



ALWAYS ONE STEP AHEAD

OPERATION CHECKMATE SERIES BOOK 5

SCOOTER'S

Engage

DOROTHY EWELS

SCOOTER'S ENDGAME
(SPECIAL FORCES:
OPERATION ALPHA)

OPERATION CHECKMATE

BOOK FIVE

DOROTHY EWELS



CONTENTS

Foreword

1. Scooter
2. Kathleen
3. Scooter
4. Kathleen
5. Scooter
6. Kathleen
7. Scooter
8. Kathleen
9. Kathleen
10. Scooter
11. Kathleen
12. Scooter
13. Kathleen
14. Scooter
15. Kathleen
16. Scooter
17. Kathleen
18. Scooter
19. Kathleen
20. Scooter
21. Kathleen
22. Tex
23. Kathleen
24. Scooter

About the Author

Also By The Author

Where to find the author

More Special Forces: Operation Alpha World Books

Books by Susan Stoker

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

© 2023 ACES PRESS, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this work may be used, stored, reproduced or transmitted without written permission from the publisher except for brief quotations for review purposes as permitted by law.

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, please purchase your own copy.

Dear Readers,

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

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

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

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

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

He'll do anything to keep her, even give her up...

Beckett “Scooter” Archer has been in love with another man’s woman since the day Kathleen Pierce smiled at him at a cookout. But he’s not the type of man to break up a happy family, especially when he’s a fellow Navy SEAL and she has a young son to take care of.

Stay-at-home mom, Kathleen, has always put her son Luke’s wellbeing above her own. In and out of hospital since birth, his need for medical care is the only reason she’s stayed with Jeff as long as she has. Everything changes when he kicks her and Luke out without a word of explanation, leaving them homeless and alone.

Learning of their situation, Scooter makes Kay an offer she can’t refuse. He needs a housekeeper; she needs a job and a home for herself and her son. Unable to deny their attraction for each other, Kay hardly dares to hope that the man offering her a happily-ever-after is for real, until their idyll is shattered.

With their relationship under scrutiny and Luke’s future at stake, Scooter is determined this is one endgame he’s determined to win, at any cost. But can he convince Kay they’re worth the risk, or will she sacrifice their love to keep her son?

SCOOTER

For once the waiting room at Riverton General is fairly quiet. Not many people are here as I wait with Gator for his follow up appointment. The injury he suffered to the shoulder in our last mission seems to be worrying him more than first expected, so I offered to drive him.

“Mr. Soren – Godric Soren?” a nurse calls from the doorway.

Gator gets to his feet and ambles over to her. “Yes, ma’am. That would be me.” He gives her one of the smiles he’s known for – the panty-melting one – and, as expected, it works its magic.

I shake my head, laughing to myself as I watch the show. A woman and little boy skirt around Gator and head for the cashier’s desk. Something about the woman seems familiar, but with my attention focused on Gator and the nurse, I didn’t get a good look at her.

Gator disappears, and I take my phone out to occupy myself while I wait. Time passes, and I finally make it through a particularly difficult level of my game and decide it’s time for coffee. Getting to my feet, I glance over to where the woman is still standing at the desk. Odd. And her body language is screaming tension.

The coffee machine is close to where she’s standing, and I can’t help but overhear the cashier tell the woman that the insurance company has informed her that the health insurance was cancelled a couple weeks ago.

“Oh my God, what?” Distress is clear in her voice.

I turn to look over at her and immediately recognize her. Kathleen Pierce is the fiancée of one of my colleagues – a SEAL on one of the other teams on base. I walk over to where she’s standing.

“Hey, Kathleen. Everything all right?” I ask, not wanting to let on I’ve overheard anything.

She looks over at me with panicked eyes, huge like those of a deer caught in headlights. But like a trooper, she gives me a weak smile. “Hey, Beckett. All good, thanks. Are *you* okay?” she asks.

“Yeah, I’m fine, thanks. Just here with Gator.”

“Ah, okay.” She nods, but her words dry up. Kathleen stands there, shifting from foot to foot, and it’s clear she’s waiting for me to move on.

Not wanting to add to her difficulties, I do just that.

“I’m sorry – are you absolutely sure you have the right account? That’s impossible that my insurance has been cancelled.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Pierce. I double-checked with the admin lady, and she confirmed that this insurance policy has been cancelled. Mr. Grimes not only called to cancel but then followed it up with an email confirming his instructions.”

Silence greets the woman’s words. Yes, I’m shamelessly eavesdropping because I’m concerned about Kathleen. Her son stands quietly by her side, but you can see he’s picked up on her distress and is upset by extension.

With a deep sigh, she rummages around in her purse and pulls her wallet out. Taking a card out, she hands it over to the cashier, anxiety clearly stamped on her tired face. I can’t help but wonder how long she’s been here.

The tense silence is broken by her son having a coughing fit that has Kathleen dropping to her haunches in front of him. “We’ll get you home soon, okay, buddy?”

She hands him an inhaler when the coughing spell eventually stops. “Okay, Mommy.”

The cashier clears her throat, and Kathleen stands to face her. The woman looks uncomfortable. “I’m sorry, Miss. The card has been declined.”

The shock on Kathleen’s face speaks volumes. “I’m sorry, that’s – how can that be? There must be some mistake.”

“I’ve tried it three times, Ms. Pierce.”

She takes another card out of her wallet and hands it to the cashier, who takes it in silence. After another wait, fraught with anxiety, the cashier hands the card back to Kathleen, and before she even says the words, I know what she’s going to say.

“This one too?” Kathleen all but wails, her voice thick with tears. The woman simply nods, a look of compassion on her face. “Can you give me a moment?”

The cashier nods, and Kathleen walks away over to the wall of vending machines at the back of the room. I know I should be embarrassed, prying so shamelessly into her private affairs, but it’s my nature to help where I can, especially if it’s someone I know.

In this instance, it’s not just someone I know, it’s someone I care about. Not that she is aware of how I feel – I would never tell her, because she’s someone else’s woman, and breaking up a home is not my thing.

Just by looking at her – her body language, the look on her face, the way she’s constantly running her hand through already disheveled hair – I can tell things are not going well. Whomever Kathleen’s calling is clearly not picking up, but she keeps trying. When she finally admits defeat, I watch as tears start down her face before she turns her back to the room.

Her little boy, Luke, quiet as always, pats her hand, a sad look on his face no child of his age should ever have.

Coming to a quick decision, I make my way over to the desk. I smile at the cashier – Carol, according to her nametag. “Hi, how may I help you, sir?”

“I couldn’t help but overhear Ms. Pierce is having some issues. I’d like to settle her account, please. Could you tell me the amount?”

“Sir, it’s not a small amount.” The woman’s look of surprise almost has me laughing, but I refrain as I have no wish to embarrass her.

“I’m good for it. Just tell me how much it is.”

She studies my face to assess, I assume, how serious I am. I guess she finds the answer she’s looking for since she replies. “The total bill comes to four hundred and nine dollars and eighteen cents.”

Nodding, I take out my card and hand it to her. Once the transaction is finalized, I glance over to where Kathleen is still frantically trying to reach whomever, without much luck it would seem. “Thank you,” I say with a smile. “I’d be most obliged if you didn’t tell Ms. Pierce it was me who paid her bill.”

“Sir, in the twelve years I’ve worked this desk, I’ve never been blessed to witness an act of such kindness. Over the years she’s” — the cashier nods toward Kathleen — “been in and out of this hospital with that little boy, and not once has his daddy been with her, no matter what the day or time.

“I’ve developed a soft spot for her, and it breaks my heart to know how that deadbeat partner of hers treats her. Thank you for showing her some compassion and humanity today. I promise I won’t say a word, so I’ll say thank you on her behalf.”

I can actually feel myself flush at her words. Awkward at her praise, I clear my throat but find myself unable to say a word for a moment. Finally, all I can say is, “We always take care of our own, ma’am. Thank you for your assistance.”

Going back to my seat, I study Kathleen. She’s lost weight since the last time I saw her, and she’s looking exhausted. Yet, for all that, she’s still a beautiful woman. Not necessarily beautiful in the classical sense – some would say her mouth’s too wide for that. To me, she’s gorgeous as she is.

It's the look of compassion, of empathy, in her eyes which draws me to her though. Eyes that have seen too much. But it's the sheer beauty of her soul that made me fall in love with her. But, for as long as I've known her, she's been with someone else, and these feelings have remained bottled inside.

For the seven years I've known her, she's been with a colleague on one of the other teams – Jefferson Grimes. He's not the most popular man on the base, but his team put up with him because he gets the job done. Despite being a complete jackass, he's proved himself to be committed to the job.

“Mama, it's okay. Don't cry,” I hear a little voice say and look over to find Kathleen has returned to the cashier's desk.

Tears stream down her face, and I can only assume that Carol has informed her the account has been settled. The sight has my heart clenching, and I'm incapable of staying away. Without conscious thought, I find myself on my feet and walking over to where they're standing.

“Kathleen?” She turns drenched eyes toward me, and a look of relief crosses her face. “Everything all right?”

“Beckett, hey,” she replies, frantically wiping at the tears. “Yeah, all good, just a bit tired and overwhelmed. It's been a long night, you know?”

“How long have you been here?” I frown as I notice just *how* tired she looks.

“Um, what time is it now?”

“A little after eight thirty,” I reply, checking my watch.

“Oh. Wow. That late? Gosh, we've been here since half past three, quarter to four – somewhere around there.”

Playing dumb, I ask, “Where's Gonzo?”

“Oh, er, Jeff – he – he had — er – somewhere to be.” She doesn't look at me. My gaze meets Carol's, and I see a quick flash of anger in hers, but she remains quiet.

“Do you need a lift home since he's had to leave you here?”

“No, no. I’m good thanks. I ...” She doesn’t complete her sentence, blushing a fiery red. “I’ll give my girlfriend a call to come get us.”

“That’s not necessary. I can give you a lift. I’m just waiting for Gator – he has an appointment this morning, but he should be just about finished now. You can ride with us.”

Speak of the devil, as Kathleen’s pondering my offer, Gator comes strolling over to where we’re standing.

“Hey, Kathleen, Luke. Good to see you guys. What brings you to the hospital this morning?”

“Hey, Godric,” she replies. “Luke had some breathing issues during the night, so I – er – we brought him in.” It would be comical to see the look on her face when she realizes she almost let it slip that Gonzo wasn’t with her last night, if it weren’t so damn sad. But she recovers quickly, I’ll give her that.

“Gonzo has an appointment this morning, so I offered to take Kathleen and Luke home. You good with that?”

“Yeah, good. Well, I’m ready to get out of here if you are,” Gator responds, turning for the door.

“Let’s get going then, shall we?” I indicate for Kathleen to precede me and, as she does, I turn to mouth *thank you* to Carol. She shakes her head and mouths back, *no, thank you*.

I drop Gator off first since his is the closest stop. Kathleen and Luke sit quietly in the back of my car on the drive to the base, and randomly, I wonder if this is what it feels like to be a taxi driver. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I notice that Luke is dozing against his mother’s shoulder. Loathe to disturb him, I remain silent.

Stopping outside their home on the base, I hop out to give her a hand getting Luke out of the vehicle. Kathleen takes her key out of the pocket of her jeans before reaching for the boy. “Thank you so much for the lift. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. It’s the least I could do.” Indicating the sleepy Luke, I ask, “Can I give you a hand to get him inside?”

“No, I’m good, thanks. I’ll manage. I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

Not wanting to push the issue, I take that as my cue to leave. I give her a smile. “You know how to reach me if you need anything. Anything at all. Take care, Kay.”

I hate to just leave her standing at her front door but, with little option, I drive away, a hollow feeling of foreboding in my gut. The same feeling I get right before a mission turns to shit. With one last glance, I make a left turn and head for the gate, and home.

KATHLEEN

Watching Beckett drive away is one of the hardest things I've done to date. I want so badly to ask him for help, to take me away from the goat rodeo that is my life, but I can't. It's not in my genetic makeup to open myself up like that. Life has taught me I can only rely on myself.

As my favorite motivational speaker always says, no one's coming. No one's coming to save me, no one's coming to do it for me. It's all on me. But, dear God, some days it's really hard to simply put one foot in front of the other, to keep going.

With a deep sigh, I shift Luke's weight so I can slide the key into the lock. I've only managed to turn the key when the door flies open.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Jeff stands in the doorway, blocking my entry.

"Please, Jeff. It's been a long night. I'm exhausted. Can I please just go put Luke down for a nap, and then you can interrogate me?"

For a moment, it looks like he's going to deny my request, then steps out of the way, allowing me to pass. "Thank you," is all I say as I pass him.

I get my sweet boy settled, checking to make sure his temperature is still fine, before going back to the living room to see what has Jeff so hopping mad today.

"I've been waiting for you, for hours. So, I ask again, where the fuck have you been, Kathleen?" I've barely cleared the doorway when he starts in on me again.

I stare at Jeff for long, silent minutes, thoughts rioting through my mind. This man – the man I had, at one point, believed to be the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with – leaves me cold.

Any love and affection I felt for him is dead, never to be resurrected again. I'm so done with him and all his crap. I just wish I had the courage to leave. But I don't. So I've stayed. For Luke. That sweet child that has been through so much in his short lifetime. Born at twenty-eight weeks, he's struggled with asthma since his birth. As my gaze roams over Jeff's face, I realize how much of a mistake it was to stay.

I should have made a plan to leave. Found a way to support myself and my son.

“What are you looking at?” Belligerence thick in every word, Jeff sneers at me.

“To answer your first question, I spent the night in the ER with Luke. To answer the second question, I'm looking at the man who left me to deal with that medical emergency on my own.” Bracing for the fallout, I ask a question of my own. “My question to you is, where the fuck were *you*?”

“I don't owe you any explanations, bitch. I pay the bills around here, and I expect you to be home when you should be.”

A spark of discontent, of anger, I've been ignoring for way too long flares to life. Fury like I've never known consumes me, silencing my usual need to avoid conflict at all costs. But it's an icy rage that has me speaking calmly and quietly. “Do you now?” I ask. “Funny how the bill failed to get paid at the hospital this morning.”

Something passes over his face, too quickly for me to decipher it. His ruddy complexion turns red as his own temper builds. “What are you talking about?” The way he says the words makes me think that, despite his playing ignorant, he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

“When I got to the cashier to settle up the bill for Luke's treatment this morning, the insurance was declined.”

If I hadn't been paying attention, watching him like a bug under a microscope, I would have missed the flash of guilt in his eyes. My anger burns brighter. "Don't talk shit. Why would the insurance have been declined? Unless you've depleted it. You're always babying that boy. Rushing to the ER for the smallest thing. No wonder he's turning out soft."

"Firstly, the fact that *you* are to blame for all our son's health issues means you don't get to pass comment on the topic. Secondly, I'd like to know why was not only our health insurance declined, but the debit card for our joint account and the credit card declined, Jeff? Can you explain that to me?"

In the pit of my stomach, I already know why. I want to hear him say the words out loud – to admit what I suspect he's done. Again, I see guilt flash in his eyes. Oh, not guilt over the fact that there wasn't money in the account. Rather guilt as in he's culpable. But, true to form, Jeff attempts to bluster his way out of it rather than take responsibility for his actions.

"How the hell would I know? I'm not the bank. I have no idea why they would have been declined. Unless you've overspent again, like you always do."

As if a switch has been flipped in my brain, I lose the stomach for this confrontation. Before the filter in my brain can engage and monitor what comes out of my mouth, I hear myself saying, "I'm done, Jeff. Done with your lying, your gambling, done with having to turn every penny over ten times before I spend it on essentials. I'm just done."

"Don't you threaten me, bitch. You'll never be done because you've got nowhere to go. And how are you going to survive? Who's going to be stupid enough to put up with you and your sick brat draining them of every dollar they earn? If anyone should be done, it's me."

"Then be done. That way I won't have to worry about how much money you've lost at the tables and how much is left to keep us – all three of us – fed and clothed. And as for 'my sick brat', he wouldn't be sick if you hadn't pushed me down the stairs, would he?"

“Typical of you to bring the past up every single time we argue. You’re like a broken fucking record. ‘It’s all your fault, Jeff,’” he mimics me, his face contorted in ugly lines. “I’m so sick of you—” A knock on the door interrupts his tirade. “Yeah, who is it?” he snarls, whirling toward it.

“Petty Officer Grimes, please open the door,” a masculine voice calls out.

Anxiety wells in me. If whoever’s out there is addressing him so formally, I sincerely doubt they come bearing good tidings. Jeff’s face creases in even more pissed off lines.

“Who is it and what do you want?” Irritation ripe in his tone.

“Petty Officer, open the door. This is official Navy business, and I will not ask you again,” the voice replies.

Smart enough not to push his luck, he walks over, unlocks, and yanks the door open. “Yeah?”

A rather large man stands on my doorstep, neatly dressed in uniform. He’s unsmiling and unamused, I’m guessing at Jeff’s childish antics.

“Commander Hurt wishes to see you immediately. He’s been unable to reach you on the phone, and we’ve been dispatched to bring you back to him.” At his words, my gaze shifts to the even larger man standing beside a vehicle parked at our curb.

Holy Mother of Mercy, he’s freaking huge. Looks like he could snap a person in half like a twig if you pissed him off. Even Jeff appears shrewd enough to know not to mess with these men.

“Fine. I’ll be right there. I just need to change.” He disappears at speed, as if his ass is on fire.

The soldier standing at my door tips his head. “Ma’am.”

“Hi,” I reply rather inanely, not knowing what else to say.

Before long, Jeff’s back. The man steps back to make space for him to exit the house, then falls into step behind him. I watch as the two of them walk to the car and the giant

standing there opens the back door for Jeff. The two soldiers climb in the front, and then the three of them are gone.

An uncomfortable knot settles like a boulder in the pit of my stomach. Something tells me that bad news is headed our way. However, since there's not much to be done about it right this second, I head for Luke's room to check in on him.

He's sleeping like a log when I peek into the room, so I quietly leave the door ajar and head for the kitchen. May as well get a start on the cleaning for the day. Pushing the worry to the back of my mind, I lose myself in the rhythm of vacuuming, dusting, and tidying our tiny home.

Even over the noise of the vacuum cleaner, sometime later, I jump at the slamming of our front door. Spinning around, I find Jeff standing just inside the room, a scowl on his face as he watches me through stormy eyes.

Fear joins tension as I take in the thunderous expression on his face.

"Everything okay?" I ask, despite not really wanting to know the answer.

A beat goes by before he replies. "No, Kathleen. All is definitely not okay."

This time, I don't ask. I probably couldn't get the words out past the lump in my throat, even if I tried anyway.

"Oh, now you're quiet." He removes his cap, throwing it across the room. "Typical. Just fucking typical of you. Well, since you didn't ask, I'll tell you." Before he can though, I hear Luke call me.

Turning to look, I spot him standing in the hall, his eyes darting between his father and me. I hold out a hand to him, and he comes over to burrow into my side. I'm sure he can feel the tension in the room.

Jeff gives me a look of disgust, his curled lip clearly conveying his thoughts and feelings. Then he proceeds to drop his bombshell. "I want you out of my house by tonight. I don't care how you do it or where you go. I just want you gone. Got it?"

“I – what? Where are we supposed to go?”

“Are you deaf? I just told you; I don’t care. Just get gone. I’m going out for a few hours. By the time I get back, I want you out of the house.” With that, he pushes past me on his way to the bedroom. A few minutes later he reappears, dressed in civilian clothes again. “Best get a move on,” he says, giving me one last filthy look before slamming his way out of what I considered our home until now.

I stare after the man, completely at a loss. What just happened? And what am I supposed to do now? Jeff would never joke about something like this, so if he says to get out, he means for me to do exactly that. To pack our stuff and leave. Before he gets back home. Whenever that will be.

My stomach roils with nerves; anxiety, fear, worry, all lying there like a lead ball, to add to the unhappy mix of emotion.

“Mama?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Why’s Daddy so mad at you?”

“I’m not sure, baby. I think he’s just having a bad day.” My brains scrambles to find a way to explain to my sweet boy why we need to leave the only home he’s ever known. Out of nowhere, inspiration strikes. “I have an idea. How about you and me, we go on an adventure.”

Luke’s little face brightens as he looks up at me. “An adventure? To where?”

“Well, that’s the adventure. Finding someplace to go – you know, a bit like a vacation. Just you and me. What do you think?”

“Yeah. That sounds like fun.” He hops up and down on the spot.

“Easy there, slugger. We don’t want you to get sick again. That’ll ruin the adventure.”

“Okay, Mama.”

“Come on then,” I say, urgency tugging at me. “Let’s go get you packed up so we can get going.”

In little more than an hour, I’ve got all our stuff packed – well, the stuff I can take with, at any rate – and we’re ready to leave. I’m trying my best to keep panic at bay, since I have no idea where we’ll go.

I’ve managed to squirrel a tiny bit of savings away for a rainy day. Living with my mother taught me to always be ready for anything. But heaven knows, it won’t last forever. In fact, it won’t last long at all. So, first order of business is to find somewhere for Luke and me to stay, and then I need to find a job. Stat.

Lord only knows where I’ll find one of those since I haven’t worked in over six years. Not since Jeff knocked me down the stairs and I went into premature labor. But that’s tomorrow’s worry. For today, I need to find somewhere for us to go.

SCOOTER

Kathleen and Luke have been on my mind for days. I've been hearing rumors around the base about Gonzo and some side piece he's been fooling around with. And that pisses me off. He's got a good woman to go home to, but instead he'd rather step out on her. The dumbass is too arrogant – or stupid – to appreciate what he's got.

I check my watch and see it's almost lunchtime. Making a snap decision, I impatiently wait for the time to tick by before I grab keys out of my locker and head for the car. I'll pop in at the house to see how Luke's doing after his hospital visit.

I pull up to the curb outside the house and am confused to find the house completely empty. Not even curtains remain to cover the windows and shield the rooms within from passersby. What the hell?

Just a few days ago, I dropped a woman and her child off at this very house, and now there's no trace that anyone's even lived here in ages. I cycle through surprise, confusion, and then worry.

I've heard that the man has not only managed to gamble everything he owned away, but he's gotten involved with some seriously sketchy people. All I can do for now is hope she and the boy are all right until I can find out where they've gone.

I make my way back to the office, thoughts of Kathleen in the forefront of my mind. I'll never forget the first time I saw her as long as I live. The base hosted a family day, and we'd just finished the obstacle challenge.

We whipped Gonzo's team, again, and the man was hopping mad. The more we ragged on them, the more riled he got. Even his team leader couldn't calm him down. Just as he was ready to throw hands, this vision walked up to him with the most radiant smile. A few choice words and that light winked right out.

Red-hot rage flooded my veins, and I had to walk away to avoid giving the jackass a beat down for all the world to see. But the look of devastation on Kathleen's face haunted me for weeks after.

The thought of love at first sight had always been a laughable concept. Until the moment I laid eyes on Kathleen. Sunlight cast a halo of liquid fire around her auburn hair. I have no idea what they call the complicated-looking do she had going on in her hair, all I do know is that it looked damn good on her.

When she turned those distressed doe eyes on me, I was a goner. Cheesy as it sounds, I literally felt the moment it happened. And if I'm brutally honest, I think I could have silenced my conscience over stealing another man's woman if I hadn't spotted the gentle swell of her belly. But I draw the line at breaking up a family.

At the time, I firmly believed every child deserves to have their father present in their lives. Unlike mine, who took off first chance he got. Knowing what I do now, I'm not so sure I believe that anymore.

For the rest of the afternoon, I brood. Conversation ebbs and flows around me, I contribute where needed, but otherwise I'm quiet. Lost in thought. When it's time to go home, I grab my stuff out of the locker, but before I can exit the room, Knight calls out to me.

"Hey, Scooter. Got a minute?"

"Yeah, sure. What's up?"

Lowering his voice so only I can hear him, he asks, "Everything okay? You've been very quiet this afternoon."

"Yeah, all good." I nod.

Those shrewd eyes study me for long seconds, and I doubt they miss a thing. The man knows me too well. “I’m going to have to call bullshit on that one, bud. Your mouth is saying one thing; your eyes are telling a whole different story. Wanna talk about it?”

For just a moment, I entertain the idea of talking it out with Knight. He always knows what to say, and he always has a plan. But at the last minute, I chicken out.

“Nah, it’s all good,” I reply.

Taking my arm, he leads me down the hall and into an empty office. He closes the door and turns to face me. “Dude, this is me you’re talking to. Firstly, that wasn’t really a request. More me being polite. And secondly, I can see there’s something heavy on your mind. If I can, you know I’ll help with whatever it is.”

Gripping the back of my neck, I hang my head. Study my boots. Weigh up my words. Before I’ve decided what to do, he shows me yet again why he’s our team leader. The man does not miss a thing. “Does this have anything to do with Kathleen Pierce?”

I consider denying it, but our relationship, both professional and personal, is based on mutual trust. Brotherhood. Lying to the man’s face would harm that. With a deep sigh, I nod again.

“I don’t know how the hell you know half the shit you do, but yeah, it does.”

“I heard about the hospital incident.”

“What did you hear?” I ask, curious to know how much information he’s privy to.

“If you’re wondering if I know about your covering the bill, yeah, it was mentioned.” All I can do is shake my head. “So out with it. What’s weighing on you so heavily?”

Accepting defeat, I reply. “She and Luke have been on my mind since the hospital. That dickhead treats her like crap, and I’ve been worried about them. So, I went around to the house during lunch –”

“Hmm, I wondered where you’d disappeared to.”

“The house is empty. Not a piece of furniture, not a curtain, nothing in it. Not one solitary thing. I don’t know where they’ve gone or if they’re okay, and that’s what’s worrying me, based on what happened with the whole bill debacle. Worrying if they’re okay or not, since money seems to be an issue, you know?”

“I hear you. I’ve been hearing things on the grapevine. Things that don’t make me happy, and sure as hell won’t make you happy, since you’ve been sweet on Kathleen almost from the time you laid eyes on her.”

“Don’t keep me hanging, dude. What have you been hearing?” I want to snap at Knight but hold onto my temper. None of this situation is his fault.

“Well, for one, I hear he has a girl on the side—”

“Yeah, I’ve heard about her,” I interrupt.

“Did you also happen to hear she’s pregnant with Gonzo’s baby?”

I can feel my blood pressure climbing at Knight’s words. “*That* I did not know.”

“Yep. And he’s just been dishonorably discharged for a heap of violations. That’s probably why the house is empty. I know he’s currently staying with his new baby mama. What I don’t know is the status of his relationship with Kathleen or where she and the boy have gone.”

“Fuck.” I rub the back of my neck as concern for the two of them ramps up. “Fuck,” I repeat, kicking at the baseboard beside me. “I’ve got to find them, Knight.”

He studies me, then nods. “I’ll put some feelers out and see what comes back. If all else fails, I guess we can sic Tex on them. You know if anyone can find a needle in a haystack, it’s him.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

“That’s what family does, brother. We look out for each other.” He claps me on the back, then shoulder bumps me.

“Now let’s blow this popsicle stand. I’ve got to get home. Indigo’s decided we need more culture in our lives and is dragging my sorry ass to the ballet tonight.”

I snort out a laugh at the idea of him at the ballet. If he isn’t snoring within the first thirty minutes – if not less — I’ll be surprised. “Well then, best we get going so you aren’t late. You won’t be super popular if you are.”

“If that ain’t God’s honest truth. Indie’ll have my head. Especially since she’s gone and got herself some fancy outfit for tonight.”

“You’re definitely going to want to be on time then.” I grin at him.

We make our way out to the parking lot as we chat, but as we reach Knight’s vehicle, he puts a hand on my shoulder. “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks, Knight.”

“Anytime, brother. Anytime.” With that, he hops in and starts her up. I keep walking toward my own, waving in response to his hoot as he drives by.

A lonely night at home doesn’t appeal to me, but the choice of single friends to hang out with is now down to two since everyone else seems to be hooking up. Dialing Digit’s number, I listen to it ring as I climb into my own vehicle.

“Hey, hey. What’s up.”

“You got plans for this evening?” I ask without preamble.

“Nothing earth shattering. Just some tube and a couple cold ones before bed. What you got going on?”

“Absolutely zero. And I’m seriously not in the mood for my own company tonight. Up for going to grab a burger or something?”

“Yeah, I’m in. Where and when?”

We toss some ideas around and finally settle on a burger joint roughly halfway between our homes. “Think Gator’d be interested in joining us?”

“Probably. I’ll give him a call while you head for home to change. I’ll let you know what he says.”

“Sounds like a plan. Speak to you later.”

Since my apartment isn’t too far from base, I’m home in next to no time. I dash through the shower, and within fifteen minutes I’ve spoken to Digit and am on my way to meet him and Gator for dinner. A night at home with nothing but my thoughts for company successfully avoided.

KATHLEEN

It's been a week since Jeff kicked me out of the house, and I'm trying really hard to stay positive, to not panic. We've been staying at a women's shelter, and while it's not that expensive, the cost of storing our few belongings is eating into my meagre savings.

I need to find a job, but no one is willing to take me on. Since I had Luke just out of school and have been a stay-at-home mom at Jeff's insistence, I have zero work experience. Because of it, they won't take a chance on me.

Tonight, I'm trying Aces to see if they have any openings. I don't know what I'll do if I strike out here. Waiting for the manager, I have a knot in my stomach.

"Hey, sorry for making you wait. I'm Jessyka, how can I help you?" A pale woman, with a pronounced limp and a pretty smile, rushes into the office.

Returning her smile, I reply, "No problem. I'm Kathleen Pierce. I'm here to enquire about a job."

"Ah, I see. Do you have any experience?"

The knot in my stomach tightens. Taking a deep breath, I answer her. "No, ma'am. But I'm a quick study, and I'm willing to do what needs to be done."

Jessyka takes her time answering me. And while it's the expected one, I'm still devastated. "You know, I believe that. Unfortunately, I don't have any openings at the moment. But if you give me your details, I'll keep you in mind for when we do."

I do my best to give her a convincing smile. “Thanks, I appreciate it.” I take the piece of paper and pen she slides across the desk and fill it in before sliding it back. Fighting back the tears of defeat, I get to my feet and hold out a hand. “Thanks for your time. I’ll get out of your hair now.”

“No bother. You take care now.”

“Thanks. You too.” I exit her office with my shoulders back and my chin up. The last thing I want to do is humiliate myself by crying in public yet again because of the consequences of Jeff’s actions.

I make it as far as the bar. Beckett is sitting there nursing what looks to be juice of some kind. He’s clearly waiting for someone and, exhausted and emotional, I can’t help but wish it were me. In fact, there’s little I wouldn’t give for it to be me. The man is indecently hot, but more than that, he’s just a terrific guy. Sweet, patient, attentive.

And that’s when I lose the battle to stem the tears that have been threatening. As they stream down my face, I duck my head and make a dash for the ladies’ restroom, praying he won’t see me.

Lost in an emotional haze, I have no idea how long I hide out in the stall, giving vent to all the pent-up feelings that have been riding me hard all week. Living with an alcoholic gambler for a mother, I learned early on in life that the world doesn’t care about you. You’ve got to fend for yourself, and if you want anything, you’ve got to fight for it yourself. Nobody’s coming to save you.

So I learned to survive, to be self-sufficient, to be strong. And then I met Jeff, and repeated history by getting involved with another gambler, unknowingly. The only saving grace in this situation is that he isn’t an alcoholic to boot. Not that it’s turned out any better.

Because there’s only so many punches you can roll with before one takes you down. And I’m afraid this is the one that might just do it. However, I simply can’t afford that with a sick little boy to look after and only myself to rely on.

God, I must look an absolute mess, with mascara and snot running down my face, red and swollen eyes, and a nose that could give Rudolph a good run for his money. I now have a pounding headache on top of all of that, and limited time to pull myself together before I have to fetch Luke from a friend's house.

Hopelessness weighs on me – I'm not a stupid person, but right this minute, I can't figure my way out of this mess. I desperately need a job; I just don't know how to get someone to give me a chance. As my mind races through yet another cycle of "what the hell am I going to do," I feel the tears well again.

Stop it. Pull yourself together, Kathleen. None of this is helping you.

Taking a deep, calming breath, I get to my feet and straighten my clothing. I stand in front of the door for long seconds before finally reaching out a hand to unlock it. The water I splash on my face is icy cold and refreshing, but does zero to remove the traces of my crying jag.

When I eventually feel ready to go back out into the bar, I let myself out into the hallway and walk into a wall that wasn't there before.

"Oof." The sound is involuntary as air is forced from my lungs at the sudden impact.

Gentle hands cup my elbows and steady me. "Shit, are you okay?"

You have got to be kidding me right now. That sinful voice belongs to none other than Beckett, and he is, for sure, the last person I would want to see me this way. Praying a hole would simply appear in the floor beneath me and swallow me whole, I'm sorely disappointed when it doesn't.

I can feel the moment he recognizes me, despite not lifting my head, when his body stiffens. "Kathleen?" With a careful touch, he lifts my face to his, but I can't find it in me to look at him. I couldn't bear to see the judgment in his eyes.

"Kay, look at me."

I shake my head. The last thing I want is for him to see me looking like this. Nor do I want to have to answer the questions that will inevitably follow. I both hear and feel him sigh and realize my hands still rest on his rock-hard chest.

Yanking my hands back as if I've been burned, I tuck them behind me.

"I promise I don't bite. Well, not unless you ask me to." His chuckle has my cheeks heating, but conversely has the knot in my stomach relaxing just the tiniest bit.

He's standing so close I can smell a comforting blend of soap and aftershave. Breathing him in, I allow the scent to wrap around me and ease the constriction around my chest a little more. Still, I refuse to look up at him.

A cloak of silence surrounds us amidst the loud music and chatter of voices in conversation. We stand like that for what feels like a long time but probably isn't more than a couple minutes. Finally, with nothing else for it but to look at the man, I lift my eyes to his, and our gazes lock.

The compassion and something else I can't quite put my finger on in his deep blue eyes is almost my undoing. A girl could get lost in those glorious orbs for a lifetime and be quite content to remain there.

"Hey," he murmurs, barely audible over the noise that surrounds us.

"Hi," I reply; feeling stupid, it's all I can think of in the moment.

His gaze roams my face, those sharp eyes taking it all in, missing nothing. It's almost as if he's cataloguing all he's seeing. I guess it's part of the job to be so observant.

With the softest touch, he cups my cheek. "Talk to me." I start to deny that anything's wrong, despite knowing how I must look. "Don't." Beckett shakes his head, cutting me off before I can finish my standard response of "it's all good/I'm fine".

"Sweet pea, don't lie to me. I can see something's troubling you – it has been since I last saw you at the hospital

the other day. Please. I just want to help. Let me help you.”

After dealing with Jeff’s absolute disinterest in anything relating to Luke and me, his kindness destroys the tenuous hold I’ve managed to get on my emotions. Once again, scalding tears streak down my face.

Without another word, Beckett pulls me into his arms, cradling my head against his shoulder, and holds me close as I give vent to the ugly mix of feelings swirling within me. The world ebbs and flows around us as we stand in the middle of the hall outside the restroom. I feel safe shielded by his body, lulled by the soothing hand that rubs up and down my back.

When finally the tears stop and I’m left a hiccupping mess yet again, Beckett holds me at arm’s length to see my face. “Where’s Luke?”

Feeling a little punch drunk from my crying jag, it takes me a moment to process the question. “Um, he’s at a friend’s house.”

“How long before you have to collect him?”

I frown. “What’s the time now?”

“Three thirty-nine,” he replies, checking his watch.

“In a little less than an hour and a half.”

He nods, a thoughtful look on his face. “Come on then. Let’s get out of here.” Taking my hand, he guides me down the hall, out of Aces, and into the parking lot.

As we walk, he uses his other hand to take his cell phone out of his pocket, dials, and listens; not once letting go of my hand. “Hey. There’s been an unexpected change of plans. I won’t be able to make it this afternoon.” He listens some more. “Thanks, bud. Chat later.”

“No, don’t cancel your plans.”

“Already done.” His words are brief, but not unkind.

“No, Beckett –”

He stops long enough to look me in the face. “Kay, don’t sweat it. I can hang out with Gator any time. You clearly need

a friend, and right now? That's way more important to me. Okay?"

Wordlessly, I nod. His words leave me speechless. "All right then. Let's go."

When we reach his vehicle, he opens the door and waits for me to climb in before closing it again. He circles around to his side, hops in, and starts the car. Neither of us say a word as he pulls out of the parking space and points us in the direction of wherever he has in mind. For a moment, I wonder if I should be scared. But this is Beckett – the man has never been anything but sweet and kind to me.

Not too much later, we stop in front of a rather impressive house at the end of a cul-de-sac not too far from the beach. Looking around with interest, I ask, "Whose house is this?"

When he doesn't reply, I turn in his direction and am intrigued to find him looking a little uncomfortable, subtle color riding high on his cheekbones. Quirking an eyebrow, I wait him out.

Eventually, he says, "It's mine." Definitely not what I was expecting. "I inherited it from my grandmother when she passed a few years back."

"Oh, Beckett. I'm so sorry for your loss. Were you close with her?"

Sadness clouds the beauty of his blue eyes for a moment. "Yeah, I was."

I reach out and squeeze his hand but don't say anything else. Instead, I take the house and property in. Apart from the house, there's a small guest cottage off to the side of the rather large grounds. A three-car garage is attached to the house on the opposite side to the cottage. And flower beds rioting with bright blooms line the neatly maintained lawn the color of emeralds.

What a beautiful place this would be to bring up children, with the freedom to ride bicycles in the street, play catch or ball on the lawn, or shoot some hoops in the driveway. A little

lost in the fantasy I can see so clearly in my mind, I start a bit when Beckett opens my door.

His house is a revelation as I step into the foyer and he closes the door behind us. It's big and homey, inviting you to come in and stay a while. Despite being a little untidy, it's clean and smells fresh – a scent I can't quite place perfuming the air.

He guides me into the living room, in the corner of the open-plan area. "Have a seat. What can I get you to drink?"

"A little juice maybe? Or water is fine if you don't have juice."

"Juice I can do. I have pineapple or grape juice – which would you prefer?"

"Pineapple would be great, thanks." I study the room around me as he heads off to get our drinks. It's only when he returns with the beverages and takes a seat beside me that I realize I'm wringing my hands as he lays his warm one over mine.

SCOOTER

The feel of Kathleen's satiny skin beneath my hand sends tingles up my arm. Awareness rears its untimely head. I brought her home because she clearly needs a friend right now, not someone to perv over her.

"No need to be nervous. I just want to help if I can. It's obvious that something's wrong and, if I'm able to, I'd just like to be there for you." I see her side-eye me, but she neither lifts her head, nor replies. "Will you let me?"

"Will I let you what?"

"Help you."

She takes a deep breath. "You can't help me. No one can. This is something I have to do."

I contemplate her words, and how sad they sound, before changing tactic. "Will you at least tell me what's going on? Please?" The rest can wait for now, but we need a starting point, and that's as good a one as any.

For a long time, she doesn't say a word. She simply sits there, worrying her thumb nail. There's a hollow feeling around my heart thinking she's not going to answer me. But then she surprises me.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to help me? No one – not one single person – has ever offered before. What makes *you* want to?"

My mind races as I consider all the ways I could reply to her, but knowing that most will send her running, I finally just settle on, “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Do I need any more of a reason than that?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I’ve never been in this situation before.”

“By now you know I’m not like everyone else. Military are family, and we take care of our own. You know the drill.”

“Yeah, I guess I do, even if I’ve never understood it.”

It hurts me to know that no one has ever once taken care of Kathleen. She’s the kind of woman who should be loved, honored, and cherished for eternity. How has nobody seen the value of that? Of what she brings to this world?

“Talk to me, sweet pea. Tell me what’s going on.”

Despite the reluctance clearly stamped all over her face, Kathleen starts to talk, and I don’t like what I hear. “That day at the hospital, when I went to pay the bill, our health insurance was declined. I thought it was strange, but no big deal, I would simply pay with our debit card. That too was declined.

“But it was only when the credit card was declined that I really started to panic. I tried to reach Jeff, but his phone was off. Eventually, I was forced to give up. I went back to the cashier – Carol has been there a long time now, and we’ve gotten to know each other over the years – to try and make some arrangement.

“When I got back to her counter, she said someone had paid the bill. I still have no idea who it was. But that wasn’t the worst of it. After you dropped Luke and me off at home, Jeff was waiting for me. We got into an argument.

“Then two men in uniform came to the house and told Jeff he needed to go with them. It didn’t sound good. And they certainly didn’t seem to like him very much. I’m guessing whatever happened while he was gone was bad, because he

was madder than a wet hen when he got back. So mad, in fact, he told me we were over, that he was going out for a few hours and to make sure to be out of the house by the time he got back. And that was that. He left, and I did as I was told.”

My blood boils at her words. I knew Gonzo was scum, I just didn’t know how much. The man is batshit crazy – that’s how he got his nickname during training – but not in a good way. But to throw his own family out? Yeah, that’s low. Then again, I guess it’s not so surprising since he already has a replacement all set up.

I can see there’s more to the story by the fear in her eyes. “Where are you staying? How are you supporting yourself?” Once again, Kathleen worries at her thumb nail, not meeting my eyes. “Kay.”

“At a women’s shelter, okay?”

My gut clenches. I hate the thought of her being in a place like that. Especially with a young child. “How are you supporting yourself?”

Her sigh is a little irritated and a whole lot soul-weary. “I managed to save a little money over the years, but it’s not going to last forever.” She’s quiet for so long I think she’s done talking. But then she turns devastated eyes on me. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I can’t find work.

“I have no experience, and nobody wants to take a chance on me. The money’s going to run out sooner rather than later, and I have no idea how I’m going to take care of my son. God forbid, he has a serious asthma attack, because I can’t pay for it ...”

The more she talks the faster her words and her breathing get. To stave off a panic attack, I take her hand in mine, brushing my fingers over hers. “Easy there, sweet pea. It’ll all work out.” Kathleen shakes her head, but before she can say anything, I continue. “You said you have no experience. Did you mean for a specific job, or just in general?”

“In general. I met Jeff and fell pregnant not too long after I got out of school. He wanted me to be a stay-at-home mom –

didn't want some stranger looking after his child. So, I never got an opportunity to gain work experience. Now I'm struggling to find work because I chose to stay home with my boy."

"What kind of work have you been looking for?"

"Anything. Literally anything I can get an interview for." She hangs her head. "That's what I was doing at Aces. I went to ask if they had any vacancies. I'm willing to wait tables, bartend – hell, I'm even willing to wash dishes if it means earning money."

My mind races at her words. I've been using a cleaning service for years, but lately have been toying with the idea of getting a housekeeper to take care of the house and keep an eye on the grounds. Grams left money in a trust for the upkeep of the house since she didn't want to burden me with the cost – not that I can't afford it, but that was Grams.

Now I'm sitting here, looking at this incredible woman with more strength and resilience than a lot of men I know, and feeling like it's kismet. I want a housekeeper, and she needs a job.

"It seems we were meant to cross paths today, sweet pea."

Kathleen frowns at me. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it just so happens that I've been considering taking on a housekeeper instead of continuing to use a cleaning service like I have been. You need a job. Makes me wonder if this isn't the universe's way of giving us both what we want." Hope and caution war in her eyes. "Is that something you'd be interested in?"

"Absolutely. But I don't expect you to hire me out of pity."

"I wouldn't do that. Someone I can trust is more important to me than a person with experience. I know and trust you, so it just makes sense. Personally, I think it's a match made in heaven." To sweeten the deal, I continue. "It would be a live-in position, so your accommodation would be taken care of."

I can see that has her attention. Then I tell how much I'm willing to pay per month, and I can see the hope begin to edge

the wariness out. “What would you need me to do? What would my duties be?”

We chat back and forth, and the more we do, the more excited I can see her getting. After a while, the thought strikes me. “Would you like to see the cottage?” I’m hoping the charm of the compact space will seal the deal.

“Yes, please,” Kathleen replies with zero hesitation, and something settles in me at her words. The idea of having her in my home, on my property, where I get to see her every day I’m home brings me a sense of serenity I’ve never known.

As we walk over, Kathleen asks questions relating to the job I’m offering her. This is the most animated I’ve seen her in the years I’ve known her, and I’m pleased to see the haunted look in her eyes has faded.

I open the front door and step back for her to precede me. With one more ace up my sleeve, I go over to the large picture window and pull back the curtains. Light streams into the room while revealing the garden beyond. Her gasp of pleasure tells me I’m on to a winner here, and I can’t hide my smile.

“You like it?”

Eyes wide, she turns to me. “Oh, Beckett, it’s incredible. So beautiful – I have no words.”

“Do you think you and Luke could be happy here?”

“Are you kidding me? How could we not be? Your whole place is magnificent.”

“Well then, would you like the job?”

“Yes. Yes, I would like that very much.”

Holding out my hand to her, we shake on the deal. “Without wanting to sound like a douche, I’m not crazy about the idea of you two spending another night at the women’s shelter. So how about we go get your boy and your stuff, and get you settled in the cottage today? You can take a few days to settle in and start the new week fresh on Monday. How does that sound?”

As if someone cuts an imaginary wire that's been holding her rigid, I watch as Kathleen's body sags with relief. "That sounds good."

Nodding, I show for her to go ahead of me. "Excellent. Let's do it then."

We reach the front door, and she stops, turning to me. "Thank you." Her eyes well, and she takes a moment to compose herself. "Those two little words seem so insignificant – they don't even begin to do justice to the magnitude of my gratitude, but it's all I have."

Unable to help myself, I reach up to cup her cheek. "It's all I need. Knowing that the two of you are safe, it's all the thanks I need. Now let's go get that boy of yours."

KATHLEEN

There are no words to describe the intense feeling of relief that flooded through me when Beckett offered me the job as his housekeeper, knowing that I would not only have a means to support Luke and me, but we'd have a home too.

And *what* a home I now get to give my boy. The restrictive band that has resided around my chest for as long as I can remember has loosened just ever so slightly. It almost feels as if I can breathe freely. A sensation, and state of mind, I'm unfamiliar with.

I'm so caught up in my thoughts it takes a moment for me to process the question that Beckett asks. "Do you have anything other than your clothing?"

"Yeah, I have a few things in a tiny storage locker. Mostly stuff of Luke's, you know? Things I couldn't bear to throw away – toys and such."

"That's got to be chewing through your savings."

"It is, and one of the reasons I needed to find a job pronto."

"Anything big that needs transporting?"

"Nothing that wouldn't fit in, say, your car. I had to use a cab so I couldn't take anything that wouldn't fit."

"All right, then here's the plan. It's coming up on dinner time, so let's get Luke, grab a bite to eat, get all your stuff, and then get you settled in. You good with that?"

Chewing on my lip, I search for the right words to tell Beckett I can't afford to buy dinner for both Luke and me

without putting another dent in the little money I still have. There's only so far I can make it stretch, and fast food simply isn't in my budget at the moment.

"I can hear your thoughts from over here, sweet pea." The man never fails to amaze me with how astute he is, how in tune he is with my emotions. "Dinner's on me – a celebration of your new job."

How does he always know what's bugging me? It's refreshing, but also startling since Jeff was so oblivious to anything other than himself and his own needs. Now that there's been time and distance between us, I can see all the red flags I ignored. I never should have given so much of my power away, but I did under the guise of making sure my son was taken care of.

What a joke that is. Other than medical insurance, a roof over his head, and food for his belly, Luke got nothing else from Jeff. When we first discovered we were having a boy, Jeff couldn't wait for him to be born. But being sick all the time due to being premature, Luke's appeal rapidly dwindled until he was nothing more than a burden to his father.

Jeff saw him as weak and underserving of his love and attention. He never saw the beautiful heart and loving personality. All he saw was the financial drain and "wasted time" of hours spent in the emergency room. Missing out on the incredible little human his son is behind all the illness.

Illness that he caused. Luke's health issues all stem from being born around twenty-eight weeks, after he pushed me down the stairs in a drunken rage over losing at the tables. In his twisted mind, Luke's worth nothing to him, and I'm to blame.

"That's an awful lot of sighing going on over there. Everything okay?" I jump at the sound of Beckett's voice.

"Yeah. Sorry. Got a little too caught up in my own head for a second."

"No need to apologize." He turns briefly to smile at me before turning back to the road. "So, about that celebratory

dinner. You in?"

After all the crap we've been through the last couple of weeks, I decide we deserve a treat. "I graciously accept your kind offer," I reply, throwing caution to the wind and allowing someone to do something nice for us for a change.

"Excellent. I have just the place in mind."

Doing a little happy dance inside, I hug my excitement to myself, while giving Beckett directions to Luke's little friend's house. "I'll just be a moment," I say as he pulls up to the curb.

As I hurry up the path to the front door, I permit myself to feel cautious optimism over a future that has suddenly turned promising. For the first time in my life that I can remember, I seem to have someone who's on my side. It feels weird, but so, so good to know I have a friend in Beckett. A luxury I've not really had before.

Friendship requires trust – a commodity I'm a little low on. Life, and my mother, taught me early on that I can't rely on anyone other than myself; and that made it difficult to form friendships.

I've gotten better at it over the past few years living on base. It's a different kind of community to the rest of the world, a place where you learn to lean on each other in times of need. The only place I ever felt any kind of sense of family. A community that brought Beckett into my life.

"Hey, Mama," Luke's happy little voice pipes as he walks up to the door.

"Hi precious. You got all your things?" He nods. "Great. Then let's get going." Turning to the woman at the door, I continue. "That's so much for having Luke over this afternoon. Maybe we can organize a playdate next week for Liam to come over to us?"

"That sounds lovely. I'll chat with you then."

"Terrific. See you."

We walk toward the car, and Luke spots Beckett standing beside the passenger door. "Hey, Uncle Beckett. Hi," he calls

out, a smile on his face.

“Hey, little man. You hungry?”

“Yeah.” Luke’s enthusiastic response is unexpected. He’s generally a reserved child, especially when it comes to men — the legacy his father’s treatment has left him with. Opening the door, Beckett waits for Luke to hop in and secure his seatbelt before moving to my door. He repeats the gesture, waiting for me to climb in.

We’re not even underway when Luke starts regaling us with the events of his afternoon at Liam’s house, sharing all the things they did, what they ate, programs they watched. While enjoying the interaction with my son, I’m blown away with how animated and comfortable he is in Beckett’s company.

But what surprises me more is just how natural and engaged Beckett is. A warmth around the region of my bruised and battered heart spreads through my chest as I sit quietly, absorbing the moment. And on the tail of that feeling comes an unexpected yearning for this to be reality. How amazing wouldn’t it be if this was an everyday, normal moment? Someone who cares what happens to us, who cares for us and about us.

During a lull in Luke’s verbal tsunami, Beckett gives me the side-eye before looking at my son in the rearview mirror. “So, your mom has some pretty exciting news to share.”

“What is it?” he shouts, bouncing in his seat.

I have to take a second to gather my thoughts. I hadn’t expected to have it sprung on me like this. I thought I’d have time to tell Luke at my own pace, possibly over dinner. But here we are. “You know how I’ve been looking for a job and a new place for us to live?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I found both today.”

“Does that mean I get to watch TV again, Mama?”

My heart clenches at my child's words. Television has always been his escape from the reality of his health issues, and while we've been at the shelter, he's been unable to watch TV. There's a common room where a large flatscreen is available to share, but with a group of women all vying for screentime, he's not been able to watch the kiddies' programs.

"Yeah, baby, it does. You even get your own room again."

"Yay." The backseat bouncing recommences with more energy than before.

"Uncle Beckett's going to take us to fetch our stuff out of storage so you can have all your toys back tonight."

"Oh yeah." The little fist pump is too cute and has me fighting back tears as I silently curse the man who fathered this special human but lacks the capacity to be a dad.

"But before that, we've gotta grab a bite to eat. We don't want to be too weak to carry those toys, am I right?" Beckett adds.

"Right," Luke choruses from the back on cue.

Beckett simply grins at me. As my boy takes up his regaling of his day, I lapse back in to silence and let them carry the conversation.

"How do we feel about Damon's Burger Shack?" Beckett whispers out of the side of his mouth.

"We like it," I reply, laughing at his antics.

"Good to know." He puts his blinkers on, waiting for a gap in the traffic to make his turn. He pulls into the parking lot of a mall, and after a brief search, finds a spot. "Right then, let's go see about that food, shall we?"

He leads us over to the restaurant and holds the door open for Luke and me to precede him. A hostess seats us, and as we're waiting for a server, Luke asks if he can go play. "Sure, that's fine, just tell me what you want to eat first," I reply.

He tells me his choice, but before he can dash off, Beckett gives me his order too while sliding out of the booth. "I'll be

back in a bit. Just going to make sure he's okay over there." He points over to the play area.

I've heard the saying and always thought it was such hogwash. Today I learned that "my heart melted" is a thing. Because, staring over at this man – a casual friend up until recently – my son's hand firmly clasped in his, I can feel my sentimental heart melt in my chest.

All I can do is nod since there's no way I'd be able to get words past the lump that's formed in my throat. Added to the melt-worthiness of the moment is the strange sensation of actually having someone show not just my son but me, too, thought and consideration. I've never had that in my life, and I'm not sure what to do with it. So yeah, all I can do is nod and smile.

Watching the muscled, tattooed man and the small boy by his side, walk away from me I melt just a little more inside. I'm not sure if something shows on my face, but as our server comes to stand beside the booth, she nods in their direction and says, "That sure is a beautiful picture. It's always heartwarming to see a dad so involved in his kids' lives."

For the briefest moment, I consider correcting her, then decide not to. I hug the image to me, storing it in the vault where my limited happy memories live. "Yeah, it sure is. He's an amazing man."

"You're a lucky girl, sweetie." She smiles at me. "So, what can I get for you?"

I place an order for the three of us and, as luck would have it, Beckett arrives back at the table at the same time as the waitress as she brings the drinks over. He gives her one of his smiles, and I can see her react to it – pretty much the same way I do, except mine is internalized.

She has no problem letting him see he's made her weak-kneed. "Sweetie, you can't go around smiling at ladies like that, especially when you're lucky enough to have a beauty like this one on your arm." Our waitress tilts her head in my direction, and I can feel my cheeks heat. "That smile should be registered as a lethal weapon." His belly laugh can be heard

around the entire restaurant. She grins in return. "I'll be back with the food in a minute."

True to her word, it isn't long before she's back with the food. "Enjoy folks. Shout if you need anything else. Otherwise, I'll be by in a little while to check on you."

"Thanks." Beckett flashes her that lady-killer smile again. This time she simply laughs, shaking her head as she walks away.

"You're shameless."

"You have no idea." He winks, then waggles his eyebrows at me.

Unable to help myself, I laugh at his antics. Looking around, I spot Luke close to the door of the enclosed play area. "I'll be right back. I'm just going to call Luke to come eat."

Before I can move, he places a hand on my arm. Sensation akin to what I imagine an electric shock would feel like, races up my arm. Awareness, hot and sweet, floods my system on a level I've not experienced with anyone else. Ever. Not even Jeff.

In fact, by the time we split his touch had become repulsive. Our sex life was almost nonexistent. Not something I would initiate anymore, and for Jeff it seemed more like scratching an itch than anything of emotional significance.

Blissfully unaware of his effect on me, Beckett says, "Leave the little guy to have fun. If we need to, we can always heat it later for him."

I swallow, then lick my suddenly dry lips and notice Beckett's eyes follow the motion. His gaze collides with mine, his pupils dilated, the blue of his irises a deeper, richer blue. Holy smokes. Is it possible the man is as affected as I am?

SCOOTER

The feel of Kathleen's soft, satiny skin beneath my callused hand rocks me back in my seat, figuratively. I'm guessing she feels something too when the tip of her tongue darts out to wet her lips.

Mesmerized, I watch as it traces the shape of her mouth and feel the fit of my camo pants go snug. I would be mortified if I were forced to stand right this second. That's the effect she has on me. Has always had on me. Her presence in a room is enough to make me hyperaware of her – the scent of her perfume, the shape of her plump bottom lip, the color of her hair, the fit of her clothing.

Just every single little thing about her.

Now that I know she's free of the slimeball she was engaged to, it takes everything in me not to make a move on her. Having watched from the sidelines for the past seven years, yearning for something I couldn't have, I want to make her my own before I miss my opportunity.

But it's not fair on her. No matter what the relationship was like, she needs time to move on from it. I've waited this long, I can wait a little longer, difficult as that may be.

"Well, then –" She clears her throat. "We should, er, probably eat before *our* food gets cold."

"Yeah."

Reaching for my burger, I shift in my seat in an effort to ease my discomfort. Between bites, we chat about the job and

what her duties will be, hours, pay, benefits and other random things.

We're almost done eating when Luke comes running up to the table. His face is a little flushed, his breathing a bit choppy, but his eyes are shining with excitement. "Hey there, bud. You good?" I ask.

"This place is so awesome." The boy stands bouncing in place beside the table. "I'm thirsty, Mama."

Kathleen hands him his soda. "There you go." He drinks nearly half before returning the glass to the table. "Come sit a minute and have some of your nuggets and fries."

"I'm not hungry, Mama."

She frowns, but then simply says, "Well, okay. If you're sure, I can have them box it up, and we can take it home for you to eat later."

"Yeah, I'm sure – I'm just thirsty." He reaches for his glass again, draining it this time. "Can I go play some more?"

"Yes, you can, but only for a little bit longer, okay? We still need to go by the storage locker before we go home. And then it's bath- and bedtime."

"Okay." He gifts her a smile so sweet even a grizzly SEAL like me can't help but be affected by it.

I watch as he runs off before turning back to Kathleen. "Everything all right? You seemed taken aback when Luke said he wasn't hungry. Not a usual occurrence, I take it?"

"Not at all, no. Unless he's fixing for an attack. He did seem a tiny bit short of breath when he got to the table, but that could also just be from him running around with the other kids."

"Tell me about him," I invite.

"Who, Jeff?"

I have to bite back my original response, since the man is not one of my favorite people, by any means. "No, I meant Luke."

“Oh. Sure.” A smile of pure love tilts her lips upward, pulling her wide mouth into the most endearing cupid’s bow. “Jeff and I were together around six months when I discovered I was pregnant. We weren’t in the best place at the time, but Jeff seemed so excited about the prospect of a baby, especially if it was a boy, that it improved dramatically. I had an easy pregnancy; no problems or complications and life had never been better.

“One night Jeff went out with friends, and I decided on an early night. It wasn’t until he came home blind drunk and madder than a wet hen that I realized where he’d been – Jeff has a gambling problem he was trying to beat. Or so I thought.

“I came out of the bedroom to see what all the fuss was about, since he was ranting like a crazy man. He was coming up the stairs.” She pauses for a moment, and it’s clear to see the memory isn’t a happy one. “We got into it, and he got in my face to yell at me.”

Everything tightens in me as my mind races ahead to how this story is probably going to end. But I hold my peace, not interrupting her.

“He said I disgusted him with my constant whining, and how I never wanted him to have fun anymore. Then he pushed me, telling me to get the fuck out of his sight. I lost my footing and tumbled down the stairs.”

“Jesus, Kathleen ...” The horror of the mental image her words invoke has me feeling queasy, the burger I’ve just finished sitting like lead in my stomach.

She runs a shaking hand through her hair, the memory obviously still difficult for her. “At first, when I landed at the bottom, nothing hurt, and I thought everything was all right. But then the most indescribable pain ripped through my abdomen. I won’t go into the details, but the end result was premature labor at twenty-eight weeks.”

“Ah, it makes sense then – why he’s been so sick over the years. At the time, we left on a mission, and you were still pregnant. We were gone for so long that I just assumed you’d delivered when you were supposed to. Well, damn.”

“Yeah. He spent months in the NICU before he was strong enough to come home.”

“That must have been rough on you guys.”

Kathleen’s quiet for a moment. “It was for me, yeah. Jeff wasn’t around much – you know how it is.” Her softly spoken words leave much unsaid but clearly understood. I just don’t think she realizes that.

It’s the worst kept secret on base that he’s been cheating on her with one of the ladies in human resources for years. I wonder if she’s aware of it and tolerated it, or has been blissfully unaware of the man’s lack of morals.

How he’s lasted in the military as long as he has remains a mystery. He’s hot tempered, batshit crazy, and has a gambling problem that’s gotten him into tight spots more than once. We can’t decide whether the guys on his team love him or simply tolerate him because the one favorable thing I *can* say about him is he can be counted on in the heat of battle.

“Gosh, look at the time. Luke’s bedtime is in just over an hour.”

“And we still need to swing by the storage place. Best we hustle then. You go call him while I settle the bill and get his to-go bag.”

In no time at all, we’re heading out the door, Luke seemingly played out and quite sleepy. The ride over to fetch their belongings is a lot different than the one to the restaurant. It’s quiet in the car – Luke has stretched out on the backseat, and Kathleen appears to be lost in thought, staring out the window.

Turns out, their belongings are meagre, consisting mostly of the child’s stuff. Knowing how much Gonzo earns, and how he spends it, has my blood pressure rising because it’s clear to see barely any of his money went on his family.

In less than ten minutes we’re already on our way home to get the two of them settled in, and in another ten we’re home. Luke is passed out in the back, so I pull around to the guest cottage and park close to their front door.

“I’ll grab Luke if you can go ahead and unlock,” I say as I open her door.

“Okay, great. Thanks.”

She hurries off, and I reach in to pull the boy into my arms. The moment I touch him, I know something’s wrong. His skin is cold and clammy to the touch, his breathing shallow and labored.

Fuck.

I need to get Kathleen’s attention so she’ll come back to the car, but if I shout for her, it’ll most likely freak her out. On the other hand, I don’t want to leave the boy alone. Thankfully, the solution presents itself when she comes back on her own.

“Everything all right back here?” When she sees I have yet to take him out, she continues, “It’s okay, you can pick him up. He sleeps like a log. He’ll sleep right through being moved.”

“Kay –” My tone of voice must alert her that something’s off because she frowns.

“What is it? Is something wrong? Luke ...” She tries to push past me, but I stand firm. Jesus, how do I do this? I’ve never been in a situation quite like this one. I could face a group of terrorists with nothing more than a knife easier than this.

“Luke doesn’t seem to be doing too good, so I need you to jump in the back with him, and I’ll drive to the ER so we can get him checked out.”

“Oh God, what’s wrong w–”

“I have no idea,” I cut her off. “Climb in, we’ve gotta go.” Riverton General isn’t far, and I mentally track the quickest route over as I jog around to the driver’s side.

Kathleen does as I ask, and I hear her gasp, then call Luke’s name repeatedly. Glancing in the rearview mirror as I start the car, I see her shake him gently. “Come on, baby. Open your eyes for Mama. Please.” Her gaze collides with mine, and I see the panic she’s fighting back clearly etched there.

“God, I’ve never seen him like this – well, not that I can see very well in this light ...” She trails off. “His skin is so cold, but it’s clammy to the touch. I’ve been through so many bad asthma attacks with him, but he’s never been like this. I don’t know what to do.” Her words end on a whisper I have to strain to hear.

“Just sit tight, love on your boy, and I’ll have you at the hospital in no time. They’ll know what to do for him.”

I back out of the drive as fast as I dare in an attempt not to jostle the boy any more than necessary. And as I drive, I try not to think about the number of traffic violations I’m committing as we race to the hospital. I approach every intersection on high alert to avoid an accident, but slow down only long enough to ensure we’ll make it safely through.

The drive is made in absolute silence. The only sound that can be heard is the *swish* of tires on the asphalt. And the only time I break the silence is as I make the final turn.

“I’m going to pull up outside the ER. The second I stop, you hop out, and I’ll come around to get Luke, yeah?”

“I can do it,” she says with a little bite to her words.

“I know you can, sweet pea – I don’t doubt that one bit. I just want to make things easier for you is all. If you’ll let me. Okay?”

Screeching to a halt outside the doors of the emergency room, I dash out of the vehicle to grab Luke. By the time I round the vehicle, Kathleen’s out and standing clear. Reaching in, I gently lift the boy into my arms and am taken aback at how little he weighs.

We rush into the room, Kay calling out for assistance as we clear the doors. Cottoning on to the urgency of the situation, staff spring into action. Before I know it, someone is there to take Luke from me and disappears into the treatment area.

KATHLEEN

Helplessness overwhelms me as I watch the nurse vanish through the doors to the treatment area, my child in his arms. Standing there, watching my heart disappear from sight, I feel lost. My mind is blank, and I can't think of what to do.

I feel an arm wrap around my shoulders and turn to find Beckett beside me. "Come on, Kay. Let's take a seat. I'm sure someone will be out in a minute to talk to you."

I allow him to lead me over to the bank of chairs closest to the doors and take a seat. I sit, my eyes fixed on them, wondering what they're doing to my little boy. If he's even – I can't even finish the thought. The sense of panic I've been battling back washes over me like a tidal wave, taking me under mercilessly.

My breath hitches, and I want to scream. Why didn't they let me go back with them, like they normally do? As if simply thinking the words magically conjures a nurse, I see one hurrying toward me.

"Ma'am, are you the mother of the boy that's just come in?"

"Yes, I am." My voice wobbles as I reply.

"Come on back. Doctor would like to see you."

I turn to Beckett. He nods. "Go on, I'll be right here when you need me."

Despite the stress of the situation, I can't help but think how different this hospital visit is. If Jeff and I were still

together, I'd be here all alone, going out of my mind with fear and no one to talk me down from the ledge.

A whispered "thank you" is all I can manage before I follow the nurse.

She leads me to a cubicle near the back of the room, but before she draws the curtain back, she cautions me. "I don't want to scare you, but you need to be prepared for what you'll see. We're currently monitoring your son and he's therefore attached to a myriad of wires. Parents sometimes have a hard time processing all of this, so you let me know when you're ready and we'll go in."

"You can open. I just want to be with him. Please." She dips her head, then pulls back the weird pastel blue curtains. The sight that meets my eyes, despite her warning, has me rocking back on my heels.

Luke looks so tiny lying on the bed, his complexion pasty white. A heart monitor blips out of rhythm and the quiet *sshhh* of oxygen can be heard as it's fed to him via a nasal cannula. An oximeter is attached to his finger, the display a glaring red harbinger of bad news.

"Ah, thank you, Nurse. Good evening, ma'am. I'm Dr. Ackhurst."

"Hi, Doctor. I'm Kathleen Pierce. This is my son, Luke."

He looks over at Luke, a serious expression on his face. "Mrs. —"

"That's Miss —" I stop. Gather myself. Just because I'm freaked the hell out does not mean it's acceptable to be rude. "My apologies, Dr. Ackhurst. I didn't mean to be impolite."

"No need to apologize, Ms. Pierce. It's quite understandable that you're under significant strain." He gestures to the bed. "Our young man here is rather ill, I'm afraid. Can you give me some health history?"

I proceed to tell the man all about the circumstances of Luke's birth and the subsequent years of hospital visits and stays for his asthma. "But other than that, he's always been pretty healthy. I give him supplements to keep his immune

system as strong as possible so that he doesn't get colds and such."

"Has there ever been any issues with his heart?"

My own heart sinks at the words. "His heart? Er, no. Not that I've ever been made aware of, at any rate. Why, is that what's wrong? His heart?"

"I'm afraid there's indication that there might well be. During the course of my examination, I've discovered a heart murmur, and an arrhythmic beat. I'd like to send him for some tests and to consult with a colleague from pediatrics."

"That sounds serious." I can't seem to get the words to come out louder than a weak whisper.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Pierce. I know it's not the best news, but if it is something to be concerned about, it's always better to catch it when they're young." Giving me a kind smile, he continues. "Now let's get your little man off for his tests and see what we can find, shall we?"

Biting down hard on my lip to stave off fresh tears, I simply nod. Two nurses, one of whom is the nurse who brought Luke back to the treatment room, release the brakes on the bed and ready it to be wheeled wherever they're taking him.

The nurse who came to fetch me touches a hand to my arm to catch my attention. "Why don't I escort you back to the waiting room where you can wait in comfort, and I'll get you as soon as he's settled after the tests?"

Feeling like a puppet being operated by the puppet master, I nod again. The short walk back to Beckett seems endless as I move ever farther from Luke. As she pushes the door open, I see Beckett stand and hurry over to me.

The intense sapphire of his eyes deepens as he studies me, concern clearly etched in his gaze. "What did the doctor say?"

I open my mouth to tell him, but all that comes out is a harsh sob that hurts my throat. Without another word, he simply wraps me in his warm embrace. He cups the back of

my head in his palm, guiding it to his shoulder. With the other hand, he rubs soothing circles across my back.

The bustle of the ER ebbs and flows around us, yet none of it penetrates my bubble of misery as I give vent to the crippling fear that has taken up residence throughout my body. My entire body shakes, and my legs feel like Jell-O. Sobs wrack my body as the misery I can no longer keep contained pours out onto Beckett's shoulder, soaking his shirt.

“That’s it, Kay. Let it out. I’m here.”

His words soak into my affection-starved soul like rain falling in a parched desert. In the years I’ve known him, Beckett has always been kind to Luke and me. He’s treated me with respect, paying attention when I speak, never telling me that what I have to say is trivial or irrelevant.

The tears finally begin to slow, and he loosens his hold, stepping back. Leading me over to a bank of chairs in a quieter corner of the room, he guides me into a seat. Then he drags one around to sit in front of me. I’m not sure if it’s to protect me from curious onlookers staring or just so he can see my face. Either way, I’m grateful for the buffer he provides.

Beckett leans his elbows on his knees, then reaches for my hands. The warmth of his hands feels good against the icy-cold of mine, and the restrictive band around my chest eases a little.

Drawing a bracing breath, I repeat the words Dr. Ackhurst uttered in the treatment room. “The doctor picked up a heart murmur and an arrhythmic beat. Luke’s oxygen blood saturation was too low – he didn’t say anything about that, but I saw the reading on the oximeter. I’ve spent enough time in this hospital with his asthma to know eighty-three percent isn’t great.”

“Do they know what’s causing it?”

“No. So they’ve taken him to run some tests. The doctor wants to consult a colleague of his in pediatrics. That’s pretty much all I know right now.” My voice wobbles on the last sentence.

Beckett gently squeezes my hands. “He’s in good hands here. They’ll get it figured out.” We lapse into silence for a while until the doctor comes out briefly to talk to me.

“Ms. Pierce, I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Murray. She’s the head of pediatrics here at Riverton.”

“Hi, Dr. Murray.”

“Hello, Ms. Pierce. I’m Carolyn Murray.” She holds her hand out, and I shake it. “Dr. Ackhurst has consulted with me about Luke and, after examining him, there’s a few things I’d like to take a closer look at. So, with your permission, I’d like to do some scans and a couple other tests on him.”

There’s a buzzing in my head as I hear the words but struggle to process them. How did this happen, and how the hell am I going to pay for everything? My stomach clenches at the thought. Guilt twists my heart for even thinking it. The reality, however, is that without Jeff’s health insurance, I can’t afford this. Even with the generous salary Beckett will be paying me.

But I don’t have an option. Like with everything else in my life, I’ll have to figure it out. Luke needs the treatment. Period. It’s not his fault that his sperm donor is an asshole who abandoned us.

“Ms. Pierce?” Dr. Murray gives me a sympathetic look.

“Sorry, it’s just a lot to process, you know? Of course, you must do the necessary tests.”

“Very well then. I’ll get the ball rolling and report back as soon as I have something for you. Once Luke is done, I’ll get a nurse to come collect you so you can see him.”

“Thank you very much. Both of you,” I reply. They nod at almost the same time before leaving the same way they came.

The next few hours are a blur as we sit waiting for news. Any news. We sit side-by-side barely speaking, but just having Beckett there brings me comfort. His quiet strength keeps me calm as the people come and go, the bedlam of a busy emergency room playing out around us.

At some point, I must have dozed off because I become aware of being plastered to a warm body. For a moment, I absorb the feeling of a hard shoulder beneath my cheek; the clean smell of soap teasing my senses.

“Kay? The doctor’s here to see you,” I hear Beckett say.

Jolting upright, I’m mortified to note I’ve obviously been napping on the man’s shoulder. Oh God, I hope I did not drool on him. I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth as surreptitiously as I can, breathing a sigh of relief when it comes up dry.

“Yeah, I’m awake now.”

“Ms. Pierce,” Dr. Murray greets. “Dr. Ackhurst is attending a case in the treatment room. I’m sure he’ll be along as soon as he can. In the meantime, I wanted to talk with you about the result of the scans.”

The look on her face tells me I’m not going to like what she has to say. I open my mouth to speak, but no sound comes out. So I simply nod instead.

“Dr. Ackhurst informs me that Luke was born at twenty-eight weeks, correct?”

“Yes.” This time I manage to squeeze the word out.

“Do you know what caused the premature birth?”

“Yes, my ex-fiancé accidentally bumped me down the stairs, and the doctor said it caused the placenta to pull away from the uterus – I think the term she used was placental abruption?”

“Ah, I see.” I can’t judge what she’s thinking from her neutral response. “Were there any problems during delivery? Do you remember what his Apgar test scores were?”

“During the delivery, no. I did hemorrhage afterward, but they managed to get it under control. As for Luke’s Apgar, I don’t remember exact scores. I just remember them being unhappy with them both times. And then they rushed him off to the NICU where he stayed for a while.”

Dr. Murray scribbles notes on her pad, nodding as I speak. “Based on what you’ve told me, the results of all our testing ties in. The tests have revealed that Luke is suffering from ASD or Atrial Septal Defect.

“Basically, what that means is that he has a hole in his heart between the upper chambers, which increases the amount of blood that flows through the lungs. This condition is present at birth and can often go undetected in adulthood. Sometimes something sets it off, causing it to be picked up before then. Did anything out of the ordinary happen today?”

“Well, no not really.” My mind races to remember everything that happened today, but nothing stands out. “The only thing out of our ordinary typical daily routine is we went to dinner, and Luke played in the children’s area.

“To be honest, it’s the most active I’ve seen him. He tends to be a quiet kid who loves to watch TV and game. A side effect of regular asthma attacks and chest infections.”

“That’ll do it. The more-than-usual physical exertion would have upped his heartrate, increasing blood flow. Which in turn would have pushed a higher volume to the lungs than it already was. The fact that the lungs would have had to work harder would have, in turn, taxed the heart, resulting in a perfect storm, so to speak.”

“So how do we fix this? Can we even fix it?”

“Yes, it can be. We’d have to go in and close the hole in his heart – not something I advise lightly, since it’s pretty major surgery for one so young. However, in Luke’s case, it’s necessary.”

KATHLEEN

The doctor's words have me reeling in shock. The entire situation feels so unreal, like I've stepped into some weird alternate universe. Closing my eyes, I rub them. I'm tired after a long, stressful day and feel quite literally ill at the idea of my poor boy having to go under the knife.

In fact, knowing a little about heart surgery, I shudder to think of what he'll go through. But, once again, what option do I have if I want to save him? I'm unaware that I'm beginning to hyperventilate until Beckett takes my hand in his and squeezes ever so gently. Almost as if to say, you're not alone in this. I'm here.

I'm so grateful for his presence, but on the flip side feel bad that he's been dragged into drama that isn't his own. Yet, through all of this, he's not once made me feel like a burden. He's been nothing but kind and sweet, taking care of me and trying to keep my spirits up.

While I'm still scrambling to make sense of this fresh new hell, Dr. Ackhurst joins us. "I see by the look on your face that Dr. Murray has given you Luke's diagnosis. I'm sorry we don't have better news for you. Since I'm an ER doctor, I'll be handing his care directly over to her — I just wanted to come out and let you know they have him settled in the pediatric ward, and you can go on up when you're ready."

"Thank you for all you've done for him this evening, Doctor. I appreciate it," I reply.

“You’ve most welcome, my dear. I wish you all well.”
With that, he leaves us.

“I think you’ve had quite the shock to your system, so I’m going to leave you to go see your boy and reassure yourself he’s doing better. I’ll be by a little later to check in on him. Hopefully, I’ll have the rest of the test results, and we can talk more then.”

“Thank you, Dr. Murray.”

She dips her head in acknowledgement. She turns to leave, and Beckett, who’d been quiet to this point, pulls me from my seat. “Come on, let’s go find Luke so you can see for yourself he’s okay, just like the doc said.”

Checking the information board, we find where we need to go and find the nearest bank of elevators to take us up to the pediatric ward. Our ascent is interrupted when we stop two floors before ours, and a nurse wheels a patient into the elevator. She’s talking to the lady in the bed but looks up to guide the bed in, and I see it’s one of the guy’s significant others, Indigo.

A smile tilts her lips up as she spots the two of us. “Hey you two. What brings you by?”

Beckett steps forward and gives her a quick peck on the cheek while I simply return her friendly smile.

“Hey, Indie. Visiting Kay’s son, Luke.”

I see her eyes bounce between the two of us, a million questions crowding the gorgeous orbs. God, she has such pretty eyes. A light green the color of a tender new shoot, doe-shaped that’s accentuated by the subtle makeup she’s wearing.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Nothing too serious, I hope?” she asks, looking directly at me.

“To be honest, I don’t know how serious it is, just that he has Atrial Septal Defect and has to have surgery to close the hole,” I reply.

“He’s still pretty young – four or five?”

“He’s six now.”

“Already? Gosh, how time flies. But since he’s still so young, having picked it up now, they’ll fix him up, good as new. Who’s his attending?”

“Attending?”

“Sorry, his attending physician.”

“Oh. Dr. Carolyn Murray.”

“You’re in good hands. She’s brilliant. When I have children one day and I’m ever in need of a pediatric cardiologist, I want her. She’s absolutely fabulous, and such a nice lady.”

“Good to know. Then I’m glad Luke got her, on Dr. Ackhurst’s recommendation.” The bell dings, and this time we stop on the right floor.

“This is us,” Beckett says, placing his hand between my shoulder blades. “Cheers, Indie. I’m sure I’ll see you soon. Take care.”

“You too, Scooter. So long, Kathleen. Hope Luke’s home real soon, lovely.”

“Thanks so much, Indigo. Bye.”

We step off the lift and survey our surroundings. Beckett spots the signpost for the children’s ward, and we head in that direction. Stepping up to the nurses’ desk, I ask for Luke’s room.

“Are you that sweet, sweet boy’s mama?” the nurse, an older lady, asks, a soft look on her face.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You have such a wonderful son. So respectful and just lovely.”

Feeling a like a stuck record, at this point, I reply, “Thank you very much. He’s such a good boy.”

“I can see that.” She smiles as she comes out from behind the desk. “Come on, Mama. Let’s take you to your little guy.”

My heart hurts – physically hurts – as I walk into the room and see him hooked up to machines and IVs, his small body so fragile and vulnerable looking in the bed.

“Hey champ, your mama’s here,” the nurse calls out as we enter the room.

Luke turns his head in our direction, his pale face lighting up when he spots me. “Mama, I missed you.”

Holy guacamole, just kill me now. I’m not sure how many more hits my poor heart can take tonight. “I missed you too, bud. But from what I hear, you’ve been busy.”

“Yeah. I’ve been all over the hospital.” He grins as if it’s been some great adventure. “I even got to ride on the magic carpet.”

I frown, confused at his words. Then wonder if it’s maybe something in one of the drips that’s got him imagining things. “The magic carpet?”

“Yep. They took me to this biiiiig, weird tunnel, and I got to ride the magic carpet from one bed to the other. It was fun.” His giggle is infectious, and I can’t help laughing along.

Thankfully, the nurse clarifies the mystery ride for me, whispering quietly beside me. “They didn’t want him falling off either of the beds – the meds they’re pushing through one of the IVs can make them a bit lightheaded and unsteady on their feet. So they transferred him over, telling him it was a magic carpet.”

“Ah, got you. Thanks. I confess I was pretty confused there.”

She laughs. “We were too, at first.”

Despite how difficult tonight has been, Luke almost dying, it’s reassuring to know he’s been treated so well. It makes it somewhat easier to deal with having been separated from him for the past few hours, knowing that he was entertained rather than frightened out of his wits.

A call signal chimes somewhere down the passage, and the kind nurse goes off to answer it. Beckett and I take up a

position on one side of the bed, so Luke doesn't have to look back and forth between us. He regales us with tales of his various tests and scans he's had done, while I try not to panic over the *cha-ching* sounds I can hear in my head.

Tomorrow is soon enough to freak out over how I'm going to pay for all of this.

After a few minutes, Beckett excuses himself from the room. I'm so focused on my son that it isn't until he comes back that I realize he's been gone for a good long while. Then I notice the bag he has in his hand.

"I grabbed some of your stuff out of the car while I was talking to Knight. I don't know how long we'll be here, so I included some delicacies. I apologize if you feel that's overstepping the mark."

A few things hit at the same time – an unaccustomed sensation of being taken care of, mortification that he's had his hands all over my underwear, and lastly, bafflement over the "we" comment.

"Erm, thanks."

"Also, I've arranged with Knight to take a couple days, so I can be here with you g–"

"Beckett, no. I don't expect you to disrupt your life for us. We're friends, sure, but this is – I ..." Tears choke the words off, yet again.

"Hey, little man. Mind if I steal your mama for a minute?" Beckett asks of Luke.

"No, it's okay, Uncle Beckett. I don't mind." Bless this child.

Beckett ushers me from the room, guiding me down to the small waiting area at the end of the hall. Stepping into the room, he closes the door behind us. I open my mouth to speak, but before I can get a word out, he silences me. "I've known you for seven years. We've been friends from the very beginning."

“I’ve watched how Gonzo has treated you like shit for years, and how it’s grown worse since Luke’s birth. But I know he’s the only support structure, such as it was, that you had. We may not be in a romantic relationship, but I’d like to think our friendship goes deep enough that you’d be willing to let *me* support you in this difficult time.”

For what feels like the millionth time tonight, tears I’m unable to hold back flow down my cheeks. He pulls me in for a hug, rubbing soothing circles on my back.

“There’s so much more I want to say to you on the topic, but it’s definitely a conversation for another time. Just know that I’m here for you. No matter what you need. Okay? And while we’ve got a minute to ourselves, I want to talk to you about finances.”

I step back, straining against his hold to peer up into his face. “What – do you mean?”

“I know you’re worried about how you’re going to pay for all of this, now that your idiot ex has taken you off his health insurance. But I want you to know – I should have told you during the interview, but it slipped my mind – the job comes with health insurance and a 401K.”

“Beckett.” My tone comes out far harsher than I intended, due to shock.

“Don’t Beckett me. That’s the deal. You take the job, you get the perks. If the health insurance declines to pay for this because I only registered you earlier today, then I’ll cover the cost.”

I shake my head vehemently, and keep shaking it. I’m back to feeling like I’m living in an alternate universe. Nothing feels real, and definitely not like it’s my own life. Good things such as this *never* happen to me.

“Now is not the time for us to argue over this. Your son needs you right now. We can pick this up some other time if you want. For now, let’s get back.”

“We’ll pick this up another time for sure.”

The crazy man simply grins at me, bows at the waist, then opens the door for me to precede him.

SCOOTER

It's been a long day, and it promises to be an even longer night. With all the high emotion Kay's been through today, she's sure to be exhausted. Even I'm running on fumes now as the clock hits two a.m.

As the night wears on and Luke's condition continues to remain stabilized, I can see her finally allow herself to breathe a sigh of relief. The boy is going to be okay, but it's going to be a long road ahead. One where she'll need to be strong for him, to be his rock as they navigate this new, albeit temporary, reality.

And I intend to be by her side every step of the way. She just doesn't know it yet. I may have stood down when she was someone else's woman. Now? All bets are off. I'm done watching and wanting from the sidelines. I never thought I'd get this opportunity, but now that I *am* being given the chance, I plan on taking it.

The guys would probably laugh their asses off if they knew how much time I've spent thinking about what it would be like, the three of us as a small family. Who'd have thought the guy whose parents barely knew he existed, who never truly knew the value of family, would yearn for a family of his own?

By change of shift, I'm so tired I need a serious caffeine boost to keep me going. I'm about to head out to the cafeteria when the door swings open and Indigo walks in, carrying two cups of coffee.

“Good morning. I come bearing gifts.”

“It’s like you read my mind – I was literally about to do a coffee run.”

“I wanted to pop in and see how Luke’s doing before I leave, so I figured I’d bring you some. I know what those all-nighters are like.” She hands a cup to Kathleen and then to me.

“Thanks so much, Indigo. That’s so sweet of you – not just for popping in, but bringing much-needed coffee.”

“Thanks, Indie, you’re a life saver,” I say.

“Doc been by to see him this morning?”

“No, not yet,” Kathleen replies.

Indigo checks her watch. “She’ll probably be here soon then. With such a full roster, Dr. Murray likes to get her rounds done early.”

We chat for a few minutes and, as predicted, the woman enters the room, a nurse close on her heels.

“Good morning, everyone.” She offers us a smile before turning her attention to Luke, who’s just woken up. “Hi Luke, how are you doing this morning?”

“Hi,” he replies with a sleepy smile of his own. “I’m fine.”

“You feeling a little sleepy today?”

“Yeah.”

The doctor does a quick exam, chatting with him the whole time. It’s clear to see Dr. Murray loves what she does. She’s incredibly gentle with Luke, while being friendly and joking with him. Done with the exam, she consults her tablet, scribbles some notes, and then gives Kathleen another reassuring smile.

“I’m happy with the results of our overnight observation. His oxygen saturation is looking good, heartrate and pressure’s much better. Overall, I’m happy with the results, under the circumstances.

“So, I’m comfortable with him going home today. However, I would ask that you keep him as calm as possible. Excitement of any kind can lead to a repeat of last night, and we want to avoid that at all costs.”

She turns to Luke. “All right, young man. Home time for you. But I need you to make me a pinky promise that you’re going to take things easy, no running, and that you listen to Mama when she cautions you to be calm and still, okay?” Luke nods solemnly. “Promise?” she asks, holding out a pinky to him.

“I promise,” he replies, hooking his smaller one around hers.

“Good man.” This time, Dr. Murray holds up her hand for a high five. When he gives her one, she ruffles his hair. “I’ll see you soon.” Turning to Kathleen she says, “My secretary will email you all my written instructions and recommendations, she’ll include an appointment date, and I’ll leave a prescription at the nurses’ desk for you. I’ll see you soon. In the meantime, give my office a call if you need anything. They always know where to find me.”

“I appreciate everything you’ve done, Doctor. Thank you. We’ll see you soon,” Kathleen says, shaking the woman’s hand.

Dr. Murray shakes my hand and takes her leave. “I’ll be right back with the discharge paperwork,” the nurse says, following the woman out.

True to her word, it’s not long before she’s back with the relevant documentation to get Luke discharged and on his way home. I think we could all do with the rest. In no time at all, everything’s arranged and we’re on our way.

The trip home has a heavy sense of déjà vu – we travel in silence as Luke naps in the back and Kathleen broods in the front of the vehicle, much like the trip back from their storage unit.

The last twenty-four hours have been pretty damn stressful, not just for me as a bystander watching it all unfold

and being helpless to help. But for Kathleen especially. I can only begin to imagine how she must be feeling as his mother.

But there's a solution to the problem, and the doctor is confident that Luke has a healthy future ahead of him, post-surgery.

Once again, I pull the car up to the front of the cottage and tell Kathleen to go ahead and open up for me to bring the boy inside. Thankfully, this time is very different from the last. Gently, I lift him and take him to his mother so she can do what needs to be done. I place him on the bed and turn to exit the room. "I'll be in the living room when you're done."

"I'll be right there. This won't take long."

Walking toward me down the hall, the bright light highlights the exhaustion on Kathleen's face. Dark circles beneath her eyes give them a bruised look. Her shoulders sag as though she carries the worries of the world upon them. Her skin is pale beneath the makeup she wore for her interview at Aces the day before.

It's bizarre to think it was only yesterday. It feels as if days have passed. "He's out like a light, and will most likely be that way for a good few hours."

"Then you should grab some sleep too. I can hang around if it'll help you rest easier knowing someone's looking out for him?"

Kathleen appears to consider my offer, but then declines. "I appreciate the offer, Beckett, but I couldn't possibly impose on you more than I already have."

"It's not an imposition if I offered." It's clear she's not used to having people help her, and it certainly has her on the backfoot. "Kay, I hate to say this because the last thing I want to do is make you feel bad, but, sweet pea, you look all done in. Go get some rest. I've got you. Both."

I watch her wrestle with her conscience – her internal struggle plays out on her face. Finally though, practicality – or sheer drop-down weariness – wins out. "Well, if you're sure –"

"I wouldn't have made the offer if I wasn't. Promise."

“Then thank you. I graciously accept.” Sighing, she says, “That definitely seems to be my word of the moment. I haven’t said it as many times in one twenty-four-hour span as I have these past hours.”

She’s close enough for me to reach out and give her a quick hug. “No need to thank me. I’m just glad I was in the right place, at the right time, to be able to help out. Now off you go.”

For the briefest moment, it looks as if Kathleen is about to rest her head on my shoulder. But then she steps back and turns for her bedroom. Watching her walk away, my mind begins to spin with thoughts on how to win over her affections. Because in this very second, a vision of what life could be makes me want it more than my next breath.

I’ve spent my entire career serving and protecting the lives of strangers who will never even know who I am or even that it was me who saved them. And it’s never mattered. Having been able to do it is what’s important. But this, right now? It matters. More than I can put into words.

Settling on the couch with the remote, I turn the TV on, ensuring it’s turned low so as not to disturb either Kathleen or Luke. I’m fading fast, watching a football game when Luke comes running into the room, looking confused and scared. In his fear, he’s searching the room, but I’m convinced he’s not really seeing anything, since his breathing continues to speed up.

“Hey buddy, you okay?” I ask as quietly as I can so as not to freak him out any more than he already is.

He whips his head around in my direction, and he spots me sitting on the sofa. “Uncle Beckett,” he cries, rushing over to me.

He crawls up on the seat beside me, then into my lap, latching on tight. I can feel the child’s heart beating like a snare drum in his chest. “Hey now, it’s all right. You’re safe. I need you to calm your breathing for me, okay, bud?”

He nods his head where it rests in the crook of my neck. “I was so scared when I woke up and it was dark. I called Mama, but she didn’t come. And then I couldn’t find her.” Luke’s voice hitches.

“You’re safe here. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you or your mama. She was tired so I sent her to get some sleep while I sat watch to make sure everything is okay.”

“Where did Mama go? I can’t find her.”

“She’s right down the hall, bud. Did you check her room?”

He shakes his head. “No, I don’t know where it is.”

His words are a testament to how out of it Luke is. The cottage may be spacious for what it is, but it isn’t big. Getting a secure grip on him, I get to my feet, easily lifting him with me. “Come on, let me show you where she is so you can see Mama’s okay. Yeah?”

Again, he simply nods. Without a sound, I open Kathleen’s bedroom door, praying she isn’t awake and weirded out by me letting myself in. Thankfully, she’s passed out, sleeping so hard she’s snoring softly.

The light from the short hallway illuminates the room enough to satisfy Luke that it’s his mother, and that she’s safe. I can feel a puff of air on my neck as he sighs. Closing the door, I return to the living room with Luke in my arms.

“Wanna watch a movie for a bit until you’re sleepy again?”

“Yes, please.”

“What do you want to watch? Anything in particular?”

“Can we please watch Charlie Brown?”

I’m surprised at his choice. I mean, *I* can remember watching it with my grandmother after my parents died and I went to live with her. It was our rainy weekend favorite pastime.

“Sure we can, but we’re going to have to keep it down so we don’t wake your mama. Deal?”

“Deal.” Giving me a grin that’s more like his usual self, Luke curls up at my side and rests his head on my thigh.

Yep, you can bet your last dollar I’m going to do my level best to make moments like this a regular thing in my life.

KATHLEEN

I come awake slowly, the room dark and still around me.

I lay listening for any sound beyond the bedroom door but can't hear a single thing. Rolling over, I check my phone for the time and find I've slept for hours. I'm surprised Luke hasn't been in to complain he's hungry. At the thought, my own stomach grumbles.

Now that I think about it, we haven't eaten since dinner last night. Makes the fact that Luke's not been in even stranger. Getting up, I go take care of business, then go in search of my son. The sight that greets me as I come into the living room stops me in my tracks.

Warmth spreads through my chest at the sight of my sweet boy curled up on his side sleeping with his head on Beckett's thigh. For his part, Beckett's hand rests on Luke's back, his head resting on the backrest of the sofa, fast asleep.

The TV is playing softly in the background, empty cereal bowls littering the coffee table. I have no idea where they found the cereal, but now I know why Luke didn't come to wake me for food. It doesn't really matter where it came from, I'm just grateful to the man for taking care of my boy while I slept.

With action, Beckett has shown me he's a man of his word, and that he can be relied on. It's a strange feeling, knowing that I can ask for help and he'd be willing to give it. I've never had that in my life; I could only ever rely on myself.

My mother lived in her own world of alcohol and gambling, never caring whether there was food or electricity at home for her young daughter. In fact, I'd go so far as to say she didn't even remember I existed for large chunks of time. So I learned to take care of myself.

Beckett challenges all the things I believed to be true by showing me things can be different.

Leaving the two of them to sleep, I silently go about collecting their dishes and washing them in my beautiful new kitchen. Leaving them to drain, I take a seat at the kitchen counter to browse options for food. I'm starving, and I'm sure the guys will be when they eventually wake up. Deciding to splurge, I place a takeout order for delivery.

I'm about to turn my attention to groceries when the ringing of Beckett's cellphone shatters the quiet. It's impressive watching how he goes from dead asleep to wide awake in the blink of an eye.

"Archer," he answers without looking at the display.

I go back to my online grocery shopping, trying to decide what to make for dinner. Something quick and easy, then an early night, appeals to me. So I place a quick order for the bare minimum of groceries and, by the time I'm done, Beckett's done with his call.

"Hey." He smiles over at me. "How'd you sleep?"

"Hi. Like the dead. That bed is incredibly comfy. You?" I give him a grin of my own, dipping my head in Luke's direction.

"Like the dead," he parrots with a wink. "Seriously though, I did sleep well. Young Master Luke did too – well, is still. It appears not even a ringing phone seems to bother him."

"That's unusual. God, I hope he's okay—" My heart races at the idea that he's relapsed or worse, taken a bad turn.

"He's fine, Kay. Just sleeping deep. I promise. I checked before I came over here. It's been a stressful couple days and a long ass night. He's probably just tuckered out."

I exhale sharply as the air trapped in my lungs makes its escape. I nod my thanks, then change topics as I catch sight of the clean cereal bowls. “So where did you get the cereal?”

For a second Beckett looks confused. Then he laughs as he obviously catches on to what I’m referring to. “We were watching a movie when Luke announced he was hungry, and I realized I was too. So, the two of us snuck over to my place to grab something to eat in front of the TV. When he spotted the cereal, he decided that’s what he wanted, so that’s what we had. We ate, we watched, and then we crashed. And that’s how you found us. And I’d probably still be sleeping if it wasn’t for my damn phone ringing.”

“Nothing serious, I hope?”

“No, nothing like that. Actually, it was Sage – you know, Dutch’s girl – inviting me to a surprise birthday party for Indigo, day after tomorrow. Would you and Luke like to go?”

“Er, was that invitation not for you only?”

“Nah, we can bring someone, so I was wondering if you’d be my plus one? Well, plus one and a half in this case.” He laughs as I pull a face at him.

“Funny guy. Won’t it raise a few eyebrows to see us together as if we were a couple?”

“We’re friends, aren’t we? And that’s how we’d go – as friends. But frankly, I couldn’t give a rat’s ass what anyone thinks. Who I take with me is my business. It’s got fuck-all to do with anyone else, who they are and why I asked them.”

“Fair enough. Let me think about it. By when do you need an answer?”

“It’s day after next, so I RSVP’d for the three of us already.”

“Without asking me first? Beckett, I –”

He holds both hands up. “Hold on, before you get your dander up –”

“Too late ...”

“It was not my intention to upset you. And I didn’t mention any names. I just said I’d like to bring a friend and their child – I didn’t even mention whether they were a boy or a girl. Could be anyone. But if you’d rather not go, that’s cool. No harm, no foul. I’ll ask someone else and just say the child couldn’t come – make some excuse up.” He studies me for a moment. “But honestly? I’d really like it if *you* would come.”

I can’t deny, I would love to go with Beckett, but I worry about what people would think. It’s one of my toxic habits – caring too much about what others think of me. “Can I think about it a bit and give you my answer later?”

I’m sure it’s purely wishful thinking that he seems disappointed with my answer, but his reply has me doubting myself. “Sure. Absolutely. Well, I guess I best get on home and leave you to it.”

Rattled by his abrupt decision to leave, I blurt, “But I ordered food for us.”

This time, there’s no mistaking his surprise. “You did?”

“Yeah. I figured we could all do with something to eat, since dinner last night was our last proper meal. Luke didn’t even have that. So, I decided to splurge and order us some take out. I figured pizza was a safe bet.”

“Sounds great. How long before the food’s due to arrive?”

“Fifteen, twenty minutes,” I say, checking the time on my phone.

“Okay, good, enough time for me to jump in the shower. I won’t be long.”

“Well, okay. Sure.”

Hopping down off the barstool, I walk with him toward the door. From behind us I hear Luke. “Where are you going, Uncle Beckett? We haven’t finished our movie yet.” His voice is whiny, and there’s the unmistakable sound of tears in his voice too. So unlike my boy.

Without hesitation, Beckett turns and walks back to where Luke’s sitting up on the sofa. “Just going to grab a quick

shower, bud. I'll be back before you even know I'm gone. And then we can finish watching. Yeah?"

"Promise you'll come back?"

My heart squeezes hard at his words. Despite the lack of meaningful interaction between him and Jeff, I never realized how much Jeff's leaving has affected Luke. I can only imagine that he's worried about being abandoned again after Beckett has been so kind to him. Giving him attention like his father never did.

"I promise, bud. I won't be long. Okay?"

The doubt I see in Luke's eyes breaks my heart. No child his age should ever have that look. Sadly, it's a lesson learnt the hard way, being let down and disappointed by Jeff more times than any kid should be. But in the end, all he says is "okay" in a voice so tiny we have to strain to hear him.

He rolls over on the sofa and pulls his blanket up around his ears. Apparently not one to easily be deterred, Beckett reaches out a hand and ruffles Luke's hair. "See you shortly, bud."

I walk him back to the door, mouthing an apology as we reach it. He shakes his head, leaning forward to whisper in my ear. "Don't sweat it. I understand. More than you know. But that's a story for another time, maybe."

With that he lets himself out, leaving me to wonder about his parting comment.

Once again, proving he's a man of his word, he's back barely ten minutes after he left, a pizza box in hand. "Met the delivery guy coming up the walk."

Before I have a chance to reply, my son beats me to it. "Yay, you came back."

"Promised I would."

"Yeah, you did."

My eyes meet Beckett's, and I swear I see the pain at Luke's words reflected there. That, however, is a topic for a different day. Still feeling a little punch-drunk from our all-

nighter at the hospital, despite sleeping so well for the few hours earlier, I decide to let things be for the moment.

The evening passes quickly with good conversation, good food, and mindless television. Before I know it, Beckett is getting to his feet, smothering a yawn behind his hand. He starts to gather up the debris of our dinner, and for a moment I'm too surprised to respond. Then my brain catches up.

"No, Beckett, you don't have to do that. I'll clean up."

"It'll take me two seconds. You relax, I've got it."

"Please, I –"

He pauses what he's doing to look at me. I can't read the expression I see there. "I'm not him, sweet pea. I've got this." His voice is quiet, his tone gentle.

In that moment, I feel seen. And I feel vulnerable. It's as if the man can see beneath the scar tissue that covers wounds Luke and I carry from experiencing life with a parent that doesn't care.

My scars were not my fault. They came from the circumstances of my life. Luke's, however, *are* my fault. They come from mistakes I've made, repeating unhealthy patterns, and making choices based on the only life I knew. That's on me, and something that I will forever regret.

When he's done, he comes over to Luke and gives him a hug. "Sleep tight, and be good for your mama. I'll see you tomorrow."

Rubbing his eyes sleepily, Luke nods, then replies. "I will. See you tomorrow." Beckett holds a fist out, and Luke bumps it with his own.

"Night, bud." He gets a smile and a wave in reply.

"Go on and brush your teeth. I'll be there to tuck you in shortly, baby."

"Walk me out?" I follow Beckett over to the door. He checks over my shoulder. "I know I said I'd organized a couple days off to help you out with Luke, but will you be okay on your own tomorrow?"

“Yeah, absolutely,” I say out loud, when what I’m thinking is, no, stay with me.

“You sure?”

“One hundred percent.”

“It’s just, I got a message from Knight asking me to come in tomorrow, if possible. If you need me, I’m happy to stay though.”

“Goodness, no. It’s your job and you need to go. We’ll be fine.” I’m relieved that the reason he’s changed his mind is because of work.

“All right, well as long as you’re sure you’ll be fine then. But if you need me, I’m just a call or a text away, okay?” I nod. “I mean it. Call me if you need anything. I usually turn my phone off if we’re in meetings or anything like that, but tomorrow I’ll keep it on vibrate.”

“That’s very sweet of you. Thanks.”

“Sleep tight. See you tomorrow.”

He waves, and I watch as he walks toward the main house. He doesn’t get far when he turns around, and I’m mortified he’s caught me watching. He gives me that cheeky grin of his. “Go on in and lock up behind you. I’ll wait.”

“Okay. Good night then.”

Closing the door quietly, I lean back against the wooden panel and let out a deep breath. Effortlessly, and without even being aware he’s doing it, that man makes me hot. I have to bite back a shriek when Luke appears before me. Beckett even makes me forget my poor, sick child.

SCOOTER

It feels weird to come home and find a cooked meal ready and waiting for me.

It's been a long, grueling day that ended far later than I anticipated. I had hoped to make it home in time to check and see how Kathleen and Luke are doing, but it's late, and I don't want to disturb them.

I messaged Kathleen this morning to let her know she didn't need to come in to work today. In a few days' time, Luke will be able to go back to school as long as Dr. Murray's happy with his progress, and Luke knows that he'll have to be careful. In the meantime, he needs her more than I do.

I'm guessing this was what they had for dinner tonight, and she made me a plate. It's been so long since anyone else cooked for me, and I'm not gonna lie, I like it. I could get used to this.

When I first conceived of the idea to offer Kathleen a job as my housekeeper, it was mostly to help her out of a tight spot, with a healthy dose of selfishly wanting to have her close. Initially, there was no thought of making a play for her. But the more I've thought about it, the more I like the idea of it.

Tomorrow's Indigo's surprise birthday party. And there's no better time to test the waters.

For now, I have notes and building diagrams from recon missions I need to study. This extraction we're planning is complicated and will need careful attention to detail. Papers

and coffee in hand, I make my way to my home office and lose myself in those details for a few hours.

It's two in the morning when my eyes are finally too gritty to keep going. But a restlessness unlike any I've ever experienced has me on edge, and I'm nowhere near ready to sleep. Done with the groundwork for now, I grab a beer and head outside for some quiet time by the pool.

The tranquility of the gardens and the gently lit pool is soothing. It's been a favorite spot of mine since I was little. All school breaks and holidays and more weekends than I can count. This house was my home, my safe space, my sanctuary. My grandmother made it that way.

My paternal grandmother was under no illusions when it came to her son. Or his wife, for that matter. I once overheard her tell someone that all children deserve parents, but not all parents deserve children. And that's how she'd felt about them.

From one day to the next, my parents had no idea where I was, who I was with, or what I was doing. In fact, even if they *did* know, they didn't care. They were too busy living a carefree, child-free lifestyle to give a rat's ass about their son.

God, I miss her. Every single day.

I don't suffer much with insomnia anymore, and certainly not like I used to when I was young. But tonight, it's made one of its rare appearances. Pink is just a barely-there blush on the horizon when my body surrenders to the siren call for sleep. I make my way back to the house, and my bed, my brain finally emptying itself enough for me to give in to the need.

* * *

A LARGE MUG of strong coffee clutched in one hand, I knock on Kathleen's front door with the other. Relief fills me when she opens up.

"Good morning," she greets.

"Hi. Kay, I need your help."

“Okaaaay. Sure. What with?”

“I have less than no idea what to get Indigo for her birthday. I mean, what do you buy for a woman who isn’t your significant other?” I ask.

“What do you mean? Haven’t you ever bought a woman a gift before?” Her confused frown is cute and distracts me for a nano-second. But then I remember my dilemma.

“Um, yeah, I’ve bought gifts for women, just not anything that would be appropriate to give to someone *else’s* woman. Last thing I need is Knight kicking my ass ‘cause I gave his lady lingerie or some shit like that.”

Her snort of laughter is all the answer I get for the long moment it takes her to get herself under control. “Sorry, I’m not laughing at you. But the image you invoked with your words was funny.”

“For you maybe.”

“Why don’t you come on in? I’m just making some lunch for Luke. We can talk while I finish it up.” She turns back toward the kitchen, leaving the door open for me to follow. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Me? No. This” — I hold up the jumbo-sized mug — “is the first thing I’m consuming today.”

She rounds the counter and looks over at me, studying me. “You okay? You look exhausted.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a rough night is all. I struggle with insomnia every now and then. Last night was one of those nights.”

Kathleen tips her chin at the bar stools. “Sit. I’ll make you a grilled cheese. Sorry, it’s as haute cuisine as we’re getting today.”

“Thanks, Kay. I didn’t mean for you to feed me. I just need some help with Indie’s gift. But I’m certainly not turning the offer down.” Just then, Luke comes running into the room.

“Uncle Beckett, hey. Look what I’ve got.”

“What you got there, slugger? Let’s see it.”

He offers me the action figure he’s holding. “I found him in a box in my room. I forgot Mama packed him, and I thought I’d lost him. But now I’ve found him.”

“He’s pretty cool. What’s he from?”

The little guy hops up onto the bar stool beside me and launches into a monologue about the toy and the movie it comes from.

Lunch is a simple meal of grilled cheese and tater tots – God, I can’t even remember when the last time was I had those little potato nuggets – but it’s fun and chatty, laughter the main ingredient. It’s unlike anything I’ve experienced before. And I absolutely love it.

“So how can I help?” Kathleen asks once we’re done eating and Luke’s run off to play in his room. She starts to put the kitchen to rights as we talk, so I hop off my stool to give her a hand. “What are you doing?” Her surprise is clear.

“Helping you clean up.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“You didn’t need to feed me either, yet here we are.”

Kathleen chuckles at my come back. “Well then, have at it. Let it not be said I stood in the way of your right to participate in domestic chores.”

This visit has been an eye-opener for me. This relaxed, funny, teasing version of Kathleen isn’t one I’m used to seeing. Not that I’ve never seen her laugh before, but she’s generally more reserved. It’s awesome to get to see her this way.

“So, is it a state secret, or are you going to tell me what it is you need help with?” she teases.

“Oh, right. Like I said, I need to get a gift for Indie, and I have no clue what to buy her.” I hesitate for a moment, not sure I want to hear the answer, but then bite the bullet and ask. “Er, about tonight, since we’re on the topic ...”

I'm not usually the shy, retiring type, but weirdly I can't get the words out. Mainly because I don't want to hear her say no.

"Oh yes, you said so. And that reminds me, I meant to let you know that if you still want us to, Luke and I'll go with you to the party."

Honestly not what I was expecting her to say, but I can't deny I'm elated at her answer. "That's great. Yeah, I absolutely do."

"Well then, I'll need to get her something as well. So if you want to give me a budget, I can just get something for you while I'm at it."

"That would be awesome, thanks." I'm reaching for my wallet when a thought strikes me. "How are you getting to the stores?"

"I'll call for a ride. Why?"

"How about this? I take you shopping, you do the buying. Does that work for you?"

"Yeah, that works for me," Kathleen replies with a smile.

And that's how I find myself in retail hell. I did not think things through when making the offer. Being dragged from store to store looking at all the girly things is not my idea of a good time.

After an hour, maybe more, Luke eventually stops dead, tugging on his mother's hand to get her attention. "Mama, I'm tired and thirsty."

A look of concern crosses her face. "You feeling okay, baby?"

"Yeah, I'm just thirsty."

Seeing my opportunity, I offer to take him to the food court and get him something to drink. "If it'll make things easier for you, we can maybe go play some games at the arcade and meet back up when you're done."

"Well, I – you sure you don't mind?"

“I wouldn’t have offered if I did.”

“All right then. That’ll certainly help to speed up the process.” She rummages around in her purse, pulling out her wallet.

“If you’re about to do what I think you’re about to do, don’t.”

“And what’s that?”

“Give me money.”

“Er, yeah. You’re about to take my kid to get a drink and play in the arcade.”

“That I am. See ya. Have fun shopping.” Luke’s hand firmly in mine, we wave and head off, laughing at the face she pulls.

Spending time one-on-one with Luke turns out to be a whole lot more fun than I had anticipated. The boy is smart, with a quirky sense of humor unexpected in one so young. But more than that, he’s a font of knowledge when it comes to his mother. He’s also way more observant than the average child.

“Uncle Beckett, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, bud. Go ahead.”

“You were Daddy’s friend ...”

Not technically true, but I’m not about to tell the boy that. “Yeah.”

“Do you know why he left us?” His little face is turned up to mine, an earnest expression in his eyes.

My gut clenches at his question. I mean, how the hell do I tell him it’s because his father is a douche who doesn’t deserve the amazing family he had? And was too stupid to appreciate what he had when it was his.

“I don’t know, bud. It’s not something he talked to me about. But one thing I *do* know for sure is that it had nothing to do with you and your mama.” As the words come out, I realize that’s the crux of the question. The unspoken meaning behind it.

“You’re a really great kid, and your dad knows that. I think he just needs to deal with some stuff that no one can help him with – that he has to do on his own.”

“But why did he have to leave to do it?”

“Because he needs to go somewhere to get the help.”

“Do you think he’ll ever come back?”

“Maybe. But even if he doesn’t, he will always love you. Sometimes we just don’t know how to tell or show people how we feel. And that’s not your fault. It’s something that’s broken in the other person.”

“Is Daddy broken?”

The conversation is definitely not a comfortable one, but I’m guessing it’s one he needs to have and either doesn’t want to have it with his mama or he’s not comfortable talking to her about it.

I’m also super aware that whatever I say could potentially make things worse if I say the wrong thing or in a way he doesn’t understand. “Yeah, I think maybe he is. It happens sometimes.”

“Is that why he never hugs me or plays with me?”

Jesus. This fucking idiot has done a real number on Luke. Something I can understand, since my father was just as bad. “Exactly. Because he doesn’t know how to show you how much he loves you. Does that make sense?”

“Because he’s broken?”

“Yeah, champ. Because he’s broken.”

The noise and hubbub of people moving around us highlights the silence as Luke mulls over our conversation. His intense study of me, as if to divine whether I’m telling the truth or bullshitting him, is a little uncomfortable.

Finally he nods, releasing me from his scrutiny. “I hope they can fix him. I don’t want him to be angry or sad anymore.”

The generosity of spirit this boy displays is something Gonzo could learn a lot from. Despite the fact that his father turned his back on him and walked away without so much as a backward glance, I'm betting, Luke is still more concerned about the man than himself.

To be honest, I think we can all learn from Luke.

KATHLEEN

Is it wrong of me to wish that someone other than Jeff were Luke's father? That I would give almost anything for it to be Beckett instead? If it is, I can't find it in my heart to be sorry for feeling that way.

Watching the two of them walk away from me earlier, the yearning for it to be so hit me square in the solar plexus. It's heartbreaking that a man who is nothing more than a friend seems to care more about my son than his own father does.

I haven't been able to shake the thought the entire time I've been shopping, despite trying my best to stay focused on the objective – finding birthday gifts for Indigo. The fruitless trekking from one store to another was really starting to grate on me. Until I found this cute place that stocks all kinds of trinkets and knickknacks.

Now, purchases made, I'm making my way over to the arcade in search of Beckett and Luke. Not expecting to find them so easily, my heart skips a beat when I spot them sitting at a table in the food court outside the arcade. Luke, a serious expression on his face, is talking, and Beckett – bless him – for his part appears to be taking my child seriously.

Jeff could never be bothered to pay enough attention to Luke long enough for them to have any kind of meaningful interaction. As I watch, Beckett leans forward, looking the child in his eyes, a hand on his shoulder, obviously replying to whatever was said.

Out of nowhere, with the brute force of a jolt of electricity, I realize that I'm in love with the man. And if I'm being honest with myself, I have been for some time. I've always been drawn to him. For the most part, it's been work-related gatherings, but there've been a few birthdays and holiday get-togethers we've attended. And I always find myself wherever he is.

I chalked it up to coincidence. Now I know, it was me subconsciously moving into his orbit. Wanting to be near him. The comprehension leaves me a little shaken and off-center. Putting my best game face on, I walk up to their table. "Mind if I join you handsome gentlemen?"

"Mama." Luke's excitement is contagious as he spots me.

"Why, ma'am, we would be delighted to welcome you to our table, wouldn't we, young master Luke?"

"You're talking funny, Uncle Beckett," Luke replies, giggling at Beckett's shenanigans.

Having gotten to his feet, the man pulls a chair out for me, making my feminine heart sigh at the gentlemanly gesture.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thanks. I'm good. Ready to head for home any time you are. I'm all shopped out for a while now."

"That's why I like online shopping. A few clicks of the mouse, and it all comes to you."

"Agreed. Best invention ever, in my opinion."

Laughing, he nods, then turns to Luke. "Ready to head for home, bud?"

"Yeah." My child hops out of his chair like the thing is spring-loaded.

By the time we reach home, Luke is yawning like he hasn't slept in a week. Thankfully, there's enough time for him to grab a nap before we head out again. Otherwise, we're going to be stuck with a cranky youngster, and nobody wants that.

“I’m going to get slugger here down for a nap. What time do we need to be ready to leave?”

Beckett checks his watch. “I’ll come get you in a couple hours. That enough time?”

“Perfect. See you then,” I reply.

“Bye, Uncle Beckett. See you later.”

“Later, bud.”

Two hours seemed plenty enough time when he said it, but when Beckett knocks on my door, I’m only just putting the finishing touches to my makeup. Thankfully, it’s the last thing I do, so I’m ready to go. Giving my simple outfit of jeans and an off-the-shoulder sweater a final once-over, I hasten to open for him.

I’m wholly unprepared for the look I get when I open the door. It’s one I’ve seen him give his lady of the moment, but have never been on the receiving end of that level of appreciation – from any man, for that matter. Especially not for something I consider to be so plain and casual.

“Looking good, Kay.”

“Thanks.” It’s been a long time since I last blushed, but his compliment has my cheeks heating. “Good timing. We’re ready to go. Let me just call Luke and grab my stuff, and we can get going.”

I’ve managed to stave off a severe case of the jitters all day, but pulling up to Dutch and Sage’s place, seeing the cars outside their house, I remember there’s likely to be a number of people I know at the party. Cue the nerves.

Regretting my decision to come, based solely on not wanting to disappoint Beckett by turning him down, I have to tamp down the urge to cut and run.

“Stop it.” I swing my head in his direction. “I can feel the nerves vibrating off of you,” he says softly so that Luke won’t hear him.

“I can’t help it. So many people here tonight will know who I am and wonder why you’re here with me.”

With gentle fingers, he urges me to turn and face him. “Sweet pea, I couldn’t give two hoots what people think. Let them wonder. It’s got jack to do with them. And if it’s an issue for them, tough. But I warn you, if anyone has something shitty to say, they’d better believe they’re going to have me to deal with.”

Surprisingly, the evening goes off without a hitch. Sure, there were a few curious looks when we entered the house together, but nothing else. I panic a tiny bit when, not two minutes after we arrive, Beckett disappears, but then he reappears with a drink for me. This time, we get raised eyebrows, not just the mildly curious looks of a few minutes ago.

Feeling vulnerable and more than a little exposed, I can’t stop myself from shifting foot-to-foot. Luke, clearly picking up on my nervous energy, clings to my leg like a limpet. Beckett leans in to whisper in my ear, and I jerk so hard my drink sloshes perilously close to the rim of my glass.

“Relax. These are friends. Sure, they’re probably a little inquisitive about why we’re here together, but it’s none of their business. They won’t bite. I promise.”

“I know. I’m just out of my element here, and so their scrutiny is making me uncomfortable. I’ll be fine.”

Before either of us can say anything more, Sage comes over to greet us. “Hey guys. It’s great to see you. Thanks so much for coming.” She leans in to hug first me, then Beckett. “Indigo should be here in a few minutes. We told Knight to give us thirty minutes before they come over.

“There’s plenty to eat and drink, please help yourselves. And have fun.” Luke chooses that moment to peek out from behind me. “Hey gorgeous. How are you doing?”

“Hi Sage.” He gives her that endearing shy smile of his. “I’m good, thanks.”

“I don’t see any yummy treats in your hand, so I think you need to come with me. I’ll show you where all the good stuff is hidden.”

He looks up at me, a pleading expression in his eyes. “Can I, Mama? Please?”

“Sure you can. Have fun.”

The two of them walk off, hand-in-hand, Luke chattering away excitedly. I see Beckett give someone a chin lift, and before I can turn to see who he’s greeting, an arm drops around my shoulders.

“Hey there, Kathleen. Good to see you again.” Godric gives me a quick side squeeze. He reaches out with his other hand to fist bump Beckett. “Scooter. How’s it going, bud?”

“Hey Gator,” Beckett replies bumping his fist to Godric’s.

The two of them chat, Godric’s arm around my shoulders the entire time. Periodically, I see Beckett flick a glance at it, but he doesn’t say anything. It seems to be bugging him, but I have no idea why. Although, to be honest, I’m a little taken aback by it since it’s not something any of the guys have ever done before.

Mentally shrugging it off, I turn my head to see what’s going on over near the door when things go quiet. Then a hushed whisper, “Take your places, folks,” indicating we should hide in the places pointed out to us earlier when we arrived.

We do as we’re told and wait for Merrick to bring Indigo into the house. The door swings open, and we see him usher Indigo in ahead of him. We wait for our cue – Sage hugging Indigo – and almost as one, we step out our hiding spots, yelling “Surprise!”

For long minutes after that, pandemonium reigns as everyone hugs and well-wishes the birthday girl. We take our turn and, once again, see the unasked questions in their eyes. I doubt I’m meant to, but I catch a meaningful but wordless exchange take place between Merrick and Beckett.

Academically, I knew Beckett would mingle and not stay beside me the entire evening. What I didn’t realize is how stabilizing his presence was until he wasn’t there. It almost

feels like I've swallowed a handful of Mexican jumping beans, the way my stomach jitters.

But then a couple of ladies I'm friendly with from the base come over to say hi and chat. One of them hands me another glass and, slugging back a healthy dose of my drink when no one's looking, my nerves begin to settle.

Dinner is casual and fun. The guys grill patties for a "make your own burger" extravaganza – a vast array of toppings and ingredients laid out on the kitchen counter to craft your own masterpiece. Competition abounds as they try to outdo each other, creating monstrosities and seeing who can finish first. Hilarity ensues, laughter echoing around the backyard as people settle down at the tables set up on the lawn.

A little buzzed, I lean back in my chair with a sigh of contentment I can't remember feeling in the longest time. I smile at Beckett as he returns to his chair beside me, putting yet another glass down in front of me. My bladder chooses that moment to make itself known, demanding I offer it some relief or things won't end well.

Praying I'll find a bathroom that's not in use, I make my way into the house, thrilled to find there is indeed one immediately available. I'm washing my hands after taking care of business when I hear a couple of voices out in the hall. I can't identify who it is since there's too much noise for that, but it doesn't drown out their words.

"Did you see who Scooter brought with him this evening? I can't say I'm surprised though. He's certainly been waiting in the wings long enough. To be honest, I didn't think he stood a chance since she was involved with that jackass, Gonzo."

"Yeah, me either. But did you see how he was looking at her when she wasn't paying attention? God, it made me hot just seeing it. It feels like forever," her words disappear for a second, "looked at me like that. So swoon-worthy."

Done washing my hands, I have no more excuse to delay leaving the bathroom. Ensuring I make enough noise to alert the two ladies outside the bathroom, I eventually emerge only

to find them gone. Damn it. Who was that? More importantly though, how accurate was what they had to say?

Has Beckett always been interested in me, and I've just never noticed?

SCOOTER

As the evening's worn on, Kathleen's relaxed more. I'm sure the alcohol her friends are plying her with has a lot to do with it. Regardless of the reason, though, I'm glad to see her unwind and enjoy herself. The last while has been stressful, and she can definitely do with a bit of fun in her life.

A few of the guests have brought their children, so Luke has some friends to keep him occupied. All in all, a good call to get her to come along.

It's just me that's having to put up with the side-eyes and ribbing. The guys have been ragging on me pretty much since I got here. I knew it was going to happen, but they've surpassed themselves this time.

I make my way over to the bar area to grab another soft drink since I'm driving. While I'm debating what I want, I feel a presence beside me and turn to find Gator grinning at me. We're trained to move silently – our lives may well depend on it – but I have yet to meet anyone who moves as silently as this aptly nicknamed man.

Silent and deadly as his namesake, he's so good at it he's been known to freak more than one person out, especially while on a mission.

The mischief in his grin has me bracing. With Gator, you never know what's going to come out of his mouth. I don't have long to wait. "So what's the scoop, dude?"

"Scoop?"

“Yeah. You know, what’s the story with you and Kathleen?”

“Sorry, bud, no scoop. She’s had a rough go of it for a while, and I thought she could use the distraction.”

“Fair enough.” I can feel his gaze bore into the side of my head as I study the selection of soft drinks. Far harder than is required as I attempt to avoid eye contact. The joking and teasing I can shrug off, but this man knows me better than anyone else, other than Knight. He’s far too astute for comfort. “This is me, though, dude. I know there’s more to this than meets the eye. Question is, are you ready to admit it yet?”

“What are we admitting to? Sounds interesting,” Digit pipes up from behind us.

“Hey buddy, you’re late. Everything good?” I ask, hoping to distract Gator from his line of thought, and questioning.

“Yeah, all good, thanks. Just been on the phone with my sister. Maverick and the team are out on a mission, and she’s not heard from him in weeks. She always struggles when he’s gone for so long. And she keeps saying that she’s got a bad feeling about this one.” He shakes his head, a grim look on his face.

“It can’t be easy for them. Sure, we think of home when we’re out there, but we have something to focus on, to keep us distracted from missing home too much. They don’t have that. I mean, yeah, they have stuff to keep them occupied, but not knowing what’s going on can’t be easy either,” I reply. It’s clear he’s worried about his sister, Sherri.

“It isn’t. And this time is really working on her. I think I’ll make time for a trip out to see her and the kids next weekend. I’m not sure if it’s because the kids are picking up on her worry, but apparently, they’ve been a handful since he left.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Gator says. “Shout if you want company.”

“What can I get you to drink?” I ask Digit, since I’m still trying to decide what I want. How hard can it be to make a decision?

“I’m driving, so a cola’ll do me fine, thanks,” he replies.

“Yeah, I’ve got the same issue. I think I’ll join you in having one.”

Grabbing up two cans, I hand one to Digit.

“Thanks,” he says, gesturing with the can. “Best I go say hi to everyone. Later, dudes.”

Gator takes a swig from the can he holds in his hand. Swallowing, he grins over at me again. “Thought you were going to get out of it that easy, huh? How well do you know me, brother?”

“Like a terrier with a bone. A man can be hopeful.”

His laughter attracts unwanted attention. “I bet. But no, no luck.” He contemplates the drink in his hand. “I know how you feel about her – I’ve known for a long time.”

Worried I’ve been transparent in my feelings for Kathleen, my stomach clenches. The last thing I want is to have been a contributor to the demise of her relationship with Gonzo. Or to have caused her to be the focus of unwanted gossip.

“Chill. It’s because I know you so well, I see it. It’s there in your eyes if anyone’s paying attention. But I don’t think they have. I just know you better than anyone else that it seems obvious to me.”

“I’ve tried my best not to let it show. I would never want to cause her more grief than she already had going on.”

“Yeah, I know. But the question is, Scooter, now that she’s free, what’s your endgame?”

“What makes you think there *is* an endgame?”

“Because I know you?” He pokes me in the arm. “You always have an endgame in mind, right from the get-go. It’s what makes you such a good soldier. That big-picture brain of yours. So spill it.”

Sighing, I drop my head, study my sneakers, my mind whirling with possible answers. Finally, I conclude it’s pointless trying to avoid having to answer his uncomfortable

question – he’ll just keep at me, like that terrier with a bone. With another sigh, I brace for the conversation.

“It helps that you know me so well when we’re out in the field. In my personal life, it sucks sometimes.” Gator throws his head back and belly laughs at my reply.

“Yeah, I’ll just bet it does,” he responds when he stops laughing long enough to catch a breath.

“Didn’t think it was that funny.” My grousing sets him off on another round of chuckles.

“It’s your grumpiness that’s so amusing.” He shoulder-bumps me. “Come on, let’s go grab a quiet corner and get out of the way here.” He tilts his head at a small queue that’s formed behind us.

“Shit, sorry, guys,” I say as I move out of their way. “I swear, you’re worse than the women.”

“Could be.” He shrugs, a smirk tilting the corners of his mouth.

Dropping into chairs in a more secluded corner of the garden, Gator crosses his arms and simply waits me out.

“Fine, since you’re not going to let it go until I tell you what you want to know, ask your questions.”

“I already did – you’re just avoiding answering it.” Uncrossing his arms, Gator leans forward, his forearms resting on his thighs. “At the risk of this all sounding sappy, I ask because I care. I know I tease you a lot. But when it comes down to it, it’s because I care. You’re my best friend – my brother-in-arms. I’m always going to have your back, just like you have mine.”

Rubbing tiredly at my neck, I nod. “I know. And I appreciate it. It’s difficult talking about my feelings, is all. Always has been. My parents weren’t interested, and my grandmother, as much as she loved me, had no idea how to deal with a teenage boy most days.”

“Yeah, I know,” Gator echoes my words of moments ago. “It’s easier for me since I grew up in a house full of women. In

our house, you didn't get much of an option." Gator's laugh has me smiling in response.

Without even realizing I'm doing it until my gaze lands on her, I search for Kathleen in the crowded garden. Seeing her laughing with her friends for the first time since Gonzo did her wrong, something settles in me. And the endgame becomes crystal clear.

I've wanted her from the very beginning but never thought I'd get a chance at something meaningful with her. As I sit in the noisy garden, Gator waiting patiently for an answer, I know exactly what it is. I want Kathleen, and Luke – I want the whole package. The problem is, I don't know how she feels. For all I know, Kathleen merely sees me as a friend, and her employer.

"The endgame, my friend, is to have it all. I don't know all the details, but from what I've gathered, she's not had an easy life. I want to give her that. Well, as easy as I can, considering what we do for a career. But you know what I mean."

A strange expression crosses Gator's face as he stares, seemingly sightless. Then he replies. "Yeah, I know what you mean." As if shaking himself out of a trance, he continues, "You both deserve the happiness, and if it's together, so much the better. I say go for it."

Gator turns a mischievous smirk on me, a lingering something in his gaze. I give him a chin lift in response, nothing else left to say. Then again, now's the time for action rather than words, I reckon.

After dinner, things mellow as a live music performance starts, and couples start settling down with each other as well as friends. Gator and I are chilling, listening to the music and talking shit when, out of nowhere, Kathleen drops to the ground between my parted thighs and leans back into the V created by them.

She rests her head on my leg, and I feel it throughout my entire body. But it's when she rests a slim hand on my inner thigh that it feels like I've been branded with a hot iron. Holy

shit. My body reacts, and my jeans pull uncomfortably tight as my dick goes rock hard.

“I can’t remember who this is, but their music is so good. Such a stunning voice,” she says, her voice soft and dreamy. I can feel the gentle brush of her jaw through my jeans as she speaks.

All I can do is pray I won’t embarrass myself like some untried teenager. I accidentally catch Gator’s eye and seriously consider throwing hands when I catch him wiggling his eyebrows at me. Apparently, I’m as transparent as clear glass. Shifting to cut him from my field of vision, I have to bite back a groan as the back of Kathleen’s head brushes across my aching dick.

I freeze and, deciding it’s probably better to just sit still, we remain like that for the rest of the evening, sporadic conversation with Gator integral to me not losing my mind. I thank my lucky stars when Luke comes over to ask his mother if we can go home.

Seeing an opportunity to end the suffering, I second the motion. She looks up at me, eyes big and luminous – and I want nothing more than to lean forward and place my lips on hers – a murmur of disappointment on her lips. “Do we have to?”

Laughter bubbles up, despite my current discomfort. It’s like she’s turned into the child and me the parent. “Yeah, I think we do. Considering how Luke’s been the last few days, it’s probably better to get him home for some rest.”

Her lips pull up in the most adorable pout. “I suppose you’re right. Sometimes, being an adult sucks.”

“It sure does,” I can’t help agreeing. It absolutely does.

I’m still debating how best to work my way out of the current seating arrangement when Gator gets to his feet and offers Kathleen a hand up. He’s being nothing but gentlemanly when his hold lingers far longer than I’m happy with to steady her as she sways on her feet for a moment.

Yet again, he says nothing, but the mischievous sparkle in his eyes communicates wordlessly exactly what he's thinking. Giving me a solid whack on the back, he speaks up. "Why don't you take Kathleen around to say goodnight. Luke and I will hang out until you're ready to go."

I simply nod and, a hand to her back, guide Kathleen around to say goodbye to our friends. Her graceful body is supple, warm and relaxed beneath my hand as we move around. Turning the screw a little tighter. I just pray my zipper is up for the challenge I'm currently experiencing. Finally, we make it out the front door and down to where Gator and Luke are waiting at the parked vehicle.

"Ready to go, champ?" I ask Luke.

"Yeah, Uncle Beckett," he replies. Standing under the circle of light from a streetlamp close by, I can see how pale the child is. Here's hoping he hasn't overdone it. I'm not sure any of us are ready to deal with another emergency again. Shoving the worry away, I hit the remote to unlock the doors.

While Luke hops in the back and gets comfy, I help his mother into the front passenger seat. "Bye, Gator. See ya," she calls around me as I lean in to fasten her seatbelt. The slight slur to her voice is pretty damn cute. At least I know she had fun tonight.

After all the crap they've been through recently, they both deserve a little fun.

Before I can back out of the confined space, Kathleen runs a finger down my cheek, her nail scraping over the five o'clock shadow. "You're very handsome, you know that?"

Everything in me tightens, even as I hear Gator snicker behind me. "You're not so bad yourself," is all my brain can come up with in the moment. The rest of its resources are engaged in imagining what it would feel like to have that finger, and all its friends, all over my naked skin.

Backing away, I close the door, careful not to hurt her as I do. I'm almost too scared to turn around and say goodbye to Gator – I can just imagine the look of pure mirth on his face.

Quite frankly, I'd far rather face down an enemy right this second than see that cheesy grin I know I'm going to find when I finally turn around.

In a ploy to delay the inevitable, I check the back to make sure Luke's settled, and when I can delay no more, I turn to find an unexpected look of ... understanding? Not exactly what I'd anticipated.

Then Gator proceeds to blow my mind with his words. "My friend, you have the opportunity for something beautiful in your life, if you're willing to reach out and snag it. Don't waste it like I did." He sticks out a hand to shake mine, and too taken aback to speak for a moment, I simply shake his. "Safely home, bud. I'll chat with you tomorrow."

And with that, he turns and heads back to the house.

The indescribable expression in his eyes as he turned to leave has me curious what the backstory to it might be. I stand staring at the closed front door long after he's gone inside and closed it behind him, lost in contemplation.

The sound of a car door opening pulls me out of my thoughts. "Beckett?"

"Yeah, sorry. Coming."

KATHLEEN

God, my head is spinning so bad. That's the problem with cocktails – they taste so good that by the time you realize you've had too much it's too late. Not to mention, it's been a while since I let loose with the girls – wives and girlfriends of Jeff's teammates – whom I haven't seen since Jeff and I split up, now that I think about it. Not even so much as a phone call.

Well damn, that's mean. I could have done with a girlfriend to talk to, and I don't really know Sage and Indigo that well, since we only really got to see each other at family days. I guess I now know who my fair-weather friends are though. At least they're fun to hang out with casually. The party would have been pretty awkward had they not been there. So there's that.

Although, I have to say, Beckett was so sweet – making sure I had something to drink, to eat, that I had fun. It felt good to be taken care of for a change. To be catered to instead of being the one to fetch and carry.

Looking over at Beckett, his strong hands handling the car with grace and ease, a random thought pops into my head. I wonder what it would be like to feel those same hands all over my body, on my naked skin ...

My thoughts take flight, and I can feel my cheeks heat at the direction they take.

I must zone out, because the next thing I know, Beckett's leaning over me and undoing my seatbelt. With zero thoughts

in my head, and my self-preservation filter MIA, I find myself leaning forward and placing my lips over his as he turns to look at me.

Obviously in the process of saying something, I catch him with his lips parted and take the opportunity to slip my tongue between them, to caress his. For a split second, Beckett's body freezes, and I think he's going to reject me. But then I feel him sink into the kiss, and it's like Christmas come early.

Damn, the man knows how to kiss. I fall into it like Alice tumbling into Wonderland, losing all sense of time and place. After what seems like forever, and no time at all, he leans back, breaking the kiss. Sucking a breath in, I lean my head back against the headrest, my head spinning harder than ever.

"Come on, sweet pea, let's get you out of here and into the house."

"No, I need to get Luke into the house first."

His chuckle is husky, sending waves of hot and cold washing through me, the sound like a whisper of a touch over my skin. Seductive and undoubtedly arousing. "Don't worry about him. Let's get you into the house and then I'll come back for him. He'll be plenty safe here in the car."

I'm proud of the fact that I only wobble once as he eases me out of the car and onto my feet. With a sure hand, he guides me over to the front door of my tiny new home, ensuring I'm steady on my feet before releasing me to unlock with the key he fished out of my pocket.

Even that was hot, feeling him dig around the confined space so close to my skin.

Once again, as he leans past me to unlock, I lay my lips on his. This time, he steps into me and takes control, cupping my chin to hold me still for his exploration of my mouth. My skin burns where he touches me, like he's branding me, and that feeling arrows straight to my core.

Desire curls through me, like tendrils of smoke, making me feel more electrified and alive than I ever have. I want him with everything in me; I just don't know how to tell him.

This time it's me that has to break our kiss or risk suffocating. He rests his forehead on mine, his own breath sawing in and out of his lungs like he's just done a quarter mile.

The words come out of nowhere, and I feel Beckett go rock solid beneath my hands. "You're the sweetest man I know. You know that? No one's ever been as nice to me as you have over the last short while. I just want you to know I'm thankful for you and grateful to you. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Is that what this is all about? Gratitude?" I'm so taken aback by his words I'm struck silent. Without giving me time to answer, he steps back from me. "Go ahead and open up, I'll grab Luke."

He steps away from me, turning toward the vehicle behind him. I feel awkward and confused at his abrupt coldness. What the hell just happened?

"Beckett?"

"Just open the door, Kathleen." His tone brooks no argument and, like the good little automaton I am, I do as I'm told. But I can't stop the tears from forming in my eyes.

I'm not just confused by the about-turn in his behavior, but hurt too. I can't figure out what I did to upset him. Unlocking my front door, I step out of his way so he can take my son inside.

Watching him cradle my boy in his arms, I feel an overwhelming longing for him to hold me close like that again. He takes Luke to his bedroom, and I lose sight of him for long moments before he returns to where I'm standing.

"If I wanted gratitude, I'd get a dog," he says, his eyes hard. My lips part as his words land like darts, and I have to bite down on my bottom lip to prevent it from quivering. Before I can respond, he walks out, throwing parting words over his shoulder without turning around, "I'm out tomorrow. Lock the door."

I watch as he walks over to the main house, never once looking back.

Once again, doing as I'm told, I lock up before going to my room. As I go through the motions of removing my makeup, far more sober now than when I first got home, I allow the tears to fall.

In all the years I've known Beckett, that's the first time he's ever made me feel like shit. And I don't understand why. All I know is, it hurts more than it ever did when Jeff did the same thing.

Turning the bathroom light out, I climb into bed. Saddened to my soul, I lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling, and pray for sleep to claim me. Maybe I can figure out what happened here tonight in the clear light of day.

SCOOTER

What the actual fuck?

Yeah, gratitude is great and all, but not exactly what I want to hear when I'm pouring my heart and soul into a kiss, thinking she's feeling the same heat as me. Only to find out it's because she's thankful for all I've done to help her and her son? Fuck that.

Madder than a wet hen, I pour myself a glass of Kentucky's finest bourbon as I glare over at the small cottage. "You're the sweetest man I know? You know that?" I mimic her words as I slosh liquid into my tumbler.

I can't remember the last time I was this mad. Dropping down into a chair, I continue to stare over at the darkened house across the lawn, brooding. After a good few minutes, as the alcohol begins to weave its magic and smooth my mood out, a thought pops into my head.

Did I just overreact?

The closer I get to the bottom of my glass, the stronger the feeling gets. I totally blew things out of proportion. But then my mind swings back to how the words sliced through me after one of the best damn kisses of my entire life.

I don't want her to rock my world with a kiss that's right off the charts – just out of gratitude. Because that shit hurt. Sharp, painful, they sliced me right to the soul. I don't want her appreciation; I want her love. I want her to *want* me back.

Yep, I totally overreacted. As the thought sinks in, I realize why it made me so mad – why it hurt so bad. I want her to feel

about me the way I feel about her – have felt about her for years now. So I behaved like a complete ass.

Sickened by the idea that I'm no better than Gonzo, saying hurtful things and being a monumental douche to her, I sit and stew in the misery of my own making. And try to figure out how to make things right.

Eventually at four a.m., I accept that sleep is not in the cards for me. I head for the shower, then run through my morning routine, just to give myself something to do. As I'm grabbing a quick breakfast, again focused on the little guest cottage, I notice a neatly dressed man walk up to Kathleen's door. I check my watch and see it's barely seven a.m., so there can be nothing good about his visit.

On top of that, he gives me an off vibe. Not sure what exactly, but something about him screams of trouble. Feeling like a voyeur, I watch as she opens up, speaking to him briefly. Even from this distance, I can see her body stiffen as the man hands an official-looking envelope over to her. He tips his head at her, then turns to saunter down the path to the curb.

My eyes track back to Kathleen to find that she's opened it and is now eyeing the paper in her hand like it's an incendiary device about to detonate. Before I can even think better of it, I'm already out the door and on my way across the lawn.

“Good morning,” I call as I approach, not wanting to startle her. She appears unnerved enough as it is.

Her gaze tracks over to mine, fear saturating them. She opens her mouth to speak, but not a single sound comes out. She turns her attention back to the document in her hand. A single tear drops from her bottom lashes to land on her cheek. She reaches up to dash it away, and I see it trembling.

I step up beside her and, with a gentle finger, tip her face up to mine. Despite being on the shorter side at five ten, I've still got a good four inches on Kathleen. Our eyes meet – connect and, in her case, cling to each other.

“Sweet pea, what is it?”

Tears well and spill over, tracking down her cheeks. Silently, she holds the paper up to me, allowing me to see the black, bold, bald words proclaiming that Jefferson Franklin Grimes is suing Kathleen Millicent Pierce for full custody of the minor, Luke Bennett Pierce.

The words leapt up off the page at me. It's all I saw – all I could see. It's all I needed to know.

I wrap an arm around her shoulders to lead her back inside, as firmly but gently as possible. I guide Kathleen over to a sofa and encourage her to take a seat. Once she has, I pull the coffee table over and sit down in front of her. Taking the document from her, I place it face down on the table beside me and engulf each of her hands in mine.

Her breathing is rapid, as if she's beginning to hyperventilate. "What am I going to do?" she whispers.

"What *we're* going to do is speak to a lawyer friend of mine and see how strong the idiot's case is. We'll take it from there. Okay?"

For the first time since I met her, Kathleen gets a mutinous look on her face. Normally easy-going and amenable, I'm surprised as she snatches her hands back, and stands. "After the way you treated me last night, you think I'm going to let you help me with anything else? Not fucking likely." Her body about vibrates with anger. "In fact, get out of my home. I don't want to talk to you right now."

Exhausted and still smarting from the "gratitude" kiss, I too get to my feet and go toe-to-toe with the woman. "Why are you mad at *me*? Number one, I'm not the one suing you – I'm trying to help you. And number two, I'm not the one who rocked the other person's world and then turned around, saying thanks for being a nice person and helping me. So, I repeat. What the hell are you mad at *me* for? I'm the one who should be mad, don't you think?"

Kathleen recoils from me, like I just kicked her favorite puppy. "You're a jackass. You know that?"

"I – what? How am I the bad guy here?"

“Because you’re an idiot.” And then – not one word of a lie – she stomps a foot. “I’m the one that was somewhat tipsy last night, and yet, somehow, you’re the one that read the whole situation wrong.”

She paces away from me, across the small living room floor. Standing in front of the kitchen island, Kathleen rubs the base of her skull before turning around and stomping back over to me. “I’m not sure why the words came out when and how they did, but the alcohol gave me just enough courage to do what I’ve longed to do for the longest time.

“And when I finally gather up the courage to kiss you, that’s what you do. You make me feel dirty – like I’m offering to sleep with you in return for the help ...” Her words hang in the air between us as horror blooms in her eyes, and she takes a step back from me. “Oh my God – that’s exactly what you thought.”

Well, shit.

That *is* exactly what I thought. And, apparently, I was so way off the mark I may just as well have been on Mars. One of my maternal grandmother’s favorite sayings was assumption is the mother of all fuck ups. Yeah, Grandma Ginny hadn’t been wrong. Because it seems that’s what we have here – a fuck up.

One I’m clueless on how to fix. Then, before I can think better of it – I’m blaming it on a brain fart – I pull Kathleen to me, cup her cheeks in my palms, and with my thumbs I gently tilt her head up. I lay my lips on hers and dive in for a kiss powered by all the pent-up frustration and desire swirling in the pit of my stomach like a lethal concoction.

Placing her hands on my chest to push me away, I trap them between us as I step into her. For a heartbeat, then two, she resists, and just as I’m about to acquiesce, she surrenders to the kiss.

Kathleen burrows her hands under my T-shirt to rest her hands against the bare skin of my back. Her tongue tangles with mine, tempting and teasing me. Time loses meaning as I lose myself in the taste and feel of her. It’s only the vibration of my cellphone in my pocket that breaks the spell.

I seriously consider ignoring it for a moment, but being that I'm active service and always on standby, I could find myself in deep shit if I do. Sighing, I rest my forehead against hers briefly, before stepping away and grabbing the offending instrument from my pants.

I give the message a quick scan. Nothing important, just a sweet thank you from Indigo for being a part of her birthday celebration. I tuck it away and focus my attention back on Kathleen. "I don't know why I was so sensitive about it, but I'm sorry for the way I behaved. It was a shitty thing to say and do." Cupping her chin in my hand, I look into her eyes, willing her to see my sincerity. "I'm sorry – for being a douche, but especially for hurting you."

Her posture tightening at my words, Kathleen studies me for far longer than is comfortable without saying a word. Despite how twitchy it makes me, I stand still, giving her the time she needs to process whatever it is that's going on in that brain of hers.

Eventually, just when I'm about to beg her to say something, *anything*, her shoulders drop, and her body relaxes a bit. "Can you forgive me for being an ass?"

"Yeah, I guess," she answers on a sigh. "Right now, I've got a serious problem on my hands and no idea what I'm to do about it."

"My offer was sincere. I have a friend who's an attorney. If she can't help, she'll certainly know who to refer us to."

"Beckett, I can't afford an attorney. You know my situation. Even the last little bit of savings I have left over won't be enough."

"I can help you –"

"No." Scrubbing her hands tiredly over her face, Kathleen shakes her head. "I'm sorry, that was rude. But no, thank you. You can't keep bailing me out every time a new shitstorm blows into my life."

"Would it make you more comfortable if I offered to loan you the money, rather than giving it to you? We can work

something out that's affordable on your salary. I'll even get my attorney friend to draft a contract if you like."

That seems to seal the deal. "Much as I wish I didn't need to, I'll accept your offer to loan me the money and the contract to make it all legal and official," she finally says hesitantly. "My options are pretty limited at this point. I can't lose my son. It's simply not an option."

"Consider it done. I'll go give her a quick call."

"No, Beckett, wait. It's Sunday –"

"Yeah, and?"

"And she's entitled to her downtime."

"Under normal circumstances, I'd agree with you. But not today. I'll see you in a bit." Not giving her a chance to voice any further objections, I hurry back to my house to make some calls. If Gonzo thinks he's going to fuck with Kathleen, for whatever juvenile reasons he has, he'd best rethink his choices.

Not only am I *able* but, more importantly, I'm more than *willing* to run interference for her. Kathleen will get to keep her son, and I'll have the satisfaction of derailing his plans. Listening to the phone ring on the other end, I smile in anticipation of teaching the fuckwit a lesson.

KATHLEEN

Three Months Later

“We’re as prepared for tomorrow as we’re ever going to be. So, hang tight and this will all be over soon, okay?” Lindsay Seymour, the attorney friend Beckett recommended, says.

“Easier said than done, I’m afraid. But I’ll be there, bright and early, in the morning.”

“I’ll see you outside the courthouse at nine a.m., yeah?”

“Nine a.m., yes, ma’am,” I reply.

“See you then,” Lindsay says before cutting the call.

I sit back in my chair, breathing out a deep sigh. The past few months have been such a weird mix of emotions. Anger at Jeff for the emotional hell he’s putting me through, anxiety over the outcome of the court case, a deep appreciation for the support that Beckett’s been during this goat rodeo, and something a little more I’m not ready to examine until the custody battle is over.

Checking my watch, I see it’s time to get dinner going so it’ll be done on time. The house is clean, laundry done, just dinner left to distract my thoughts. Beckett was away on a mission for a few weeks, only returning a couple days ago, and there’s been little to do around here. So, I’ve taken up learning to knit.

I know people call it a granny activity, but the challenge of learning has kept my mind occupied instead of worrying. I

planned on making Luke a scarf for winter, but considering what the mangled mess on my needles looks like, I'm thinking that's the last thing it resembles.

I guess I'm going to have to rip it all back and start again. And since the case gets underway tomorrow, it's probably not a bad thing. I'm determined to master this and welcome the distraction of learning this new skill.

Just as I slide the rack back into the oven, the front door opens. My breath catches as the light silhouettes Beckett, highlighting his muscular frame and the breadth of his shoulders. Dressed in jeans and a Henley, as he is today on his day off, he's oh so yummy looking, but that man in a uniform? Hot, hot, hot, with a capital H.

My heart beats a little faster at the thought of spending some time in his company, just the two of us. Luke is staying with a friend for a few nights, just until I know how proceedings run and what time I'll get home each evening.

The thought of alone-time makes me feel guilty, considering the current situation, but I can't help looking forward to it anyway. Feelings I've ignored for years are demanding attention, and I find myself craving time in his company. There are a million things I wish I had the right to say – to tell him – but I'm unsure of exactly how Beckett feels about me.

The fear that we aren't on the same page emotionally stops me from giving voice to any of my thoughts. I really need this job – it's not back-breaking labor, long hours, or unpleasant work, the money's good, and I have fabulous perks. But that's not the only driving force keeping me silent.

Beckett has been one of the few stable elements in our lives, Luke's and mine, and it would devastate me to lose his friendship. Because while, yes, I'd love it if we could be more than that, we're friends first. A friendship I cherish, above all else. And I would rather bite my tongue than say something stupid and ruin what we have.

“Hey.”

“Hi, you’re home earlier than expected.”

“Yeah, wasn’t really in the mood, so I decided to come home. Knight and Bear did the same thing. The rest of the guys are gonna hang for the evening – something about dinner and a movie.”

“Ah, okay. Well, I’ve literally just popped the casserole for dinner into the oven. The timer’s set for an hour. There’s cooked rice on the stove – you’re pretty much set when you’re ready to eat. Everything else is done, so I’ll leave you to enjoy a quiet evening.” I give him a smile as I come around the counter, intending to head back to the cottage and leave Beckett in peace.

Reaching for the doorknob, I turn back to face him. “Oh, before I forget, I need to place an online order for groceries tomorrow, since I probably won’t make it to the store in time with it being Day One of the court case. If you need anything, please add it to the grocery list on the refrigerator door.”

“Great. Thanks.” He hesitates for a moment. “What are you and Luke doing this evening?”

“Um, Luke’s spending a few days at Liam’s – with my case starting tomorrow and not knowing anything about what all it’ll entail, or what time I’ll be getting home, I thought it would be better for him.”

“Right. Gotcha. So you’re on your own this evening?”

“Yeah.” My stomach tightens with nerves. The uncertainty of the moment has me constantly cycling through a million negative emotions and thoughts. I’m not looking forward to what’s coming, but there’s not much I can do about it. Which is probably one of the top things I’m struggling with the most.

Beckett looks like he wants to say something. Rubbing at his neck, like he does when he’s got something on his mind, he drops his gaze to his shoes. For long, strained minutes we stand like that – him studying his shoes, me standing awkwardly by the door, my hand resting on the handle as if I might need to make a fast get away.

“Er – would you like to stay – you know, hang out with me for a bit and eat dinner together, instead of both of us being alone?”

I can't help but laugh at the last bit of his sentence. “Don't you know being alone is a coveted luxury for mothers?”

“Oh. Well, in that case, I'll – er, not to worry then. We can do it another time—”

Taking his face in, my heart sinks as I realize my joke's fallen flat. He's missed the humor and, if I don't miss my guess, I've made him feel like shit. “I'm sorry. I was just teasing you. I mean, we do covet our alone time, but I'm not *that* precious about it. I'm happy to hang out with you. And to be honest, I really could use some company tonight.”

“Yeah, I hear that.” Before I can question him, he continues. “Then come on back and get comfy on one of the outdoor sofas. I'll grab us some drinks.”

“There's still a few of your beers left in there.” I point over at the fridge.

“What can I get for you? A soda, glass of wine?”

“I could seriously use a glass of wine, thanks,” I reply, making my way out back.

He brings the drinks out, dropping into the chair beside me, and hands me an enormous glass generously filled with golden liquid. I enjoy a good wine, I do, but tonight there's a very real possibility of over-indulging, which will lead to being fragile at a time I need to be at my best. And, God knows, I'm going to need my wits about me when I square off with Jeff.

“I can hear you thinking from over here.” I turn to look at him and, while his lips are smiling, his eyes are serious. “I'm not trying to get you drunk – that's not my intention. It's enough to take the edge off, but not to make you regret your life choices in the morning.”

“Thanks,” I reply, chuckling at his words.

The sun is descending below the roofline of the neighboring houses when Beckett's stomach rumbles. Loudly. I'm not sure why – probably because I've had a glass and a half of wine already? – but the sound makes me laugh. Deep, gut-busting guffaws that have me clutching my own stomach, leading to tears of mirth rolling down my face.

It's *really* not that funny, but once I get started, I can't stop. Beckett gives me a funny look, like I've gone insane, which only makes me laugh harder. When I can finally catch my breath, I pat the hand resting on the thigh closest to me.

"It's okay, I haven't lost my mind quite yet. I guess I just needed the stress relief of laughing like a loon." Wiping the moisture from my face, I get to my feet. "Come on, let's get you fed."

"I like the sound of that." Grinning, he stands too, at the same moment I round the table.

Air is forced out of me in a sharp "oof" as I collide with his hard frame. Instantly, his hands are there to cup my elbows to ensure I don't land on my ass. "Shit, sorry, sweet pea. You okay?"

I want to tell him I'm fine, but my body's on fire from where we're currently touching. In fact, my whole body burns from the intense need for him to touch me. Everywhere. I want to feel his roughened hands all over my naked skin – touching, teasing, tempting. Anywhere. Everywhere.

We've been dancing around each other for years without even realizing it, but now that we find ourselves here, all I want is to tell him how I feel. But if I do, what happens if he doesn't feel quite the same way? Can we go back??

"Um, Kay ..." I look up at Beckett, focus in on his face, his eyes – and oh my God, the heat in those bottomless pools. It has me drawing in a harsh breath.

I'm guessing he sees a similar thing in my own gaze, because he leans in slowly – to give me time to pull away, I assume – wraps a hand around my nape, and pulls me into

him. His lips stop a hair's breadth from mine, his eyes bore into mine for long seconds.

Before I can reply, he mutters, "Fuck it. Never mind."

Then he lowers his lips the rest of the way and proceeds to, yet again, rock my world with nothing more than what should be a simple kiss. It's not. It's so much more. When he takes my hand and leads me toward the hallway that goes to the bedrooms, I know my world is about to change. Forever.

If this is headed the way I think it is, nothing will ever be the same for me again. There will be no going back, no undo. The fall will be swift and brutal, with no hope of recovery. My heart will forever and always become the property of one Mr. Beckett Archer.

SCOOTER

Kathleen's hand firmly in mine, I walk toward the hallway that leads to the bedrooms. I can feel the slight tremor of her hand, but no resistance. Is it possible she feels even the tiniest bit of what I do?

Somehow, it feels as if there should be more ceremony to celebrate what is, at least for me, a huge moment. The culmination of years of patience, wishing and waiting for an opportunity. But all that there is to mark this occasion is the quiet ticking of my grandmother's old Grandfather clock in the hallway by the door, and our nearly silent footsteps as we make our way to my bedroom.

Stopping at the doorway, I turn to give Kathleen one last chance to say no, this isn't what she wants. "Sweet pea ...". Suddenly nervous, I can't seem to string two words together. I can face a band of insurgents and not flinch. Sex for the first time with the woman I've desired for years and I'm a wreck.

"Yeah, me too." The softly spoken words settle me somehow. Knowing I'm not the only one feeling this way makes me less anxious. "But I want this – more than I can accurately express."

Simply nodding, I turn back to the opening and step into the room beyond. I come to a stop at the foot of the bed and cup her sweet face in my hands. I take in every detail, committing each one to memory – the texture of her skin, the laugh lines at the corner of her eyes, the earnest expression in the endless pools.

My gaze roams over her face, down her neck, and lower to the modest amount of cleavage peeking out of her T-shirt. And back, snagging on the rapidly beating pulse at the base of her throat. The tiny telltale sign that affirms her nervousness she admitted to moments ago.

“I’m not generally the kind of guy that talks about his feelings. Making myself vulnerable to others is difficult for me. But I’m willing to do that with you. Standing here, with you, my heart is pounding with nerves and excitement.” I study her face, smoothing a finger over the silky skin of her cheek. “I’ve waited so long for this moment. I can’t believe it’s happening.”

“Me too. Since that first time we met at the family beach day all those years ago, something in you has called to me. I see how respectfully you treat your colleagues’ significant others; how gentle you are with the kids. And I longed for the same.

“Jeff and me ...” She shrugs. “He’s never treated me with the same courtesy and respect you treat others. In the beginning he was kind enough I guess, but over the years he’s changed. And now, here I am, with you, and my knees are shaking so hard I’m surprised they aren’t knocking together.”

“One day I hope you’ll tell me your story, but for now I’m hoping you’ll let me love on you some instead.”

Kathleen frowns at me, and my heart sinks. “I ...” She stops, clears her throat. “I want that too. But I need to ask – God, this is embarrassing,” she says as she covers her face.

“There’s nothing you can’t say to me. I want you to know that.”

Dropping her hands, she takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders. “Jeff – um, he’s the – you know ...”

“I don’t follow, sweet pea.”

“He’s the only ...” She clears her throat, and in one quick sentence, she blurts, “He’s the only one I’ve ever been with.” Kathleen’s eyes are fixed on a point behind me, avoiding

mine. “So, I need to ask you to have patience with me. Please?”

Her cheeks a bright red, she continues to look everywhere but at me, and my heart aches for her in that moment. I can see how hard it’s been for her to make her admission. “Sweet pea, look at me.” It takes long moments, but I wait until she does, because this is important, and I need her to know my words are sincere.

When her gaze finally meets mine, I continue. “Whatever you need – anything – all you have to do is ask. Yeah?”

Kathleen searches my gaze, as if looking for reassurance. I’m guessing she finds it when she nods slowly. “Yeah,” she answers softly.

“That’s what I want to hear.” Smiling, I cup my hand around her nape and pull her closer for a quick kiss. Releasing her, I step back. “Undress for me, sweet pea. I want to see all the gorgeousness that hides beneath your clothes.”

“You might be disappointed at what you find. I’m not a young woman anymore. My body’s got some wear and tear, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not looking for a young woman. I want a woman who’s mature, doesn’t play games, knows what she wants. More than that though, I want *you*.”

It’s clear that Kathleen’s nervous. And if I’m being honest, so am I. I don’t want to fuck this moment with her up, mainly because I don’t want to ruin any chance I may have of developing a relationship with her. I’ve waited so long for this; it would be devastating to fall at the finish line.

I watch as Kathleen reaches for the hem of her T-shirt with shaking fingers. She hesitates briefly then, ever so slowly, she lifts the material up and over her head. The sight of her in her tightfitting leggings and lace bra makes my blood run hot, and my hands itch to touch all that creamy skin.

But it’s when the leggings come off and she’s left in nothing more than scraps of lace and satin that I’m robbed of breath. Kathleen may be concerned about no longer being a

young woman, but the years have certainly been kind to her. Sure, there's telltale signs that her body has grown another life within, but those womanly curves simply make her even hotter in my opinion.

An image of her standing, just like this, her belly curved with my baby nestled beneath her heart pops into my head. It's so vivid, each detail so clear, it steals my breath once more.

"You're exquisite. Simply breathtaking." This time, it's *my* hand that shakes as I reach out to smooth a fingertip down the slope of her breast, stopping at the lace edging. The dark grey of her underwear is a stark contrast against her creamy skin.

Taking a couple of steps back, I savor the sight of her, once again, in nothing more than the satin and lace of her barely there lingerie. "Take it off, gorgeous," I say, hooking a finger under a strap where it lies on her collarbone.

A shiver works its way up Kathleen's spine at my words. Lifting her eyes to mine, she reaches behind her, undoing the snaps on her bra with one hand while holding it to her breast with the other. Her gaze clinging to mine, she slowly lets the scrap of fabric fall to the floor.

Everything in me demands I throw her on my bed and sink into her hot little body. But I want this first time to be as good as it can be – for both of us, but especially Kathleen.

My restraint severely strained, I clench my hands to resist reaching for her. "And now the rest," I rasp in her ear.

Without a word, she removes her tiny thong, finally standing completely naked before me, and all I can do is stare like an untried teenager who's never seen anything like it before.

I drop to my knees, gaze fixed on the pink, swollen lips of Kathleen's sex already wet and glistening; just begging for my touch. Breathing in, I take her scent deep into my lungs. Placing my hands on the smooth globes of her ass, I draw her in and rub my tongue gently over her clit.

Kathleen moans low in her throat and grips the short strands of my hair, as if to anchor herself. I lose myself in the

joy of lapping, nibbling, sucking, and teasing her ever closer to an orgasm. And when I feel her body tighten in preparation to catapult her into freefall, I stop. I can't hold back a smile as she groans out her distress.

With one arm behind her knees and the other across her shoulders, I pick her up and carry her over to the bed. Placing her down gently, I step back and tear my clothes off; too impatient to do anything else.

I climb onto the bed and settle over Kathleen, supporting my weight on my elbows. Unable to control myself any longer, I lean down and kiss her, plunging my tongue into her mouth over and over, an imitation of what I want to do to her with my rock-hard cock. And apparently Kathleen's right there with me, because when I lift my head, she smiles up at me and plants a foot on the bed.

Quick as a flash, she reverses our positions and, as I roll to my back, she licks her kiss-swollen lips and shimmies down my body. Surprise and a jolt of lust rock me to the core as I realize her intent. Reaching her destination, those gorgeous lips part, and she runs her tongue over the head, licking and lapping it like a kitten with a saucer of milk. I grip the sheets beneath me in an attempt not to grab *her*.

I can't bite back a groan of pleasure when she opens wider and takes me deep into the wet, warm velvet of her mouth. With every pass, she takes me farther into her mouth until she has as much of me as she can take. When I bump against the back of her throat and she swallows around me, I'm convinced I've died and gone to heaven. Holy shitballs, that feels incredible.

Feeling the familiar warning tingle, I manage to speak through gritted teeth. "Sweet pea, you need to stop." She sits up and grins at me, clearly pleased with herself.

I reach into my nightstand for a condom and rip the foil. Before I can do more, Kathleen removes it from my hands and rolls it over my dick before straddling me. As she sinks down the hard length, both of us groan.

Sinking into the warm depth of her core, slick with her pleasure, I bite back another groan at the pleasure that rockets through me as I plunge into the warmth of her pussy, slick with desire. Buried so deep inside her, I'm not sure where I end and she begins.

A long moment passes as Kathleen simply rests there, head thrown back, her breathing rapid. I give her the time and am rewarded for my patience when she looks down at me, her eyes wild and dilated, and she begins to move.

Wrapping my hands around her hips, I lay back and enjoy the ride, gliding in and out of her tight channel. It's a joy to watch as her excitement mounts, but when Kathleen throws her head back and lets out a low moan – it's a thing of beauty.

“Oh God, Beckett,” she pants, collapsing on my chest “I – it's too much ... I – I can't.”

Draped over me like this, Kathleen is all I can feel, see, hear. I feel completely surrounded by her, and I love it.

I take over, thrusting into her, the friction quickly undoing me in the most delicious way. There's no way she's going to last much longer. I can already feel her body start to tighten. I shorten my strokes, and her breath quickens. Driving deep into her, I tauten my grip on her hips, clenching my teeth as my balls tighten.

“Let it go, sweet pea. I've got you. Let me see you come apart for me.”

Kathleen looks up into my face, hers etched in beautiful, raw passion. I thrust again and watch as she surrenders herself to the pleasure, crying out with her release. Watching as she's catapulted into orgasm, I can't hold back my own, especially as her sleek walls grip down on me like a fist.

Burying my face in her neck, I follow Kathleen into the steep spiral of surrender. Spent but completely sated, I lay like that for long moments, running a soothing hand up and down her spine, content to simply hold her like this while we recover our breath.

KATHLEEN

Dawn is nothing more than a smudge on the horizon, but I find myself unable to sleep, despite being snuggled in Beckett's warm embrace. Nerves lie in a cold, hard ball in the pit of my stomach, wondering what fresh hell today will bring at Jeff's hands.

He's always behaved like a spoiled brat when things haven't gone his way, going to great lengths to make life as unpleasant as possible. I can't be one hundred percent sure what's set him off this time, but I suspect that word has gotten back to him about me being at Indigo's party with Beckett.

With Luke being a sickly child, Jeff's never been particularly interested in his son. So, I shudder to think what life will be like for my poor boy should he be successful in taking custody away from me.

And there's every chance that he will since he's the one with the money. He can afford to hire a good attorney whose sole purpose is to convince the court I'm a terrible mother and that my son would be far better off without me. The mere thought of the life my son will have with his father causes major anxiety.

I am incredibly grateful to Beckett for his assistance in finding an attorney who can give me a fighting chance at keeping custody of Luke, but only time will tell just *how* good she is.

Easing out from under Beckett's arm, heavy in sleep, I rummage through the pile of clothing lying in a jumbled heap

on the floor. His T-shirt is the first thing that comes to hand, so I pull it on over my naked body, then pad down the hall to get a fresh pot of coffee going.

It's going to be a long day, so I'll need all the caffeine I can get to boost my flagging spirits. The gurgling of coffee as it brews is the only sound in the silent house. I stand watching the colors change in the sky as the sun continues to rise, marveling at the beautiful show Mother Nature puts on.

When it's done, I pour myself a large mug and moan quietly as that first glorious sip hits. I continue to watch this morning's spectacular sunrise as I savor each mouthful, as well as these few minutes of absolute silence before the insanity of today hits.

I'm almost done when I feel a strong pair of arms wrap around me, Beckett's warm body snuggled up to my back. He places sweet kisses beneath my ear and on my neck.

"Good morning, sweet pea."

"Hi," I reply, snuggling back into his embrace, drawing strength and courage from his presence.

"How'd you sleep?"

"Much better than I thought I would, all things considered. You?"

"Like a log. You plum wore me out." Stepping back with a chuckle, he gives my ass a light slap. "I need coffee, woman. The restorative powers of caffeine is all that will save me now, if I'm to be any good to you in court today."

Surprise jolts through me at his words. "In court?"

"Er, yeah."

"But it's a workday."

"And? You didn't seriously think I would leave you to suffer through this on your own, did you?" Before I can reply, he continues. "I have a ton of vacation days due to me, and since there's nothing big in the pipeline at the moment, the commander had no problem granting me some time off so I could be there for you."

Tears well as I turn to look at Beckett. “I – I don’t know what to say. Thank you. Your support means the world. You’re doing so much for me – I have no idea how I’ll ever be able to pay it all back, but I’ll find a way.”

“You don’t need to say anything. And you certainly don’t need to pay me back. I’m just grateful I’m in a position to help.” He runs gentle fingertips down my cheek. Pulling me in for a quick hug, he says, “Now, let’s go get ready to slay today. Yeah?”

Nodding, I give him a quick hug, and, to his credit, he doesn’t prolong the embrace. Because Lord knows I’m a half breath away from a complete meltdown. “I’m off to shower and get dressed.”

“Yeah, same. I’ll come collect you from the cottage and we can travel in together.”

His words give me pause. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Beckett studies me, then nods as if he’s had an internal conversation and come to some conclusion that I’m clueless about. “As far as anyone knows, last night never happened – it did, and I’m thrilled it did, but no one else needs to know. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, I am your employer – that simple.”

I mull over his words. “You’re right. And a lift would be great. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now scoot. We don’t want to be late.” He gifts me one of his heart-melting smiles before shooing me toward the door. “I’ll come over as soon as I’m done.”

* * *

MY HEART IS POUNDING as the judge opens proceedings. She takes the attorneys through the opening of the case, the official interaction making my situation all too real now. Jeff’s representative, Terrence James, is cocky and aggressive, which

does nothing to allay my fears that I'm going to be like the proverbial lamb to the slaughter in this fight to keep my son.

It does not inspire confidence in me.

Lindsay Seymour, my attorney, appears far softer spoken and less confrontational than Mr. James. All I can do is pray that she's up to the task ahead because I'm fighting for my life here, albeit figuratively. Because, without my son, I have no life. He's all I have – all I've had for the past six years.

The parties discuss the reason for the case, most of the jargon going way over my head, but none of which sounds good.

“Mr. James, are you ready to proceed?” The judge's words jolt me out of my thoughts, my stomach clenching.

“Yes, Your Honor,” the man replies.

“Very well. You may proceed.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. I'd like to call Mr. Jefferson Grimes to the stand.”

“Mr. Grimes please take the stand.” A smug look on his face, Jeff – neat as a pin in what appears to be a bespoke suit I've never seen before – takes the stand. “Bailiff, you may proceed,” the judge says.

The bailiff takes him through his oath to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” If it weren't for the fact that this farce is no laughing matter, Jeff promising to “tell the truth” would be laughable. I'm not sure he remembers what the truth looks like anymore.

“Thank you, Mr. Grimes. You may be seated. Mr. James.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” The man shuffles through some papers on the desk before him, nothing more than showboating, I'm sure. “Mr. Grimes, you've brought this case before the courts. Could you please tell us why?”

“A short while ago, my fiancé and I split. Recently, it's come to my attention that she's moved in with a man – one of my military colleagues – and I'm concerned about that. My son is six and very impressionable.”

The words fall out of the smarmy bastard's mouth with ease, and I want to scream at how easily he lies, portraying the concerned father. When, God knows, he's never given a rat's ass before.

When I first met Jeff, he seemed so sweet and caring. For a girl like me, his attention was heady. Growing up in a home where my mother was hammered, more often than not, and there was never money because she'd gambled it all away as soon as she got any in her greedy little hands; the contrast was insane. He seemed so stable. Stability being something not often experienced with my mother.

Because of her gambling and drinking addiction, we moved often since she wouldn't be able to pay the rent. With Jeff, life initially seemed so wonderful. At first all was great. I felt cherished and cared for. That was until I saw him for who he really was.

I'll never forget the day I realized that history was simply repeating itself. The very life I thought I'd escaped from. Just like my mother before him, Jeff turned out to be a gambler – different game, same results. While my mother was addicted to slot machines; horses and cards were Jeff's weakness.

When I discovered I was pregnant with Luke, he promised me things would be different. He'd get help. He'd stop the madness. But, of course, he never did. In fact, if anything, things got a whole lot worse. Then the night he pushed me down the stairs in a fit of pique after losing a substantial amount of money, the damage became irreparable.

The love I thought I felt for him died an agonizing death as he began to treat me more and more poorly. Until Luke was born. That was the final death knell of our relationship. He blamed me for our boy's illness, never once taking responsibility for being the one to cause it. And I'm ashamed to admit that I stayed because, even with the constant losing of money, finances were still more stable with him than without him.

Even when there wasn't cash, at least there were the health benefits and guaranteed housing because of his job. It meant I

didn't have to worry about paying for Luke's healthcare or about a roof over his head, despite how miserable I'd become. Especially as more of his true nature surfaced the longer we were together.

Right at the end, before we split, life under the same roof was unpleasant, but I stuck it out for Luke's sake. Despite the financial fear of being on my own, there was still an overwhelming sense of relief to be away from Jeff and his toxic treatment of us.

But I should have known he'd find a way to mess with me. As our relationship deteriorated, it was as if he actively sought out ways to hurt me. There's no easier way than going after the one thing that means everything to me in this world. And now, here we are.

"Asshole," I hear Beckett mutter under his breath, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I warned her more than once about those stairs, but she always knew better, you know. And then she fell, causing Luke to come early. The doctor said his poor health is a direct result of her falling."

My body goes ice cold at Jeff's words, and it takes everything in me to remain seated, when all I want to do is jump up and yell that he's a liar at the top of my lungs. The outburst would only hurt my cause, but man, it's difficult.

Through the course of the morning, there are a million more moments that I want to rail at him for the lies he's spewing to what seems to be a captive audience. The man can be charming and charismatic when he wants or needs to be. All I can do is pray the judge remains impartial, as she's meant to, and not get taken in by this lying bastard.

All of which is causing me massive anxiety since I have no idea how I'm going to prove that he's lying to the court, under oath, without making it look like a case of sour grapes. By the time we break for lunch, I have a pounding headache.

While we wait for people to exit the room, Beckett turns to me, a pissed-off look on his face and a compassionate light in

his eyes. “I need to make a quick phone call once we’re outside. I won’t be long, okay?”

“No problem,” I reply. I mean, what else can I say? But it’s hard watching him walk away, praying that Jeff won’t come over and start something.

SCOOTER

Impatiently, I listen to the ringing of the phone on the other side. I can see Kathleen from where I'm standing, keeping an eye on her. I doubt Gonzo'll start anything outside the courthouse – only because his attorney will have told him not to, but he's stupid enough to ignore good advice when it suits him.

“Yeah?”

“Well, good morning to you too, sunshine.” I have to smile at Tex. He's never been a man of many words.

“Good morning, darling. Sleep well?” Sarcasm drips like molasses from every word, and this time I can't help but laugh out loud.

“Actually, I did, thanks.” His snort of amusement is clear over the line. “On a serious note, our friend is being an even bigger dick than we thought he was going to be. But even I didn't realize just how much he'd lie under oath.”

Tex doesn't say a word, but I swear I hear him growl like a feral animal. “And the smarmy bastard has weaved his tale of deceit so well that the minute Kathleen gets up there and disputes what he's said, it'll look like *she's* the one that's lying. So what did you manage to find out that we can use? Because I really need to burn this douchebag's ass for all to see.”

“See if you can get your attorney-lady to call me as a witness. I'm on my way as we speak. I'll give you a rundown of what I found at the same time – two birds, one stone, and all that.”

I'm taken aback at the man's words. When he agreed to help, I never dreamed he'd actually go so far as to come to town and want to give evidence in Kathleen's defense. I thought he'd simply send information and documents we could use.

"I'll get right on that. Chat with you soon then." Without another word, the line goes dead in my ear. Like I said, not a man of many words. But it sure will be interesting to hear what he has to say about dear old Jefferson Grimes.

As if a sign from the gods, Lindsay Seymour appears at the front of the courthouse, her assistant by her side. The woman doesn't look happy, and frankly I don't blame her. Maybe Tex's words will make her feel better.

Casting another glance Kathleen's way to make sure she's still okay, I jog over to Lindsay. She spots me as I'm taking the stairs, two at a time.

"Hello, handsome. I didn't expect to see you here today." To the casual observer, you'd think that the good counsellor was hitting on me. However, that couldn't be further from the truth.

I met her a few years back now when she organized to meet the team to thank us for rescuing her husband from a hostage situation. For some weird reason, she and I really hit it off, and we've been friends ever since. Today, I am more grateful than ever for that friendship.

"Hey gorgeous. You got a second for me?"

"Sure. I need to figure out how to do damage control thanks to the slimeball, but I've always got time for you. What's up?"

"Actually, I think I might just have the answer you're looking for."

Lindsay's eyebrow quirks. "Yeah? I'm all ears."

"I have a colleague – ex SEAL – who's a wizard at PI work. He's apparently found some interesting information on said slimeball and wants to take the stand as a witness. Would you be able to use him?"

“Depends.”

“On?”

“His credentials and, of course, the information that he has. But I’m sure we can work something out. I’d like to meet with him first though.”

“I can arrange that. Apparently, he’s on his way here right now.”

“Excellent. Let’s set a meeting up for this afternoon and see what we have.”

“Perfect. Then I’m off to go find Kathleen. See you later.”

Approaching Kathleen, I see Gonzo standing in her line of sight, smirking that fuck-you grin of his, and it takes everything in me to not go over to him and beat it off his face. Instead, I step in front of her, effectively cutting off her view of the bastard.

“Hey,” she says, her expression strained.

“Hey yourself.” I study her and notice how pale she is, despite the makeup she’s wearing. “You doing okay?”

“I’ve had better days.”

“I’m sorry.” I don’t know what else to say.

“I know.” She gives me a weak smile.

Before I can say anything else, Lindsay’s assistant comes over to let us know court’s about to reconvene. I thank her, searching the area for any sign of Tex but can’t spot him in the crowd. I indicate for Kathleen to precede me, searching one last time before following her.

Roughly ten minutes into this session, Tex slides onto the bench beside me.

“I miss anything good?” he whispers.

“Not yet. He hasn’t dropped any whoppers this session, but the afternoon is young yet. Give him a minute. I’m sure he’s got more shit up his sleeve.”

Tex gives me an evil grin, rubbing his hands together. “I can’t wait.” His gaze travels around the room, taking it all in. “You organize anything with the attorney?”

“I spoke to her right after I got off the call with you. She’s interested but wants a meeting first to see what you’ve got for her.”

“Fair enough. I think she’ll love what I have for her.” He turns that grin on me again, and for the first time ever, I actually feel a twinge of sympathy for Gonzo.

Tex doesn’t suffer fools gladly on a good day, but when it comes to men fucking with women who don’t deserve it, he’s even worse. I would love to know what he’s uncovered about the man.

Turning back to face the front, I notice Kathleen looking at Tex and me from the corner of my eye. However, now’s not the time for introductions. I’ll do the honors once court is done for the day.

The afternoon is no different than the morning session – lies and half-truths twisted to suit the jackass’s purposes. On one side I have Kathleen, tense and tearful, and on the other Tex stiff and disapproving. Finally though, the first day is done and people get up to leave.

We wait patiently as Lindsay finishes up with the judge and Gonzo’s attorney. She and her assistant come up the aisle toward where we’re sitting, a smile for Kathleen on her lips. “Hi,” she says, encompassing the three of us in her greeting before turning her attention solely to Kathleen. “You hanging in there, Kathleen? I know it’s been a bit of a rough day, but it’s just the start. Plenty can happen to swing the tide in our favor.”

“It *has* been a rough day, but I’m hanging in there. I have faith in you.”

Lindsay gives her a smile, a little strained around the edges if you know what to look for, while her shrewd gaze swings to Tex sitting beside me.

Moment of truth. “Lindsay, Kathleen.” I turn to include Kathleen. “I’d like to introduce you to my friend, Tex.”

The expression on Kathleen’s face tells me she’s heard of him, which she confirms with her next words. “The elusive Tex – your legendary status precedes you. It’s nice to actually get to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, ma’am.” He turns to Lindsay. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

“Yes, you too. Scooter tells me you have some helpful information for me – us.”

“Yeah, I have some real interesting stuff that should help put a stop to this bullshit case. I’m happy to get on the stand and share what I know.”

Shock crosses Kathleen’s face at the same time a look of excitement spreads over Lindsay’s. “I like the sound of that, because honestly, this man is really pissing me off. I guess, mainly, because I know he’s lying. Maybe if I wasn’t privy to what I now know about him, I’d have been sucked in by his lies, but man, it’s difficult not to want to slap that smirk right off his face.”

Kathleen nods at Lindsay’s words. “Same. Absolutely.”

“Well, I’m here to stop that shit in its tracks. Last thing I want is for him to take a young boy away from his mama, and especially when I know it’s not for a better life. We all know how this’ll end if he gets custody.”

Tears well in Kathleen’s eyes and she turns away. “I’ll, um – I’ll be back in a moment.”

She almost runs from the courtroom, Lindsay’s concerned gaze and Tex’s knowing one track her progress toward the door. I take a step to follow her, but his hand on my arm stops me. “If you don’t mind, I’ll go.”

Before I can respond, he takes off after her.

They’re gone for a good while, and I’m about to go after them when the door opens and the two of them walk in. Even from where we’re standing, I can see that Kathleen’s been

crying and everything in me goes tight. I hate to see a woman – any woman – cry, but especially when it's her. Not to mention, I'm itching to know what Tex said to her.

“Shall we adjourn to my office to discuss things further?” Lindsay asks. Tex and I nod at the same time; Kathleen's a little slower to respond. “Kathleen?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

It's clear for all to see that this first day of court has been hard on her, and honestly, I don't foresee it getting any easier. I knew Gonzo was capable of lying, but even I didn't understand how good he is at it – pathologically good. Thank God for all the shit Tex has managed to uncover about the lying, cheating asshat.

Kathleen is quiet on the ride over to Lindsay's office, conversation between Tex and I light. We're ushered into a boardroom upon arrival and not long after, Lindsay joins us, her assistant in tow.

We take a seat, and she invites Tex to share what he's uncovered during his investigation. He looks over at Kathleen. “I'm sorry for any emotional distress this causes you.” Then he turns back to Lindsay. “That man has been lying through his teeth for years – not just on the stand. He's been living a double life and doesn't seem to suffer any remorse over it whatsoever.”

“How so?” Lindsay asks.

Again, Tex looks over at Kathleen. It's clear to see he's uncomfortable with how his discovery will affect her. “Let's start with what we already know, being that the man has a gambling problem. However, it runs deeper than, I think, many people are aware. In fact, that's the reason he was dishonorably discharged from the military.”

I'm watching Kathleen as Tex speaks and see how she jolts at his words. Clearly not something she was aware of. The rumors had been doing the rounds, but from what I can understand it didn't come up during Lindsay's investigation into the man.

“That’s not what it says on his personnel file,” she says, the look on her face indicating she’s lost faith in anything else the man has to say.

“Yeah, I know. That’s because the file has been tampered with.”

“How could you possibly know that Mr. ...” Lindsay’s eyebrow quirks as she waits for Tex to fill in the blank.

“The name’s Keegan. John Keegan.”

“Well, Mr. Keegan, how could you possibly know that Mr. Grimes’s personnel file has been tampered with?”

“Because I followed the digital trail. Just because something is deleted doesn’t mean it’s gone, if you know what I mean.”

“No, Mr. Keegan, I don’t,” Lindsay replies.

Tex nods. “All right. So, all digital data has a footprint. Even when something is deleted from your computer, it still leaves a footprint. Granted, it can no longer be seen, but there are ways of tracing the footprint if you know how and where to look. I do, and I found it. According to his file, he retired from the military. The deleted data tells a very different story.”

“And do you know what the story behind the story is?” Lindsay’s tone is ripe with skepticism. But at least she appears to be willing to hear him out.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Would you care to share?”

He nods, once again. “I spoke to the commander’s admin – a friend of mine – and he gave me the true story. In fact, he was unaware that the records had been tempered with, at the time.”

“Oh really?” Lindsay replies, her misgiving replaced by avid interest. “Do tell,” she continues, pencil poised.

And so he does, spilling all the details that spell certain death to this farce of a custody case.

KATHLEEN

As the words fall from Tex's mouth, a sick feeling takes up residence in the pit of my stomach, my heart squeezing painfully. Did I not know this man at all? Seems not.

God, how could I have been so blind, so oblivious to this man and his devious ways? I shared a home, a life – my body – with him, and all that time, I had no clue who he truly is. I feel so stupid. An overwhelming urge to go home and hide from the world washes over me. Abruptly getting to my feet, I look at Beckett.

“Please, can you take me home?”

He studies me for a moment, then nods decisively. “Sure can,” he says, standing from his chair. “Ladies and gentleman, if you'll excuse us,” he continues, coming around the table and offering me his hand.

Grateful for his support, I grasp it and hold on tight, as if it's my only anchor in suddenly rough seas.

“Er, Kathleen, I think it would be beneficial for you to hear what Mr. Keegan has to say,” Lindsay says.

“That may well be, but if Kathleen wants to leave, then that's what she'll do. We can always ask Tex to share what he knows later. But for now,” Beckett replies, “I think it's best I get her home.”

Without waiting for her response, he guides me out of the room, and the building, stopping only to wait for the elevator. My hand still firmly in his, Beckett leads me to his car. He unlocks my door, but before I can get into the vehicle, he turns

me to face him. He finally lets go of my hand so he can cup my face with both hands.

“I know this is hard on you, for you to deal with, but we’ll get through it. I have faith in both Lindsay and Tex.”

“I don’t know, Beckett. After seeing Jeff in action today, I’m not so sure. He had everyone hanging on his every word, convinced I’m the worst mother in history.” The tears that well in my eyes seem to upset Beckett.

After a short silence, he eventually asks quietly, “Do you trust me?”

Without even having to think about it, I nod without hesitation. “Yes, I absolutely do.”

Lifting my hand, he threads my fingers through his. “Then trust me when I tell you Gonzo’s going down. He’s opened a can of whoop ass he’s not going to be able to close again. Tex has *never* failed to deliver – this time will be no exception. I promise, all will be okay.”

Studying his face, searching for reassurance despite what he’s said, my shoulders relax a tiny bit when I see the strength of conviction shining bright in his eyes.

“I trust you – your judgment. If you trust Tex that much, I’m willing to do the same.” Still, I send up a silent prayer that all will end well. I can’t lose my son. Dramatic as it sounds, my life will pretty much be over if I do.

* * *

TEX IS WAITING out front when we arrive at the courthouse. Seeing him stand tall and proud, it’s easier to believe that this man will make all of this go away. Maybe it’s unfair to put so much unspoken pressure on him, but I don’t have much choice if I want to keep custody of Luke.

After a quick exchange of pleasantries, we head inside for the start of the second day of mental anguish at Jeff’s hands. I know I should have expected something underhanded from

him – he’s never been one to tolerate being made to feel unimportant or disrespected, even if it is only implied.

Yet here we are. Not in my wildest imagination would I have believed he’d go so far as to try to take Luke away from me.

The morning goes by quickly with more of the same as yesterday. More lies, manipulation, passive aggressive venom. And his audience continues to hang on his every twisted word. Watching the judge’s face, I can see how taken in she is by him, and panic begins to bubble in my belly once again.

Unexpectedly, I feel a warm hand wrap around mine, squeeze gently. Turning to look over at Beckett, I take in his handsome face.

“Have faith, sweet pea. We’ve got this, I promise.”

Nodding, I feel myself settle again. I told Beckett last night that I trust him. Now I need to *show* him that I do. Squeezing his hand in return, I take a deep breath and reach deep for a sense of calm.

By lunch, Jeff’s team is finishing up with his testimony.

“Your Honor, that’s all I have for Mr. Grimes at this time.”

“Thank you, counsellor. Thank you, Mr. Grimes. You’re free to step down.”

He gives her one of his smiles – the one he believes to be irresistible to women. And maybe he’s right. Women seem to adore him. “Thank you, ma’am.”

As he steps out of the box, he looks right at me and gives *me* a smile that tells me he knows he’s crushing it. I have no idea what prompts me to do it, but I give him a confident smile in return. A look of surprise flashes across his face before he turns away, taking a seat beside his attorney.

“All right then. We’ll adjourn for lunch since Mr. James is done for the moment. Ms. Seymour, are you ready to proceed after the break?”

Lindsay gets to her feet. “Yes, thank you, Your Honor.”

“Very well, then we are adjourned for lunch.”

Beckett leans over to whisper in my ear. “Want to grab a quick bite before proceedings reconvene?”

I shake my head, my stomach roiling at the thought of eating. “No, thanks. But you go ahead. I’ll find somewhere to sit and read.”

He doesn’t look happy at my response. “I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone for that long.”

“I’ll be fine. You and Tex go. It’s not *that* long.”

The look of doubt lingers, but I insist, and eventually he gives in. We leave the court together, and he helps me find a relatively quiet spot to sit. “We won’t be long. Call me if you need me.”

“Stop worrying so much. I’ll be fine. Go.”

I watch as the two of them walk off and, for the first time since meeting him, I notice that Tex has an almost undetectable limp. Still pondering the possible reason for it, I open the reading app on my phone. My favorite author has released a new book, and I can’t wait to dive in and lose myself in the story – an escape from real life.

I have no idea how long I’ve been reading when I hear a voice from behind me. “Lover boy abandoned you already?” The tone is so oily it would be flagged as an environmental crisis. It immediately has my back stiffen and my mood souring.

“There’s so much wrong with that sentence, but I couldn’t be bothered to correct any of it. You wouldn’t listen anyway. Besides, my attorney has advised me not to talk to you.” I stand, intending to walk away from Jeff, but he grips my arm painfully to prevent me from leaving.

I struggle against his grasp but only succeed in causing myself more pain as he tightens his grip. “Don’t you walk away from me, bitch. I’m not done with you yet.”

“Yeah, actually, you are. Get your hands off her before I break each and every one of your fingers.”

My eyes widen in surprise as I hadn't even heard them approach. The first I knew Beckett and Tex had returned was when Tex spoke up.

“Was that a threat, Mr. Macho?”

“No, sir —”

“Didn't think s—”

“What that is, you slimy little worm, is a promise. One that would give me great pleasure to fulfil.” Stepping between Jeff and me, Tex crooks his elbow, offering me his arm.

Over his shoulder, I see Jeff step forward to push Tex but, quick as a flash, Beckett grabs and twists Jeff's arm behind his back. “You really don't want to do that, asshat.” Then he leans forward, whispering something in Jeff's ear.

I have no idea what he says to the man, but he nods, and Beckett releases Jeff's arm slowly. Yanking it clear, Jeff turns and stalks away.

“You all right, darlin'?” Tex asks.

More shaken than I'm willing to admit, I simply nod. Beckett, now on my other side, rubs a hand gently up and down my back. “I think it would be a good idea to report the incident to Lindsay. He's probably convinced you'll be too intimidated to do that. Don't give him satisfaction. Rat his bullying ass out and let him face the consequences of his actions.” Again, I just nod.

I can feel his eyes on me, but don't turn to look at him. I keep walking and hope I don't cry in public. Swallowing hard, I bite the inside of my lip in an effort to distract myself. We arrive at our seats, and as I take mine, Tex smiles down at me. “He's going down today. Have no fear, little one.”

Looking up him, it's hard to miss his determination and conviction.

TEX

The judge raps her gavel on the bench. “Court is now in session. Ms. Seymour, are you ready to proceed?”

“Yes, Your Honor, I am.” Kathleen’s attorney gets to her feet, shuffles some papers on the table before her, then gives me an encouraging smile.

“Very well. You may do so.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. I’d like to call Mr. John Keegan to the stand.”

From my vantage point, I see Gonzo’s body go stiff. He’d definitely not been expecting that, and I experience a childish sense of glee at his obvious discomfort at the turn of events. He knows who I am, and my reputation as a “fixer” is a poorly kept secret. Thank God my *methods* are not widely known.

I have every intention of making sure this asshole is never given custody of the son he doesn’t want, just so he can get at Kathleen. But it would certainly hurt her case if it came out that sometimes my means of gathering intel can be, shall we say, less than legally acceptable.

As quickly as I’m able to, I make my way to the stand and wait patiently beside it to be sworn in. Once the bailiff’s done the deed, I take a seat and give Ms. Seymour a nod to let her know I’m ready.

“Good afternoon, sir. Could you please state your full name and occupation for the record?”

“John Keegan, Forensic Cyber Investigator.”

“Thank you, Mr. Keegan. And tell me, what did you do before you branched into this line of work?”

“I was a Navy SEAL before this. After I was medically discharged, I needed something to keep myself occupied with, and I’m good with a computer, so it seemed like a natural transition.”

“I see. How do you know the defendant, Ms. Pierce?”

“I’ve never met Ms. Pierce, but have known about her for years through Mr. Grimes, since they were a couple. And I know *him* because we served in the military together.”

“And what was your relationship like with Mr. Grimes?”

“Cordial. Even though we were assigned to different teams, you have to be able to work together since you may be required to work together on a mission.”

“Now, Mr. Keegan, getting to the reason we’re all here, can you please share with the court what you found during your investigation.”

“Yes, ma’am. Ms. Pierce’s employer is also an ex-colleague of mine. When she was served with the notice for this court case, he reached out on her behalf to ask me if I could assist in any way. I agreed to take her case. During the course of my investigation, I discovered numerous facts about Mr. Grimes that have direct bearing on this case.”

“And what did you uncover?”

“Shall I start with what I found out about his career and then move on to personal facts I uncovered?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Relating to his career, I discovered that Mr. Grimes had been dishonorably discharged from the military due to his gambling addiction. His commanding officer learned that he owed a well-known local loan shark a large amount of money and had been doing jobs for him, using skills developed through his work, as a means of reducing some of his debt.

“Concerning his private life, I uncovered that Mr. Grimes has actually been living a double life. While he was with Ms.

Pierce, he was also in a relationship with one Josephine Bach. He and Ms. Bach are still together, and she is pregnant with their first child.

“Shortly before he broke the relationship off with Ms. Pierce, contrary to his testimony that *she* left *him*, he removed both his son and Ms. Pierce from his medical insurance. He also removed all the money from their joint savings account as well as their credit card account, leaving her financially destitute.”

I look over at Kathleen as I say this, knowing it’s something that will hurt her – something I specifically didn’t mention in front of her during the meeting at the attorney’s offices. This situation is shitty enough without having the knowledge that this asshole cheated on her, pretty much the entire time they were together, then dumped her. Shifting my gaze back to Ms. Seymour, I continue.

“Ms. Bach currently works in Human Resources on the base where Mr. Grimes was serving – I say currently, because it would appear she won’t be there too much longer either. The reason being, all traces of Mr. Grimes’s dishonorable discharge have been removed from his personnel file, and replaced with a false claim of honorable discharge due to retiring from service. Ms. Bach is suspected of being the one who did so, having both the means and the personal motivation. At present, she is being investigated on charges of tampering with official documents, abuse of her position, and criminal misconduct.”

Before Ms. Seymour can utter a word, the judge speaks up. “So if your testimony is to be believed, Mr. Keegan, you’re telling this court that everything Mr. Grimes testified to, under oath, on this stand is a lie?”

“Yes, Your Honor, that is correct,” I reply.

“Do you have evidence to back up your claims, sir?” she continues.

“Yes, ma’am. Everything is documented and can be substantiated.”

The look on Gonzo's face is priceless – something I wish I could capture for posterity. He's so mad a vein stands out prominently on his forehead. His attorney is whispering furiously in his ear. And the judge, so smitten with the lying bastard prior to my testimony, is now looking at him with an expression of disgust.

“Mr. Grimes, I'm going to give you one opportunity to answer me honestly. Is any of what Mr. Keegan has told us this afternoon true?”

“Your Honor, I don't –” Gonzo cuts the judge off, his tone clearly blustering.

“Mr. Grimes, please answer the question. I ask you again, is any of Mr. Keegan's testimony true?”

Put so firmly on the spot, Gonzo gives the appearance of a fish out of water as he flaps his lips in an attempt to find the words to respond. Probably words to dig himself out of the hole I've dug for him, without making it any deeper.

“I'm waiting, Mr. Grimes.” Pointing at him, she continues, “You've brought strong allegations against Ms. Pierce before this court – allegations that could cause her to lose her son, *and* potentially land her in some deep hot water. If any of what Mr. Keegan has told us today is accurate, and you have lied to me – under oath, no less — I will not be well pleased.”

The man looks like a deer caught in headlights as the judge glares over at him. He opens his mouth to speak, but no sound comes out.

“Your silence leads me to believe that you have, indeed, given false evidence. If Mr. Keegan is to be believed, you're already in a world of trouble with the law. Perjury carries serious consequences of its own. So, I'm giving you one last chance to redeem yourself, somewhat, by being honest with me now.”

Once again, Gonzo's attorney leans over to whisper in his ear. With obvious reluctance, he gets to his feet, panic clear on his face as it sinks in that the game is up. He's been caught at his lies, and there's no way out.

He hangs his head, shuffles his feet, and then proceeds to shock the hell out of me. “Yes, Your Honor.”

At his admission of guilt, the courtroom erupts into a cacophony of sound as the people in the gallery lose their minds.

The banging of the judge’s gavel adds to the chaos. “Silence. I will have silence in my court.”

As the gallery slowly quietens down, a voice from somewhere near the back can be heard. “The man clearly doesn’t understand the concept of honesty, or simple human decency. Throw the book at him.”

Through all the pandemonium and calls of agreement, I return my gaze to Kathleen, then wish I hadn’t. The woman looks absolutely devastated at not only the revelations she didn’t stick around to hear at the meeting with her attorney, but also Gonzo’s admission that he was willing to lie in a court of law to cheat her of her son. As if his infidelity during their relationship wasn’t enough cheating.

The judge, clearly giving up on trying to silence the gallery, impatiently waits them out. Finally, the courtroom quietens down, and she turns once again to Gonzo. “Mr. Grimes, I am deeply disappointed. In a time when we rejoice at more fathers wanting to be involved in their children’s lives, more fathers stepping up and no longer allowing mothers to rob them of their children, I was more than willing to entertain your case.

“I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt and support you in your endeavor. To hear that you’ve attempted to manipulate this court in order to hurt Ms. Pierce more than you already have – there are no words to adequately express how disgusted I am by your behavior.

“I will deal with you momentarily. However, I wish to address Ms. Pierce first.” The judge scans the crowd in the gallery. “Ms. Pierce, would you please stand.” Kathleen does as instructed, and my heart hurts for her. She looks positively ill.

“Ms. Pierce, could you please tell me what your current situation is? According to Mr. Grimes, you have taken to living with a man who supports you and your son in return for – special favors. However, in light of Mr. Keegan’s testimony, it is patently clear that Mr. Grimes is not to be believed.”

Kathleen raises a shaking hand to push her hair from her face. “Your Honor, I am not living with anyone other than my son. A friend of both Jeff’s – Mr. Grimes’s – and mine, offered me a job as his housekeeper after Mr. Grimes, um – evicted us. Luke and I live in the little cottage on his property, and he pays me a salary to take care of his home and property. That is how I am able to support my boy.”

“I see,” the judge responds, looking as if she’d sucked on a lemon. “Is there anything you wish to share with this court before I make my decision?”

I notice Scooter whisper something to Kathleen. She nods, then turns back to the judge. “Your Honor, there is one thing I’d like to clear up, if I may.”

“Yes, of course. Go ahead.”

“The day Luke was born, I did not fall down the stairs, as Mr. Grimes testified –” She takes a deep breath. “I was, in fact, pushed down the stairs. By Mr. Grimes. It caused me to go into premature labor and his poor health is a direct result of that.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“And this too can be substantiated?”

“Yes, Your Honor. It’s in Luke’s medical records.”

“I see,” she repeats.

The judge is quiet for a long moment. Then, levelling a scathing gaze on Gonzo, she says, “Well then. Normally, I would retire to my chambers to weigh up all the factors, testimony from both parties, and then make my decision. However, in this particular instance it would appear the matter is quite clear and I’m therefore ready to deliver my verdict. It

is the opinion of this court that the boy, Luke Bennett Pierce, remain in the custody of his mother, Ms. Kathleen Millicent Pierce.”

I watch Gonzo react to the woman’s words, fully expecting him to lose his cool – waiting for it, in fact. His attorney, however, appears to talk him down from the ledge, and I’d pay good money to know what he says to the idiot.

“I’m so sorry you’ve had to go through this, Ms. Pierce,” the judge continues, shifting her gaze to Kathleen, “Go home and give your little boy all the love you know how to give him, and try to put this farce out of your mind.

“As for you, Mr. Grimes,” she once again shifts her gaze, “you should be ashamed of yourself for committing perjury. If I were able, I would lock your lying self up for not only wasting the court’s time, but attempting to remove a young boy from a happy, healthy environment for self-gain.

“I like to consider myself a compassionate person. And I am always happy to advocate for fathers who are actually interested in and willing to be a part of their children’s lives. However, I find it difficult to find my compassion when a man uses the courts in an attempt to get at their exes for their own twisted purposes.

“Mr. Grimes, it’s clear that your son means very little to you and that you were willing to take him out of a loving home and plunge him into who knows what kind of hell, just so you could hurt Ms. Pierce. And so, based on that and the evidence that has come to light about you, and realizing what kind of a person that makes you, I’m happy to award sole custody of the minor boy to Ms. Pierce. I would have no trouble handing down a prison term for having the audacity to come into *my* courtroom and *lie* so blatantly to my face if I were able to, but since I’m not, I will let you off with a warning to never darken my door again.”

Still watching Kathleen, I see her drop down, hard, onto the seat beside Scooter, as if her legs were no longer able to support her. He puts an arm around her, pulling her close and

murmuring to her. Tears begin to stream down her cheeks, and she tucks her face into his neck.

Shaking her head, giving Gonzo one last glare, the judge says, “Mr. Keegan, I thank you for your testimony. You are free to step down. This court is dismissed.”

The level of sound increases as people begin to leave the courtroom. Stepping down from the stand, I make my way over to where Scooter and Kathleen are still seated – him looking thrilled, her looking shellshocked.

I pass Gonzo on the way back to my seat, and he lunges at me landing a glancing blow on my arm, snarling, “You fucker. You’ve destroyed my life.”

“You’re welcome,” I throw over my shoulder as I breeze past him, a smug grin firmly in place.

“Mr. Grimes,” the judge’s voice booms out, “that is not only unacceptable behavior in my courtroom, but can also be viewed as assault. Mr. Keegan, do you wish to press charges?”

The answer requires zero time to consider. It would be just one more nail in the moron’s coffin. “Yes, Your Honor, I would.”

“Very well. I’ll put the ball in motion.”

I doubt it’ll be anything substantial, but even a short stint in a cell would be gratifying, and based on his current track record, it’s likely he’ll see the inside of one. Hot damn, it feels good to know this man is probably headed where he belongs.

KATHLEEN

It's over. I can't believe I won. I get to keep my boy.

As for all that's come out about Jeff? That's equally difficult to wrap my head around. How could I have been so wrong about the man? I always considered him to be a little reserved. Turns out he was just a miserable asshole who was just good at hiding the worst of himself.

Yeah, I'm sad I wasted so many years on him, but I can't be mad at it since I got my beautiful son out of the deal. He makes anything I went through worthwhile, just to have him in my life.

"You all right?" I hear from above me. Looking up, I find Tex standing there, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. Jumping to my feet, I fling my arms around his waist and hug him. He stiffens at the contact, and I'm about to step back when he relaxes a little. Even going so far as to pat me awkwardly on the back. I'm guessing public displays aren't his thing. I hug him tight anyway.

"I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you for what you've done. Or repay you, for that matter. I have no words for how truly, deeply grateful I am to you for everything you did today."

"A simple thank you is all that's required. I'm just glad I could help." I take pity on the man and release him from my embrace. Looking somewhat self-conscious, Tex checks his watch. "It's earlier than expected – I thought, for sure, the case would take longer, that there would be more questions. But

since there aren't, I'm gonna beat it to the airport and see if I can't get an earlier flight home."

"Can we give you a lift?" Beckett asks.

"Nah, I'm good. But thanks for the offer. I'm off. I'll see you crazy kids around sometime. In the meantime, stay out of trouble." With one last grin, he's gone, and we're left standing in an almost empty courtroom.

"You ready to get out of here too?" Beckett asks.

"You bet I am."

"Well, come on then." He holds out his hand to me, and happily I take it.

"Yeah, let's get out of this horrible place. It gives me the heebie-jeebies just being in this room."

All the new things I've learned about Jeff today whirl in my brain as we walk out into the fresh air, despite my best effort to put it all out of my mind. I know I jumped into our relationship way too quickly in order to escape my mother and all the chaos and drama she brought to my life.

But never in my wildest imagination could I have dreamed that Jeff would turn out to be such a heartless bastard. At least now I'm free of him and his toxicity. I have a new life ahead of me that includes Luke. And if I'm really lucky, Beckett too.

I'm not sure what the future holds with him, but after our night together, I'm hoping it's the start of something beautiful for us. I could do with a little beauty in my life, and that man certainly knows how to bring it. And the way he treats Luke is such a joy to watch.

More than once over the last while, I've thought about how wonderful it would have been if Beckett were his father rather than Jeff. And no day more so than today. If it weren't for him, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this case would have had a very different outcome.

I've always known he's a compassionate, empathetic man, and I'm so lucky to have him in my life. I don't know what I've done to deserve it, but I'll take it. Following Beckett, my

hand firmly in his, I feel something settle inside and, for the first time since Jeff threw Luke and I out, there's a lightness in me.

I've kept my love for this man hidden in fear he doesn't return it, and I have to bite my tongue to prevent the words from spilling out right there. I'm terrified to tell him how I feel – I don't want to drive him away. I'd rather take what I have now than lose it all, including him.

I'm so lost in my thoughts I'm unaware that Beckett has stopped. So I plough full tilt into his back. Damn, the man is solid muscle. It's like slamming into a brick wall.

“Shit, sweet pea, you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm good. Sorry, I wasn't paying attention. Kinda lost in my own head.”

“Good thoughts, I hope.” The soft look in his eyes warms me inside. “Hop on in,” he continues, opening the car door for me.

I got so wrapped up in thoughts of Beckett that I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. Staring up into his gorgeous face, it dawns on me that Luke will still be away for a couple more nights. A plan begins to form in my head as I climb into the car, and I can't suppress my grin of excitement.

I may not have the courage to tell him how I feel, but I can certainly show him.

The trip is over quickly, mainly because I'm so wrapped up in my planning that I once again lose track of time and surroundings.

With a rough plan in mind, I waste no time getting out of the car once Beckett stops in the drive.

But first I need to ensure he has no plans for tonight. “Thanks a million for – well, everything. I have to dash, so I'll see you later, okay?” I lean over and drop a quick kiss on his cheek, then hop out of the vehicle. Before closing the door though, I lean back in and ask, “Do you have plans for this evening, by the way?”

“No, I don’t, why?”

“Excellent. I have something I need to do right now, but I was wondering if you wanted to hang out after.”

“Yeah, I’d love that,” There’s zero hesitation in his quick response, and my heart sings.

“Cool. I’m not sure when exactly I’ll be done though.”

“No problem. I’ll be here whenever you’re ready.”

“Great. I’ll see you later then.” My mind racing with ideas, I head for the cottage, happiness in my heart for the first time in far too long.

By the time I let myself in, I have a rough idea of what I want to cook for dinner. I’ll figure the rest out as I work. I grab what I need and get started with putting dinner together. Setting a timer on my phone, I dash through the shower, wanting to look my best for tonight’s seduction.

All’s going well until I open my closet and eye the meager selection available to me. The best I can do is a pretty black T-shirt that does wonders for my figure and some black jeans to match. With no time to waste, I pull it out and go in search of underwear. At least in this department, I have an array to choose from thanks to Jeff’s penchant for sexy lingerie.

The thought makes me giggle that he spent an absolute fortune on buying these beauties for me, and now another man gets to enjoy them instead. I hurry into my clothes before shifting my focus to hair and makeup, taking my time to get the siren look I’m going for just right. I’m just about done blowing out my hair when the timer goes off for me to check on the food.

Done to perfection, I set the warmer function and, taking a bracing breath, I call Beckett to invite him over for dinner. My pulse hammers in my ears as I wait for him to answer.

“Hey.”

“Hi. So, um – I’m done with what I needed to do, and I was wondering if you’d like to join me for dinner to celebrate today’s victory.”

“That’s sounds great. What time did you have in mind?”

“Now, if you want.”

“Give me a few and I’ll be over.”

“Sure thing. See you then.”

Hanging up, I toss my phone on the counter and take some calming breaths to slow my pounding heart down. My plan’s in motion, and all I can do now is pray it doesn’t blow up in my face.

SCOOTER

I've barely stopped and engaged the parking brake when Kathleen's reaching for the door handle.

"Thanks a million for – well, everything. I have to dash, so I'll see you later, okay?" Surprisingly, she leans over and drops a quick kiss on my cheek, then hops out of the vehicle. Before she closes the door though, she leans back in and asks, "Do you have plans for this evening, by the way?"

"No, I don't," I reply.

"Excellent. I have something I need to do right now, but I was wondering if you wanted to hang out after."

I don't even need to think about my response. "Yeah, I'd love that."

Too damn right I want to. Woman, I'd do pretty much anything to spend time with you. I just don't know how to tell you. Yet. But I'll figure it out.

"Great. I'll see you later then." The smile she graces me with as she closes her door has my heart squeezing and my dick hardening. With just a look or a smile, this woman has me hard and ready to rock at a moment's notice. Problem is, it's a case of "all dressed up and nowhere to go."

One thing that's become abundantly clear during these last few days especially is that I want Kathleen and Luke in my life. I have no idea exactly how she feels about me, but the only way to find out is to take the bull by the horns, as the old cliché goes, and make a move. With all the crap with Gonzo behind us, I fully intend on making my play.

So I guess I'll find out, one way or the other.

I have a few hours to kill – time enough to give some thought to how I'm going to make that move. A quick shower while I wait sounds like a solid plan. The idea of washing the day's bullshit away appeals immensely.

I'm just done drying off when my cell phone rings. "Archer."

"Hey, Scooter. How's it going?" Knight asks.

"Hey Boss. It's all over – Tex pulled it off. Kathleen got the kid and Gonzo will likely get time for assault – he tried to attack Tex in the courtroom."

"Excellent news. The guys and I are just sorry we couldn't be there to support you both, but with this mission coming up, there's still some stuff we need to nail down."

"Sorry, I know this was really shitty timing. I'll report back in the morning."

"Bullshit. It's weekend anyways, so you may as well enjoy the day off. Monday is early enough. One extra day's not going to make any difference. And you know we understand your need to support Kathleen, since she's got no one else to do it."

"Still, I appreciate it."

"You know I'll always have your back, bud. So sole custody, huh?" Knight's laugh is rich and deep with amusement.

"Yeah. After Tex got through ripping his house of cards to shreds, the judge wanted to know if it was true. The dickhead got caught lying red handed, and he still tried to bullshit his way out of it. But she was having none of it.

"And wouldn't you know it, for once he was actually smart enough to tell the truth, to own up to his lies. I think she'd have locked him up for perjury if she could have. She was hopping mad."

"Man, I'm sorry I missed it. But I'm glad she got custody of the boy."

“Yeah, sole custody sure has a nice ring to it.”

“It’s awesome she got it. Definitely something to celebrate. Let’s make a plan to get together and do that over the weekend.”

“For sure. I’d like that, and I’m sure Kay will too.”

“Speaking of. What are you intending to do about ‘Kay’?”

“That, right there, is the million-dollar question.”

“As a friend – a brother if you will, rather than your team leader — I say this because I care about your happiness. Tell her how you feel. You’ve had feelings for her for years. If there’s ever going to be a time to speak up, now’s that time. *Tell her how you feel.*”

“Lay it all out for her and take your chances. We’re not getting any younger, so when we have a chance at love, I say we grab it with both hands. So, I repeat – tell her how you feel.”

Knight’s sentiments echo my own. Just a short while ago I was thinking exactly the same thing. Tonight’s the night.

“Yeah, you’re right. And I think tonight’s as good a time as any. In fact, she’s invited me to hang out this evening.”

“Sounds good. Let me know how it works out, yeah? And Scooter, you know I’m here for you anytime, right?”

“Yeah, I know. And I appreciate it. I hope you know that.”

“I do. Now go get your girl. I’ll chat with you soon.” Like always, the line goes dead, and he’s gone, leaving me to mull over our conversation while I finish getting done.

* * *

A BOTTLE of wine in one hand, I lift the other to ring Kathleen’s doorbell. Out of nowhere, a case of nerves like I’ve not experienced in a long time hits me square in the chest. What if she doesn’t feel the same as I do? Worse, what if she

says she's not interested in me like that, but wants to stay friends?

A sheen of sweat forms on my forehead, and I feel like I'm about to embark on my very first mission again. I drop my hand back to my side and just stand there, staring at the door. Out of nowhere, I hear Knight's voice in my head. "Deep breaths, you've got this. I know you can do this. You just need to believe you can." The very same words he said to me on that first mission, standing in front of another door as I prepared to breach it.

I reach up and wipe the sweat from my brow, take a bracing breath and, before I can change my mind, I jab the doorbell. I hear the gentle peal of the bell, and then moments later, the soft tread of Kathleen's footsteps.

She opens up, and my world tilts on its axis. Gorgeous. That's the only word that comes to mind right then.

I have no idea what the hell she's done to her eyes, but they're huge and smoky, and oh so seductive. My body reacts, before I've even taken in the rest of her. Headed south, my eyes take in the drapery T-shirt that manages to cover but accentuate at the same time, and the curve-hugging jeans. She's swapped her sneakers for flat, blingy sandals that show off her cute, painted toes.

Damn, this woman is fire.

"Hi, come on in," she invites, standing aside to make space for me to pass.

It takes me a minute to find my voice. Clearing my throat, and mind, I step inside. "Hey." I hand her the bottle. "I'm not sure what's for dinner – smells incredible, by the way – so I hope this will pair with it."

Kathleen checks the label, then nods. "Yep, it's perfect actually. Thanks." I see her look over at a clock. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Shall we eat? Or would you prefer to wait a while?"

I'm not sure what it is, but there's something in her voice that makes me study her just a little closer. I was so caught up

in how incredible she looks I completely missed how nervous she seems.

Curious as to why, I ask, “Everything all right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“No particular reason. Just checking in on you. It’s been a stressful few days, after all.”

“Isn’t that the truth. But yeah, I’m good.” Her words and vibe don’t jibe, but I decide to leave it for the moment.

“Okay, as long as you’re sure?” She nods while I study her for a minute longer. “Well, in that case, let’s eat. I’ll open the wine while you get everything set out.”

“Thanks,” she replies, turning toward the kitchen. I have to clench my fists to prevent myself from reaching for her as Kathleen leads the way, hips swaying seductively in those snug jeans.

“Where will I find a corkscrew?”

“Top drawer of the island.” She opens the oven door, and the most delicious smell wafts out. “I hope you’re hungry, ’cause I made plenty.”

Then she proceeds to lay all the food out on the island, and she wasn’t kidding. There’s easily enough food for four people, and all the dishes are personal favorites.

“Looks amazing, Kay. I have no idea how you pulled all this off in the short time we’ve been home, but I’m certainly not complaining.”

My stomach chooses this moment to grumble, lending credence to my words. Accepting the plate Kathleen holds out to me, I dish up a bit of everything. We tuck into our meal and the first mouthful has me moaning with delight.

“God, that’s incredible. I always enjoy your cooking, but damn, this is the bomb-dot-com. So good.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

We chat throughout dinner, enjoying the food and each other’s company, but as the evening progresses, Kathleen

seems to be getting more fidgety. I, on the other hand, just want to get on with telling her how I feel. I don't think there's ever going to be a perfect opportunity, so I figure now's as good a time as any. I consider for a moment what I want to say, then take the plunge.

“Kay, I –”

“Beckett, I've got something –”

As our words fall over each other, Kathleen gives a nervous laugh.

“Ladies first,” I say, tamping my own case of nerves down.

“No, it's okay. You go ahead.”

“No, really. It can wait. What did you want to say?” Kathleen bites her lip and rubs at the counter, like she's trying to remove a mark or stain. My heart drops to my well-fed stomach. “Kay – sweet pea – are you sure everything's all right?”

I see her chest expand as she takes a deep breath before she speaks. In a rush, her words tumble out, one over the other, challenging my brain to keep up.

“I've been wracking my mind trying to find a way to say this to you, but I don't think there's a good way that ensures the outcome I want, so I'm just going to rip the Band-Aid off and say it, and if you don't feel the same way then I'll figure it out, but I have to say something because saying nothing isn't working for me anymore –”

“Whoa, Kay, slow down. I can't keep up with you. What do you need to say to me?”

At first, it doesn't seem as if she's going to reply, or that she even heard a word I said. Kathleen's eyes focus on her feet as she scuffs one across the tiled floor. But then she simply puts my world on its head when she finally does answer me.

“For years I've harbored a secret I had no intention of ever sharing – mainly because I never imagined Jeff and I splitting up. But now that we have and I'm here, working for you, seeing you every day, being around you, and how nice you've

been to Luke and me, it's so hard not to say anything. And it may ruin things, but I can't keep quiet anymore."

"O – kay ..."

Kathleen massages the back of her neck, looking everywhere but at me. Then blurts, "I'm in love with you. I think I have been since the day we met, but I was with Jeff. And honestly, even if I hadn't been with him, I didn't think you'd ever be interested in someone like me.

"But I need you to know how I feel so that I can move on with my life if you don't feel the same. God, I can't believe I'm saying all of this, but I also can't not say it—"

The stream of words stops abruptly, her face a study in horror and something else I can't define – fear or doubt maybe? She claps a hand over her mouth, her gorgeous eyes saying a million things I don't understand.

Getting to my feet slowly so I don't startle her, I round the counter to where she's standing. I have every intention of telling her she's not alone in how she feels, but what happens instead is I reach for her, pulling her in close, my mouth taking hers in a kiss so hot I'm surprised it doesn't singe our eyebrows. It's only when my brain is screaming for oxygen that I finally break the kiss. As she stands there, eyes glazed, breathing fast like she's just done a full cardio workout, I cup her cheek and consider what I want to say.

"You are so beautiful, both inside and out. I think that now, just as I did that first day we met on the beach at the family day. On a beach crawling with people, you stood out like a glowing beacon for me. I couldn't take my eyes off you. But you were with Gonzo and, despite thinking he didn't deserve you, I would never have come between the two of you.

"The thing that has always stood out for me is how you treat others – the kindness and empathy you show people around you. Even absolute strangers. I remember how even Tommy, Abe and Alabama's son, responded to you. That boy didn't take easily to anyone in the beginning, yet he opened up when he was around you."

The look on Kathleen's face is priceless, and I'm not done yet. My hands drop lower on her cheeks to mold around her jaw, my thumbs brushing over the smooth skin. "In a nutshell, what I'm trying to say is, I love you too. I have from that very first time on the beach. And if you'd give me the chance, I'd like to spend the rest of my life showing you how much."

Kathleen doesn't respond right away. Standing still under her scrutiny, I give her time to process what I've just said. Warmth spreads through me as I watch hope bloom in her expressive eyes.

"You love me?"

"Yeah, sweet pea, I love you. More than I will ever be able to express."

I rock back on my heels as she throws herself into my arms. Closing them around her, I hold her tight against my heart. The heart that beats for her.

"I never dreamed you'd feel the same way. When you offered me this job, I didn't hesitate to take it. Yes, I needed the money, but it was the perfect excuse to be close to you. Not once did I think we'd end up here."

"I know exactly what you mean, because I didn't either. Yet here we are. I want to spend the rest of my life taking care of you and Luke. And on the subject of Luke, I'm putting it out there that when we reach that point, I'd like to adopt him and raise him as my own. I know we'd have to get Gonzo's permission for it to happen, but that's a topic for another day's discussion – I just want to be open and transparent with you."

"Knowing him, he'll probably try and block you at every turn."

"I have resources but, like I said, that's for another day. I just wanted you to know how I feel."

Tears tremble on Kathleen's eyelashes. One tiny droplet rolls over and slides down her face. Swiping it away with my thumb, I lean down and rest my lips on hers. I savor the taste of her as I trace the plump, pillowy softness. On a soft sigh,

she opens up to me, and I sink into a kiss that's both a surrender and a commitment to each other.

“From a young age, life taught me not to rely on others. That was a path to disappointment and unhappiness. Words are worthless – you can make all the promises in the world, but unless you come through on them, they're meaningless.

“But you – thinking back on all that's happened since things with Jeff went sour, you've not made a single promise. You've just quietly gotten on with showing me you care. It's only now I realize that's what you were doing all along, and I love you all the more for it.

“And for the record, if we can make it happen, I would be honored for you to adopt Luke. You'll be a terrific dad and he'd be blessed to have you.”

Standing in the middle of Kathleen's kitchen, my arms securely wrapped around her, I feel my soul settle, as if this is the single moment I've waited for my entire adult life to this point. There's no way of knowing what the future holds for us, but the one thing I *do* know for certain is that I will spend the rest of my time on this earth showing her how much I love her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author Dorothy Ewels lives in the city of her birth, Cape Town, South Africa, with her husband, son, two crazy rescue dogs and a cat with plenty of cattitude. A lifelong love affair with reading got her writing at a young age, but it wasn't until she was retrenched in 2017 that she finally found the courage to write her first book, leading to its publication in 2018. She's addicted to coffee, books and finding humor in life, not to mention happy endings against all odds. As well as being a proud and active member of the Romance Writer's Organization of South Africa (ROSA), Dorothy is also thrilled to be a contributing author in Samantha A. Cole's Suspenseful Seduction World, Vi Keeland and Penelope Ward's Cockey Hero Club and Susan Stoker's Special Forces.

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Also By The Author

Operation Checkmate

[Knight's Queen](#)

[Lucky in Love](#)

[Baring All](#)

[Dutch's Defense](#)

[Scooter's Endgame](#)

Unchained Duet

[Trusting Laurence](#)

[Liberating Mia](#)

Stand-Alone

[Sassy Surrogate](#)

[Love At Last](#)

[Burn For Me](#)

[Destined](#)

[A Cowboy For Christmas](#)

[My Girl](#)

[Meet Me Halfway](#)

[Cooper's Salvation](#)

[Loving Leila](#)

WHERE TO FIND THE AUTHOR

[Website](#)

[Newsletter Signup](#)

[Email](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Facebook Readers Group](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Bookbub](#)

There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

You can also visit our Amazon page at:

<http://www.amazon.com/author/operationalpha>

Special Forces: Operation Alpha World

Christie Adams: [Charity's Heart](#)

Linzi Baxter: [Dangerous Rescue](#)

Misha Blake: [Flash](#)

Anna Blakely: [Rescuing Gracelynn](#)

Julia Bright: [Saving Lorelei](#)

Cara Carnes: [Protecting Mari](#)

Kendra Mei Chailyn: [Beast](#)

Melissa Kay Clarke: [Rescuing Annabeth](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Samantha A. Cole: [Handling Haven](#)

KaLyn Cooper: [Spring Unveiled](#)

Janie Crouch: [Storm](#)

Jordan Dane: [Redemption for Avery](#)

Tarina Deaton: [Found in the Lost](#)

D.M. Earl: [Claire's Guardian](#)

Riley Edwards: [Protecting Olivia](#)

Dorothy Ewels: [Knight's Queen](#)

Lila Ferrari: [Protecting Joy](#)

Nicole Flockton: [Protecting Maria](#)

Hope Ford: [Rescuing Karina](#)

Amy Gamet: [Guarded by the SEAL](#)

Desiree Holt: [Protecting Maddie](#)

Danielle Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Jesse Jacobson: Protecting Honor
Rayne Lewis: Justice for Mary
Ireland Lorelei: The Detective
Kristin Lynn: Worth the Risk
Callie Love & Ann Omasta: Hawaii Hottie
JM Madden: Rescuing Olivia
A.M. Mahler: Griffin
Ellie Masters: Sybil's Protector
Trish McCallan: Hero Under Fire
Naomi McKay: Twist
Rachel McNeely: The SEAL's Surprise Baby
KD Michaels: Saving Laura
Olivia Michaels: Protecting Harper
Annie Miller: Securing Willow
MJ Nightingale: Protecting Beauty
C.K. O'Connor: Delaney's Bodyguard
Melinda Owens: Betraying Katie
Victoria Paige: Reclaiming Izabel
Danielle Pays: Defending Sarina
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
Lainey Reese: Protecting New York
KeKe Renée: Protecting Bria
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: Extracting Mateo
Ariana Rose: Chasing Paige
Deanna L. Rowley: Saving Veronica
Angela Rush: Charlotte
Rose Smith: Saving Satin

Tyler Anne Snell: Cowboy Heat

Lynne St. James: SEAL's Spitfire

E.M. Shue: Discovering Tyler

Bella Stone: Rexar

Jen Talty: Burning Desire

Reina Torres, Rescuing Hi'ilani

LJ Vickery: Circus Comes to Town

R. C. Wynne: Shadows Renewed

Delta Team Three Series

Lori Ryan: Nori's Delta

Becca Jameson: Destiny's Delta

Lynne St James, Gwen's Delta

Elle James: Ivy's Delta

Riley Edwards: Hope's Delta

Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World

Freya Barker: Burning for Autumn

B.P. Beth: Scott

Jane Blythe: Salvaging Marigold

Julia Bright, Justice for Amber

Gia Cobie: Saved from Revenge

Hadley Finn: Exton

Emily Gray: Shelter for Allegra

Danielle M. Haas: Crossroads of Betrayal

Deandra Hall: Shelter for Sharla

Jenna Harte: Dead But Not Forgotten

Amber Kuhlman: Protecting Paisley

Reina Torres: Justice for Sloane

Aubree Valentine, Justice for Danielle

Maddie Wade: Finding English

Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, Fighting for Elena

Deandra Hall, Fighting for Carly.

Haven Rose, Fighting for Calliope

MJ Nightingale, Fighting for Jemma

TL Reeve, Fighting for Brittney.

Nicole Flockton, Fighting for Nadia

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

Finding Monica

Finding Carly

Finding Ashlyn

Finding Jodelle

Eagle Point Search & Rescue

Searching for Lilly

Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley (Oct 2023)

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora (Nov 2023)

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (TBA)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley

Shielding Devyn

Shielding Ember

Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

Securing Caite (FREE!)

Securing Brenae (novella)

Securing Sidney

Securing Piper

Securing Zoey

Securing Avery

Securing Kalee

Securing Jane

Delta Force Heroes Series

Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)

Rescuing Aimee (novella)

Rescuing Emily

Rescuing Harley

Marrying Emily (novella)

Rescuing Kassie

Rescuing Bryn

Rescuing Casey

Rescuing Sadie (novella)

Rescuing Wendy

Rescuing Mary

Rescuing Macie (novella)

Rescuing Annie

Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series

Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)

Justice for Mickie

Justice for Corrie

Justice for Laine (novella)

Shelter for Elizabeth

Justice for Boone

Shelter for Adeline

Shelter for Sophie

Justice for Erin

Justice for Milena

Shelter for Blythe

Justice for Hope

Shelter for Quinn

Shelter for Koren

Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

Protecting Caroline (FREE!)

Protecting Alabama

Protecting Fiona

Marrying Caroline (novella)

Protecting Summer

Protecting Cheyenne

Protecting Jessyka

Protecting Julie (novella)

Protecting Melody

Protecting the Future

Protecting Kiera (novella)

Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)

Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

www.stokeraces.com

www.AcesPress.com

susan@stokeraces.com