



SHARP EDGE

SECURITY OPERATIONS GROUP BRAVO 

KAT BAMMER

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KILO BRAVO SIERRA PRESS

*To you,
if you haven't found him yet, your hero is still out there!*

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1

FELICIA



This was a bad idea; I could feel it in my bones. I looked at the Three Oaks Diner through the windshield of my parked car, then down at my wringing hands in my lap. I was shaking inside. Shaking and ready to bolt.

I could still leave. He didn't know I was here, or even planning on telling him it was over.

I could run. Take Bobby, pack our things, and run.

I groaned. I couldn't do that. This was our home. Family, my shop, everything was here in Three Oaks.

I couldn't end this without putting myself in jeopardy.

At least we were in a public place. He'd never hit me in public. Manhandling...sure, but he'd never actually completely lost control in public before—not like he did at home.

Not like he'd done yesterday.

I carefully touched my left side, and the sharp pain robbed me of my breath. My ribs were probably broken; at least, the bruises had looked nasty when I'd stared at my beaten-up body for half an hour before leaving the house.

Trying to breathe as shallowly as possible, just to avoid the pain.

I needed to get them checked out afterwards.

Afterwards.

After I told him it was over.

I looked back at the three bags that hid Bobby's booster seat under them. Roy's clothes and every single item that belonged to him.

This was it.

A clear cut.

Go in there, tell him it was over, give him his stuff, and be done.

I turned back around, inhaled.

My eyes fell on the glove compartment. I opened it, grabbed the familiar little pearlescent box, and swiped my thumb over the fading black letters—the remains of the name of the hotel that I had smoothed out over the years.

Holding it in my hands soothed me, but once I opened it and inhaled the clean scent of the soap inside, it catapulted me back.

Back to that night.

Back to him.

Back to when my life as an adult really began and the choices I made changed the trajectory of my whole life.

But I didn't regret them.

Not for a second.

*Seven Years Earlier*

This had been a terrible idea from the start. I mean, come on... helping your little sister and her two best friends get into a nightclub was bad. Illegal and plain stupid. But then why did I do it? I watched over at the dance floor where Gracie and Owen were having fun dancing. George was hovering right next to me, his eyes never leaving Gracie and his brother.

All evening, they'd been dancing, goofing around like they did always and everywhere. Their friendship, their bond was so absolute. How could I not feel like the odd one out, like something vital was missing from my life? Even among friends who loved and accepted me unconditionally.

I had my sisters, but I longed for so much more. Longed to just feel like I belonged to someone. Someone who loved and accepted me for exactly the person I was. I wanted just for once to not feel so damn insecure, so broken, so alone.

My eyes met those of the stranger by the bar like they'd done a million times throughout the evening, and a shot of awareness zapped through my body. He looked older, at least going on thirty, and weary. But boy, was he the sexiest guy I'd ever laid my eyes on. Dark brown hair, intense eyes, square jaw, and a body to die for.

He'd been nursing his golden-brown drink all evening. And I had felt his eyes on me more than once.

I should've just walked over to him, said hello. Acted courageous for once in my life.

"Hey, we're done. You ready to go home?" Owen said.

His eyes still held me captive. I didn't get a predatory vibe from him—just silent interest—or maybe it was the same perplexing pull that drew me to him.

"Feli?" Gracie said.

I broke eye contact, and a harebrained idea formed in my mind. I would take a risk—would stay back and talk to the man. I would come out of my shell and for once, do something daring.

Just because I could.

And because I wanted to.

I looked at my little sister, then at George. "I'm staying. Can you make sure Grace gets home okay?"

He nodded but scrunched his eyebrows together, showing concern for me.

George seemed so much more mature than your typical sixteen-year-old, worlds apart from his brother who was the happier, more irresponsible one of the two of them. "What about you?" he said.

"A couple of friends are due to arrive any minute. I'll stay and hang out with them for a while, but you don't have to wait. They'll be here any second." A little white lie. Now, I've started lying? What the hell?

"We can wait."

Busted.

I leaned my head to the side, feigning annoyance when I was internally shaking.

But I was two years older than George, and I sure didn't need his company or supervision. "I'm fine. Get Gracie and

yourselves home safely, will you?”

He looked like he wanted to argue. But when I put my hands on my hips and cocked my head, he raised both hands.

And I continued to ignore the little voice in my head whispering, “You’re out of your damn mind.”

Staying back in a club just to maybe start a conversation with a stranger was the situation that started every good horror movie ever, and staying back alone was the move that got said actress killed in Act One.

That and walking into the woods.

I would never walk into the woods.

I fingered my pepper spray in my purse.

I wouldn’t do anything stupid, like leave the club with him, so there was really no reason to feel scared.

“Okay,” George finally said, and the three of them said their goodbyes.

I watched them exit the club. Then turned and made my way to the bar and the guy.

My chest tightened.

This was stupid and dangerous. I wobbled, then came to a standstill. I should leave, as well. I turned, but, for whatever reason, I looked back, and his eyes clashed with mine.

Curiosity and bemusement made them appear almost neon.

Play it cool, Feli, you can do it. Just say hello—see if his personality matches his good looks.

Just a conversation, a harmless flirt.

That thought almost tripped me up as if I knew how to flirt.

But I marched on.

“Hey.” I didn’t pretend, didn’t play shy or anything, just settled next to him and ordered a club soda. I looked older than nineteen.

I knew I did.

Even though my black, dyed hair didn't make my freckles go away, the heavy layer of makeup I'd donned today did.

"Hey," he said, then looked down at his drink. His voice was deep and caused shivers to run down my back.

Just as I expected—matching his entire persona of dark and handsome and intriguing.

"You shouldn't talk to strangers in clubs," he said with gravel in his voice.

Another shiver went down my back and settled directly in my core like a quivering ball of energy.

I raised one eyebrow, feigning indignation when secretly I felt pegged. "If I shouldn't talk to strangers, you shouldn't have stared at me the whole evening."

He spun the glass in front of him but kept staring. Then he sighed, nodded. "You're right. I shouldn't have stared at you."

I nodded. "Then why did you?"

He chuckled, his eyes turning dark, almost black, matching his dark voice. "None of your business, little girl."

My stomach squeezed. Being called little girl...by him made me feel sexy and cared for at the same time. As if he was taking charge and I could relax and follow his lead. Completely irrational, but at the same time pure heaven. I took a deep breath.

Then he shook his head. "Damn. Shouldn't have said that."

It was a cop-out, but I let it slide. "What are you doing here?"

He gave me a sideways look. "You asking why?"

I smiled. "Because you don't seem like the type who's hanging around in bars a lot."

I didn't hang around bars either, but he didn't need to know that. He looked more like the type who was hanging around a fitness studio, maybe even doing some dangerous

shit. So maybe chatting him up wasn't such a good idea after all.

He nodded. "I have a hard time sleeping."

I stared at him. I hadn't expected him to show vulnerability or give me a real reason.

I suddenly felt much safer, even a bit daring. He needed a cheer-me-up. "So, you're trying to drink yourself to sleep instead?" I raised one eyebrow.

Wow, I was being sassy. I'd never been sassy before. Or anything other than a good girl. But boy, did it feel good. Empowering.

Today, I wasn't good, reliable Felicia. Tonight, I was someone else. Someone bold, feminine.

I could pretend to be a femme fatale for one night and see how it felt. See if I liked that.

"Something like that." He didn't try to hit on me. Didn't give me any creepy vibes of being overly interested. But it felt risky just talking to him.

He took a sip, then our gazes locked again. "Why did your boyfriend leave without you?"

"Boyfriend?" I asked and frowned. What boyfriend?

"The guy who's been standing right next to you, watching the other couple dancing?"

I shook my head, then chuckled. "You mean George. He's not my boyfriend." I snapped my mouth shut. No details. He was still a stranger, so I should avoid talking about my sister and her friends.

At close range, he looked even older, probably in his late thirties. Men like him were definitely not interested in childish stuff like that.

And a femme fatale wouldn't blabber on about inconsequential stuff, right? Right.

Time to turn the light back on him.

“What has you in a brooding mood and not sleeping?” I asked. Getting the attention off of me and onto him would be a good strategy to remain mysterious. At least, I hoped that was how it worked.

“Just life stuff. How old are you?” he asked instead. If that was how it was going—if he was answering every question with three words and a counter-question—this flirting plan would go up in flames.

“Old enough. Why were you staring at me?” At least he’d already admitted he’d done it. So that was out in the open.

“Because you’re beautiful. And interesting. And I can’t seem to look away...” He petered off.

Was that the alcohol speaking? Because I was neither beautiful nor interesting. I shrugged my shoulder. What would a femme fatale say to that?

I laughed, and it came out deliciously raspy. “Thank you,” I said, even though I cringed inside. “You’re interesting and beautiful, as well.”

That earned me another slowly raised brow, which was insanely sexy and had my knees shaking.

Then he turned in his chair and caged my knees between his.

Wow.

I tried a smile—which came out really, really awkward. Why couldn’t I be naturally charming, or sophisticated, or at least self-confident?

“Are you really doing this?” he asked, then captured my hand into his much bigger one.

This? What exactly did he mean by this? My heart raced while I tried to be super cool by raising one brow. “This?”

“This.” He drew a circle with his thumb on the back of my hand.

Delicious sparks shot through my stomach. “This, in the sense of...” I needed him to say it—whatever he meant this

was.

He chuckled. “Are you hitting on me?”

I exhaled, smiled. At least he got the message. Maybe my flirting game didn’t suck as bad as I’d expected. “Yes, are you hitting on me?”

He thought about that question a little too long, and the delicious sparks turned into nervous flutters.

“I think I am. Though I’ve had a lot to drink, so maybe that’s not the best decision I’ve ever made.”

I sighed. Fair enough. I’d never had a single boy, or man fall head over heels for me...or at all. So why would he be different? I pulled my hand back, but his grip tightened.

“But on second thoughts. Yes, let’s do this.”

“This?”

“Just tonight. No names. No attachment. You game?”

I sucked in air. Holy moly. How did we get from flirting and finding each other attractive to one-night stand in five seconds flat?

Danger, danger, danger.

“I don’t know you enough to commit for the night.”

He nodded. “Wise decision. Good to know you’re not reckless.”

Reckless? I snorted. I was the opposite of reckless. I was the queen of reliability and caution. Something I hated about myself. “What tells me you’re not a serial killer hanging out in bars, picking his next victim?”

He chuckled. I liked how he raised one corner of his mouth slightly higher than the other. That lopsided grin made him look younger and more approachable. “Well, asking me that outright, I wouldn’t be a very good serial killer, if I told you, now, would I?” His eyes never left mine, and he never stopped with the lazy circles caressing my hand.

“You need a neutral third party to vet me.”

I nodded. What a pity that we didn't have a neutral third party.

“Hey, barkeep.” He let go of my hand, whipped around, and signaled the barkeeper, who approached immediately. “Would you check her ID?”

I snapped back to him and our eyes locked. “My ID?”

He gave me a lopsided grin that made my knees weak. “Humor me.” Then he gave me a small nod to go ahead.

Fuck me.

If he looked at me like that, he could probably tell me to strip naked and I would do it. I pulled my ID out of my pocket and handed it to the barkeeper.

I looked around, avoiding watching. The club was already emptying, so there wasn't a lot for the barkeeper to do. How late was it? How long had I been here and talked to him because it sure felt like only a couple of minutes had passed?

“I can vouch for him,” the barkeeper said and handed back my ID.

Wait. What? My head snapped back to the man next to me, who took his wallet back from the barkeeper. I'd completely spaced out. And missed the entire transaction. “Excuse me, what?”

“I can vouch for him. I think you're reasonably safe with him. I can jot down his details if you want me to?” the barkeeper said.

Okay, now this I didn't see coming. What was in his wallet that made him so sure of my safety? Was he a cop or something?

“You look alarmed.” He put his wallet away, and the bartender moved away.

“Because I am.” Also, did the barkeeper tell him my age and my name?

“I understand. Why don't we just stay here and talk?”

I nodded, relieved. I wasn't ready for anything more, and he didn't seem to mind.

"I like your company."

This made me smile.

"What are you doing...outside of hanging out in bars, talking to strangers?" he asked.

"College. What are you doing...when you're not drinking instead of sleeping?"

He sighed. Then ran his fingers through his hair.

Deliciously dark and stubborn hair. But it was like a dark cloud settled on him. Not that anything outwardly changed. It was just his sigh and the slight slump in his posture.

Something bad had happened. I could just feel it.

"There's some shit that happened, and I've been working too much. Trying to keep myself occupied."

"So, you don't have a drinking problem?"

He raised his brow. "Are you always this direct?"

I nodded. I was today. "So, you're not answering that question?"

"I'm not a functioning alcoholic if that's what you're implying." He sounded put off.

I exhaled. I was being rude. But then again, if there was only tonight—which we'd already established there was—beating around the bush would be a colossal waste of time.

And if I never saw him again, which was a pretty reasonable assumption, would I regret not having had a one-night stand with him?

Would I regret being a coward but definitely safe?

Probably.

The bartender had vouched for him.

If I didn't take a risk, I would never find out what could be.

And nothing in his behavior screamed pervert or serial killer.

Maybe, just this once, I could be brave and trust this man.

“Let’s go.”

He looked surprised and a bit miffed. Then he looked at his watch. “You’re right. It’s late, and you probably have an early morning. It was nice talking to you.”

Did he misunderstand on purpose? Or wasn’t I clear in my choice of words? “Nope, I mean, you and me, let’s go... together.” My muscles quivered, and my stomach did a somersault.

He stared at me—long enough that my insecurities skyrocketed and heat crawled up my neck. “Are you sure?”

I nodded with a conviction I didn’t really feel.

Nope.

Not sure at all.

But I probably would regret it more if I didn’t do it.

And I’d already decided I wouldn’t behave like I usually did.

This was an experiment.

This was me being...not me.

His gaze was intense, and the way he scrutinized me was making my belly flop and my breath turn into a pant.

Then he nodded once as if he’d come to a conclusion.

He reached out and pulled me in between his legs.

Damn. I’d never been this close to a man’s...

“Your eyes are mesmerizing,” he murmured.

I cocked my head. My eyes were...nothing special, just a dull green. Not the pretty blue eyes my sisters had. Or his. Green and gray, but with a tint of brown. A bit different every time I looked into them. Cat eyes.

“Yours aren’t so bad either.”

He smiled, and the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkled—details I could only see because we were just inches apart, me standing between his muscular legs, and his hands spanning my waist, flooding me with heat.

The flutters in my belly came back with full force.

This was it. He would kiss me.

Oh my.

I closed my eyes, but instead of the kiss I'd expected, I heard his stool scratch against the floor.

“Let’s dance.”

I cracked my eyes open, heat flooding my cheeks. Hell.

I'd acted like some idiot naive bimbo in a rom-com.

But he just smiled and led me to the dance floor.

They played a slow song, and he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me against him. My chin landed somewhere at the level of his chest. Should've known he would be tall.

But he was huge, standing next to me.

I wrapped my arms around his waist as well, and together, we swayed to the music.

“So, you’re a dancer?” I asked and looked up.

He stared down at me, his gaze locked with mine. I could lose myself in that gaze if I wasn't careful. He gave me that lopsided smile again, and my insides squeezed. “Not usually.”

Then he wove his fingers into my hair, pushed my head back against his chest, leaned down, and whispered, “But for you, I’m making an exception.”

We danced in silence. He had a good sense of rhythm, and his movements were smooth and certain. Dominant.

I felt irresistibly safe in his arms.

I lost myself in the music, his powerful arms, and his scent wrapped me into a cocoon.

And when the song ended, I didn't want to stop.

Luckily, they played another slow one, and we just kept on swaying.

His hands roamed over my back but never dipped too low.

He was honoring my personal space, well not so much personal space, as personal areas, which made him almost too good to be true...or maybe too slow because I was clearly ready to take it to the next level...aka make out, like a horny teenager.

Oh my. I hid my face against his chest and could feel his fingers run through my hair.

“What is it?” he asked.

I looked up. “Nothing.”

He smiled. “Don't bullshit me. You tensed up, why?”

I shook my head. “It's nothing, just a silly thought.”

He cradled my face and looked me in the eye as if the two of us were the only people in the room. “There are no silly thoughts. I need to know if I'm going too fast, or if you need space. I don't know you well enough to read you.”

To read me? WTF? What was he? Some kind of superhero? Was that why the barkeeper said he was okay? Because it said Superhero, right there on his driver's license? “Okay. But I wasn't thinking about you going too fast...more like the opposite.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled again. “Too slow, then?”

I nodded.

“I can definitely remedy that.”

He leaned down, and when his lips touched mine, my eyes fell closed. There was no urgency, no pressure in his kiss. Just a quiet meeting of our lips. Approaching, testing, feeling.

Too little.

Deliciously too little.

I shifted my weight to the balls of my feet and increased the pressure. I didn't want sweet. Not from him.

I wanted...I wanted...

He pulled me tightly against his body and nipped at my lower lip.

More force, more dominance, and my core turned liquid.

I opened my lips, and he plunged in, like a wave of deliciousness, stroking his tongue against mine, demanding my reactions and participation.

Oh, I would give him participation.

I didn't know how long we kissed, but what started out sweet turned into a battle of our tongues. Somehow, the more we kissed, the more empowered I felt.

And the more we kissed, the more certain I became of how I wanted this night to end.

Him and me.

A bed.

Hot sex and absolutely no thinking about tomorrow.

Lucky me, he was all in on that plan.

He pulled me off the dance floor and paid his bill and for my drink. Then he took my hand in his, and we were out of there in minutes.

Once outside, he pulled me against him again, and we kissed some more. I rubbed against him like a cat in heat. Didn't care if anyone watched, either.

"We need a room," he said and kissed me once more, took my hand in his, and walked on.

He obviously knew the area because he steered us right around the corner to the entrance of a small but chic boutique hotel.

I hesitated. This was for real. Was I bold enough to have a one-night stand? Was I bold enough to go into a hotel with a complete stranger?

Apparently, I was because he led me right into the lobby, sat me down on one of the comfy chairs, kissed me once, and told me to wait for him. Then he marched to the front desk to get a room.

Holy shit.

My eyes went from him to the entrance. I could just leave. Now would be the perfect time. I was reasonably certain he didn't know my name. Would never find out.

Well? Not so much femme fatale now.

My belly quivered with indecision and anxiety. It was now or never.

Then he was by my side again.

He squatted down in front of me and searched and found my eyes with his. "Do you still want to do this?"

I nodded.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You can leave anytime. You know this, right?"

I nodded again.

"And nothing has to happen. We could just cuddle, get some rest..."

I laid my hand on his cheek, his five-o'clock shadow scruffy against my skin. "As far as I can tell, you're a good man. I trust you, okay?"

He nodded, kissed me on my nose, which made me feel truly adored, then helped me up.

Together, we went to the elevator.

This was an adventure, unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

I would enjoy every minute of it.

And treasure this memory for the rest of my life.

3

FELICIA



Present Day

I closed the box with a snap. Put it back into its hiding place and straightened my spine.

Enough.

I got out of the car into the sweltering heat, crossed the parking lot, and stepped into the Three Oaks Diner. I was shaking inside, but there was a drive within me that pushed me forward, dragged me forward.

This was it.

I couldn't live like I did these last couple of years anymore. I scoffed. Lived was too strong a word. I'd hibernated. Barely survived. Stepped on eggshells around Roy even though it didn't help, anyway.

No matter what I did, no matter how I did things—he always found some fault in it.

He found a way, a reason to punish me, to abuse me. And I took it. Like a good little girl.

A coward.

Anything to protect Bobby. That's what I told myself. But I didn't protect him. Protecting him would've meant to stand up to Roy when he first gaslighted me. Protecting my sweet

little boy would've meant to show him you need to be strong and protect yourself and your child.

Instead, I watched my friendships slip away, saw my sister's concern grow, but whenever they voiced their unease, I went back into my shell.

Enough.

I let my eyes scan the crowd. It was just after lunchtime, so many of the tables were empty. But I knew I'd find him here. That's where he always started his nightly drinking session. Not that this was where he started his drinking. I'd watched him time and time again, filling his thermos for work with vodka.

He drank all day. Sometimes until he passed out—those were the good days.

On the bad days, he came home before that.

Those were the days I feared the most. Those were the days when I cried myself to sleep.

And recently, those bad days far outweighed the good ones.

I caught a glimpse of him at one of the tables.

His back to me.

He hadn't seen me coming in. I could just leave. He would never know I was even there.

I steeled my spine. That was not why I was here.

I marched towards his table, straightening my spine and clenching my hands into fists until my nails bit into my palms.

The pain soothed me.

Anything to give me an edge.

I stopped at his table.

Watched him gulp down a beer. Probably not his first one.

"Roy, we're over. I'm leaving," I said, hastening the words before I lost my courage.

He stopped drinking, put his glass down, and stared at me. It was like the words took a while to sink in. Then he jack-knifed out of the booth—faster than I'd anticipated—grabbed my wrist and dragged me with him outside.

Shit.

I stumbled behind him when a sharp pain shot through my body.

He nearly pulled my arm out of its socket.

Fudge.

There went my plan. I thought confronting him in daylight, at the diner, with people around would give me some sense of protection.

I should've thought this through.

He pulled me to his truck and threw me against it.

I cried out when my shoulder crashed against the metal, and my ribs radiated in pain.

“Get in,” he snarled.

His first words. Barely slurred. But oozing with malice.

I was dead.

If I got into his truck, I was as good as dead.

“No.”

“Felicia.” He scowled at me. His brows lowered until they met above his nose. He'd been a good-looking guy in college. Had been there on a football scholarship. Academics wasn't his forte; that's why he begged me to learn with him.

Until I got pregnant.

When he stumbled into my shop a couple of years later to get a gift for his mother, he'd changed already. I just was too blind to see how partying had taken over his life—to the point of him dropping out of college.

We'd kept in contact after that. He'd seemed genuinely interested in me, and after he'd asked me out on a date, it became this whirlwind romance.

Every girl's dream.

I'd never been courted before. I felt flattered and in love, and he even seemed to like Bobby.

The shift was gradual.

He'd worked construction at the time, though he hopped from job to job, and whenever he was without a job, things got worse, until they were bad all the time.

Until it slowly turned into a nightmare.

For the longest time, I thought he was still the nice guy I got to know in college.

Boy, was I wrong.

"It's over, Roy."

He acted so fast; I didn't even see it coming. A menacing mask settled into place, his eyes blazing and almost black when he grabbed me by my throat and pushed me against his truck.

My head banged against the metal, and I cried out. It hurt. But what scared me the most was the pure evil I saw in his eyes.

He would not let me go.

He would rather kill me than let me go.

"We will go home, and you will apologize for this scene," he drawled through clenched teeth.

His breath hit me. Hot and humid.

He increased the pressure.

I gasped and stared at him.

Dark spots clouded my vision.

"Roy." I croaked and dug into his wrist. I fought to loosen his hand around my neck, battled for a little bit of air.

Scratched and clawed.

Weak, so weak.

I turned my head sideways in a futile attempt to gain an inch.

My eyes met a girl staring at me, and I stared back until I lost my ability to focus.

One last effort.

I brought up my knee, the effort almost too much. Hit him...but to no effect.

Then suddenly, there was a cry—was it me? I couldn't say.

Then another face appeared next to Roy's. Was I hallucinating? Double vision? Was this what dying did to you?

I could feel myself being dragged down deeper into the blackness. The spots grew bigger and bigger...

...Until he was suddenly gone.

I dragged a breath in, then another. It hurt. Everything hurt. But at least I could breathe again.

Someone grabbed my upper arms, held me up, but I was too focused on breathing rather than looking at him. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. Didn't know if I could utter a peep. But he let go of me.

I glided down against the truck and sat there in the gravel, trying to get my bearings. Tuning out the noise and commotion all around me.

Suddenly, someone squatted down in front of me. "Hey there, are you okay?"

I raised my eyes from my hands—where I'd been staring—to the person in front of me.

Male. Sheriff's uniform. Richard Travers, Edith's Ricky—my soon-to-be brother-in-law.

I exhaled when I recognized his face.

He inhaled sharply. "Hey, Feli." His voice was unbelievably soft. He raised my chin with his finger and stared at my throat. "Are you okay? The ambulance is on the way."

Was I okay? I didn't know. I shrugged. I felt dull.

Dull and empty.

And then the tears came.



I looked through the windshield at the dark warehouse, then at my watch.

I was an hour early.

Preparation was everything, and I sure as hell didn't trust FBI Agent Trent Gallagher enough not to be there early.

Whether he was FBI or not, I didn't trust him.

Right now, with everything that was going on in Whitebrook and Three Oaks, everything and everyone was under suspicion.

And the blatant absence of the FBI regarding our joint operations between the DEA, the sheriff's office, and our unlikely partners from the Security Operations Group, Bravo, had all my spidey senses tingling.

Why hadn't they taken over by now, stomped in, and steamrolled everyone like a horde of elephants—the way they usually operated?

Why was Sheriff Travers—as good a man as he was—still running the show?

With a case of the magnitude we were suspecting, the FBI should be all over it.

I looked around again, then sensed movement behind my car.

In the twilight—and with whoever was approaching my vehicle expertly hiding in the shadow of the warehouse—I couldn't make out a face.

My pulse sped up, and my hand moved to my gun before I intentionally relaxed.

My hand went to the scrunchy I always kept in my pocket instead.

I'd carried it with me for the past seven years.

It was worn by now, faded, and the elasticity was gone. But it had the magic ability to calm me.

Just like the young woman who'd owned it—a mystery woman—who saved me as I was drowning. Who—in one shared night—had calmed my inner pain and infused me with a renewed will to live, and a new purpose—finding her again.

Letting go of the scrunchy would mean letting go of the hope of ever finding her again.

And I couldn't do that.

Not yet.

But this was not the time to go down memory lane.

I needed to focus.

I tracked the movement through my rearview mirror.

This was not a stakeout.

This was a friendly meeting.

A meeting I instigated.

A meeting my contact at the FBI reluctantly agreed to under one condition.

I come alone.

Strange as it may sound, but I'd gotten used to doing everything with my new partner, George. I felt a strange kind of kinship with him, almost big-brotherly feelings, right from the start.

Maybe because he was fellow army. Though, unlike me—who served as a Ranger—he was a pilot—one of the guys who brought us where we needed to be and hopefully came to our rescue when the shit hit the fan.

Before he transitioned from the military to the DEA.

Now he was the new guy. Shoved into an impossible situation of investigating a cartel undercover—while pretending it was his life.

Sometimes, just one decision—dating the wrong girl—could send your life into a roller-coaster ride.

But having your real life and undercover work blend like it did for him?

I couldn't even imagine the level of complicated George was currently dealing with.

The level of complicated and dangerous we were battling together.

His role was more bait than anything else right now. And he was feeling the pressure.

And all I could do was sit on the sidelines and be his handler, backup, and partner.

Fuck.

If past experience taught me anything, it was—how undercover work could destroy your life completely.

I watched the person—hopefully Gallagher—come closer, my body tightening involuntarily while I waited.

And waited.

Damn.

Waiting was a major part of our work. I'd spent a lot of time waiting. And I'd lost my family over it. My precious little baby.

I shook my head. I'm not thinking about this now. I'd become damn good not thinking about it. Damn good at

putting my memories, my grief into a mental drawer, which I only opened sometimes and only a little.

Seven years, and it was still painful.

Nina and Carolina had been my responsibility, mine to protect.

And I failed. Too focused on my new job. Too obsessed with it to see Nina was deteriorating. Until she took her life and took Carolina with her.

That's what you got if you compartmentalized your life and were in too deep on only one of these compartments.

The walls you build to protect turn into craters too deep and wide to bridge.

My eyes traced the approaching person's every movement.

When he reached the car, I drew my service weapon and held it loosely in my lap.

I was pretty sure it was Gallagher, but I verified his identity once he arrived at the passenger-side window.

I unlocked the doors, and he slipped inside.

"Mulberry."

"Gallagher."

We sat there silently, scrutinizing each other while keeping half of our attention on the outside.

Everything seemed calm.

"You're early," Gallagher said, and I nodded.

Of course, we both were.

"What can you tell me about the Sormiza Cartel?" I asked. I could beat around the bush. And we could waste time by dancing around, finding out what the other knew, without giving away too much, but I wasn't interested in that. At all.

We weren't officially collaborating when we should be. And I wanted to know why.

“You asking for yourself or a friend?” Gallagher said, which told me everything I needed to know.

He knew about our joint operation. The FBI’s absence had been intentional—which could only mean two things.

One, they were working an angle.

Two, they didn’t trust the players involved.

So, who weren’t they trusting? The DEA, the Sheriff’s Department, or the SOG guys.

“You met Carter Plesak?”

Gallagher looked at me with a grin. “Midas? Yes, but not in a long time.”

So not SOG.

I nodded—time to do some fishing. “So, there’s this joint op going on. Sheriff Travers and I are running point.”

Gallagher nodded. “Richard’s a good man. Marine. Hasn’t been in office long enough to be corrupted by politics.”

So not the Sheriff’s Department either.

That left us. The DEA.

The FBI didn’t trust us.

So, I hadn’t imagined the lack of transparency and support from our superiors.

Something wasn’t right.

“I’m not so happy with my work-life balance right now.”

He nodded. “I understand, Edge.”

I remained unfazed by his use of my old Ranger call sign. Even though it was slightly unsettling to know he’d looked into my past. But my past was not important right now.

“My boss is a real asshole.”

He nodded again.

“Have you met him?”

“Benno Gusmann? Not personally, no.” It was the things he knew and the things he left out that had the hairs on my neck stand up. Okay, this was it. If I wanted him to trust me, I needed to trust him first.

“I think there’s some cleaning to do at our office.”

Gallagher nodded again.

“You didn’t take the lead or participate in the task force handling the Sormiza family?”

He sighed, then looked into the mirror on his side without giving an answer or looking at me.

“You got someone on the inside?”

His head turned toward me—slowly. He didn’t agree or deny it, just looked at me without blinking.

Bingo.

But also, this was the best I could get out of him.

He was protecting either an asset or someone working undercover. “I can respect that. I also trust you will step in if we get too close,” I said.

He nodded.

Good enough for me. I had my suspicions confirmed and had made my intentions clear.

“I trust my partners in this,” I said, and he nodded once more.

I trusted my partners but not my superiors. Something fishy was going on up my chain of command. Fishy enough, even the FBI knew.

Which left George and I in a precarious position.

And alone in this fight.

Alone and vulnerable.

5

JEREMY



I entered the Oaktree, the local diving hole in Three Oaks, with my new partner, George, right behind me, then scanned the room until my eyes fell on a table filled with big, bulky dudes.

They wouldn't be able to blend in even if they wanted to.

Deputy Sheriff Peter Fisher raised his hand and waved us to the table.

He was the one who'd invited us.

But not in our official capacity as DEA Agents. This was an informal get-together, and since we'd received the go from our boss Benno to work with the sheriff's office and the Security Operations Group Bravo—SOG for short—guys, it felt only right to get to know the guys whom we'd be working with better.

I had known Sheriff Richard Travers and his deputy Peter for a while now. Hard not to, when you were working in a semi-rural area, where we all were on the same tight budgets and manpower was even tighter.

We crossed the room—to the left, there was a long bar with a big, bearded gentleman behind it. I nodded at him, and he nodded back. I'd been working in Whitebrook for the better part of the past five years, but I'd never been in here...or any other bar. I'd stopped hanging out in bars after that one fateful night.

After meeting a girl, taking her back to my hotel room, and having mind-blowing sex, without even learning her name.

She was the reason I'd relocated to Whitebrook when I'd gotten the chance. She was the reason I got my shit together after Nina's and Carolina's death.

All that happened almost seven years ago, and I was still hoping to find her one day, looking for her whenever I entered a place.

We arrived at the table and shook hands with everyone. We'd already met Carter—the owner and leader of SOG, Peaches—his computer whiz, and Goofy at the meeting at the sheriff's office where we discussed the idea of the joint task force.

But there were a couple of new faces, as well.

“This is Max,” Carter said.

Max was a new face, but he fit right in, muscular, self-confident, with sharp eyes—that saw everything—and an air of danger.

“These are Blake and Lucas.” Peter introduced the other two strangers—who looked and held themselves eerily similar to Peter. Navy SEAL friends of his?

One look at the group of guys and one thing was crystal clear: these men were warriors, a bunch of battle-hardened soldiers who didn't soften after leaving the service.

Fellow military men. Not that I would ever compare myself to Navy SEALs. I was a proud Army Ranger who after he got out, luckily found his purpose by working as a federal agent for the DEA, fighting against the illegal drug trade and trafficking.

I observed the group and stayed quiet—as did Carter who seemed a bit reserved. He was the most interesting of the bunch if you disregarded all the newspaper articles that had portrayed him as some billionaire playboy.

But if you dug a little deeper—that's when it got interesting. And once you realized what the tabloids wrote

wasn't at all who he was—that's when it got really strange.

His company—Security Operations Group Bravo—was privately funded, which meant he had deep pockets. They specialized in finding missing persons, with a focus on fighting sex-trafficking which couldn't be cheap.

Richard held him in high esteem, and he still had government clearance, which meant he had some friends in high places.

Connections.

The guy named Peaches jumped up. “Need to check on something. Got my laptop in the car. Be back in a sec.” He was out the door with Max following behind him.

I raised an eyebrow and looked in Carter's direction. He looked after them, his brows drawn together.

Something unexpected had come up.

And whatever it was, Carter seemed concerned about it.

Then the barkeeper stepped up to the table. “Looks like you've got quite the meeting. Why don't you boys take the back room?”

Carter looked around before he focused on a closed door next to the bar, and I did, too.

Peter got up, patted the barkeeper on the back, and said, “That's a great idea. How's Niki these days?”

I tuned them out and scanned the rest of the bar. It was still early with most tables unoccupied. Though there were a couple of women sitting at the far end.

I scanned their faces.

Not her. Not her. Not her.

I shook my head. I needed to stop searching for her. Needed to stop obsessing over her. It had been just one night. A hookup. No names, no backstory, no future.

It shouldn't have had such a profound impact on me. She should've been just a fond memory. A pretty face. A one-night

stand. A means to an end.

Instead, her youthful spirit had pulled me to her—stronger than I'd ever experienced. Her beautiful face, her body to die for, the way she reacted, and the way she fit so perfectly into my arms. She'd made me laugh, taught me that there was still beauty, despite pain. That there was always a future even though the present seemed devastating. The way she appreciated me, accepted me exactly as I was and the way she let me see her, openly and honestly.

She should've been a blip on my radar.

Instead, she became everything. My inspiration, my motivation. The reason I got up in the morning. The reason I worked out like a man possessed. The catalyst for allowing myself to grieve and get over my loss. And the reason I wanted to become a better man.

To be worthy of her? Maybe.

Or maybe to not find myself in the same situation again. Alone, drunk, and sad. Hooking up with a stranger and having no way to find her again.

We stood and went into the back room after the barkeeper opened the door and turned on the lights. It was roomier than I thought it would be, with pool tables and dartboards on the wall. And one big table we settled around on. George talked to Carter—too low to follow their conversation—and I turned to Goofy. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he said. “Glad you joined us today.” He grinned, and it was a disarming, boyish smile—almost hiding his lethal edge. “We didn't have the best start the last time we met, but I'm glad to have you as part of the team.”

I nodded, and Peter chimed in. “Rocky starts are the bedrock of every good relationship,” he said, which I wasn't entirely on board with. “I'm sorry I was standoffish, but Richard kinda ambushed me into that meeting at the sheriff's office. And I had to clear it first.”

Peter and Goofy nodded. “No problem at all,” Goofy said. “Guess our background checks came up clean and shiny?”

I grinned. “Mostly. I didn’t know both of you grew up around here.”

Peter nodded. “Born and raised in Moon Lake. Best small town ever.”

Goofy chuckled. “You’re only saying this now. I bet at 16, you couldn’t wait to get out of there.”

Peter nodded, and there was a seriousness that changed his face. There was a backstory there. One that still lingered on to this day.

“What about you?” Lucas chimed in after he’d silently followed our conversation and directed the question at Goofy. “Couldn’t wait to get out of here, as well?”

Goofy shrugged and stared down at the bottle in his hand. “There was some shit going on when I was a teenager, so yeah, I couldn’t wait to escape.”

I did my research on Goofy, aka Scott Walters, so I knew what he was talking about. His big brother disappeared at the age of 18, when Goofy was just 16 years old. His brother didn’t come home from school one day. There’d been search parties and campaigns. His picture had been shown in every major news outlet.

But he’d never been found.

It must’ve thrown Goofy’s parents for a loop.

Changed their whole lives.

His life.

No wonder he’d wanted to escape.

“Carter, there’s something you need to see.” The alarm in Peaches, as well as his demeanor, stopped all conversation.

He put a laptop in front of Carter, and we all gathered behind him.

The still frame of a bleeding woman made Carter sit ramrod straight.

6

JEREMY



We divided up and piled into two trucks. Richard had joined us, and we were ready for battle.

From what I'd pieced together, the woman in the video was called Edith Cleaver and was Carter's woman.

Working theory was she'd been abducted by the Sormiza Cartel, which we and the SOG guys had been monitoring. Somehow the SOG guys knew where they held her—something I had to get to the bottom of later.

After we went after their kidnapers and saved her.

To top it all off, the location where she was being held—Carter had apparently bought it a couple of days ago.

So, this was basically his home turf the tangos had chosen as their base camp.

What idiots.

I'd been in my fair share of task forces, but it was mostly government agencies working together and pushing papers.

I'd never experienced a task force like this.

The sheriff sure cut through all the red tape.

The SOG guys were ready and primed for battle—as well as engaging in borderline illegal activities to gain an edge.

And George and I? We were down for the cause.

I still had my reservations. Still didn't know how to best get on top of this whole situation regarding the Sormiza Cartel. And how the DEA's objective was reconcilable with that of the others.

But this was enough.

This was it.

While George had declined the cartel's demand to fly some merchandise for them and had ignored some calls earlier, we both hadn't expected to be part of a rescue mission come evening.

This was usually not in our wheelhouse.

Impromptu missions were not part of our job description.

Until now.

And if the cartel was trafficking women on top of pushing drugs, it was an even more urgent matter to get on top of things.

The Sormizas were launching a massive operation in our backyard, and I was over waiting for George to gain more intel, or for our boss Benno to pull his head out of his ass.

We entered a gravel road up the mountain at full speed. The vehicle shook and groaned, which was almost a throwback to my military days. In my head, I went over the blueprint Peter had drawn earlier—once again. I tuned out the others. The plan was intelligence gathering first. Block the road, spread out, observe, not attack.

We stopped the trucks and got out before we hit the clearing.

"Incoming," Blake shouted. We scrambled to get our things out of the trucks and disappeared into the trees on both sides of the road.

Having someone come up behind us had not been part of the plan. We hadn't even considered that scenario.

I kept my eyes glued on the trucks, illuminated by headlights, but remained low and motionless.

The car screeched to a halt, and two guys got out and stalked toward the trucks, then one got out his phone.

Shit. There went our element of surprise.

But before he could establish the call, he was rushed on the ground and put to silence. As was the other guy. It all happened so fast and so smooth that I hardly could believe it.

Who were those guys?

I blinked. Then got up and walked back out of the treeline. Richard, Carter, Blake, and Peter stood there as if they hadn't just taken down two guys.

They weren't even breathing hard. Talk about silent professionals.

“Okay, guys, let's step it up,” Carter said as if his guys hadn't just silently tackled and neutralized a threat. “Time is of the essence here. Lucas, Peter, block the road and hold the line. Nobody in or out. Roger?” He waited until they gave their consent.

Then he turned to me and the rest of the guys. “Let's haul our asses up there and assess the situation. Go. Go. Go.”

He didn't have to say it twice. We formed a loose formation and walked on the edges of the road. We would be safer deeper in the trees, but speed was the force we chose.

When we reached the compound, we split up into two groups. Me, George, Peaches, and Goofy crossed the road in a sprint to spread out and cover the east side. The barracks were to the west, so we concentrated on the main building.

The old mill had seen better days. The windows were shattered. And it looked like somebody should take a wrecking ball to it. But there were lights on in and around the building. Two cars were parked alongside it. Other than that, there weren't any signs of movement.

We stopped. “Goofy, Peaches, you go on, cover the east side and each other. Check in when in position,” I said.

Goofy and Peaches gave me the okay and took off. At least we had radios. Thanks to Richard and Peter who pulled those

out of their trucks last minute.

George stayed next to me, and we both focused on the building. Five minutes stretched into ten. Everything remained silent. Until two men exited the building and hopped into one of the cars.

“Peter, you’re getting company. Two guys, one vehicle,” we heard Richard call over the radio.

I looked at George, and he nodded. “Peter, we’re on our way,” I radioed in, then we took off in a dead sprint back to the trucks.

We arrived just seconds before the two men exited the car that had stopped in front of our trucks.

The next second, Peter knocked down the driver.

And George and I rushed the man who’d been riding shotgun.

I tackled him to the ground while George grabbed his gun hand and disarmed him.

Once secure, I looked up to catch Lucas doing an impressive flip over the hood of the car. Only when he realized we had it under control, he gave me a salute and moved back to assist Peter.

These takedowns weren’t nearly as graceful or silent as the ones we’d witnessed earlier, but we got the job done. Peter appeared with zip-ties and a big grin on his face. “You army boys aren’t so useless after all.”

I glared at him, but he tightened the ties and fist-bumped first George and then me.

Damn navy prima donnas.

Max arrived just as we pushed the last one into the backseat of Richard’s truck. “Edith escaped. She’s not there.”

The radios crackled. “Guys, we need some reinforcement up here. Can you come and bring some zip-ties?”

We split. Peter got into the tango’s car, which blocked our trucks, and drove up the mountain in reverse. Max and Lucas

followed in one, George in the other truck, and I followed with the second tango car.

When we arrived up at the clearing, Richard, Goofy, and Peaches had two more guys lying at their feet.

We pulled the other guys out of our trucks and rounded them up.

It was almost comical how un-exciting this whole showdown had been. But maybe it spoke to the level of professionalism of our group.

There was no hesitation. Everybody knew their place, and we operated as if we'd been working together forever.

It felt exhilarating to be part of such a disciplined and abled group.

What could've very well been a disaster turned out to be a win.

And when Carter arrived with Edith in a fireman's carry, we all relaxed.

Good guys—1, bad guys—0.

That was how we did things.



“You need a ride?” I pulled my feet from my desk and snapped upright in my office chair when George passed my desk—faking nonchalance when, in reality, I was seething.

A feeling I squashed when I took a good look at my partner.

George’s debrief had taken hours, and exhaustion was etched on his face.

No wonder, after the night he’d had.

Not only had the cartel forced him to fly a helicopter and transport guns for them, but he also had to fight for his life—and killed a man in the process.

All without backup—because he hadn’t fucking told me.

I looked at my watch. 4:45 a.m. It had been a bitch of a night. And on top of everything, the higher-ups had taken their sweet time debriefing George after kicking me out of the room.

When Benno didn’t want me sitting in—and told me to go home—my spidey senses had gotten all tingly.

Hence my waiting for my partner at our desks.

But why wouldn’t Benno want me to know all about what went down?

Hell, I’d known Benno for years. We both went through the academy together. And he’d been friends with Nina’s

brothers. We'd never been friends. But with this case, he'd reached a new level of nutty and peculiar behavior.

Which didn't sit right with me.

George nodded, then dragged his hands through his hair. "Yes, please."

I gathered my things, and together, we made our way down to my car. George remained quiet.

We'd made it out of Whitebrook before he finally broke the silence. "The boss wasn't too thrilled with what went down tonight." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

I glanced at him with a single raised eyebrow before I looked back at the road.

No shit.

Benno wasn't the only one not too thrilled. George obviously didn't trust me because why else wouldn't he tell me the cartel hired him for a job? Why go at it alone? Without backup?

"What did I do wrong?" George asked.

I sighed, or maybe he was just clueless. "Kiddo. You messed up everything."

He shrugged and turned to stare out of his window.

This wouldn't get us very far. I could either be an asshole—which would be my ego talking—or I could be honest. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" George asked, still facing away from me.

"Did you know this was going down tonight when you left the Oaktree? That stupid early appointment... Did you make that up?" I held my breath, waiting for his response.

His head snapped in my direction. "Hell no."

I couldn't make out the expression on his face in the dark, but surprise lingered in his voice.

"Pepe Sormiza showed up unexpectedly. He was waiting at my house, and I thought, for sure, they would search me. So, I

left my phone behind but not before texting you.”

I nodded. Took a second to process. George had made a lot of stupid decisions tonight. Basically, all the rookie-pull-your-head-out-of-your-ass-and-think stuff. But, at least, he didn't lie.

At least I could still trust him.

“Received that text. When I got to your house, nobody was there. Benno was furious when I woke him.”

I chuckled. I'd felt a distinct sense of diabolical satisfaction in disturbing Benno's beauty sleep.

But George didn't share my amusement. Too soon, probably.

“Benno seemed a bit...” George hesitated and appeared to be at a loss for the right word.

I straightened. I didn't want to influence George, but I needed to know if I was the only one feeling this way. “Mistrusting?”

He nodded. “Don't get me wrong. I'm taking full responsibility. I know I fucked up.”

I sighed. Time to let the rookie off the hook a little. No sense in having him beat himself up. “George, listen. You're new to this job. You're in an impossible position. When someone points a loaded gun at you, your instinct kicks in, regardless of their intentions. You trusted your gut, and you're still alive. You completed your mission by placing the tracker. So, I'd say you did well.”

“But Benno—”

“Benno is an asshole who prioritizes his own reputation over the lives of his subordinates. He's not looking out for anyone on the team except himself.”

George snapped his mouth shut.

Maybe I should've cushioned my words. George was already in over his head and probably feeling exposed and vulnerable after tonight. I only made things worse by

undermining his trust in his boss. “But I’ve got your back. So don’t worry about Benno, okay?”

He nodded.

He didn’t believe me, and honestly, I wasn’t entirely convinced myself. But for now, it was the best reassurance I could offer. My mind was still reeling from the intel Edith had shared after our compound raid—something Benno had scolded me for. Perhaps excluding me from George’s debrief was his way of punishing us for our involvement. But we obtained crucial information about the big boss, Sormiza, using his old DEA cover. That should have satisfied Benno. Instead, he was furious, threatening consequences in the morning. I looked outside at the sunrise in the distance.

Just my luck it wasn’t quite morning.

I focused back on George. He looked like crap. Tired and worn out. “I was worried about you.”

He scoffed. “I was worried about myself, too.” He paused for a moment. “That helicopter was meant to transport Edith.”

I nodded. “Go figure.” We had discussed the impracticality of using a helicopter for drug transportation when the Sormizas first mentioned the flight to George, who declined the offer to fly it. Apparently, the cartel had little regard for personal choices.

“I don’t think their initial intention was to kill me. Something changed when Pepe Sormiza boarded the jet. He received a phone call, and that’s when he handed the gun to bomber-jacket guy. Maybe Pepe instructed the pilot to take care of himself and not trust me. Or something like that.” He rubbed his forehead, looking distraught. “I’m not sure if I read the situation right. I thought for sure he would kill me, but maybe I was wrong.”

From what I’d gained, before Benno ordered me out of the room, George’s actions would be classified as self-defense. At least in my book. “Don’t second-guess your gut feeling,” I said. “Once you’ve done this job for as long as I have, you

realize that your gut is sometimes the only thing you can trust and the only thing that is right.”

Our eyes locked for a short moment. “You did what you had to do. Now, put it behind you.”

He nodded and leaned back, his head drooping.

Letting it go wouldn't be easy—at least not at first. Taking a life left a mark on you. Be it in self-defense or not. “Now, do you want to grab breakfast before you crash?”

George leaned forward and looked outside through the windshield, checked his watch, and groaned. “Sleep first,” he said, and I nodded.

As we approached his house, I parked the car by the curb. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

George nodded and got out.

I watched him drag himself up the driveway.

Tonight, luck was on our side. But I refused to let my partner's life rely solely on luck going forward.

Our entire case against the cartel hinged on the insight George could provide, but tonight had revealed the substantial risks involved. Benno's behavior was unacceptable, and I needed to uncover his agenda. Because something was up.

And that something smelled very fishy, indeed.



Being ambushed twice was not part of my plan. Unfortunately, that's exactly how I felt at this moment. Sitting around my sister Gracie's kitchen table and facing Sheriff Richard Travers, my future brother-in-law, and Dr. Niki Michaels MD, one of my best friends, was making me uncomfortable as hell.

I loved Gracie's apartment and felt safe here, but this, right now, screamed danger.

As if I hadn't had enough already.

As if I hadn't already met with them at the hospital and shared every detail of what happened. I had hoped that would be sufficient.

My injuries were mostly superficial, at least the visible ones. But nothing could've prepared me for the fear that consumed me when I was being strangled. Thoughts of my sisters and Bobby raced through my mind, and of the mystery guy who had given me the greatest gift of my life—my precious son.

I experienced bone-deep fear, followed by an odd sense of calm, almost as if my body was preparing for death.

But it was not to be this time.

Although I longed for that calm again because the fear resurfaced with a vengeance at the drop of a shoe, gripping me tightly.

“We’ll keep him locked away for as long as we can. We have eyewitnesses, so evidence shouldn’t be a problem,” Richard assured me, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I nodded in response.

“We’ve documented everything meticulously, so evidence shouldn’t be a problem. The case is solid,” Niki added.

I nodded.

My hand instinctively went to my throat, covered by a scarf, hiding the injuries from the world—and from Bobby—as best as I could. He was downstairs with Dorothy and Grace, probably eating too much pie. But I didn’t care. He’d been through so much. Had been scared and silently suffering.

I owed him a better life than the one I had given him.

I owed him the best life possible, and it started now.

I refused to be a victim ever again. I wouldn’t be weak. I had already found a gym and signed up for a self-defense class. I was determined to become a fighter—a warrior.

Strong, self-reliant, and proud of who I was.

No man ever would tell me I wasn’t good enough. No man ever would lay a hand on me.

Not without me giving him the fight of his life.

“Do you need anything else?” Richard asked, placing his hand on top of mine.

My breath caught for a moment, a fleeting panic rushing through me before I forced myself to relax. The warmth from his hand spread through me, and I felt grateful for his kindness. I was thrilled that Dorothy had chosen such a worthy man. “No, I’m good. Thank you so much.”

He nodded. “Anytime. Now I’d better get downstairs before Dori gives my cake to Bobby.” He winked, love for Dori evident in his eyes.

That’s the kind of love I wanted for myself. A man who adored me, cherished me, and didn’t try to control me.

My thoughts drifted back to that one faithful night. He'd made me feel cherished. Made me feel sexy and—against all odds—safe. I'd contemplated my decision to leave while he was still asleep a lot. What would've happened if I stayed? Would it have been awkward? Would it have been the start of something?

I shook my head, letting go of those thoughts. I would never know. It was just one night, no names. Those were the terms we agreed on.

I'd tried to find him when I found out I was pregnant. But how do you find a guy you met in a bar weeks ago? Even if I had remembered the room number, the hotel probably wouldn't have given me his name. And the bartender couldn't even remember me. I regretted not having him jot down his details when he offered; maybe then he would've remembered.

"Feli? Are you okay?" Niki's voice brought me back to the present, and I refocused on her.

I had been having trouble focusing a lot since the incident, but I was getting better. And there were other things to focus on, like Gracie.

Something had happened between her and George. She'd been so happy when he spent the night. I thought for sure they had finally found each other. But it didn't last long.

Gracie had been pissed when she came home earlier. Pissed and hurt. But she wouldn't talk to me about it.

Maybe after tomorrow, after the memorial, we could find the time to have a sit-down. Edith, Dorothy, Gracie and I—all four of us—had some major things going on in our lives, and it had been weeks since we last talked. "I'm good."

Niki tilted her head to the side, her gaze fixed on me.

God, having your friend as your doctor sucked. "Okay, okay. I'm not okay, but I'm getting there. Satisfied?"

She nodded, then smiled. "Let me have a look."

I unwound the scarf, revealing the fading marks on my neck. The red spots in and around my eyes were nearly

invisible by now. And the swelling of my tongue and lips had gone down, as well. My voice was still a bit raspier than it had been, but all things considered, I got lucky.

Incredibly lucky.

And I wouldn't waste this second chance.

Niki examined me. Prodded, turned my head to the left and right. "Looks better. Are you sleeping?"

She gave me that look again, the one that told me without words not to lie to her as if she knew I wasn't sleeping.

"I'm getting there. I promise."

Niki turned away, rummaged through her purse, and handed me a business card. "She's good. Trust me. You should talk to her."

I looked down at the card—a therapist. I wanted to decline, but she was probably right. I needed to get my head right again. For Bobby. "Thank you."

I wasn't prepared for the hug, but I didn't flinch either.

"I was scared for a minute there. Don't do that again," Niki said against my side.

"I won't, I promise." My voice cracked, tears welling in my eyes.

Damn.

Now she had me crying again. I sniffled. I was lucky and grateful.

I had incredible friends and supportive sisters I could lean on.

I wasn't alone in this. Roy had made me believe I was, but that was just his way of isolating me from my friends and family. It was his way of trying to control me.

But that was the past.

No man would ever control me again.

Never again.

9

JEREMY



My heart was still pounding as I parked the car in front of George's home and hopped out. After days of uneventful investigations and combing through every bit of information on Benno I could get my hands on, I finally had a breakthrough.

Should've known everything would happen all at once. That was how it was. You work diligently, but sometimes, you just need that extra ounce of luck.

I'd hit that jackpot right before George's call, prompting me to rush to his house.

One look at him hunched over on his front porch and I knew something had gone terribly wrong. But if he thought his situation was bad, he'd have another think coming.

We were in some deep shit. Much deeper than I ever thought possible.

I made my way up the driveway. "So, you're having a pity party on your front lawn, just as I expected," I said, extending my hand to George and helping him up. "I'm sorry to be a hardass. But there's no time for this right now. We have a meeting in"—I glanced at my wrist—"half an hour, and I need you on top of your game."

"What's going on?" George asked.

"Keys," I said.

He retrieved them from his truck, locked it, and tossed the keys in my general direction.

I chuckled, bowed playfully, and picked them up from the ground. “Boy, you’re in one hell of a mood.” I closed his front door and locked it. “Get your act together before we meet the others.”

That seemed to snap him out of his funk. “I’m sorry,” he muttered.

I nodded, patting his back. “Women troubles can be the worst. You’ll figure it out. This is about a woman, I assume?”

He nodded and followed me to my truck. “Gracie was here and bolted after she met Marisol.”

I sighed. Worlds colliding.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

He shook his head and remained silent until we hit the freeway.

“Why the impromptu meeting?” George finally broke the silence.

I figured he’d need some time to calm down and gather his thoughts. Maybe I was right.

“I was actually on the way to pick you up when you called. And I already knew your fake fiancée, Marisol, was back in town.”

George inhaled sharply, his head snapping around as he glared at me. “You, what?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know before, so don’t give me that look. I followed Benno and overheard a conversation.”

He rubbed his forehead. “Overheard?”

“I was still in the office when he got a call that made him...nervous. So, when he left the office, I followed him.”

“You followed our boss?”

“Don’t look at me like that. We both know something’s off.”

George sighed.

“He met with a guy I didn’t recognize. But I listened in on their conversation.”

George looked at me as if I’d grown a third eye. “How?”

I gestured toward the backseat.

“What the hell is that?”

“That, my friend, is a parabolic dish directional microphone. Great for long-distance eavesdropping,” I explained with a gleam in my eyes. I loved my little gadgets. It was so much fun to play with them, and sometimes, they came in handy.

George chuckled and shook his head. “So, what did you learn?”

“Benno is somehow involved with the cartel. They mentioned you and how Jorge wasn’t pleased with the death of his pilot. Then the guy informed Benno that Marisol was back. That’s pretty much all I got before the other guy started looking around all nervous, and I had to abandon my clandestine operation. Then you called, and I came straight here and called Richard to arrange an emergency meeting with Carter.”

Clearly, all of that was a bit much to swallow for George. I could almost see the wheels turn behind his eyes. “So, I’m now persona non grata for the cartel?”

I nodded.

“And Marisol is back to keep me in check and under control?”

I shrugged. Maybe...probably. Hell, if I knew.

“And Benno is involved with the Sormiza’s, as well?”

I nodded. It seemed that way, and it would explain his peculiar behavior and directives over the past few weeks. But why would someone like Benno, someone who had been with the DEA for so long, suddenly switch sides? Did the cartel have something on him? There were still many unknowns.

“Damn. What do we do now?” he asked.

I’d contemplated that during my drive over. The correct approach would be to involve DEA-OPR, the division that investigated misconduct within the DEA, but I wanted Richard’s and Carter’s input before taking that step. “First, we’ll meet with Carter and Richard at the sheriff’s office. Then we formulate a plan.”

George nodded.

It was the best answer I could offer even though it wasn’t particularly satisfying.

When we arrived at the sheriff’s office back in Whitebrook, Richard ushered us into his office just as Carter arrived and joined us.

“Can I get you something? Coffee, tea, anything?” Richard asked.

Both George and I declined.

“What’s the emergency?” Carter barked, seemingly not amused about being summoned.

Well, might as well get straight to the point. “We’re compromised,” I stated and rubbed my neck.

“You’re what?” Richard asked and leaned forward.

“Compromised.”

“Care to elaborate?” Carter said.

I glanced at George, who shrugged.

“Both George and I have sensed something was off with our boss’s behavior and actions regarding this case,” I explained.

“And?” Carter, who’d been leaning against the wall, shifted his weight.

“And today solidified our suspicions. We think our boss is in bed with the cartel, so we don’t know who to trust anymore.”

“So, you came here,” Richard said and leaned back in his squeaky chair.

They both seemed to enjoy our predicament. And it made sense. Here we were, a big, bad, government agency. And we couldn't even keep our own house in order.

“I need someone as backup for George. We don't know what they know. We don't know their plans. I need someone we can trust to have his back.”

“We intercepted some chatter about that upcoming auction you've mentioned,” Carter said and focused on George.

Another event looming in the future with us having no solid intel.

“So, my team is knee-deep in collecting and searching through all the digital material. But Lucas could be an option. If he's up for the job.”

Lucas. Yeah, I had met him at the Oaktree and read his file. He had been a Navy SEAL, a below-the-knee amputee, although I distinctly remembered him jumping over a hood like he could fly. With or without two legs, he was an impressive individual. But it was George's decision. He had to feel comfortable working with Lucas.

“Having Lucas work with me would be a great addition,” George finally spoke.

I exhaled, sensing some trepidation in his voice. Maybe it would be better to pull him from working undercover altogether.

And with this, with the enemy infiltrating our own lines. Building a case against the Sormiza Cartel would be much more challenging.

I looked from Richard to Carter. They both were all-in. And it made sense. Both had their women kidnapped and endangered by the Sormiza family. This wasn't just about drugs—it involved the safety of the people they cherished. Guns, violence, human trafficking. Greed and evil operated right under our noses—for profit.

This was personal for them. And it was personal for George, too.

We wrapped up the meeting. Carter would speak to Lucas and would get in touch with us. And if Lucas agreed, George would introduce him as his right-hand man.

If the cartel contacted him again.

Big *if*.

But at least we had a plan. A loosey-goosey one, but we were mitigating the risk.

Next came the wait. And the upcoming memorial for George's brother.

A fallen hero.

JEREMY



It had been a couple of long, tedious days without any real results when I arrived at George's parents' home.

Mansion more like it.

I looked around. I would've never guessed George was a trust-fund baby. But taking in the size of this mansion, there was wealth written all over the place. I got out and gave my keys to the valet.

Damn.

Valet-parking, another thing of the uber-rich.

Given George's down-to-earth personality, I would've never guessed his privileged upbringing. He'd stayed level-headed despite being on edge due to the Sormiza Cartel silence after that flight debacle.

Maybe they'd decided lying low for a while was a good idea.

Yesterday, we had a conversation after leaving the sheriff's office, and George expressed his desire to end his relationship with Marisol. And fuck it, by the rate this investigation had deteriorated, it was the smart thing to do.

And yet, I reminded him of the importance of his work and how that move could jeopardize the entire case. Hopefully, Lucas would agree to become George's backup. At least with him on board, I wouldn't feel like we were bumbling around in unknown territory, like half-blind drunks.

Damn, Benno.

“Hey, who pissed into your shoes?” a voice called out.

I turned around and found Richard and Carter standing behind me while I was still standing by the valet stand.

I hadn’t moved an inch and was completely unaware of my surroundings. Not my brightest move. “Hey, guys.”

Richard raised an eyebrow and studied me closely.

“What?”

“Are you having a seizure? Why are you standing here scowling at the house?” Carter chimed in.

Always great to hear you’ve lost your poker face in public.

“It’s nothing. I just didn’t expect George’s parents to be...” I pointed at the house. “Well, loaded.”

Carter glanced at the house, then back at me. “It could’ve been in the family for generations; a big house doesn’t necessarily mean they’re wealthy.”

Great, now I was making assumptions about things. I nodded. “You’re absolutely right.”

Richard patted my back. “Well, they are. Let’s go inside.”

We entered through massive glass veranda doors. Tables and umbrellas were scattered outside, but few people mingled there. Inside, I stepped into an impeccably furnished room. The expensive rugs, art on the walls, and George’s mother’s jewelry all screamed wealth.

We exchanged greetings with the Bryce family and made a beeline for the bar. Carter excused himself shortly after and approached Edith. She looked much better than when I’d last seen her at the compound. She laughed at something Carter whispered in her ear. Good to see her bounce back after all she’d been through.

I’d gone through every file I could get my hands on of the infamous Mr. Caroz. The cover for Diego Sormiza—the senior boss of the cartel—which had been heavily used in the 90s when he worked as an informant for the DEA but had been put

to rest after that. How was old Sormiza still using it without raising red flags left and right?

Was it Benno's doing?

Benno had been with the DEA for a long time, but I doubted he had enough power to orchestrate all of this. There had to be someone else behind the scenes, someone pulling the strings for the cartel.

I scanned the room until I found George, then followed his gaze to a petite woman. Pale and blonde, she looked barely of age. And vaguely familiar, though I couldn't quite place her.

So, this was who George was obsessed with?

Gracie Bryce.

His sister-in-law.

A widow.

The one who'd stolen George's heart and had his whole life in turmoil.

I ordered a vodka on the rocks and turned to Richard. "Let's head over and say hello to George."

He nodded, and together, we crossed the room. Richard looked as uncomfortable as I felt. He knew a lot of the people in the room, shook hands, and exchanged head nods. But I got a distinct feeling that socializing wasn't his favorite pastime.

Counterproductive if you were running for sheriff. I wondered how he'd pulled it off.

I approached George. "Hey."

It took him a moment to focus on us. "Hey, thanks for being here."

When our eyes met, I raised an eyebrow and nodded toward Gracie. Then I handed him the drink.

George shrugged, sniffed, then took a sip.

"Carter talked to Lucas, and he's on board," Richard said, his voice calm enough that it wouldn't carry outside of our little circle.

I exhaled and suddenly felt a lot lighter than I had a moment ago.

“He’s going to call you so you can get to know each other better and discuss plans for his engagement,” Richard added.

“That’s great,” George said, though his answer clearly lacked enthusiasm.

Richard tensed, and I instinctually mirrored him. I followed his gaze and suppressed a groan when Marisol Alvero approached. She slipped her hand around George’s arm and plastered herself against his side.

“Gentlemen, this is Marisol Alvero.”

The enemy.

“Ms. Alvero.” I nodded at her since she didn’t seem to want to let go of George. She looked just like in her file—dressed up to the nines, all dolled up. However, her eyes revealed a hardness that gave away her real personality.

A cold-hearted woman in bed with a South American drug cartel.

Marisol nodded in return, then turned to George. “Your parents want to introduce someone.” With that, she pulled him away from our little circle.

“Excuse me,” George said, over his shoulder, and gave me an eye roll that I mirrored.

“Who is she?” Richard asked.

Well, if that wasn’t the million-dollar question.

But this was neither the right time nor the place to delve into it. I shook my head, and Richard narrowed his eyes, waiting for an explanation.

I exhaled. “His girlfriend.”

Richard gave me a don’t-bullshit-me look. “Then why doesn’t he like her?”

I tapped him on the back. “Long story. Why don’t you buy me another drink, and maybe then I’ll tell you all about it.”

Richard rolled his eyes. It was an open bar, and apparently, he didn't find my joke funny.

We took a few steps before my eyes landed on Dorothy and Edith. They were leading George's Gracie through the room with a clear sense of purpose.

I hadn't seen Dorothy since Richard and Peter had rescued her from that damn gang, but she looked good. All three sisters looked good.

I followed their path until my gaze landed on another woman.

Everything came to a halt.

A sudden chill ran through my core and exploded all over my skin as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice over me.

I blinked slowly, then focused on her face.

Her.

The one woman who haunted my dreams.

The one I had been furious at when I woke up and realized she was gone.

The reason I had moved to Whitebrook in an attempt to find her again.

The one I still tried to forget.

"Are you okay?" Richard asked, curious, as he looked at me.

"Who's standing with Dorothy and Edith?"

Richard followed my gaze. "You mean Gracie? Or Felicia?"

"Felicia?" My voice came out strangled.

"Yeah, she's the fourth sister. You haven't met all of them together, have you? They're a sight to behold when they're all together."

I nodded, feeling numb inside, but my mind was racing. And my heart?

Finally.

That word reverberated throughout my body and bounced through my skull like a bouncing ball from that 90s computer game.

Finally.

I didn't realize I even moved until I was right outside their little circle.

I stopped.

"Feli..." My voice cracked. "Ahem, Felicia?" I took a breath. Her name rolled right off my tongue. Felicia. It suited her.

She looked older, a bit worn out. Too much makeup on.

But she looked the same, too.

Kind, funny, gentle.

My body hummed.

Edith and Dorothy stepped to the side, opening their circle.

Both had easy smiles on their faces, as far as I could tell in my peripheral vision because my eyes remained locked on her. Felicia.

I saw the moment she recognized me. Her face turned pale, and her eyes grew wide.

"Jeremy, hey. Have you met my sisters? Dorothy, Felicia, Grace, this is one of the men who saved me," Edith said.

"Ladies." I took a bow like a complete moron.

Dorothy stepped forward and kissed me on the cheek. "Looks like you're moving up to hero status in this family. First me, then Edith... Who's next?"

Next? It all began and ended with her. "Felicia, nice to see you again..."

"What's wrong?" George suddenly appeared by my side and grabbed my shoulder. "Jeremy?"

I didn't react, couldn't react. Instead, I took her in. Her eyes, light green with golden flecks. Her freckles were hidden beneath her makeup, just like that night. But I knew they were there. I'd watched her sleep, stared at her beautiful face when the makeup had been long gone.

Her lips formed a perfect *O* before her hand fluttered up, hiding her expression from my sight.

Then I was pushed, which jolted me out of my fixation.

"What?" I caught myself, then glared at George standing beside me.

"What's happening?" he asked again.

"Nothing. Just reconnecting with someone I met a long time ago," I said.

"You know Felicia?" he asked, still unsure about the strange atmosphere between us.

"We met a couple of years ago. Once," I replied, my eyes returning and locking with hers.

"Excuse us," Edith said, linking her arms with Dorothy and Gracie as they moved away.

George's eyes darted between me and Felicia before he, too, followed the sisters.

And we were alone.

Just the two of us.

Finally.

FELICIA



My entire body froze, then a tingling sensation coursed through me when our eyes met.

Before my brain even registered him, my body reacted to his presence instinctually.

As if we were connected on some physical level.

“Feli... Ahem, Felicia?”

There it was. His raspy voice turning my body into a quivering mess.

Edith and Dorothy took a step to the side and opened our circle until I had a full view of him. But his eyes held me captive. Those eyes—I’d dreamed of them my entire adult life. Those eyes, that were both green and gray with a hint of brown.

Eyes that were focused on me like a laser beam. As if he could look right inside of me. As if he could really see me.

“Jeremy, hey. Have you met my sisters? Dorothy, Felicia, Grace, this is one of the men who saved me,” Edith said and pulled me out of my trance.

“Ladies.” He bowed. Which somehow underscored his masculinity.

Dorothy stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek.

A sharp sting of jealousy blasted through my chest.

“Looks like you’re moving up to hero status in this family. First me, then Edith... Who’s next?”

Next? What the hell? How could it be that my sisters knew him, enough to greet him with a kiss, and they never mentioned him to me? Jeremy, Edith had called him. The name suited him.

“Felicia, nice to see you again,” he said, his voice gravely low, sending a shiver down my spine that settled right between my thighs.

Holy...

“What’s wrong?” George was suddenly by his side and grabbed his shoulder. “Jeremy?”

He remained motionless, and his intense eyes stayed locked on me, as if I was the only person in his entire universe.

It made all my nerve endings fire at once.

Then George gave him a shove, which severed our connection.

“What?” He glared at George.

“What’s happening?” George asked.

“Nothing. Just reconnecting with someone I met a long time ago,”

“You know Felicia?” George asked and looked from me to him and back to me.

“We met a couple of years ago. Once,” Jeremy said, and his eyes snapped back to me, and the force of his gaze felt like a physical caress, which made me sigh.

“Excuse us,” Edith said, and they all walked away. George followed, and just like that, there was nobody between us.

Nothing between us.

“Hey.” His voice was deep and took on a soothing quality, then he smiled.

Damn.

I was transported back to the dance floor and his smile right before he leaned down and kissed me.

His smile—how could I’ve forgotten his smile?

I swallowed, then stumbled over my own words. “Hey, I didn’t know…”

That was the extent of what I was capable of.

He took a couple of steps, and suddenly, he was standing right in front of me, blocking out the rest of the world.

His scent hit me and set my heart ablaze. It was somehow still the same. Soap and aftershave, and something undeniably, amazingly sexy.

Not the hotel soap I’d cherished.

I inhaled deeply. If only I could catch that scent and recreate it in my shop. Now that would be an instant bestseller.

“I missed you,” he said, sending another shockwave through my system.

And just like that, I was completely lost for words. My eyes stung with the tears welling up, and I struggled to swallow around the lump in my throat.

I missed you.

I couldn’t even pretend I didn’t feel those words deep in my bones.

I missed you.

It echoed my feelings exactly.

Seven years. Seven long, hard, lonely years.

I missed you.

I nodded, unable to trust myself not to burst into tears if I tried to open my mouth.

And somehow, he knew.

He opened his arms, and I immediately walked into him.

No hesitation, not even the slightest amount of fear. Just the feeling of belonging and of finally coming home again.

He held me tightly against his chest and caressed my back with his big, gentle hands.

I'd never felt so safe, so cared for.

At least not in recent years.

"I was so pissed you weren't there when I woke up."

"Me too," I mumbled into his white dress shirt. Even though my words didn't make sense. I was the one who left even though it broke my heart to do so.

"I tried to forget you," he confessed, nuzzling my hair.

"Me too." I gripped his shirt tighter.

"It didn't work," he whispered, his warm breath hitting my ear and sending goose bumps down my neck.

I nodded, understanding all too well.

"I can't believe you're really here. Can't believe I finally found you."

Again, I nodded. What a miracle. After all those years.

"Are you living around here?" he asked, and I looked up at him.

"Yes, in Three Oaks. You?"

He furrowed his brows. "You've been here all this time." He shook his head. "I can't believe we haven't run into each other once."

I smiled. I'd spent most of my time at home after I dropped out of college when I learned I was pregnant. Then later, when I started working in Ellie's shop in Three Oaks and moved in with her, I didn't do much else other than care for my baby boy and work.

Not many opportunities to run into someone when you didn't venture out much.

"Wait." I leaned back. "Are you living around here?"

He nodded. "I requested a transfer and moved to Whitebrook, about a year after we met."

“Really. Why?” I asked, curiosity piqued.

He raised a single eyebrow, his eyes holding mine captive.

Because of me. I wanted him to say it. Needed him to say it. “Well?”

He chuckled, then shook his head. “Because I wanted the chance to run into you again.”

I exhaled with a whoosh.

Me. He came back because of me. This man uprooted and changed his whole life because of me.

Something else we had in common.

Our shared night completely changed my life, as well.

Shit.

I stiffened, and he immediately let go of me.

I needed to tell him about Bobby. How do you tell someone you barely know, someone you only met once that he had a child?

Should I tell him now? But how?

The sound from across the room of a spoon clinking against a glass silenced the noise and brought our surroundings into sharp focus. Maybe here and now wasn't the best time.

“Can we meet tomorrow?” I asked, and he grinned.

“Why don't we go for a walk first thing tomorrow morning?”

I nodded and smiled. A morning walk? Not exactly what I had in mind, but maybe it was a good opportunity to get to know him better before I told him about Bobby.

Not that I wouldn't tell him, no matter if he turned out... different from what I made him out to be in my mind. Because, honestly, how could anyone live up to the idealized version of him that I had in my mind?

I'd made him into this dream man—a guy larger than life, perfect. Someone who could do no wrong. Hell, that's even

what I told Bobby about his father—shared stories about this honorable, perfect gentleman whom he could be proud of.

Well, the truth would probably be far less grandiose. Nobody could ever be that perfect, that flawless.

I was in for a rude awakening. And so was Bobby, and Jeremy.

But I wouldn't introduce them tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I would take the time to get to know him better. Find out what kind of a man he was. Find out if my boy could be proud of his father. "When?" I asked.

"Six a.m. Just a casual walk in the morning."

I nodded.

Casual I could handle.

And at 6 a.m. it would still be cool outside. At least cool enough for a walk.

Jeremy turned around to listen to Gracie's father-in-law giving a speech, thanking all the guests.

It was the same one every year, so I zoned out and instead looked for my sisters. I needed one of them for babysitting tomorrow, and the shop? I'd kept it closed these last couple of days and would keep it closed until I got my bearings again.

I glanced at him sideways. Being near him didn't bother me, and his touch felt natural. Maybe I was already recovering faster than I thought. Wouldn't that be great? A speedy recovery without lingering mental trauma.

Our sisters returned and joined us, and I ignored their questioning gazes. Instead, I watched Gracie, who had joined the Bryce family once again.

Something was severely off between her and George.

Well, severely off was an understatement.

Especially with that leech hanging on George's arm.

Whatever had happened after his speech? After he'd told me he'd had feelings for Grace for as long as he could

remember?

Whatever happened with, ‘My intentions for Grace are as sincere, and my feelings are as deep, as they could be. We’re taking this one step at a time right now, but I would appreciate your support.’

I’d believed him when he said that. Believed Gracie finally had a shot at happiness. What had gone wrong these last couple of days that had led to this outcome? To Gracie alternating between pissed and hurt and George looking tortured?

I looked sideways at Jeremy again. “How do you know George?”

He looked down at me. “He’s my partner.”

My eyebrows shot up. George had transitioned out of the military and was working for the DEA now, wasn’t he? Something like that. So that would make Jeremy a federal agent, as well. “What did you show the bartender that night?”

Jeremy wrinkled his forehead, and for the first time, I noticed gray hair woven in between the black. “My badge, probably.”

I nodded. That’s what I thought. If only I had paid better attention, I could have learned all this—from his name to his occupation—at that moment. I could have searched for him and probably found him when I discovered I was pregnant.

“Why?”

I shook my head. “No reason, just curious.”

He smiled again, leaned sideways and kissed my hair once more. “Time to get to know each other.”

I nodded.

Time to get to know each other. I just hoped his reaction to getting to know me better and realizing our brief encounter had consequences, wouldn’t be too bad. And hopefully, he’d turned out at least halfway the man I wanted him to be.

Probably not.

Inevitably not.

Not that I was searching for my dream man. Or any man, for that matter. I just hoped he'd turned out to be decent. For Bobby...and for me.

JEREMY



“Hey, you. Rough day?” I said and got up from my seat on George’s front porch where I’d been waiting for him to come home for the past hour after leaving the memorial service.

I thought he could use some pick-me-up, and judging from the force with which he’d shut his car door, and the heaviness in his step, I was right.

Time to shift my focus.

I’d been going through a range of emotions while waiting. From giddy, to daydreaming, to admonishing myself for my teenager-like behavior.

But I found her.

I finally found her.

It seemed impossible. But a part of me, one that had been dormant for a very long time, had finally awakened.

Like that tiny missing piece that had caused this niggling sense of unease had finally snapped back into place—making me complete.

It was idiotic to project all this onto Felicia, but then again, holding her in my arms had felt amazing.

Amazing and right and more real than anything I had experienced in the last couple of years.

I shook my head, then focused back on George, who looked like crap. Even worse than during the reception.

“What happened.”

George shook his head. “It’s just one big, giant mess.”

“What is?”

“I ended things with Marisol. And I told Gracie everything.”

I sucked a breath through my teeth. “Everything?”

George nodded. “Every single thing. The whole truth. Everything.”

I watched him walk up to his door and unlock it.

“And?”

He opened the door and leaned against it, letting me in.

“And she might not feel the same way I do.”

“She doesn’t?”

“Nope. She wanted time to think things through.”

“Are you sure about that?”

He nodded. “Her exact words.”

I raised my eyebrows. Maybe I wasn’t as good at reading people as I thought I was, but I could’ve sworn Gracie had been beyond jealous during the reception. But maybe taking some time was the right move for them. Letting things cool off a little. Settle.

I scratched my neck, shaking off that thought. Screw that. Letting things cool off might be suitable for the investigation, but not for George and Gracie.

He opened the fridge and handed me a beer before he took one for himself.

He looked miserable beyond words, and I didn’t like seeing him this way.

“Tell you what.” I squeezed his shoulder. “I watched Gracie today, and she sure as hell seemed jealous and angry. Not the way a woman looks when she has no feelings. Just

give her a couple of days to cool off. I'm sure it will all work out."

He nodded, but he didn't look convinced.

"Let's sit out back," he said and led the way through the glass double doors to the surprisingly nice back porch.

A huge tree cast its late afternoon shadow onto the porch.

"Now it's your turn," George said, and a devilish grin transformed his face. Gone was his misery, replaced by an almost childish glee. "You and Felicia?"

I nodded. Quid pro quo. You could either be partners in a purely professional sense or you could be partners in every sense of the word. The first option was the safer choice, but considering how much I cared about George, like a little brother I had taken under my wing, professional distance wasn't in the cards for us.

Add to that, our doubts about our leadership and working with the SOG guys, and there wasn't another human being I trusted more than George right now.

Which said a lot about my life. A lot about my lousy, non-existent social life.

"We knew each other a lifetime ago," I said.

George raised his eyebrows and took a swig from his beer.

"Today was the first time we saw each other again."

George nodded. "Yeah, you seemed real glad to see each other again." He grinned.

My mouth went dry, and I rubbed my neck. I wasn't used to talking about my feelings or anything personal really. Not anymore. Not for a long time. My initial reaction was denial, but who was I kidding? I was over the moon, magically attracted and awestruck when I saw her.

Denying that would be childish.

"It was good to see her today. She looked better," George said, and something hard and sharp tightened inside of me.

“Better?” Why would she look better? Had she been sick or anything?

George nodded. “After the incident with her ex, she had some strangulation marks.” He touched his own throat. “But she seemed a lot better today.”

My body went ramrod straight, while my brain spun out of control. I flattened my lips to keep myself from exploding. Incident with her ex. Strangulation marks. What the fuck was he talking about?

A subtle red sheen layered over my vision. Had that bastard touched Felicia? Hurt her? I gripped the armrests of my chair.

George must’ve noticed my tension because he suddenly straightened. “It’s okay. She’s fine. I talked to Richard, and he’s still locked up. If anything changes, he’ll let me know.”

I ground my teeth. At least she wasn’t in immediate danger. But even knowing what had happened to her, made me want to punch something—or someone—preferably her ex.

“Remember the night we met with the SOG guys at the Oaktree? The night we rescued Edith?”

I nodded.

“From what I pieced together, that incident happened just hours earlier, at the Three Oaks Diner.”

I snapped my mouth shut. Hours earlier.

So close.

We’d missed each other by mere hours. I could’ve found her days ago. Could’ve protected her... I took a deep breath, then pried my fingers from the armrest and took a big swig to cool my throat.

If, if, if—didn’t matter. The past was in the past. I couldn’t change it now. The only thing I had any influence on was the present, and maybe, to a degree, the future.

I’d learned that the hard way. Learned that when I stood at Nina and little Carolina’s graves. I couldn’t change the past,

no matter how much I wanted to.

I could just learn to deal with it, live with it. And focus on the present. One breath at a time, one day at a time. “How bad was it?”

He shrugged. “She was admitted to the hospital but was released after a couple of hours. She’s been staying with Gracie since then. At least she did that night.” He suddenly looked like his thoughts were a million miles away.

“So, Richard?”

George’s attention snapped back to me. “What?”

“Richard is the one to contact about that?”

George laid his head to the side. “Why?”

Why what? Of course, I wanted to know what was happening with her. “I care about her.”

George nodded, then took another sip while watching me the whole time. “Of course, you do.”

There was something in the way he looked as if there was more to tell and he was contemplating saying it. Or maybe he was trying to figure out what was going on between me and Felicia.

But that was something I had to figure out myself first.

FELICIA



I finished loading the last dinner plate into the dishwasher. “I’m going for a walk tomorrow morning. Can you keep an ear out for Bobby in case he wakes up early?” I straightened, turned around, and plopped my ass against the counter, drying my hands on a towel while waiting for my sister’s answer.

Gracie arched an eyebrow and tilted her head skeptically. “A walk?”

I nodded.

“Alone?” Her eyes searched for more information.

“Yes.” Alone with Jeremy. Part of me wanted to confide in her, but if I told Gracie, everybody would know and talk about it, come tomorrow. And I wasn’t quite ready to share.

“Ahem. Why?”

What an excellent question. I scrambled my brain to come up with a reason, believable enough that she would buy it. Other than—because my baby daddy asked me out on a casual 6 a.m. walk. “I need the exercise.”

She looked at me as if I was insane.

“Before it gets too hot out.”

She continued to stare, her sister-bullshit-detector probably going on high alert.

But then she relaxed and nodded. Or at least faked it really well.

“Tell me about Jeremy.”

Totally fake. But two could play that game. I shrugged, trying to mask my excitement just thinking about him. “I don’t know him very well.”

Gracie’s expression softened, and she sighed. “Is he the one?”

I chuckled and shook my head but ended up nodding anyway, admitting everything. This was Gracie. I could never keep a secret from Gracie. She was the first one I told about the one-night stand. She was the first one to know about me being pregnant. She was my sister, best friend, and confidante, all rolled into one.

Gracie’s reaction was immediate and completely silly. She got up, grabbed my hands, and hopped up and down, squealing in delight as if she were twelve.

Such a kid move, but also...her enthusiasm. I grinned and joined in, and together, we jumped and squealed until we were both cackling like lunatics.

“I can’t believe it’s him.”

I nodded. “I can’t believe it either.”

Then she turned serious. “You have to tell him about Bobby.”

Oh, didn’t I know it? I sighed. The mention of Bobby brought a mix of emotions to the surface. Fear mostly. “I will. I just need to find the right time.”

She cocked her head and looked at me with empathy. “Take your time, but don’t wait too long. He deserves to know.”

Just thinking about telling Jeremy about Bobby made my skin crawl. I needed to get it over with as soon and as quickly as I could. Tomorrow probably. Though the thought of telling him made my skin itch. Enough to stop thinking about it.

Changing the topic, I asked, “What happened between you and George?”

Gracie sighed, sharing a glimpse of her own struggles, then shrugged. “There’s a couple of things. But we’re working on it.”

Working on it? How exactly was Gracie being pissed at him and throwing daggers at his girlfriend constitute working on it?

“It’s complicated.”

I nodded. Sure sounded like it. “Just trust your heart, Gracie-bear,” I said, using the old nickname my parents had sometimes used. “Together you’ll figure it out.”

“We will. But he’s George.”

I nodded as if I knew what she meant even though I had no clue.

Generally, when it came to men, I preferred to adopt an I-have-no-clue attitude. Because looking at my track record, that was truly what I was.

Clueless.

And looking at how my last relationship ended... Well, no... Actually, I wouldn’t think about that, wouldn’t think about Roy.

Not anymore.

That part of my life was over.

Me being a pushover was over.

I didn’t need or want another man running my life.

So where did that leave me?

Where did that leave Jeremy?

Was finally finding him a cosmic sign to finish that chapter of my life, as well?

End that imaginary love story so I could re-invent myself as the strong, not-taking-any-crap-from-anyone woman I should’ve been all along.

It felt like closure and new beginnings all mixed into one.

I didn't sleep a wink all night. Instead, I remembered our night. Fantasized about our night. The way he looked at me, sitting at that bar. The way he held me while we danced. Our first kiss. I hadn't thought about it in a long time, but I thought about it all night. Watching the clock finally turn 5.30 a.m. Then I jumped out of bed like a coil spring finally released after being compressed all night long.

I looked at Bobby, who was deep asleep and smiled. He was the deepest sleeper ever and was a major bed hog, despite being so little. Though I was just glad my tossing and turning hadn't had an impact on his sleep.

I entered the bathroom and got ready in record time.

I donned mascara but left the heavy makeup I'd used the last couple of days off. I looked at the faint marks on my neck. Should I cover them up? They were almost invisible by now.

Probably completely gone within the next couple of days. I draped my hair over my shoulders. This should be enough to cover them up. Jeremy didn't know they were even there, and if he was walking next to me, he probably wouldn't be able to see them anyway.

Jeremy.

Thinking about his name still made me giddy. How long had he been just a face? Just an unforgettable memory.

Far too long.

I switched the light off and tiptoed across the apartment and down the stairs, then I crossed the cafe and unlocked the door downstairs.

For a split second, I panicked. We hadn't talked about where to meet. I was outside alone.

Then my eyes met his across the street, and the panic inside me suddenly calmed.

There he was.

Everything was okay as long as he was by my side.

I shook my head. What a stupid thought. Had I learned nothing these last couple of days? I couldn't depend on someone else, anyone else. And especially not someone I didn't really know. Trusting someone almost got me killed. Time to wake up Felicia Cleaver. Time to take your life into your own hands and become truly independent.

Strong and untouchable.

I straightened my spine and crossed the street. However this would go, whatever Jeremy had to say, nothing could touch me if I didn't let it.

I wouldn't ever be weak again, and I would never again put myself into a position where a man could hurt me.

Never again.

"Hey there," he said, his smile so gentle I almost swayed in my promise to myself just seconds ago.

"Hey."

He held open his car door for me, and for a second, I hesitated. Nobody knew where I was going. I didn't really know him. Getting into his car was not a smart move. I looked up at the apartment above the cafe.

George trusted him. He was a federal agent. Not once had I gotten a bad vibe from him. I'd trusted him once. I could do it again.

I entered the car, but I didn't really feel the connection I felt yesterday. There was some kind of disconnect. Something slithery and cold inside of me. Mistrust? Doubt? Was it coming from him or me?

He took his seat, handed me a cup of hot coffee, and smiled at me. "I thought we could drive out to the quarry."

I looked at him, then at the cup in my hand. Then back at him.

He chuckled. "It's coffee."

I took a sip. A caramel latte. My favorite. How would he know? "How do you know what kind of coffee I like?"

He smiled, the laugh lines around his eyes creased. “I’ve got my sources.”

I raised my eyebrow and stared him down until he raised his hands.

“I called Richard and asked Dorothy.”

“You did?”

He stared back at me and nodded.

There was a fluttering in my belly. I had forgotten how mesmerizing his eyes were. Every time, I seemed to forget the impact his presence had on me. Shit. Independent. Strong. “Stalking doesn’t look good on you.”

His easy grin vanished and was replaced by an intensity that scorched me. “I once made the mistake of not knowing everything there is to know about you.” His voice was rough, and the intensity in it made me shiver.

“I’m not making the same mistake a second time.”

The fluttering turned into full-body tingles. And I felt almost scorched by the dark, promising look in his eyes.

Oh my.

FELICIA



“So, you talked to George, Richard, and Dorothy about this?” I waved between him and myself. “About us?”

He moved the car out of the parking lot and focused on driving. “Yes.”

“Hmm.”

“Is that a good hmm, or bad hmm?”

As if I knew. It was just hmm. Did I like that people knew we were meeting? Yes. It felt a bit safer that way. Did I like that those people were my sister, her man, and George? Not particularly. “What if I didn’t want them to know?”

“Why wouldn’t you want them to know.”

“Just because.”

“Because?”

He wasn’t letting this go, but I didn’t have an answer. Or maybe I did. Him talking to my sisters—there was potential disaster written all over that scenario. By the way, my sisters behaved yesterday, they’d figured it out. Or at least had their suspicions. It was only a matter of time until someone brought up Bobby. I was already running out of time without knowing what kind of a person Jeremy was. If he was good enough, worthy enough to be my boy’s father.

The only fact I knew about him was that he hooked up with random women in bars, whose names he didn’t know, and had one-night stands.

I couldn't fault him for that without also taking a good, hard look at myself. I'd acted out of character that night.

Maybe he did, too?

I'd made a stupid decision and a potentially dangerous one by staying behind, and later leaving with him. But I couldn't find it inside of me to regret any of it.

I got the best thing that ever happened to me out of that night.

I was thankful first and foremost. Slightly embarrassed second.

Now I had to find out the kind of person he was. I had to make sure he was safe to have around my sweet baby boy.

And I had to do that now.

When I didn't answer for a long time, he slowed, then pulled up to the curb. "Felicia, look at me."

Again with that low, demanding voice that made me want to please him. I turned to him.

"I want to know everything about you. Every single thing there is to know." He took my chin, turned my head, then smoothed his fingers along my throat. "And when I have to go to my friends or your sisters, then that's what I'm going to do." His finger lingered until goose bumps appeared on my skin and my breathing turned choppy. Then he moved my hair back over my shoulder. "They're still visible."

I averted my eyes to escape his stare, tried to move my head away from his fingers. I should've known he would find out, should've covered the remaining marks up.

But he just tightened his grip until I snapped my gaze back to his. Our gazes locked, and the intensity in his eyes made my skin buzz as if I'd entered a magnetic field.

He growled, then skimmed his finger over my cheek. "Don't ever hide from me." It was a command—one that should've made me tell him to fudge off.

Instead, my whole body relaxed as if finally I didn't need to be careful, or vigilant, anymore.

As if his pure presence was enough to make me feel completely safe.

He relaxed his grip and continued his soothing circles that made my nerve endings tingle.

But in contrast to his gentle touch, his eyes hardened and his lips turned into a menacing scowl. "If I didn't know the asshole who did this to you was still in jail—and I talked to Richard about that, too—I sure would pay him a visit and give him a taste of his own medicine."

I swallowed. Couldn't break the mesmerizing hold he had on me. I was suspended in space and time, soaking his attention up like an empty sponge. I wasn't afraid, not for one second. Instead, I felt heat and something deliciously heavy settle into my stomach. I wanted him to kiss me. Wanted him to haul me over onto his lap and do with me whatever he wanted.

But—to my utter dismay—he let go.

He checked his mirrors, put the car into drive, and moved us back into traffic. Then he gave that incredibly sexy, lopsided half-smile of his.

As if nothing had happened, and for a moment, I was questioning myself if I'd just imagined this little moment.

"George told me there are some nice trails out there."

Wait, what? It took me a couple of seconds before my brain came back on. He was giving me whiplash. It was mildly unsettling he could go from intense to smiling to easy conversation in under a minute, while I was still trying to get my heartbeat back to a normal frequency.

"Trails?" I looked at my shoes: ballerina flats. Good enough for walking the streets, not good for hiking.

"Yes."

Something about his matter-of-fact manner rubbed me the wrong way.

“I’m not equipped for hiking. You invited me for a walk yesterday. Already breaking your promises?” I said in a teasing, trying-to-be-funny kind of way, though the way he looked at me, he might not have gotten the teasing part. Too subtle?

“No.”

“No, what?”

“I’m not breaking my promises; are you?”

What promise? I’d never given him any promises. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you not bullshitting me.” His voice took on that gravely undertone, which made shivers run down my spine. “I still don’t know you well enough to read you.”

Holy shit. Memories from so long ago resurfaced in my mind.

He used those exact words back then. This exact phrase. Wow. “I’m not bullshitting you. I was trying to tease you. Apparently, I’m not very good at it.”

He grinned. His mood swings from dark to light, easy to intense, were giving me whiplash. “Teasing me?”

I nodded, crossed my arms in front of my chest, and looked outside the window, hiding my mortification. “Sorry, didn’t have much practice.”

“You’re sassy.”

“Excuse me?”

He chuckled. “I don’t remember you being sassy.”

Hmph. I could be sassy and sexy if I wanted to. I was just a bit rusty. Time to change the subject and get on with the getting-to-know-him part. “Tell me about your life.”

“My life?”

“Yes.”

“I met this girl a couple of years ago, then moved to Whitebrook—end of story.”

“Are you serious?” I stared at him, my mouth gaping.

“Dead serious, why?”

I leaned my head to the side. “That’s not your life; that’s a grave simplification of our crossing paths. Tell me about what happened in between. About your life. About all the other women.” I slapped my hand over my mouth.

Shit.

I could feel his eyes on me as if he was physically touching me. If I were in his shoes, I would probably stare, as well. Where was this coming from? Where had this I-don’t-take-no-shit-from-nobody woman been these last couple of years?

Where had she been when Roy had bossed me around, threatened me, and hit me?

Where had she been then?

“There were no other women.”

I scowled at him. “Who’s the one bullshitting, now?” I pouted. No way had this gorgeous man been alone for that long. “How about you try again?”

“Are you asking about sex? Yes, I had sex. But there’s sex and then there’s having someone in your life. There wasn’t somebody in my life in the last seven years.”

My stomach tightened. Our one-night stand belonged firmly in that it’s-just-sex category, as well. It didn’t mean anything. I hadn’t been in his life. Hadn’t been that someone. “So, you’re single?”

I blew out a breath. Why did I even ask him that?

And his sex life wasn’t important anyway. His character was. I needed to make sure he was safe for Bobby, not if he was sexually available.

“I wouldn’t have behaved that way yesterday if I did.”

Behaved that way? Oh, wow. He told me he’d missed me. We hugged. So that was already stepping over the line for him?

The straight-laced, honorable type, then.

“How would you have behaved?”

He chuckled. “I would’ve shook your hand?”

He said it like a question as if he wasn’t actually sure what he would’ve done.

“Felicia?”

“Yes?”

“I asked George and Richard about what happened that day at the diner in Three Oaks.”

Icy slithers of dread filled my veins. I balled my fists until my fingernails pricked my skin. Here I was, trying to be sassy, and just like that, just the mentioning of the incident brought back the unease and the fear.

I swallowed. Hard. “What did they say?” I tried to be nonchalant about it, but where was he going with this?

“I’m sorry I just touched you yesterday. I didn’t think. Didn’t know, not until after...”

I exhaled and cocked my head to the side. So that was where he was coming from? He didn’t want to know all the details; he just wanted to make sure he didn’t overstep. “So, you wouldn’t have hugged me if you’d known?”

He stayed silent as if he had to think about it. “I’m not sure.”

Well, I, for one, was glad he hadn’t known. I was glad our reunion had been exactly as it had been.

Simply perfect.

We arrived at the quarry, and he parked the car. This early, there wasn’t anyone else around.

He opened my car door and helped me out—another touch.

Another electrical zing.

No fear, no doubt, no hesitation.

Maybe I was okay; maybe my brain could distinguish between Roy and all the other guys. Maybe I wasn't really broken, just rattled.

The morning air was fresh and smelled of water from the lake mixed with the earthy smell of nature. A bird somewhere in a tree chirped. It was serene and peaceful. I should bring Bobby out here more often. There was a playground to the left, and he'd have a blast swimming. It would be a fun day out here.

We hit a trail, and Jeremy stopped at a sign with a map of all the different trails. He didn't consult me when he chose one and steered me in the right direction.

We walked for a while without talking, but it was an easy silence, and I didn't feel the need to fill it with empty words.

"How about you?"

"Me?" I gazed up at him. What was he talking about now?

"How has your life been?"

My chest tightened, and I blinked. Shit. What now? Do I tell him? But how? *Hey, Jeremy, you remember the sex? There were some consequences I've been dealing with these last couple of years—you're a dad—surprise.*

Fuuck.

Right then, his phone rang, and it felt like heavenly intervention. I didn't know how to tell him. I needed a game plan. I needed to rehearse this conversation and prepare myself for his reaction. Because from furious to pissed off to happy, anything could be possible.

"Thanks for calling back." He caught my gaze, indicated he needed a minute with his raised index finger, and walked a couple of steps away.

I walked on, increasing the distance between us to give him privacy. I settled down on a bench but turned slightly so I could watch him in my peripheral vision.

He looked even better today. The suit he wore yesterday had been perfectly okay, had given him a distinguished, older

look. Had emphasized the age difference between us, but the jeans and T-shirt today reminded me of that guy in the bar. The one who'd stilled my hands when I tried to unbutton his jeans. Instead, he'd stripped me naked, kissed every inch of skin he unveiled, and had me writhing and on the brink of orgasm before undressing himself.

That guy wore jeans. That guy was still sexy as hell even though his hair was salt-and-pepper grey by now.

How old was he? We never talked about it. And—if I was brutally honest—we didn't talk much of anything—at least not really personal things.

Instead, we let our bodies talk.

He ended the call, and I watched him approach me. Like a determined jaguar. Sleek, deadly, graceful.

He scrubbed a hand over his face when he reached me. "I'm so sorry, but there's a work thing that's come up."

I jumped up from my sitting position.

"I need to take the first flight out I can get."

I nodded. "Of course, whatever you need to do."

He gave me a half-smile. "I need to get you back home safe, and I need you to go on another date with me."

Another date? So, this early morning stroll was his idea of a date?

I nodded. And smiled inwardly. I was down for another date.

He took my hand, and together, we walked back to his car.

My inner smile evaporated. Should I tell him about Bobby? Now?

At the car, he held the door open for me again, then hurried to the other side.

When I tried to put the seatbelt on, it got stuck.

Damn thing.

I pulled and pulled, until his hand clamped over mine, his lips hovering just inches from mine.

I sucked in a breath, my eyes locked in by his intense stare. My heart started a bruising rhythm against the inside of my ribs. Could he tell? “Let go.”

It was a command I felt deep in my belly, and I let go of the seatbelt.

“Good girl,” he whispered, then pulled the seatbelt across my body and strapped me in.

And I?

I was barely breathing, while lust pooled deep in my belly.

Holy fudge.

I’d never had anyone call me a good girl, especially not with that sexy, gravelly, dark voice.

But boy, did I like it.

He cast me a sideways glance when he started the car.

Did he know the effect he had on me?

Probably.

I wasn’t that good at hiding my reaction.

His phone rang again, and he took it over the speaker. And the rest of the drive, he stayed on the phone, giving directions to get his flight sorted out.

I remained silent.

I hadn’t had that kind of visceral reaction to a man in a long time. Honestly, not since that night—and him.

Which resulted in Bobby.

I watched him drag his hand through his hair.

Now was not the time to tell him. Not when he was busy with work and I wasn’t prepared.

I would tell him next time.

He ended the call just seconds before we arrived at the café, and he double-parked the car directly in front of the diner.

“I’ll call as soon as I’m back in town again.”

I nodded.

He got out, helped me exit the car, and held my hand while he walked me to the door. “I’m looking forward to seeing you again.” He kissed my hand.

Such an old-fashioned gesture. I smiled, and he grinned back—sexy laugh lines and all.

Then he waited until I was back inside before he took off.

He was respectful, well-mannered, and, from what I’d gathered, a good person on top of being incredibly sexy.

Worthy and safe to get to know his son.

Soon.

JEREMY



Every time I closed my eyes I saw her. How her razor-straight hair moved in the wind like wheat bathed in a red sunset—how her subtle yet fresh scent had filled the car and mixed with the coffee had turned into an enticing all-body experience.

I snapped my eyes open. All-body-experience. What the...

If one of the guys would've heard those thoughts out loud, I would, for sure, be forced to hand in my man-card.

I looked around the plane, the noise of the engines creating a soothing backdrop. None of my fellow passengers paid any attention to me.

I leaned back and placed Felicia's scrunchy—which I'd been playing with—next to the notes and questions I'd scribbled during the flight.

When Matthew, Benno's and my former boss called me back, it was the worst possible timing.

And he called with even worse news.

He didn't want to talk over the phone, and he was about to go on a four-week cruise. Which, if anyone asked me, was an obscenely long time to be stuck on a ship.

I'd never imagined my hard-boiled former boss would ever retire, let alone go on cruises when doing so, but here he was, doing exactly that.

I fastened my seatbelt, blending out all the other passengers. I'd decided not to let my parents know I was in town since I intended to fly back later today, driven by urgency to see Felicia again and to not waste any time to act on whatever intel I could glean today.

I hadn't thought about coming home too much.

Hadn't let myself think about them.

I wiped at my chest. The sharp pain had turned into a dull, niggling ache. An emptiness, which was just a part of me.

A missing part.

Thinking about Nina and Carolina didn't hurt anymore—not like it had in the beginning when I had struggled to settle into my new normal and had thrown myself into work.

Inevitably thinking about that time led to my night spent with Felicia.

It had been a couple of months after their deaths. The pain had been unbearable, especially at night. So, I avoided sleep. I'd been to Whitebrook on a business trip. I couldn't even remember what for—some kind of training?

But I could remember her...us...making love. I didn't even know I had it in me, but her insecurity covered with moxie had a profound effect on me. I'd been gentler than usual. Cared more, deeper. I had both the unbearable desire to make her mine and at the same time, this gut-wrenching need to protect her.

I'd tried to find it in other women after her.

But none even came close. I wasn't lying when I told her there weren't any other women. Sex—sure—but nothing of meaning.

Nothing that came even close to her.

Us. Together.

The plane hit the tarmac and jostled me out of my thoughts. Coming home, to the place of so many memories... I'd avoided coming here these last couple of years. I'd settled

into Whitebrook, loved the small-town vibe even though it had grown quite substantially.

The mom-and-pop labs we'd investigated in the beginning had been replaced by more and more trafficked drugs.

And still.

This had been home.

Everything went smoothly, and I was out of the airport and hailing a cab in no time.

Matthew gave me his address when I called him from the airport, and it was a short ride.

He was already waiting for me on his front porch.

I grinned. He looked older than I remembered but also the same. He'd been the best boss I'd ever had, a father figure and mentor, and leaving him was one of the hardest parts of relocating to Whitebrook. I stepped onto the front lawn, but he shook his head, nodded to the car parked in the driveway, and marched towards it.

What the hell?

We got into the vehicle and spent the first couple of minutes in silence.

"I didn't think you would show up."

I shrugged. Maybe it was crazy to go to such lengths. But if Benno was a traitor, I needed to know, and Matthew knew Benno better than anyone. "What is going on?" I asked.

"I'm not going to talk about whatever you want to talk about at home," he said, then gunned the engine and pulled out of the driveway and into the traffic.

Was he paranoid? Maybe he'd had some kind of mental decline I didn't know about.

"The wife doesn't like me being involved in any shady shit." The inflection in his tone implied how ridiculous he thought it was.

“Are you involved in any shady shit?” I asked. I knew him, and I knew his wife. She had been pretty chill while he was still active.

“Of course not. I just had a long career. Saw too much and got to know that a lot of people have a shady past,” he said and cut a corner at a speed that had me uncomfortably tensing and grabbing hold.

His driving style hadn't changed.

“Where're we going?”

“Somewhere private and safe.”

Safe? Why would we need to be somewhere safe? I just wanted to ask a couple of questions. Not talk about state secrets.

When he took another corner, I became aware of our surroundings.

I tensed. He wouldn't do this, right?

But just like that, he steered us into the parking lot, and I stared at the walls of a cemetery.

The cemetery.

“Fitting, don't you think?” Matthew said and got out.

I followed. What did he mean? Fitting? Was this some kind of cruel joke?

“You know Benno had been in love with her, right?” Matthew said, and I just stared at him.

“Nina?” I asked.

Matthew nodded. Together, we passed the heavy iron gates.

I hadn't visited their grave in two years. I cleared my throat which had become uncomfortably dry. “Wasn't he just friends with her brothers?”

Matthew gave me a sideways glance. One of pity.

I still didn't understand why he would drive us here, why he would choose this place to talk. To torture me?

I looked around. There were no people around. The whole thing was fenced in by heavy stone walls. Trees grew between the tombstones, leaving enough space to be able to view the whole space.

So maybe this was the perfect place to have conversations that couldn't be eavesdropped or spied upon. But this conversation didn't require this level of caution.

“When you mentioned Benno, I did some digging. Contacted a few friends,” Matthew said when we reached our destination.

I'd commissioned a company for the upkeep of the grave, the beautiful red flowers a testament to it. Nina never wanted a big tombstone like this. But her Catholic family demanded it. And frankly, at the time, I just didn't care. I'd been hanging on by a thread, unable to sleep, breathe, or think rationally. I focused on their names. My troubled wife and our beautiful, innocent baby.

I became aware of the solid thumping of my heart in my chest.

Thumping when her little heart would never beat again.

My throat closed up. I didn't want to be here. Not with Matthew or anybody else.

“Did you find the girl?”

I looked at him, confused. My girls were right here. I'd buried them, together with my heart, hope, and future.

I turned away, trying to get a handle on my emotions, then stopped myself. I didn't have to pretend with him. He'd seen me at my worst. Had stood by me in my darkest hours. Matthew never judged like so many others. He'd just been there for me.

The one friend. The best one.

“The reason you relocated to Whitebrook?” Matthew said.

I was about to shake my head, so used to this, but stopped myself. “Yes. I did.”

Matthew's brows shot up. "You did?"

I nodded. "A couple of days ago. Mere chance."

"Hmm." Matthew's face said it all. He thought I was a lunatic when I put in for my transition back then. Tried to hold me back.

But in the end, it was the right thing for me.

For my sanity.

Too many memories and demons had haunted me here.

It was better to start fresh, and I'd chosen Whitebrook to do so. Because of Felicia. But I had left because of me.

But I wasn't here to rehash my past. Wasn't here to belly gaze at my fucked-up life. "There's some shady shit going on, and I have the suspicion Benno is involved."

Matthew nodded. "There's not much I found out. His gambling problem seems to be under control."

"Benno has a gambling problem?"

Matthew shrugged. "In the past, yes. There's no evidence of it now. His records are stellar."

I nodded. "But what if he is gambling again? What if that is the leverage the cartel uses to blackmail him?"

Matthew stared at me. "Do you believe he's a snitch?"

I shrugged. "No evidence. Just smells fishy."

But it might fit in. Though it didn't sit right with me, why wouldn't he just come clean and ask for help?

"I'm sorry I'm not much help," Matthew said. "But I'll keep my feelers out."

I smiled, then patted his back. I knew this was a long shot. But I had to try.

"Should we go back? Carol wants to see you for sure."

I grimaced. "Tell you what. I'll stay for a while. Give Carol my best and tell her I'll visit the next time."

Matthew nodded.

“And have fun on your cruise.”

He chuckled. “The things we do for love.”

I smiled. Matthew and Carol’s marriage was the most solid relationship I’d ever experienced.

We even named our little girl after her. Carolina.

Matthew patted my back, then turned, and I watched him make his way back to the exit.

I focused back on the gravestone, squatted down, then followed the golden inscription with my finger.

Carolina. My breath hitched.

My baby girl.

“Why did you take her with you? Why not just end your life and leave her be?”

Tears welled up behind my eyelids and dropped down on the ground.

So many tears.

FELICIA



“Hello?” My voice trembled and I hesitated before Bobby and I entered the worn-down warehouse, aka gym, which I didn’t even know existed. How could I’ve lived in Three Oaks for the past six years and not know?

Bobby looked up at me with big eyes, uncertainty written all over his face. He slipped his hand in mine and squeezed, and my throat tightened. Shit.

I straightened my spine. I needed to get a grip on my fear, especially for Bobby’s sake.

“Hi.”

My head snapped back to see a man who came to the entrance and welcomed us in.

“You must be Felicia.” He looked nice enough, with an easy, open smile with laugh lines around his eyes, his gray-blue eyes sparkling with friendliness. Not really intimidating—if you ignored the bulging muscles and tattooed arms, which made my stomach tighten, and I sucked in a deep breath before clamping down on the rising panic.

I exhaled. It was okay. I could deal with this.

Though I’d expected Carter—whom I asked to teach Bobby and me some basic self-defense—not this hunk.

But this wasn’t Carter.

“Hey, buddy.” The guy hunkered down and fist-bumped Bobby, who smiled.

I relaxed even more.

“I’m Goofy. Carter told me the two of you are interested in learning some self-defense techniques.”

I nodded because I couldn’t do anything else since my tongue was stuck to the roof of my too-dry mouth.

My brain screamed at me to leave. I didn’t want to be here, avoided looking at the mats behind Goofy. I mainly did it for Bobby.

I inhaled.

You’re a strong woman. A fighter.

I exhaled.

Not true.

Yet.

I wanted to become strong. To take charge of my life? To never again become a victim? This is where it started.

Maybe if I’d known some simple techniques, I could’ve avoided being nearly choked to death by Roy.

I watched Goofy talk to Bobby.

Then he smiled back up at me.

Goofy.

The name suited him. It sounded fluffy and fun and matched his easy grin.

“Hey.” Another man, this one even bigger and bulkier, came up behind us. He stepped into the warehouse, slipped off his shoes, and moved next to Goofy. His black hair was disheveled, and at least three days’ worth of stubble made him look even more dangerous.

“Hey, you,” he squatted down in front of Bobby, as well. “I’m Thomas, but everyone calls me Peaches. Carter matched the two of us, with us being almost the same size and weight and all,” he said to Bobby—whose eyes bulged—as did mine.

Then he smiled a lopsided grin, and his whole demeanor softened. He would never pass off as anything but

humongous...and intense, like someone who should be on a movie poster...playing Superman, or Zeus, or something. But right this moment, he looked like a big teddy bear. Non-threatening and, in spite of his bulk, almost...harmless.

Bobby snickered, and my heart did a double beat. My baby hadn't laughed a lot these last few days, not since everything that had happened with Roy—although he didn't know the details, he had sensed my stress—though he was getting back to his usual self. Being around all of his aunties helped. And my not being so tense anymore helped, as well.

This was the way; this was how we got back to normal.

Right through it.

“Okay, come in.” Goofy and Peaches got up, and standing next to each other, they were even more intimidating.

“You can put your shoes there.” Goofy pointed to a rack next to the entrance where Peaches had slipped off his. “And if you need to change, there's a changing room behind this door.” He pointed to one of three doors towards the left side of the entrance—the only separated structure in the otherwise open space of the warehouse.

I nodded. I was dressed in leggings and a T-shirt, as was Bobby. “I thought this was okay?” I said, my voice sounding tinny in the open area. “Carter said to dress in something comfortable but long-sleeved.”

Goofy looked me up and down and gave me a thumbs-up. “Perfect. Then we can start right away.”

I nodded. I put Bobby's and my shoes onto the rack, slipped off my purse right there, as well, then followed them to the mats.

Peaches and Bobby had already started, so it was only Goofy waiting for me.

“We'll start with something easy today, okay?” he said, moving back onto the mat.

I went with him. “But we should warm up first. How about we'll join whatever Peaches and Bobby are doing for warm-

up?”

I looked from Goofy to Bobby, who was giggling again. He and Peaches had their heads down, then they both clapped into their hands at the same time and started running in circles around the edges of the mats. Goofy followed, and I did, too.

Peaches started a couple of warm-up exercises—jumping sideways and running backwards, and he incorporated swinging arm movements, somersaults, and jumping jacks, and we ended with something Peaches called the shrimp.

By the time we were finished warming up, I was truly warm. I hadn't kept up with my fitness these last couple of years after losing the baby weight.

Roy hadn't liked for me to join a gym, but I should've at least continued to do some yoga at home.

Well, safe to say I was on the verge of wheezing once the warm-up was done.

Sadly, I was the only one. In case their pure good looks weren't enough indication, watching Goofy and Peaches barely break a sweat, while I was out of breath, really hammered home their physical fitness.

Bobby laughed about something Peaches said to him, and the sharp squeezing sensation in my chest surprised me.

What was it about Bobby's laughter today, that hit me like that? Had I gotten so used to him being as demure as I had been?

“Okay, let's start with a very basic exercise.”

George and Peaches showed us a simple move. Peaches grabbed George's arm, and George showed us a technique to free the arm. They showed us a couple of times, then Peaches and Bobby paired up, and I was left with Goofy.

He stood opposite me. “Any questions?”

I shook my head. Looked simple enough.

He took a step, grabbed my forearm, hard, and the world suddenly started spinning.

He might as well have grabbed my throat because I couldn't breathe, couldn't get any oxygen inside my lungs.

I grasped at his arm, but I couldn't get my muscles to work. The fear that I was going to die was overwhelming and debilitating.

Then it all faded to black.

When I came to again, I was lying on the floor, Goofy was standing with my raised feet in his hands, and Peaches and Bobby were kneeling on both sides of me.

I looked from Goofy, to Peaches, to Bobby, whose trembling lips made me wince. "I'm okay. I'm sorry."

I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists.

Shit.

What the hell happened? One second, I was feeling fine, the next one I was...flat out on the mat.

Goofy put my feet down and offered me a hand. I hesitated but took it, and he pulled me into a sitting position.

My eyes met Peaches', and I could see the worry and sympathy reflected in his.

I was officially a basket case.

Then I looked at Bobby who was still hovering by my side. One look at his rapidly blinking eyes and the nibbling at his lip and my heart cracked a little.

He shouldn't have seen this, shouldn't have to worry about me. "I'm really good; you can continue to practice with Peaches. I got lightheaded for a second. I just need to rest for a little while."

He hesitated, but Peaches got up and walked away and Bobby followed.

What was it that had triggered me? Just the situation? The strength of his grip? My mind went back to the memorial. I hadn't had this kind of reaction when Jeremy touched me. So maybe this was really just the situation.

Goofy sat down beside me, handed me a water, and we both watched Peaches and Bobby repeat the exercise again and again. “You okay?”

I nodded. My stomach hardened. I needed to give him an explanation. “It’s just.”

Goofy raised his hand. “Carter told us. No need to—”

“Thanks.” I sighed. “It’s just...how can I overcome this, if I can’t even...”

Goofy looked at me sideways. “You take one step after the other. One day after the other. You find someone to talk to about it, and it will get better with time. And one day, you will wake up, and you will feel like yourself again.”

I nodded.

One day I would feel like myself again.

FELICIA



I sat in my car and stared at my shop, Pure Essence, for a full five minutes.

It had stayed closed for the last week since the attack, but it was time to get myself together.

Time to get back to my normal routine.

Time for the being-independent-and-brave thing. Despite my breakdown at the gym with Goofy and Peaches.

I could do that.

I could take back control of my life. Be independent, brave, and strong.

Or at least try.

I opened the glove compartment, got out the little soapbox, took a sniff and shook my head. Now that I knew Jeremy, knew how he really smelled, the soap's impact wasn't what it used to be.

I shoved it back, got out, and rounded the building. It had been a two-story family home before the ground floor was converted into a small shop, while the previous owner lived above it. When I came to work for Clara, she'd just turned sixty, and she immediately adopted me.

It was a couple of years working with her where I learned everything about making soaps, skincare products, essential oil blends, and tea blends.

Clara poured all her wisdom into me as if she'd known, and the loyal customers hadn't batted an eye when I took over full-time.

I rang the bell and took the stairs up, and Mary, Clara's caretaker, opened the door to the apartment above the shop. "Hey, Felicia."

"Hey, Mary. It's been a couple of days. I'm so sorry." I usually visited at least every other day, just for half an hour. To sit with Clara and tell her stories.

"It's okay. I heard what happened." She eyed me up and down.

Of course, she did. Three Oaks was a small town, and the rumor mill had probably gone into overdrive. That was the good thing about spending time with Grace in Whitebrook. No nousey neighbors or village elders showing up to get the dirt.

"Are you okay?" Mary asked with a concerned smile.

She wasn't nousey. I had to remember not to be so critical or mistrustful of others. I'd had that at one time—had faith in the good in other people before I'd let Roy poison my mind.

He didn't trust anyone, including me. He was always suspicious if someone did something kind; he'd always assumed an ulterior motive. He'd laugh at me and tell me not to be so naive. Everybody was looking out for themselves.

I sighed. I bought into his arguments. His persuasion. It led to me pulling back, keeping to myself, and losing trust in the good in others.

My mind went back to the day of the attack.

That girl, the one who jumped Roy that day in the parking lot. She didn't have to interfere. She didn't have to jump in and save me. But she did. I made a mental note to ask Richard for her contact details. I owed her a heartfelt thank you. I looked back at Mary, whose smile grew even more concerned.

Shit. I'd spaced out completely.

"I'm okay. At least I'm getting there. How is she today?"

Mary cocked her head, probably not happy with my answer. But it was the truth. I was getting there. Was working on my mind. Was trying not to let doubt and fear dominate me.

“Today is a bad day,” Mary said.

I nodded. There had been very few good days these last couple of months.

“You can take a walk if you want to,” I said.

“It’s fine.” She laid her hand on mine. “Her daughters will come in later today; I will have time for a walk then. I’m making tea. Would you like a cup?”

I declined. I really only had a couple of minutes before I needed to open the shop.

I watched her shuffle to the kitchen, then turned and went to the backroom. It was a beautiful sight. Light flooded in through the big windows, and dust danced in the sunbeams. Clara sat in her rocking chair, staring outside, her white hair glowing in the sun.

“Hey, Clara. It’s me, Feli,” I said as soon as I entered, then sat down in the chair beside her.

She hardly reacted. Her watery eyes looked empty.

Seeing her like this broke my heart every damn time. Gone was the whirlwind of a woman I had come to love. I still remembered the first time I entered the store, pregnant, ready to leave college and take a job—any job—to support my little family. She’d worn a caftan in the shrillest colors imaginable, and her energy had matched the explosion of colors. She had me at ease and laughing in five seconds flat. And every day while working together since then. She’d been there for me when I went into labor and whenever I felt like I was the worst mother on Earth.

She gave of herself so freely. When I started dating Roy, she disapproved. But she never said anything outright.

I sighed. I should’ve listened.

“It’s finally over. I left Roy. He’s out of my life for good.” I sighed. “You knew from the beginning, didn’t you?”

The look in her eyes didn't change. Was she even still in there? At the beginning of her illness, it was just moments when she looked disoriented. Now, it was the reverse. The clear moments were few and far between. Gone was her energy, her boisterous laughter. Her personality.

“The shop had been closed for a couple of days. I needed some time to recuperate. But I'm back now. Ready to start over.”

Ready to start over.

My mind immediately went to Jeremy—our little moment in his car.

“Good girl.”

I got goosebumps just thinking about his whispered words. His lips almost touching mine. His eyes locked on mine.

I exhaled.

I hadn't heard from him since he'd dropped me off after our little almost-hike yesterday.

“Remember Bobby's father. The guy I met in a bar and spent the night with?” I didn't expect an answer. Of course, she didn't remember. There wasn't much she still remembered. “I found him.”

I found him.

It sure felt like that when we first met. Like I'd been searching for him all my life and I finally found him. There was the familiar fluttering in my belly. Like every time I thought of him. Of how he took me in his arms and told me he missed me. I shook my head. That was fairy-tale bullshit. But life wasn't a fairy tale. “I haven't told him about Bobby, but I will. I think he's a good man.” Though maybe I shouldn't trust my own judgment in that. I'd been wrong before.

Clara suddenly turned her head and looked at me. “Trust your heart. Your heart knows,” she said. Then the look in her eyes turned dull and inward again.

I swallowed hard, trying to dispel the thick ache in my throat. Tears pooled in my eyes. There was a glimpse of the

friend, the mentor I'd gained and lost in the span of just a couple of years.

Mary came in with a tray, and I jumped up to make space. "I need to go." I kissed Clara's temple. "Thank you," I whispered into her ear, still all choked up from her moment of clarity and sage advice—of the gift of having my friend back even if it was only for a moment.

"Have a nice afternoon."

I let myself out, went downstairs, and entered the shop from the back door. The cornucopia of scents immediately hit me and put me at peace. I loved Pure Essence. I loved the materials I got to work with and the beauty I got to surround myself with. I even enjoyed the soap-making classes I'd started last year to bring in additional customers.

This was my safe haven. The one thing Roy couldn't touch, couldn't pollute with his toxicity. It was a good thing he never knew I owned the shop now because otherwise, he would've tried...and possibly succeeded.

I shook my head when I flipped the little sign at the entrance and opened the door to let in fresh air. The chimes above the door sounded like pixie dust was strewn all over the shop and immediately made me smile.

I was okay.

I went back through the shelves, checked on the best-before dates on the skincare products in the see-through fridge. Threw away a whole bunch. That was the downside of only adding natural ingredients and preservatives. Then I started the ethereal music, which was another signature feature of the store. I'd tried to change the music once, but after the third customer asked me if anything was wrong that day, I went back to the tried-and-tested CDs from another century.

I wasn't even settled behind my desk when the first customer, Mrs. Bernbrooke, entered.

And it didn't let up all afternoon. It seemed all of my customers were running low and had just been waiting for me to open up the shop again. Or they had heard and had been

nosey or concerned about me. Though not one asked me outright or mentioned something. They all seemed to be relieved that I was back to my old self.

That meant I was convincing.

And all of them were very nice about it.

I closed the front door after one of my customers left, then settled back behind the counter. I was happy I'd opened the shop today, but the interaction with my customers had been exhausting, as well.

The chimes jingled once more, and I looked up.

There he was.

Butterflies erupted in my stomach.

I couldn't hide the smile blooming on my face.

I'd tried all day not to think about him. To not constantly check my phone to see if I'd missed a call from him.

It was pathetic, but here he was as if I'd conjured him up with sheer willpower. He wore a suit again. And even though he looked good, I liked him more in jeans and a T-shirt.

In a suit, he looked so formal and unapproachable despite being sexy.

"Hey, Felicia," he said and hesitated, then marched across the shop to my desk.

"Hi." I pasted on a smile and clasped my hands together. Why was I suddenly nervous? "What brings you here?"

He grimaced, then looked around uncomfortably. "I need soap."

I raised my eyebrows and clamped down on my urge to snort with laughter. "You need soap, and that's why you're here?"

He nodded for a moment. Then stopped himself, grinned, and shook his head. His eyes darkened when he suddenly turned serious. "I'm here because I needed to see you."

Wow.

The look in his eyes, his dark voice, the words. I could feel his urgency like a physical entity that matched my own feelings.

But what did that even mean? Need? He didn't need me, and I didn't need him.

“How did you even know I was here? How did you know about the shop?”

He looked at me for a long time, and I at him.

“I told you...” He leaned forward onto the counter, our faces only inches apart.

I could smell his scent—woody, dark, with a hint of spice.

He looked at my lips until they tingled. “...I want to know everything about you. Every single thing.”

Wow.

The butterflies I felt when he entered the shop were replaced by a hive of angry bees buzzing deep inside my belly—a hot flush shot through me as if I physically faced a fire.

He'd used the same words yesterday morning.

And now again.

I needed to tell him. Needed to tell him about Bobby.

Now.

I swallowed and watched him slowly lift his eyes.

“Ahem. There's something I need to tell you.”

Jeremy nodded. Waited.

“I...we...” I stumbled over my own tongue, clutched my hands until my nails pierced my skin, anxiously searching for the right words, the courage to tell him.

Then his phone rang again. He groaned. Straightened, then retrieved it. “What?” he bellowed.

He made eye contact, held up a finger, and moved towards the door, then outside.

When the door closed, I could breathe again. But it was only a short respite. Once he came back, I would tell him, just straight out. Get it over with.

I arranged the pens in front of me on the counter.

Neatly aligned them.

Waiting, I watched him pace in front of the shop. Watched him end the call. Watched him come back inside.

“I’m so sorry, but I need to go. My boss needs me to come back in,” he said and ran his hand through his hair.

I nodded.

“Are you free Friday afternoon?”

I cocked my head to the side. Another date? “I need to check.”

“Do that, and let me know if you’re not. Otherwise, it’s a date. And Felicia...”

I looked up.

“I promise, I’ll leave my phone behind.”

He was about to turn around.

“Wait. What kind of shoes do I need?”

He turned back. “The pretty ones from our walk will do.” He grinned. “It’s just a little get-together. A couple of friends. No hiking, I promise.” He winked, and I melted.

That’s all my heart needed. One wink and I was a goner.

FELICIA



The lingering smile his visit had planted on my face came crashing down fifteen minutes later when the door opened and three men walked in. They didn't look like my usual customers, but for a second, I hoped one of them had a girlfriend with a birthday coming up, that it was the reason they were here.

That hope evaporated when they came straight toward me.

I couldn't even pinpoint why I felt intimidated in an instant.

Maybe the way they looked around the shop, maybe the way they came in—not exploratory but aggressive and geared for battle.

Whatever vibe I caught from them, it had my heart pumping and my palms sweating.

“Hey, you Roy's girl?” the one with a bandana around his left wrist asked; he had a slight accent, a harsh way of pronunciation, but nothing too noticeable.

But the hair on my arms and neck lifted immediately. I swapped a shaky hand across my forehead. Roy's girl? What did those guys have to do with Roy?

I'd never seen them before. They'd never visited him at home, and none of them looked like they would hang out in a bar drinking their evenings away.

My reaction must've been too slow for him because he squeezed his eyebrows together and narrowed his eyes, which

turned his face into a menacing mask. Then he leaned forward and pressed his hands on the counter.

I took a step back and shook my head.

No way would I tell them anything.

He looked around the shop. “Is Roy around?”

I shook my head again. “I just work here.”

He looked me up and down.

And it felt like a dark, slimy mass creeping over my skin. Goose bumps arose on my body, and my mind raced.

Roy? Why was he asking for Roy? Roy had never had any interest in the shop. Except when he called the landline to make sure I was really working.

He’d always done things like that, little things to control me. To see if I’d lied to him.

Which I never did.

“Talk, woman.”

His bark made my stomach harden and my knees shake. I could feel that same lightheadedness I’d felt with Goofy and Peaches at the gym.

I shook it off, forced myself to take deep, slow breaths. I couldn’t afford to lose consciousness. Not with these guys in my shop. I cleared my throat. “I think Roy is in jail.”

His eyebrows snapped up. “Prison?”

I nodded.

He looked around the shop before once more focusing on me. “Roy’s really bad at poker.”

My breath hitched. I didn’t know Roy’d been gambling.

“He’s got some open debt and told us to come here to collect.”

My stomach hardened even more, and my heart hammered in my chest.

He did what?

The shop wasn't his. I didn't even think he knew it was mine.

Why would he do that? Could he even do that?

Not legally, but those guys did not care about the legality of it.

"Talk to the owner and tell her, we'll be coming back," the guy said and turned around, then pushed a shelf until it toppled over.

I shrunk back until my back was against the wall and watched the three of them walk out of the door. Even the ringing of the bell sounded shrill and alarming.

Oh my God.

I was suspended behind the counter, not able to move a muscle. I waited until they got into their car. Watched them drive away. Then I sprinted to the door, locked it, ran back, and cowered back down behind my counter.

I had full-body shivers. My heartbeat thrashed in my ears and bounced against my rib cage, which made my entire chest hurt. Breathing was difficult, and I rubbed my sweaty palms against my jeans-clad thighs again and again.

Danger, danger was still flashing through my mind. And it took me a while until I could think straight again.

What the hell? What was that? What did Roy do, and why was this happening to me? Hadn't he fudged up my life enough? Hadn't it taken all my strength to rid myself of him, only to have his shit haunting me even when he wasn't around?

How would I get out of this situation? I needed to tell someone. Needed to contact the sheriff's department. To call Richard.

I angled forward until I could open one of the drawers, then reached for my phone with shaky fingers.

Once I got it, I leaned back against the shelves behind me and sank to the floor again.

Then I called the sheriff's department, and they promised to send someone over immediately.

While I waited behind the counter, I recalled what had just happened.

So, Roy owed someone money and told them to come here to collect it? Why would he do that?

He knew I barely made enough to keep us afloat.

Not nearly enough to pay back any gambling debts.

There was a knock on the door, and my breath hitched. But then I peeked and saw a man in uniform.

I pulled myself together and opened the door.

"Hello, I'm Deputy Fisher; you called in a threat?"

I nodded, then pulled myself together. "Three men were just here."

"Can I have some ID?"

I stumbled back to the counter to get my purse and handed over my ID.

He studied it, then his eyes snapped to my face. "You're Felicia Cleaver."

I nodded.

Three Oaks was a small town, and even though the sheriff's department was located in Whitebrook, I was pretty sure everybody had heard of the woman who'd been choked at the parking lot of the Three Oaks diner.

Nothing stayed a secret around here.

Not even the things you wished no one knew.

He looked around. "Did they take something?"

I shook my head.

"Harmed you in any way?"

I shook my head again. "They threatened me."

He narrowed his eyes. "Did you know them?"

“No.”

“Why did they threaten you then?”

“They know my ex, who’s in custody right now.”

He nodded.

“They asked for Roy Garber—my ex—then, when I told them he’s in prison, they said they were collecting gambling debts.”

He looked around again. “Do you have a security camera?”

“No.” This was Three Oaks, for Christ’s sake. I’d never had troubles in all my years working at the shop.

No troubles at all.

“Did they say they would come back?”

I nodded.

He wrote down my answers, had me sign his notes, then told me someone would be in contact.

I didn’t feel any better, so I closed the shop and went home after he left.

Trying to shake the fear once more.

Deputy Fisher had told me there was a possibility they wouldn’t come back since they were looking for Roy. But I wasn’t sure about that at all.

JEREMY



On the drive over to Felicia's house, I couldn't shut down my brain.

All the events that had happened between now and the last time I'd seen her at the shop had been constantly running through my mind.

Searching for where we went wrong, trying to find the learning opportunity in all of it. Somehow, what should've been a carefully planned sting operation of a human auction taking place at the V-club in town, had turned into a complete shitshow.

With us chasing after Max's girl, Milli, and her kidnapers.

And me getting reamed a new one by Benno without being anywhere near outing him as a traitor.

It was—what one might call—a complete clusterfuck.

And I was sitting right in the middle of it.

Benno had told me in no uncertain terms that he was having my head for this, one way or the other.

And he hadn't been joking. So now I was officiously under investigation and off of the case.

Not that I'd told that fact to anyone, not even George.

I always knew we were toeing a fine line with working so closely with the SOG guys.

I couldn't be sure, but it might also be that Benno had gotten wind of me snooping around in his past when I dug into Mr. Caroz's files. I thought it wouldn't raise suspicion, since he was one of the agents on file. Maybe I was wrong. But anyway.

It was just overall bad timing to be sidelined right now.

Our joint task force was on wobbly legs since apparently, after they'd kidnapped Milli, things had been hairy for a while. With Max almost coming to blows with one of Richard's deputies.

I shook my head, then squeezed the bridge of my nose.

At least that one turned out okay without too many aftereffects—because why else would Max and Milli have us all over for their little get-together just three days later?

So today, I would not think about the total disaster my work life had become.

Today, I would focus on getting to know Felicia.

Maybe bringing her to the party at Max's wasn't such a brilliant idea. Not for our second date. Though I wanted her to get to know the guys, wanted to see if and how she would fit into my life.

I parked at the curb and got out of the car. The address in Three Oaks Felicia gave me wasn't that far from George's house. And not far from where I agreed to pick up Goofy.

It was a pretty little unit. In a street full of similar little houses. Nothing fancy, not very big, but the colorful flowers along the walk up to the house did a good job of making it feel homey and inviting.

I rang the bell, and she opened the door in an instant.

And took my breath away.

Her green sundress was feminine and playful and made her look so young and beautiful, it took my breath away.

“Hi.” She looked nervous, the green in her eyes popping.

“Hey.” She looked so damn pretty; I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

She closed the door, and her dress got caught in it.

I pulled it free, put my arm around her shoulders, pressed her to my side, then took the key from her hand and locked the door for her.

Her cheeks turned an adorable shade of crimson, and a niggling sensation took root somewhere in my brain. “How old are you?”

She raised her eyes to mine, then cocked her head.

But I couldn’t take the question back. And I didn’t want to. She’d been young when we met, when we shared the night. College-age. Barely legal—that’s why I had the bartender check her age.

But she still looked so young, I was downright frightened of her answer. Did she show a fake ID and I’d had sex with a minor? My stomach dropped.

“I’m 26.” She smiled. “You?”

I led her to my car. Twenty-six. Damn. “I’m forty-two.” Which made me almost twenty years her senior. “You were way too young.”

She looked at me with a grin when we stopped at the car.

“Or you were way too old.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

I loved this teasing side of her. Capital-L loved it. “Now I feel like a pervert.”

That had her chuckling. “Well, we were consenting adults, and age is just a number. But if hooking up with young girls at bars floats your boat—”

I put my hand over her mouth—the only way to shut her up besides pressing my lips against hers and kissing her senseless.

Thinking of it, maybe I should’ve chosen option B.

She chuckled and bit the palm of my hand playfully.

A sharp zing flashed through my body and right down to my dick.

Holy fuck.

I took a step closer, dropped my hand to her belly and pushed her against the car.

Her pupils dilated, and she sucked in a breath—another shot of lust that had my dick tightening. “Let’s make one thing perfectly clear from the start.” I let my thumb skim over her cheek and settle directly on her pulse point. “Our one-night stand?”

Her pulse fluttered beneath my thumb.

“I don’t usually do shit like that.” Our gazes locked, and she buried her teeth into her lower lip, which made me want to replace her teeth with mine.

“And for liking young girls”—I stepped even closer, and caged her in between my body and the car—“you’re the exception.”

I could feel the shiver that coursed through her body. Could see desire darken her eyes.

Desire matching my own.

Then I took a step back and opened her door. “Hop in.”

She stared at me as if I was crazy, and maybe I was because I wanted to kiss her. Wanted to rub against her, right here on the street, with everyone watching.

But I wouldn’t. Not only had she been assaulted recently, but this time around, I would court her properly.

And that meant no more power moves.

I helped her into the car and watched her settle. The hem of her dress crept up a couple of inches and revealed creamy-white skin. I tore my eyes away, made sure her dress didn’t get caught in the door, and closed it.

Flashes of memories assaulted me: of me lying between those legs, caressing every bit of skin she’d revealed. She’d

been shy. Innocent. But so sensual, and I'd been caught in her little moans and the feeling of her silky skin.

I rounded the hood, got in, and started the car. But my thoughts were still there.

Back in that hotel room. In that bed.

It had been a memorable night—all the more since she'd been gone when I woke up. My reaction to waking up alone had been immediate and visceral—nothing I'd ever experienced before or since—the urge to get her back, that deep sense of her belonging to me, of loss, and the guilt—so much shame and guilt.

“You're not a pervert,” she said without looking at me.

I nodded.

Nevertheless, seven years ago, she'd been nineteen. And just thinking about it made me break out in a cold sweat.

Holy hell.

“Tell me about your friends. Where are we going?”

I snapped myself out of going down memory lane—no use in regretting the past. “We'll have to pick up one more, but then we'll be heading toward Moon Lake. Max, our host, has bought a lodge up in the mountains. I don't know if you've met him. He's one of Carter's guys.”

“Carter? As in Edith's Carter?”

I nodded. “The rest of Carter's crew will be there, as well as George and Richard, and his deputies. Richard is bringing Dorothy, as well; that's why I thought you might feel comfortable.”

“Wow.”

She didn't look comfortable.

“There a problem?”

She shook her head. “I just now realized there will be a lot of guys. And you already know everyone.”

Was she feeling uncomfortable because of the men?
“Dorothy will be there, as well, and a couple of other women.”

I’d made sure Richard was bringing Dorothy so Felicia had someone there she knew and trusted. Even though she never showed any signs of being uncomfortable in my presence, the assault hadn’t been that long ago, and I wanted to make her feel safe. Needed to make her feel safe.

Every time I thought about that asshole attacking her, I could barely suppress my anger.

When I’d marched into Richard’s office—after George had told me—and demanded details, he barely blinked an eye. He refused to give me any details either. Just the barebones of the assault. And the status of her asshole ex-boyfriend in jail.

“This sounds like fun, but Jeremy, there’s really something we need to talk about.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Remember our night?”

I glanced at her sideways; of course, I remembered. “Yes. It was a memorable night.”

She nodded. “Well...”

Right at that moment, my gaze fell on Goofy standing in the driveway, holding onto the wrist of a woman who didn’t seem too happy about it. I slowed down to a stop.

“What?” Felicia said, and my gaze snapped back to her. I forgot to tell her we’d be picking him up. My chest tightened. What if she wasn’t okay with being in a car with two men?
“We’re picking up one of Carter’s guys. I’m sorry, I forgot to mention it. If it makes you uncomfortable, I can...”

She sighed, then shook her head once, but her gaze remained on the scene playing out in front of our eyes.

“Just let me go, Scotty,” the woman outside said.

Felicia’s head whipped to me. “Scotty?”

I shrugged. “He goes by Goofy, but Scott is his real name.”

She shook her head.

I opened my window. “Hey, Goof?”

He looked around and let go of the woman’s wrist who looked towards us, as well.

Her eyes widened. “Felicia?”

She approached her door, and Felicia let down the window. “What are you doing here?” She gave me a critical once-over before focusing back on Felicia. Then she brushed Felicia’s hair to the side in a move far too intimate.

My stomach hardened when the woman took her chin and moved it around, looking at her neck, at the marks.

My eyes narrowed. Who the hell was she?

I took Felicia’s hand and squeezed.

Felicia’s gaze moved from her friend to our hands, then to my eyes. Then she squeezed back. “This is Dr. Niki Michaels. She’s a good friend.” She turned back to the woman who was looking at our hands with one eyebrow raised, “Niki, this is... Jeremy.”

When Felicia said my name, Niki’s second eyebrow shot up.

There was a moment of silence.

Some non-verbal exchange ended with Felicia shaking her head slightly before Niki looked back at me, and we shook hands. “Jeremy, we’ve met before—in the ER.”

I nodded. Yes, we did. I just didn’t make the connection. She looked different now than in scrubs-work-mode.

“Where’re you guys headed?” she asked.

“The party I begged you to accompany me to,” Goofy said while opening the back door, folding his frame into the backseat, and squeezing forward between our seats.

She shook her head. “You made it sound like a date.”

Goofy grinned. “You and me at a party? It would’ve definitely been a date.”

She rolled her eyes. “Anyways, have fun.” Then she stepped back with one last sharp glance aimed at Felicia and met head-on by Felicia.

Maybe it had something to do with the assault and doctor-patient confidentiality. But something told me it had something to do with me.

“Ready to go?” I asked, then eased us back into traffic.

Felicia nodded.

“Yeppers,” Goofy said, then leaned back into his seat. “Hey, Felicia, how’re you doing?”

Felicia turned around and looked back. “I’m quite good.”

“No more—”

“Nope. None. It’s all good,” she said, her voice sharp and finite.

What the hell was that all about? “I didn’t know you two know each other.”

Felicia said nothing but just stared straight ahead through the windshield.

“Well, it’s a very small world around here,” Goofy said.

His answer was vague. But the silence that stretched told me everything I needed to know.

Something was going on that I didn’t know about.

And I did not like that at all.

JEREMY



I parked the car at the end of a long lane of trucks in Max's driveway. I guess we were the last to arrive.

Goofy jumped out immediately and sprinted up the stairs, two at a time.

Max's lodge was old but at the same time looked hyper-modern. Whoever had it built must've been truly futuristic in his visions. The entrance—on the top floor of the two-story wooden lodge—was accessible by a set of wide outdoor stairs, which also led to a deck that surrounded the entire top floor. It looked like a fortress but in a nice way.

Felicia stared at the lodge through the windshield. "Wow, I didn't expect that."

That was my exact reaction when I drove up here for the first time. The road up, nothing more than a gravel road, wound through heavy vegetation and was an experience in and of itself, and after every bend, you expected it to end right then and there.

But once you reached the lodge, it was like the sky opened up on a cloudy day and handed you...a fortress on a mountain.

I chuckled, exited the car, rounded the hood, and opened her door. When she looked up, I saw hesitation in her eyes.

I squatted down and took her hands in mine. "It's really low-key—just a couple of friends having a relaxing day while stuffing themselves with the best barbecue you've ever

experienced.” I hesitated when a thought popped into my head.
“Do you even eat meat?”

Shit.

I should’ve asked that before inviting her, or at least before picking her up. At least then I could’ve made sure to pick up something she would eat.

“I’m okay.” She cupped my cheek with her hand.

When she made contact, the sizzling sensation was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. It made the blood in my veins sing.

“I do eat meat. I’m just nervous to meet all your friends.”

“What can I do to make it better?”

She sighed, and a smile made her gorgeous lips part.

“Don’t leave me alone.”

I grinned. “Done.”

With that, I got up and helped her out of the car.

And my so-called friends took exactly that moment to descend from the house and welcome us and draw Felicia into the fold.

I kept my promise of not leaving her side even though it meant almost no shop talk with the guys; instead, we talked to every single one of the girls attending and all the couples, as well.

And holy shit. The moment Milli and Felicia faced each other, they both started to squeal and jump up and down, then hugged each other as if they were long-lost friends.

“I don’t even know...you saved my life how can I ever repay what you did for me,” Felicia said.

My stomach tightened.

Milli smiled, almost sheepishly. “Everyone would’ve done the same thing.”

I narrowed my eyes. What was going on? And then it clicked. There’d been a girl who helped Felicia when her ex

attacked her. I stared at Milli—all five foot nothing of her.

We ate, and whatever Blake was doing while preparing the grilled meat, it was some of the best I'd ever had.

I could've watched Felicia forever. After that tension in the beginning, she relaxed more and more. As it turned out, she already knew half the people here, and her sister, Dorothy, introduced us to the ones we didn't know.

Now, we stood in a big circle talking with Dorothy, Sharon, who was apparently Lucas' better half, Belinda, who was the deputy sheriff Max almost came to blows with, and an old family friend of the Cleaver sisters, and Milli, who looked carefree and relaxed, which, on top of my deep gratitude for her for having stepped up and rescued my woman, made me appreciate her resilience.

A lot.

She was one tough cookie for how young, petite, and innocent she looked.

Courageous and admirable.

Watching her, I would've never guessed she'd been kidnapped just days ago—or that she attacked a man twice her size—risking her own life for a stranger.

I turned around, and sure enough, up on the deck, Max was talking to Carter, but his eyes were fixed on Milli—never leaving her out of sight.

I chuckled. What a small, small world.

And thank God for happy endings.

Then I made eye contact with George across the lawn who looked miserable and alone. I touched Felicia's elbow. "Hey, I'll go and catch up with George for a sec; you good?"

She nodded. A carefree smile lit her eyes up even more, and a quick flashback hit me.

That same smile, that same look in her eyes of pure joy and excitement. She'd looked like that...after I'd made love to

her for the first time.

My stomach tightened with the memory, and my dick did, too. Having her stand in front of me—the woman of my fantasies—was still surreal, and thrilling.

I gave her a quick peck on the lips because I couldn't not do it, even if I wanted to. I wanted to do even more, I wanted everything with her. But I would go slow. Would give her time to get used to having me in her life.

Then I excused myself and marched over to George.

A bout of laughter made me glance back at Felicia. Her laughter was magnificent, clear as the bell she had above the entrance of her shop, and it lured me in like a moth to the flame.

“Is there something you wanted to tell me?” George said.

I turned and looked at him. “Hmm?”

“You want to tell me how you know Grace's sister Felicia? And why you arrived together?”

I scratched my neck, my eyes searching and finding her again. How would I even start telling our story?

“We met a long time ago.”

“And?”

“And, nothing. We met again at Owen's memorial and have reconnected.”

“Let's go over and talk to her.”

I stared at him for a moment. He was in a strange mood.

But then I nodded, and we both walked back toward the group. Once there, Felicia looked at George, her eyes narrowed.

“I'm sorry,” George said and raised both his hands.

“For what?” she said, her arms crossed over her chest.

It was marvelous seeing her like this. Gone was the insecurity, gone was the shy woman, and she was now replaced by a goddess of vengeance, ready for battle.

“For hurting Grace.” George sighed. “But I love her, I truly do, and I will do everything in my power to do right by her.”

Felicia softened visibly. “It’s hard for the both of you. Just...don’t hurt her. And don’t let her retreat into her shell.”

Dorothy joined our little conversation and nodded, as well. “But if you hurt her, we’re gonna kick your butt,” she added.

George nodded though he looked unconvinced.

This was a much-needed intervention if I ever saw one. I shifted until I was behind Felicia, giving her my silent support.

It was time for George to clean up his act.

George looked from Felicia to me and back to Felicia. His eyebrows shot up as if he had some kind of revelation.

Suddenly, a loud whistle made us all turn toward the lodge.

Max stood there on the deck. “Goofy, go with Carter. The rest, gather around—we got work to do.”

His grim look and the tone of his voice conveyed an urgency that had the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Something had happened, and that something wasn’t good.

We all jumped into action immediately while George and I simultaneously moved towards the lodge and up the stairs to the deck and gathered along all the other guys in the living room.

Felicia followed and stood next to me, our hands almost touching.

“What happened?” Peaches asked.

“Carter just got a call from Edith. There was a gunfight on the street right in front of the coffee shop, and two guys commandeered their car. Edith could jump out, but Grace and her nephew, Bobby, are still trapped. Looks like they’ve been kidnapped.”

All color drained from Felicia’s face. But in this moment, I was more concerned about George’s reaction. He looked shell-shocked and stumbled toward the door before he stopped and

looked around as if seeing all the people for the first time. I took a couple of steps until I was by his side and clamped down on his shoulder.

We needed to get the facts and formulate a plan before taking off.

“How old is Edith’s nephew?” I asked. Having kids involved always made everything worse.

I looked at Dorothy who was holding hands with Felicia. But my eyes got stuck on Felicia, who looked so pale, her skin looked almost translucent, her freckles almost invisible.

“He’s six,” Felicia whispered, looking me straight in the eyes, hers resembling a brooding storm. Then she looked down at her shoes, hiding her face.

I stared at her. It took a few seconds to sink in.

Six years.

He was Felicia’s son, and he was six years old, when our night had been almost seven years ago. Six years plus...nine months?

A suffocating coldness slithered through my body like a snake, coiling in my guts and squeezing the breath from my lungs until I was paralyzed with anger.

We used protection, didn’t we?

My heart clenched. What were the chances her child was mine? My chest tightened as if I’d been punched, and I couldn’t catch a breath. Or did she sleep around? A dangerous cold-burning flame spread through my body until ice-cold rage consumed me. Was I just one of many one-night stands she’d had?

I clenched my jaw, balled my fists, and stared at her, barely keeping myself from spinning out of control.

But when she finally looked back up, her eyes said it all.

Mine.

Suddenly, all the tension fled my body.

Felicia and I had a son.

I shook my head, and my eyes locked on George, who was standing next to me, his thumb hovering over the call button.

“What are you doing?” I grabbed his forearm, squeezed, and stopped him.

George looked up, his eyes shining with desperation. “They have them. I just know it. I need to make sure they’re okay.”

I let go. “Why do you think it was the Sormizas?” He couldn’t know. He was just desperately clawing at straws.

He shrugged. “Gut feeling.”

Gut feeling. I looked at him closer. He was clearly agitated. But somehow also cool and determined. “You need a wingman?”

He nodded. “Always.”

“Then let’s go.” I turned, and my eyes fell on Felicia again. I took a step towards her and pointed at her. “You and me gonna have a talk when this is all over. Understood?”

The words came out sharp. Harder than I intended.

She absorbed them and nodded—guilt all over her face.

Something inside of me softened immediately. This was Felicia. I knew her. She’d been my guiding light all these years, had pulled me from the blackness that had threatened to consume me.

I didn’t, for one moment, believe she had a single cruel bone in her body.

“Jer!” George next to me growled, then moved in and stepped between Felicia and me.

I looked at him. He might’ve been alarmed by my harsh tone of voice, but as soon as our eyes met, he relaxed.

I sighed, reached out, and pulled Felicia past George until she bumped against my chest and relaxed into my fierce hug.

“Please bring him back,” she whispered.

I nodded and looked down at her. She wasn't meeting my eyes.

Not enough.

I raised her face with a finger under her chin until her gaze met mine.

She blinked, and the tears that had pooled in her eyes spilled over.

The overpowering feeling, the need to protect her, hardened my stomach. But it wasn't only her.

We had a boy.

Bobby.

And he needed my head in the game.

I clamped down on all the feelings that threatened to spill over.

Not the right time now.

But later.

Later I would allow myself to feel it all. To come to terms with it all.

I wiped away her tears, then kissed her forehead, released her and stepped back. "I will... I will, baby."

Because one thing was clear. I might let her go for now. But she and Bobby were mine.

Mine to claim.

Mine to protect.

Mine.

JEREMY



We convened in the war room in Max's basement to come up with a plan—at least a tentative one.

We didn't know where to even start. And having my attention split between the task at hand and keeping my thoughts from circling around the fact that Felicia had had a child—my child—didn't help either.

Carter gave us all the information he got out of Edith. How they had gone out to get ice cream and had gotten mixed up in a shooting in front of the cafe. And how the same shooters ultimately commandeered their car and kidnapped them.

And despite this, we weren't much the wiser.

George ended up calling Marisol after all, and something in her tone of voice more or less confirmed George's gut feeling. She agreed to a meeting at George's house though we still didn't know how all the pieces fitted together.

We'd hoofed it to Three Oaks—in separate cars. George would go in while I was his backup and would wait outside. Peaches and Max were somewhere farther behind.

George didn't want a wire so as to not further blow his cover.

Though we all suspected it was too late for that. Whatever the cartel knew about our little operation, getting Grace and Bobby back was our number one priority right now. After that, we'd have time to look at the big picture again.

The big picture that clearly showed how we'd always been a couple of steps behind the Sormiza Cartel.

And how they exploited our vulnerabilities and were easily outmaneuvering us left, right and center.

I parked my car at the curb before I reached George's house, got low, and watched George. He didn't park in the driveway; instead, he jumped the curb and parked on his front lawn, got out, and marched towards the front door.

I didn't like the odds of me being his only backup for now. We'd agreed on me staying in the car, but if I was honest, I would feel much better circling the house with my weapon drawn.

I observed the house and the neighborhood. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No car in George's driveway. No one sitting in one of the cars parked at the curb. It looked like there always was someone, which made my stomach harden.

I listened in on the other guys—Carter had picked up Edith in Whitebrook—and they were on their way to Three Oaks, as were Max and Peaches, who left Max's house in Moon Lake after they waited for someone to arrive to protect the women there.

What felt like hours were only minutes.

Minutes where my mind went over every single encounter with Felicia.

Hadn't she repeatedly told me there was something she needed to talk to me about?

And hadn't my phone interrupted us each and every time?

Was Bobby the thing she wanted to talk about? Would she have told me? And would it have made a difference hearing it from her instead of learning it the way I did?

I didn't know.

But probably. Maybe.

I focused back on the house. Minutes ticked by.

Minutes with no sign of George, Grace, or Bobby or any other movement.

Which made me too antsy to sit still.

Screw it.

“I’m exiting the car to take a look,” I reported through my comms, then exited the car through the passenger’s side, keeping low and hopefully undetected from George’s house.

If they had eyes on the street, me sitting in my car would be equally suspicious, so sneaking up to the house was the way to go.

Peaches and Max were only five minutes out—they would take over my surveillance position.

I peeked across the hood of my car, verifying one last time that nothing seemed out of the ordinary, when George’s front door tore open and Grace ran out as if she was charged by a group of lions.

She had two bags clutched in her arms and stared to the right.

“Come on, toward me. I got you,” I murmured under my breath.

But luck wasn’t on my side when she made a beeline to the left, away from me.

Shit.

I watched the house, ready to pounce if someone was coming after her. But when nothing happened, I crawled back into my car. Better to have a vehicle than follow her on foot. “Grace just stormed out of the house. Max, position?”

I waited, precious seconds ticking away.

“Coming up right behind you.”

Thank God for small favors. “Take my position. I’m getting Grace.”

I peeled out and passed George’s house without looking. Instead, I searched the street for any sign of Grace.

Did she follow the street? Or did she skip between houses and was hiding in a backyard?

My eyes got drawn to movement, and I saw her sprint up a driveway and dive into an opened garage.

Bingo.

I took my phone out of my pocket. She'd had a purse; maybe she got her phone.

I dialed the number we all saved into our phones earlier while I approached. She must be freaked out already, so better to warn her I was coming.

It rang a couple of times before she picked up. By then, I was almost there and parked at the curb. "Don't freak out, Gracie, but I'm coming up to you right now."

I heard a strangled sound, like from a wounded animal, and got out of the car.

"Deep breaths, Gracie. In and out. Breathe with me," I said and sprinted up the driveway.

When I reached her, she was sitting on the ground, her eyes turned upward, and she looked like she was fainting. I cupped her head, laid her down gently, then grabbed her feet and lifted them up into the air. "You're okay, Gracie. Breathe."

She did. Opened her eyes again and slowly focused on me.

"You okay?" I asked.

It took a while before she nodded.

I put my phone away, then put the earpiece back into my ear. "Carter, Jeremy here. I've got Gracie. She's freaked but in one piece."

"Good, what about Bobby?"

"Negative, he's still inside." Why did I even say that? I didn't know. Peaches and Max had eyes on. Not me.

"Positive, George and Bobby are still inside. No movement at the house. Grace and Jeremy are a couple of houses down the road." Peaches verified my answer.

“What happened?” Carter asked.

I looked at Grace. She was following my side of the conversation. I should probably ask her what happened, but Bobby was still inside. My boy was still inside that house. And I was running out of time. “Don’t know what happened, but I need her picked up.”

“We’re five minutes out. Get ready to get her picked up. Did she say anything else?” Carter replied.

“Roger...negative. Out.”

I swiped the street outside for any movement, but there was nothing. Not that Peaches and Max wouldn’t warn me, so I focused back on Grace. “You good enough to get vertical again?”

She nodded, her eyes clear and calmer than before. “Sure.”

I helped her into a sitting position, then hunkered down. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“There was a shooting outside the café. We were just about to get some ice cream.”

I waved my hand. “We know all that. Edith...”

She sighed. “Bobby is still inside.”

There was an icy-cold mass slithering through my veins before I clamped down on my emotions. Not the time to think about my son in danger.

“ETA. Thirty seconds,” Goofy’s voice sounded in my earpiece. I nodded at Grace but didn’t even attempt to unclench my jaw.

Not that I thought I could. Not until Bobby was safe in his mother’s arms. And my partner out of this house.

It took at least 30 seconds until Carter’s truck arrived at the curb. I snatched the two purses from the floor and led Grace toward the truck.

She was still hesitant.

I tried to handle her with care, but the clock ticking inside my head got louder by the second.

Hurry...time is running out.

Bobby was inside; George was still inside. We needed to hurry, needed to get eyes on them, make sure they were safe.

I needed to know what was going on.

I threw the bags into the truck and shoved Grace inside. My eyes met Goofy's who was driving, while Carter and Edith were in the backseat. I nodded once, closed the door, and they took off.

"Max, sit rep?" I barked, walking back to the garage, just to make sure we'd left nothing behind. I would get in my car, circle around, and position myself toward the back of the house; maybe I could get access from there. I waited for a second, then another.

"Max?"

"Hold," Max said, his voice calm and cool. Whatever was happening, the professional in him was in control.

And it was grating on my nerves.

"There's movement," Max said.

"Movement?" I asked even though I felt like an idiot.

"Car's backing out of the garage."

"Edith's car," Peaches said.

I ducked down and stayed in the garage. If they were on the move, chances were they would drive down the road and come my way, and I didn't want them to spot me.

And sure enough, seconds later, George passed me in what must've been Edith's car. There was a guy on the seat next to him and Marisol in the back.

Shit. Where was Bobby?

"Did you get eyes on Bobby?"

"Positive, he's in the back. We're in pursuit," Max said through comms.

I did one last sweep of the garage, then ran to my car to follow, as well.

JEREMY



I followed Peaches and Max to the highway; the sun had set by now, which was both good and bad.

Darkness would mean more cover for us. But it also meant that Bobby had been in their hands for hours now.

I swallowed down the bile that rose into my throat, just thinking about it. My little boy was probably scared shitless.

Was he otherwise okay?

Please, let him be okay, I prayed.

At least George was with him. George would do everything in his power to keep him safe. Though what power would he have? It was stupid to send him into the house alone. What had I been thinking?

I stayed close to Peaches' and Max's tail, almost combat-driving, then eased off the gas a little—letting the distance between us grow.

Where were they going, anyhow? Back to Whitebrook?

Carter piped into my ear. "Peaches? Location?"

"Fuuuck." I heard screeching tires. "They stopped."

They stopped? On the highway? I looked in the rearview mirror, then jumped on the brakes and slowed down. And Peaches in front of me did the same. We'd hung back—so as not to be discovered—but if they'd stopped right in front of us, we were closing the gap fast.

I slowed down even more and increased my distance from Max and Peaches.

“Do you have eyes on the vehicle?” Carter said, “Shit, got an incoming call.” Carter kept his comms open, so we all listened in.

“Carter, this is Hawk, Raptor Security,” a tense greeting echoed through the comms; Carter probably had the caller on speakerphone.

“Hawk. Now’s not a good time,” Carter replied.

“You’ve got a situation,” Hawk said.

“What do you know about it?” Carter’s tone of voice remained cool and aloof.

“Not enough. But your boy, Peaches, reached out to us to help him track a car. And as it seems, we have overlapping fields of fire on this one.”

“We do? Peaches? Anything you might want to tell me?” Carter barked.

What the hell? What did that mean? Who was Hawk? Why would Peaches reach out to him to track the car, and what did he mean with overlapping fields of fire? Was someone else after that car?

“Don’t give him crap,” the deep voice belonging to Hawk interjected. “It’s one of mine gone rogue. Your shit’s airtight.”

“And?”

“And. The car we’ve been tracking for Peaches, it’s in the vicinity of my operator.”

“Of your operator?” Carter asked.

“Birdie.”

“Your Birdie?” Carter seemed surprised.

“Positive.”

“Birdie has gone rogue? Are you kidding me?”

“Just know she’s out there and look out for her. I don’t think she’ll come between you and them, but...” Hawk trailed

off.

“Roger that,” Carter said, then there was a pause.

“The car they’ve been tracking?” This was Edith chiming up. I couldn’t hear her as well as I could Hawk, but at least someone was asking one of the questions I had, as well.

“You’ve planted a tracker on my car?” Her voice took on a hysterical quality.

That’s when Carter cut his comms.

“Peaches? You’re tracking?” I asked, now that Carter didn’t block our communication.

“Yes, just got the location.”

“And.”

“Getting off the highway, now.”

I watched them take an unmarked exit, glad for the distance I’d put between us because it allowed me to take the unmarked off-ramp and follow them smoothly. “Who’s Birdie?” I asked, once my vehicle’s forward motion on the single-lane road, leading exactly nowhere, had come to a crawl and I lost sight of Max and Peaches up ahead.

“Birdie is everyone’s little sister at Raptor Security.”

That clicked in my head. Hawk Hawthorne, Raptor Security, of course. I’d heard of Raptor Security—one of the biggest private military contractors—and its illustrious and mysterious owner, Hawk. I mean, who hadn’t—but I’d never researched them further.

“Birdie is the deadliest, stealthiest woman I know. All sweet and pretty on the outside, but boy, you don’t want her on your bad side. She scares the shit out of me,” Max said into the comms as if we had time for this kind of shit.

“Focus.” I cut him off. “Position?”

“Up ahead, 1.2 miles northwest of the highway.”

I sped up until I got eyes on Max and Peaches again. My phone rang, and I took the incoming call.

“Mulberry, heads up; we’re coming up behind you.” It was Peter, one of the deputy sheriffs.

I looked into my rearview mirror, and sure enough, a police cruiser approached, then slowed down.

“The cavalry’s here,” I said into my comms to give the others a heads-up, as well.

“Taking cover,” Max said when we reached a couple of scattered trees, and Peaches and Max slowed down to a stop.

I followed suit.

I jumped out, careful to be as stealthy as I could be. The darkness was deepening now, and there was a wisp of light farther ahead, but it was too far to see. I marched toward Max and Peaches, and only seconds later, Richard and Peter joined our little group.

“What’s the plan?” Peter asked.

Max grabbed a pair of binoculars from his trunk and looked in the direction of the parked car and the light source. We were far enough away not to get seen, but at the same time, we couldn’t see as well.

Max tightened. “Looks like a landfill. There’s floodlights and multiple trailers. There’s motion. There’s at least two—”

The sound of dirt bikes roared up in the distance.

Shit.

Then a single shot rang through the air, and we all stiffened.

“We need to get in there. Now,” Richard bellowed, and we all jumped back into our cars.

We increased the distance between the vehicles when the road led into a dirt road so we could create some wiggle room and avoid blocking each other in case one vehicle would get taken out when another shot was fired.

But when we finally arrived at the edges of the ring of light, surrounded by what looked like abandoned trailers, with

the backdrop of rolling hills of garbage, and the matching, overwhelming scent—there wasn't any movement.

Only two bodies lying motionless on the ground in the middle of the circle of light.

Please don't let it be George.

We stopped our vehicles in a half circle, got out, and used them as cover.

Peaches popped open his trunk, produced a handful of bulletproof vests and handed out rifles and ammunition.

I geared up, never taking my eyes off the scene, then took a deep breath.

I didn't see Bobby anywhere, but losing my head now, letting all those feelings of worry and despair in, wouldn't help them.

"Incoming," I heard over my earpiece right before a truck barreled toward us, then stopped.

No stealth there.

Goofy and Carter jumped out and ran toward us.

"Sit, rep."

"Two shots fired. Two men down. That's all we know," Richard answered.

A slight chill lifted the hair on my neck—a sense of urgency that made my palms sweaty. "Let's move."

Richard nodded, Goofy sprinted back from their truck, and we all checked our gear and got ready to move.

Even though we'd never had any formal training together as a unit, we moved like a well-oiled machine. Cleared the RVs one after the other, then we approached the two bodies.

Goofy had been up front, followed by Peter, then Peaches, Max, Richard, Carter, and me.

We all took up defensive positions, while Peter kneeled down and tended to the guys on the ground.

“Max!” he shouted, and for a split second, I turned and saw George on the ground.

Fuck.

Max turned, dislodged his ruck, and kneeled.

I canvassed the area—there wasn’t any movement—those bastards had escaped on dirt bikes before we could get them.

And they still had Bobby.

Max worked on George, who groaned.

I let out a huge breath, the vise that had threatened to crush my chest a little looser.

Carter left our defensive position and moved back to our parked vehicles.

I swept the area, then looked back to where Carter went. There was motion and someone—Grace—came flying toward our little circle. I motioned to Peaches, who nodded, then I moved to stand beside her and squeezed her shoulder, still looking outwards for any danger.

“He’s got a through-and-through to the shoulder, and one grazed him in the flank,” Max said. “He’s lost blood. He’s pretty out of it.”

“Oh, baby,” Grace whispered, choking up.

George groaned.

Grace leaned down, dislodging my hand on her shoulder. “I’m here. Don’t move.”

He groaned again. “Bobby. Tree. Dirt bikes.”

I wouldn’t have heard him if I hadn’t stood so close.

“What does Bobby, tree, dirt bikes mean?” Grace asked.

It was like a lightning strike. All my senses turned on at once. I straightened. Maybe they didn’t escape with Bobby. Maybe they were hunting him.

I looked in the distance—there was a single tree illuminated by the almost full moon. Glowing really. The perfect orientation mark for a little boy trying to escape.

Fuck.

JEREMY



I jumped into the truck with Carter and Goofy. My car would've never managed the terrain, but Goofy handled Carter's truck like a pro, and we flew over the rocky ground, over fields and grass toward the tree.

"If you hit Bobby, I'll kill you," I said in my most menacing voice, which led Goofy to leave the straight line he'd taken and take a wider angle.

Please don't let us be too late, I prayed silently while I opened my window to listen for the dirt bikes.

I grabbed the handle when we jumped over a bump and the whole truck rattled.

I heard something that sounded like an explosion.

Shit. What now? Were they firing at Bobby? Who was so savage that they would hunt a little kid?

My chest squeezed, and for a moment, I thought I would pass out.

Then I saw the fireball rapidly approaching.

Way before we reached the tree, the two dirt bikes came into focus, one illuminated by the glow of the other one burning. Both drivers were motionless on the ground.

No Bobby.

Goofy hit the brakes and turned the truck to a slithering halt while I catapulted myself out of the truck.

Goofy and Carter could take care of them. I needed to find Bobby.

“Bobby?” I shouted while I raced toward the tree with my heart racing. “Bobby? Where are you?”

I hesitated when I sensed movement, though it was too dark to see.

“Stop.”

It was a female voice. And it held a deadly edge.

Which made me stop in my tracks.

“Who are you?” I said, panting.

“No one,” she answered.

“Have you seen a boy?”

“Maybe.”

I sucked in air. “Maybe?” I took a couple of steps. “Bobby, are you there?”

“Stop,” she said again, a glint of moonlight reflected on the lens of her scope, which made me freeze. “Do not move.”

“He’s my boy. I don’t know who you are or why you’re here, and frankly, I do not care. But I need to find Bobby, and if you have him, I swear to God...”

“Do you know him?” she asked someone behind her.

“No.” I heard the voice of a child, and the sudden relief of tension almost made my knees sag. Bobby was safe.

“Bobby,” I said, grasping for words that didn’t come. My throat closed off. So much to say, so much emotion. But I couldn’t get it out.

“If he was—as you said—your boy, he would know you, wouldn’t he?” Her voice dripped with disgust, and I tensed, ready to pounce.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and Carter came up behind me.

“This is Jeremy Mulberry—he’s DEA—and I’m Carter Plesak, Security Operations Group Bravo. Hawk told me there might be a chance of our paths crossing.”

“Hawk?” she said, sounding bored.

“Birdie. Enough with this. Give us the boy.”

“Do you know him?” Birdie asked Bobby, who said no again.

Shit. How could he not know Carter? When he was dating his aunt.

What now? We needed Edith and Grace.

Then Goofy stepped up next to us. “Bobby, remember our little self-defense lesson with your mom and Peaches?”

I held my breath.

Until I heard a sob and a “Yes.”

Yes.

“We’re here to bring you back to your mom; she’s missing you a lot,” Goofy said, his voice calm and kind.

Bobby hiccupped, and my chest tightened.

“Do you want to see your mom?” Goofy said and went down on one knee.

Birdie lowered her rifle and stepped to the side.

I couldn’t see him clearly, but he was smaller than I’d anticipated. But then again, what did I know about kids? I’d actively avoided any contact with kids since I’d lost Carolina.

My chest tightened. I had a boy, and I didn’t know.

I had a boy, and he didn’t trust me. Didn’t know I was his father. That hurt more than I could deal with right now.

I tried not to think about Felicia, about the way she’d deceived me. But seeing him, witnessing his lack of trust, made heat flush my body and had me clamp down on my feelings.

He didn’t know. Bobby wasn’t the one at fault.

Felicia was.

I was.

FELICIA



I was going from bouts of uncontrolled shivering to profuse sweating, from a dull ache in my chest to feeling like I was suffocating while my mind kept running through all the worst-case scenarios I could imagine.

Dorothy and I had left Max's lodge almost an hour ago to come home. Despite the protest of the others, I had needed to be home. Not Gracie's apartment, but my house, Bobby's and my home.

Just in case he would come back here.

The sun was already setting, and it took all my might not to roll down into the fetal position and start rocking.

I'd become an expert in faking it over the last couple of years. Faking I was holding it together. Faking I was happy. Faking I wasn't hurting.

But this...this was too much.

These last few years, I'd at least been able to shield Bobby from Roy's violent outbursts. But now, Bobby was out there, and I had no way to protect him, no way to make sure he was okay.

I wiped away another tear rolling down my cheek with my forearm. My throat constricted, and it sadly wasn't from the fumes of the cleaning agent I'd spread on the tiles to deep-clean my bathroom with a toothbrush.

What a stupid idea.

I sat back on my haunches then rocked back and forth.

Pain, pure unadulterated pain and the feeling of utter helplessness threatened to choke me.

I'd failed my boy, the one person in life I'd vowed to protect. I'd vowed to never let harm fall upon him.

I was a failure as a mother.

And he was paying the price.

Dorothy appeared at the door to the kitchen. She'd been here the whole time, hovering around me though she was equally nervous, so her presence didn't have a calming effect on me.

I sighed. How ungrateful of me. Of course, her presence helped. As much as anything could help right now.

"Did you hear anything?" I sat up and pushed my hair back with my forearm.

She shook her head.

This was stupid. I got up, got rid of the gloves, and poured the bucket into the toilet. I didn't care if my bathroom was clean or not. And it didn't distract me from my thoughts enough to warrant the movement. "Could we call Richard again?"

We'd called him earlier and that he even picked up was a miracle. But he told us he would let us know as soon as he knew something. He'd been in the car. That much I could gain from the brief conversation.

Dorothy cocked her head and just watched me.

Then my phone rang in my pocket, and our gazes locked. Her eyes bulged.

The bucket fell from my hand, and my chest tightened to the point that I wasn't getting enough oxygen. I fumbled around until I finally got my phone out.

Edith.

I showed Dorothy the screen before I took the call and pressed the phone to my ear.

“We got him. He’s okay,” Edith said.

I sagged down like a deflated balloon, holding onto the phone in my hand by sheer force of will.

Dorothy made an alarming sound and guided me to the floor while a sob tore free from my throat. I clamped down my jaw. “He’s okay,” I whispered and watched the relief on my sister’s face.

She took the phone from my hand. “Edith,” she said and listened, nodded. “We’re at Feli’s.”

She nodded. “Yes, of course. We’re on our way.” She ended the call and looked at me. “They’re on their way to the hospital.”

I sucked in a breath.

“Just to make sure,” Dorothy said and hunkered down and cupped my cheek. “Just to make sure. But Bobby is okay.”

I nodded.

“George is hurt, though.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Pain, so overwhelming that tears started to stream down my face. “How bad?”

“He will be okay, at least—that’s what Edith told me. Gracie is with him. Let’s go.”

She helped me up, and I was grateful she didn’t let go after I was upright. My knees wobbled, incredibly weak.

We made our way to the hospital, and I counted down the seconds, flip-flopping between relieved and feeling antsy. I wanted to hold my baby. Wanted to make sure—with my own eyes—that he was really okay.

Dorothy dropped me off at the entrance to the ER, where Edith was already waiting for me. “He’s fine,” she said and took me by my hand and led me through a door into an examining room.

Everything hit me simultaneously, and I stifled a moan.

Bobby—white as the sheet of the bed he was sitting on—clad only in a hospital gown with a blanket around his shoulders, was leaning, with his eyes closed, against Jeremy, who had his arms wrapped around him.

Hovering and protecting his son.

Our eyes met, and my heart did a triple somersault before it settled into a pounding rhythm.

“Mom,” Bobby cried out, and a rush of new tears choked me.

I was at their side in a heartbeat and sat down next to Bobby, and he immediately crawled into my lap, like the little boy he sometimes still was.

I inhaled deeply, and a mixture of his familiar shampoo and the smell of rotting garbage attacked my nostrils.

What the hell happened?

I turned my head and looked at Jeremy. “Thank you,” I whispered.

And he?

He scooted over, took us in his arms, and held us without saying a word.

Like a father would.

Like a family.



After the doctor who had checked on Bobby talked to me and told us we would be discharged soon, had left, I sat down again, and Bobby immediately crawled back into my lap.

Jeremy hesitated for a moment, then took his place at our side again and slung his arms around us.

Edith and Carter checked in on us and then went back to Gracie’s apartment to get Bobby a change of clothes. But most

of the time, it was only Jeremy, Bobby, and me in the room.

We remained quiet.

Bobby was exhausted and had his eyes closed. It had been a long day for him, filled with fear and danger. If he hadn't needed therapy before, he sure did now. I made a mental note to find the best therapist for him tomorrow.

Jeremy was quietly holding us, keeping us warm, safe, and secure.

I closed my eyes. Would it have been this way between us? If I had known his name. If I had found him and told him about the pregnancy? Would he have been there for us?

I shifted; the thoughts too uncomfortable to sit still with.

Jeremy's arm loosened, and I straightened. I could feel his eyes on me, then he raised his right arm—the one he had slung around me most of the time since I'd arrived—cupped the side of my face, and pulled me to him. When his lips touched my temple, I was ready to cry.

So much tenderness, so much care.

I closed my eyes, ignoring the yearning that tightened my stomach.

I wanted this. I wanted to be cared for, to feel safe and protected, and loved.

But was Jeremy the one? Was he the one willing and able to give me all that?

Give all of that to us?

I leaned away, and Jeremy let his hand fall. I looked down at Bobby, and a weight settled in my chest.

There was too much we hadn't talked about, too much between us. My thoughts flashed back to the moment of realization, the shock, the anger in his voice when he made the connection. It would've been so much better if I'd told him. If he'd heard it from me, instead of piecing it together at the worst possible moment.

“You and me gonna have a talk when this is all over. Understood?”

Those were his exact words. We needed this talk. Alone. Without little ears to follow our conversation.

“How’s George?” I asked Jeremy without looking up.

He shrugged, the movement rubbing his shoulder against mine.

I turned my head and searched for his eyes, stormy eyes, brewing with emotion and worry. He must be worried about his partner. “Why don’t you go check on him while we wait for Edith to come back with Bobby’s clothes?”

He wanted to refuse; I could see it in his narrowed brows and the harsh slant of his lips, but I laid my hand on his forearm, the forearm that was still slung around Bobby. “We’ll be here, waiting for you.”

That seemed to assure him.

He nodded, released Bobby, and got up. He stopped at the door, looked back, and our eyes met again. I nodded and gave him an encouraging smile. There was so much to say, so much to talk about.

But all of that had to wait for now.

When the door clicked closed behind him, I immediately missed his warmth, but at the same time, I could breathe for the first time. If there had been any question or doubt in my mind about what kind of father Jeremy would be, I now knew.

He would be the best kind.

Protective, warm, and caring.

After a while, the door opened again and Dorothy and Edith walked in.

“Is he asleep?” Edith asked.

I looked down at Bobby’s crown, then shook my head no.

“I have some comfy pants and that dinosaur T-shirt you love. And pup,” Dorothy said, then kissed Bobby’s temple and

laid the bundle of clothes and his favorite, worn-out stuffed dog next to us on the bed. “Where’s Jeremy?”

I squeezed Bobby’s arm, then helped him sit upright. “He went upstairs to check on George; do you know how he’s doing?”

“I was just upstairs. He’s fine but hurting.” Dorothy sighed. “Gracie refuses to leave his side.” Her relief was clearly noticeable in her voice.

I helped Bobby into his T-shirt.

“Do you want to go back to Gracie’s?” Edith asked.

“No.”

We all looked at Bobby’s forceful outburst. It was the first time he’d talked since I’d taken him into my arms.

“What do you want?” I asked him, leaning down, so I could look into his eyes.

“I want my own bed. I want to go home.”

I nodded. If my son wanted to go home, then that’s exactly what we’d do.

“Carter is upstairs with George, but I can call him,” Edith said.

I shook my head. I promised Jeremy we’d wait for him, and I didn’t intend to break my promise. “Why don’t the two of you head on up and let me have a little alone time with my baby?”

Both my sisters gave me an inquisitive look but nodded and exited the room.

“How are you, buddy?” I ran my hands through his hair, then helped him into his pants.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“That was scary, right?”

He nodded. “Mom?”

“Yes, baby?” I took his little hand in mine.

“Is Jeremy my daddy?”

My breath got stuck in my throat, and I nearly choked on my own saliva. Did he know? Did Jeremy tell him? Without me? “Why would you think that?”

He looked up at me, his eyes clear and much older than his age would warrant.

I could feel the laser-sharp prick in my heart. It was my fault. My fault for staying with Roy for as long as I did. For accepting his treatment of me. Having Bobby watch and suffer through it alongside me.

“Because he told the woman I was his boy.”

“What woman?”

“The one who picked me up, helped me hide up in the tree, and climbed after me, after I escaped.”

WTF? After he escaped? What the hell had happened?

But Bobby cocked his head. “Is he my daddy?”

I nodded. I’d always told Bobby a version of the truth, how his daddy was a very good guy, whom I loved very much, how I’d lost him and couldn’t find him after I got pregnant. How, if he knew he had such a great boy, he would move Heaven and Earth to find us and never, ever leave again.

“Will he stay, now that he’s found us again?”

I forced down a swallow. Stared at my son, wracking my brain for the best answer. Yes? Maybe? I don’t know?

“Sure he will, baby.”

Bobby nodded.

And just like that, he accepted my answer, and I just hoped my version of truth would become a reality.

For Bobby.

And for myself.

FELICIA



There was some debate as to who would drive us home from the hospital until Jeremy made the executive decision.

We borrowed Dorothy's car since Jeremy didn't have a car and she had a car seat in the back, while Carter, Edith, and Dorothy stayed in the hospital with Gracie and George.

The ride home to Three Oaks was quiet.

"Are you hungry?" Jeremy asked and looked through the rearview mirror at Bobby.

"Yes," Bobby answered.

"Fast food okay?" Jeremy asked me, and I nodded. On a day like today? If Bobby wanted ice cream for dinner, it would be fine with me.

We went through a drive-through, and Bobby dove into his fries as soon as I handed him the food. Apparently, my little boy was much more resilient than I was because the scent of food alone had my stomach roiling.

Once we arrived at my house, we remained seated.

"Do you have your keys?" Jeremy asked.

I sagged in my seat and shivered with a wave of cold.

The keys! I forgot the keys.

I shook my head, tears pooling in my eyes.

I hadn't even thought about any of that. Dorothy must still have them. Or she'd given them to Edith since the keys to

Gracie's apartment were on the same keychain.

Jeremy's eyes never left me. "Any hidden spare keys?"

I shook my head and started shaking all over.

My neighbor had kept a set of spare keys for a while. But Roy hadn't liked that and demanded them back. It had been an early sign of Roy's mistrusting nature—one of many—that I'd ignored.

"Okay, no big deal," Jeremy said and laid his hand over mine. "Feli?"

I nodded but didn't look up. If I looked at him, I would lose it over a set of forgotten keys.

Hell. I was losing it anyway.

"Feli, eyes on me." His words were whispered, but there was a hard edge to his voice. It snapped me out of the downward spiral of self-reprimanding going through my head enough for me to pull it together. I looked up and met his eyes head-on. His were calm and warm in the overhead light. And they grounded me even more.

"I'm going to handle this, but I need you to breathe for me. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Long, deep, breaths. Can you do that for me?"

I nodded.

He leaned forward and gave me a bruising kiss. "Be right back." Then he got out of the car and walked to the house next to mine.

I watched him through the windshield, concentrating on taking deep breaths. I hadn't realized how shallow I was breathing, and it was difficult at first, but after a couple of awkward inhales, I figured it out. In, belly extending, and slowly out in a long exhale.

He rang the bell, and Homer, my next-door neighbor, answered the door. Jeremy motioned to us in the car, showed him his badge, then they walked together to the attached garage. Homer had been concerned after my first fight with Roy and had even called the cops once. After that, Roy was

careful, toeing the line, not using physical violence, at least not too much. Though sometimes it would've been easier for him to just knock me out, instead of the verbal abuse I'd endured. Why did I take it so long? Why did I ever put up with his crap? I shook my head, focused on breathing. I needed to forgive myself. Needed to look forward, not back. I couldn't change the past, but I could make sure I wouldn't make the same mistakes in the future.

Was trusting Jeremy a mistake?

Would it be okay to be alone with him in my home? I didn't even think about it on the way home. I hadn't been nervous being alone with Jeremy. But we'd been through a lot today. Maybe it would've been better to have Dorothy or Edith acting as a buffer.

A safety net.

It took maybe five minutes until Jeremy resurfaced. He marched to our front door, squatted down, and had the lock picked in under a minute.

Holy hell.

So much for ever feeling safe again.

Then he sauntered back to Homer, who had been hovering in his driveway, handed him the tools, back-slapped him, and walked back to us. He opened my door first, helped me out of the car. "Okay?" His stare was unnerving.

I nodded. Even though my legs felt like spaghetti, it was better than before—the breathing had helped.

He opened the door to the backseat and chuckled. "Seems like our little man is asleep," he said and moved to the side, so I could look at Bobby, and sure enough, his head had rolled to the side and he was fast asleep.

I groaned.

Bobby was getting heavy, and my legs didn't feel steady enough to carry my sleeping son.

But I shouldn't have worried.

Jeremy unhooked his seatbelt and lifted Bobby into his arms as if he weighed nothing. The movement woke him, and he opened his eyes.

“Walk or carry?” Jeremy asked Bobby, who took a moment, then yawned. “Carry,” Bobby said, then wrapped his arms around Jeremy’s neck, rested his head on his shoulder, and closed his eyes again.

My chest squeezed, the whole scene tugging on my heartstrings. Bobby’s trust in Jeremy. Jeremy’s willingness to let my son have the choice, to give him the space to decide with whatever he was comfortable with.

“Why don’t you lead the way, and turn on some lights?” Jeremy said, his voice void of any exertion—Bobby’s weight a non-issue for his fit physique—but laced with tenderness.

I nodded, preceded them, and turned on the lights, leading the way to Bobby’s room. He hadn’t been here in almost two weeks, but I’d been in here earlier. Had made sure everything was ready for him to come home with me.

I leaned against the doorjamb and watched Jeremy put him to bed. Bobby sighed, then curled into a little ball. Jeremy took off his shoes and wrapped him in a blanket.

Watching them unfurled something deep inside me. That’s how it always should’ve been. Would’ve been, if I hadn’t left that morning. If we hadn’t entertained that stupid notion of not exchanging names.

If we had met under different circumstances. If we’d started dating and gotten to know each other.

Jeremy touched Bobby’s hair one last time. “Sleep tight, little man.” Then he straightened and came towards me. He slung his arm around my waist and led me to the kitchen, leaving the door to Bobby’s room open and the light on.

Good man.

Once in the kitchen, he urged me to sit down and filled the electric kettle with water. “How’re you holding up?” he asked and leaned against the kitchen counter.

I looked up and smiled. He looked right at home in my kitchen as if he'd always been there. "I'm okay. Breathing helps."

He raised the left corner of his mouth into a short almost-smile. "Yeah, breathing usually helps."

I laid my hands on the table, sighed, and a heaviness settled into my belly. "I'm sorry. I should've told you sooner."

He curled his hands around the countertop behind him, took a deep breath, tipped his head back, and looked up at the kitchen ceiling.

I slumped in my chair and cast my eyes down on my hands. Whatever words he would say next had the power to destroy me.

The moment of silence expanded and sucked the air right out of the room.

He sighed. "You tried, didn't you? You told me—repeatedly—how there was something you needed to talk to me about. You wanted to tell me."

I nodded.

"It would've been better to hear it from you."

I nodded again. I could hear the hurt in his voice. Felt its resonance deep inside me.

"I've missed so many years."

I nodded, tears clogging my throat. He'd missed it, and I couldn't give it back to him.

"Did you at least try to find me?" His voice cracked and my heart with it—the sharp pain in my chest evidence of that.

I got up. I didn't know if he would even want me near. But keeping my distance wasn't an option.

The devastation in his voice was like a palpable force calling at me, pulling me toward him.

Once I stood in front of him, I clasped his hand.

He looked down at me, his eyes swimming with sorrow and pain.

“I tried to find you. I went to the hotel, but I’d forgotten the room number—not that they would’ve told me anything. And I went back to the bar, talked to the bartender. Asked him about you, but he couldn’t remember. I was so scared. So alone. If I had any way of finding you or contacting you, I would’ve told you. I swear.”

He nodded, sighed, then wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a crushing hug. “I know.”

That was all he said while he held me, and I could finally relax.

JEREMY



Standing in Felicia's kitchen and having her in my arms like this felt so incredibly right, it almost made me freak out.

What was it about her that I couldn't even be mad at her? Not even for having missed my boy's baby years.

Not that she was the only one to blame. I mean, come on. Whoever thought a one-night stand without exchanging names was a good idea should be punished.

She relaxed against me, and I inhaled her scent.

"He knows, you know."

"Hmm?" I nuzzled against her temple, then her ear, then farther down to her neck. She smelled even better there. Good enough to eat. I nibbled, waited for her reaction, which came in a swift inhale and a speeding up of her pulse.

"Jeremy?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Honestly? Probably not. But bite me if I haven't fantasized about having you in this exact situation for the last couple of nights."

"So, you're still attracted to me?" she said, her voice trembling, which made her even more adorable.

"Attracted?" I leaned back and stared at her, but at the same time pulled her body closer until her core pressed against

my dick. “I’ve been a goner since you took the seat next to me at that bar all those years ago.”

And it wasn’t a lie. She didn’t know about Nina and Carolina. Didn’t know about how lost I’d been at that time and that night. And how she saved me and put me back together in a very non-rational kind of way.

Maybe that had been part of my fascination, of my obsession all these years. But seeing her right now, having her in my arms and feeling her against my body, it wasn’t just that. Some primal part of me wanted her.

Needed her.

Recognized her as mine.

My dick twitched in my jeans, and there was no way for her to not notice.

“Why do you think that is?”

“What is?” I cupped her ass and squeezed.

“Why is it this way between us? Why do I feel like in your arms is the one place I want to be? Need to be.” She sighed. “It’s not logical. Our attraction should’ve faded over the years. Why didn’t it?”

Hell, if I knew.

Love? Destiny? Animal magnetism?

“I don’t know. But I sure as hell won’t let you escape a second time.”

She grinned, then leaned closer and rubbed against my rapidly hardening dick. “It was stupid of me to leave before you woke up.”

I nodded.

“At least this time we’re at my house, so no chance of me disappearing on you now.”

I twitched my eyebrows, which made her laugh. “Nope, zero chance of disappearing on me again.”

I dove in but held back at the same time. I caught her lips with mine, and she opened for me beautifully. I took it slow with soft kisses, tiny nibbles, roaming hands. Retreated again, nuzzling the side of her throat. As much as I wanted her—and my hard-on was a testament to that, and my hormones screamed at me to take her—I hadn't forgotten what had happened to her. She'd just gotten out of an abusive relationship. Was choked by that bastard, and God knows what else happened to her before that.

How could she be ready for more than this?

More than a couple of easy kisses, light hugs, and soft caresses—not that there hadn't been moments when I had already forgotten about it. When I went all dominant on her.

She rubbed against me, and it was nearly too much.

What was I thinking? She was like fire to my tinder, like lighter fluid to my simmering flame.

She moaned, and it had a profound effect on my insides, ripping away the tight restraint I had on the lust burning inside of me. But I was determined to go slow.

“Jeremy,” she said between kisses.

“Hmm.” I took the opportunity of her parted lips to dive in, stroking my tongue against hers.

Feeling, exploring, then withdrawing again, teasing her, luring her out. It was a beautiful dance, a beautiful coming together of giving and taking.

“Jeremy!” She cupped my cheeks with her hands and steadied me until I focused on her eyes.

“Yes?”

“Are we doing this?”

“Doing this? You mean kissing?”

“No, I mean, will you, please, make love to me?”

Holy fuck.

If anyone ever told me I would lose all self-discipline and restraint in a single second, I would've laughed in his face. But, boy, was I holding on by my fingertips.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” I pushed her hair behind her ear. “We have time. We can just do this. Get to know each other better. Take it slowly.”

With that, she grinned. “We have a son. We didn’t take it slowly the first time. What makes you think we should do that now?”

“Because we’re older? And wiser? And have more self-restraint?”

She chuckled. “Talk about yourself. I have no self-restraint around you.”

I loved her smile, her ease around me. But I wasn’t willing to let this go.

“You just escaped an abusive relationship. Don’t you think you should...wait?”

She sighed, then cupped my ears. “I’ve waited for you for almost seven years. And no matter what happened with Roy, I feel safe with you. You would never treat me that way, and even if you tried, I wouldn’t let you. I’m a different person with you.” The corner of her mouth lifted. “I trust you.”

Her words sank into my chest and settled somewhere in the middle, filling a void that I had forgotten was there—had gotten used to it being there.

I trust you.

Such a profound statement. And one that resonated deeply.

I trusted her.

Simple as that.

FELICIA



I trust you.

The minute the words were out, I felt so much inner peace that my breath hitched. I didn't understand where it came from, that trust in Jeremy. But it was there. I was safe with him, sure he would protect me, even from himself, if necessary. I took a step back, and he immediately let me go. I sighed.

That was it. That was why I knew I could trust him.

He would never force me to do anything I didn't want to do, would never accuse me of something he fabricated in his own mind. He wouldn't be violent, or abusive, or anything even resembling Roy. I remembered our night so many years ago. How he'd made sure I wanted it. How he'd squatted down in front of me and suggested cuddling.

I smiled.

I knew it back then, and I knew it now.

Cuddling wasn't enough. I wanted more; I wanted it all.

I wanted his hands roaming my body, his hot lips devouring me, his barely controlled dominance when he would take me.

I took his hand and led him to my room. I hesitated for a second. I'd shared this room with Roy, and there were a lot of unpleasant feelings attached to it, but it was time to change all that.

Time to reclaim my life and my home.

Time to take back my sexuality and my body.

And there was no one I trusted more.

No one I'd rather share this with.

There were fresh sheets on the bed, thanks to my frantic cleaning to distract me earlier. "Wait. Bobby." I stopped, and Jeremy bumped into me, grabbed my hips, and anchored my behind against him.

"It's not the right time. Let's just lie down and rest; we have all the time in the world to explore."

I turned around, wrapped my arms around his neck, and smiled. Our gazes locked. Holy shit. This felt like exactly what I needed. "You tired, old man?" I teased him, goading him. And it felt amazing.

Especially when his eyes started to dance, then turned dark and dangerous. He cupped the back of my head, pulled me against him, then caught my lower lip with his teeth.

He bit down.

Arrows of fire shot down my spine.

Then he moved back an inch and hovered his lips over mine, our breaths mingled together, and I quivered inside.

He arrested me with his gaze. "You wanna play, little girl?"

His whispered growl made my core clench and turned my insides into liquid lava.

I gasped and pressed myself against him. Yes, yes, I wanted to play.

His next kiss had it all. Gone was the unhurriedness. Instead, there was an urgency, a fever that engulfed him—and matched mine.

I worked on his shirt buttons, like a banshee, while his hand found the clasp of my bra under my shirt. I held my

breath, expecting him to open it, but instead, he went under and caressed my back.

“Feli?”

My eyes lingered on the perfect torso I’d uncovered with every unbuttoned button. I couldn’t wait to roam my hand over his muscular chest, across his perfectly ribbed abs and follow that trail of dark hair even farther down, below his perfectly V-shaped hips.

“Eyes on me, Red.” I snapped my gaze up. Red...I liked that nickname. The look in his eyes made me stop.

So much tenderness. So much care. “I missed you.”

I smiled. I loved the vulnerability he was willing to show me. We could’ve gone down and dirty and I would’ve been okay with that, too—craved it, really.

But this added a layer of vulnerability. His willingness to let me see. It made this so much more...than just sex. “I missed you, too.”

He winked. “Good. Don’t forget that.”

I frowned. Why would I forget that?

But then I knew.

He had my shirt over my head in a heartbeat, had unclasped my bra, and he threw it over his shoulder. He groaned. Weighed my breasts in his hands, kissed each tip, then lifted me and threw me on the bed.

His urgency overwhelmed me for a second, but when he took off my shoes and socks, unbuttoned my jeans, and took his sweet time slipping them off me, together with my panties, I knew.

He was as eager as I was. Too much pent-up lust to take things slow.

And I was ready to meet his desire with mine.

Ready to see him naked.

Ready to be seen.

Ready to be touched and touch him back.

Though I didn't get a chance.

He toed off his shoes and socks, unbuttoned his jeans, and crawled onto the bed, his knee between my thighs.

He towered over me, then fused his lips to mine for a long, hot mating of our tongues.

I could feel lust pooling between my thighs, growing wetter by the second.

He palmed my breast, played with my nipple, then replaced his fingers with his mouth again.

I groaned.

His ministrations were exquisite; he alternated between sucking and biting, then went to the other side and did the same.

I felt hot and feverish, then cold when he blew on my wet nipple.

I ground against his thigh, the texture of his pants deliciously rough against my naked core.

"You are still the sexiest woman I've ever had the pleasure of seeing naked."

That sentence gave me pause.

Exactly how many women had he seen naked? How many women since our last time?

Suddenly, I became conscious of how my body had changed. There were stretch marks on my belly. My breasts weren't as firm and small as they'd been, my nipples darker and larger since breastfeeding Bobby.

"What is wrong?"

I hadn't even realized he'd stopped but he was looking at me, observing me.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

His eyes turned hard.

I shrugged. “My body has changed since the last time you saw me naked.” It was a dumb statement. Then I steeled my core. Of course, my body had changed. I’d had a child. His child.

But he just smiled. Kissed my nose. “And you look so much sexier.” He swept his finger along one of my stretch marks. Then leaned down and followed his finger with his lips and tongue.

So, he had seen them.

I should’ve known. He’d been observant back then, freakishly tuned into my every reaction.

Why should he be any different now?

He settled between my legs and looked up at me.

Thank God I’d showered and shaved earlier—in preparation for our date. Not that I’d expected to end up here. In my bed—with him.

Then his mouth descended on my bare sex, and I stopped thinking altogether.

Again, his perfect mixture of sucking, circling my clit, and nibbling brought me to my first orgasm in record time. His rhythm was divine.

But it wasn’t enough. I wanted to feel him inside of me. Wanted to feel him wrapped around me. His skin against my skin.

His weight on me.

I tightened my fingers which I’d run through his hair, tugged on his hair until he looked up.

“I need you.”

A slow grin transformed his face. “Are you bossing me around, little girl?”

For a second, I was stunned. Was I? Never had I been dominant in the bedroom. I’d always been happy just going along with the flow, hoping for an orgasm but never expecting one.

Seldom getting there with Roy.

Luckily, most of the time, he didn't get horny when he drank, or it was the pot that kept him from forcing himself on me.

Only the nights when he came home mean and aggressive were the nights I'd feared most. Those were the nights when anything could happen.

I shook my head. Stop thinking about it. This is not that. Jeremy is nothing like Roy. The way I felt with Jeremy was nothing like I'd felt with Roy.

"What's wrong?" Jeremy sat back on his haunches, his eyebrows raised in question.

This brought me back into the here and now.

"Nothing."

"It's not nothing—you've gone from lust, to sadness, to... I don't even know where your mind went. Do you need me to stop?"

"No." My forceful outburst surprised us both.

"I want to make love to you," I said.

Which brought a smile back to his face.

"That's good because I want to make love to you, too." He kissed my stomach.

I pulled at his hair again. "Though you need to lose the pants for that to happen."

"And back to bossing me around," he said and winked. Then he rolled to the side and tugged his jeans down, his underwear following suit. "Red?" He waited until I pulled my gaze from his gorgeous hard-on to meet his eyes.

"Should we close the door?"

I turned my head and looked at the door, realizing for the first time how we left it open. Bobby's room was right across the hall, too.

Was I a bad mother for wanting it closed and locked? I shook my head. "If he wakes up, I want to hear him," I said.

Jeremy grinned, then gave me a peck on the lips. "I do, too." Another peck. "But you have to be real quiet then."

I mirrored his sexy grin.

For a moment there, I feared he wanted to stop, didn't want to sleep with me. But I shouldn't have worried.

He was as invested in this as I was.

Hence the condoms he fished out of his wallet before placing them on my nightstand.

The sight of the condoms reminded me of our last night. We'd used one, as well...and I ended up pregnant. Not that it would happen now since I was on birth control.

"Jeremy?" I waited until he met my eyes. "How long have they been in your wallet?"

A wicked grin made his eyes shine. "A week, exactly. Why?"

I bit my lip.

Then realization dawned on his face as if he could read my mind. "Oh, shit. The condoms." He sighed. "I'm sorry about what happened."

I shook my head and smiled. What was he sorry about? A broken condom?

"I should've taken better care of you. Should've protected you better."

I rolled us around. Leaned down, kissed his lips, then hovered right before his face. "You gave me the best gift of my life. There's nothing to be sorry about."

And that was the truth.

It might not have been what I'd chosen for myself at the time. I might've wanted to finish college, get a degree, and explore the world.

But Bobby was the greatest joy of my life, and I didn't regret having him even for one second.

Jeremy rolled us back until I lay under him, my back pressed against the mattress, then kissed the tip of my nose before he pushed himself up, the veins on his forearms bulging.

He kneeled between my legs, and I watched him slowly put on the condom, wishing I had touched him first and played with him a little bit.

“What?”

I looked up.

He was staring at me, waiting.

I turned my lips into a pout. Look at me, going full-on girly. “I wanted to touch you first, suck you—”

He groaned, then leaned forward and gave me a searing kiss before going back into his kneeling position between my legs. I caressed his flat stomach, then snuck deeper.

His cock looked amazing—even sheathed. Thick and heavy and oh, so hard.

I slid my hand over him, jerked him a couple of times, then drew slow circles with my thumb over his crown while I cupped his balls with the other.

He groaned, then captured me by my wrists, first the hand on his dick, then the other, and lifted them slowly above my head.

He ground his cock against my pussy, and hot arrows of lust zinged up my stomach.

I groaned.

“Baby girl,” he growled, “if you touch me right now, I'm not gonna last, so you leave your hands right here, understood?”

I cocked a brow. “Or, else?”

A devilish grin transformed his face from sexy to irresistible.

“Or else, I’ll tie you up and wring every last orgasm out of you until you either lose consciousness or beg for mercy.” He squeezed my wrists, then leaned to the side and nibbled my earlobe. “And I’ll do that all night long.” His lips barely touched my ear. His voice was barely more than a whisper, but I got whole-body goose bumps, and my eyes fell closed. “Until you beg, until you can’t take it anymore. And then”—he licked the side of my throat from my shoulder to my ear—“I’ll put you on all-fours. And that sweet ass of yours gets its turn. If you’re game, that is.” He grabbed me under my knees and pushed my feet higher up, until they were caught between our bodies. Then his finger swept through my folds and spread my wetness back between my cheeks to that forbidden but oh-so-sensitive place.

I inhaled sharply and could feel myself gush.

“You’re mine, all of you.” He circled—the pleasure almost had me gasping. “And I’ll take what’s mine. Again and again.”

Holy Mother of God. My breath got stuck somewhere between my sternum and my throat. Hot flashes turned my body into a quivering, burning mess. I had never wanted a man more than I wanted him right now.

Wanted to be taken. Everywhere.

“And Felicia…” He let my name roll from his tongue as if he’d never tasted anything better.

He waited.

Until I opened my eyes and our gazes locked.

“I’m gonna enjoy every single fucking second of it.” His smile was so agonizingly hot, my breath hitched.

He lined up his cock, then buried himself inside of me with one long thrust.

JEREMY



The moment I was inside of her, felt her heat around my dick, I clenched my jaw, closed my eyes, and held perfectly still, enjoying her smoldering heat surrounding me, sucking me in.

She was incredibly tight, and I could feel every ripple, every shiver against me. Her inside muscles clamped down on me, and I panted.

This was it, this was exactly where I wanted to be, where I was destined to be. I opened my eyes and stared down at her. She looked beautiful, her hair all over the place, her lips opened in a sexy *O*.

Her wrists were still above her head, exactly where I told her to keep them.

She looked incredibly young, defenseless, and yielding to me completely.

My stomach tightened with a surge of pride and protectiveness.

Mine.

Then she opened her eyes, our gazes locked, and her lips curled into the sweetest smile I'd ever seen.

I leaned forward, kissed her lips and the tip of her left breast, then her right. And then I started moving again.

Her reactions were beautiful—once or twice she moved her arms—but my soft growl reminded her, and she immediately put them back over her head.

Was there anything sexier than a woman who could follow commands?

I increased my thrusts. Ground against her pubic bone, raised her ass to get better access.

Deeper. Faster.

She gasped when I hit a particularly sensitive spot, and I hammered it over and over again, my own heartbeat pounding in unison. Until her gasps turned into squeaks.

I covered her mouth with mine. Absorbed her cries. Clamped down on my own release until the tingling of my spine was nothing more than an afterthought. I cupped her neck. Raised her from the mattress. Invaded her with my tongue and dick.

Faster.

Harder.

Until she tightened around me and then came with a beautiful moan.

And I let myself follow her into heaven.

I kissed her softly, lowered her to the mattress, and rolled to the side. Panting.

I didn't want to leave her, but I needed to lie down, and I didn't want to squish her under me.

“Jer?”

I gulped down air, unable to answer.

She slapped an arm across my body.

I grunted.

She rolled over until she was flush against my body, then she slung her leg and arm over me. “That was the best sex of my life.”

I opened one eye, then nodded and grinned. Yep. This was pretty much up there.

She sighed, then snuggled against me. But it wasn't enough.

I pulled her over my body until she lay on me, pressed against my body from head to toe.

She weighed almost nothing. Then she rested her head on my chest, and I could feel her soft exhales against my still-throbbing heart.

I couldn't even say how long we stayed like this. Couldn't say when her breaths evened out and I knew she was asleep. But my mind was racing.

This was it for me. I'd never been more sure about anything in my life.

Felicia was mine.

She woke me up a while later, and we made love once more before we ravaged the kitchen.

"I'm so hungry, I can't even." She banged her forehead against the counter of the table, and I smiled. I loved how incredibly sweet and relaxed she was and just the right kind of dorky. As if she'd finally let go of the tension that had subdued her real nature.

Everything would be okay again.

I stirred the tomato soup one last time, then filled two bowls and brought them over.

She dove in with gusto, and even watching her eat filled a void in me I hadn't known was there.

Was there anything sexier than watching a woman do something with enthusiasm?

Apparently not.

Not for me.

And just like that, I knew.

"You're sexy."

Her spoon stopped in the air on the way to her mouth.

"Eating?"

I nodded.

“With my hair like this?”

I nodded again, then took a spoonful of soup.

“Wearing your shirt?”

I grinned. “Especially wearing my shirt.” It was at least three sizes too big and hid her silhouette, and the hem hit her at the middle of the thighs. And boy, did she look delicious in it.

Her grin turned cocky, but it hid a vulnerability that tore at my heart. “I know sleep deprivation can lead to delusion. We should really get you back into bed.”

I raised one eyebrow.

Her face turned serious again.

Was she really believing I was delusional for thinking she was sexy? “Come here,” I growled.

She raised her eyes to mine, drawn in by the steely undertone in my voice.

She hesitated for a moment, then got up and stood next to me.

I scooted back and pulled her down until she sat on my lap. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. You’re kind. My friends love you. You’re a good mother, and you’re sexy as hell. And it breaks my heart that you can’t see all that.”

She sighed and stared down at her hands, playing with the hem of the shirt. “I’m not; it’s just...”

“What is it?”

“It’s just been a while since anyone thought I was sexy.”

“Including you?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Maybe.”

“Whatever that bastard said to you, none of it is true, you know that, right?”

She nodded but didn’t look up.

Anger surged hot through my body, and I ground my teeth just thinking about her ex.

How he'd laid his dirty hands on her. How he'd hurt her, with his words and with his hands.

I took a deep breath in an effort to calm down, then raised her face with a single finger under her chin. "Feli..." I waited until she looked me straight in the eyes. "He's the worst scum on Earth. Nothing he ever said or did was anywhere near true or relevant."

She nodded, though there was still a speck of doubt in her eyes.

"And if he ever comes near you again, I will kill him."

She looked a bit surprised at the violence in my voice. But that's how I was feeling.

Pure, unadulterated hatred of the asshole who undermined her self-assuredness and destroyed her self-confidence.

Who caused her to not believe in her beauty and her sex appeal.

She leaned forward and kissed me. Her lips tasted like tomato soup, home, and a promise.

And I knew.

It was the feeling of completeness, a feeling of destiny.

I shook my head. Destiny? How stupid that sounded.

But whatever it was, I wasn't willing to lose it again. Wasn't willing to wait another second to claim her as mine. "Will you marry me?"

She stared at me as if I'd grown a second head, and I held my breath. I hadn't planned to pop that question, hadn't even thought about it. But it was true and raw and real.

Maybe too raw and real.

Because she shook her head and looked at me full of bewilderment.

Right at that moment, Bobby appeared at the kitchen door.

She squealed, struggled against my hands, and hopped off my lap.

Damn.

FELICIA



“Will you marry me?”

My breath got stuck somewhere between my throat and my chest, and I just stared at him. For a second, I thought I’d misheard, and by the looks of him, maybe I did. Because the way he stared at me all bogey-eyed and shellshocked, he sure as hell didn’t plan to propose.

Holy shit.

I heard something behind me and jumped off his lap when Bobby appeared at the kitchen door.

“Mommy.” I looked from my naked thighs to Jeremy’s naked torso and his jeans which hung haphazardously low on his hips.

No socks, no shoes, no shirt.

Just moments ago, I’d enjoyed the view and feel of pure male strength and sexiness. But now, it was time for Mom to come back on scene.

Responsible, adult, Mom.

“I’m hungry,” Bobby said and rubbed his eyes. I squatted before my sweet baby boy and willed him not to see our disheveled appearance.

I shouldn’t have worried.

As cute as my baby was, he was in this very self-absorbed stage right now where only his wants and needs mattered. And they did. “What do you want, sweetie?”

“Soup.” He sniffed, and it brought a smile to my face. It was so normal as if nothing bad had happened when, in reality, this day was the worst we’d ever had—at least for him because being with Jeremy had turned things around for me. “You can eat my soup.” I led him to my chair and moved the bowl closer to him.

I could feel Jeremy’s eyes on me but refused to look at him. Not that I even remotely would’ve known what to say or how to act.

And what do you say to someone who asks you to marry him after your first time having sex?

Well, second time.

He couldn’t have been serious, right?

Though he didn’t look like he was joking. His eyes still followed my every move, a brooding intensity causing my stomach to quiver and my knees to wobble.

And despite all that, despite being attracted to him and feeling safe and more cared for in his arms than I’d ever experienced before—the facts remained the same.

We only knew each other slightly more today than we had seven years ago.

So, his proposal was completely outrageous, unthinkable even.

We both watched Bobby eat with gusto; when he finished my bowl, Jeremy replaced it with his bowl, and my chest squeezed.

Finally. Finally, Bobby had the father he’d always deserved.

But did I deserve him, too?

What if I said yes now and a couple of months down the road, we realized we weren’t working as a couple?

Or as a family.

No, I couldn’t risk that.

Wouldn't do that.

I'd rushed into the relationship with Roy too fast. Ignored all the signs. I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

There was too much we had to talk about. We had to get to know each other beyond the bedroom.

And only then, if I was sure we would work, then we could maybe take the next step.

"I'm tired," Bobby said after having finished Jeremy's soup, as well.

"Of course, baby. Let's get back to bed."

Jeremy got up and offered to carry him.

I inhaled.

Waited.

Bobby didn't hesitate. He reached out, and Jeremy lifted my little boy into his arms. Together, we walked back into his room, and when Jeremy put him to bed, he immediately rolled into a ball and closed his eyes.

We both stared at him for a little while, then silently retreated.

Back in the kitchen, Jeremy went back to preparing another batch of soup, and I hand-washed our dishes.

"I'm serious," he said into the silence, his voice sensuous and insistent, continuing our earlier conversation.

Of course, he wouldn't let it go. "I know. But I'm not remotely ready to contemplate that."

He stared at me and rubbed his neck. "I understand." He sighed. "I don't like it, but I understand."

"We need time to get to know each other." I leaned my hip against the counter, and he did the same.

There was something in his eyes. A simmering intensity. "I've searched for you for the past seven years, whenever entering a room, at random women on the street. I've been constantly screening faces, willing yours to appear."

He hid his emotions behind his gravely, calm voice and once again, my breath hitched.

I did the same—had always been hoping, searching, daydreaming about him coming back into my life.

“I won’t let you go again,” he said, and I could hear the conviction but also agony.

“You don’t have to. We just have to take it slow. One step after the other. We have to think about Bobby.”

He let out a hard sigh, then closed his eyes. “Do you want me to leave?”

My chest felt like it might explode with emotion at his question.

He felt rejected when nothing could be further from the truth. “No.”

He opened his eyes again.

Was he relieved?

“I wouldn’t have left even if you wanted me gone. Well”—he hesitated—“I would’ve left the house, but I would’ve spent the night in the car out front.”

“Jeremy.”

His eyes sharpened, focused on my face.

“It’s a ‘not yet’, not a ‘no’.”

He started to grin. And I got a distinct pang in my stomach accompanied by an “oh-shit feeling.” Because his grin was predatory and sensual at the same time. A silent promise that he would pursue me. He wouldn’t make waiting easy for me.

“That’s great to hear, Red.” He grinned. “And I’m nothing if not patient. I waited for seven years—I will wait for however long it takes until you’re ready to agree to forever.”

Forever. His proposal wasn’t just for now.

Marriage was forever.

And he asked me having that in mind.

Forever sounded amazing...and scary.

Trapped.

Dangerous.

JEREMY



After we finished the second batch of soup, we went back to bed and she fell asleep in my arms in my T-shirt.

We kept the door open, light from the corridor casting a soft glow on us.

She looked so beautiful. So peaceful. Her freckles pooled around her nose and made her look younger, too young and vulnerable.

She was twenty-six now. Twenty-six to my forty-two.

That was quite the age gap.

She should've been too young for me. Even back then.

Especially back then.

Though something had pulled me to her. Had made me disregard her age.

She was the exception.

In fact, before her, I'd never really been attracted to younger women, not that I even looked at other women during my marriage.

Nina had been my one and all. Though not like Felicia. Not in that I-need-her-like-the-air-I-need-to-breathe kind of way.

There hadn't been any urgency in our relationship.

It was just an easy attraction. Calm, subdued. A much-needed counterpoint to my action-packed job as a Ranger.

We just were, whenever I was home. No big love story, or that all-consuming attraction I felt for Felicia.

We just were a good match.

She was independent enough to not need me.

Independent enough so I could do my job as a Ranger in the army, could go on one deployment after the other.

Not be home.

She didn't need me; instead, she lived her own life—had her own career and her big family with enough obligations to stay busy and her brothers to take care of her.

We'd decided to postpone starting a family until I retired. And we did exactly that.

One last deployment, then the transition to the DEA.

It was a stressful time.

And I was too focused on my own shit.

Too focused to see the change in Nina. To see the struggle or the downward spiral she'd been trapped in after giving birth to Carolina.

I should've seen it. Should've gotten her help.

I stared up at the ceiling.

I didn't. And that was the reason they were dead now.

I rubbed at the lingering pain in my chest—which was here to stay. But that searing self-hatred that consumed me when I met Felicia was gone.

And now I had a second chance.

Bobby.

My mind went back to that field, the tree, and Birdie pointing her rifle at me.

I'd almost lost him today.

I looked back at a sleeping Felicia.

We almost lost him today.

I tightened my arm, pulled her closer, and inhaled her scent.

It calmed the panic inside of me.

I could've lost them, too.

And I wouldn't let that happen.

Not again.

I needed to be more careful.

Needed to make sure everyone was safe.

What was it the Cartel really wanted? Power and money. It always came down to power and money.

But why were we bumbling around, always one step behind?

It was time to get more aggressive.

Time to start the hunt, instead of being the hunted.

But it also meant making sure the women were safe.

They'd gotten to Edith, then Milli, then caught Gracie and Bobby.

Shit like that couldn't happen again.

I looked at my watch. It was already 05:00. Carter would be up by now—probably the rest of them, as well.

I gave Red a kiss on the forehead, then extricated myself.

I needed to talk to Carter and Richard.

We needed a plan for how to lock down our shit.

We'd been vulnerable.

But it ended now.

FELICIA



I woke up with a start and to an empty bed.

Where was Jeremy?

I got up. I couldn't remember falling asleep, but I was still in his T-shirt, so he probably wouldn't have left the house without his shirt.

I tiptoed over to Bobby's room, and he was still asleep.

My baby. So resilient.

I closed the door and made my way to the kitchen—then gasped and froze.

Five sets of eyes stared back at me as I stopped at the entrance. “Wha—?”

They seemed to be equally shocked because nobody moved, or said anything.

Heat rose into my cheeks, probably painting them fire-engine red.

What the hell? How did I not notice my kitchen and living room had turned into party central?

I pulled my shirt down—Jeremy's shirt—the only thing I wore besides my panties, acutely aware of my half-naked body. Then my eyes searched and found Jeremy's. He sat at the kitchen table together with Carter and Richard. His eyes met mine, though they popped lower a second later when I stretched my shirt, trying to cover my naked thighs.

His gaze was like a laser. Sharp and hot and focused on my nipples—which tightened in reaction.

Oh God—I wasn't wearing a bra! I let go of the hem, and it popped back up, exposing my thighs.

Freaking great.

My sister Edith was the first to recover. Her face split into a grin—as wide as her face allowed—when she stepped toward me. “Hey, sleepyhead,” she said, then took me by my shoulders, turned me around, and shoved me out of the room. “How about you put on some clothes while we make you some breakfast?”

I nodded, covered my butt with my hands, then walked back to my room like a sleepwalker.

Holy shit.

How could I ever look either Richard or Carter in the eyes again?

I got dressed and half-waited for Jeremy to enter at any minute—which he didn't—then went back into the kitchen.

The guys had moved into the living room and seemed to be deep in conversation. But as if he'd sensed my presence, Jeremy raised his head. Our gazes locked again, and the tender look in his eyes and the slow once-over he gave me made my knees buckle.

“How're you doing?” Edith asked and cut our connection by stepping into my line of sight. She pushed a cup of coffee into my hands and urged me to sit down at the table. However, my eyes went back to Jeremy, who wasn't looking anymore.

Carter showed them something on his phone, and they put their heads together.

Dorothy placed a bagel in front of me, and both she and Edith flanked me at the table.

“So?” Edith asked again, which caught my attention.

“What?”

“How're you doing?” she asked.

“I’m fine. Bobby is still asleep.”

Dori nodded. “We checked earlier.”

“How’s George and Gracie?” I asked, taking a bite and chewing slowly. Somehow my mind went back to our meal last night. The way he pushed his bowl toward Bobby without a word.

Attentive and caring.

“They’re doing fine,” Edith answered.

“We’re heading on over right after this,” Dorothy said. “We just wanted to check on you and Bobby first.”

I nodded. “That’s good to hear.” Big sisters in action—always taking care of everyone.

My eyes went back to Jeremy’s when I felt his gaze on me as if he was physically touching me, and sure enough, he was looking right at me again. There was a flutter in my belly when he got up and came toward me.

“Can we talk for a second over there?” he asked, his hand outstretched, waiting for me.

I laid mine in his, and he pulled me to my feet and away from the nosy looks of my sisters. I thought he would stop in the corridor, but instead, he pulled me into my bedroom.

He smoothed his hair back. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I called Carter to see how George was doing, and next thing I knew, the whole pack descended like hungry wolves feasting on prey.”

I smiled. He didn’t know Dorothy and Edith, didn’t know they’d practically raised me and Gracie, since we were so much younger than them. And with Carter and Richard, they’d met their matches, at least in regards to being overbearing and overprotective. “It’s okay, you couldn’t have stopped them from coming over even if you’d tried.”

He nodded.

There was something he wasn't saying. Something in the way his head was bent forward, his eyes fixed on the ground. "What is it?"

"I need to go to the hospital and check on George. And then to work."

I nodded; why was that a problem? "It's okay," I said, my heart suddenly hammering in my chest—why? Because the thought of him leaving me felt...uncomfortable?

I straightened. Didn't I just decide a couple of days ago it was time to change? Time to step up and be strong? Depending on someone, anyone, was weak.

And I was done being weak.

I gave him an assuring smile.

He was watching me, then his eyes narrowed, and he pulled me to his chest in one forceful move.

"What's going on?" I asked. I didn't understand where all of this was coming from. What was he thinking? Of course, he had to leave. I didn't expect him to be with us 24/7. Didn't want to depend on him.

"I just wanted to make sure..." he whispered against my forehead.

"We're okay."

He gave me a half-smile. "Okay." Then he led me back into the kitchen, back to my sisters who were both scrutinizing me and their men and watching us, as well.

Great, just great.

Dorothy, Richard, and Jeremy left, and soon, I was alone with Edith and Carter—who managed to turn my living room into a command center.

He was on the phone constantly, and I tuned him out, taking another bite from my bagel and replacing my cold coffee.

I could feel Edith's eyes on me the whole time. Silently following me around. "So?" she said once I was back to sitting

at the table.

“So, what?” I answered. I wasn’t thirteen anymore.

“Jeremy?” she said.

I shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

She nodded. “It always is.”

“It’s...he’s so...I need to learn to manage on my own.”

She nodded.

“I could just let him take over, but I feel I need to learn how to be independent. Need to find myself again. I can’t just —”

“Have him sweep in and take over your life?” Her eyes were kind.

I nodded.

“I think that’s wise. Give yourself all the time you need.”

I nodded again.

The time I needed. Time to get my life under control. Without falling into his arms and letting him take care of everything.

Or even getting married to a virtual stranger.

“Also...Bobby,” I said, more to myself than Edith.

Edith’s eyes searched mine. “He’s never had a dad. A real dad.”

I sighed. “How could I’ve ever let Roy into our lives? Into Bobby’s life?” On top of being an overall bad human being, he’d been a bad role model for Bobby.

“Jeremy isn’t like that.”

“I know.” I knew that on a visceral level. But I also knew starting a relationship with Jeremy now would take time and energy away from him focusing on Bobby. “They need time to get to know each other, build a relationship.”

Time without whatever was going on between Jeremy and me interfering.

So, Jeremy could focus on his son—without me standing in the way.

JEREMY



“Okay, guys, let’s talk about what the fuck’s really going on. And why we’re finding ourselves in the same situation over and over again.” Carter looked at me expectantly, and Richard nodded.

Twelve hours after we left Red’s kitchen, we met once again in the Sheriff’s Department conference room—only the three of us.

And the two guys who felt like brothers were both looking at me for answers.

Except, despite reviewing everything I’d been working on for the past week, I had even more questions than before. At least the wiretap was in place but had yet to provide any valuable intel.

“There’s not much to tell, which is kinda telling in and of itself. Our guys are working the wiretap, but aside from some low-level gang activities and drug deals, there’s no chatter about anything. Not about what happened yesterday, not about any future plans.”

“The guy George shot was identified as Pepe Sormiza a couple of hours ago.”

I rubbed my neck. “The Sormizas have gone to ground, which leads me to believe that they are either licking their wounds or planning something.”

I looked at Carter and Richard, who both looked as dissatisfied as I felt.

Fuck this.

They'd kidnapped my son and put my partner in the hospital. I needed answers, and I needed them now.

"George's going home today. At least that's good news, right?" I said, and both nodded. I'd slipped in a short visit over lunch. And he was looking a lot better.

"I'm sorry I don't have more." I sighed and looked from Richard to Carter, and they both stared back at me with a hardness in their eyes that made me glad they were on my side.

"I don't know if the Sormiza family is acting out a plan, or if they're just bumbling around, taking every opportunity that presents itself—like the one yesterday."

Carter sighed. "It doesn't make sense on a macro level. But on a micro level..." He scraped his hands through his hair. "The asshole is still trying to grab Edith."

Richard nodded. "That means they had no intentions to take Grace or Bobby. Those two had just been collateral."

Which made it worse. Collateral meant dispensable, which scared the shit out of me.

"If he wasn't before, George now moved to the top of their shit list."

Carter agreed.

"I made some inquiries about why the FBI hasn't shown up yet," Richard said and looked straight at me. What were the chances we both had the same liaison officer?

I stared back and interpreted the scrunched-up look and the cocked brow that he'd gotten some intel. And he knew or had at least a strong suspicion—I knew, too.

I gave him a one-sided shrug; there was nothing I was willing to say right now. I'd promised to keep my mouth shut for now, and that's what I was going to do.

"They seem to be very unavailable right now," he said, which made me smirk.

Unavailable, my ass.

More like doing their own thing and uninterested in a joint task force.

“On another topic,” Carter said, and I knew what was coming before he even said a word.

“Felicia?”

I zoomed in on my hand lying relaxed on the table. Like hell would I show any weakness.

“We couldn’t help observing she was wearing your shirt this morning,” Richard said.

I slowly leaned back, hit their gazes head-on. “And?”

“And we’re just wondering if you know what the fuck you’re doing,” Carter said. With every word, he got louder and leaned closer to me.

“Really? You, of all guys?” He narrowed his brows. “She doesn’t need any more shit in her life right now.”

“And I would be shit in that scenario?” I was seething.

“Guys, cool down,” Richard said. “What Carter tried to say is, are you sure this is the right timing? The right move?”

I sighed and put my head in my hands. Right move, wrong move. I didn’t know anymore.

“For her?”

That hit me like a bullet. Was this right for her? It was as if I wasn’t in control anymore.

Because If I were, would I have really asked her to marry me yesterday?

For fuck’s sake. She almost sent me packing.

“I asked her to marry me.”

That shut them both up.

“For real?” Carter said.

I nodded.

There were a few beats of silence, then both Carter and Richard started to chuckle. “I’ll be damned. Another one bites the dust” Carter patted my shoulder. “We’re falling like dominoes stacked right next to each other.”

Richard nodded.

“Only I was the first domino in line. And I fell a couple of years ago.”

Richard chuckled. “That sounds like a cliché. I never knew it was you. Nobody really knew what happened.”

I sighed. Richard had known Felicia forever, and he’d known me. How easy it would’ve been to just meet again through mutual acquaintances. “She saved my life.”

Carter’s gaze hardened. I was sure they had me thoroughly vetted. So, they knew about Carolina.

“Just be careful with her, okay?” Richard said, and I nodded.

Careful, but determined.

I’d lost her once; I wouldn’t risk losing her again.

“Okay, now that we have discussed this issue, and because it seems the officials are slow on the uptake—as always”—Carter looked from Richard and then back to me, then grinned—“I guess you guys are really happy SOG is part of this task force right now.”

“And why is that exactly?” Richard asked.

“Because I can paint outside the lines.” That said, he took his phone and made a call.

Minutes later, a group of guys in jeans and baseball caps strolled into the Sheriff’s Department as if they owned it and made their way straight back to our meeting room.

Carter got up, opened the door, and invited them in.

“Richard, Jeremy, meet our new security detail.”

I got up and watched the group of guys enter.

The way they moved, the way they looked far too observant, I was certain they were all military trained, probably formal operators.

Carter's employees?

Then the last guy entered, and suddenly, it became clear.

I'd seen his face on countless magazine covers.

Noah Hawthorne, aka Hawk. The owner of Raptor Security, a Fortune 500 company with government contracts up the wazoo—who had been on the phone with Carter yesterday.

These were Raptor Security guys. The same security company Birdie belonged to.

My stomach tightened, and I straightened.

“Okay, guys,” Carter said. “We don't have time for a pissing match right now.” He gave me a hard look. “We'll discuss Birdie's involvement another time.” Another look—this time containing an unanswered question. Could I be professional?

I nodded.

“I hired Hawk's guys to make sure our women are safe while we're finally doing our fucking job of hunting those bastards down and throwing them out of town again,” Carter said.

“Hawk.” They shook hands. “Thanks for coming.”

Hawk patted his shoulder, then turned to me. “Jeremy, I've heard good things about you.”

My eyebrows shot up. Where the hell would he ever have heard about me?

“These are Falcon, Oz, Buzz, Eagle, and Owl.”

Raptor Security—fitting call signs.

“At your disposal,” he said, then nodded once.

“Wow, I...” Carter was clearly rocked. “I didn't expect you to give us your top tier.”

Hawk grinned. “This is exactly what the guys needed. A little small-town charm with a bite of danger to stave off boredom.”

I looked at the group of men nodding their heads at Hawk’s speech.

Then Hawk sighed, his face suddenly hardened. “Also, Birdie...”

I nodded. Whatever had gone down yesterday, Hawk couldn’t be too happy about one of his operators running an off-the-books solo operation.

Again, the group’s faces hardened.

And those other guys seemed equally shaken by it.

“Birdie’s like a little sister to most of us.”

He hesitated for a split second as if not sure if he’d chosen the right word. And by the way Falcon’s eyes shot to Hawk, while the one called Oz hid his chuckle behind a cough...

His team was hiding something.

It appeared Hawk wasn’t among those who saw Birdie as a little sister.

Well, he was her boss, so of course, their relationship would be different.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road; we’re burning money here,” Carter said.

Hawk chuckled. “As if you don’t have enough money to burn.”

Carter grinned. “You’re right, especially with you giving me the friend’s and family’s discount.”

They appeared to have a great relationship, which put me at ease.

We mapped the whole thing out. There were only seven of Hawk’s guys guarding too many of us, so we needed to combine our efforts. The SOG guys would take over guarding duty, as well, as would all of us, whenever possible.

“I bought the second house and the shelter, as well, so we’ll create a secure perimeter,” Carter said.

The second house?

By the mill?

So now he owned all three of those houses?

Just how many billions did Carter actually have?

“We only need a security detail for people outside the wire then,” Hawk said.

Carter nodded.

“And only those who can’t protect themselves,” I said, which earned me another set of nods. But even then, this would be a massive operation. Covering everyone while they were out working. Maybe we could get them to take their vacation days, or reduce their working hours, so we could coordinate things.

Though if I knew one thing about the Cleaver ladies, this would not go over well.

“I’ll have Lucas cover Moon Lake, and we’ll have Blake keep an eye on the situation there, too.”

What they meant was someone covering Milli, who’d been kidnapped when she and Belinda—one of Richard’s deputies—had taken matters into their own hands. Where was Belinda? I hadn’t seen her in a while. I made a mental note to ask Richard about her later.

“Okay, so for now, I will get the second house adapted ASAP, and we’ll convene there as soon as possible,” Carter said. “And in the meantime, Hawk and I are coordinating security details.”

Everybody nodded.

I hung back when everybody left. “Richard, a word.”

He nodded. “There’s actually something we need to talk about.” He led me into his office.

“There was a threat called in a couple of days ago. Peter answered that call.”

“Okay?” What had that to do with me? I would think the Sheriff’s Department was handling hundreds of calls.

“It was a threat called in from a shop owner in Three Oaks,” he said, and my stomach dropped.

“Felicia?”

Was my assumption she was just collateral wrong? Had she been targeted?

He opened a folder on his desk. “Apparently, some thugs were looking to collect gambling debts from her ex”—he leaned closer to the file—“Roy Garber.”

I filed her ex’s full name away for later. Someone came to her shop and threatened her, and she didn’t tell me?

It was like a blow to the stomach. Did she not trust me?

Richard must’ve sensed my distress because he tilted his head and drew his eyebrows together. “By your reaction, I take it she didn’t tell you?”

I shook my head. Why wouldn’t she tell me?

“It was a couple of days ago. Could it be she forgot with all the excitement?”

I shrugged. Maybe. Though I’d visited her at the shop that day, had called her, had taken her to Max’s.

“They were looking for her ex, so the threat wasn’t categorized as imminent. But according to Peter, the safety measures around her shop could be better even though she will have a security detail from now on, so this isn’t so pressing anymore.”

I nodded.

But no number of arguments would lessen my worrying or the primal urge to destroy anyone who threatened her.

Or the tightness in my chest.

Because she hadn’t fucking told me.

Which could only mean one thing.

No matter what she said, she still didn't trust me.

Not fully. Not unconditionally.

FELICIA



The moment I saw Jeremy through my new doorbell camera—which he’d had someone come over and install as a safety measure yesterday while he was at work—my stomach plummeted.

It was just a feeling, but when I opened the door, I knew something was wrong.

Jeremy barely looked at me. Barely made eye contact. And didn’t say a word.

Hell. What was wrong now?

He didn’t come back after work yesterday—as he’d promised—instead, Dorothy and Richard had camped out on our sofa.

My mind immediately snapped back to the here and now when I saw the blond guy standing behind Jeremy.

His clear blue eyes blinded me, like being blinded by sunlight when hitting the end of a tunnel, and it rendered me temporarily mute and frozen to the spot.

He watched me, scrutinized me more like it, and I felt heat crawl up my spine.

I stepped back and broke the spell he had on me. “Hi, ahem, come in?”

It came out like a question because that’s exactly what it felt like.

Who was this guy, and why did Jeremy bring him over?

He was blond, in dire need of a haircut, and heavily bearded, which hid his boyish face.

Without the beard, he would've probably looked normal, even friendly in a young neighbor-next-door kind of way—if it weren't for his tractor-beam eyes.

And his body composition.

A mixture between human and—I didn't even have a reference for the pure muscles on this man—The Terminator, maybe?

Once they both stepped inside, Jeremy passed me first. I inhaled his scent—so familiar by now. I watched Jeremy's ass in jeans, which made me want him.

Period.

When Blondie passed me, I snapped my gaze away and closed the door—no need for the stranger to see me ogling.

Though I briefly inspected Blondie's backside, as well—formidable, though it did nothing for me.

I suppressed a grin and felt a strange sense of satisfaction about the nickname.

A few days ago, I would've been intimidated by his intensity—not that I wasn't—but I would've retreated into my shell.

Something I vowed not to do anymore, after what happened with Roy. And after those thugs threatened me at the shop.

It was time to step up and not be intimidated by everyone and everything.

Though there was no way I would ever be comfortable with that guy around—without Jeremy.

But I was my own woman now. A fighter. A protector.

Letting some guy intimidate me wasn't who I wanted to be anymore.

At least, that's what I told myself—while ignoring my internal shaking.

We settled around the kitchen table.

“Can I get you a coffee?” I still didn't know the stranger's name, and Jeremy still hadn't said a word.

“This is Oz.”

Oz gave me a wave. Did he pick up on the strange vibe coming from Jeremy?

“He will be here, when I'm not around.”

What? Wait a minute. “He will be? What?”

“He's your security detail from now on. There might be others filling in, but Oz is your main guy.”

“I don't think so.”

Bobby came into the room, and Richard introduced Oz to him, as well.

Apparently, Oz—what a strange name—was good with kids because he immediately had Bobby involved in a conversation, and my boy was talking and gesturing a mile a minute.

Jeremy and I watched them, then he got up and gave Oz a sign.

Oz looked up at me, unsmiling, then back at Jeremy and nodded once.

Jeremy grabbed my upper arm and led me to my room.

I had a bit of a flashback.

We'd been here before. Me—in a bit of an out-of-body experience—and Jeremy leading me to my room.

He didn't say a word until we were in my room. Then he closed the door, and with his hand cupped around the back of my head, stepped closer until my back hit the door.

“Oz is your guy. He's here to protect you.”

I shook my head.

Here to protect me? Was he serious? And also, “First up, hello to you, too.”

He narrowed his eyes. But said nothing. Then his face transformed into a smile. “Hi.” He gave me a soft kiss on the lips, then another. His scent was pure masculinity, his lips on mine intoxicating and swoon-inducing.

I softened against him and lost my train of thought for a second. Until laughter from the living room, from Oz, pulled me out of my state.

“Wait.” I pushed him from me. Was he trying to seduce me into submission? “Why? I mean...”

“We talked about this,” Jeremy said, and his jaw hardened.

“We did?” We talked about me getting protection from someone other than Jeremy? I didn’t think so.

He nodded. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Tell him what? I narrowed my brows. “Tell you what?”

“Richard told me about the incident in your shop yesterday. I didn’t like hearing the news from him. Don’t you trust me?”

That’s when all the pieces fell into place. I hadn’t yet told him about the thugs threatening me. Was that why he was so distant when he first came in? “The deputy said it wasn’t a big deal, and they most likely wouldn’t be coming back. And then everything else happened, and I forgot to tell you.”

I gave him a lopsided smile, which was most likely the wrong thing to do.

Jeremy narrowed his eyes even more and took a step forward until his body was flush with mine.

I focused on his Adam’s apple.

“You told me you trust me.”

I nodded.

“You had sex with me.”

I nodded again.

“And we talked a lot.”

Another nod.

“But you didn’t find it necessary to tell me someone came to your shop and threatened you? Don’t you get it? You’re precious. And just the thought of you in danger is enough to bring me to my knees.”

Well, looking at it from his perspective, I should’ve definitely told him, should’ve called him right away and told him what had happened and that I was okay. Maybe he had a point to be a bit disappointed. I owed him an apology. And a promise. I lifted my eyes, stared back at him, but the words died on my lips.

This was another version of Jeremy. The fierce warrior version.

The intense version.

The version who was scared for me, pissed as hell and not afraid to show me. The one who wouldn’t take anything but the full truth for an answer. But I also knew deep in my gut he would never go any further than this. Would never use violence against me despite his intensity.

He pushed me back against the door, then brought his arms up, caging me in.

And instead of scared I felt...safe, cared for, wanted. I wrapped my arms around him.

He pushed his thigh between my legs, increasing the pressure.

I moaned and closed my eyes.

“Eyes on me, baby girl,” he said, the demand in his voice causing a sharp zing to my core.

I snapped them open when he moved his hand to the back of my neck and squeezed.

Unblinking, he leaned forward until our foreheads met. His eyes bore into mine, holding me hostage, his breath fawned

over me until my lips tingled and my breath got stuck in my throat.

Holy fudge, this was hot.

If he was trying to scare me, he was shit out of luck.

“I can’t do my job if I have to worry about you. Is that what you want?” His voice was hoarse, and my core quickened.

I shook my head.

“I need to know, Red, need to know things like this so I can keep you safe.”

I nodded.

He caught my lower lip between his teeth. Nipped at it.

The pain was sharp.

“You will not lie or omit things anymore. Are we clear?” he growled in my ear before he bit my earlobe.

I nodded again.

“I need to hear it.” He caressed my cheek with his hand, then slipped lower.

“Yes.”

He squeezed a nipple through my shirt, and I could feel a responding flash in my nerve endings—going right to my core.

“And Oz, or whoever is taking over, will be welcomed to protect you.”

“Yes,” I said, my pulse racing.

He slipped his hand inside my pants.

“Good.”

And that was it. His hand slipped inside my panties, and he squeezed my clit—hard.

I sighed, and my knees weakened.

Then he slid his finger lower, and dove between my folds.

When he encountered my wetness, he chuckled—and the reverberations against my chest rubbed against my sensitive tips.

“You’re wet for me.”

I nodded.

“You’re not scared at all.”

I shook my head.

“Good girl,” he growled into my ear.

Then he added another finger, angled them up, and filled me while he pressed his thumb against my clit.

I went on tiptoes before I lowered again, riding his hand.

It took him mere seconds until he had me on edge, and he didn’t let up until the first waves of my orgasm hit me.

He held me through it, then stepped back.

I shivered, and a coldness hit my core.

He was still fully clothed. He hadn’t shown any signs of wanting more, of searching for satisfaction for himself.

Suddenly the distance between us felt like more than just physical.

He made me come to shut me up or to get what he wanted. Or to make a point.

Manipulated me.

Made me weak.

Our gazes remained locked.

A knot formed in my stomach with each passing second, and I mentally distanced myself.

This was not what I expected him to do. What I expected us to feel like.

“We can’t do something like this when Bobby’s around anymore,” I said.

He cocked his head.

“We should take a step back. It’s important for him to get to know you better. For you to build a relationship.”

“And you and I would interfere with that?”

I nodded.

He narrowed his brows and folded his arms until his biceps bulged.

He didn’t like my suggestion. I could see the distaste in the tightening of his features. But the wheels in his brain were spinning. Then he gave a sharp nod.

“I trust your judgment.”

Trust. Again with trust. Did he really believe I didn’t trust him? Was that why he was throwing that word around?

“We’ll do whatever you think is best,” he said but took a step closer. “For now. But don’t think for a second I’m backing off for good.”

I exhaled.

“You’re mine, Red.”

The way he stared at me, unblinking, unwavering, made a shiver run down my spine and my knees weak.

Yes, I was undoubtedly his.

He stepped back, and it felt like a loss even though I won this battle.

I turned, opened the door, and escaped.

When I stepped into the kitchen, I realized my worry about Bobby had been needless. In the living room, he was in a wrestling match with Oz, showing off what he’d learned during our ongoing self-defense lessons with Goofy and Peaches.

Oblivious to what had just transpired.

Oz looked up, though. His gaze ping-ponged from me to Jeremy and back. “Everything cool?” he asked while Bobby was on his back, holding on like a monkey.

I nodded. “Everything cool. Would you now like a cup of coffee?”

He smiled. “Coffee would be great.”

Jeremy bypassed me and plucked Bobby from Oz’s back. “My turn, monkey,” he said, and Bobby laughed. They really needed the time to forge a relationship. And everything between me and Jeremy—especially sex—would just complicate matters.

FELICIA



The last two weeks had gone by in a flurry.

I looked at Jeremy sitting next to me, his full focus on driving and on the road.

We were on our way for an all-is-well celebration to George's parents' home—home, in this case, being the mansion that resembled an English country estate, where this year's memorial had taken place.

The day I met Jeremy again.

I glanced at him sideways.

Today, the entire crew would meet for the first time since the big revelation. Since the day Edith, Gracie, and Bobby had been kidnapped.

Jeremy had told me about the team, about the Cartel that had moved into the area which was targeting Edith.

Oz had filled me in on the ongoing threat—the reason Bobby and I hadn't been a second alone in the past two weeks.

Which made keeping Jeremy at arms-length more and more difficult.

Or maybe it made the distance I'd been feeling more difficult to bear.

He was beyond considerate, always there, his eyes on me.

But he kept his distance.

Honoring my decision to give Bobby the space to get to know his father.

And even though it was the right thing to do, the constant tension it created between Jeremy and me was affecting me, and him.

So, despite my first negative reaction to Oz, now I was almost relieved when he was with us.

“You okay?” Jeremy looked from the road to me.

Our eyes met for a split second before he focused back on the road, and I looked over my shoulder at Bobby, who was staring out the window.

We hadn't had any physical contact since that day when he'd pushed me against the door and made me come. And it had created tension and distance between us.

“You're mine, Red.”

How many times had I repeated those exact words in my mind?

By now, it sounded like he'd stated a fact.

I was his. Had been since our first night. And nothing, especially not time apart, would change that.

But then where did this insecurity come from?

Why did I sometimes think I'd only imagined those moments between us?

I shook my head to jolt myself out of the negative spiral I was going down.

Right now, we both had enough to worry about, and the decision to take a step back and give Bobby time to get to know Jeremy, as well as get settled back into his routine and overcome the shock of the events, still felt right.

Painful but right.

Bobby needed stability, not more change.

And starting a relationship with his father—there were so many potential pitfalls, so much that could go wrong—I still

wasn't willing to risk that.

Not right now.

Sometimes—especially late at night—I'd been wondering what would happen if we tried and our physical attraction turned out to be the only thing Jeremy and I truly had.

Whenever he was around—which was a lot—he was focused entirely on Bobby.

And even though watching them build a relationship had been heartwarming, it had been worrying too.

Because Jeremy seemed reserved around me.

Downright polite—like a stranger.

“I'm fine,” I said, then looked out of the side window.

Maybe coming here together had been a mistake.

It wasn't fair to Jeremy, either. I promised we were good. He'd promised to give me time.

Neither felt like it was working.

We stopped at a wrought-iron gate guarded by Oz, who waved us through immediately.

Then passed through a heavily wooded area before it opened up to the Bryce mansion.

Gracie had been right when she always said the Bryces flaunted their wealth around.

Everything about the house screamed money. It was a mixture of a Southern-style home and something out of a Jane Austen novel.

The gardens looked like they had been kept up by a whole team of gardeners, and I couldn't even fathom how it must've been growing up here.

Though you would never know meeting him that George grew up that privileged.

George's truck was the only one visible in the driveway, and Jeremy parked behind it.

I didn't wait and immediately hopped out and helped Bobby out of the car, as well. I could feel Jeremy's eyes on me.

Like always.

He was always holding back, evaluating the situation.

Evaluating me.

I knew I wanted to be with him, but was it the right move for me and for Bobby?

And how would Bobby react? He finally had a dad, someone who gave him all of his attention. Would sharing Jeremy with me mess with that?

I needed to talk to someone. Dorothy maybe? She probably had a lot of professional experience with situations like this.

Nobody was outside even though everything was decked out. We made our way to the door, which was open.

"Hello, anybody here?" I hollered, hovering in the doorway.

"Hey," Gracie and George came toward us, and I took a step back and nearly bumped into Jeremy, hovering behind me.

Why did I feel today was more strained than usual?

Maybe because it was the first time since that morning in my kitchen we were meeting all of our friends and family. I'd managed to dodge my sisters' inquiries for the past couple of days, but today—with everybody in the same place—all eyes and scrutiny would be on Jeremy and me.

Attention, I couldn't deal with because as much as I wanted him in our life, I was unsure in what form.

Gracie immediately hugged me. "Don't look so scared. Nobody here will judge you or ask uncomfortable questions."

And she was right. Just because there was a lot of tension between Jeremy and myself, it didn't mean anyone else would notice.

I turned around at the sound of cars arriving. It seemed like everybody coordinated times because suddenly, the whole driveway filled up.

When I turned back, George was hugging Bobby, and they were talking in hushed tones.

My chest tightened.

While George had been in the hospital and for the days after, he hadn't wanted Bobby to visit and see him recovering from his wounds, so we stayed away.

But, of course, the two of them had experienced this difficult event together. Had formed a bond.

I exchanged a glance with Gracie, who squeezed my hand, then let go and passed me to welcome the other guests.

She and George had been through so much. They'd shared a very special bond—together with George's brother, Owen—ever since they were kids—and even though Owen and Gracie had been married, we'd always known George and Gracie were meant to be together.

Now they finally had the chance to be happy.

And it looked like they were wise enough to seize it.

Bobby took a step back and settled against me, and George straightened again.

Peaches joined our little group.

“Why is Belinda looking like she wants to shoot you, Peaches?” George asked.

Peaches scrubbed his neck. “Damn woman is too stubborn for her own good.”

I turned around and watched Belinda, who stood beside Gracie, then Niki joined them. This was my cue. I was surrounded by testosterone—too much for my taste. I tugged Bobby along, and together, we joined the other girls.

“Hey, you.” Belinda and Niki both hugged Bobby first, then me.

“Felicia, have you met Lisa and Claire?”

I shook my head.

“They’re the owners of the Moon Lake Inn.”

They both smiled at me, and we shook hands.

Dorothy and Edith seemed to know them, as well.

I was amazed at how my life had suddenly expanded when I’d been so isolated just weeks ago.

But that was Roy’s intention: Isolating me. Making me believe I was all alone. Powerless and alone.

Bobby tugged on my hand and forced me out of my head. “Can I go play?” he asked, and for the first time, I recognized the little girl and the little boy standing before us.

“This is Sunny,” Claire said.

“And Brody,” Edith continued.

“Of course, you can go play.” I smiled at Bobby and watched him walk away with the two other kids.

“I never realized their names are so similar,” Edith said.

“What?” I focused back on my sister.

Edith shrugged. “Bobby and Brody—maybe we could give either one a different nickname?”

“We’ll have to talk to Bobby about it, but I’m sure it’s fine with him,” I said.

Maybe.

Though changing his nickname was change. And didn’t I decide to minimize change as much as possible?

I searched for Jeremy and found him deep in conversation. He seemed relaxed, right at home, between his peers.

However, none of the guys could hide their intensity.

They were warriors, alert and hyper-vigilant.

Even while attending a party.

And Jeremy might be the most vigilant of all because his eyes met mine across the distance, and his raised brow held an unspoken question.

Only which one, I didn't know.

FELICIA



“Can we talk for a second?” Jeremy took the cup of coffee I handed to him and made his way into my living room.

I looked at the clock. We had a couple of minutes before he would take Bobby and Brody to their self-defense practice.

He and Brody had hit it off at the party, and now they were visiting each other constantly.

. And now that Brody had joined Bobby in their self-defense classes, they had a blast on the mats.

Usually, I joined them, but I was expecting a delivery at the shop this afternoon, so Jeremy offered to take them.

I listened to the noises coming out of Bobby’s room.

It was so good to see Bobby make a new friend.

When everything seemed normal, I followed Jeremy into the living room and sat down next to him on the sofa.

“Do you remember some time ago we talked about Carter buying the second house and converting it into a secure location?” Jeremy said.

So, this was what he wanted to talk about. Edith had told me about the renovations and how amazing it was how fast things were moving along.

Money could do that.

My stomach tightened. Aside from Oz’s company, our life had been almost normal these past two weeks.

Even though Jeremy's vigilance never eased.

"Of course, you told me about it."

"I want you and Bobby moving there. Carter told me it's ready, and he will show it to us later this afternoon."

My first reaction was to decline. Bobby needed stability which meant he needed his own home, his bed, and his familiar environment.

And Jeremy knew that. How could he even think about ripping all of that away from him?

"Before you say no—which I can tell is your first reaction—I want you to hear me out."

He sighed. "There's something I need to tell you. Something about my past. Something I should've told you a while ago, but I can't seem to find the right moment. "

Jeremy's eyes had turned dark, his voice void of emotion.

What was going on?

"Do you remember the night we met?"

I cocked my head. How could I ever forget? But we'd been over this, hadn't we?

"You caught me at a very rough time in my life."

What was he talking about?

But then I remembered. He'd looked worn out, broody. Sexy as hell, yes, but he hadn't looked happy or relaxed or like he was having a good time sitting at that bar and nursing that drink of his.

Didn't I call him on it?

"I remember."

"Well." He swallowed and focused on his thumb, drawing circles on his coffee cup. "The thing you don't remember—because I didn't tell you—is that I lost my family a couple of months before we met."

My eyes snapped to his, and a shiver grazed my body and left me chilled.

His family?

He lost his family?

What did that even mean? Did his parents die?

He opened his wallet and pulled out a folded picture and handed it to me.

I was almost too scared to look at it. The old Felicia probably wouldn't have wanted to know. Would have focused on making him feel better first. But I'd changed in the past couple of weeks. I didn't value keeping the peace over everything anymore. I didn't hide anymore and wasn't afraid to face the truth. Even if it wasn't pretty, or pleasant. I'd become braver and stronger. Even more so after Bobby had been kidnapped. I unfolded the photograph and looked at the young woman who was holding a baby in her arms.

My stomach plummeted.

Not his parents.

The woman in the photo was smiling—full-on teeth and everything—happy.

I looked from the photograph to Jeremy and back.

He was looking at it, as well, the expression on his face somber.

“This is my wife, Nina, and our baby, Carolina.”

My chest tightened, and I froze. He couldn't have said more shocking words even if he tried to. My mind was going a mile a minute. His wife, his child? He'd been married, and I was the other woman? I could feel the bile rise in my throat.

I always had this movie-like romantic memory of that night in my mind—almost ethereal as if I was the princess who'd found and lost her prince. But of course, this was real life, and I should know by now that life was nothing like a movie.

Then another shocking thought hit. He said “is.” He used the word “is.” *This is my wife*. Was he still married? “You're married?”

I couldn't even look at him. Suddenly, I felt so hollow. As if all my life was sucked out of me and the only thing left was a shell. An empty shell oozing pain and betrayal.

"No. Nina committed suicide, and she took Carolina with her." His words sounded as if he had to force them out of his throat, as if he hadn't said those words in a long time.

Fu...

Right. He started with that. He'd lost his family. Instead of listening, I went into full-blown panic mode. I grabbed his hand and squeezed.

"It happened a couple of months before I met you. I was hurting. Beating myself up. Trying to survive the days and somehow get through the nights. And then I met you."

His eyes were unseeing when he stared at me.

"Our night together changed me in so many ways. You gave me hope when I had none. And as crazy as it sounds, you disappearing on me lit a fire inside of me."

Now he focused back at me, and what I saw made my breath stick in my throat.

"The need to find you again probably saved my life. You saved my life. And that's why I need you and Bobby to move into that safe house because I can't risk losing someone I love, not again."

He looked into my eyes when he said those last words, and I could see the pain and the sorrow, and the truth there.

Someone he loved.

Me and Bobby.

There were so many layers beneath every story, and I couldn't believe I even hesitated for one second.

All Jeremy ever wanted, did, since finding us again, was to protect Bobby and me, and if that meant we had to temporarily move, then that's what we were gonna do.

This amazing man.

I squeezed his hand again.

Something shifted inside of me.

He loved me and I loved him.

And the only real reason I told him to back off was because I was afraid.

Of course, I wanted to give Bobby a chance to get to know his dad. But our relationship, our love, wouldn't take away from Jeremy's love for his son.

That meant telling Bobby I was in love with his dad was the next point on the agenda.

Right after telling Jeremy I loved him.

I looked deep into his eyes. Dove into the love, the patience I saw reflected there. Ready to finally claim what has been mine all along.

“I—”

He grabbed my shoulders, and I leaned forward, expecting him to kiss me; the next second, he flipped us, and I was buried under him on the floor next to the sofa.

I opened my eyes and stared at his hand holding a gun.

What the fudge?

“Knock, knock, your taxi is here.”

My eyes snapped from Jeremy above me up at Oz, who leaned in the doorframe as if he didn't have a care in the world.

“How the hell did you get in?” Jeremy barked, his eyes narrowed, holding a distinct warning, while he holstered his gun and helped me up.

Oz held up a toolset and grinned. “Need to practice my breaking and entering skills, and your guarding skills,” he said nonchalantly as if he was talking about the weather and not picking a lock—or having been seconds away from getting shot.

“How about you practice somewhere else next time? I hear Carter always enjoys company,” Jeremy said, his narrowed eyes holding a distinct warning.

“My bad.” Oz held up his hands. “You’re in need of a chauffeur, ma’am.”

I nodded. As soon as Bobby went back to school, I started working again. Usually, I opened the shop in the mornings and closed at lunchtime, so my afternoon was free. That had been our routine before.

Though I wasn’t sure how that would work out with moving into the safe house. Even though it was just a couple of blocks away so Bobby could still attend school in Three Oaks, and I could still open the shop while he was there.

There was so much we still had to talk about, so much to figure out.

Though right now, with Oz hovering around, it wasn’t the right time.

I watched Jeremy put the photograph back into his wallet.

I had so many questions, so many things I wanted to know, but those had to wait.

I squeezed his hand once more, but instead of letting me go, Jeremy caught my hand and intertwined our fingers. “Hey, Oz, why don’t you get the boys ready? They’re in Bobby’s room.”

After Oz saluted and disappeared, Jeremy turned toward me and caught my eyes with his. “I couldn’t keep Nina and Carolina safe,” he said, his voice a little rough around the edges. “That’s why I need to do everything in my power to keep you and Bobby safe. You are my second chance. My only chance, and I just can’t take a risk.”

I stared into his eyes.

He was so raw, so open. It was such a contrast to his usual self—always in control, bossy, so sure of himself. For this man to let me see, to let me know. It meant so much.

“Of course, we’ll do whatever you think is best.” I cupped his cheek with my hand, his rough beard tickled my skin, and for the first time, realization hit.

How I hadn’t touched him for so long. I told him I needed time, and he completely accepted my wishes.

He’d been there, always. But he’d never forced me; he didn’t even urge me.

I leaned in and gave him a kiss on the lips.

This man asked me to marry him out of sheer honor and responsibility, and when I asked him to back off, he did that, too.

Realization hit me at that moment how Jeremy truly was the best man I’d ever met and probably would meet, and all my hesitation and insecurities had nothing to do with him or the man I knew him to be.

It was time to be brave, time to step up and finally live my life to the fullest.

And doing it all alone didn’t mean I was strong. Loving again, opening up again. Potentially getting hurt again and doing it anyway.

That’s where true strength came in.

And I was ready. Ready for anything this man was willing to give.

Bobby and Brody came into the room at that exact moment.

Well, maybe right now wasn’t the best time for a declaration of love.

It could wait until later tonight. And then we would tell Bobby—together.

“Okay, boys, do you have your backpacks?”

They both nodded, and Jeremy and I moved toward the kitchen. Our hands touched, and I could feel while just standing next to him that everything had changed within me.

I couldn't wait to tell him.

I grabbed my bag, and together, we left the house.

The boys ran to Jeremy's car, and Oz and I watched them leave before we settled into his truck.

"I'm sorry I interrupted your little something." Oz gave me a lopsided grin. He was a great guy and behaved like a little brother. Somehow, I didn't think he would be as relaxed and friendly on the job if it weren't for this special assignment. All of the Raptor Security guys felt like they were just more team members. Just a part of the family. Like Goofy and Peaches were. "Do you often apologize to your clients?" I asked him.

Another lopsided grin. "Never. But my usual clients aren't as pretty as you."

Amazing how Oz's flirting somehow put me completely at ease. Not that I had extensive experience in flirting with anyone. Not besides my attempts at flirting with Jeremy that night.

But with Jeremy, it was different.

Had always been different.

Where Oz felt safe, and I instinctively knew he meant nothing by flirting with me, it only took one whispered "*good girl*" from Jeremy to have me in a state.

And on top of pure lust, I loved him.

How lucky was I?

JEREMY



“The wall was still intact, just needed some reinforcements. But we have motion detectors, and the whole property is under video surveillance,” Carter said and grinned.

How the hell he’d managed to turn the property into a high-security compound in under three weeks, I couldn’t even fathom. But somehow, he managed.

My gaze met Richard’s, and he gave me a lopsided grin. “Having billions at your disposal apparently doesn’t suck.”

Hawk, who accompanied us on our walk of the perimeter, patted Richard’s back. “Maybe you should think about joining Carter’s or my team?”

Richard chuckled. “Nope, I’m right where I want to be. Elected to serve.”

We’d started our tour up on the hill where Carter had the old mill transformed into a command center and training facility of epic proportions.

But the real magic had been done to the houses down the hill.

They were more mansions than houses—three of them.

One housed the Little Women’s Home, a women’s refuge and shelter. The other two mansions had been sitting empty for the longest time.

“How did you pull it off?” I asked Carter, who looked at the two tall buildings.

“Edith once told me those houses reminded her of great old ladies, whose dresses were all shabby.”

He chuckled. “And she was right. Structurally they were still sound. A lot of paint, new windows, a new roof, and a lot of work on the inside, and they were good as new.”

“And you had all of this done within the month?”

He shrugged. “If I want something, I make it happen.”

I nodded. That was probably an accurate statement—as far as I’d looked into him.

“So, what do you think? Will they go for it?”

Now wasn’t that the burning question?

When I left Felicia earlier this afternoon, I could see all the questions swirling around in her brain. I hadn’t intended to spring Nina and Carolina on her like that.

But I needed her to understand where I was coming from.

I needed her to get how much her and Bobby’s safety meant to me.

One close call with Bobby was enough.

I’d doubled down on digging into Benno’s connections with the Sormiza Cartel—risking my job by doing so.

I’d found some evidence. Contacts, undercover work he’d done. But nothing concrete.

And the cartel was still lying low. The tracker George had planted had led to Costa Rica. But I hadn’t been read in on the details. Benno’s attempt to punish me.

“I talked to Felicia earlier. She’s in. What about the rest?”

“Edith is in. She’s still mad I didn’t tell her about the tracker, but she gets it.”

The tracker. All the cars had now been equipped with one, and Peaches had set up a surveillance operation of all of our vehicles.

“Dorothy’s in, as well, and I think George and Gracie are coming too,” Richard said.

And Max and Milli.

Peaches, Goofy, Hawk, and his guys and girl.

“Full house, then,” I said.

Carter nodded. “Peter, Blake, and Lucas will focus on Moon Lake. Just in case.”

“Is there enough space?” Richard asked.

Carter chuckled. “More than enough. You wouldn’t believe it. I have all of you in the second house. Hawk and his team are moving in with us.”

Us.

Carter had adapted one of the houses for Edith and him, plus Brody and Carter’s mother, Judith, whom I’d met a couple of days ago.

“We have six apartments, so you all should be reasonably comfortable,” Carter said when we got to the front door of the house.

We entered and walked into a big room where Peaches and Goofy were entertaining all the Bryce sisters with stories about Brody’s and Bobby’s latest fight.

All the sisters except one.

“Where’s Felicia and Oz? They should be here by now,” I asked nobody in particular.

Hawk and Carter immediately looked tense.

I took out my phone and dialed Felicia’s number—it rang and rang. And my stomach dropped when my eyes connected with Hawk.

I shook my head.

Something wasn’t right.

Fuck.

FELICIA



I dumped the box I'd lifted back into the trunk and bolted into the shop when I heard my phone ring.

Oz hot on my heels.

“What do you think you're doing?” he shouted, his weapon drawn, running backward and looking around as if he was ready to whack anybody who would raise his head. Kind of like Bobby and I were acting when we were playing whack-a-mole at the Arcade. Waiting for anything to jump up.

The thought had me laughing when I held up my phone and shot him a look full to the brim with all the indignation I was feeling. Mental note—no abrupt movements in Oz's presence. “I'm taking a phone call. I'm not running into an ambush,” I said, with my best condescending voice.

He cocked his head and raised one eyebrow—chiding me for mocking him. But all it did was dampen his pure masculinity and make him look slightly constipated. Not that I would ever dare tell him that.

Oz was a good guy. And even though it was a hassle having someone by my side at all times, at least that someone had a sense of humor, and I didn't feel constantly threatened by his mere presence. “How about you get the rest of the stuff in while I take this call.”

He huffed, but I turned around and answered the call.

“Hey, you,” I said.

There was a full five seconds of silence before the extra-long exhale.

“Jeremy?”

“Yeah, why did it take you so long to pick up your phone?”

“It was inside the shop, and we were outside hauling in supplies,” I answered.

But the clearly audible tension in his voice made me jumpy. “What’s wrong?”

Another deep breath. “Nothing. I was just wondering where you were. I’m at the safe house, and everybody is here but you.”

“I’m still at the shop.” I suppressed a sigh. “Remember my shop; it’s my livelihood.” I hesitated for a moment. There had been some complications with the delivery, so it took us longer than expected, but I needed to make him understand that I needed to work, needed the independence and the money this shop gave me.

Even if it was independence from him.

“It took longer than expected. The supplier’s van broke down, so we needed to do the pick-up ourselves. We are lugging in the supplies right now.”

Also, I wanted to expand the opening hours and possibly hire someone. Though I didn’t know if it would work out because the shop barely made enough for me to scrape by—

Stop!

That wasn’t true.

That’s what Roy had always told me, that my measly salary from the shop wasn’t worth the hassle.

As if. This shop provided more than enough for Bobby and me—now that Roy was out of the picture.

My mind instantly jumped back to those guys who visited me right here a couple of weeks ago.

Who told me about Roy's gambling debts.

I'd always wondered if Roy drank all the money away.

Apparently not.

Apparently, he'd gambled it all away.

My stomach hardened and my throat burned from the bitter taste flooding me. Only hatred and a keen sense of frustration for myself remained. I let him treat me like a doormat for far too long, had swallowed everything, even his physical abuse. When in reality he was such a loser who somehow made me lose all confidence in myself—lose the ability to think and act independently. I sighed.

Well, that will not happen again.

“Okay, I'm sorry I snapped at you,” Jeremy said.

His apology made me smile.

This was why Jeremy was a truly great man. Apart from the obvious—his panty-creaming body and pure animal magnetism—he was reasonable.

And if he messed up, he was man enough to take ownership and even apologize.

I turned around, and my eyes clashed with Oz's. He was still watching me, listening in.

I covered the phone and held it away from my face. “Can you please carry the rest of the boxes inside?”

He looked like he wanted to object, but in the end, he huffed, turned around, and walked back outside to the car.

I turned back around and put the phone back to my ear. “I understand. We're all under a lot of stress right now. I know you just care about my safety, and I promise I won't do anything risky or stup—”

Something cold and hard pressed against my temple. And the words stuck in my rapidly closing throat.

What the fudge was happening?

“Let’s go,” a dark, menacing voice behind me said and sent a shiver down my spine.

Whoever was holding that gun to my head snatched my phone out of my hand. The last thing I could hear was Jeremy’s voice asking what was wrong before my attacker laid the phone on the counter—face up, so the image of Jeremy I had programmed in there a few days ago was still visible.

My mind, though, was somehow nonfunctional.

Neither was my body.

“Let’s go, bitch,” the guy behind me said, moved his gun to the back of my head, then grabbed my shoulder and pushed me to walk in front of him.

I hadn’t even seen his face.

I needed to do something.

One last look at the still-connected call and Jeremy’s face made me start talking. “What’s happening? I don’t have money right here, but I have some in the safe in the back.”

The guy chuckled, a deep, malicious chuckle, condescending and dismissive at the same time. Then he pushed me forward.

“Move, bitch. You’re all the payment we need,” he growled in my ear; his baseball cap touched my hair, and I recoiled.

Shudders raced down my body.

When he steered me toward the exit, my eyes immediately searched for Oz.

Where was he? Why wasn’t he protecting me?

But the moment we stepped outside, I knew.

My eyes shot to his still form, lying crumpled next to my car—supplies all around him.

My breath hitched. And my insides turned to ice.

Was he dead? Did they kill him?

He didn’t move, so I couldn’t be sure.

I made a step in his direction, but before I could get close enough to see if he was still breathing, the guy behind me grabbed my arm and dragged me back and to the left—away from Oz.

“Oz, are you okay?” I shouted.

Without reaction.

Then the guy shoved me into a blue van that appeared right there in front of my car, out of nowhere.

I fell to my knees, and the guy gave me another shove with a hand on my ass.

Bile rose up my throat. I crawled forward—away from the hand.

The van had no windows in the back, no seats either. The floor was littered with trash. And when the guy closed the door behind him, complete darkness surrounded us.

When I hit the wall, I turned around and stared.

It took my eyes a couple of minutes, but then I could see the guy holding the gun straight at me while holding onto a belt with his other hand.

The van started moving with a U-turn, and I lost my balance and hit my head.

Fuck.

I steadied myself. But there was nothing to hold onto where I was sitting. I inched backward. Maybe there was a latch in the back. Maybe I could escape.

The guy with the gun looked at me. But not in the way you look at a human being you’re threatening.

He looked at me as if he was bored out of his mind and holding me hostage was little more than a formality.

Who were these guys?

And what did they want from me?

The fact that they weren’t wearing masks or anything to disguise their identities did little to calm my galloping heart.

They didn't care if I saw them or not, probably because I wouldn't survive whatever they had planned for me.

JEREMY



“What’s wrong?”

I stared at my screen, then back at Hawk who was staring at me.

I shook my head, then listened, and what I heard next had me turn hot and cold and back to combustion levels.

“Let’s go, bitch.”

I stopped breathing and listened.

“What’s happening? I don’t have money right here, but I have some in the safe in the back.”

That was the sentence that hurled me into action.

“Robbery,” I mouthed to Hawk who immediately dialed Oz and alerted the others on his radio.

I watched him, but when he shook his head, a heavy weight settled on my chest.

What the ever-loving fuck?

How was crime suddenly omnipresent in this little fucking town in the middle of nowhere?

With the phone on my ear, we ran for the vehicles. Hawk barked instructions into his phone while Carter took the wheel.

We were off immediately and approached the automatic gate, which Carter had installed just yesterday, at breakneck speed.

It was slowly opening, but Carter didn’t slow down.

For a split second, I thought we would crash into the fucking thing, but we slipped through, missing the half-open gate by mere inches.

I held onto my door handle.

I hadn't experienced that kind of driving since my military days.

But boy, was I glad these guys were on my side.

Praying Carter wouldn't crash the vehicle on the way to getting there, I looked at Richard's truck following ours.

I still listened to my phone, but there was only silence. I thought I heard tires screeching, but I wasn't sure. Maybe Felicia had led them to the safe in the back, and that's why I wasn't hearing anything.

The shop wasn't that far from the compound, so we arrived within a couple of minutes. The scene had my heart doing a double flip. We parked in the middle of the road and slowly exited the vehicle with our weapons drawn.

The door to the shop stood open, as did the trunk of Felicia's car.

But no movement otherwise.

We rounded Felicia's car, Hawk's weapon trained on the shop while I was covering our six, and Carter and Richard edged around the trunk.

"Fuck," Carter murmured.

I cast a glance at his position and saw him leaning over Oz's unmoving body.

"Is he dead?" Hawk's voice was void of emotion from years of training in high-danger environments.

"Nope, still breathing," Carter said, "but he got a nasty bump on the head."

"Let's secure the scene," Richard said.

"Roger that," Hawk answered, and we proceeded toward the shop.

Through the glass panes, I could see the whole interior—with no one visible inside.

Maybe they were in the back?

But the moment I stepped foot into the store behind Richard, I knew it was empty.

Despite that, we did a full sweep of the shop, including the back.

“Clear,” I shouted after making sure the back room was empty.

“Clear,” Hawk’s voice came from the left.

I watched him close the door to the bathroom.

My breath was ragged when my eyes found the phone on the counter.

It showed my face and our still-connected call.

“Let’s get it all sorted out,” Richard said and grabbed my shoulder and pulled me outside.

A siren in the distance announced Peter’s arrival seconds before he jumped out of his truck.

Peter’s eyes turned stormy when he looked at us and then at Oz. Richard called an ambulance over his radio while Peter stepped up to us.

“What happened?” His eyes zeroed in on me.

“We were on the phone when somebody came into the shop and threatened her. She told them she had money in the safe, but it hasn’t been touched. She’s gone.” My voice broke with that last word. And I could see compassion in Richard’s eyes.

“You were here awfully fast,” Carter said while he kneeled beside Oz and had his head in his lap.

“We got alerted to a possible abduction,” Peter said, then he took a step back and looked upstairs.

At least someone had witnessed what had been happening.

“The shop’s clear,” Richard said.

Peter nodded and walked around the corner while Richard came back to us. “How certain are we this is related to the threat Felicia reported a couple of days ago?”

Reality slammed into me as if I’d raced down a slope on skies and collided with a tree.

Fuck.

I hadn’t even talked to her about it—apart from pushing her against the door and making my anger known.

How could I’ve been so negligent? I should’ve asked her about every tiny detail. Should’ve come with her here instead of thinking Oz protecting her was enough.

Fuck.

I could feel Richard staring at me.

He gave me a beat or two until I got my breathing back under control.

Was all of this connected to her ex?

Gambling debts—that’s what Richard had told me.

But also, something about the shop being collateral?

Then why would they take her?

Why not extort her until the debt was paid?

Argh.

The ambulance arrived, and Max was one of the EMTs on duty.

He shot me one knowing look before he focused on Oz.

But that one look was enough.

Filled with compassion and sorrow. He’d been through the same thing after the V-club incident.

But I didn’t need any compassion, and I didn’t need sorrow.

What I needed was to get Felicia back ASAP.

Nothing else.

Little did I know how long it would take and how slowly going insane would feel like.

FELICIA DARK NIGHT-1



I crawled to the back of the van, then settled with my back against the wall.

I tried to follow the turns, but without any visual clues and starting late, I felt off-balance.

The drive wasn't long, and even though I tried to focus on the roads as soon as I pulled myself together, it was too late.

I couldn't get back my orientation, so we were either in Moon Lake or Whitebrook—which was the likelier option, given the traffic I could feel all around us.

The guy said nothing the whole ride—I didn't either.

He didn't even acknowledge me, didn't look at me, didn't even properly point the gun at me.

And yet it was enough to keep me scared shitless and very off-balance.

I felt small and insignificant. As if I wasn't even worth his attention.

As if I didn't matter.

What the ever-loving fudge?

The ball cap guy suddenly gave me a sharp look. Did I say that out loud? I curled into myself.

Made myself small. That's what I'd done for so many years, what kept me safe for so many years.

Finally, the van slowed down, and so did my heart.

Whatever was happening, I didn't have my phone or my car, so there was no way Jeremy could track me even if he wanted to.

And that was the only thing I was certain of.

He would search for me. Wouldn't give up. So, I had to stay alive for as long as it took him.

Survive and wait for a chance to escape.

Then the van stopped, and so did my breath.

JEREMY



It had been exactly two hours, and I was slowly going insane.

The neighbor upstairs, who'd called the sheriff, had reported a blue van.

Richard had immediately put out an APB, and it was found on the outskirts of Whitebrook within the hour—torched.

At least we knew the direction they'd taken—but not a single thing more.

Hawk had accompanied Oz to the hospital, and everybody else had reconvened back at the safe house.

I sat outside on a big stone, staring at the old trees, holding Bobby in my lap.

At a loss for words.

I should've never let Felicia go to the shop without me.

I looked across the lawn to the big, open double doors of Carter's house, which housed the war room.

Everybody was either on the phone or gathering intel.

I watched George and Gracie arrive, with Oz and Hawk in the backseat.

Oz had regained consciousness in the ambulance and had refused to stay in the hospital.

“Hey.” Gracie squeezed my forearm, then hugged her nephew. “How about we go, find Auntie Edith, and demand some ice cream?” she said and held her hand out to Bobby.

He nodded—he was probably happy to leave because after I told him there'd been an incident with his mom, I hadn't been able to say anything else.

He jumped off my lap but then hovered by my side as if he was the one who had to take care of me.

I winked at him. "Don't eat too much."

He nodded solemnly, and I immediately regretted my words. He should stuff himself. Should eat all he wanted.

Then he walked away with Gracie.

George gave me a pat on the back, hard enough that I lost my balance on the stone and stood. "Get your act together, Jer. I know it sucks, but we need your head in the game to get her back; copy?"

I nodded. He was right. Staring into space wouldn't help.

"I'm so sorry," Oz said and squared off with me. I could see the anguish in the tightness of his sharp-featured face—deep grooves, and his eyes were dark.

This was a man haunted.

I shrugged.

I couldn't tell him it was okay because it wasn't.

Felicia was under his protection, and he'd failed.

We all had failed. Again.

"Let's go," George said.

I trod beside him, following Oz and Hawk.

When I entered the war room, it was buzzing with action.

But everyone fell quiet.

"Okay, guys, gather round," Hawk said, and everybody moved to the big table in the back.

"What do we know so far?"

"Felicia Cleaver was taken from her shop two hours ago."

“There were at least two assailants, one who knocked out Oz, the other one driving the van.”

Everybody looked at Oz who was looking down at his feet.

“Oz was attacked from behind, so we don’t know what they looked like, according to the police report, though she was forced into a blue van at gunpoint.”

I sucked in air through my teeth. How had I missed that point? Had Richard held that information back on purpose?

“There was a threat a couple of days ago against her shop.” Hawk looked down at a copy of the report. I couldn’t believe Richard just handed that over, but apparently, nobody was playing by the books anymore.

“According to the police report, they told her they were there to collect a debt.” He looked down once more.

“She assumed they’d mistaken her for an employee,” Hawk said in a tone that made all my spidey senses tingle. “Because they asked for the owner...” He trailed off.

“Why would we assume her ex put up the shop as collateral—”

And not her?

The thought made me stop cold—as if someone had chucked a bucket of ice water directly in my face.

At the same time, I was fairly certain.

They’d come to collect the debt—her, not the shop.

Fuck. What would they do with her? What would be the plan?

Hawk watched me. “What’s the conclusion, Jeremy?” he asked me, wanting me to be the one to say it out loud.

“She’s the collateral, not the shop. They will sell her or use her to make them money.”

It was the only thing that made sense, but at the same time, it was the worst thing I could imagine.

Hawk nodded.

There wouldn't be demands. There wouldn't be a ransom notice. They might not even know she was connected to us—if it even was someone connected to the Sormiza Cartel.

Fuck.

I raked a hand through my hair.

We need to find her ASAP.

Before she disappeared.

FELICIA



The side door of the van slid open, but I didn't move.

Whatever happened now, this was my chance to escape. They hadn't put any cuffs on me, so I could just jump out and run.

I braced myself.

The guy hopped out, but instead of demanding my exit he just...left.

Now. Now. Now.

I got to my feet and flew towards the door.

I jumped out, angling to the right—the opposite direction of where the stupid ball-cap guy disappeared.

And hit a wall.

A leather-jacket-clad brick wall the size of a house.

“Easy, lass.”

Lass? What the actual fudge?

He pulled me off his chest and set me down a foot in front of him.

Just like that.

As if I was a doll.

I struggled against his saucer-sized hands on my arms, but that didn't do jack shit. The guy in front of me was built like a

gorilla—a beautiful blond gorilla with a tattoo up his neck and a menacing scowl.

The more I struggled, the tighter his grip and scowl became.

I deflated like a pufferfish releasing water.

No matter what I did, no matter if I could get my mind to remember those self-defense movements—which I couldn't—I had zero chance of escaping this gorilla.

Nothing would change the outcome.

I looked around at everything to escape his scowl. I didn't recognize the spot, but we were in the innercity part of Whitebrook.

Then the guy wrapped one hand around my arm and pulled me through a doorway. Down the entryway, then down a flight of stairs.

“What's your name?”

Should I lie? What would it change?

“Felicia Cleaver.”

There was no visible reaction from him.

We passed a couple of doors, then he unlocked a door and shoved me into the room and into complete darkness.

The door fell closed behind me. The lock clicked.

Caught.

For a split second, I just stood and took the room in.

I couldn't see much, but I instinctively knew I wasn't alone.

The burning stench of excrement and the filthy scent of unwashed bodies and cold sweat assaulted me first, and I slapped my hand over my nose and mouth. Then my skin pebbled with a whole-body shudder when I heard the silent moans.

Not of pain but of desperation.

Fuck.

I stood frozen, then slowly retreated toward the door, afraid to stumble over someone.

I tried the handle.

What was this place? Why were they here? And why was I?

“Hey, girl, you can sit over here.” A voice came from my right.

The voice was female with no detectable accent.

That was the only thing my brain could gather from where I was standing.

I hesitated but then turned to my right, my heart beating. Slowly, my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I could see outlines.

What was this place?

What the hell happened?

“Almost there. Stop. Stop.”

I stopped and looked down. There was a mattress, which I almost tripped over. I focused on the silhouette of a woman leaning against the wall and sitting on the mattress.

I went down and crawled next to her.

“Hey.” Her voice might’ve been melodic once, but it sounded crackly and flat.

“Hey,” I said as if we were meeting at a cocktail party and making a new acquaintance.

Completely surreal.

“What’s your name?”

“Felicia.”

That was met with silence for a couple of seconds.

When I realized she wouldn’t volunteer hers, I asked, “What’s yours?”

“Clarice.”

“Nice to meet you, Clarice.”

The sound she made was somewhere between a scoff and a sigh.

“Do you know where we are?” I looked around. There were at least four other mattresses, filled with women. Ten, maybe twelve total.

“We’re in the basement of one of their buildings.”

“Who are they?”

“I think they’re local thugs, but I don’t know exactly,” Clarice said.

“For how long have you been here,” I asked, not sure if I even wanted to know the answer.

“Two days.”

Double fudge.

Two days?

I couldn’t even imagine staying in here for an hour, let alone for days. My breathing turned ragged.

“The other’s too?”

“Yes, you’re the first newcomer.”

Oh, God.

What if this was it?

I’d heard about human trafficking and slavery. What if this was it for the rest of my life?

That thought made me completely lose it.

My heart raced in my chest, and there was a distinct ringing in my ears. And suddenly, I couldn’t breathe.

Images appeared before my mind’s eye. Bobby, Jeremy, my sisters. What if I would never see them again?

“You need to calm down,” Clarice said.

As if I could.

Instead, I sucked in air, but somehow, it wasn't enough.

I thought about those I loved until my mind shut down my body, or was it the other way around?

JEREMY



“Dad?”

I dragged my heavy eyelids from my hands, playing with Felicia’s old scrunchy, and blinked to get my blurred vision back to normal, then focused on my son standing before me.

His hair was mussed from sleep, and his PJs were at least a size too small. My chest squeezed.

“Dad?” he said again, and my heart thudded dully. Bobby had started calling me dad sometime during the two days and two nights since his mother had gone missing.

He’d been having a rough time sleeping—the reason why I’d been spending half my nights in the chair in his room watching over him and the other half in the war room, desperately trying to gain new intel.

Any insights on where they’d taken her.

My throat hurt, and I blinked away the threatening tears. I didn’t want my boy to see me cry, see how desperate I was.

Even though, apart from rough dreams, Bobby had been a trooper about the whole situation.

Far stronger than I was.

I was way beyond my breaking point. Way beyond self-flagellation and hope.

I didn’t protect the woman I loved. I’d lost her. Again.

I took a deep breath, pulling myself together, and reached out and caressed his hair. “Trouble sleeping?”

He nodded.

At least during the day, Felicia’s sisters were here, giving him the stability of family he so desperately needed—because I, his father, was ping-ponging between nervous energy and complete despair.

“What if she never comes back?” His eyes were brimming with tears.

I sucked in air. Fuck. Talk about a gut punch.

I pushed the scrunchy into my pocket and held out both hands. I’d known this conversation was on the horizon. I just didn’t think having it in the middle of the night, or anytime, was the right time. “Come here.”

He came to me without hesitation, and I lifted him into my lap. “We will get her back; do you wanna know how I know?”

He nodded.

I pulled the ring from my other pocket. The ring I had been carrying with me ever since I asked her to marry me. “Because I have been searching for her, for you, for a very long time. And as soon as she’s back—if it’s okay with you—I want to ask your mom to marry me. What do you say? Is this something you would want?”

I didn’t even need to hear the words by the way his eyes sparkled. “So, you will be my dad?”

Fuck me.

Love, unencumbered, flowed out of me.

I petted his hair and forced a smile. “I’m already your dad, and I will always be, no matter if your mother marries me or not.” I sighed. “But I would like to at least ask her. What do you say?”

He cocked his head as if he had to think about it, then he smiled. “Okay. I’ll even ask her for you if you want me to.”

I pulled him against me, kissed his crown, and hid my smile in his hair. “Thanks, buddy, but that’s something I have to do myself.”

He nodded solemnly as if he understood perfectly. My chest squeezed again. How did I ever deserve this second chance?

I stood and carried him over to his bed.

“Now jump in.”

He jumped into his bed, and I rolled him into his sheets like a burrito—the way we established he liked to be tucked in. “If you need anything, I’ll be downstairs for a while.”

He nodded, his eyelids already drooping.

“See you in the morning, bud.”

“Night, Dad.”

I stood, leaned over him, kissed his forehead, then turned off all the lights except the one on his nightstand, since we agreed to keep that one on at all times. And left for the war room.

I hadn’t slept in two days. And I wouldn’t sleep until the love of my life was back in my arms.

I walked down the stairs, crossed the room, and settled in front of a flickering monitor.

I thought losing her the first time had been bad, but it had nothing on now.

The agony had settled deep into my chest—a constant reminder she was missing, the burning need to find her taking turns with an all-consuming desperation I could feel deep in my bones.

I promised her I would protect her, promised her nothing bad would happen.

I sank my head into my hands and groaned.

I didn’t even last a month until I broke my promise.

And it broke me.

Somebody clogged me with a ball of paper and catapulted me out of my stupor.

“Dude, your phone.”

I stared at the guy named Falcon.

He stared back at me with unflinching blue eyes—a stark contrast to his olive skin and black hair.

I’d wondered about his origin, and my first impression of his Mediterranean heritage had been confirmed when he’d introduced himself as Gabriele Falcone aka Falcon—an Italian name if I’d ever heard one.

One of the Raptor Security guys was always manning the head office—watching over every single ongoing operation—which they now handled from Carter’s war room.

Apparently, tonight it was Falcon’s turn, the most mysterious member of Hawk’s Tier One unit.

I grabbed my phone—unknown caller—and accepted the call.

“She’s safe for now.”

I straightened in my chair, my heart bruising my ribs from the inside. Was this Gallagher’s voice? “Who is?”

“Felicia Cleaver.”

I sucked in a breath. How would Gallagher know?

“Where is she?”

Falcon’s head snapped around, and our eyes locked for a second before he radioed it in.

“I can’t tell you.”

“The hell you can’t.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you anything—but let’s meet in an hour. Same spot.”

“Copy that,” I said, and he ended the call.

If Gallagher knew Felicia was safe, it had something to do with the FBI’s secret operation that they didn’t want anyone to

know.

And this secret operation was connected to the Sormiza Cartel.

Fuck.

This was our first real lead after every attempt we'd made in the last two days had led us exactly nowhere.

I shot up, grabbed the keys to my car, and left without a word.

At the crowded parking lot, I jumped into my car, then floored it.

Then came to a stop at the gate. I punched in the security code, and my head jerked around when the doors in the back of my car opened.

FELICIA



When I came to again, my head was on Clarice's lap.

"Welcome back. You successfully knocked yourself out. Don't do that again," Clarice said. "You have to be ready to defend yourself at all times," she said and helped me into a sitting position.

"To do that, staying conscious is the minimum requirement."

I couldn't believe how calm, how collected she sounded when I was freaking out enough to faint.

"How long was I gone?" I asked, almost afraid to hear it.

"Just a couple of minutes, long enough so your nervous system could down-regulate, and your breathing pattern returned from rat-appropriate back to human levels."

I raised my brows. "Rat-appropriate?"

"They have the highest breathing rate of all lung-breathers, technically; fish have an even higher breathing rate, but they're fish, so they don't count."

She chuckled.

I liked her already—not only was she cool as a light dusting of snow, but she was also able to function enough to remember random facts like the breathing rate of rats.

I straightened. If Clarice could stay cool, so would I.

"What do you think they will do with us?"

She sighed. “Either sell us or work us,” she said in such a matter-of-fact way that my breathing rate jumped back up, matching that of a rat again.

“Do they give us water and food?” I asked. Why that mattered, I didn’t know, since I’d rather starve to death than be sold or worked.

“Yeah, only the toilet situation isn’t so hot.” She nodded to the corner opposite from us on the other side of the door, where the outline of three buckets was visible.

Oh, God.

That’s where the stench was coming from.

“I don’t think they will hold us here much longer, though,” she said.

And she was right.

JEREMY



Falcon and Birdie were both dressed in black and each had a black bag with them.

What the hell?

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked when they both were inside.

“Backup,” Falcon said.

“Sniper overwatch,” Birdie said at the same time.

I sighed. “Guys, I need to go alone.”

Falcon winked. “Yeah, see.” He sighed. “That’s not gonna happen. Hawk’s orders.”

Birdie nodded. “Solo operations are a big no-no.”

Falcon scoffed. “As if our little innocent Birdie isn’t the reason solo operations are blacklisted.”

“Well, too bad, Gabriele, since we all know you don’t play well with others. Not even with your own family. And trust me, I’d rather go alone than go on an op with you.”

Falcon growled.

What the fuck was that all about? “Guys, out.”

They both focused back on me.

And shook their heads.

“So”—Birdie handed me an earpiece—“who knows where our little Red has wandered off to?”

Little Red? How the fuck did she know my nickname for Felicia?

I put the earpiece into my ear. “The FBI,” I said.

“Son of a bitch.” That was Hawk’s voice—through my earpiece.

Then Carter chuckled. “I’ve been wondering what they were up to since their absence from our task force was a little suspicious.”

I sighed. “Sorry, I couldn’t tell you.”

“It’s okay,” Carter said. “So, who’s your contact, and how does he know?”

I hadn’t talked to Gallagher since our last meeting, so the fact that he knew Felicia was taken—and she was my woman—must mean he’d been keeping tabs on all of us.

“They’ve got some kind of undercover operation going. Don’t know any more than that.”

“Let’s hear what they have to say then,” Hawk said.

The rest of the way, we all remained silent. Birdie and Falcon exited the car a block out after I told them the exact location of our meet, then I rolled up to the warehouse.

There weren’t any security lights, so the empty lot and the warehouse were cast in complete darkness.

I checked my watch. I was here early, though when my headlight swiped over his car, I tensed.

Time for some answers.

I parked right behind him this time, then got out as he did the last time, and approached his car from the rear.

I opened the passenger door and sat down. “So?”

Gallagher sighed. “They’ve brought in a red-headed woman that matches the description and name of your missing girlfriend,” he said in a chippy tone.

I ground my teeth, balled my fist, and looked outside my window before I relaxed.

“Who’s they?”

“Can’t say.”

“Where did they take her?”

“Don’t know.”

This was the last straw. My insides felt like a volcano about to erupt. “Then what the fuck do you know?” I roared.

He stared at me, probably because he’d never seen me lose my temper.

And I usually didn’t. As a Ranger, they’d even nicknamed me Edge, a testament to the fact that I’d managed to walk the edge without it fazing me.

Well, that was before everything changed. Before I’d met and lost Red.

When Gallagher refused to start talking, he would really see what it meant if I lost my temper. And it wouldn’t be pretty.

“She’s okay for now...according to my source.”

“Then let’s get her out.”

He sighed, then shook his head. The asshole really sounded like he gave a shit, but his words disabused me of my premature trust.

“No can do. We need her to stay put for a little while longer.”

“Stay put?” I said, putting as much acid into my words as I felt burning through my stomach. “Stay put? She’s a goddamn captive, enduring God knows what, and you need her to stay put?”

He nodded. “Listen, as soon as we’re on the move, I’ll read you in, so you can be there. I know you don’t like it. But that’s the best I can do. She’s okay for now. That’s all I can say.”

I wanted to deck him. I could feel a deathly calm come over me like I’d never felt before.

If I had my gun, which I didn't—because Birdie and Falcon refused to share whatever they had in their big, black goodie bags, I would've probably held him at gunpoint until he gave up every single bit of information.

“Jer, keep it together. Get out of the fucking car. Right the fuck now. This is an order.” Falcon's voice in my ear was gravely low and hard.

“That's all. Now get out.” Gallagher's voice was dismissive as if I was little more than a nuisance to him. But he braced himself, as well.

Gallagher knew I was on edge, flirting with the danger and destruction zone of throwing my values overboard and choking him. And he would probably have a field day, if I lost my cool.

“Call me the minute you got something,” I said and nearly choked on the words. I felt like I was letting her down.

My Red. I was letting her rot in whatever prison she was in right now.

“One more thing,” Gallagher said with deathly calm. “This, me informing you, is a fucking courtesy. And I don't owe you shit. Got it?”

Something about the dismissiveness in his voice made me snap.

I pulled my arm back and hit him right in his smug fucking face.

Then grabbed him by the collar and slammed him against his door.

And he gave as good as he got.

It turned into a brawl; there wasn't enough room to do serious harm, but more than enough to at least get some of my aggression, my desperation out.

And my message across.

“This is just business as usual for you, isn't it, you fucker?” I growled through clenched teeth.

He pulled back and got me in the nose, and I could hear a cracking noise.

But it only fueled my anger.

“Fuck.” I heard in my ear, then—I don’t know if it was seconds or minutes but my car door opened. Arms slung around my throat.

I could hear a roar.

Was pulled out of the car.

Before my vision turned fuzzy.

I woke up lying on the ground. Dark spots danced in my vision of Birdie, who was standing on my throat and grinning down at me. I turned my head sideways, could see the taillights of the car light up right before it disappeared around the corner.

The pressure against my throat vanished.

Bile rose into my throat, and I turned to the side and retched until the little I’d eaten since they’d taken Red was out of my system.

“Come on, big one,” Birdie said from behind me, compassion tinging her voice.

She helped me up, led me back to the passenger seat, then jumped into the back.

Falcon gunned the engine and brought us back to Three Oaks at warp speed, and all I could do was stare out into the darkness through the windshield and pray for my little Red to hold on just a little while longer.

FELICIA



They brought us to what might've been a motel once—before it had been shut down by officials—for what I could only imagine were various health violations.

Like rat infestation, mold, and exposed wires.

Or maybe the wires happened afterward. The whole property looked like it had been sitting empty for a while and was probably being used by squatters or something.

The most disturbing thing, though, was the stripper pole mounted in the middle of the room they put us in.

What kind of a motel had this been?

A brothel?

At least the toilet was working.

The blonde gorilla, plus a few of his friends, had picked five of us from the room and shoved us into another van. It had been dark out—the second night since they'd taken me.

When they turned on the lights in the room, my first instinct was to crawl as far into the back as I could.

I didn't want to be among the first to go, but when Clarice volunteered, it was like a slap in the face.

Did I want to be scared and hide and pray they wouldn't choose me, or did I want to be brave and unstoppable?

That's when I stood. And was right by Clarice's side, ready to see what destiny would bring.

Whatever was happening, facing it head-on would be my new motto. My knees shook. But it was better than cowering in fear, hoping without hope someone would come and rescue me.

So help me.

I'd endured so much already. I could endure a little more.

They could do whatever they wanted with my body, but they would never break my spirit.

I promised myself I was done being a victim.

And God or the universe, or whoever was looking out for me, was giving me the chance to prove it.

Now I just had to prove it, somehow.

I looked around.

I wished I had Jeremy's soap with me. Something to calm me down. I could even use it to clean myself up.

I chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Clarice asked me from the chair in the corner.

"I just wish I had soap," I answered.

She sighed. "It'll be over soon—just hang on tight."

How would she know? "Why do you think they brought us here?"

Her light green eyes left mine and focused on the stripper pole. "Work," she said and re-tied her strawberry-blond hair. What were the odds they'd captured a blonde and a redhead by mere chance?

"Work?"

"They will have us working," she said so matter-of-factly, it took me a couple of seconds before realization sunk in.

"We're sex slaves." The words were ripped from my frozen body like the cracking sound of a frost quake.

Her gaze slinked back to me, but she remained perfectly still.

I was right.

The pain of sucking the next breath through my tight throat was excruciating.

How could she be so calm when I was dying from fear?

“Don’t freak out again.”

Don’t freak out? Don’t freak out? Those were the words she chose to say to me in this kind of situation?

But somehow, on some level, they worked.

Apparently, I was too used to following orders.

Fudge that.

“I’ll freak out, whenever the fudge I want to freak out,” I said through gritted teeth.

But when the door opened, that was when I really freaked out.

JEREMY



“This is a fucking disaster. What the hell, Edge? You’re a fucking government official. So is he. You don’t clobber a co-worker if you want to keep your job,” Hawk screamed in my face, his face an unnatural shade of red, a vein in his neck bulging and pulsing.

I sighed.

Then hung my head.

I shouldn’t have snapped.

I singlehandedly destroyed every chance to see my Red again.

Every chance to ever hold her in my arms again.

What the fuck has gotten into me?

“Here.” Birdie handed me a bag of frozen peas. “Put this on your nose, but maybe...” She got in my face, grabbed my nose, and jerked it to the left.

Another crack.

A lightning bolt of white-hot pain.

“Sorry, it would’ve been crooked,” she said as if fixing broken noses was a daily occurrence for her.

I stared at her for a couple of seconds.

What kind of badass woman was Birdie really?

She stared back. “Put the ice on—it will reduce the swelling, and then maybe your face will be back to looking all

pretty when you see her again.”

“You pulled me out of the car,” I said.

She cocked her head. That was the only reaction. She looked so frail; not like she was strong enough to fix my nose or pull me out of a vehicle.

But I should’ve known.

She’d been a badass from day one.

Damn good at her job.

“Thanks for just putting me to sleep and not breaking my neck.”

She smiled. “We all lose it every now and then”—she glanced sideways at Hawk, who still looked at me as if he wanted to strangle me—“especially if it’s family.”

Hawk harrumphed, then turned to Falcon and growled, “Give me my fucking phone.”

Birdie and I both watched him for a second, then looked at each other.

She grinned, then shrugged. “Daddy’s not happy.”

My eyebrows shot up. There was a shit ton of sass in her voice, which made me think this wasn’t the first time she’d called him “Daddy.”

The door opened and Carter stepped through. His hair stood on one end as if he’d run his hands through it repeatedly.

“Okay, I issued an official apology to Agent Gallagher and had a gift basket sent to his home. I cozied up to his superiors. We will be notified if there’s a change even though you fucked up the inter-agency relationship. Royally.”

My mouth hung open. Carter and Hawk were some heavy hitters—I’d known that—I just didn’t know how heavy.

But I needed to talk to Gallagher myself.

Apologize.

Man to man.

FELICIA



They brought us into another room.

It all felt surreal. The way they handled us as if we were nothing more than cattle, herded to wherever they wanted us.

And I almost felt that way.

The blond guy didn't even look at us. He just pushed us into another room, this one a bit nicer but not by much.

"Clean up, shower, makeup, and make it quick." He settled down on the bed, and I immediately got the mental image of bed bugs and mold overtaking his body.

It almost made me smile.

"There something to see?" he said and sat up straighter.

Fudge. "No, everything's okay." I hurried after Clarice, who'd disappeared into the bathroom.

"Shit. No window," she said.

I looked around. The bathroom was tiny, and ugly. The tiles might've been white in another life, but they were dirty and covered in black grime now.

"There's no lock on the door, but I'll guard the door if you do the same for me."

I stared at her as if she was speaking gibberish.

No way in hell was I taking a shower with that guy in the room.

Then the freaking guy in the room knocked.

Knocked—at least he had some sense of decency left.

“Almost forgot. Gimme your clothes.”

No fudging way.

Then he opened the door and squared off with Clarice.

She blocked him from entering, then shook her head at the same time. “No can do, Blondie. And by the way, we’ll need towels and soap to get clean.”

Her saccharine voice and the absolute disobedience conveyed in her fuck-you-message didn’t go unnoticed.

And it didn’t land well.

He stepped closer until their noses almost touched. “Well, Ginger. I’m happy to do it for you.” He pulled out a knife, and my breathing stopped. “And when I’m done with you, I’ll do the same with Red over there.”

Clarice held his gaze for what felt like forever, then she took a step back and glanced at me. “That won’t be necessary,” she said, her voice hoarse. “If you could get us some soap and towels, we’ll get you our clothes right away.”

What? Nooo.

I didn’t want to undress. I didn’t want to shower.

He looked from her to me. “I’m waiting; get crackin’.”

Shit.

He wouldn’t leave without our clothes. What should I do? There was no escape. No window, no door. The space was too small to outrun him or even kick him.

Clarice next to me started to undress, which made me freeze.

“Red?” he said, not in a nice way, more in a do-it-or-I’ll-cut-you-open way.

Clarice looked back at me, nodded, and mouthed a silent “do it.”

And my fingers moved as if on autopilot.

I unbuttoned my jeans.

Blondie didn't even look at me—his eyes were fixated on Clarice, who was down to her bra and panties.

Then he turned toward the door. “Throw it outside when you're finished. And take a goddamn shower. You reek.”

That said, he marched outside and hurled the door closed behind him. Maybe he didn't like this part of his job as much as I thought he did.

Maybe he saw us as more than cattle. Though I was sure nothing good would ever come from giving someone who was holding you captive your clothes.

“What do you think will happen?” I whispered.

Clarice shrugged. “Don't think about it. Just survive.”

Just survive.

When I took my shower, I silently repeated the mantra again and again.

And still when I stood naked and wet in the bathroom, guarding the door for Clarice's shower.

Blondie pounded against the door as soon as Clarice shut down the water.

No.

He forced us to come out—buck naked—but avoided looking at us. Instead, his eyes remained glued to our faces when he supervised the makeup we put on, and later, when he led us to the main building and down the steps into the basement.

Just survive.

My heart was thrashing in my ears, in rhythm with the bass welcoming us.

“Move.” Blondie shoved Clarice into me, and I took a step through the doorway and into the flashing lights.

The noise level was deafening. The room was dark and full of people.

Men.

The room was full of men.

Every single one dressed in a black suit.

As if it was some kind of uniform.

What the fudge.

There were several dancers up on small, round stages, gyrating against poles or writhing on their stages.

I watched one of the men in front of the dancer on the floor grab her between her legs as if it was nothing more than a statue he was touching.

A shiver ran down my spine.

Apparently, there wasn't a no-touch policy in place in this club.

What would that mean for the naked servers bringing the drinks?

Just survive.

"Bob," Blondie hollered over the noise at a guy behind the bar. "Two more servers."

Bob nodded and waved us over.

Nobody gave us any attention. As if we weren't, in fact, absolutely buck naked.

"You're here to serve drinks. So better get going, and don't fuck up." That said, he thrust a round tray into my hands, turned me around, and with a whack on my ass that had me jumping, sent me a couple of steps forward.

Just survive.

I blinked and looked at two guys in a heated discussion.

Was this for real?

It was so out there, my mind had difficulties computing the scene.

As if it needed to distance itself to remain in balance.

I took a couple of steps. Everything suddenly felt like a movie.

As if I was watching.

And wasn't even there.

JEREMY



“Thanks for meeting again.”

I stared at Gallagher, trying to avoid looking at his shiner, then lowered my gaze down to my shoes.

How many strings must Hawk have pulled to get Gallagher to come here into our little war room?

We were standing in a circle, and Gallagher had looked around surprised and interested when he first entered.

That was before he spotted me. Then his expression turned to just-tasted-something-rotten-and-ready-to-puke.

Fuck.

How could I’ve screwed this up so badly? I knew how much relationships mattered in this job. And here I was burning bridges I couldn’t afford to burn.

Not if I ever wanted to see Felicia again. “I’m sorry I tried to kill you.”

Gallagher chuckled. “Honestly, you and I know you didn’t try to kill me. If you had, I would be dead by now.” He sighed. “And I understand.”

My eyes snapped back up to meet his.

“Hawk made it known to me how much mental distress you’re under right now.”

“Mental distress?” My eyes turned to Hawk, who was standing suspiciously close to Birdie in our little circle and

who avoided eye contact with me.

“Well, he said, you’re all kinds of fucked up because the woman they’d taken is the love of your life and you’re dying internally.”

I nodded and scratched the side of my neck. Thinking about it, that actually caught exactly how I was feeling.

“So, you get extenuating circumstances, and honestly”—he chuckled, then rubbed his neck—“it’s kinda nice to see you all fucked up. You’re usually such a poster child for being in control. It’s fucking annoying.”

I took his gaze head-on. We’d worked together every now and then for a while now. But I wouldn’t call us friends or even acquaintances. And I wouldn’t have pegged him as someone who’d even notice my mental state or behavior.

“It’s nice to see you’re just a mere mortal, like the rest of us.”

I raised a single brow. Why would he even think I had more self-control than any other man?

Especially since I was feeling like I was flip-flopping between the high of a roller-coaster ride and losing my shit the other half of the time.

As I was skirting the line between love-sick puppy and overprotective asshole, with a death wish, and a desperate need to get to know my son and persuade the woman of my dreams to take a chance on me.

Yeah, no dignity or self-control left.

“Great, now that we’ve cleared the air, what can you tell us?”

Gallagher looked from me to Hawk. “We’ve had our eyes on one of the local gangs for a couple of weeks now. Everything seemed quiet. Business as usual until the Sormiza Cartel made a massive move into the area.”

I nodded. I knew all of this.

“We don’t know exactly why they chose this area, but it looks like they’re establishing a stronghold here. They’ve completely taken over. Flooded the area. Local gangs are all working for them; they control the trade routes, they control supply, they control everything. Drugs, guns, and merchandise. Nobody makes a move anymore without them knowing or directing it. In my twenty years of service, I’ve never seen anything like it. Especially not the speed of force.”

Fuck. My chest tightened. Everything Gallagher said confirmed what we knew already.

“We think there’s a couple of reasons they chose the area,” Hawk said. “All of them personal.”

“Personal?”

Carter, who had been quiet until now nodded. “Apparently, old Sormiza had stalked my woman for the better part of a decade.”

“Your woman?” Gallagher looked as if his eyes were about to pop out of his sockets.

“Also, I moved here, and I was dating one of the cartel princesses,” George said.

Gallagher’s head shot from Carter to George. “Are you serious?”

Carter nodded.

“So basically, it’s your little merry group’s fault they’re even here?”

Said that way, it sure sounded bad.

“Be that as it may,” Hawk intervened. Pure authority laced his voice. “What can you tell us about Felicia?”

Gallagher shrugged. “We’re waiting for a signal.”

“Waiting for a signal?”

Waiting for a signal? And if the signal never came?

“You got nobody in a van trailing your UC’s steps?” Carter said.

Gallagher's eyes narrowed. "Who told you we got someone on the inside?"

I sighed. "Stop playing games. If you can't tell us. Don't. But this is fucking serious."

He sighed. "Our agents—"

His phone pinged. He looked up, his eyes searching mine. "I gotta go."

Something in his gaze told me it was go-time.

"Where?"

He cocked his head as if he was contemplating if he should tell me.

"I'm on your ass like white on rice, anyway." My deadly determination made my voice low and deep. "You either tell me or I'll chase you. Your choice."

He nodded once as if he'd made a decision. "We've just gotten a distress call from one of our agents inside. We tracked it to an abandoned motel south of Whitebrook."

"This is not planned, and this is not the signal we've been waiting for. I don't know what to expect. But do not interfere." Gallagher stabbed a finger at me. "Do not fuck it up." Another stab and this time he narrowed his eyes and took a step in my direction. "Stay the fuck out of it, or I'll have your fucking head."

We were standing nose to nose.

Staring at each other.

He was in my face like nobody had been since that nasty drill instructor at boot camp, who gave me a dress down on my first day for no other reason than to put fear into us.

Didn't work then; wouldn't work now.

"Of course. We'll stay out of your way, and we will not interfere." I was lying through my teeth. I had no intention to let someone else run the show when Red was in danger.

Sting operations went wrong more often than they went right.

In a hail of bullets, nobody was safe.

And it was my job to keep the love of my life safe.

FELICIA



It took all of my self-control to ignore the hand that slipped over my ass and between my legs to grope at my bare pussy while I took their orders—three whiskeys neat.

I froze while bile rose up my throat.

Then the guy let his hand fall as if I was nothing more than an object he just wanted to touch.

A full-body shiver made my nipples hard.

For everyone to see.

My vision blurred when I hurried back to the bar.

Was this my life from now on?

An object? Not human anymore?

My chest, hollow, like an empty cavity, tightened. My heartbeat slowed and got heavier but at the same time insubstantial, as if it was shrinking, breaking.

Disappearing.

As did I.

I ignored the pounding in my head, the coppery taste in my mouth. Had I bitten myself?

It didn't matter.

Nothing mattered.

Just an object.

My eyes met Clarice's.

Just survive.

I could hear her words in my mind, faint and echoey as if they, too, were slipping away slowly.

Then a hand suddenly grabbed me by my upper arm and dragged me through a door.

Clarice turned toward me and followed, but after a couple of steps, she faltered.

Just survive.

He shut the door behind us and cut off my connection to Clarice.

I was completely and utterly alone.

Nobody could help me.

Nobody would help me.

Just survive.

But suddenly, I wasn't so sure if surviving was even in the cards.

I looked around the side room he'd pulled me into. There were couches, brand new—by the way the room smelled of cheap leather and bubble wrap. Was this the VIP area?

Then why was it empty?

“Give me a lap dance,” the guy demanded and shoved a glass coffee table to the side, placed a bottle of whiskey on it, then sank down onto the couch, opened his legs, and forced me to step in between.

I stared down at him, then at the tray still in my hands.

What the fudge?

A giggle bubbled up and filled my chest.

This was so surreal.

Wait.

I sobered up immediately.

Could I hit him over the head with the tray?

I looked around. There was a second door.

Maybe I could escape.

“Now,” he screamed, and my gaze snapped back to him.

“Get rid of the fucking tray.”

A vein was pulsing on his forehead, and his face turned a very unhealthy shade of violet.

And as if all of this wouldn't have been disturbing enough, I looked at the barrel of a gun he was pointing right at me.

Rendering me immovable.

And scared. So, I complied.

I let the tray slip from my fingers and started to gyrate my hips.

And danced.

Only it was not really me.

Just survive.

JEREMY



We parked a couple of miles away and geared up. I tried to call Benno, to at least let him know what I was doing—last minute.

Too last-minute to interfere.

But he didn't pick up, thank God.

I watched Hawk and Carter who were both on their phones, ringing up a storm.

On the ride over, they'd pulled every single favor to get us on the inside—without luck. Not that it would change anything.

I would go in no matter what.

What if it was too late?

I fastened the Velcro on my vest and forced the thought out of my mind.

I would know if it would be too late.

And I fucking knew she was still alive.

I didn't know which state she was in, but no matter what, we would get through this together.

Red, I'm coming. Hold on just a couple of minutes longer.

“Guys, gather round,” Carter said.

We formed a half-circle.

“The feds have cleared all the rooms. But apparently, there's a party going on in the basement. Hawk, Jeremy,

Falcon, you're the front echelon. Observation only. Do not make entry; hang back behind the feds."

He turned to the other side. "Birdie, Goofy, overwatch—get high and tell us what you see—no surprises."

The two of them fist-bumped—Birdie with a lethal grin on her face—then scurried away into the night.

Holy shit. She was one frightening woman.

I watched Hawk look after her, his face all scrunched up. Was he worried about her?

She seemed solid since the night we'd rescued George and Bobby.

But something made Hawk worry about her. Or maybe he was still pissed about her solo escapades. And she still hadn't earned his trust back.

"George, Owl, Max, on me. We're waiting for Richard and Peter to arrive; let's see if the FBI is more inclined to interact with the Sheriff's Department."

We nodded at each other, and Hawk and Falcon looked at me expectantly.

"How about we go to the entry point the feds don't know about," I said.

Hawk grinned and gave me a nod.

I'd poured over the plans Peaches illegally acquired back at the house and all the way here. The way the structure was designed, there was a big basement under the main building.

And even though there was no evidence in the plans, experience from working construction—pouring basements—almost every summer since my fourteenth birthday, told me there was an extra exit.

Nobody was dumb enough to build a basement with only one exit—especially since it was against regulation in most states.

We hurried to the far border of the property.

I would bet my ass there was some—bingo.

I could see a door on this side of the building. What I hadn't expected was the overgrown cave-like entry we stumbled upon right at the border of the property.

FELICIA



Not a minute later, the man snaked his arm around my hip, twisted me sideways, and pulled me onto his lap.

I expected to feel his hard-on. Had prepared for it.

Braced for it.

But nothing. Just wool trousers and softness against my backside.

And the tornado building inside of me.

As if my coming into contact with him had shaken something loose, I suddenly zoomed back into my body.

All the feelings. Fear, disgust, and helplessness—mingled together into a ball of energy fed by my gyrating hips.

Fuck this.

Fuck surviving.

If this fucker touched me, I would sucker punch him.

Just like Goofy and Peaches had taught me.

I promised myself, I wouldn't ever be a victim again.

Well, time to make good on my promise.

I would not let him get to me, or rape me, and even if he killed me, so be it.

At least Bobby wouldn't become an orphan. He had Jeremy now. And my sisters would take care of him, as well.

He would be safe. Happy. Loved.

Wetness gathered behind my eyes. My heart hurt, just thinking about Jeremy and my sweet little boy.

The family I'd always wanted.

So close.

So fudging close.

I closed my eyes for a moment, causing tears to spill over.

Tears I used to feed my rage.

This was it.

I was going to fight or die trying.

I eyed his hand, which lay limp next to him, loosely holding the gun.

“If your opponent has a weapon, go for the weapon first. You need to get it.” Peaches' words rang in my ear as if he was standing beside me. *“Grab it like a pull-up bar, a chin-up, or over-under. Get positive control of the weapon and drop to the floor and let gravity do the rest.”*

I focused solely on the gun hand, so I didn't see it coming.

He suddenly shoved me from his lap with such force that I stumbled and took a nose dive onto the opposite couch

Fudge.

I spun around and stared at him.

“You're not very good at this,” he said, his voice dripping with malice. Then he reached into his pocket.

“I thought you would be better,” he said, taking a small mirror from the glass table.

I hadn't even realized it was there. I could've used it to cut him wide open.

Fudge.

My eyes snapped back to the gun, which lay on his lap.

Fantasies of it going off and shooting him in the crotch swirled through my mind.

He lined up a white powder, then took a pen out and disassembled it.

I stared at him, watched him snort the white line through the hollow piece of the pen as if I was caught in a bad mafia movie.

What the fudge?

He straightened again. "I'm starting to wonder what exactly it is Jeremy sees in you."

Wait what?

I stared at him, and he stared back while he wiped the white powder from his nose.

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

How should I know? I've never seen him before.

And the asshole knew it.

I shook my head.

"Let me tell you a story, then." He leaned back and took the gun in his hand and played around with it as if it was just a toy.

I could've grabbed it while he was snorting his brain out.

God, I was so stupid.

"A long time ago, there was this girl named Nina. She was kind and gorgeous, and I fell in love with her in first grade."

He paused, fixated on me until I nodded.

"She lived right next door. I was best friends with her brothers. And so, she became an inseparable part of me."

I nodded. It seemed like a cute story.

So why was he telling it to me?

"She was my first love, cute as a button. I told her that I loved her once, you know."

"And?"

He shrugged, then sighed. “She said I was like a brother to her.”

I nodded. So unrequited love, then.

But again, how was this relevant?

“She went away to college, met someone. Married him.”

He looked at me as if I should know what he was talking about when all I could think of was how I was buck naked with a stranger in a room who held that gun as if it was nothing more than an afterthought.

I should’ve been scared—well I was—but it also felt unreal, like reality couldn’t be this strange.

“She was happy in the beginning. But then I had to watch him choose his job over her again and again.”

He sounded choked up and pensive. “She slowly withered away until there was nothing left. Until she wasn’t even there anymore.”

Tears were streaming down his face. He took another swig from the bottle of Jack.

“What happened to her?”

He looked at me but didn’t see me. Not really. Instead, he was caught back then. Whatever happened back then, I didn’t think there was a happy ending to the story.

“She drove her car against the pillar of a bridge.”

He smashed the bottle against the glass table, and it cracked.

I flinched back.

More tears made their way down his cheeks.

My chest tightened. How could I feel sorry for him when he was the one holding the gun, and I was the one being threatened?

But no matter how rough he’d handled me, no matter how he touched me, or forced me into a lap dance, right at that moment, I saw him for the little hurt boy he really was.

There wasn't any power left.

I wasn't scared anymore.

He might be more physically powerful.

But mentally, he had nothing on me.

"She died instantly and took Carolina with her."

"Carolina?"

Alarm bells rang in my brain.

He nodded, but his eyes were unfocused, his mind far, far away in the past. "Her little baby girl."

Fuck.

She'd killed herself and her child.

Nina and Carolina.

Jeremy's Nina and Carolina.

His wife and baby, who died.

Jeremy's reason why he'd been so pushy, so overprotective.

And this man's reason to hold me here.

Was this revenge?

"What happened then?"

"I hated him with all my guts. He was the reason she spiraled."

He sighed, wiped at his tears. "But I also hated myself. I knew how she wasn't right, knew I should've said something, done something."

"And?"

"And I spiraled out of control. Booze, drugs, women. I got onto the radar of some bad people. Made some bad decisions."

He sighed, his body limp as if telling me all this had drained him of all his energy. Or maybe it was the cocktail of drugs and alcohol.

“Now I’m stuck, and I can’t get out. Deeper and deeper. I betrayed my country and every single one of the values I once swore to protect.”

My eyebrows shot up.

His country? Was he a police officer? Or working with Jeremy at the DEA? Was that why he knew who I was?

I watched him as he played with his gun, absentmindedly, stared at it.

He didn’t talk for a very long time, and I didn’t move.

Maybe he would forget I was even there.

But no such luck.

He raised the gun and pointed it at me.

My breath stuck in my throat while my heartbeat sped up, then slowed.

This was it.

He was going to kill me.

No way out.

I was stuck. And I was going to die. Naked.

“No way out,” he said, almost caressing the weapon in his hand—as if he could read my mind.

Fear clogged my throat, but I forced myself to swallow.

“*Slow down your breathing and focus.*” Peaches’ words rang in my ears as if he was standing right next to me.

“There’s always a way,” I said. To myself and to him.

I needed there to be a way out. For both of us.

Please, let there be a way.

He shook his head, and my heart sank.

Jeremy didn’t know where I was—nobody knew.

I’d gotten lucky. Nobody had raped me or touched me—aside from the asshat before.

But now my luck had run out.

Just survive.

But how? How could I survive this?

I turned my focus inward. Imagined Jeremy and Bobby together back home, outside. On a beautiful day, Jeremy showing Bobby how to fly a kite. Patient and kind, like the man he was.

They were high-fiving each other, laughing together like father and son.

Please, let this become real. Let me be there, witness it. Have the family I always wanted to have.

The pang in my chest made me choke.

For a second, I closed my eyes, willing my dream to become reality. Willing all of this to be just a bad dream.

But when my eyes snapped back to the guy sitting opposite me, I froze.

He had the gun in his mouth.

His eyes found mine once more.

Regret. Defeat. Desperation.

“Nooo.”

JEREMY



Hawk and I exchanged glances, then I pulled out my phone—the call connected after the first ring. “Hey, Gallagher, we’re on the south border of the property, and there’s a tunnel. Do you guys know anything about this?”

I ignored his heavy sigh.

“Didn’t I tell you not to interfere?”

“You did, and I chose to ignore it. But we’re just observing things, so don’t get your panties in a twist— Now, do you know about this tunnel?”

“One sec,” Gallagher said.

I waited while Gallagher checked in with his people.

“They don’t know shit. If they’d known, we wouldn’t be the only ones here,” Hawk said.

I nodded, then straightened when there was a big explosion followed by shots fired.

“Edge?” Gallagher’s voice sounded calm even though shots rang out in the background. “How many men do you have in position?”

“Eight total. Three with me.”

He sighed. “They’ve barricaded and fortified our ingress. I have four men down. But I’ll send troops your way. We need another entry.”

“Sure, there’s the tunnel and another entry back here; do you have enough people to cover both?”

The murmured “fuck” was answer enough.

“I’ll send a team to cover the exit. And I’ll send someone to liaise with you so you and your guys can check out the tunnel,” Gallagher said.

“Roger that.”

“Don’t breach. Just make sure there aren’t any squatters coming out that way, and fucking wait for my guys before you make a move,” he said.

“Roger that.”

I put the call on hold, then Hawk, Falcon, and I spread out to cover both exits.

All remained quiet.

Too quiet.

I hated it because my thoughts wandered to Red.

I’d suppressed my emotions, compartmentalized everything, but sitting here, waiting.

What was happening inside?

Didn’t Gallagher say he had someone on the inside?

Where the fuck was this guy now, and how the fuck was the FBI so sloppy to miss not one but two exit routes?

This was beyond ridiculous. A five-year-old could’ve planned this op better than that.

The FBI team came within sight a couple of minutes later. There were only five of them. Gallagher obviously had some serious manpower problems.

I high-ported my rifle as they approached. They didn’t see me until they were almost on top of me.

I pushed the button to take the call off hold. “Gallagher, tell them everything’s quiet, and they’re about to meet friendlies,” I said, and after he’d conveyed my message over the radio, I stepped out of hiding.

The group split up—four of them taking a hold position at the exit and one coming with me to join Hawk and Falcon, who were positioned at the tunnel.

“Where’s the tunnel?” the female FBI agent—which I only determined by her voice—asked once she stepped next to me. Her head was on a constant swivel.

Ready for everything.

“Hawk, Falcon, inbound,” I said into my radio, and we stepped through the woodwork until we met Hawk and Falcon, who’d taken over the tunnel.

The four of us made our way to the entrance of the tunnel.

All dark and quiet.

“Did you go inside?” the FBI lady asked.

“Negative.”

“Then let’s check it out,” she said.

“Roger that.”

We fell into formation, and together, we made our way into the darkness.

FELICIA



I stared open-mouthed at the ghoulish image in front of me before bile rose up my throat and I vomited on the floor.

But I never took my eyes off of him—or what was left of him, hyperaware and at the same time, strangely sluggish.

Even my blinking happened in slow-mo.

The guy just blew half his brain off.

His body was still sitting on the couch.

Dead.

I tried to catch my breath, tried to not hyperventilate.

Which was not happening.

I stared at the gun still in his hand, and my mind started spinning out of control.

What should I do now?

Take the gun?

Shoot my way to freedom?

I moved my eyes to the door leading back into the big room—back to all the other men. I hesitated, then slowly glanced at the other door.

Escape.

That's what I would do.

Escape.

I forced myself up even though it took more energy than it should, then made my way to the unknown door and pushed the handle.

I expected it to be locked, so the door swinging open caused my heart to jump and settle into a bruising rhythm.

There was blackness beyond.

Was I fainting? Losing consciousness? Because that was certainly a more appropriate reaction to watching someone kill himself than just staring.

I took one measured step after the other. Expected someone to jump me any second.

I was ready to fight.

Fight for my freedom and for my life.

And a couple of steps later, I got my chance.

JEREMY



We moved forward for what seemed like an eternity. The tunnel smelled moldy and unused.

Then my heart stopped.

Someone stumbled into our cone of light. And a split second later, the FBI Agent pointed her gun right at Red's forehead, touching Red's forehead with her gun.

Everybody froze.

"Felicia?" I whispered, not sure if my eyes were playing a trick on me. But apart from that, all I could do was blink and stare.

"Put your weapon down; she's one of us," Hawk said in as calm a voice as if he was rattling off a lunch order at a drive-through instead of telling someone to not shoot someone.

What a fucking nightmare.

"Is someone coming after you?" Hawk asked.

The FBI Agent lowered her gun.

Felicia exhaled a shaky breath as soon as the weapon left her forehead.

"I don't—" Then her eyes suddenly turned over, and she lost consciousness.

"Fuck, let me through." I shoved my rifle on my back, Hawk to the side, then kneeled down next to her crumpled, naked body.

What the hell had happened to her?

Why wasn't she wearing any clothes?

"Red?" I grabbed her shoulder and shook her gently—no reaction.

I shook her again, this time with a lot more force. "Fuck, Red, you need to open your eyes, right the fuck now."

My voice was trembling. I had been so good at keeping my emotions stored deep down, shutting them off as good as I could.

But I was about to fucking lose it.

Right here, right now.

I touched her cheek again, leaned down, and touched my forehead to hers. "Red, wake up."

She moaned, and her eyes fluttered open.

Thank God.

It took a second until she recognized me, but then a sob tore free, a sound so heart-wrenching it completely did me in.

It sounded like it was ripped from her chest, and I grabbed her and pulled her against me and into my lap.

"You're safe; you're okay. Everything will be okay, Red," I murmured into her hair followed by anything that came to mind—every caress I could think of and a lot of I-love-you's.

"Hey, Red, it's Hawk." He squatted down next to us. "Can you get up?"

She looked at him, nodded, then gazed back at me.

I didn't like the look in her eyes—deep shock and most likely trauma.

But together, Hawk and I helped her up.

Once upright, I opened my vest, ripped my tee over my head, and put it on her. She was cold to the touch and let me handle her like a puppet.

I didn't like it at all.

Once I fastened the Velcro of the vest on her, Hawk spoke again.

“Get her back out and to safety. We can push forward without you.”

That seemed to rip Felicia out of her stupor. “Wait.”

Hawk turned back to her.

“There’s a guy in the room; he shot himself in the head; he’s sitting on the couch.”

What the hell?

Did she witness it or did she just stumble upon the body?

Anyway, she sure as hell would have some work to do to overcome this experience.

Hawk nodded. “Anyone else down there?”

She nodded. “A lot of men in suits and a lot of naked women.”

“I guess those naked women aren’t there of their own free will?”

She shook her head.

“Fuck.” This came from the FBI agent, who—until now—hadn’t said more than a couple of words.

The agent took a photograph from a Velcro patch on her vest and handed it to us. “This is Agent Holt.”

Felicia stared at the photo. “This is Clarice. She helped me; she’s somewhere in the main room. Serving drinks.”

My eyes met Hawk’s over her head. Given the circumstances, Agent Holt wasn’t likely to serve drinks anymore.

“She naked, as well?” Falcon asked, looking away from the tunnel for the first time after Hawk took point. He studied the picture in his hand in the dim light of his flashlight, then handed it back to the FBI agent and raised his eyes to Red.

She nodded.

“Roger that. Get your woman out of here.” He turned, then tapped Hawk’s shoulder in a sign to push forward.

I watched them until they disappeared into the darkness.

Now my priority was to get Felicia to safety. “Can you walk?”

She nodded, and I slung my HK416 over my shoulder and guided her in the opposite direction.

Outside.

Far away from here.

Somewhere safe.

FELICIA



I stumbled along, setting one foot in front of the other. It was too dark to see anything, and the scent of old dust and dry earth, which had been undisturbed for a long time, stuck in my nostrils. Twice I bumped into the walls before I started tracing along with my fingers. When I saw the light, I ran towards it.

My chest hitched.

Free, I was finally free.

But when the cold barrel of a gun touched my forehead, it stopped me dead.

“Felicia?”

My breath hitched. Was I imagining things or did I just hear Jeremy’s voice?

“Put your weapon down; she’s one of us,” another voice said.

Relief replaced my shock. Relief so intense, I suddenly felt lightheaded.

“Is someone coming after you?”

“I don’t—”

Then everything went black.

When I came to, I half-sat in Jeremy’s arms.

“I love you, Red. I will never, ever let you out of my sight. I’m so sorry. So terribly sorry.”

He had nothing to be sorry about.

It was my ex who was to blame.

“Hey, Red, it’s Hawk.”

The other guy squatted down right next to us. His voice had a soothing quality. “Can you get up?”

Laughter bubbled up inside of me and tickled the inside of my chest when I realized I was stark naked, on the ground in Jeremy’s lap, surrounded by Jeremy’s strong arms.

But the laughter had an edge, and if I let it out, it would end with me being hysterical.

So, I shut my mouth, shoved down those feelings, and nodded.

They helped me up.

Thank God because my legs felt like sausages. Firm but notwithstanding the pressure of actually standing on them.

Jeremy stripped out of his tee and pulled it over my head, then he fastened his bulletproof vest around me.

It was like a split out-of-body experience. Like I was watching myself and feeling his hands against my skin at the same time.

“Get her back out and to safety. We can push forward without you,” Hawk said.

They would push forward. They would get inside and see him.

Him.

“Wait.”

Hawk turned back and stared at me.

At least it felt like it.

I hesitated. I still didn’t know who the guy was, but he knew Jeremy, so Jeremy knew him, too.

Should I tell him now?

But what could I say, when I had no clue?

Bile rose into my throat just thinking about the image of him.

Nope.

I couldn't tell them.

Not right now. Not before I had a better grip on my emotions.

But there wasn't time.

"There's a guy in the room; he shot himself in the head; he's sitting on the couch."

I could hear Jeremy sucking in a breath.

"Anyone else down there?" Hawk asked.

"A lot of men in suits and a lot of naked women."

"I guess those naked women aren't there of their own free will?"

I shook my head.

Who would be naked in a basement of their own free will?

"Fuck."

My head snapped to the female voice. I hadn't even realized one of them was a woman.

She handed me a photograph. "This is Agent Holt."

I stared down at the photo in the slim light of Jeremy's flashlight.

Clarice, all dressed up and official-looking, stared back with a sincere expression on her face. She looked older in the photo. Older and a lot meaner.

But the face was the same.

"This is Clarice. She helped me; she's somewhere in the main room. Serving drinks."

"She naked, as well?" the other guy asked, then plucked the photo out of my hand.

He studied the picture for a while, then handed it back to the woman and looked at me expectantly.

I nodded.

“Roger that. Get your woman out of here.”

When the three of them disappeared into the shadows, Jeremy slung his rifle over his shoulder, then turned us around. “Can you walk?”

I nodded.

And he set a steep pace.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” I said.

“When we’re outside, okay? We can talk then.”

Once we reached the exit of the tunnel, moonlight greeted us.

We stopped and Jeremy pulled out his phone.

“Hey, I got Felicia, and we’re coming out of the tunnel now. The others are pushing forward. Don’t shoot us.”

He listened for a while. “Apparently, there’s a way in. How else would she have gotten out?”

He listened again. “Roger that—just give me five minutes, and find me some shorts. And Gallagher, be prepared. There might be a lot of naked victims inside.”

JEREMY



“Come on, Red, just a couple more steps and we’re home free,” I said to her, squeezing her waist, where I placed my hand to keep her pressed against my naked torso.

The vest chafed my side, but I didn’t care. I would gladly bleed and hurt if she didn’t have to.

She’d been a trooper thus far, but I was strung tighter than a rope, holding up a suspension bridge. I needed to get her to safety, ASAP.

It could be minutes or hours, but she would crash from that adrenaline high that kept her upright right now, and she would break down.

I’d seen it all my life.

Two hundred fifty-pound men—breaking down and crying like babies. Some things you just can’t unsee. Some experiences were so hard, so heartbreaking, they took you down, no matter how strong you were.

But if she fell, I was ready to catch her. Would always be here to catch her.

I saw the truck a split second before Carter and Birdie appeared in my field of vision.

“I’ll take it from here,” Birdie said and slung her arm around Felicia’s waist.

I shook my head. “I got her.” Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t be able to let her go.

“Edge”—Carter patted my shoulder, then squeezed it—“let Birdie take care of Felicia. We got work to do.”

I looked at Red, who was looking at me. She wet her lip with her tongue, clearly nervous, then nodded. “Go, I’m good here, I promise.”

Forces strong enough to bring me to my knees warred inside of me. I didn’t want to let her go. It would physically hurt to let her go.

“Jeremy.” She sighed. “I love you. I’m good. Go, help your friends.”

Something in the look she gave me quieted the roaring beast inside of me.

She was okay.

Birdie would keep her safe, and I would have her back in my arms in no time.

Her sincere “I love you” calmed down my nerves. I hadn’t lost her. She was right here. Waiting for me.

Hawk, Falcon, and the FBI agent weren’t enough of a ground force to face whatever was in that basement.

They needed me to step up.

Right the fuck now.

I grabbed her, pulled her against me, then skimmed my thumb over the soft skin of her cheek. I stared into her beautiful eyes, then pressed my forehead against hers. “I love you—be back as fast as I can.”

I gave her a quick but forceful kiss before I handed her back to Birdie.

“She’s the most precious thing on this Earth. Guard her with your life.”

Birdie gave me a mock salute.

Such a brat.

Then I took the black shirt Carter handed me.

“It’s clean—from my gym bag,” he said when I eyed it suspiciously. “Your woman gets my shorts.”

That made me feel marginally better. Though no matter what she wore, I would never forget the image of Felicia stumbling along, stark naked, stopping on the wrong end of an HK416.

Fuck.

“Get your head in the game,” Carter said and handed me another vest, “mental-breakdown time is later.”

I handed him my rifle, slipped into the shirt, fastened the vest, then took back my rifle and took a couple of breaths until I was steady again.

“Good to go.”

Carter nodded.

“We’re coming up behind you,” he said into the radio. Hopefully, the radio worked inside the tunnel.

Our answer was a double click.

Carter and I shared a look, we both nodded, then we started toward the tunnel in a full-on run.

Hawk had acknowledged us, but he wasn’t able to talk.

Time to hoof it.

At the entrance of the tunnel, Gallagher stopped us.

“There’s still a firefight going on at the other entrance, so we haven’t gained access to the basement that way.” He sighed.

“We’re ready to breach, so this isn’t ideal.” He activated his radio but looked me in the eyes. “We got friendlies from two sides. Remember fire discipline.”

He nodded at us.

“Roger that,” I said.

Then we dove into the tunnel.

We traveled not much farther than when we'd stumbled upon Red to reach a door.

We made ourselves known before entering the room.

It smelled of leather and plastic and death.

I did a quick survey—Hawk, Falcon, and the FBI agent had their weapons trained at the only other door—their backs to the figure sitting on the couch, the man Felicia had told us about, the one who blew his own head off.

I gave him a cursory glance, then stopped dead in my tracks.

Holy fuck.

Carter crouched down out of reflex—reacting to my actions.

“What?” he whispered.

I pointed at the guy. “That’s my boss.”

Carter raised an eyebrow.

“That’s Benno Gusmann.”

“You sure?”

Now it was my time to raise a single eyebrow.

Hell, yeah, I was sure.

Fuck.

He shouldn’t be here. Was he a victim? Or were his ties to the underworld even deeper than we thought?

What a clusterfuck.

“We got this, if you need to step out,” Hawk said.

I rolled my eyes.

I’d just left my woman in Birdie’s borderline-lunatic hands. Why the hell would I step out now? “I’m good; let’s get this over with.”

“We’re still waiting for the go,” The FBI agent said.

And so we waited until all hell broke loose.

FELICIA



“They’re good at their job,” Birdie said when the shooting intensified.

We watched from a distance when the FBI people breached the visible exit and flooded inside.

We watched when they carried out people who had gotten hurt, and I crossed my shaky arms. “Do you think it will be over soon?”

Birdie nodded.

“Shouldn’t we do something?”

Her eyes shot from the building to me. “What did you have in mind?”

I shrugged. “There are a lot of naked women inside. Women like me. Victims.”

Birdie cocked her head. “Please, look at you.” She gave me a once-over. “You’re no victim. You are a survivor. A fighter. Look at you. You barely made it out five minutes ago, and you’re already thinking about how we can help someone else. Instead of staying in your own head, reliving your own experience. You are one badass woman. Fucking admirable.”

Her words, spoken so matter-of-factly, sunk in like a stone dropped into water.

And the ripples it caused grew higher and higher, waves, strong and fierce and unstoppable like a stormy sea.

Instead of scared, I suddenly felt—powerful.

I was powerful.

Unstoppable.

And nothing and nobody could take that from me.

No matter the mayhem, the hardship, the chaos around me. No matter what happened to me, or to my body. I would come out the other side. Profoundly okay.

Unstoppable.

I hugged Birdie, who clearly wasn't used to or comfortable with any signs of affection.

She stayed stiff as a board. "What?"

"Thank you," I said, "now let's prepare."

We roamed around the backs of the vehicles. Gathered emergency blankets, jackets, everything we could find.

And then we waited until the first women came out of the tunnel. Led by none other than Clarice.

An army of naked female warriors.

As soon as she recognized me, I could see the relief written all over her face. She helped hand out blankets to the others before she covered herself.

"Good to see you're okay," she said.

"Good to see you, as well," I replied.

"Are there more coming?"

A shadow fell over her face. "Negative."

Birdie kicked the dirt. "Fuck."

I looked from Birdie to Clarice and back until it slowly sunk in. They were talking about them not making it out alive.

Shit.

I plumped down in the passenger seat of a truck.

Holy Mother of God. Some of the girls in there were dead.

It could've been me in there.

That sick fuck, who killed himself had saved my life by pulling me into that room.

Had saved my life by killing himself and letting me go.

It was a tough pill to swallow.

But I was grateful to be alive.

Grateful and tired.

JEREMY



It had been three days since the incident.

Since I finally had her back in my arms safe and secure.

And with every day, the situation had gotten worse and worse.

Somehow, I didn't know how to act around her anymore.

Could I touch her? Would it trigger memories? Was she even ready for anything physical?

I sighed, then looked down at the cup of coffee sitting on the bar in front of me. Carter had equipped the house with a top-notch modern kitchen, big enough to feed an army.

It turned into our community space. But it was empty right now, which I was eternally grateful for. I needed space. I needed something to get me back to sanity. I needed Red.

But she'd been violated and hurt, and she might need a lot of time to get back to being okay.

"Hey, bud." Hawk entered, patted my back, and prepared himself a coffee. "Talk to me; what's eating at you?"

I sighed. Of course, in a house full of people, there was no chance my misery would go unnoticed. "Nothing. I'm good."

Hawk chuckled. "If I got a penny for every time one of my guys told me he's good, when he's anything but, I would be a very wealthy man."

I cocked my head and raised an eyebrow. “According to my research, you are a very wealthy man.”

Hawk chuckled. “Fair point.”

Carter and George entered, and George watched me and Hawk. “What are we laughing about?”

I sighed. “Hawk’s making fun of me.”

Carter smirked. “You’ve been moping around all week. Easy target.”

“Thanks.”

“Talk to us; what’s going on?” Hawk said.

“I don’t know I just... I’m giving her space, standing down, but I feel there’s a rift between us, and I have no idea how to fix it.”

“You ever talked to her about it?” George asked.

I put my head into my hands. “No.”

“Well, you should. You might not know this, but the Cleaver women are hard-chargers. They’re not as fragile as you think. They can handle whatever life throws at them,” Carter said.

“You keeping your distance, it sends the wrong message. You need to tell her that nothing has changed, that no matter what—she’s yours,” Hawk said.

I looked at Hawk. “And if she tells me she needs more space?”

“Then you can sit here in the kitchen and sulk some more, and maybe we will drag your mopey ass to the local watering hole so you can drown all your sorrows,” Hawk said.

“But right now, we need you to man the fuck up and tell your woman that nothing has changed and that you love her no matter what,” Carter said.

I nodded, then stood.

They were right. That’s exactly what I needed to do. What I should’ve done right from the start.

I went upstairs in search of her and found her in our room.

I hadn't spent the nights here; instead, I'd given Felicia and Bobby space. Maybe this, too, had been a mistake.

"Can we talk?"

She nodded, then sat down on the bed. "It's time we talked."

"Before you say anything, I need to put something out there. And I need you to hear me."

"Okay."

"What happened to you was god-awful, and I wish I could've prevented it. Should've prevented it."

She grabbed my hand, but I shook my head. "Let me finish."

"I realize it takes time to overcome such a traumatic event, and I'm prepared to give you all the space and time you need. Hell, I've waited seven years, and I will wait seven more if that's what you need."

"Jeremy, stop."

I snapped my mouth shut and my eyes to hers.

"I wanted to talk about the guy on the sofa."

"The guy on the sofa?"

What the fuck was she talking about? Benno? She wanted to talk about Benno.

"We talked before he shot himself."

My look sharpened.

"He knew who I was. Told me about Nina and Carolina. How he loved Nina, how he hated you for taking her from him. He blamed you for her death, and he blamed himself. He also told me he got mixed up with the wrong people and that there was no way out for him. Then he killed himself before my eyes."

A coldness so absolute hit my core, I didn't even know how to react to that.

How had it been a week, and I was hearing this just now?
“Fuck. Did you tell the FBI?”

She’d been interrogated for hours after everything settled down. But I was too occupied to even ask. Or maybe I was too afraid to hear all the painful things that happened to her. I retreated when I should’ve listened.

Stayed silent when I should’ve pressed her to talk to me.

When would I ever learn this lesson?

Well, right the fuck now would be a good time, wouldn’t it?

I should’ve learned the lesson after Nina’s death. How my not communicating, my not opening up and sharing what was going on affected the people around me. And vice versa.

From now on, I would avoid keeping things unsaid. I would never again let things fester in silence.

From now on, I would be an open book. And I would be an advocate for open communication. Even if it killed me.

“Yes, I told the FBI, the DEA, I told anyone but you because you were so distant, I didn’t know what was wrong.”

“Fuck.” I sighed. “I’m so sorry, Red. I got stuck in my head. Believed the bullshit I was telling myself. Believed you needed space.”

“Well, mister, let me tell you something.”

I perked up at the sudden menace in her voice.

“If I need space, I will tell you. So, until I tell you otherwise, what I need from you is that you take me in your arms every chance you get. I need you to love me and show me. I need you to growl in my ear, call me a good girl and make love to me and kiss me until my toes curl and I beg for mercy. And then I need you to hold me in your arms and sleep next to me every night, and give me a good-morning kiss every morning. And on top of all this, I need you to be open and talk to me about everything. You think you’d be up for that?”

The smile splitting my face was amusement-park-worthy.

“Fuck yes. I’m up for that, Red. But I have one condition.”

“What condition?”

I sank to my knee in front of her and pulled out the ring I’d been carrying with me for quite a while now.

Maybe she needed some time.

Maybe I did.

But I should’ve known the amount of time and space I gave her was too much. We’d spent enough time apart.

Now was our time to get closer.

“Marry me.”

Her soft smile filled every corner of my heart with warmth and joy.

“I will, under one condition.”

I raised an eyebrow. “If you’re being a brat about this, I will take you over my knee, Red, until you scream ‘yes’.”

Her smile deepened—my girl liked that promise. “I need Bobby to be on board. We need to talk to him first.”

Now that was finally something I had taken care of already.

“Way ahead of you,” I said, pushing the ring on her finger. “He even offered to ask you for me.”

I got up and took her in my arms.

Finally.

FELICIA



I watched him from the side.

It was weird.

He'd avoided this room, being with me, sleeping with me for the past couple of days, but he wasn't avoiding me now.

Who would've thought someone so capable and as bossy as Jeremy needed to be told what I expected, what I wanted?

But how the fudge should he know? He still didn't know what I had experienced, didn't know the details of what I'd been through.

Of course, the honorable man he was, he'd been giving me space, had wanted to give me everything I needed.

He just didn't know it was him I needed the most.

I looked down at the beautiful ring. The fact he'd talked to Bobby before asking me made my heart swell with gratefulness.

He would be such a great father to him. And a great husband. I watched him empty his pocket when my eyes got stuck on a piece of fabric.

"What's that?"

He looked at me completely confused.

"What's that?" I grabbed the cloth thingie at the same time he did.

He was faster and shoved it back into his pocket.

“Jeremy?”

He sighed, then hung his head. “Fuck, Red. Do you need to know each and every one of my secrets?”

That made me curious, beyond words.

Of course, I wanted to know each and every one of his secrets, especially if he was carrying something with him, that looked like he’d been carrying it a long time.

Did it belong to Nina or Carolina? Did that mean he wasn’t over them?

Fuck this.

He told me he loved me more than once. And I’d decided to trust him.

Being in competition with a dead person—that was a surefire way to heartbreak. “It’s called marriage, bud,” I said, in my best sassy voice—immediately his promise rang in my ears.

If you’re being a brat about this, I will take you over my knee, Red.

I so wanted him to make good on his promise, make good on all of his promises—but especially the sexual ones.

“This is the scrunchy you forgot in the hotel room after you left.” He pulled it out of his pocket and crumpled it in his hand, then opened the hand and showed it to me.

No fucking way.

I took it from his hand, looked at it, then back at him.

“You kept this all this time?”

He nodded. “Pathetic, I know. But it felt like I had a little piece of you with me. At all times.”

I chuckled. I need to show him something. I took his hand and led him outside and to my car. It was already dark, though the security lights Carter had installed made for a beautiful ambient light.

I got in at the passenger side—thank God the car wasn't locked—and popped the glove compartment.

And sure enough, there it was.

My piece of soap from the hotel. My piece of him—at least what I remembered as his scent after we shared a shower—I held onto over the years. I placed it into his hand, and he stared at it.

“What am I looking at, Red?”

“I took the soap from the hotel when I left, so I could remember how you smelled after our shower.”

I looked at the scrunchy in my hand; he looked at the soap.

Even though it took us this long to find our way back together—we both hadn't let go of our shared night.

Not for years.

“Get in the backseat, Red,” he said, his low, growly voice causing shivers to run down my spine.

Hell, yes.

I closed the passenger door and opened the one to the backseat.

“Wait.”

He pressed his body against my back, and I could feel his cock nudging against me. “What?”

“Take off your clothes.”

His whispered words caused whole-body goose bumps.

I turned my head sideways.

“Everyone will see us.”

He bit my earlobe, then soothed the stinging pain with his tongue.

“They won't, I promise.”

He couldn't promise me that, but I wanted to believe him. Or maybe I just wanted to be daring and risk it.

“Now, Red.”

I pushed the shirt over my head, and while I handled my shorts, he opened my bra with a snap.

“Wait.” He pushed me to the side and moved Bobby’s booster seat to the passenger seat.

Then he straightened again.

“In,” he whispered and helped me into the backseat. I scooted over, turned, leaned my back against the opposite door, and watched him get rid of his shirt.

How I loved his muscled body and tattoo-covered arms.

Then he opened his jeans but didn’t lower them.

He crawled inside in front of me and put his knee on the seat between my thighs.

“So, I’m over here all naked, and you get to keep on your clothes? How’s this fair?”

He approached me like a tiger approaching his prey.

It was a tight fit, and he pushed my legs up until I was jackknifed in the backseat of my car—in only my panties, with him occupying most of the space.

“Who said anything about fair, Red? And who wants fair when you can instead have an amazing orgasm or two?”

Well, put that way, he was probably right.

Fair was overrated, anyway.

He stared at me, didn’t move, just drank me in.

“Is this the time where I tell you what to do next?” I grinned at him, in my best bratty behavior.

His low chuckle sent shockwaves through my legs and into my body. He ripped my panties off my body with one swift move.

Holy fucking hotness.

Sweat gathered between my breasts; I was panting while waiting—tight as a bow—for what he was planning to do next.

“This is the time when you stay silent.” He leaned forward until his lips touched my ear, and he whispered, “And do what you’re told, or I can improvise a gag if that’s the way you prefer it.” He dangled my ripped panties from his fingers.

No fucking way he wouldn’t.

Our gazes met, and sure enough, his eyes were hard and held the unspoken promise.

I remained silent.

This wasn’t Jeremy playing nice anymore.

This was his dominant side coming out to play. This was the Jeremy that pushed me against the door and made me come.

Hard and fast.

Yes, please.

“Now that’s a good girl,” he growled before he moved back, then descended to cover my core with his mouth.

He kissed my folds, just a short touch. “Now, if you stay quiet, I promise”—he flicked my clit—hard—“I’ll make every single dream of yours come true. And after that, I will bend you over the hood and take what I need.”

Then he leaned down and ravaged me. And all I could do was hold on, suppress my whimpers, and feel.

My first orgasm surprised us both; the second one, he ripped out of me, and before I could catch my breath, he pulled me out of the car, bent me over the hood, and pushed inside of me with one long, hard thrust.

Ahhh.

He found his rhythm as his fingers found my clit.

He took it between his thumb and forefinger and pinched it—hard—then released, then pinched again.

The other hand did the same to my nipple until I was caught in a delicious vortex of sensations.

He fucked me until my core tightened again.

“Come for me, little girl.”

And fuck me, if I didn't follow his command and came for the third time.

I would never be able to look at my car the same way again.

JEREMY



I hadn't expected this little formal act—a small wedding, just friends and family—I had planned to spin out of control so completely and bloom into this extravaganza.

But here we were, standing with the officiator in front of a beautiful wedding arch in the middle of Carter's compound, which had been transformed into a sea of flowers overnight.

Being watched by seemingly everyone we knew.

Holy crap.

“You may kiss the bride.”

Hell, yeah, always down for that.

I grabbed Red and pulled her against me.

“I love you, wife.”

Her smile couldn't have been sweeter.

“I love you, husband.”

Somehow, hearing her say that rearranged everything inside my chest. That gaping wound that had been there after Nina and Carolina's deaths. That festering blackness that had lingered after I'd lost Red after that night.

It all disappeared.

Instead, I was filled with pulsing white light, pure energy, and I finally felt whole again.

What a foreign and utterly ridiculous feeling.

But I was whole, in control, and hopeful of what was to come.

Hell, I couldn't wait to see what the future would bring.

Then I kissed my beautiful bride and reveled in the hollering of our friends.

Friends.

We smiled at each other once more before we made our way to the reception area Carter had set up.

He really was the king of getting stuff organized.

Bobby met us halfway, and when I opened my arms, I didn't have to ask him twice.

He jumped up immediately and giggled when I blew a raspberry on his neck.

My family.

My gorgeous family.

We arrived at the reception area, had a drink, danced, and smiled at each other until I feared it would be cemented on my face.

Fuck me if I could stop that.

I found everything I'd ever wanted, everything I needed in this woman.

And I wanted the day to never end.

I was watching Goofy and Niki—the doctor from the hospital—dancing with each other. They looked comfortable as if they'd known each other for a long time.

“Hey, Red. Remind me again, how exactly do Goofy and Niki know each other?”

Felicia chuckled. “I think they were childhood best friends until she chose his brother, or something. It's a story right out of a bad movie.”

I nodded. Then kissed her forehead, glad it was other people's drama we were occupying our minds with instead of our own.

“They had some ups and downs reconnecting, but I think it will be okay.”

Yeah, they sure looked like they would be okay—maybe even more than okay.

Felicia elbowed me in the side. “Look at Peaches and Belinda glaring at each other. Isn’t this hilarious?”

I turned my head to look at the other side of the room. Belinda was facing off with a furious-looking Peaches. Oz and Falcon stood beside him, hiding their amused half-smiles.

My eyebrow shot up. Peaches was our residential geek. Intense, but laidback. Introverted and probably a badass in his own right. But I never pegged him for the aggressive type.

He sure looked like a bull, ready to pounce right now.

Belinda, on the other hand, she was as badass as they came, probably in the same class as Birdie. Both women were petite and beautiful. Perfectly hiding their lethal edge and their warrior personalities. Not unlike Agent Holt, who was attending alongside Gallagher and a huge blond guy named Agent Ericson. All three FBI. Holt and Ericson had been working undercover. Apparently, the gang that took Red had handed her over to the cartel right after taking her.

And apparently, Ericson had taken my woman’s clothes—which he apologized for—and Red graciously forgave him immediately.

I looked down at my woman again.

A couple of weeks ago, I wouldn’t have classified her as a warrior, but the way she’d taken control of her life, the way she’d put all her traumatic experiences behind her as if they’d never happened—she was a strong, strong woman. Surrounding herself with other strong women.

I shook my head.

Then looked at every one of the men. Carter, Max, Richard, Peter, and Blake. Every single one of them had picked a woman their equal.

Resilient. Strong. Beautiful.

Able to deal with anything life threw at them. Able to overcome anything. With or without their men at their side.

I searched the room for Birdie when she burst in and brought a shockwave of angry energy with her.

It was as if every single person in the room noticed the change at the same time and straightened.

Birdie crossed the room, her head on a swivel, and when she zeroed in on Hawk, she froze.

Hawk looked up but dismissed her immediately and turned his head back to Carter.

Birdie flew through the room. “You.”

I wouldn’t put it past her to scratch his eyes out. She seemed that angry.

What the hell had happened?

Oz and Falcon moved into position and intercepted her at the same time as every single phone started beeping.

It was an alarm Carter had set up recently.

Like a fire alarm. Calling everyone into the war room.

But why?

I watched Peaches and Goofy approach Carter, Peaches carrying his phone, the expression on his face one I did not like.

At all.

The work never stopped, not even for a wedding.

But what had happened now? Everyone was here, safe and sound.

So, whatever was wrong, this was not business as usual.

And it didn’t deter Birdie.

She flew towards Hawk, ready to scratch his eyes out.

“Oh no,” Felicia muttered next to me, “better get her away from him before she kills him.”

And just like that, my beautiful bride strutted away ready to intercept the 120-pound soaking-wet fireball ready to explode in Hawk's face.

Without fear, without hesitation, she signed her sisters, and together, they grabbed Birdie and steered her out the door.

What a fearless bunch.

Hawk watched them leave, his eyes narrowed, his lips turned into white slashes.

Was he unhappy about Birdie, or had he been looking forward to the confrontation?

Because no matter how much he tried to keep this aloof image—he wasn't fooling anybody.

He was head over heels in love with his much younger employee. And he just did something to piss her off.

Majorly.

FELICIA



I shoved an over-the-top angry Birdie into the kitchen, surrounded by my sisters.

I couldn't believe it.

Even my wedding reception was anything but conventional.

But it was kind of fitting.

Nothing in Jeremy's and my story was even remotely conventional.

Not the evening we met.

Not the night we spent with each other.

And not the time we spent apart, secretly pining for the other, even though we had no idea if we would ever see each other again.

Not the way he only now had met his son; not the way he proposed after the first time we had sex again.

Our story was surely one for the books, and I couldn't wait to tell our grandchildren all about it.

Couldn't wait to see how our future would play out.

But our future had to wait.

"What's wrong?"

"Hawk." Heat and anger were radiating off of Birdie like heatwaves ready to singe everything and everyone in her vicinity.

“What did the dumbass do?” Edith asked. I recognized her big-sister-tell-me-all-about-it voice.

“What he did? What the asshole did? There’s a bounty on my fucking head, and he thought it was okay to not tell me. Fucking asshole.”

Wait, what?

“There’s a bounty on your head? So, you jumped bail?” Gracie asked.

“No. By the cartel. I’m marked for death, and instead of telling me, Hawk tried to protect me.”

The way she pronounced “protect,” you would have thought she just told us he stuffed sand down her underwear or something.

Like protecting someone was a dirty word.

I smiled.

Watching those two battle it out would be a lot of fun.

Though I wiped the smile off my face immediately.

Having someone in our found family specifically targeted to be killed by the cartel was more than unsettling.

It was downright frightening.

I’d been targeted, but not me specifically. It was just Roy’s shit that had bled over into my life.

But I was just a number, a body.

Unlike Birdie.

“Birdie?”

I waited until she looked at me. “I’m scared.”

She held my gaze for a couple of seconds, then she took a step and took me in her arms.

She was usually so distant. So unapproachable. It seemed as if she didn’t need anyone.

But the way she squeezed me against her body, I teared up.

“It’s not necessary, Red. I can take care of myself. Though I have to say”—she hesitated—“I’ve never had girlfriends, so this”—she turned her head to my sisters, including them—“feels nice.”

There was more. I could feel there was more to her story. More she didn’t say.

In the way she was clinging to me but also recoiling from the physical contact.

It had me wondering how her childhood might’ve been.

How did a woman like her get to become a sniper? That’s what the guys had called her—a sniper.

Most likely, she’d been in the military, right? Because how else would you get into her line of work?

“But there’s really no reason to be scared. I can handle myself.”

She stepped back—as if the closeness was suddenly too much.

“I really appreciate the sentiment, though. Now if you would help me kill Hawk, I would really appreciate that, too.”

The wicked smile brightening her face almost led me to want to help her.

And I was looking forward to seeing the ever-in-control Hawk roasted over hot coals.

And if any woman could do it, it was Birdie, giving him the fight of his life—or maybe an epic love story.

Just like Jeremy’s and mine and Bobby’s.



This is it for now for the SOG series. But if you haven’t checked out the Moon Lake Series, you definitely should—because you will find out a lot of the guys and girls who show up here, have their own rollercoaster rides over in the Moon Lake Protector Series.

The Moon Lake Protector Series starts with Burning Steel—Peter and Lisa’s story [here](#).



And if you, like me, could use a little more of Felicia and Jeremy—I got you covered. You can hop onto my email list and get the bonus epilogue. [One-night-stand-reenactement](#), that’s all I’m saying. You can get it [here](#).

<https://links.katbammer.com/sog4-bonus>