

“Get a rock,” said Harris, and Rachel grabbed one.

“You were a dick,” she screamed. “You just left me hanging! You ran off, talked over me—my mouth works just fine!” She hurled her rock and it ricocheted off the water, straight up in the air and down out of sight.

“I’m sorry,” said Harris. “I was way out of line.”

Rachel grabbed another rock. She wasn’t done. “I’m not *trash*,” she howled. “It’s not wrong that I’m pregnant. I’m a good person, and I deserve—I deserve—” She dropped her rock and doubled over sobbing. Harris caught her and gathered her close, arms wrapped gently around her.

“I don’t get it,” she whispered. “I just can’t believe my mother would do something like this.” The words came out hoarse, raw-edged with grief. “Would she really risk killing me over some mythical treasure?”

Harris flinched and pulled her closer to his chest. “I want to believe she wouldn’t,” he murmured into her hair. “Do you have a will drawn up? Is she going to inherit if something happens to you?”

“That’s just it.” Rachel adjusted her position so she could breathe easier and not smear his shirt with her runny nose. “My mother’s not going to inherit my share. She knows that. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Angry people don’t always behave rationally. Especially when you’re keeping them from something they want.” Harris rocked her gently. “They get carried away. Forget who they’re hurting.”

“Ohhh,” Rachel tried to respond coherently but a sob stole her voice, then another and another until she couldn’t stop crying.

“Sweetheart,” Harris whispered, rubbing her back. “I’ve got you.” Soft kisses peppered the top of her head, and a wad of tissues magically bumped her hand. “Google suggested I keep a clump in my pockets.”

Rachel grabbed them gratefully and pressed them to her face. Harris’s words kept replaying in her mind. “I can’t imagine getting so mad I’d hurt my child.” She pressed her hand to her belly. “She’s supposed to love me. Why doesn’t she? Is there something wrong with me? Some kind of…” More sobs stole her breath and she swallowed against them. “How do I know I won’t be just as bad?”

“Shh.” Harris kept rocking her. “You’ll be an amazing mom. The way you are with your guests, the way you care for this place—the way you took care of a lonely Marine? Are you kidding me? You’ve got more compassion and responsibility in your little finger than your mom has in her whole body.”

Rachel’s tears slowed, and she clung to his words.

He kissed her head again. “You’re strong, Rachel. You can do this.”

“I’m strong,” she quietly repeated. “I can do this.”

“Hell, yeah, you can.” Harris cupped her cheek. “And you also have me. I promise I’ll be here for you and our child. You’re not doing this alone.”

Rachel smiled, pulled his head down, and placed a soft kiss on his lips. “Thank you,” she murmured in between.

His grip on her cheek shifted and he tilted his head to kiss her deeper. Heat exploded through her. She licked his top lip, hungry for more. He opened his mouth, and she slipped her tongue inside. She didn't tear at his clothes, and he didn't throw her down. Instead, they teased and explored, enjoying the gentle intimacy of kissing. In some ways it scared her how good it felt to be held in his arms and kissing him like this, but she refused to overanalyze the incredible, poignant moment.

"I want you," he whispered, then kissed her like he was drowning.

She pulled back just a hair. "I want you too."

He stilled, then in a show of sheer strength, stood straight up with her in his arms.

With a watery giggle, she whacked his shoulder. "Put me down."

"Uh-uh." He shook his head. "You might change your mind and run away. I want you where I can have ample opportunity and time to change it back."

Rachel laughed louder, and Harris laughed with her. It felt great to let go after everything that had happened.

"We have company coming," she said, when her giggles tapered off. "A family of four checking in after lunch—"

"So we'll kiss till they get here, then you'll check them in." He strode for the door, still cradling her tight. "After that, I'll send them sightseeing, to get them out of the house, and feast on your bounty the whole time they're gone." He leaned down and kissed her where her neck met her shoulder. Rachel shivered. That sounded amazing, but...

"Aren't you forgetting your therapy appointment?"

"Damn it." He stopped in his tracks, eyes darkened with frustration. "Fine. I won't be able to worship you like I planned, but I'll do what I can before I go. And I'm still having you for dinner, so count on that." He stole a kiss. "Just promise you won't go anywhere or ingest anything while I'm gone. Otherwise, I might have to drag you along with me."

“I can’t leave,” she protested, secretly enjoying his caveman protectiveness. “I’ve still got my chores to do, from this morning.” She pecked his cheek. “I promise the only thing I’ll put in my mouth will be *you*.”

He set her down, growling. Rachel spotted a paper sticking out of his back pocket, and she reached out and snagged it. “Hold on. What’s this?”

Harris stopped when he saw her unfold it. “I almost forgot. Your mom dropped that when she came by the other day. It went behind the counter, and I forgot about it till today.”

Rachel stared the paper. It took her a second to decipher the squiggles and blobs, but when she did, she burst out laughing anew. “It’s a treasure map,” she said. “With some notes—quite poetic. *Between the sea and an ancient tree*, how about that?”

“That’s interesting,” said Harris, his dry tone suggesting it was anything but. “But I’ve got something, er, *someone* much more pressing to do.” His eyebrows waggled. “Tomorrow we can look at some maps.”

Rachel refolded the paper and slid it back in his pocket, giving his ass a good squeeze as she did. “In the den, you’ll find a whole set of books about the history of the area, and even a few about the pirate in question.”

He raised an eyebrow.

Her cheeks bloomed with heat. “I told you I was obsessed with the story when I was younger.”

“Who am I to judge? I’ve got an obsession of my own.” He then proceeded to show her just how captivated he was with her.

The morning sun bathed the front room in bright, friendly light. Harris sat in the window seat, soaking it up. He'd already picked up the items on Rachel's grocery list, along with a brand-new coffeemaker and a fresh bag of beans. (He might have shown a bit too much aggression destroying the old machine before he chucked it in the trash, but no one saw a thing.) From now on, he'd lock both the machine and the coffee grounds in the apartment at night. Anyone wanting to tamper with either would have to go through him.

With a fresh pot percolating in the coffeemaker he had moved into the den so he'd know for damn sure it wasn't tampered with, Harris continued his research on the pirate's treasure. It was something to do while he waited for Rachel to wake up.

Satisfaction stole through him as snatches of yesterday afternoon replayed in his mind. The moment they'd hit her bedroom, his craving for her had become ferocious. Still, when he'd touched her, he'd found himself wanting to take his time and explore every inch of her, every sound she could make, what made her shiver. Not needing a condom didn't seem like a big deal, until it was—the moment he was inside her and their connection felt *huge*, stronger and more powerful than ever before. He'd only gotten to claim her once before he left for therapy, but she'd attacked him in the middle of the night, so of course he had responded...again and again...

He smoothed his finger down the spine of an aging book that smelled faintly of mold. Its frontispiece was a treasure map, a rudimentary sketch. He slid the book to one side and reached

for another that had a map of its own, comparing the two treasure maps with a scowl on his face. Of course they didn't match. Still, looking was fun, and Rachel's library was extensive. It warmed his heart to explore her secret romantic obsession.

Spreading Tammy Winchester's latest contribution across the table, he scrutinized yet another version of the property's layout with the supposed location of the treasure marked, then he noticed faint writing on a curled corner. Smoothing it out, he blinked at what he found: tiny, scrawled diagrams and hasty-scratched notes, alluding to hidden passageways in the house itself. But that was impossible. He'd been over every inch of this house, and the spatial circumferences of each room were exactly what they should be.

He slapped the paper back down and rubbed the bridge of nose. A headache had begun to form behind his eyes. All the small print in the books was driving him to distraction, to say nothing of the conflicting maps. He needed to walk the property once he was through with his tasks for the day. He had a knack for surveying and understanding land. More than once in his Raider unit, his innate sense of direction had come in handy. It wasn't a trained ability—it was just instinct, one he'd had since he was a kid. He'd always been able to find his way home, to pick the best path based on just intuition...until the day he'd gotten his best friend killed. It'd been *his* instinct that'd had them humping through the forest, and it'd been *his* responsibility to—

Stop. He pressed his palms to his temples, trying to hold it all in. He didn't want to remember the yelling, the chaos. That bright white explosion, hot as the sun.

"No." Curling over the table, he knocked into the books, desperate to shove the visual and auditory replay back into the dark hole where they belonged. Dwelling on the events in therapy was making the flashbacks worse, not better.

"Harris?"

Something touched the back of his head, and he jumped out of his seat, ready to defend himself against all comers. Rachel

backed away from him, hands in the air.

“Rachel,” he croaked, heart pounding in his throat. “You’re awake.” *Duh. Get it together.* He pointed to the coffeemaker in a frantic bid to keep her from seeing the ghosts dancing behind his eyes. He’d rebury the memories—he just needed a second. “I made coffee,” he said, and the words came out steady. “It hasn’t left my sight.”

Her eyes flicked to the new machine, then back to him. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” He attempted a smile while forcing his muscles to relax.

“Hmmm.” She canted her head. “Not very believable, Mr. McCallister, but I won’t press. I’m here if you want to talk.”

Relief helped drain the last of the tension from his flashback, and he straightened up the books to dispel his nervous energy.

Rachel strolled to the coffeemaker and poured herself a cup. “I see you’ve been a busy bee this morning. Besides grocery and appliance shopping, what else have you accomplished?”

“Not much.” He began putting the books away. “Just reading up on the treasure. Now you’re awake and you know the coffee’s safe, I’m going to tackle the trim outside.” He tipped Rachel a wink before he strode from the room. Okay, fine, he fled, but he fled like a *man*, because men fled to work. He marched out to the shed and muscled the long, aluminum ladder to the front of the house.

Buckling on his toolbelt, he climbed the ladder he’d propped against the house. The three second floor guest bedrooms each had their own balconies. Two were facing the ocean, and the other faced the landscaped lawn. Rachel’s apartment sat at the back corner, one bedroom facing the lawn, the other, the ocean. She also had an office she’d converted from a smaller bedroom on the lawn side.

The inspector had marked the loosening trim above the balconies as a safety hazard. An exaggeration, if you asked Harris, but the delicate, lacy-style wood was easy to work with, and nailing it more firmly in place was a quick fix. After

this morning's flashback, he craved the mind-numbing task. It had been a while since he'd had something simple to handle, a straightforward task with simple rules and logic.

Harris was soon lost in his task. He worked his way around the house, from Rachel's apartment along the rear wall, and before he knew it, he was securing the last of the trim. His stomach let out a growl, and he blinked in surprise. *Huh*. The sun was high in the sky, letting him know he had probably missed lunch. At some point, he remembered waving to the nice family checking out. They were on a leisurely road trip, heading to Disney World from Maine before school started in three weeks.

He'd lost track of time, but it was worth it to stand back and see a job well done. He couldn't wait to tell Rachel she could check one more task off the list.

Sauntering inside, he found her in one of the guest rooms, plumping a set of pillows on a freshly made bed. She bent to gather a pile of sheets off the floor, only to startle at finding him in the doorway.

"Oh. Hey." She gestured behind her at the spotless room. "I just finished cleaning up."

"Looks good," said Harris, but he frowned at the tightness around her eyes. "Not feeling good again?"

Rachel sighed and slumped down on the bed. "I swear, this baby isn't satisfied unless I'm constantly queasy."

Harris sat down beside her and stroked her tense back. "Well, then," he said. "We'll just have to see what we can do about that."

Rachel huffed laughter. "Not sure there's much to do, but thanks for the thought."

Harris just smiled. He had a plan, but he'd need a few things from town. "Clear your evening," he said. "I might have a surprise."



“Walk with me.” Harris leaned in the doorway of Rachel’s office. The sun hung low in the sky, and he’d marked two more items off his to-do list, but now it was time to focus on the mother-to-be.

“Huh?” Rachel looked up, bleary, from her computer. She’d been working on marketing, from the looks of her screen, all glamor shots of the building and its private beach. Her eyes had gone glassy from too much squinting.

“You need a break,” said Harris. “And I want to see the property. All those books contradict each other, and I need to see the layout for myself.”

Rachel rubbed her eyes. “*I’ve* seen it. I told you, I know this land like the back of my hand. I searched every inch of it when I was a kid.”

“Then you’ll be my guide.” Harris refused to give up. “If you don’t start moving, the nausea’s going to get worse. You need endorphins to feel better, and walking is a great way to fire them up.”

Rachel sighed, then snapped her shoulders back. “This is your surprise? You’re going to put me to work?”

“The first part is your workout, then you get your surprise.” Harris tried not to smirk, but Rachel made it tough, pouting outrageously and poking out her tongue. When he didn’t budge, she got to her feet.

“All right,” she said. “I’m willing to try anything to keep from hugging a toilet bowl.”

He laughed. “That’s the spirit.”

It didn’t take them long to settle into an easy gait. He hadn’t realized how much property she owned. Beyond the sweep of white beach, her land went on for acres. Trees, tall grass, and what had probably been farmland formed a vibrant green tapestry. As they walked, Harris pointed out landmarks that seemed obvious to him—a lightning-struck stump with a new tree growing through it; a flat, mossy rock nestled into the weeds—that Rachel admitted she’d never noticed.

“You’re really good at this,” she said. Her skin was practically glowing from the exertion of the walk.

“My unit calls me Pigeon. Like a homing pigeon.” He chuckled. “Not the manliest nickname, but they mean it with affection.” He shrugged. “I’ve just always had an affinity for the land, a great sense of direction, and a sixth for—”

His throat closed, and he tried to unlace his hand from hers. Rachel held on tighter and turned him to face her.

“What’s going on? Talk to me, Harris.” She squeezed his hand gently. “I’ve been dumping my burdens on you since you got here. I want you to know you can do the same with me.” She bumped his bicep with her shoulder. “We’re a team, remember?”

Harris swallowed. *A team.* He and his unit, they’d been a team too. And now they were down a man, all because of him.

“Harris?”

He stared at an oak tree spreading high overhead as he fought the visions trying to take over. “I let everyone down the one time it counted most.”

“Harris. What happened?”

He took a deep breath. It caught in his throat. “My last mission,” he said. “My sixth sense crapped out, and it cost my best friend his life.”

Rachel stilled, then she pulled him into the shade of the oak he’d been staring at. She nudged him to sit with her, between its gnarled roots. “Go on.”

Harris tried to get comfortable, but his heart hurt too much. He picked up a fallen leaf and turned it over in his hands. Did he really want to talk about this? He got enough grilling in therapy, but Rachel had a point. It wasn’t fair if he kept this bottled up from her but asked her to confide in him.

He twirled the leaf by its stem. “I can’t tell you everything,” he said slowly, still trying to figure out how much he wanted to share—how much he even *could* share, given that some of the details were still classified. “We were in the Amazon

rainforest, hunting a drug cartel that'd branched out into arms dealing. The jungle was thick, really rough terrain. It was my job to lead us. To find the safest path through the thick vegetation. And I did, until..."

Harris stopped talking. Rachel rubbed his arm. He set his hand on hers and twined their fingers together, an anchor to hold him in the here and now. If he blinked, he'd be back in the deep, humid green, slapping off clouds of tiny black bugs. He could hear his unit, their heavy breathing. That last hasty conference.

"We'd lost the trail," he said. "We were all arguing about where to go next. It's hard to describe. I had an intuition. So I said 'Okay, that way,' and that was that." He dropped his head into his hands and shuddered. Rachel moved closer, but she kept silent.

"I'd give my right arm to go back and pick another path." He focused on Rachel to keep from flashing back there—her sparkly nail polish, a scrape on her hand. "We started moving," he said, tensing as he got to the hardest part. "I should've been leading, but Shawn—my best friend—somehow beat me to the front of the line." Helplessness pulled him down and tried to drown him. "He took my position. I shouldn't have let him. But we were all tired, and the jungle was dense. It would've been noisy, all that shuffling around. So I gave him the nod, and he flashed me this smirk..."

When Harris closed his eyes, he saw that damn smirk. He smelled wet leaves, mud, and rank day-old sweat. He felt an insect biting his neck and dirt in his boots, Rachel's hand gripping his—

Rachel.

Rachel.

Rachel stroked his hand with her thumb, but she still remained quiet, not rushing him or pelting him with questions.

"That was the last time I saw his face. He took two more steps, and *bam*. Fucking IED. They'd buried it in the leaf litter. He never had a chance."

Rachel dropped his hand and wrapped her arms around him, helping to anchor him in reality instead of the nightmare.

“It was my fault,” he whispered. “I chose the path that killed him.” He fought against the numbness trying to close in. Rage rose in its place, and turned inward, a sick, rotten rage that made him want to scream. “It should have been me,” he said.

“Hey.” Rachel forced his chin up. “Don’t say that. If you had died, then our baby wouldn’t exist.”

He turned away, anguished. “Rachel...”

“I’m so glad you’re here, Harris.” She kissed him on his forehead. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

Harris closed his eyes, caught between feeling nothing and feeling everything at once. He wasn’t sure which was worse, blocking the world out or letting it in. Letting *Rachel* in, letting her see him, as flawed and broken as he was.

“Stay with me,” she said.

“I don’t know if...”

She kissed him again, this time on his lips. It was a gentle kiss, more invitation than demand. He felt it as though it was happening to someone else. As though he were watching from outside himself.

One last press of her lips, and then Rachel pulled away. “It’s okay,” she said. “Come inside, and we’ll—”

“No.” Harris pulled her toward him, into his lap. He kissed her back hard, and this time he felt it, the heat of her lips, the catch in her breath. The weight of her body pressed against his. He felt his pain too, his shame and regret, but with it came tentative joy and excitement. Rachel, their baby—they were his too. Part of his life now. Two fresh sparks of hope.

Rachel shifted against him, brushing against his cock. Electricity roared through him, sparking an inferno deep in his chest. He flipped her over and laid her on her back.

“Don’t stop,” she said, and he attacked her mouth, plundering its depths with a newfound ferocity. He needed to feel her,

every glorious inch. Needed to *make* her feel the same fire he did.

She met his fever with her own, tearing at his T-shirt. He wrenched away to rip the damn thing off, then did the same with her tank top and tossed it aside. Her bra was red today, a bright, flaming shade. He jerked down the cups to feast on her breasts, teasing her nipples with the tip of his tongue.

She cried out and arched, digging her nails into his shoulders. The sharp points of pain made him gasp with desire. He nipped her in turn, teeth scraping a nipple, and she made a sound he'd never heard before—a desperate mewling, hungry and hot.

“You like that?”

“Oh, God!”

He savored the taste of her skin as he worked his way down her torso, following the sweep of her floral tattoos. Reds, blues, greens, and purples danced with her movements, a rainbow of color coming to life.

“My fierce fairy,” he murmured, and bit her right hipbone. He unsnapped her denim shorts and pushed them down, revealing red panties as bright as her bra. “So full of life and color. You’re a work of art.” He tugged her panties aside and inhaled her sweet scent. Parted her pink lips and darted his tongue in between. She snatched at his hair and bucked up to meet him, and he licked her from her opening to the tip of her clit. That made her cry out, so he did it again. And again. And again.

He pressed his lips to her slit and hummed deep and low. Rachel gasped and she stiffened all over. A wail broke from her throat, and she clutched his head with her thighs, riding out her orgasm without shame or restraint.

The moment she'd finished, he unzipped his pants, pushed his boxer briefs down, and rubbed his cock on her clit. He caught her eye.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t you stop, or I’ll smack you.”

He plunged inside, and she fluttered around him. Wet heat gripped him hard, and he groaned at the exquisite feel.

“Harder,” she demanded, raising her hips to meet his.

He rolled over, still holding her, and settled her on top. “Go on and ride me. As hard as you want.”

Rachel did as he said. Planting her palms in the dirt on either side of his head, she bent forward and set a blistering pace. She took him deep and hard, like she couldn’t get enough. Her breasts swayed with her movements, and he surged up to lap at them.

Thrusting upwards, he fucked her brutally. She gave as good as she got, grinding her hips in tight circles. They grunted like animals, breaths coming fast. His dick pulsed inside her, and she tightened around him. His balls drew up, his orgasm close.

“Rachel, I’m about to come,” he warned, gutturally.

She cut him off with a cry, and this time, he got to feel her climax around him—a sweet, violent storm milking him dry. His orgasm barreled through him, and he moaned so loud birds flapped off cawing.

Rachel slumped against him, her body dead weight.

Neither one could catch their breath, and she rose and fell with the heaving of his chest. After God knew how long, he heard a small sigh of pleasure, and he opened his eyes to find her smiling down at him, her face full of joy. He couldn’t help but smile back.

“We’re lucky,” she said. “Those birds could’ve taken out their displeasure in a nasty way.” Harris laughed and Rachel laughed along with him. He hugged her tight, savoring the breathless moment.

“That would have royally sucked after such an epic orgasm,” he said, as his laughter died down. “Seriously, you’re amazing. I’m not sure I can keep up with you.”

“Oh really?” She sat up and rocked her hips.

His cock twitched, still semi-hard. He felt it start to rise again, and he grinned unrepentantly. “You’re sexy as fuck. What can

I say? My dick *really* likes being inside you.”

Rachel leaned closer, and her blue hair fanned forward. Harris tucked it back neatly behind her ears. She settled against his hips, and he skimmed his fingers over the tattoos down her ribs.

“Tell me about these,” he said. He traced the petals of an exuberant orange daisy down its curled stem, to a nest of azaleas. “What made you start? Which one was your first?”

Rachel rolled off him and cuddled up close. She bent her leg at an athletic angle—something he’d have her duplicate when he was deep inside her—and tapped a sparrow in mid-flight tattooed on her ankle. “It started as rebellion. I figured I should live up...er, down?...whatever, to everyone’s expectations. But then I found the experience surprisingly empowering.” A blush stole over her face, and she ducked her head. “Sounds stupid, I know.”

“It doesn’t,” said Harris, toying with her hair. “You let them get in your head too much—those folks like, what was her name? Cara Whoever.”

“Levine,” said Rachel.

“What you gotta ask yourself is, who’s she to judge? What makes her so special she gets to decide who you are?” He rose on his elbow to look in her eyes. “I’ve told you repeatedly, I think you’re amazing. I’ve never met anyone as special as you. You’re smart, beautiful, kind. As for your tattoos...” He ran his hand down her ankle to touch the little sparrow. “These tattoos are a part of you. Part of what makes you special. *Of course* it’s empowering to choose them. You’re choosing what people see and that’s sexy as hell.”

Tears glistened in Rachel’s eyes, and she blinked rapidly. “You get it.”

“Some people might look at you and see what they want to see. But these—these are *you*. What you decide to show them.”

“I wish they’d see.”

“I do,” said Harris. “I see color and happiness, plus a whole lot of life. I see strength, and courage. I look at your art and see someone I respect. I’ve always seen that. Right from the start.”

Rachel sniffled, but she was smiling. She reached for her top. Harris grabbed his as well, and they got dressed. The sunset was fading as they headed languidly toward the beach. Something caught Harris’s attention in the dying light, and he paused. “You see that?” He pointed.

Rachel turned to look, but she only shrugged. “See what?”

“It’s a divot in the land.” He led them over and stood beside the indentation. As if the land spoke to him, he knew exactly what he was seeing. “A tree used to be here.”

Rachel smiled wide, her eyes beginning to twinkle. “The one from the map?”

“Maybe someone cut it down. Someone who didn’t want it to be found.”

He gauged how close they were to the beach and her house.

“Or it could’ve been hit by lightning or riddled by rot.”

“*Or* it could’ve been one of the markers.” He bumped her shoulder. “C’mon, I thought you were getting into our treasure hunting adventure? We need to look at those maps again.”

Rachel groaned. “Right now?”

“We could do that,” said Harris. “Or you could have your surprise.”

Rachel smacked him playfully. “It wasn’t the sex?”

“Well, that was *a* surprise, but no. No, it wasn’t.” He led her back to the house and up the porch steps, sliding his hands over her eyes to keep her from peeking.

“Ugh, I can’t see!”

“What, don’t you trust me?”

Rachel just giggled. He guided her inside, leading her to sit down at the big kitchen table.

“Okay, you can look.” He pulled his hands off her eyes, and Rachel gasped.

“What is this, a gift basket? Ooh—is it chocolate?”

“Not exactly,” said Harris, and tugged on the ribbon. It came loose with a soft hiss, and the foil fell away. “It’s kind of a care package. For your morning sickness. See, you’ve got ginger—tea, ale, and chews—plus vitamin B6 and herbal teas. Then there’s saltines for snacking, and lavender oil. You put a drop on a cloth and keep it handy to smell when the nausea hits. They say it helps. And these wristbands—”

“Harris!”

“You wear them, and I guess they do *something*. The lady in the shop said her daughter swore by them.”

Rachel stared at the basket. “You got me all this?”

“Well, it wasn’t Santa.”

She turned to grab him and pulled him down for a kiss.

“You’re the best,” she whispered. “And guess what?”

“What?”

“Once we’ve got the house fixed up, we’re going after that treasure.”

Rachel scraped the last of the poison ivy vines off a healthy, green shrub, tugging them loose with a heavy-duty metal rake. She dragged them out, then shook them from the tines. They'd been flourishing in the bushes without her realizing it. In a way, it was a good thing Mom had called in the inspector. It would've sucked if some kid had found the hazard instead. Still, Rachel wouldn't be sending her a thank-you note any time soon.

She took a moment to breathe and mop sweat off her face. The heat index had hit ninety-two, and still she and Harris were outside working. Three o'clock on a hot Sunday afternoon should've meant napping under an umbrella on the beach or relaxing on the porch with ice-cold sweet teas. But, no. Harris was apparently a glutton for punishment. Rachel herself had an entire house to contend with—beds to change, bathrooms to clean, laundry to do, and the groceries to tackle—but she'd come outside just to be close to Harris.

The past two days, the B&B had been filled to capacity. Some were families visiting Marines stationed on Parris Island. One couple was celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary with a romantic beach getaway. A man on a business trip had chosen her B&B over a chain hotel. His glowing Yelp review had swelled her chest with pride and made her weekend. Thankfully, though, they'd all left by noon. Rachel was exhausted and needed the break—not that she was taking one.

While she was grateful for the business, the downside was that she had barely gotten to spend any time with Harris. He had

opted to continue working on their to-do list while she took care of the guests and saw to the business.

One big thing had happened, though—Harris had moved out of the spare room and into Rachel's bed. It had happened without discussion, by mutual consent: she'd pulled him in by his belt and they'd fallen on the bed. After the lovemaking was done, he'd stayed. And he kept on staying.

Waking up with a man in her bed had been disconcerting... until the first time she saw him peacefully asleep, all the worry and care smoothed out from his face. God, he was gorgeous, and she loved having him all to herself in those moments.

My fierce fairy, he'd called her. On anyone else's lips, it would've sounded goofy. Coming from Harris, it made her feel...seen. It made her feel beautiful, and wanted, and cherished. She loved how it sounded in their most intimate moments. Loved how he accepted everything about her...but her mind kept going back to that possessive *my*. Had he meant she was *his* and not anyone else's? Or had he just been caught up in the moment? It felt like he'd claimed her, but was she reading too much into it? *Gah!* These pregnancy hormones were going to be the death of her.

She used a spray to keep the poison ivy from growing back. It had come packaged with a long plastic hose, and she appreciated how it allowed her to keep her distance. She already had on old sweatpants, a long-sleeve shirt, and gloves just in case she touched the vines or leaves, and this canister allowed her to stay clear. Of course, all her precautions just made her sweat.

She peeled off her gloves and trudged around the house, whipping her long-sleeve T-shirt off to reveal a tank top beneath. Harris had opted to re-stain the front porch today so the new step would match, and she stopped well short of chemical-smelling range. He'd freaked out when she'd offered to help, citing some study about the solvents in the stain causing birth defects. She'd whipped out her own phone to check it out for herself and had discovered the study involved women who worked around stains for a living. But Harris's

jaw had jutted out at a stubborn angle that let her know he wouldn't budge.

She guessed he'd been right—with him on the porch and her on the garden, they'd crossed two items, not one, off their to-do list. Still, she'd missed him, and she waved for his attention.

“Hey! Do you think DIY is an inherited gene?” She raised her voice to be heard over the sprayer.

Harris cocked his head, puzzled, and shut the hose off. “What was that, now?”

“DIY,” she repeated, all but melting in the heat. “I want Ava to be as self-sufficient as possible.”

“Ava?” Harris asked, working the freshly sprayed stain into the wood with a long-handled brush. “Who's Ava?”

“Our child, maybe?” Rachel rubbed her stomach.

He jerked straight up and faced her. “We're having a girl?”

“*Maybe*,” said Rachel. “It's too early to say.”

“But if we are, you've decided on Ava?” A deep crease had formed between his eyes. “Without talking to me? Don't I get a say?”

“I didn't know you wanted one.” Rachel smiled, slightly tense. “I like Ava,” she said. “It sounds sort of regal, like a name for a queen. Why? Did you have something else in mind?”

“Yeah. I did.” His jaw jutted out again. “If it's a girl, I like Isabella, but if it's a boy, I want Logan.”

“Wait, Logan, really?” Rachel didn't know whether to laugh or to smack him. He had to be joking—*Logan*? No way. “Logan? Like Wolverine? Uh-uh. Not happening.”

Harris vaulted over the porch's railing and thumped to the ground. He marched down to meet her. “Emily.”

“Aiden.”

“Jacob.”

“Scarlet.”

“Scarlet?” he sputtered, his skin a vivid shade of red. “Like Miss Scarlet? From *Clue*? You made fun of Logan, but you want to name our child Scarlet?”

“Yes, I do.” She leaned up on her toes and poked him in the chest. “C’mon, this is silly. There are middle names, right? Ava Emily could be nice.”

“So, yours comes first.”

“Well, I’m doing the heavy lifting.” She gestured at her belly, but Harris wasn’t laughing. A cold feeling settled deep in Rachel’s belly. The smile died on her lips, and she took a step back. “I’m sorry—what’s happening here? Are we having a fight?”

“I’m the father,” Harris said. “And you’re cutting me out.” His tone was dry, flat. “Be honest: do you see me as the father or just as your sperm donor?”

Rachel gaped, stunned. Her head felt hot, like she might blow her top, steam pouring out like in a cartoon. She saw red, actual *red*, creeping into her vision. Sperm donor—was he kidding? *Sperm donors* didn’t sleep in her bed.

“And I guess you’ve decided *on your own*,” he hammered, “whose last name our child should have.” His eyes had gone cold, and his gaze bored right through her.

“*My name*,” said Rachel. She realized she was shaking—not with fear, but with rage. She pushed at his chest to get him to back off, but it was like trying to move a brick wall. “She’ll have my name, and what’s wrong with that? You have a problem with Winchester?”

“Fuck, yeah,” he thundered. “This baby’s half mine. That makes her a McCallister. Or him. Whichever. Either way, they should never have to doubt that I claim them as mine.”

Rachel clamped her mouth shut at the last second, cutting off her comeback: *what good is your claim if you’ll be thousands of miles away doing God knows what? Maybe getting yourself killed?*

She spun on her heel and stormed away.

“Where are you going?”

Rachel kept marching toward her car. If she didn't get out of here, she'd say something she'd regret. Part of her wanted to turn on him and let her fears all spill out. Part of her feared what he'd say in response. Did she *want* him to tell her he was retiring from the Marines? Or was she *terrified* he'd tell her he was retiring from the Marines? What *was* wrong with Winchester? Did he think she was trash?

Harris chased after her, boots crunching on gravel. “Rachel, stop.”

She broke into a jog, heading for her car. He dove for the passenger side door just as she hit the button on her fob. Wrenching the driver's side door open, she threw herself in. Harris jumped in, too, and she shot him a glare.

“Get out,” she demanded, slamming her door closed. “I need to be alone.”

“Tough shit.” He slammed his door so hard it rocked the four-door sedan. “You're not driving alone when you're this upset. Frankly, you shouldn't be behind the wheel at all, but far be it from me to have an opinion. You'll just ignore it since I don't matter in your world.”

“And you think sitting there and pissing me off is going to help the little lady drive better?” Rachel jerked her seatbelt on and cranked the engine before roaring out of the driveway, churning up gravel.

Harris latched onto the panic bar above his window and braced his other hand on the center console. “I think I'll do whatever I need to, to keep you from wrapping this car around a tree or killing someone.”

Her tires squealed as she swerved onto a two-lane road, barely in use since the cannery closed ten years ago. She had no desire to hurt anyone, she just needed to cool off.

“Slow down.”

“Stop telling me what to do.” On a long straight stretch, she pressed the gas pedal further. The Elantra shot forward, its four-cylinder engine screaming to keep up.

“Slow the fuck down,” Harris growled, knuckles whitening on the console.

Rachel waited another five seconds, wanting to slow down only when *she* was good and ready, not because Harris demanded it. Then she squeezed the brake pedal, frowning when it felt mushy. She stomped down harder, and her foot hit the floor—but the brakes didn’t engage. Her fury drained out of her, replaced with panic, and she kept jabbing at the useless pedal.

“SLOW DOWN!”

“I CAN’T!”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I’m flooring the brake, and *nothing’s happening!*”

“Christ.” He lunged across the car and seized the wheel. “Don’t touch the gas and grab your headrest with both hands.”

She grabbed for the headrest and accidentally elbowed him in the face. “Sorry,” she gasped. “I’m not touching the gas.”

“Just hold tight, okay? I’ve got you. You’re fine.”

But Rachel didn’t feel fine. Her guts had turned to liquid. Her breath wouldn’t catch. She’d never been this scared, not once in her life. A turn was looming, a sharp right. At the posted speed limit, it’d be perfectly safe. Doing seventy-five, they’d flip like a pancake. Her heart slammed against her rib cage and her stomach turned pinwheels. She choked back a scream, dizzy with terror.

Harris clutched the emergency brake and pulled it up slowly. At the same time, he kept a tight grip on the steering wheel. The Elantra protested, shimmying as it began to slow.

But not soon enough.

They were out of time.

The turn was on them, and Harris bared his teeth. He yanked the emergency brake up all the way and muscled the car into the curve. Rachel’s arm bashed into the window as inertia

worked against them. Squealing tires wailed, and she squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the impact of flipping side over side.

The car shook and drifted, then the pressure keeping Rachel against the window eased. She opened her eyes, stunned to see that they'd made it, the Elantra slowing with every passing second.

Then it stopped. They were safe, idling on the shoulder.

Harris turned the car off, and she burst into tears, too many emotions assaulting her at once. He unclicked her seatbelt and dragged her over the console with clammy palms. The position was awkward and uncomfortable, but she burrowed into his warmth.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she offered over and over into his shoulder. "Thank you. Thank God for you."

He shifted beneath her and she lifted her head to find a cellphone in his hand.

"Nine, one, one," came a voice through the speaker. "What's your emergency and location?"

"Someone tampered with the brakes on our car," said Harris, his voice cool and steady. He tilted Rachel's head up. "Hey. Where are we?"

"Daniels Pond Road," she answered, then peered out the window. "About two miles south of the old cannery."

He repeated the information and asked for the operator to send the police. Then he hung up. "This was overt."

This, meaning someone was trying to kill her.

“**Y**ou seem agitated and distracted, Harris.”

Harris allowed his gaze to wander from the yellowing plant sitting on the radiator to survey the rest of the office. Mid-morning sun filtered weakly through the closed blinds, never reaching the plant on its gloomy perch. Between the lack of sun and obvious overwatering, no wonder it was dying.

Dull, cracked, dented, and worn furniture, compliments of government funding, filled the rest of the depressing space, and Harris couldn't wait until his mandatory hour was done.

“Harris. I said you seem distracted.”

Harris focused on his therapist, sitting attentively in a freshly-pressed uniform. At one point, he'd been a door-kicking, first-one-in tango-chaser, but First Lieutenant Greg Martinez, Ph.D. had chosen a new path. He'd traded his crappy tent for a crappy office stateside, and now here he was, shrinking Harris's head.

“I'm fine,” Harris said, tone carefully even. *Liar, liar*. His frustration was eating him alive. He wanted to scream.

“Master Sergeant McCallister.” Martinez leaned back, adjusting his tall frame in his ugly pleather chair. “You see me three times a week. Have I ever allowed you to bullshit me?”

Goddamn it. He didn't need this on top of everything else. “No, sir.” He gave the only response he could, knowing Martinez outranked him. Martinez, stretched out with his

notepad on his knee, his pen poised above it to capture all of Harris's private thoughts and fears.

The silence dragged on between them, awkward and dry. Harris could wait it out, he guessed, but he'd have to talk some time.

"Last night," he said. His voice caught and he swallowed. "Could I get some water?"

Martinez got him a bottle from the fridge in the corner. Harris took a gulp, then twisted the cap closed. He'd left Rachel to come here. Left her at the B&B, alone. The cops were damn useless—*we'll do what we can. But without prints, without evidence...*

What would it take to get them to act? Rachel's dead body laid out on the road? Her baby, *their* baby, dead in her belly?

We'll question them, don't worry. You got Darryl's last name?

He'd been tempted to go question Darryl himself. But if he'd done that, his fists would have done the talking, he'd probably be in jail, facing dishonorable discharge and God knew what.

"Last night?" said Martinez.

Harris ground his teeth. *Shit.* "I had another flashback last night."

"Were you awake or dreaming?"

"Dreaming." He crossed his arms and pushed back in his chair. "It woke me up, but I remembered enough to know I was reliving the Colombian mission."

The faint scratching of the pen grated on Harris's nerves as Martinez took notes.

"Anything different in the dream from what you remember happening?"

"No," Harris snapped. "I still gave the same orders, and Shawn still paid the price." A pang ripped through his chest, and he sucked in air to keep it from tearing him in two. His damn intuition, his damn pigeon sense. Should've known it was a warning, not a green light.

“Shawn Ramirez was a veteran Marine with just as many missions under his belt as you,” said Martinez. “He broke protocol and charged in first when it was not his place to do so.”

Heat flushed Harris’s skin as fury whipped through him. “I don’t give a fuck. He trusted me to keep him safe, and I got him blown to hell and back.”

“You’re not a divine being, Harris,” Martinez responded calmly, seemingly unbothered by the fact that Harris felt about two seconds from putting a hole in the drywall. “You may have a knack for reading terrain, but only God and the drug cartel knew that IED was planted there. Had you gone first like you were supposed to, it’s likely *you’d* be dead instead of Shawn.”

He opened his mouth to yell, *as it should be*, but Rachel’s voice stopped him, echoing in his head. *If you had died, then our baby wouldn’t exist.*

“You don’t get it,” Harris said instead, his grip on the armrests tightening. “Shawn’s life should never have been sacrificed for mine. I failed my best friend.”

“Or your best friend made a mistake and paid a terrible price,” Martinez retorted softly. “None of your teammates nor your CO blame you for Shawn’s death.” He paused as if letting that settle in, but Harris refused to accept his absolution. He didn’t deserve it. All his life, he’d striven to be the man who fixed things. The man people counted on—that had been him. Like Dad had been, once, working two jobs, then coming home to more work. There’d always some repair waiting around the house—a broken dishwasher, a sparking outlet. Dad had loved his family, and that was how he’d shown it, by keeping the house up so it would be safe and comfortable for them. By doing what he could.

Harris had looked after things, too, with his talent for reading terrain. He’d kept his unit safe a hundred damn times, only to lose big on a hundred and one. He’d let his friend down. Just like he was letting Rachel down. She needed him to keep her safe, but she was still in danger. Darryl or Tammy hadn’t got

what they wanted. That meant they'd strike again, and where was he?

"You can't keep taking on the blame for Shawn's death," said Martinez, pulling Harris out of his spiraling thoughts.

"I think you'll find I can."

Martinez flashed him a half-smile. "What's my policy on sarcasm?"

"Check it at the door."

"That's right." Martinez's smile widened, and for a moment, Harris thought he might ease up. Instead, he continued to hammer at Harris's guilt, then switched it up in the last fifteen minutes to talk about his father. By the time Harris climbed into his car, he felt like he'd gone ten rounds as the punching bag instead of the boxer. And he was still hung up on Rachel. Damn it, couldn't she see? Couldn't she see he was there for her, nailing up trim? Staining her porch? Cleaning her air ducts? Didn't she see what that meant? He was falling for her—for the most amazing, courageous, stubborn, intelligent, savvy businesswoman he'd ever met. It scared him to death, but he wasn't hiding. He was showing her every moment. Why couldn't she see it?

He got in his car and cranked down both windows. The fresh air revived him as he hightailed it off the base. Inhaling deep, he cleared his sinuses of the claustrophobic stench of the psychology building.

Harris took the long way home, over the bridge then through the backstreets, needing the monotonous drive to clear his head. God, that had been rough, that hour with Martinez. They'd talked about Shawn before, and about his dad. They'd even touched on Rachel. But today had been different. Martinez had been relentless.

He stopped for the red light and fished his phone out. If he turned left at the next light, he'd head toward home, but if he kept going straight, he'd hit wide open road.

Tapping Rachel's name in his contacts list, he put the call on speaker.

“Hey,” Rachel answered. “How’d it go with the shrink?”

“Same old, same old,” he said, lying through his teeth. “Just making sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.”

The light turned green and he slowly crept forward.

“I’m still cleaning the rooms from the weekend guests,” she continued.

“Mind if I drive for a bit?” His hand hovered near the turn signal in case she needed him.

“Not at all.” She paused, as if distracted. “You mind picking up more string cheese? I seem to have eaten the whole box.”

“Consider it done.” He pressed the gas pedal. “See you soon.” He hung up and flicked on the radio to drown out the echo of Martinez’s words in his head.

The yellow lines were hypnotic, and he logged mile after mile, hardly noticing the time passing by. The pleasant green scenery soothed the hurt in his soul. Rank farm smells mingled with freshly mowed grass, making him smile for the first time since he’d left the house.

House. Shit. His eyes flew to the clock. *Oh man.* He hadn’t meant to drive for hours.

He pulled a U-turn and sped back to the grocery store, where he tossed as many things as he could remember from the refrigerator list into the cart. The sun was riding low by the time he was done, and he put the pedal to the metal heading back home. He made it in record time. A sense of unease curled in his gut when he rolled into the driveway and noticed that in the parking space Rachel liked to use, someone had parked a navy Honda CR-V. He backed in beside it and hopped out for a look.

“Who the hell...?”

They weren’t expecting any guests, and Rachel would’ve have told him if she’d gotten a last-minute booking. Warning bells rang louder, filling his head. Damn it, he should not have gone

for that drive. He'd left her vulnerable when she needed him most.

He pounded up the porch steps and threw the front door open. "Rachel!"

Footsteps tripped overhead, then he spied Rachel's cross trainers tromping down the steps. "Harris, what's wrong?"

Heart thundering in his chest, he peered down the hall, searching as much of the interior as he could see. "Are you okay? Who's here?"

"I'm fine." She stopped moving. "No one's here but me. Why?"

"Go up to the apartment and lock the door." He lifted his T-shirt and pulled his Glock from its holster. Rachel let out a gasp.

"Is that a gun?"

"It's my personal weapon." He flipped off the safety. Rachel might not like it, but keeping the Glock on hand was non-negotiable, at least until she and their baby were safe. "Call the police."

Her eyes bugged out and she stumbled backwards. "What's wrong?"

"A strange car's parked outside." He turned toward the front door. "Someone's lurking on the property, and I'm going to catch the bastard."

"Stop."

Scowling, he peered over his shoulder.

Rachel slumped down and clasped her hands to her face. "You scared the shit out of me." She exhaled. "Is it a two-year-old Honda CR-V you're talking about?"

Executing a pivot that would make his old drill sergeant proud, he jammed his gun away. "Why, yes, it would be." Fear instantly converted to aggravation, and he just knew he wasn't going to like the explanation.

“It’s mine,” said Rachel. She waltzed around him and was out the front door before he could respond.

“Yours?” He followed behind like a damn dog. “What do you mean?”

Her legs were short, but she could really hustle when she wanted to. In seconds, she was standing by the trunk of his car. “Is the string cheese inside?” She motioned with her thumb. “I don’t want it to spoil in this heat.”

He unlocked the trunk and she smiled at all the bags.

“Oh, you got everything! Is this the whole list? Harris, you’re the *best*.” She went to reach for the bags, but he gently batted her hands away and lifted them himself.

“It’s not good for the baby to strain yourself.”

“A few groceries are hardly a strain.” She rolled her eyes. “And anyway, we’ve got months before I need to start worrying about that.”

Eyeing the CR-V one last time, he led them back into the house. Once they reached the kitchen, he couldn’t wait any longer. “Explain. What do you mean, the CR-V’s yours? The Elantra’s brakes won’t take long to fix.”

But until then, she was without a car, and now he felt even worse for driving so long. He’d left her stranded. “Is it a loaner?” he asked, taking items out of the bag and handing them to her to put away.

“Nope.” She plopped cans into the cabinet. “I was up late last night, spending quality time with the toilet, and my mind started churning. There’s so much to think about with the baby on the way—and one of those things is a newer, safer vehicle.” She took the eggs from Harris and stuck them in the fridge. “Your car is fine for us to share now, but it’s a classic. Safety regulations concerning things like airbags and child locks weren’t around back in 1967.”

She darted around him, grabbing the groceries and tucking them away. He couldn’t argue with the facts, but he felt—he felt *hurt*.

“The Elantra’s been a good car,” she continued, her head in and out of the bags and refrigerator. “But I’ll need something that can haul all kinds of baby stuff. And I should have four-wheel drive in case of emergency. So, I had an Uber drop me off at the dealership. The salesman worked it out with the garage so I can trade in the Elantra. They knocked off the cost of the brake job, but my car was still worth enough that I got a good deal.”

Harris swallowed thickly. Something mean and ugly slithered in his gut. He couldn’t deny she’d made a smart, logical choice. She needed a sturdy, reliable vehicle of her own so she wasn’t dependent on him for transport. But once again, she’d cut him out of an important decision. It seemed like it hadn’t even occurred to her to discuss it with him. She could’ve brought it up last night, or before he left for therapy, but she hadn’t.

He didn’t need the reminder of what triggered their fight yesterday, but she’d slapped him with it anyway. She continued to act like she planned to raise their child on her own.

Pain and hurt warred for dominance in his chest. How did she see his role in her life once the baby was born? Did he rate a recurring role, or just a cameo? Was she only placating him until the therapist released him to active duty?

The knife twisted in his heart. And here he’d been daydreaming about making a home with Rachel, mooning like a smitten fool, while she wasn’t thinking much about him at all.

“I’m going to work out,” he said. “Yell if you need me.”

“Oh, uh, I—didn’t you want dinner?”

Harris shook his head and bolted. He needed to run off his anger before it came bursting out. The last thing he needed was a screaming match with Rachel.

Rachel hummed along with the song blaring in her earbuds. She had gotten so much accomplished this morning, she felt on top of the world. Harris, too, seemed to be bursting with energy. He'd worked out so long and hard last night, she'd fallen asleep before he climbed into bed, and he was already doing pushups on the beach when she woke up.

Folding the last of the freshly laundered sheets from the weekend, Rachel stuffed them in the linen closet and slid the door shut. The bedrooms reserved for tomorrow's guests were ready to go. The grandmother and granddaughter would each have a room facing the ocean. They'd be staying two nights, which was a nice chunk of change—ding-ding for the baby fund. Rachel grinned wide, then she winced as her nausea kicked in.

Eating protein and staying active had helped a lot, as has Harris's basket of treats, but she still had her moments. If this gurgling continued, it would soon sour her morning.

She found a chair and sat down, taking a few deep breaths. The nausea passed, which was a relief, because she had big plans for today. She'd signed up on the waiting lists for a few local daycares, ordered new hair dye from her favorite website, changed the socket plates in the kitchen, and caulked the guest showers. Her massive to-do list had shrunk to a stub, which left her day free and clear for the treasure hunt she'd promised Harris. Something to take his mind off the specter of Darryl.

Heavy clomping caught her attention—Harris on the stairs. Something thudded on the wall, then the footsteps continued to the apartment. Harris must be hauling up the furniture they'd picked out for the nursery. Normally, new parents waited until the baby shower before buying furniture and stuff for the baby, but Rachel had no illusions. No one in this town would be throwing her a party. So, they'd decided to shop together online. Some of the furniture was a no-brainer, but how they wanted the room to look was harder. They had no clue if they were having a boy or a girl, and that made it tough to compromise on the theme.

"Cowboys are gender-neutral," Harris had said.

"Then why are they *cowboys*, not cowboys and girls?"

"We could get cowgirls. Or, how about just cows? A barnyard theme, with a pile of stuffed animals."

Rachel chuckled at the memory, and her stomach sort of... tickled. Was the baby reacting to her laughter?

Calm down. It's only the size of a peanut. It's not doing backflips. But it sure felt like it was. Smiling, she got up and went looking for Harris.

"Wow," she exclaimed, drifting into the bedroom that would soon be a nursery. The whole space was empty, apart from the boxes of furniture. "You cleared everything into the carriage house by yourself? I'd have helped if you had asked."

Harris straightened from plugging in the vacuum. Sweat glistened on his bare chest and his hair was still damp. He obviously hadn't showered yet after his workout.

"Take a picture," he said, catching her staring. "It'll last longer."

Rachel smirked. "But the live show's so...shiny."

"You want a live show? I'll give you a show." Winking, he flexed for her and did a slow turn. Rachel's mouth went dry, and she licked her lips. His body was sculpted, bronzed from the sun. Taut muscles gleamed, hard and defined. A dusting of red hair sprawled across his chest. Rachel wanted to touch it. Wanted to—

“Keep looking at me like that and you’ll find your back against the wall.”

Rachel slid closer. “How about the shower wall?” She bit her lip, her whole body thrumming with anticipation. “Wanna get wet with me? All soapy and—*EEK!*” She squealed as he scooped her up into his arms, giggled as he marched her through to the bathroom. Within moments, they’d discarded their clothes, and her back hit the shower’s tiled wall just like he’d promised. Then she dropped to her knees and swallowed him whole.

“Rachel! Oh God...”

She reached up behind him and turned on the water. It came on cool and refreshing, and she felt Harris shiver. Sliding back up his length, she teased the slit with the tip of her tongue. His fingers burrowed into her hair and he gripped her head hard. She flattened her tongue to taste his salty precum, then wrapped her lips around him, teasing with her teeth as she swallowed him deeper. She could feel his hips twitching as he tried to hold back. Then his control broke, and he let out a growl.

“Ah, fuck.” He thrust his hips forward and tightened his grip on her hair. She tilted her head back and let him fuck her throat. His cock throbbed and jumped, and she knew he wouldn’t last long.

“Rachel!”

She sucked him down harder and felt his hips stutter. Cupping his balls, she rolled them in her palm, tickling with her fingertips, thumbing his taint.

“Shit, Rachel,” he groaned, his grip on her hair tightening nearly to the point of pain. His other hand slapped against the tile. “I’m about to come.”

She fluttered her tongue, then took his cock deep.

Jets of his orgasm hit the back of her throat. He shouted and shuddered, thrusting himself through it.

Rachel licked him through the aftershocks, then rocked back on her heels, peering up at him with a huge grin on her face.

His eyes, dark with barely sated lust, glittered under heavy lids.

“Your turn,” he said, when he’d gotten his breath back. Hauling her up, he made good on his promise. They kept at it until the water ran cold.



Rachel meandered along beside Harris, her body so loose and *satisfied* she wished she’d asked him to take a nap with her instead of dig for treasure. Her large-brimmed straw hat helped block out the sun, and the ocean breeze kept her from melting in the heat.

Harris was carrying their shovels, and he jabbed them into the ground with each step like a cross-country skier without the skis...or the snow. They’d come close to bickering over whether Rachel was allowed to dig, but she’d been in too good a mood to let Harris ruin it. She’d simply grabbed the shovel off the wall and walked out of the carriage house. Harris had caught up to her and offered to carry it. That seemed a fair compromise—she got to do some light manual labor; Harris got to be chivalrous on the walk.

Heading down the beach toward the spot where the tree had been, Rachel was surprised to find herself enjoying Harris taking the lead. It was nice to let go and let someone guide her for a minute.

“This is it.” Harris stopped, his gaze darting between the ocean, the house, and the green divot where the tree had once stood. “Those maps were all terrible, but they made reference to the treasure being around a tree. Assuming this was it, we should dig around here.”

Excitement sparked in Rachel’s belly, and she couldn’t stop beaming. “This is so cool. I can’t believe we might actually find something.” Her voice shot up at the end, and Harris chuckled.

“I mean, we might not, but it’s worth a shot.” He grinned, and warmth flooded Rachel’s chest. She hadn’t realized how much

she'd missed that wide, easy smile. It'd been days since she'd seen it break through the clouds.

"Keep doing that," she said.

He frowned. "Doing what?"

"Smiling and laughing. Makes me want to smile with you... and maybe undress you."

Harris's eyebrows shot up, but his grin came back with a vengeance. "I'll keep that in mind." He passed her a shovel and gripped his own with both hands. "Okay, here goes nothing."

Rachel's whole body tingled as he started to dig. She'd meant to pitch in with him, but she couldn't stop staring at the way his muscles rippled with the stretch of his back. Cords stood out on his forearms, and his calves bunched up taut. She'd just gotten through slaking her lust in the shower, but his ass in those shorts had her craving him again.

A seagull cried overhead, rousing her from the fantasy ramping up in her mind. She shook her head to clear it and pushed her own shovel into the soil.

Harris glowered at her. "Stop that."

She ignored him and kept going. The physical work felt good, though she didn't have the strength to slam the shovel in very far. It didn't take long to find a peaceful rhythm. Her arms burned with the repetitive motion, but she refused to make Harris do all the work. The joy was in hunting for treasure *with* Harris, not acting like he was her minion.

The sun rose in the sky and the morning got hotter, but soon they'd cleared a hole about three feet long, going about two feet deep. Harris drove his shovel in again, and—

Thunk.

Harris froze. Rachel dropped her shovel, then scurried to his side. "We found it!" She hovered, eager, as he dug in again, carefully this time, scraping away dirt. His shovel made a hollow sound on something underneath.

"I can't believe it," he murmured.

Rachel trilled and clapped.

Harris kept digging, excavating more dirt. He'd discarded his T-shirt, and sweat poured down his back. Rachel retrieved his shirt and swiped his forehead, wanting to do something to help.

"Find the edges," said Rachel, and grabbed her shovel to help. She probed around, cautious. The buried wood felt spongy.

"It could just be the tree trunk," said Harris. "Or part of its roots."

Rachel didn't think so. She redoubled her efforts. Harris did, too, and fifteen minutes later, they'd uncovered a small chest. *An actual pirate chest!* Rachel dropped her shovel.

"I can't believe it," she said.

Harris slid an arm around her, and together, they stared at the dirt-encrusted wooden box. Nothing about it seemed special or fancy. In fact, it looked flimsy, cheap and decayed. If a strong breeze hit it, it'd probably fall apart.

Harris let out a snort. "Not quite your Hollywood pirate chest, is it?"

"I know, right? No padlocks. No chains. Not even a curse?"

Harris nudged her. "There *could* be a curse."

"You open it, then. I don't need—"

A loud *crack* rang out, like a branch breaking. Rachel half-turned, and the sound came again. She clutched her heart.

"What—"

The air rushed from her lungs in a hard, painful *whoosh*. She blinked up at the sky from flat on her back. For a moment, she lay there, uncomprehending, then loose dirt rained down on her and she understood. Harris had thrown her into the hole. Her back hurt, her head hurt, and she groaned at the bruise that was sure to be forming on her shin. She'd hit it on something on her way down.

"What the hell?" she muttered. She raised herself on one elbow and let out a groan. The chest had tipped over when

she'd crashed down beside it, and it was digging into her leg. She pushed it off and peeked out of the hole. Harris was darting between the trees like a ninja...or, she supposed, a highly trained Marine.

Sunlight glinted off his handgun, and her skin prickled with terrified goose bumps. Adrenaline coursed through her. What the hell happened? Had those sounds been gunshots? Mom wouldn't do that...but clearly *someone* would.

Harris vanished from sight and Rachel felt her heart plummet. She desperately wanted to call him back. Grabbing her discarded shovel, she dragged it into the hole, and she clutched its handle till her fingers went numb. No way would it protect her against a bullet, but she couldn't just lie there without *some* kind of weapon.

"Rachel." Vibrations thundered against the ground, running footsteps. Rachel poked her head up at Harris's voice.

"Harris! Are you hurt?"

"I'm good. You?"

She flew out of the hole and into his arms. "You're safe. I thought..."

Harris swooped her up and cradled her tight. "You sure you're not hurt? I didn't mean to toss you, but I needed to get you out of the shooter's sights."

"I'm okay. Just bumps and bruises." She hugged him as tightly as he held her. "I kept thinking *you* were hurt. I couldn't see where you went, didn't know what you were running into."

"I'm fine," he rumbled, raining kisses her head. "I found this over there." He pointed toward the house, then he opened his hand.

Dizziness made her drop her head on his shoulder. On his palm was a spent bullet casing.

"The shooter was gone by the time I figured out the trajectory."

"It wasn't my mother," Rachel wheezed. "She can't stand guns."

Harris didn't react. She peered up at him and found his attention riveted on something on the ground.

Oh God. What now? She lowered her gaze.

In her bid to get to Harris, she'd kicked the chest open. It was empty—or *nearly* empty. An old, ratty scrap of fabric lay inside. Looking closer, she saw that it was leather, studded with brass. She pulled it out carefully, between thumb and forefinger, and a round metal tag dropped between her feet. Harris picked it up and rubbed it clean with his thumb.

"Bonesy," he read.

"Seriously?" she snapped, fear and adrenaline spiking in her veins. "We were shot at for this?"

"Let's go," said Harris, and began marching toward the house.

"Wait. Shouldn't we grab the shovels? Refill the hole?"

"Please," he said, and the word came out shaky. Rachel saw he was trembling, now that the crisis had passed. "I just need to hold you. I could have lost you. I need to feel you safe and close."

Rachel swayed, feeling dizzy, and reached for his hand. "Okay. You're right. I need to feel you safe and close too."

Harris got his arm around her and steadied her on her feet. They hurried inside, and he helped her sit down, cuddled into the blankets on the entertainment room's sofa. He dialed 911 with one hand and pulled her to him with the other.

While he spoke with the emergency dispatch, Rachel's terror ran rampant. She could have died—but what really scared her was that she could have lost *him*. A new crystal clarity stripped her of the blinders she'd been wearing, leaving one truth behind. One stunning revelation.

She was falling in love with Harris McCallister.

“Thank you so much for staying at Winchester Manor Inn.”

Rachel followed the grandmother and granddaughter to the edge of the freshly stained front porch. Harris had done an incredible job. The front of the old plantation-style house had never looked so good.

“Your bed-and-breakfast is beautiful,” the grandmother effused, pausing on the sidewalk. “I wish we had more time so I could poke around and soak up its history. We’ll definitely be back.”

Rachel’s heart grew ten sizes just like the Grinch’s as she stood on the top step and waved them down the drive. It was moments like this that made it all worth it—all the hard work, the mortgage, the drama.

Closing the front door behind her, she glanced at the clock on the foyer’s credenza. Harris should be back in ten minutes. He had switched his therapy appointment to earlier than initially scheduled in hopes she wouldn’t have to spend any time alone in the house, but the grandmother had wanted an early start on their trek back to southwestern Alabama.

Since the shooting, Rachel hadn’t been able to relax. Harris hadn’t, either. He’d been like a caged tiger. The police had no new leads and as of last night, they were still looking for both Tammy and Darryl to question.

Clomping up the steps, she debated whether to hop in the shower now or wait for Harris to come home...*home*. Shit. As much as she reminded herself that he was going back to active

duty soon—deploying to God knew where on life-threatening missions—she couldn't stop picturing him here with her, building a life together. Like a real family. Like someone she could grow old with.

Her heart thumped hard. Last night had been like a preview of what could be, all her fondest dreams coming to life. Harris had helped make dinner, then insisted on serving. He'd carried all the food to the buffet table while Rachel sat at the table like an honored guest. He'd poured everyone's drinks, pulled out everyone's chairs—Rachel's, the grandmother's, and the granddaughter's. He'd anticipated their every need. Rachel hadn't had to get up once. And, like the ice cream he'd served her for dessert, Rachel had felt her heart melting, her walls tumbling down.

With every minute they spent together, she was falling more in love. She couldn't stop dreaming about the life they could have, if only he'd stay rather than returning to the service. They could run this place together. He'd proven he could do it. His DIY skills outstripped hers by a mile. She was better at cooking, but he was great with yardwork. And they both had a talent for charming the guests. It could all be so perfect. So beautiful. So right.

What if it wasn't just their child who took his last name?

Stop it. She physically shook herself.

"You're dreaming," she said, aloud. "Next stop after Dreamland is Heartbreak City." She ducked into the nursery, weaving her way through the pile of baby crap that was growing exponentially. She wasn't sure how they were going to fit it all in. And before they even tried, they'd have to finish decorating the walls, which meant agreeing on a theme for the room. Cowboys or farm animals? *Treasure Island* or *Toy Story*? None of it felt quite right.

She set her hand on her belly. "What do you think? You like pirates? Me neither. I'm pretty mad at them, actually."

"Sweetheart?" Harris yelled from below. "You okay?"

“I’m upstairs,” she shouted, moving into their bedroom. *Their* bedroom, God. She was in serious trouble.

Heavy boots pounded up the stairs, then Harris appeared in the doorway, pecs bulging through his shirt. “Thought I heard you up here. Were you talking to someone?”

“Myself,” Rachel said, ducking to hide her blush. When she looked up, she caught Harris drinking in her body, and she took a moment to do the same to him. Muted sunlight caught the red in his hair. He’d let it grow out some, and it was getting shaggy. Beautiful. She loved how he kept putting off shaving it to military standards and secretly hoped he’d wait as long as possible.

Moving closer, he smiled at her. “You weren’t here alone long, were you?”

“Nah.” She pulled fresh panties from the drawer. “How did your appointment go?”

He grimaced. “A nonstop party.” A twinkle appeared in his eye. “Among other things, we *may* have talked about you. I lobbied for you to have to see him too.” He sauntered closer. “Your insistence on hijacking my mind with your stunning fairy fierceness is cause for concern.”

“You sure you have a mind to hijack?” she shot back, dodging into the bathroom as he pounced to catch her.

“That’s cold, Winchester.” He darted after her and crowded her against the sink. “I wish I could go with you to your doctor’s appointment.”

Smoothing her hands up his pecs, she met his eyes. “I wish you could too. But everything’s *fine*.” She took his hand in hers and pressed it to her belly. “I’m still getting morning sickness. Google says that’s a good sign.”

“And everything feels good? You’re not dizzy? No fever?”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “Don’t borrow trouble. This is just a precaution, after all we’ve been through, to confirm that everything’s still on track.”

“Any chance we could find out the sex today?”

Rachel laughed. “Sadly, no. That’s a ways off yet.”

“And you’re sure you don’t need me there?”

Rachel shook her head. “Better not. With Mom and Darryl still out there, someone needs to be here to guard the property. I wouldn’t put it past them to show up with a backhoe. Or burn the whole place down, just out of spite.”

Harris pulled her to him and nuzzled her neck. “I’m feeling intensely growly at being left behind. Might need some extra loving to soothe my broken heart.”

“You got that this morning.” She tilted her head to give him easier access. “And I need to shave my legs and *other* areas. You’ll just be in the way.” Her fingers burrowed into his hair, holding him in place.

“Cruel,” he muttered against her skin, then licked a trail up to her ear. “Leaving a man with a raging hard-on and no relief.”

She wrenched away and turned on the shower’s faucets. “Is something wrong with your hand?” Stepping into the spray, she laughed at his muttered curses.



“I’ll tell you all about it when I get home,” said Rachel, poised half-in and half-out of her new CR-V. “But I can’t drive while I’m on the phone.”

“You could put it on speaker.”

“Or you could be patient.”

Harris chuckled, and Rachel did too. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll get off the line. But hurry up and get home already. I’m climbing the walls.” Something metal and glass crashed in the background. “Seriously? Goddammit.” More glass tinkled. “You didn’t really like the chandelier in the dining room, right? Great.” He kept going as if she’d answered. “We can now buy a new one.” He blew out a breath. “Please hurry. I can’t concentrate until I know you’re safe.”

Warmth settled inside her, and Rachel clung to the feeling. To have someone waiting at home was a novelty. To have him so worried about her that he couldn't function was downright breathtaking. And scary as shit, given how up in the air the future seemed to be.

“Well, you're right—I never liked that chandelier. I've had my eye on a new one for weeks.” She didn't mention that the one she wanted was out of her budget. It looked like she'd be getting it regardless. Stupid inspector, adding the old chandelier's ancient wiring to his list. She slammed the door shut and buckled her seat belt. “You'll see me in fifteen minutes.”

“One minute more and you'll find me tearing up the roads in search of you.”

She hung up, and exactly fourteen minutes later, she pulled into the B&B's driveway.

The front door flew open.

Before she could even get the keys out of the ignition, Harris had yanked her door open, pulled her halfway out, and kissed her hello.

“There,” he said. “That's done. Now, is everything okay?”

Rachel nudged him back and got out of the car. “The baby is healthy and strong, and so am I. *The picture of health* was how the doc put it.”

His shoulders slumped, and he entwined his hands with hers. “Thank God. I was worried.”

“Well, you don't have to be.” She led him into the foyer, lifting her chin to enjoy the air conditioning. “Now we can focus on what's important. On—”

“On what?”

Rachel swallowed. If Harris didn't feel the way she did, this could go badly. She'd been riding a high on her drive home, flush with good news and anticipation. But now Harris was here, fixing her with those gorgeous, expectant eyes. What if she asked him, and he said no?

“Rachel?”

“On us,” she said cautiously. Harris frowned for a moment, and her heart cracked apart. Then he grinned widely, and it knitted back together. A naughty gleam replaced the worry in his eyes.

“So, we’re headed upstairs?”

Rachel laughed. “Yes, we are, but not how you’re thinking. We’re getting changed, and then we’re going on a date. I’m taking you to my favorite place in the whole world.”

“Oh, yeah? Where’s that?”

“Get changed and find out!” She bounded upstairs ahead of him, her heart light as air. He hadn’t rejected her. Hadn’t pushed her away. Harris was into this, racing hard at her heels, catching her when she stumbled at the top of the stairs.

“Give me a clue, at least. How dressed up do you need me?”

“Jeans and a button-up shirt will do. It’s not super-fancy.”

Harris was soon dressed and waiting downstairs. Rachel took a little longer picking her outfit—a pretty blue sundress with a flared floral skirt; blue sandals to go with it. She didn’t have time to curl her hair, but she pinned it back with a barrette decorated with silk flowers. Was it too much, she wondered? He’d never seen her in anything but tank tops and shorts, jeans in the winter. Nothing like this.

She took a deep breath and pushed down her nerves. If they were going to make a go of this, he’d need to love her in *anything*, ball gown or hospital gown, bikini or bathrobe. She picked her way down the stairs, shaky on her heels, and—

“Oh, my God. You’re an *actual fairy!*” Harris darted toward her, but he stopped short. “I want to grab you and kiss you, but I might mess you up.”

“One kiss should be fine.”

Harris grabbed her and dipped her, kissing her deep and long. By the time he let her back up, her head was spinning. She clung to him, laughing, having never felt so wanted. Then they

were racing to her CR-V, Harris playing twenty questions, trying to guess their destination.

“You won’t get it,” said Rachel, as she passed the old cannery. “It’s sort of a secret. Locals only.”

Harris made a huffing sound, but he eventually subsided. Soon, Rachel pulled into a wide parking lot.

“There’s nothing here,” said Harris.

“Oh, ye of little faith.” Rachel headed toward the hiking trails. “It’s not far,” she said. “I promise it’ll be worth it.” She led him up a narrow path canopied by trees, dappled sunlight filtering through the leaves. Birds chirped, bugs droned, and water bubbled.

“I hear something—a creek?” said Harris.

“Through here.” She pulled him down an older trail, dim and overgrown. She could smell the water, running clear and fresh. Then the trees parted, and she could see it as well—the deep, pool topped by low waterfalls, three of them cascading one into another. Harris sighed behind her, soft and full of awe.

“This is your favorite place?”

“In the whole world.”

“But...” He cocked his head, frowning. “Why’d we have to dress up?”

“Because I wanted to,” said Rachel. “I wanted to wear something nice for you.” She winked. “That, and we’re getting lunch after. We ought to look good for that.”

Harris looked about curiously, taking in the scene. He went down to the water’s edge and tested it with his fingers, then pulled off his shoes and socks and let his feet dangle in. “It’s so peaceful,” he said. “Magic, almost.”

Rachel sat next to him and leaned up against him. “I used to make wishes here.”

“And did they come true?”

“Sometimes.” She’d wished for Mom to stop drinking once, when she’d been about ten. It had come true for a month or so

—Mom had gotten a DUI. She'd lost her car, copped a huge fine, and started going to AA. That had been a good month, but then Mom had slipped. *Relax*, she'd said. *I can stop if I want to*. If that was true, then she hadn't wanted to, not then, not ever.

"Rachel," said Harris, his voice low and hushed.

"Sorry," she said. "I was just—"

"No, Rachel, *look*." He pointed across the water, and Rachel's breath caught. There, in a sunbeam, danced a cloud of black wings, dotted with delicate blues and greens.

Fairies, she thought. But, no. These were butterflies, jewel-like black swallowtails. She gazed at them wide-eyed, entranced by the sight. Harris found her hand and twined his fingers with hers.

"I've never seen so many in one place."

The cloud dispersed, came together, and fanned out again. They fluttered close, all around them, and Rachel laughed with delight. She held out her free hand, hardly daring to breathe.

"No way," whispered Harris.

The butterflies came nearer, flitting so close she felt the breeze from their wings soft on her skin. Rachel's vision went blurry and she blinked back tears—tears of joy and surprise and startled wonder.

"It isn't this place that's magical," said Harris. "It's you." He turned to watch the butterflies. Then, he said something that made Rachel's heart leap.

"Let's come here again. All three of us. Every year."

The butterflies flitted away, and Rachel's spirits soared with them. *Every year*—did that mean he wanted this too? The three of them? A future?

Had her wish come true?

Harris filled the roller with more paint from the tray, then applied it to the wall he'd prepped after Rachel fell asleep last night. *Shish. Shush. Shish. Shush.* With even strokes from the long-handled roller, pale green covered the white from floor to ceiling.

He stopped and stared for a moment, overcome with emotion. Holy shit. *Holy shit.* He was about to become a father. Him. A father. He was painting the room where his child would sleep. Where *his child* would play, maybe say its first word. The reality of the situation was hitting him hard.

He loaded his roller again, full of terror and elation. What the hell did he know about being a father? If his kid got bullied, what would he do then? He couldn't beat up the bullies, because they'd be kids too. Teach his kid to throw down? Rachel would kill him.

There came the terror again. What if he screwed up and scarred his kid for life? What if he or she wanted to be a Marine? Could he honestly stand by and allow it, knowing the atrocities they'd witness, the violence they'd face? But not supporting his kid's choice would make him an asshole, and he couldn't allow that either.

Shish. Shush. Shish. Shush. He hoped like hell Rachel knew what to do. If their kid grew up to be even a little like her, Harris would count that as a win.

He'd tried calling his brothers, hoping for reassurance, but Lee hadn't answered. Chance had, but he'd taken the opportunity

to ratchet up Harris's anxiety by reminding him just how horny they'd been in high school. *Imagine it's a girl—remember senior prom?* Harris shuddered again, because yes. He remembered. His daughter wouldn't be dating until she graduated college. Neither, for that matter, would his son. *Lock the kid up. That should work great.*

He took a deep breath, then a few more. If he ignored the paint fumes, the repetitive motion was kind of like therapy, the long strokes of the roller providing a slow, soothing rhythm. Painting was also a great way to show Rachel how much he loved her, without putting her on the spot with words. He wasn't sure he was strong enough to see her reaction to that particular confession, at least not until he knew she felt the same.

Shish. Shush. Shish. Shush. Yesterday evening, when Rachel had gone to the kitchen to throw a simple dinner together—even though he offered to order a pizza—he had snuck in a phone call to the hardware store and bribed the store manager to meet him at the crack of dawn this morning. Instead of heading out for his run, he had met the manager at the store, his phone full of photos from his date with Rachel.

“I want a room like this,” he'd said.

“What, full of plants?”

“No—no. The colors. The sunlight, the green. It's for my kid's nursery. It's gotta be right.”

The guy had slapped Harris's back in enthusiastic congratulations, then helped him pick and mix gallons of paint. Harris had then crept back into the house with two different shades.

The first was the soft, pale green that would cover three walls. The second was a yellow as bright and vibrant as Rachel herself and would light up the wall where the crib would go. He could see it already in his mind's eye: a cozy, home version of Rachel's happy place. She'd love it, he thought. Hoped.

“Ohhh.” A loud exclamation shattered the quiet.

Harris set down the roller and turned around. Rachel was riveted, taking in his work. He couldn't tell from her slack jaw if she was horrified or thrilled, so he slapped on a smile and stood up.

“Surprise.”

“It's gorgeous,” breathed Rachel. She was radiant. Glowing. “That color's amazing. Like spring leaves. So...rich.”

“You like it?” He grinned, relief making him giddy. Part of him had been worried she'd hate it, or that she'd blast him for leaving her out of the decision-making process.

“It's perfect,” she murmured. “My dream nursery.” Her eyes strayed to the partially painted wall. “Thank you, Harris. I mean it. For so much. Just...thank you.” A look passed over her face that had his heart thumping loudly. He wanted to call it love, but he couldn't let himself hope. Just because he was falling fast didn't mean she was too.

“That's not all,” he said, a little hoarsely. He pulled an unopened paint can toward him and popped off the lid. “I got this yellow for the back wall, where the crib will go. I thought it'd be—”

“Like sunlight.” Rachel was beaming.

“Like the sun by the fairy pond, y'know, from our date.” He pulled out his phone and showed her the pictures. “I told the paint guy I wanted leaves and sunshine. I wasn't sure he could do it, but...”

“You did great.” Rachel stretched up on tiptoe and cupped the sides of his face. She kissed him slow and gentle, palms soft on his cheeks. He could feel her heart beating when she pressed up against him, and his own pulse picked up to match its rapid patter.

“I love it,” she whispered, and his whole body ached. It was so close to *I love you*, just off by one word. He worked his fingers through her silky blue hair, down the line of her back and the curve of her hips. She was glorious from top to bottom, full of color and life. He bent to kiss the chrysanthemum tattooed on her shoulder, and his heart sang *I love you* as his lips grazed

her skin. He drew breath to say it, but what came out was “I want you.”

Rachel gasped harshly and pushed up his shirt. She nipped his right pec, pain and pleasure at once, then kissed down his torso, across his tight abs. Her hand found his hard length and caressed it through his shorts, the pad of her thumb grazing over the slit.

He inhaled a sharp breath through his teeth. “Rachel...”

She winked up at him, wicked. “What do you want?”

“Your mouth,” he managed.

“My mouth? Tell me where.”

Harris made a feral sound. Rachel lowered his zipper and unbuckled his belt, popped his shorts open and let them drop to the floor. They landed with a hard *thump* and Harris felt her flinch. She’d forgotten the gun he kept holstered at his back.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t apologize for protecting us.”

His dick twitched at the hot puff of Rachel’s breath. She ran her hand up his thigh and cupped his balls, fingertips tickling, the sensation almost too much. Then her wet mouth was on him, tongue massaging his shaft. He groaned and thrust his hips. Rachel moaned around him. The vibration nearly tipped him over the edge.

“Wait,” he said.

Rachel glanced up, brows knit in confusion.

“I won’t last,” he said, and pushed her back gently. “I don’t want to come like this. I want to get there together.” Lifting her T-shirt, he caressed her nipples through her bra. They firmed up tightly, and he felt her shiver. Gooseflesh rose down her arms, and he soothed it away. He lowered her to the drop cloth spread out on the floor and stretched out on top of her, careful not to crush her. Rachel arched up to meet him.

“Harris...”

He unhooked her bra and bent to tease her nipples with his mouth. Rachel reached down to dispose of her shorts and panties. He snaked his hand past hers and found her freshly shaved—smooth, slick and yielding under his touch.

“Christ.” He stared down at her luscious pink slit. “You are a fucking fantasy.” He smoothed his hands up her thighs, but stopped just shy of her core. She spread her legs and he growled. “So wet for me, my fierce fairy, but I think we can do better.”

He tracked his tongue up her left thigh, skimmed her clit, then darted away.

“Tease,” she pouted.

He did the same thing again but with her right thigh.

“Harris,” she growled.

“Still not quite there...”

He flicked his tongue on her clit, again and again, light, skimming licks that made her quiver and shriek. Her desperate cries went straight to his cock, and he couldn’t wait much longer to plunge deep inside.

“Please.” She gripped his hair, dragging him up. He pretended to resist, then let her take charge, hauling him up for a deep, bruising kiss.

“You think you’re ready?” he whispered, and *God*, he was hard.

“Yes,” she cried, raking her nails down his back.

He bumped her legs wider apart to make room for himself, and then he was in her, thrusting deep, pleasure spooling tighter and tighter. Rachel ground up against him, pistoning her hips. Harris matched her rhythm, burning with want. He felt it when she came, that tight, needy clench. He heard her as well, screaming his name.

“Again,” he growled, picking up speed.

“Again? I—I can’t...” Rachel clung to his shoulders.

“I think you can,” he said, and lapped at her ear. Her eyes fluttered shut.

“Harris—Harris—”

He pounded her hard, and his own climax neared, a wave cresting inside of him, an unstoppable force. Rachel was squirming, pulling his hair. Her hips bucked up twice, and he felt her cum again. The force of her pleasure dragged him over the edge, and he collapsed in her arms, riding out the storm.

“That was amazing,” whispered Rachel, when she got her breath back.

Harris, still breathless, grunted his agreement.

“In the baby’s room—shame on us.”

“I’m not ashamed.” Harris rolled off her and sprawled on his back, staring up at the ceiling. It should be yellow, too, or pale blue with clouds.

“I was thinking,” he said. “We haven’t been on the same page with the nursery’s theme.” Understatement alert, but Rachel just bobbed her head. “How about we go all-in on your magic forest? No cowboys, no pirates, just...maybe murals? Wildflowers in bloom? Butterflies, even, or fierce little fairies?”

Rachel turned toward him, a smile on her lips.

“We could do that,” she said. “I’ve seen stuff like that—wallpapers, decals. Borders and accents that go over the paint. We could keep all the colors, but—here, let me show you.” She reached for his shorts and fished his phone from his pocket, tapped the screen a few times and turned it to face him. “The Garden of Eden.”

Harris squinted at the screen, and he felt himself grinning. She was right—they had everything. Colorful garden scenes, mix-and-match decals from huge weeping willows to tiny sprays of flowers. They had fairies, too, in all sizes, shapes, and colors. Boy fairies, girl fairies, even a frog fairy.

“So, you really do like it? The colors, the theme?”

“What, you can’t tell from the way I just thanked you?” Rachel bumped him with her elbow. “I thought you were hopeless, with all your cowboys and farm animals. How’d you come up with something so perfect?”

Harris turned to face her, raising himself on one elbow. “You asking me out yesterday meant something to me. You taking me to your favorite place in the world. I wanted to keep a piece of that memory alive in this room. I wanted our baby to experience what I did, that happiness. That moment. When those butterflies flew toward us.” He shrugged, feeling stupid now that he’d voiced it out loud.

Rachel wiped at her face. Were those tears? Was she crying?

“I’m not crying,” she said. She sniffed loudly and peppered his face with kisses. “Okay, I am. You’re incredible, you know that?”

The vise constricting his chest snapped away and he exhaled theatrically. “Oh, thank God.”

The office phone rang, and Rachel scrambled to her feet. She jogged off to answer it, tugging her shorts up as she went.

Harris lay where he was a few moments longer, savoring the knowledge he’d something right.

“Back to work,” he murmured. Rachel’s reaction had fueled him more than ten cups of coffee. He pulled his own shorts back up and was reaching for the roller when movement caught his eye from out the front window. An aging Honda Accord was coming up the driveway, almost winging his Mustang.

Son of a bitch.

Rachel’s voice drifted to him from down the hall. She was still on the phone, taking down a new booking. Good. He jogged down the stairs and waited for Tammy Winchester outside. If his luck held, he’d have her off the property before Rachel had to see her.

Crossing his arms, he blocked the front door. Tammy hurried up the walkway, heels crunching in the gravel. She looked a

mess, her hair all askew. There was a ketchup stain smeared down the front of her shirt. When she saw Harris, she froze.

“Oh, it’s you.” She lifted a shaky hand and swiped at her face. She wasn’t wearing makeup, and it made her look younger, a far cry from the brazen woman who’d shown up with a treasure map in her hands.

Harris fixed her with a cold stare. “The police are looking for you.”

“I know.” She nodded as if that would somehow excuse her. “I talked to them this morning.” A tremor ran through her as she climbed the porch steps. “I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” Harris wasn’t sure why he bothered asking. No matter what she said, he’d have a hard time believing a word from her mouth.

She turned on the waterworks and wrung her hands together. “I didn’t know Darryl was physically attacking Rachel.”

He barked laughter. “Bullshit.”

“I swear,” Tammy cried. “It wasn’t until the police questioned me this morning that I found out.” She swallowed hard, lifting eyes eerily similar to Rachel’s, but without the warmth or love. “Did he really poison her coffee? Did her brakes really fail?” Another swallow. “He shot at her?” she whispered.

“As if you weren’t in on it.” He clenched his fists to keep from strangling her.

“I wasn’t.” She shook her head harder. “I knew Darryl wanted the treasure, but not—not like this.” Her trembling hand covered her mouth, then dropped away. “I just wanted the money. I thought we could get it. All that was supposed to happen was—”

“You’d destroy Rachel’s business?”

“Not...not destroy it, exactly. She’d just fail her inspection, and she’d have to sell. She’d have made out fine.” *Jesus Christ*. This woman had no shame.

Tammy met his gaze again. “I just wanted the *treasure*, not my daughter *dead*.”

“This place is her life!” Harris snarled, his palms screaming from his nails digging in. “Taking it from her would kill her.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Her wounded eyes hardened a notch. “Rachel is a survivor in a way I’ve never been.”

“You’ve got that right,” Rachel barked from behind Harris.

He twisted just enough to let Rachel past, keeping Tammy in sight as he took Rachel’s hand.

“You’re a self-absorbed leech,” Rachel continued, her hand tightening in his. “You may have inherited half this property, but that doesn’t give you the right to destroy my business.”

“Rachel loves it here,” Harris added. “She was made for this business. She’s smart, she’s savvy, and the guests love her to death. If you could’ve just been patient, you wouldn’t have needed any damn pirate treasure. Your share of the profits would’ve come flowing in without you having to do a damn thing.”

Rachel shot him a grateful smile.

“Just stating the truth.” He pecked her lips.

Rachel turned back to Tammy and rubbed her stomach. “And this house is going to be a wonderful place to raise our child.”

Tammy stumbled back, her skin paling. “Child? So you really are pregnant?”

Harris allowed the ice in his veins to freeze his gaze. “It’s not just her life you and Darryl nearly ended.”

“Sweet baby Jesus,” Tammy croaked, stricken.

“So if you want to live another day.” Harris leaned forward. “You’d better start talking. When it comes to Rachel and my baby, there is *no* line I won’t cross to keep them safe.”

“Rachel.” Tammy stretched out her hand, but Rachel didn’t take it. “I swear, I didn’t know Darryl was trying to kill you. You *know* I hate weapons. I’d have stepped in if I had known.”

“Cutting my brakes didn’t involve any weapons,” Rachel retorted. “And how’d he know about my hazelnut allergy if you didn’t tell him?”

Tammy made a strangled sound. “I didn’t know. He didn’t tell me. I had no idea what he was going to do.”

“I think we all know he’s not going to stop now,” Harris pressed. “What’s his next move?”

“I don’t *know*,” moaned Tammy, like a broken record. “He said he was going to ransack the house the next time you both went out, but as of last night...I don’t know. He’s gone.” She took a shaky breath. “I went to his trailer after I talked to the cops. His stuff was all gone. I don’t know where he went.”

Tammy thrust her shoulders back. “You may not want to believe me, Rachel, but I’m still your mother. I’m going to protect my child too.” Her eyes locked on Harris. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.” Harris squeezed Rachel’s hand. He didn’t trust Tammy as far as he could throw her, but he’d get the truth out of her by hook or by crook. Kissing Rachel’s cheek, he murmured, “You and the baby will be safe soon. I promise.”



Rachel tried to match Harris’s optimism but the vise choking her heart made it hard to breathe. Harris had talked a big game about keeping her safe, but not once had he mentioned staying by her side. Nothing about helping her run the B&B, nothing about a future with her or their child. Like he just wanted to ensure she was safe before he left.

He has one foot out the door, and the other lifting to leave me behind.

“Please be safe,” Harris begged into Rachel’s hair. “Keep your eyes peeled.” He pulled back, and his gaze bore into hers. “Be vigilant—”

“Harris.” Rachel clamped a hand over his mouth. “I won’t do anything risky. I’ll spend the afternoon at the mall.” A grimace pulled at her expression, but she tried to hide it by kissing his cheek. “It’ll be a ton of fun shopping for maternity clothes. Yay, wide elastic waistbands and tent-sized shirts!” Her exaggerated fist-pump was not convincing.

If Darryl was looking for an opportunity, Harris wanted to give him one. He figured the asshole would be more likely to break into the house when he thought no one was home, hence Rachel’s shopping trip. Harris, too, would be going, but not for long. He leaned down and kissed Rachel.

“If you find anything with fairies—”

Rachel whapped his shoulder, but the light in her eyes remained dull. “I’ll be sure to buy it in *your* size.”

“As long as you bring me heels to match.” He cupped her cheek. “This will be over soon.” The empty promise tasted like ash on his tongue. He could only *hope* he caught Darryl before the bastard hurt Rachel.

“It’s not me you need to worry about.” Her expression soured. “*You’re* the one running into harm’s way. I don’t care how much training you’ve had, you’re not bulletproof.”

They'd fought long and bitterly over how to deal with Darryl. Rachel had been insistent they leave him to the police, but Harris had refused to budge. The police had *been* looking for him, to no avail. Maybe they'd find him before he struck again...but maybe they wouldn't. Harris couldn't risk that. Couldn't risk Rachel paying the price. The argument ran so hot they'd both stormed off, and they'd slept in separate bedrooms for the first time in days. Then, this morning, Rachel had slipped into bed beside him, ending the cold shoulder he'd endured all night.

Harris swallowed. He was nervous, but he couldn't let it show. Not about Darryl—he could handle that fool. But being apart from Rachel, not knowing what might happen.

“The mall should be open by now,” he said. Sunday hours were abbreviated, but that would work out fine. He didn't want Rachel gone all day. Just long enough to give Darryl a chance to strike.

He stood on the porch and pretended to watch her taillights disappear. His actual purpose was twofold: to let Darryl see him, if he was lurking around, and to survey the area for signs of threat. He didn't spot anything, and he went back inside, grabbed his wallet and car keys and headed down the drive. If Darryl was watching, Harris imagined he'd probably wait five minutes or so to make sure no one looped back, then he'd do what he'd come to do, whatever that was.

Harris wasn't going to let him.

He pulled into a private drive a short way up the road, locked up the Mustang, and looped back through the woods. He sprinted till he crossed onto Rachel's land, then hunkered in the bushes, scanning the property for anything amiss. Seeing nothing, he circled behind the house, running bent over, low to the ground.

He let himself in through the back and hurried upstairs, into the nursery, to wait for Darryl. Here, he could see without being seen—the road and the driveway, the yard on one side. He could even see the back lawn if he left the door open, out through the window at the end of the hall. That covered the

obvious points of ingress: front door, back door, and side door. Everything but the windows along the west side.

Perfect. He inhaled, then scowled at the purr of an engine. A van was approaching—big, brown, and...*shit*. It had the UPS logo on its side.

“Go away,” he muttered.

The van pulled up the drive. Harris willed it away. *I paid for three-day delivery. This is day two.*

The UPS man got out. He loaded two big boxes onto a dolly, pushed them to the porch, and marched up the stairs. He knocked, and Harris was tempted to go answer it. Rachel would love to come home to this. She'd be so surprised. She'd picked out a crib, but he'd found a better one, and he'd gone behind her back and changed the order. It was expensive as hell, but totally worth it. It wasn't just a crib, but a work of art, embellished all over with roses, tulips, and daisies, etched into the white-painted wood.

The UPS man knocked again. Harris stayed where he was. He couldn't be home right now, in case Darryl was watching.

An exasperated sigh drifted up from below. Harris heard shuffling, then a smack on the door, one of those sticky notes. *Come pick up your parcel.* Yeah, he'd do that, but first, there was Darryl to be dealt with.

He settled back by the window as the brown van pulled out. The new crib would go right here, where he was crouching. His kid would sleep here, in a warm nest of flowers. *His* kid and Rachel's, tucked up so sweet. He couldn't breathe for a moment, the image of his sleeping child gripping him hard. Tiny curled fists. Round little cheeks. Quiet little baby snores.

He whirled abruptly as the room went dark. His senses all sharpened, his body on alert. If he'd cut off the power, Darryl had to be here.

Harris lunged for the doorway, only to stop in his tracks. The hall light was on, and the light from downstairs. Darryl hadn't snuck by him and cut off the power. The bulb in the nursery had just burned out.

He took a deep breath to center himself and turned back the way he'd come. Rachel kept spare bulbs in the nursery closet. He leaned up to retrieve one, and the floor dipped beneath him. He jumped back, and a floorboard snapped up, then back down, clapping back into place like the lid of a box. Harris stared. *What the hell?* That wasn't safe.

He bent and pried at the floorboard, but it wouldn't come up. That was weird. Two seconds ago, it'd been loose enough to go flying. Now, it was locked in place, tight as a drum. Harris probed at it, pressing along the sides. When he reached the end of the board, it pushed in with a *snick*, and when he let go, it snapped up again, the back end anchoring it as if by a hinge. Squinting, he spied something in the space underneath.

Adrenaline raced through him. Could *this* be the treasure? Reaching in, he encountered something smooth and soft, wrapped in what felt like twine. He pulled the stash out and exhaled in wonder. "Look at you," he whispered, pivoting on his crouched heel to get more light. A thick bundle of letters had been tied in a stack—old letters, ancient, faded and brown. Holy shit. Holy *shit*. This had to be the treasure.

Footsteps came scuffling somewhere below, then a muffled whimper. Harris dropped the letters and surged to his feet. He glided out of the nursery, snapping into Marine mode—silent and deadly, on high alert. Smooth as silk, natural as breathing, he drew his Glock. He thumbed off the safety and that sound came again. That tiny, pained whimper. *Rachel*. Downstairs.

He flowed down the stairs, skipping the squeaky tread, and spotted Rachel. She'd already seen him. She opened her mouth. He shook his head no, but he was too late.

"Harris," she whispered, her eyes huge and frightened.

"Shut up," snapped Darryl. He jabbed his black Smith & Wesson into her temple. "One more step, and I'll shoot her."

Rachel whimpered again and swayed like she might faint.

Harris gripped his Glock, but he didn't have a clear shot. Darryl was using Rachel as a human shield, like a motherfucking coward.

“I know you found the treasure,” he said. Give it to me or she dies.”



Rachel trembled in Darryl’s grip. He was sweating, or she was, through both of their shirts. Her legs were like jelly, her guts all in knots. Bile rose in her throat, and she thought she might puke. That would probably startle Darryl, and then he might—

The barrel of the gun dug into her temple, and she flinched at the pain. She should’ve stayed at the mall. Should’ve waited for Harris. But she’d forgotten her ginger chews, and she’d just felt so *sick*. And the pharmacy wasn’t far, just down the street. How could she have known Darryl was waiting, tucked in her back seat?

I locked the damn doors. How’d he even manage to get in?

It didn’t matter. He’d broken in somehow, and the second she’d pulled out, he’d nearly scared her to death, popping up like some nightmare Jack-in-the-box.

“Drive,” he’d said, and she’d driven. What choice did she have?

Now Harris stared past her, his eyes locked on Darryl. He’d gone still as a statue. Was he even breathing?

“The treasure,” Darryl demanded, his breath so bad that her stomach churned anew. “I know you found it.”

But they hadn’t. They hadn’t. They’d found an old dog collar. *Oh, God, no. My baby.* Panic fluttered in her chest. *Don’t hurt my baby. Not for this. Not for nothing.*

Harris’s face revealed no emotion. He lowered his Glock, his stance going loose. If Rachel didn’t know better, she’d say he looked...bored?

Don’t let him hurt our baby, she wanted to scream, but her throat refused to work.

Harris lounged against the doorframe. “And you think your threats will work, why?”

What? His tone, cold as ice, chilled her to the bone. *Harris... our baby.*

“What do you mean *why?*” Darryl leaned into Rachel, the gun gouging her temple. “I’ve got your woman.”

Harris chuckled with no warmth and put his free hand on his hip. “You mean the woman who ruined my life?”

Rachel made a wounded sound. She’d always thought heartbreak was a metaphorical thing, but the pain was real, physical, lancing through her chest. Her panicked thoughts took on a new level of frenzy. She gaped at Harris. Was this true? Did he mean it? She flashed back to the moment she’d asked Harris out. She’d said *us* and he’d frowned, and she’d felt that same pain: were they not an *us*? Was that not what he wanted? But then, he’d smiled, and her heart had knit together. Which had been real, his frown or his smile?

Darryl laughed, jerky, nearly knocking Rachel off her feet. “I’m not falling for that.”

Harris scratched his chest, then his sides, like his comfort was more important than the *gun* to her head.

Oh Jesus. Her heart sank. He really didn’t care. She thought about all those times he’d gone cold on her. The hospital, the crash, the distance between them she’d marked down to stress—was it just that his mask had slipped then? Was that the real Harris?

“Quit playing,” said Darryl. “You won’t let me hurt her.”

Harris glanced at Rachel and his lip curled. “If you believe that, you’re stupid as fuck.” He shifted his weight to one leg and hardened his expression. “She got pregnant on purpose to trap me into marriage. Poked holes in the condoms, maybe—hell if I know what a woman that desperate would do.” His bitter gaze flicked to her, then turned dismissive. “Way I see it, you’re doing me a favor. I keep the treasure and lose the damn brat.”

Rachel gasped. *The damn brat?* Her baby? How could he say that, unless—it was true.

It was true, all of it, her worst fears come to life.

Hope died, and her heart broke. The blood drained from her head. Her legs gave out. She crumpled, and Darryl lost his grip on her. He scrambled to keep her standing, but Rachel pitched forward, just as a deafening shot pierced the air.

Rachel screamed, dropping to her knees. Darryl jerked, then let go. Rachel turned to look, and she saw him topple, blood seeping from the brand-new hole in his head. Her stomach lurched, and this time, she couldn't stop it. She threw up everything she'd eaten since what felt like forever and kept on dry-heaving till her retches turned to sobs.

Harris.

She looked up, and he was lowering his gun. He jammed it into its holster and took a step toward her.

“No,” she wheezed, half-crawling away. Her throat was burning, her eyes blurred with tears, but she had to stop him. “Don't come near me.”

“Rachel?” Harris searched her face. “Are you hurt?”

She wiped her mouth on the hem of her T-shirt. “Get out,” she croaked.

Harris reeled back like she struck him. “What? Talk to me.”

“I mean it, Harris.” Rachel pointed toward the door, her arm shaking so bad she had to drop it. “Get the fuck out of my house.”

He blinked. “Rachel, you're in shock.”

“Probably, yeah.” Her eyes strayed to Darryl, but she forced them back to Harris. “But I'm also thinking clearly for the first time in weeks. You're no longer welcome here.” She studied his face, but his expression hadn't changed, still cold. Still distant, that thousand-yard stare. “I doubt you care, but I can send you a notice when the baby is born. After that, you won't hear from either of us again. We're no longer your burden.” She'd raise this child on her own, and that would be fine. How stupid had she been to fall for his act?

“Wait, you...you *believed* what I said? Rachel, I was just—”

“The damn *brat*?”

Harris flinched. “Rachel, no...” He stepped forward again, but she backed away, not wanting him anywhere near her. “If you’d just listen—”

“Oh, I listened,” she shot back. “I heard you loud and clear.”

His expression hardened. “Another decision you’re making without consulting me first.” A derisive grunt fell from his tightening lips. “But why am I surprised? Why should this be any different from all the other times you’ve cut me out? You never wanted me in your life or our child’s. You’ll jump on any excuse to grab back your freedom.”

“My *freedom*?” She laughed. “I trapped *you*, remember? And speaking of decisions, how about yours? You painted the nursery without asking, and what did I say? *Thanks*. You assumed our child would have your name, like an accessory, not a person. It’s all about *you*. It’s always *been* about—”

“The nursery was a surprise, not some sneak attack. I wouldn’t have ditched you if you hated the color.” Harris paced back and forth, fists clenched at his sides. “Right from the start, you made sure I knew you didn’t need me. You never saw me as part of your future. I was just the dumbass who didn’t want to believe it.”

Rachel bristled. *Oh, hell no*. He’d been the one with one foot out the door. And she was right about to tell him that when he *literally* started walking away, turning his back on her and heading up the stairs.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“To get my stuff,” he spat back. Rachel followed, not wanting to be left with Darryl’s body. Harris glowered at her as he tossed his duffle on the bed.

“In case you care—” He dug through the dresser, clothes flying in the air. “—I found the treasure.” He shoved his things in the bag. “In the nursery closet, you’ll find a bundle of old letters. There’s a secret compartment under the floorboards. I popped it by accident, changing a bulb.”

He snatched his duffle up and made for the door. “I’ll wait on the porch for the police. Once they’re done questioning me,

I'll be gone as commanded.”

“Has something happened since we talked on Friday?”

Harris glanced at Martinez, then went back to studying the black spot on the carpet. The last twenty-four hours had been pure hell, and the last thing he felt like doing was reliving that.

“How many more of these sessions do I need to attend?” he snapped. “When is my evaluation? I’m ready to return to active duty.” *Liar, liar.*

Martinez regarded him evenly. “Why now?”

Harris pulled a sour face. Why now, indeed? Because, where else would he go? He couldn’t say *that*, even if it was the truth. He’d been living in a fantasy, away with the fairies, dreaming of a future he could never have.

Martinez cleared his throat.

“What?”

“Why are you so anxious to return to active duty now?” Martinez narrowed his gaze. “What’s changed? You’re so wound up, the agitation’s just rolling off you.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Oh, it’s something, and we’re not even going to entertain the notion of you going back to your unit until you spill it.”

Harris’s knee bounced harder, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Rachel kicked me to the curb,” he said, blurting it out. It hurt just to say it, and he looked down at his feet.

“What happened?” Martinez’s voice was gentle, and Harris couldn’t hold back. Like a dam had burst, the whole story poured out of him. He held nothing back, not like his past sessions. He confessed everything that had happened since he’d returned stateside. The news of his father’s death. His one-night stand. How he’d found out he was about to become a father. How he’d fallen for Rachel, but she hadn’t fallen for him. It all came pouring out. His hurt at being shut out of important decisions. His excitement when he thought Rachel was opening up. Darryl’s sabotage attempts, and how they’d filled him with terror.

“I thought I might lose her,” he said. “It was the worst feeling ever. This guy was out to *kill* her. I felt like if he did it, he’d be taking away everything worth a damn that I wanted for my future. Her. Our baby. Our life together. But apparently I was the only one who saw it that way. Once she didn’t need me anymore, she jumped on the first excuse she found to kick me out. Wouldn’t let me explain.”

Martinez nodded, his pen flying over his pad of paper. He didn’t say anything, and Harris filled the silence.

“I can’t tell you how good it felt, fixing that house together. Working on the nursery. We felt like a team.” He stared at the dying plant on the radiator. “It felt like me and Rachel were building ourselves a home. And now I can’t go back. Guess that makes me homeless.”

Martinez waited, his huge frame engulfing the cheap chair and taking up too much space.

“What does everyone want from me?” Harris shouted, frustration rising. No matter what he did, it was never enough. It was never right.

“A better question is, what do *you* want?”

“I want to stop these therapy sessions and be cleared for active duty,” Harris shot back, then clamped his mouth shut. The words were all wrong, tasting like ash on his tongue. But he had no other words, so he nodded his head.

“I’m ready,” he said, more firmly this time. “I want to go back to my unit.”



Harris swiped a soapy rag over the Mustang Shelby, the bubbles leaving a trail behind. Yesterday’s therapy appointment had been a disaster. With every fiber of his being, he regretted opening his mouth. Pouring his heart out like that was just asking to *prolong* the sessions.

Son of a bitch. *Swipe, swipe.*

After weeks of living with Rachel in the B&B, his one-bedroom apartment felt cold and sterile, and he couldn’t stand to stay inside for long. With nothing better to do, he’d decided to wash his vehicles—Dad’s old Mustang and his Ford F150. Having the truck had given him the freedom to hit the road whenever he was stateside, but he hadn’t driven it in months. He should sell the damn thing now he had the Mustang.

He dipped his rag in the soap bucket and ran it along the Mustang’s white accent lines. If he was selling any vehicle, it should be this thing. He’d get more for it...but no. No. It wouldn’t be right.

“Not Dad’s car,” he muttered, wiping bug guts off the hood. He couldn’t part with it, even if that was the logical choice. Rachel had made some excellent points about safety features like child locks and—

He planted his hands on the hood, breathing through the sudden tightness in his chest. Christ, it felt like a part of him was missing, and his body just couldn’t function without it.

“Master Sergeant McCallister?”

“Yes?” Harris peered over his shoulder to find a young private standing on the sidewalk. The kid was so new to the Marines, his fatigues still had fold lines. Harris felt old just looking at him, old and used up.

“This is for you.” The kid thrust an envelope toward him.

Harris dropped the rag back in the bucket. He had to rinse the Mustang before the soap dried, but he didn't think the kid would be here long. Still, Harris outranked him, and he was feeling petty. He snatched up the hose and blasted the car.

Private Too-Young jumped back and scowled at Harris.

"Sorry," he said, but really, he wasn't. His mood had been foul for days, and it wasn't getting better.

Water streamed down the metal. The scent of the soap intensified as the bubbles ran off the car. His mind flashed back to standing in the shower while another kind of soap ran down a different body. Rachel shuddered against him, pressed her soft lips to him...

No. He pushed down the memory and snapped back to reality, releasing the nozzle and dropping the hose. Wiping a hand on his gym shorts, he held it out for the letter.

Private Too-Young eyed Harris suspiciously for a moment, then picked his way around the water on the sidewalk.

Oh, for crying out loud. Are you kidding me? The kid was wearing combat boots. Did he think the soles would melt if they got wet? Christ. What kind of Marines were graduating boot camp these days?

Snatching the envelope, he glared at the private and felt a teensy bit better when the kid lost his smirk and hustled to the plain, government-owned car parked a few spots away.

Nothing on the envelope told Harris what he might find inside, but he knew his future was literally in his hands. This was it. Either he was reinstated or he wasn't. Probably, he wasn't. That meant more lonely nights in his bland, sterile apartment. More fun-filled times with First Lieutenant Greg Martinez, Ph.D.

He ripped the envelope open and plucked out the paper. Unfolding it, he braced himself for the news.

"Right. Here goes nothing." He scanned past all the bullshit, straight to the meat, and he froze where he stood. He couldn't believe it: *...you are hereby reinstated to active duty...*

A tremor started in his feet and worked its way up. He skimmed for more details, but there weren't many, just orders to report to his CO tomorrow at eleven. He'd be redeployed, he guessed. Rejoin his unit.

White noise grew louder in his head. His trembling ramped up to full-on shakes. He should be overjoyed. He had gotten his wish. Instead, he wanted to throw up.



Harris slammed the Ford F150's door shut in the parking lot reserved for Marines. He'd rather have brought his father's car—every time he climbed inside, it felt like his father was with him, and today more than ever, he could use his phantom presence—but the truck needed to be driven after sitting idle for so long. He glanced at his watch. 10:49 A.M.

He figured the letter would've said if he was deploying right away, but he'd packed his duffle on the off chance he was wrong. Plucking his bag out of the truck bed, he hoisted the strap onto his shoulder. His combat boots *thwumped* across the asphalt as he headed toward the admin building. All morning, his stomach had been tied up in knots, and it pissed him the hell off. He needed to get his shit together and put his game face on.

He crossed the private lot and cut across the visitors' lot, breathing deep through his nose and out through his mouth. Soon, he felt calm again. Or at least, as calm as he'd get.

“Daddy!” A little girl broke free of her mother, jelly shoes slapping as she ran across the lot.

A Marine about Harris's age, dressed in fatigues, dropped his fully packed duffle and scooped up the girl. She looked to be around five years old. A boy, not much older, threw himself at the Marine's legs and clung to them like a barnacle.

“You can't go,” cried the girl, big fat tears running down her face.

“You’re never home,” said the boy, sounding about a second away from crying too.

“You have to let go of Daddy.” A woman—Harris pegged her for the wife or girlfriend—tried to take the girl from the Marine, but that just made the girl scream even louder.

The doubts that’d plagued Harris since he’d gotten the letter surged up even louder. He clenched his fist to keep his hands from shaking. He’d gotten exactly what he asked for, but was this what he needed? His heart screamed no. This was all wrong.

“Screw this,” he whispered. He needed his family, and not just his brothers. He needed the family he’d been building with Rachel. She’d kicked him out, yeah, but before that, it had felt like they were on the verge of something amazing. Something worth staying for. Something worth *everything*. Was he really going to run away from that—just give up without even trying to win her back?

Paper shushing in the wind caught his attention. He glanced down at the envelope crinkling in his fist. What the fuck was he doing? It was one thing to fight in service of his country. It was another to use that service to avoid a different kind of fight. He wouldn’t be returning to combat with the pride of a patriot, but with the unease of someone trying to escape.

Hell. No. Harris McCallister did not run or escape, nor did he avoid battles that needed fighting.

He marched toward his CO’s office to fire his opening salvo.

Sitting in her apartment's living room, Rachel carefully slid a razor under the tape on the shipping box. It had been four days since Darryl had been shot.

Four long, miserable, soul-stealing days.

She'd needed to sand the hardwood to get his blood out, and the bare spot still had to be refinished. She couldn't bring herself to haul out the cans of stain, so she'd covered the spot with a rug, a stopgap solution. Yes, her couch looked stupid straddling the hardwood and the rug, but what did it matter? She wasn't expecting guests.

Her heart sat like an anvil, heavy in her chest. *Who are you fooling?*

She couldn't be bothered with the job because it reminded her too much of Harris. Not because he'd shot Darryl—good riddance to bad rubbish—but because this was the type of thing she'd gotten used to them doing together. Everywhere she looked, she saw him. In the house, in the yard, everywhere they'd hammered or weeded or caulked. They'd felt like a team, then. A winning team, even.

She still froze every time she heard a throaty engine growl, expecting Harris's Mustang, but it was never him.

Today, she was trying. She was up and about. She'd done the dishes and taken out the garbage, and even made a start on the living room floor. She'd picked up her packages from UPS. Now she sat opening one of them—the crib she'd ordered, she guessed. A nice crib, with great safety ratings. Not the

fanciest, but good quality baby things were so *expensive*. Going with a plainer crib had made sense.

She flipped the box open and let out a gasp. Flowers peeked through the packaging, roses and tulips. This wasn't the crib she'd ordered. This was...

"Oh, God. Harris." Her face crumpled, and she lost the last trace of control she'd had over herself. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she dropped her head in her hands. He'd gotten her the crib she'd secretly wanted—the one she'd decided against because it was too expensive, even though it had looked absolutely *perfect*.

"Why?" She didn't get it. Why go to so much effort to make her think he was happy? Why expend so much time, money, and trouble pretending?

Maybe she'd never understand. In the end, she guessed it didn't really matter. She'd gotten so wrapped up in the fairy tale she'd missed the reality. She'd fallen for a man who only wanted to be free.

"Rachel?"

She winced at the woman's voice floating up from below, not wanting a customer to see her this way.

"Coming," she yelled, pushing the box away. She dried her face on one of the tissues she kept stocked in her pockets—the ones Harris had bought for her, a whole damn case—she pushed off the couch and hustled down the stairs.

"What can I do for you, Lorraine?" Rachel met the retired town librarian outside the den.

"We know you're busy, and we won't keep you long. But we have a surprise for you. Something you'll like." She gestured toward the den. "What do you say? Five minutes?"

Rachel didn't want to go in. The den was full of memories, just like everywhere else: Harris surrounded by ancient books, reading about pirates. Harris guarding the new coffeemaker like a ferocious beast. Harris laughing, joking, holding her close.

“After you,” she said.

Rachel stepped into the den, Lorraine following swiftly. The Quilting Club had gathered around the big table—five older ladies, all from town. Moe from the bakery and Bitsy from the bank. Patsy, a retired fifth grade teacher—Rachel had been in her class—and Marge, the oldest at nearly seventy, who’d run the greeting card store at the mall.

Rachel smiled awkwardly, unsure what to say. The club had been holding their meetings at her B&B once a month since she first opened, but this wasn’t their usual day. Outside of those meetings, she’d exchanged pleasantries with these women in passing, but she didn’t know them well. They weren’t the types of people her family mixed with. And today, she was dragging. She barely felt human. Even forcing a smile felt like a monumental effort.

“It’s okay, honey,” said Patsy. “Come on, sit down.”

Rachel pulled up a chair and sat at the table. She hoped her red puffy eyes and blotchy face weren’t as noticeable as she feared. At least she’d managed to dress herself correctly, unlike yesterday’s disaster. She’d walked around all day with her shirt inside-out, only spotting her flub when she undressed for bed.

Lorraine reached into a carpet bag sitting on the table. She pulled out a small quilt and shook it out on the table. “What do you think?”

Rachel sat gaping at the bright, happy colors—squares in green, blue, orange, yellow and purple. Each square had an intricate flower sewn onto it, colorful petals in dozens of cheerful fabrics. The middle flower had a heart instead of a flower. Rachel reached out to touch it and found it soft as silk.

Lorraine smiled. “That’s where the name goes, once you’ve decided.”

Rachel’s head spun. The name? For her baby?

“Um, that’s...” Rachel felt herself choke up, and she swallowed hard. “That’s for me?”

Lorraine put her arm around Rachel's shoulders. "How are you feeling? The nausea getting better?"

"Oh, man," Patsy interjected. "I remember those days. I couldn't lift my head out of the bowl."

"And the swollen ankles?" Marge pulled a face. "Don't get me started on those." She peered over her glasses, smiling at Rachel. "But you, you look fabulous. Glowing through and through."

Rachel covered her snort by coughing. She looked like a train wreck with a plane crash on top.

"Yes." Lorraine nodded. "You're going to be a radiant mother."

"And a strong one too," Patsy announced.

"Damn straight." Marge slapped the table. "It's not our place to ask what happened with the father, but whatever his problem is, *you'll* be just fine. You've got us if you need us, but just look at you! A mother, a businesswoman, and you're so brave."

Tears pricked Rachel's eyes. She'd always hated the town rumor mill, but these women weren't laughing or pointing fingers. They were rallying around her. How had that happened?

"You call us," said Lorraine. "If there's anything you need."

"We'll be surrogate grandmothers. Free for babysitting and spoiling." Marge nodded sagely, and Patsy chuckled.

"Lord knows, we've had enough practice."

Rachel wiped a tear and laughed wetly. Between these five ladies, they had an army of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. And they wanted to help her? She wouldn't say no.

"You've always been so good to us," said Patsy. "Don't think we haven't noticed how generous you've been. Letting us stay late, bringing us tea."

"And those divine snacks. *How* are those free?"

Rachel managed a smile. “All part of the service.” She touched the quilt again. They’d made this for *her*. They liked her, respected her, and she’d never noticed. She’d gotten so used to contempt and condemnation, to being labeled as “trash” or being ignored, that genuine acceptance flew straight over her head. She’d been certain her pregnancy would be the final nail in her coffin, and they’d all write her off as one more worthless Winchester. She’d been so sure the people of this town wouldn’t give her a chance, she’d never thought to try giving them one.

“Thank you,” she said. “I mean, this is...*thank* you.” She yanked another tissue out of her pocket and cleared her nose. “This is so beautiful. It’s going straight in the nursery. The baby’s going to love it.” She half-stood, eyes watering. She had to get out of there before she lost it completely.

“We’ll get out of your hair,” said Lorraine. “I know you’re busy. We just wanted to stop by and bring you your gift.”

The ladies all stood, still smiling. Lorraine hugged Rachel, and Patsy did too, and then they were off, heading out to their van. Rachel scooped up her new quilt and clutched it to her chest. If the baby didn’t like it, she’d sleep with it herself. Or Harris could—

She stifled a whimper. There he was again, hiding behind every corner in her mind. Rachel ran from his memory, straight to the nursery. It was her favorite room, and it hurt so much being in it. It hurt even worse now, seeing the crib in its box. Why had Harris had bought her that, if she was such a burden? How had he known she wanted it? Why had he cared?

She stared at the walls, pale green and yellow. To capture the memory of their perfect date. So Harris had said, but had it been true? Maybe these colors had just been on sale. But that still didn’t explain the crib. Rachel turned to look at it, and a lump stuck in her throat. This crib rang of love, clear as a bell.

“I don’t get it,” she whispered. She knelt to open the box. This crib was perfect—the prettiest, the safest. All it needed was a mobile to hang over the mattress. She could almost hear the music, a sweet, plinking tune.

Wait. Rachel froze in place. She wasn't imagining that melody. The music was real.

She turned to find Harris standing in the doorway, a spinning mobile dangling from his hand. Colorful butterflies danced and trembled, and it took her a second to realize it was because Harris's hand was shaking.

Rachel's traitorous heart leaped with something like joy. He was back. To say he was sorry? It was all a mistake? Then she saw that he'd shaved his hair back to regulation lengths. He wore full fatigues and combat boots, as if he had just come from the base.

"Rachel," he said, his voice low and strained. "Please, hear me out."

She gripped the box tight to keep from running to him. "You've already said plenty. You're free of me, so—"

"I don't want to be free of you." He inched into the room, the mobile still chiming its happy tune.

"That's not what I heard." She lifted her chin, her heart breaking at the sight of his face. He looked like she felt—worn down, heartbroken. "Please, Harris. I don't want to be the bad guy and ask you to leave again."

"I was talking out of my ass to Darryl," he pleaded, still inching closer. "I was saying anything I could to distract him till I had my shot."

Rachel pressed her lips together. "No one can lie that convincingly. What you said about our child—"

"Made me want to puke." He took another step closer. "How can you sit there, and still be so blind? Look at this room. What do you see?"

She couldn't look. It hurt way too much. "Lies."

"The hell you do." He closed the distance. "I see love." He hooked his finger under her chin and forced her to look up at him. "You didn't ruin my life. You made it worth living. You gave me something to fight for when everything else fell apart." The mobile bounced in his hand. "This room was me

trying to show you how I felt. I was too scared to say it aloud, in case you didn't feel the same. But these walls, this crib, this mobile—it's all us."

Rachel stared at the mobile. The butterflies, black swallowtails, danced on their strings. The same butterflies they'd seen on their date.

Oh God. It was true. What had she done?

Harris stroked a thumb lightly over her cheek. "I love you," he said. "There. Now I've said it." His eyes darkened with emotion. "I'll say it again—as many times as you need to hear it until you understand. I love you, I love you. I love you, Rachel."

Rachel blinked. Was she dreaming? "You love me?"

"That's right." He brushed a tear off her cheek. "I've loved you for weeks. I love you so much, it's been killing me to be away from you. And I love our child—our Ava. Our Aiden. Our McCallister-Winchester—the child we made together." He set the mobile down gently, on top of the box. "I love the home we've made here. The home we've took care of together. It's the haven I didn't even know I was looking for, but I was lucky as hell to find it."

Rachel could hardly see him through the tears streaming down her cheeks, but she still couldn't let herself fall into his arms. One nagging fear kept her frozen in place.

"I love you too," she said, her voice soft and trembling. "But I don't know if I'm strong enough to watch you leave on missions. Or wait for months without knowing if you're coming back."

"You won't have to."

"What?" He wasn't saying what she thought he was, was he?

"I retired earlier today."

Rachel swayed, and he pulled her against him. "You did? But why?"

"You're my home and my family." He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "You're what I *need*. I want us to be a

team, to build our future. The military taught me a lot and gave me a purpose for a while, but I have new priorities, and you and our baby are the center of them. Can you believe that?”

Rachel smiled. “You retired for us? Then, yes. Hell, yes.” She flung her arms around him. “I love you so much, Harris McCallister.”

He wrenched back and searched her face. “Say that again. I want to watch those words pass your beautiful lips.”

She laughed. Her face was wet, and her nose was running, but she’d never felt better. “I love you, Harris McCallister.”

“*Yes!*” He picked her up and spun her. “Now, back to those baby names. I was thinking—”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Barclay.”

“Shut up.”

“Agatha.”

Rachel burst out laughing, and he silenced her with a kiss. Tilting her head, she welcomed him in, kicking the door shut in case anyone stopped by. She planned to do some wicked things to her retired Marine, and the only audience she wanted was the butterflies on the mobile.

EPILOGUE

Balancing on the ladder, Harris carefully matched the purple fairy decal to the blue one on the right. Sunlight would have made this easier, but Rachel had been so excited to finish decorating, he couldn't say no.

"A little to the left," she said.

Harris inched left.

"No, to the right, I think."

Harris inched right.

"Maybe try up a bit? It's still not quite right.

Harris squinted back at her. "You're messing with me, aren't you?"

"Took you long enough to get it."

Harris just laughed. It felt good to joke with Rachel, to see her smile. He pressed the decal to the wall and smoothed out the bubbles. He had to admit, the wall looked awesome, burgeoning with wildflowers with fluttering fairies dancing around.

Rachel snapped a piece of material in the air, then smoothed it over the ironing board she had set up near the closet. Steam puffed up as she ironed the curtain, curling through her beautiful hair.

Harris had never felt so at home as he did in this moment, here in the nursery with the woman he loved.

After a glorious afternoon spent *thoroughly* debauching her, he'd made Rachel dinner, and they'd eaten on the veranda, watching the sun go down over the ocean. They'd talked about nothing and a little of everything, and Rachel's joy made him certain he'd done the right thing. A real team, a strong team, could work through their problems. That's what they'd done, so he knew they'd be fine.

As for Harris himself, he wasn't fine yet. But he was determined to get there by the time the baby was born. To that end, he'd put in a request to his CO, to be allowed to continue seeing First Lieutenant Greg Martinez, Ph.D. for. He needed to be one hundred percent for Rachel and his child, and therapy was the best way to make sure he got there. It'd be a long road, dealing with losing Shawn, but for his family, he'd go the distance.

"Did you find the letters?" Harris asked, climbing down the ladder to re-situate it for the next section.

"I did!" Rachel exclaimed. "You should read them. They're amazing." She switched off the iron, gathered up the curtains, and inserted a curtain rod through the loops at the top.

Harris grabbed the next decal and held it to the wall. "You read them already?"

"Sure did." She moved the ladder to the window and attached the rod to the hooks he had already mounted.

"All of them?" He blinked, peering over his shoulder. "That stack had to be two inches thick."

"Four days of hell, Harris," she retorted blandly. She futzed with the material, swishing it this way and that until she was satisfied. Harris had already hung thick shades so that they could fully block the sun when needed, but the curtains were a pretty accent.

Harris swallowed his frustration. They'd both suffered needlessly. Rachel shouldn't have jumped to conclusions, but he should have pushed to be heard. They'd both let their insecurities get in their way. But that was over now. It was time to move on.

“So, what did the letters say? Were they from the pirate? Did he ever return? Were they tragic?”

Rachel chuckled. “Looks like I’m not the only one who’s a romantic when it comes to the pirate and his lover.”

“Guess what?” Harris winked at her. “I’m also a romantic when it comes to a fierce fairy and a retired Marine.”

“Ooooooo,” she cheered, beaming. “Smooth, McCallister.” She shot him with a finger gun.

“That’s just sad.” He shook his head theatrically. “You think your little peashooter is any match for my—”

“Hammer? Drill?” Rachel filled in with a raunchy cackle. “Isn’t that what the bachelorette party called your dick?”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.” Harris sauntered over and caught her by the hips, pulling her close and planting a kiss on her brow. “You’re the only bachelorette for me.”

“I’d better be,” Rachel snapped without heat, pointing at him. “Me in a jealous fit is not a pretty sight.”

“You’re always gorgeous, jealous or not.”

Rachel just snorted, knowing he was lying but appreciating the sentiment all the same. “Anyway,” she said, “the letters are heartfelt and almost too personal to read. The oldest ones are between the pirate and his lover. The later ones are from her sister. Their whole story’s in there, and it was a good one.” She set to work ironing the other set of curtains. “The pirate came home one day. He married his lover. They had two children, a boy and a girl. The collar we dug up belonged to their dog.”

“Oh, wow. Like a fairy tale.” Harris picked up the last decal and situated the ladder.

“Yeah, but she also had two miscarriages while he was at sea.”

The blood drained from his head, and Harris nearly fell off the ladder. “Never mention that word again. I can’t even imagine losing a baby.”

Rachel hugged her stomach, slightly green, and nodded. “Agreed. The M-word is banned from this household.” She fed

the rod through the other set of curtains. “Moving on. I talked to a history professor at the college, and he said they’re quite valuable.”

Harris whipped his head down. “So, I was right. In essence, they were the treasure.”

“Yup.” Rachel attached the rod to the side window’s mounts. “I thought I was going to have to get physical with the guy to make him give them back. He really wanted to study them for historical value.”

“Maybe we should let him.” Harris rubbed the decal to smooth out the bubbles.

“I want them appraised before I do anything,” Rachel answered. “And as much as it rankles me to say this, I don’t own them outright. My mother co-inherited the property, and I don’t feel right making a decision without her.”

“Have you told her about them?” His boots scuffed on the hardwood floor he planned on refinishing, thanks to Darryl ruining the living room. If he was going to refresh one room, he might as well do the whole house. He’d definitely have the time, seeing as he was unemployed unless he counted trading handyman repairs for sex...hmmm...that would make him a gigolo. *Niiicce*.

“I haven’t talked to my mom since she showed up the other day.” Rachel met him in the middle, then turned in a slow circle. “It looks amazing. I love it.”

“I do too.” He intertwined his hand with hers. “But I love you more.”

“I love you the most.” Rachel’s expression softened. “I also think you should be involved with the decision about what to do with them.”

Satisfaction unfurled in Harris’s chest. She had heard him and was already showing she’d meet him halfway. “Thank you.”

“I’m pretty sure those letters would fetch a high price at auction.”

He pulled her against him. “I’m hearing college fund secured. What about you?”

Rachel chuckled, then raised herself on her toes and murmured in his ear, “I’m hearing our bed calling.”



A cellphone incessantly ringing pulled Harris out of a deep sleep. He and Rachel had fucked themselves into a stupor, a sexual marathon he’d never forget. Sleep had been slow to come, after that. He’d lain awake planning their future—schools for the kid, dates to take Rachel on. Big things and small things, all of it. A life.

He grabbed for his phone, and groaned at the time. He’d only managed to get three hours’ sleep. The call display flashed UNKNOWN CALLER.

“Hello?” Damn, his voice sounded rough.

“Harris,” Lee barked, tension crackling down the line. “I’m sorry to be calling so early, but I need you.”

“Lee?” Harris sat up, instantly awake. He swung his legs over the bed. “What’s wrong? Whose number is this?”

“Harris?” Rachel asked groggily, propping herself on one elbow. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s Lee,” Harris answered. “I’ll take it in the living room. Go back to sleep.”

“Ah, fuck,” Lee snarled. “I shouldn’t have called you.” A horn blared in the background. “I got your voicemail, by the way. Congratulations on moving in with Rachel. I’d give you shit about taking so long, but I don’t have much battery left.”

Harris closed the bedroom door. “Hell, yeah, you should call me,” he snapped, ignoring the jab. “*Always*. No matter what. Now spill. What do you need?”

Figuring he wouldn’t be going back to sleep, he turned the TV on, and the screen flared to life with a news station. He muted

it, then flicked on the coffeemaker he'd set up in the corner of the living room.

Silence pulsed for another second, then Lee answered his questions. "My cellphone was smashed in a botched HALO, so I'm using a brand-new burner I haven't had more than a second to charge."

What the actual fuck? A botched High Altitude, Low Opening meant something had gone wrong while jumping with a parachute from a plane. Why the hell had Lee been jumping from a plane—and what had gone wrong?

"I don't have time to get into it," Lee continued, "but I need you and Chance to help me rescue a woman I've promised to keep safe. I've thwarted multiple kidnap attempts, but they sabotaged our plane. I had to jump with Viktoria—"

"Jesus," Harris barked, his eyes darting to the TV. "There's a story about a plane crash on the national news." He silently read the bar running across the bottom of the screen. "In Pennsylvania. That was you?"

"Yeah. We all survived, but I got knocked out on the way to the ground. They took her," Lee growled. "I shouldn't ask, knowing everything you have going on, but I need you to help me get Viktoria back."

"Like I'd *ever* say no," Harris answered, already making a mental list of what had to happen next. The McCallister brothers always had each other's backs.

They hashed out a place to meet and Harris promised to call back with the timing after he'd booked his flight.

Hanging up, he opened the bedroom door to find Rachel sitting up in bed.

"Is everything okay?"

"No," Harris answered honestly. "But it will be." He pulled his duffle out of the closet. "Can you help me with some stuff? Lee is in trouble and needs my help. He's calling Chance too."

"Absolutely." Her feet hit the floor without hesitation, and Harris felt warm inside. If he hadn't been convinced before,

now he knew she must trust him. She hadn't even met his brothers yet, but here she was ready to help without complaint.

Rachel's blue hair flew as she hustled to the dresser Harris had taken over. She pulled out socks, underwear, and multiple changes of clothes without batting an eyelash or pestering him for details. Tossing them on the bed, she peered at him with eyes clearing from sleep.

"Want me to start researching flights?"

"Thank you." Harris engulfed his fierce fairy in a tight hug. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too. And I know you'll come home."

Home. This was home. "Always will," he said. It'd been a journey to get here, full of hurt and loss, but if he had it all to do again, he would. At the end of his struggle, he'd found everything he wanted and more. Rachel Winchester was his destiny, and he thanked God for her.

END OF SAVING RACHEL

MCCALLISTER MILITARY BROTHERS BOOK TWO

Protecting Mandy, August 31, 2023

Saving Rachel, September 7, 2023

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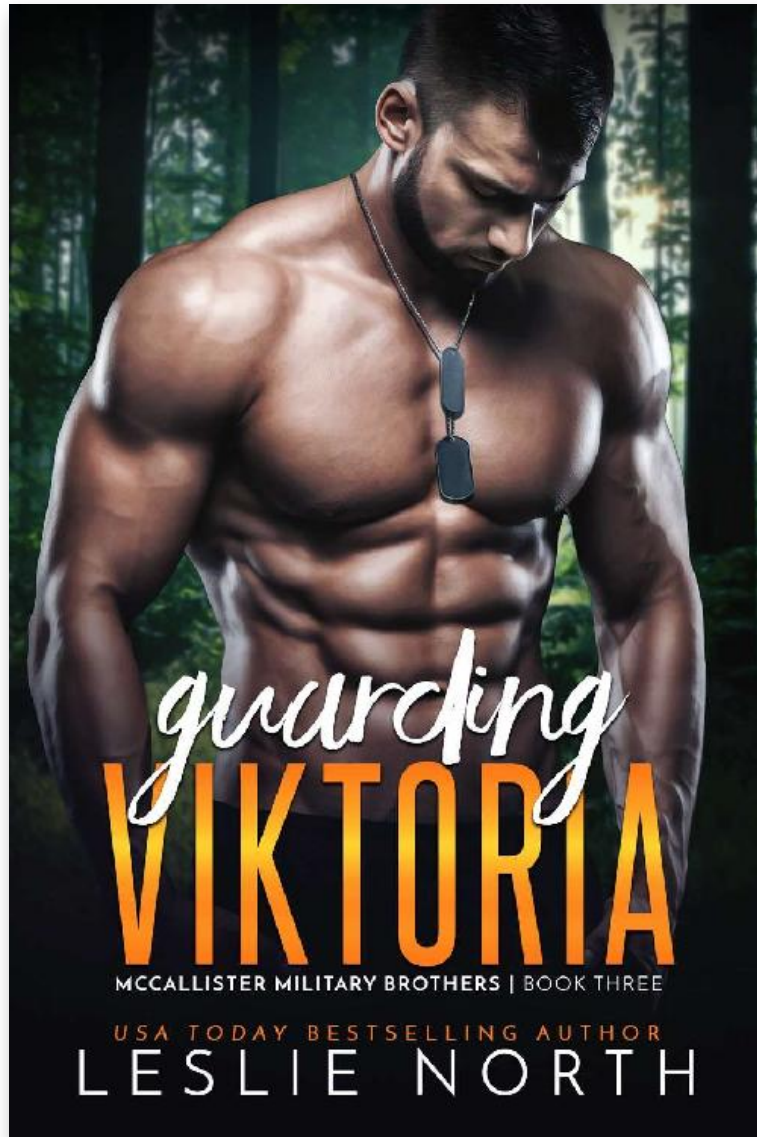
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BLURB

When danger meets desire, all bets are off...

Viktoria Jonsdottir is smart, driven, and beautiful. But she's also in danger. To protect her, her father has hired a bodyguard to look after her. But the last thing Viktoria wants is a babysitter, even if he is sexy as hell. Like it or not, though, she's got Lee McCallister, former Army Ranger, keeping her safe. From what, she's not really sure... Until the pilot hired on for her private plane attempts to kidnap her at gunpoint. Thank goodness Lee is there.

Lee cares only about one thing. Doing his job. And if that job includes keeping a rich brat safe, so be it. The former Army Ranger braces himself for days of enduring Viktoria.

Demanding, lovely, kissable Viktoria. It isn't long before he realizes she's not the spoiled princess he thought she was. Despite his best efforts, he's starting to fall for her.

And if they can survive this ordeal, maybe she'll fall for him too...

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Available September 14, 2023

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EXCERPT

Chapter One

Lee McCallister steeled himself. Scowled down at his phone. He didn't need this, not now. Not today. Not in the alley out back behind Boom's office, a strong Dumpster odor wafting in his face.

Just get it over with.

He zoomed in on the document filling his screen—a letter, a short one, on Army letterhead. It had showed up yesterday at his childhood home—the address Lee claimed as his permanent residence, though he didn't live there—and his eldest brother had opened it and texted him the picture.

You're already out. How bad can it be?

Lee exhaled sharply and started to read. The letter was an invitation from his old lieutenant colonel to report to Fort Benning, Georgia, in three weeks' time. His former Army Ranger unit was to receive the Valorous Unit Award for extraordinary heroism in action.

Extraordinary heroism... Lee gripped the phone tight as he skimmed down the page. *Your unit performed with marked distinction under difficult and hazardous conditions—*

Lee slammed his phone face-down on his leg. Echoes of explosions rang in his head. Fire, frightened screams. Men

shouting orders in multiple languages. Lee ground the base of his palm into his right eye socket, forcing the chaos back where it belonged, a deep hole of memory buried in his head. He hated thinking about that day. On paper, the mission had been a success—they'd rescued the hostages, a small band of soldiers and medical personnel—but Lee had lost his career. His right eye looked fine to the rest of the world but thanks to a flying piece of shrapnel, he'd lost the perfect vision required to maintain his sniper status with the Rangers. He'd had to take medical retirement at twenty-eight, and become a civilian twenty years too soon.

He might've been able to hit the ground running, even with no backup plan, had life not decided to kick him once again while he was down. The ink had barely dried on his discharge papers when his father had died. With his mother long gone, his two older brothers were all he had left—Chance and Harris. Good thing the three McCallisters had always had each others' backs, or he'd be in even worse shape.

Lee's phone chimed, jolting him out of his spiraling thoughts. He swiped the letter away and got to his feet. Early morning sunshine angled behind his sunglasses as he headed for the office. It made his bad eye sting, but Lee didn't care. The pain helped him focus on the present, helped him keep the last few months boxed up in his mind. San Diego, California, was two thousand miles from that letter, waiting in his hometown of Springwell, Georgia. He didn't need to respond this minute, so he shoved it to the bottom of his list of priorities.

Boom's office was on the second floor, a tight two-room suite. A clock on the wall in the small waiting area showed Lee had arrived at precisely eight a.m. *Right on time.*

"Go on in." The young man at the reception desk pointed to the open door on the left.

Lee dipped his chin in acknowledgement as he passed, then ducked into the office and shut the door behind him. More sun filtered in through the high, narrow windows, bathing the room in pale morning light. The plants on the filing cabinets basked in the light, but it did nothing to brighten the face of the huge man crammed behind the desk.

“Boom,” Lee said, extending his hand as Boom got to his feet. Sebastian McKinney never went by any other name. It might’ve harkened back to his Explosive Ordnance Disposal days, or it might’ve referred to the volume of his voice. Either way, the moniker fit the man perfectly.

A massive hand engulfed Lee’s and squeezed just enough to be noticeable but not enough to cripple. Boom was in his sixties, but he stuck to a strict workout regimen and diet that had him looking years younger and maintaining the solidly muscled width of a Humvee.

“Welcome back,” Boom said, his deep voice bouncing off the walls. “I read your report on the Asia assignment.” He motioned for Lee to have a seat in one of the two visitor chairs.

Lee dropped into the black-cushioned seat. “Nice and boring,” he said.

Boom laughed. “Just how we like it.”

Yesterday evening Lee had returned from escorting a prominent politician to South East Asia for three days, then back.

“You’ve completed four assignments for us now.” Boom rested his hands on his desk. “And I’ve been very pleased with what I’ve seen so far. Are you settling in okay? Still want to stick with us?”

Lee opened his mouth, but his enthusiastic *yes, sir* stuck in his throat. *Was* this what he wanted? Or just where he’d landed? His former CO had reached out after Dad’s funeral, wanting to know if Lee had anything lined up for work. Lee had admitted he had nothing at all.

“I might have something for you,” his CO had said. “I know a retired Ranger, got his own outfit—Elite Security Services. Might be a fit. I can get you an interview if you’re ready to work. Only thing is, they’re out in San Diego.”

That had seemed more like a plus than a problem. He’d figured the change might do him good. But security could mean a lot of different things. “What kind of security?”

“Executive protection. They do short- and long-term bodyguard assignments.” His CO had then suggested Lee find a shooting range and become proficient in small arms. Lee had done it. He’d bought himself a Sig Sauer, welcoming the chance to do something besides wallow in loss and anger. At first, the handgun had felt foreign, light compared to the weight of his beloved sniper rifle, but he’d sucked it up. Risen to the challenge. His brother Harris, an active-duty Marine Raider, had helped him hone the skill during their recent road trip from Georgia to Vegas. With his vision off in his dominant eye, he could still hit the bullseye, but it wasn’t easy. It took a lot more focus than he’d needed before. Still, he’d gotten the job done.

And now he was here. Working for Boom. Was this actually where he wanted to be, rather than with his unit? Hell, did it even matter? He couldn’t go back. Nor was he fool enough to throw this opportunity away, even if he couldn’t see himself as a career bodyguard.

“It’s different from the military,” Lee answered honestly. Boom could smell BS from a mile away, so Lee didn’t try. “But I’m getting the hang of things. I’ll stay on if you want me.” Maybe he’d stick around long enough to find a real place to live, instead of his month-to-month sublease on a deployed SEAL’s condo.

“Glad to hear it.” Boom smiled wide and lifted a file off his desk. “Seeing how well you did in Asia, I’m convinced you can handle another sensitive assignment.”

Lee took the file, curiosity piqued.

“This job,” Boom continued, “is confidential. Outside of the two other men I’ll be assigning to your team, the fewer people who know this client’s movements, the better. But the work itself should be a cakewalk.”

Lee opened the file, and *ho-ly shit*. He resisted the impulse to let out a whistle. The client was gorgeous, perfection made flesh. Her eyes made him think of cold Arctic springs, ice-blue and piercing, framed with long lashes. A cascade of black hair

tumbled over her shoulders. *Sex hair*, he thought. “This is the client? Happy birthday to me.”

Boom laughed, but he wagged a finger. “Sorry, son. She’s strictly hands off.”

“Damn.” Lee put on a show of pulling a sour face, but he wasn’t upset. The line between a professional bodyguard and his client needed to remain as impenetrable as a Kevlar vest. Boom had told him that on his first day, and Lee respected him for it.

“Viktoria Jonsdottir is the daughter of Jon Aronsson, a very powerful man. His company’s based in Iceland, but his operations are global. He’s in wool products, manufacture and export.” Boom ran through the basics as Lee studied the file. “They’re in the US on business, and Aronsson, wants his daughter protected while he handles some tough negotiations.”

“Why me?” Lee paused, flipping to the next page. “I mean, I’m grateful for the assignment, and I appreciate your vote of confidence in making me the lead. But the fact is, I’m still new here, and your tone tells me you’re cautious about this job.”

Boom inclined his head. “The fact you’re picking up on that just solidifies my decision.” He scratched his chin. “You’ve got good instincts, and your former CO told me you had your men’s trust. That counts for a lot.” He motioned to the file. “This *should* be a standard babysitting gig, but I’m not taking any risks. Jon Aronsson is an exacting man. His standards are high. I don’t want anything to screw up a potentially long-term relationship.”

Lee frowned. “Does he have reason to believe Viktoria will be targeted by anyone?”

“He doesn’t,” said Boom. “He’s more concerned he’ll be targeted, himself. That’s why he and Viktoria aren’t traveling together. We have no reason to believe she’s in any immediate danger, but if something happens, you’re the man I want with her. That, and you’re the one man I’ve got with a tandem jump certification, and you have the most HALO and HAHO jumps under your belt.”

Lee blinked—*wait, what?* Was Boom anticipating they'd be jumping from a plane? HALO—High Altitude Low Opening—and HAHO—High Altitude High Opening—jumps were used in covert missions, when the planes had to stay high to avoid detection by sensors. The difference between the two was when you pulled the rip cord to open the parachute. “You think we're going to be tandem jumping?”

Tandem was skydiving with two people strapped together in a specialized harness so that one parachute could support both their weights. It wasn't as easy as it sounded and it wasn't his favorite activity.

“I certainly hope not.” The crease between Boom's eyes deepened. “But since you'll be crossing the country in a private jet, I'd be stupid not to have that scenario covered.”

Lee nodded slowly. From what he'd experienced so far, Boom never held back or beat around the bush. He laid out all the pucker factors to make sure Lee understood the risks, but Viktoria wasn't a known target. Barring disaster, this should be an easy babysitting job.

Lee's gaze drifted back to her picture. The sunlight gleamed off the photo, catching those piercing blue eyes, taunting him to remain professional as they lounged on a luxury plane. Slapping the file shut, he grinned at his boss. “Should be fun. When do I meet her?”

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Sean

BLURB

Romance on the run is a risky proposition...

Once Julia Hart realized her brother-in-law is the head of a drug ring, she knew she had to get away from him—and no way was she leaving her late sister's kids behind. Now, Julia's on the run with her little niece and nephew, desperately trying to protect them from their unhinged father.

Enter former Navy SEAL Sean Miller. The taciturn hulk has made it clear he'll do anything to protect her and the kids. And as they grow closer, a smoldering attraction soon grows between them. A desire that neither can deny...

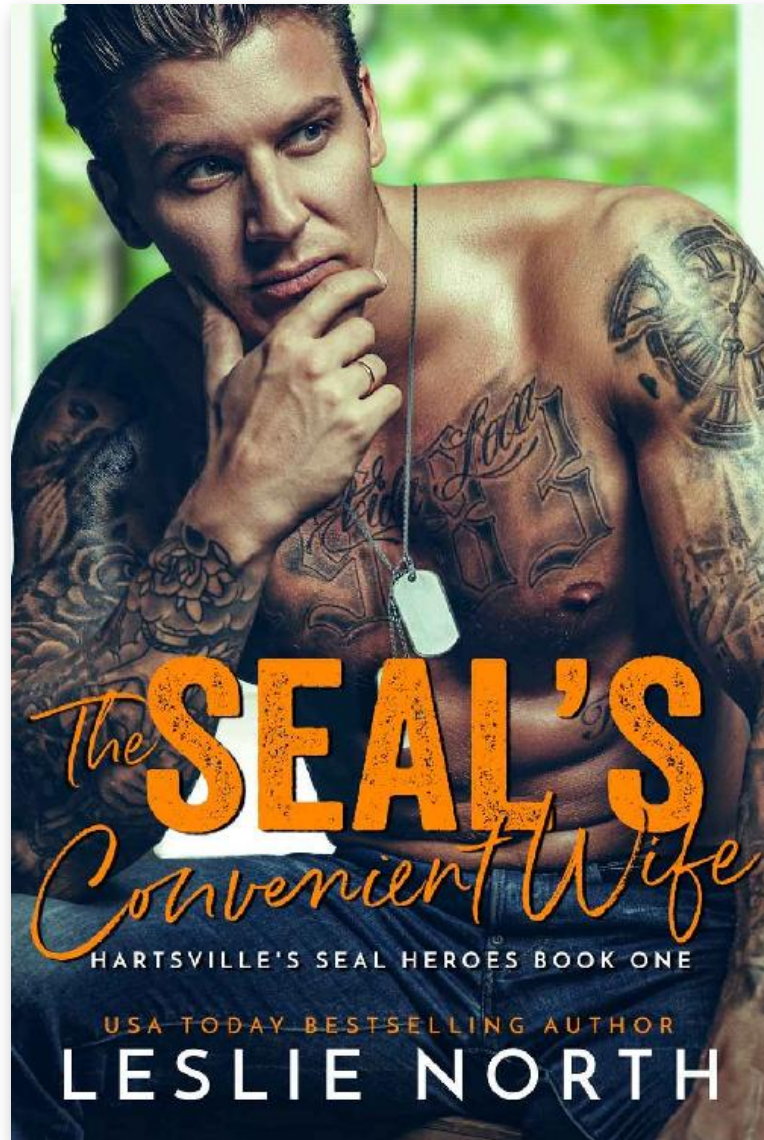
Sean wasn't looking for trouble, or romance. But there's no way he can abandon Julia and the two kids to face an angry, desperate man on their own. And this fierce, beautiful woman, touches his heart in a way he never imagines possible. And if he had imagined it, he might have run in the opposite direction. Because if there's one thing he's learned in life is that love equals pain.

But sometimes, the pain is worth it...

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BLURB

When Navy SEAL Patrick Nelson returns from a black-ops mission, he's in for a shock—his six-year-old daughter Ellery has been abandoned by his ex and is currently in foster care. Now he has to prove he can be a good, stable father to Ellery, and that includes convincing Imogen Mendel, his daughter's gorgeous kindergarten teacher, that he's one of the good guys. Turns out, Imogen is more than just a pretty face. She's planning to testify against some dangerous people who are now threatening to silence her—for good. But not on Patrick's watch. He's got the perfect solution to keep Imogen safe and give Ellery a stable home: get engaged.

Imogen may have agreed to a fake relationship with Patrick, but she has to admit there's absolutely nothing fake about their

attraction to one another. It's red hot and impossible to ignore. Before she knows it, they're turning into a real family and her heart is taking a painful turn toward falling in love. Things would be pretty good if not for the threats that escalate as the date of the trial looms closer. Thank goodness she has a sexy SEAL protecting her. But for how long? This fake marriage is turning far too real for both of them...

**Grab your copy of *The SEAL's Convenient Wife*
(Hartsville's SEAL Heroes Book One) from
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EXCERPT

Chapter One

Patrick Nelson climbed the steps of the elementary school he'd attended as a kid. The front doors of the yellow brick building stood open to the spring weather, and he frowned. Weren't schools locked down these days? His hand automatically went for a sidearm that wasn't there, and then he gave himself a shake. This was the civilian world, where an unexpected open door meant nothing—and he didn't carry a gun in the civilian world. Well, not usually. And not to pick up his six-year-old daughter.

But he'd been on an extended deployment, and the transition back to life in his hometown was tough... especially since this mission had had more than its share of challenges. Moreover, he felt as if he'd let his responsibilities as a father slip—though not by choice. Yes, he'd been busy and out of touch, but his ex had made things ten times worse. Rachel had completely cut him off from any news of their daughter four months ago. Not one Skype session. No FaceTime. Nothing.

Patrick had been expecting Rachel to be difficult, after the fight they'd had before he left, but this was too much. Their arrangement had to change. He'd taken extended leave from the SEALs, and he was going to fight for full custody. He had

no idea what that would look like... but he'd figure it out, because Ellery deserved better.

A man wearing a Hartsville Elementary T-shirt greeted Patrick just inside the front door. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the kindergarten classroom," Patrick said, looking around. The building hadn't changed much since he'd been a student there, but it seemed strangely quiet for a place that housed kids.

"There are three. At the end of this corridor." The man pointed down the hall. "I think Ms. Mendel is the only teacher still here."

"It's only three o'clock," Patrick said with a glance at the oversized clock that hung nearby. "I thought school got out at three."

"Usually, but we had a field day, so the kids went home two hours ago."

Damn. He'd missed Ellery. Patrick had wanted to surprise her by picking her up from school—though he'd been nervous about it, too, since they'd had no recent contact. He didn't know Ellery as well as he should, and even when they'd been in touch, he'd often had no idea what to say to her. Despite that, he'd decided that he wanted to see her without Rachel around to interfere. Maybe the teacher could give him some insight.

"Thanks," he said and made his way toward the classrooms. The first room he looked in was empty, but in the next, a slim woman's figure was outlined against the bright light coming in through a wall of windows. "Ms. Mendel?"

She swung around, her hand going to her heart as if he'd startled her. "Hello," she said breathlessly. "I didn't hear you come in."

Was she the nervous type? That seemed at odds with teaching kindergarteners.

"I'm Ellery Nelson's dad. Is she in your class?"

“Oh, yes, she is,” Ms. Mendel said, but her manner stiffened. “I understood that her father was out of the picture.”

He held out his hands in a “look at me” gesture. “As you can see, I’m here. Do you need proof?” he asked, taking his military ID from his wallet. He walked closer to her. As he approached and the glare hiding her features receded, he could see she was a young woman with blonde hair. Pretty, very pretty, with delicate features and hazel eyes.

She scrutinized his identification card before handing it back. “Thank you, Mr. Nelson. So, what are you doing here?”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “I’m Ellery’s father. I just got back to the States, and I want to see my daughter. I’m sorry you apparently received inaccurate information about my involvement in Ellery’s life, but...”

She looked at him a moment and then seemed to relax a bit, though her expression was still guarded. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

He looked around at the knee-high chairs and reluctantly folded his tall frame onto one. Maybe she just needed a little more information. “I’ve been deployed since not long after the school year started,” he continued, “so I haven’t been here for any events, but I was hoping to pick Ellery up. I didn’t realize it was a short day. I guess I’ll have to get in touch with her mother,” he concluded, trying to keep the frustration from his voice. He wasn’t looking forward to having to deal with Rachel, who’d probably do everything in her power to block him from seeing Ellery.

“So you don’t know?” Ms. Mendel sat at the desk next to him, looking more sympathetic now.

“Know what?” He felt a prickle at the back of his neck, a sensation he’d learned to heed during his years in the service.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you.” She paused before seeming to come to a decision and continuing. “It’s not really my place... but if I were you, I’d want to know. Ellery’s been in foster care for the past two months. Her mother left her with a nanny and then, well, didn’t come back. After more than a few days of

not being able to reach the parent, the nanny called Child Protective Services.”

“What?” Patrick shot to his feet and towered over the teacher. “Child Pro—does that mean foster care? Why didn’t someone contact me? Where is she?”

“I can’t disclose that.” Ms. Mendel rose to her feet and took a step back, crossing her arms in front of her as if to ward him off. Her eyes strayed to her desk, where a phone sat.

“I’m her father,” he said through gritted teeth as he searched for the control that had gotten him through so many tough spots. He had no wish to alarm Ms. Mendel. She wasn’t the enemy. But she did know where his daughter was.

“I’m not disputing that, but you don’t have custodial rights,” she said. “You’re not even on the list of people permitted to pick Ellery up.”

“I’m not?” He and Rachel had talked about that when Ellery started school, and she’d assured him that she’d filled out the paperwork showing him as Ellery’s father, with parental rights. Another lie. He shouldn’t have been surprised.

“No. Look, I’ve told you as much as I can. If you want to see Ellery, you’ll have to go through CPS. You should go now.” Her words weren’t an invitation, but a dismissal. He got that he was making her nervous, but he had to ask one more thing.

“Just tell me if she’s okay,” he said. Foster homes weren’t always the best, and he wanted to know that his little girl was safe for now. “Please.”

Ms. Mendel’s face softened, making her look even younger. “She’s struggling with this. Any child would, but I think she’ll be okay in the long run. She’s a resilient girl.”

That helped. A little. But what he’d thought was going to be an unpleasant negotiation with his former girlfriend had just ramped up to a battle with an enemy that he knew little about—with Ellery’s safety and happiness at stake. How the hell did he go about extracting his daughter from foster care?

“Thanks. I’ll get out of your space now.” He stalked to the door and made his way back to his SUV. Just as he was

opening the door, his phone rang.

“Hey, man. Got plans tonight?” Anderson, one of his SEAL team members, was on the phone. They’d been buddies since high school.

“I could actually use your help right now, if you’re available,” Patrick said. Anderson was a strategist and might be a big help in dealing with the bureaucrats at children’s services. “Can you meet me at the county office building?”

Anderson’s reply was instant. “Of course, but why?”

“I’ll explain when I see you.” Patrick hung up and drove to the modern building located just outside town. In his head, he replayed the conversation with the teacher. She hadn’t shared any information that was helpful beyond that last comment about Ellery’s welfare, which he hadn’t found all that reassuring. His job was clear, though: he had to get answers and formulate a plan to fix this.

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